



# SORCe—An Integrative Model of Collaborative Support for People in Need

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## 46.1 Introduction

The **Safe Communities Opportunity and Resource Centre (SORCe)** is a multi-agency collaborative consisting of 13 government and not-for-profit agencies working in a brick and mortar store front in downtown Calgary. With 1.3 million people, Calgary is a major urban centre in Alberta, Canada, and consistently ranks amongst the most livable cities in the world. On 11 April 2018, the Alberta Point-in-Time Homeless Count was conducted across the province's seven major cities (Calgary Homeless Foundation 2018). The count found that Calgary had 2911 chronically homeless individuals. That accounts for 51% of the province's homeless population and makes Calgary the epicentre of homelessness in the province of Alberta.

SORCe connects people experiencing homelessness, or those at imminent risk of homelessness, to programmes and services that can help address the barriers to stable housing. SORCe focuses on housing assessments, mental health/addiction supports, justice interventions and connections to employment/training. By addressing an individual's upstream issues, two primary benefits should occur. The client receives better outcomes, and the two major systems that are impacted by this

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population should see a reduction in usage, specifically the justice and healthcare systems.

The original model for the collaborative was developed in 2009. The model grew from the recognition that the justice system has become a default mechanism for dealing with this demographic and that the system fails homeless people and their integration into the community. When police respond to calls from the public to deal with social disorder complaints, the homeless offender is typically charged with an offence ticket and/ or potential criminal charges. Failure to pay the ticket or deal with the criminal charges eventually leads to arrest and incarceration. This incarceration is usually only for short-term stays (30, 60, 90 days) and rarely does it have an impact on this demographic in the form of changed behaviour or recidivism rates. After release from the Calgary Remand Centre, the cycle starts again. This approach fails to address the underlying causes of homelessness and results in a substantial waste of resources.

A closer look at Calgary's homeless population shows a clear picture of vulnerability and instability (Campbell et al 2015; Nicholson et al. 2008). Trauma, mental health disorders and addiction are highly prevalent and are paired with physical health issues. Recent local data would suggest that 48% suffer from moderate to severe mental health issues and 54% from severe addiction. Calgary's homeless people self-medicate on street narcotics to address their mental health and rely on alcohol, non-beverage alcohol (hand sanitizing bladders, Listerine, rubbing alcohol) and crystal methamphetamine. Opioids are now appearing with a higher level of frequency within this population and in some cases are mixed with other street narcotics. In some cases, the mixing of the narcotics is intentional; in other cases, the chemical contents of the narcotics can be a complete mystery and the clients do not know what they are consuming. Many suffer from concurrent health problems ranging from frost bite to AIDS. Enforcement on this population has no impact on their behaviour and leads to cycling them through the criminal justice system. Data from the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) shows that as much as 50% of the homeless self-report a previous encounter with the justice system (Calgary Homeless Foundation 2018). This number is likely significantly underreported as are the numbers for those suffering from mental health issues and addictions. Based on her caseload, the SORCe mental health clinician estimates that close to 85% suffer from mental health issues (as many homeless people do not have a formal diagnosis), and that about 80% of them have a severe addiction.

SORCe is based on the supposition that the Calgary Police Service (CPS) cannot enforce its way out of these broader community-based issues such as trauma, mental illness, addiction or homelessness. In fact, during its early conception, it was posited that the CPS had to work closely with other government agencies and not-for-profit organizations to support Calgary's homeless citizens.

In 2012, three community leaders came together to create SORCe: Chief Rick Hanson from the Calgary Police Service (CPS), Dr. Lucy Miller the CEO of the United Way of Calgary and Area and Mrs. Brenda Huband the Chief Operating Officer for Central and Southern Alberta for Alberta Health Services (the Regional

Health Authority). Fourteen agencies in the not-for-profit and government sector responded to their call for action, and SORCe was born. The CPS would provide the facility and the management, and the other agencies would provide “service providers” as an in-kind contribution. This was an opportunity to work in a collaborative setting and see if this innovative approach could have an impact. The vision was to benefit clients by looking upstream and addressing the root causes of their criminal behaviour: trauma, mental health, addiction and homelessness.

### 46.1.1 Results to Date

Fast forward to 2020, SORCe is now a key institution in Calgary’s social fabric. In operation for just over 7 years (18 September 2013), the model continues to evolve. The most recent numbers speak to the success of the model:

Service volume	May 2017—March 2018 data (11 months)	April 2018—March 2019
Unique clients recorded	4001	4736
Total client visits	14,324	17,496
New clients per month	338	280

Note: Numbers are from the Homeless Management Information System

The majority of SORCe clients:

- Receive 3 services from their primary service provider;
- Seek services from at least one additional service provider at SORCe;
- Average 8 service transactions overall.

Since SORCe’s inception on 18 September 2013, the Calgary Homeless Foundation through their Coordinated Access and Assessment housing triage process has placed 3217 clients into housing in concert with programming. Of those, 1528 clients (47%) were SORCe clients.

#### *Participant Outcomes:*

A program evaluation reported the following participant outcomes:

- Time savings; simplified system navigation; access to multiple resources/programme in one location;
- Data sharing across the system of care, so clients can move between agencies and services seamlessly;
- Faster approval for, and access to, appropriate housing;
- Case management for those suffering from mental health and addiction issues;
- Outreach within the community to support reintegration;

- Access to food hampers and access services from case managers;
- Applications for municipal, provincial and federal funding programmes;
- Faster assessment, monitoring, planning, advocacy and referral to support services to manage ongoing issues and prevent relapse.

*System Outcomes:*

The Housing First Programmes require each participant to answer a set of questions prior to entering programming. Follow-up surveys are completed every three months up to a period of 45 months after being released from the programme. During a twelve-month period from April 2015 to March 2016, while clients were in programming, they reported the following outcomes.

Justice system:

- Contacts with police (↓ 73%);
- Days in jail (↓ 82%);
- Court appearances (↓ 44%).

Health System:

- EMS usage (↓ 61%);
- ER visits (↓ 61%);
- Days in hospital (↓ 79%).

Please note that this is client-reported data. A fuller evaluation is currently underway with findings released later in the year.

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## 46.2 The SORCe Model

SORCe is not itself an agency, but rather a multi-agency collaborative and was developed as a grass-roots initiative that is supported by a variety of community-based organizations. These organizations strive to expand the capacity, reach and coordination of existing programmes and services aimed at addressing the barriers to stable and sustainable housing.

By bringing together multiple agencies and programmes in a single location, SORCe strives to connect each client to all necessary programmes and services to support the individual and complex needs of each client that comes in the door.

Two key values drive SORCe:

**Housing First:** By providing the stability of permanent housing first, those experiencing homelessness will be better equipped to address the underlying issues contributing to homelessness.

**Inclusivity:** SORCe is a welcoming space where all people are treated with respect and dignity, regardless of race ancestry, place of origin, religious belief, skin colour, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, marital status, family status, physical or mental disability, or age.

SORCe operates primarily through in-kind contributions from the agencies participating in the collaborative, along with a small annual operating grant.

The SORCe partnership has evolved over the years and currently includes thirteen partners:

- *Alberta Health Services:* urgent mental health and addiction services;
- *Alberta Justice and Solicitor General:* access to a Probation Officer for individuals who have probation conditions and no fixed address;
- *Alpha House:* offers a safe space for those whose lives are affected by alcohol and drug dependency;
- *Calgary Catholic Immigrant Society:* resettlement and immigration services;
- *Calgary Child Advocacy Centre:* through Prenatal Outreach Support Team provides resources and support to pregnant women experiencing homelessness;
- *Calgary Police Service:* justice system navigation support for individuals seeking to address justice system-related barriers to ending homelessness;
- *Calgary Public Library:* connects clients to library resources by issuing library cards and providing information and available programmes and services;
- *Distress Centre Calgary:* provides financial empowerment services (financial education, tax assistance, support in accessing financial assistance); connects individuals to social services; primary access point to housing in Calgary;
- *The Calgary Drop-in and Rehab Centre:* victim outreach services for homeless people that have been a victim of crime;
- *Inn from the Cold:* provides housing information, referrals and assessments for families;
- *The Mustard Seed:* employment programme (resumes, referrals, coaching);
- *Woods Homes:* primary youth intake for Calgary's housing system;
- *YWCA Calgary:* domestic violence outreach and intensive case management outreach for women experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

Programmes and services are offered on a walk-in and appointment basis during regular business hours and are free to anyone who is experiencing or facing homelessness. SORCe is open Monday to Friday, from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. To access programmes and services, clients are required to complete an intake process which includes a client profile questionnaire. Clients must acknowledge that intake information shared with SORCe will be shared with all agencies that are participating in the collaborative, although a single client record does not exist. The service providers are all well versed on what each agency can do to support the clients and at what stage in the continuum of care a client is in. Client-centredness is critical, and client needs or wants in that moment in time determine what resources will be mobilized for that individual. Case conferences between SORCe agencies ensure that a client gets referred to the most appropriate services.

An early evaluation focused on the quality of the collaboration, i.e. how well the collaboration was working. The evaluation was completed by the United Way of Calgary and Area. The evaluators were tasked with interviewing a number of the front-line service providers. SORCe leadership stressed the importance in taking part in this process and reinforced with the staff that they were all subject matter experts in their respective fields and that they would determine the “speed, flow and direction” of SORCe based on their feedback. Not surprisingly, a number of issues emerged that reflect the challenges of traditionally autonomous agencies working in partnership (e.g. lack of trust and turf protection). From the evaluation, 21 recommendations were proposed; the most important was to be more client-centred (SORCe 2020). Initially, all the services were appointment-based (an agency-centric approach) and, anecdotally, only about 40% of clients would show up for their appointments. SORCe agencies now offer walk-in appointments primarily for highly acute clients to serve their immediate needs.

The Calgary Police Service was the backbone agency that supports SORCe. It provided the facility and SORCe’s Executive Director. It is governed by a Community Leadership Group (CLG). The CLG is comprised of the following agencies and positions:

1. United Way of Calgary and Area—CEO (Chair);
2. City of Calgary—Strategist Child and Family Service;
3. AHS—Executive Director Addictions and Mental Health Calgary Region;
4. Calgary Drop-In Centre—CEO;
5. Calgary Alpha House—Executive Director;
6. Calgary Distress Centre—CEO;
7. City of Calgary—Director Animal and Bylaw Services;
8. Calgary Homeless Foundation—CEO;
9. Calgary Police Service—Deputy Chief;
10. Government of Alberta—Prosecution Services—Chief Crown Prosecutor;
11. YWCA—CEO;
12. Government of Alberta—Probation Services—Director Southern Alberta.

As SORCe has evolved and matured, the question has been brought forward whether a different governance model would be more appropriate. Some have argued that there should be two levels of governance: one committee to examine how SORCe integrates into the broader community and its alignment with municipal and provincial government mandates and a second committee to support SORCe more on an operational level. These issues are being examined and explored by the current CLG committee.

### 46.2.1 Evolution of SORCe

From the success of SORCe, two other initiatives have organically grown. The first is the **Cross Roads Centre**, and the second is the **Calgary Community Court**.

### 46.2.1.1 The Cross Roads Centre

The Cross Roads Centre brings together four distinct entities:

- (a) iitaohkanitsini’kotsiiyio’p “Place of Conversation”: Canada’s first Indigenous Hub was launched by the Aboriginal Friendship Centre of Calgary, this hub is based on the 94 Recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) and the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls report (2019). It currently provides 16 different culturally sensitive programmes such as outreach connections programme, youth mental health mentoring, an indigenous homeless initiative, access to elders and ceremonies, a spring cultural camp, and youth and family drumming.
- (b) Safe Communities Opportunity and Resource Centre (SORCe).
- (c) Alberta Health Services (AHS) Mental Health and Addiction Service Centre: This centre supports five different programmes, as well as two group therapy sessions (Addictions Talk Therapy and a Mental Health Talk Therapy). It also houses the Canadian Mental Health Association’s Street Outreach and Stabilization programme and Alberta Addicts Who Educate and Advocate Responsibility (AAEAR), which is a peer support programme.
- (d) Calgary Homeless Foundation’s Learning Lab. This computer laboratory allows service providers from a variety of agencies to come and learn how to do housing assessments, Needs and Services Questionnaire (NSQ), and how to access and use Homeless Management Information System (HMIS).

The Cross Roads Centre provides social services, cultural supports, health care, justice and a centre for learning in a single location in the downtown core, where vulnerable street populations are known to congregate. Co-location is not the ultimate goal, but rather a critical first step to building a future of co-creation. The centre explores new ways of designing and delivering services in the community and across sectors, to a very vulnerable population with complex needs. Having SORCe embedded in this bigger collaborative allows extending the reach and impact for Calgary’s homeless population, in particular indigenous groups. The indigenous hub offers diverse culturally appropriate services to urban indigenous clients who make up 3–5% of Calgary’s population but make up 20% of the Calgary’s homeless population. The question that is being explored is whether these large systems can come together and move the clients between the systems to create a “warm hand off”.

### 46.2.1.2 The Calgary Community Court<sup>1</sup>

In 2015, the Calgary Police Service, through the SORCe programme, initiated collaboration with representatives from several Alberta/Calgary organizations to research and understand the revolving door of vulnerable persons engaged in public disorder (Lemieux et al. 2020) and establish an intervening mechanism, possibly a

<sup>1</sup>As of 2021 this program has not launched as a result of resource shortages, within the Justice System.

community court. This cross-agency steering committee eventually became the Community Justice Collaborative Calgary (CJCC) that drove the proposal for an initiative serving the City of Calgary. CJCC established a mission of helping vulnerable Calgarians charged with non-violent social disorder offences whose criminal activity is related to issues of marginalization, addiction, mental health and/or homelessness. These individuals were to have improved access to integrated support services while still being held accountable for their behaviour.

In 2017, after visiting community courts in Canada and in the USA, CJCC engaged the Center for Court Innovation to assist in the planning efforts for a community justice initiative in Calgary. The result was a comprehensive review and a business plan for the initial launch of the Calgary Community Court (Center for Court Innovation 2018).

The Calgary Community Court is an individual-centred alternative court system that uses a therapeutic approach to justice and focuses on individuals struggling with trauma, addiction, mental health and/or homelessness as underlying causes for criminal involvement. The Community Court's individual-centred approach reduces the burden on the traditional justice system by combating recidivism. This is achieved by focusing on individual needs and the root causes of criminal involvement that are not addressed in the current criminal justice system.

Key elements of the Calgary Community Court are:

- (a) Takes the traditional adversarial justice model and moves to a collaborative approach with the introduction of a probation officer with a social work background to engage with the client and build case plans.
- (b) Uses the justice system to leverage supports for the clients, through mandated interventions.
- (c) Is extremely effective with high system users.
- (d) There are 50 jurisdictions around the world that have Community Courts. All these courts have been top down, usually driven by governments. Calgary's is the first which comes from a grass-roots community movement.

The Calgary Community Court is seen as supporting a number of current issues and strategies such as the mental health and addiction strategy, strategies to combat the crystal meth and opioid crisis, as well as counterbalance recent funding cuts to corrections and probation. Once at full capacity, the court could see over 2000 clients a year. It is anticipated that the new approach would save the justice system close to \$35 million over three years. While some seed funding has been received, the initiative is still working on securing funding to move to implementation.



### 46.3 Summary and Conclusion

SORCe is the only one of its kind in Canada and is setting a standard, provincially, nationally and internationally. There were no templates or best practices that the instigators could refer to as they went about their business. The model took time and evolved through tenacity and a desire to bring about tangible change for Calgary's most vulnerable population. SORCe partners were able to prove that they could work together and can jointly impact on the clients, and subsequently the justice system and health system. When new agencies are brought to SORCe, the provision of care evolves, and this has a multiplier effect that cascades through the other service providers.

SORCe has fundamentally changed the approach to dealing with one of Calgary's most vulnerable populations. It is important to remember that historically, this population has not had a positive relationship with the police or other uniformed authorities (e.g. Calgary Transit Peace Officers, Calgary Bylaw Officers or mall security). In many cases, police officers now bring clients to SORCe because they have invested the time in building a relationship with those clients. Also, homeless people increasingly seek out the services of SORCe voluntarily, encouraged through word of mouth. Both attest to the acceptance SORCe has created with a level of trust that did not previously exist between these clients, Calgary Police Services and service providers.

The 2019 Social Return on Investment (SROI) evaluation was recently completed by the CPS. For every dollar invested at SORCe, there is a SROI of \$4.14 (SORCe 2020). This return will continue to grow with the increase in the number of participants and continued implementation of this initiative. The SROI analysis also provides insight into key project gains, inclusive of:

- Confirmation of the appropriateness of the services being offered;
- The critical importance to focus on housing support and mental health or addiction help;
- The value of the services added to this population as expressed by the clients themselves;
- The growing need of the services as evidenced by the increasing service use year over year;
- The ability of SORCe to continue to find ways to offer new services to meet the needs of their clients, despite having received very little programme funding.

SORCe has become part of the fabric of the homeless serving system of care. In conjunction with the Cross Roads Centre, it provides an opportunity to test a unique model of system integration for vulnerable populations. Supported by the Community Court, this integration model has the potential for significant collective impact.

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