



An IPAC Case Study

Case Studies in Policy Innovation in Canada's Public Sector

Province of Alberta: Alberta's Plan to Prevent and Reduce Youth Homelessness

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**Title: Case Studies in Policy Innovation in Canada’s Public Sector:
Province of Alberta: Alberta’s Plan to Prevent and Reduce Youth
Homelessness**

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Abstract: This case study explores key mechanisms of policy capacity that can support Canadian public sector organizations to deliver policy and program innovation and excellence in an increasingly complex context. The Alberta Youth Homelessness Plan is a targeted response to a specialized population—young people are among the fastest growing and most underserved of Canada’s homeless population—and is the first of its kind in Canada. The Alberta Youth Homelessness Plan is analyzed through Mohr’s (1969) motivation-obstacles-resources lens which considers the motivations of organizations to innovate, the obstacles faced by governments contemplating innovation, and the resources drawn on to adopt these innovations. Several policy capacity mechanisms comprising the resources used to adopt innovative initiatives are revealed and examined.

Key Words: Homelessness, Innovation, Policy, Policy Capacity, Social Policy, Municipal Government, Provincial Government

Innovation in the Public Sector: About This Series

Government and public agencies are constantly adapting and innovating. There is no shortage of challenges, natural, human and organizational, that demand it. Often innovation takes the forms of small steps, tentative trials and adaptations based on experimentation. Seldom is innovation of the big-bang, game-changing variety in government. It is more often the tentative change, the trial and error and adaptation or, as we see more often, the rapid response to major events, threats or urgent demands. The series opens with three cases, written by Malumir Logan and extracted from her larger look at innovation in the public sector, entitled, **Policy Capacity Mechanisms to Support Innovation in the Canadian Public Sector.**

We welcome more cases like this. IPAC celebrates innovation in the public sector in a number of ways, through its awards program and the content of its Annual Conference as well as the Leadership Conference. What case studies bring to the conversation is a granularity of detail and the capacity to learn from others through lessons learned, roads best not to take and practices that worked and might be applicable in other situations. For the academic, these cases provide concrete examples of what innovation actually is, what the challenges are and how to best understand the concept in the public context.

Please connect with the Case Study Editor if you have a case for the Series.

Initiative Description

The Alberta Youth Homelessness Plan (referred to as the “Youth Plan”) has developed out of Alberta’s 10-Year Plan to end homelessness. As a targeted response to a specialized population—young people are among the fastest growing and most underserved of Canada’s homeless population—the Youth Plan is the first of its kind in Canada (Alberta Human Services 2015).

The Youth Plan is aligned with *A Plan for Alberta: Ending Homelessness in 10 Years* (Alberta Human Services 2008) (referred to as the 10-Year Plan) which states that “Albertans from specialized groups, including homeless youth, are dealing with particularly challenging issues, and require targeted responses.” (2015: 4; 2008: 13).

Impetus for the Initiative

In 2009, Alberta launched its 10-Year Plan on Homelessness, and tasked a gaps analysis to support the development of the province’s homelessness policy portfolio. The purpose of this internal review on homelessness policy, led by a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), was to identify any policy gaps, seek to understand why any gaps existed and whether there were opportunities to fill those gaps. The review discovered that although previously, the 10-Year Plan was focused on chronic homelessness, there was a gap on youth homelessness. The internal review process led to the development of recommendations and organizing government around those, and helping these various areas of government to understand their respective roles (I2 2016).

In 2013, then-Minister of Human Services David Hancock—who was a champion for inclusion of youth who at that time were not being served under the 10-Year Plan—initiated a secretariat to develop a response to that gap. The Minister had served in a number of ministries over the years and had seen a range of touch-points of youth homelessness as a result. Additionally, Hancock had experience as a community volunteer who had witnessed the issue “on the ground.”

Provincial leadership was strong for the Youth Plan following Minister Hancock’s involvement. Cabinet policy approval for the Youth Plan demonstrated cross-government responsibility for the issue and the work detailed (I2 2016).

Community leadership was also a key contributor to this initiative; communities demonstrated responsiveness to the Plan and undertook Point-in-Time (PIT) counts that demonstrated increased numbers of youth experiencing homelessness and a ground swell of support from Alberta’s 7 Cities on Housing and Homelessness to undertake this work (I2 2016).

The Youth Plan officially launched in 2015. Although the plan has only been in the community for a short period so far, there have been a number of significant shifts. Firstly, increasingly the provincial government is recognizing the importance of this work; the community has been deeply involved in this work for a long time, and is now witnessing the government enter into the challenging aspects of the youth homelessness conversation. Secondly, the provincial government is providing funding with the use of a model that allows each of twelve communities to set its own priorities within the guiding principles of the Youth Plan priorities. In this way, the funding model is not prescriptive but rather direction-setting. The initiative has a similar governance structure to Alberta's 7 Cities on Housing and Homelessness.

Initiative Purpose

Given that the primary issue is the lack of stable housing for youth who find themselves homeless, the key purpose of the initiative is to increase housing stability for youth. Ending youth homelessness will be an incremental process. Youth homelessness is completely avoidable; there simply need to be effective mechanisms in place to prevent it (I2 2016).

Increasing housing stability for youth encompasses a number of factors. One is to encourage youth to stay at home, and focus investment on helping youth to repair relationships at home before those relationships break down. Another consideration is how young people can be supported to stay at home or with family so that s/he doesn't enter into homelessness. However, this initiative recognizes that youth shelters are not a solution in and of themselves. Tensions can arise when youth leave care, or leave the youth justice system or mental health or addictions treatment. The Youth Plan is a social-well-being plan to develop youth resiliency, and includes strong prevention efforts, such as developing attachment of youth to school, community and programs (Alberta Human Services 2015; I2 2016).

Alberta's current response to youth homelessness places much of the emphasis on emergency response. While emergency services are important and necessary, we cannot rely on these as the 'system' to deal with youth homelessness. The strategies presented in the Youth Plan suggest a new way to address youth homelessness that builds on the three existing components: prevention/emergency services/housing and supports – but shifts the emphasis away from purely emergency response. As a result, implementing these new strategies allows prevention, as well as housing and supports to become a greater priority (Alberta Human Services, 2015). Emergency services are still

provided, with support, in order to facilitate this shift in Alberta's response (I2 2016).

There are two overarching goals of the Youth Plan: firstly to prevent youth from becoming homeless through family supports and education and secondly to provide rapid rehousing of homeless youth through family reunification or supportive living by utilizing a client-centred approach (Alberta Human Services 2015; I2 2016).

The Youth Plan is a unified, integrated, provincial response to youth homelessness that engages government, communities, parents and youth in building solutions (Alberta Human Services 2015). The priorities of the Youth Plan include:

- Prevention and Awareness – Prevent youth from becoming homeless.
- Early Intervention – Youth receive supports before they become entrenched in homelessness.
- Client-Centred Supports – Youth have access to client-centered supports.
- Research and Evaluation – Youth homelessness in Alberta is understood, measured and evaluated.
- Stakeholder Engagement – Community partners and youth mobilize solutions to address youth homelessness (2015: 15).

Process and Outcomes to Date

In the development of the Youth Plan, a number of processes contributed to the development of the Youth Plan, including an internal review of youth homelessness; collaboration through a cross-ministry committee; extensive research; dialogue with community partners and stakeholders and youth engagement (Alberta Human Services 2015).

In the implementation of the plan, the first major process underway is the external drive by communities to inform Alberta's youth homelessness priorities. The communities have been funding a wide range of initiatives, based on the priorities they set that reflect both their local needs and the broad direction of the Youth Plan. For example, as a large urban centre, Edmonton's system can be very difficult for young people to navigate to access various services. Edmonton has decided to direct funding into the development of integrated youth hubs (like community hubs in Ontario) that can be one-stop shops for young people to access government and community services. Two youth hubs will be established; one north of the river and one south of the river, to reflect geographic realities of the city. Another example is that of Calgary, which has funded the first "host homes" approach in Canada to focus on providing housing for homeless

LGBTQ2S youth. This model is based on engagement with community members who provide host homes for homeless LGBTQ2S youth (I2 2016).

Additionally, historically, the ten-year homelessness plan in Alberta only provided funding to major centres. However, the Youth Plan is also providing funding to programs in five rural communities (population under 25,000) to help them develop their priorities and innovative solutions in these small communities (I2 2016).

The launch of the Youth Plan also helped inspire A Way Home, a new national coalition in Canada that will focus on bringing together national, regional and local players with the single focus of preventing, reducing and ending youth homelessness (I2 2016).

Another major process underway to support the Youth Plan's implementation is the system change taking place within the provincial government. The Youth Plan is permission-giving to have challenging conversations within government regarding how government operations have not changed to respond to young persons' needs. These conversations are now increasingly taking place across government. For example, conversations have increased on child intervention processes and how various areas of government can better work together to prevent youth homelessness when young people leave care.

Initially, the Youth Plan adopted the same performance measures as the 10-Year Plan. Currently, these are being recalibrated to reflect youth homelessness (Alberta Human Services 2015; I2 2016). The four broad outcomes that will inform indicators and measures in the Youth Plan include outcomes at the individual level, sector and system level, community level and societal level (2015; 2016).

Key Factors of Success

There have been a number of key factors that have contributed to the success to date of the Youth Plan. One is that of the political and community champions discussed earlier. Other key champions were developed through the Interagency Council on Homelessness which brought together key leaders across Alberta to consider the gaps and advocate incorporation of overcoming youth homelessness into Alberta priorities. The governance structure of this Council is set up to be accountable to the Minister of Human Services, which has helped significantly with priority-setting. At a national level, two additional key champions included Tim Richter—President & CEO of the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness (CAEH) and Vice Chair of the CAEH Board of Directors; previously President & CEO of the Calgary Homeless Foundation (CHF)) (CAEH 2016)—and Stephen Gaetz, Director of the Canadian Observatory on

Homelessness and the Homeless Hub and the President of Raising the Roof, a leading Canadian charity that focuses on long term solutions to homelessness (Homeless Hub 2016).

Another related factor is the proactive engagement of government with community organizations early in the process, which enabled these organizations to begin realigning their work to reflect the direction of the Youth Plan (I2 2016).

Barriers or Limitations Encountered

An initial barrier included the timing in the release of the Youth Plan. There were changes in government (three premiers and three ministers) during the development of the plan, which required re-education, and the development of cabinet approval decision documents each time (Government of Alberta 2013; 2014; I2 2016).

Another barrier is that as strong as the cross-ministry and cross-community support may be, education is always required, as discussed earlier. The investment required in education, awareness-building and support cannot be underestimated (I2 2016).

Additionally, there were some difficult conversations to be had at the community level. For example, a recurring area of challenge is related to child intervention, which often involves a range of community providers that are regionally delivered. Child intervention itself is regionally delivered; homelessness providers are regionally delivered, as are mental health and addictions services. These discrete organizations often do not have built-in mechanisms to support integration of their services, which can lead to barriers that require some hard conversations (I2 2016).

Lessons Learned

The most significant piece of learning is not to underestimate the general lack of understanding regarding homelessness. There are many common misperceptions that can become paralyzing for policy makers and decision makers. For example, there is commonly a misperception that homeless youth are from low income or Aboriginal families; there's also the common misperception that becoming homeless is a choice. However, these aren't always realities. These misperceptions have been addressed regularly to policy makers and decision makers, but the need for education to overcome these ideas has been substantial (I2 2016).

On this education front, however, there have been some really strong partners who recognize the breadth and complexities of the issue. Additionally, there has been recognition that there are roles across government to contribute to this file.

Big policy issues often become centralized in one ministry, but in this case, it has been clearly identified and framed as a whole-of-government issue (I2 2016).

Political and Public Acceptance

Overall, the reaction has been very positive. There will always be critics; for example, there has been some pressure that perhaps the plan doesn't speak to subpopulations as much as it should (e.g. new immigrant or Aboriginal subpopulations). The hope is that the plan can be broad-sweeping. There have been some barriers and challenges felt at the community level, specifically with respect to multi-sector involvement; awareness-building is again required (I2 2016).

Nationally, there has been some political reaction and interest, particularly from small city mayors and provincial governments on the rationale and implementation of Alberta's approach. So far it has been too early to speak to some of the successes of the program, but it is anticipated this dialogue will continue (I2 2016).

There has been a very responsive and positive reaction from the community, to a greater degree than perhaps first anticipated, in particular from the youth sector. This community sector has been very adaptable and responsive to make the changes necessary in their planning and programs in order to align with the provincial policy. For example, the Youth Plan is the first policy document in Alberta that speaks to a harm reduction approach for youth under the age of 18. Community organizations had been using this approach for years in secret, because they knew from on-the-ground experience that it is effective. In this way, the Plan has been very permission-giving (I2 2016).

Another example of the community's responsiveness is the adaption that many community organizations have implemented to make their spaces more welcoming for LGBTQ2S youth. There was no funding provided to support this kind of adaptation; community organizations have taken these important changes upon themselves in order to align themselves with the provincial policy. The community was prepared when the plan was released given Alberta's focus on community engagement and collaboration throughout the Plans development. Two important examples of community preparedness to align with provincial policy include:

1. The release of the Community Strategy to End Youth Homelessness in Edmonton. This strategy was ready to be released months before the Youth Plan was released. But Homeward Trust wanted to be sure there was direct alignment so they delayed finalizing the Plan until the Youth Plan was released.

2. The 2011 Calgary Plan to End Youth Homelessness is now being refreshed because of the presence of the Provincial Youth Plan. They want to align it the work directly (2011 was misaligned). (I2 2016).

Motivation-Obstacles-Resources Context

Next, we will discuss the obstacles which helped to fuel the motivation for the adoption of the Youth Plan, and will then examine the mechanisms of policy capacity used in this case.

Obstacles

Key obstacles in this case included the three changes in the Alberta government that took place during the development of the Youth Plan, and the general lack of familiarity with the foundational aspects of youth homelessness. The changes in government included three premiers (Premiers Redford, Hancock, and Prentice, respectively) (Legislative Assembly of Alberta 2016) and three Human Services ministers including David Hancock, Manmeet Bhullar, and Heather Klimchuk, respectively (Legislative Assembly of Alberta 2014; Government of Alberta 2013; 2014). This required development of Cabinet decision documents each time, but also required development of briefing materials and education on the foundational aspects of youth homelessness and the importance of prioritizing development of the Youth Plan.

Motivation

Young people under age 24 are among the fastest growing and most underserved of Canada's homeless population (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health [CAMH] 2014; Alberta Human Services 2015; Koeller 2008), with the number of homeless youth in Canada estimated to be approximately 65,000 (2015; Stewart, Reutter, Letourneau, Makwarimba and Hungler 2010). In 2012, point-in-time counts of homeless individuals revealed that youth under the age of 25 represented 13 percent of the Calgary homeless population; 37 percent of the Red Deer population; and, 13 percent of the Edmonton population (Alberta Human Services 2010). There was consistent agreement among community service providers that homelessness among youth is an issue that is distinct from general homelessness, and that the solutions must be distinct in order to be effective (2010; Kraus, Eberle and Serge, 2001; Vengris, 2005). Additionally, the Minister's experience with the range of youth homelessness touch-points across several Alberta ministries, coupled with his own experience as a community volunteer having witnessed the issue on-the-ground enhanced the political motivation to create a homelessness plan targeted at youth.

Resources

The changes in the political administration between 2013 and 2015 could have posed significant obstacles to the adoption of the initiative, were it not for the significant policy capacity resources at play in Alberta. Specifically:

- The significant political championship of the Youth Plan reflects the political resources present in this case, particularly as this provided momentum in the early stages of the plan's development.
- The analytical, operational and political elements of policy capacity reflected in the political will and internal leadership to continue to push forward the development and adoption of the plan throughout each change in political leadership.
 - o Analytical resources existed in the extensive research and policy work that informed the development of the Youth Plan and the recognition of the importance of investment in ongoing education on the foundational issues of youth homelessness; operational resources were present in the inclusion of the plan's development within the framework of the 10-Year Plan, the MLA-led Internal Review of Youth Homelessness which also helped inform the analytical work as well as a Cross-Ministry committee to foster collaboration across all ministries involved in the priorities identified in the Internal Review; political resources included the significant political championship of the Youth Plan, particularly as this provided momentum in the early stages of the plan's development and provided momentum in the early stages of the plan's development.
- Analytical, operational and political resources to recognize the value of and enable:
 - o Inclusion of this priority in the 10-Year Plan framework.
 - o Internal leadership to recognize that this Youth Plan will result in a shift in perspective from individual ministry portfolios to thinking about youth homelessness from a whole-of-government angle.

The IPAC Case Study Program

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