

## Feature Article #02

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### **The Mustard Seed: Giving Chances, Saving Lives**

By Brandy Wenger, Corporate Properties, The City of Calgary

Life is all about perseverance, John<sup>1</sup> realized, as he struggled to find employment and get off the streets. After losing his job as a machine operator and being evicted from his residence, John turned to the Mustard Seed (Calgary) Street Ministry – better known as The SEED – for help.

Two and half years ago, the former resident of Airdrie heard about The SEED from a friend. “It was my first time back in Calgary in 20 years and I didn’t know what to do,” said John. Using the services The SEED provided, John volunteered in the emergency shelter’s kitchen for approximately two years and also sold newspapers for the *Calgary Herald* through the Street Hawk program. With the help of The SEED and a desire to change his life, he is now employed as a prep cook at a four-and-one-half star hotel, with hopes of renting his own apartment and getting back on his feet.

It is the aim of The SEED to help people like John via the many opportunities the facility provides. While The Mustard Seed was first opened in 1984 as an emergency shelter and a place of worship, it has grown to be much more. Not only does the Christian humanitarian organization provide meals and shelter, it offers programs and services designed to help clients move from homelessness to independence.

In December 2001, the renovation of The SEED’s Creative Centre was completed and it became a place where guests learn how to work towards independence. Programs such as leather and wood working help participants to enhance their job skills, while producing products that are sold in The SEED Works Store or to corporations. In the Resource Centre, guests can also pursue an academic path by taking school upgrading and college entry courses, and by participating in life skills, pre-employment and other programs to achieve a higher level of education. So far, 33 men and women have graduated from Storefront 101 – a credited University course – and 15 guests have completed their GED (Grade 12 equivalency) exams.

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1 Name has been changed to protect identity.

“It is our intention to give people the skills and abilities they need so they can go back into the community and make enough of a wage to live,” said Floyd Perras, Chief Operating Officer of The SEED. Because Alberta’s minimum wage is only \$5.90 per hour, most of the low-income Calgary households identified by The City of Calgary as being in need of affordable housing<sup>2</sup> cannot afford to pay average market rent.<sup>3</sup> Since the affordable rental limit range – 30 percent of gross household income – is far below the average apartment rental rates in Calgary, housing is not affordable. For example, someone working 40 hours per week at minimum wage can afford a monthly rent of \$307 (30 percent of their gross monthly income). When comparing this amount to the average rent of \$509 per month for a bachelor apartment in Calgary (CMHC, 2004: 9), it is very clear that the wage earner would fall significantly short of the rent required – or spend much more than they can afford on housing, leaving very little money for food and other necessities. As a result, many people become homeless and find themselves at The SEED or one of the many other facilities in Calgary that serve the homeless.<sup>4</sup>

“Unless you find a job that lets you work eight to 12 hours a day, you can’t get off the streets,” said John. “Even if you are making \$1,000 per month, you still have to eat, get clothing, and pay utilities. That is large piece of your pay cheque each month, which doesn’t leave you with much money,” he continued.

Perras states the two goals of The SEED are to “look after the homeless and mobilize the community to do it.” This is evident when looking at the organization’s volunteer support. This past year, 7,222 volunteers contributed an estimated 130,000 hours of their time to The SEED. In addition, 1,640 businesses, 431 other organizations, 2,072 churches, and 20,399 individuals lent a hand to enable The SEED to keep helping Calgarians in need. Churches usually help with evening meals through the purchase, preparation, and serving of food, while businesses typically provide financial support. The SEED provides a safe place to sleep for about 100 individuals each night, as well as meals for approximately 800 people every day.

The SEED offers emergency, short-term and long-term housing. Its emergency shelter offers beds to 80 people each night, with a high turnover rate. “Even though we only have 80 beds, we probably served 1,890 guests last year,” said Perras.

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<sup>2</sup> A series of *Research Briefs* on housing needs and *Research Summaries* on affordable housing and homelessness have been produced by The City of Calgary and can be viewed or downloaded on The City of Calgary website. Go to [www.calgary.ca](http://www.calgary.ca) and select the “A to Z” index. The entry for *Affordable Housing* will link to the web page where these and other reports can be found.

<sup>3</sup> Calgarians whose gross annual household income is less than \$38,000 and whose housing costs exceed 30 percent of gross household income face serious housing affordability challenges. Indeed, 18 percent of all Calgary households (58,560 households) fall into this category. Of these, 34 percent of all *renter* households (34,655 households) and 10 percent of all *owner* households (23,905 households) are affected (Statistics Canada, 2003; CMHC, 1991: 4).

<sup>4</sup> For detailed information on the facilities serving the homeless in Calgary, see both the *Biennial Count of Homeless Persons in Calgary: Enumerated in Emergency and Transitional Facilities, by Service Agencies, and On the Streets – 2004 May 12* (City of Calgary, 2004) and *The Calgary Community Plan 2004-2008: Building Paths Out of Homelessness* (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2003).

In addition, as of June 2004, there were 22 residents in Step Up Housing, which focuses on preventing individuals from experiencing recurrent episodes of homelessness. Another 26 people were residing in Transitional Housing, which provides longer term accommodation and helps promote independence. A particularly valuable component of The SEED's housing programs is that those who live in Step Up or Transitional Housing receive more than just shelter. Residents work with support workers in areas such as financial management and addiction control, and have access to the full range of programs and services provided by The SEED.

John, who has been in the Step Up program for approximately one month, found that the temporary shelter provided him with a home base, which made it easier to find employment. "It's hard to get a job when you are carrying a bag on your shoulders, aren't properly shaved and in dirty clothes," said John. With the use of amenities such as showers and a luggage storage facility, John was able to be more presentable and prepared for his interviews, which he believes was one factor that enabled him to obtain employment.

John's success story is just one of the many The SEED assists in creating. "A lot of people think if you stay in a shelter, you are trash or a bum. But what they don't realize is there are a lot of people out there working and trying to change their lives," said John. It is agencies like The SEED that create choices for individuals and offer them the chance of a better future.

Unfortunately, a drop of \$378,000 in government funding over the past year – coupled with a 17 percent increase in people using emergency housing and an 18 percent increase in the number of meals served – means The SEED may have to cut programs and job positions. Hoping for additional community funding and volunteer support, "we have really boosted our resource development program," said Perras.

The emergency shelter experienced a cash crisis in May 2004, with projected income falling dramatically below expectations. "Short term we have big issues and long term we have to rely less on the government," said Perras, who believes the best way to alleviate the homeless situation would be more income support or increasing minimum wage. "The mantra is 'affordable housing is going to solve the problem' but when we are dealing with 14,000 individuals [using emergency shelters in the city<sup>5</sup>] and another 3,000 on the waiting list, it is going to cost \$1 billion to alleviate this issue. The government has no intention of going to that extent."

The SEED is urgently seeking donations so they may continue to do good work for the less fortunate in our community.<sup>6</sup> There are many guests like John, who, when given the chance to make a difference in their lives, gladly take it.

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<sup>5</sup> For information on full-year shelter utilization in Calgary, see *Interagency Shelter User Count for 2002* (Perras and Huyder, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Contact The Mustard Seed (Calgary) Street Ministry at (403) 269-1319 or visit their website at [www.theseed.ca](http://www.theseed.ca).

## References

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