

Family Services Windsor-Essex - Housing First Program

Case Study # 3

Promising Practice

- Working through a by-name list of homeless individuals using a housing first approach, conducting outreach to initiate contact with services.
- Using a trauma informed approach to providing support.
- Partnership between experienced support agencies, housing outreach services and the municipal housing corporation.

Background

Family Services are multi service organizations in Ontario communities, whose core service is counselling. Each local Family Services agency provides programming geared to needs in their community. In addition to counselling, Family Services Windsor-Essex (FSWE) provides a number of clinical and practical programs for low income people with mental health and addiction issues. Because of the array of services available and their clinical expertise, FSWE was selected to be a community lead agency for a program to address local homelessness through a housing first approach. The City of Windsor administers federal and provincial funds aimed specifically at reducing homelessness. When initiating the Housing First program 3 years ago, the City approached FSWE to lead a program, along with 3 other community organization partners.

They work through a by-name list of people experiencing homelessness in Windsor-Essex to engage those individuals, move them into housing and provide necessary supports to keep them housed. The goal of the program was to house 50 unique individuals off of this list; to date FSWE and their partners have exceeded this goal and have successfully housed over 200 individuals in 3 years.

Population Served

To be eligible for this program, a person must be on the by-name list of people experiencing homelessness, must have experienced a chronic period of homelessness (at least 6 months of the past 12 months) and have mental health and addiction concerns. The by-name list was developed by the City of Windsor during a point in time count and can be continuously updated as new people are engaged.



Funding Model:

- Supports are funded through the Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative (CHPI) from the Ministry of Housing and the City.
- Landlord Developers are funded by the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) Federal Funding.
- Rent Supplements are funded through the Investments in Affordable Housing (IAH) Program.

Housing

Working through a by-name list of homeless individuals using a housing first approach, conducting outreach to initiate contact with services.

The housing first program at FSWE operates through a portable rent supplement model, with the rent supplements paid wherever the tenant

chooses to live. In order to find the housing, the program staff includes 2 “landlord developers” who look for available units with landlords willing to work with the program. Landlord developers look for buildings that fit with criteria given to them by intensive support team staff to match units with the specific needs of the future tenant. In order to appeal to landlords, landlord developers let them know that support workers will meet with tenants at least once a week and they guarantee that rent will be paid on time (tenants are often on pay direct or voluntary trusteeship and the rent subsidy portion comes directly from program partner Housing Information Services). The program also has a landlord repair fund that can cover any potential damages that are the fault of the tenant.

FSWE recognized that it takes a highly motivated individual to walk through the doors of support organizations to get the help that they need. In order to engage with the most vulnerable population experiencing homelessness in Windsor, FSWE developed an extensive outreach program to add people to the by-name list, and engage tenants to participate in services including the housing first program.

Below are key learnings from the outreach program:

- **Determine where to look.** In Windsor, like many small to mid-sized cities, the homeless population is not large and visible. In order to engage with homeless individuals who may not be as visible in public spaces, the outreach

worker actively seeks out homeless people by exploring areas where people may sleep outside. It is also useful to visit organizations serving homeless individuals such as shelters and food programs. The outreach worker at FSWE found it useful to connect with tenants at the local mission during their community kitchen program.

- **Carry supplies to distribute.** Some basic items for outreach workers to carry with them include food, water, gift cards and a naloxone kit. Get to know individuals you are approaching and ask them what their needs are and bring those items with you for future interactions.
- **Repeatedly approach.** Developing a relationship with someone who has been disconnected from services for an extended period of time can be a long process. Expect engagement to take time and continuously approach individuals to build a rapport. At FSWE, there were people they had to approach over 10 times before engaging them in services.
- **Coordinate with other outreach services.** Many times there are other outreach services working the same path attempting to engage people for different services. To make outreach across the region more efficient, FSWE has organized an outreach table for outreach workers to come together with the goal of covering the city and connecting individuals to the services they need in a coordinated way. For instance, at this table, the addictions outreach workers who are distributing harm

reduction kits said that the number one service need they hear from the people they connect with is housing. This provided an opportunity for housing and addictions workers to discuss ways to coordinate their activities and more readily connect people with services.

Support

Using a trauma informed approach to providing support.

Family Services Windsor-Essex recognizes the prevalence of trauma amongst the people they serve throughout their organization and practice within a trauma informed approach. FSWE also uses Maslow’s hierarchy of needs to determine what supports someone may need urgently before engaging in mental health services. When a person comes to FSWE for counselling or any other services they are first assessed to ensure that their basic needs are being met - including housing. Although it isn’t often that someone will walk into the Family Services office and not have somewhere to live, many present with substandard housing, precarious housing, in rent arrears, or lacking basic utilities. FSWE implemented a housing first approach throughout all services and will first work with the tenants to make sure their basic needs are being met before attempting mental health interventions. Once in housing, each tenant is assigned an Intensive Support Team (IST) staff who visits with them at least weekly. ISTs are hired by Family Services Windsor-Essex and work with 15 people at a time.

Trauma Informed Care:

- Recognize the prevalence of trauma people have experienced.
- Ensure emotional and physical safety. Provide a safe and welcoming space. Use screening tools to assess basic needs.
- Foster trust. Have clear and consistent policies. When you make a promise to do something - do it.
- Choice. Ask the person receiving service about their needs, goals and wishes and make them a priority when providing a service or finding them housing.

Below are some key features of providing trauma informed support services to housing first tenants:

- **Once in housing - focus on housing.** At the beginning of a tenancy, focus first on furnishing the unit, working on practical skills such as cleaning and educating the resident about responsibilities of being a good tenant.
 - Furnishing the unit - During their first year, FSWE would provide furnishings for each tenant but found that many of the items were getting very damaged or were being traded/sold. They soon realized that this was happening because the tenants did not feel ownership for these items. ISTs began shopping for furnishings with the tenant for these items and found that damages and loss was drastically reduced. ISTs and tenants will shop together working within a set budget and with a basic household items check list.

- **Improve tenant income.** Individuals who have been disconnected from services are often not receiving all of the benefits they are entitled to. Many of the tenants can have a quick improvement to their income by being connected to social assistance programs or navigated to appropriate supports such as moving to ODSP from OW.
- **Connect tenants to their neighbourhood.** Once tenants are becoming settled into their units, begin to introduce tenants to amenities in their neighbourhood. ISTs will walk around with the tenants showing them where the grocery store is, library, and any other community program they may be interested in.
- **Start goal setting.** Tenant choice needs to be a key feature of any housing first program from the beginning when finding a housing unit through to support services. ISTs at FSWE work with service users to establish their own goals which are adapted over time. At the beginning these goals may be small and practical - related to upkeep of the unit, self-care etc. - and adapt over time.
- **Primary care and mental health care.** After the first year or so in which the focus is on practical skills, ISTs will work with tenants to connect them to primary health care and mental health care. FSWE has found primary care doctors to be a valuable tool as a first step to mental health and addictions services. Primary care doctors may build a rapport with their patient and then identify areas that are outside of their scope and refer them to psychiatrists and addictions services.

- **Understand that changes take time.** Service providers need to recognize that change takes time. At the beginning of the program, ISTs would sometimes experience frustration that their scope of support with the person had been focused on practical skills and harm reduction and not seeing concrete change related to mental health or addictions issues. It wasn't until after the first year of the program that one of the residents approached a worker saying they would like to work towards getting a handle on their addiction.

Partnerships

Partnership between experienced support agencies, housing outreach services and the municipal housing corporation.

The housing first program at Family Services is a partnership between 4 organizations with FSWE as the lead. The other three organizations are Housing Information Services (HIS) - a non-profit who helps people look for housing, Access County Community Support Services (ACCESS) - a multi service organization who works in the smaller communities in Essex County, and Can-Am Indian Friendship Centre (CAIFC) - a multi-service organization serving Aboriginal peoples within the areas of Windsor Essex County. FSWE oversees the housing first program and employs the ISTs, outreach worker, social worker and manager. Outside of this main partnership, FSWE has other partnerships including the outreach table consisting of outreach workers from across the region and case conferences every two weeks with CMHA to profile support issues back and forth without using people's names. FSWE also does quite a bit of direct work with municipal staff administering housing and homelessness

programs, who visit the office regularly, coordinate their homelessness point in time count, and sit on the homelessness coalition table. The latter is a coalition of community organizations working together to end homelessness in Essex county.

Outcomes

- Main outcome is that people stay housed. This is the program’s primary determinant of success.
- ISTs take case notes that are then synthesized by a data analyst to demonstrate outcomes.
- Use a HERIN workbook.
 - When search began, when person was placed, 6 month, 12 month, 24 month milestones
 - Reasons for exiting the program: returned to homeless, successful exit, other exit

Replication and Advice

- Create a healthy tension between landlord developers and support workers. Landlord developers work closely with landlords and are able to view issues from their perspective, while ISTs work closely with participants and are well positioned to advocate for their needs. Having staff able to speak from both perspectives has been invaluable for the collaborative when problem solving.
- Municipal housing providers can be quite receptive to housing tenants through such a program, but you must work within the waitlists they are managing.
- Need to establish buy-in from the community that housing is a basic right, harm reduction is a valuable approach that saves lives, and services need to be delivered in a trauma informed way.
- Be prepared for successes and setbacks along the way. Successfully housing and supporting peoples does not happen in a linear process.
- Focus on main outcome goal of keeping people housed.
- Foster trust with the tenant. Use clear and consistent policies and follow through on tasks that you have committed to.

Shared Resources

- HERIN Workbook
- Unit Viewing Protocol
- Outreach Protocol
- Move in Protocol

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Outcomes:
203 individuals housed

- 38 had a positive change in income (22 OW, 16 ODSP)
- 100 positive change in social well-being (can be counted in multiple categories below)
 - Employment 35
 - Training and education 36
 - Volunteer work 21
 - Social participation 64
 - Recreational or cultural activities 47


