

CMHA Lambton-Kent

Case Study # 2

Promising Practice

- Supporting tenants to transition from living in group homes to self-contained supportive housing units.
- Housing tenants with private landlords under a housing first model.

Background

CMHA Lambton-Kent provides a range of mental health supports from crisis intervention, to ongoing case management, clinical services and mental health promotion activities. Their supportive housing program began in 2002 and adopted a housing first approach in 2013. As part of this change, CMHA Lambton-Kent transitioned 20 tenants from 3 group homes into self-contained private rental units. Today, CMHA Lambton-Kent houses over 200 residents in their permanent supportive housing program.

Population Served

People who need affordable housing and supports to maintain their housing, particularly people with mental health and addiction issues.

Housing

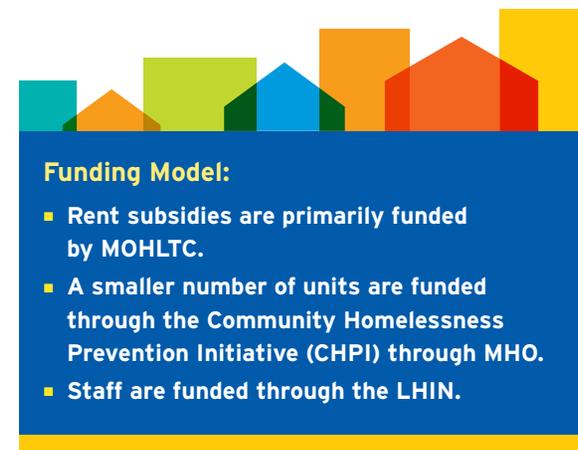
Housing tenants with private landlords under a housing first approach.

CMHA Lambton-Kent's supportive housing program consists of portable rent supplements largely with private landlords. When a person enters the program they work with a Housing

Case Manager to find housing of their choice and are provided a rental subsidy and any supports that are needed to help that person maintain their housing. CMHA Lambton-Kent receives most of the funding for the housing portion of their program from the Ministry of Health & Long Term Care (MOHLTC). In addition, they receive some rent supplement funding through the Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative (CHPI) program. In both approaches, CMHA has a referral agreement with private landlords and the tenant holds the lease directly with the landlord. Through this approach, tenants are able to pick housing of their choice and are able to move the rent supplements with them across their life span as their housing needs change.

Below are key features from the housing model at CMHA Lambton-Kent:

- **Separate landlord and support function.** CMHA Lambton-Kent has found it to be beneficial to de-link support services from the landlord function. In their experience, having the roles separated removes power dynamics that may arise with one's case manager also being the landlord. In order to support positive



tenant-landlord relationships, landlords have ongoing communication with the organization and are provided with a direct contact person within the organization.

- **View the landlord as a service partner.** Although the Housing Case Manager's ultimate role is to support the tenant, staff spend a considerable amount of their time working with landlords. In order to build relationships with landlords and continue to build a partnership to acquire more units in the future, CMHA Lambton-Kent staff make a point to respond to landlord concerns immediately and if possible in person.

■ **Identify clients from the waitlist with priority.**

CMHA Lambton-Kent manages an internal waitlist for their housing program. Priority is given to tenants with the highest housing need whose housing costs are in line with the amount of subsidy available. CMHA is piloting the SPDAT (Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool) in one of their programs to determine the complexity of presenting needs. CMHA Lambton-Kent also administers an intake form of their own design that asks clients about their housing and support needs. The organization found that administering their own form as a part of a longer process of building rapport gave a clearer indication of the types of supports a person needed after move in. (see shared resources).

■ **Determine Housing Quality Standards.**

Housing Case Managers work with tenants to find housing units of their choice but require the units to meet a baseline of standards determined by the organization. The tenant and worker use an apartment checklist when visiting a potential unit to identify any areas of concern. The checklist includes checking that the appliances work, that the unit is in good repair, that fire safety measures are in place, and that the utilities are affordable. (see shared resources).

■ **Over Housing Challenge.** Typically tenant subsidies cannot be applied to a unit with more bedrooms than are needed to house a tenant, even if that unit is within budget, because it is considered “over housing” by the Ministry. However, CMHA Lambton-Kent has been successful in getting permission to

apply subsidies to units with extra bedrooms if a tenant requires the additional space to accommodate a disability (eg. need a larger space to accommodate a wheelchair/scooter), and in smaller rural communities when a larger unit is all that is available.

Support

Supporting tenants to transition from living in group homes to self-contained supportive housing units.

In 2013 when CMHA Lambton-Kent adopted a housing first approach for their supportive housing, they decided to close the three group homes they were operating and transition twenty tenants into self-contained, supported independent units. It was determined that many of the residents in these group homes would be able to successfully live independently with the proper supports in place. Many of the tenants had been living in group homes for extended periods of time - some for as long as 30 years - and transitioning them into self-contained units was a long but ultimately successful process.

Below are key learnings from this process:

- **Get staff on board with the change.** Many staff had been working in the group homes with the same tenants for a long time. Some of the staff were skeptical of the change and did not believe that the tenants would be able to live independently. As an exercise, staff would meet and come up with a list of reasons they thought the tenant would not be able to live independently and then problem solve how that barrier could be remedied with supports.

For instance, if a person is unable to cook they could be set up with meal delivery; if a person is unable to manage their money, staff could work with them to plan their finances or if necessary, they could be set them up on public trustee. Through this exercise staff were able to problem solve and shift their thinking around tenants being able to live independently.

- **Have a clear consistent message from all staff.** It is important to communicate the changes to tenants as a positive change. Emphasizing new benefits that tenants can get from independent living, like more privacy and freedom can help ease transition.
- **Consider nuances of tenant personalities and feelings when approaching them with the change.** Each tenant will have concerns and reactions that are unique to them. It is important to meet with each tenant and address the concerns they have, and explain to them in a personal way how the change may benefit them. Many of the tenants were excited that they would have more control over their finances, instead of paying room and board with a small personal needs allowance, and would now have more discretion on how to spend their finances after paying rent. CMHA staff found that talking to people about their specific interests helped get buy-in from the tenants. For example, if a tenant is interested in painting you can explain that they will have more choice on how much to spend on art supplies; if someone is into physical activity they can now budget to buy a pass to the YMCA.

- **Work with each tenant to find housing of their choice.** Staff spoke to each tenant about their housing needs and tried to find housing that met each person's individual preferences. Most of the tenants had lived in the group homes for a long period of time and viewed their co-tenants as family and wanted to remain in close proximity. CMHA Lambton-Kent were able to find a landlord that had multiple units in the same building and were able to move tenants who wanted to remain close into self-contained units in the same apartment complex.
- **Need flexibility from regular funding policies.** In order to ease the transition, it is important to have some wiggle room with budgets. This could be spending a bit more on a rent supplement to get the person into an ideal unit, or covering moving costs.
- **Start with intensive supports and scale back when appropriate.** When tenants first moved into self-contained units housing case managers met with them very regularly. The first tasks were to link them with a primary care doctor, a psychiatrist, public trustee (if needed), social activities, and turning their apartment into a home with furnishings. Each tenant is connected to a housing case manager. These workers do case management, housing advocacy, assistance with activities of daily living, and apartment checks. Over time, it was found that in most cases, the levels of supports needed became less and less.

- **Monitor outcomes.** After transitioning the tenants, CMHA Lambton-Kent monitored how each tenant was doing and found that there were many positive outcomes. Many of the tenants had reunited with family members, and were seeking out activities that they had never engaged in before.

Partnerships

The Supportive Housing program at CMHA Lambton-Kent functions with a variety of partners. The main partnership is with the private landlords. The local communities in Lambton-Kent are small enough that landlords often speak to each other. It is important to maintain a positive reputation in order to keep housing options for your tenants. One way CMHA Lambton-Kent builds this reputation is by making it a point to respond to landlords very quickly when there is an issue. If a landlord calls with an issue, staff make sure to respond to that landlord immediately and, if possible, attend to the matter in person the same day.

CMHA Lambton-Kent also has partnerships with the local homelessness shelter. Staff go to the shelter twice a week and talk to the people living in the shelter about their housing needs and assist them to find housing where possible, or add them to the waitlist for the supportive housing program. Similarly, CMHA has a partnership with the local hospital to participate in discharge planning on the psychiatric unit, including working with people on their housing needs.

Outcomes

CMHA Lambton-Kent describes their success as being with each individual client. When someone is able to maintain their housing and have supports in place to support them with their mental health that is a success. Incremental successes include things like hearing from tenants that they are now a member of the YMCA, that they got a job, or that they are in school and that they attribute this to having housing and supports or that they feel safe and happy in their home. In addition to hearing from tenants about their successes, the organization does track data outcomes including length of tenancy, and use of emergency services. In the CHPI funded program, the first reporting cycle of 8 months, there was an 80% reduction in ER visits across their entire supportive housing program.

Replication and Advice

- All staff from leadership to frontline case managers have to be on board with the changes of transitioning tenants out of group homes into self-contained units.
- The housing first approach is very adaptive but it is important to keep key elements such as tenant choice with portable rent supplements, scattered units, and delinking support from housing.
- When transitioning tenants you must be able to work creatively and have flexibility with the budget to do so.
- Respond to individual tenants concerns and try to match each tenant to the best possible housing for their particular needs.

Shared Resources

- CMHA Housing Intake
- Apartment checklist
- Role of Housing Case Manager

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