

# Emergency Shelter Survey

*Preliminary Results*



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Waterloo, Ontario

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## Introduction

Sam Nabi is an undergraduate urban planning student at the University of Waterloo. In the summer of 2012, he began developing an online information system for emergency shelters as a personal project. After consultations with the Region of Waterloo and some emergency shelters, he prepared a survey to hear from people that have used emergency shelters.

This report is intended to present a general picture of shelter usage patterns, communication methods, and internet access among people that use emergency shelters. It is subtitled "Preliminary Results", because the survey's small sample size (25 participants) and lack of third-party oversight make it unsuitable for drawing strong conclusions. However, this report provides a good jumping-off point for discussion and further research into the role of online information systems for emergency shelters.

FindABed.ca is a private endeavour and is not affiliated with nor endorsed by the University of Waterloo, the Region of Waterloo, or any individual emergency shelter. If you have any questions or comments, please contact Sam Nabi at [sam@samnabi.com](mailto:sam@samnabi.com).

## Methodology

To solicit participation in the survey, information sheets were posted at two locations: Supportive Housing of Waterloo (362 Erb Street West, Waterloo) and St. John's Kitchen (97 Victoria Street North, Kitchener).

The survey was conducted from 17-21 January 2013 at Supportive Housing of Waterloo and the Queen Street Commons Cafe (43 Queen Street South, Kitchener). Questions were posed orally in one-on-one interviews, and the participants' answers were recorded anonymously in a database. Each participant was compensated \$20.00 in cash. There were 25 participants in total.

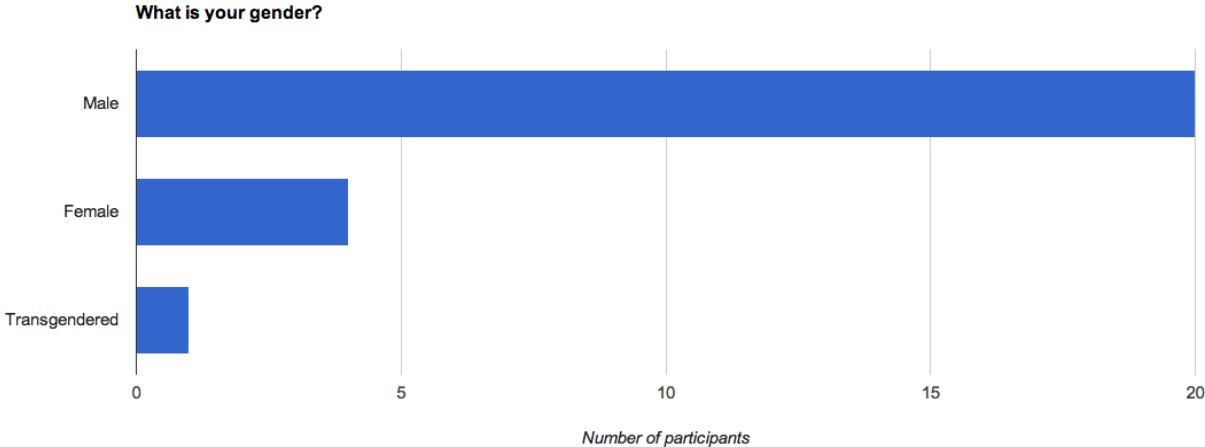
# Findings

## Demographics

Despite the survey’s small sample size, there was participation from all genders, and all age groups up to age 64.

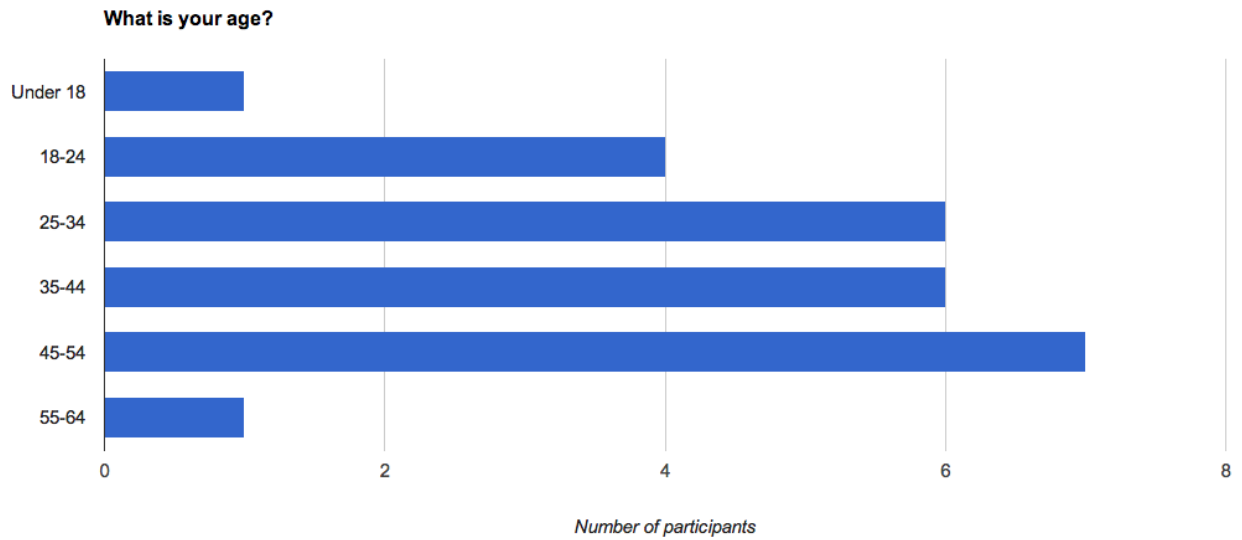
Men were overrepresented in the survey. Five times more men than women responded to the survey, whereas there are two times as many men as there are women in the Region of Waterloo’s housing stability system<sup>1</sup>.

**Fig. 1**



<sup>1</sup> All Roads Lead to Home: The Homelessness to Housing Stability Strategy for Waterloo Region – Policy Framework (<http://socialservices.regionofwaterloo.ca/en/inc/resources/HHSS.pdf>)

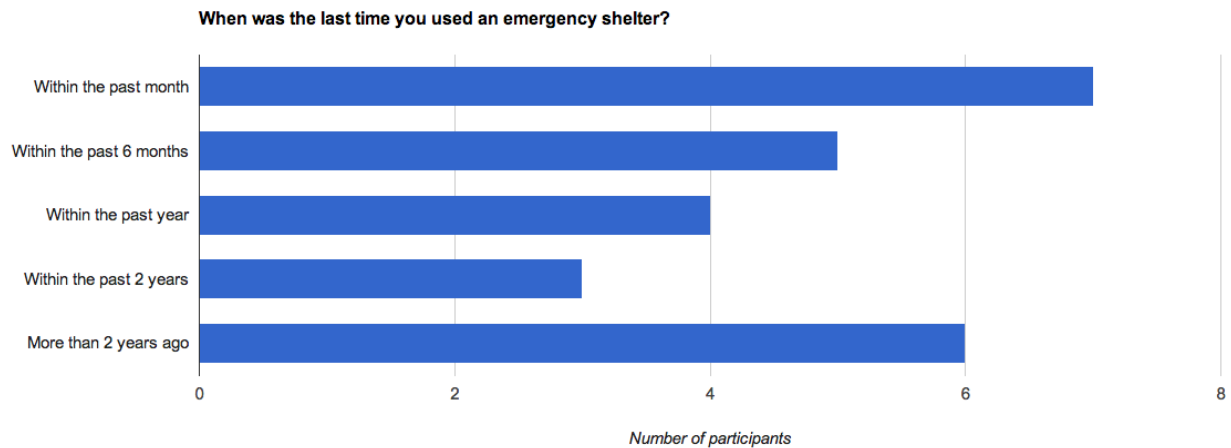
**Fig. 2**



## Shelter use

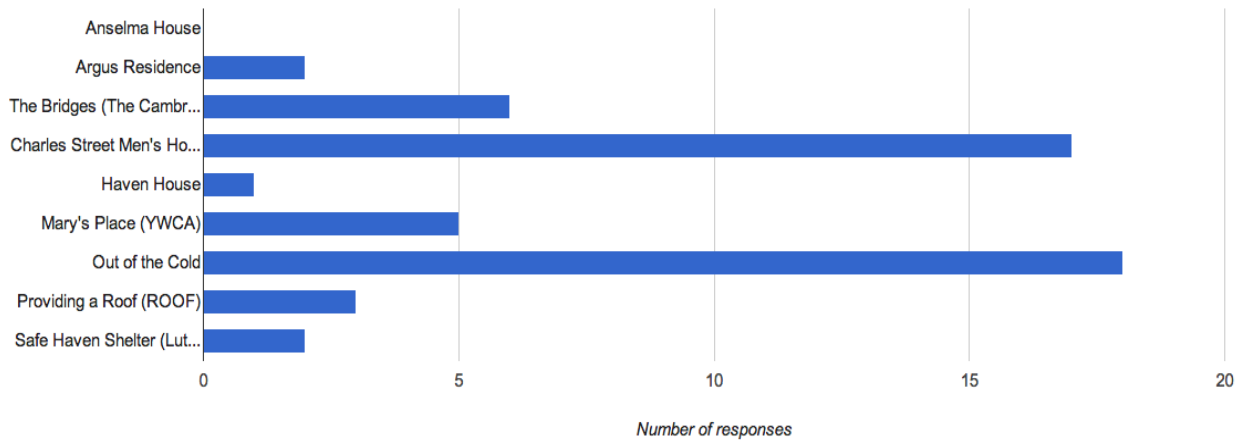
Seven of the 25 participants used an emergency shelter within the past month, while six of the participants last used a shelter more than two years ago (Fig. 3). Participants had been to every emergency shelter in the Region except Anselma House (Fig. 4).

**Fig. 3**



**Fig. 4**

Which of the following emergency shelters have you been to?

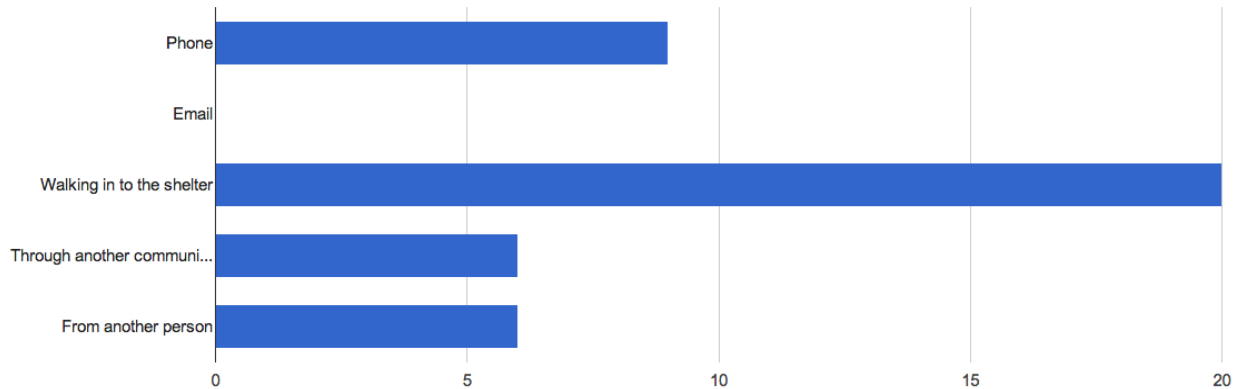


## Communication methods and access to internet

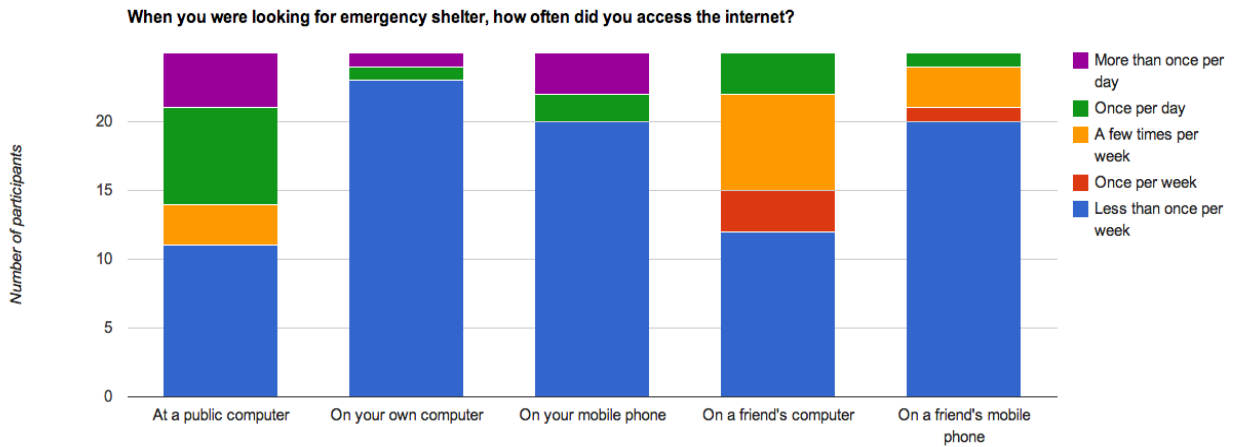
Participants were asked what methods of communication they used to find out whether shelters had beds available (Fig. 5). They were also asked how often they accessed the internet from various locations (Fig. 6). Internet access was most frequent at public computers and on a friends' computers.

**Fig. 5**

How did you find out if there were beds available at a shelter?



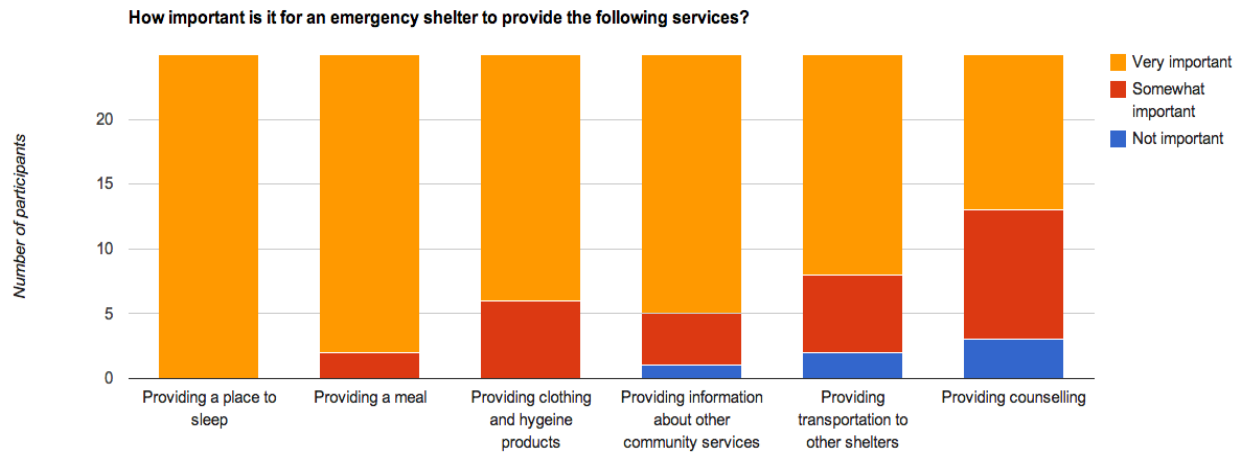
**Fig. 6**



## Importance of shelter services

Participants were asked about their views on a number of services that are provided by emergency shelters. Providing a place to sleep, providing a meal, and providing clothing and hygiene products were viewed as the most important services. That said, all services were overwhelmingly viewed as “very important” or “somewhat important”.

**Fig. 7**

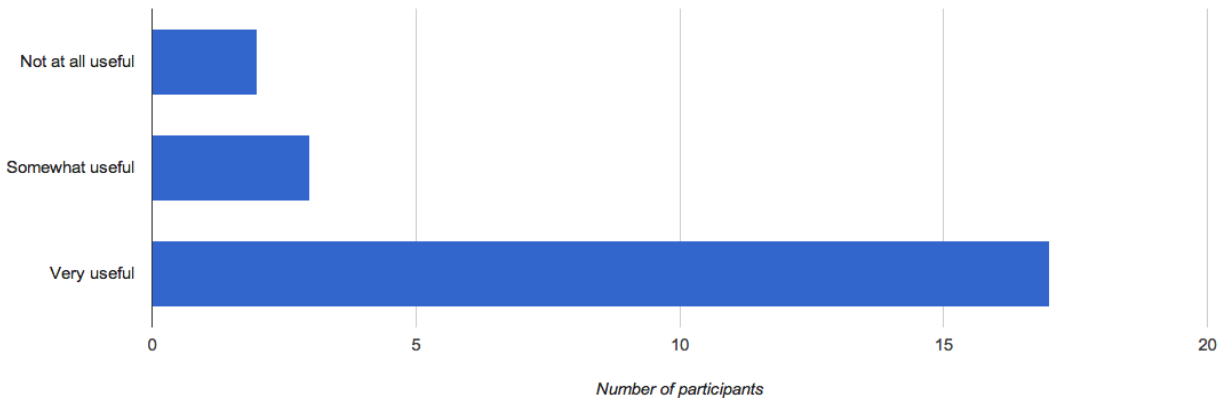


## Value of online information

The last question that participants were asked was intended to gauge the demand for an online information system for those seeking emergency shelter (Fig. 8). Three participants did not respond to this question. Of those who did respond, nearly all thought that such a website would be “somewhat useful” or “very useful”. Some participants acknowledged that while they personally would not use such a website, they recognised the value of online information for those that do have access to the internet.

**Fig. 8**

If there were a website showing the number of free beds at every shelter in the Region, how useful would it be to people looking for emergency shelter?



## Discussion

There are currently no sources of information online to find out whether an emergency shelter has vacancies in real time. This reality is reflected in Fig. 5, which shows that the majority of participants simply walk in to a shelter to find out if there are any vacancies. Some participants noted that when they phoned a shelter, they were told to come in person to confirm the number of vacancies.

It is understandable that emergency shelters cannot set aside beds for people that inquire over the phone, as they often operate on a first-come-first-served basis. Another reason that people are encouraged to come in person is that while an individual shelter may be fully occupied, the shelter system in Waterloo Region as a whole is never “full”. Anyone needing emergency shelter will find it, whether they are placed in overflow beds, transferred to another shelter, or given alternate accommodations. It is important that a website communicate these facts. For example, rather than simply showing zero availability at a shelter, the website could direct individuals to contact the shelter for further assistance.

Shelters provide many services over and above providing a place to sleep. As shown in Fig. 7, those who use emergency shelters are cognizant of this and place a high importance on these other services.

Any website that would show real-time shelter vacancies needs to provide more information than just the number of beds available. Information about other services, such as providing meals, counselling, and clothing and hygiene products, must be highlighted if individuals are to choose the shelter that best meets their needs.

The responses in Fig. 8 show that the idea of an online information system is, on the surface, a popular one. People looking for emergency shelter frequently use the internet at public computers and on friends’ computers (see Fig. 6). In order for such a system to meet the needs

of these individuals, as well as the needs of shelter staff and governments, continued discussion among all stakeholder groups is imperative.

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**For further information or to provide feedback, please contact:**

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