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# Housing First as a Systems Approach to Ending Homelessness? Lessons Learned from the Canadian Governance Landscape and Future Directions for Systems Transformation

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## Introduction

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The implementation of Housing First in Canada almost 20 years ago represented a paradigm shift. It pushed back against traditional thinking that placed blame on individuals experiencing homelessness for their plight, with solutions relying on such individuals to make personal changes until they were deemed fit and ready for housing. Housing First turned all of this on its head, and as a rights-based approach, claimed that everyone was ready for housing, and moreover, people would recover better when they were first housed and provided the wrap around supports they needed to recover, and reduce the risk of their return to homelessness. Along with Housing First came a realisation that individual organisations providing Housing First could work more effectively if they were coordinated into a single system, with centralised intake, data management systems, and efficient flow through to help those in greatest need to exit homelessness. This was a significant change that promised to give us the tools to prevent and end homelessness.

From a systems perspective we ask, is this sufficient? Optimising the homelessness sector as a system focusing almost exclusively on enhancing the coordination of services to deliver Housing First is an important approach to thinking and operating as a system, but it must be distinguished from approaches that emphasise coordination between systems. The current arrangement of homelessness systems optimisation as a new orthodoxy is well-intended, but the evidence suggests it is not sufficient to end homelessness. Our argument is that we need to address the inflow into homelessness through prevention. Moreover, to create positive impact

through prevention, a multiple systems approach is needed to call upon other public systems, including those that perpetuate homelessness (health care, child protection, justice) to contribute to solutions to homelessness.

## **Homelessness Governance and Housing First in Canada: Systems Change or New Orthodoxy?**

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Constitutionally, governmental responsibilities in Canada are divided between different orders of government including the Federal Government and provincial/territorial governments. Municipalities, while not constitutionally established entities, also play important governance roles devolved upon them by the provinces/territories. All three orders of government provide funding for homelessness services (supported by philanthropic and charitable giving) which are delivered at the local level by a range of not-for-profit services. When Canada established its first homelessness strategy in 2000, it went around the provincial and territorial governments to directly fund activity at the local community or municipal level by initially dividing the country into 61 'designated communities', each governed by a 'community entity' which in most cases was the Municipal Government. Despite federal funding accounting for much less than 20% of local spending on homelessness<sup>1</sup>, the Government of Canada has historically played a very important leadership role in setting national directives, collecting and aggregating national-level data on the state of homelessness, and supporting local homelessness system integration.

Housing First (HF) gained traction in Canada between 2005 and 2010. A key development that contributed to the broader adoption of HF was the decision by the Government of Canada to invest \$110 million in a five-year HF demonstration project called *At Home/Chez Soi* to conduct research on HF in five cities across the country. Using a randomised-controlled trial methodology, 2 148 individuals experiencing chronic homelessness and mental health challenges were randomly assigned to receive HF services or the standard care in their community. This large-scale project produced impressive results impacting policy and practice across Canada (MacNaughton et al., 2017). Under the federal Homelessness Partnering Strategy, not only did the Federal Government openly endorse HF, but they required the cities and communities to invest a large percentage of federal funds received in implementing HF locally.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For an example, see the Ontario provincial government's breakdown of funding by order of government, where the federal government accounts for only 8% of spending on homelessness (Government of Ontario, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> The 10 largest cities in Canada were required to use 65% of their federal funds on HF, and the other 51 Designated Communities were required to spend 40% (Macnaughton et al., 2017).

A change in government in 2015 led to the development of a new homelessness strategy called Reaching Home. As part of the redesigned homelessness strategy, the Federal Government set a goal of reducing chronic homelessness by 50% over the next 10 years, which was then expanded to eliminating chronic homelessness by 2030. However, in 2019, the Government announced that “all mandatory Housing First investment targets that were under the previous federal homelessness programme have been removed” and the cities and communities it funded were instead offered “more flexibility” in how they used federal funds to address homelessness locally (Infrastructure Canada, 2019). One mandatory requirement is the use of federal funds to invest in ‘Coordinated Access Systems’ to coordinate homelessness services and enhance community entities’ ability to deliver HF. The Federal Government’s efforts in this regard have been supported by the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness’ Built for Zero campaign.

The impetus to coordinate the homelessness system at the local level was linked with the adoption of HF. Following American practices – which have been highly influential on homelessness practices in Canada – local municipalities combined an investment in HF with plans to end homelessness, data management systems, centralised governance and decision-making, coordinated access, and the broad adoption of highly problematic common assessment tools to assist with prioritisation (Brown et al. 2018; Cronely, 2020; Wilkey et al., 2019). All of this was designed to integrate homelessness services as a unified system at the local level, with governance and coordination assigned to community entities. This was to become the key mechanism to help communities shift from a central focus on, and investment in, an emergency response, toward coordinating local service providers to work together to implement HF.

Over the past 10 years, this approach to ending homelessness in Canada has become the new orthodoxy – the formula that will enable communities to ‘end’ homelessness, or at least achieve ‘functional zero’.<sup>3</sup> However, we suggest there is an important distinction to be made between this singular system approach reflected in dominant frameworks for ending homelessness, and a multiple systems approach which calls all relevant systems and sectors into solidarity and shared accountability for action to both prevent and end homelessness. The former places the weight of the responsibility for ending homelessness on the relatively small and under-resourced homelessness sector, while the latter calls on a broader network of primarily public systems that are implicated both in the causes of homelessness, but also potential solutions. This distinction stems from our understanding of systems theory which characterises homelessness as a complex, fusion policy

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<sup>3</sup> Functional Zero is a concept in which a population has the equivalent housing and supports available to meet the needs of the of people who become homeless at any given point in time.

issue perpetuated through social practices across societies and therefore requiring rights-affirming governance across numerous public, private, and not-for-profit systems. A multiple systems understanding of how homelessness is (re)produced gives us a framework for assessing existing and proposed efforts' potential for ending homelessness.

## **Can an Integrated Homelessness System Focusing on Housing First Actually End Homelessness?**

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There can be no doubt that HF is an effective and evidence-based intervention for addressing the needs of people experiencing homelessness, especially for those who have long histories of homelessness and have high needs regarding mental health and substance use. It should also be said that the broad application of HF can and should have a positive impact on the problem of modern mass homelessness. The weight of research evidence in this regard is overwhelming (Tsemberis and Eisenberg, 2000; Tsemberis et al., 2004; Tsemberis, 2015; Gaetz et al., 2013), and Canada's At Home/Chez Soi has been a major contributor to this evidence base with over 130 scholarly articles published (Goering et al., 2014; Hwang et al., 2012; Aubry et al., 2015; Nelson et al., 2014). Additionally, efforts to coordinate the homelessness sector to facilitate and optimise the functionality of the sector to deliver on HF is a good idea. This of course requires effective governance, strong and high-quality data collection and management systems, coordinated access systems, available and adequate housing, and quality HF programmes. This is what we consider a single system response.

It is an askable question to consider whether this single system response is sufficient for ending homelessness? Unfortunately, evidence suggests that this is unlikely. Investment in HF combined with system coordination to support its implementation, and prioritising people with long histories of homelessness has been arguably the dominant paradigm for how to address homelessness for over 20 years in the United States, and almost 20 years in Canada. Such efforts have been supported by national organisations (with active campaigns), different orders of government, and significant local action and effort. Yet, the evidence for the achievability of ending homelessness through such efforts is surprisingly slim. In the United States, to date only a handful of communities have reached Functional Zero, and only one in Canada (Medicine Hat).

Moreover, data released by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development sheds some light on important trends. In 2007, there were approximately 120 000 people with long histories of homelessness in the US. By 2016, the number dropped to 77 000, and then by 2020 the number was back up to over 110 000 (Henry et al.,

2020). Over the 14 years they have been collecting data, there has not been a significant, nor sustainable, drop in the number of people with long histories of homelessness, so how do we account for the decline that happened between 2009-2016? Further analysis points to the US Government's response to veteran homelessness, which saw a 50% reduction between 2010 (73000) and 2020 (37000) (Henry et al., 2020). Spending on veteran homelessness more than doubled from \$717M in 2010, to \$1.65B (USD) in 2017 (NAEH, 2018). Yet more than increased investment, US Veterans Affairs is its own integrated cross-government system, including health care (medical centres, outpatient clinics), housing assistance, disability supports, education benefits and supports, careers and employment, support accessing benefits, and family supports. This is *systems integration* at a very comprehensive level that goes well beyond simply coordinating homelessness services.

While the resulting reductions in veteran homelessness were no doubt impressive, there are no realistic opportunities in the United States to effectively coordinate the same broad range of public systems (including health care) outside of Veterans Affairs – in other words, this cannot easily be replicated as long as the relevant public systems are not mandated to participate. More ambitious efforts to coordinate public systems would require all orders of government to collaborate in ways that would be incredibly challenging given the constitutional division of responsibilities among federal, state, and municipal governments. Absent the data on the reduction of veteran homelessness, the figures suggesting a decline in the levels of people with long histories of homelessness from 2007 to 2020 are hardly impressive. What is missing from current efforts? We argue that we need to go beyond a narrow focus on coordinating the homelessness system and relying on HF to carry the entire weight of ending homelessness, and take a multiple systems approach that prioritises a range of housing-led approaches for both preventing and sustaining exits from homelessness.

### **Working Across Systems to Prioritise Homelessness Prevention Alongside Housing First**

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Through complex systems modelling, Fowler et al. (2019) demonstrated that the widespread adoption and resourcing of HF could have comparable impacts to a combined HF and homelessness prevention approach on the overall number of people experiencing homelessness in the United States. So why not solely focus our efforts on HF? Even with the political will to secure the funding and housing to make HF available to all who need the intervention, the approach is generally not designed to prevent homelessness. In the context of the full realisation of people's social and economic rights, including the right to adequate housing, exclusively

resourcing HF leaves people vulnerable to negative impacts of housing loss and precarity and does not sufficiently demand the cross-systems and broader structural changes required to avoid these rights violations in the first place.

One of the challenges in both Canada and the United States is that preventing homelessness has not been a priority until recently. There has not been a widespread understanding of what homelessness prevention is, whether it works, and who is responsible. The fact that prevention has not been widely taken up within the homelessness system to date may in fact be a reflection of the lack of effort across multiple systems to support people's housing rights.

The reality is that homelessness is a 'fusion policy' issue that necessarily implicates a broad range of public systems and all orders of government in solutions to homelessness, and ideally a multiple systems approach will require deep and ongoing engagement to support working with such systems in an integrated way. This includes not just housing and homelessness services, but public systems responsible for health and mental health, justice, children and child protection, income supports, families, training, equity and employment, and education.

Fortunately, in the last five years, there has been a growing body of scholarship that seeks to define and expand the evidence base that contributes to a broader understanding of what the prevention of homelessness entails and the possible roles of various systems (Gaetz and Dej, 2017; Gaetz et al., 2018a; Dej et al., 2020; Oudshoorn et al., 2020; Fitzpatrick et al., 2021; Mackie, 2015; Mackie et al., 2017; Gaetz, 2020). Our work through Making the Shift – Youth Homelessness Social Innovation Lab<sup>4</sup> has given us important insights into how we should be approaching the prevention of youth homelessness in particular. As we have sought to design prevention focused interventions such as Family and Natural Supports (Borato et al., 2020), Youth Reconnect (Gaetz et al., 2020), Upstream (Mackenzie, 2018; Sohn and Gaetz, 2020), Housing First for Youth (Gaetz et al., 2021a; b), and Duty to Assist in Canada (Bridgeable, 2019; Gaetz et al., 2018b), we have applied a human-centred design approach, which challenges our assumptions about how people navigate and engage services to get their needs met.

Thinking about the circumstances of youth struggling with homelessness provides insights into the importance and necessity of engaging public systems in solutions to homelessness. Generally, youth who are precariously housed and in crisis do not engage the homelessness sector for help, or at not least right away, in part because they typically do not consider themselves to be homeless (O'Grady et al., 2020), nor do they have any understanding of what kind of help might be available to them and their families. Additionally, in Canada, there generally are no homeless-

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<sup>4</sup> Making the Shift – We Are a Youth Homelessness Social Innovation Lab. <https://makingtheshiftinc.ca/>.

ness supports for youth under 16 (and in some jurisdictions, under 18), despite the reality that more than 40% of youth currently experiencing homelessness had their first experience before they were 16 (Gaetz, et al., 2016). Many youth will keep their struggles to themselves, or if they do reach out for support will approach meaningful adults in their lives who are often connected to or embedded in public institutions outside of the homelessness sector, such as teachers, counsellors, coaches, instructors, community workers, health care professionals, child protection workers, and employment supports. In these scenarios, people working in these institutional contexts are generally not responsible for or trained to support young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness, and lack connections to services and supports that could be helpful to young people and their families. But what if we coordinated these various systems of supports to more effectively help young people and their struggling families? With the right mindsets, leadership, investment, and a commitment to working in solidarity across multiple systems, we could transform our response to homelessness so that people are supported effectively in all circumstances before they become homeless and their health and well-being declines dramatically.

There are of course major challenges to this type of systems integration. That major public systems including health care, corrections, and child protection (all the responsibility of provincial and territorial governments) are not required nor mandated to actively participate in addressing homelessness through investing in and supporting Housing First and the prevention of homelessness means the work of integrating such public systems falls to homelessness sector organisations and their ability to network and build relationships with people who work in such systems. Unfortunately, such fragile connections between public systems and the homelessness sector undermines the success of Housing First programmes and the desire to take such interventions to scale.

In an effort to unpack the complexity of the current state of cross-systems efforts to prevent and end homeless in Canada, one of our collaborative initiatives, the Systems Planning Collective, engaged in a series of conversations with leaders from across the country working locally to coordinate and implement plans and activities addressing homelessness. The discussions mapped out the opportunities and challenges faced by the individuals, organisations and entire communities to engage across orders of government, different mindsets, and conflicting mandates around homelessness. The resulting report, the *State of Systems Approaches to Preventing and Ending Homelessness in Canada* (Buchnea et al., 2021), demonstrates that despite valiant and relentless efforts to be more strategic in the coordination of local homeless services, interpersonal, systemic, and structural challenges continued to undermine sustainable reductions in homelessness. The key challenges communities face are (1) navigating the complexity of transforming

responses to homelessness, (2) moving beyond managing crises reproduced by inequitable systems and structures, and (3) difficulty knowing where to begin and how to avoid reinforcing the status quo. The report also demonstrates a groundswell of interest in engaging in challenging conversations, learning from on-the-ground examples of transformative systems change, and taking action to create a more just future.

## **Conclusion: A Systems Approach to Ending Homelessness Not an End in Itself**

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The concepts of 'systems thinking' and 'systems change' are frequently used, yet difficult to pin down in the context of social innovation and social policy discourse and can easily become detached from broader social justice goals. This has troubling implications – without a clear definition, any minor adjustment to even a singular system might be considered 'systems change', regardless of its impact on the status quo which perpetuates inequitable social conditions such as homelessness. To achieve the significant and transformational goals of both preventing and ending homelessness and upholding social and economic rights, including the right to adequate housing, we need more nuanced understandings of systems change.

Much of the foundational thinking around systems theory and systems change comes from management studies addressing organisational changes to adjust to a rapidly changing world (e.g., Senge and Sterman, 1990). Beyond change management practices at the organisational level, systems thinking has been applied to the changes across individuals, institutions, and entire societies/structures to achieve social justice ends. More recently, Kramer et al. (2016) use the definition of systems change from Social Innovation Generation Canada, which is "shifting the conditions that are holding the problem in place" (p.3). 'Systems change' is an ongoing process rather than end state, which addresses the complex interplay of policies, practices, resources, relationships and connections, power dynamics, and mental models. Petty and Leach (2020) highlight the importance of engaging in deep equity work from the individual to the systemic and societal levels of systems change to enact sustainable and equitable change. This is an emergent field with significant insight and potential to bring to the work to address homelessness.

Within the report on the *State of Systems Approaches to Preventing and Ending Homelessness in Canada* (Buchnea et al., 2021), the authors draw on the works of systems thinkers to propose a framework for systems transformation for addressing homelessness within four interrelated spheres of systems change work:



1. **Systems thinking and awareness** refers to changes to beliefs, values, and assumptions at the individual and philosophical level. This sphere requires what Petty and Leach (2020) refer to as the ‘deep inner work’ to challenge the mental models that shape our individual and collective perceptions of the causes and responses to homelessness, and our roles within the work to prevent homelessness.
2. **Systems planning, implementation, and evaluation** involves changes to the practices, distributions of power, and the ways of relating within and between organisations and local communities. This requires assessing power dynamics, relationships, roles, and responsibilities of the various systems and sectors within a community to better coordinate for an equitable future state.
3. **Systems change and accountability**, which goes beyond merely improving the organisation of service delivery within a community, to seek accountability from policymakers and funders to address the policy and funding structures that result in systems barriers and failures leading to homelessness.
4. **Systems transformation toward systems justice** articulates the ultimate goals of large-scale structural and societal change which promote and sustain the equitable and just realisation of social and economic rights.

This framework creates a more comprehensive picture of the change work required to address homelessness from a systems perspective. The report demonstrates the importance of equity, justice, and accountability to move from eligibility-based, crisis responses reliant on the homelessness system toward rights-based, preventative, cross-systems solidarity. It involves a strong attunement to and ongoing reflection on the ways in which power is distributed and whose voices and interests are not only heard, but acted upon within systems change work. Equitably and deeply engaging with community members with lived expertise<sup>5</sup>, for example, is essential to all four spheres of systems change work to address homelessness.

It has been suggested that systems change will result from changing the goal of the homelessness system from ‘managing’ to ‘eliminating’ homelessness. While it is true that the late and prolific systems modeler, Donella Meadows, asserted that changing the goals, purpose, or function of systems is a strong leverage point for systems change, it was not *the* strongest. In her posthumously published manuscript *Thinking in Systems* (2009), Meadows identifies both changes in paradigms

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<sup>5</sup> People with lived expertise refers to those who have/continue to experience homelessness and housing precarity. It should be noted that people with lived expertise are not a monolith but have diverse experiences and perspectives and intersecting identities. Attending to equity and power dynamics in lived expert engagement is just as important as in all other aspects of systems change work to address homelessness.

(deeply held beliefs and assumptions) and transcending paradigms as possibly the most powerful leverage points for systems change. From this standpoint, there are important questions to ask of the existing paradigms for addressing homelessness in Canada and internationally. What are the underlying assumptions and whose beliefs inform the ways in which the goal of ending homelessness is pursued? Is it enough to reorient the homelessness system toward ending homelessness solely through better governance and the delivery of Housing First? How might the homelessness system be left vulnerable to the paradigms of systems with more power, resources, and potentially contradictory goals? Interrogating and moving beyond the prevailing paradigms surrounding approaches to homelessness is an important part of the complex and dynamic systems change required to transform responses to homelessness.

This article calls on homelessness advocates, policymakers, researchers, and practitioners to critically reflect on the past, current, and future directions of preventing and ending homelessness. The goal of 'eliminating homelessness' is noble and inspiring in its intention. However, if an end to homelessness is merely understood as optimising our ability to use Housing First to rectify failures of other systems to keep people housed, we would fall short of fully realising people's social and economic rights. Ending homelessness, like systems change, is an ongoing process working toward an imagined future state in which individuals, communities and systems relate to one another differently than the current status quo. It requires deep and ongoing consideration of the paradigms that inform policy and practice and goes beyond the governance of the homelessness system to bring an end to the conditions across multiple systems that perpetuate homelessness. It is not a path easily or fully charted by any nation state, yet there is transformative potential within the growing body of international knowledge from research, practice and lived experience advocacy demonstrating ways forward that are preventative, rights-based, and social justice-oriented.

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