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Housing Hurdles: A Joint Initiative to Find Creative Solutions to Housing for Halton's Vulnerable Populations

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Housing Hurdles

**A Joint Initiative to Find Creative Solutions to Housing for Halton's Vulnerable Populations
Housing for Everyone**

And when it comes to housing, I think we should be making a declaration that housing is a right. So that our citizens, we have a right to education, we have a right to health care, we should have a right to housing. And maybe by approaching it from that way... Safe housing (frontline worker, Halton Region).

A Summary of the research findings from focus groups held at the Housing Summit, October 13th 2016.

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The Research Context

The Community Ideas Factory is a SSHRC funded collaborative research project that aims to leverage Sheridan's research and creativity expertise, in supporting the Oakville Community Foundation's efforts to implement and execute actions to address community issues identified in their Vital Signs® report. The co-investigators of this project are Dr. Michael McNamara, professor of creativity at Sheridan College and Dr. Sara Cumming, professor of sociology at Sheridan College.

The Community Ideas Factory is a two year project that includes an analysis of four separate, and yet interrelated, areas in the Halton Region; housing, food (in)security, employability and wraparound services. Qualitative research will be conducted in each of the identified areas to determine any underlying issues or gaps in services in each of the sectors. Once the data from a sector is collected and analyzed by the lead researcher, Dr. Sara Cumming, the project will then move to Creative Problem Solving sessions led by Dr. Michael McNamara. Specifically, the project is to engage the Foundation, its charitable donors, charitable funding recipients, and clients of services in a series of Creative Problem-Solving Facilitations in order to produce new, creative, and fundable projects that align with the issues identified in the qualitative research. An expected key deliverable of the project is the development of new, creative and fundable project plans that address the Vital Signs® issues.

This report is a summary of the findings from qualitative data collected from a series of six focus groups that were conducted at the Housing Summit at the Botanical Gardens in Burlington, Ontario, October 13, 2016.

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This research would not have been possible without the efforts and support of our community partner, the Oakville Community Foundation, who helped make all of the appropriate connections between the researchers' academic world and the Region and local charitable sectors. I would also like to express my appreciation to Sarah McPherson, Wendy Rinella, Stephanie O'Keefe, Daryl Kator and Andrew Balahura for contributing to the development of the research in the housing sector.

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Organizations in Attendance

Affordable Housing
Bethany Residence
Bridging the Gap
CMHA – HRB
Community Development Halton
Community Living North Burlington
Community Living North Halton
(HAND) Community Living Burlington
Habitat for Humanity Halton-Mississauga
Halton Community Legal Services
Halton Housing Help
Halton Multicultural Council
Halton Region
Halton Women’s Place
Home Suite Hope
Housing Help Centre
Kerr Street Ministries
Millhouse Resthome
Milton Transitional Housing
Open Doors – St. Christopher’s
Salvation Army
Shifra Homes
Summit Housing & Outreach
Support & Housing Halton
Supported @ Home
Wesley Urban Ministries

Breakdown of people by organizational role:

16 Executive Directors/Directors
12 Program Managers
18 Case managers/workers
2 Board members
2 lawyers

Executive Summary

In October 2016, fifty individuals working within the housing community in the Halton Region participated in six focus groups to discuss the major issues and gaps in services that their particular organizations experience. The findings from these focus groups suggest that housing needs must be addressed at the individual level, community level and at the government level.

Individuals require access to affordable and safe housing that can meet their needs, and that access must be equitable across the Region. In particular, gaps were noted in providing culturally appropriate housing that met the needs of larger immigrant families, housing that met the needs of the youth and elderly populations—as well as the needs of families who were comprised of both the elderly and youth in the same household, and housing that addressed a myriad of health issues (physical limitations, mental health, addictions, etc.).

There was recognition that the only way to be successful in addressing housing for all is to come together as a community in a multitude of ways. First, there was recognition that frontline workers have the drive and desire to work together to meet the needs of their clients; however, they often lack the time and capacity to facilitate effective collaborations. Some of their time constraints as frontline workers could be ameliorated by instituting one hub where vulnerable populations can apply for all the services they may require simultaneously rather than having to locate and secure individual services. In addition, appeals were made for the Region to act as a collaboration hub to help facilitate effective networks and to navigate funding applications. Furthermore, frontline workers suggested that in the true spirit of collaboration, funding agencies also needed to learn to collaborate so that larger pools of money could be made available to make real and effective change.

Government transparency at each of the local, municipal, provincial and federal levels, or lack thereof, has resulted in great frustration within the housing community. There is a lack of clarity in what levels of government specific funding requests need to be processed, and furthermore, in how funding decisions are made. Furthermore, the government's continual call for creativity and innovation in the housing sector insults frontline workers who feel they are already incredibly creative in finding solutions to a myriad of difficulties their clients' experience. There is a demand for funding to sustain already successful programs rather than the continued expectation for new innovations. In concert, there is need for the use of evidenced-based outcomes in assessing the efficiency as well as any redundancies that may exist within the sector.

Table of Contents

Contextualizing the Focus Groups	6
Housing in Halton	6
The Housing-Homeless Link.....	7
Maintaining Housing Stability and Caring for Halton’s Homeless	8
Housing Priorities in Halton	8
Preventing Displacement and Keeping Residents Housed	9
Responding to Homelessness.....	10
Housing Summit Focus Groups	11
Participants.....	12
Focus Group Table Breakdown:	12
Findings	13
Meeting Individual Needs	13
A House for Everyone	13
Affordable housing.....	13
Permanent rather than Transitional Housing	16
Sheltering against the Storm.....	17
Address Disparities within the Region	18
Educating the Community Members in the Region.....	20
Educating Landlords	21
Needs left unmet: Gaps in service delivery	23
Culturally appropriate housing	23
Housing the young and the old	23
Meeting health needs: physical limitation, mental health, and addictions.....	26
Transportation	28
Wearing multiple hats: Frontline workers addressing complex needs	30
Enhancing the client’s ability to become self-sufficient	31
“It takes a village”: Coming together as a Community	33
Hello, my name is.....	33
The Region: The Heart of the Sector.....	34
Moving from Discussion to Action and Accountability	36
One Hub: Applying for all Services Simultaneously.....	37
Housing at the Government Level	39
Innovative Sustainability?	41
Evidence-Based Outcomes	43
Conclusions	45
Recommendations	46
APPENDIX A	49
Focus Group Script.....	49
Focus Group Questions.....	51
Informed Consent Letter	52
Focus Group Face Sheet	54

Contextualizing the Focus Groups

Housing in Halton

Although the focus of the housing summit was not on homelessness per se, housing related issues (lack of affordability, lack of availability and suitability) share a close relationship to homelessness. In this sense, understanding current housing trends at a national, provincial and regional level need to be understood within the context of homelessness. As current Canadian research suggests, providing adequate housing for the most vulnerable and increasing housing security in order to prevent displacement are both important steps in eradicating homelessness. Both of these issues are addressed throughout Halton's social planning documents.

It is estimated that roughly 35,000 Canadians experience homelessness on any given night¹. This in turn results in an estimated 235,000 people experiencing homelessness in Canada each year². Importantly, research suggests 80% of Canada's homeless population are considered "hidden" (couch surfing, seeking refuge in abandoned buildings and temporary accommodations). While these numbers provide some general context, the academic community and those who provide services for the homeless, agree that a lack of quality data coupled with the challenges of comparing data between regions within the province make any attempt to quantify homelessness in Ontario problematic. With this in mind, a one-night count in Toronto in 2013 found over 5000 people living on the streets. Located roughly 20 kilometers away from the Halton Region, in Hamilton a total of 3,149 people relied on an overnight shelter in 2014. The 2016 Halton Region Point in Time Count located 264 individuals or heads of family who were identified as homeless. Additionally,

While the causes of homelessness are multiple, Canadian scholarship has highlighted how precarious employment, economic hardship, unequal access to opportunities (employment/education) and a general lack of affordability within the housing market throughout the province are major contributing factors that push people onto the streets. Because these issues affect so many, Canada's homeless population is diverse comprised of men and women, young and old. However, a growing body of literature would suggest that indigenous Canadians, those who suffer from mental illness as well as members of the LGBTTQ communities are overrepresented amongst Canada's homeless population. Women and children attempting to escape abuse at home also represent a significant portion of Canada's homeless population.

Over the last 20 years in Canada a majority of the responses to homelessness have been reactive, focusing on providing temporary shelter and basic needs. While emergency shelters, social service agencies and the non-for-profit sector play an important role in responding to homelessness and caring for those who live on the streets throughout Canadian cities (including the Halton Region), preventing people from being displaced onto the streets is perhaps one of the most important ways to eradicate homelessness in Canada. With this in mind, whether reacting to the existing homelessness problem or attempting to prevent it, research suggests that collaboration between all levels of government and amongst neighbouring municipalities is crucial. At the same time, at a local level, municipal government and service providers must acknowledge that there is no "fits all" solution to

¹ Gaetz, S., Gulliver, T., and Richter, T. (2014). *The State of Homelessness in Canada: 2014*. Toronto: The Homeless Hub Press.

² Ibid.

homelessness. In other words, although sharing best practices are important, municipalities must also be aware of the challenges unique to each local region.

The Housing-Homeless Link

As provincial data suggests, since 1990 the average cost of a home in Ontario has far exceeded increases in average household income. Not unlike other municipalities in Ontario, in the Halton Region rising housing costs continue to threaten housing stability for some residents increasing the probability of displacement. As outlined by the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), in order for Canadians to achieve housing stability, they should not spend more than 30% of their income on shelter³. For those Canadians who rent, the CMHC's 30% threshold includes rent and utilities. According to data collected in 2011 in the Halton Region, over half of all non-family households (people who live alone or share housing) use over 30% of their income to pay for shelter⁴. Likewise, in Halton, over 45% of lone parent families, 30% of coupled families without children and 27% of families with children use more than 30% of their income to pay for shelter.

According to the Region of Halton, the affordability threshold when purchasing a new house is \$357,200. Comparably, the average new home in the Halton Region cost \$845,981. Rising housing costs throughout the Region mean that in 2015 only 580 units (31% of new sales) fell below Halton's affordability threshold. Unsurprisingly, 99.5% of the new units that fell below the affordability threshold were townhouses or apartments. While these units meet the affordability threshold, housing advocates have pointed out that suitability is often problematic (e.g. older children having to share bedrooms or sleep in common areas of the unit). Issues of affordability and suitability also affect those residents who rely on the rental market.

As suggested by the CMHC, a vacancy rate of at least 3% is required within the rental market in order to ensure adequate competition and housing options⁵. While Ontario's vacancy rate in 2015 was 2.4%, the Region of Halton's vacancy rate was even lower (1.3% in 2015)⁶. The average monthly rent in Halton exceeds the provincial average. For example, in 2015 the average monthly rate for a Bachelor suite in the province was \$840⁷. In the Region of Halton, the average monthly rent for a Bachelor apartment was \$876⁸. This gap is consistent across all types of rental accommodation in Halton with 1 bedroom suites exceeding the provincial monthly average by \$148, and two bedrooms exceeding the provincial average by \$162⁹. In Halton a 3-plus bedrooms rental costs just under \$170 more than the provincial average¹⁰. These averages also vary within the Region itself. For example, with no exception, Oakville's average monthly rent exceeds the rest of the Region.

³ *The housing continuum*. 2015 State of Housing Report. Pp. 2. LPS-16161

⁴ November 2015. *Waiting for Affordable Housing*. Community Lens. Community Development Halton. Bulletin #108. (www.cdhalton.ca)

⁵ *Rental housing*. 2015 State of Housing Report. Pp. 15. LPS-16161

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *2015 Average Rents for Apartments*. CMHC Rental Market Report 2015

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Maintaining Housing Stability and Caring for Halton's Homeless

In order to understand the challenges the Region of Halton is facing in relation to maintaining housing security and providing safe and suitable refuge for the most vulnerable needs to be situated within a broader federal/provincial context. For example, in part because of the lack of “purpose-built” rental units, over the last decade rental housing options continue to decrease in Ontario. This trend has been particularly detrimental to first-time home buyers, seniors and new Canadians. Consistent across the province, many properties that once served as rentals are being demolished for new-build condominiums. This has corresponded with significant decreases in federal funding programs that traditionally played an important role in helping municipalities build and maintain lower-rent options. For example, it has been estimated that federal government housing subsidies have already stopped funding to over 70,000 units across the province in the past decade¹¹. This is made further problematic by the fact that many units that were built with federal government subsidies are now between 35 to 50 years old and in need of repair. In most cases, the costs of repairing and maintaining these properties has been transferred to non-profit sectors. As will be discussed below, decreases in funding and a lack of policy direction from higher levels of government means that municipalities have been left to address housing related issues with little guidance/assistance.

In Halton, policy responses to housing related issues are two-pronged, attempting to first maintain housing security by taking measures to avoid displacement and secondly, to provide subsidies for lower-income residents. Not unlike other municipalities, within this latter grouping of policy responses, the Region of Halton also operates and funds several emergency shelters. The following section will first discuss housing priorities in Halton followed by an overview of the various measures the Region takes to prevent residents from being displaced from their homes. This section will conclude by giving a brief snapshot of how the Region responds to Halton's chronically homeless population.

Housing Priorities in Halton

As outlined in Halton's Comprehensive Housing Strategy (CHS) Report Card¹², the Region has established several priorities in order to address housing related issues. These priorities include:

- Promote health and complete communities with an adequate mix/variety of housing and capacity to meet housing and human service needs
- Encourage and protect affordable housing through a policy framework that responds to changes in housing trends that stimulates the creation of affordable housing across the Halton Region
- Encourage and protect assisted housing through a sustainable housing program aimed at creating new supply and protecting the existing assisted housing stock

¹¹ Pomeroy, Steve (May 2015) Declining federal funding and market failure (p. 12) *Built to Last: Strengthening the Foundations of Housing in Canada*. Federation of Canadian Municipalities

¹² Halton Region, 2015 *Comprehensive Housing Strategy (CHS) Report Card* (No. SS-18-16) LPS-16-3919

- Support independent living through increased availability of supportive and accessible housing
- Continue to assist Halton residents to maintain their housing and prevent homelessness

As the CHS Report Card¹³ suggests, some of the strategic directions outlined by the Region have already resulted in meaningful action. For example, the Region continues to advocate for the advent/continuation of federal/provincial government funding. Halton is also developing a Long Term Capital Needs Strategy (to be presented to council in 2017), to ensure the current housing stock operated by social housing providers remains viable¹⁴. The Region is also taking steps to improve the efficiency of the Halton Access to Community Housing (HATCH) wait list process. The development of Halton's Housing Stability Fund has also provided much needed assistance to lower-income/vulnerable residents helping 487 people secure permanent housing and prevent 201 evictions¹⁵. The fund has also assisted residents in avoiding utility disconnection, helped cover moving costs and helped provide essential furniture¹⁶.

Preventing Displacement and Keeping Residents Housed

As outlined in Halton's policy documents, keeping the Region's seniors population housed is a key priority. As part of the priority, the Region provides a range of programs to assist seniors in maintaining their independence. For example, the Community Care Access Centre (CCAC) provides personal services for eligible residents while also offering lists of qualified companies who provide private services¹⁷. In an attempt to keep seniors housed, Halton also offers an Older Adult Tax Deferral Program which allows older adults (65+) with an income below \$43,200 (before taxes) to defer their annual tax payments¹⁸. The Region is also encouraging older residents to consider renting a portion of their homes to help cover housing expenses.

Seniors are just one of the many sectors of the local population who are at risk of displacement. For example, similar to other municipalities, Halton offers residents Rent-Geared-to-Income (RGI) housing. According to the Region's data, Halton administers 4,299 assisted rental housing units, a majority (93%) of which are governed under social housing legislation¹⁹. Throughout the Region, these units are located within 58 housing communities, owned and operated by non-profit co-operative and private sector housing providers²⁰. At the same time, in the Halton Region, there were 3,906 households waitlisted for RGI housing in 2014, representing a 29% increase since 2004. As a result, over 40% of households with children wait an average of 4.3 years to receive RGI accommodations. For seniors, who represent roughly 1/3 of those waitlisted in the Region, the wait time is close to 2.5 years. Other housing initiatives include the Region's In-situ Program (HIP) which

¹³ Halton Region, *2015 Comprehensive Housing Strategy (CHS) Report Card* (No. SS-18-16) LPS-16-3919

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Halton Region, 2016 Halton's Housing Stability Team 2016 Dashboard (No. SS-04-17).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Housing Options for Older Adults in Halton by Halton Region Older Adult Advisory Committee. Pp. 11.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ *Assisted Housing*. 2015 State of Housing Report. Pp. 18. LPS-16161

²⁰ Ibid.

provides residents with income tested housing allowances ranging from \$250-\$850 a month²¹.

Responding to Homelessness

Although prevention is certainly important, the reality is that Halton does have sectors of the local population who experience homelessness. According to data provided by the Region, emergency shelters served the needs of 143 families in 2015. These emergency shelters include 27 beds located in 12 apartment buildings in Halton. Similar to other Regions, Halton offers 30 beds for single homeless individuals and an additional 8 beds for those experiencing mental health issues²². In 2015, 837 single homeless individuals relied on these beds for shelter²³.

Like Toronto, Calgary and Vancouver, the Region of Halton has committed to a Housing First Approach. Focusing on transitioning chronically and episodically homeless from the streets into permanent housing, the Housing First Approach encourages independent living alongside supports tailored to individual needs. The Housing First Approach is guided by several key principles²⁴

- **Rapid Housing with Supports** – helping people locate and secure permanent housing while also assisting with moving in.
- **Offering Clients Choice in Housing** – people must be given choice in both housing options and services.
- **Separating Housing Provisions from other Services** – acceptance of services are not required for accessing or maintaining housing. However, clients must accept regular visits.
- **Providing Tenancy Rights and Responsibilities** – people must contribute a portion of their income towards rent (a 30% threshold is preferred). A landlord- tenant relationship must be established.
- **Integrating Housing into the Community** – location matters. Housing should be integrated into neighbourhoods in order to avoid segregation and stigma.
- **Strength-Based and Promoting Self-Sufficiency**- the goal is to ensure clients are ready and able to access regular supports within a reasonable timeframe. Ultimately leading to self-sufficiency, this needs to include employment, education, social integration and health promotion.

In 2015, the Housing First Approach assisted 17 individuals in the Halton Region in transitioning into more permanent housing.

²¹ *Halton In-situ Program*. 2015 State of Housing Report. Pp. 19. LPS-16161

²² *Homelessness*. 2015 State of Housing Report. Pp. 20. LPS-16161

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Housing First Approach*. (2014). Employment and Social Development Canada. (Retrieved from http://www.edsc.gc.ca/eng/communities/homelessness/housing_first/approach/index.shtml)

Housing Summit Focus Groups

It was within this context that the Housing Summit came into existence. In the late spring of 2016 Halton Region's Social and Community Services, Housing Services Division approached the Halton Housing Alliance about plans for the joint Housing Provider/Support Services Agency Summit to be held October 13, 2016.

A planning committee comprised of representatives of the Alliance and Housing Services met to begin to discuss the purpose of the Agency Summit and the possibility of a community agency taking the lead in the overall planning and coordination of the event in collaboration with the Region. Subsequently, Affordable Housing Halton was engaged by the Region to assume the community lead on the planning and coordination of the event in collaboration with Halton Region's Housing Services Division. Simultaneously the Oakville Community Foundation and Sheridan College had begun to operationalize and plan the *Community Ideas Factory*.

In Spring 2016, the Oakville Community Foundation brought together business, government, charity sector, and research partners, to discuss the key issues that would be the focus of Dr. McNamara and Dr. Cumming's research and Creative Problem Solving facilitations. As part of this discussion, it was identified that the best starting point would be to focus on housing. To do this, it was determined we should develop a working group for each of the four issue areas in the Vital Signs® report, to assist in identifying both research and resources in place, as well as where we needed to do further study.

In June 2016, we held a meeting of the Housing working group, representatives from Community Development Halton, Halton Region, Halton Housing Alliance, First Ontario Credit Union, Genworth Canada, Habitat for Humanity Halton-Mississauga, Sheridan College, and the Oakville Community Foundation.

At this meeting, two key opportunities arose that would align well with the research we were doing. First, the Region of Halton had engaged Affordable Housing Halton, to hold a Housing & Homelessness Summit in October. As such, in July, The Foundation met with Affordable Housing Halton, Sheridan College and the Region of Halton to determine if there was alignment with involvement on the session, and possible alignments with the National Housing Day event being planned by the Halton Housing Alliance. There was agreement and a spirit of collaboration for the event thus it was determined that in the afternoon of The Summit, Dr. Sara Cumming would lead a team of researchers through a series of focus groups with The Summit attendees.

The Summit was designed to be the first step in the process of developing a community based action plan to improve access to affordable housing and develop an integrated approach to delivery of support services. There were three goals for the Summit:

1. to bring together the housing and support services agencies together with the Region to continue to rebuild the relationship with the community;
2. to determine through a facilitated focus group process the challenges and obstacles facing agencies in accessing affordable housing and delivering support services across the region; and
3. to set the stage and gain agency support for the development of a community action plan.

Participants

The decision as to which agencies and community groups were to be invited to participate in The Summit was made jointly by the Region and Affordable Housing Halton. A scan of agencies known to provide supportive housing and/or support services to those who are experiencing homelessness, accessing supportive housing and supports (emergency shelters, violence against women shelters, transitional & supportive housing providers, domiciliary hostels, etc.) identified a number of key agencies. The invitees represented the leadership of the organizations as well as front-line staff, with the rationale that both groups would bring different perspectives and experiences to the table.

A list of agencies was drawn up identifying the Executive Directors, and front line workers and an email distribution list was created. A pre-survey was developed by Affordable Housing Halton in coordination with the Region. The purpose of the survey was to both engage agencies in the upcoming Summit and to gain a better understanding of the agencies work in the community (where they are based; what client base they serve, i.e. addictions, mental health, victims of violence, development challenges, etc.; what age group they serve; where their primary source of funding comes from; and what are the biggest challenges they are facing). Once the survey was completed, invitations were sent to participate in the Housing Summit and its accompanying focus groups.

In consultation with Regional staff it was determined that in addition to invitations being extended to agency Executive Directors, the invitation was also sent to additional agency program managers, case managers and/or case workers. There were no formal criteria in place as to which program managers or front line workers would represent their agency with the rationale being that majority of these individuals were identified because of their participation in the 2016 Point-in-Time (PiT) Homeless Count as their experience and knowledge of the system was extensive and would be valuable.

The Executive Directors, case managers and case workers were then sent invites using Eventbrite on September 19th, and participants would register by going to the Eventbrite registration page that was set up for the event with a deadline of September 27th. Because of the nature of the caseload and work schedule for frontline staff, if they were not able to attend the Executive Directors had the discretion to send a substitute to The Summit.

Sheridan College's information letter was sent to all registered participants via email on October 5th (a week prior to the event). An event reminder was sent to all registered participants via Eventbrite on October 11th two days prior to the event. Over 95% of registrants for the focus group were in attendance.

Focus Group Table Breakdown:

After a morning of information sessions and a lunch break, participants at the Housing Summit were assigned to tables of 6 to 8 people throughout the room. In total 50 participants were purposely assigned to one of six tables. Two tables consisted of Executive Directors of a mixture of housing providers and/or support services agencies. The Executive Directors were grouped together because of the perspective they bring to the table. Many sit on cross sectoral planning groups and play a strategic role in the coordination of services across the region – because of this, most of the Executive Directors already have relationships with each other, so efforts were made to try ensure the tables were comprised in such a way to stimulate discussion.

Four tables were comprised of caseworkers, program managers, agency board members, and regional staff. The rationale for separating the Executive Directors and the front line workers was in part made because it was felt that front line workers would have a greater level of comfort in sharing their thoughts on issues and challenges they face on a daily basis if there was no individual in a management or leadership position at the table. This decision was also made in part to facilitate a common understanding of the issues and to make inter-agency connections where there may not be any already in existence. A conscious decision was made to ensure no table had more than one agency representative (where possible). Because The Summit was housing and support services focused, individuals with lived experience were not included.

Four of the focus groups were facilitated by doctoral researchers and one was facilitated by an Associate Dean, all of whom are from Sheridan College. One focus group was led by an experienced intern from the Oakville Community Foundation. Two research assistants helped to take notes at the latter two tables. The focus groups were approximately two hours in length. The research was explained to all of the participants who signed informed consent forms prior to the start of the focus groups. Each participant either chose, or was assigned a pseudonym. All six focus groups followed the same interview guide and were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. All identifying information was removed from the transcripts by the lead researcher and the data was then coded. The focus groups guide with letters of consent are attached in Appendix A.

All six focus groups were asked to identify their strengths as organizations and their principle 'pain-points' or gaps in services. The following section presents a summary of the qualitative findings from this research. As per feminist guided qualitative research, wherever possible, the participants own words are used to tell the story.

Findings

The data from the focus group revealed a network of individuals who are both dedicated and innovative in their delivery of services both at the micro and macro level. There was much consensus around the overarching issues in the housing sector and an abundance of passion around coming up with viable solutions. There were ten issues that were raised with the most frequency between the six focus groups, and of these the need for collaboration was discussed at length at each of the tables. These ten issues have been organized around three major themes: addressing needs at the individual level; community level; and at the government level. Below we begin with a discussion of the individual need for permanent housing for all Halton Region residents.

Meeting Individual Needs

"I long, as does every human being, to be at home wherever I find myself."

- Maya Angelou

A House for Everyone

Affordable housing

Perhaps the least surprising finding is that every focus group discussed the dire need for more affordable housing. While it is recognized as a fundamental need in the Halton

Region, the participants recognized that this is something that we as Executive Directors (EDs), frontline workers, community members and academics have very little control over. The participants recognized that housing in Halton is extremely expensive compared to other regions across Ontario and has a very low vacancy rate making it very difficult for middle income families to live in the region, and even more problematic for those who are trying to find or maintain housing with incomes at or below the Low Income Cut-Offs.

I mean, our vacancy rate across Halton is 1.3 percent, which is totally unhealthy. 3 percent is considered healthy. And within that 1.3 percent of those units, you have the very high rental and very few, so around our alliance table, and talking to other service providers who are trying to find transitional or permanent housing for their clients, yeah, they're feeling exactly what you said, Michelle. They're competing against each other. And the Region is in there, too, because they're trying to put in rent geared to income. So the supply issue is absolutely a root root cause of what we're dealing with (Sienna).

Each focus group was asked what the major pain-point in the housing sector was and the first answer that was given most frequently group resonated with Sienna's sentiments—*affordable housing*. Participants who have been employed in the housing sector for more than a decade expressed frustration that the number one need has remained the same throughout their entire careers. Michelle echoed the sentiments of four other participants when she stated;

So in the fifteen year that I worked In Housing there was a lot of talk about affordable housing, affordable housing, and I feel like it gets frustrating because you feel like, you know, fifteen years later affordable housing is still... and you know there's a lot of consultations, a lot of focus groups about all these things and it's always we need more housing, we need more affordable housing. That's always it. But there never seems to be enough there, right? And so it's a continual theme and so it feels frustrating going through all these processes and you feel like why are we continuing to do this? We all know we need more affordable housing and there's not enough...(Michelle).

Compounding that frustration is the knowledge that the money continues to be made available for 'innovative solutions'; however, the solution rarely seems to include building more housing.

It's funny because the fed [federal government] that was here, I heard her say something about 213 million or 200 million dollars. I'm like 200 million dollars? Put that toward some affordable housing! I mean, I understand it's for grabs for people to fund things but let's put up some affordable living spaces for people for a while instead of everybody doing... yeah. Build. Just build (Samantha).

Sometimes, when I hear about these pockets of money where they're like, well we're going to disperse \$10,000 here and \$10,000 there, or \$25,000... and like, I feel almost like just take that money and put it into making some real change at the municipal level where there are like, there are broader requirements and maybe this is... There are broader requirements for how much affordable housing is available. Like, so that the change isn't just happening in band-aids and little... but real, significant something so we can... so we're not trying to figure out what churches can stay open all night so we can put people in there during the cold months. So, something more (Braeme).

Because, for example, when this lady from Service Canada was talking about \$25,000 for innovation, at the end of the day we really know that \$25,000 is not a lot of money to serve the needs that we have in the community and at the end of the day, we're only asking for one thing. It's affordable housing. So instead of giving \$25,000 here and there, just to make a serious commitment to build and many of our problems will be solved. But... so the problem is not how to access those grants, the problem is how these funding are created (Angelina).

The participants argued that even though there are stocks of affordable housing in the Region, accessing them is particularly problematic. Permanent housing has extremely long wait lists across the providers.

Yeah, that's the problem with the so-called 'wait list' because, unless you go into crisis, there really is no movement. So you're right. Like, people think there's a list and they're climbing this list, but any time a person goes into crisis, they immediately take the next available spot (Serena).

I think with wait lists too, when we have families who have applied for HATCH, something that we hear quite often is 'I handed in my HATCH application, they told me I'm close to the top. I'm close and I'm going to get housing soon.' And then when we tell them, you know, there's a wait list attached to that, clients say 'no there isn't, I was told that I'm close to the top of the waitlist'. And that's something that we hear all the time, and then it comes to, when we're telling them no, there's a waitlist (Michelle).

And those wait lists are a huge barrier. So if there's one thing on my wish list, it would be to get rid of the wait lists because what I hear, or the trend from clients, is 'why are you offering me a resource that isn't going to help me for five or ten years? I don't need it in five or ten years, I am in a crisis now. You're wasting my time'. And certainly that's not our intent with our service, but there's some validity to what they're saying. Do you want them to go through all that extra work and fill out all those

applications for something that might help them if they're still in a precarious situation five to ten years from now. Five to ten years from now, a lot can change. Some of the children are grown and out of the home, so the whole demographic will change (Billy).

The crisis in availability of permanent housing has resulted in more people living in precarious situations for longer durations. Instituting a wait list, arguably, does little more than give people false hope that there may be relief insight and results in them staying in unsuitable housing for longer than they should.

Permanent rather than Transitional Housing

Discussions around the availability of permanent housing and its associated issues led participants to bring up transitional housing as one of the options available. Transitional Housing was instituted as a mechanism to provide temporary relief to homelessness and to allow individuals some time to organize their lives in healthy ways that allow them to move towards self-sufficiency. The participants recognized that with very few exceptions, transitional housing was not providing the imagined results. Instead, people are provided with limited time relief rather than real solutions to their inability to afford market rent.

I think it is about permanent, stable housing that is not associated with... like, that is not transitional housing. That is in the private sector. I think that is the solution and working with landlords in, you know, having clients find permanent housing, not transitional housing. I think that really is the answer. And I think that's a struggle here (Jordan).

Even though I think that the research indicates that currently that transitional programs aren't as successful as they probably could be. That was just from a recent presentation with the region with the So... which was a little disheartening to hear considering that's what I'm working on, but I think the solution is permanent housing. We have to get people permanently housed. And this is obviously a pathway to get there, but, as you said, frankly, we're not sure how successful. I mean, we have to tweak the programs and see what we can do to further implement...(unknown).

Transitional housing was viewed as an unrealistic solution in helping people get to the end goal of finding a home. One of the participants, Jordan, noted how those who are on social assistance are by nature going through transitional housing because of a limited budget provided for rent.

That's a huge challenge here in Halton, and specifically as a youth worker, for clients who are on OntarioWorks and, you know, their max rent is \$550, all they can afford is a room rental. So, that, in its nature is transitional because at any point, a landlord could say 'you know what? This isn't working out, so here's your 60 days or here's your 30 days'. In terms of some of the legal rights that they have, there's very few as a... as someone who's renting a room (Jordan).

Overall, the sentiment around transitional housing was negative and was associated with instability. Although temporary relief from homelessness is its main goal of transitional housing, the short-term aspect of it does not allow individuals to find ways to become self-sufficient in such limited time. It was argued that rather than attempting to transition people from limited time housing to permanent housing, the sector repurpose their current transitional housing to permanent housing. On the other hand; however, there was recognition that transitional housing was very effective for newcomer populations, especially in the case of refugees.

Homelessness has so many layers that one of the best things for newcomers, which is the population that I work with, is transitional housing. Because when you are brand new in this country, if you don't have a job, if you don't have a credit history, you're not going to be able to rent. So this transitional housing will give you the first stepping stone for you to continue living in another life. How would I implement this program for youth, for example? No, it's awful! Or for people who are chronically homeless, or for single women, it's actually like giving a candy and taking it back. But, so let's not forget the different layers of homelessness and... yeah, for some people, for some community or for some people, transitional housing is the way. It is their stepping stone. (Angelina).

Angelina's comment above speaks directly to one of the overarching problems discussed throughout all of the focus groups—the tendency for “best-practices” to be applied to all situations. Such band-aid solutions to larger social issues, such as housing, was recognized as problematic by many participants, as many frontline workers could speak from their experiences of working with various client populations. It is clear that housing issues are not experienced by one homogeneous group with similar issues, and thus having one strategy for all does not make sense. Transitional housing was articulated as having potential for newcomer immigrants who may need a “stepping stone”, but was not viewed as useful for individuals who need more than just a “temporary relief”.

Sheltering against the Storm

Interestingly, while participants argued that there is a dire need for more affordable and permanent housing solutions, they simultaneously argued that the Halton Region desperately needs to re-examine the lack of shelters throughout the region. Below Braeme discussed the dilemma that many frontline workers face when forced to send homeless clients out into the cold for the night;

So, something that weighs really heavily on us is the lack of shelters in the region. We roll up into winter and this fear starts building at the end of Tuesday night dinner. We have programs that run throughout the week, but Tuesday is like our nighttime program. So, at the end of Tuesday dinner, it's kind of who's going to be hanging out well after

dinner – I’m on site until 9:30 – who am I going to have to wake up off a bench and put out into the cold with nowhere to go? And there’s a lot of spaces where people can come and sit down with me and I can call Halton Housing Help and advocate on their behalf and support them in sort of long term solutions, but when I’m faced with a human being and it is below zero outside and what... what do we do? And it’s... we’ve been trying to brainstorm different ideas about, like, can we do Doors Open... Open Doors? Where different... I think in other communities, it’s churches and they’ll pick a different night of the week in the really bad winter months, say, on Monday night, it’s going to be this church’s night – Out of the Cold, sorry, it’s called Out of the Cold – and, you know, we have some soup. We have some coffee and tea and some places to go to sleep. And I don’t know if that’s a solution here. I don’t know. Because... And we’re, we’ve started facing it at our space already just in fall. And we had one woman try to break back into our facility last week to find a place to sleep after everything had closed down. She waited and she tried to get back in. And what I love about our space is that the answer wasn’t to, like, to get her into trouble. The answer was let’s sit down and try to figure something out for her. And... But what are we going to figure out? It just really weighs on I think a lot of front line providers. And it really undercuts those that have mental health issues. They can’t... where can they fit? (Braeme).

Jordan, a youth worker, articulated that one of the solutions from a frontline perspective has been to send their clients to out of region facilities;

To kind of jump on top of that, in terms of the shelter issue, when our clients aren’t able to get into the shelter in Oakville, then they have to go outside of the region and they have trouble even getting into a shelter in Hamilton. So Hamilton is saying ‘you know what, I don’t want Halton clients here’. Mississauga is starting to say I don’t want Halton clients here, because we have such limited shelter space within Halton that these other municipalities or regions are having to deal with people who are actually Halton clients. And so our clients are having to lie to kind of get around having a shelter spot (Jordan).

This scenario of sending clients out of region was shared in 5 out of 6 of the focus groups. The participants urged the housing sector to come up with other manifestations of the shelter concept so that they could at the very least offer some refuge out of the cold weather.

Address Disparities within the Region

The above noted issue with the lack of shelters across the region was not the only cross-region disparity articulated. Many of the frontline workers expressed utter frustration in what they termed as a ‘hierarchy of services’ in the Halton region. Even when

there are shelter services available in Halton, the placement of these shelters proves problematic;

And the fact that, as alluded to, we have one shelter for singles, one family shelter program located in the south of Halton... There's no way for people in the north to get there. And if they have school or if they are working, it's not even an option (Sienna).

According to the participants, this disparity between the north and south of Halton is present throughout the housing sector not just with shelters. Two participants who work mostly in Acton, Georgetown and Milton expressed extreme frustration with trying to service clients in these areas;

The one thing I did want to address as well is... and there might be, like, a slight shift, but that's... I think in terms of Halton and the way that the municipalities are placed is that there's a lot of services in south Halton, but the further you go up, you go up to upper Halton, to Acton and Georgetown in terms of housing, it gets even more limited. And I think a lot of times when we talk about housing, we're talking about maybe Burlington, Oakville and Milton and not necessarily Georgetown and Acton. And each municipality has its own issues in terms of access to affordable housing. And I think that's something that needs to be addressed is that we shouldn't just be talking kind of about south Halton. We need to be talking about Acton and Georgetown. We need to move beyond lower Halton (Jordan).

Another barrier that I thought of that I want to bring up, I don't know if anybody else faces it, but sometimes clients' ability to even attend viewings, and especially Acton, Milton, Georgetown, where there is no transit, if the person doesn't drive, if they're elderly, if they have mobility issues, sometimes just physically having them get out and be able to view the number of units that they need to. 'Cause they're not going to go to one unit and be approved automatically or have it be the right fit. So sometimes I don't have the ability to take clients in my vehicle. And I do have clients that physically... I have one in Milton right now, and she's been looking in Milton with no luck, and she's open to Oakville now, but she has no way of getting back and forth from Oakville to Milton. There's no direct transit (Hailey).

Hailey's comments speak directly to the fact that even when housing might be available in other locations for those living in North Halton, there is very limited services available to help these clients navigate between cities (transportation barriers are discussed in greater detail below). The disparities within the Halton region allude to the lack of communication between different municipalities, making it difficult for organizations to provide the most effective services through collaboration.

Educating the Community Members in the Region

The participants recognized that they need the larger communities' help in working toward long term changes in access to affordable housing. They argued that campaigns are required to educate individuals living in Halton region, that there are indeed a large number of people suffering economically in the region, and that providing tangible solutions to these issues will make the community as a whole stronger. Many of the participants argued that Halton Region in general suffers from Nimby syndrome (Not In My Backyard) which appears to present itself in two different ways in the region; the first is that due to its relatively high average household income, many do not believe that there are people struggling 'in their backyards', and second, even when there is acknowledgement that services are required to help those who are economically disadvantaged, there is a strong sentiment that those services should not be built in the 'backyards' of the wealthy families.

I remember my supervisor when I first started, and he's no longer with us, he retired, but he said the shelter was supposed to be placed in his community where he resided, or where he resided in Oakville and someone stood up and said 'I'll write a cheque and how much should I make it out to so that this problem goes away?' So that this shelter isn't placed in this community. And I think that throughout the whole region, that's the feeling (Jordan)

Or they turned a blind eye to it. Or they're not from our community, they're from Hamilton, they're from Mississauga, they don't belong here, they don't need a shelter, they're not our people... and it continues (Lina).

A lot of people don't realize but every Friday in Halton people are evicted for economic reasons at the Landlord and Tenant Board. We're there every Friday. You know a lot of the types of situations we might see, somebody who's got a disability, mental health issues, somebody who's transitioning, they've lost their job, there's something that's thrown off the situation in the family, and sometimes they've reached out to Halton to see if they can get that funding and for whatever reason they can't and they end up... and they're evicted so there's... so yeah. A lot of people in Halton don't realize this goes on, but (April).

There's one things that I don't know if we touched much upon but some community education to change how the communities in Halton view homelessness, poverty, like that, well... Nimbyism is really, really prevalent in this community and it's... there just needs to be some work done around that so that perceptions are shifted and people understand both some of the realities in our community and that... and their reactions to people that have impacts. And... I don't know how to express it correctly, but shifting attitudes is I guess...(Braeme).

The lack of awareness within the community members raised significant concern among participants as they were well aware of the potential for philanthropic contributions in the region. There is hope that perhaps if there is enough community awareness and outreach, that enough resources could be put into the housing sector to put Halton Region at the forefront of communities who have been successful in tackling access to housing.

Educating Landlords

In addition to educating the general community members, landlords, in particular, were seen as an important figure in bringing change in the housing sector. There is recognition that one of the key pieces in educating the public may come in the form of educating homeowners in the pros of becoming landlords, as well as in encouraging them to consider renting to low income individuals. The frontline workers, who deal directly with helping individuals locate rentals, noted a great deal of overt stigma being perpetuated by landlords. Five different participants noted rental advertisements in local newspapers and online that explicitly stated that social assistance and disability recipients were not welcomed. Serena expressed frustration that people have been allowed to get away with this overt discrimination for so long, but like many of the participants, she recognized that landlords are most often business men and women, and as Amy articulated “not social workers”.

And we have heard from landlords repeatedly is we're a business, I'm not a social worker. So, I understand that your program wants to give me a subsidy to put your client in there. And what support are they going to get? So, for rent supplement, or whatever the program is, if there is not case management involved, that landlord feels like you're just putting the burden on them. And now they have to deal with somebody who maybe does have barriers, so they could use support work. And it puts them in a tough position, right? I think those bigger landlords, once they've dealt with a program or two and they have had one or two cases where they haven't had the bad experience, it really leaves a bad taste in their mouth for ever wanting to work with any of the other programs (Amy).

And I also feel a lot of it is to do with education. They've been allowed to get away with this kind of discrimination and... cornering that market, and some of it is very much making as much money as humanely possible in the shortest period of time. With housing values being what they are in Halton, obviously, the rents are going to match that. That's business. They're not going to give a subsidy and lose money on a second home or building. I mean that's just unrealistic to expect from them as well as an individual. So, now that that's identified, what do we do with that, how do we control that, how do we create that space (Serena).

Billy also noted that a newly emerging problem is that some landlords require first and last months rent with the rental application. Finding first and last month's rent has been historically difficult for this population once a location has been found, especially in light of the

challenging process of finding and locating somewhere to live in the first place. Asking these individuals to come up with 2 months of rent is obviously then problematic.

And the other thing too that I see a lot that seems more recent, in recent years... You know, landlords want... they want first and last month's rent with the application, not when you get accepted for the apartment. So the person has to somehow come up with, you know, \$2000 or \$2500, you know, before they can even get the application in, right? And I find, you know, as an organization, we scramble to get, you know, our portion of the subsidy as their last month's rent and first month's rent, scramble to get that. They're applying for, you know, housing stability through the region. They don't want to issue that unless it's guaranteed so then, you know, sometimes they'll issue a letter saying we will get that, but you have to get the landlord to agree to accept, you know, a letter which is... You know, they want money. So that's a huge problem as well (Billy).

Many participants articulated the same frustrations about market rentals. However; two EDs noted that they have begun to sense a shift in the private market whereby landlords and tenants were starting to envision themselves in mutually rewarding relationships. Bob contended that;

...historically the roles have been adversarial in the sense that tenants are there to take advantage of a landlord and a landlord is there to take advantage of a tenant. And one of the things that's been kind of evolving through an understanding of a kind of rights and responsibilities balance is that they are partners in this exercise and that they mutually need each other. And if they work effectively together, there is a net gain for both of them. Right? There's less damage cost, there's less vacancy loss, there's some of those considerations and the pressures of the imbalance between income and inability to afford rent versus the actual capital cost and the cost to deliver the service, that gapping piece is where the risk taking of the region has come to recognize the need to gap that, to support that gap to a degree (Bob).

Gerri concurred stating;

And I would agree with Bob certainly that it's a new trend that we're seeing. Trends in the past, and not the very distant past, were that our relationships with the private market were not good. And they were not good with the region either. So this is a very positive move forward that we've seen over the last couple of years. Speaking for ourselves, I'm very pleased with what we're seeing (Gerri).

Educating landlords were seen as one of the vital roles in changing the scope of housing sector in the Halton region. Participants noted the positive economic aspect of changing the landlords' view of working with different organizations to bring mutual benefit.

Needs left unmet: Gaps in service delivery

The findings section started with the broader issue of access to more physical space for individuals to be housed and outlined some of the issues that the participants noted within access. This next section begins with a discussion of the findings in relation to the individuals or families who are falling through the cracks of the system who are at the very least, being underserved. This section outlines the participants' requests for housing that is culturally appropriate, addresses the needs of the young and the old, as well as for individuals who have a myriad of health issues.

Culturally appropriate housing

Focus group participants recognized that there were several populations of people who were particularly difficult to house in the Halton region. A majority of these challenges shared a close relationship to the diversity of needs within the region. For example, several participants spoke at length about the importance of culturally relevant housing. As one participant noted:

The face of the family is changing in Canada. It's changing drastically...the biggest issues that I find when I'm looking at some of these applications is how the heck are we going to house these families? Because it used to be, you know, nuclear family with four persons and a house, but now we've got families coming in and Canada is not their first country, and they've got, you know, four, five, six, seven children.

A different participant shared a similar perspective, adding how new Canadians are often the most vulnerable. As the participant suggested:

...with the larger scale families and the language barriers that they [new Canadians] face and being able to communicate, and they're a huge target to be taken advantage of, and that's not necessarily monitored. I think for as much as a country we were prepared, we were not prepared. And so they've really been put in some, in some interesting situations, to try to be politically correct.

With existing barriers of finding a new home in a new country, providing various housing styles would benefit newcomer populations. Current housing conditions are only suitable for the "Canadian standard" of nuclear family (very limited idea of family structure). Furthermore, considering the significant influx in the number of refugees to cities across Canada cultural considerations in housing should be paramount.

Housing the young and the old

Relating to the issue of the need for more variety of housing structures, another

concern raised was pertaining to age of the clients. One of the gaps identified was the issue of housing for age specific populations. More specifically, youth was raised as one of the populations that is more likely to face barriers in finding suitable housing. One of the participants listed some of the problems that youth face:

...often because of those limited finances and then you add to that the barriers of their age, typically not having any credit, not having the types of relationships and supports where they have co-signers, and so their pool of housing is so small and we're often looking at very non-ideal situations like congregate living, room rentals where... Every given room rental is so different but there's a number of challenges that go along with that.

As noted above, financial problems and the lack of credit history limit housing options for youth, often leading to impractical living arrangements like congregated living and room rentals, as opposed to independent housing. Another participant, Jordan, also highlighted that majority of *his/her* youth clients are renting rooms because of the limited affordability in housing. Congregated living and room rentals not only demarcate youths' independence, but may also have potentials of conflict with other housemates. Ruby noted on this issue by highlighting maturity and described:

So those young people, they don't know who they're living with, they don't know what the culture of that home is going to be like. They might not have the social skills and maturity to be able to manage problem solving living with other people. Often they also don't feel safe. So we find that there's even more barriers to what's available and then the flip side of that is really around as well that readiness and that maturity and not having enough of those middle ground housing options that are going to allow young people enough, kind of, freedom that they are interested in...

Focus group participants raised the issue of youth not having life skills or interpersonal skills to live independently, while there is also a need for "those built-in, ingoing, mentor-like supports for [youth] to help them navigate taking on these responsibilities of living independently, managing finances, figuring out...education" (Ruby). Jordan echoed Ruby's comment explaining, "And then you talk about not having the life skills and not having, kind of, the adults in place to actually help them [young people] learn those life skills and yeah...".

The lack of life skills also put youth in vulnerable positions where youth can be taken advantaged by the landlords renting rooms or homes. Several participants agreed to the multiple issues that arise for youth homeless population, highlighting the different needs of youth group compared to general homelessness. Lina noted:

Like, the needs of young homeless people as opposed to older people are very different. I used to work in Ottawa at the young women and young

men's emergency shelter. They had two. They had created two and they had transitional housing for people as well and that was the whole premise of it. That you can't put a sixteen or seventeen year old into a mainstream homeless shelter. It's... the needs are very different. Like, they are kids

For the front line workers, supporting youth also becomes difficult because there are multiple roles involved. Ruby explained the multiple roles that workers need to play:

And I find, at the front line level when you're playing multiple roles: landlord advocate, recruiter, support to the youth – we end up in really difficult situations now and how we further advocate for this young person with other landlords knowing kind of the circumstances and the barriers and the challenges and then that's going to deter landlords, but still needing to be a support and help navigate young people, homeless people, vulnerable people through this process.

Another population facing gaps in services included the elderly. Many participants raised the issue of finding suitable housing for the elderly as they require specific living conditions that have accessibility and other support programs. One of the participants raised the point that the older age population seems to be fast growing in areas like Burlington, with more elderly women looking for shelters. With expensive costs of long term care, suitable housing is needed for the elderly that provide accessibility for their decreasing mobility, such as more wheel chair accessible homes, and provide appropriate living facilities with support for those fleeing domestic violence. Carole highlighted the issue of accessibility for elderly by suggesting:

Even people who live in retirement homes can't stay there if they get in a wheelchair. You can't stay here. We don't have room for you so you have to go. They've often sold their homes, so they can't go back there. And they have to try to find somewhere else where they can go.

Stacey, who works for a privately owned mental health provider, highlighted that privately owned organizations like hers are not even recognized by Local Integrated Networks although her organization provides care for those who were turned down by long term care. She explained the position of her organization and the problems with meeting the needs of elderly population in the region:

For us, we're in this position where we have a couple of our residents that are crisis list long-term care. Long-term care turning them down because they're beyond their level of care. Now this completely confuses me. So they live with us and we meet their needs in the time while they're living... How does this make sense? I don't know. I think sometimes the question that should be asked, because our per diem is \$53 per day, long term care's about \$250, so the question is what are they spending their money on? This is... If I can do it, although I'm taking

risks when I do it, people are being placed in a position of risk, why is it costing so much money in long-term care? (Stacey).

Elderly population require accessible and affordable homes where they are provided the care that they need for health issues and accommodating living arrangements for their limited mobility.

Interesting; however, is the fact that the frontline workers also indicated that housing is often *too* age specific. One of the participants highlighted the need to accommodate blended families and other types of families that may require housing for wide range of age groups. Hailey explained:

...so grandparents raising their children or individuals are having their children later so we might have somebody who's over the age of 65 with a teen who is now facing medical conditions... There are senior's residences with two bedrooms in Halton. Can we not have them access that with the team and have more of that mixed living environment...?

When thinking about suitable housing for various age groups, it is important to have accommodating circumstances such as mobility issues for elderly and limited credit history for youth. However; it is crucial to have flexibility in order to be inclusive of particular situations such as blended families as the above participant demonstrated.

Meeting health needs: physical limitation, mental health, and addictions

This section demonstrates how the participants indicate the need for housing that is client focused, attending to unique circumstances of the clients and providing flexibility to meet their needs.

For research participants, another important part of housing suitability was accessibility. More so than simply meeting AODA and building standards, focus group data revealed the true complexity of matching the needs of Halton's population with appropriate housing options. For one participant:

...our challenges is there's just not enough units for the physically challenged. They're very limited. So there's no place that they can go, so often they're staying in their home which is very inappropriate for them. And so that... And so the big problem is we just need more... and also they're stuck in hospitals. Hospitals have a fair number of people that should not be there. That should be in supportive housing but they can't because we don't have the buildings for them.

Several participants elaborated on how the suitability of many housing options in the region have been influenced by provincial mandates which have done little to help those with disabilities. For example, provincial initiatives promoting density were seen by participants as detrimental for creating an inclusive housing environment. At the same

time, challenging provincial policies was seen as an important piece of creating solutions. As one participant explained:

....maybe the region or the municipalities need to step up to the plate and demand a certain percentage of a particular type of housing in an area so for every fifty houses that you build that are two story, you have to build a bungalow or something like that. So that there's appropriate housing for those that don't want multiple stairs...

While housing suitability was certainly an important theme for focus group participants, so too was the need to improve supportive housing arrangements and access to frontline services. This was particularly important for those research participants who interacted with Halton's chronically homeless population. As one participant explained:

I probably have two dozen chronically homeless people that been with us since I've been with the organization for three years and they all fit into the categories we were just talking about. So, people that have schizophrenia. High functioning schizophrenia I would say, generalized developmental issues, and addictions. Another area that we see are women fleeing domestic violence situations and there's no... there's no beds first of all for the short term.

Similar to what is outlined above, those involved in housing service provisions and frontline shelter work reiterated how helping those with addiction and mental health issues was particularly problematic in the region. As discussed by one participant:

I think that there's a lack of housing period for people struggling with significant mental health and addiction. I know that there are housing programs, and they've been great but the wait lists are years. And for people who have an addiction concern, there is no housing.

Similar thoughts were shared by those who worked in Halton's shelters. Perhaps because of their frontline understanding of the complex ways in which addiction collides and intensifies other issues (e.g., general mental health), several participants discussed the possibility of a harm reduction model for the region. For example, as discussed by one participant closely associated with a local shelter:

From the shelter perspective as well, it's a catch-22 right? Because we're trying to remove barriers because we know that with domestic violence comes trauma, and with trauma comes coping and with coping comes... you know... various types of substance abuse. It can be a way that a woman is coping. We don't want to put a barrier, you know, in place for her to access shelter. So, shelters used to be zero tolerance. They are now, we work from a harm reduction approach, so, you know... we don't have drugs and alcohol in the shelter, so if a woman uses and comes back,

if we thought she might have been drinking, it used to be 'you need to leave'.

While some shelters have embraced a harm reduction model, other participants noted how this model of care was only one piece of the solution to addressing addiction and mental health concerns amongst those who relied on service providers in the region. As a participant explained:

So I guess there's short term and long term. I see short term and long term pieces. So I'll just... A short term thing we could really use is... they showed what we used to call a wet shelter. Or a harm reduction shelter could really be helpful. And a shelter or more beds for the sort of chronically homeless. People with mental health issues and I think that is a short term measure that really needs to happen in Halton.

While harm reduction models were seen as a positive thing, in the short term, the somewhat narrow focus of some service provider's mandates, long waitlists and sometimes rigid program admission requirements made responding to homelessness even more problematic. For example, one participant explained how:

...there's a real gap for respite care or any kind of supportive care for homeless individuals because they can't stay in the hospital, they can't come to the shelters, they can't get into supportive housing so it's kind of like... I'm not sure where they're going but I know that's a real challenge for us because we get a lot of people and we actually can't accept them into the program.

Importantly, this gap in service provisions was made worse by the absence of the province during these important discussions. At the same time, one focus group participant who shared a closer working relationship to those responsible for enacting provincial housing related policy and funding frontline service providers pointed out, how the Ontario government is seldom invited to participate in more localized, or municipal level discussions. A similar sentiment was shared by a focus group participant who worked for a service provider owned and operated by a private entity who explained how his/her organization "don't even get invites to sit at the table".

Transportation

Participants noted that even when we do have housing available, frontline workers are faced with the issue of how to transport individuals both to their housing, and to all of their daily appointments and/or work/school requirements. Transportation was seen as one of the long standing issues in the region of Halton. Many participants viewed transportation as the key issue in improving their organizations so that it becomes more client-focused. This was especially highlighted for North Halton, in cities like Acton or Georgetown, where there is no public transportation. One participant explained:

But that is, going forward, transportation is an issue. I've had the kind of workshop in Acton, I don't know if you were there, but that's one of the things that came up and that's not one that even like, it doesn't seem that they're working on so there's no public transportation in Acton or Georgetown. Zero.

When providing services to clients in North Halton, transportation was seen as a major issue to meet adequate needs. Apart from the cost of transportation, it was apparent that there was a lack of public transportation to begin with. ActiVan is one of the few transportation services in the region of Halton, but this service is only provided to seniors and people with disabilities. This limited service leaves out those such as youth homeless or other homeless people who are not yet seniors. As Jordan explained:

They have the Acti-Van, but that's very limited also in terms of transportation. And I know from my clients, none of the youth I work with don't want to leave. They want to stay in their community. They've grown up there. But in terms of even access to room rentals, it's far and few between. And the room rentals that are posted, you know, are going to adults, are going to individuals who have a job, who might be working in the area and might just need a place to stay for a week. Who have, you know, whatever. Who might be a little bit more stable. So youth housing I think is a huge issue in this community as well (Jordan).

As mentioned by Jordan, youth clients are left with little options as transportation limits their mobility. Yet Jordan explains how most youth "[do not] want to leave" their community and want to stay where they grew up. Nonetheless, youth clients' wish to stay in their community is met with additional challenges because of the limited room rentals available for their age groups. Transportation could allow youth more freedom to commute in between cities while getting the services they need. However; it is not just about having transportation for organizational services. Raquel noted:

But our people may need medical attention at times and if they have to go to, like with the new hospital on Dundas there, that's kind of our premiere hospital, for people now in Halton. If they have to have tests done, then they have to find some kind of transportation to get down and it's not always easy (Raquel).

Transportation can therefore help youth, seniors, and people with medical needs to get services they need without having to limit their options for living situations. As one participant noted, "you've got to weigh the cost and the options" (Amy) when thinking about transportation and housing. Sienna summarised the general sentiment around the issue of transportation in the region as follows:

If there were a better public transit system, that would help to some extent. I know it wouldn't solve the problem because some folks need the

support of being accompanied, but it would make it a little bit easier. So public transportation across Halton has been a longstanding issue.

Wearing multiple hats: Frontline workers addressing complex needs

Frontline workers play crucial roles in running the organizations and providing services to housing clients in the region of Halton. When asked about obstacles or challenges faced by the participants in serving the clients, many participants raised the issue with their role as catchalls. Case workers were often dealing with pressure in fulfilling multiple roles when meeting the needs of their clients. Angelina, explained the enormous pressure case workers need to deal with day to day in their workplace,

I think that one of the negatives is the huge pressure that you have as a social worker to work ... first of all, you don't have a secure funding. Second, transportation is a huge issue in the region so you don't even have a way to send your clients to access those services. And third, you don't have the freedom to really work freely, embracing or promising this family a bright future and that family really relies on you because when you're a social worker, you're a friend, you're a mother, you're a sister, you're an advocate, you're everything. So always pushing the brake on services just because you don't want to give the family the hope that everything's going to be fine tomorrow when you don't even know if your job is going to be there tomorrow creates enormous pressure on you as a case worker and on the families that you're working with.

Angelina demonstrated the reality of multiple roles frontline workers need to play when helping the clients. Unlike the conventional understanding of case workers' role as just managing cases, Angelina explained how the frontline workers need to attend to different individual focused work depending on the clients, the situation, and the circumstances. Many participants showed their understanding that clients need social work. Frontline workers described their need to play the role of a social worker by helping the client(s) find all the required programs and services available. Victoria, an intensive case manager, illustrated how being a strong advocate was one of the most important role as a frontline worker:

I think, like, as... in my personal work as an intensive case manager, you have to advocate for your client. And you have to be a strong advocate. You have to push your client to advocate for themselves because many don't want to, don't have the skills to, so that's a big thing that comes into play. You know, just not, like, taking those answers from other agencies or other workers, you know 'okay, you maybe can't work with this person because...' but trying to move them to a different sort of thinking. How can we work together to serve this person better? So, I guess just like not necessarily kind of giving up at that first stage. You just have to keep going as a worker and you have to tell your client that as well. So...(Victoria).

Bella echoed Victoria and explained,

I tell people to call everyone they know and as often as possible. (laughter) I don't care if you have five case workers in different organizations, you're calling every single one of them and I'll call them with you. And I don't care whose... and we'll just wait to see what happens first. And that's really what... and at this point, which is unfortunate, but that's really my strategy. With everyone. And I agree with everything you just said (Bella).

Front-line workers revealed similar remarks that case management is reflective of social work is needed to truly meet the needs of the clients.

Enhancing the client's ability to become self-sufficient

Frontline workers recognized that while providing housing first is an integral step in the success of their clients, housing alone will not keep the majority of their clients on the path to self-sufficiency. Focus group data suggested that participants saw wraparound programming as beneficial to their organizations and had potential to help their clients. Coordinating services was viewed as particularly important when transitioning people out of shelters into more stable forms of living. As noted by one research participant, when someone leaves a shelter in the Halton region;

We're [the Shelter] not able to go into that community and provide that hand holding. So that is a huge gap, so which agency picks that up? And how do we enter into those conversations and where would that be realistic, and then who's going to pay for that? (Unknown)

One research participant also emphasized the importance of including governmental organizations, like the police, into a broader discussion of service provisions in the Halton region. As the participant explained:

If you look at police, they've been good in some communities, not good in other communities. There's big system players that are consistently absent from these tables that need to be around these tables. And they're not held accountable to being around these tables, right? I mean, they receive huge amounts of money and yet people are still discharged out of emergencies straight into shelters with no plan, with no, you know... (Max)

Financial constraints were identified as a key barrier. Interestingly, most research participants discussed financial barriers in the context of service provisions. For example, outlining the challenges associated with transitioning people out of homelessness, one participant explained how:

There's a lot of background and administration [cost] that goes along with the programs, but if you are still... if you are still swamped with all of that work, then you don't have time for the true case management. You don't have time for the customer service, you don't have time to follow up with clients. You're not getting to know the people that you're serving and that... that's a huge gap (Victoria).

The amount of resources devoted to helping Halton's chronic service users/vulnerable was also an important theme that emerged during focus groups.

There's a famous number from the hospitals where they say these five percent of the clients take up fifty percent of the resources. And I think that's true for social services. So if we can create situation tables or community partnerships where we can really address some of these guys who are sucking up a lot of resources, we can serve more people....But also, you know, getting some leadership on it from the region or somebody connected to all those points to pull them together and talk about why this is worthwhile (Jason).

Research participants also drew parallels between financial constraints and the importance of tailoring services to the individual needs of their clients. As one service provider explained, "the people that we serve, there's different capabilities...so one size doesn't fit all" (Fran). Sharing a similar viewpoint, a different service provide discussed how

Our clients now come with multiple issues, you know, including mental health, addictions and so we've had to grow to deal with those. And in terms of diversity, we believe that we're a model for diversity within the organization from the board right down, right through our staff. Because our clients are very diverse and come from a variety of, of places (Geri).

Sharing a similar opinion, another research participant noted that:

...so the successes that we've had are not assuming we know what people need or want, but actually, you know, helping people to, you know, talk about that and then having a unique plan per person, right? Because not everybody is the same. And I understand that's very... that's very costly in some ways, or seen as very costly, but I truly believe that actually it will actually be a cost reduction on the other end when you look at overall the whole system (Olivia).

While participants outlined the challenges commonly associated with helping their clients access services/resources, this same group also discussed the techniques they use to break through barriers and assist their clients connect with other services providers. As one focus group participant explained:

I tell people to call everyone they know and as often as possible...I don't care if you have five case workers in different organizations, you're calling every single one of them and I'll call them with you...and we'll just wait to see what happens first (Bella).

Empowering clients to advocate for themselves was also discussed by some service providers. One participant in particular highlighted how "you have to push your client to advocate for themselves because many don't want to, don't have the skills to..." (Victoria). In addition to empowerment, several service providers also discussed the importance of educating clients on the services available to them. As one participant outlined;

I find I provide a lot of education that people don't necessarily know that's it's about other agencies that are able to help or it's like budgeting, education, or if it's a legal eviction, stuff like that, connecting with other agencies and, like, also getting the client to fully like follow through with things (Lucy).

Focus group participants were adamant however that having coordinated services that wrap around individual clients would be a much more effective than requiring clients who are often already overburdened to chase down services.

"It takes a village": Coming together as a Community

it's getting back to that grassroots level and it takes a village, right? That's what I keep saying. And I think we have to return to that mentality, you know? We [should not] all [be] working individually in our own fields (Michelle, housing and outreach worker.)

The participants of the focus groups were resolute that the only way that the Halton region can truly make meaningful strides in the move to provide housing for all its residents is to come together as a community. In fact, building collaborative capacities was the most discussed theme that emerged from all six of the focus groups. There was widespread acknowledgement that understanding the capacity and capability of each organization is an important first step in forging networks for collaboration. Front line workers recognized the need for help outside of their own organization in coordinating services. In addition, there was recognition that real change requires large monetary investment that will primarily be achieved if funding agencies follow their own requirements for collaboration and join forces to offer bigger pools of money.

Hello, my name is.....

Participants in each of the focus groups argued that collaborations are occurring across the sector; however, these collaborative efforts are based more on loose friendships that have been made over time, rather than on a real understanding of the services that each organization has available. Geri echoed the sentiments of many when she stated that she'd "been doing this for a long time and has

known tons of people in the region, and [yet, she] could count on one hand the number [of housing workers] that [she] would call by their first name or that [she] would give a telephone call to". As articulated by Norah below, the frontline workers urged for opportunities to both know what services each agency provides, but also to have organized face-to-face meetings within the sector.

It's about these in person opportunities to see some faces, to feel like you're aligned with some other services and that... You used that word before. I can call my friend, my contact, my so-and-so at this other place and we already have something to kind of work with and run with, so, I think something like these kinds of days where you bring people together in the community. Probably, I'm going to say most of us, we operate within our own realm, right? That's kind of our human nature is to go to the faces that you already know. So even something like this activity has a very specific focus – research - but when we're almost forced... Sit at a table we're assigned to to talk to some people, maybe I've talked to before and maybe I haven't, it pushes us all out of our comfort zone and allows some new relationships to open, some new dialogue, some new networking. That's really key.

The data revealed that the many working in the housing sector believe that the Region is the best situated to facilitate networking opportunities. Two separate, but related, systems of networking were proposed. The first was an easily accessible database that contains all of the services that each organization in the Halton region provides. The second, and arguably even more important piece was the need for regularly scheduled networking opportunities.

you know, part of the challenge is we want to move forward [with networking opportunities] but it's, you know, how do we make that happen in a meaningful way is... And with a community like Halton, where you have, you know, large geography, long distances, you know, we have urban/rural mixes, you know, so some of those dynamics and stuff and so...They are all pieces (Spike).

It was clear from the data that there is a need for one point of contact within the sector to take the lead in providing a collaboration hub. Ideally, the hub would be located somewhere that already had a relationship with the variety of organizations at work in Halton.

The Region: The Heart of the Sector.....

An employee from the Region argued that they are “uniquely positioned, [in that they] have funding partnerships with everybody in the sector” and that they are often the point of contact for project ideas,

And what I get on a continuous basis is calls from people. Hey, I've got this great idea. Can we meet? Only to, when you meet with them, well I talked to so-and-so last week about something similar and so-and-so the week before, right? And so we're always seen as, by de facto, we're

almost serving like a systems navigation role. People are confused about where to go. They've got questions about what the needs are so they come to us (Bruce).

Frontline housing workers also asserted that the Region was ideally positioned to facilitate collaboration and to coordinate networking. Different than in the other regions where the authors have conducted studies of this nature, was a real appreciation and allegiance to the Region's role. Bob acknowledged that the housing sector already relies on the Region to fulfill this role; however, they have not yet been clearly positioned as the system navigator. Bob argued that this causes problems sometimes as organizations in the sector inaccurately blame the Region for shortcomings;

... we can't rely on the region as much as the systems navigator, that's not their expressed purpose either and if they aren't... if they can't do it as effectively as they need to do it, then we just blame them and say well you didn't tell me that. So the ownership of how we know what those roles are is challenging, but again, it's information management is a difficult piece (Bob).

Frontline workers and their EDs acknowledged many organizations are currently trying to be a 'catch all' service rather focusing on their own areas of expertise. Having a lack of information about each program is leading to many organizations overextending themselves, or not filling a need in the same way that a different organization may be able to. Many of the front line workers argued that there is a need for each agency to clearly articulate their capacities;

I think one of the challenges we all face is being clear of what we do and don't do and sharing that information with one another because we all make assumptions that we know what's going on and it's a... you know, you're perpetually trying to keep up to that information (Bob).

... at the end of the day, most of us don't know everything that the other agencies are doing. It's really rare that we can kind of say 'oh, you mean you have a program to deal with it?', and we've been struggling on our own all this time? This is foolish!...We're the experts in one thing, but not everything. So I think that part of that collaboration is just learning what each other does (Norah).

We all got into social work for the same reasons and we need to be able to pull the resources however we can and lean on each other and pick up the slack. And what we're not good at, maybe you are. And we turn to you and we might be able to help you down the road. So it's really important that we breed that culture now, you know? (Michelle).

I also think having more education about other services, like, helps the client so much more... the more education we have about all the services or, like, what criteria people need for certain programs, it's better helping our clients really (Lucy).

While some of the front-line workers argued that the Region should implement a database where up to date information from each organization is easily accessible and can be altered in real time, others recognized that there needs to be face-to-face networking opportunities as well.

I think that trying to do it [only on a database] doesn't really catch everything and so I think that this kind of [social networking] environment is great (Sam).

While a database would again be nice again as a sort of backdrop, reference thing but it's really the meeting because also find out the nuances of programs and services of... that don't get captured in any kind of a database. But the challenge is, you know, we've all got fifteen plates that we're juggling. And how do you.... So how do you, how do you... how do you build that cohesively so that you start learning about those people that you've maybe seen a bit, or know a little bit about their program or service and you just haven't been able to connect? (Spike).

I'm kind of a believer in relationship and face-to-face. I think there's something about a database or a spreadsheet as a point of reference to go as a refresher but I think if that's the primary means, it's very disconnected, and that it really is about...(Ruby).

There was much support for active triannual meetings of the housing community where members could networks and come to understand the services that each are able to provide and to better coordinate the different expertise. Important to this discussion was the assertion that the housing community must find a way to move from *talking* to *doing*. Five out of the six focus groups discussed the need to have action plans in place.

Moving from Discussion to Action and Accountability

And I think it's part of moving forward as we put in place structures to facilitate greater collaboration, it has to come with an action plan. It can't just let's... Because my understanding is in the past, people got together, they talked but nothing ever materialized (Geri).

Participants recognized that one of the practical challenges of collaboration is determining how to align each organizations' separate mandates and practices, and how to determine who becomes the lead and allocates the resources.

...there are some challenges and I think what would be important is to work out those practical challenges of those collaborations because it's not going away. This is more going to be what our vision is. But we need to sort out how we're actually doing it at the operational level because there are some... some... some real challenges associated with accountability, resource allocation, overlap, you know... (Gee).

The fluidity of services is a barrier and every organization and staff needs to have their own target groups and mandates and we need to know one another, you might be able to provide some types of referrals, but in order to identify what the true gaps are and to fill those and make it more fluid and streamlined and client focused, I think is going to involve a lot more at this table. A lot more sharing of experiences and actual case examples to be able to try to identify first and then create some sort of solutions (Olivia).

There was agreement that once the gaps were identified, and there was an understanding of the capacity of each organization the housing community needs to “hold [themselves] accountable to move the agenda forward”. Bruce articulated that key to moving forward would be to come up with shared fundable projects and to actively work in conjunction with one another to move those projects forward.

One Hub: Applying for all Services Simultaneously

Most of the populations who are struggling to obtain and maintain housing are often vulnerable in a number of other ways. As has been discussed throughout these findings, the needs of clients are often vast, interconnected, and run the spectrum from: counseling due to abuse; mental health; addictions; hunger; lack of transportation; lack of education to an inability to find employment. Due to this reality one particular client may in fact need to obtain several services in an effort to deal with their particular issues. The current framework requires the client to apply for each service separately, most often in a different location, on a different day, with different identification and varying burdens of proof. This requires an abundance of travel and meetings in addition to keep tracking of numerous documents. Often, frontline workers acknowledge that clients do not have the capacity to successfully navigate these systems. Frontline workers recognize this barrier and advocate for one application hub whereby all organizations that fall within the client’s needs receive their information simultaneously.

Frontline workers contended that for some of their clients having to tell their life story over and over again adds negatively to their mental health and can increase anxiety and stress which deter the client from moving forwards.

... it’s really difficult for [people who have experienced abuse] to share their stories, to share everything and then to have to put it on paper. To relive that and put it on paper. And we often face that. It’s kinda like... you know, let’s bleed a little bit more. Right? And give you this paper that says more and more and more. It’s revictimizing, right, our clients in that. So I think that that process, much like the OntarioWorks application process, they can just be very intrusive to what qualifies you right? (Lina).

I think one of the pain points for clients is telling their story numerous, numerous, numerous times to various agencies or, you know, front line staff or something that like where, if there was a way to better kind of coordinate that, as well as, and I know it was brought up this morning, two things, is

around the privacy. I really feel like there should be a better way to coordinate that and I know it's larger than just the regional but being able to get around privacy a little bit to better help clients (Rich).

I think the piece, and I don't have an answer to it, but I think the piece that resounded with me was that... around... clients having to continually tell their story. Right? With every... and sometimes that in and of itself may be the barrier to connecting with another service. Another person who has to know the ins and outs and so without really any grand answers to it, I mean, I do wonder about more of a centralized database. You know... is there something that could be expanded that with client consent and that they're meeting with multiple services, multiple resources that there may be a bit of a centralized component where they don't have to repeat everything if that's not what they want to do (Ruby).

Five out of the six focus groups included a discussion of relocating the major services to the same building so that rather than sharing a database for applications for each service, clients could book all of their appointments one day in the same location.

You look at Kitchener-Waterloo. They're really ahead of the game on those community hubs where they have a lot of agencies in one building, you know, and you have the client come in one door and you walk to the next door, and you walk to the next door with them and you know, and you go through and you meet everybody that you need to meet and then everybody knows that they're working with that client and then you can move forward in a wraparound approach (Norah).

I'd like to see a one stop shop where we we could have representatives there to share information with a client so they would just have to come through the front door. Somebody from housing, somebody from health would be there just to make the referral once. They only have to tell their story once as opposed to telling it, you know, eight different times. So it's a community hub that I think is really valuable and have representatives from the police and justice, you know, all the big players in a client's life. And you wouldn't see everybody, you'd see who you needed to see (Geri).

Something we've talked about is almost like a central intake or community intake where, you know, a client is being assessed and even if you want to leave it up to the client to say, you know, this... these three programs I think you could benefit from whether, you know, it's that warm referral, however it wants to be done, however the client wants to do it. If you want the warm referral, no problem. If you just want the information and you'll choose what to ... I think to be able to give, and I know with a lot of programs the challenge would be, like, capacity and being able to kind of take on more and that goes back to funding and I understand that. But I think that, you know, I've heard about central intake in Toronto, stuff like that, where, you know, it's a

understanding that if there's space available in central intake determines that you're going there and the client's willing, really that's the path available to the client to start the process so to speak, so not only those community type outcomes but also... And it does come with time and leadership and trust. I get all that but I think something along those centralized intake or community intake (Rich).

While agreeing with idea of a one-stop application process for all required services three participants pointed out that the current rules around privacy are indeed quite prohibitive and would not allow for the easy sharing of information between organizations.

It would be nice is if we could get around or at least come to some rationalization around the freedom of information and the ability to dialogue with one another. We aren't dialoguing because we're trying to ruin somebody's life, so why are they making it so difficult for us to do it. I understand protection of rights and those sorts of things, but it really becomes counterproductive and in... it doesn't enable us to have legitimate conversations, so if there were a hub, you'd have to solve that communication or that freedom of information conversation, so why don't we solve it and see how it does in the community, and then maybe it forces it to move in that way (Bob).

I'd like to see a more blanket consent for programs and, you know, to... I know other, in Hamilton specifically or other areas they list, like, a plethora. And it could be this, like lengthy, lengthy list of programs that you give us consent to talk to. It's pretty daunting for a client to say, like... they don't even know half the programs we're consenting to or something like that... If there was a way to, you know, have some sort of blanket consent to say... I don't even know how you would say... would you say housing or community organizations... I don't know exactly how you'd word it but somewhere because again (Rich).

One of the key issues with one-stop application processes is recognizing that services that clients require may fall under the umbrella of different levels of government. As a result, it may not be possible to get most services under one roof, or to share one computer program amongst all of the key players. However, participants advocated for working together to find creative solutions to working around any potential barriers to making the system more efficient.

Housing at the Government Level

For the participants who took part in this research, responding to housing and homelessness in the Region of Halton required action from all levels of government. While a majority of research participants were critical of higher levels of government when it came to housing-related funding, there was some optimism over proposed changes to provincial planning policy. As one research participant explained:

There is new legislation proposed...Bill 206? Which, if approved by the government will mandate inclusionary re-zoning going forward...if the legislation is passed, and it's supposed to be January 1st I believe it is, then it would require that the private development actually build a defined percentage of new units as affordable...That would be the mechanism here to try and incent and force the private sector to develop affordable housing.

As noted above, when discussing the role municipal, provincial and federal government play in addressing homelessness and housing in Halton, participants expressed their frustrations with coordinating services and accessing funding. For example, as one focus group participant noted:

I appreciate them [representatives of the Federal Government] coming, and they were showing the beautiful slides of all this housing and stuff like that and I was like 'that's fantastic, out in Thunder Bay, amazing'. So why isn't it happening here? Why isn't it happening in Ontario? Why is it not happening in Toronto, why is it not happening in Hamilton, why is it not happening in Halton, why is it not happening in Peel Region? You know? I mean, I get what they're trying to do. They're trying to show all these different models that have been successful where they have been, but let's move on it. You know?

The same research participant was also quite critical of the Region of Halton and city council's response to a recent PiT homeless count. As the service provider explained:

Are our councillors aware of the PiT count results? You know? What's the message there? They are the ones that are able to make things work and find solutions. So we are just paddling and paddling and trying to find solutions and when things come to this level... I don't even think they are not listening, it's just like somebody is protecting them for not to listen those awful things that are happening in their community. So I think that this is a huge, huge gap or mistake (Angelina).

Bureaucratic factors within the Region of Halton were also identified as barriers to service provisions and program implementation in relation to housing. This was particularly true when it came to the planning of new housing developments. As one official explained:

...So it's one of the complexities of working in a two-tiered system. Hamilton, for example, City of Toronto, it's a one-tiered system where planning and housing sit within the same board of government. In a two-tiered system, you've got the region doing the housing, yet you've got the local municipalities doing the planning and herein lies potentially some of the challenges (Bruce).

Importantly, a different research participant noted how the same tensions do exist in single-tier systems. However; this participant also noted how a two-tier system (like Halton) did make housing related planning more complicated.

When discussing the role government plays in assisting the Region of Halton in addressing housing-related issues, a major theme that emerged from focus group discussions was the challenge of accessing funding. While research participants were aware of funding opportunities at the municipal, provincial and federal level, unclear guidelines from all levels of government meant participants were unsure of where to focus their funding requests. As one participant explained:

The other piece that is frustrating for me is that I know there's money at government levels, at all government levels. And we talked about this yesterday in our meetings with the feds. It's difficult to access the money because you don't know which level to go to. You know it's there, whether it's a large or a small pot of money. But if you don't know the person to get to, you can't get the money (Geri).

For most participants, the disconnect between federal and provincial government was most problematic in relation to housing funding. Discussing the relationship between the two levels of government, one participant suggested:

The connection is very tenuous at best and I think that the challenge, you know, particularly when we're talking various kinds of supports for people that are, that are, you know, vulnerable around housing, then how are... why aren't we getting a better connection between those two kinds of dollars from our upper tiers of government particularly. I think that's a real disconnect (Spike).

An emergent theme participants focused on was the need for clear and concise funding guidelines as a way to improve accessibility.

Innovative Sustainability?

Executive Directors and their frontline workers recognized that government funding was often tied directly to finding 'innovative approaches or solutions' to affordable housing. While appreciating having the opportunity to hold funds to institute programs, the participants expressed great frustration in continually being told that they needed to be innovative, and argued that when they did create programming that made a real difference, its funding was at best tenuous and always came to an end so that the new innovation could receive funding. Angelina, echoed the sentiments of many participants when she asserted;

I really feel affected or offended by the word 'innovation' because we are super creative already. Super creative, and on top of that, what we're doing is not enough, so we really have to, on top of what you're saying, you know working day and night, we have to be innovative.

Braeme, a frontline worker at a different organization also reflected on that fact that calls for innovative funding proposals result in already overtaxed workers having to "find something else [they] can do in addition to everything else [they're] already doing. If [they] are lucky enough to secure funding it is usually not going to pay for any additional staff".

Thus, some frontline workers acknowledged that they let excellent funding opportunities pass by so that their organizations can stay afloat with the little staff and dollars they already have rather than letting those programs slip to chase money they may never see.

Those organizations who have been lucky enough to put forth successful bids to fund 'innovative' programs are often disillusioned with the process once they realize that their funding is for a limited time and all of the hard work they put into creating and administering new approaches will most likely be for naught once the funding expires.

I perceive that there is very limited or no funding for services that aren't innovative or unique or partnerships. And I'm not criticizing that but what I'm saying is, so, say you're fortunate enough to get funding for three years for a Trillium program. You've got this program for three years. It's excellent, it's got the momentum, it's moving forward, it's accomplishing the things the funding is on. It's no longer unique and innovative because you've done it, but you're not finished yet or there's no funding to continue on with that service, with that excellent program. So there's no core... very little core funding available. You can come up with all the creative things you can do, but organizations are jumping from project to project to project (Raquel).

I mean, funding, particularly provincial and federal it's time limited. So, often you want to develop programs. We all want to test and develop programs that are long term. That are not temporary. That are not transitional but when you receive funding that's two or three years, that's the only thing that you can do, and it's better than nothing. So we keep doing the same thing over and over again, repeating a lot of the same types of programs because of the limitation of not know whether or not there's going to be additional funding after two years or after three years. Or will the government change and then there's going to be a different mandate? (Greg).

I would say two things. Well, two things come to mind but they're... they're connected which is funding, I mean that's an obvious, but I think all of us, back to your point, it is certainly a shift to that but we still are... we're still providing services based on, you know, a contractual agreement with a funder and sometimes when we receive funding to try a new program out, and I'm just thinking of a program we have specifically right now running out of funding at the end of this fiscal year, so now's the chase for more funding for it and... because it was start up funding. So the outcomes are amazing but now it's just securing additional funding to keep new innovative things that we're all trying out going in our community (Gee).

Participants in all six of the focus groups pleaded with the government and other funding

agencies to recognize the need for long term funding options so that innovative ideas could in fact be fully developed and instituted in meaningful ways.

Evidence-Based Outcomes

One of the key arguments made by the housing sector in reference to projects and program funding was that there exists a real need to employ evidence-based approaches rather than simply instituting a cycle of innovative ideas. Bruce, from the Halton region, noted that there is a push to use evidence-based approaches; however' argued that it proves to be extraordinarily difficult to be "strategic at the local level when there's no guarantee funding is coming".

...one of the issues around collecting data is historically the funders and our boards and our donors... We tell them trust us, we know what we're doing, and we're doing good things and the world's a better place and we get their trust at the end of the day. Those days are done and we have to figure out how we can actually quantify those outcomes and measure them so that you can measure preventative as having an outcome with some value that you can assign dollars to it as an investment as opposed to, well, the province just tells us that we're supposed to spend it in that box. And we just spend it in that box (Bob).

The majority of the EDs understood that moving to evidence-based outcomes however, was not as simple or straightforward as it may have been at one time. There is recognition that individuals need a different quality of care if they are to ever become fully self-sufficient. This quality of care manifests itself differently amongst different individuals and it is not easily quantified. In addition, providing quality of care could potentially mean providing services to less people, thus understanding the metrics is paramount.

...we're seeing the province is re-engineering its mechanism. So it used to be very output driven. We gave you X, we did Y. We gave you a million bucks, you built three... you know... five units. Fantastic. Now, it's did you house the right people. How do you know that that's the strategic investment? It's an outcome based regime and that's what we need to be ready to respond to because, going forward, they'll be asking for outputs, they're going to be asking for outcomes. So if we service less people, but the quality of service is better. In terms of they stayed longer, they got more wraparound support. But it also establishes a need outside of that. Because if you want that level of service, you can't service 800 people. You know? So what are the proper measurements? And that outcome measurement. (Bruce)

you can provide a hundred units to one person, or one unit to a hundred people, but you can't provide a hundred units to a hundred people. And

you have to find out what that balance is and where it functions and so you need to be able to quantify what a unit is and... and figure out what it is so that the level of outcomes or outputs for you, it's significant, and it's a matter of are we accomplishing the same thing (Bob).

Another important acknowledgment was that measuring outcomes requires a longitudinal lens rather than just evaluating new programs on their time limited cycles. Frontline workers and EDs argue that truly making a difference requires time to build relationships of trust and to get the correct pieces in place for individual clients.

The outcomes or the results are sometimes longitudinal. It doesn't happen in a four year political cycle. It happens long term and what does that look like and, you know, can we accept that (Bruce)?

I think with the notion of outcomes and the idea that there's pathways and so on, doesn't speak to the needs of people in a relationship of trust and how long things take to get back on track on time into a different way so the idea that you can have outcomes around people is kind of an interesting notion on its own. You're stably housing somebody and that's a widget so just putting people into some of those pieces I think with some of our new levels of accountability to whether it's a funder or the region or whoever and what they are requiring of us doesn't allow, you know, for those... doesn't... well, we do it, but it's not taken into account how long the spiral into homelessness takes and how long it takes to get out of that. So I just think those pieces aren't taken into account in the system frameworks people are setting up, right? And that flows to the funding ideas, right (Max)?

Furthermore, Edward from the Region noted that the impact of prevention programs are even more difficult to measure.

I think measuring prevention is always difficult as opposed to applying for emergency response or risk intervention programs that you could get immediate metrics for. But in terms of prevention, it's a really a different thing to create a cost analysis... so I think that if there were better metrics and if the funders were able to see that as a value as well in terms of prevention, I think that would hold more weight in terms of funding

The other issue that participants highlighted in regards to evidence-based outcomes was their confusion over what appears to be a lack of willingness, or perhaps the inability to incorporate programs that have shown to be extremely successful in other regions into the Halton region. Frontline workers spoke about their frustration with having guest speakers' talk about successful innovations all over Canada but never seeing them come to fruition in

Halton. Sienna urged that we even need to move beyond Canada to see what is working in other parts of the world;

... we're applying Band-Aids across this country. That's what we've been doing for years. We have not focused the resources and the expertise that's been learned from the other parts of the world and so on in terms of finding alternate solutions. And right back, sorry, to supply of appropriate housing is one absolutely key bullet.

Furthermore, some frontline workers expressed their annoyance with the community NIMNY syndrome that appears to exist in regards to the types of programs instituted despite evidence-based practices. For example five different frontline workers spoke at length of the need for wet shelters; however' acknowledged that despite evidence of their successes they are rarely funded. Victoria argued that their needs to be better communication of evidence-based outcomes so that both funders and the community at large better understand what works. Furthermore, Stacy urges the sector to stop confusing "best practice" with evidence-based outcomes and to stop applying it to all contexts.

Conclusions

Six focus groups were conducted with a total of fifty individuals working within the housing community in the Halton region. Through this qualitative research participants explored the major issues and gaps in services within the housing sector. The findings from these focus groups suggest that housing needs must be addressed at the individual level, community level and at the government level.

More than any one thing, vulnerable populations need access to affordable and safe housing that can meet their needs. The findings from the focus group highlighted the populations that were most struggling to access housing. In particular, gaps were noted in providing culturally appropriate housing that met the needs of larger immigrant families, housing that met the needs of the youth and elderly population—as well as the needs of families who were comprised of both the elderly and youth in the same household, and housing that addressed a myriad of health issues (physical limitations, mental health and addictions).

There was recognition that the only way to be successful in addressing housing for all is to come together as a community in a multitude of ways. There was recognition that frontline workers have the drive and desire to work together to meet the needs of their clients, however lack the time and capacity to facilitate effective collaborations. The participants contended that some of their time constraints as frontline workers could be decreased by instituting one hub where vulnerable populations can apply for all the services they may require simultaneously rather than having to chase down individual services. In addition, pleas were made for the Region to act as a collaboration hub to help facilitate effective networks and to navigate funding applications. Furthermore, frontline workers contended that in the true spirit of collaboration funding agencies also needed to learn to collaborate so that larger pools of money could be made available to make real and effective change.

The findings from the focus groups highlight that government transparency, or lack thereof, has resulted in great frustration within the housing community. The participants articulated that there was a lack of clarity in what levels of government specific funding requests need to be processed, and furthermore, in how funding decisions are made. In addition, the government's continual call for creativity and innovation in the housing sector insults frontline workers who feel they are incredibly creative in finding solutions to a myriad of difficulties their clients experience. Frontline workers require funding to sustain already successful programs rather than the continued expectation for new innovations. In concert, participants asserted that there was need for the use of evidence-based outcomes in assessing the efficiency as well as any redundancies that may exist within the sector.

Recommendations

As with any study there are recommendations at the macro, meso and micro levels. At the macro or government level, increasing funding from the federal and provincial governments to municipalities to invest in increasing stocks of affordable housing is of the utmost importance. Investing in accessible education for all would greatly improve the life chances of many individuals in our community, as would offering credentialization programs for our highly educated immigrant populations. Increasing the minimum wage to a living wage, and increasing social assistance levels to at very least the LICO's would also improve the lives of many. Increasing funding to mental health and addiction services would also greatly improve the likelihood of success in obtaining and maintaining housing. Unfortunately however, these are not recommendations that the Region can facilitate, and while they should remain as the overarching goal, the rest of the recommendations are Region specific, and many come from the frontline workers themselves.

At the individual level, there needs to be much more access to housing. While building new affordable housing complexes may be ideal, there is a need to find innovative solutions within the communities across the Region. One of the solutions may be to start creatively reimagining spaces for housing; warehouses, industrial complexes, commercial properties that are currently sitting unoccupied could perhaps be repurposed to offer housing opportunities, especially to larger families who cannot easily fit into the traditional North American housing. Facilities such as schools and hospitals that are being closed down due to low enrollment or lack of funding could potentially be repurposed to be shelters, or individual apartments with shared kitchen facilities.

Increasing the emergency shelter capacity is of utmost importance especially during the fall and winter months when temperatures fall. Instituting a revolving schedule for shelter space might be a way to alleviate some of this need until proper funding can go into building new shelters or repurposing other buildings. If 30 facilities could come together and each open their doors for one day of the month to allow people to have a warm space to sleep it would ease the burden for the already overpopulated shelters. Faith based services, some businesses, banquet halls, and postsecondary school spaces, are just some ideas of spaces that may have enough capacity to allow people to stay warm. Volunteering

personnel and property owners would also be less taxed if the community came together and each offered services for one day.

Offering significant rebates to homeowners willing to renovate their houses to become landlords may help open up vacancy rates. Perhaps this could be accomplished through tax breaks for landlords who enter into contractual relationships with the Region to offer rental space at an affordable rate. In addition, facilitating an expansion of house sharing beyond senior citizens may be beneficial. For example, families that have undergone a dissolution of a relationship who may lose their housing as a result, may find a better option to be sharing their home with another lone parent family. Families who have their own teenagers and are struggling financially may be willing to take in youth who are struggling to find appropriate housing.

There are also several recommendations at the community level. The first, and most obvious to the frontline workers, is to ask the funders and funding agencies to model the behaviour they are asking to see throughout the housing sector. Collaborating as funders has the ability to exponentially increase the organizations capacity to work together to effect real change rather than simply reapplying bandage solutions. While the agencies are all happy to be successful in their quest for any money, regardless of the amount, generally the funds are so low and must be spent so quickly that their hands are tied in making any real lasting changes. Real and lasting change requires an increase in funding that can indeed be met if funders work together the same way that frontline workers and agency have been asked to collaborate.

Frontline workers need opportunities to spend time with one another in order to better understand what the capabilities and capacity of each organization. Two participants in the focus groups offered excellent suggestions on how this might best be achieved recommending triannual breakfast or lunch meetings arranged by the Region for the entire housing sector. There were two different suggestions offered on the organization of these meetings. The first suggestions was that at each meeting a predetermined list of organizations does a short presentation on the services they offer, capacity, funding and partners they work in collaboration with. The second suggestion was that the region predetermine seating to ensure diverse organizations are seated at each table and then present a couple different scenarios of individuals or families in need of housing. Each table works together to determine what services they could collectively provide the potential client. While this recommendation does nothing to solve the housing crisis in the short term, it does have significant long-term rewards. These meetings will serve as networking opportunities for the sector to develop and strengthen their partnerships and their capacity for collaboration.

Funding directed towards a Region-based hire whose job description is to act as a liaison between all of the agencies, seeking out collaborative funding opportunities, as well as the organizations that could effectively work together, was a high priority for the frontline workers. The participants in the focus groups were emphatic that collaborative efforts were their best route to effect real change, yet were quick to point out that they didn't have the time or personnel to facilitate networking or collaborative applications for

money. Funding a position such as this has many long-lasting benefits for the community as a whole.

Instituting a computer program within the region that allowed vulnerable individuals to fill out one detailed application for all required services simultaneously is by far the most economically advantageous recommendation. Frontline workers in every sector are already overworked without the added difficulty of continually trying to aid clients in reaching out to the numerous of agencies and services that they require. Having one system that each organization can log into enables the Region to see any redundancies, ensures that clients are receiving access to the myriad of services they need simultaneously, reduces the time constraints of frontline workers, allows for the same information to be shared cross sector thus reducing chances for any errors, and allows agencies to pick up services that may otherwise be missed. In addition, this system allows clients, some of whom have histories of trauma, to tell their stories and provide all of their documentation one time. This also allows clients to focus their attention on taking the necessary steps to improve their situation rather than on trying to find help.

Lastly, some funding needs to go into procuring evidence-based outcomes of programs that are already in place. There needs to be longitudinal qualitative and quantitative research that measures the efficacy of programming prior to the institution of new programming or the ending of already intact programs. This research cannot merely measure outcomes based on percentages of those who have left housing or received housing. Movement forward in the lives of vulnerable populations must be measured qualitatively and understood as a long term process in most cases. New programming should also not be incorporated without evaluative tools in place.

APPENDIX A

Focus Group Script, Questions and Probes Housing

Focus Group Script

Welcome and thanks for participating in the “Community Ideas Factory” project!

The “Community Ideas Factory” is a two-year research project that is funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC).

The goal of the project is to explore and develop creative solutions for philanthropy in the Halton Region.

Dr. Michael McNamara and Dr. Sara Cumming from Sheridan College are leading the project alongside the lead community partner; the Oakville Community Foundation.

Within this project, we are working with various stakeholders to first identify the principle pain-points, challenges, and obstacles confronting our housing and homelessness service delivery.

Next, we build on this information to engage stakeholders in a series of Creative Problem-Solving sessions with a view towards developing creative solutions that will help us improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our housing and homelessness services and practices in the Halton Region.

This focus group is an important first step of the research in so far as it will allow us gain a better understanding of the particular challenges, obstacles, and prospects your organization is confronting.

This project has received approval from the Research Ethics Board at application. As part of that approval, we are asking participants to review and sign a ‘consent to participate’ form, which I’ll review with you in a moment.

First, I’m going to tell you who I am (brief introduction to you; name/position).

Now, I’m going to tell you about the structure of the focus group you’re about to participate in. This focus group is informed by a ‘guided conversation’ approach, which means, it will feel like a conversation. I have six primary questions I’ll be asking you, but I may be following up with some probes (like, tell me a bit more about this) as one might do during the course of a conversation.

I want to let you know that your participation in this exercise is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time and for any reason without penalty by contacting me or one of the lead researchers.

You are not obliged to answer any of the questions I will pose.

You might also have noticed that I'll be recording our conversation. I'm doing this so that we can accurately capture your responses. The tapes will later be transcribed, reviewed, and analyzed by our researchers... but we are bound to ensure that your name and organizational affiliation will be disguised and/or redacted in any/all academic publications and any presentation and written summaries of the findings.

A lot of this information is contained in the informed consent documents, so let's review (and sign) those forms now (if we haven't done so already).

Ok, does anyone have any questions at this point?

The last order of business is for us to review and agree to some ground rules.

- 1) We've set aside about 1.5 hours for this session- it might go a bit longer, or shorter. Is everyone ok with this?
- 2) For integrity of the data collection, we ask that only person speak at time. (You might want to use the conch/rock system- speaker holds rock; then passes to next speaker).
- 3) We ask that we be respectful of each other and each other's contributions.
- 4) If anyone feels uncomfortable at any time, please let me know and I will redirect us accordingly.
- 5) You might notice me doing a tape check here and there, so please just ignore me.
- 6) Does anyone have anything else they'd like to add to our ground rules?

Ok, then I think we're ready to get started with our focus group questions.

I'm starting the tape now (start tape).

Focus Group Questions

Question 1:

Who are you? So, I'm wondering if we could go around the table for some quick introductions. Who you are and your role in your organization.
(probes, where you feel necessary)

Question 2:

What is your organization's (or unit's) goal and/or objective?

Question 3:

What is working well in terms of allowing you and your organization to meet the needs of your clients?

Question 4:

What are the principle pain-points or obstacles you would like to see being addressed and which, if addressed, might help you better serve your clients?

Question 5:

What might work better in terms of allowing you and your organization to meet the needs of your clients?

Probes:

- Meeting demands?
- Applying for and obtaining funds?
- Servicing clients?

Question 6:

Based on the pain-points and gaps identified, what would it take to work more collaboratively with other organizations to better server your mutual clients in the housing and homelessness sector?

END

"Thank you so much! That's it, we're done."

Give an appropriate closing- thanks, and make sure they have contact information for follow-up.

Stop tape, double check you have collected all consent forms.

Informed Consent Letter

Sheridan College, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Informed consent

Title: The Community Ideas Factory (Focus Group Interviews)

Lead Researchers: Dr. Michael McNamara (Michael.mcnamara@sheridancollege.ca) and Dr. Sara Cumming (sara.cumming@sheridancollege.ca)

Name of stakeholder:

I understand that the goals and objectives of the Community Ideas Factory project are to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of Oakville's philanthropic sector. I understand that, throughout this project, key stakeholders in Oakville's philanthropic sector are being asked to participate in one, two, or several data collection exercises in Oakville, ON.; namely, Asset-mapping, Focus-Group Interviews, and Creative Problem-Solving Facilitations.

I agree to participate in this Focus Group Interview in Oakville, ON. I understand that my organizational affiliation and responses will be recorded by the researchers and I consent to having my participation be video and/or audio taped by the researchers named above or by a member of their research team.

I understand that my participation in this exercise is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time and for any reason without penalty. I understand that I may withdraw from the study by contacting any one of the lead researchers listed above and that by withdrawing, all my contributions as well as my organizational affiliation information will be stricken from their records. I understand that there is no obligation to answer any question. I also understand that if I choose to withdraw from this study before it is completed, any information I have provided will be omitted from the study.

I understand that there will be no payment for my participation.

I understand that my personal biographical data (name, organizational position, and organizational affiliation) will be recorded by the researchers and disclosed to my fellow session participants. I also understand that my contributions to these sessions may be recorded through video, audio, notation, and/or photography for the sole purposes of advancing understanding and knowledge of the research topics and issues. I also understand that my name and organizational affiliation will be disguised in any/all academic publications and any presentation and written summaries and will only be used in community reports or other publications when consent is explicitly and separately given in writing (at the request of the researchers).

Participant's signature:

Date:

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Sheridan College Research Ethics Board (file#....., Dr. Kirsten Madsen, Chair of the Research Ethics Board, 905-8459430 ext 9430).

If you have any questions or concerns about this research please contact Dr. Michael McNamara Michael.Mcnamara@sheridancollege.ca or Dr. Sara Cumming Sara.Cumming@sheridancollege.ca

Thank you for your help.

I have fully explained the procedures of this study to the above stakeholder

Researcher's signature:

Focus Group Face Sheet

Housing Focus Group

Face Sheet

Name: _____

Organization: _____

Position: _____

Length of time with organization _____

Who are your funders? (federal, provincial, municipal, philanthropy...)

Number of years working in housing _____

Number of years in total in the not-for-profit sector _____

Is your organization currently working in collaboration with any other organizations or service providers? If so, please list

Please circle one of the following

Gender: Male Female Transgender Gender Neutral

Age: under 20 20-30 31-40 41-50 51-60 over 60

Please choose a pseudonym you would like to be referred to in any written material

Please write your chosen pseudonym on the accompanying name tag

