



# **Beyond Housing First: A Holistic Response to Family Homelessness in Canada**

CAEH National Conference on Ending Homelessness  
November 4, 2015

# Beyond Housing First: The Report

- Released in March 2015
- Based on the preliminary findings of our larger Child & Family Homelessness Initiative
- Information drawn from nation-wide interviews with 139 agency staff and clients

“It’s trying to find units; something that can accommodate small or large families. And not only the size, but the location. Is this a building that a family is going to work well in? It’s trying to find a big enough unit, but one that’s a good fit, because kids in a quiet building might not be a good thing. So finding the right unit is kind of a big change [when working with families]. Before, even though we had low vacancies – looking for units for families reduces that even more.”

*-Chris, follow-up support worker for a Housing First program*

Some families on social assistance have only



**\$1,000 =**    **etc.**

per month to cover: rent, food, transportation & other expenses



**1 in 5**  
of all rental  
households  
in Canada spend  
**>50%**  
of their income  
**ON RENT**

**235,000**  
Canadians experience  
**homelessness**  
**EACH YEAR**

Gaetz, S., Gulliver, T., & Richter, T. (2014): The State of Homelessness in Canada: 2014. Toronto, ON: The Homeless Hub Press.



**841,191**



an increase of

**25%**

people in Canada visited food banks

from 2008

Food Banks Canada. (2014). Hunger Count 2014. Downloaded at: [www.foodbankscanada.ca/HungerCount](http://www.foodbankscanada.ca/HungerCount)

# Child & Family Homelessness Initiative

- The Issue

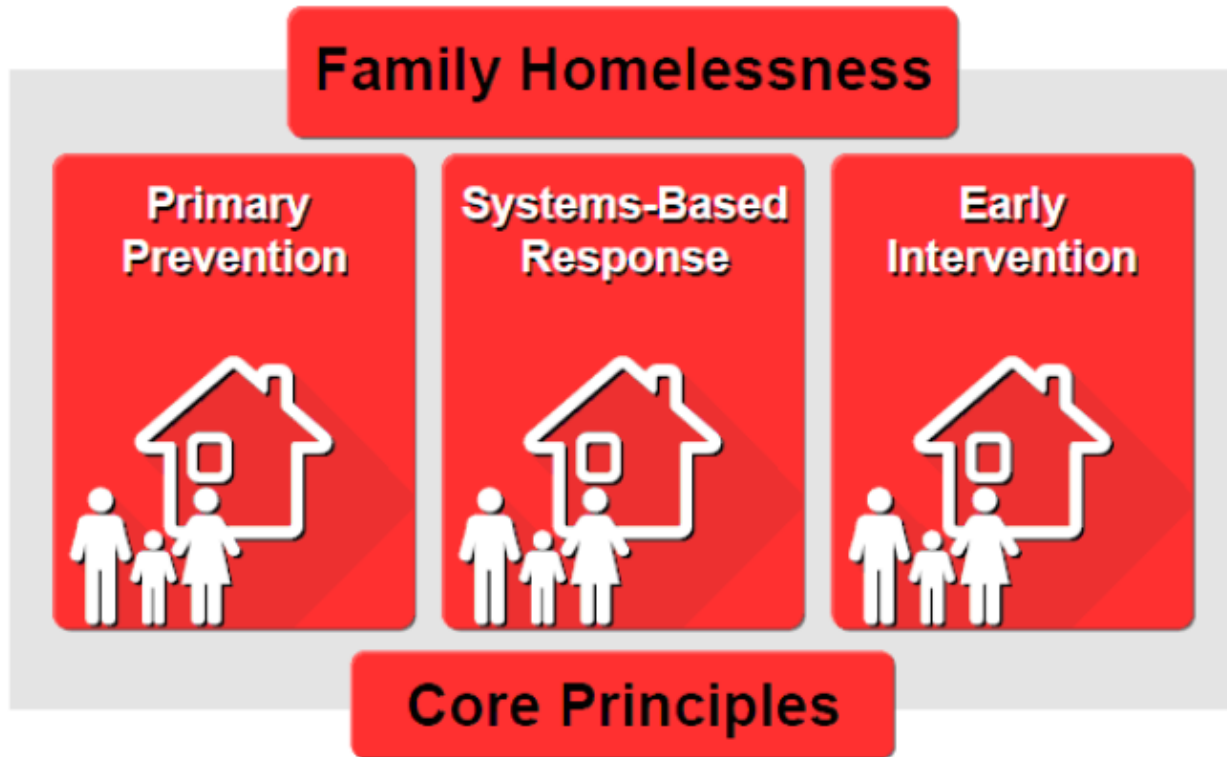
- **380,600** households experiencing severe housing insecurity
- Between 2005 and 2009, the estimated **number of children** using emergency shelters **grew by 50%**

- Our National Initiative

- We believe that by educating Canadians, learning from and sharing innovative community-based work and developing a practical planning framework, we can develop **solutions** to child and family homelessness in Canada.
- Our goals:
  - To learn about **current programs** and services across Canada and internationally, that are already working to address family homelessness
  - To create a comprehensive **early intervention and prevention framework** that looks at **solutions** to family homelessness at three levels: primary prevention, systems-based responses, and individual/familial factors
  - To **develop practical tools** and resources that can be used by community organizations and government to encourage promising practices and generate recommendations.

# Emerging Framework

## Prevention and Early Intervention Framework



# Housing First as an Early Intervention Response

- Housing First has shifted the homelessness sector toward a more humane, rights-based approach where **housing is not contingent** on whether an individual agrees to receive services or treatment
- Housing **retention rates** consistently measuring in the **75-90%** range after one year of programming
- Thousands of individuals and families have been housed under Housing First programs in Canada
- However, **structural and systemic barriers** to escaping homelessness have become increasingly apparent
  - These include high-levels of poverty and the lack of affordable housing

# Methodology

## Phase 1

### Environmental Scan

Scan Canadian and International programs for family homelessness

Early development of Framework and Pillars

Selection and confirmation of Partner Agencies

## Phase 2

### Interviews and Data Analysis

139 interviews with staff and families at 8 Partner Agencies across the country

Data analysis guided by preliminary framework, pillars, and emergent themes

## Phase 3

### Summit, Report and Public Ed.

National and Provincial Summits to further inform findings

Release Report and Resources on Family Day 2016

Public Education campaign to coincide with report release





“Homelessness is not a social concern that occurs in a vacuum, but one that **intersects with multiple social concerns**, including affordable housing, income, food security, discrimination, and gender and intimate partner violence (IPV). When it is viewed this way, **solutions can be envisioned in a holistic manner**, where interventions are geared at strengthening the foundations of our society, not just ensuring people have housing.”

*-Beyond Housing First (Report)*

# Framework: Primary Prevention

- **Primary Prevention** addresses the root causes of homelessness
  - Without addressing these fundamental issues there will always be new families entering homelessness or recurrent episodes of homelessness
- **Poverty cannot be separated from homelessness**
  - A family that becomes housed but remains in poverty continues to remain at risk of homelessness

# A Need for Prevention

## ➤ Affordable Housing

- Limited availability of units combined with the unique needs of families

## ➤ Income

- Income insecurity from low wages, precarious employment, or decreasing social safety net

## ➤ Food Security

- **841,191** persons visited food banks across Canada; over **1/3** of them children

## ➤ Discrimination

- Visible minorities, young parents, single dads – or simply the stigma of ‘poverty’

## ➤ Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

- **1 in 4** of all *reported* violent crimes are incidents of IPV

“Sometimes I feel like we refer □ our clients to the same system that keeps them oppressed □ because it doesn’t empower them...The entire system is actually a barrier. So how do you pull yourself out of poverty when you’re on income support? It’s like nothing, so how do they pay their bills? How do they get out of debt? When they’re making \$700 a month or less...like yeah we want to take them out of poverty but we put them on income support, which keeps them in poverty.”

*-Shane, Agency Staff Member*

# Framework: Systems-level Response

- Lacking and inefficient services
  - lack of necessary services (particularly for mental health needs), long wait-lists for services, eligibility criteria and rules left to be enforced at the discretion of individuals workers
  - “We get some workers who are absolutely fabulous, more than willing to help, here’s information, here’s resources...and then there’s some that will go there and be like nope, they aren’t employable, denied.” –*Angela, Front-Line Worker*

# Systems-level Response CT'd

- Limited and conflicting systems
  - A Housing First philosophy can be difficult when working within systems that have conflicting mandates, goals and philosophies
  - “Most of the systems are punitive. Like as a worker going in I feel like a criminal trying to access some of these services...I’ve been sternly talked to or told to do something that’s not part of our job... I feel like everybody, us and the workers in different agencies, are frustrated and they’re trying to access the different resources, and everybody is just grasping for the few resources there are. “ – *Donna, Follow-up Support Worker*

“I see a lot of helping in these programs, but then what about when they end? You’re done, goodbye? And then it’s like you get kicked out of the nest when your wings aren’t quite developed. Where are you going to go? Straight down...I’m going to stay in the program as long as possible. I’m basically 16 going on 37 and am scared shitless. I’ve come too far to go back now.”

*- Anthony, single dad of 5*

# Limitations of Housing First for Families

- Mandates to 'graduate' clients in 12-18 months
  - Limited time often prevents greater support of clients, which can result in a return to homelessness or housing insecurity
  - Identified as insufficient time to work with participants, particularly those who have been living with barriers such as trauma and addiction for multiple years, even decades
  - Participants often express great anxiety when discussing graduating from Housing First
- Limitations around the types of units that are available
  - Not always realistic for families (as opposed to individuals)



# Limitations of Housing First CT'd

- Systems, services and resources are different in each community

“Everybody is talking about Housing First... and I look at Housing First and think ok, what is Housing First going to look like here? And I shudder to think that those of us that provide housing for families are not going to be getting any help. Because in Yellowknife, where are the resources? You know, who is going to be providing the money to provide the resources to have wraparound services for the families? How are we going to find housing for them? And is it just going to be in Yellowknife, or in the whole North where there is a shortage of housing to begin with? When three generations are living in the same house?”

*–Kate, Agency Staff Member*

# Opportunities

- Housing First programs have largely created the space for workers and policy makers to identify glaring gaps and inconsistencies within various systems and begin to discuss how to address this
- Many communities have developed a ‘System-of-Care’
  - A local or regional system for helping people who are homeless or at imminent risk of homelessness. As a method of organizing and delivering services, housing, and programs, it aims to coordinate resources to ensure community level results align with 10 Year Plan goals and meet client needs effectively. An integrated System of Care improves the capacity of homeless serving agencies through strengthening accessibility, continuity and coordination of care.

# Conclusion

- Providing families with **housing is the first step** in helping them escape homelessness and gain stability in their lives
- However, until **complex societal issues** such as affordable housing, income, and food security are addressed, families will continue to fall into homelessness and graduates of Housing First programs may once again become vulnerable
- Systems and services **need to act as a support** and not a barrier in order to ensure the long-term success of prevention initiatives and Housing First programs
- Best approach is a **holistic approach** that includes prevention, systems-response, and early intervention