RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT

HOMELESS APPLICANTS' ACCESS TO SOCIAL HOUSING:

INTRODUCTION

This study of how homeless applicants; access social housing had two main purposes:

(1)   to investigate how social housing providers presently accommodate homeless applicants; and

(2)   to assess how access to housing could be improved for homeless people.

METHODOLOGY

This study of waiting list and application processes for social housing and the issues facing homeless applicants took place between April 2004 and February 2005. The research included a literature review, interviews with key informants, and data collection using survey tools and focus groups.

Twenty housing providers from four provinces (Alberta, British Columbia, New Brunswick and Ontario) were interviewed by phone or in person. The providers were chosen to include representation from large and small housing providers, public housing providers, non-profit providers, co-ops, supportive and alternative housing providers, and those housing special needs groups. The sample included providers with both independent units and shared housing. The providers had a variety of target populations, including singles, families, seniors, homeless and 'hard to house individuals,' Aboriginal households, and special needs tenants such as those living with mental illness, brain injuries, addictions, and physical disabilities.

Staff from ten agencies in the four provinces were also interviewed for the study, to provide perspectives from front-line organizations working with homeless or at-risk clientele. The sample of agencies was purposely diverse to seek input from a range of organizations, including shelters and transitional housing, multi-service agencies, health and mental health organizations, and housing help and access centres for social housing.

Two focus groups, involving a total of 14 participants, were held to obtain input from individuals and families who were homeless or

had experienced homelessness. One focus group was held with residents of Ecuhome Corporation, a non-profit provider in Toronto housing homeless and 'hard to house' individuals. The second focus group was held with residents staying at the Peel Family Shelter in Mississauga, Ontario.

FINDINGS

The results of the literature review, interviews and focus groups highlighted a wide range of barriers facing homeless people in accessing social housing. These barriers fall into three categories: systemic barriers, obstacles at the community or organizational level, and personal issues or limitations.

Systemic Barriers

At the systemic level, the limited supply of subsidized units was the barrier to social housing most often mentioned by housing providers and agency staff. It was also noted by participants in one of the focus groups. A lack of social housing options, including housing with both minimal rules and long-term supports, was also widely noted during the interviews as a barrier to housing homeless individuals.

A long wait time for subsidized units (especially for units in 'regular' non-profit housing, as opposed to supportive housing or shared units) was reported across the country by focus group participants and housing and agency staff. Some interviewees noted how even a relatively short wait time of six months to a year does not meet the need of someone who is homeless.

Housing providers noted that homeless applicants can face barriers getting onto the waiting list for social housing and are disadvantaged when there is no local system for coordinating access to subsidized units.

The requirement for social housing providers to maintain waiting lists can disadvantage homeless applicants. For example, chronological lists, whether with an individual provider or system-wide, can

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disadvantage applicants who need immediate assistance. On the other hand, point score systems can be less favourable to some subsets of the homeless population, such as singles or those exiting from transitional housing, who may not be considered highest priority.

A lack of consistency between immigration laws and practices, and social assistance rules means some potential applicants are ineligible. Other rules, such as ineligibility due to outstanding debts to social housing providers and the requirement to have a source of income, are also barriers for some.

Barriers at a Community or Organizational Level

Many examples of barriers that occur at the community or organizational level were noted by housing providers, agency staff, and focus group participants including the following:

• Applicants perceived as non-conforming with support agency or housing provider expectations;

• Waiting list procedures requiring regular updates from applicants in order for them to retain their place on the list;

• Application procedures requiring interviews, home visits, or criminal record checks;

• Discrimination against applicants by social services or housing staff;

• The length of time on the waiting list; and

• The role of front-line staff in selecting applicants to be interviewed, determining need and eligibility, awarding discretionary points, evaluating suitability and making decisions about the applicants' support needs; decisions made during the processing of applications can result in barriers for some homeless applicants.

Other barriers facing homeless applicants at the community level identified in both the literature review and the data collection for this study include:

• Little capacity among some shelter services to provide one-on-one assistance to homeless individuals and families in their housing search;

• Few programs to help stabilize formerly homeless households once they have been re-housed;

• Rules that bar individuals from using certain services, resulting in homeless people with complex mental health and addictions problems not obtaining help;

• Applicants from minimum-barrier homeless shelters being labelled as undesirable tenants, and therefore unable to access social housing units;

• Many social housing providers unable to offer housing to individuals with significant mental health or addictions problems due to lack of supports, and concerns about applicant's suitability within the existing tenant group;

• Requirement among many social housing providers that incoming tenants be able to live independently and maintain their unit, or be able to broker any supports that they need; and

• Rules about pets, guests or substance use/abuse.

Personal or Individual Barriers

The literature and the information gathered in this study from interviews and focus groups provided examples of barriers which result from individual circumstances or limitations. These include:

• Non-compliance with the expectations of housing providers;

• Addictions, mental health and behavioural issues;

• Having mental and physical health support needs which housing providers cannot meet;

• Not having a phone, access to voice mail, or an agency willing to field calls on one's behalf;

• Owing rent arrears to a social housing provider or having had a previous unsuccessful tenancy with the provider;

• Not having positive landlord references or a good credit rating;

• Not having a social support system;

• Being without linkages to health professionals and social support services;

• Lacking income or being unable to keep employment;

• Personality characteristics, such as being shy about talking on the phone, lack of confidence, or low self-esteem; and

• Language and cultural differences.

Understanding the Practices that Create Barriers

In examining the barriers that homeless people face in accessing social housing, it is useful to consider the operating environment and the context within which exclusionary practices emerge.

Decisions about waiting list management practices take into account the interests of stakeholders and the public. Homeless applicants are but one of the potential tenant groups for most public, non-profit or co-op housing providers. Funders want to know that waiting lists are managed in a way that is equitable and defensible. Providers and their boards want to feel they are fulfilling their mission and running their operations in a fiscally responsible way. Many housing staff want to know that incoming tenants will have successful tenancies and will not be a burden on the resources of the organization. Tenant communities want to feel safe and secure and experience a sense of belonging.

Like waiting list management, decisions about application processing (home visits, eligibility assessments, suitability assessments, interviews at time of application and/or pre-offer, references, credit checks, and data collection) are indicative of an environment where housing providers are balancing many

interests. Funders impose requirements on housing providers; the boards of co-ops and non-profits and their tenant/member selection committees have requirements; and housing staff have their own priorities when working with applicants including a responsibility to the applicant (not to set him or her up to fail in a new tenancy), to the tenant community as a whole, and to their board of directors. The desire among housing providers to have some control and autonomy over their waiting list and tenant selection processes can lead to reluctance to support local initiatives for coordinated intake and processing of applications for subsidized units.

The message from housing providers who feel unable to house homeless individuals or individuals with complex support needs typically relates to:

- their inability to house applicants quickly because of long waiting lists,

- the need for tenants to live independently while being part of a community, and

- the ability of vulnerable households to meet their obligations as tenants (for example with respect to unit maintenance, keeping their support systems in place, providing for their own needs, paying rent on time, and having respectful relations with neighbours).

The limitations felt by some 'regular' housing providers in housing homeless or 'hard to house' clienteles have created a niche and a need for providers who have a specialized mandate to house and support this population.

For the homeless applicant, the difficulties in accessing social housing have a significant impact on their path out of homelessness. The applicant can 'get lost in the system,' experience endless referrals with no chance of being housed, or be denied access to help and treatment. Limited access to social housing can result in ghettoization of homeless or vulnerable households in substandard housing, in less desirable areas of cities, and in unsafe or overcrowded situations. Without adequate and affordable housing options, linked with supports tailored to individual needs, the possibilities of being re-housed and maintaining that housing are diminished.

Helping Homeless Applicants Access and Retain Units in Social Housing

Housing providers, agencies and focus group participants provided examples from their own experience of ways to assist homeless applicants to access and retain social housing. These themes are also echoed in the literature on housing and homelessness.

Greater housing choice

- Foster the development of housing providers with specific mandates, allowing providers to specialize in particular kinds of issues and client needs;

- Ensure homeless applicants can access a suitable range of housing choices without going through the regular waiting list procedures;

- Develop housing with minimal rules and housing suited to the complex needs of homeless people with mental health and/or addictions issues;

- Facilitate greater access to rent supplements.

Multiple access points and coordination

- Have a range of access points in the community for homeless people to obtain emergency assistance and 'get into the system';

- Ensure homeless applicants have access to agencies and services where they can use phones and access a free voice mail system, or where staff will take messages for them;

- Facilitate homeless individuals' access to advocates who can provide one-on-one assistance with housing searches and contact with social housing landlords;

- Strive for better coordination of information and referrals between agencies and housing providers to assist homeless applicants.

Application processing and tenancy requirements

- Relax requirements to update application information in order for homeless applicants to keep their place on waiting lists;

- Establish referral agreements between housing providers and agencies who work with homeless or at-risk individuals;

- Make rapid processing of applications from homeless clientele a priority;

- Minimize requirements for credit checks, criminal record checks, landlord references;

- Use an 'inactive' waiting list to keep a record of applicants whose contact information becomes out-of-date, but who should not be penalized by losing their original application date.

Adequate funding for providers housing homeless applicants

- Give those housing providers higher maintenance budgets, to deal with unit turnover and repairs when tenants damage the units;

- Give extra funding to providers who are prepared to house homeless applicants so they can provide on-site support with higher staff/tenant ratios.

Incentives to move out of social housing

- Implement initiatives that assist in-situ tenants to move out of social housing and into private market housing, thus freeing up units.

Help for vulnerable households in maintaining their tenancy

- After-care programs, which help to stabilize the tenant in his/her new home;

- Partnerships between housing providers and support agencies, to provide case management support to vulnerable tenants;

- Trusteeship programs and initiatives so that the housing portion of social assistance is paid directly to the social housing landlord to help prevent eviction due to non-payment of rent;

- On-site staff support linked to housing;

- Assistance or training for households in unit maintenance;

- Eviction prevention strategies.

CONCLUSION

While the social housing sector was the primary focus of this study on homelessness and access to housing, an underlying message throughout the course of the work was the importance of cross-sector collaboration. For many housing providers, collaboration either on a formal or informal basis with local agencies across many sectors (including mental health, services for homeless people, support services, community care and others) was valued for networking, referrals, and assistance in helping tenants stay housed. This sentiment may be a useful starting point in identifying new ways to help homeless applicants obtain housing that responds to individual needs and circumstances.

There are some important questions arising from this work that point to topics for future investigation.

Who is responsible for housing homeless people?

Policy debate on what part of the housing system is best suited to proactively house the homeless could lead to focussing on how to effectively support the operations of housing providers who are dedicated to housing the homeless and how to ensure that communities have a range of housing options available for homeless and at-risk households.

What can housing providers gain from local agencies?

To what extent is there a trend underway for social housing providers to formally or informally partner with agencies for referral and support needs? What are the most innovative supports being offered through support agencies, how have they been evaluated and how can they be replicated in other communities?

As the social housing sector continues to evolve, how can new directions in housing homeless people be supported?

The needs of homeless individuals and households are not homogeneous, and there are many paths in and out of homelessness that impact on the suitability of one housing type over another. How can communities be supported in identifying and responding to the needs of subsets of the homeless population with a view to developing variations on the housing types and access systems that currently exist?

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