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Introduction

The Purpose

In recent years, news of the success of Housing First has become increasingly widespread. However, this news is often spread with little detail regarding programming and implementation, and sometimes with the underlying assumption that Housing First is a panacea to the problem of homelessness. This can lead to suggestions that all that is needed to solve homelessness is to convert all programing to Housing First and everything will be taken care of.

In contrast, Housing First executed well is nuanced by the circumstances and environment within which it is delivered, tailored to meet the needs of its intended service population, and operates within a system of interventions. This report seeks to inform on some of the nuances of the homelessness context within Metro Vancouver to encourage a Housing First implementation that considers our unique operating circumstances.

Who is GVSS?

The Greater Vancouver Shelter Strategy Society (GVSS) supports its membership to collectively respond to trends and issues related to homelessness in Metro Vancouver. Membership is targeted to shelter and outreach programs but also includes all levels of government, health authorities, the justice system and other community bodies¹.

The Circumstance

The success of the At Home/Chez Soi project² saw Housing First become required activity under the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) – the Ministry of Employment and Social Development Canada's (ESDC) current investment into supports to address homelessness. Metro Vancouver is one of the communities that receives these funds and was mandated to ensure that at least 65% of all HPS funds to the community be spent on Housing First related activities. The first open call for proposals under this mandate provided over 12 million dollars of funding to local service providers between January 2015 and September 2016³.

In part because of the direction taken by the federal funding, and because of increasing reports of success in using Housing First across Canada, shelter and outreach providers in Metro Vancouver have identified increasing pressure to conform to Housing First principles. In an effort to support its membership in responding to this pressure, GVSS conducted a series of discussions as part of its Committee of the Whole meetings. This report is a summary of those discussions, including suggestions of how perceived gaps in the system may be addressed. It is hoped that this report may be used by funders, municipalities and other decision-makers to inform their perspectives on Housing First implementation within Metro Vancouver.

Any inquiries about the information in this report can be forwarded to Rebecca Bell at rebecca@gvss.ca.

¹ GVSS. (2015). Committee of the Whole Member Organizations. http://gvss.ca/Members.html

² Mental Health Commission of Canada. (2015). Initiatives: At Home. http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/initiatives-and-projects/home

³ Metro Vancouver. (2015). Homelessness Partnering Strategy Community Entity for the Metro Vancouver Region: Results of the 2014-2016 Open Call for Proposals. http://www.metrovancouver.org/services/regional-planning/homelessness/HomelessnessPublications/2014FundingAwardsoftheHPS.pdf

What is Housing First?

With the proliferation of Housing First there is always the risk that its original form will be diluted or altered as part of the propagation. To commence our discussions, GVSS members took the time to confirm the principles of Housing First as⁴:

- 1. Immediate accessing to housing with no housing readiness conditions
- 2. Consumer choice and self-determination
- 3. Recovery orientation
- 4. Individualized and person-driven supports
- 5. Social and community integration

At its core, Housing First is a proponent of moving individuals experiencing homelessness directly into housing with sufficient supports for the individual to maintain that housing. Choice and self-determination drives the application of Housing First such that all decisions are centered by individual preferences and needs.

Full understanding of Housing First recognizes that all five of these principles must be fully embraced for a program to be truly classified as Housing First. Organizations may be working towards an implementation of Housing First and creating alignment in its practices with Housing First principles, but until all five principles are employed, a program should not be designated Housing First.

Also central to understanding these principles is the acknowledgement that the Housing First paradigm exists outside of any particular funding stream⁵. As long as their circumstances allow, it is possible for an organization to undertake the implementation of Housing First without the direction of a particular funding body or other organization.

Relationship to HPS

While it is true that Housing First exists outside of a particular funding paradigm, for the majority of service providers in Metro Vancouver, their experience of Housing First has been primarily informed by that which has been implemented under HPS funding. As such, the particular details of the HPS Housing First funding are acknowledged and included in this report.

What are the Concerns?

The majority of the feedback provided by GVSS members could be categorized into three areas:

- 1. Housing First requires sufficient levels of support
- 2. Existing services must be appropriately valued
- 3. Limitations of Housing First must be recognized

The remainder of this report outlines each of these areas including recommendations for potential solutions.

⁴ RainCity Housing. (2014). Housing First – Principles into Practice. http://www.raincityhousing.org/hf-p-into-p/

⁵ Housing First was developed by Sam Tsemberis in the Pathways to Housing program. https://pathwaystohousing.org/

Housing First Requires Support

That Housing First requires access to communities is not news to anyone familiar with the paradigm. However, GVSS members identified concerns that current levels of available community supports can hinder the success of Housing First in Metro Vancouver.

Under HPS funding, the model of Housing First that has been implemented is Intensive Case Management (ICM). In an ICM model, case workers link clients to mainstream housing, clinical, and other supports, and are available 12 hours of the day, 7 days a week⁶. This is contrasted with an Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) model, where a multi-disciplinary team of health professionals provide wrap around services directly to the client, available 24 hours, 7 days a week⁷.

Because they have been required to implement an ICM Housing First model, recipients of HPS Housing First funding are reliant on available existing community supports to provide the additional supports that their clients need to maintain housing. This reliance has led to the identification of the following concerns:

Necessary Supports Aren't Available

- Some communities are underserved in available supports
- Supports are available but are over-demanded
- Supports are available but don't meet the needs of clients
- Not all supports are aligned with Housing First values
- Rent supplements are identified as a necessary support for Housing First success

Without Supports Housing Fails

- Without appropriate supports, unmet client needs can result in housing loss
- Immediate housing can then lead to increased harm to clients through loss of housing
- Current support for triaging to create a successful environment is limited

Funding Does Not Target Supports

- Housing First can create additional demand on already 'maxed-out' community supports
- Increased demand increases backlog
- Funding is not available to meet this increased need

These concerns highlight the need for a **systems approach** for successful Housing First implementation. Housing First relies on a wider system to support its operation and without their willingness and capacity to participate, and alignment without Housing First goals, success can be hindered.

http://www.esdc.gc.ca/eng/communities/homelessness/housing first/service delivery/index.shtml

⁶ Homelessness Partnering Strategy. (2014). 2014 Call for Proposals General Guide: HPS Eligible Populations, Communities, and Program Definitions. http://www.metrovancouver.org/services/regional-planning/homelessness/HomelessnessPublications/HPSCFPGeneralGuideIIEligiblePopulationsCommunitiesProgramDefinitions.pdf

⁷ Employment and Social Development Canada. (2014). Models of how to organize housing, clinical and complementary supports.

Recommendations

Increase Support Accessibility

Housing First fidelity assessments for ICM consider programs to be operating at a high level when, "[A] program has established relationships with agencies that provide a vast array of services and routinely makes referrals." This means that programs should have formal or informal

arrangements with services such as psychiatric, substance use, employment, nursing/medical and social supports to assist them in making these referrals.

At present, organizations are typically required to develop these relationships for themselves, based in their own community. While there are benefits associated with a local approach, at times, organizations are 're-inventing the wheel' through each individual effort to establish the necessary relationships. Some organizations also have more capacity to establish these relationships than others due to factors including size and operating history.

Region-wide partnership arrangements

If Housing First is to successfully proliferate within the region, then organizations would strongly benefit from arrangements to establish relationships with necessary services that impact the entire region. Such arrangements would enhance the speed at which a new organization could implement Housing First and could also work to improve alignment with Housing First for the support service. This work would require effort by any of municipal, regional or provincial bodies or funding aimed directly at supporting initiatives to develop regional partnerships.

Enhance Resource and Learning Availability

When organizations consider implementing Housing First there are a number of potential internal and external hurdles that they must overcome to ensure successful implementation. They must obtain support from the Board, senior management and program staff. They also have to identify differences

between their current operational approaches and those of Housing First and adapt, while also identifying and implementing means to obtain all of the necessary support resources, including rent supplements.

When considering the number of steps that may be required to successfully implement Housing First, organizations may, reasonably, hesitate. To overcome this hesitation there is need for clear documentation of paths to success with supporting resources. At this time, there are high level resources that are available to support Housing First implementation. However, by necessity, these do not speak to local challenges of a specific area. To promote successful implementation of Housing First in Metro Vancouver there is the need for **resources that outline**

Clear demonstrations of paths to success

successful step by step processes on all of the different elements of Housing First implementation. It is not sufficient to even point to successful organizations within the area; there is need for clear resourcing regarding local implementation and also evaluation of local success and sustainability. Such resources should greatly increase an organizations confidence and success when implementing Housing First.

⁸ Nelson, G. et al. (2013). Follow-up Implementation and Fidelity Evaluation of the Mental Health Commission of Canada's At Home/Chez Soi Project: Cross-Site Report.

http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/system/files/private/document/Housing_At_Home_Qualitative_ Report_Follow-up_Implementation_Fidelity_Evaluation_Cross_Site_ENG.pdf

Fund Support Services

Currently, HPS funding does not allow funding to be directed towards supports that are already provided by the province⁹. For Metro Vancouver, this can include rent supplements, general clinical

health, medical, mental health and addictions support services. While these supports are provided by the province, their exclusion from funding eligibility does not recognize that these services may already be utilized to their maximum capacity and do not have the ability to effectively respond to increased demand that may be created by the implementation of Housing First.

Include support services as funding-eligible

Without this additional funding, necessary services can have long waiting lists and this lack of available support services can impact an individual's success when participating in Housing First programming. Without access to necessary services, organizations can risk setting up participants to fail by providing housing, knowing that the support services that are necessary to keep this individual housed are unavailable. Reasonably, such an approach is considered untenable by many organizations.

For Housing First to be successful within Metro Vancouver there is the need to understand the additional demand that will be created by its implementation and for **funding to be directed towards support services that will experience increased demand**.

Existing Services Are Valuable

When considering implementation of Housing First, the second concern presented by GVSS members was that existing services may not be sufficiently valued within current funding priorities.

It is important to recognize that there has been substantial investment into the homelessness infrastructure by BC Housing over the last 10 years. In late 2005, the administration of emergency shelters, cold wet weather beds and extreme wet weather beds was transferred from the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance to BC Housing 10. The Homeless Outreach Program was created in 2006 and both of these programs have invested heavily into the quality and expertise in service within the province, including Metro Vancouver. While not all shelter or outreach programs in Metro Vancouver are funded by BC Housing, the impacts of BC Housing's initiatives to develop the standard of these programs has been felt broadly throughout the region.



The result of these initiatives means that the response to homelessness can look different in Metro Vancouver when compared to other provinces or countries.

⁹ Employment and Social Development Canada. (2014). Homelessness Partnering Strategy Directives 2014-2019. http://www.esdc.gc.ca/eng/communities/homelessness/funding/directives.shtml

¹⁰ BC Housing. (2007). BC Housing Annual Report 2006/07. http://www.bchousing.org/resources/About%20BC%20Housing/Annual%20Reports/2007/2006-07 AR.pdf

The Emergency Shelter Program¹¹ and the Homeless Outreach Program¹² each serve those who are homeless, at risk of homelessness or are considered hidden homeless and share the following program services:

- Client intake and assessment
- Development of individualized case plans and referrals to support services as needed
- Assistance in obtaining housing

These programs also share outcome measurement that evaluates:

- Number and percentage of clients who move to stable accommodation
- Number and percentage of clients who are housed and remain housed at six months
- Percentage of clients offered a case plan
- Percentage of clients offered a referral to support services

In addition, each of the programs have unique elements in terms of service delivery:

Emergency Shelter Program	Homeless Outreach Program
24 hr access to services	Direct engagement where situated
Laundry facilities	Accompaniment to appointments
Access to personal hygiene inc. supplies &	Provision of rent supplements
showers	
Personal storage lockers	Provision of tenancy support and training
Meals that meet Canada's Food Guide	Landlord support and engagement

These findings lead to the following conclusions:

- 1. Metro Vancouver providers are well-equipped to implement Housing First
- 2. Some programming mirrors Housing First implementation
- 3. Sheltering can be of a higher standard in British Columbia

http://www.bchousing.org/resources/Partner_Resources/Program_Resources/Emergency_Shelter_Program/ESP_Program Framework.pdf

¹¹ BC Housing. (2012). Emergency Shelter Program: Program Framework 3rd Edition.

¹² BC Housing. (2014). Homeless Outreach Program: Program Framework 4th Edition.

http://www.bchousing.org/resources/Partner_Resources/Program_Resources/Homeless_Outreach_Program/HOP_Program_Framework.pdf

Metro Vancouver Providers are Equipped

Factors that are key to successful Housing First implementation under an ICM framework include a knowledge of case management and experience in supporting participants to achieve their goals, knowledge of and relationships with key support organizations and the ability to successful identify housing and support an individual to transition to housing. These are all areas in which existing homelessness programs in Metro Vancouver have years of experience. In addition, outreach programs (and some shelter programs) also have experience engaging with people from their personal starting

The similarities between job descriptions in ICM and existing positions has led more than one staff member to ask, "How is this any different from what I am currently doing?"

point, supporting navigation through the community and providing tenancy and landlord support. Again, these are key areas of implementation in Housing First, particularly under an ICM model.

When reviewing job descriptions of key Housing First roles, such as Housing Specialist¹³, very few tasks are identified that would be unfamiliar to front line staff of Metro Vancouver homelessness programs. Some unfamiliar tasks may include specific issues related maintenance and repairs. The similarities between job descriptions within ICM and existing positions has led more than one staff member to as, "How is this any different from what I am currently doing?"

Acknowledge Existing Expertise

Acknowledging the existing expertise includes a recognition that most homelessness programs and staff in Metro Vancouver are starting from a more advanced starting point. This should be considered a great strength for the area. Incorporation of existing expertise can be included from the design of the program by incorporating many areas of knowledge of the local resources, population specifics, relationships within the community and the community dynamic in response to homelessness.

Training does not need to spend great lengths educating about the specifics of 'what is case management' because these concepts are well known. Instead, it is important for **training to assist staff in understanding and navigating the specific differences** between previous roles and the expectations of Housing First – there are differences, even if these are not apparent at the start.

There Are Similarities in Programming

Especially when considering homeless outreach programs, there are substantial similarities between its current operation and that of Housing First. In addition, both shelter and outreach programs also align with Housing First with the inclusion of outcome measurement. Key to the success of Housing First has been its ability to demonstrate its impact using empirical means. Shelter and outreach programs have experience with these approaches and this information can be utilized to further align with Housing First as needed and also understand the impacts of implementation from a systemic perspective.

¹³ Pathways To Housing (2014). Service Coordinator/Housing Specialist. http://www.housingfirsttoolkit.ca/sites/default/files/Service-Coordinator-Housing-Specialist.pdf

Build on Strengths

Existing providers would also benefit from an implementation that focuses less on starting brand new Housing First programs and more on how their existing programs do and do not align with Housing First practices and what is necessary to create further alignment. It should be reasonable to support existing shelter and outreach programs to become Housing First aligned while retaining many of the existing structures of their operation.

If this is not done, Metro Vancouver risks wasting the benefits of existing strengths in programming. The starting point ins not zero; these strengths should be leveraged to provide accelerated implementation of Housing First rather than assuming the need to start over. In contrast, effective utilization of existing alignment should lead to the ability to accelerate Housing First implementation within Metro Vancouver.

Shelters Have High Standards

The standards for shelters, as laid out above, mean that the role of shelters within Housing First should be expected to be different with BC and Metro Vancouver. Often, the operation of shelters in communities that are implementing Housing First has consisted of warehousing-like arrangements where large numbers of people are provided a space to sleep and retreat from the cold without any support for transition beyond their current situation.

This is not the case for shelters in Metro Vancouver. This point is further highlighted by the experience of shelter operators who see certain individuals choose the shelter as their current place of residence. Examples include some seniors who find the structure of the shelter and the community and staff contact to be more desirable than an anonymous existence in an independent dwelling. There are women leaving situations of violence that find that the shelter provides a safe space, support and a calm

It may be, that in Metro Vancouver, there is a legitimate place for shelters within a Housing First approach that moves them beyond simply a holding ground while housing is found to a key initial point of engagement.

environment for them to recover before they take the next steps to move on with their lives. The existing investments into sheltering allow providers to tailor their environments to better meet the needs of these individuals.

The ability to choose to start their journey in exiting homelessness in a shelter environment is not at odds with a Housing First approach. In fact, it is perfectly aligned with Housing First principle of choice and self-determination. It is not suggested that shelters are a choice for all individuals, or that shelters should be considered a permanent solution to homelessness, rather, that investments into sheltering in BC have afforded them characteristics and strengths that may not be found in other communities. When considering Housing First implementation, it is to our benefit that we incorporate and

build upon the strengths of the current sheltering system.

It may be, that in Metro Vancouver, there is a legitimate place for shelters within a Housing First approach that moves them beyond simply a holding ground while housing is found to a key initial point of engagement. However, if this is to be determined their must be the funding and support to allow this to happen.

Limitations Must be Recognized

As mentioned in the introduction, at times, Housing First can be presented as a complete solution for homelessness in a community. However, as in all interventions, there are nuances associated with Housing First that must be recognized to ensure a realistic expectation of service implementation.

Eligibility & Choice Can Be Limited

Eligibility as it Impacts Choice

Under the current HPS funding, there are a number of funding eligibility criteria that may act to limit an individual's choice. Particularly, HPS Housing First funding cannot be used to support an individual who has chosen to live in transitional housing or in a shelter. This can negatively impact the ability for organizations to serve particular demographics such as youth, women and seniors under the funding paradigm.

As identified within the work of Stephen Gaetz, a Housing First approach for youth must account for their developmental transition as well as a transition out of homelessness¹⁴. There are many life milestones that a young person must navigate from early teens to early adulthood which complicate and compound with homelessness. As such, housing models that are effective for adults may need to be adapted for youth. It has been found that transitional housing, with the additional supports that it is able to provide, appears to be perfectly suited to a young person's life stage as they also navigate a transition out of homelessness.

GVSS members have also identified that both women and seniors¹⁵ may prefer the opportunity to stay in a shelter prior to navigating a move to housing. A trauma informed perspective, supported by the recovery-orientation principle of Housing First, recognizes that the transition to homelessness can be associated with substantial trauma and that the requirements of maintaining a house for oneself and/or family may be more than an individual is able to navigate when they first arrive at the shelter. The ability for a client to choose to stay in a shelter, then becomes in their best interest, as it is their choice.

Because the current implementation of HPS Housing First funding does not allow for support to an individual who chooses an accommodation option other than permanent housing, the current funding paradigm does not allow organizations to fully meet the needs of all populations.

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Location as it Impacts Choice

As has been identified previously, access to effective support services is necessary to maintain housing within a Housing First paradigm. Depending on available supports and existing support relationships,

¹⁴ Gaetz, S. (2014). A Safe and Decent Place to Live: Towards a Housing First Framework for Youth. Toronto: The Homeless Hub Press. http://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/HFFWYouth-FullReport 0.pdf

¹⁵ Greater Vancouver Shelter Strategy Society. (2015). Housing Recommendations for Vulnerable Seniors. http://gvss.ca/PDF-2014/Housing%20for%20Vulnerable%20Seniors.pdf

this may limit an individual's practical choice in where they live. For example, if an individual's health, mental health and other supports are located in a particular area, an individual may find it difficult to move out of this area and still access those supports. It can then become necessary to choose to either transfer services, which may or may not sustain the current support the individual receives, or live in close proximity to those services and possibly have to choose substandard living conditions.

At times, GVSS members have identified that they have witnessed clients who appear to need to make a choice between housing or health with those two goals not being accessible to them at the time. Obviously, without the ability to maintain housing, it becomes incredibly difficult to sustainably pursue health goals. These observations remind us that choice in Housing First may not be as all encompassing as it can be presented for each individual and these realities must be navigated.

Systems Can Hamper Success

If the system of support services that exists within a community are not aligned to Housing First, this lack of alignment in philosophies can often impact the success of Housing First. Examples can include

interactions with Ministries such as Children and Family Development, Justice or Social Development & Social Innovation (Income Assistance), whose approach to supporting those who engage with their systems may not support a Housing First approach, particularly as it relates to client choice and the ability to learn from mistakes through the choice-making process. Other misalignments may include how social housing providers, including BC Housing, select and manage their tenants.

As previously discussed, these examples highlight the need for a systems approach in implementing Housing First. If the necessary support systems are not aligned with a Housing First approach, implementation can be hampered and an individual



provider may have limited control over their levels of success. As such, when funders, communities and organizations are looking to implement Housing First there is a need to assess the realistic levels of support that are available within this community.

Outcome Measurement Must Support 'Failure'

If Housing First prioritizing client choice and learning through these choices, then program outcomes must support this process of choice. If outcome measurement does not have an ability to capture loss of housing and 'ups and downs' in the journey of support for an individual, it can create an environment in which organizations may feel compelled to coerce the choices that clients make.

This reality highlights the need for a strong focus on fidelity, or process, evaluation when reviewing Housing First providers. Research into Housing First fidelity has demonstrated that higher fidelity to the

Housing First paradigm results in better outcomes for individuals involved in the program¹⁶. Fidelity evaluation, as it has been successfully operationalized, focuses on affirming practices that are strongly aligned with Housing First principles and creating a learning and development opportunity for those that are not as closely aligned. This approach, which is not punitive, supports and encourages provider growth, and creates a space that encourages them to experiment and develop to learn how to best support those who they are supporting.

Outcome measurements are not excluded from evaluation but in some ways then follow a, 'if you build it, they [the outcomes] will come' approach because strong client outcomes are consistently tied to high fidelity.

Conclusion

Housing First contributes a number of key elements to the conversation regarding homelessness. It's demonstration that housing stability can be achieved moving directly from the streets, without the need to pass through a series of readiness steps, has changed the way many think and act when seeking to end homelessness. It's focus on client choice and self-determination is empowering and elevates the standing of those who find themselves experiencing homelessness.

However, as acknowledged by its founder himself, Housing First is the same but different, depending on where it is implemented, based on those who the program serves¹⁷. There are a number of unique characteristics to the landscape of homelessness within Metro Vancouver that must be considered to successfully implement Housing First. If we are to follow the lessons from implementation across the nation, our ability to incorporate and adapt to these characteristics will not weaken the implementation of Housing First but will, in fact, strength it as it is bounded and supported within the local realities.

¹⁶ Georing, P. et al. (2015). Further Validation of the Pathways Housing First Fidelity Scale. Psychiatric Services. Sep 2015.

¹⁷ Tsemberis, S. (2015). Housing First fidelity in a Canadian context. Conference proceedings at National Conference on Ending Homelessness 2015. Montreal, Canada.