Discerning 'Functional Zero': Considerations for Defining and Measuring an End to Homelessness

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Key Points

- Efforts underway internationally to create consistent definition and measures of **functional zero**.

- Currently **no consensus** in Canada on an approach to measuring an end to homelessness.

- US (USICH, HUD, VA) and Canada (COH, CAEH) colleagues beginning conversations on a **common conceptual framework** for defining an end to homelessness.

- This workshop can help shape our **national direction** and next steps.

Why does a common definition matter?

*What gets measured **gets done**.*

*What gets measured and fed back **gets done well**.*

*What gets rewarded **gets repeated**.*

- Articulates what the system aims to achieve.

- Drives continuous quality & performance.

- Informs investment decisions, system gap analysis, policy change.

- Promotes service integration across systems.

Why does a common definition matter?

- Helps address concern and **skepticism** about "what it really means to end homelessness"

- Demonstrate progress in a way that **resonates** with public, service participants, decision-makers, service sector.

New Orleans ended veteran homelessness. Let's do it across America
Mitch Landrieu

Ours was the first city in the US to get all veterans off the streets. But there is still much work to do against homelessness across the community and country

Homelessness in America affects a large proportion of US veterans. Photograph: Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

On any given night, 50,000 of our nation's veterans are without a safe place to sleep. As First Lady Michelle Obama said: "When a Veteran comes home kissing the ground, it is unacceptable that he should ever have to sleep on it."

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Connecticut ended chronic hom
veterans, officials say

By Dave Collins
Associated Press
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NEWINGTON, Conn. — The federal government has declared Connecticut the first state in the country to end chronic homelessness among veterans, officials announced Thursday.

The declaration means that all known veterans experiencing chronic homelessness in the state either have housing or are on an immediate path to permanent housing, officials said. Chronic homelessness is defined as being homeless for at least one year or being homeless at least four times

Thursday May 14, 2015

Medicine Hat becomes the first city in Canada to eliminate homelessness

A homeless woman lies on a sidewalk in Vancouver, B.C. (Andy Clark/Reuters)

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A Scan of Current Approaches

- Content analysis of 60 existing plans and strategies to analyze definitions in Canada, US, Australia, and Europe.

  – Canada: 28 municipal plans, 7 provincial plans, 1 national plan

  – US: 10 municipal plans, 4 state plans, 1 national plan

  – Australia: 1 national plan, 1 state plan

  – Europe: 6 national plans, 2 municipal plans

- Interviews with <u>small</u> sample (n=6) of persons with lived experience.

How do official documents define an end to homelessness?

Explicit Definitions	Implicit Definitions

Few examples
 	
Typically focus on small number of measures
 	
Example: At Home in Medicine Hat: Our Plan to End Homelessness (2014)
 	
   "An end to homelessness means that no one in our community will have to live in an emergency shelter or sleep rough for more than 10 days before they have access to stable housing and the supports needed to maintain it."
	Most commonly used approach; little consistency between plans
	
	Based on performance measurements and targets:
	   Length of stay in shelter
	   Swiftness of re-housing
	   Shelter utilization rate
	   Sufficiency of housing continuum
	   PiT Count
	   Recidivism rate
	   Retention rate of housing
	
	Example: A Place to Call Home: Nipissing District 10 Year Housing and Homelessness Plan 2014-2024 (2013)
	   Length of stay in shelter: "Average length of stay an emergency shelter is less than 5 days."
	
	   Shelter Utilization Rate: "A 20% annual reduction in admissions to the emergency shelter; by the 5th year, total nights in shelter are at minimum levels."
	
	   Sufficiency of housing continuum: "A 20% increase in the affordable housing supply; Nipissing Housing Development Corporation has created 250 new affordable housing units for singles and seniors"

An end to homelessness **does not mean that no one will ever experience a housing crisis again**. Changing economic realities, the unpredictability of life and unsafe or unwelcoming family environments may create situations where individuals, families, or youth could experience or be at-risk of homelessness.

An end to homelessness means that every community will have a **systematic response in place** that ensures homelessness is prevented whenever possible or is otherwise a rare, brief, and non-recurring experience.

Specifically, every community will have the capacity to:

- **Quickly identify** and **engage** people at-risk of and experiencing homelessness.

- Intervene to **prevent** the loss of housing and **divert** people from entering the homelessness services system.

- Provide immediate **access to shelter and crisis services**, without barriers to entry, while permanent stable housing and appropriate supports are being secured.

- When homelessness does occur, **quickly connect people to housing** assistance and services—tailored to their unique needs and strengths—to help them achieve and maintain stable housing.

U.S. Criteria for Ending Veteran Homelessness

1. The community has **identified all veterans** experiencing homelessness.

2. The community **provides shelter immediately** to any veteran experiencing unsheltered homelessness who wants it.

3. The community only provides service-intensive **transitional housing in limited instances.**

4. The community has **capacity to assist** veterans to **swiftly move into permanent housing**.

5. The community has **resources, plans, and system capacity** in place should any veteran become homeless or be at risk of homelessness in the future.

U.S. Benchmarks for Ending Veteran Homelessness

A.   Chronic homelessness among veterans has been ended.

B.   Veterans have quick access to permanent housing.

C.   The community has sufficient permanent housing capacity.

D.   The community is committed to housing first and provides service-intensive transitional housing to veterans experiencing homelessness only in limited instances.

How do people with lived experience define an end to homelessness? #1

Inclusive and safe communities

– Q: When did you no longer consider yourself homeless?

– Margret: When I got a **safe apartment**… when I knew I could go to my door without getting attacked.

– Q: [What are your thoughts on typical performance indicators and targets such as the swiftness of re-housing?]

– Alice: … if it is just about getting people into a place where there are walls than… it's not going to make a lot of difference. [People] are going to keep going back out [into homelessness] because **there has to be community building**.

How do people with lived experience define an end to homelessness? #2

Accessible, secure, and affordable housing

– Q: What do you think ending homelessness means?

– Wayne: A home to me is… 1. A place in which I can entertain family and friends, consisting of a living room, kitchen, bathroom, and bedroom. **2. A secure, safe place without fear of having to move**. And **3. A affordable place, that reflects my income support for shelter allowance**.

Appropriate supports and housing

– Q: So for yourself, does ending homelessness mean that everyone has a house? Or it is more than housing?

– Janice: To me it's more than housing because a lot of people struggle with abuse backgrounds, which causes them to commit crimes and feel unsafe in their own place. So **if we take care of underlying issues—whether it's abuse or mental health issues, addictions—then we can actually get towards better housing and ending homelessness.**

Toward a Common Conceptual Framework

Common or more relevant elements across jurisdictions:

- **Articulated vision, aspirational state, values, and/or policy** (e.g., "homelessness should be rare, brief, non-recurring," "it is unacceptable for families to live on the street") – *with implicit or explicit broader community buy-in*

- **Quantitative goals, indicators, and targets** to measure the efficiency and effectiveness of local homeless system in addressing and reducing defined level of need.

  - Number of program and housing units available against estimated demand.

  - Length of stay in shelter/street.

  - Time between identification or 'registry' and placement in housing.

  - Numbers of homeless persons (point-in-time count, annual shelter /transitional housing utilization).

  - Percent who successfully exit to permanent housing

  - Percent of those rehoused who return to homelessness.

  - Number of net new homeless in system from at risk population.

Toward a Common Conceptual Framework, Cont'd

Common or more relevant elements across jurisdictions:

- **Qualitative goals and indicators** complement these measures to assess the system response.

  – Community has resources, plans, and systems for continued efforts and to ensure long-term stability.

  – Projects adhere to evidence-based practices and function interdependently.

  – People using system report effective, efficient, quality services.

- *Implied notion of supply-demand dynamic…*

  – *Between broader community and homeless system:* meeting defined needs for immediate housing crisis interventions (prevention/outreach/shelter/other crisis services)

    - Implicit recognition that demand or "inflow" driven by forces outside system control.

  – *Within homeless system:* meeting defined needs for housing crisis resolution (re-housing and transitional or permanent stabilization supports)

Considerations in Developing Common Definition

- Define **system boundaries**, components, providers, and the people served by the system

  - Include diverse sub-populations within the scope of a common definition (vs. limiting to one subgroup – veterans, youth, chronic).

  - Ensure alignment with Canadian Definition on Homelessness (COH).

- Ensure homeless-serving system plan and assessments include measureable **quantitative indicators**, as well as **qualitative aspects** of a well-functioning – optimized – system of care

  - Differentiate between intermediate and longer term goals and performance targets

Considerations in Developing Common Definition, cont'd

- Assess public system and policy impact on homelessness **beyond the homeless-serving system** response (child protection, corrections, police, education, health, income assistance, economic development, etc).

  – Discharging from public systems into homelessness.

  – Criminalization of homelessness.

  – Level of access to appropriate mainstream services by homeless/at risk persons.

  – Alignment and integration of public systems at policy and service delivery levels to identify and intervene with at-risk households to avoid housing loss or facilitate access to emergency accommodation.
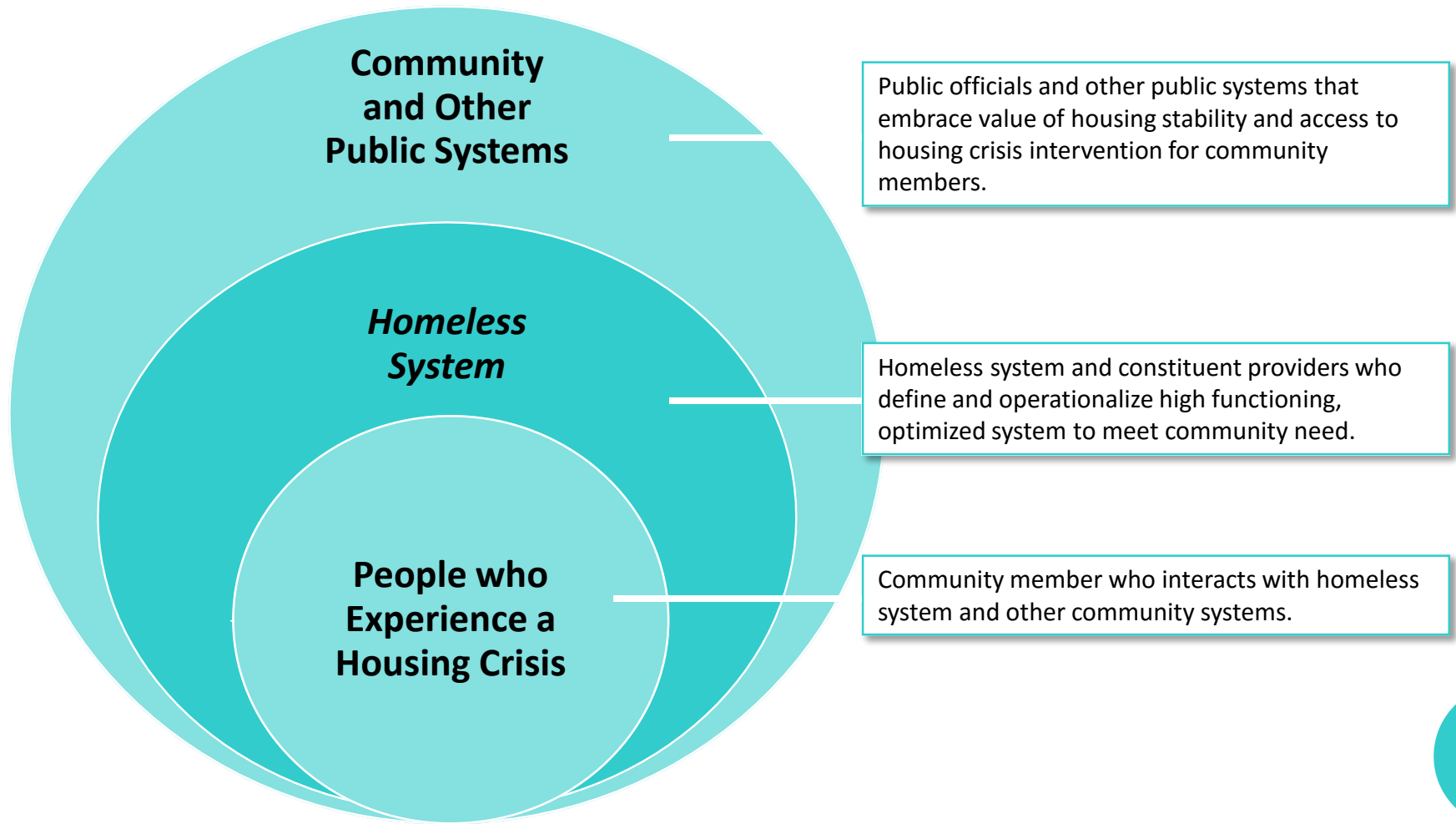
Considerations in Developing Common Definition, cont'd

- Opportunity for voice of those with **lived experience**.

  - Validation that system is performing as designed: efficiently, effectively meets the needs of the community it serves.

  - Perceived service accessibility, navigability, low-barrier, etc.

  - Perceived housing sustainability, affordability, accessibility, safety, security of tenure - sense of control over one's own housing.

  - Social inclusion: participation in community activities, sense of belonging, connection with friends and family.

  - Consider homeless crisis response system integration with other community-based supports: access to appropriate supports re: addiction, trauma, mental and physical health issues, employment, education, etc.

Key Dimensions of a Common Conceptual Framework

Community and Other Public Systems

Public officials and other public systems that embrace value of housing stability and access to housing crisis intervention for community members.

Homeless System

Homeless system and constituent providers who define and operationalize high functioning, optimized system to meet community need.

People who Experience a Housing Crisis

Community member who interacts with homeless system and other community systems.

Key Dimension	Community and Other Public Systems
Examples	• City government commits that no one should be forced to live on streets and provides sufficient resources to meet emergency shelter demand. • Community has consistently reduced the percent of those entering the homeless-serving system from other public systems (e.g., child protection; corrections; inpatient treatment etc.) • Formalized coordination efforts are in place with public systems to ensure appropriate referrals, timely access to services/supports. • Diverse public and private funding sources committed to maintain service delivery levels to sustain high functioning system. • Evidence of high levels of funding and policy coordination across government in community's jurisdiction to ensure ending homelessness objectives are supported. • City laws don't criminalize people who are unsheltered.
Verification Process	Public and private investment in system. Public system and policy stakeholders interviews/focus groups; policy, procedural and funding analysis, system integration surveys; Program participant surveys/interviews; lived experience consultations (surveys, focus groups, interviews, advisory groups);

Key Dimension	Homeless System
Examples	• Total number of persons experiencing homelessness (rough sleeping/shelter) has consistently decreased by a minimum of 25% for past 3 years. • Total number of persons rough sleeping is no greater than 10 on any given night and all are engaged and have been offered low-barrier shelter and housing. • Length of stay in shelter/street is less than 10 days on average; maximum of 30 days for any one individual during course of the year. This performance is maintained for a minimum of 12 months. • Turnover rate and occupancy levels in current system capacity allow access to appropriate housing and supports to individuals and families experiencing homelessness and/at imminent risk within 30 days of referral. This performance is maintained for a minimum of 12 months. • No more than 5% of those who exit programs return to homelessness within 12 months. • Community planning and service delivery is highly coordinated using a systems approach that includes coordinated entry, assessment, formal standards of care, performance management and funding allocation process; integration with public systems. (Verified by external review process).
Verification Process	System/program-level data analysis (HIFIS, PIT, HMIS, program/system evaluations); system of care site visits, stakeholder consultations (management & frontline), service standards assessments (including sample casefile reviews).

Key Dimension	2. Lived Experience

Examples	• Program and housing participants report high satisfaction using standard survey tool re:
	   • housing quality, security of tenure affordability and safety;
	   • case management services received;
	   • access to appropriate supports to address diverse needs within homeless system & mainstream public systems (addiction, trauma, mental and physical health issues, employment, education, etc.);
	   • process of referral and intake into programs & housing;
	   • discharge planning and aftercare supports.
	
	• Overall program participant perception of quality of life, including sense of belonging, participation in community activities, connection with friends and family using standardized assessment tool.
	
	• Evidence of systematic and effective inclusion of those with lived experience in community coordination efforts and decision-making to develop and deliver services in the homeless-serving system (Verified by external review process).

Verification Process	Program participant surveys/interviews; lived experience consultations (surveys, focus groups, interviews, advisory groups); System/program-level data analysis (HIFIS, PIT, HMIS, program/system evaluations); system of care site visits, stakeholder consultations (management & frontline), service standards assessments (including sample casefile reviews).

Where do we go from here?

- **Broder consultation** to gather input on common definition – lived experience, frontline, leadership, research, policy makers; cross section of rural/urban communities, diverse sub-population foci.

- Cross sectional group to shepherd **engagement process** to formulate standard definition and process for validation.

  – Define explicit **quantitative and qualitative criteria** for a functional end to homelessness across identified dimensions (homeless-serving system, lived experience, public systems).

  – Identify acceptable **sources of data** to validate community progress.

  – Develop **process for validation**: community self-assessment, review panel, site visits, independent data collection/analysis, etc.

  – Test proposed approach with **pilot communities** and refine on an ongoing basis.

  – Training and **capacity building** to support communities.

  – **Engage funders** in alignment across investments.

  – Develop means of integrating definition and validation process, capacity building **across public systems.**

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