

Employing Calgary's Older Homeless Adults: Barriers & Best Practices

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Introduction

By the year 2021 the population of adults aged 65 and over in Calgary is estimated to increase by approximately 55% to account for 13% of Calgary's total population and will continue to rise to 17% by 2026 (The City of Calgary, 2011). These statistics are undeniable evidence that significant attention needs to be focused on issues that will arise with the aging of our population, one of those being older homeless adults.

The body of literature and research conducted on homelessness continues to expand as the severity of the homeless epidemic is recognized by the City of Calgary, nationally, and internationally. Despite the significant amount of focus homelessness has experienced in the literature over the past few decades, many gaps of knowledge remain and need to be filled to ensure the safety, well-being, and support of those experiencing homelessness. In particular, older adults (50 years and older) are in growing need of consideration. This marginalized population experiences unique barriers that have not yet been adequately addressed by mainstream services and organizations. A central step toward exiting homelessness is that of finding secure employment, a task that proves incredibly difficult for older adults experiencing homelessness. In this study I will address the experiences of older homeless adults looking for work, the barriers they face and some of the best ways to overcome them.

There is widespread agreement across the literature that stereotypes of older workers include poor health, stubbornness and rigidity, accident proneness, a lack of computer literacy or relevant skills, and being difficult to train (Berger, 2009; Billett, Dymock, Johnson, & Martin, 2011; Wilson, Parker, & Kan, 2007). Shimoni, Scotney, Coho-Kenney, and Maginley (n.d.) list health-related issues, technological changes, financial implications for employers, and staff attitudes as barriers experienced by older adults looking for work. Additionally, there are an abundance of stereotypes and a high level of stigma associated with hiring homeless individuals. The National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH, 2009) highlights lack of education or skills, lack of transportation and housing, and disabling conditions as barriers faced by the homeless when seeking employment. Vance (1995) expands upon this, noting that older homeless individuals encounter additional difficulties, including patchy work histories, poor longevity and feelings of hopelessness of the individual.

When considering the situational and interpersonal barriers experienced by the older homeless population, there remains a gap in the literature binding the two issues (employing older adults and employing the homeless) in order to effectively capture the distinct circumstances they endure throughout the employment process.

The purpose of the current research is to explore the barriers experienced by the older homeless population in obtaining and keeping employment, identifying specific challenges that hinder their employment prospects. In addition, I hope to develop a comprehensive understanding of best practices that have been or need to be developed to effectively support older adults experiencing homelessness to obtain and keep employment. The goals of the current research are as follows:

- To identify barriers experienced by older homeless individuals throughout the employment process
- To explore best practices associated with overcoming such barriers
- To generate recommendations for the implementation of identified best practices in successfully employing older homeless adults

Methods

In an effort to uncover the barriers associated with employing older homeless adults a comprehensive review of the literature on employing the homeless and employing older adults was conducted.

As previously mentioned, there is little data available on employing older homeless adults and it was therefore necessary to integrate the results of both bodies of research in an attempt to paint an accurate portrait of the experience of this particular population. In addition, data was collected from open-ended interviews with clients aged 50 years and older who, at the time of the interview, were currently enrolled in the Mustard Seed Employment Program.

Background

By the year 2031 the last of the baby boomer generation will turn 65 and the proportion of seniors in Canada is estimated to increase to 23% from a current 15% (Statistics Canada, 2011). Coupled with declining birth rates and longer life expectancies, as the majority of the baby boomers reach their 50's and 60's, the number of older workers participating in the labour force has risen and will continue to rise dramatically. According to Statistics Canada (2011), in the year 2011 "almost one out of five workers was aged 55 years and over". This pattern of data is not unique to Canada. Australia has seen a similar rise in the prevalence of older workers, making up 32% of the total population in the year 2003, an 8% increase over a period of 20 years (Billett et al., 2011). In Calgary, the cohort of 268 000 baby boomers are currently between 48 and 68, a huge increase in numbers from the 98 000 seniors that preceded this generation (City of Calgary, 2012)

Intuitively, the percentage of older adults experiencing homelessness will rise simultaneously with the aging of the general population. Research has shown that individuals born in the second half of the baby boom experience a higher than average risk of experiencing homelessness (Kushel, 2011). Culhane, Metraux, Byrne, Stino, and Bainbridge (2013) found that in New York City shelters, the peak ages of single adults utilizing the shelter services to have increased from 28 - 33 in 1988 to an average of 46 - 51 in 2010. Similarly, in Massachusetts, the proportion of shelter users 55 and over increased by a shocking 60% from 1999 to 2002 (NCH, 2009). Although the knowledge deficit regarding the older homeless population in Canada has yet to be adequately addressed, Stuart and Arboleda-Florez (2000) cite a report that estimates 6% of shelter users in Calgary to be aged 55 years and over. Moreover, in summer 2012 those aged 65 and over made up 3% of Calgary's homeless population (Calgary Homeless Foundation [CHF], 2013). Despite overwhelming evidence pointing towards the severity of homelessness among older adults, this growing population continues to fade into the background when it comes to the provision of services and public policies.

Being an older homeless adult is an experience that offers barriers to employment unique from those of a homeless adolescent or young adult. Apart from decreased mobility and increased fragility, homeless older adults experience a breadth of additional health concerns. Within the homeless population there is a relationship between aging and having a higher number of physical health problems (Tompsett, Fowler, & Toro, 2009). Cohen (1999) along with the NCH (2009) point out that chronic age is relatively unrelated to the health status of older homeless individuals, the health of a homeless 50 year old may resemble that of a 70 year old in the general population. Stergiopoulos and Herrmann (2003) state that mental health impairments exist in approximately one third of homeless adults. In addition, the rates of mental health problems among the older homeless deviate more from those of the general population than do those of adolescents (Tompsett et al., 2009).

Apart from experiencing major physical and mental health difficulties, compared to younger homeless individuals, older homeless adults are less likely to have large social support networks to draw upon and are therefore somewhat more isolated than their younger counterparts (Cohen, 1999; Tompsett et al., 2009). Older homeless adults are also more vulnerable to victimization, specifically, abuses such as muggings and beatings (Vance, 1995). In the past, homelessness initiatives, services, and organizations have often focused their resources on youth, women with children, and traditionally working aged people. In addition to a lack of services catering to the needs of the older homeless population, the older homeless are less likely to have knowledge of what services are available to them and are sometimes less motivated to seek advice or assistance (Pannell & Palmer, 2004).

A lack of affordable housing for older adults plays another major role in precipitating and maintaining homelessness among older adults. Eviction due to lack of income was named as a reason for homelessness for 60% of participants in a study of shelter users in New York (Stergiopoulos & Herrmann, 2003). The NCH (2009) states that 'throughout the nation there are at least 9 seniors waiting for every occupied unit of affordable elderly housing', a definite indication of a lack of low income housing for older adults. Housing and employment exist in a bi-directional relationship for the homeless population, making both job searching and applying for low income housing all the more difficult.

On top of the barriers to employment mentioned above, older homeless individuals face difficulties associated with the general older population as well as those associated with the general homeless population. The inability to find a secure job that offers enough hours to make a living is a challenge to overcome for those attempting to escape homelessness. Inconsistent, part time, or temporary work opportunities do not provide reliable income and are therefore not an effective solution for overcoming homelessness (Shier & Jones, 2013).

Not having contact information or legal identification, stigma toward hiring the homeless, and limited and lack of competitive education are a just few of the additional barriers the majority of the homeless population experience in becoming employed (CHF, 2012).

Older workers generally take significantly longer than younger workers to secure employment, those aged 55-64 spending on average 22.8 weeks unemployed compared to a mere 7.9 weeks for individuals aged 15-24 (Statistics Canada, 2007). Berger (2009) recognizes that while the literature largely challenges the validity of old age stereotypes, employers are still heavily influenced by their stereotypical beliefs in hiring, training, promoting, and retaining older employees. Studies have found employers perceive older workers as less adaptable, flexible, and trainable, and have poorer physical abilities and cognitive capacities (Berger, 2009; Billett et al., 2011; Wilson et al., 2007).

When reviewing the immense number of barriers that stand in the way of the older homeless population obtaining employment, it is easy to appreciate the challenging reality that is faced by this population when looking for work. These barriers do not only concern the well-being of older adults, but affect the entire Canadian workforce. Declining birth rates coupled with increasing life expectancy means the population, and in turn the workforce, will be older than previous generations (Shimoni et al., n.d.). By 2023 there will be an estimated 25 workers 65 years and older for every 100 workers aged 15-64 compared to 16 in 2008 (Government of Alberta, 2008). Without a sufficient number of younger workers or immigrants to replace the baby boomers as they approach retirement, the workforce will experience a major loss of skills, knowledge, and ultimately, manpower. Thus, there is growing concern regarding how to keep older workers engaged in or to re-engage them in the workforce in order to maximize their potential contribution (Government of Alberta, 2008). That being said, the barriers experienced by older workers, including employer misperceptions, must be changed to avoid a labour force shortage in the near future.

Programs, services, and policies have emerged aimed at supporting and protecting older workers throughout the employment process. One approach involves providing subsidized work training programs specifically for older workers experiencing unemployment. The Government of Canada's 'Targeted Initiative for Older Workers' (TIOW) is an example of such a program. The TIOW offers services such as resume writing, employment counselling, skills upgrading and work experience for those aged 55-64 who are currently unemployed. Frerichs and Naegele (2008) suggest a preventative strategy whereby companies forwardly acknowledge the needs of older workers in their policies to ensure no discriminatory treatment occurs. Smaller community-based organizations offering services such as employment coaching and resume writing as well as free or low cost skills upgrading workshops, some of which are developed specifically for the retraining of older workers, are also becoming increasingly prevalent. For older homeless adults however, a population facing discrimination from more than one angle, there remains a lack of services that can effectively address and accommodate their unique circumstances.

Barriers to Finding Employment

Health Barriers

Physical Health

There are a plethora of health problems that are faced by the older homeless population. Physical health problems emerged repeatedly as a major precipitating and maintaining factor of the homelessness of older adults. The natural physical decline experienced with age is exacerbated by the homeless lifestyle, which causes the health of the older homeless to decline prematurely. Homeless older adults suffer from significantly higher rates of chronic illness compared to homeless individuals under the age of 50 as well as compared to the general older population (Cohen, 1999; Greater Vancouver Shelter Strategy [GVSS], 2013; Vance, 1995). In addition, concerns such as poor nutrition and sleep deprivation, both of which are characteristic of a homeless lifestyle, can contribute to the development and worsening of the state of many chronic illnesses. Some of the chronic illnesses that are more commonly experienced by the older homeless include cardiovascular disease, chronic lung disease, chronic liver disease, diabetes, arthritis, and chronic respiratory illnesses (Crane & Warnes, 2010; Vance, 1995).

Moreover, there are countless acute physical health issues that the older homeless are highly susceptible to, many of which prove to be extremely limiting. Examples include poor dental hygiene, foot problems, poor circulation, leg ulcers, scabies, urinary incontinence, infection, and dehydration (Bottomley, 2001; Crane & Warnes, 2010). Many clients who were interviewed mentioned health issues as a barrier to finding employment.

Mental Health

A recent study conducted at the DI in Calgary found an astonishing 60.2% of Calgary's homeless population to have probable mental illness (Ganesh, Campbell, Hurley, & Patten, 2013). Rates of mental disorders in the general homeless population have can range from 20-70% or higher depending on the location, sampling criteria, and diagnostic measures used from study to study (Cohen, 1999; Vance, 1995; Wintringham, 2004); as many as 80% of these disorders go untreated among the homeless (Cagle, 2009). Such mental health issues may be present before an individual is experiencing homelessness and therefore may contribute to an individual becoming homeless. On the other hand, the stressful, unhealthy lifestyle associated with homelessness may serve as a trigger for the onset of a mental illness for which an individual already has a diathesis.

Although little is known about the exact rates of older homeless adults suffering from mental disorders, studies have shown older adults to score significantly higher on mental illness scales for a variety of disorders including depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, paranoia, somatization, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and psychoticism (Crane & Warnes, 2010; Tompsett et al., 2009). Other studies contradict such findings claiming to find relatively low rates of some mental illnesses, specifically psychoticism, among older compared to younger homeless populations (Cohen, 1999; GVSS, 2013; Stergiopoulous & Herrmann, 2003).

Despite such discrepancies, there is consensus throughout the literature that depression, dementia, and alcoholism are major mental health challenges faced by older homeless individuals. Depression is overwhelmingly the most prevalent mental illness experienced by the older homeless population, estimates ranging from 33- 65% of the older homeless being depressed at any point in time (Crane & Warnes, 2010; Stergiopoulous & Herrmann, 2003; Wintringham, 2004). Depression can be caused or exacerbated by various factors that are characteristic of older homeless adults: a lack of social support, restricting health issues, comorbid mental illnesses, alcoholism, and stressful life circumstances such as divorce, the death of a loved one, or unemployment. Suicide rates are also significantly higher within the general homeless and general older populations (GVSS, 2013).

Memory impairments, often associated with old age, are another mental health barrier commonly seen amongst older homeless adults, at least one third of the population testifying to have experienced some form of dementia (Crane & Warnes, 2010; Stergiopoulous & Herrmann, 2003).

Addiction

Up to 56.5% of homeless older adults report experiencing alcohol problems, a significantly higher rate than the general population (Crane & Warnes; Crane et al., 2005; Tompsett et al., 2009; Wintringham, 2004). Individuals may have used alcohol before they were homeless as a means of coping with stress or traumatic events or they may turn to drinking as a means by which to escape their current situation. Alcohol can play a causal role in marital dysfunction, behavioral problems, and eviction, all of which can lead to homelessness (Crane et al., 2005). Some studies have indicated that older homeless adults are more likely than younger homeless individuals to engage in alcohol abuse, while others claim that no significant difference exists (Crane et al., 2005; Stergiopoulous & Herrmann, 2003).

Drug addictions are much less prevalent than alcoholism among older homeless adults; however, rates are still higher than that of the general older population (GVSS, 2013). Finally, gambling addictions have been linked to homelessness, especially for males; age differences associated with gambling problems and homelessness has not yet been explored. The power addiction has over every aspect of one's life makes it an essential barrier to address before creating healthy relationships, attaining financial security, and becoming sustainably employed.

Physical health constraints are commonly cited as a reason for which individuals are forced to quit their jobs or for being fired. Health issues reduce the employability of the older homeless substantially. If, for example, an older man has worked with construction for his entire life, but can no longer engage in hard labour due to age-related physical restraints, his employment prospects diminish significantly (CHF, 2012).

Likewise, many mental illnesses make finding and maintaining employment an enormous challenge for older adults and for the homeless.

Unpredictable and or maladaptive behaviors are characteristic of depression, alcoholism, and most psychotic disorders, behaviors such as outbursts and missing work that are often not tolerated by employers. Physically or mentally health induced or maintained unemployment can in turn lead to financial difficulties, marital breakdown, ineffective coping, and eventual homelessness (Wintringham, 2004).

Social Barriers

Stressful Life Events

It is perhaps not surprising that stressful or traumatic life events often precipitate homelessness. Some individuals may experience an accumulation of negative life events beginning in childhood, the sum of which may eventually lead to homelessness. Individuals who grow up in low socioeconomic status homes and poor neighborhoods are at a higher risk of becoming homeless (Cohen, 1999). The majority of these people's work experience involves semi-skilled or unskilled labour, which, on the resume of an older homeless individual, acts as an additional barrier to finding meaningful employment (Cohen, 1999). Similarly, rates of homelessness are higher in those who spent a portion of their youth in the foster care system or living in group homes (Cohen, 1999) as well as for those raised in single parent homes (Echenberg & Jensen, 2009). Rates of physical and sexual abuse in childhood, including severe parental neglect, are also well above average in the homeless population and have been shown to correlate positively with the frequency and duration of adult homelessness (Echenberg & Jensen, 2009). Events experienced early in life can also influence mental illnesses experienced later in life and may serve as motivations for drug and alcohol addictions, all of which, as previously discussed, negatively impact the one's employability.

In contrast to an accumulation of negative experiences, a single negative event can directly trigger homelessness (Schroder-Butterfill & Marianti, 2006). An event commonly cited as having precipitated homelessness is the breakdown of one's marital relationship (Crane et al., 2005; Echenberg & Jensen, 2009; Wintringham, 2004). The terms of one's divorce may impact an individual's financial circumstances and often forces one or both partners out of their current accommodation. Additionally, there may be interplay between divorce, addiction, domestic abuse, or mental illness affecting many areas of one's life, including the ability to work and successfully hold down a job. For women in particular, escaping an abusive relationship may directly result in homelessness (Echenberg & Jensen, 2009).

Another life event that pertains to the situation of many older homeless adults is the death of a spouse or loved one (Crane et al., 2005; Butterfill & Marianti, 2006; Schroder-Butterfill & Marianti, 2006; Wintringham, 2004). For an older adult, this may mean the loss of their primary source of income, caretaker, or of an important source of social support. Individuals may be left with heavy debts after the passing of their spouse that they are unable to pay off, including expensive medical bills or rent payments that one's pension cannot adequately cover (Wintringham, 2004). The death of a loved one may also increase one's vulnerability to depression. A final trigger worth mentioning is being laid off from work. Especially for low income individuals, cessation of monthly income paired with the challenge of finding work as an older adult may lead to the rapidly depletion of one's savings, leaving them unable to afford their basic needs and forcing them onto the streets.

Social Support

A reliable social support network is a crucial resource for anyone to have access to. Having family and or friends to turn to in times of need heavily influences one's coping capacities; not having these ties can precipitate homelessness when combined with difficult or traumatic life circumstances (Schroder-Butterfill & Marianti, 2006). Unfortunately, older homeless adults lack strong relationship ties more often than not. Older adults often experience longer and more frequent episodes of homelessness than adolescents, Hecht and Coyle (2001) finding an average of 747.1 days spent homeless for older adults compared to a mere 337.8 for younger adults. Some research points toward the existence of an inverse relationship between length of time homeless and social support (Tompsett et al., 2009).

Compared to adolescents, homeless adults report having fewer and experiencing less contact with family members and friends with whom they were acquainted prior to becoming homeless (Tompsett et al., 2009). Homeless older adults may not have any living family members or friends to engage with and they may not be as well-accepted by the general homeless population (Vance, 1995). Being cut off from one's family can occur for a variety of reasons that can potentially exacerbate the negative consequences associated with homelessness, including chronic substance abuse, behavioral problems, or mental health issues.

In addition to not having strong family connections, older adults may lack other types of social relationships. Being employed provides another important source of social support, especially for older adults who may lack friends or family in their community.

Relationships with co-workers provide an opportunity to engage with individuals in the community and form social ties; becoming unemployed as an older adult may mean losing not only one's source of income, but a significant portion of one's social contacts (Berger, 2005). Finally, such social connections can "act as a buffer to reduce the stress associated with unemployment" (Berger, 2009, pp. 311). The importance of social support in maintaining a healthy lifestyle is well documented and cannot be stressed enough.

Exploitation and Victimization

Some employers, contrary to what one would expect, are highly motivated to hire older workers. Unfortunately, this desire does not always occur for the right reasons, for example, hiring older workers under the presumption that they are not as motivated to make as much money as younger workers so that they can maintain various supplemental incomes. Exploitation and abuse are serious concerns for the general older population. In terms of the labour market this means not offering older workers adequate wages based on actual levels of productivity. Furthermore, the combination of being older and homeless makes individuals exceptionally vulnerable to being victims of crimes, such as muggings and fraud, perhaps due to their declining physical and mental abilities (Vance, 1995) as well as their lack of social connections within the homeless community to protect themselves from such abuses. Fear of being mugged may mean not being able to safely carry money around, and, on top of potential injuries, anticipating being attacked may make older homeless adults paranoid, suspicious, and withdrawn.

Logistical Barriers

Basic Needs

When it comes to applying for a job there are certain blanks that have to be filled in if an employer is to consider hiring an individual. For older homeless adults, their date of birth is not the only piece of information that makes them likely candidates for discrimination. Many homeless individuals do not have or may be in the process of attaining government issued identification, which may be required by employers upon being hired. Another potential barrier that disproportionately affects the employability of the homeless population is the existence of a criminal record.

Arguably the most obvious logistical barrier for the homeless is not being able to provide an address and a telephone number on one's resume or job application (CHF, 2012). This may deter potential employers from hiring someone due to stigma associated with homelessness, or, it may make an individual genuinely difficult to contact. Including a shelter address or phone number on one's resume is not always a desirable alternative and can hinder one's confidence in looking for employment (CHF, 2012). Finally, lack of adequate or affordable transportation to and from work can make it hard for older adults, especially those with limited mobility, to find and maintain employment.

Another barrier for finding work is simply a lack of available full time jobs. Calgary's unemployment rate increased to 5.5% as of June 2014 from 4.7% in February 2014 (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada [HRSDC], 2014). Job stability and security have declined over the past few decades; new forms of labour have become more prevalent, including part-time hours, day labour, temporary work, and independent contracting (NCH, 2007). These jobs often exploit workers, paying them unfair wages and offering minimal job security and benefits (NCH, 2007). For homeless individuals, temporary or inconsistent work is not a form of secure employment. Individuals working such jobs cannot reliably meet their basic needs and often experience difficulty saving enough money to find a place to live (Shier & Jones, 2013). Additionally, being paid in cash can tempt individuals with substance abuse issues to spend their money on drugs or alcohol (CHF, 2012). For some older homeless adults, full-time work is the only means by which they can afford their basic needs. For others living on the edge of homelessness, part-time may be sufficient as long as they can cover the cost of living.

Housing

Housing is deemed 'affordable' if it costs an individual less than 30% of their income. In Canada, over 1 in 4 households spend over 30% of their income on housing, and 10.5% spend 50% or more (The Homeless Hub [HH], 2014). As Calgary's aging population grows, so does the shortage of affordable housing.

For older homeless adults, affordability may not be the only necessary criteria for a suitable living space. The need for specialized housing that is accessible to seniors is growing rapidly in Calgary. There is currently an 800-1200 deficit of housing units available for seniors. By 2031 Calgary will need an estimated 16 000 more apartments and ground oriented units (City of Calgary, n.d.).

Older adults may be forced to leave their current housing for many reasons: inability to maintain housing due to age related issues, problems with neighbors or family members, or financial problems such as not being able to afford monthly rent.

Not surprisingly, rates of homelessness are positively correlated with housing prices (Crane & Warnes, 2010). Paired with the unemployment and underemployment characteristic of older homeless adults, the 948 dollar average rent for a one bedroom apartment in Calgary (CHF, 2013) is simply unaffordable. Calgary has recently decided to take a 'housing first' approach to ending homelessness with the idea that "by taking the homeless away from the dangers of life on the streets, their lives stabilize and their conditions improve" (Charity Intelligence Canada [CIC], 2009). So far the program has proved successful in keeping people in their homes, an accomplishment that has been recognized as an important step in attaining sustainable employment. Even with an estimated 1570 low income units being built in the city over the next few years (CHF, 2013), Calgary will not have enough suites that are suitable for the population of older homeless adults, many of whom have additional barriers to consider.

Skills and Training

With today's rapidly changing technology, it can be hard for any of us to keep up. The nature of jobs available is has become somewhat dichromatic, positions are either entry level, or require further education. This restricts older workers who may have spent their entire working life working in the declining number of semi-skilled positions that have now become computerized or automated. For the older homeless, this challenge is magnified by their lack of access to training and technology as well as by their minimal experience with technology relative to younger generations. Although older workers may bring a lifetime of work experience and skill to the workplace, their skills and education may be considered "obsolete" or "outdated" and are therefore not incentives for employers, many of who take a capitalistic perspective and hire based on levels of perceived productivity (Wilson et al., 2007).

Older adults may not be qualified or physically able to work in the field in which they were trained and therefore may require training in a more suitable career for their current circumstances, one that may be completely unfamiliar to them. Additionally, individuals who have been unemployed for some time may have lost some of their skills over time due to disuse or declining physical capacity and may not be able to work as efficiently as they were once able to (Frerichs & Gerhard, 2008). Low levels of computer literacy and or access combined with the growing trend of businesses using online applications also puts restrictions on the type of jobs this population has access to (CHF, 2012).

Older adults who have been experiencing homelessness may not have much work experience to begin with or may have large gaps in their resumes. This limits the type of jobs these individuals are considered for, and in today's competitive economy, severely hinders their employment prospects (NCH, 2007). Some older homeless individuals may not have graduated high school, which even some entry-level jobs require. On the other hand, some individuals may have degrees, diplomas, or extensive certification yet still experience difficulty finding employment due to other barriers and circumstantial factors.

Knowledge and Use of Services

If all things were equal, older homeless adults would have easy access to the many aged care services in Calgary. Unfortunately, this is not the reality. Service professionals may consciously or unconsciously discriminate against individuals with homeless backgrounds and not offer them the same level of care. On the other hand, older homeless adults may be reluctant to accept or be suspicious of these services (Tompsett et al., 2009; Wintringham, 2004). Poor interpersonal skills characteristic of the homeless population may also hinder their tendency to reach out to service providers. In addition, older homeless adults aged 50-64 who are not considered 'old' or a 'senior' but nonetheless may be experiencing health problems of someone much older, do not have access to the same services as those aged 65 and older (Cohen, 1999). In terms of services for the homeless, there are many services that cater specifically to youth, families, and women, while the older homeless remain a sub-population largely overlooked.

Although some older homeless adults may be in contact with multiple services, others remain isolated or spend extensive periods of time as 'hidden' homeless (sleeping in long term hostels, in a car, or on someone's couch, for example) (Pannell & Palmer, 2004). Also, older homeless adults may not make use of shelters due to fear of victimization by younger, more physically able homeless individuals (Crane & Warnes, 2010).

Another possibility for not accessing services is simply a lack of knowledge about one's rights and about the services one has access to. Not only must older homeless adults know what services are available to them, but they must understand how they can access them as well as the procedures involved with utilization of each (Vance, 1995). For example, whether or not one can be admitted intoxicated or what times meals are served each day.

Societal Barriers

Discrimination and Stereotypes

Age discrimination in the workplace has become more prevalent in recent years and is perhaps the most restrictive barrier for older workers looking for employment. Discriminatory practices such as unwillingness to hire older workers, not providing older workers with equal training opportunities, or terminating the employment of older workers without justifiable cause, can make finding or keeping a job next to impossible for older workers. Older workers experience significantly longer periods of unemployment than younger workers (Shen & Kleiner, 2001). Many older workers report never having such difficulty finding work when they were younger, and believe age to be one of their most defining factors in the eyes of potential employers (Berger, 2009).

The youth oriented nature of modern society may also influence discriminatory employer practices (Billett et al., 2011; Wilson et al., 2007). The tendency toward the privileging of youth in countries such as Canada makes employers less likely to hire and train older adults even if they perceive them to be equally as competent (Billett et al., 2011).

The central driving force behind age discrimination is stereotypes and stigma associated with the older population. Many people's schematic representations of older adults do not include characteristics that would make them effective, able workers. Employer's attitudes and decisions are heavily influenced by stereotypes of older workers, most notably, the negative ones. Negative stereotypes of older workers include less flexibility, adaptability and creativity, diminished cognitive and physical ability, poorer productivity, being difficult to train, and having higher rates of illness and accidents (Berger, 2009; Magd, 2003; The NTAR Leadership Center [NTARLC], 2012; Wilson et al., 2007). In fact, older employees are less likely to be absent and more likely to be satisfied with their jobs, are equally as trainable and just as, if not more productive than younger employees (Magd, 2003; Shen & Kleiner, 2003). Employers also may perceive older workers to have outdated skills and to be less connected to social media, an essential communication tool for many modern businesses (NTARLC, 2012).

When older adult workers are exposed to the stereotypical beliefs of others, the anxiety and distress individuals experience due to fear of acting in a manner consistent with these stereotypes can cause a self-fulfilling prophecy effect whereby their anxiety causes them to act in accord with the stereotypical expectations they were trying to avoid in the first place (Berger, 2009). Older adults in particular, are prone to internalizing stigmatization (Berger, 2009) and therefore may experience despair and hopelessness in the workplace, in turn, come across as less competent and productive workers.

Recommendations

In order to facilitate the reintegration of older homeless workers employers, employees, and service providers alike must make an active effort to promote the hiring, retention, and satisfaction of older workers. The following are recommended initiatives that are considered best practices associated with the hiring of older homeless adults that can be put into place in Calgary and other cities across Canada (Billett et al., 2011; Bethany Care Society & ElderNET Calgary., n.d.; Frerichs & Gerhard, 2008; Malatest & Associates Ltd., 2003; National Bank of Canada, 2012; Shepell.fgi, n.d., Shimoni et al., n.d.; World Health Organization, 2007):

General Recommendations

The importance of employing the aging population makes government involvement essential in successfully challenging age discrimination in the workplace and promoting the benefits of older workers.

Comprehensive city-wide campaigns promoting the positive qualities of older workers should be created to change the general public's preconceptions associated with the term 'older worker'. In addition, laws and policies against age discrimination and the exploitation of older workers need to be strictly monitored and enforced. Another method that should receive more attention is providing government incentives or subsidies for the training and or hiring of older workers. It is essential that these subsidies ensure workers are earning enough money to meet basic costs of living.

Other general recommendations to consider include:

- Prevent the onset of older homelessness through altering mandatory retirement policies to ensure older workers can remain employed past 65 if they desire or need additional income
- Educate aged care service providers about the unique barriers associated with older homelessness and encourage their acceptance and service of older homeless adults
- Provide reliable, frequent, affordable public transportation options to and from business dense areas
- Build a sufficient number of affordable, accessible housing units for older adults close to transportation options or places of employment

Training Recommendations

In addition to offering more government funded training options for older workers, it is important that older workers are consulted and involved in the development of such training programs, as well as in the creation of workplace policies, campaign efforts, and recruitment strategies. In order to improve training outcomes, the preferences and preferred learning styles of older workers must be taken into consideration in determining training strategies and programs. It is essential that a sufficient amount of free or affordable career training and skill upgrading opportunities are provided and are easily accessible to those living in or at risk of poverty. Additional specific training recommendations include:

- Encourage businesses to integrate training with recruitment and provide paid training periods for new employees
- Regularly offer, free/affordable, basic technology skills certification courses specifically designed for older adults/those individuals who are unfamiliar with technologies required in the workplace

Hiring & Retention Recommendations

Employers should consider designing mentoring or supervisory roles specifically for older workers with relevant experience to facilitate the passing on of knowledge to younger generations. This can be done through creatively integrating the unique skills and knowledge of older workers with individual workplace demands to create age targeted, meaningful job opportunities. Such positions would also ensure older workers are assigned less physically and mentally demanding tasks. In terms of older employee retention, offering phased or gradual retirement options is a valuable option in terms of maximizing employee knowledge and skill and ensuring financial stability for employees prior to full time retirement. Other methods of attracting older workers to apply to jobs and remain employed include:

- Emphasize skills and knowledge over education in job descriptions to attract older workers
- Ensure job descriptions and application processes are accessible to a diverse population (not only available online, for example)
- Monitor preferences of older workers through providing opportunities to them to elaborate on their workplace experiences
- Provide opportunities for workplace advancement or assignment variety to maintain high levels of motivation
- Continuously provide educational and upgrading opportunities throughout employment to avoid skills becoming 'dated' or weakened due to disuse

Recommendations for Employers

The key for employers in terms of successfully hiring and retaining older workers is flexibility. Flexibility in terms of hours and schedule, location (providing opportunities to work from home, for example), and time off are of huge importance in creating age appropriate employment opportunities. In addition, it is crucial for employers to acknowledge and adapt to age related health limitations through taking measures such as ensuring worksites are accessible and being tolerant of sick days based on individual circumstances.

Employers must maintain an approachable, available rapport in order to foster a comfortable work environment and should be prepared to provide feedback and encouragement to employees on an individual level. Scheduling one-on-one meetings with employees to monitor their satisfaction, experiences, and to build a professional relationship can help ensure employee contentment, workplace quality, and foster employee confidence. Employers can also:

- Diminish stereotypes through age diversity and awareness workshops for all staff and management to create an age inclusive work atmosphere
- Pay employees a minimum wage that can successfully meet their basic needs
- Employ workers on a full time or guaranteed part time basis rather than temporarily to increase job stability
- Introduce new employees to a 'go-to' co-worker to whom they can ask questions easily and build a relationship with
- Have a means by which employees can anonymously voice their concerns for those who feel anxious or embarrassed to come forward in person
- Have counselors available for employees to access through the workplace and promote their use

Recommendations for Service Providers

In order to design effective employment programs/services for older adults who are experiencing homelessness, using the experiences of homeless or previously homeless older adults who are currently or were recently searching for sustainable employment to adapt employment programs to the older homeless population it an important measure to take. Employment services should have advocates/case workers who specialize in working with older adults and are familiar with the unique barriers they face; these professionals should be the ones promoting older workers to businesses in the city and connecting employees with employers using a job referral system.

- Implement outreach initiatives within communities to create widespread awareness among older homeless or older adults of the services available to them and the procedures involved with each
- Create new or refer clients to existing mature workers programs, search engines, and job boards
- Post job listings at seniors centers and speak to seniors groups about employment opportunities available to them
- Provide counseling/mentoring services to help older homeless individuals develop confidence, identify their strengths, and teach modern job search, resume, and interview skills
- Provide workers approaching retirement age with retirement planning advisors and information to help them plan for a successful transition into retirement
- Collaborate with other services that cater to the wide range of needs and barriers faced by older homeless adults to simplify the processes involved in getting the assistance they require (housing and health care, for example)

Recommendations for Older Workers Approaching Retirement

Employees approaching retirement age should seek advice from a financial advisor who can help calculate the best possible time to begin receiving Old Age Security (OAS) and Canada Pension Plan (CPP) payments based on one's age, work status, savings, disabilities, etc. Additional considerations such as setting up a RRSP, budgeting strategies, and paying off debt should be discussed to determine one's required retirement income. Employees should also inquire with their current employers about phased or gradual retirement options as well as whether or not they offer an Employer Pension Plan. This is also the time to begin searching for career options that are suitable for post-retirement circumstances that may include reducing to part time or temporary hours, engaging in telecommuting, or agreeing upon alternative flexible terms of employment. In addition, workers approaching retirement should:

- Begin working toward finding a sustainable housing option for post-retirement years
- Pay close attention to their health status and stay active to maintain self-sufficiency
- Create a support network by becoming involved in your community through volunteering, activities, clubs, etc.
- Actively seek out and take advantage of services that cater to older adults (health care, mental health, social involvement, employment and volunteer options, educational, etc.)

Conclusions

As the city of Calgary progresses through its 10 year plan to end homelessness, the unique needs of older homeless adults will need to be addressed if homelessness is to be successfully eliminated. For individuals characterized by the combination of old age and homelessness, achieving and maintaining employment presents an extreme challenge. Barriers to employment experienced by older homeless workers discussed in this paper include:

- Health - physical health, mental health, addiction
- Social - stressful life events, social support, victimization/exploitation
- Logistical - basic needs, housing, skills and training, knowledge and use of services
- Societal - discrimination and stereotypes

As the growing sub-population of older homeless adults is recognized, organizations will need to implement specific strategies and programs aimed at ensuring their safety and well-being. In terms of employment, this means developing services that focus on overcoming age related obstacles associated with employment and employability and making these services easily accessible to those experiencing homelessness. It is equally as important for individual employers and employees to make changes and take steps toward creating an age inclusive environment that benefits both parties. Recommendations include:

- Strict implementation and monitoring of age discrimination policy
- Educating employers, employees, and the general public about the benefits of older workers
- Innovative creation of job opportunities that take full advantage of the skill and knowledge of older workers by individual employers
- Implementing targeted recruitment strategies for older workers
- Allowing workplace flexibility and accommodation of age or situation related needs
- Providing and taking advantage of gradual or phased retirement options
- Ensuring ample access to affordable or subsidized training/skill upgrading opportunities that appeal to older adults
- Availability of various complementary support services for older workers
- Preparation of and assistance in determining retirement plans and strategies toward a successful transition into retirement

In order to successfully facilitate the employment needs of the older homeless population service providers and employers must be well-informed regarding the unique situations older homeless adults endure.

Further research should aim to explore:

- The prevalence of older homelessness in cities across Canada
- The type of employment opportunities that appeal to the older homeless population
- The preferences and perceived needs of the older homeless population
- Current initiatives that have been implemented by businesses internationally designed to cater to the needs of employees and employers in terms of the aging population and their successes/challenges
- Possibilities for modifying services available to older adults and to the homeless to cater to the unique needs of older homeless adults

One in six Canadian workers is aged 55 and older; this number will likely reach one in four by the year 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2011). Initiatives aimed at encouraging older adults to join the workforce and promote the hiring and training of older workers need to be implemented promptly to take full advantage of their expertise and to ensure stability of the Canadian workforce. Therefore, it is necessary to sustainably employ older workers, not only for personal stability, but also to benefit employers, and the Canadian economy in general. Through acknowledging the needs of older workers, re-structuring stereotypical perspectives of older workers, and the creative integration of older workers into the workforce, we can work towards meeting the needs of and reducing the number of unemployed older adults, and in turn, the number of older adults experiencing homelessness in Calgary.

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