

HOUSING FIRST IN CANADA: SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES TO END HOMELESSNESS

Housing First Case Studies

Edmonton ALBERTA

Nikihk Housing First/Homeward Trust

Key Messages

- *It is a model designed to address the over-representation of Aboriginal people in Edmonton's homeless population.*
- *It shows the ways in which housing is just one part of a Housing First program.*
- *It highlights what Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal agencies can do to integrate culture into a Housing First program.*
- *The program is an example of how to create an inclusive governance structure to address the needs of different sub-populations.*

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Introduction

The rising problem of homelessness in Edmonton, Alberta's capital city, made headlines in 2007 when more than 200 people experiencing homelessness set up tents in a vacant lot that became known as 'Tent City'. In the absence of other affordable housing options, the residents of Tent City believed in their right to sleep in a public space. Three months later they were forced to move. With the help of government officials 58 residents found some form of housing, while the remainder maintained 'no fixed address'.

Several factors contributed to the housing crisis in Edmonton that led to Tent City. Beginning in the early 2000's an economic boom brought thousands of people looking for work from outside the city into Edmonton. Soaring rents, conversion of rental units to condos and a desperate lack of affordable housing limited the housing options for many people (Edmonton Committee to End Homelessness, 2009).

After Tent City, it was obvious that something had to be done to improve the situation of people experiencing homelessness in Edmonton. Calgary had recently started developing their *10 Year Plan to End Homelessness* and challenged by the same issues, Edmonton started their own plan.

In late 2007, Sam Tsemberis, Executive Director of Pathways to Housing in New York, and Phil Mangano, the Director of the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USHIC) – referred to by some as the US' homelessness policy czar - spoke at a Housing First conference in Red Deer, Alberta. Their charismatic presentations on the value of 10 Year Plans to End Homelessness and the Housing First model had an impact on all of the communities present, many of whom were ready for a new way of addressing homelessness.

The continued support of the city's current mayor, Stephen Mandel, was crucial in making a significant change in Edmonton's response to homelessness. Mandel was eager for an innovative approach to homelessness and established the Edmonton Leadership Committee to End Homelessness, which was comprised of representatives from businesses, philanthropic organizations, social agencies, government and faith-based organizations.

In 2009, Edmonton's plan *A Place to Call Home: Edmonton's 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness* was adopted. The *10 Year Plan* focuses on ending chronic homelessness and is based on the Housing First model. The *10 Year Plan* has the following 5 goals:

- Provide permanent housing options for all people living on the street and in public places;
- Ensure an adequate supply of permanent, affordable housing with appropriate supports for people who are experiencing homelessness;
- Ensure emergency accommodation is available when needed, but transition people quickly into permanent housing;

- Prevent people from experiencing homeless; and
- Establish a governance structure and an implementation process for the Plan that builds on the strengths of the community, develops capacity, promotes collaboration, innovation and cost-effectiveness and measures progress.

The most recent count of homelessness in Edmonton, conducted in 2012, found 2174 people experiencing homelessness. This represents a 30% reduction from the 2008 - the last one prior to implementation of the *10 Year Plan* - and the lowest number since 2002. It was the second consecutive count that registered a decrease, following 2010's, which reversed a steady increase registered in counts from 1999 through 2008. However, of those experiencing homelessness, 46% were Aboriginal, despite Aboriginal peoples comprising only 5% of the city's population (Homeward Trust, 2012).

HOUSING FIRST – PERFECT FOR ADAPTING TO SUB-POPULATIONS

The city saw a need to change the response to Aboriginal peoples experiencing homelessness in a manner that recognized the structural and systemic barriers faced by Aboriginal peoples and integrated housing with social and cultural approaches to solving homelessness. The Housing First model has the capacity to fulfill these needs and is adaptable to the contexts and needs of Aboriginal communities.

The *10 Year Plan* lays out several strategies to address Aboriginal peoples experiencing homelessness including:

“[working] with the Aboriginal community to develop the capacity of an Aboriginal agency or agencies to deliver Aboriginal specific services in support of the Housing First program by Aboriginal peoples to Aboriginal peoples when requested. Work with the Aboriginal and existing service communities to ensure services provided to Aboriginal people are relevant, respectful and effective in helping Aboriginal people secure and maintain a home”
(*A Place to Call Home*, 2009).

Once the *10 Year Plan* was adopted, the City of Edmonton created the Homeless Commission, comprising many of the members of the Edmonton Committee to End Homelessness. The mandate of the commission has been to maintain and ensure continued support for the plan to end homelessness and report to council on the community's progress. The plan also identified Homeward Trust Edmonton as the management body responsible for implementation.

HOMEWARD TRUST

Homeward Trust, established in 2008, has a mandate to:

- Increase access to housing by funding the development of new units and accessing market units;
- Coordinate the provision of support services;
- Undertake community planning and research; and
- Raise awareness in the community through events and initiatives that promote ending homelessness in Edmonton (Homeward Trust, 2012).

Housing First as a philosophy guides all of the work of Homeward Trust. While Homeward Trust functions as an independent entity it maintains positive lines of communications with all orders of government, including working closely with Aboriginal governments and communities. Homeward Trust functions as both a direct service provider and an overseer of funded project for both capital and support services.



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ADDRESSING ABORIGINAL HOMELESSNESS IN EDMONTON

In 2006, before the *10 Year Plan* was established, an examination of the challenges faced by the Aboriginal community was presented in the *Your City, Your Voice Report on the Edmonton Urban Aboriginal Dialogue (YCYV)*. The report was a result of an initiative by the Edmonton Urban Aboriginal Accord Initiative, the Edmonton Urban Aboriginal Affairs Committee (EAUAC) and the City of Edmonton that brought together over 1800 Aboriginal community members and leaders in a dialogue about the central issues facing urban Aboriginal peoples.

This report and several of the priorities identified in the YCYV provided insight into the need for Aboriginal community members to be key players in solving an issue like homelessness where a high percentage of the homeless population was and still is Aboriginal. The YCYV was one of several sources the Homeward Trust Community Planning community used to inform *Edmonton Area Community Plan on Housing and Supports: 2011-2015*.

The community needed to adapt their response to Aboriginal homelessness in a manner which included a coordinated approach to integrated, culturally-informed services. With the over-representation of Aboriginal peoples experiencing homelessness in Edmonton, new solutions had to be a part of the city's *10 Year Plan*.

AN INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

Addressing homelessness within the Aboriginal populations required the participation of Aboriginal community groups and networks. These groups and networks were essential in creating an approach to homelessness that focused on the systemic cultural and social forces contributing to the over-representation of Aboriginal peoples experiencing homelessness.

Of the nine Directors on Homeward Trust's Board, four are chosen from within Aboriginal communities, by Aboriginal stakeholders. These four directors are chosen through an Aboriginal Nominating Committee, composed of a



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member of the Homeward Trust Board, one appointee each from the Métis Nation of Alberta, Treaty 6 First Nations of Alberta, Treaty 8 First Nations of Alberta and the Canadian Native Friendship Centre.¹

The work of Homeward Trust is also informed by the Aboriginal Advisory Council (AAC), comprised of community leaders. This council is a critical component of Homeward Trust's Indenture model. In order to have the intended impact on ending homelessness that was desired it was clear that the Aboriginal community needed be a long-term ingredient in the unique governance model and functions of the organization. The Council advises Homeward Trust on matters relating to Aboriginal issues and projects by:

- Encouraging innovative solutions to promote the building of Aboriginal organizations, groups and communities in Edmonton;
- Providing awareness of the Urban Aboriginal experiences, knowledge and cultural perspectives;
- Ensuring Aboriginal-focused projects are led by or supported by organizations that have a proven track record of serving Urban Aboriginal people in a productive and successful manner. For example, Homeward Trust is currently working with community partners to establish Indigenous Indicators for Success. It has long been proven that Western models of assessment and evaluation do not include the Indigenous worldview. As a result, there is the potential for skewing of outcomes.

1. Treaty 6 and 8 refer to geographic areas of land based on treaties signed between First Nations communities and the Queen and continue to frame the relationships between the Nations and the federal government. Treaty 6 was signed in 1876 at Fort Carlton; it includes 50 First Nations in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Treaty 8 was signed in 1899; it includes 39 First Nation communities and the territory covers Northern Alberta, Northwestern Saskatchewan, Northeastern British Columbia, and the Southwest portion of the Northwest Territories. See <http://www.treatysix.org> and <http://www.treaty8.ca> for more information.



In addition to creating an Aboriginal-inclusive governance structure for its own organization, Homeward Trust is often recruited by other local and national organizations that are interested in re-creating Homeward Trust's governance model. Homeward Trust offers strong examples of Aboriginal Board member and leadership role recruitment, as well as the importance of engaging a range of people in order to increase the sustainability of the relationship.

Homeward Trust also advises on who, where and how to establish connections with the Aboriginal community, including relationship building with Aboriginal groups and Aboriginal-serving agencies. This may include extending invitations to annual pow-wows or community gatherings. Finally, Homeward Trust offers methods of improving outcomes for Aboriginal clients through the inclusion of more culturally informed services.

Funded by Homeward Trust, the Housing First team, named *Nikihk* (meaning "home") is administered by the Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society which provides programming for Aboriginal children and families based on traditional Indigenous teachings.

The purpose of this case study is to provide an overview of Homeward Trust and Bent Arrow's experience of planning, implementing and sustaining Housing First for Aboriginal peoples in Edmonton, as well as some of the barriers faced and how they were overcome. Included are examples of data that demonstrate the effectiveness of Edmonton's Housing First programs in supporting Aboriginal peoples experiencing homelessness in securing and maintaining housing, as well as the program's effectiveness in addressing their cultural, spiritual, mental, physical and social health needs. It concludes with a discussion of the central lessons learned in creating a Housing First program for Aboriginal peoples.

Getting Started: Framing the Issue

Public perception of the issues facing people who are experiencing homelessness can sometimes get in the way of implementing Housing First. For example, the misconception that addiction is a matter of personal choice rather than a result of complex issues supports services that have historically been abstinence-focused.

Edmonton's *10 Year Plan* calls for a fundamental change in addressing homelessness that moves away from simply managing the issue to solving it. The Plan highlights the "overwhelming evidence" that this new approach, Housing First, is both effective and financially sound. The Plan lays out the financial case for investing in Housing First:

"Assuming a growth rate of 8% per year, (the average from the last 3 homeless counts), there would be approximately 6,500 homeless Edmontonians in 2018. Assuming that we provide emergency shelter space to 40% of that population, as we now do, the annual cost of 2,627 shelter spaces alone would be \$54.3 million, not including all the additional costs of health care and other services. And those costs would grow unabated. By comparison, the operating costs of implementing this Plan will be \$90 million a year" (*10 Year Plan*, 2009).

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Initially some community members did not agree with the Housing First model and expressed cynicism about the availability of housing stock and the ability to engage landlords. However, as the program developed and the successes and positive outcomes of the programs were shared, community support became inevitable. The collaborations that developed over the course of community meetings created a basis of trust that allowed people to discuss what was and was not working.

REVERSING AND ADDRESSING THE EFFECTS OF COLONIALISM FOR ABORIGINAL PEOPLES

Aboriginal peoples in Canada (and in other countries) have faced a number of unjust systemic barriers and traumatic experiences. The colonization of Aboriginal peoples has been described as "the primary form of oppression because it affects Aboriginals' consciousness, self-worth, self-identity, community identity and cultural identity" (McKenzie & Morrisette, 2002 as cited in Verniest, n.d.:6). Gagne (1998 as cited in Quinn, 2007:73) also suggests that "colonialism is at the root of trauma because it has led to the dependency of Aboriginal peoples to settlers and then to cultural genocide, racism and alcoholism". Residential schools, the '60s scoop², colonization, racism and discrimination have resulted in a generation of Aboriginal peoples who may have few family ties, limited sources of support, have been forced to disconnect from their culture and experience increased vulnerability.

2. The 60s scoop (or sweep), beginning in the 1960s and lasting until the mid-1980s, refers to the forced and systematic removal of Aboriginal children from their homes and their placements with primarily white families for the purpose of fostering and/or adoption.

Moving Forward: Planning

DO NOT WAIT FOR THE PERFECT CONDITIONS TO IMPLEMENT HOUSING FIRST: JUST DO IT

The only real requirement for implementing Housing First is a commitment to end homelessness. Beginning the work leads to the relationships, partnerships and conditions needed for a successful Housing First program. Based on the success of 10-year plans and Housing First models in the US, Homeward Trust staff knew that Housing First needed to be tried in Edmonton and they could not wait for the perfect conditions for program implementation. An increase in affordable housing or good relationships with landlords was unlikely unless staff started creating and delivering programs.

There were a number of pilot projects in Edmonton at the time, funded through the Government of Alberta, similar to the Housing First model in their delivery of Intensive Case Management (ICM). Programs with the capacity to commit to delivering the new Housing First framework migrated to the new model over an 18 month period. A key component of this is ensuring that Housing First is serving the right population, one that both requires the intervention and can be expected to succeed in the program. More intensive supports are required for populations with the highest needs.

The Pathways to Housing program had also been implemented since the launch of the Plan, meaning that Housing First was not entirely new to Edmonton. In addition to this local example of Housing First, a team of service providers went to Toronto to learn about its Streets to Homes Program. Additionally, Pathways To Housing in New York City conducted an evaluation of the Edmonton program.

PROGRAM VERSUS TEAM

In Edmonton, there is an important differentiation between a program and a team. Homeward Trust delivers a Housing First program through teams with varying mandates to serve particular sub-populations. Some teams deliver ICM while others focus on Assertive Community Treatment (ACT). There are seven ICM teams, 2 ACT teams, as well as two Rapid Exit management teams and two Permanent Supportive Housing teams. Each team has resources specific to the service they are delivering. The Bent Arrow *Nikihk* team is part of Homeward Trust's Housing First program and delivers services to Aboriginal populations within Edmonton. In order to address the overrepresentation of Aboriginal peoples, every Housing First team is expected to have a minimum of 40% Aboriginal clients as part of its case load. Through Team Lead meetings, Bent Arrow contributes to a community of practice, sharing learnings and serving as a resource for other teams. Team members are expected to complete Cultural Diversity Training.



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The Housing First Model at Bent Arrow

Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society provides culturally-informed Housing First and support services to Aboriginal peoples (First Nations, Metis, Inuit and non-status individuals and families) who are experiencing chronic homelessness. The team's program was designed to foster life skills that enable people to maintain their housing and to connect or re-connect clients with their culture. The program provides an integrated model using conventional and trans-cultural support services.

BENT ARROW'S PRINCIPLES ALIGN WITH EDMONTON'S HOUSING FIRST PHILOSOPHY³ BY INCLUDING:

- A harm reduction approach to reducing the negative consequences to substance use and other potentially high risk behaviors such as sex work;
- A culturally relevant sobriety option like Wellbriety – a journey for addictions recovery;
- In vivo services that are delivered in the home and community;
- Clients have choice in receiving service, as well as the frequency, intensity, duration and type of services;
- There is no coercion in the delivery of the services;
- Services are strength-based;
- Services support greater independence;
- A client-centered service delivery approach;
- Services for individuals who experience mental health challenges have a recovery and healing orientation;
- There is a commitment to re-house any clients who lose their housing and they will

receive a continuation of support services should that occur.

- Practices are evidence-based, aligned with healing and respectful of Aboriginal traditional ways.
- Motivational interviewing is practiced.

The Housing First model for Aboriginal peoples in Edmonton maintains the core principles of the approach. It includes unique support services that recognize cultural and spiritual Aboriginal practices and traditions as avenues for improving the sustainability of an individual's housing.

HOUSING FIRST SERVICES FOR ABORIGINAL PEOPLES WILL:

- Be accessible to any self-identified Aboriginal individual or family experiencing chronic homelessness;
- Model flexibility and be client-centered, focusing on the journey of the individual;
- Be established on the principles of anti-oppressive practice, including do no harm;
- Provide for the health and safety of all program participants;
- Be representative of the many and diverse Aboriginal teachings recognizing the reality that Aboriginal peoples are a diverse population of distinct peoples with unique heritages, languages, cultural practices and spiritual beliefs.;
- Have strong and vibrant relationships with the Edmonton Urban Aboriginal community which is accountable, respectful and honouring;
- Recognize the importance of family and community.

3. Principles adapted from Bent Arrow's funding proposal for Housing First. Retrieved from www.homewardtrust.ca.

INTAKE PROCESS

Clients can access the Housing First program directly through Bent Arrow, through Coordinated Access or by referral from another agency. Clients are required to complete an application, including the Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (SPDAT), in order to assess a client's needs.

When a client is deemed eligible and accepted into the program, they are connected to a Housing Outreach Worker. After the Housing Outreach Worker (HOW) has the tools in place that can best assure successful housing (furniture, utility hook up, groceries, and other start-up items), the HOW worker then transferred the participant to a Follow-Up Support Worker who will guide those families and individuals on the remainder of their journey to Housing Stability.

The SPDAT, which identifies challenges and barriers, assists the client and the frontline support worker in determining areas they wish to address in the next 12 months including employment, training, education and/or family or cultural reconnection. To help clients set and achieve goals, the Follow-Up Support Workers use the Specific Measurable Achievable Realistic Timeline (SMART) approach. This helps clients identify their goals, how they can be addressed and make a realistic plan with an attached timeline. The Follow-up Support Worker assists the client to meet their goals and access needed resources through referrals. The client can also access programming in support of their goals that includes involvement in cultural events and ceremonies, meeting with elders to discuss reconnecting with cultural identity and receiving advice on meaning, spirituality and becoming whole.

LIFE SKILLS

The Bent Arrow team has put together a 10-week life skills course that covers topics including healthy communication, relationships, maintaining a home, addictions and lifestyles. Clients have reported that the program has been very useful and have expressed an interest in exploring many of the themes further. Staff are currently planning a second part to the course in order

to further develop clients' life skills. At its heart, Life Skills Training takes a very proactive approach to barriers which commonly arise for newly housed *Nikihk* participants.

HOUSING FIRST STAFF

All Bent Arrow *Nikihk* staff must be open to and have an understanding of Aboriginal cultures. Bent Arrow's Housing First staff include:

TEAM LEAD

The Team Lead is the liaison between the Aboriginal Housing Team and the Housing First service sector and participates in Team Lead meetings, working groups and committees. The Team Leader is responsible for the recruitment, supervision and evaluation of team members and ensuring the outcomes of the Aboriginal Housing First Team are met.

HOUSING OUTREACH WORKERS

Housing Outreach Workers support clients in accessing housing, or being re-housed, as well as items necessary for the clients' homes. Outreach workers also assist clients in connecting to their local community, including identifying community resources and free community events that develop a sense of community belonging.

FOLLOW-UP SUPPORT WORKERS

Follow-up Support Workers assist clients in maintaining their housing by providing ongoing support services and facilitating access to additional mainstream services or services specific to Aboriginal peoples. A Follow-up Support Worker offers ICM to clients until they graduate from the program.

TRAUMA SUPPORT WORKER

The Trauma Support Worker provides trauma support services to clients by providing recovery services, assisting the client in building relationships within the community or facilitating access to other specialists in the field of trauma. The impact of trauma can have significant influence on a client's behaviour and ability to maintain their housing. Having a Trauma Support Worker attached to the Housing First team can help clients avoid eviction.



ABORIGINAL CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL EDUCATOR

The Aboriginal Cultural and Spiritual Educator assists clients who are interested in connecting or re-connecting with Aboriginal traditions and people through events, activities and resources, such as elders.

The Cultural and Spiritual Educator also provides opportunities for clients to learn about historical events and their impacts on Aboriginal cultures. Topics such as residential schools, prisons, protocols, cultural resources, ceremonies and cultural events are discussed in relation to how these topics apply to a client's daily life.

SUPPORT AND CULTURAL SERVICES OUTSIDE OF STAFF ROLES

Clients are able to access other supports such as cultural leaders, pipe carriers, traditional healers and psychologists outside of those offered by staff. These opportunities

also include participating in a variety of cultural activities such as medicine picking and teachings, smudge teachings, home blessings and cleansings, cultural camps, storytelling, preparation for ceremonies, sweat lodges, drumming circles, pipe ceremonies, round dances and pow-wows, cultural teaching and advice from elders.

CLIENT TO WORKER RATIO

The ratio of clients to worker was originally set at 1:20. This number has since been adapted to 1:15 to 1:20 to better serve clients.

Making it Happen: Implementation

WHAT IS AND IS NOT HOUSING FIRST

Housing First programs that are funded by Homeward Trust are obliged to adhere to the program's core principles. The effectiveness of Homeward Trust's Housing First approach is based on more than housing. Support services are crucial in addressing the various reasons people experience homelessness and in assisting clients in maintaining their housing. Programs that only offer housing services and do not have ICM or ACT teams are not Housing First programs. The importance of support lies not only in improving client outcomes but also in maintaining positive relationships with landlords. If clients are housed but not getting the support they need, problems can develop for landlords and housing associations. All Homeward Trust Housing First programs must provide appropriate support services.



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HOUSING AVAILABILITY

The current housing vacancy in Edmonton is approximately 1.8%. However, of the available housing stock few are affordable for Housing First clients, effectively creating a zero vacancy rate. Lack of access to an adequate supply of a variety of affordable housing types is an acknowledged gap in Edmonton. Part of the Housing Outreach Worker role is working to fill this gap by approaching new landlords and building the relationships necessary to recruit additional housing.

This lack of housing options decreases the program's ability to adhere to the principle of choice in Housing First. When housing stock is not available, clients are sometimes required to take the first place they see rather than wait for

something potentially more suitable; a situation that can negatively affect their long-term housing stability.

The lack of affordable housing makes the program's rent supplements an important part of Housing First in Edmonton. The program also offers a graduate's rental assistance program for clients who have maintained stable housing but are unable to pay market rent. Clients are able to graduate from the program but continue receiving a rent supplement.

ACCESS TO SUPPORT – LOCATION

Bent Arrow offers a variety of services to clients and has become aware of the significance of service location. Initially not all services were provided on-site. Staff noticed problems developing around client service use. For example, program staff developed a partnership with a psychologist providing therapy for clients. Despite wanting the service, clients were not always showing up for appointments. Program staff began offering clients the opportunity to see the psychologist in Bent Arrow's cultural room, which increased their participation in the service.

ASSESSMENT AND ACUITY MATCHING

The capacity to assess clients and matching their acuity to supports is an area of growth for Homeward Trust. Sometimes problems arise due to a lack of assessment, such as when an agency knows that a client needs help but have not performed a full assessment in order to match the client's needs to the available supports. Systematic use of the SPDAT will continue to improve assessment and acuity matching.

COORDINATED ACCESS AND INTAKE

Homeward Trust provides a coordinated point of access and intake for its Housing First programs. This allows clients to be referred from one team to another in order to provide the most appropriate services. It also helps avoid mismatch in acuity and support. Currently the focus of Housing First programs is on addressing chronic homelessness. However, the challenges regarding community response to family homelessness means that families are being referred to Housing First when they are not experiencing chronic homelessness. Coordinated intake helps Housing First programs avoid drifting away from their focus demographic.

COMPLEXITY OF CLIENT NEEDS

Addictions and mental health challenges are very prevalent among the populations experiencing homelessness, including Aboriginal peoples. These challenges, combined with homelessness, create complex cases requiring multiple interventions. Bent Arrow has employed a cultural and spiritual advisor with a background in addictions support. Homeward Trust has also been brainstorming ways that Follow-Up Support Workers could be more dynamically connected to different organizations, not only those they are employed with. Follow-Up Support Workers ideally would have relationships with other agencies and organizations to provide any type of support a client lacks.

ONGOING REVIEW AND EVALUATION

The Bent Arrow *Nikihk* Housing First Team Leader is a part of the Housing First Advisory Council, which meets monthly to discuss improvements needing implementation in Edmonton's Housing First programs. The team identifies potential program components that would add value for clients and stakeholders. For example, the team started to create improved access to short-term housing for clients waiting for permanent housing. Short-term housing provided the client with a more stable environment than a shelter while the search for more permanent housing continued.

Homeward Trust also meets regularly with Bent Arrow to discuss processes the team has created, to identify successes and to identify the barriers experienced by people who are having less success in accessing housing.

THE COST OF REPAIRING UNITS

One of the biggest surprises in Edmonton has been the cost of repairing damaged units; in serious cases costing as much as \$20,000. The team knew mitigating such risks for landlords was required, however they did not accurately forecast the amount that would need to be put aside. Initially each Housing First team had a budget to cover the costs of repairs, however some teams experienced more damage than others, resulting in the creation of a central fund that all teams can access.

ADDRESSING OTHER HOUSING-RELATED NEEDS: FURNITURE

Most people experiencing homelessness have few personal possessions and generally no furniture, which makes furnishing a home difficult. Inspired by the Toronto Streets to Homes program's relationship with a furniture bank, Homeward Trust established FIND, a furniture market that is free for clients. In 2011, FIND became a social enterprise. It continues to serve clients, while also selling furniture to the public and re-investing the proceeds into housing and support programs.

COLLABORATION/PARTNERSHIPS

Housing First is about accessing housing and supports for clients and making relationships with other service providing agencies crucial to the program's success. The following partnerships support Homeward Trust and Bent Arrow's *Nikihk* Housing First programs:

HOUSING FIRST ADVISORY COUNCIL

All agency Team Leads managing Housing First programs in Edmonton are a part of the Team Lead meeting. Additionally, the Executive Directors of each agency are part of the Housing First Advisory Council. The council meets monthly to discuss challenges and barriers in program implementation as well as ways to address those challenges.

LANDLORD AND HOUSING PROVIDERS

A full-time staff position of Manager, Landlord Relations at Homeward Trust works with all Housing First Teams to respond to landlord concerns, address issues and continue to build relationships with housing providers. Team Leads and Follow-Up Support Workers are also able to work directly with landlords and respond quickly to their concerns. The team also works with the Edmonton Apartments Association, Capital Regional Housing Association (the management body for social housing in Edmonton) and HomeEd Properties (non-profit housing for low-income people).

COMMUNITY PLAN COMMITTEE

The Community Plan Committee of Homeward Trust includes representatives from the for-profit housing sector. The Committee is tasked with preparing and updating Edmonton's *10 Year Plan*, which guides the overall direction, resource commitments and priorities of Homeward Trust.

BOARDWALK RENTAL COMMUNITIES

As a result of the Community Plan Committee a relationship with Boardwalk Rental Communities was developed. Boardwalk offered \$150 reduction in rent to Homeward Trust clients, one-third of whom are in a Boardwalk unit. The program makes sense to Boardwalk economically because there are support workers that ensure rent is paid and are available to call if there is a problem.

ALBERTA HEALTH SERVICES

Homeward Trust works with Alberta Health Services (AHS) to ensure the province's input and commitment to understanding and decreasing barriers to health services for Aboriginal clients.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING ON ABORIGINAL ISSUES

Homeward Trust delivers several trainings and workshops for all staff on a variety of topics including Aboriginal Diversity, Residential School Survivors, the Sixties Scoop, Circles Process, as well as Colonization and Decolonization.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RENT SUPPLEMENTS

Poverty is the common denominator among people experiencing homelessness and assisting people out of

poverty often means providing financial assistance that lower an individual's costs. Rental assistance means that landlords receive market rent for their apartments and clients can afford to live in market properties. Without rent supplements, it would be very difficult to house clients.

SUSTAINABILITY

Sustaining Housing First in Edmonton requires financial investment; an investment that will pay significant social dividends. It also requires cooperation among all orders of government, the business community, faith communities, educators, service providers and all Edmontonians.

Homeward Trust continually works to engage the community and maintain focus on the intervention process of Housing First. Making a commitment to end homelessness places pressures on a community to deliver quick and visible changes. Some will not be convinced there is no longer a homelessness crisis until there is no one living on the street. Others understand that despite the strongest commitments, it takes time and significant investment to reach the point where no one is experiencing a housing crisis for longer than a couple of weeks.

ALTERNATIVE STREAMS OF FUNDING

The creation of the social enterprise FIND has been important in generating revenue outside standard funding avenues. FIND is a large used furniture store which currently generates approximately \$50,000 per month. As part of the business model this money allows Housing First participants to access furniture, dishes and other household supplies at no cost to them.

To date there has been success in achieving the targets laid out by the *10 Year Plan*, but people are still living on the street. If shelter use is going to decline, there must be investment in the other services crucial to avoiding the need for anyone to stay in a shelter in the first place.

COST

For intensive case management teams in Edmonton, the costs for a client in the first year of Housing First are in the range of \$15,000-\$20,000. This includes the start-up costs of housing, case management and Rental Assistance. In the long term, the cost of ending homelessness is more sustainable than the cost of managing it.

Evidence of Effectiveness

Efforts to Outcomes (ETO) is a case management and data collection system used in Edmonton that tracks client progress, housing and outcomes. Information is collected via the SPDAT to assist in identifying the individuals and families with the greatest need and to track their success over time. SPAD is administered at intake, when the client is housed and ongoing at regular intervals to allow staff to see improvements in a client's overall housing score, as well as in relation to issues like mental health.

Data collected since the beginning of Homeward Trust's Housing First program (April 1, 2009) until December 31, 2012 demonstrates that:

- *2325 individuals were housed;*
- *786 of those were Aboriginal; and*
- *86% of those housed retained their housing (percentage of clients served in the period who have successfully exited the program or remain housed as program clients. Calculation excludes exits due to death or incarceration).*

The data also shows that compared to the non-Aboriginal population, a greater portion of Aboriginal clients are women (59% compared to 32% of non-Aboriginal clients). In addition, Aboriginal participants were more likely to be housed as a family (46% of clients housed by ICM teams are Aboriginal, 58% of families housed are Aboriginal and 60% of children and adult dependents housed are Aboriginal). Lastly Aboriginal families that are housed tend to be slightly larger than non-Aboriginal families (average size of Aboriginal family housed = 3.3 people compared to 2.6 people in non-Aboriginal families) (Homeward Trust, 2013).

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

In 2011, Homeward Trust engaged the Blue Quills First Nations College in a qualitative program evaluation of Housing First for Aboriginal peoples. The evaluation was to assess the success of the program and to identify gaps in services and challenges in delivering services for Aboriginal peoples. The report, *Perspectives on the Housing First Program with Indigenous Participants*, highlights the need for Indigenous identity development through life skills training, mentorship, access to elders and therapy to address trauma in order to support Aboriginal peoples in accessing and maintaining housing. The findings of this report helped inform the development of an Aboriginal Housing First team.

DEVELOPING ABORIGINAL-SPECIFIC INDICATORS

The Aboriginal Advisory Council put forward the observation that tools adequately measuring the impact of culture-specific programming on client outcomes were lacking. As a result, Homeward Trust has begun a process of developing tools to assess these outcomes. Aboriginal staff were eager to measure the extent to which a worker has helped a client access their culture, develop more meaning in their life or to identify the impact of traditional ceremony on a client's healing or recovery process. Some measures are currently being piloted in Aboriginal-specific programs including availability of services in Indigenous languages and the introduction of appropriate protocol in processes.

Key Learnings

AN ABORIGINAL TEAM IS ONE PART OF THE SOLUTION TO ENDING ABORIGINAL HOMELESSNESS

Simply ensuring Aboriginal teams are working to end homelessness in a community is not enough to eliminate the problem. Successfully addressing Aboriginal peoples experiencing homelessness also means reducing racism and discrimination, dealing with the effects of trauma, providing culturally-informed, relevant, respectful and appropriate support, along with the active involvement of the entire community.

There are many facets of Aboriginal life that need to be taken into account when working to end homelessness. There is no single pan-Aboriginal identity; each Aboriginal nation represents a particular culture. Simply providing one elder on staff to assist with generic cultural re-connection is insufficient. Instead, there must be a community navigator who is aware of traditional processes and existing relationships within a broad range of Aboriginal nations and communities.

CONTEXT MATTERS IN GOVERNANCE

Effective solutions evolve when those most directly impacted are a part of the input process. When creating and delivering services for Aboriginal peoples, the manner in which they are engaged in decision-making and governance will impact the effectiveness of the service.

Addressing the needs of Aboriginal peoples experiencing homelessness is not limited to service delivery; engaging Aboriginal peoples in creating the solutions to homelessness is an essential component to ending homelessness.



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DO NOT UNDERESTIMATE THE TRANSFORMATIVE ROLE OF EDUCATION AND TEACHINGS

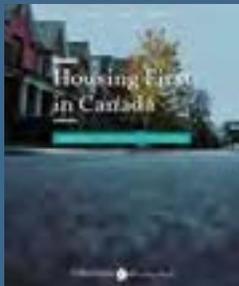
Supporting people in changing their lives is not solely about providing the required information. It is a process that requires everyone involved to model the healthy conversations and behaviours that they want to see in others. The problem of homelessness will not be solved by simply delivering workshops. The effects of colonization must be viscerally understood; we cannot think ourselves out of colonized systems, we must act ourselves into decolonized systems.

SET TARGETS TO ASSESS REDUCTION OF A SUB-POPULATION'S HOMELESSNESS

The over-representation of Aboriginal peoples experiencing homelessness requires a unique solution. For Homeward Trust part of that solution involves setting a goal for all contracted agencies to maintain a minimum caseload of 40% Aboriginal clients. By setting these goals, Homeward Trust is not just housing people, they are also reducing the disproportionate representation of Aboriginal peoples experiencing homelessness. This minimum caseload, as well as cultural diversity training, also demonstrates Homeward Trust's belief that both mainstream and Aboriginal-specific agencies have a responsibility to provide diverse and culturally appropriate services.

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This case study was researched and written by Fiona Scott.

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