

3.6 Community

 “Deal with the reality that it is in your neighborhood. There are already homeless in your neighborhood no matter what part of the city you are in. Unless we do something, it will not stop.”

A wide range of community groups met to offer input and advice. From education providers to community leagues to youth groups to the faith community - all felt a need to end homelessness and supported the Housing First concept.

Guiding principles


Guiding principles were seen to be an important starting place. Some of these included:

- Integration - make people who are homeless part of the community. Do not segregate them in “ghettoes”.
- Supporting individual dignity - see people who are homeless as people rather than some lower form of life.
- Risk mitigation - provide assurances for landlords that their rents will be paid and their property respected.
- Wrap around services - provide life skills mentoring, follow-up services, medical services, job planning: whatever is required to help people who are homeless adjust to his or her new circumstances.
- Proactive planning - provide support before problems surface. Think ahead in developing “move-in” plans or landlord-tenant relations.
- Collaboration - collaborate among agencies and also among levels of government and public services.
- Accountability - set targets and measure successes.
- Awareness and education of the community - if it “takes a community to raise a child”, then it also takes a community to end homelessness. The community needs to know the facts about homelessness and be made aware of how the Housing First program works.

Imposed solutions need education and awareness

The participants in all groups were concerned with negative public perception that may be attached to a Housing First initiative and, similar to the business community, counseled a strong communications strategy that focused on education and awareness.

Participants felt that without public education and buy-in, the solution would appear to be imposed, and thus not accepted by the community at large.

 “We need public education through billboard ads, TV to take care of the fear and the realization that the homeless are already here. We need public education to recognize the need for change.”

“Everyone is wanting a solution, but imposed? Focus on public education vs. a forcing or implementing model.”

“With such a tight timeline, do you have the time to educate and inform or is the plan to impose a solution? Need to be aggressive about public education.”

“Remember that this is a change management issue, especially given the scale of the change. It must be implemented according to everything we know about managing change.”

Building a community

Community groups also recommended that we be ‘low key’ in placing people into housing and to not shine a spotlight on the person being placed. Community groups also felt that Housing First is a good opportunity to welcome the person into the community and invite them to participate in community activities.

Some community members suggested that the case worker link with the community league board as well as the city social worker to ensure that the new resident is integrated into the community.

All groups looked for ways in which their skills and backgrounds could contribute to ending homelessness. The Post Secondary and Training Providers, for example, felt that they could be called upon to develop and deliver customized programs to help the newly housed. For example, if a person who was homeless registered as a student, they would be eligible for bursaries and other student supports.

“Don’t make a big issue out of moving someone into housing. Be subtle. The worst thing you can do is make a spectacle of them. They should be treated exactly the same as anyone else moving into a home.”

“Once they are in apartments, we have to stop calling them the homeless. They go from being homeless to being our neighbors. It is incumbent upon us to treat them as new neighbours and welcome them into the community.”

If we (a post secondary institution) were asked “could you take 25 people and give them housing and an education?” we would definitely look at ways to make that happen. Once you are a student you have access to career counseling, part-time work, etc. We would be very open to that kind of request. We could make bursaries available, and could provide for the students.

Feeding the spirit

The faith community also identified a potential role for themselves. They also suggested that their roles could be fully explored through holding a plenary session with ‘people of faith’ modeled after the frontline worker session.

“Once housed, people need community and relationship to replace the community and relationships they have lost. This is an area where there could be a role for the faith community. They can link ‘people of faith’ to opportunities to provide relationship support (visiting, etc.) for the (previously) homeless.”

“We could get everyone in the same room together, and get people to come up with solutions and identifying what they can do.”

Inheriting the problem

The three youth groups that participated encountered homelessness every day of their lives.

Participants in the youth sector felt an intense commitment to solving the problem of homelessness, and expressed frustration that ‘I don’t even know how to help.’ They asked for tips and suggestions as to how they as a youth community might help.

“Downtown is my whole sphere of existence. I live downtown and I work downtown, and there is a huge disconnect for me.”

“I pass them in the stairwell as I go up to my apartment. I am so close to them, yet a world away.”

“It isn’t black and white. They can be homeless and on drugs. It isn’t the homelessness in that instance that is the problem; it is what it takes and what they will do to get drugs.”

“We are inheriting the city. Jobs and economy aren’t the issues. Homelessness is.”