

Houselink Steps to Support

Case Study #

6

Promising Practice

- Determining resident needs and getting the right services for the people you support.
- Supporting tenants with mental health and addictions issues in municipal housing using a supportive housing model and a partnership.

Background

Houselink is a supportive housing provider with a 40 year history of providing permanent, affordable and supportive housing to people with mental health and addiction issues. In 2013 they partnered with Toronto Community Housing (TCH) to provide on-site supports to tenants in 2 TCH buildings that were identified as having many tenants with complex health problems including mental health and addictions issues. The context included rising needs in several TCH buildings, and more TCH-LHIN collaboration to help meet such needs. This particular partnership formed the “Steps to Support” program.

Population Served

Steps to Support offers voluntary supports to tenants in two TCH buildings who self-identify as having mental health and addiction issues.

Housing

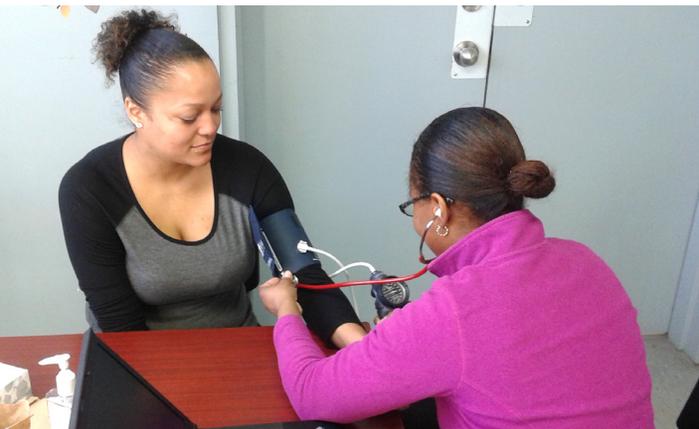
Toronto Community Housing (TCH) is the landlord and responsible for the safety and maintenance of the building. The buildings house tenants in rent geared to income units who have come through the general Housing Connections waitlist and are protected by the Residential Tenancies Act. Rising numbers of applicants and tenants have significant support needs, often undiagnosed. As TCH carries out its normal property management and tenant services functions, its staff are able to identify tenants who may need further support. They can connect them to the Steps staff, who can in turn provide supports to those tenants around issues that may affect their housing. For example, if a tenant is having issues with clutter/hoarding or rent arrears, TCH can encourage the tenant to connect with Steps staff to work with them on these issues.



Support

Determining resident needs and getting the right services for the people you support.

The Steps program consists of 5 Mental Health Supported Housing Workers, 1 Recovery Worker and 1 Coordinator, with capacity to support about 100 people. The main purpose of this program is to support TCH tenants to maintain successful tenancies despite all of the limitations and barriers they may experience. The main supports provided are eviction prevention services, informal counseling, referral services, recreation and community development.



In order to determine support needs of tenants in the two buildings Houselink conducted a needs assessment in partnership with Fred Victor, a non-profit also providing supports in the buildings, and the Centre for Urban Health Solutions a research centre with a focus on improving health in cities, particularly for those experiencing marginalization. Conducting needs assessments identifies what services your tenants are already utilizing and where the service gaps are. In addition, the process of administering the needs assessment works as a community engagement tool.

Below are some key learnings from the Steps needs assessment:

- **Assess roles needed to complete and project and whether partnerships are necessary.** Houselink was working with Fred Victor (another support provider) to support tenants in partnership with TCH. They utilized in house staff to coordinate the project, hired peer interviewers, and partnered with the Centre for Urban Health Solutions to collaborate on designing the research instrument, data analysis and final write up.

Steps to Conducting a Needs Assessment:

- Determine work roles and develop partnerships if needed
- Design a research instrument
- Recruit participants
- Interview service users
- Analyze data
- Write up findings
- Use findings for service planning

- **Design the research instrument.** Determine what areas of service your tenants may require or may be already accessing. For Steps, the partners collaborated to develop a tenant questionnaire with 8 domains of service needs. The questionnaire was based on the Ontario Common Assessment of Need (OCAN) tool, so that findings could be related back to other agency data, but was modified to include questions about tenant capacity, service needs, services already utilized, to further guide development of the Steps program.

- **Recruiting participants.** Create realistic targets for the number of service users you interview. If the program serves a large number of tenants - aim to interview at least 30%. Research recruitment can often be challenging, particularly when potential participants have unmet health challenges. The Steps team was proactive in sharing information about the project with tenants in the front lobby of the buildings, and had interviewers available to conduct on the spot interviews (tenants were taken to a private office). Tenants were also provided with gift cards to a nearby grocery store as a thank you for their time.
- **Building connections in interviews.** Hiring peer interviewers who identified as having a mental health issue was a critical success factor. They were able to establish a quicker rapport with residents and had knowledge and lived experience in the subject area that helped them explore people's issues more deeply.
- **Plan response to support needs raised in interview.** Be prepared that when engaging tenants about their support needs that some tenants may raise issues for which they need immediate support. Each participant was also provided with background information about the project including a FAQ sheet and a consent form. They were also provided with a resource guide of services available in their community. If a serious issue was raised during the interview, interviewers were trained to bring this to the attention of the project coordinator who had a background as a supportive housing worker.

Advice from Steps on conducting a Needs Assessment:

- Consider whether ethics approval is needed (particularly when partnering with an academic institution) and the additional time and training that may be necessary.
 - Plan who the data and findings will be shared with at the onset
 - Ideally analyze the data collaboratively with people familiar with the community.
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- **Analyze the data.** Have a framework for reviewing the data once the interviews are completed. Having a team available to review the data to look for common themes helped spread the workload and gather different perspectives on the same information.
 - **Write up findings.** Document the project and findings in one place in order to share information between partners and to reference when service planning.
 - **Use findings for service planning.** Once the needs assessment is complete you can identify what services are already in the building and coordinate efficiently. You can also identify where the high service needs are, where the gaps in services are and strategize how to fill those gaps. (See shared resources for needs assessment tool and accompanying documents.)

Partnerships

Supporting tenants with mental health and addictions issues in municipal housing using a supportive housing model and a partnership.

Both Toronto Community Housing and Houselink Community Homes have long histories of providing non-profit housing to low income tenants across the city. Partnering with Houselink allows TCH to focus on being a landlord while Houselink focuses on responding to the service needs of the tenants. Leveraging each partners' strengths has improved the overall safety and security of the building and has improved the health and well-being of many of the tenants.

Below are key factors to leveraging strengths in similar partnerships:

- **Voluntary supports.** A main difference between this partnership and a typical supportive housing program is that participation is voluntary because tenants did not initially choose to move into a supportive housing arrangement. At Steps, tenants are able to opt in and out of supports, providing flexibility for tenants should they want support to address a short-term need or if they have more ongoing issues that they would require greater support with.
- **Tenant engagement.** In order to engage with tenants, staff have found it most effective to have an open community space with drop in hours and programming such as a community meal, staff onsite with regular office hours available for walk in meetings, and participating in already standing events including building meetings.

- **Coordination with housing staff.** TCH has Community Service Coordinators and Tenancy Service Coordinators who work with tenants on issues related to housing (arrear, safety and maintenance etc.). Steps staff have built a relationship with them through face to face contacts and inviting them to participate in their team meetings. Through this direct contact TCH staff are able to alert Steps staff to issues related to mental health, addictions or other issues where the tenant may benefit from contact with support staff.



The program started off by talking about stabilizing buildings but buildings are composed of individuals. The more you work with the individual the better understanding you have of the demographics. You get to know the particular issues, and what their struggles are and a lot of them are complex."

Support Services Manager

Replication and Advice

- Establish clear partner roles and expected outcomes from the beginning
- Need to have external resources available to refer tenants to. Not all support needs will be in the scope of the support program.
- Need to have high rises or a cluster of buildings with enough tenants that would access the program. Because supports are voluntary and tenants are able to opt in and out of supports, having a density of service users in the area ensures levels of participation in the program that will regularly be high enough to warrant having support staff on site.

Outcomes

The buildings involved in the Steps program have seen an increase in safety and security and decreased use of emergency services.

The tenants of the building have seen improved health outcomes. With deliberate planning, Steps staff are able to coordinate services effectively knowing which service providers were already in the buildings, bringing in services where there were gaps and improving tenancy outcomes through arrears follow up and other eviction prevention activities.

Needs Assessment Tools

- Needs Assessment Tools:
 - interview guide
 - flyer
 - consent form
 - FAQ sheet
 - resource list
 - honourarium and consent tracker

Contact:

Jaipreet Kohli
Support Services Manager
Houselink Community Homes
Tel: 416-516-1422 x225
Email: jaipreetko@houselink.on.ca

