

Housing for Everyone

A Joint Initiative to Find Creative Solutions to Housing for Halton's Vulnerable Populations

Executive Summary

Housing Hurdles in Halton

The Halton Region of Ontario, is made up of the city of Burlington and towns of Oakville, Halton Hills, and Milton, and has been named the 'Safest Place to live' in Canada for the last 4 years. In 2016 the Halton Region had 264 homeless individuals and families and emergency shelters served the needs of 143 Halton Region families in 2015. These emergency shelters include 27 beds located in 12 apartment buildings in Halton. Halton offers 30 beds for single homeless individuals and an additional 8 beds for those experiencing mental health issues. In 2015, 837 single homeless individuals relied on these beds for shelter.

The community of Halton has a large immigrant population and is considered one of the fastest growing communities in Canada. The population is approximately 440,000, and is estimated to increase to 625,000 within the next three years. The expected population growth poses increased concerns for homelessness in this region, particularly as housing prices soar in Toronto, influencing housing costs in surrounding areas, as people are forced to move outside of the city.

To help address these issues, in 2016, scholars from Sheridan College and group of community stakeholders initiated a community based research program to identify the major gaps in services in relation to housing insecurity and homelessness. This project, the Community Ideas Factory, is a SSHRC funded collaborative research project that leveraged Sheridan's research and creativity expertise, to support the Oakville Community Foundation's efforts in addressing key issues within the community, such as housing. This project employed qualitative research methods, which involved 6 focus groups, including 50 key members working within community housing, in the Halton Region. Once the barriers to and gaps in services were identified the research team engaged community stakeholders, charitable donors, agencies, and service users in a Creative Problem- Solving (CPS) initiative. In total, 123 individuals representing 53 organizations from across the public, private, and not-for-profit sector were invited to participate in the CPS workshop in order to work together to identify fundable solutions to help improve the efficiency and effectiveness of social housing service delivery in Halton Region. Of those invited, 91 individuals (7 of which were clients) took part in the CPS workshops. Participants were asked to address the following question: 'In what ways might we collaborate to improve the efficiency of service delivery in Halton's affordable housing sector?' The CPS sessions' particular strength is to collectively come up with new, creative, and fundable ideas that align with the issues identified in the qualitative data collected. The findings suggest that housing must be addressed at the individual, community and government level, while listening closely to the people experiencing housing insecurities.

Background

Safe and affordable housing is a basic human need, yet it is estimated that over 235,000 people experience homelessness every year in Canada, and this number is rising. This number doesn't even take into account the "hidden" homeless population, which includes people with precarious or temporary housing. While the causes of homelessness are multiple and complex, research shows that precarious employment, economic hardship, unequal access to opportunities (employment/education), and a general lack of affordability are major factors that lead to homelessness in Canada.

Canada's homeless population is made up of men and women, young and old, however, there are some populations that are overrepresented. For example, Indigenous peoples, people with mental health issues, as well as members of the LGBTIQ communities, have higher rates of homelessness in Canada, as do women and children attempting to escape abuse at home. As such these communities must be given a louder voice in helping to create positive change in Canada.

Addressing Housing on the Individual Level

On an individual level, people require access to permanent, affordable, safe housing that meets their particular needs, and access to such housing must be equitable across the Region. The participants identified major gaps in the availability of culturally appropriate housing particularly for large immigrant families, youth, and elderly populations, as well as families that include both elderly and youth within the same household. They also identified the shortage of safe and appropriate housing for people with a range of health issues, such as physical limitations, mental health issues and addictions.

Each group identified the pressing need for affordable housing within the Region. Housing costs are a major barrier in Halton, as housing costs in Halton are exponentially higher than other regions across Ontario. Halton also has a very low vacancy rate, which contributes to the high cost and makes it very difficult for even middle-income families to live in the region. Housing is even more problematic for those trying to find or maintain housing with incomes at or below the Low Income Cut-Offs.

Research participants also raised concerns about how federal money continues to be made available for 'innovative solutions' to housing, yet the solutions rarely seem to include building more housing. Furthermore, permanent housing in the region continues to have long waitlists so gaining access to housing is extremely difficult. The identified crisis in availability of permanent housing has resulted in more people living in precarious situations, for longer periods of time. Participants also expressed worry that instituting a wait list does little more than give people false hope that there may be relief insight, and often results in them staying in unsuitable housing for longer than they should.

One solution that has been employed to manage housing issues is increasing the availability of transitional housing. However participants raised serious concerns about transitional housing as they see it as an ineffective solution, which tends to provide people with temporary relief rather than a workable solution to being able to afford market rent. They argued that transitional housing is associated with instability, and its short-term nature does not help individuals find ways to become self-sufficient within such a constrained amount of time. It was argued that rather than attempting to transition people from limited time housing to permanent housing, the sector repurpose their current transitional housing to permanent housing.

On the other hand, there was recognition that transitional housing was very effective for newcomer populations, especially in the case of refugees, an increasing population in the region. It is clear that housing issues are not homogeneous and not everyone has the same housing needs, as such, having one strategy for all does not work. Transitional housing is seen as having potential for newcomer immigrants who may need a "stepping stone", but was not viewed as useful for individuals who need more than just "temporary relief".

Housing solutions that are diverse and adaptive are clearly a priority. Furthermore, while participants pointed out that there is a dire need for more affordable and permanent housing solutions, they simultaneously argued that the Halton Region desperately must re-examine the lack of shelters throughout the region.

Summary of Recommendations

- Increasing access to housing
- Increasing emergency shelter capacity particularly during the fall and winter months
- Reimagining spaces for housing and emergency shelters such as unoccupied warehouses, industrial complexes, commercial properties, closed down school buildings, and hospitals
- Increasing vacancy rates by providing tax breaks for homeowners to renovate single dwelling homes to create apartment unit

Addressing Housing on the Community Level

Addressing housing at the community level requires the community to come together in a variety of ways. For example, participants recognized that they require the larger community's help in making long-term changes to increase affordable housing. They argued that campaigns are required to educate individuals living in Halton region, to raise awareness about the large number of people suffering economically in the region as well as and decreasing stigmatization. It was suggested that this could also be addressed through education campaigns for school children at regional schools. They also suggested involving the people most effected by housing insecurity to be actively involved in finding tangible solutions that are most meaningful for those most effected. These destigmatizing and inclusive initiatives will strengthen the community as a whole. Participants expressed the hope that if community awareness is raised, and that enough resources are put into the housing sector this would put the Halton Region at the forefront of communities who have been successful in tackling access to housing.

Educating landlords was another community level solution participants raised. For example, educating homeowners about the pros of becoming landlords, as well as in encouraging them to consider renting to low income individuals could help increase housing availability. Further, frontline workers, who deal directly with helping individuals find rentals, noted a great deal of overt stigma being perpetuated by landlords. This requires community level education about the underlying individual, social and systemic factors that contribute to income inequality and homelessness in the first instance. Five different participants noted local rental advertisements that explicitly stated that social assistance and disability recipients were not welcomed. This type of discrimination perpetuates stigma and homelessness for those most in need and segments the community.

Another example of the need for community involvement was raised by frontline workers, who feel they work hard to meet the needs of their clients, but lack the time and capacity to facilitate effective collaborations. They suggested that some of these time constraints could be reduced by simply streamlining application processes for vulnerable populations. For example, instead of having separate applications for each service making it possible to have an application process that allows people to apply for all of the services they need at once. Currently, applicants have to locate, apply and secure services one by one, which is much less efficient in all regards.

Building community level collaborative capacity was the most discussed theme that emerged in all six of the focus groups. There was widespread acknowledgement that understanding the capacity and capability of each organization involved in the housing sector is an important first step in creating and maintaining networks for collaboration. There was also widespread

Summary of Recommendations

- Ask funders and funding agencies to model the behaviour they are asking to see throughout the housing sector
- Collaborating as funders to increase the organizations capacity to work together to effect real change rather than band-aid solutions
- Front line workers need to better understand the capabilities and capacities of differing organizations in the region and to enable networking and decrease redundancies
- Employing a region based liaison to work to build collaborative capacity of regional agencies and increase opportunities for joint funding
- Creating a regional computer program to facilitate streamlining application processes for services into one for vulnerable populations
- Funding for evaluating the efficacy of programs already in place over the long term and to inform new programming
- Education campaigns in schools to help decrease stigma associated with housing insecurity, increase volunteer recruitment and retention, and improve private sector involvement and revenue generation
- Adopt a more client-centric approach to planning and decision-making about housing in the region

concern that redundancies and overlaps in services are identified and addressed to increase efficiency. Front line workers recognized the need for help outside of their own organization in coordinating services. In addition, there was recognition that real change requires large monetary investment that will be better achieved if funding agencies follow their own requirements for collaboration and join forces to offer bigger pools of money. This would create a larger network of resources to draw from to enable real and lasting change within the community.

However, participants recognized that one of the practical challenges of collaboration is determining how to align each organizations separate mandates and practices, and how to determine who becomes the lead and who allocates the resources. This would require ongoing careful attention and negotiation to ensure effective collaboration and efficiency. One suggestion was to relocate major services so that they are 'housed' all under one roof so rather than sharing a database for applications for each service, clients could book all of their appointments on the same day at one location. This would however require careful negotiation around privacy rules, as currently these privacy rules are quite prohibitive, and would not allow for the easy sharing of information between organizations. As such, it may not be possible to get all services under one roof, or to share one computer program amongst all of the key players. However, participants advocated for working together to find creative solutions to working around any potential barriers to making the system more efficient.

Addressing Housing at the Government Level

Participants all agreed that responding to housing and homelessness in the Region of Halton requires action from all levels of government. They were particularly critical of higher levels of government and their housing-related funding practices, yet there was some optimism about proposed changes to provincial planning policies. Participants raised concerns over the lack of government transparency at the local, municipal, provincial and federal levels, which has resulted in frustration within the housing community. They also identified a lack of clarity as to what levels of government funding requests need to be processed, how funding decisions are made, and even how to access available funding in the first place. Also, participants find government bureaucracy a major barrier to service provision and program implementation with regards to housing, particularly when it comes to planning new housing developments. Participants agreed that there is a need for clear and concise funding guidelines as a way to improve accessibility and to simplify bureaucratic processes to enable projects to move forward more quickly.

Executive Directors and their frontline workers all agreed that government funding is often tied directly to finding 'innovative approaches or solutions' to affordable housing. While appreciating that having the opportunity to hold funds to institute programs, the participants expressed great frustration in continually being told that they needed to be innovative, and argued that when they did create programming that made a real difference, its funding was at best tenuous and always came to an end so that the new innovation could receive funding. The government's continual call for creativity and innovation in the housing sector negates the creative solutions frontline workers already employ to address the multiple difficulties their clients' experience on a daily basis. Maintaining funding to sustain programs already in place and working, instead of constantly seeking new innovation is crucial.

Summary of Recommendations

- Increased funding to municipalities so they can invest in creating affordable housing
- Investing in accessible education for all to improve the life chances of many individuals in our community
- Offering credentialization programs for the highly educated immigrant populations in the region so they are more employable
- Increasing the minimum wage to a living wage to improve quality of life for many
- Increasing social assistance levels so people can afford to have a place to live and other basic living expenses
- Increasing funding to mental health and addiction services to improve the likelihood of success in obtaining and maintaining housing.
- Developing a more prominent role for private-sector participation to address housing (to create new sources of funding)

This includes a need for evidenced-based outcomes in assessing the efficiency as well as redundancies that may exist within the sector to ensure best practices. For example, one participant argued that their needs to be better communication of evidence-based outcomes so that both funders and the community at large better understand what works.

Concluding thoughts

The involvement of such a diverse range of participants as employed in this study, helps broaden our understanding of how working to increase affordable housing is experienced on the frontlines, by workers and clients alike. Moreover, the participants suggested some very imaginative and innovative ways to create positive change within the community that can contribute to significant 'capacity building' within the system. Specifically, through this work, we have witnessed significant gains in awareness raising, training, and learning about how to mobilize stakeholders to identify strengths and weaknesses within the system.

Over the last 20 years a majority of the responses to homelessness have been reactive and short sighted, focused largely on providing temporary shelter and basic needs. While emergency shelters, social service agencies, and the non-for-profit sector play an important role in responding to homelessness, prevention is key. Taking steps to ensure people do not end up precariously housed in the first place is crucial and ends up costing less in the long run. All levels of Government, not-for-profits, funders and private business need to work together to ensure housing is a realized basic right. This is the beginning of such a collective to work towards positive change.

Sheridan



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How can I learn more?

Dr. Sara Cumming, Dr. Mike McNamara and team are doing the research study this executive summary is based on. If you have any questions, please contact:



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