

Housing First for shelter & outreach



Presented by the Greater Vancouver Shelter Strategy

2014 session proceedings



Executive Summary

This report provides a summary of findings and feedback obtained from a series of sessions delivered in summer 2014. These sessions sought to deliver information that would enhance the capacity of Metro Vancouver homelessness serving organizations to implement Housing First programs.

The delivery of the session was considered successful as participants embraced the concepts of Housing First on the whole, indicated increase in knowledge in a variety of areas related to Housing First service delivery and generally indicated that they would promote Housing First ideas within their organization as a result of the sessions.

Participants did identify a number of concerns with the parameters of the funding for Housing First provided through the Homelessness Partnering Strategy. It will be important to review how these concerns have impacted the successful delivery of Housing First prior to the delivery of additional funding under this framework.



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Session Objectives

These sessions were developed to enhance the capacity of homelessness service providers within the Metro Vancouver area. In line with the mission of the Greater Vancouver Shelter Strategy, these sessions also sought to provide an opportunity for discussion as to the place for shelter and outreach providers within a Housing First system.

The identified goals of the sessions were:

- Provide knowledge about Housing First principles and implementation
- To shape conversation around the intersection between shelters and outreach and Housing First in the Metro Vancouver region
- To provide clarification on Homeless Partnering Strategy specifications on Housing First funding

The sessions endeavoured to support providers in understanding the fundamentals of Housing First independent of funding provided under the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS), and then building on the specific requirements of the funding.

Sessions were held with support from Brian Williams from Shift Education who provided professional clinical services as part of Raincity's Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) within the At Home/Chez Soi project. The sessions also benefited from the contributions from speakers from the Housing First's Speakers Bureau who were participants within the At Home/Chez Soi project.

Session Learnings

Connection with Private Housing Market

Related to: **Immediate Access to Housing with No Housing Readiness Conditions**

Service providers recognized that for Housing First (HF) to be effective there must be a successful connection with landlords. They identified that this was an area in which they felt they had more need for learning and capacity development.

Key areas that may be looked at in the future are:

- How to build initial relationships with landlords to open up possibilities for housing
- How to effectively support landlords to maintain ongoing working relationships
- How to appropriate balance confidentiality in supporting clients and landlords
- How to ensure that an unsuccessful housing placement doesn't

Learnings for the session identified that:

- Previous projects have demonstrated that success in effectively identifying housing and building landlord relationships can work in a community through a '**housing brokerage**' model. One organization works to open up opportunities within the private rental sector and then works with organizations in the community that provide the client-focused services within HF. The housing that is found by the housing broker is then occupied by the clients of the service organizations.
- Effective relationships with landlords doesn't mean that all landlord-identified issues or challenges are addressed immediately or that there is always a solution to every issue identified. It has been found that landlords respond well to knowing that **there is someone to talk to and that action is being taken**, even if it may take time.



- The capacity for HF **clients to receive substantial support in maintaining their housing** can be seen as an attractive benefit for landlords. The support provided by HF staff is not something that they would receive if they were simply renting from the pool of rental applications they may receive.

Choice is Fundamental to Success

Related to: **Consumer Choice and Self-Determination**

Under traditional methods of engaging with those who are homeless, it can be the case that decisions are more easily made for them, rather than being afforded the greatest capacity of choice in where they are housed. High levels of choice help give individuals ownership over their own situation.

Learnings for the session identified that:

- While having a roommate can increase the affordability of certain accommodation options, it is commonly found that the majority of people want to live alone. It was identified that roommate situations can be challenging at the best of times and can be far more difficult when navigating the issues of substantial life change. As such, it is important to have clear conversations that **help people balance financial and other considerations** that will lead to successful housing.
- Choice often means finding **creative solutions** that support people to maintain their housing. Finding ways to allow people to be fully comfortable in their space increases the likelihood of maintaining their housing. This process includes both examining how some choices may negatively impact housing while always seeking to identify solutions that meet the needs of the individual – it's not so much, 'don't do this or you'll lose your housing,' but, 'can this be reasonably accommodated if we found the right housing setting?' It's when accommodations may not be reasonable that the person may need to consider a change in their own behaviour.
- The above highlights the need for **organizational flexibility**. Organizations need to be responsive to the needs of those they are supporting with the ability to connect with a wide reach of resources. There are also times when assumptions that have been part of standard operating practices may need to be challenged for the benefit of those who are served.
- It was recognized that within the guidelines of the HPS Housing First funding, organizations will need to be up clear and upfront with those they are seeking to house about **available sustainable choices in housing within the existing financial opportunities**.

Community Connections are Important

Related to: **Social and Community Integration**

While obtaining housing is a huge step forward, it is really the first step in the journey of being housed. Stable housing can change what a person is focusing on and allow previous ignored issues (or issues that had to have less priority) to become more apparent. This highlights the need for the ongoing support provided in HF; without it people are more likely to slip back into homelessness. One of the issues is the need for community connection and it can be a journey of many years:

- **Connections in the community can happen in the unlikeliest of places.** This is one of the benefits of scattered site housing – participants of a Housing First program have the opportunity to be another neighbour within their community, rather than being associated with stigmas or labels that may exist from living in a certain housing complex.



- It was acknowledged that at times HF participants can become identified in their community as ‘problematic’ or ‘less desirable’ through potential biases. A willingness to work through these issues and **demonstrate a positive contribution to the community** can be successful in navigating this issue.
- Moving indoors can mean disconnection from other communities that were associated with being on the streets or in shelters. It is important for workers to not diminish the potential benefit of these communities to individuals. Working with individuals to **identify reasonable alternatives** is important and can be a long process.

Operational Considerations

Partnerships are Imperative

- When an Intensive Case Management (ICM) model is used, partnerships are essential for service delivery. The **organization will likely not provide all of the services that are needed** to support their clients and so they must look elsewhere for effective service partnerships.
- Effective partnerships can also **enhance the effectiveness of the community response** as organizations are working together, decreasing the gaps in the system.

Self-Care Systems for Staff

- Delivery of HF services creates a **substantial workload for staff**. If this is not properly managed this can result in substantial staff turnover due to burnout, perhaps even more than is typically seen in the sector.
- Programs will do well to **plan for staff care from the outset** of the program. This will typically go beyond what can be accessed through Employee Assistance type programs and may need to be regularly scheduled times for check-in and debrief. Some programs found success in building in recreational times as a team.
- The high workload is also a reason to **closely monitor appropriate staff to client ratios** as these may differ across populations and communities.

Implementation Challenges

A common piece of feedback from session participants was that they agreed with the principles and practices of HF and were very interested in implementing them, but that they felt hindered by the parameters provided with HPS funding.

Rent Supplements

- **Timeframe for subsidy:** Participants expressed concern about the lack of an ongoing rent supplement to support participants in maintaining housing. While it was recognized that the funding parameters promoted the consideration of existing resources it was felt that these may already be fully utilized and therefore not able to support additional participants under a Housing First program.
- **Impact on choice:** Participants recognized that a substantive rent subsidy was critical to the level of housing choice that is typically available to those in a HF program. There were concerns that this reduction in options because of financial limitations would dramatically undermine the principle of choice within the HF paradigm and have the potential to substantially impact the success of the HF program under the current funding model.
- **Concerns about affordability/availability:** Participants identified concerns in securing appropriate housing for clients within the current funding situation. If an organization does not



have access to rent supplements that they can make available to HF participants, organizations expressed concern that they may not be able to find housing at all.

- **Funding always tied to the individual:** Participants identified that the current funding model may limit their capacity to utilize strategies that other HF programs have found successful. For examples, other programs have bulk-bought furniture for program participants or have utilized funding to 'hold' rooms that facilitated quick move-in and outs when this might be needed by those they were serving. Because organizations will need to apply the support funding they receive to a particular individual, they will not be able to employ some of these successful strategies.

Risk for Organizations

Participants identified a significant amount of inherent risk for the organization within the current funding model. These risks included:

- **Assessing client eligibility:** Program eligibility requirements are quite specific but are not always easy to navigate. This may lead to delays in identifying eligible clients, which will increase the time take to house. Participants were also concerned that incorrectly identifying clients would lead to failure to receive reimbursement for services that they had already delivered.
- **Time limit to housing:** Participants identified a number of situations in which they felt they may not be able to housing a client within three to four months (required to be eligible to receive subsidy for services delivered to the client). These included a client deciding they no longer want housing, moving away from the area or serious lack of housing for their particular needs, e.g. large families. Again participants felt that they may be at risk of delivering services that they would later discover were ineligible for reimbursement.
- **Eligibility for Provincial Assistance:** Participants identified concerns that their determination of eligibility for provincial assistance may not align with assessment made by the provincial service, or may not occur within the required timeframe. This is another situation in which participants felt that they may be at risk of not receiving reimbursement for services delivered.

Challenges of Specific Populations

- **Women fleeing abuse:** It was noted that the experience of abuse within her accommodation did not contribute to an assessment as having a history of homelessness for a women fleeing violence. While examples of successful HF programs do exist for women fleeing violence, the current funding parameters will not typically allow for service to these women as they will not be identified as chronically or episodically homeless.
- **Homeless seniors:** It was recognized that a portion of the population for homeless seniors are those who have recently become homeless. The number of homeless seniors is increasing within Vancouver, highlighting the need to be able to successfully serve this population. However, current funding parameters will not allow service to this population.
- **Youth:** As outlined in detail in the youth session proceedings report, effective service to youth may be limited due to the inability to fund HF services delivered to those who choose transitional housed (an evidenced-based successful practice for youth). Effective service to youth should also be comprised of a substantial amount of prevention and early intervention, neither of which will be eligible services within the current funding parameters.



Smaller Communities

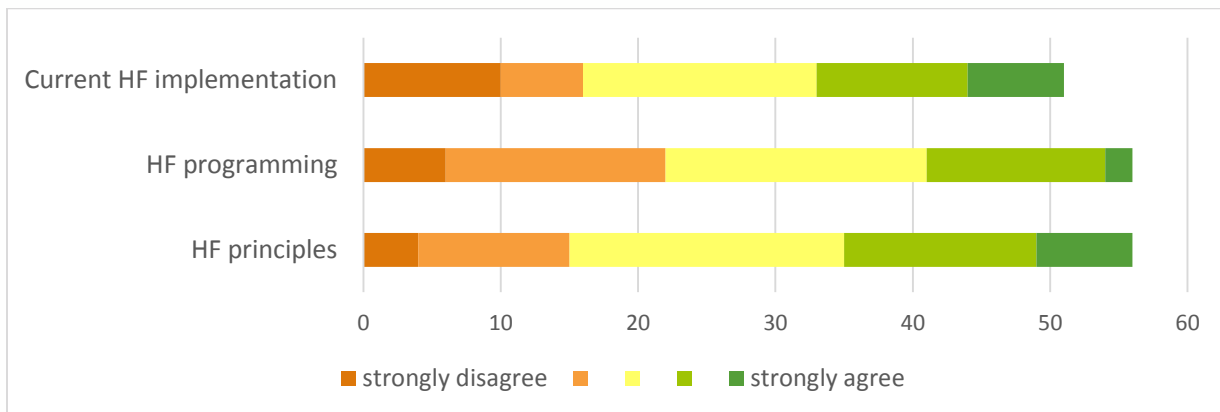
- **Fewer availability resources:** Those from smaller communities were concerned that they may not have access to the range of services needed to successfully deliver ICM services. It may not be possible for them to provide the range and flexibility of referrals that are required to meet the needs of their clients because services either do not exist or are at capacity.
- **Less capacity to leverage existing operations:** There was concern that organizations in smaller communities are typically smaller themselves, and therefore receive less funding. They may not have the capacity to leverage existing funding to cover gaps identified in the current funding structure.

These challenges highlight the desire by participants for the opportunity for further input into how future funding will be designed. It will be important review how those who do receive funding have navigated these concerns and whether program success has been substantially impacted. It

Session Evaluation

Participant Knowledge

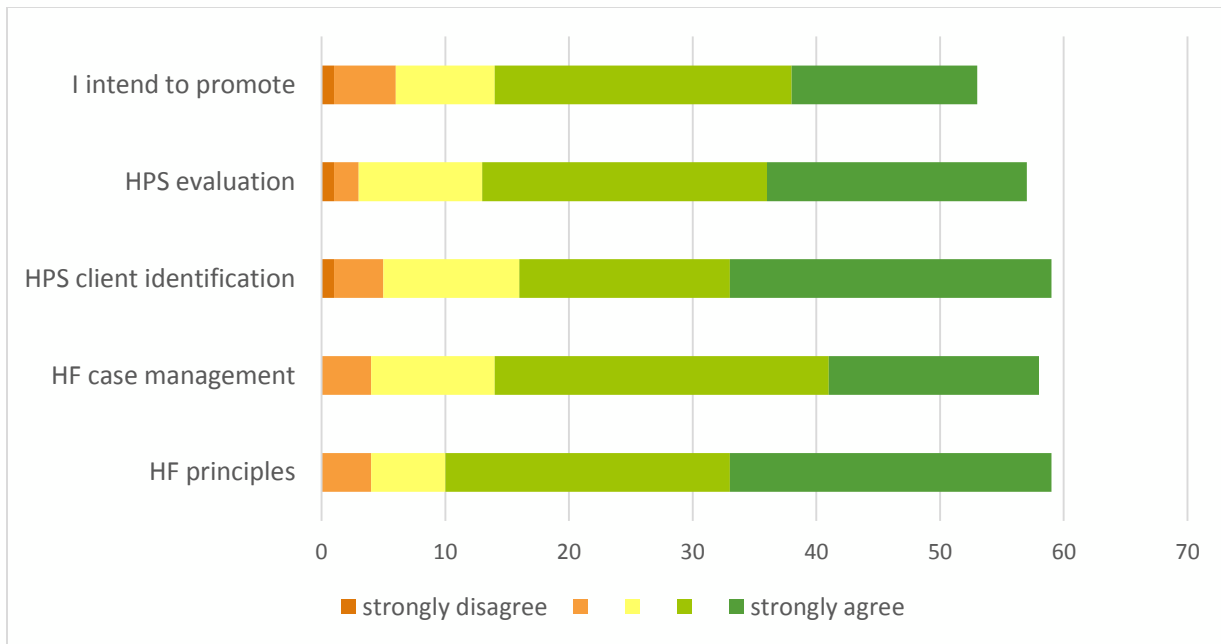
An assessment of participant's initial knowledge of Housing First (HF) was taken prior to their completion of the session. This assessment demonstrated a broad range of self-assessed HF knowledge from those who felt that very un knowledgeable about HF to those who felt very knowledgeable and indicated that their organization was currently implementing HF. Response regarding organizational implementation were lower as some participants did not represent a direct service delivery organization.



Session Impact

The vast majority of participants (73% to 83%) agreed or strongly agreed that their knowledge of the key learning areas had increased as a result of participating in the sessions. The lowest area of agreement was around HPS client identification (73%). It is suggested that this may have been impacted by limitations in currently available information from the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) relating to some key demographics, as indicated by some feedback comments such as “A lot of gaps of info for our clientele still (incarcerated individuals)” and “It would be good to have an increased understanding as to where youth leaving government care fit in the eligibility for HPS Housing First funding”.

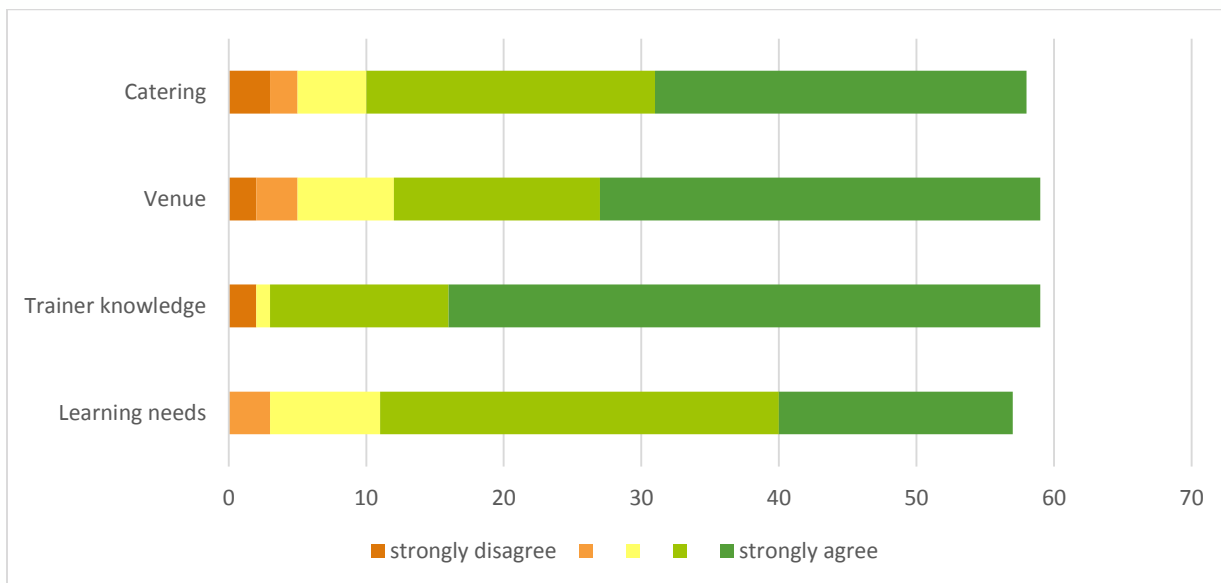




One encouraging result of the sessions was the number of participants who indicated that they intended to promote HF principles after attending the sessions. Almost three-quarters (74%) of all participants indicated that they intended to promote HF in their organization as a result of attending the sessions.

Content/Format Evaluation

The vast majority of participants (80% to 83%) also indicated that the session had met their expectations in areas of catering, venue and learning needs.



Participants were very satisfied with the training knowledge with 95% of participants agreeing or strongly agreeing the training knowledge had met their expectations. This is further supported by comments such as:

- “Trainer was very knowledgeable. I appreciated the guest speakers.”
- “Trainer did great, kept the day moving along. Enjoyed the speakers.”

- “Well presented and organized event.”

The comments also highlight the benefit of involving members of the Vancouver Housing First’s Speakers Bureau.

“Most Important Learning”

Participants were asked, “What was the most important thing you learned today?” A total of 27 responses were then categorized into based on predominant responses as they related to session content. Comments could be included in more than one category if referenced in the comment.

- What: Housing First Principles
- How: Case Management Engagement
- Who: Client Eligibility
- HPS: Comments referencing details of HPS funding
- Other: Comments that did not fall into the above categories

