

Homes First Society - Strachan House

Case Study # 4

Promising Practice

- Creating a community within a community in a changing neighbourhood.
- Practicing “assertive tolerance” to accommodate and support individuals with complex needs.

Background

Homes First was a 1980s pioneer of permanent housing for people experiencing chronic homelessness in Toronto. It provides supportive housing and emergency shelter across the city of Toronto. Strachan Housing opened in 1998, replacing the former StreetCity project. It provides transitional and supportive housing, using a low-barrier approach and “assertive tolerance” principles, for people who have experienced chronic homelessness. Strachan House provides supportive housing to those with mental health and addictions issues but is distinct in the way the supports provided are municipally funded.

Population Served

Single men and women 21 years and older who are chronically homeless and are considered “hardest to house” with severe mental health

issues, addictions, behavioural and cognitive issues, cognitive disabilities, physical disabilities and people are experiencing issues related to aging. The population has histories of chronic homelessness and has always had difficulty securing and maintaining housing.

Housing

Creating a community within a community in a changing neighbourhood.

Strachan House is a 3 level former textile warehouse owned by the City of Toronto and operated by Homes First. It has 83 housing units for long term tenants and 5 emergency shelter beds. Strachan House has maintained many of the design elements from the original StreetCity program to function very similarly as a community/neighbourhood within a dedicated building.



Funding Model:

- Receives block funding by the City of Toronto’s Shelter, Support and Housing Administration (SSHA) Division.
- Some United Way funding for specific staff positions.
- The meal program receives grant funding from 3 private foundations.

Below are key features of the Strachan House building that allow it to function as a community within a community:

- **Building is broken up into smaller ‘neighbourhoods’.** Strachan House consists of 11 areas each named after a letter (A through L). Each area or neighbourhood consist of 5-8 units, a shared kitchen area and a shared washroom. This design allows space for micro communities within a large residential building.



- **Individual units are private spaces.** Tenants are protected by the Residential Tenancies Act (RTA) and are able to do what they choose in their individual units, including keeping pets and having guests. Staff must also follow legal procedures to enter the unit including giving proper notice, providing tenants with greater privacy despite sharing other elements of their housing.
- **Common space use Guidelines.** Although the common areas located outside of the units they are considered shelter space. Residents participate in decision making on how that space functions including how to decorate the common areas. There are also guidelines that residents helped to develop against substance-use in common spaces. Having residents participate in these types of processes allows for a feeling of ownership and feels less top-down.

In addition to being a community within the dedicated building site, Strachan House is also part of the external community of Liberty

Village. The neighbourhood around Strachan House is rapidly changing with the development of condominiums thus bringing an increase in middle-class young adults. Strachan House views themselves as an important part of the neighbourhood, serving the most marginalized people who are a part of the community. Strachan House decided to be proactive in responding to the community changes and built relationships with their new neighbours and businesses while providing information and education about their services.

Below are key ways to get community buy-in in a neighbourhood that is rapidly changing:

- **Attend neighbourhood meetings.** When a new condominium opened up directly across the street from Strachan House, some of the new residents responded to Strachan House tenants with fear. Staff at Strachan House asked to attend their condo meetings including their condo board meeting to introduce themselves and provide education on the tenants they are serving and what types of services they provide. Strachan House explained that the tenants they serve are already members of their community, and that Strachan House is there to support them with their range of complex issues. The majority of neighbours who participated in these discussions became supporters after learning about the program.
- **Speak with nearby businesses.** Similar to the condo meetings, Strachan House staff introduced themselves to businesses opening up in the area and explained who their tenants are and the work that they do. Many of the businesses support the program and have

utilized the supports of Strachan House staff to intervene if they are having a challenge with any tenant in the community. In situations where potential conflicts arise, local businesses are able to connect with a support worker from Strachan House to de-escalate the situation rather than involving police. This has led to fewer conflicts while also helping to reduce the stigma tenants face and create bonds and working relationships with the local community.

Support

Practicing “assertive tolerance” to accommodate and support individuals with complex needs.

Strachan House provides 24/7 on site supports from Community Support Workers. Supports available for tenants include a life skills program that assists tenants with activities of daily living, improving financial literacy, and educating tenants about tenant obligations. They also have a hoarding and housekeeping specialist position that engages intensive case management with tenants around pest control, hoarding and hygiene. Strachan House considers themselves to be “no barrier housing” because residents are able to choose how much or little they want to engage with supports available and tenants are able to maintain their housing so long as they are not causing harm to themselves or others. Strachan House refers to this as “assertive tolerance”, where they do whatever it takes to accommodate and support individuals with complex needs with very minimal requirements for service engagement or change in behaviour.

Below are some key features of their “assertive tolerance” support approach:

- **Follow a harm reduction approach.** Strachan House received funding from the Toronto Urban Health fund to establish their own internal harm reduction-within-housing framework. In this framework, harm reduction principles are applied to all aspects of a person’s health and behaviours. When following up on a problematic behaviour associated with substance-use, staff focus on the harms associated with that behaviour and how they can be reduced instead of focusing on how to get that tenant to stop using.
- **Use staff meetings as a place to debrief around troubling behaviour.** Staff at Strachan House frequently engage with residents who have problematic behaviour. In staff interviews, it is explained to potential candidates that it is not unusual for staff at Strachan House to experience occasional verbal abuse and high conflict situations. Staff regularly discuss residents’ behaviour in their team meetings as a way to problem solve discerning behaviour. When a tenant has prolonged problematic behavior and the issue of possible eviction arises, staff will talk through where that tenant would go if they were to be evicted and remind themselves that they are often the last stable housing option for people with complex needs. Having the opportunity to debrief with colleagues and discuss client behaviors and needs brings perspective to front-line staff about the importance of the work that they do.
- **Use landlord function as a strategy to engage with tenants when necessary.** If a tenant’s behaviour is disruptive to other residents or

staff and they will not engage with support services, Strachan House staff will work to demonstrate to tenants from a ‘landlord’ perspective what harms are being done by their behaviour and what real consequences may follow if it continues. Drawing up agreements helps tenants to actualize the severity of the situation. If problematic behaviour still continues to exist, Strachan House staff will submit a mediated agreement through the Landlord and Tenant Board, which will detail steps the tenant agrees to take to change the problematic behaviour.

Partnerships

Strachan House directly partners with the Parkdale Queen West Community Health Centre to provide on-site medical supports. Parkdale Queen West Community Health Centre serves low income individuals and communities who are at risk and/or face barriers accessing health services. Physicians from this health centre work on a rotating schedule to provide medical services on site to the tenants at Strachan House. This service has been a necessary component to the success of the Strachan House program as many of the tenants face barriers accessing health services and will not go to appointments off site.

Strachan House also works closely with other service providers, particularly with referring organizations who continue providing services to tenants after they move in. The majority of referrals to Strachan House come from CAMH, St Joseph’s Health Centre - Mental Health and Addictions Division, City of Toronto Streets to Homes and ACT teams. Formal partnerships

have been formed with CAMH and the Streets to Homes Program.

- CAMH: Under an MOU, CAMH can provide direct referrals to Strachan House, and remain connected to these individuals to provide additional supports they may need. 14 clients are currently supported in this partnership.
- Streets to Homes: *Streets to Homes and Hostels to Homes* are City-run programs (with federal, provincial and City funding) that help move chronic homeless people into shelters and into permanent housing. Through the Hostels to Homes project, City staff identify clients who bring the most challenges to service provision and connect them to housing through Strachan House. In this partnership, staff help tenants move from this program into the emergency shelter portion of Strachan House, with the goal of transitioning them eventually into a permanent housing unit. To date, 9 people have come through this program and been placed in permanent housing.



Many of these individuals have had bad experiences dealing with outside institutions, doctors, hospitals... they just won’t go. So even minor issues become major issues. So now they have been able to build relationships with doctors that come on site, get bloodwork, wound care, managing diabetes things like that.”

Homes First Housing and Shelters Manager

Replication and Advice

- Provide as many supports on site as you can. This population faces barriers to accessing programs off site.
- Use a harm reduction model to guide work with tenants beyond substance use.
- Be proactive and engage with the external community.
- Need to have staff who are capable of dealing with residents with complex issues. Need to hire intensive case managers. If possible, bring in a medical component including Personal Support Workers and Nurses.
- If designing a new build - use strong materials. The building may take a lot of abuse and need to withstand high traffic.
- Have a community space where everyone can get together. Particularly a communal dining area.
- If possible, give each tenant their own washroom and kitchen.

Outcomes

For Strachan House, the most important outcome is that tenants remain stably housed, and in this goal, the project has been successful. Homes First has recently started increasing documentation of staff interactions with clients in upgraded case management software. This will yield more specific information on performance and impact of services so that they may work continually to improve the program.



Sometimes people want this conveyer belt of success - this person is really bad then they're going to go through the program and be really good. Our successes are measured really differently here. It is more this person is really struggling and may not have had a home in 10, 15, 20 years...may have been in hospital for 2 years...may be jail for 4 years... may be living under a bridge...and now they have a home, they feel safe, they have good, they have access to primary care, those are our successes."

Homes First Housing and Shelters Manager

Outcomes 2016:

- 96% of tenants remained stably housed at Strachan House.
- 96,360 nutritious meals were served.
- 9 people from City of Toronto Streets to Homes partnership were successfully transitioned to permanent housing at Strachan House.



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