

Champion Centre goes national

By LISA JOY /Editor
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A made-in-Ponoka solution to get vulnerable mentally ill homeless off the street and into safe, affordable long-term housing is positioned to become a national model.

The first Champion Centre opened its doors in Ponoka in 2002, the second one got the green light in Medicine Hat with construction starting last month and the idea will be pitched to a group of Edmonton city officials, MLAs and community groups next week.

"I'd like to see a Champion Centre in every city," said Klaas Klooster, founder of the registered, non-profit national charity that provides low-income room and board for formerly homeless, or at risk of being homeless, men.

Klooster has also presented his concept to other cities.

"I got a positive response from all over Canada. Medicine Hat said we desperately need this type of housing. Edmonton, Calgary, Nanaimo and Toronto really like the idea."

"With 2,000 homeless in Edmonton we could open up 10 -15 centres in Edmonton alone," said Klooster in a phone interview from his Medicine Hat home.

"In Medicine Hat this is the first of three centres. We will also provide hot lunch along with the Salvation Army to feed the poor which is really cool."

The \$215,000 Medicine Hat facility is being constructed from an old restaurant and should be up and running late this spring and will provide a permanent residence for 10-12 men.

"It's really exciting to see it come together," said Klooster, a Lutheran pastor and former Ponoka resident. "It took almost a year to lay the ground work. It was a lot of public speaking, talking to businesses, and building rapport with the community."

The home received \$100,000 from the Medicine Hat Community Housing Society, \$40,000 from the Medicine Hat Community Foundation and \$50,000 from an anonymous donor. As well, financial support from seven local churches, businesses and fundraisers.

Like the Ponoka centre, Medicine Hat's will be a non-profit facility that operates without any government funding and will generate revenue from a café and antiques store open to the public.

"We are not a burden on society for funding," said Klooster.



LISA JOY/Ponoka News

Harold Doig sits in his room at Champion Centre in Ponoka and reads a spiritual pamphlet supplied by the centre that caters to homeless, or at risk of being homeless, men.

Support provided

The centres also provide psychosocial support to its residents for everything from medication administration and monitoring to helping them access community services. Life skills are taught and one-on-one tutoring is provided. They are involved with social interaction in the centre as well as the community. Residents pay room and board.

So far the centres are only geared towards homeless men.

"We want to serve both men and women but the need is really great among men, 80 per cent of the homeless, or those living in substandard housing, are men and we want to focus on that right now," said Klooster. "I'm hoping there will be (centres) for women. Right now there isn't a whole lot of response to it."

But Klooster added this is filling a definite need.

"That's been proven over and over again. This may be a partial solution to homelessness. With this type of housing, room and board, plus the integration of businesses to bring the public in to provide revenue, along with the tenant programs, then the concept really looks inviting.

The centre in Ponoka is a renovated old medical building downtown. The former doctor's examination rooms were converted into bedrooms with a single bed, wardrobe, drawers, desk, chair, shelves, fridge, sink and medicine cabinet. The laboratory was transformed into a kitchen, the ladies washroom and x-ray room became bathrooms and the cast room became the laundry room.

Common areas such as dining room, living room, laundry, showers and bathroom are shared. The residents have room cleaning service, satellite TV and local telephone service. A smoking room is provided downstairs and a pool table downstairs.

The centre emits a homey, quaint atmosphere.

"It's not an institution and not a care facility," said Klooster's brother Fred who runs the Ponoka facility. "That's why I decorated the place like my own house.

"This is long-term housing so they can stay here the rest of their lives. They need a stable environment.

"It's like my extended family," he added. "Every one gets along. Yes there are arguments once in awhile but that can soon be resolved."

The centre has a zero tolerance for drugs and alcohol with immediate eviction if caught breaking the rule. It is a Christian organization that provides chapel services every Sunday evening with voluntary attendance and its open to the public.

"We plant the seed and God does the rest," said Fred.

Facing homelessness

Long-time Ponoka Champion Centre resident Harold Doig, 66, knows what it's like to be faced with homelessness.

Doig worked on the railroad for 20 years and operated his own feed mill business for 15 years.

"I overworked," said the former Hanna resident. "Work, work, work. It just about killed me. Then I was drinking so darn bad and developed mental problems, depression."

He ended up as a patient in Alberta Hospital Ponoka (AHP) and upon release in 2002 had no

home to return. But the Champion Centre had just opened its doors in Ponoka and Doig was referred.

"I'm quite happy here," he said. "It suits me to a T. There's no groceries to buy. No dishes to wash. I was lucky I got in."

John Maddox, 65, farmed for a living near Eckville until his wife and family left him.

"It wasn't much fun then," he said. "So I went to drinking. I drank everything away."

Maddox also ended up without a home. His niece, a psychiatric nurse from Red Deer, told him about the centre in Ponoka. He has been here at Champion Centre for almost two years now and is settled.

"They're punctual here. Your supper is set at 5 o'clock every night, right on the money. It doesn't vary."

"It's a home for us no doubt," he added. "It's the only home we got."

Victor Berkey, 66, has lived at the centre for one-and-a-half years and has worked all over Alberta including Lacombe and Calgary.

"I worked mostly rough labour but when my back went out on me I couldn't work," he said. "I ended up in (AHP).

"I would rather be living on my own but I can't work," he added.

The centre has become a permanent home for men who otherwise may be on the street. But more still needs to be done says Klooster.

"I shouldn't be the only one doing this. If more organizations want to adopt this concept that we have I think go for it please. It will work."

Klooster expects the Medicine Hat facility to generate more revenue for operating costs than the Ponoka centre.

Not in it for money

"Our operation in Ponoka is a losing operation and not a money maker," said Klooster. "If we didn't have donations from people we wouldn't survive.

"I'm not in this for money if I was I'd be broke," he added. "I'm not paid by Champion Centre in Ponoka. I don't get paid. The Champion Centre does not support me. I have to go look for funding."

In fact, when Klooster launched the estimated \$150,000 Ponoka Champion Centre, \$62,000 in funding came from Canada Mortgage Housing with Klooster himself picking up most of the shortfall.

"The rest of it came out of my pocket and donations from people."

But Klooster is dedicated to his mission.

"What we do as a non-profit charitable organization is very valuable so we stick with it.

"My belief, I believe I'm a Christian number one, and number two, if we follow the example of Christ then I believe we should help the poor. In fact, we have a mandate to do that from the scripture. Charity is love."