HOST HOMES DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION: REPORT II

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1. Background

As previously covered in the Host Homes Developmental Evaluation: Interim Report I, a literature review was conducted and an online survey was distributed to youth-serving agencies across Canada to gain a better understanding of awareness of and interest in implementing the Host Homes model in their community.

The next step in this Developmental Evaluation involved interviewing key informant interviews who are members of the Host Homes National Advisory Committee. Recall, committee members represent the following organizations:

1) A Way Home Canada
2) Bridging the Gap (Halton Region, Ontario)
3) Calgary Boys & Girls Club (Calgary, Alberta)
4) Home Horizons (Collingwood, Ontario)
5) oneROOF Youth Services (Kitchener, Ontario)
6) The Bridge (Kelowna, British Columbia)
7) Western Rocky View Family and Community Resource Centre (the Resource Centre) (Cochrane, Alberta)
8) YES Shelter for Youth and Families (Peterborough, Ontario)
9) 360 Kids (York Region, Ontario)
10) Portal Youth (Annapolis Valley, Nova Scotia)
11) Social Planning Cowichan (Cowichan, Alberta)

Ten committee members from six different organizations participated in one-on-one phone interviews (with the exception of two members who participated together). Results from these discussions are reported in this report.

2. Scope of Work

Results from the key informant interviews attempted to answer the following questions:

1) How can the Host Homes model be adapted to meet the needs of diverse Canadian contexts (i.e. urban vs. rural, different geographic regions, various political climates)?

2) How can partnerships and cross-ministerial relationships be utilized to create high leverage policy opportunities for scaling the Host Homes model across Canada?

3) How can Raising the Roof most meaningfully support agencies in developing and implementing Host Homes programs across Canada?

3. Results

QUESTION 1: HOW CAN THE HOST HOMES MODEL BE ADAPTED TO MEET THE NEEDS OF DIVERSE CANADIAN CONTEXTS (IE. URBAN VS. RURAL, DIFFERENT GEOGRAPHIC REGIONS, VARIOUS POLITICAL CLIMATES)?

Partnerships and collaboration are necessary in all contexts. Participants all touched on the need for collaboration and partnerships, regardless of a community's geographic size and makeup. Participants believed that it is important to work with other local agencies, as well as other nearby communities to provide young people with true wraparound supports. Participants expressed that partnerships and collaboration are especially necessary within smaller communities where there are much fewer services available for young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. For example, one participant mentioned that there are no other youth-serving agencies in their community other than their own Host Homes program.

Overall, the types of strategic partnerships will vary depending on the community's size, needs, and other relevant factors (e.g., political climate, funding opportunities, other agencies and organizations). For instance, one participant shared that in communities where there are organizations working to house international students, it may be promising to develop a collaborative partnership with them to ensure that young people, including post-secondary students, are supported and stably housed.

QUESTION 2: HOW CAN PARTNERSHIPS AND CROSS-MINISTERIAL RELATIONSHIPS BE UTILIZED TO CREATE HIGH LEVERAGE POLICY OPPORTUNITIES FOR SCALING THE HOST HOMES MODEL ACROSS CANADA?

Host Homes programs are highly collaborative. This means that a number of partnerships and government relationships need to be involved to secure positive outcomes for the young person. Moreover, a strong program with collaborative partners at the local, provincial, and federal level can help to scale the Host Homes model across Canada.

Key systems for collaboration and partnership. One participant believed that to secure a true wrap around approach for young people, different agencies and organizations within the community need to be involved. Specifically, participants identified a range of key systems: education (school boards, schools), mental health, social assistance (e.g., Ontario Works), justice, and child welfare. These systems were believed to be key components of the Host Homes model given that the young person in the program have entered many, if not all, of those systems.

In addition to these key systems, participants highlighted local housing, health, and social services agencies as essential to the Host Homes model. Participants stated that by having partnerships with local agencies, they are able to refer high-risk clients to the appropriate supports and services, such as to mental health agencies that are best suited to support individuals with severe mental health challenges.

Coordinated access. By involving all important systems, Host Homes programs can fit within a coordinated access (CA) approach. The CA approach is used in the housing and homelessness sector to streamline the process for people experiencing homelessness to access housing and support services. By sharing client information with other organizations, adopting uniform prioritization policies, and coordinating referral processes, all involved organizations can efficiently connect individuals with appropriate housing and supports. Therefore, including Host Homes programs within CA systems was deemed important by some participants.

Supporting the diversity of young people. One participant who operated a Host Homes program specifically targeting 2SLGTBQ+ youth, recognized the importance of understanding and respecting diversity and inclusion in sexuality. For example, Host Homes programs, including program staff and host providers, should receive training

focused on 2SLGBTQ+ young people. This step was viewed as highly important given that the majority of young people entering Host Homes programs are under the age of 18 – a prominent age in which young people are shaping their gender identity and sexual orientation.

QUESTION 3: HOW CAN RAISING THE ROOF MOST MEANINGFULLY SUPPORT AGENCIES IN DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING HOST HOMES PROGRAMS ACROSS CANADA?

When asked what advice participants would provide agencies and communities looking into developing their own Host Homes program, a range of suggestions were offered, which fall under one of the three categories: 1) Technical advice; 2) Systems advice; and 3) General advice.

Technical Advice

Acknowledge the importance of host providers and properly support them. Several participants recognized that host providers contribute to the essence of the Host Homes model. It was suggested that time and effort should be focused on strengthening relationships with host providers. Moreover, participants believed that host providers need to be well supported so that they feel safe and comfortable while participating in the program. This can involve offering weekly check-ins with host providers and young people, mental and health and counselling supports for young people, and 24/7 on-call support, as well training them in areas such as conflict resolution, communication, the teenage brain, and sexual orientation.

Acknowledge the importance of program staff and properly support them. In addition to host providers, program staff were identified as another key component of the program. One participant explained that program staff are closely linked to both the family and young person and are the ones responsible for mediating any potential issues that arise between the two. Staff should therefore be adequately trained and supported by Host Homes programs.

Extra efforts needed to recruit host providers. Many participants talked extensively about the significant challenges they faced while recruiting host providers. As such, participants prompted interested communities and organizations to focus heavily on the recruitment process, stating that the "*program is only as strong as [its] providers*". Factors impacting a low supply of hosts included: high turnover of host providers, lack of matches between youth and host providers, and disruptions that may prevent hosts from consistently hosting (e.g., taking vacations away from home).

Participants shared their own strategies to recruit host providers; the most commonly identified strategies were through interviews with local media (e.g., newspaper, radio, television) and social media posts (e.g., Facebook). Other strategies included holding information sessions at places of worship and local events. One participant proposed educating and spreading awareness to debunk the general public's stigmas and myths about youth homelessness while recruiting for host providers, which can potentially convince a portion of the population to sign up as a host provider.

Program accreditation can gain more trust among the community. One participant proposed that gaining accreditation of the Host Homes program would be a promising practice since the general public and community are more likely to trust programs with set standards of practice.

More housing options empowers youth. One participant believed that having a variety of Host Homes providers (e.g., housing locations, interests of host providers, housing setup) is not only practical in terms of appropriately matching the young person to housing that meets their needs, it is also empowering for young people. With more housing options in place, the young person is empowered to make decisions about their own housing choices rather than being randomly placed in a Host Homes.

Achieving diversity by breaking down barriers. Participants were aware that diversity in the host providers' demographic is great for young people. One participant observed that the foster care system, unfortunately, is not widely diverse since the screening process currently in place creates barriers against non-white families. From this observation, the participant proposed that the Host Homes model should be mindful when designing and implementing the screening process to ensure that barriers are not created, which may reduce the diversity of potential host families. The participant further suggested that this can be done by consulting those diverse groups to ensure that the process is not eliminating.

Consider age implications. One organization observed a trend where many young people under the age of 18 are entering their Host Homes program. The program staff believed that this trend may be associated with the fact that youth are unable to enter adult shelters until they are 18. Additionally, in most cases, youth under 18 cannot receive financial assistance from social assistance while in independent housing, unless they live with family (including host providers). It is important that communities and organizations are aware of these provincial differences and policy implications while determining their program's age restrictions.

Clearer definition of what entails a 'Host Homes program' is needed. One participant urged to better define what a Host Homes program is, from the program's scope to the level of client needs covered by the model. Creating a clear definition will align with efforts needed to develop a CA system with other housing and homelessness prevention initiatives.

System Advice

Need for collaboration from a variety of systems. As previously mentioned, the Host Homes model requires a collaborative approach to successfully achieve its intended outcomes. Multiple participants urged for collaboration with several community partners in order to strengthen a Host Homes program. Collaboration allows the different partners to strategize with one another on how to improve and effectively implement the program. For instance, participants suggested creating a youth council that includes key players that work with youth, such as school boards. Other participants proposed approaching unusual suspects to participate in the model, such as: local colleges, employment agencies, and service providers within the family and natural supports realm who focus not only on housing the young person, but also reconnecting them with their family and natural supports.

Collaborate with the child welfare sector. Building onto the need to work collaboratively with other organizations is the need to work closely with other systems, in particular, the child welfare sector. One participant believed that it is important to leverage the work of other systems since young people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness are often exposed to multiple systems, such as the foster care system and child welfare system. Working collaboratively with these systems not only ensures that the young person receives wraparound supports, it can also help to strengthen the homelessness-serving sector's relationship with these other systems. In particular, participants talked about the potential for partnering with the foster care

system given that there are many overlaps in the roles and responsibilities of foster parents and host providers. Participants noted that foster parent applicants who were either uncomfortable with the foster system's screening process or unsuccessful in their application were sometimes interested in becoming host providers instead given the similarities in roles and responsibilities.

Need to de-stigmatize youth homelessness. Once again, there is an ongoing need to de-stigmatize the experience of youth homelessness given that there continues to be stigma associated with homelessness. One participant pointed out that this is especially prominent with youth homelessness since there is the false, but widely held, belief that young people do not want to follow rules and actively want to leave the home. One participant shared a strategy to eradicate these misconceptions, which is to set up face-to-face meetings between the young person and the potential host providers. The participant explained that doing so will help show the potential host providers that their negative impressions of the young person is likely more extreme and dramatic than the actual reality.

Shift in perspectives among the homelessness-serving sector. Though the homelessness-serving sector is aware of the myths and misconceptions held against the homeless population, there are still areas in which the sector can improve. According to one participant, this includes the need to shift away from a charity-based perspective and towards a rights-based one. A rights-based approach acknowledges that the individual who is at risk of or experiencing homelessness is not only deserving of the support, they have the right to it; they have the right to housing. The participant believed that these rights need to be widely acknowledged and incorporated into the sector's work so that communities and staff understand that housing is a basic human right that everyone has access to.

Another suggested shift that needs to take place is a cultural shift among the homelessness-serving sector. This shift entails ensuring that service providers within the sector understand the meaning of prevention. The participant believed that this understanding will enable service providers to see that they are part of that preventative work and that they are a key component of the bigger system.

Lastly, a shift in evaluation perspectives was identified as necessary. One participant noted that in Canada, program staff are often trained to think in terms of quantity rather than quality. Funders, for example, are thought to be more interested in the number of youth who have been stably housed, rather than the quality of the youth's housing.

Unfortunately, this sets the focus on short-term outcomes. The participant thus urged for a shift towards outcomes (i.e., service quality) rather than solely on outcomes (i.e., number of clients).

Colonial practices need to be continuously recognized and addressed. While one participant recognized that effort needs to be focused on ensuring that housing and homelessness prevention initiatives are not harming Indigenous communities and other racialized individuals, no concrete strategies were identified.

General Advice

The work needs to be youth centered. Multiple participants highlighted the importance of placing the young person at the centre of this work. They believed that it is imperative to understand the young person's needs in order to properly support them. Moreover, participants said that communities need to understand that the young person's needs are not two-dimensional; rather, they require a range of supports that cannot all be met by the Host Homes program since the program only makes up one aspect of the support spectrum. Lastly, participants believed that it's important to show the young person that service providers have a vested interest in their lives beyond their time in the program, such as by inviting them back for holiday dinners.

Patience and determination are key. Another recommendation that participants offered was that service providers need to have patience, determination, and to be open-minded while doing this work since outcomes are not achieved overnight. Based on their own experiences, participants shared that it is a program that requires a lot and has a lot of nuance. Despite these challenges, they shared that it is a worthwhile program.

Opportunities to Support

Based on these advice and suggestions, the following are opportunity areas where Raising the Roof can meaningfully support agencies in developing and implementing Host Homes programs across Canada.

Opportunity 1: Educate and raise awareness about youth homelessness

Given that educating and raising public awareness about youth homelessness is a potential strategy to increase the supply of host providers, as well as to debunk

stigmatizing myths, this is a promising area in which Raising the Roof can support organizations and communities.

Opportunity 2: Support the potential for accreditation of Host Homes programs

Accredited programs are generally trusted by the general public and communities. As such, there is promise in supporting organizations and communities to gain accreditation for the Host Homes programs. This aligns with work being conducted on a similar program to Host Homes, Nightstop.

Opportunity 3: Defining 'Host Homes programs'

There is still some confusion about the details of a Host Homes program. A clear understanding of Host Homes programs and where they fit into the full housing and homelessness prevention spectrum is desirable so that communities will have a better picture of whether the initiative is suited to meet their needs, and whether the community is best equipped to operate that initiative. Any definition that is developed must be flexible to allow for adaptations of the Host Homes model to occur.

Opportunity 4: Support partnership development

Another area in which Raising the Roof can support community efforts is in helping different organizations and agencies develop strategic partnerships to strengthen the Host Homes program. Given that the Host Homes model is a collaborative approach, building strategic partnerships can help to improve outcomes and facilitate the work of each individual organization and agency.

Opportunity 5: Advocate for shifts in systems and within the homelessness-serving sector

While the Host Homes model does fall under the homelessness-serving sector, it does not operate in isolation of other systems. The reality is that the work of the homelessness-serving sector overlaps with many other systems, such as: education, mental health, and child welfare. As such, it is imperative to advocate for systemic shifts to promote a more collaborative approach across systems. Raising the Roof is best situated to lead this work since the organization is one of the first national leaders in homelessness prevention work.

At the same time, it is important to advocate for shifts in perspectives (e.g., shifting towards a rights-based approach and an outcome-focused approach to evaluation) among the homelessness-serving sector. Once again, this work is best suited for a national non-profit like Raising the Roof that is well aware of the current perspectives within the sector and the need to shift towards new ways of thinking.

4. Impact of COVID-19

With the global pandemic operating in the background of the Host Homes program, several impacts to Host Homes programs have been observed.

Impact 1: Further stigmatization

Some participants feared that the global pandemic will further stigmatize youth experiencing homelessness. One staff noted that unlike the general public, the homeless population is unable to engage in the same pandemic responses of accessing essential resources and supplies (e.g., food, hand sanitizers, cleaning products, toilet paper). Moreover, with limited technology among this population, they are less likely or able to download applications that monitor and track pandemic outbreaks in their community. Such stark differences are most evident during the pandemic and dramatically highlight the poverty faced by these marginalized groups. Unfortunately, the general public may not equate these differences to financial constraints, but instead to the individual's negligence or laziness.

Another form of stigmatization is the growing sentiments of whether individuals experiencing or at risk of homelessness are deserving of supports. With the federal government's creation of the Canadian Emergency Relief Benefit (CERB) for Canadians affected by the pandemic and in need of financial support, some recipients, including those experiencing or at risk of homelessness, were scrutinized for receiving this support.

Impact 2: Decrease in number of host providers

With health concerns at the forefront of many individuals' minds, potential host providers have opted to either cancel or indefinitely postpone their Host Homes applications. As such, several Host Homes programs have seen a decrease in the number of people willing to host young people. In cases where individuals were already hosting a young

person, some have decided to end the relationship early due to concerns that the young person is not adequately following social distancing guidelines and hygiene practices (i.e., frequent hand washing).

Impact 3: Shift in demographic of hosts

Prior to adopting an international Host Homes program to the Canadian context, one organization conducted a feasibility study to see if the program is a good fit. This feasibility study found that seniors are best suited to be Host Homes providers given that they tend to own their own property and often have space in their homes (e.g., empty nesters). Another participant similarly observed that host providers are often seniors since younger demographics are less likely to afford or own a property with extra bedrooms. Unfortunately, it is the senior population that is most vulnerable during a pandemic. Seniors have understandably grown weary of opening their homes to young people and potentially putting themselves at risk. As a result, one program staff predicted that there will be a dramatic shift in the providers' demographic away from the senior population.

5. Interpretation of the Findings

Below, the findings from the interviews are summarized and interpreted.

Partnerships and collaboration are necessary in all contexts. Participants all touched on the need for collaboration and partnerships. Partnerships and collaboration are especially necessary within smaller communities where there are much fewer services available for young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. To secure a true wrap around approach for young people, a range of key system partnerships are required, including: education (school boards, schools), mental health, social assistance (e.g., Ontario Works), justice, and child welfare.

Host Homes programs should be part of a coordinated access system. Including Host Homes programs within a community's coordinated access system is important for the full implementation of Host Homes programs within a homelessness system. Where Host Homes programs fit within coordinated access will be discussed in greater detail in the last report.

Supporting the diversity of young people and recruiting host providers that reflect this diversity. Host Homes programs must support the diversity of young people, particularly Black, Indigenous, People of Colour, and 2SLGBTQ+ young people. This includes providing supports that meet the needs of young people, including their cultural needs, and referring to community-based supports that are specific to their intersecting identities. Host Homes programs should also aim to recruit host providers that reflect the identities of the young people in the program. This may mean that targeted outreach needs to occur, as well as ensuring that the program application process does not have barriers which may prevent diverse host providers from applying.

Colonialism needs to be addressed. Host Homes programs need to understand how the model may perpetuate colonial practices. For example, the Host Homes model, much like the foster care system, has parallels to the Sixties Scoop, where Indigenous young people were removed from their families and placed into foster homes or adopted. It will be important for Host Homes programs to collaborate with local Indigenous organizations to ensure that Indigenous young people who may be eligible for a Host Homes program are supported in culturally appropriate ways. It will also be important for Host Homes programs to recruit Indigenous host providers, should it be appropriate.

Developing a flexible definition of the Host Homes model is required. There was still some confusion about what a Host Homes program actually is. This includes the target group of the model, the length of support, the type of support, and the role of a young person's family in the program. It is also important to differentiate between foster care and Host Homes programs.

Consider accreditation and developing fidelity standards. Along with developing a clear and flexible definition of the Host Homes model, accompanying accreditation and/or fidelity standards may also require development. By developing standards for accreditation and/or by developing fidelity standards, existing Host Homes programs can examine how they fit or do not fit within these standards and provide guidance for new Host Homes programs.

Host Homes programs need to be youth-centered in design. An important aspect of the Host Homes model is to be youth centered. This means that young people ultimately determine if they would like to be matched with a host provider, the goals that they would like to work toward, and their exit from the program. By being youth centered, Host Homes programs will align with a Housing First for Youth philosophy.