

December 2012

HOMELESSNESS

CLOSING THE GAP BETWEEN CAPACITY AND PERFORMANCE

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Online ISBN 978-1-927350-34-8
Print ISBN 978-1-927350-33-1

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In response to a significant rise in homelessness in the mid-1990s, particularly in Canada's larger cities, the federal government developed a national program, based on community partnerships, largely to address the underfunding and insufficient supply of beds in shelters for homeless people. Since the program's announcement in late 1999, it has allocated more than \$1 billion on direct homelessness programming. Although the community-based model underlying the federal program has been fairly well received, best estimates suggest that the number of homeless people has not been reduced. A number of other issues have emerged, including: the lack of reliable data on the actual number of homeless people in Canada; no clear commitment to the Housing First principle, which focuses on getting homeless people into housing, with additional supports so they can maintain their new housing; and divided responsibility for matters related to homelessness within the federal government.

Provincial governments are the most important constitutional levers related to the homeless population, and a number of them have been addressing the issue for quite some time. In the past several years, some of them—Alberta and New Brunswick are leading examples—have expanded their programming. In some cases, community innovations have had an impact on the shape of provincial programs. However, the Housing First principle has not been widely implemented. Moreover, with a few exceptions, provincial governments have not taken steps to actively coordinate their efforts across different departments with responsibilities that could help reduce the number of people who remain homeless.

Drawing on interviews conducted with representatives of the federal and provincial governments, non-profit organizations, and the academic sector, the author uses examples of innovative practice to demonstrate that there is a great deal of capacity in the homelessness sector in Canada but that this capacity is not being translated into sufficiently positive results. Part of the problem lies in the overlapping and competing roles of the different orders of government, a lack of clarity about who does (or should) do what, and a lack of incentives to squarely address the core problem. There are nonetheless promising practices to build on. In some communities, such as Trois-Rivières (Quebec), innovative and effective programs have been developed to help move homeless people out of homelessness.

To help build on this untapped capacity, the author recommends that the federal government's involvement be transformed. In interested provinces, the provincial government would be solely responsible for direct homelessness programming. This would be reflected in bilateral agreements between the federal and relevant provincial governments; each agreement would stipulate the terms for continuing funding from the federal government. The federal government should fund housing projects for homeless people who can leave shelters through a Housing First Fund and play a leading role (through Statistics Canada) in data collation and analysis.

In addition, provincial governments should implement a series of priority actions, including: rules for shelter funding that place an incentive on the reduction of homelessness; shelter bed moratoria; coherent and coordinated discharge planning; and the appointment of a minister responsible for homelessness, where this is not already the case. Above all, these and other actions need to be coordinated through a more integrated, client-centred approach to addressing the challenges in this important policy field, particularly the causes of homelessness.



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INTRODUCTION

Homelessness is a policy space that is thick with governmental and non-governmental players whose respective roles are often unclear. The field is characterized by competing interests, unclear accountability, significant data challenges, and even disagreement about the definition of the problem.¹ There is a great deal of capacity in Canada's homelessness sector, but this capacity is not being translated into sufficiently positive results. Part of the problem lies in the overlapping and competing roles of the different orders of government, a lack of clarity about who does (or should) do what and a lack of incentives to squarely address the core problem. There are nonetheless promising practices to build on. In some communities, impressive and effective programs have been developed to help alleviate homelessness.

The purpose of this research note is to diagnose the policy and governance challenges associated with homelessness in Canada, critique existing programs and make recommendations designed to move the country towards ending homelessness. This research note is divided into three sections:

1. the involvement of the federal government in the homelessness sector;
2. provincial and territorial government programs for homeless people; and
3. policy options to close the gap between the homelessness sector's capacity to address the problem and its performance to date.

At present, governments and agencies alike are seemingly unable to fully focus on solutions to homelessness. A principal impediment to effective policy making and programming is a lack of clarity about which level of government is responsible for progress on homelessness. While the author sees a specified role for the federal government, he concludes that explicit concentration of responsibility in provincial governments is the best route forward.

To support this analysis, between January and March 2012, the author interviewed 10 experts from the federal and provincial governments, non-profit organizations and the academic sector to inquire about what is working well in the homelessness field in Canada, what is not working well and what should be done to improve policy and programming. These interviews were conducted on a not-for-attribution basis in order to elicit candid observations.²

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT INVOLVEMENT IN THE HOMELESS SECTOR

Homelessness did not resonate with either the public or federal politicians as a policy issue until the late 1990s. In fact, the index of topics discussed in the House of Commons did not list a single debate on homelessness in the 1990s until September 1997. It was not until December 17, 1999 that the government made a formal commitment to fighting homelessness.³

Why did it take so long for the federal government to turn its attention to the issue? There are at least three interconnected answers. The first is that provincial governments already occupied the field. For example, as early as 1958 the Ontario government authorized funding for people experiencing homelessness through that year's General Welfare Assistance Act.⁴

The second is that homelessness only became a significant social challenge in the 1990s. Until then, homelessness appeared to limit itself to older men with alcohol addictions. Provincial governments and the homeless shelters in Canada's larger cities seemed able to keep the clientele safe, warm, fed, and off the front pages. In the mid-1990s, the number of homeless people spiked. In Toronto, between September 1992 and September 1998 the average daily hostel occupancy for single adults increased by 63 per cent. In the same six-year period, the increase in shelter use in Toronto was 80 per cent for youth, 78 per cent for single women, 55 per cent for single men, and a shocking 123 per cent for families.⁵ In Calgary, the homeless population increased by 122 per cent between 1994 and 1998.⁶ The media began to cover the issue more actively, which in turn drew public attention to the growing social problem.

The third, and perhaps most crucial, reason relates to the dramatic reduction in the federal affordable housing program and in social transfer payments to provincial governments from 1993 to 1998. These cuts were particularly damaging to the structures that had once prevented vulnerable people from slipping into homelessness.⁷ As NDP MP Libby Davies said in the House of Commons on February 2, 1999:

A week or so ago I concluded a national tour across Canada on homelessness in this country. One of the things I learned from housing activists and anti-poverty activist in places like Toronto, Moncton, Winnipeg, northern Manitoba, New Brunswick, and in my riding of Vancouver is that more and more people are feeling the impact of the abandonment of the national housing program by the federal Liberals since 1993.⁸

The federal government's response was the National Homelessness Initiative (NHI), much of the credit for which belongs to Claudette Bradshaw, then the federal Minister of Labour. The tip of the NHI's spear was the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI), announced in December 1999.⁹ (The SCPI became known as "skippy" within the sector.) With an original three-year budget of \$305 million, SCPI's stated policy objectives were:

1. to ensure that no individuals are involuntarily on the street by ensuring that sufficient shelters and adequate support systems are available;
2. to reduce significantly the number of individuals requiring emergency shelters and transitional and supporting housing;

3. to help individuals move from homelessness through to self-sufficiency;
4. to help communities strengthen their capacity to address the needs of their homeless population; and
5. to improve the social, health, and economic well-being of people who are homeless.¹⁰

Eighty per cent of SCPI funds were allocated to the 10 cities identified as having the most serious problems with homelessness; the remainder of the program funding was allocated to some 45 (mostly smaller) centres. SCPI funding could be used to cover up to 50 per cent of eligible costs on an equal basis with direct and in-kind contributions from other funding partners.¹¹

Federal officials reported that successive federal governments spent the decade from 2000 to 2010 essentially focusing on improving the lives of homeless people while they remained homeless. The stated rationale was that, beginning in the mid-1990s, emergency services for people living on the street or in shelters were generally under-funded and unable to meet demand.

SCPI was renamed the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) in 2007, and the annual budget was increased from \$100 million to \$134 million. The federal government has renewed the SCPI program for one to three year periods although funding to non-governmental service delivery agencies has always been contracted on an annual basis. The program continued to focus principally on building the sector's capacity to sustain individuals suffering through homelessness, rather than on preventing homelessness in the first place. University of Toronto Professor David Hulchanski criticized this emphasis in 2005: "Unhoused people do not want further services that may make them a bit more comfortable while their physical and emotional health declines due to a lack of a place to live. Go ask them which they would choose."¹²

SCPI/HPS was built on a community-based funding model. Funding flowed directly from Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC)¹³ to frontline agencies based on plans developed and agreed to by designated communities, primarily large urban centres. This model forced agencies, municipalities and other actors to develop a shared vision and direction for meeting SCPI objectives. Except for Quebec, provincial governments were not involved. The Quebec government agreed to the model on the condition that representatives of its health department would have the authority to vet and coordinate funding proposals in designated Quebec communities.

The community-based approach has generally been viewed as a success. As one provincial official commented: "I don't like giving credit to the federal government, but it deserves credit for introducing homelessness programming at a community level. We might have organized our own approach to homelessness differently if the feds hadn't developed that approach." A municipal official in Toronto said essentially the same thing: "I'm the biggest fan [of HPS] around. The feds actually listened in terms of the [community-

A principal impediment to effective policy making and programming is a lack of clarity about which level of government is responsible for progress on homelessness.

based] delivery model”. However, a study of the initial years of the operation of SCPI in Winnipeg concluded that the program’s promises of flexibility and responsiveness were not being met because the federal government was “in practice...reluctant to relinquish power.”¹⁴ In contrast, in Vancouver and Saint John, New Brunswick there were fewer frictions with stakeholders and a more cooperative spirit prevailed.¹⁵ More generally, community leaders in the field, although generally enthusiastic about the community-based approach, have repeatedly emphasized that HPS is administratively burdensome; exasperation in this regard is a common sentiment.

On another front, a promising policy shift in 2007 was the adoption by HRSDC of a Housing First philosophy. “Housing First” means that homelessness should be solved through housing and not managed through shelter programs or otherwise. The Housing First approach was developed through research produced by Pathways to Housing in New York.¹⁶ The organization found that the costs of housing homeless persons were lower than per diem shelter funding and other costs assumed by the state to maintain people in homelessness.¹⁷ A 2011 report by the National Council of Welfare cites numerous research studies that came to the same conclusion.¹⁸ For example, it costs the Alberta government \$1,200 a month to finance a shelter stay in Calgary whereas it would cost \$600 to \$800 a month to provide the same person with stable housing.¹⁹ According to another recent study, \$9,300 a year is saved by providing mentally ill homeless people with a home and suitable social supports.²⁰ Early findings from the Mental Health Commission of Canada’s At Home/Chez Soi Project also show potential savings from a Housing First approach for chronically homeless men and women.²¹

The Housing First approach has nevertheless been criticized for seeming to imply that housing alone is a sufficient response to homelessness, and for failing to take into account the social services that formerly homeless people need to maintain the housing they obtain. However, while the founders of this approach have shown that homeless people fare better in housing even without such services, making appropriate supports available does improve their chances of remaining stably housed.²²

Between 2000 and 2010, the federal government spent more than \$1 billion through SCPI and HPS on direct homelessness programming through the community-based delivery model. This does not include funding for rental rehabilitation, Aboriginal homeless initiatives, youth homelessness and affordable housing (reintroduced by the Chrétien government in 2001). Nor does it include the “SURFI” component of federal homelessness programming which allows the transfer of designated surplus federal property to community-based homelessness projects. The federal government is proud of how it has successfully leveraged \$2.50 for every dollar of HPS funding. In addition, HPS funding allowed some provincial governments to fill gaps, for example in the area of youth homelessness.

What were the results? HRSDC’s evaluation of the HPS program in 2009 found that although the community organizations delivering frontline services to homeless people were generally satisfied with the program, it was difficult to conclude that homelessness was shrinking.²³ If anything, it seemed to be growing:

Currently, there are no reliable national-level data available on the number of homeless individuals and families in Canada. As a result, it is challenging to estimate the actual trends and rates of homelessness on a national level. According to data collected at local levels, homelessness in many communities is increasing. Many services and facilities are experiencing increased demand, and are operating at or above capacity.²⁴

After a decade of federal homelessness programming, HRSDC was thus unable to report whether homelessness was going up or down. However, as noted in the

evaluation, in cities where homelessness counts were regularly conducted, the numbers were definitely rising. For example, in Vancouver, Calgary and Edmonton, there was an increase of as much as 20 per cent between from 2006 and 2008.²⁵ The Canadian Housing and Renewal Association estimates the homeless population in Canada today to be anywhere from 150,000 to 300,000 people,²⁶ although an academic interviewee noted that this estimate is not necessarily reliable.

Three years after the 2009 evaluation, a federal official informed the author that the federal government has achieved data coverage for most of the country, although the data will not be shared until its accuracy and reliability can be confirmed. The same official noted that by stabilizing emergency services in the sector over the last 10 years (by funding activity that attends to the needs of homeless people while they are homeless), the federal government was able to begin turning its attention to longer-term initiatives such as the reliability of homeless data.

Although this is encouraging news, the continuing lack of published data is worrisome. A provincial official from a western province described HPS as “the worst federal program with the least accountability.” This view contrasts strongly with that of other interviewees, such as those quoted above, who described HPS as an effective federal social program because of its decentralization and community emphasis. It may be that both views have elements of truth. The community-based planning and delivery model of SCPI-HPS appears to be a best practice, even if data collection and reporting for the program are relatively weak. A non-profit leader in the sector attributed this disconnect to the “hyperlocalization” of the SCPI-HPS approach to fighting homelessness, which has involved a decades-long focus on building community capacity to respond to human crises, with less effort devoted to other concerns, such as data collection.

The 2009 evaluation addressed another important issue. It illustrated that although the availability of transitional housing for homeless people is fundamental to a Housing First approach, “the supply of transitional and supportive housing is not meeting the demand.”²⁷ In other words, despite support for the Housing First guiding principle, an insufficient volume of housing was available to meaningfully put the principle into practice.

Responsibility for housing in the federal government does not belong to HRSDC but to the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC). This makes it even more difficult to realize the Housing First goal through HRSDC programming. CMHC’s mandate is to help “Canadians access affordable, better quality housing” and, in particular, to “provide federal investments in housing programs for lower-income Canadians and for First Nation communities.”²⁸ Although HPS does provide limited funding for brick and mortar projects, developing significantly more supportive and transitional housing (as called for in the 2009 HPS evaluation) would be more in line with CMHC’s mandate, which it executes in partnership with the provinces. This awkward division of responsibilities is addressed later in this paper.

“The supply of transitional and supportive housing is not meeting demand.”

- HRSDC evaluation of the HPS program (2009)

Another federal department, Health, also plays a role in this policy field. In 2008, the Department of Health provided \$110 million over five years to the Mental Health Commission of Canada to study the connection between homelessness and mental illness. The Commission initiated a major experimental program, At Home/Chez Soi, to see if an active Housing First approach for homeless individuals with mental health issues might yield positive results for this cohort.²⁹ The program, which involves more than 2,000 homeless people, is being tested in Moncton, Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg and Vancouver.³⁰ The Mental Health Commission states that the project is “the largest of its kind underway in the world right now.”³¹ This experiment is showing early signs of success. As of 2011, more than 1,030 homeless men, half the cohort, had been housed. In Moncton, the At Home team has taken a proactive approach by linking homeless individuals with services, including provincial income support and housing. Early indications show this has been successful.³²

One question is how these various federal initiatives relate to each other. A federal official explained that the homelessness file is coordinated among HRSDC, CMHC, Health and other departments. The HPS team from HRSDC sits on a variety of interdepartmental committees to ensure that information is shared and programming is coordinated. For example, through the interdepartmental committee for drug treatment the HPS team was able to direct HPS dollars into a Justice pilot project for housing homeless drug offenders who are in approved drug treatment plans. When questioned as to whether a separate committee specifically dedicated to homelessness would be helpful, one federal official responded that “there’s a big push to engage other departments, so I’m not sure if we need another table.” Although it is true that “more committees” is rarely the answer to complex social programs, implementing a Housing First approach may require that clear accountability be invested in a group with impactful policy levers and delivery mechanisms.

Relations between HRSDC and provincial governments appear to be focused on ensuring there is a measure of alignment between their respective priorities. The federal government has invited provincial governments to consider more formal bilateral arrangements that reflect provincial needs in areas such as research, data, and capital projects. However, there is presently no common planning, priority setting, or reporting between the federal government and provincial governments in the homelessness field.

After some 12 years of intervention to address homelessness, the federal government has a mixed record. On the one hand, it has created and managed a credible community-based program focused on the day-to-day needs of homeless individuals. It has partnered with other federal departments on numerous projects and successfully leveraged external dollars with its HPS funding.

On the other hand, SCPI funding, in the amount of about \$130 million a year, is a fairly insignificant allocation for such a complex and significant social challenge. In addition, because of uncertainty about the program’s duration, agencies have often had to ramp up and scale down their activities. A Toronto municipal official interviewed for this project noted that the city’s official position is that HPS funding should be doubled and made permanent in order to address these two major issues. The federal government is only starting to consider longer-term solutions to homelessness (notably through the Housing First approach). It has not yet published any national data on homelessness trends. Although there is information sharing and even some joint programming among federal departments, horizontal coordination is fragmented and accountability is weak. Finally, there does not presently appear to be an interest in, or the capacity to set up, a process to begin the complicated task of planning and coordinating the reduction of homelessness in Canada.

PROVINCIAL AND TERRITORIAL GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS FOR THE HOMELESS

Provincial and territorial governments have long been involved in the homelessness sector—in some instances for more than four decades. However, as with the federal government, the growth in the size and complexity of the problem in the 1990s compelled provincial governments to become much more active.

In response to the increase in homelessness in the 1990s, provincial governments mostly did more of what they were already doing. In general, they did not develop more creative or effective interventions. The clearest illustration of this was the increase in the extent of homeless shelters. Between 1995 and 2005, shelters in Canada's biggest cities became some of the largest institutions in the not-for-profit sector. In fact, some of them dwarf many public institutions in terms of the number of clients and beds. For example, the Calgary Drop In and Rehab Centre has more than 1,000 beds in its network (up from several hundred in the late 1990s).³³ The Old Brewery Mission in Montreal presently operates about 450 beds (compared to approximately 200 in the mid-1990s).³⁴ The number of homeless shelters has also grown. For the one-year period 2006-07, the number of known shelters in Canada grew from 859 to 1,020, and the number of beds increased from 21,988 to 26,872.³⁵

Not all of these beds are of the traditional dormitory type where homeless clients are required to leave the premises during the day. It is estimated that about 71 per cent of the total beds are of this type, with the rest being supportive and transitional housing spaces.³⁶ The operating costs for a majority of the homeless shelter beds are covered by either a per diem or provincial funding that reflects the number of beds in the shelter.

The story is similar in the territories. A recent study about homelessness in Canada's North reported the following:

Homelessness is generally regarded as a recent phenomenon in the NWT. Before the 1990s, visible signs of homelessness in NWT communities were largely uncommon. Yet a walk down the main street of the territorial capital, Yellowknife, or those of regional centres like Inuvik, indicates that something has significantly changed. Since the late 1990s, emergency shelters in Yellowknife and Inuvik have reported a steady increase in use, representing a rise in absolute, or 'visible' homelessness.³⁷

The growth of homeless shelters occurred, in part, because provincial governments have created incentives for their growth. This includes contracts that pay a fixed rate to shelters for each bed that is filled. The same governments have not put a priority on reducing the number of clients that shelters serve. Many shelters are nonetheless building capacity to help clients leave and stay out of homelessness. Provincial governments must ask themselves whether they can do more to partner with the shelters to focus on reducing homelessness rather than on managing its continual increase. This could include transfer payment arrangements, funding formulas, and accountability arrangements that create additional incentives for those working in the sector to place people in housing.

Provincial governments are undertaking new approaches that include integrated service provision and a focus on the underlying causes of homelessness, with the objective of reducing homelessness. Some of them have taken additional actions, including setting up health, social work and addiction units for homeless people as well as housing and employment referral centres. The Ottawa Mission, for example, is home to a provincially funded palliative care unit for homeless people.³⁸

A few provinces have recently decided to go beyond the standard approach of mainly offering services to homeless people. In particular, British Columbia and Alberta have launched aggressive campaigns to change the homelessness landscape. BC Housing acquired an unprecedented number of units in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside and elsewhere in order to break the cycle of homelessness throughout the province. In January 2009, the provincial government, through BC Housing, announced a \$34 million investment to purchase or lease 15 properties with a total of 600 units to house homeless people.³⁹ This is a clear example of the Housing First approach. Nevertheless, while *street homelessness* in Vancouver has fallen by half in the last few years thanks to concerted local action, the *overall homeless* population has remained unchanged. This is because large numbers of men and women who were living on the street have moved into the city's homeless shelters.⁴⁰

HOW DO WE DEFINE "HOMELESS"?

The homeless population has three components:

- street people, who live out of doors in parks, under bridges and in crawl spaces;
- shelter people, who live in homeless shelters; and
- resource people, who move from place to place with no fixed address of their own, relying on the resources of friends, family, churches, and soup kitchens.

Alberta has gone even further down the Housing First path. In 2008, the provincial government created a Secretariat on Homelessness. In 2009, it adopted a 10-year plan to eliminate homelessness, inspired by the movement in the United States ignited by Philip Mangano, the former head of the Federal Interagency Council on Homelessness. Alberta's Department of Municipal Affairs spent some \$3.2 billion in capital investments and operating funding for the 2009-2012 period for prevention initiatives and to move people off the street and out of shelters.⁴¹ This assertive Housing First orientation humbles the federal financial commitment. Alberta's investments have started to pay off. For example, in Edmonton, there was a 21 per cent decrease in overall homelessness between 2008 and 2010.⁴²

Ontario and Quebec have not been as active as British Columbia and Alberta. Although funding to frontline organizations has improved over the last five years in both provinces, neither Ontario nor Quebec has a focused province-level commitment to provide stable housing for homeless people. Some good programming has nevertheless been developed in recent years. Toronto's Street to Homes initiative has been exceptionally successful in housing street people. Indeed, it led to a 51 per cent drop in street homelessness between 2006 and 2009.⁴³ However, the number of homeless people relying on shelters in Toronto barely changed over that period.⁴⁴

In Quebec, Montreal's Old Brewery Mission won the Quebec Department of Health's 2009-10 Award of Excellence for its innovative programming to reduce homelessness in the city.⁴⁵ There are other examples of successful initiatives in Quebec, but a broad commitment to change has been elusive and demand for shelter services continues to rise.⁴⁶ In both Quebec and Ontario, large deficits make finding revenue more difficult than in some other provinces.

Other provinces have also made changes to their approach. The New Brunswick government has developed a comprehensive plan to fight homelessness that is embedded in its housing strategy. With the full support of community partners, the province has been gradually increasing and restructuring its funding to frontline service agencies in order to create incentives for clients to move into housing rather than stay in shelters. Concerted community action with the right funding formula is starting to pay off. For example, the Fredericton shelter saw a 15 per cent drop in usage from 2010 to 2011.⁴⁷ Newfoundland and Labrador has also shifted to a Housing First model. A community leader in the field reports that the province has not opened a single new homeless shelter bed since 2006.

Overall, perhaps the most important criticism of provincial programming concerns the lack of horizontal coordination. The provinces have jurisdiction in the principal areas that concern homeless individuals, namely healthcare, income assistance, housing (including supportive housing and rent supplement programming), as well as training and education. However, as a general rule, provincial governments have not moved to integrate health and social services with homelessness initiatives. Although several provinces are starting to consider how to coordinate timely and appropriate services to homeless people in a client-centred, integrated way aimed at helping them get out and stay out of homelessness, no provincial government has yet achieved this objective to any great degree.

However, such integration has sometimes occurred at a local level. One example is in Trois-Rivières, Quebec. Although the Quebec government deserves some credit, the leadership came from a small shelter called Le Havre. Demand for Le Havre's services spiked from 281 different clients in 1989 to 1,108 in 2007, with the biggest increase from 1995 to 1999. However, between 1997 and 2007 the shelter was able to reduce its number of beds from 25 to 16. How was it possible for Le Havre to accommodate more than four times the number of clients with considerably less capacity? The key was adopting a "social emergency room" approach to homelessness. As in hospital emergency rooms, clients are triaged, treated, and referred to more appropriate places to "convalesce." In partnership with health, housing, and social service partners, Le Havre staff help homeless individuals find options for housing, care, and income security. After an average of seven days, clients are able to leave the shelter, most of the time on a permanent basis.⁴⁸ This proactive approach allows the shelter to assist significantly more clients. Peel Region in the Greater Toronto Area has also undertaken a move toward horizontal service delivery that is also producing measurable positive results.⁴⁹

Provincial governments also have most of the legal tools to *prevent* homelessness. The three primary areas for achieving prevention are mental health, social services (including child welfare), and correctional services; all but the last are entirely within the provinces' constitutional ambit. However, provincial governments have not yet found the right innovative methods, particularly to prevent vulnerable clients from slipping onto the street or into a shelter after they are discharged from institutional care.

As we have seen, provincial governments—sometimes building on community innovation—have become more active in the homelessness sector. They are beginning to experiment with new delivery models and a greater focus on reducing homelessness in a systemic way over the long term. How can Canada build on these innovations and do even more?

POLICY OPTIONS

As the preceding two sections demonstrate, there is significant capacity in the homelessness sector that has not been adequately mobilized. This section discusses policy options in three areas: clarifying governments' roles, priority actions, and data. A number of recommendations are presented to further the objective of narrowing the gap between the homelessness sector's abilities and its performance.

CLARIFYING GOVERNMENTS' ROLES

One federal interviewee noted that provincial governments have a “closer relationship” with the homeless clientele. Does this mean the latter should have the primary responsibility for dealing with the issue? “This is a great Canadian question,” suggested an academic interviewed for this project. He added: “The provinces in general have been maturing to the task [of fighting homelessness]. Federal leadership was important when the provinces were essentially absent, but times have changed. Maybe it is time to hand the file over to the provinces and ask the federal government to play a different and more appropriate role, such as in the housing file.”

Three primary options for organizing the federal and provincial governments' policy responses to homelessness are:

1. the status quo;
2. more concerted joint federal-provincial action; and
3. withdrawal of the federal government from homelessness programming, along with a more integrated approach on the part of provincial governments to align programs that address the causes of homelessness.

Although the federal and provincial governments have improved their approaches to addressing homelessness, the fact that the number of homeless people appears to be increasing in many places, holding steady in others, while shrinking in very few, speaks strongly against a status quo approach. In light of the impact of homelessness on health (including life expectancy), the status quo is not acceptable for moral reasons.⁵⁰ It is also not acceptable on financial grounds—as we have seen, there are significant cost savings to be found in housing homeless people rather than investing in measures to make a life of homelessness more livable.

The second option, more concerted joint action between federal and provincial governments is better than the first. It reflects the American approach formalized in the Interagency Council on Homelessness.⁵¹ One avenue would be the creation of a Canadian Roundtable on Homelessness, which would include all relevant federal departments, representatives of all provincial governments and territories, and national non-profit organizations engaged in the sector, such as the three national networks referred to below and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities. The council could be chaired by HRSDC or a highly respected community leader and have a mandate to prepare a joint anti-homelessness plan and track success against the plan. However, given the number of civil servants who might be asked to contribute to the forum, their frequent job movements and the time (and perhaps legislation) to set it up, such an undertaking might end up being a bureaucratic distraction from the essential policy goal of reducing and preventing homelessness.

With a few caveats, option three is the best approach. The federal government should withdraw from homelessness programming and leave the field to the provinces. It developed a national program in 1999 on homelessness largely because of the alarming rise in homelessness in Canada's largest cities. In some senses, the federal government's primary job—namely to develop capacity at the community level to reduce homelessness—may be complete. Almost all the interviewees for this project agreed that the federal government had provided successful leadership in this regard. As provincial governments have become more active, the need for federal leadership is not as obvious.

One provincial official advised the author that provinces “have to take up the gauntlet of leadership and implement Housing First.” The same official said that provincial governments need to “break the back of the upstream issues as they are the authors of homelessness.” They also have the greatest power to shape the future of the field through activities to prevent and reduce homelessness. In addition, the provinces are the level of government that most benefits from the reduction of homelessness, as it relates to lower utilization of emergency health, criminal justice, and social services.

A further consideration is that, with both orders of government active in the sector, neither can be held accountable for achieving positive results for homeless people. Federal government withdrawal would clarify issues of responsibility and accountability. Provincial governments would no longer have to spend time and effort negotiating priorities, data collection, and community plans with the federal government, and would be able to focus on further improvement through the use of their jurisdiction over health, housing, and social services. Community planning entities and agencies would also benefit as they would need to interact, apply to, and partner with only one order of government.

Some of the benefits of this option can be seen in Alberta's significant success in the field to date. This can be explained by the enhanced leadership demonstrated by the provincial government (admittedly prodded into action by municipalities and community agencies), the strategic commitment it has made to end homelessness in a decade, and its efforts to bring about greater horizontal coordination among the relevant departments and agencies, leading to more client-centred and integrated service delivery.

Another argument in favour of federal withdrawal is the emergence of three national networks to fight homelessness. The Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, the Homelessness Learning Network and the Canadian Homelessness Research Network would continue to keep the issue in the public eye at a national level, advance best practice among frontline agencies, and develop and disseminate research. In addition, the provinces could come together in a permanent forum to jointly address homelessness issues, as they do in the education sector through the Council of Ministers of Education. Federal funds could be tied to the collection of data agreed to by governments, along with public reporting and identification of best and less satisfactory practices.

There is significant capacity in the homelessness sector that has not been adequately mobilized.

The federal government's withdrawal should come with a transfer of resources, including financial, real property from the SURFI program, and administrative resources. This is important because HPS funding, though small in relative terms, is very important to the community sector. An Alberta official suggested that financial resources could be rolled into the Canada Social Transfer to ensure provinces can benefit from the funding over the long term. However, there is a risk that the transfer would be directed to other spending priorities. A potentially more fruitful approach would be to negotiate bilateral agreements with interested provincial governments; the agreements would include specific commitments about the activities (but not specific programs) on which the federal funds would be spent.

Federal withdrawal from homelessness programming does not mean ending the federal role in some important related areas. For example, in order for provinces to successfully implement Housing First type programs, they may need more flexibility from CMHC on the terms of federal-provincial housing agreements. Provincial governments should be assured that they can direct federal affordable housing and rental rehabilitation dollars into programming for homeless people. The eventual creation of a CMHC "Housing First Fund" for homeless people, similar to the federal government's Affordable Housing Initiative and administered and delivered by the provinces, would be laudable and consistent with this new role.

There should also be a continuing federal role with regard to data. The lack of reliable data on Canada's homeless population hampers effective policy and program development for both orders of government. Statistics Canada should be directed and funded to prepare a regular review and report on homelessness trends, particularly in the areas of street and shelter homelessness, using and improving on HPS data collection.

There are some drawbacks to such a realignment of the federal government's roles described above. Although leveraging private resources should not be affected if the provinces continue to manage the file in a community-based manner, there is a risk this may happen. The gaps HPS may fill today in provincial streams of funding could re-open. However, the risk of this is significantly outweighed by the advantages of the realignment of the federal government's roles as outlined above. It should also be said that according the provinces clear primacy over homelessness programming and the federal government a supporting role would not mean overnight success. Political will on the part of the provinces would be necessary to fill the space vacated by HRSDC and expand its efforts.

Several provincial governments may not be interested in or ready for such a move. The federal government could retain its presence in the homelessness domain for these provinces, as it will have to in any case for the three territories and for on-reserve Aboriginal people. This is what has occurred in other policy fields such as housing.⁵² The timing to open the door to such discussions is ideal, as the present phase of the federal HPS program expires in 2014.

PRIORITY ACTIONS

With full responsibility for homelessness programs, provincial governments would be in a position to set clear objectives, if they have not already, to prevent and reduce homelessness. They should begin by considering four key issues.

First, the rules for shelter funding need to place an incentive on the reduction of homelessness. Formulas that simply increase funding for more beds and more clients must be replaced with more demanding criteria that tie funding to success.

Many homeless shelters have talented boards and staff who can help the agencies stably house homeless individuals in the community as quickly as possible.⁵³ Many shelters may even decide, as did Thames Reach in London, England, to transform themselves into home support agencies for formerly homeless people.⁵⁴

Second, provincial governments should consider declaring moratoria on adding new shelter beds, as Newfoundland and Labrador has already done. The challenge is to turn fewer shelter beds over quickly by proactively providing homeless clients with the services they need to escape chronic reliance on the shelter.

Third, a minister responsible for homelessness should be named in each province where this has not already been done. The minister should be supported by an intradepartmental structure to coordinate responsibility for discharge planning (including strong housing and community supports) for young people leaving the child protection system, mental health patients, patients with addictions leaving institutional care and parolees leaving correctional service.⁵⁵ In New Brunswick, the Leadership Group on Homelessness, which brings together a number of departments and partners, was created precisely to bring together the necessary stakeholders to develop a common vision and plan to fight homelessness in the province. This model could serve as an example for other provinces.

Fourth, provincial governments should align their many programs directed toward dealing with the causes of homelessness into a more integrated, client-centred approach. Lessons can be drawn from looking to experiments that are yielding good results, such as those in Trois-Rivières and in Peel Region. Greater horizontal coordination of the relevant provincial services would be beneficial, even if the federal government continued to be involved in direct programming for homeless people.

DATA

Effective planning and programming depend on quality data. Provincial governments should require their community partners to collect and share client data (taking confidentiality requirements into consideration) as a condition of funding. This should be developed in partnership with the sector and standardized across provinces. Community entities that manage community planning efforts should be funded to carry out annual street counts and share results. Shelters and other transition homes should be accountable for shelter data: if they do not provide data, they would lose funding. Data obtained and collated by provincial governments would be shared with Statistics Canada and others through open data conventions to allow for the preparation of regular reports. Such an approach would also allow the community and academic sectors to probe and analyze the data, which may help reveal important evidence to identify factors and programs that contribute to reducing homelessness.

In some senses, the federal government's primary job—namely to develop capacity at the community level to reduce homelessness—may be complete.

CONCLUSION

Homelessness can be reduced and even eliminated in Canada. The Housing First research and Canadian best practices demonstrate the possibilities. However, as Canadians continue to step over large numbers of street people in major cities and most homeless shelters continue to fill up every night, governments are making only modest headway towards improving their plight. One academic interviewee lamented, “Here we are in 2012 and no one is accountable for the homelessness file.” Provincial governments are best placed to create the conditions that prevent and reduce homelessness. It is recommended that the federal role be transformed, notably by clarifying that, in interested provinces, the provincial government would be solely responsible for direct programming. This would be reflected in bilateral agreements between the federal and relevant provincial governments; each agreement would stipulate the terms for a continuing transfer of resources from the federal government. The provinces would then be positioned to implement a series of priority actions, including more strategic shelter funding, shelter bed moratoria, and coherent and coordinated discharge planning. Providing that provincial governments become more active in horizontal coordination, vesting them with responsibility for homelessness programming could help close the gap between capacity and performance in this important policy field.



ENDNOTES

1. The Canadian Homelessness Research Network is proposing a “Canadian definition of homelessness” and is seeking input on a proposed definition:<http://www.homelesshub.ca/Library/Canadian-Definition-of-Homelessness-54225.aspx>
2. The author would like to thank the interviewees for their time and thoughtful contributions.
3. Judi Longfield, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Labour, House of Commons Debates, December 17, 1999.
4. See: Regional Municipality of Waterloo, “Understanding Homelessness and Housing Stability Experienced by Adults in Waterloo Region’s Urban Areas,” 2007, chap. 5; <http://www.homelesshub.ca/%28S%28g4bcog55rnljj145ippq3miu%29%29/Resource/Frame.aspx?url=http%3a%2f%2fhomelesshub.ca%2fResourceFiles%2ffmne3gzq.pdf&id=34977&title=Understanding+Homelessness+and+Housing+Stability+Experienced+by+Adults+in+Waterloo+Region%27s+Urban+Areas&owner=121>
5. Taking Responsibility for Homelessness: An Action Plan for Toronto (known as the “Golden Report”) 1999, p. 14; http://www.toronto.ca/pdf/homeless_action.pdf
6. City of Calgary, Results of the Count of Homeless Persons in Calgary, 2006, p. 45; http://intraspec.ca/2006_calgary_homeless_count.pdf
7. Homelessness was undoubtedly further exacerbated by the intersection of ongoing deinstitutionalization of mental health patients and the intensive cuts to housing, income support programs and community supports occurring in the 1990s. On this, see: C. Forchuck, R. Russell, S. Kingston-Maclure, K. Turner and S. Dill, “From Psychiatric Wards to the Streets and Shelters,” *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, 13:3, 2006; and Gordon Laird, Shelter – Homelessness in a growth economy: Canada’s 21st century paradox, Sheldon Chumir Foundation for Ethics in Leadership, 2007, p. 6; <http://www.chumirethicsfoundation.ca/files/pdf/SHELTER.pdf>
8. House of Commons Debates, February 2, 1999.
9. NHI contained several other funding streams, including youth, Aboriginal and regional homelessness initiatives. The author focuses here on SCPI because of its relative size and importance.
10. Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, “Implementation Review: Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI),” October 2001; http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/publications_resources/audit/2000/6572/page00.shtml
11. Ibid.
12. J.D. Hulchanski, “No Homeland for the Poor: Homelessness and Canada’s Unhoused Population,” May 2005, p. 3; http://www.urbancenter.utoronto.ca/pdfs/researchassociates/2005_Hulchanski_Conference.pdf

13. Now Human Resources and Skills Development Canada.
14. Christopher Leo and Martine August, "The Federal Government and Homelessness: Community Initiative or Dictation from Above?", April 2005, p. 1; http://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/Manitoba_Pubs/2005/Fed_Gov_and_Homelessness.pdf
15. Christopher Leo, "Deep Federalism: Respecting Community Difference in National Policy," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 39:3 (2006), 497.
16. See Pathways to Housing website: http://www.pathwaystohousing.org/content/our_model
17. A 2012 University of Calgary study by Jeannette Waegemakers Schiff and John Rook, "Housing First: Where is the Evidence?", questions the underlying methodology and results of the original Housing First research: https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&pid=gmail&attid=0.1&thid=136936f77bf0e201&mt=application/pdf&url=https://mail.google.com/mail/?ui%3D2%26ik%3D7b2dd47c79%26view%3Datt%26th%3D136936f77bf0e201%26attid%3D0.1%26disp%3Dsafe%26zw&sig=AHIEtbSNXEdY0mIVGj3aglk_78IEZDjhlw&pli=1
18. National Council of Welfare, *The Dollars and Sense of Solving Poverty*, autumn 2011, chap. 6; http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2011/cnb-ncw/HS54-2-2011-eng.pdf
19. Ibid.
20. Stephen Gaetz, "The real cost of homelessness: Can we save money by doing the right thing?", *The Homeless Hub*, 2012; http://homelesshub.ca/ResourceFiles/costofhomelessness_paper21092012.pdf
21. Mental Health Commission of Canada, *Beyond Housing: At Home/Chez Soi Early Findings Report, Volume 3 – Fall 2012*; http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/AtHome-ChezSoi/AtHome_EarlyFindingsReportVolume3_ENG.pdf
22. Sam Tsemberis of Pathways to Housing made these comments in a speech at the annual general meeting of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities in June 2011 in Halifax, Nova Scotia.
23. The community sector did criticize HPS for having overly short timeframes and insufficient funding; see Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC), *Evaluation of the Homelessness Partnering Strategy*, July 2009; http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/publications_resources/evaluation/2009/ehps/sp-ah-904-07-09e.pdf
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. See <http://www.chra-achru.ca/en/index.php/our-work/homelessness/>
27. Ibid.
28. Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, *2011-2015 Summary of the Corporate Plan*, 2011; http://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/corp/about/anrecopl/upload/2011-2015_CPS_EN.pdf

29. The Housing First approach in the case of At Home/Chez Soi is defined as providing people with housing along with support services tailored to meet their needs. See the Mental Health Commission of Canada's website: <http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/Pages/homelessness.aspx>
30. The Moncton site is run by the former Liberal Cabinet minister Claudette Bradshaw, the guiding light behind the introduction of federal homelessness programming in 1999. It offers both housing and social services to participating homeless people through coordinated planning with the New Brunswick government's health and social services departments.
31. Mental Health Commission of Canada: <http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/Pages/homelessness.aspx>
32. Mental Health Commission of Canada, Beyond Housing.
33. See the "History" section at: <http://www.thedi.ca/about-the-di/di-history/>
34. Author's personal knowledge from time spent as Director General of the Old Brewery Mission
35. HRSDC, "Housing -- Homeless Shelters and Beds"; <http://www4.hrsdc.gc.ca/3ndic.lt.4r@-eng.jsp?iid=44>
36. Ibid.
37. Julia Blythe Christensen, Homeless in a homeland: housing (in)security and homelessness in Inuvik and Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, Canada, PhD dissertation, Department of Geography, McGill University, August 2011.
38. See: <http://www.ottawamission.com/index.php?q=hospice.html>
39. See: http://www.bchousing.org/Media/NR/2009/01/30/5590_0901300929-578. This investment, admittedly motivated in part by the upcoming Vancouver Olympic Games, was equivalent to 23 per cent of the federal government's total direct investments for addressing homelessness in Canada in that year.
40. See One Step Forward: Results of the 2011 Homelessness Count in Metro Vancouver; <http://www.metrovancouver.org/planning/homelessness/ResourcesPage/2011HomelessCountFinalReport28Feb2012-FinalVersion-Tuesday.pdf>
41. See Mariel Angus, "Alberta government announces plan to end homelessness by 1019!"; <http://www.cpj.ca/en/blog/mariel/alberta-government-announces-plan-end-homelessness-2019>
42. Metro Vancouver, One Step Forward: Results of the 2011 Homelessness Count in Metro Vancouver; <http://www.metrovancouver.org/planning/homelessness/ResourcesPage/2011HomelessCountFinalReport28Feb2012-FinalVersion-Tuesday.pdf>
43. See City of Toronto, Street Needs Assessment Results 2009; <http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2010/cd/bgrd/backgroundfile-29123.pdf>
44. Ibid.
45. http://www.oldbrewerymission.ca/new_projects_award_of_excellence.htm

46. See Daphné Cameron, "Affluence record dans les refuges de sans-abri," May 7, 2011; <http://www.cyberpresse.ca/actualites/regional/montreal/201105/07/01-4397192-affluence-record-dans-les-refuges-de-sans-abri.php>
47. "Experiencing Homelessness: New Brunswick Report on Homelessness," 2012; <http://issuu.com/cagh/docs/reportcard-2011?mode=embed>
48. Centre Le Havre de Trois-Rivières, *Mémoire*, Commission parlementaire sur l'itinérance, September 15, 2008; http://www.havre.qc.ca/fichiers_pdf/M%E9moire_spt2008.pdf
49. Jennifer Gold, *Integrating Human Services in an Age of Fiscal Restraint: A Shifting Gears Report*, Forthcoming, Mowat Centre, 2012.
50. A 2009 study by Stephen Hwang in Toronto estimated that homeless men in Canada have about the same chance of reaching the age of 75 as an average man in 1921, before the advent of antibiotics. Another Hwang study, from 2000, showed that, on average, homeless men in Toronto die at the age of 46 and homeless women at 39. Data reported on website of St. Michael's Hospital's Centre for Research on Inner City Health; www.stmichaelshospital.com/pdf/crich/homelessness-health.pdf
51. United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*, 2010; <http://www.epaperflip.com/aglaia/viewer.aspx?docid=1dc1e97f82884912a8932a3502c37c02>
52. Housing programs have been devolved to the provincial government in all provinces except Prince Edward Island.
53. In Ontario, homelessness programming has been devolved by law to municipalities. The latter would have to be part of the discussion around new shelter funding models that focus on success and not size.
54. See: <http://www.thamesreach.org.uk/what-we-do/>
55. Combining discharge planning with housing is the first of four recommendations in Martha Burt, Carol Peterson and Ann Elizabeth Montgomery, *Strategies for Preventing Homelessness*, prepared for US Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2006; http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/1000874_preventing_homelessness.pdf

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