

Hong Fook Mental Health Association

Case Study #5

Promising Practice

- Providing culturally competent services to East and Southeast Asian communities across the GTA.
- Assisting clients to find housing of their choice in their communities of choice by building partnerships with non-profit housing providers and private landlords.
- Providing culturally responsive ongoing support.

Background

Hong Fook is a multi-service mental health organization serving East and Southeast Asian communities in Greater Toronto, through clinical mental health services, self-help, family initiatives, prevention and promotion, youth services and training. Hong Fook started their supportive housing program in 2001 and today houses 60 families, with 103 people.

Today Hong Fook serves a variety of different ethnic communities including Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese speaking), Vietnamese, Cambodian and Korean communities.

Population Served

People aged 16 and over who have mental health issues and linguistic and cultural barriers in accessing other mental health services. To qualify for the supportive housing program you must also be homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Housing

Assisting clients to find housing of their choice in their communities of choice.

Hong Fook adopts different models in its Housing Program. One of the models used is a head lease model, where Hong Fook partners with private landlords to run 60 units. In this model, Hong Fook is the lease holder and pays rent directly to the landlord and the tenants pay their portion of the rent to Hong Fook. The head lease model with scattered units across the city works well for Hong Fook and their tenants because it gives flexibility for tenants to find apartments of their choice in neighbourhoods of their choice, an important feature for Hong Fook's culture specific services. Hong Fook shared some of the challenges and successes from this housing model as well as key features related to providing culturally specific supportive housing.



Funding Model:

- RMOHLTC provides funding for the housing subsidy. Hong Fook can apply the subsidies to units as they see fit - as long as they house a minimum number of tenants set by the Ministry.
- Case management is funded through the Central East LHIN.
- Recently awarded funding for an additional 8 units from the City of Toronto through the Housing Allowances to Maintain Successful Tenancies program.

Below are key learnings from their housing model:

- **Build a relationship with landlords.** At the beginning, Hong Fook experienced discrimination from private landlords when they told them they were a mental health agency.

Hong Fook provided detailed information and explained the kind of supports provided to their clients when they approached the private landlords. Many landlords, who were previously in an agreement to rent a unit, would suddenly say the unit became unavailable. Hong Fook addressed their stigmas by providing education on mental health. They provided information about what is involved and what benefits there are to the landlord. Although they make a point to say that they cannot promise behaviour of the tenant, they do promise rent and that tenants will receive ongoing supports. Hong Fook also encourages tenants to build their own relationship with their landlord, by working with them as partners to address housing issues. One way that Hong Fook has facilitated this is through the creation of their *Communication Booklet for Tenant and Superintendent/Landlord* - a resource with pictures and phrases in 5 languages to assist tenants to communicate with landlords who do not speak the same language about maintenance concerns (see shared resources).

- **Prioritize tenant choice and autonomy.** Housing workers are assigned to clients based on their ability to speak the same language and their understanding of the culture. When assisting a tenant to find a rental unit, housing workers discuss what their needs are in terms of location and community amenities. Through their familiarity with the tenants' cultures and culturally specific neighbourhoods across the city, housing

workers and tenants are able to find suitable rentals that meet their needs- including proximity to family, grocery stores, places of worship and other community resources.

- **Be creative and evaluate risk when using rent subsidies.** Rather than being assigned a maximum subsidy per tenant, Hong Fook is given a total dollar amount from the MOHLTC and a minimum number of tenants that it must house. Under this model, Hong Fook is able to work creatively to apply different subsidy amounts responding to each situation. In this way Hong Fook has been able to house a greater number of tenants than the minimum set by the Ministry.

- **Successes:**

- 35% of Hong Fook's clients are families which is much higher than other supportive housing agencies. By housing families together, overall housing costs are cheaper than people living on their own in separate units.
- Moving tenants into non-profit municipal housing when possible. If a tenant moves into RGI housing, Hong Fook will continue to provide the supports to that client and transfer the rent supplement to a new tenant requiring culturally specific supportive housing.

- **Challenges:**

- Market rents go up every year. It is especially challenging when landlords are approved to raise rent above the

Rent Increase Guideline when they have done repairs or renovations. Hong Fook mitigates this risk by budgeting for rent increases beyond the standard amount each year.

- Tenants who have needed a lower subsidy for a unit may have to work with less if they wish to move in the future. Whether there is additional subsidy available for tenants to move may change from year to year. If a tenant wants to move Hong Fook will let the tenant know what their rent subsidy budget is and try to work with the tenant to find a new unit, however the portability of the rent supplement is a challenge when working with the reduced amount.

- **Use head lease model to maintain lease terms.** Hong Fook signs the lease agreement with each landlord, and each tenant signs a separate sublease with Hong Fook. Although the headlease involves some financial liability for the agency, the benefit is that they can hold onto the lease with the same rent and same terms when tenants move in and out. The challenge in this model is that it gives tenants somewhat less choice of rental units, and the agency has to move quickly to find a new tenant for a vacant unit. Hong Fook has managed to avoid such issues, in part because units where they hold leases are often in desirable neighbourhoods for the communities they serve.

Support

Providing culturally responsive ongoing support.

Each tenant at Hong Fook is connected to a case manager. Case managers are assigned to tenants who share the same culture and speak the same language. Hong Fook specializes in culturally specific support from their case managers, community events and mutual support building.

Below are some of the key learnings from Hong Fook on providing culturally responsive support:

- **Assign clients to case managers from outside of the housing program.** In cultural specific supportive housing programs there are a lot of factors to consider when assigning clients to staff. Matching staff to clients who share the same culture and speak the same language is the top priority at Hong Fook. Other factors to consider include geographic distance between clients and allowing room for change in who is working together. With all of these factors at play, Hong Fook has found success in assigning case managers 1-2 tenants from the supportive housing program and the rest from their general case management services. This approach allows Hong Fook to match clients to workers from the same culture, limits travel time for home visits and allows flexibility for who staff are working with and for how long.
- **Family reunification.** For many of the clients at Hong Fook, family relationships are an important part of their well-being and recovery. Hong Fook understands this

and assists tenants to connect with family members where relationships may have broken down. Some of the tenants have left the supportive housing program after they have reconnected with their families.

- **Facilitate mutual supports between clients.** Hong Fook lays the groundwork for clients to connect with one another through events and informally introducing tenants to each other. One way they do this is through neighbourhood support groups. Tenants who live in the same neighbourhood come together for facilitated group sessions where many of them also make personal connections with neighbours from the same cultural background who are also clients of Hong Fook.
- **Tenants remain connected to a case manager throughout their tenancy.** Hong Fook tenants are always connected to a case manager. Although intensity of supports may change over time, each tenant will always have a point person who they are connected to. This works for Hong Fook because they are able to provide flexible supports but tenants always know who to contact within the organization and Hong Fook is able to quickly respond.

Partnerships

Hong Fook functions with a variety of partnerships including with landlords, primary care and other service providers. A distinctive partnership that they have is with family members of their tenants. Hong Fook

understands the importance of family in many Asian cultures and to many of the clients that they serve. Upon intake, if clients identify that they would like Hong Fook to include their family members in the services they receive, they sign a consent form allowing Hong Fook staff to be in contact with their family. The work Hong Fook does with families includes case management, education about mental illness and mental health promotion, as well as informal dispute resolution and family reunification.

Replication and Advice

- Assess risk when deciding how many units to take on. Costs change year to year.
- When working under a head lease model, find landlords who are compatible with the organization's approach to housing. Some landlords have refused to communicate with the tenants because the lease agreement is with the organization, not the client. Hong Fook will avoid entering into agreements with landlords who do not share the same value of tenant autonomy.
- Use head lease agreements to hold on to lease terms for multiple years.
- Provide supports at the right time and place. For those who are not suitable for the housing program, provide case management and assist them to find the appropriate referral.
- Provide flexible support - always connected but pull back and step in as needed.

Outcomes

Hong Fook uses a variety of methods for tracking the outcomes of their supportive housing program including tenant satisfaction, whether clients are reaching their desired goals and through data indicators provided to the LHINs annually.

In order to track tenant satisfaction, Hong Fook uses the Ontario Perception of Care (OPOC) tool which examines the client's experiences related to their expectations of service. OCANs (Ontario Common Assessment of Need) are used to service plan with the clients and track progress overtime. Hong Fook also has a list of data indicators that they provide to the LHINs related to housing stability, such as the use of hospital beds, emergency room visits and development of Coordinated Care Plan.

Shared Resources

- Communication Booklet

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Outcomes from OPOC:

- 85% of tenants agreed with the statement "The services I have received have helped me deal more effectively with my life's challenges"
- 86% of tenants agreed with "I think the services provided here are of high quality"

