

Housing First for Women & Families

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Introduction

West Central Women's Resource Centre exists to empower women to help themselves, their families and their community to safer, healthier lifestyles. Our home is the diverse West Central neighbourhood of Winnipeg.

Our shared vision is for a healthy, sustainable, equitable, just and peaceful community where women's knowledge and experience is valued and respected. Our vision includes women having hope and strength while living out equal social, economic and political rights.

Introduction

We work toward achieving our vision using a Women Centered Approach, informed by the lived experience of the diverse women in our community. We also use the following to guide our work, words and actions:

Empowerment Framework - A capacity building framework with 4 stages of empowerment (breaking social isolation, networking, awareness, action).

Inclusion Framework - We value and celebrate our community's rich diversity of identities and perspectives. We strive to foster a culture of belonging and work to advance equity within the centre and the wider community. We use of a Trans-inclusive definition of women.

Harm Reduction - Taking steps to reduce harm in people's lives by valuing where they are and helping them move to a place of less harm.

Multi-level Approach - Working simultaneously in many spheres (the individual, family, community and systemic).

Community Economic Development - Supporting local goods, services, investment, employment, decision making and skill building while promoting neighbourhood sustainability, human dignity and the environment.

WCWRC's Housing Context

- ▶ Centre created through a women's community housing and income project.
- ▶ Consistent focus on multi-level work - women-centred program delivery, community organizing and communication towards system change.
- ▶ Involvement in local networks: Winnipeg Rental Network, Right to Housing, Make Poverty History Manitoba.

Homelessness Partnering Strategy: Definitions and Community Priorities

- ▶ HPS definition of homelessness: not specifically excluding OR including gender based experiences. Leaves it up to communities to develop priorities. (emphasis added)

The target population for the Housing First approach under the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) is individuals who are chronically and episodically homeless. HPS has defined these populations as follows:

Chronically homeless refers to individuals, often with disabling conditions (e.g. chronic physical or mental illness, substance abuse problems), who are currently homeless and have been homeless for six months or more in the past year (i.e., have spent more than 180 cumulative *nights in a shelter or place not fit for human habitation*);

Episodically homeless refers to individuals, often with disabling conditions, who are currently homeless and have experienced three or more episodes of homelessness in the past year (of note, episodes are defined as periods when a person would be *in a shelter or place not fit for human habitation, and after at least 30 days, would be back in the shelter or inhabitable location*)

Homelessness Partnering Strategy: Definitions and Community Priorities

Winnipeg's Community Priorities 2014-2019:

- ▶ Chronically and Episodically homeless individuals
- ▶ Youth
- ▶ Aboriginal people

Women's unique experiences of homelessness are not mentioned in the Community Priority document.

Homelessness Partnering Strategy: Definitions and Community Priorities

Challenges

- ▶ Local interpretation of HPS direction: hard to find out where the locus of decision is.
- ▶ Staggered staff hiring: resource intensive, challenges in creating team-oriented relationships
- ▶ High caseloads, high crisis dynamics in start-up caseload
- ▶ Resistance to funding supportive housing

Moving Forward

- ▶ Close relationships with funders and community decision-making bodies
- ▶ Negotiate caseloads and intake plans to anticipate pinch points.
- ▶ Broaden discussion of supportive housing beyond rigid program models.

Housing First Intake & Screening

Challenges

- ▶ Winnipeg's context: centralized vs. coordinated intake
- ▶ Need for gendered outreach strategy.
- ▶ Need for strong relationships with community agencies doing gender-based work to support the intake process. Disclosure is limited in the SPDAT.
- ▶ VI-SPDAT not gender responsive.
 - ▶ Questions are system-focused, so they leave out experiences that aren't served by the system. Eg. number of interactions with police, emergency services
 - ▶ Dramatic under-reporting of risks experienced. Eg. Mothers, women who need toughness to survive

Moving Forward

- ▶ Participate in developing a truly coordinated model. We're all moving toward the same goal.
- ▶ Offered to develop a gender-based outreach strategy including organizations we know work with women experiencing homelessness
- ▶ Coordinated intake body has taken feedback and adjusted questions.

Individual Support

Challenges

- ▶ Risk from abusive relationships increases immediately following housing.
- ▶ Challenging to simultaneously support the family and each individual in it.
- ▶ Families with babies and young children are juggling a lot, more difficult to connect.
- ▶ Resources for families are inconsistent. HPS Housing First hasn't fully adapted to family needs.
- ▶ Different age groups look for different types of support.

Moving Forward

- ▶ Safety planning!
- ▶ Support each adult in a couple with a different caseworker if necessary.
- ▶ Cultivate new circles of support based on changing circumstances
- ▶ Share resource gaps with funders
- ▶ Be patient!

Social Systems: Gendered Paths to Homelessness

- ▶ Intersection with Child Welfare system. Families live in fear of apprehension due to risks inherent in their situations. Child apprehensions can either cause or complicate homelessness.
- ▶ Gender-based violence.
- ▶ Family conflict.
- ▶ Intersectionality: Intersectionality provides a framework for understanding that aspects of social identities (including race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, etc.) are not exclusive but in fact overlap and produce specific experiences of discrimination and oppression.

Gender-Based Strategy to End Homelessness in Winnipeg

Vision: Winnipeg will prevent homelessness for women, trans, two-spirit and gender non-conforming individuals by closing system gaps that create gendered paths to homelessness.

Mission: The Steering Committee will develop a Gender-Based Strategy to End Homelessness in the City of Winnipeg based on community consultation and research. It will propose a body to promote its implementation to the City of Winnipeg and the systems which impact paths to homelessness.

Structure:

- ▶ Steering Committee
- ▶ First Voice Advisory Committee
- ▶ Research

To be launched in 2019.

Discussion

- ▶ What challenges have you seen in relation to your table topic?
- ▶ What solutions or promising practices have you used to create more gender inclusive services?
- ▶ Present back to larger group.