
Executive Summary

The Edmonton Committee to End Homelessness instructed its Community Engagement Sub-Committee to conduct a community consultation regarding a Housing First initiative. Housing First provides housing to people who are homeless, with no preconditions or requirements.

The Community Engagement Sub-Committee consulted with over 800 participants. The process included large and small groups, as well as one-on-one interviews. The following groups were consulted:

- **Homeless citizens.**

62 people were interviewed. They ranged in age from 16 to 71 years and were evenly split between male and female. Interviewees had been homeless from 6 months to more than 10 years. 58% were Aboriginal. Location was important to these interviewees as was being able to live in a “nice” place. The most important factor in obtaining housing was affordability. Interviewees suggested a number of ideas for help in finding or maintaining housing. Easy access to services, help in looking for housing, help with landlords, help with addictions, and Aboriginal services were among the ideas mentioned.

- **Aboriginals.**

Over 75 people participated in an Aboriginal Consultation. Combating racism was listed as key to a successful Housing First initiative, to be addressed through education and awareness promotion. Most important in a housing environment were the inclusion of spiritual and cultural practices. Some participants felt that a legal Aboriginal housing service would help. Participants suggested that services should be client driven. Services provided should include addictions support and life skills training. Participants were also asked what they thought would prevent homelessness. Answers centred around strengthening the Aboriginal culture, providing better transition between cultures, and having a goal when coming to the city. Community was stressed as a key factor.

- **Frontline workers.**

A full day forum was held specifically for frontline and agency workers. Over 200 frontline workers participated. Topics covered were guiding principles to end homelessness, requirements for the Housing First approach, barriers to the approach, considerations around what client-centred means, coordination among agencies, and measures of success. Participants also considered what their agencies would do if everyone had a house.

- **The United Way.**

The United Way discussions involved supporters of the organization including leaders from business, government and the community. Many felt a strong moral and civic obligation to end homelessness. They had several ideas for success, including a social marketing campaign, having a champion in the business community and having the government involved.

- **The business community, including landlords and developers.**

Members of the business community were eager to apply business thinking to the problem of homelessness. They felt that strong marketing and positioning was important to garner support for the Housing First initiative. They had good insight into the challenges inherent in ending homelessness and supported using a business approach.

- **The community at large, including educational and training organizations, the faith community, and youth groups.**

A wide range of community groups met to offer input and advice. These groups provided their take on guiding principles and suggested strong communications strategies to address potential negative public perceptions. They emphasized building on community. Faith and education organizations offered ways that they could help, while the youth groups asked for direction in how they should be involved.

- **Police, fire and emergency medical services.**

The Police Chief, the Fire Chief, and the Deputy Chief of Emergency Medical Services were interviewed and all were eager to be part of the solution. They felt that wrap around services were key and that a successful Housing First initiative would allow them to release resources to other duties. They also mentioned the need for coordination and linkages with other provincial groups working on similar strategies.

- **Elected officials.**

One-on-one and small group sessions were held with over 20 individuals in various levels of government. They recognized a need for the three levels of government to work together. Some, however, were tired of “over planning and under delivering”. Participants suggested several ideas on how Housing First should be managed. All acknowledged that ending homelessness was an idea whose time had come, and was a trend that was sweeping the province.

There was overwhelming support for the Housing First concept. In addition to the need for strong, visible leadership and a nimble organization to implement the program, participants identified six elements they deemed crucial to the success of a Housing First initiative in Edmonton. These elements define a Circle of Hope around homelessness in support of the Housing First initiative.



The six elements are:

- **Wrap Around Service** - The key element in a successful Housing First program is the capacity to provide seamless, easy to access, and targeted services to clients who are housed. Existing agencies do tremendous work and are crucial in the success of any initiatives. However, lack of understanding about roles, coupled with policy and budgetary constraints, often minimize collaboration and effectiveness. The majority of groups felt that an inventory of existing services was essential in order to plan and deliver a new type of service. In addition, there must be a central conduit to simple, easy access to services. Everyone, from community members, to the Police, to people who are homeless themselves, need 'one stop shopping' that streamlines services. Another theme was the issue of agency worker's wages: the worker's value is not being recognized. Too many agency workers are among the 'working poor'.
- **Urban Aboriginal Community Involvement** - Over 40% of the people who are homeless in Edmonton are Aboriginal. Housing First should work with the Aboriginal community to determine the need for welcoming centers, a central Aboriginal Housing Authority, housing within the community, and prevention strategies.
- **Homeless Citizens Consulted** – Participants reinforced the need to consult with the people who are homeless themselves, and suggested a 'nothing about us without us' approach.
- **Policy Framework** - A comprehensive policy framework needs to be established. Prevention resides in the realm of government policy: governments need to embrace the policy positions necessary to prevent poverty and homelessness. Prevention is also linked very closely to Services. If current agencies are not forced to be reactive, and were not tangled up in a plethora

of bureaucracy, they could better manage the programs that would actually prevent homelessness.

- **Metrics and Measure** - It is important to have measurable targets that are staged and met. Procedures need to be developed to do the measuring or monitoring. Targets are important for continuous improvement.
- **Housing and Landlords** – Given appropriate market conditions, there are enough units in Edmonton to house the people who are homeless. If the circumstances are right, property owners, landlords, and developers would welcome the opportunity to work on this concept. Depending on circumstances, some new units may need to be constructed. For people who are homeless, pride of place and choice were seen as essential for success.

The support for the Housing First approach was overwhelming. Participants agreed that we must all work together to build and support comprehensive wrap around service delivery. Given the right planning and awareness program, we can get buy-in from all segments of our city. We have the opportunity to end the misery that blights the lives of too many in our city. We can put a Circle of Hope around Homelessness. As the participants have said:

“We have the money. We have the resources. We have the will. Let’s challenge our community and do the right thing.”

