

Winnipeg Site Implementation Final Report – Executive Summary



Report prepared by

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Executive Summary

This report documents the implementation of the Mental Health Commission of Canada's At Home/Chez Soi project in Winnipeg. It reports on the viewpoints and perspectives of the site's stakeholders concerning the fidelity of the Site to its original plans; formative issues related to successes and challenges; stakeholder relationships; the involvement of participants; issues related to Site resources; and the influences and consequences of the local Site context in terms of adaptations made to Winnipeg Site and the resources upon which it has drawn. The report is the result of a series of interviews and focus groups facilitated by researchers at the Institute of Urban Studies at the University of Winnipeg.

The project is already having positive outcomes. Service teams in Winnipeg have found that a harm reduction approach to participant behaviour is beneficial in building relationships and encouraging success in participants. Some participants have been assisted with and improved their personal finances by budgeting for their alcohol and/or drugs along with groceries, etc.

Service staff have sometimes been challenged in trying to house new participants quickly while having only limited information on a participant – often just name and birth date – and not knowing if this person has a history of addictions, violence, or criminal behaviour. The project has found that some participants have great difficulty maintaining housing, and have had to be “re-housed,” sometimes four or five times. In response, the Site leadership and housing team recently formed a triage approach, involving a weekly meeting at which such cases are reviewed and assessments made in respect to extremely hard-to-house participants. Some participants are going months without being housed.

The project has benefitted from staff members who have the skills and personal qualities to work well with people of all kinds, especially high-need individuals. Given the importance of relationship-building to the success of the project, staff need to be able to engage in empathetic listening and respond appropriately to people in crisis, and develop case management plans individualized to that person.

The primary theme emerging from the interviews and focus groups is of the importance of relationships: between participants and the service teams; between various levels of staff; between landlords and housing provision; between the service arms, housing and research; between the Winnipeg Site and external partners; and between the Site and the National Team. Healthy relationships, particularly with participants, are important because of the traumatic experiences and social challenges participants face, with the result that trust has in some cases been slow to build.

The major components of housing and the three service arms are seen by most to be of equal value, in the sense that one part cannot work without the other. Staff saw that shared leadership is good, but some also pointed out how sometimes a stronger

leadership style was needed to ensure that decisions are reached about some issues, and within a reasonable time frame. In terms of the structures related to services, there is a strong cultural component to all three.

Research and service staff regularly faces very challenging conditions. The interviews themselves are often very grueling emotionally, and sometimes in very difficult settings. While there have been some “self care” interventions for staff (such as team sweats) interviewers pointed to the need for something to help them to avoid burnout, as it’s very draining work emotionally. Flexibility and supportive working environments are important to allow staff to unload negativity, and to debrief and build positive mental health.

There were mixed views on the training. The training regarding trauma was generally seen as valuable, but some of it was felt by to be “*kind of irrelevant to field operations.*” Requests for specific training seem to have taken a very long time to be acted upon. More sensitivity training was needed – viz. Aboriginal communication styles, body language. The biggest training gap was felt to be in regards to how to deal with persons at risk of suicidal behaviour.

The main concern is the challenge pose by the Winnipeg housing market; the site is struggling to house its participants. Some participants have to wait for some months – in some cases up to 5 months – for housing. The type of housing has played an important role, as has housing location. Many participants reportedly experience isolation when they move into a new place after having lived in shelters and surrounded by the friends and community they knew there. Staff commented that the project should source more congregate-style housing, even recommending that the project design their own. However, the new furniture packages delivered through Housing Plus have been very well-received.

Service teams are unsure if they’re getting the information that the research teams need. Yet without detailed information from Research there have been problems in housing participants.

There are good and mutually rewarding relationships in place with many of external organizations. As a result of useful and positive networking, relationships with community groups have improved. The structures in place at some of these external institutions and organizations do present challenges though. For example, Employment and Income Assistance supplements the rent, but not enough to cover utilities. Participants are often housed in old units with high energy bills, which, if they get a \$300 hydro bill from Manitoba Hydro could be setting them up for failure.

The most serious problem reported in terms of communication is that the service and housing teams are not given histories of participants and often have to learn about potentially serious problems – and dangerous tendencies – on their own. Information sharing doesn’t always happen in formal situations (like conference calls) but rather in informal or semi-formal settings that allow groups who don’t usually have contact, to

share information and problem-solve. More opportunities for informal communications, which aren't built into the structure, were desired.

Discussions are ongoing to see if the Province to pick up the subsidies at that point. The advantage with the Winnipeg Site is that it has a provincial government that is very engaged in housing issues, and wanting to invest in housing. As a result, Winnipeg may have more success with sustainability than it might have otherwise because of provincial leadership on this issue. There are however probably limits to how long the diverse organizations comprising the Site could continue to work on this project. It would likely be more practical and sustainable over the long term to have a future Housing First model directed and coordinated by a single entity.

The cultural component that the service arms have adopted has been very important for the Winnipeg site. The majority Aboriginal participant population benefits from services within an Aboriginal context or understanding. The large number of solvent-abusing participants (about 25) has required adaptation on the part of the service teams. While not unique to Winnipeg, it is the scale of the issue that is relevant to the project.

The Housing Plus component emerged as one of the most significant innovation at the Winnipeg Site. Housing Plus, operated out of Ma Mawi, looks after move-ins, move-outs, inspections and housing condition reports. It arranges for furniture and personal needs goods (e.g., pots and pans, toiletries), which it distributes from its warehouse, as well as maintenance and repairs. Along with Manitoba Green Retrofit, it has allowed rapid outfitting and housing of participants, while at the same time fulfilling an important local economic development role by sourcing locally-produced bedding and furniture, hiring people with lived experience, and using local companies.

Positive social outcomes for participants and within the community are evident, and much of these successes is owed to the excellent staff and many instances of supportive working relationships. At the same time, there are some structural issues and internal communication problems that could be addressed.

The major cross-cutting themes emerging from the project are that relationships are essential; that the Site has adapted well to its local context; that communication between Service Arms and research could be improved; that there have been some significant delays; and that stronger connections could be made to bridge misconceptions.

The implementation of the At Home Chez Soi project has already had positive outcomes in the form of new relationships between organizations and sectors in Winnipeg that formerly had little contact, with the effect that there is now a growing infrastructure that would be capable of delivering a housing first model, should one be permanently funded. The authors recommend however that some form of intermediary capacity to better connect the disparate components of the Site is needed.