# HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION PLANS IN SMALL CANADIAN CITIES: AN ANALYSIS OF PROBLEMS, PROSPECTS, AND INSIGHTS INTO COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS ACROSS SMALL CANADIAN CITIES

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# BACKGROUND

**Homelessness in small to medium range cities is under-researched**

**Homelessness programming and policy changes are often developed without adequate prior research**

**Siloing occurs within service sectors**

- There is very little knowledge transfer within and outside service sectors (i.e., between comparable sized locales where knowledge mobilization could produce innovation)

- Challenges of multi-sector cross-provincial homelessness innovation development and their current and potential prospects

# RESEARCH QUESTIONS

## How do individual agencies mobilize to:

- Shift their internal policies and procedures to a Housing First approach?

- Implement internal data collection for shared measurement and evaluation of their new programs?

- Coordinate services to ensure their clients get the right help from the right agency?

# STUDY DESIGN

Kelowna, BC – 14 participants

Lethbridge, AB – 12 participants

Sherbrooke, QC – 14 participants

*A comparative approach helps systems to move beyond anchoring biases, availability biases, framing effect, and inattentional blindness*

**SITE SELECTION:**

- Geospatial – proximity to American border
- Size/population:
  - Kelowna, BC ~144 600
  - Lethbridge, AB ~ 98 410
  - Sherbrooke, QC ~ 161 300
- Diverse economic bases
- Diverse political/cultural bases
- Diverse points in time relative to multi-year plans

# FINDINGS

FOUR MAIN THEMES:

1. Jurisdictional issues and oversight complications

2. Unstable and inflexible resources

3. Communication flow & data sharing issues

4. Service providers' attitudes towards organizational change
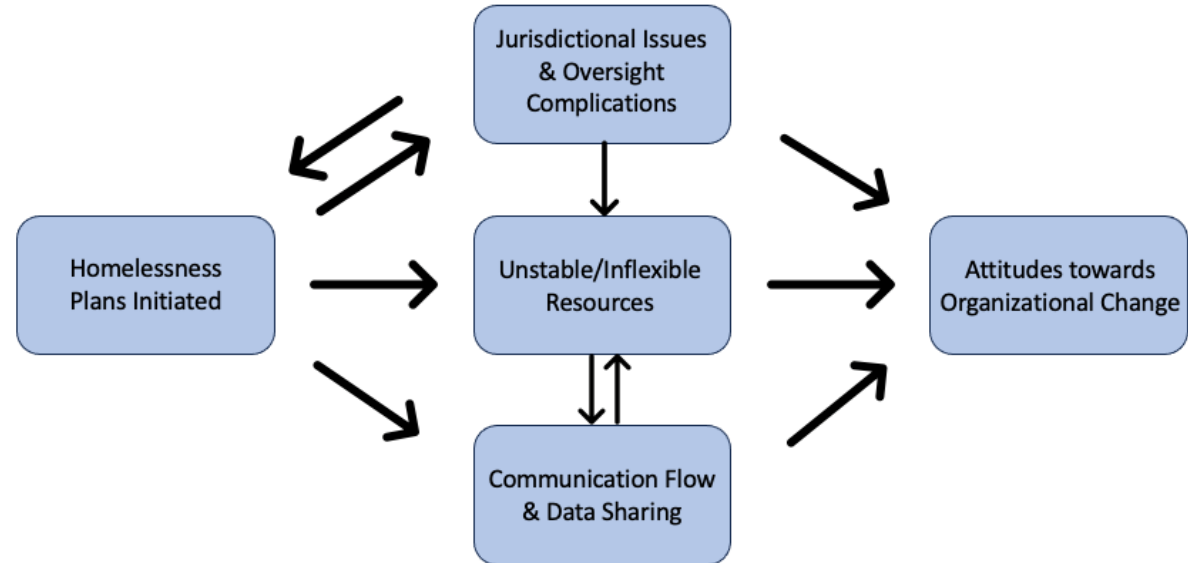
## 1. JURISDICTIONAL ISSUES & OVERSIGHT COMPLICATIONS

- Insufficient consultation processes with government bodies

  - *I think sometimes [consultation] is not done that well, and it's done more like 'hey, we're a government department, we have this idea, we're going to implement this idea, we're going to tell you about it, and then after we're done telling you about it, we're going to say we consulted.' (Executive)*

- Bureaucratic red tape and challenges posed by our political system

  - *The fact that we have a political system that will run on for four years, and within those four years there's only about two years within that window that you can get anything done. That means the system is set up in such a way that putting out fires is really hose this has been done. (Executive)*

- Scalability of homelessness plans

# 2. UNSTABLE & INFLEXIBLE RESOURCES

*I know that our service providers feel undervalued and underpaid, and I think that that's challenging when the work is so challenging. And especially in, again, recent times, where I feel like there's a significant staff shortage in not just this sector. And so, when you can see that your friends at the bike shop are getting $20 an hour, and here you are working with complex high needs folks that require a lot of mental energy and emotional capacity and you're getting $23 an hour, you know, how does that feel fair? (Supervisory/Management)*

*So I am told: meet these criteria, offer these services, and at the same time, here is the money you have to do it 24/7. I am not able to do it. Well, I do it, but there is a high staff turnover, I'm not able to develop an expertise. I have a stable team, which is my management team, my specialists who are there, but my field staff, I have an incredible turnover. This means that they don't have time to build up their expertise, to develop it. So I'm asked to meet to certain things, but I'm not given the financial means to do so. For me, here, it's not in terms of capacity, in terms of beds and space, it's the capacity of intervention that limits me. I don't have all the employees I would need. That's the problem we have. It puts a constant stress on us, with all the programs. It means that no, we don't have the resources. We're not even close to having it. (Executive)*

# 2. UNSTABLE & INFLEXIBLE RESOURCES
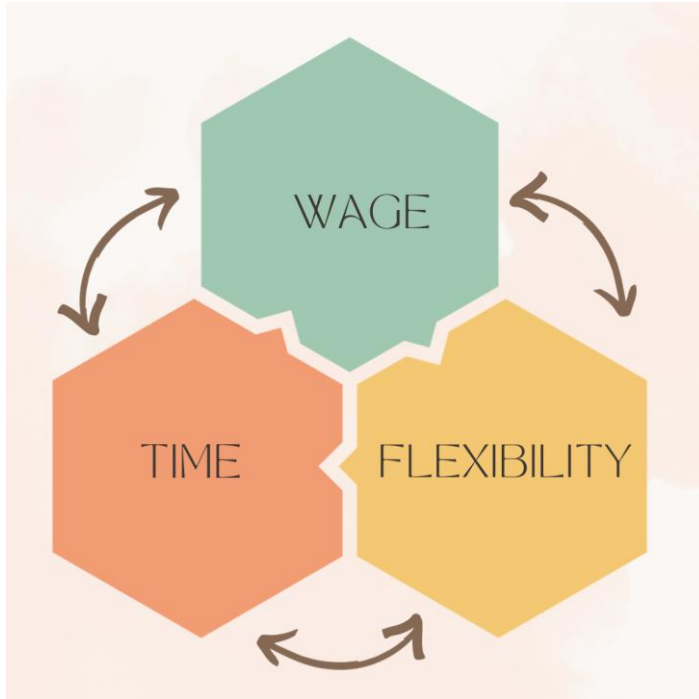
**Inadequate wages** lead to high **turnover** among front-line workers

Loss of experienced professionals hinders vital **systems planning**

Funding inflexibility forces organizations to conform, **restricting innovation**

Cycle perpetuates inefficiencies and limits effective resource allocation

Urgent need for more flexible resources to proactively address homelessness

# 3. COMMUNICATION FLOW & DATA SHARING

- **Data utilization** for decision-making needs improvement

  - *In terms of our work with individuals, we have no time and place to take progress notes, follow-up, etc. … When stakeholders ask for lots and lots of data, I tell them "are you going to give me additional funds for this so I can hire someone to take this on?" … there's no funding for it and I need to have all hands on deck working with individuals. I'd rather see someone helping people rather than filling in paperwork.*

- Communication flow does not extend to **front-line workers**

  - *What's interesting to me is we're often looked to as someone who will step in to fill the gap, but not necessarily regularly invited to contribute to a conversation around some of the things that we see on the front line. (Executive)*

- Homelessness policies are **poorly communicated** to service providers

  - *I think the higher ups have a good vision of what it is, but I think on an organizational level, I wouldn't say, like if I just asked one of our staff "do you know what [plan name] is?" I think they might know surface level, but I don't think there would be a lot of deeper knowledge. Like even I don't know a ton of it, I just know the bits I've been involved with. (Front-line)*

# 4. ATTITUDES TOWARDS ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Service providers are willing and eager to engage in best practices stipulated by homelessness planning, but the aforementioned themes act as barriers for them being able to do so.

EXAMPLES:

Resource Issues - *They need to hit the mark, they need to allow us to have enough services or enough staff… it's not that the plans are bad. Even if the plans are adequate, we, on the ground level, we have to be able to meet the needs and we are not able to do so.* (Frontline)

Communication Issues – *[there] is a cultural shift in attitude towards [the plan] and viewing it as not very effective, just kind of floundering in place and not having a lot of impact on the work that we're doing. We're here, we're saying 'we're in, we're game, we need to know where you want us,' but no one's telling us that, telling us where to be.* (Frontline)

# IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY & PRACTICE

**Facilitating Service Provider 'Buy-In' of Homelessness Plans Through:**

- Effective **consultation** processes with all levels of employment
- Adequate **support** through stable & sufficient resource allocation
- Resources explicitly dedicated to **data management**
- Greater service provider **authority** in funding allocation
- Ongoing communication of plans with all levels of employment

# LIMITATIONS & CONCLUSION

- Study would benefit from a larger pilot sample (results not generalizable)

- Exploring lived experience of service users to capture combined stories

- Findings emphasize the need to move beyond cognitive biases toward accomplishing heightened service improvement and fidelity to homelessness plans and initiatives.

- Understanding and addressing the challenges faced by service providers in relation to the four themes is crucial for moving forward with the development and success of homelessness plans & initiatives.

# THANK YOU

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