

Hamilton's Hostels to Homes Pilot Project

Though this initiative is not directly related to the work of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction (Hamilton's Vibrant Communities' convener organization), it demonstrates the interconnectedness of the City's many social service organizations and the importance of leveraging relationships and influence in order to make Hamilton "the best place to raise a child."

The Roundtable is co-convened by the City of Hamilton and the Hamilton Community Foundation. Its Government Engagement Working Group has had numerous informal discussions with senior civil servants in the provincial government and with elected officials about the importance of Hostels to Homes Pilot. In 2009, members of the Roundtable's Policy Working Group submitted a brief to the Minister of Finance highlighting the initiative as a cost-effective, responsive and local solution to the problem of homelessness.

Challenge

Like many other cities in Canada, Hamilton's homelessness shelters underwent a period of continued growth beginning in the late 1990s. In 2003 alone, 118 spaces for men were added to the system; there are currently 370 emergency and long-term shelter spaces for men in Hamilton.

In January 2005, municipal officials and key players in the city's shelter system invited Ontario government representatives to a two-day Shelter Summit to discuss what system transformation could look like. In effect, they were exploring how to put all but emergency shelter operations out of business. What would an implementation strategy look like? Could they ensure the sustainability of emergency housing while redirecting funds to support a Housing First-type approach for chronic shelter users? How could Hamilton become a community where everyone has a home?

Hamilton had long advocated for a new funding formula for emergency shelters. The current per diem structure does not adequately account for shelters' fixed operating costs, nor is it set at a

realistic level. Following the 2005 Summit, City officials began to advocate to Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS) officials that its per diem emergency shelter rate could be better used to both house people independently and pay for live-in attendants for every three clients.

Both the Association of Municipalities of Ontario and the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association had long challenged the Ministry's per diem emergency shelter funding formula. They indicated that the system offered no incentives for service providers to move people along the housing continuum. Work undertaken to untangle the various funding complexities indicated that the current per diem rate should be set at \$68.00. Translated to an annual cost of \$25,000 per bed, the case was made for finding more permanent housing solutions – with the necessary supports.

In the summer of 2006, the province invited Hamilton to apply for “Hostels to Homes Pilot,” a two-phase project that would test the validity of its system transformation ideas. Five other municipalities were funded in this work – Toronto, Ottawa, London, Kingston and Windsor. The MCSS contract stipulated that one of the following objectives should be achieved:

- ensure emergency hostel residents have access and attachment to affordable, stable, transitional or permanent housing
- show savings to both the municipality and the province by transitioning people out of emergency hostels and moving them into sustainable affordable accommodation
- reduce the length of stay/usage of emergency hostel beds by chronic bed users within the timeframe of the pilot project
- enhance the coordination and integration in the provision of housing and other support services.

In Hamilton, no additional government money would be used to operate Hostels to Homes Pilot. Instead of paying monthly hostelling costs of \$1,316 per person, the project would enroll participants in Ontario Works (\$548 per month) and administrators could use the remaining \$768 to cover costs associated with programming for housing, mental and physical health, addiction, education and employment supports. Phase one of the project operated from June 2007 to December 2009. Phase two continued the work and will end in June 2010.

Response

Of the six municipalities involved in the Hostels to Homes (H2H) pilot, Hamilton was alone in choosing to focus efforts on its chronic (more than 42 nights per year) male emergency shelter users. The original goal was to find permanent housing solutions for the city's largest shelter user group, and their efforts were enormously successful.

Key to the project's success was the creation of an Integrated Mobile Case Management Team. Available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, it provided clients with mobile support,¹ housing placement, access to employment supports and community-based services. The team included a nurse/physician and an addictions worker. On an in-kind basis, the City's Community Service

Department contributed an Ontario Works case manager, a home management worker and a tenant relations officer. Team members also liaised with a mental health outreach worker.

The team was directed by a project manager who worked closely with a rent supplement and tenant relations officer. The project manager was a municipal employee but the remaining team members were recruited from the agencies within the shelter system, bringing their personal contacts and experience with them. Most were entry-level employees and saw H2H as a professional development opportunity.

Recruitment and teambuilding took six months, during which the city decided to allot the project 80 of the 250 housing allowances it was awarded through the Canada Ontario Affordable Housing Program.² Says Betty Lou Purdon, Program Manager with the City's Social Housing and Homelessness Division: "The housing allowances gave us a vehicle for approaching for-profit services providers and, as a result, our clients are now housed in 44 separate locations. They aren't ghettoized and a number of them have been able to move back to their home communities. During phase one, we housed between 8 and 10 people each month, using all 80 allowances. Based on the successes realized in phase one, the City committed an additional 40 housing allowances through the Developing Opportunities for Ontario Renters Program for phase two. All 40 have since been assigned."

Though some clients have moved away from Hamilton, been re-housed in residential care facilities (and a few have died from the long-term health impacts associated with chronic homelessness), 106 of the 145 people (73 percent) housed in phases one and two are still in their homes. Program accounts show that H2H has, indeed, shown cost savings for the City and the province. In 2009, \$697,000 was reallocated from the emergency shelter budget for the associated program costs for the H2H Pilot; actual expenditures were \$53,000 less than this amount. Between 2003 and 2009, emergency shelter occupancy dropped from 90 percent to 70 percent within the men's system.

Phase one work had identified that some of the participants required intensive counselling or supports to help them deal with the effects of lifelong trauma. Current research indicates that there is a high incidence of head and brain injuries among chronically homeless people. With federal dollars, a separate project called "Finding Home" was launched to provide counselling and long-term interventions to 49 chronically homeless men. Difficulties getting the project started led to funding slippage, but organizers were able to use the accumulated funds to purchase 30 client assessments from Hamilton Health Sciences. Says Betty Lou: "Assessments are extremely valuable but costly. Over the course of H2H and Finding Home, we learned a great deal about the childhood traumas – physical, emotional and sexual – that lead men to homelessness. Women and children in crisis have been given first priority in homelessness matters, even though the majority of our homeless are male. These projects allowed us to better recognize and respond to the needs of this sub-group."

New problems emerged as some of the pilot projects' clients were moved from Ontario Works support to the Ontario Disability Support Program. Once housed, people felt isolated and needed social outlets, and employment and educational advice. They needed help to deal responsibly with debts and savings once they began receiving the higher ODSP benefit rate. As Finding Home and H2H progressed and funding arrangements allowed services to be managed jointly, the Case

Management Team looked after a mountain of detail work to ensure that people remained suitably and affordably housed.

For the clients, waking up in an apartment with appliances and a lock on the door, getting treatment for addictions or returning to school or work are like many dreams coming true at once. Formerly addicted to drugs and living on the streets, one participant in H2H spoke at length with the *Hamilton Spectator* about his transition away from homelessness. “It’s a really weird feeling to have somebody, other than a family member, actually have some genuine concern for you. These people have gone a step further. I call them my angels” [Cacho 2007].

Outcomes

An interim report to City Council in May 2009 revealed that the 145 participants in Hamilton’s H2H project had represented 20,000 bed nights in the emergency shelter system within the year prior to their being housed. Good news on the housing front was bad news for shelter operators trying to keep their books balanced. The City recognized that H2H had destabilized the system and it created a committee of shelter service providers and municipal staff to look more closely at the issue in late 2007. The group is now called the Hamilton Emergency Shelter Integration and Coordination Committee (HESICC).

Paul Johnson, Executive Director of Wesley Urban Ministries, was the first Director of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction when it was formed in 2005. His work with that organization has influenced his thinking and action on a number of fronts, including homelessness. Paul co-chairs HESICC with Betty Lou Purdon.

The group drafted *A Homelessness Blueprint for Emergency Shelter Services*, that outlines the changes required to effect an emergency shelter system transformation. Its goal is to ensure the continued movement of people from hostels to housing, and to reassign organizational roles and expertise. A key Blueprint outcome was the creation of a collaborative oversight body for Hamilton’s emergency shelter system.

Says Paul Johnson: “This exercise has profoundly influenced how we will work in the future. We will permanently remove 55 emergency beds from the men’s system in 2010, collectively develop a set of operating standards and commit to doing case management as a coordinated team. All of this required long hours of sometimes heated discussions, but there is trust around the table that every organization will share the pain of having their operations downsized or significantly altered and the joy of seeing people well housed.”

Making good on the Blueprint commitments, the Wesley Centre announced on March 24 that its 55 emergency beds will close on July 31, 2010, due to a steady decline in demand. Over the next few months, clients will be redirected to other emergency shelters, which currently operate at 70 percent capacity. The Centre will continue to offer daytime programming – meals, health care, employment services, housing supports, and social and recreation services – which it began offering to the Hamilton community in the 1950s.

Next steps

The implementation of the Blueprint is challenged by a need for more investment and greater flexibility. The millions of dollars needed to ensure less homelessness require long-term funding commitments. For now, funding for the multidisciplinary H2H Case Management Team – renamed “Transitions to Home” in January 2010 – has secured sufficient federal and municipal funding to continue operating until March 31, 2011.

Says Paul: “When we examined the system, we realized that in addition to the expertise and community connections shelter operators provided, their organizations were contributing 30 to 50 percent of the operations costs for shelters each year. We were at the table as shareholders whose contributions make the difference between basic service and life-enriching system. We can’t rely on continued donations to make the system work, but for now, our contributions pay for many of the recreational and social activities that create strong connections between people.”

Keeping up the energy and enthusiasm for the work is also a challenge. Paul Johnson’s hope is that the Blueprint will provide the means for working together in the future.

Though proud of the results accomplished through H2H and the Blueprint, Betty Lou Purdon believes that homelessness requires further municipal and provincial government action. Says Betty Lou: “The issue of solving homelessness is not just getting people housed or closing emergency shelter beds. Without a new funding formula, flexibility within funding streams and an infusion of dollars that represents the ‘true’ costs of emergency services and supports to help people sustain their housing, the success of our work will be tenuous over time.”

Anne Makhoul, Betty Lou Purdon and Paul Johnson

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Endnote

1. Mobile support means that team members ‘walked alongside’ clients, accompanying them wherever they needed encouragement or moral support. This might mean going to court or legal appointments, helping with banking and furniture purchases – whatever the client requested.

2. A housing allowance is a supplement paid to a landlord on behalf of households in need of rental assistance. It is meant to help bridge the difference between the rent that a household can afford to pay and the actual market rent. The Housing Allowance/Rent Supplement Program is a component of the broader Affordable Housing Program (AHP), a partnership program cost-shared between the federal and provincial governments [Canada-Ontario Affordable Housing Program].

References

Canada-Ontario Affordable Housing Program. (nd). *Program Guidelines*. <http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/AssetFactory.aspx?did=4080>

Cacho, M. (2007). "Joint initiative aims to end homelessness." *Hamilton Spectator*, September 20. <http://www.thespec.com/article/251394>

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