CONCLUSION

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This book was produced with strategic intentions: our goal is to leverage collective expertise to produce an evidence base that supports policy and government decision makers, community organizers, institutional leaders (e.g. managers and directors) and funders to conceptualize, plan for and implement coordinated efforts to end homelessness in Canada. We see efforts to coordinate services, policies and governance strategies as the critical next step in a pan-Canadian effort to end homelessness.

For a long time, the predominant response to homelessness in Canada reflected a commitment to providing emergency food and shelter to people in crisis. Over the last few years, we have observed a dramatic shift in conversations about homelessness and community efforts to address it. A central precipitating change was linking up people who work in research settings, community-based organizations and all levels of government to combine efforts to understand the state of homelessness in Canada. It started with talking and working across disciplinary boundaries – sharing stories, building relationships and figuring out how to work together. From here people began collaborating on research projects to understand different causes and experiences of homelessness and assess efforts to address it. Staff and volunteers in community organizations began to engage with and then conduct research. Officials in government began to engage with and then request research. Faculty and students in universities began to focus on producing knowledge with (rather than about) communities and thinking as much about how to share research findings as they thought about producing them. As these people across Canada began working across disciplines and across sectors to understand and resolve homelessness, other shifts were observable.

As it became clear that street-involvement exacerbates the very exclusionary conditions that shape pathways into homelessness, people began to talk about the importance of homelessness prevention. Increasingly, policy, research and practice recognize that homelessness is not simply the result of individual failures but a confluence of structural and individual factors that manifest in extreme forms of social and political marginalization. Collectively, we now understand that street homelessness and institutionally mediated homelessness (e.g. shelter living) make it very difficult for people to take care of their physical and mental health, access labour market opportunities, establish trusting relationships, self-advocate or exercise their rights as political citizens.

As our understanding of homelessness improved, it also became clear that many of our attempts to address homelessness have actually been keeping people in a state of crisis that becomes increasingly difficult to

escape over time. As such, we began to look elsewhere for promising evidence-based solutions to homelessness. Community planning processes were engaged, centralized databases were created and Housing First approaches were rolled out across the country. Over the last decade, we have witnessed widespread paradigmatic shifts in how communities in Canada are thinking about and working to resolve homelessness.

This book was produced to support continued momentum for our collective efforts to make change. We set out to shine a light on the growing body of research about systems-level approaches to homelessness in North America as well as the growing number of initiatives being implemented by diverse groups of researchers, community agencies and different levels of government. What has emerged from this book has surpassed our expectations.

We deliberately organized the book into longer research-based chapters that distill general principles to be applied in the pursuit of different types of systems-level responses to homelessness as well as shorter descriptive vignettes that offer accounts of diverse systems-coordination efforts across Canada. In the introduction to the book, we highlighted key organizational themes used to structure the sections of this book: program and service-level collaboration; systems planning for targeted groups; inter-sectoral collaborations; and high-level governance challenges and opportunities. Beyond these overarching thematic areas that provide the overall structure for the book, the chapters in this volume suggest several common elements of a systems-level response to homelessness that are worth highlighting in this conclusion. The elements we elucidate below suggest an emerging theoretical framework, which we see guiding systems-level thinking, planning and working more generally.

The first element of systems-level work that the chapters in this volume highlight is the centrality of people to any process of structural reform, including efforts to align policy, procedure and practice. The work of planning, coordinating access, aligning professional language and culture and designing and implementing data collection processes and policies is always done by people. So while technical or structural coordination is essential to the development of a sustained systems integration endeavor, a process or policy can only ever be as effective as the people who activate and apply policies and procedures in the context of their work. For example, Hurtubise and Rose show us how the effective implementation of inter-professional teams (in this case composed of police and social services) require that people learn how to work across differences in workplace and professional culture. Bopp, Poole and Schmidt illuminate how a Community of Practice model can be used to support learning and working across professional differences. Nichols demonstrates how external coordination coupled with shared goals and/or commitments can be used within a collaborative structure to navigate conflicts and make collective decisions. Other chapters illuminate the importance of outwards-facing leadership (championing) provided by an agency or individual (e.g. Charette, Kuropatwa, Warkentin, & Cloutier; Puligandla, Gordon & Way). While still others point to leadership approaches that work within smaller grassroots networks (Evans; Nichols) and larger more complex collaborative governance structures (Doberstein; Doberstein & Reimer). For example, Evans argues that service delivery coordination is better supported by a community-based approach to governance characterized by distributed leadership, horizontal collaborative networks and partnerships than a traditional top-down managerial approach characterized by performance management targets and contractually organized service delivery frameworks. On the other hand, cross-sectoral coordination efforts require different (or additional) governance structures that link government departments or ministries. Learning, training, coaching, relationship-building, networking, outreach, public and community engagement, consensus building, knowledge exchange, participatory and inclusive approaches to research and data collection – all of these relational components of a systems-level reform initiative matter.

The second element the chapters in this volume highlight is the importance of conceptual coordination – that is, a shared conceptual framework to guide systems planning and implementation efforts. How we think about the problem of homelessness shapes how we proceed to solve it. Doberstein describes the conceptual shift that enables the associated discursive, practical and structural changes necessary for the development and implementation of a systems response. 'Systems thinking' invites us to see homelessness as a complex, multi-faceted problem that requires an equally complex solution. His work draws our attention to the wider policy arena that would enable a systems-response to homelessness – that is a policy response that enables joined up work across the child welfare, criminal justice, health, employment, social services, welfare and affordable housing systems. Kline & Shore as well as Buccieri illuminate how distinctive understandings of the problem of homelessness shape different pragmatic responses. For example, Buccieri suggests that framing homelessness as a public health issue would enable the type of integrated social and health care response that a long-term resolution of homelessness requires. Other chapters (e.g. Bopp, Poole & Schmidt; Kirkby & Mettler; LeMoine; Schiff & Schiff) remind us that it is essential to understand how homelessness is experienced by different groups of people in different geographic contexts; it is clear we must differentiate our responses accordingly. How we think about homelessness (its drivers, outcomes and social, political and economic implications) influences the type of response we imagine and the methods of intervention we employ.

The third key element in an effective systems-level response is the importance of structural supports to enable ongoing collaborative or joint work. While it is true that people are at the heart of a coordinated response, their collaborative efforts must be supported by explicit policy, procedural, programmatic and governance structures to maximize what any well-intentioned collective is able to accomplish. Beyond a willingness to work together, systems-level responses require inter-organizational, cross-sectoral and high-level governance mechanisms that enable day-to-day and big-picture integration of policies, processes, programs and practices. The chapters in this volume speak to the importance of shared assessment and referral tools, centralized access processes, formalized data sharing and communication procedures, structured opportunities for inter-professional learning and training, sufficiently collaborative funding and accounting procedures, shared definitions, systems planning practices, shared terms of reference, collaborative and/or aligned government structures.

Leading systems-planning researchers (Milaney & Turner) describe how systems planning was used in two different municipalities to implement a systems change effort to end homelessness. Evans, Doberstein and Reimer suggest distinctive governance structures that support joint work within a service delivery environment (Evans) and across ministries (Doberstein & Reimer). A number of chapters (e.g. Dressler; Frisna, Lethby & Pettes; DeMoine; Nichols; Norman & Pauly) highlight the importance of inter-organization communication and referral protocols, coordinated access and assessment strategies and other systemized processes (e.g. case management, collocated services and shared staffing models; inter-agency agreements; network structures; and centralized access processes) that support collaboration across service delivery organizations within and crossing sectors. A final group of chapters (e.g. Charette, Kuropatwa, Warkentin & Cloutier; Forchuk, Richardson & Atyeo; Hug) describe a diversity of housing partnership approaches that bring together cross-sectoral stakeholders to fund and deliver comprehensive housing supports.

The chapters in this book suggest a number of tangible things communities can do to support improved communication and joint-work across organizational contexts. It is also evident that efforts to improve service delivery coordination at the community level will not end homelessness. The chapters in this collection illustrate the high-level structural or

technical supports that implicate funders, governments and policymakers in the resolution of homelessness in Canada. For example, Belanger shows us how a policy construction of Aboriginal people as culturally, ethnically and politically 'other' than the general population and outside of provincial or territorial jurisdiction (tasked with responsibility for housing) means insufficient access to mainstream services and investment in housing infrastructure for Aboriginal people living on and off reserve. Norman and Pauly illuminate how a centralized housing access point is merely a centralized housing wait list without sufficient supportive and social housing stock in a given municipality. Doberstein and Reimer examine the role that inter-agency councils to end homelessness have played in supporting provincial or state-level integration and outline important considerations for effectively using inter-ministerial or inter-agency governance models to resolve complex problems.

Pleace, Knutagård, Culhane and Granfelt, who produced one of our two international case studies, provide an overview of a two-phase national response to homelessness in Finland. The response combined a Housing First approach with increases in social housing stock, improved access to preventative services and other supportive housing models to reduce chronic, episodic and hidden homelessness nationally. This case is exemplary insofar as it describes an effective effort to coordinate policy, practice and funding across the non-profit sector and all levels of government in the country that has significantly reduced – although not eradicated – homelessness. As well as highlighting mechanisms for supporting integration at the community level, the contributions in this volume speak to the need for an aligned policy response that spans ministries and levels of government. A comprehensive federal housing strategy can provide an overarching framework that supports policy coherence between municipalities and territories/provinces and ensures the equitable distribution of housing resources on a pan-Canadian scale, including First Nations reserves.

Finally, the chapters draw our attention to the ongoing data collection, management and assessment work that is required to enable productive inter-organizational and cross-sectoral work as well as some of the difficulties of managing and analyzing data across organizations and sectors. The fourth and final element of systems-level work is the use of data to capture and assess the efficacy of our collective effort. Clearly, a complex systems approach to preventing and solving homelessness requires sufficiently complex and adaptive methods for tracking the costs and outcomes of this work across time and space. Many chapters in this volume point to important considerations for the collection, use and analysis of data in complex systems. For example, the measurement challenges and possibilities associated with double and single feedback loops (Doberstein) or the accountability and accounting challenges posed by a collective impact approach, where investments in one sector may result in reduced expenditures elsewhere (Nichols).

Fewer chapters point us to comprehensive methods for addressing these data collection and management issues. Brydon's chapter on 'stock and flow' analyses is an exception. He offers practical analytic strategies for supplementing data collected during point in time counts of homelessness and for tracking flows into and out of homelessness in a given locale. A 'stock and flow' approach can be used to capture fluctuations in homelessness over time and identify wider systemic flows into homelessness that will require a collaborative data management response in order to fully account for them (e.g. economic trends, cost of housing, institutional discharge processes). In other words, stock and flow monitoring can serve to provide a fuller picture of the number of people experiencing homelessness across a complex system as well as highlight potential areas for collaboration with other ministries and/or agencies in order to collaboratively address flows related to migration and/or institutional discharge practices, for example.

A stock and flow methodology complements Kovacs-Burns and Gordon's discussion of the social determinants of homelessness. A clearer understanding of the interlocking social and structural factors that influence homelessness and housing security helps to identify potential flows into and out of homelessness in a particular setting. While not every community is resourced to undertake the type of stock and flow analysis that Brydon sketches for us, the chapter by Duchesne, Rothwell, Ohana and Grenier suggests a cross-sectoral solution to this capacity gap. They argue that community-academic research partnerships might be an effective strategy for using homelessness serving sector-generated administrative data and local knowledge to generate the longitudinal and complex analyses that a systems response to homelessness requires.

A central contribution of this volume is the synthesis of rigorous evidence on the structural factors (e.g. poorly coordinated institutional discharge processes) that influence pathways into homelessness, the criminalization of homelessness, the links between

homelessness and poor health/wellness and the difficulties people face in their efforts to secure safe, affordable and appropriate housing in Canada. Of course, despite the vast amounts of evidence that illuminates the broad social, economic and health implications of a poorly coordinated response to homelessness, the lingering issue is that we do not yet have sufficient evidence that systems integration efforts actually reduce homelessness in a sustained way. It is also the case that we do not yet have adequate and accessible methodological strategies (as Brydon clearly points out) for measuring the effects of an intervention or set of interrelated interventions at a systems level.

There remains important research to be done, in other words, to assess the efficacy of various systems-level efforts to prevent and end homelessness. Our collective research-to-action agenda might look something like this: a) adopt a standard definition of homelessness that enables measurement and comparison on a pan-Canadian scale; b) standardize homelessness point in time count data collection processes and implement on a pan-Canadian scale; c) determine key flows into and out of homelessness; d) establish a definition for a functional zero, which will allow communities to assess whether they have ended homelessness; e) describe systems-level efforts to prevent and end homelessness on various scales (e.g. service delivery, municipal, provincial) and with various populations (e.g. chronically homeless men, families); and finally f) evaluate and compare the efficacy of various interventions for various populations in the context of a shared goal of preventing and ending homelessness in Canada.

By bringing some of the brightest minds together from various spheres of involvement in homelessness research, this collection has brought to light some of the significant achievements of this past decade to improve our collective response to homelessness. It is also clear that there is more work to do. We emerge from this project with every confidence that it will be done.