



National Alliance to END HOMELESSNESS

Promising Strategy: Housing First in Toronto, Ontario Getting Chronically Homeless People Back Into Housing

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Streets to Homes is a Housing First program that has been operated by the city of Toronto since 2005. This strategy targets unsheltered homeless people, and provides them with government subsidized permanent housing with follow-up supports. To date, approximately 1,500 people have moved directly from living on the street into permanent housing units, and 87 percent have remained housed. Program administrators attribute the effectiveness of this program to the cooperation of community agencies and the coordination of the Shelter, Support, and Housing Administration of the City of Toronto.

Program Description

The Streets to Homes program is a city initiative aimed at ending, not managing, street homelessness using a Housing First approach. By engaging community social service and outreach agencies, this program has been able to successfully reach a large number of people who are homeless and living on the street in Toronto. The program model has basic elements: outreach workers work one-on-one with clients to develop an individualized “housing plan.” Outreach workers then assist him or her through each step of acquiring housing including securing identification, filling out housing applications, accessing income supports, and searching for units. The program emphasizes client choice and helps people find housing that meets their needs as well as financial resources.

There are three program requirements: clients must participate in follow-up services, must apply for subsidized housing, and the government pays the rent directly to the landlord (instead of providing assistance to the client for payment to the landlord). Once clients move into housing, the program provides mandatory follow-up services for one year. Follow-up workers provide the services needed to help their clients transition from the streets into housing, often checking in with landlords and building managers to directly address any problems that might arise. They also link clients to community and social services to develop life skills. Through the development of a plan and intensive goal setting, visits by follow-up workers decrease over time.

Target Population

The Streets to Homes program targets unsheltered homeless people in the City of Toronto. A 2006 census found an estimated 818 people living in parks, under bridges, on sidewalks, alleys, building doorways, ravines, and in vehicles. The program model identifies the individual's needs and preferences in housing and works with him or her to both achieve and maintain it.

Outcomes

The Streets to Homes program has housed more than 1,500 people since inception, and 87 percent have remained housed. A study conducted on this Housing First program found that 91 percent of those surveyed considered their lives improved since moving into housing. Measures used to identify improved quality of life were physical health, mental health, personal safety, sleep, food quality, and social interaction. Most people demonstrated improvements in all categories: 70 percent indicated that their health improved, 72 percent reported their personal safety had improved, and 57 percent felt their mental health had improved since becoming housed. Though there is no requirement to stay sober in this program, substance use changed dramatically for those surveyed: 49 percent had decreased or quit alcohol use and 73 percent indicated that they had decreased or quit using drugs (31 percent quit completely). The use of emergency services such as 911, emergency rooms, ambulance, fire, police detox, and jail decreased, while there was an increase in appropriate health and community services such as doctors, food banks, job training, education, drug and alcohol treatment centers, and mental health programs. When asked about their futures after being placed in housing, 82 percent were more positive than prior to entering housing.

Funding Sources

The Streets to Homes program is made possible through municipal, provincial, and federal funding, which is managed by the Housing and Homelessness Supports and Initiatives section of the Shelter, Support, and Housing Administration Division of the City of Toronto. This Division is responsible for funding and administering 90,000 units of government subsidized housing (commonly referred to as "social housing" in Canada), 63 shelters, and over 100 nonprofit community agencies responsible for outreach services and community supports such as job training and education.

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