

## A Success Story

### **Oasis, unité mobile d'intervention Laval, Quebec**

#### **An oasis on wheels for young and not-so-young homeless persons in Laval**

*Most people know very little about poverty in Laval. But every year, there are no fewer than 3,000 disadvantaged people aged 12 to over 50 who climb aboard the Oasis, a mobile unit that cruises up and down the streets of Laval, one of the wealthiest cities in Quebec. They find a little comfort, but mostly, they find compassionate listeners who are willing to help them.*

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With its trendy shopping malls and beautiful neighbourhoods that shine like new pennies, Laval, the second-largest city in Quebec, looks like anything but a city where poverty is rampant. Yet it is there, hidden in neighbourhoods overlooked by the recent economic boom. The premises of Oasis, a basement in an office building in Pont-Viau that serves as a meeting place for Oasis staff, are just as inconspicuous as the disadvantaged people in Laval. From these offices, they run the Oasis mobile unit, which for the past 10 years has been a familiar sight to those who have needed someone to lend a non-judgmental ear.

#### **A growing clientele**

Oasis started out as an organization for young people aged 29 and under. Many today still climb aboard the big Oasis trailer to talk about their troubles, meet people and obtain referrals and information. "When we started out, there was only a handful of streetworkers and a few drop-in centres for youth," explains Oasis Director Guy Boisvert. "Today, we see more than 3,000 people a year, from pre-teens to adults over the age of 50."

#### **Preventing homelessness**

No one sleeps on the street in Laval. Félix Désormeaux, an Oasis worker, explains that because Montreal is so close by, people who are at high risk of becoming homeless usually go there instead of staying in Laval: "That's why I feel our work is so important. We can help prevent those who are at greatest risk, even the younger people, from ending up in the street." Just having someone to talk to for a few minutes, night after night, is enough to open communication lines, enabling many young people to gradually open up and confide their problems to the people at Oasis. "We do not judge anyone, we do not pressure people into giving their names and we are ready to discuss any topic," says Félix. "In the space of an evening, I can just as easily discuss how to use condoms with a teenage couple as talk about the problems a young student may be having with his or her teacher. Daytime, however, brings a completely different set of problems."

#### **An oasis for adults**

Guy Boisvert says that thanks to the SCPI,\* Oasis can also operate during the day, making contact with an adult clientele, by parking the trailer near soup kitchens: "Our first SCPI\* contribution was used to replace our trailer in 2002 and our second one enabled us to add an evening run and three daytime runs for adults, as part of the Baluchon project. Without the SCPI\*, that project would not have gotten off the ground." In dealing with adults, Oasis workers talk about health issues and lend a sympathetic ear as their clients talk about money troubles, depression and mental health problems. The trailer houses an impressive collection of documentation that enables workers to refer clients to the appropriate resources. The workers sometimes accompany people to doctor's appointments, help them replace lost health insurance cards or teach them how to take their medications properly, with the help of a nurse from the Ruisseau-Papineau CLSC, who is always on board.

#### **Reliable partners**

In addition to working in partnership with the local CLSC, the Oasis serves as an intermediary between clients and the city's community service agencies, and has been receiving support from the Laval Rotary Club from the start. The trailer is also supplied with free Oasis orange juice from Lassonde, which it serves to its passengers. The SCPI's\* \$325,103 contribution and Oasis' association with comedian Louis-José Houde, who agreed to act as the organization's spokesperson, enables the small team to carry out many projects, one of which is to provide emergency shelter with follow-up services. Now that the idea has been floated, it is bound to get rolling ... just like the famous brightly coloured trailer making the rounds on the streets of Laval!

by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada

June 2005

\*SCPI: Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative