Housing First in Alberta: A Comparative Policy Analysis of Housing First in *Medicine Hat* and *Lethbridge*

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Introduction

- Medicine Hat's method of Housing First implementation is internationally acclaimed:
  - First city in Canada to have ended chronic homelessness.
- Lethbridge provides an ideal complementary study, with a proven effective response to the homelessness crisis, and recognized as a leading example in Canada.

Introduction

- **Why it's important:**
  - The study provides a policy analysis of the Housing First model in two cities.
  - This study complements studies completed exploring Housing First.
  - It elaborates on how it is operationalized in the field and provided as a service to those in need of permanent shelter.
  - This study provides practical examples of housing first's real-life application – it is a much-needed addition to the literature.

Context

- Lethbridge and Medicine Hat both adopted Housing First around the same time.
- Both cities are:
    - situated in Southern Alberta, away from the large city centers, along key travel corridors, and sporting mixed economies based with strong farming and ranching emphases.
- Yet both cities have taken dramatically different approaches to their implementation model.

Demographics

- Lethbridge population: 92,729 people in 2016; 83,517 people in 2011
  - In 2011, 4.3% of the population identified as Aboriginal
  - More than 50% of Lethbridge's homeless population is Aboriginal
- Medicine Hat population: 63,260 people in 2016; 60,005 people in 2011
  - In 2011, 4.6% of the population identified as Aboriginal
  - Presently seeing an increase in family homelessness
- Acknowledgement from both cities that Lethbridge's homeless population is more complex than that of Medicine Hat's
  - Lethbridge's homelessness population is more complex: more concurrent disorders

Objectives

- **Key objectives for this study:**
  - 1. To identify the implementation models of the Housing First model in each city
  - 2. Identify the similarities and differences in manifestations
  - 3. Identify pros and cons of each method of implementation

Methodology

▶ ~15-20 personal interviews were conducted in each city.

▶ I spoke with individuals identified as connected with Social Housing in Action (SHIA) in Lethbridge, or with the Medicine Hat Community Housing Society (MHCHS).

▶ The mayors of each city were also interviewed.

▶ Interviews were transcribed and coded.

▶ NVivo10 is being used to conduct a thematic analysis.

Preliminary Results: Lethbridge

- With acknowledgement that the City is currently undergoing change to address some of these identified concerns, the following predominant themes have emerged with regards to the CBO being attached to the City :
  - Rate of program change was identified
  - Stakeholder communication is unclear and appears to lack clear direction
  - How do we apply Housing First to everyone?
  - Stakeholders cite tense and conflictual city-front line agency relationships
  - Inter-agency competition is a norm due to funding model; City and front line agencies often appear in competition
  - Overly bureaucratic and political
  - A general sense of wariness and concern when speaking about the strengths and opportunities for improvement

Preliminary Results: Medicine Hat

- After an initial review of the interview data the following predominant themes have emerged with regards to the CBO being independent of the City:
  - Strength in not having the CBO be attach to the City identified
    - Allows for more timely response rates
    - An immense amount of faith and trust in the CBO
  - More focused on building relationships: personal, participant, landlord, and agency
  - Client-centric
  - Less competitive and bureaucratic (although challenges still exist)
  - Bottom-Up approach; there is no wariness with regards to bringing up concerns
  - Stakeholders identified a positive and encouraging atmosphere

Building a Better Tomorrow by Building Resiliency Today

▶ **Best practices/Lessons to be taken from both cities:**

  ▶ Regardless of method of implementation, success can be found

  ▶ Growing pains are to be expected, but big results can still be achieved

  ▶ There are pros and cons to both models of implementation.

  ▶ Setting clear program parameters and maintaining clear, consistent communication is paramount to program success.

  ▶ Ensure the voices of your front line are being heard.

  ▶ Data collection: possessing clear, accurate statistical data is vital

    ▶ Advocate for changes in data collection and expansion of what stats are being collected

Conclusion

- Both cities are undertaking efforts to continuously improve the system to work in the interest of individuals who may be facing homelessness

- Preliminary results indicate that, when looking at the two cities, the CBO as a separate entity fosters a more collaborative, positive, approach to ending homelessness

- Housing First flexibility:
  - Both cities demonstrate that success can be found with both models of implementation

- Maintaining Fidelity:
  - Key to program success is to maintain program fidelity

Questions

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