



Official Submission: Homelessness Partnering Strategy

Prepared for: Advisory Committee on Homelessness (Government of Canada)

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Background: **Role of the PTF**

The Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination works collaboratively, informed by diverse voices of experience, to take local action and advocate for system and policy change. The Poverty Task Force (PTF) recognizes that affordable housing and homelessness is a key priority for our community and has a goal that everyone in Guelph & Wellington can find and maintain an appropriate, safe and affordable place to call home¹.

In 2015, the PTF was moved to act on homelessness after a point-in-time count by the County of Wellington cast intensified light on the issue. Encouraged by action taken in other communities to end homelessness, the PTF and County of Wellington made a strategic decision to co-lead a local movement to support the 20,000 Homes campaign. As part of this campaign, a local Registry Week was carried out in April 2017, identifying 295 individuals experiencing homelessness over a three-day period in Guelph-Wellington. Since Registry Week, the PTF has played an active role in developing an active By-Name List as part of a Coordinated Entry System.

The PTF has acted as a lead advocate in our community on affordable housing and homelessness. In recent years, the PTF has provided official submissions as part consultations on the National Housing Strategy, Ontario's Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy Update, and the City of Guelph's Affordable Housing Strategy. The PTF was also an active partner in the development of the County of Wellington's 10-year Housing and Homelessness Plan.

The PTF has been an active member of the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) Community Advisory Board (CAB) since 2014.

This submission has been prepared by the PTF, informed by our involvement as a member of the CAB, but also by our deep connection to homelessness in our community. In addition, we have included the voices of lived experience, based on community conversations with individuals who are experiencing homelessness or are at-risk of homelessness.

¹ This goal is adopted from the County of Wellington 10-year Housing & Homelessness Plan

Feedback from Individuals Experiencing Homelessness

The PTF is committed to including diverse voices of experiences to inform its work and aims to provide opportunities for all community members to engage in action and dialogue about poverty-related issues. As such, we reached out to individuals experiencing homelessness to provide input as part of this consultation. The feedback provided below is reflective of a group discussion with 25-30 adults (approximately 25+ years) at the Welcome In Drop In Centre and one-on-one and small group discussions with 10 youth (approximately 16-24 years) at Wyndham House Youth Emergency Shelter. All participants are either currently homeless or at-risk of homelessness. Discussions were facilitated by PTF staff and questions focused on the non-demographic questions included in the Advisory Committee for Homelessness online survey for individuals. These questions included:

- What programs and services are working well to reduce or prevent homelessness in your community?
- How can existing programs and services be improved to prevent and reduce homelessness in your community?
- What are some types of programs or services that are missing in your community that you think would make the biggest difference in preventing and reducing homelessness?

The following is a summary of the main themes that came out of discussions based on these questions.

Theme 1: More Affordable Housing Options / Rent Supplements are Needed

The most consistent feedback from participants, as well as the issue that generated the most amount of conversation, was about the need for more affordable housing options and rent supplements. Participants were well aware that Guelph has one of the lowest vacancy rates in Canada and noted that available units are well outside their budget.

“There’s all these apartments and new buildings going up but they’re like, \$1,000 to \$2,000 a month. I’m on disability - there’s no way I can afford that. There’s just nothing out there for me.” - adult participant

Recent research has demonstrated the rent assistance for individuals experiencing homelessness:

- Is effective at improving housing stability;
- Associated with greater perceived housing quality; and
- Improves quality of life & other psychological outcomes².

Unfortunately, HPS Directives (2014-2019) do not allow HPS funding to be used to create a new rent subsidy or rent supplement program. In a community with such few affordable housing options, rent supplements are critical for individuals experiencing homelessness to find and maintain housing.

² Pankratz, C. & Nelson, G. (2017). An Evaluation of Rent Assistance for Individuals Experiencing Persistent Homelessness in Waterloo Region. Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University. Available here: http://homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/Rent_Assistance_Community_Report_-_March_16%2C_2017.pdf

Theme 2: Stigmatization from Potential Landlords Needs to be Reduced

Many participants talked about the need to reduce stigma amongst potential landlords. Participants suggested that they are often passed over by potential landlords for university students, even when individuals can demonstrate guaranteed rent. Participants shared stories of landlords treating them poorly and refusing available units and while they understood that this behaviour violated their human rights, they noted that they didn't have the resources to do anything about it.

“As soon as a landlord gets a look at you, they say, ‘oh, sorry, this unit is for a student. They don't care if I have rent or if I don't use drugs, they just see me and say no. It's like they judge you just on the way you look and don't even give you a chance.”
- adult participant

Theme 3: One-on-One Case Management is Preferred

Many participants spoke about the importance of one-on-one case management in helping them find and maintain housing. Those with a specific worker, such as a Housing First worker, spoke at length about how the relationship they had developed with them over time played a significant role in their wellbeing and success. Participants were discouraged by experiences with agencies that take a “team approach” - suggesting that it resulted in them having to tell their story multiple times and that relationships were often strained as a result.

“I've been homeless for 8 years - since I was 15. Having supports like the resource centre to help with ID, getting a job, or finding a place is really important” - youth participant

“Housing First workers are the best. When I'm having a bad day, I sometimes take it out on them, and I get angry. But the next day, I come back to them, and they're there for me. They're like, ‘ok, it's a new day. Let's look at our plan and think about what we need to do.’ I've never had that before.” - adult participant

Theme 4: Harm Reduction & Peer Support Approaches are Preferred

Many of the participants were open about their substance use and identified it as a barrier to finding and maintaining house. Based on this, they spoke at length about the importance of organizations and staff using a harm reduction approach that built on a belief in, and respect for, the rights of people who use drugs. Individuals suggested that the workers they've had the best relationships with have taken a harm reduction approach. In addition, participants commented that peer support workers (those with lived-experience) are often the best at implementing harm reduction strategies and, as a result, are the kind of worker that connect best with them.

“We need more dedicated workers because the people that do exist are supporting so many people that they’d don’t have time. You need someone to keep on top of housing, to check-in with you, and take you to viewings. Someone who won’t look at you as someone who is underclass” - youth participant

Theme 5: Less Formalized Services Required

When asked about programs or services in our community that are working well, participants were quick to share the names of specific agencies and workers. When asked to think about the factors that set these agencies apart from others, participants noted that they liked to access services that are less formalized (e.g. no wait list, no eligibility criteria, no participant requirements, etc.). Participants expressed that they felt more welcomed and comfortable in these environments, and that trusting relationships with staff were easier to develop.

Theme 6: More Mental Health Supports Needed

Many of the participants, particularly among adults, voiced the need for more responsive and readily available mental health services. Participants were open about the trauma they’ve experienced and the mental health challenges they face, and were discouraged by experiences with the mental health system. Participants noted that when they feel ready to access services, they’re often not available (or require an appointment or placement on a wait list).

“Look around this group. A lot of us have mental illnesses. It’s hard. HERE24/7 is great, but sometimes I need someone to come to me. Sometimes I just want to walk into [CMHA] and talk to someone right away. But the system doesn’t work that way. It doesn’t work for us.” - adult participant

PTF Recommendations

Recommendation 1:

Develop transparent rationale for how HPS funding is allocated

Understanding the rationale for how HPS funding is important. As a “small designated community” (as identified by the Government of Canada), Guelph has historically received limited funding from HPS. For example, Guelph was allocated \$195,606 over the 3-year period of April 2011 - March 2014 (0.05% of overall HPS funding). Comparable cities to Guelph, in terms of population, but with a reportedly lower number of individuals experiencing homelessness, received significantly more in HPS funding for the same 3-year period. The justification for how HPS funds are allocated has not been shared with our community. We urge the Government of Canada to develop transparent rationale, based on relevant indicators, to guide an equitable allocation of HPS moving forward.

Recommendation 2: Streamline the HPS Community Plan with Existing Plans & Initiatives

The HPS Community Plan is expected to be based on broad consultation with local stakeholders. In the past few years, our community has experienced an increased number of community reports on affordable housing & homelessness, including the County of Wellington 10-year Housing & Homelessness Plan, the County of Wellington Homelessness Strategy (2014-2018), the City of Guelph's Affordable Housing Strategy, and the Guelph-Wellington 2016 Registry Week Final Report. Rather than engage in further consultations with stakeholders to develop the HPS Community Plan, the process should be streamlined by, wherever possible, being informed by existing plans and initiatives. Guidelines on how this can be accomplished should be provided by the Government of Canada.

Recommendation 3: Continue 5-year Funding Commitments

After two rounds of 3-year funding commitments, we welcomed the shift to a 5-year commitment in 2014. This enabled our CAB to develop a stronger community plan and for funded programs to plan for and deliver strong results. However, funding announcements need to occur earlier in the process - at least 6 months before funding is set to begin. In the past, funding announcements have happened quite late, putting pressure on the CAB and applicants to act quickly, without sufficient planning time.

Recommendation 4: Improve Targets Related to Housing First and Non-Housing First Dedicated Funding

Our community currently provides HPS Non-Housing First dedicated funding to support activities that provide individualized support services to enable the self-sufficiency of homeless individuals and families, as well as those at imminent risk of homelessness. Our CAB has struggled to set reasonable targets for these activities, in the absence of guidelines from HPS. At the same time, our CAB has expressed concern about adopting Housing First (HF) as a HPS priority because the targets identified by HPS are too restrictive. In fact, while local HPS funding is provided to a HF program in our community, we have shied away from adopting the HPS HF targets because they seem unreasonable (particularly for a new HF program that is just starting). Moving forward, HPS needs to improve the consistency in how targets are identified and set, which should include HPS guidelines and CAB input.

Conclusion

Throughout our history, the PTF has demonstrated critical leadership in our community's efforts to ensure that everyone in Guelph & Wellington can find and maintain an appropriate, safe, and affordable place to call home. We believe that HPS is an important tool in helping our community achieve this goal and are appreciative of the opportunity to provide feedback to the Advisory Committee on Homelessness.

The PTF would also like to emphasize the themes that came from community conversations with those with lived experience of homelessness:

1. More affordable housing options / rent supplements are needed
2. Stigmatization from potential landlords needs to be reduced
3. One-on-one case management is preferred
4. Harm reduction & peer support approaches are preferred
5. Less formalized services required
6. More mental health supports needed

In conclusion, we would like to highlight the following recommendations:

1. Develop transparent rationale for how HPS funding is allocated
2. Streamline the HPS Community Plan with existing plans and initiatives
3. Continue 5-year funding commitments
4. Improve targets related to Housing First and non-Housing First dedicated funding