

# Developing a Housing Placement Toolkit for Housing First

## Project Report

---

Submitted by Michelle Ninow of M. Ninow Consulting

### Introduction

The Housing Placement Toolkit for Housing First programs in the Metro Vancouver Region was developed as a resource for Housing First workers (program managers, case managers, housing navigators, and peer support workers) to share techniques, promising practices and information. The toolkit has been designed in consultation with Housing First workers and provides the content that they have identified as being helpful for their work.

The Housing First field of practice is currently going through a stage of rapid growth and development as it is being more widely implemented in Metro Vancouver. The Toolkit is current as of publishing, but it would benefit from regular review and updating. Also, continuing to incorporate input from Housing First workers on what they would find useful use in the Toolkit will help keep it relevant.

During the course of doing research for the Toolkit, Housing First workers raised a series of issues related to their work that is beyond the scope of the Toolkit. Those issues are presented in this report, along with a series of recommendations related to housing placement for Housing First. These issues and recommendations are intended to inform, in part, the development of a Housing Placement for Housing First Strategy for the Metro Vancouver Region.

### Methodology

Research and information for the Housing Placement Toolkit was collected through the following methods:

- A series of focus groups and in person interviews with 30 staff members from organizations in Metro Vancouver which are providing Housing First services ;
- A series of interviews (in person, telephone and email enquiries) with government and nongovernment service agencies; and,
- Online research

A list of the focus groups and the organizations involved is included in Appendix 1. The consultation questions are found in Appendix 2.

## Emerging Issues and Recommendations

The following issues were identified by Housing First workers during the project. They are the types of issues that cannot be addressed in a Toolkit. They need further investigation, perhaps a commitment of resources and a broader organizational involvement in the solutions. Some are best addressed at the regional level. Some are not new issues but they are listed here because Housing First workers emphasize that they remain barriers to achieving successful housing placement for Housing First initiatives in Metro Vancouver. A synopsis of the consultation input is in Appendix 3.

### Issue: Implementing the Core Principles of Housing First

- When asked which Housing First principles are most challenging to implement, Housing First workers responded that *Rapid Rehousing* and *Client Choice* are the most difficult to achieve. While rehousing is not impossible, as clients are still being housed, it is taking an increasing amount of time and effort to secure units. Client choice is very limited. Unlike the ideal Housing First program model where a Housing First worker is able to offer a client options of housing units to choose from, the reality in Metro Vancouver is that Housing First workers are searching hard to find one workable housing option for their client. Ideal locations for clients are often not available due to the lack of affordable rentals in those areas.

Housing First workers say that they need to manage their client's expectations. They speak about having to work with them to accept a shared accommodation or a unit in another community. Some Housing First workers report that the only way they are achieving any client choice is by involving the client as much as possible in the rental process – from searching for units to meeting with landlords and signing the rental agreement.

- Another Housing First principle that some Housing First workers struggle with is *Integrating Housing into the Community*. A few Housing First workers, especially those newer to the job, who participated in the consultation for this project report feeling conflicted about placing clients they perceive as potentially violent or unpredictable in to private market housing. They are concerned that the client may still be using substances heavily and/or displaying violent tendencies. Accessibility to mental health and addictions services in some municipalities remains difficult and ACT teams often have waitlists. Supportive housing options can also be limited. The Housing First workers are concerned that placing a high acuity tenant in an apartment building may endanger other residents of the building. This concern maybe an indication that more training may be required in identifying and preparing for risk with clients. It may also indicate a broader need for the organization to adopt protocols and procedures for working with higher risk clients.

### Issue: Finding Housing

- In a 2014 Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives article entitled “**Can a Housing First Initiative Work?**” the authors Evelyn Peters and Matt Stock, make the point that it is difficult for Housing First programs to achieve their full potential without an adequate number of low cost rental units on the

market. It limits the client's choice of location and type of unit and clients often spend over 30% of their income on housing. It often requires more accommodation sharing as well which can be challenging. Housing First workers in Metro Vancouver confirmed these findings in the focus group sessions. There is often little choice, clients do end up regularly paying more than 30% of their income and accommodation sharing is common.

- Housing First workers report that it is very difficult to find housing that is affordable for a homeless person who is considered “employable” by the Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation (MSDSI). An “employable” client will typically receive income assistance and shelter allowance equalling \$610 a month. This level of assistance is not adequate to secure even simple types of housing such as an Single Occupancy Room (SRO) accommodation in the Downtown Eastside, which can be as much as \$450 - \$600 a month. While Homeless Outreach Program (HOP) and Homeless Prevention Program (HPP) rent subsidies and Emergency Housing Funds (EHF) may assist the client for the short term, if there is no additional long term rent support the client will not be able to remain housed when the subsidies end. Housing First workers report that single “employable” people are one of the most difficult to house because their financial resources are so limited.
- Some of the Housing First workers report that they have used the maximum number of HOP subsidies allotted to their organization. Not having access to additional HOP rent subsidies limits the resources they can offer their Housing First clients.
- Some Housing First workers need more clarity about HPP and HOP rent subsidies and how long they can be accessed for a client and if they can be transferred between clients. There seems to be disagreement between service providers about this point. Some Housing First organizations seemed to have more flexible agreements with BC Housing about how HOP and HPP rent subsidies are used. For example, some Housing First workers mentioned being able to transfer unused subsidies from one client to another who needed a longer subsidy, but not all workers reported being able to do this.
- Housing First workers expressed frustration about their attempts to find permanent supportive housing for their clients. Much of the supportive housing stock in the region is now accessed through the Supportive Housing Registry, which is operated by BC Housing. Housing First workers report long waits for their clients, even for those who are highly vulnerable. Workers report that they will register a client for supportive housing but because they know the wait can be long, they will find their clients housing in the private rental market while they are waiting.
- Housing First workers are also finding social housing (BC Housing) access for their clients quite limited with wait times being long and unpredictable. Again they will encourage their clients to apply for social housing but they will also move ahead and find private market rental housing.

**Issue: Length of subsidies**

- Several Housing First workers emphasized that they need a longer amount of time to stabilize some clients than the housing subsidies are allowing (EHF, HPP, and HOP). They say that while one year can be enough for some clients, 2 years would be much more effective, especially in terms of high acuity clients. Housing First workers also had differing understanding about how long they could access EHF, HOP and HPP for their clients. The time limits they mentioned ranged from 2 months to 2 years. It was unclear whether this variation reflects how various organizations are choosing to implement their programs or if it had more to do with individual agreements with subsidy programs.

**Issue: Variable Access to the Ministry for Social Development and Social Innovation (MSDSI)**

- Housing First workers described a range of experiences in their interactions with MSDSI. Some reported waiting on the phone for hours to be connected with an income assistance worker and spending hours in lines at Ministry offices tracking down information and making sure requests for clients were being followed through. Others, who had a liaison in the Ministry office, had a much different experience, waits were shorter and problems were resolved much more quickly. It would be beneficial to seek Ministry office liaisons for every Housing First program in the region to help make working with the Ministry more efficient.

Positive changes are currently being implemented in Vancouver and Surrey with two dedicated Ministry outreach teams providing a more integrated approach which involves Ministry workers meeting directly with clients in service provider offices in the community.

**Issue: Limited Coordination of Housing First on a Regional Level**

- Housing First workers talked about the challenges of finding housing for a client outside of the community where the Housing First organization is located and where the client has lived. This happens when affordable and suitable accommodation can only be found outside of the home community. In these cases Housing First workers may try to help clients attach to services in their new communities, but sometimes clients wish to travel back to their former community for service. This can be difficult because of transportation costs and the time required for moving around the region. It is also time consuming for Housing First workers who have to travel to the new community to meet with their client. According to Housing First workers attempts to connect clients to Housing First programs in their new communities have not often been successful.

**Issue: Access to Services**

- Mental health and addictions services remain challenging for clients to access in most municipalities in the region. These services are not offered in a community-based approach, in fact they seem to be gated when Housing First workers attempt to help their clients get connected to resources. Application processes do not address client barriers and often mental health support cannot be accessed before addictions are addressed. ACT teams are often fully subscribed in the communities

where it is available. These challenges are not specifically housing placement issues but they have an impact on clients' housing stability.

Housing First workers also indicated that they would like more information about how to navigate the detox and treatment system in the region.

- In some communities there is a sense that service providers (government and non-profit) are not all committed in the same way to Housing First clients – there is no collective sense of responsibility or shared goals. The Housing First workers report feeling isolated in their communities in their support for the client. Lack of community capacity and collaboration among organizations was identified as threat to the successful implementation of the Housing First model in the Metro Vancouver Region in a recent evaluation of the approach, “Evaluating the Housing First Approach in the Metro Vancouver Region” (2017). The authors write “In order for Housing First providers to offer ICM (Intensive Case Management), opportunities to build relationships with other providers and organizations is needed, though these cross-sector collaborations receive limited support”.

### **Issue: Flexible Funding**

- Organizations need a pool of short-term funds for emergencies such as immediate damage deposits and first month's rent when the Ministry gets delayed in issuing cheques. In a tight rental market where competition is high, being able to offer the damage deposit and first month's rent to the landlord as quickly as possible will help Housing First workers secure units for their clients.

### **Recommendations**

The recommendations that follow have been developed in response to the issues raised earlier in this report. They are informed by input from local Housing First workers and interview informants and also by Housing First research and literature. It is anticipated that these recommendations will be taken into consideration by the Metro Vancouver Community Entity during the process of developing the Housing Placement for Housing First Strategy.

- Explore landlord incentive options; Housing First clients are at a competitive disadvantage when it comes to accessing private market rentals. They have, what some in the Housing First sector call, a lack of “renter capital” (no references, poor credit rating, unaddressed mental illness, heavy substance use). In order to address this lack of “renter capital” for Housing First clients it may be helpful to offer financial incentives to landlords such as property tax relief, higher damage deposits, more than one month's rent upfront, and landlord bonuses. These incentives have been used in some US jurisdictions and perhaps some of them are suitable for the Metro Vancouver region. It would be important to determine what kind of actual consequence each incentive would have and if they would in fact help Housing First clients access housing in the private rental market more competitively. More research is needed in this area.
- Seek to learn from lived experience and conduct focus groups and interviews with Housing First clients to get their input on the Housing First approach. It would be helpful to know how they managed the transition from homelessness, what challenges they faced in attaining housing stability

and how experiences vary for different subpopulations such as youth, women, seniors and indigenous participants in Metro Vancouver.

- Explore the ability to use HPS funds to help clients prepare for the housing search and meetings with the landlord. Housing First workers report that they would like to help clients prepare more for meetings with landlords. They would like to supply a set of clothing and shoes to clients and a haircut, if needed. Especially those working with youth, who face additional barriers to renting housing. Currently HPS funding does not have a provision for this expenditure. Some organizations have showers and washers and dryers and access to donated clothing, but not all organizations have these in-house resources.
- Develop more knowledge and expertise in the area of risk management identification, understanding and mitigation for high acuity clients and encourage organizations which are conducting Housing First programs to develop protocols and procedures to provide clear guidance to staff in their work. Consider developing template policies, protocols and procedures for risk management. More local research is needed in this area. The following DESC presentation provides some helpful direction for risk management protocols for Housing First.  
<http://wliha.org/sites/default/files/C5%202012-05%20WLIHA%20Yakima.Managing%20Community%20Risk%20of%20Violence.Jensen.pdf>
- Given the lack of affordability of housing in the region, rooming houses (licensed and unlicensed) are often one of the few viable options for a Housing First worker when seeking to house a client. It would be helpful to develop a better understanding of rooming houses in Metro Vancouver. Housing First workers report that rooming houses have varying standards throughout the region. Also, municipal governments in the region have a range of approaches to licensing and recognizing rooming houses. Usually, unless they cause issues in the neighbourhood they are left to operate, even if they are not licensed.

It would be helpful to investigate further the role of rooming houses in the spectrum of housing options available to Housing First clients in Metro Vancouver. The purpose of such research would be to understand the issues associated with rooming houses, the value of this type of housing in the housing spectrum and how to help ensure that rooming houses are safe for tenants. Possible outcomes of such research could be the development of minimum standards for rooming houses and standardized information about rooming houses in the region.

Examples:

Minimum standards for rooming houses: <https://www.consumer.vic.gov.au/minimumstandards>

Making existing information about rooming houses easy to understand for landlords, Housing workers and clients:

<http://www.housingworkers.ca/rent/RENTresources/docs/Rooming%20House%20FAQs.pdf>

[http://www.housingworkers.ca/rent/RENTresources/2015/Rooming\\_House\\_QA.pdf](http://www.housingworkers.ca/rent/RENTresources/2015/Rooming_House_QA.pdf)

Recent Research on Rooming Houses:

Derksen, J. (2016). Rooming Houses in Halifax: Issues, Opportunities and Policies, Interview Summary Report. *Community Partners in the Neighbourhood Change Research Partnership: Halifax.*

Retrieved from: <http://homelesshub.ca/resource/rooming-houses-halifax-issues-opportunities-and-policies-interview-summary-report>

Freeman, L. (2014). Toronto's suburban rooming houses: just a spin on a downtown "problem"?. *Wellesley Institute*. Retrieved from <http://www.wellesleyinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Suburban-Rooming-Houses-FINAL-Sept-24.pdf>

- Explore the concept and the usefulness of region-wide protocols between Housing First organizations for clients who move to new communities when they are housed. This could assist clients to become connected to the local Housing First organization and to local services in their new community, and, as a result, sustain their housing more successfully.
- Explore options for Housing First organizations to create a pool of flexible funds to be used to meet immediate needs, such as damage deposits and rent cheques that are delayed by the Ministry. This pool of funds would help Housing First workers secure rentals in a highly competitive market and reduce some of the barriers to housing for clients. It would also be helpful if an organization wanted to procure some units in advance. Such a pool of funds would be ideally managed by a regional organization such as VanCity or the Metro Vancouver Community Entity.
- Continue to call for more for more affordable housing options and pilot projects for Housing First clients in Metro Vancouver, including micro units, shipping container housing and other alternate forms of housing.
- Investigate opportunities to gain access to rent subsidies and support which are not typically available to Housing First workers for their clients, such as Supported Independent Living (SIL) subsidies. For example, in Surrey some Fraser Health SIL subsidies are now being accessed through the Housing First process.
- Consider a regional promotion campaign for Housing First with Landlord Associations to help raise landlord awareness of the program and the potential benefits. Such a promotional campaign could also be used in the government and nongovernment service sector to build knowledge and support for the Housing First approach.
- Support the development of an online forum for Metro Vancouver Housing First workers to share ideas and collaborate on problem solving. Housing First workers that participated in this project talked about their interest in other Housing First programs in the region. They said that workshops and meetings for sharing and learning with other front line staff would be helpful.
- Identify and/or provide opportunities for Housing First workers to access education and training. Housing First workers have built their expertise through on the job experience but many would welcome the opportunity for more formal training and skills building. Potential focus areas include learning about trauma informed practice, cultural safety, how to work with seniors who are homeless, new protocols for the opioid crisis, how to work more effectively with BC Housing and MSDSI, and how to teach financial planning.

## Appendix 1: Consultation Details

The following four focus groups, involving 25 participants, were held as indicated in the table below.

Focus Group	Organizations represented	Location	Date
Surrey Projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Surrey Collaborative (E. Fry Society, Sources Community Resources, Options, Lookout Emergency Aid Society)</li> <li>RainCity Housing</li> </ul>	Sources Office - 102-13771 72A Ave Surrey	February 23, 2017
Youth Projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>RainCity Housing, Hollyburn Family Services</li> <li>Pacific Community Resource Society, Aunt Leah's</li> </ul>	Metro Vancouver Offices – 5945 Kathleen Avenue	March 15, 2017
Vancouver & North Shore Projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>John Howard Society</li> <li>DTES Women's Centre</li> <li>Hollyburn Family Services</li> </ul>	Vancouver Public Library – Main Branch	March 23, 2017
Burnaby & New Westminster Projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Progressive Housing</li> <li>Lookout Emergency Aid Society</li> </ul>	Lookout Emergency Aid Society -	March 24, 2017

Individual in-person interviews with 5 participants were also conducted with the following organizations:

- Langley Starting Point, Stepping Stones, Langley
- A Key of Her Own, Elizabeth Fry Society, New Westminister
- MPA Society, Homeless Outreach, Vancouver

Interviews and email enquiries were conducted, to collect relevant information, with:

- Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation
- BC Housing
- Greater Vancouver Shelter Strategy
- Lu'ma Native Housing
- Family Services of Greater Vancouver
- Municipal Planning Departments in Surrey, Vancouver, and Coquitlam
- Tenant Resource and Advisory Centre
- Vancouver Aboriginal Transformative Justice Services Society



## **Appendix 2: Focus Group Questions**

### **Housing Placement for Housing First**

#### **Focus Group Questions**

1. Which of the 6 core principles of Housing First (see page 2) have you had the most success implementing and which have been the most challenging?
2. What kinds of issues do you face when assisting your Housing First clients to find housing?
3. How have you learned to do housing placement? What types of skills are important for this work?
4. How are you managing to house clients given the current affordability crisis in the region?
5. Do you have any specific techniques for working with landlords that you find particularly helpful for securing housing for Housing First clients?
6. Do you have staff members in your organization that focus solely on landlord recruitment and housing placement vs outreach work or case management?
7. Do you have formal agreements with landlords (to rent to your clients when they have availability) or are the relationships more informal?
8. Are your staff members able to connect clients with adequate support services to ensure housing stability? If no, what are the main issues?
9. Do you have any ideas for improving housing placement? What could make your job easier?
10. What would you and your staff find helpful in a housing placement Toolkit? Content & Style?

## **Appendix 3: Synopsis of Consultation Input**

Housing First workers provided the following input about housing placement for Housing First in Metro Vancouver through interviews and a focus group. The input is organized according to the questions that were used for the consultation and is presented in a high level synopsis format. Detailed comments are not provided to protect participants' identities.

### **Core Housing First principles that are easiest to implement:**

- Separating housing provision from other services
- Integrating housing into the community (for some workers but not all)

### **Core Housing First principles that are hardest to implement:**

- Rapid Rehousing
- Client choice
- Integrating housing into the community (some disagreement on this point)
- Accessing service supports beyond what the Housing First worker can provide

### **Issues associated with assisting Housing First clients to find housing:**

- Very little housing that is affordable in the region even with rent subsidies
- Limited shelter allowance of \$375 for people who are deemed "employable" by MSDSI (\$610 total with income assistance) – very difficult to find affordable housing for this amount
- High level of competition for a limited number of private market rentals
- Supportive housing and social housing challenging to access due to long BC Housing waitlists
- Supportive Housing is limited outside of Vancouver
- Landlord discrimination - based on race and culture, mental health issues, addictions, sexual orientation, income source, and age
- The stigma of homelessness
- Access to mental health and addictions services challenging in some communities
- HOP and HPP subsidies limited in number and length
- Client literacy
- Few landlords accept clients who have pets
- Credit checks and criminal/court record checks
- Shared accommodations are often for women only
- Transition from street homelessness to living indoors can be very difficult for clients
- Low "renter capital" – no references, no credit or bad credit, not enough income, no ID
- Clients have no clean clothes or shoes and limited access to showers
- Some clients are not sober for meetings with landlords or they miss landlord meetings
- Client anxiety about becoming a tenant

### **Housing First workers learn to do housing placement work:**

- On the job experience the best

- Learn from other Housing First workers
- Training helpful - Lookout webinars, Ready to Rent training, and TRAC training and workshops

**Skills that are important for housing placement work:**

- Learn to stay positive
- Focus on client strengths
- How to work with and understand landlords and clients
- Persistence
- Knowledge or services in the community
- Tenancy law and process
- Understanding senior's issues
- Financial planning
- Bed bug awareness
- How to recognize hoarding
- How to deal with landlords who discriminate – how to educate them in a non-confrontational way

**Housing clients despite the affordability crisis:**

- Shared accommodation
- Rooming houses
- The service organization purchases or lease houses and then rent to clients
- Internal housing
- Community Living BC home shares
- Single room occupancy (SRO) hotel rooms
- With rent subsidies only
- Agreement with a social housing provider for some bridge units

**Useful techniques for working with landlords:**

- Get to know building managers (SROs, apartment buildings, social housing)
- Parents can rent and sublet to their child (for youth)
- Housing First workers make themselves available and responsive to the landlord
- Constant communication
- Saying thank you often
- Emphasize the support provided to the client and guaranteed rent
- Be personable
- Speak the landlord's language and have cultural connections and understanding
- Broad based landlord engagement does not work – it needs to happen on an individual basis
- Pay attention to the landlord/client fit
- Understand that the landlord is running a business – be solutions oriented
- Deal with problems away from the property where they are occurring

**Separating housing placement work from case management work:**

- It works better when the Housing First worker does both – they understand what the client and the landlord needs
- It also means the client does not have to retell their story, which can be traumatizing
- Some staff are better at one than the other but we all do both
- Some workers do feel that it would be nice to have someone just doing housing procurement – but this is not possible due to staffing levels

**Developing formal agreements with landlords:**

- Mostly informal
- Don't want to get locked into something that does not work – uncertain of formal agreements
- A formal agreement for bridge units – for a few organizations
- Only in our own buildings
- Third party agreements for men who are still on warrant
- Starting to develop more formal agreements
- Have 5 units from the same landlord but the working relationship is still informal
- There is no “pot of money” to procure suites ahead of time

**Connecting clients to adequate support services:**

- Income assistance is challenging – not responsive enough, slow to process requests, make mistakes, this makes the relationship with landlords more difficult
- Mental Health can be a very gated service
- Addictions services also hard to access – the system changes regularly
- Services not community based – clients often unable to keep appointments, attend long orientation sessions, deal with bureaucracy
- Clients need to be able to access service they need when they show up at a local service organization that they know
- ICM and ACT teams often full
- Clients who are experiencing homelessness often do not fit the standard service criteria, which have been developed for the mainstream population. As a result they find that they are not eligible for the services that could potentially have a positive impact on their lives, such as mental health services.
- Life skills important

**Ideas for improving housing placement:**

- More rent subsidies and longer EHF
- Higher shelter allowance
- More supportive housing throughout the region
- Explore alternate housing options
- Need more housing that accepts pets

- Funds for supporting clients to get clothing and a haircut so they can present better to landlords
- Funds for meeting with clients in their community for coffee and food
- A “Housing First for Dummies” that explains what HPS will fund
- Improve societal attitudes towards people experiencing homelessness
- A list of resources
- Information on working with BC Housing and the Ministry
- Info on the different types of housing available
- Need interactive online forum for Housing First workers

**A Housing Placement Toolkit should contain:**

- Information about navigating the Ministry for Social Development and Social Innovation (MSDSI)
- Links to all of the necessary forms
- Information about seniors and youth – both growing homeless populations
- Information about racism and cultural awareness
- How to work with homeless parents and their adult children
- Tenants’ rights
- A resource list
- How to teach self-sufficiency and independence
- A one page description of Housing First
- Data collection clarity
- A complete intake package
- What housing can clients apply to directly without having to go through BC Housing
- Accessing free counselling services
- Testimonials from youth who have been successfully housed
- Information about other Housing First programs
- Financial literacy information including worksheets
- Basic pension information
- How to follow up on elder abuse
- How to find furniture
- How to get your client ID