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## 3.3 Frontline Workers

 *“People need somewhere to live, someone to talk to and something to do.”*

There are many talented and dedicated people working for agencies who are doing excellent work, often with meager resources. Gathering their input was a priority and seen as integral to the plan to end homelessness.

A full day forum was held specifically for frontline and agency workers. Over 200 frontline workers attended and demonstrated their commitment to end homelessness in Edmonton. The data from that day was summarized and fed back to the committees in a 32-page document that offered strategic, implementation and operational advice on how to design and deliver a Housing First concept in Edmonton. What follows is a summary of that feedback recorded in the small group break out rooms.

### Guiding principles to end homelessness

The responses to the question “What are the guiding principles to ending homelessness?” were thoughtful and certain. Some examples include:

- Housing is a basic need and human right.
- People need to be housed with no preconditions. If you are homeless, you need a house first, no matter what else is happening.
- Recognize the challenges that need to be dealt with. Assessment of what is being done. Develop a plan based on a case management program that works across agencies. There should be a uniform, collaborative approach.
- It will take a paradigm shift with regard to outcomes. What is success for one person may be different from others. We need to include what is success for the client.
- Commitment to a variety of housing styles, including medical care housing.
- People who are in charge should be empowered to make changes as required.
- Offer ongoing long term support.
- Accountability - evidence based program design.
- Developers and landlords kept in mind as they are in it for a profit.
- Public education campaign; not only right, but also cost effective. Need to sell program to service providers and general public.
- Should cover all areas of Edmonton and region.

### Requirements for the Housing First approach

Housing First means a person only needs to want housing. He or she does not need to meet any other requirements prior to placement in a permanent home. Some of the requirements are:

- Available units and homes.
- One person to connect with. Not having to tell their same story to numerous people.
- Holistic - service teams. Team work. Clear roles. Trained and funded staff. Staff retention.
- Wrap around services. Continuum of services, follow through. Less duplication of services.
- Develop policies that reflect the needs of the people.
- Government on board to resolve the issue.
- Who shares the information (on a need to know basis)? Privacy? Logistics?

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Participants suggested that there needs to be a complete system overhaul. We need to shift from segmented, bureaucratic, conditional and finite service delivery to holistic, client-centered, unconditional, patient housing and supports provision for clients. We need to tailor service to client's expressed needs and wishes (which are dynamic and changing.) as opposed to those of the service providers and policy makers. Policy and practice emerge from the frontlines.

The program should start with the most vulnerable people. Surround people who are homeless by the multiple agencies and resources to keep the best people working with the clients. Client choice and options are key.

## **Barriers to the approach**

Some of the barriers to Housing First identified by participants were:

- Lack of integration of services.
- Public opinion.
- Lack of dollars.
- Bureaucratic administration.
- No central coordination.

Another barrier was landlords' reluctance to rent to people who are homeless. Participants suggested that advocacy and support from agencies, having a secure rent through a third party, fixing damages, and minimizing risks for landlords would serve to reduce landlord's reluctance. Landlords and the community living around the property need to be educated about people who are homeless.

Other options suggested to reduce the perceived risk for landlords were the use of incentives such as tax breaks and designing units to better anticipate problems (i.e., special needs housing).

### ***Making housing units available***

Some of the things participants suggested for encouraging landlords and developers to make more housing units available for people who are homeless were having a long term contract between the landlord and the agency, assure landlords that support will be there, and then follow it up (have a 24 hour line to support the tenant as well as landlord), have clear dispute resolution processes, look at large areas and low percentages per building (only 1 - 2 per building).

Participants also felt that there should be a champion found for the concept and that landlords should be shown that the government is intent on the program.

### ***Changing attitudes***

Ongoing, effective public education and awareness campaign on homelessness, inclusive communities, and the Housing First program are required to move Edmontonians' attitudes from "not in my backyard" to "how do I get this in my community". Respect for the new tenant needs to be created first. Use discretion and anonymity.

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## Client Centred

When asked, “What does ‘client centered’ look like in terms of working with people who are homeless?”, participants suggested:

- Harm reduction.
- Meet where the clients are.
- Proper assessment.
- Involve client in the program.
- Funding based on 10 year plan.
- Trusted supports supplying basic needs, recreation, and spirituality.

Current views are that we are not client centred. For example, services are not offered on evenings, weekends, or holidays. Suggestions were that we must meet people where they are at and involve clients in their program, right from the beginning. Client needs are different; they are not one homogenous group. We need to be as client centered as we can, but basically we are program centered.

## Coordination

Participants felt that the three levels of government could provide tax incentives to business and make funding sustainable. Cooperation between all levels of government and their various departments is critical.

### *Coordinating case management and sharing client information*

Participants felt that collaboration could result in:

- Smaller case loads, more funding, and greater flexibility.
- A commitment to work with and focus on client.
- Everyone would have a clear definition of others’ roles. There would be flexibility to all agencies to achieve common goals.
- There would be a system for collecting data (data base) that could lead to research and evaluation. It could be constructed such that the data would be safe, private, and shared under FOIP.

Participants suggested that Housing First needs one large umbrella approach to service provision which includes maintenance workers and property managers. Workers would want new protocols in place between service providers, agencies and clients.

### *Restructuring agencies and frontline government services*

Some of the suggestions for restructuring included having a central registry for homelessness with information like registrant name, available housing, availability of case workers (agencies), community resource list. The appropriate money would need to be available to make it all work.

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### ***Common needs assessment***

Some of the concerns about a common needs assessment revolved around who develops the tool and does the client assessments (upper management or front line workers)? The use of assessment tools leads to fairness, but also takes some measure of a personal touch out of it. Too many assessments could drive people away. Assessment of physical and mental health, gradual and ongoing after housing is provided will be required. Follow-up is important. Use what is available

Workers also felt that a period of adjustment after move in should be allowed before the client is put in programs. The focus should be on supports, with client needs identified. Case managers need to be assigned quickly.

Service providers need both training and technology. Case workers need to be trained to properly assess clients. Funders need to be onboard. Funding needs to be based on all 10 years.

### **Measure of Success**

Participants stated that to measure success would need better data collection and data collection tools. Measures of success could be number of intakes and retention rate, cost savings, increase in health (community health indicators), increase of preventative services, decrease of crisis/emergency services, client success as defined by the client, staff retention and quality of workers, and/or reduction in crime.

### **Locking the Door to Homelessness**

Frontline workers were asked, “If everyone had a house, what would the agencies do?” Some of their responses were:

- We have currently strayed from our mandate in order to solve housing issues. We would go back to our purpose.
- We must sustain the housing: prevention of eviction, prediction of difficulties. Rehoused if necessary.
- Get to the root of the original cause. Move from acute care to preventative. Advocate for other determinates of health. Start younger. Educate the next generation.
- We would work on the social determinants of health (emotional well being, financial).
- We would move “upstream” to self-sufficiency.
- Agencies to support the care givers. Make sure they don’t burn out.

If the current people who are homeless had housing, participants suggested that we should better communicate services that are available that can meet client needs. Services should be pro active rather than re active. Put the focus on prevention. Increase the capacity in staffing and resources provided through agencies, i.e. mental health. Alleviate financial barrier, i.e. rent caps, subsidies.