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NORTHERN HOUSING NETWORKS: COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS TO DEVELOP INNOVATIVE HOUSING PROGRAMS FOR HIGH-NEEDS INDIGENOUS WOMEN IN NORTHERN, REMOTE COMMUNITIES

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Canada's northern and remote regions experience unique challenges related to housing and homelessness. There is a need to understand and develop strategies to address housing-related concerns in the North. The diversity of communities across the North demands the tailoring of specific local-level responses to meet diverse needs (Macgill, 2011; Schiff, 2013; Schiff and Brunger, 2015). Over the past decade, local networks have emerged as a powerful method for governance and development of localized responses to addressing homelessness across Canada and North America. Despite this, there is a paucity of research examining challenges and effective approaches utilized by these local networks or their potential applicability for building housing security in rural, remote and northern communities. The experiences of a unique Northern Canadian housing and homelessness network point to strategies that can lead to successful collaborative approaches aimed at implementing programs to address homelessness in northern and remote communities.

Most of the housing initiatives that have been established throughout Canada have emerged as a result of efforts of local community advisory boards (CABs) which were established by the Homeless Partnering Strategy (HPS) in 61 designated cities. This case study examines the efforts of a rural and remote

community in Labrador which was not one of the HPS-designated sites; however, this community used the support of an HPS-designated CAB from the provincial capital, as well as its local partnerships, to foster and evolve a non-designated CAB and develop a significant and innovative housing program.

COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Happy Valley-Goose Bay (HVGB) is a remote town of 7550 residents located in central Labrador. It serves as the administrative centre for the region. HVGB is the only community linked to all communities in Labrador by sea, air or road and, as such, is a hub for those travelling within Labrador and between Labrador and Canada's major urban centres. It is the primary location for offices of the provincial government, Nunatsiavut government, NunatuKavut Community Council and the Labrador-Grenfell Health Regional Authority. The remoteness of the town is emphasized by its location: 500 km by road from any other town its size and 1200 air miles from the provincial capital.

Inuit and many Inuit-descendent communities along Labrador's Atlantic Coast, as well as the Innu First Nation communities of Sheshatshiu and Natuashish, rely on HVGB for essential services. Many residents face significant economic challenges significant economic challenges. In 2011, 38% of the HVGB population reported incomes below the Canadian average (Statistics Canada, 2011). These economic issues are coupled with an acknowledged housing shortage and attendant problems of homelessness in the community (Lee, Budgell & Skinner, 2007; Schiff, Connors, & O'Brien, 2012). Because of its isolation, the town needs to rely on individuals in key service positions to mobilize community responses to local problems and perceived needs.

As with many rural and remote communities which lack resources (Christensen, 2012; Waegemakers Schiff & Turner, 2014), social housing and a rising homeless population had become a critical problem in HVGB by 2007 when it responded to an opportunity

for Homeless Partnering Strategy (HPS) funding. That funding supported the creation of a task force to examine problems of homelessness in the community. This task force strategically included main service providers and key municipal leaders, and led to the creation of both a Community Advisory Board on Housing and Homelessness (HVGB CAB) and a Community Plan for Addressing Homelessness and Transitional Housing (Community Plan) (Lee, Budgell & Skinner, 2007). One outcome of this plan was the recognition that the town lacked a shelter system and a treatment system that could be accessed by those needing stabilization prior to long-term/permanent housing. Included was a statement recognizing housing first as a key philosophy in terms of providing immediate housing without conditions of sobriety or treatment compliance. The overwhelming need for housing by indigenous residents who represent at least 53% of the population (Statistics Canada, 2011) was also an important factor driving the development of this plan.

COLLABORATIVE COMMUNITY SUPPORT: THE HVGB CAB AND HOUSING FOR INDIGENOUS WOMEN WITH COMPLEX NEEDS

The development of a successful housing program for high-needs Indigenous (primarily Inuit) women in Happy Valley-Goose Bay owes its nascence to the fledgling HVGB CAB and the development of the Community Plan (Lee et al., 2007). In that formative document, one of the first priority actions was to use a housing first approach to provide housing for high-needs and vulnerable people. In the community plan, the top priority was identified as the need for “using a ‘housing-first’ approach to develop accessible individual housing units for people with multiple and complex needs. Adopting flexible, intensive community supports and service coordination for consumers will be a necessary component of this approach” (Lee et al., 2007: 1). With the impetus of the newly developed Community Plan, the HVGB CAB and a newly appointed housing support worker were able to provide instrumental support to the Mokami Status of Women Council to develop a proposal for an innovative housing program. The focus of the housing program would be responding to the priorities identified in the Community Plan with a particular focus on support for high-needs women who were homeless and in need of long-term stable housing.

The Mokami Status of Women Council (MSWC) was uniquely and appropriately positioned to enter into a working alliance with the CAB to develop critically needed housing for high-needs homeless Indigenous women. The MSWC opened as a support services and drop-in centre for women in the town of HVGB in 1979. The CAB encouragement of MSWC as the lead agency to develop a housing program grew from a long-standing presence that the organization had within the community and its well-developed reputation for providing drop-in and support services to the local community. However, MSWC lacked the organizational experience in housing programming to develop the application on its own. Thus, the housing support worker and the CAB became critical supporters in the planning and preparation of the proposal to the Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, which both became key funders of the project. Thus the development of both the physical plant and its operational structure was fueled by local support and input that emerged from the CAB and its leaders.

The project focused on the construction of a new facility which would house the main offices and programming of the MSWC (the Women’s Centre), as well as eight apartments. As with many initiatives in rural communities, the CAB and MSWC used in-kind contributions from community businesses to help complete construction and furnish the eight units in a cost-effective fashion without incurring significant extra financial burdens. The partnerships that led to the formation of the MSWC housing project allowed key members of the CAB, who were also local service providers, to identify and refer the original group of women who would be housed in the apartments.

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

At the time of its inception, there were no program models for housing high-needs Indigenous women that the program leaders could access to help develop housing guidelines, tenant expectations and staff training. There are only a handful of housing programs for Indigenous women (less for Inuit women) outside of domestic violence shelters in major cities, and none consisted of purpose-built apartments that would include round-the-clock support staffing. While it is widely acknowledged that housing programs for Indigenous people need to have a cultural context and be informed by the historical issues that continue to challenge them, (Schiff, 2010) program models are not available. This includes a lack of staff training models on the roles and functions of women in Indigenous and specifically Inuit society, culturally appropriate activities, trauma-informed care and the issues of abstinence versus harm reduction approaches to substance abuse.

Thus the organization had few resources to guide its formative stages. This lack of resources was complicated by a strong vision within the Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation (NLHC) that the program should operate according to “housing first” principles. However, these guidelines were not well defined by NLHC and largely reflected the experiences of people who have co-occurring mental illnesses and addictions in large urban settings (Schiff & Schiff, 2013). Thus, they were not sensitive to the unique needs of Indigenous women in northern, remote communities. This created confusion and tensions about specific program design components, including questions as to whether alcohol and drug use should be permitted on site and what circumstances could lead to loss of housing.

An additional major challenge was the lack of staff who were trained and experienced in housing programs. This necessitated the development of a staff recruitment and training initiative. The training and recruitment strategies focused on local resources for recruitment and the use of experienced trainers from Newfoundland and other areas to provide preparation for working with high-needs women in a housing context. The staffing model included purposeful hiring of women with an Indigenous heritage as well as those who had lived experiences with addictions and homelessness. This staffing approach provided an added peer component that proved to be instrumental in engaging the residents in the program.

Serendipitously, the School of Social Work at Memorial University of Newfoundland had completed an initiative to provide Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) training to Inuit women in Labrador, the year prior to the opening of the MSWC housing program¹. The lead support persons for the BSW students, two Inuit women who had deep connections in the town and coastal communities, were recruited as the program manager and lead social worker. This team was able to provide the instrumental support that staff needed as they began to gain experience in working with deeply troubled and marginalized women. These two leaders were also able to draw on experiences in team and community building to implement a vision of an intentional community within the staffing component as well as within the housing program. Integral to this intentional community in the housing program is a strong presence of traditional culture and values that provided a new sense of identity and belonging for residents. This has resulted in considerable stability in retention of housing for residents who have historically been viewed as the hardest to house.

The results of all of these program development efforts was a unique residential program that serves Inuit women who seek to escape a life of addictions, homelessness, and family violence, learn new independent living skills, and create social relationships and a sense of community among themselves that will act as resiliency factors as they move on to more independent living. Its work has the potential to contribute to new understandings about the delivery of culturally relevant housing programs for indigenous women in remote communities. As a new program, it should be carefully evaluated for lessons learned and for important issues that continue to emerge as women move to more independent living.

Lessons Learned

What lessons in systems-level responses to homelessness can be learned from this local initiative that resulted in the establishment of an innovative housing program for high-needs Indigenous women? Two elements in particular emerge: utilising social capital to mobilise action around important issues and the importance of network and program leadership.

Social Capital

One important dynamic that facilitated the development of this program was the degree to which social capital was used to develop an engaged network in this community, as social capital is an essential component of addressing issues of public concern in rural communities (Wiesinger, 2007). The community of HVGB has historically assembled its collective interests to address issues of local concern, whether it is the misfortune of a house fire that devastates a local family or broader issues of access to needed services. The very visible problem of homelessness and lack of social housing galvanized the community to create an active network that could address these issues. The technical assistance of the NLHC was used to leverage the local willpower to create a CAB in the community and to develop timely and responsive plans to address homelessness in the community.

1. This was a one time program, designed through a partnership between Memorial University of Newfoundland, the Labrador Institute of Memorial University, and Nunatsiavut Government.

Skilled Leadership

Local leadership, which is an essential component of any successful rural initiative (Avant & Copeland, 2013), by both committed members of the CAB and the dedication of a housing support worker in a new position to serve this role, provided the impetus to develop the program. There was an element of good fortune in the availability of qualified leadership in the program. Small, remote communities often face challenges recruiting and retaining qualified personnel, especially from within the community itself. The program was fortunate to have been able to recruit women from the community who were qualified and capable of providing sound leadership and management.

The rewards to the local community in mobilising to address homelessness issues and develop a unique, culturally relevant program were multifold. The CAB was able to provide tangible evidence that the community was willing to take action and the newly developed program provided visible evidence of the town's willingness and ability to implement a much needed housing program.

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