THE PROVINCES

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Social services that work

"Then they led him away to be crucified. On their way out they met a man from Cyrene, Simon by name, and pressed him into service to carry his cross." — Matthew 27:32.

Simon House, named after Simon of Cyrene, is a residential treatment program for male alcoholics and drug abusers. The facilities are simple: two duplexes in an inexpensive part of Calgary, where six staff members work with 32 residents. Some men are referred by their employers in a last-ditch effort to keep them in the work force; most come from hospitals or jails, off the street or from Indian reserves.

On Nov. 12 of this year, Hilary Weston, the Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario, presented Simon House with the first annual Donner Canadian Foundation Award for Excellence in the Delivery of Social Services in the substance-abuse category. Six other agencies received similar awards, each worth $5,000, in other categories, and an overall winner received a grand prize of $25,000.

Funded by the Donner Canadian Foundation and administered by the Fraser Institute, the competition recognizes "non-profit agencies that exhibit efficiency in their operations and excellence in their program delivery." This year 312 agencies applied to be judged. All were private, though many receive federal, provincial or municipal grants.

With an annual budget of only $245,000, Simon House is a model of economy and efficiency. It also sets a measurable standard of success: "clean and sober one year after leaving residence." There is annual variation, but it claims an average success rate of around 25 per cent — about as high as anyone gets in this heartbreaking field.

Simon House won its award because its program is efficient and excellent according to objective performance criteria that can be evaluated by external observers. But what has enabled it to become so successful? Most important, Simon House is based on faith.

Originally founded by a Franciscan Brother working through the Catholic Archdiocese, it is today non-denominational and accepts patients of every (or no) religion. It blends professional counselling and therapy with the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, a spiritual path to overcoming addiction. We "made a decision," says the Third Step, "to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him."

The people involved with Simon House know what they are dealing with. Most of the staff and half the board of directors are themselves recovering alcoholics. They walk the 12 Steps along with the patients whose cross they help to carry. Their work is a calling, not just a career.

The patients must show personal commitment and responsibility. They have to be clean and sober for five days before they are admitted. Once they're in, they have to stay with the program or they're out, and they can't be readmitted without waiting a full year. Those capable of working are expected to get and hold jobs. Everyone pays room and board — $354 a month for those on welfare (90 per cent of their cheques), $411 for those with jobs. All the men share the cleaning, laundry and other chores in the residences.

Simon House doesn't get any government money. About half the budget comes from the monthly fees, a quarter from the United Way and the rest from charitable donations. Simon House "alumni" raise more than 10 per cent of the budget each year, and there is always an alumnus on the volunteer board of directors. When a large donation comes along, the board uses it to make physical renovations or pay down the mortgage, thus ensuring that the operating budget is spent on people, not buildings.

Canada, I hope, is nearing the end of a long and disastrous experiment with no-strings-attached charity. First came the efforts of government to abolish poverty by taxation and redistribution, based on the false but seductive belief that poverty is caused only by a shortage of money. The result was the equalization of after-tax income statistics, but also family disintegration, welfare dependency, more poverty, homelessness and squalor. Then came well-meaning private citizens with food banks, street clinics, drop-in centres and overnight shelters — facilities that may be needed in the circumstances, but ultimately encourage further dependence unless they challenge the recipients of assistance to amend their lives.

Simon House illustrates effective charity: people giving themselves as well as their money, and making demands upon the recipients. The demands are huge: Acknowledge your failures, commit yourself to a higher power, support yourself and your family, make reparations to those you have harmed, live every day in the discipline of personal responsibility. But without those demands, Simon House would be just another drop-in centre.

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