

Understanding Tenancy Failures And Successes

FINAL Report

A Research Project by:

Edmonton Social Planning Council & Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness

FINAL RESEARCH REPORT

EDMONTON SOCIAL PLANNING COUNCIL/EDMONTON COALITION ON HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

RESEARCH PROJECT: UNDERSTANDING TENANCY FAILURES AND SUCCESSES

September, 2012

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Executive Summary

The findings in this research report were generated from three main sources:

- A literature review that was initially done in February and March 2012. The literature review was expanded and revised in September 2012;
- 8 focus groups with 105 homeless, formerly homeless and vulnerably housed persons. These focus groups took place in April and May 2012; and
- an online survey directed to service providers, policy makers and landlords. 87 responses were received to the online survey during June and July 2012.

The reasons for tenancy failure are multi-faceted and complex. They include:

- An inability to afford suitable accommodation resulting in people being housed in precarious or sub-standard housing;
- an inability to attain housing due to requirements for references, having a criminal record, and/or a poor credit history;
- losing housing due it being unliveable because it is unsafe and/or infested with cockroaches, mold or above all bed bugs;
- losing housing due to a return to addictions and/or an episode of severe mental illness;
- losing housing due to conflicts with landlords and other tenants; and
- losing housing due to an inability to manage one's finances or other essential aspects of daily living.

There are many policy solutions and best practices already in place that significantly reduce the incidence of tenancy failure. All would benefit from additional investment or improvement. They include:

- The development of quality affordable housing run by landlords motivated by a desire to help their tenants succeed;
- a Housing First approach that recognizes that tenants with higher acuity (e.g. addictions, mental illness, and/or previous episodes of homelessness) may well require second and third chances;
- developing better programs to assist with getting those with low or modest incomes initially housed. This includes help with the first month's rent, utilities, furnishings and damage deposit. Many of these programs are being provided to persons who qualify for the Housing First program, but not to thousands of other Edmontonians with similar needs but not in Housing First;
- a recognition that some tenants will require ongoing rental assistance and supports on an indefinite basis; and
- a recognition that bed bugs are forcing many low income tenants to lose their housing and/or their personal belongings on a repeated basis. Bed bugs represent a public health emergency, and a more city wide approach to fighting this menace is required.

There are practical and effective measures that can be implemented by politicians and decision-makers to improve housing retention and reduce the need for re-housing low income tenants. These include:

- Constructing or renovating additional safe and affordable housing of a wide range of types and sizes throughout the city and region and thereby maximize tenant choice;
- eliminating long waits for affordable and suitable accommodation by developing and implementing a more comprehensive, seamless and fully funded rent supplement program. Rental assistance for qualifying low income persons and families is an essential homelessness prevention approach;
- more effective and better support services to keep people housed. These services include addictions treatment, mental health services, and improved financial literacy skills; and
- making sure low income tenants are heard and included in any of the changes and decisions being contemplated to improve tenancy retention.

The Edmonton Social Planning Council (ESPC) was approached by the Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness (ECOHH) to undertake a research project involving an in-depth examination of housing retention challenges. Several community organizations are concerned about clients who were successfully housed, but later returned to homelessness, and the recurring need to find new accommodation for these clients. This outcome uses valuable resources that could otherwise be dedicated to serving new people in their programs. The time and resources required for re-housing makes the goal of ending chronic homelessness in 10 years more difficult to achieve.

ECOHH is a broadly based coalition of organizations and individuals that promotes changes to public policy, increases community knowledge and awareness, and shares information and best practices on affordable housing. Some ECOHH members are affordable housing providers. Several ECOHH members operate Housing First programs.

Having completed two yearly updates of Edmonton's 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness, the ESPC is aware that housing retention is an ongoing challenge. The Edmonton Social Planning Council strives to find practical and achievable solutions to social challenges. It is within that context and spirit that this research project was conducted.

Retaining tenancy is an ongoing challenge regardless of conditions in the broader rental market. However, a tightening market makes suitable rental accommodation both less available and more costly. The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation describes metro Edmonton in its most recent Rental Market Report as follows: "the apartment vacancy rate declined year-over-year to 2.7 per cent, down from 4.7 per cent the previous year. This decline brought the Edmonton apartment vacancy rate in April [2012] to its lowest level since the spring of 2007" (Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2012, p.2).

These are the research questions we set out to answer: why do some tenancies fail thereby necessitating re-housing sometimes on multiple occasions? What best practices are in use locally and elsewhere to maximize housing retention? What practical and effective measures can be put in place to reduce the risk of tenancy failure due to negative circumstances?

These research questions had to be tailored for the use in the focus groups and online survey. This is explained further in the methodology section.

While the re-housing mandate of Edmonton's Housing First program brought the challenge of housing retention into sharper focus, housing retention is a broader challenge affecting most low income and many modest income tenants. The research focus was to look at the challenge in a broader societal context.

During the research it became obvious that many best practices around tenancy retention are already evident in Edmonton. Yet, there is always room for improvement. It was with this in mind that this research project has been undertaken.

The research methods used to generate the report's finding and recommendations were

1. A tenancy best practices literature review. Tenancy failures and housing retention are not unique to Edmonton. There is much to be learned from other jurisdictions. In addition to the work of ESPC staff, students and volunteers did extensive work mostly online to compile the literature review. These activities mostly took place during the early stages of the project, but refinements and enhancements continued to take place throughout. Rather than focus on reasons why tenants lose their housing, the literature review focused on best practices by answering research questions 2 and 3.
2. Holding focus groups was the best approach to obtain the input of vulnerably housed or homeless persons. The ESPC worked with ECOHH partner organizations to hold 8 focus groups between mid-April and the end of May 2012. A backgrounder for community partners hosting focus groups was developed and is attached as Appendix A. A list of community partners who helped organize focus groups is included in Appendix B. The project application called for 4 to 6 focus groups to be held with a combined total of 60 participants. The amount of interest expressed resulted in 8 focus groups being held instead. A total 105 vulnerably housed persons attended the 8 focus groups. Each focus group was attended by participants who had a range of past experiences. Some were homeless, some previously homeless, and some were vulnerably housed. Many had experienced mental health, addictions or other life challenges. Some had previous or current involvement with the Housing First program, while others did not.

Participants were asked a revised version of the research questions to make them more relevant to their own personal experience and knowledge. The following questions were asked of participants: what are one or two things that make it hard to find housing or keep it? What are one or two things that would help people keep their housing? What advice do you have for political leaders to prevent homelessness and keep people housed? An around the circle format was used to make sure everyone had an opportunity to be heard. The role of the facilitator was to keep everyone on task and on occasion ask brief follow up questions. The findings of the focus groups are included in the report. A coding chart used to determine the frequency with which different topics were mentioned is attached as Appendix C.

Arrangements were made through the Edmonton Apartment Association (EAA) to hold a focus group with private sector landlords. After surveying EAA members, insufficient interest was expressed and no focus group was held. Landlords were encouraged to complete the survey instead. A couple did so.

3. The online survey was intended for wider distribution to organizations and individuals in the broader community who have interest in or involvement with homeless persons, the vulnerably housed, and/or tenancy concerns. Survey Monkey software was used to develop the survey and compile results. The survey was posted on the ESPC website from early June to late July. A copy of the survey questionnaire and a quantitative analysis of responses are attached as Appendix D. A reminder to complete the survey was sent twice to the ECOHH lists serve. All but one of the 87 responses received were done online.

Best Practices to Keep People Housed – Research Question #2

Adoption of a Housing First Approach

Countries around the world have in recent years adopted a Housing First approach. Housing First involves not only rapid housing of homeless persons, but also providing the necessary supports to keep people housed. Keeping people housed has until recent years been a secondary consideration to helping get people housed. However, the goal of ending chronic homelessness will never be achieved unless effective strategies can be developed to prevent people already housed from losing their housing.

Some best practices in use to maximize housing retention are identified in city, province, or country-wide plans to end homelessness. In 2009, the Government of Alberta initiated a 10 year plan to end homelessness. This plan states that although “there may still be emergency shelters available for those who become homeless, those who become homeless will be re-housed into permanent homes within 21 days” (Alberta Secretariat on Homelessness, 2008, p. 14). The 10 year plan to end homelessness is a principle-based plan. These principles include: everyone having access to safe, affordable, permanent housing; addressing root causes of homelessness; sharing the responsibility of ending homelessness between multiple actors; planning for programs and services for effectively maintaining services and supports in transitioning to permanent housing; client-centered and community-driven goals and initiatives; and effective long-term funding (Alberta Secretariat, 2008). This plan to end, not manage, homelessness will provide a “substantially lower-cost, long-term solution versus the status quo” (Alberta Secretariat, 2008, p. 2). The objective of the plan is to eradicate chronic homelessness by 2019.

The City of Edmonton has also adopted a 10 year plan to end homelessness with goals similar to Alberta’s plan. The overall goal is to end chronic homelessness by 2019. This will be accomplished by: providing permanent, affordable and supportive housing options; providing emergency services when required without people becoming dependent on them; preventing people from falling into homelessness; and “establishing a governance structure and an implementation process for the Plan that builds on the strengths of the community; develops capacity; promotes collaboration, innovation and cost-effectiveness; and measures progress” (Edmonton Committee to End Homelessness, 2009, p. 35). Both Edmonton’s and Alberta’s plans to end homelessness recognize the need for emergency shelters and temporary housing units, although the intention is to use them in a more effective way and for a shorter period of time.

Some best practices are better explained through case studies of successful tenancy retention programs. Each of the case studies provides a measure of success, as well as a short description of the program. Six case studies of solutions to re-housing challenges in Canada will be examined, followed by three case studies from the United States and one from Australia.

Case Studies Within Canada

The City of Toronto’s Street to Homes program was an early innovator in implementing a Housing First approach to addressing homelessness. Toronto Streets to Homes values the ideal that once a person is placed in a stable, permanent home then “other barriers, such as lack of employment skills, addictions, and poor mental and physical health, can best be addressed” (De Jong, 2007, p. 3). In addition to being housed, individuals are also provided check-in visits to keep track of the tenant’s progress and assistance with life skills such as budgeting. As a result of being placed in the Toronto Streets to Homes project, 56% of participants felt like they had strengthened their ability to budget their money well (De Jong, 2007). Other benefits to the Toronto Streets to Homes project include an improvement in quality of life, less alcohol use, drug use, panhandling, and reductions in emergency service use.

The City of Victoria on Vancouver Island has significant homelessness challenges. Victoria's moderate climate attracts people from across the county and makes sleeping rough year round more feasible than in most other Canadian cities. A partner of Victoria Streets to Homes, Pacifica Housing, runs an apartment complex called Medewiwin Apartments. By being a successful support model for the homeless, Medewiwin Apartments was recognized for its "unique peer support community model which stresses independence, a sense of belonging as well as harm reduction, personal growth and wellness" (Pacifica Housing, 2012). Because of this, the apartment complex "was awarded the 2004 Best Practices in Affordable Housing award by the Canada Mortgage and Housing" (Pacifica Housing, 2012).

The City of Calgary adopted its 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness in 2008, one year earlier than the province and the City of Edmonton. An example of a Housing First model used in Calgary is Pathways to Housing, run by the organization The Alex. The Alex is a non-profit service provider that values "a multi-disciplinary model of health care that is accessible, responsive, nonjudgmental, nondiscriminatory and participatory." The Alex Pathway to Housing program provides people with a place to live first and foremost, and in addition to that housing, "supportive treatment services in the areas of mental and physical health, substance abuse, education, and employment" (The Alex, 2010). There has been great success of participants through this project. 94% of clients have retained their housing, and 47% of clients involved in some vocational and/or educational activity (The Alex, 2010).

Solutions for re-housing challenges often have to address a specific demographic of the homeless population. FairWay Woods in Langford, British Columbia, assists hard to house or homeless seniors. This housing project was started by the Victoria Cool Aid Society in 1995 (Mitchell, 2008). Most tenants of FairWay Woods have a complex array of mental, physical challenges, and/or addictions, yet turnover there is low. Out of 32 self-contained units, only 2 people were asked to leave between 2003 and 2006, and four left voluntarily. The needs of tenants are met by 24 hour on-site care and specifically tailored services that cater to the resident's particular needs. These services may include help with tax preparation, purchasing bus passes, scheduling medical appointments, as well as nursing and psychiatric care. For tenants with addictions, FairWay Woods offers a tolerant and supportive environment. It is located in close proximity to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. Tenants will not lose their unit if they decide to engage in alcohol or drug use (Gnaedinger, 2007). As a way to measure the achievements for FairWay Woods, tenants described physical and emotional improvements, expressing relief and a sense of security due to their living space. Although they still face challenges, many tenants stated that they were drinking less, socializing more, and that they have a sense of pride in the place they live (Gnaedinger, 2007). The success of the program has been pinned on this approach and the passion and dedication of staff.

Aboriginal peoples are overrepresented in Canada's homeless population. As a result, the need for "interventions that are culturally appropriate and that reflect Aboriginal peoples' traditions, beliefs, and practices" has been noted (Carlson, Pauly, & Perkin, 2012, p. 16). For re-housing programs to be successful, the program has to suit the needs of the client instead of the client needing to meet specific requirements in order to fit into the program. While there is a need for more programs specifically for homeless Aboriginal individuals, there are some successful programs within Canada that address their needs. The First Nation, Inuit, Métis Urban & Rural Housing Program administered by Ontario Aboriginal Housing Services has had success in housing "731 people... into 261 homes... this includes 182 people who have moved out of social housing and 53 people who have escaped situations of violence" (Ontario Aboriginal Housing Services, 2012). Services provided by Ontario Aboriginal Housing Support Services utilize "the talent, skills and experience of the Aboriginal Community to cost effectively deliver and administer the program recognizing and utilizing any savings earned...to further in the provision of additional units or repair programs" (Ontario Aboriginal Housing Services, 2011).

Another group within the homeless population that has specific needs is homeless youth. Eva's Initiatives in Toronto, Ontario focuses on helping homeless youth through housing support services and connecting youth back with their families. Each year Eva's Initiatives helps "over 2,300 homeless and at-risk youth to get off the street and find housing and community supports" (Eva's Initiatives Staff, 2011). One of the most important initiatives is the Family Reconnect Program, where youth and their families receive free individual and family counseling. Family Reconnect counseling helps youth with issues of mental illness, addictions, family conflict and resolve or better mitigate family problems. Counseling services also help youth develop social relations and life skills that might be left underdeveloped as a result of being homeless, as they may have been taught by an older family member at home (Gaetz, Patton, & Winland, 2011). By the end of this program, many youth return home, while others are supported by their family or community to seek independent housing (York University, 2011). This program identifies with the needs of homeless youth and assists them in being re-housed, either back with their families or elsewhere.

Case Studies Outside of Canada

In the town of Moree, Australia, an Intensive Tenancy Management Program was developed to improve the outcomes at its public housing estate (Habibis, 2007, p. 10). A team was created to manage tenancies and assets, develop the community, and provide social support. Tenants at the highest risk were visited regularly by support workers, a rent arrears reduction plan was made, and properties were slowly improved. Projects such as fence improvement and community garden contests were designed to instill participants with a sense of ownership and pride in their neighborhood. The result was a 47% reduction in tenancy arrears from 2001 to 2003, as well as decreased vandalism and complaints of nuisance (Habibis, 2007, p. 8).

Like initiatives in Canadian cities, many cities in the United States have very successful Housing First programs that focus on the need to avoid re-housing. The key aspects to this type of housing are “a simple application process...a harm reduction approach...and no conditions necessary of tenancy that exceed the normal conditions under which any leaseholder would be subject” (Corporation for Supportive Housing, 2006, p. 1). One of the key characteristics of this Housing First model is that renters are not required to refrain from substance abuse while under a tenancy agreement. This model has been found to be extremely effective for those who were previously thought to be hard to house, such as people who “have been homeless for long periods of time, have serious psychiatric disabilities, substance use disorders, and/or other disabilities” (Corporation for Supportive Housing, 2006, p. 1).

An example of the success that this housing first approach provides is The Key Alliance’s Housing First Program in Nashville, Tennessee. This program has experienced a 92% retention rate over the three year period, meaning that 50 out of 54 of the participants in the program have preserved their housing (Harris, 2010). Another solution for re-housing challenges is found in New York City and San Francisco and their Pathways to Housing programs. It was found that “83% per cent of formerly chronically homeless tenants remained housed one year later and 77% were still housed after two years. Even among those with the most severe psychiatric disorders, 79% remained housed a year later” (Corporation for Supportive Housing, 2006, p. 2).

In Columbus, Ohio, there is a dual-purpose approach put in place to end chronic homelessness called Rebuilding Lives. Started in 1999, this program enabled the community to address the short term and long term housing needs of homeless persons in the community. “Rebuilding Lives” has improved the “safety net of emergency shelters and established 800 units of permanent supportive housing” (Burt, 2004, p. 5). It is beneficial to provide for both short-term and long-term needs in regards to homelessness because people can lose their tenancy and need somewhere to go until they find a new home. However, emergency shelters are not a feasible solution to chronic homelessness, and a long-term solution is needed as well. The “Rebuilding Lives” program helps people of high risk and vulnerable populations such those who are HIV positive, have mental health problems, addictions, or a combination of these or other issues (Burt, 2004). “Rebuilding Lives” uses the Housing First model, and can provide housing to an individual in as little as three weeks from the initial contact (Burt, 2004).

Another program – LA’s Hope in Los Angeles, California - was designed for people suffering chronic homelessness and disabilities. This project is funded by the U.S. Housing and Urban Development and U.S. Department of Labor. The goals of this project are to find individuals both permanent housing and employment. Over a four year period, 69% of participants in the program were able to locate permanent, supportive housing (Burt, 2007, p. vii). 84% of participants were engaged in activities geared towards employment, such as training. Because of this, 54% of participants were able to find employment (Burt, 2007, p. vii). LA’s Hope has been compared to similar types of programs in California and has been said to have done better in areas of “sustaining housing and participating in employment activities that included full and part-time employment” (Burt, 2007, p. xi).

Practical & Effective Measures to Keep People Housed – Research Question #3

The need for solutions to re-housing challenges is evident in many places around the world. These solutions are required in order to reduce the effect that homelessness has on the draining of social services, health services, and the criminal justice system (Eberley, 2001, p. 1). The stability of neighborhoods also increases as there are more successful tenancies in an area (Habibis, 2007, p. 6). There are many practical and effective measures that can be put into place to reduce tenancy failure. The most effective measures provide a holistic approach to solving the problem. This includes focusing on tenants and landlords, as well as support service agencies and other groups included in determining tenancy failure or success. Creating relationships and understanding the connections between all actors involved is crucial while working towards a high tenancy success rate.

Understanding different demographics within the homeless population is important as well, as programs must be tailored to meet client needs. Clients must not be expected to transform themselves to meet the requirements of a program. There are different groups of people in the homeless population that each have specific needs to help them stay housed. Some of these demographics include those with mental health and substance abuse issues, which have resulted in many housing support systems for that population. However, other groups of homeless or those at risk of becoming homeless have been less researched. Therefore, fewer programs have been put in place for those groups. They include Aboriginal peoples, families, women, veterans, and immigrants and refugees. It is suggested that more research must be done on these groups in order to develop specific programs for each population (Carlson, 2012, p. 16).

Pre-existing risk factors can make certain groups of tenants more vulnerable to the disastrous effects of precipitating life events. Vulnerabilities include poverty and low income, prior household debt, mental health issues, addictions, physical disability, family instability, cultural factors, and housing factors such as inappropriate amenities and/or location (Croft, 2001). Vulnerabilities are exacerbated by life events like financial difficulty brought on by lost work hours, increases in household expenses, or any number of unforeseen expenses (Shelter WA Inc., 1996). Other life events that can impact tenancy are family crises and neighborhood conflicts. It is possible that those who are already vulnerable will often be unable to cope with challenging life events, leading to an incident that jeopardizes their tenancy.

The purpose of differentiating between vulnerabilities and events is to better direct strategic interventions with the aim of avoiding tenancy failure. Early, proactive and supportive interventions can assist at risk tenants to address factors that create vulnerabilities. Similar to the model employed by Edmonton's Housing First program, interventions promote early assessment of tenants, relevant and culturally appropriate support programs for those who need them, and intensive case management in certain situations. These support programs can offer understanding of an individual's vulnerabilities and provide resources to help people cope with life events that may exasperate those vulnerabilities, thus being able to stay housed without tenancy being jeopardized.

More research is needed in the area of creating an empirically-grounded risk identification model that can be used by housing authorities to identify tenant vulnerabilities and develop early and effective intervention strategies. The aim is to stop the problem before it occurs, and this can only be achieved by acknowledging the complexity of the circumstances that lead to vulnerabilities within the population. This would help those who are vulnerable and trying to stay housed, and can lead to a better understanding between tenant and landlord of any difficulties the renter has or might have. This is one of the ways that a positive relationship can be formed between both parties and can lead to greater tenancy success of those in a vulnerable population.

There are two main options for landlords when dealing with tenants that are difficult to deal with. They are disciplinary and supportive approaches. Disciplinary approaches include probationary or short term leases, good behavior agreements, and

anti-social behavior orders that can lead to criminal record proceedings. In some cases, tenants with a history of problematic behavior are given an initial three month lease which can be extended after they have demonstrated positive behavior. Also, alcohol restrictions and designated dry areas are sometimes used to prevent the abuse of alcohol from interfering with a tenant's ability to maintain appropriate behavior and payment of rent. There are two problems with these disciplinary approaches. First, they do nothing to address the underlying reasons for the demanding behavior of tenants, and second, they must be enforced, which can lead to increased tensions or the eviction of high risk tenants (Habibis, 2007, p. 14).

The supportive approach is more holistic in that it considers the context of the individuals' challenging behaviors and aims to reduce stresses and triggers that cause incidents. This supportive approach takes into consideration the vulnerabilities of the tenant. Through understanding the tenants' vulnerabilities and stressors, landlords and tenants can establish a relationship. Incidents can also be better dealt with if the possibility of them happening was previously discussed. By doing this, prevention and early intervention is the primary focus of supportive approaches to head off problems, followed by support of the tenant and negotiation if any conflict arises (Habibis, 2007, p. 14). Individuals are encouraged to take responsibility for their own housing in a supportive environment. Factors such as appropriate housing design and construction are taken into consideration and partnerships are established among multiple community agencies. Issues are dealt with quickly and mediation services are available to assist with disputes between tenants.

The provision of proper tools to tenants and landlords has been proposed as one possible solution for re-housing challenges. An example of providing support services, information, and resources to tenants, as well as landlords is found in Toronto's plan to end homelessness. Within this plan, there are programs that offer training and resources to help homeless, or those at risk of becoming homeless. This support system includes the Rent Bank, which provides small, short-term loans to aid tenants in paying rent, homeless drop-in programs, follow-up programs to help people stay in their homes, and information for tenants on their rights and obligations as a renter so they can maintain their residency and not be taken advantage of. Toronto's plan to end homelessness also works with landlords by providing forums to exchange information with tenants (City of Toronto, 2012). Another example of supportive tenancy management also includes life-skills training in regards to managing one's finances. These proactive approaches are client-centered and encourage tenant participation. Neighborhood improvement strategies in Queensland and South Wales, Australia, for example, have been credited with increasing the quality of life in disadvantaged areas and thereby creating a sense of ownership and a vested interest for tenants to remain in the neighborhood (Randolph & Judd, 2000).

Landlords need to be included in finding solutions for re-housing challenges. Landlords need to focus on preventative, rather than reactive strategies when dealing with conflict or hard to house individuals (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2006, p. 2). To ensure best practices of tenancy success, "landlords should seek early intervention through personal contact with the tenant, offering support and advice and agreeing on a way forward for recovering the arrears" (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2006, p. 4). The City of Peterborough, Ontario utilizes a guide for housing providers called the Eviction Prevention Protocol. This protocol provides strategies in order to foster a positive relationship between the landlord and the renter. Within this protocol, there are four tools used for eviction prevention; community partnerships, amending rental arrears policy, conflict resolution and the mediation process, and linkages for existing tenants. These four tools are focused on how the landlord can aid in the tenant in creating relationships and partnerships in the community, a fair process with rent payments and notifications, and providing information on community resources, emergency contact numbers, and alternative housing options to help tenants who have been recently evicted. This protocol is especially helpful for vulnerable persons who need appropriate support in order to avoid eviction. When using eviction prevention programs, it is important to provide these supports as those most likely to experience eviction are those in need of extra help. These are individuals such as those with mental illnesses or addictions (ACACIA Consulting and Research, 2006). These four tools aid tenants while renting to feel welcome and to also

prevent eviction through a positive conflict resolution strategy. The four strategies also help tenants after renting by providing information to help them seek a new place as quickly as possible.

The Australian government is working to ensure housing managers become better landlords as part of the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement. This agreement works with landlords to help them achieve tenancy success of individuals with complex needs. Part of this agreement involves a partnership with other service providers, which involves “a shared philosophy, policy integration, enhanced understanding of the other agency’s processes and procedures, improved opportunities for organizational learning, facilitation of informal networking and formal partnerships, and pooling of resources” (Habibis, 2007, p. 22). Also in this agreement are shared values and philosophy of the importance of human rights, a tenant-centered focus, and social inclusion, which provide a base for good policy and practice (Habibis, 2007, p. 25, 26).

Many best practices for tenancy success have been achieved through a Housing First approach. This strategy supports the idea that when people are placed in a stable home, they “are better able to pursue their personal goals towards employment, treatment, health and wellbeing” (CitySpaces Consulting Ltd., 2008, p. H-1). Along with a ‘housing first’ approach, there is also a ‘harm reduction’ approach. Harm reduction in housing is used to protect the most vulnerable of the homeless population; those with mental health or addiction problems. In practice, harm reduction consists of programs such as needle exchange locations, or education on reducing the risks associated with substance use. These programs offer a safer place for individuals to “take part in treatment activities...or housing that does not require abstinence” (CitySpaces Consulting Ltd., 2008, p. 3). Some types of housing require tenants to abstain from substance abuse while renting, and a relapse can result in being evicted. By not requiring tenants to remain ‘dry,’ many places have used this combined strategy to achieve tenancy success. Two examples are the Streets to Homes Program in Toronto, and Housing Connections in Portland. These programs are focused on tenancy success attainment by “working closely with consumers and landlords to address potential problems in the early stages” (Stefancic & Tsemberis, 2007, p. 268). By creating a relationship between tenants and landlords, there can be less of a chance of eviction as a result of a problem not properly being dealt with.

Another solution to re-housing challenges is the proper training of staff working in supportive housing for individuals with mental health issues and/or addictions problems. The Portland Hotel in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside is a housing complex that has been opened for hard to house, low income individuals. Services are provided to those who suffer from mental health or substance abuse problems. In order to provide these supports, staff needs to be properly trained to help tenants as much as possible. Health care and counseling staff meets with clients on a routine basis, providing stability, and meeting in a safe and secure environment in order to help tenants begin treatment if needed (Paulsen, 2009). Employees are also trained in supporting people with mental illnesses and addictions, non-violent crisis intervention, how to act when a resident transfers emotions associated with experiences of early life from the original object onto the staff member, how to respond to a resident and maintain a healthy perspective on personal boundaries, as well as self-defense (Shared Learnings on Homelessness, 2003). The staff is required to be flexible, non-judgmental, and compassionate, as well as go through a two part interview process in order to determine the suitability of prospective employees (Shared Learnings on Homelessness, 2003). By providing employees with proper training and support, they can then be part of the solution to re-housing challenges.

Assistance with rental payments may also be an option for tenancy success. Rental assistance programs help tenants by giving them a sum of money to go towards paying rent that they would be unable to pay otherwise. This amount is dependent on things such as how much income the person makes, and what per cent of their income they spend on rent. Ideally, no one should spend more than 30% of their income on rent, (The National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2009, pg 15). Rental assistance is therefore often given to individuals and families who spend more than 30% of their income on housing costs. For example, Capital Region Housing Corporation in Edmonton, Alberta provides rental assistance “based on the difference

between the tenant's qualified rent and 30% of their income, to a maximum subsidy of \$550. This amount is then fixed for one year. Eligibility for continued assistance, which is subject to ongoing funding, is reviewed every year" (Capital Region Housing Corporation, 2011). While ideally "the subsidy should be as short and as shallow as possible, so the program can assist as many households as possible" (The National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2009, p. 25), in some cases rental assistance may be required indefinitely. By providing rental assistance tenants can avoid eviction and the need to be re-housed as a result of not being able to pay rent.

It was very challenging to distill 16 hours of open-ended conversation in 8 focus groups involving 105 participants into research findings. Yet the voices of those who have been there are the most important to find long lasting solutions to tenancy challenges. Considerable effort was made to accurately code participant responses based on how many different mentions each topic raised received. The approach used in this chapter is to let focus participants have the first word by leading off with an illustrative direct quote or quotes from focus group participants followed by a summary of issues raised.

Question 1: Name one or two things that make it hard to find housing or keep it?

Affordability

"I don't get a subsidy where I live. The rent on my new place is \$1,005 [per month]. The rent gets taken off my cheque. I got \$160 left to spend on food and everything else."

"Thirty years ago welfare was \$600 and rents were \$300. Today, welfare is \$800 and rents are \$1200 for a decent place for a family to live. Welfare and minimum wage are not keeping up with the cost of living."

The inability to afford suitable accommodation was a recurring topic that came up in all of the focus groups. Participants made 108 separate mentions of affordability as a major barrier to finding and keeping suitable housing. Average market rents in metro Edmonton range from \$725 per month for a bachelor apartment to \$1,036 per month for a two-bedroom (Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2012, p.5). Rents rose rapidly during the boom years of the mid-2000s. Despite a significant increase in the vacancy rates during the recession that began in late 2008 and ended in early 2010, rents stayed at the same high level. Since 2010, vacancy rates are going down and rents are starting to go up again.

In recent years, there has been a trend in the rental market requiring tenants to pay separately for utilities (heat, water, electricity) in addition to basic rent. The requirement to pay separately for utilities was frequently identified as being particularly challenging since many participants are on fixed incomes. While basic rent for a continuing tenancy can only be increased once per year, utility bills have steadily gone up and also fluctuate widely from month to month.

Participants from all focus groups indicated a struggle to paying their bills when rents and utilities increase. Those receiving income support noted that benefit levels do not increase to match increases in rents and utility bills. At times, they are left choosing to pay for rent or paying for other essentials such as food and medication. Many tenants indicated that they lacked the budget skills necessary to maintain control over rising rent and utility costs while balancing other bills payments.

Housing Barriers

"When you're homeless, you don't have good references. What can be done to minimize the requirement for references?"

"I see criminal record checks, credit checks and references as barriers to housing. The landlords aren't willing to take a chance on you otherwise."

Barriers to attaining housing were mentioned 73 times by focus group participants. Barriers mentioned included requirements for reference checks, credit history, criminal record checks, and deposits to hold units prior to moving in. A failure to meet any one of these conditions means not being able to rent the unit. These barriers significantly affect low income tenants as many are unable to provide references to prospective landlords when coming out of homelessness. As well, many tenants indicated that they have no credit history or a poor credit history because they are low income or were homeless. Several focus group participants mentioned that they successfully got around reference checks by having friends pose as former landlords. While they felt bad about engaging in this deception, they felt it was the only way to get a unit. The consequences of getting caught making such false representations can however be severe. A number of participants thought that they were being blacklisted by landlords even when they had the funds to rent an apartment.

Liveability

“I’ve been in several fights with crack heads in my rooming house. I shouldn’t have to live in a place where I have to risk my life. I can’t afford a decent place because of the damage deposit and first month’s rent... I’ve lost my furniture three times because of bed bugs.”

Liveability (quality of housing) concerns were mentioned 76 times by focus group participants. Of permanent housing options, focus group participants flagged inner city rooming houses as being the most affordable but also the most substandard and least safe housing option. Only one focus group participant expressed a preference for living in a rooming house. This person said he had been housed outside the inner city through the Housing First program. However, the tenancy failed due to a return to addictions and he felt that a rooming house was a better place than living on the streets or staying in a shelter. Among other participants an often stated concern is that the majority of older rooming houses require kitchen and/or bathroom facilities to be shared with other tenants who were often strangers. This invited negative behaviours like thefts of food and other personal items.

Beg bed infestations were the most frequently cited pest concern that make rental units uninhabitable and force tenants to relocate. The most frequently cited concern about bed bug infestations is that tenants have to throw out many of their personal belongings which for a low income person can make up most of what they own. This includes not only clothing and bedding, but also furniture. Problems with mold and cockroaches mentioned less frequently.

Focus group participants highlighted that repairs were required in many of the buildings in which they live. A lack of basic repairs and upkeep were frequently mentioned including everything from broken plumbing to soiled carpets to non-working elevators. Some buildings had inadequate security which allowed for strangers to enter exterior entrances into the building at will. Broken door locks and security systems, were all mentioned as security concerns. Families with children worried about neighbors who required addiction or mental health supports and therefore did not feel the building was safe enough for their family.

Location

“Edmonton has land for affordable housing but it’s not being used. Social housing units shouldn’t be concentrated in one place. Concentrating low income in small inner city areas keeps people trapped.”

Housing that was not suitably located was mentioned 27 times by focus groups participants. Some participants in Housing First programs mentioned they were satisfied with the choices provided in terms of where in the city their housing is located, others said they were not happy with the choices provided. Many stated that the housing they could afford was often not located where they wanted to be in the city. In most cases, tenants found themselves in the inner city in substandard accommodation because that is all they could afford. A few participants mentioned a preference for living downtown or in the inner city because it was closer to friends and support services.

Question 2: What are one or two things that would help keep people housed?

Affordability

“Cost of living is a problem. If the rent goes up, then your income’s got to go up somehow.”

In terms of solutions to affordability concerns, rent controls received frequent mention. Participants made various suggestions. This included not allowing landlords to raise rents beyond increases in living costs, giving the Landlord and Tenant Advisory Board the power to disallow unreasonable increases, and keeping private sector landlords honest by increasing the supply of public and non-profit housing.

In terms of increases of utility bills, suggestions included stricter regulation of utility costs. Utility companies were urged to be more flexible on repayment of arrears, or to have them set up a special fund that might cover utilities in emergency situations for low income tenants.

Barriers

“Bills make it tough to pay for shelter... Means we have to decide between rent and food to eat. We need more low-cost housing. Regulated fees would be helpful.”

Many focus group participants noted that the need to provide first month’s rent and a damage deposit in one lump sum is often more than a tenant can afford initially. Among the solutions suggested was spreading the cost of a damage deposit over the term of the signed lease.

Participants also spoke about increasingly long waiting lists for accessing rent supplements or not being able to get into housing complexes with rents geared to income. Suggested solutions included: making sure there was enough funding made available to help all those who qualify, renovating existing buildings that are sitting empty, and constructing new affordable housing units.

Youth tenants (those under the age of 18) stated needing to find housing most often due to family issues that ranged from parents with addiction problems, abuse, and neglect. The process of finding housing was specifically difficult for youth because of unique barriers such as age restrictions. Many landlords they encountered preferred to rent to older tenants as they did not trust younger tenants to be responsible and viewed youth as ‘high risk’ renters. Suitable references were also difficult for youth to provide. One youth tenant suggested that landlords should “ask us more questions and let us bring in references from school or a print out of our grades” for a chance to show that they would be responsible tenants.

Landlord/Tenant Relations

“Landlords rejecting you from renting a decent place is hard to take. Landlords ask for references, criminal record checks, and credit checks. I can only get in to bad places with bad landlords.”

Focus group participants also reported discrimination from landlords based on their race and background. Discrimination received 71 specific mentions. Aboriginal participants – who made up an estimated one-third of overall participants – most frequently said they faced discrimination in attaining suitable accommodation. Discrimination in accommodation based on race is prohibited under Section 4 of the Alberta Human Rights Act. Of course what a tenant may consider racial discrimination, a landlord may consider failing a credit or criminal record check, or not having acceptable references. Regardless, this issue was raised often enough to be of grave concern especially when Aboriginal people are the fastest growing segment of Edmonton’s population.

Finally, participants reported discrimination in attaining accommodation based on their source of income. When landlords found out tenants were on government income support (e.g. AISH, Alberta Works), there was often greater reluctance to rent them a unit.

Liveability

“YMCA is good for cleaning facilities of vermin and bed bugs. As well, there’s not smoking and no drugs... Plus they don’t make you move unless you want to. That’s why I’ve lived there the last 10 years.”

A residential facility that breaks the mold when it comes to congregate living is Edmonton’s downtown YMCA. A number of residents at the Y have been living there for years even with rents that begin at \$157 per week (YMCA, 2012). The Y received high marks for its cleanliness and attention to tenant safety in spite of having shared kitchen and bathroom facilities.

Capital Region Housing Corporation is a large provider of non-market rent geared to income housing in the City of Edmonton. Tenants living in their complexes reported both positive and negative experiences. On the positive side, Capital Region was given high marks for both improved security and for its community building efforts in its housing complexes. Periodic security patrols with dogs were seen as a particularly effective way to deter crime. Restrictions preventing people with criminal records from obtaining housing tended to be seen as a positive development by those living in their housing. These restrictions tended to be seen as an obstacle by those hoping to live there.

On the negative side, Capital Region Housing residents expressed concern about the lack of preventative maintenance like roots growing into drainage pipes causing basements to flood, sometimes lengthy delays in getting repairs done, and restrictions on upgrades they were able to do to their units.

While some participants felt blamed by landlords when bed bugs were found in their living units, others credited landlords with being respectful and taking prompt action to address infestations. The Edmonton Apartment Association and its member landlords were credited by some participants with taking a pro-active and non-judgmental approach to the serious public health challenge posed by bed bugs.

Housing Supports

“There is no advocacy group to represent you and help you understand the Landlord and Tenant [Residential Tenancies] Act. We need someone to explain our rights. There are still people in this society today that are illiterate. And they need help to understand these documents.”

“I wish they could take our history one time, rather than having to repeat it to everyone that’s supposed to be helping us.”

The need for more effective support services was mentioned **118** times by participants in the focus groups. Support services most often cited focused on the housing process, substance abuse and mental health, and financial support.

Support services should include education on the housing process. Participants mentioned that available and accessible information to find housing is uncoordinated and therefore confusing to navigate. Different services that provide information on housing should be integrated in order to make it useful. Support services can help tenants during the renting process and provide guidance to ease this transition and the expectations as a new renter. In addition, many participants wanted more effective services for mediating landlord and tenant conflicts so that problems are resolved by a third party and tenant rights are safeguarded.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health

“To reduce homelessness more addictions treatment is needed – most treatment programs aren’t long enough to really break the cycle.”

Services and support will also aid in making sure tenants have access to programs and resources such as rehabilitation for substance abuse and/or mental health challenges. Ongoing support is needed for tenants while they are being housed and thereafter. A number of participants said that existing programs were not available when they were ready to start recovery, or were not long enough to really break the cycle of addiction. Many participants mentioned that there is not enough affordable quality housing available for the specific needs of low income tenants who may be facing mental health challenges or substance abuse.

Financial Literacy and Support

“Most of us don’t know how to manage our money. We should teach kids budgeting techniques and how to manage their money and how to use it.”

Many focus group participants want services to help with budgeting and to enhance their financial literacy as inadequate money management skills were considered a primary issue for finding and keeping housing. An increase in subsidy rates to off-set rent increases or regulating the amount of rent increases were other suggestions made by focus groups participants. Financial support to help off-set initial costs of damage deposits and the first month’s rent were mentioned as ways to make it easier to secure new housing.

Landlord/Tenant Relations

“Why did I get kicked out and end up homeless? How can I prevent that from happening again? To stay alcohol free and drug free – that has to be the start for me. There’s a lot of things that can happen that way. There’s counseling... the help is there if you search for it.”

“I’m a broken record. But it’s all about the tenant and the landlord. They need to work together to solve problems. And perhaps a [front line] worker can act as an advocate.”

One of the more revealing aspects of the focus groups was the extent to which participants agreed that they had a responsibility to be better tenants. Focus group participants often showed a willingness to look at a concern not only from a tenant but also a landlord point of view. Among the most frequently mentioned reasons for tenancy failure and evictions was falling back into drug and/or alcohol addictions. Sometimes this resulted from inviting the wrong type of people into their apartment either as guests or to stay. These tenants acknowledged that for a tenancy to be successful, they had to stop inviting in street friends who might damage the place or make excessive noise disturbing other tenants. Despite continuing to receive services from an inner city agency, a participant said he refuses to tell his street friends where he is now living.

Location

“The city shouldn’t be buying entire blocks for affordable housing. That creates a ghetto. Create more subsidized housing programs throughout the city to prevent ghettoization.”

Focus groups participants appreciated being given a choice as to where in the city they lived. One of the identified strengths of the Housing First program was being given this choice. While some focus group participants preferred to live in the inner city because it was closer to services or friends, most did not. For example, a participant now housed on the south side through a Housing First program how positive and affirming it was to hear the sound of children playing, as opposed to the screaming and yelling when he was previously living in the inner city.

Question 3: What advice do you have for political leaders to prevent homelessness and keep people housed?

Being Heard

“During the election a politician did meet with some of us at the temp agency. Wish more politicians would meet with us and ask us what we think.”

“Politicians need to see our problems first-hand rather than sitting behind a comfortable desk thinking they have all the answers.”

There was a strong under-current in the focus groups of many lower income tenants feeling their concerns were not being adequately heard or acted upon. In part, this was because almost all political leaders and decision makers, as well as many persons working in service providing organizations, are not renters and therefore have a hard time relating to what low income renters in particular have to go through. To remedy this, it was suggested that political leaders and decision makers sit down periodically across the table with low income renters and vulnerably housed persons. While appreciative of the willingness to listen afforded by the focus groups, there was a lot of expressed concern and some cynicism about whether anything would really change.

“You don’t have one person to contact. You have all these agencies... They don’t communicate with each other.”

The perceived self-interest of governments and service providers was the subject of some discussion in several of the focus groups. Support was expressed by some that more monies should go directly to low income persons rather indirectly through service providers. However, there was also recognition that giving money to vulnerable people can in some situations lead to them to spend it unwisely.

“Have a friend who did some research. For everyone staying there, \$150,000 a year goes to the shelters and their staff. We wouldn’t have to have shelters if they just get us that money.”

Participants also talked about positive experiences with front-line workers and how front-line staff goes the extra mile to be of assistance.

“My problems all started with abuse at residential schools. The co-op [Boyle Street Community Services] has been there for me. They helped me get residential school money. Then they helped me find and keep a place.”

Support for Housing First

“First time they [Housing First] got me a house I got evicted because I wasn’t ready. I got a little more counseling from a mental health worker. They stuck with me, found me a new place, and this time I am ready.”

“Rapid Exit at Hope Mission is helping [my partner] and me. They paid our first month’s rent, damage deposit and groceries to get set up. But I’m still judged negatively because of my appearance. The caretaker thinks I’m going to rob people or something.”

“Rapid Exit at Hope Mission is helping [my partner] and me. They paid our first month’s rent, damage deposit and groceries to get set up. But I’m still judged negatively because of my appearance. The caretaker thinks I’m going to rob people or something.”

“Homeless to Homes is working for me. Life is finally good. Can make a home and start working on straightening out the rest of my life.”

Despite all of the challenges of finding and retaining permanent housing, many focus group participants strongly endorsed the Housing First objective of ending the shelter-based response to chronic homelessness in favour of housing people permanently. One of the positive aspects of the Housing First program was the willingness to provide second or even third chances. Focus group participants who were housed through Housing First were generally appreciative of the efforts made to assist them in retaining their tenancy.

Prior to being in the Housing First program, almost all participants had previously spent time in shelters. Shelters generally got bad reviews as places to stay. Complaints about shelters included getting personal possessions stolen and unsanitary conditions due to crowding. Some participants said shelters would be better if they had more staff and resources available. The lack of safety in emergency shelters was mentioned frequently. Participants highlighted that their personal belongings were at risk of theft by neighbors or those who they shared a common space with. Young people under 18 reported not feeling safe in shelters that mostly accommodated older adults.

“Ending homelessness is impossible. For some, it’s a life choice. Homeward Trust plan is an excellent idea, but some people are always going to screw up and lose their housing.”

It was surprising to hear participants in most focus groups say that ending homelessness was not realistic no matter how well intentioned. While not everyone agreed with this, many participants felt that keeping homelessness to a minimum was a more achievable goal than ending it altogether. Out of 105 focus group participants, only one was quite vocal about being homeless by choice. He lived outdoors year round, saying he preferred his “chateau in the river valley” to “filthy” shelters or the responsibilities of having to pay rent.

While the focus groups solicited ideas and the views of those who were homeless or vulnerably housed, the online survey was distributed to organizations and individuals who worked with those with tenancy concerns, as well as those who might be generally concerned about housing and homelessness. In total, there were 87 respondents, the majority of whom were non-housing service providers and housing providers (60 per cent). Other respondents included individuals from the public sector (15 per cent), concerned citizens (12 per cent) and landlords (2 per cent). An assortment of ‘other’ survey participants (12 per cent) comprised of individuals working in the housing and homeless sector, including social workers, a program manager of a transitional housing unit, and volunteers with front-line organizations. The questions asked in the survey were similar to the research questions as well as the ones asked during the focus group sessions.

Question 1: Why do the tenancies of some Housing First clients fail thereby necessitating them to be re-housed sometimes on multiple occasions?

Those who participated in our survey were asked an open ended question, “Why is it difficult for some people to find housing and to keep it?” The responses varied between internal and external factors, which contributed towards tenancy failures and explained why some people need to be re-housed multiple times.

Mental Health

Determining causality between homelessness and mental illness is difficult and complex. Mental illness can lead to homelessness, often by influencing other determinants such as a person’s ability to find and retain housing (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, September 2003). Yet homelessness itself can contribute to mental illness and can aggravate existing health concerns (Frankish, Hwang, & Quantz, 2005). A vicious and mutually reinforcing cycle between mental illness and homelessness can occur here.

The issue of mental health was a major theme that emerged out of the survey, with 39 per cent of respondents indicating that this was a major barrier to finding and/or retaining housing. This assertion is congruent with some Canadian studies, which have linked mental health issues and homelessness (Hwang, 2001; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006; and the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2003). Most of the responses simply listed mental illness or the lack of supports to deal with mental illness without going into too much detail. However, a few comments did offer more details.

“Mental illness makes it difficult to find employment and therefore being able to keep housing (e.g. veterans suffering from post dramatic stress syndrome, etc.)”

“Mental health issues. [The person] might go off meds and get sick and then lose housing due to actions of getting sick.”

“Many homeless people have mental health or addictions and often that will kick in and sabotage their housing.”

The link between physical abuse and mental health was also mentioned as a factor contributing to tenancy failure. This association was echoed by some of the sentiments expressed during the focus group discussions.

“...there are a host of issues related to people’s physical and mental health. If someone is in an abusive environment growing up they are more likely to drop out of school, have mental health issues and have a harder time keeping a good job.”

“For the situation of women fleeing domestic violence, their perpetrators locate them, are let back in to the accommodation, and eventually end up being evicted due to domestic violence. Sometimes women do not receive enough money to sustain themselves. Some women may not be able to manage without support due to brain damage or other type of disability which prevents them from making successful choices.”

Further to this, the lack of specialized or one-on-one supports for those with mental illness was mentioned as possible problematic areas that need attention.

“[N]eed special housing for people who has people who have PDD, FAS, FAE, Physical and Mental disability, addiction, problem with behaviours, and Brain injury.”

“There are not enough one-one supports for people living in the community. Outreach services geared towards homelessness prevention outside of the inner-city and for people not directly linked to mental health services with the Edmonton Mental Health Clinic are basically non-existent. Where do people living in Mill Woods who don’t have children, who aren’t seniors and who aren’t new comers and are on the verge of being evicted go to access support with advocacy and system navigation?”

“[How about the] lack of wrap around supports [helping] to enable the homeless person to succeed? More attention needs to be paid to the mental health status of the homeless client. Many on the street have mental health needs and concerns that are not been addressed. [There is a] large amount of transiency amongst homeless traveling from other urban centres across Canada. Difficult to engage and difficult to follow up, due to consistency in service provision for the client and suitable services designed for the homeless client. Hope Mission does a great job, should be used for a template to model types of services to be accessed by the homeless population.”

Addictions

Alcoholism and drug addiction is highly prevalent amongst those who are chronically homeless. Similar to mental health, addictions may start from living on the streets as a means to cope with associated stresses and traumas from being homeless. Likewise, addictions can be a major cause that leads to homelessness (Charity Intelligence Canada, October 2009).

On aggregate, the survey highlighted addictions as a major reason why some find it hard to seek and retain housing. **36 per cent** of respondents listed this as a contributory factor that can lead to homelessness.

“Others deal with addictions that cause them to make poor decisions and get evicted.”

“Drug and alcohol abuse that creates havoc within housing unit.”

One respondent had focused on addictions and mental health and expressed the need to offer sustained support. However, there is the real challenge that sometimes a person will persist and not want to receive aid for their issues. This corresponds with some comments brought up during the focus groups in that we can effectively support those who desire to be helped.

“Addictions and Mental Health Issues can lend a large part to sustained housing, because many of those problems are ongoing and dynamic and difficult to balance sustaining housing while battling addictions and Mental Health Issues. And, in some cases, some people aren’t interested in cessation of their addictions or receiving help for their mental health issues.”

Indeed one landlord respondent listed addictions as the reason why some have lost their housing unit:

“Addictions and drug related issues are the source of most of our evictions.”

Lack of Supports

The provision of on-going support to treat mental illness intersects with another major theme derived from the survey - the general lack of support for those who are experiencing homelessness. **35 per cent** of respondents noted this as a factor leading to tenancy failure.

“Housing very much depends on individual circumstances and preferences. What might be perfectly suitable housing for one person is not suitable for another, or for someone who might require additional/different supports.”

There was a concern that the deficiency of social support in the community for a newly housed individual could possibly lead to tenancy failure. Isolation can be a real issue for those housed in a completely different environment that they were used to beforehand. It would not be unsurprisingly for individuals to gravitate towards their old surroundings because that was where their friends were located. Consequently, their old environment might trigger behaviours or addictions that could have negative consequences with their new housing.

“Supports: Need to find resources and no access to computers. Social Isolation: Need to find volunteer or other programs to develop a social support system.”

“Transition - when a person or a family has moved from another city; sometimes the adjustment is very difficult and they face even more difficulties. Some clients they go into negative stuff or they become too overwhelmed trying to adjust to a completely new environment as they don’t have the support systems that they had before.”

“Possibly the main reason why the participants in our program find it hard to stay housed is loneliness that lead to reconnecting with people that create unacceptable behaviours in their apartments.”

“Affordable housing is hard to find that is at an acceptable standard of living. For the homeless that are housed it’s hard to keep because they are often housed in areas that are not considered trigger zones for them however they become lonely and feel a lack of community. Also they need connecting to a variety of support services to help them with addictions, employment, mental health, etc.”

“Behaviours of some tenants that make it difficult to co-habit with others - addictions, violence, [and] severe mental health issues - lack of support for clients with those types of behaviours.”

Conversely, isolation (and the lack of a positive social support network) could also compel tenants to invite guests into their new housing, but triggered to behave ‘badly’ or reinstate their addictions. This negative cycle could thereby lead to an eviction.

“Clients of mine get very lonely and then they bring in the wrong people to keep them company - that leads to drug use and/or drinking - fighting - traffic - the rents need to be 3rd party - I realize a person can cancel it at anytime - but maybe if they couldn't they could retain their housing instead of blowing the cash - I know that money is a trigger for some - I believe a person that is struggling needs support and I don't think the support they get or if they get any is enough - I have some clients that I have supported for 12 years and I am aware of a worker that has supported clients for 15 yrs.”

Costs

The high costs associated with living were also a major theme that emerged out of the online survey. **25 per cent** of those who participated in the online survey mentioned increasing and unaffordable housing costs as problematic. This assertion is in line with research showing that rental housing is increasingly inaccessible to low-income households, for not just Edmontonians, but citizens across Canada. For example, in none of the 22 communities surveyed by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities could an individual earning minimum wage afford a private rental unit (Federation of Canadian Municipalities, 2008).

Most responses in the survey cited costs without offering too much detail. However, a few replies provided more insight into the straightened circumstances facing tenants living on low income, including the tightening of the rental market and its associated rent increases, the rise of utility costs, and prohibitive food prices.

“Increasing cost, tightening of the rental market, [and] abrupt cut offs [to] assistance.”

“Increasing costs of living - rent rates have increased dramatically in the city. Because of other increased costs of living such as food, transportation, etc. Some are forced to choose between paying rent and being able to feed themselves for the month.”

“Damage deposits, first month rent and moving costs combined with acquiring household items and meeting basic needs for themselves and their families is in most cases insurmountable.”

“Income - not enough money to make monthly payments as their rent and utilities are more than 60% of what an individual of a family is making a month.”

“I believe that the cost of renting is the main barrier to finding housing. A [...] cause for losing their housing is unaffordable rent increases.”

“Some people simple do not have enough to live on. By the time they pay for rent and utilities there may be little left for food and personal items. Eventually things get so tight that paying rent becomes a problem.”

Housing Choice

Another major theme that emerged out of the survey was the lack of choice and variety for affordable housing to suit the various needs of at-risk citizens. **21 per cent** of respondents were concerned that the narrow range of options available to individuals and families can prohibit them from finding or keeping their housing.

"[There is] not enough other choice of housing, (group home, co-ops, couple arrangements, family housing.)"

"Housing options to appropriately match clients to housing."

"Lack in choices of housing types to meet needs - apt. rental, owner or renter, # bedrooms, yards for children, location limitations, communal living, etc."

"Housing very much depends on individual circumstances and preferences. What might be perfectly suitable housing for one person is not suitable for another, or for someone who might require additional/different supports."

It was not just the lack of choice that was voiced as a concern, but also the location of affordable housing. During the focus group discussions, being able to find housing that was safe for their children or nearby to their school was considered a real challenge. The survey picked up on these sentiments.

"If a person or a family are able to afford the housing, are not in good locations, then safety becomes a concern or landlords take advantage of the situation."

"They are picky in terms of location."

Knowledge / Financial Literacy

Being financially literate, knowing how to budget accordingly, or understanding the rules and norms as a tenant were brought up by **17 per cent** of respondents to the survey as other reasons why some are having a challenging time to find and keep housing.

"Lack of skill to navigate system (don't know what to do when income is gone)."

"Do they know what their responsibilities are and what their rights are?"

"Poor \$ management skills; spend all their \$ at once and don't plan for the rest of the month (e.g. groceries and bus fare)."

"Need budgeting assistance and to be able to learn how to manage and look after a residence. Need understanding of rental rules - e.g. neighbourliness, expectations as a renter."

"First of all it is difficult for people to manage their money wisely. High school students are not taught about budgeting and finance in school and many do not have a realistic concept of how to spend or save money."

At times, it may prove to be difficult for newly housed individuals to acclimatize themselves to the new environment and assume the responsibilities associated with being housed as a renter.

“Also some tenants have never been taught the skills of taking care of their own house. For example: cleaning, budgeting, cooking and leisure activities.”

“Basic life skills: cleaning, budgeting, relationship with other tenants.”

“Lack of knowledge/skills to be able to follow rules, understand what they are required to do as a tenant.”

Question 2: What best practices are in use locally and elsewhere to maximize housing retention of formerly homeless persons?

Ongoing / Increased Support

Survey respondents were asked “Which resources, supports, or policies can best help people stay housed?” This is a variance from our second research question (What practical and effective measures can be put in place to reduce the risk of tenancy failure due to negative circumstances?). We were hoping to draw from the personal experiences of the survey respondent, and framed the question in a way that was more direct. As a result, an overwhelming theme mentioned in the survey (**66 per cent**) was the need for ongoing and/or increased support for clients.

“[There should be] policies to encourage and support people interested in overcoming their addictions and mental health issues could also go a long way in supporting these vulnerable populations.”

“As far as policies or supports, a growing number of individuals within Edmonton need guidance and mentoring. Some individuals may not be able to maintain a domicile without assistance. If an individual is receiving assistance from any source, if the money for rent could go directly for the accommodation, maybe fewer people would utilize the money for other purposes.”

“[There should be] lots of one-on-one support from staff that live in the same housing facility. Close monitoring, not only of behaviours, but of personal beliefs. Once someone believes that they deserve a future, and will be given the support to accomplish it, they’re more likely to achieve their goals. We need to foster that belief in [them], but to do that; we need to be there when they’re at their lowest and wanting to turn back to their hold habits. To be there during those times, someone needs to be living on site.”

“The support once they are stable to begin learning to take positive choices in their lives and to make sure they are receiving the support even after they have found a house. I think at least an ongoing support for three to five years, to get people completely settled. I think these will give a chance to clients to learn to see their lives in a completely different form and form them to start taking healthy choices.”

There was also a call for more ongoing mental health support. One respondent outlined the different needs of “those who for mental health reasons cannot bear to be ‘confined’ and cannot personalize any place as their home. These people can only be sheltered in a supervised, open institution where they can come and go freely within reason.”

“Mental health outreach teams and community treatment order teams are badly needed to support those with mental illness. Once the illness is managed, it is critical to help individuals connect to their community and find support so that they don’t feel so isolated.”

“One-one outreach support such as those [that] CMHA-ER had before AHS stopped funding. [As well as] supports like those provided by Bissell Centre and Boyle Street Community services through out the city.”

“On-going supports - income support liaisons, mental health and employment. Please think about the value of integrated service models -- less emphasis on call centres, engage government department staff to work in collaboration with contracted service professionals ---harnessing the best of both worlds. Sharing resources, expertise and a common plan to help individuals and families move forward to a greater quality of life. Most Albertans want this but current policies are falling short on supporting individuals in the labour market; more assistance with asset building is needed.”

The Housing First model was mentioned as a good solution, but there was some feedback as to how it could be improved: greater interaction between the client and their required supports, the need for supportive accommodation for those who do not necessarily ‘fit’ in the Housing First model, being cognizant of the particular needs and historical injustices faced by First Nations peoples, and offering support for those have suffered violence and trauma.

“There are several models that have varying levels of success. The Housing First model is conceptually sound however in practice requires a greater interaction of the client with the supporting agencies than presently exists. One of the difficulties I see is the lack of true affordable non-profit housing linked directly to support systems. The use of commercial housing suppliers is fraught with difficulties because the individuals being housed do not fit into the normative that market housing providers operate under. These are individuals who need almost daily support to get from point “A” to point “B”. They can’t simply be shipped off into a housing opportunity with the expectation that they will somehow adapt. It just doesn’t happen that way. The majority of our homeless are in their situation because of life altering circumstances that if not addressed as part of their housing supports, they will not succeed in housing even in the short term. Family housing is another issue that requires extraordinary support systems. Some of the basic knowledge in family care is missing, particularly but not limited to survivors of Residential Schools.”

“A holistic approach to front line work, [such as] having front line workers who are trained in crisis counseling, and family violence identification. [There should be] internal policies about family violence initiatives/procedures that are on par with criminal law, family law, etc. [Have] access to psychologists that are trained in trauma therapy. Internal policies that have zero tolerance for violence for couples/families that become participants in Housing First programs, where managers and front line workers cannot ignore the violence (due to lack of training, confidence, or policy guidance/knowledge) so that they can “keep” good statistics based on ‘successful’ participation/stats in accordance with Homeward Trust expectations on high retention and success rates for participants.”

Increased Money / Funds

The necessity for additional funds and increased wages to supplement individuals and families living on low-income was mentioned by almost **38 per cent** of survey respondents. While the minimum wage increased in the province in September 2012, with a formula set in place to increase annually to include inflation and average earnings, Alberta continues to have the second lowest minimum wage in the country (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2012). An increase of the minimum wage to that of a 'living wage' might help those living on low-income to steer away from being vulnerably housed.

“Raise minimum wage to help low income families.”

“Rent supplements or rent geared to income is important for some individuals and families who will never earn more than a minimum wage income.”

There are additional costs on-top-of rent, food, and utilities, which prove to be a barrier to people who are moved from the streets and into housing – costs such as bed-bug spraying. In the focus groups, a common narrative that emerged was the difficulty of overcoming the initial costs of getting one housed. The following quote echoes that sentiment.

“More emergency funding made available (in a timely manner) to assist low-income individuals with one-time costs of moving or of bed bug spraying, translation services available for RTDRS hearings and all notices from landlords (to avoid the many, many evictions caused in part by language barriers), resources and support for hoarders, increased funding for Capital Region and other subsidized housing to improve waitlists, increase in the number of accessible subsidized units, and improved shelter services in the city.”

Education

An increase in 'education' such as learning to be a responsible tenant, understand predominant social norms, and their increasing financial literacy (such as credit counseling, money management, and budgeting) was mentioned several times (23 per cent). One response recommended having levels of 'graduation' for those who have been on the streets for long time as a way to slowly re-introduce the norms of living in stable housing.

“Supports, supports AND more supports individualized support based on what people need education about what is needed to stay housed more funds.”

“Resources that aim to educate as well as meet clients where they are at, in whatever situation that may be. We need free or affordable counseling, credit counseling, health coverage, daycare, nutrition, etc.”

“Supports to teach people how to live in an apartment are important. Maybe allowing people to gradually become accustom to living indoors by giving them a couple of months to get used to it. For example: a week in the apartment and then a week on the street again. Then maybe two weeks in the apartment and one week back on the street again, etc. Perhaps that will help the person adjust. Teaching people money management - how to plan their spending, strategies to help the person stretch their dollars and financial literacy training could be beneficial.”

“Once a person is set up with housing a non-judgmental support system needs to be put in place that will teach relevant skills and help widen social circles and community by actively engaging the tenant in activities that he/she would like to do. This takes time, effort and patience between worker and tenant.”

“Skills like money management, care of the residence, proper nutrition, and family relationships are all connected to maintaining success in housing.”

“[There should be a] newcomers handbook for housing responsibilities of the tenant for pest control, hoarding, and cluttering, [as well as] information education on bed bugs.”

Interestingly, the survey also revealed the need to educate landlords in their responsibilities towards a vulnerable population.

“[I recommend] mandatory training for landlords and tenants about rights and obligations.”

“Educational programs to help landlords understand their obligations under the Human Rights Act and the Residential Tenancies Act - CRHC could use this, for sure, although I’m sure they don’t believe they need it.”

Additional Housing Options

Almost a quarter (**13 per cent**) of respondents mentioned the addition of more housing options to account for the variety of needs, experiences, and circumstances typified by at-risk clients.

“Alberta Works must bring back the emergency housing programs so newcomers who are at risk of homelessness can benefit from it.”

“Emergency housing, subsidized housing, increase number of available low income housing.”

“There should also be more financial resources for people to live in market housing instead of being placed in subsidized housing developments that are more like ‘the projects’ preventing people from the benefits of living in a varied and diverse neighbourhood.”

Survey respondents also pointed to the particular needs for couples and families.

“Of particular concern I find, is the limited resources available to couples and families. Those currently available often find a need to separate the families in order to get the male, female, and child each housed separately instead of together.”

“Change non-profit housing policy to allow bedrooms for children with 50% court ordered custody status. More supports to low income parents i.e. van ride to YMCA, drug/alcohol treatment without a threat to losing children to child welfare. Increase low income thresholds (CNITS).”

During the focus group sessions, there were strong concerns raised about discrimination against Aboriginal Peoples / First Nations and access to affordable housing and supports, which were sensitive to their needs. These sentiments were echoed in the survey.

“I think aboriginal people should work with aboriginals especially the seniors. There is too much history in working with non-aboriginals who do not understand their history and to why they moved to the urban centres etc. from their communities. They could be dealing with abuse from their children, their relatives etc. They may not understand what it is like to rent a home. I would recommend a transition centre like the one in Treaty 6-located in Bonnyville Alberta; they train people in all aspects of home ownership before moving into Edmonton.”

Question 3: What advice would you give to decision makers to help them prevent homelessness and keep people housed?

The last questions survey respondents were asked was, “What advice would you give to decision makers to help them prevent homelessness and keep people housed?” We found that there was overlap of answers between questions 2 and 3, and some congruence upon comparing frequency of responses. Nevertheless, there are some replies worth noting. The majority (**39 per cent**) reiterated the need for ongoing / increased support for those who are vulnerably housed or homeless.

“In my view, as an individual who has volunteered on a non-profit housing board for six years and who also consults on residential housing issues, we need to return to some of the basic principles of providing a total support service to each individual. I believe it would be far more productive to create the properties, develop the support systems and networks and provide an intensified hands on approach to assisting families at succeeding at staying in their homes. It would not only be less expensive than continuing in the cycle of perpetual re-housing, but create an environment in which that cycle can be broken within one generation.”

Moreover, comments of having more ‘personalized’ service supports previous calls for a more nuanced understanding of Edmonton’s homeless and vulnerably housed populations.

“[G]et some real front line experience; invest some time in meeting and really getting to know a homeless or newly housed person so that they can really and truly understand, off of paper, what actual challenges are faced by the people they are trying to help. Use the tools that have been created to manage the impacts of policy changes on low income earners. There are lots of tools that all orders of government are ignoring... People want to be heard and valued---this means giving them the time of day. Support groups, follow-up appointments with skilled professionals assisting with all aspects of healing and recovery. Change is particularly difficult for the homeless--they need stability and support for at least 3 years...”

“It is all about relationships and working with individuals to help them achieve their full potential - to live to their full capacity and capabilities. This is labour intensive and requires ongoing adequate case management and crisis intervention. Adequate community supports need to be in place and case loads need to be small per counselor or support worker so real social work and community supports work.”

“Have Aboriginal workers be available to help these people out.”

Additional Housing Options

Some responses (**24 per cent**) recommended the provision of housing that suits the variety of needs expressed by clients – whether they are ‘transient’ individuals, the elderly, those suffering mental illness, or individuals who do not necessary ‘fit’ into the Housing First program.

“My advice may not be received well because I believe there has to be an understanding that a certain percentage of the population will be homeless or “transient” for individuals who travel here and there, it might be possible to have some accommodations available for weekly or monthly periods with it being defined as a homeless initiative which technically means the individual is not homeless, just choosing to enter into short-term accommodation in various areas of the city. I don’t know what or how this would be managed if an individual is on assistance but a creative way of paying for this person’s stay might be a worthwhile investment. Maybe this would be considered ‘boarding?’”

“There is at this time in Edmonton no shelter for elderly persons who have not been abused, and no shelter where a family can stay or where a mother with children who has not been abused can go. If these individuals are not aware of the Social Services Emergency Line or are not assisted by that service, they have nowhere to turn. The Housing First Program is a wonderful program, but is only open to the chronically homeless, so that persons who have been homeless for a short time or are about to become homeless do not qualify and have very few options for housing. This is not preventive and it excludes those who have recently become homeless and who would be easy to house again with little or no continued support.”

“[P]rovide a safe, affordable housing options that will then allow clients to deal with underlying addictions or mental health issues when they are ready and willing to tackle these issues, similar to a harm reduction strategy approach.”

“Be patient with people. Not all people who have been homeless for a long time can adjust quickly. Don't expect the client to mold to the program but design the program to meet the needs of the person and give them time. Expect that there will be issues arise no one has thought of that must be addressed to help the person stay housed. Implement prevention supports for those people who may be at risk of losing their housing because of job loss or illness or mismanagement of money or any number of valid reasons. Once evicted, have resources in place to assist the person find something else - not just housing first as it is not a fit for all people.”

One response advises against some practices employed in the Housing First program – wary of its possible exclusionary consequences.

“Get rid of SPDAT that is used by Housing First models. It boxes people in or out!!! That method of scoring is ridiculous and biased. Having a policy for those on AISH, EI, or other financial support programs that direct deposit their daily, weekly or monthly rent to their housing program or facility may lend to better financial planning for vulnerable populations to manage finances while learning skills and developing positive coping mechanisms to overcome any difficulties they may find in obtaining and maintaining housing.”

Poverty Reduction / Preventative Measures

14 per cent of responses also suggested having additional measures to prevent homelessness and to focus on the root causes by reducing poverty. While respondents compliment the Housing First program, they encouraged more long-term, sustaining solutions.

“Housing First is an excellent program. However, we need to do more preventative work. We see many people on the cusp of homelessness each day. It is ridiculous to tell them that they must have 4 incidents of homelessness or have been homeless for a year to qualify for housing help. We need to be responsive to the needs of individuals prior to losing their homes. This will take time, people, and money of course. But we already have people in the city engaged in lives - educators, social workers, service providers, religious groups, special interest groups, even retailers. How can we work together to care for each person in our society? Let's look at how we break down barriers of anonymity and talk to each other, connect each other and work towards our mutual success.”

“Housing first programs are the answer to ending homelessness. However they aren’t geared to “preventing” homelessness, nor are they able to address the seriously mentally ill homeless people that are out there. Preventing homelessness involves systemic analysis and changes to provincial welfare policies and practices, employment policies and practices, and how big corporations that provide apartments contribute to homelessness via pricing, policies, and practices, yet benefit from Alberta’s resources.”

“To prevent homelessness they need to do things in stages, help those who are having drug & alcohol problems, who gamble, who do not have families here to connect with. Show them how to take care of their homes, to understand how to pay bills, have resources they can call on. Do training on all of the above in stages over a period of time to get them to understand what a responsibility they are into.”

“Develop a poverty reduction plan that acknowledges the challenges faced by people who live in poverty. Housing is certainly one of the bigger basic needs of this or any target group but by addressing housing does not mean that all the issues related to living in poverty go away. It must be a multidimensional approach that addresses basic needs while providing opportunity to develop skills and abilities that promote independence and the sense of membership in society.”

Tellingly, some respondents acknowledge the need to be committed (certainly financially) to the long-term efforts to ultimately ‘end homelessness’ by being aware of the variety of needs expressed by at-risk citizens and ensuring that legislation does not cause harm to those who are on the margins.

“Realize that this is a long term problem and the solutions need to be long term. We are now seeing the third generation of individuals trapped in a cycle of poverty in Edmonton. That is just the living memory of the organization. Our homelessness challenge may not be solved in 10 years, although it is an admirable goal. We are dealing with systems and individuals that are caught in patterns of dysfunction. We need to realize that change comes slowly and fund/prepare/invest with that in mind. You have to start at the bottom and work your way up. Trickle down social justice does not work. Providing adequate social services for children and their families is essential. Also current legislation further marginalizes people who are already at risk. Legislation with regards to sex work is a perfect example.”

“Spending money on homelessness prevention saves money in the long run, people who have a home are proven to benefit society greatly because they are healthier, productive, contributing members of society. The government needs to make more money available to expand services that prevent people from being homeless - it is that simple.”

Education

Echoing possible solutions from Question 2, **13 per cent** of the responses voiced the need for improved education in order to learn about tenancy responsibilities and improve life skills.

"I would want to see more support - home visits more often - classes they must take whether it is a 1/2 day course offered on housing support - ex. how to keep your housing - volunteer at various locations - courses that are offered - I believe if people are not supported - left on their own to keep busy - they will seek out social environments that are not always healthy."

"In my opinion we should have a required plan for the clients once they move in to their houses, they have to participate in some type of 10 days or more program that they have interest like; (cooking classes, anger management, counseling, AA meetings, job skills, etc.) May be the support worker can help them to search for the program they would like to do, and the social worker has to make sure clients start and finish the program."

Similarly, ideas such as landlords needing to go through some form of sensitivity training, as well as being more familiarized with tenancy rights were mentioned in this last question of the survey.

"Landlords and resident managers need education and awareness training regarding cultural sensitivity/racism and mental health so that they understand their responsibilities under the law. Increased advertising for the RTDRS [Residential Tenancy Dispute Resolution Service] process and legal aid organizations, and increased awareness of landlord tenant rights are also critical to keeping people housed. The effectiveness of the RTDRS and provincial court processes of course hinge on whether or not newcomers to Canada can also access these services and receive the translation and interpretation they need to seek legal remedies or defend against unfair treatment. Emergency funding should be available to a larger segment of the low-income population, rather than to just AISH recipients and Alberta Works participants."

The vast amount of useful information generated through the focus groups and the online survey formed the core of this research project. The research findings are qualitative. In many cases the findings are anecdotal. The focus groups in particular are based on people's lived experiences. They defy easy categorization into topic and themes.

Another limitation is the relative newness of the Housing First approach to housing. This research is consistent with other recent research supporting the proposition that the Housing First emphasis on permanent housing is achieving better results than previous approaches that emphasized treatment and temporary housing (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2012). However, these findings can at best be considered preliminary, and any conclusions are tentative rather than definitive.

A leading non-market housing provider in Edmonton has both Housing First and non-Housing First tenants. This provider reports a 95% tenancy success rate with its non-Housing First clients but only an 80% tenancy success rate for Housing First clients (McDonald, 2012). Part of the explanation for this difference is the higher acuity of Housing First clients (e.g. mental illness, addictions) compared to other low income tenants.

The research findings support the proposition that persons with higher acuity in terms of such life challenges as addictions and/or mental illness are more likely to experience tenancy failure. However, the qualitative research methods used do not allow for conclusions to be drawn on the degree of difference compared to other low income tenants not experiencing these life challenges. The focus group participants with past or current involvement with Housing First appreciated the willingness to re-house them by giving them second and third chances. They often blamed themselves for screwing up and losing their housing. No suggestions were made that there is any inherent flaw in the Housing First approach that is correctable. However this could be the subject of further research.

The research findings support the proposition that persons in certain types of dwellings are more likely to experience a tenancy failure (e.g. private rooming houses with shared kitchen and/or bathroom facilities). The limitations on the research methods used do not allow firm conclusions to be made, however. Moreover, there are notable exceptions as well such as the Downtown YMCA.

The research findings support the proposition that most – though not all – low income tenants prefer to live in areas of the city outside the inner city. These findings however must be qualified by the relatively small sample of persons who participated in the focus groups.

The research findings lend support to the proposition that finding practical and effective measures to tenancy retention must start by asking those who have had lived experiences with these challenges.

Finally, all of the preliminary findings of this research project could be further studied using larger sample sizes and representativeness, which would enable firmer conclusions to be drawn.

Why do thousands of Edmontonians find it hard to seek or keep their housing? We found that an inability to afford suitable and safe rental accommodation was a recurrent theme in both the focus groups and survey. The root cause of the inability to afford accommodations is incomes that are too low relative to market rents. A point strongly made is that the shelter allowances for Alberta Works recipients have not kept up with increases in rent costs. But even those receiving Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped benefits, or low income working Edmontonians, find it extremely difficult or impossible to afford market rents. Sometimes this results in those with limited incomes staying trapped in the shelter system or experiencing episodes of absolute homelessness. Sometimes, these Edmontonians end up in accommodation that is substandard, unsafe, crowded, and/or inadequate for their needs.

A number of existing programs make important contributions to helping Edmontonians find and keep safe and affordable accommodation. Capital Region Housing is the largest provider of rent geared to income housing in Edmonton. There are also many other housing providers including Edmonton Inner City Housing Society, E4C, Metis Urban Housing who provide quality accommodation at an affordable cost.

A clear message from both the focus groups and the survey is the urgent need for additional safe and affordable accommodation. Thousands of Edmontonians continue to be homeless and precariously housed. Focus group participants particularly wanted better choices in terms of type of housing and also housing location. With few exceptions, those focus group participants who expressed a preference wanted to live outside the inner city. Opinion was more mixed about whether they preferred to live in social housing or in the private rental market.

There were many calls for some form of rent controls, or at least limits on rent increases. A change made several years ago to limit rent increases to once a year on a continuing tenancy was seen to be helpful. It was however not sufficient because there is no limit on the amount of a yearly increase. The Alberta government has repeatedly said that it opposes any form of rent controls. Rent controls are therefore not likely to be implemented any time soon.

Focus group participants and survey respondents also called for shortening or eliminating the long waits for rent geared to income housing. Alberta and Edmonton's 10 year plans to end chronic homelessness will not work unless a better mechanism is found to prevent people who can't afford their existing housing from falling into a new cycle of homelessness. It is certainly within the financial means of the Alberta government to reduce and eventually eliminate the long waits for affordable accommodation. Apart from the Housing First program, the Alberta government is investing \$71 million this budget year in rent supplements for low income Albertans (Municipal Affairs, 2012, p. 222). An investment of only a few tens of millions more per year should be able to clear the long wait lists of Capital Region Housing and other affordable housing providers. In order to maximize tenant choice and to prevent landlords from capturing some of the increase in rent supplements, more of the funding should be directed to qualifying individuals and families.

With the cost of utilities (water, sewer, electricity, heat) increasingly being charged separately from rent, both focus group participants and survey respondents said rising utility bills are creating additional hardship for low and modest income renters. More effective mechanisms are required to ensure that rising utility costs do not lead to tenancy failures and a renewed cycle of homelessness.

The need for more affordable housing located everywhere in the city to provide tenant choice also came up frequently in the focus groups with homeless, formerly homeless and vulnerably housed persons. Suitable sites throughout the city and region – including surplus school sites – need to be set aside and developed for non-market housing and affordable rental accommodation.

A number of housing quality concerns were identified by the research project. These included buildings in poor repair, mold, lice, and cockroaches. But nothing came up nearly as often as bed bugs. Unprompted, bed bug infestations and their devastating consequences were raised repeatedly by focus groups participants and also got frequent mention by survey respondents. It is no exaggeration that many low and modest income Edmontonians live in an almost constant state of fear when it comes to bed bugs. The fear goes well beyond the nasty bites that these creatures can inflict on a person, their children or other loved ones. The fear extends to the loss of precious personal belonging sometimes on repeated occasions. Even if a person keeps their own unit meticulously clean, bed bugs easily find their way from an adjoining unit through ventilation systems or any gap in a wall, ceiling or floor. People are afraid to have visitors over because of a fear they may be carrying bed bugs on their clothing or other belongings.

There is a general sense among focus groups participants that the battle against bed bugs is still being lost despite the best efforts of the city, the province, landlords and pest control companies. Much of the current effort to eliminate bed bugs is being carried out piecemeal on either a unit by unit or at most a building by building basis. Bed bugs are a growing North American phenomenon, mostly - though by no means exclusively - a problem in lower end rental accommodation. A recent study done in Winnipeg suggested that bed bugs be considered a public health threat or even emergency (Lyons, 2011). Declaring bed bugs a public health emergency on par with a SARS or H1N1 epidemic (or in Alberta's case rat infestations) could allow for much more systematic city-wide or even province-wide effort to eradicate them. Governments would cover the cost of a systematic campaign to free all Edmonton buildings of bed bugs. Tenants would be fully compensated for the loss of their belongings regardless of whether they have insurance. If entire residential buildings have to be vacated, the cost of temporary accommodation and other living costs would be covered.

Focus group participants and survey respondents also spoke about the importance of better integrated and more effective support services to keep people housed. They spoke of the frustration of having to go to multiple agencies to get problems solved. There was frequent mention about the delays of getting into addictions treatment and the inadequate length of treatment programs. The wrap around services for those in the Housing First program is certainly helping in this regard. Their effectiveness is acknowledged by many who are or have been involved with Housing First.

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APPENDIX A

Backgrounder on Focus Groups

**Edmonton Social Planning Council and Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness Research Project
'Understanding Tenancy Failures and Successes'
Spring 2012**

Facilitated Discussion Questions:

What are one or two things that make it hard to find or keep housing? What are one or two things that would help to keep people housed? What advice do you have for political leaders to prevent homelessness and keep people housed?

Facilitator: John Kolkman, Susan Morrissey, Joseph Ahorro or Stephen MacDonald from ESPC staff.

Target Groups: People of all ages or backgrounds experiencing homelessness, or people who are vulnerably housed (living in unaffordable, unsafe, or inadequate accommodation).

Length: Two Hours during Weekdays or Evenings

Location: In a conference or meeting room which is convenient to those attending. Meeting room provided by the co-sponsoring organization. If not possible, another suitable venue nearby.

Suggested Attendance: 10 to 15 people

Format: Going around the circle of participants with each question. An opportunity to opt out of a question would be allowed, though the importance of having everyone's input would be emphasized.

Remuneration: \$50 per participant (cash or gift card). Participants will receive their remuneration at the end of the focus group session.

Light Refreshments (beverages and snacks): Provided by co-sponsoring organization. ESPC could reimburse if needed.

Recording: Sessions would be recorded to ensure accuracy. An ESPC staff person and/or volunteer will also take detailed notes.

Confidentiality. Before the focus group begins, the facilitator will explain confidentiality including that the focus group report will safeguard people's privacy and not include any personally identifying information.

APPENDIX B**Focus Groups with Vulnerably Housed Persons**

<i>Location/Community Partner</i>	<i>Date and Time</i>	<i>Number of Participants</i>
Jasper Place Health and Wellness	April 19, 2012, 10:00am-noon	15
Jasper Place High School	April 24, 2012, 10:00am-noon	9
Capital Region Housing	April 24, 2012, 7:00pm - 9pm	5
Bissell Centre	May 9, 2012, 11:00am-1:00pm	17
YMCA Transition Housing	May 16, 2012, 7:00pm-9:00pm	16
Mosaic Centre	May 22, 2012, 10:00am-noon	15
Boyle Street Community Services	May 24, 2012, 1:30pm-3:30pm	13
Mustard Seed	May 25, 2012, 3:00pm-5:00 pm	15
	Total	105

APPENDIX C

Coding Table for Focus Groups

Topic	Focus Group	Q1	Q2	Q3	T
Affordability High rent rates Struggle to pay bills Lack of rent suppliments Rent control	YMCA	11	11	0	22
	Bissell Centre	5	4	11	20
	Boyle Street	6	4	3	13
	Mosaic Centre	10	13	0	23
	Mustard Seed	5	4	2	11
	Jasper Place High School	4	5	1	10
	Jasper Place Health & Wellness	1	2	4	7
	Capital Region Housing	1	1	0	2
	<i>sub-total</i>	43	44	21	108
Supportive services Substance abuse issues Needing help/guidance Mental health Family services	Mustard Seed	6	13	5	24
	Boyle Street	11	2	9	22
	YMCA	12	7	0	19
	Bissell Centre	2	6	6	14
	Jasper Place High School	0	7	6	13
	Mosaic Centre	4	5	0	9
	Jasper Place Health & Wellness	1	3	5	9
	Capital Region Housing	2	6	0	8
	<i>sub-total</i>	38	49	31	118
Barriers to attaining housing Availability of housing Lack of income/jobs Reference/credit/criminal history checks Fees/deposits Age restrictions Wait Lists	Mosaic Centre	8	5	2	15
	Mustard Seed	6	3	3	12
	Bissell Centre	2	3	4	9
	Jasper Place High School	6	2	1	9
	YMCA	4	2	2	8
	Jasper Place Health & Wellness	2	4	1	7
	Capital Region Housing	2	5	0	7
	Boyle Street	2	3	1	6
	<i>sub-total</i>	32	27	14	73
Landlord/tenant relationship Discrimination (race, age) Responsibilities of each	Mustard Seed	12	3	3	18
	Mosaic Centre	6	10	0	16
	Jasper Place High School	8	6	1	15
	YMCA	6	7	1	14
	Boyle Street	4	3	5	12
	Bissell Centre	4	3	2	9
	Jasper Place Health & Wellness	2	2	2	6
	Capital Region Housing	3	3	0	6
	<i>sub-total</i>	45	37	14	96

Topic	Focus Group	Q1	Q2	Q3	T
Quality of housing Repairs Infestations (bed bugs) Neighbors/Roommates Lack of Safety	Mustard Seed	7	5	1	13
	Capital Region Housing	7	6	0	13
	Bissell Centre	5	4	2	11
	Jasper Place High School	3	5	5	13
	Boyle Street	3	2	1	6
	YMCA	3	2	0	5
	Jasper Place Health & Wellness	5	3	0	8
	Mosaic Centre	5	2	0	7
	<i>sub-total</i>	38	29	9	76
Geographic location of housing	Boyle Street	0	1	2	3
	Jasper Place Health and Wellness	1	2	0	3
	YMCA	0	1	6	7
	Jasper Place High School	1	1	1	3
	Bissell Centre	0	1	2	3
	Capital Region Housing	1	0	1	2
	Mosaic Centre	0	1	1	2
	Mustard Seed	2	1	1	4
	<i>sub-total</i>	5	8	14	27
Being heard By services providers By politicians and decision-makers	Mustard Seed	0	1	6	7
	Boyle Street	0	0	5	5
	Jasper Place High School	0	2	3	5
	YMCA	0	2	2	4
	Bissell Centre	0	0	3	3
	Capital Region Housing	0	2	0	2
	Jasper Place Health and Wellness	0	0	1	1
	Mosaic Centre	0	0	1	1
	<i>sub-total</i>	0	7	21	28
	Grand Total	201	201	124	526

Explanatory Note on Coding Chart

For coding the transcripts, key topics that each tenant shared with the group were identified. Each key topic was grouped with similar ones and then counted for how many times it was discussed in the focus group for each of the three questions. The chart above shows how many times each topic was spoken about within each focus group and includes the breakdown of the frequency for each question as well.

APPENDIX C

Coding Table for Focus Groups

1. What is your background?

	Percentage	Response Count
Non-Housing Service Provider	31.0%	27
Housing Provider	28.7%	25
Public Sector	14.9%	13
Landlord	2.3%	2
Concerned Citizen	11.5%	10
Other	11.5%	10
TOTAL		87

2. What is your position?

	Percentage	Response Count
Outreach / Front-line Worker	36.8%	32
Management /Administration	41.4%	36
Service Recipient / Tenant	3.4%	3
Funder	5.7%	5
Other	12.6%	11
TOTAL		87

Explanatory Note on Coding Charts for Questions 3 and 4

Each survey participant was asked open questions and was free to elaborate on their responses. Each response usually had more than one comment. Themes and suggestions were distilled, disaggregate, compiled, and groups accordingly into the following charts.

3. Why is it difficult for some people to find housing and to keep it?

	Non-Housing Service Provider	Housing Provider	Public Sector	Landlord	Concerned Citizen	Other
Costs	7	6	2		5	1
Not Enough Money	10	6	4		2	4
Addictions	14	6	3	2	2	2
Lack of Discipline	1	2				
Long Waits	2	2	1			
Overcrowding (With Family and Friends)	6	2	1	2	1	
Mental Health	20	4	5	2	1	2
Knowledge / Financial Literacy	8	2	4	1		2
Lack of Support / Resources	12	10	3		2	1
Discrimination / Racism	2	4			5	1
Poor Landlord Relations	4	2	1	2	2	
Poor Maintenance				1	1	1
Lack of Mentors		1	1			
Loneliness / Isolation	4	3	1			
Bad Location		1				
Bad Credit / Record	7	2	1	2	2	
Lack of Housing / Choice	5	4	4		3	2
Violence / Safety	3	2	2		1	
Bureaucratic / Efficiency	1		2			
Bad Behaviour	1	6	3	2		1
Lack of Education / Skills		1	3		1	1
Trauma						1
Lack of Documents		2		1		

4. Which resources, supports, or policies can best help people stay housed?

	Non-Housing Service Provider	Housing Provider	Public Sector	Landlord	Concerned Citizen	Other
Mental Health Support	7	4	3			2
Addiction Support	4	3	2		1	1
Handbook for Housing Responsibilities	4	2		1		1
1-on-1 support	10	6	5		2	2
Higher Wages / Income	4	4	2		3	2
More Subsidized Housing	6		3			2
Rent Supplements / Subsidies	3	4			1	3
Financial Literacy	4	3	2	2		1
Employment and Training		1				
Better Landlord	1	2	2		2	2
Flexible Payment Schedule			1		1	
Coordinated, Efficient Services	4	5	2			
Housing First	2	1			3	1
Permanent Supports / Supportive Living	4	4	1	1	2	3
Welcome Home Program		2				
Emergency Funds / Resources	2	1				3
Aboriginal Support					2	2
Rent Control					1	1
Better Client Behaviour / Choices		1		1		1
Legislative	1		1			1
Bureaucratic	1	2		2		
Community Involvement / Inclusion	1					

5. What advice would you give to decision makers to help them prevent homelessness and keep people housed?

	Non-Housing Service Provider	Housing Provider	Public Sector	Landlord	Concerned Citizen	Other
Ongoing / Increased Support	8	10	7	1	4	4
Increased Money / Support	3	4	2	1		
Funding for Newcomers		1				
Housing Options	9	1	1			
Personalized Support		2	2	2	2	
Poverty Reduction / Prevention	3	6	1		1	
Technical / Bureaucratic	2	1			1	
More Housing	4	1	1		1	2
Education	3	2		1	1	2
Housing First	1	1	1			
Audit Providers	1					1
More Open / Welcoming	1	1			1	
Better Consultations	2		1	1		
Personal Accountability	2	2				
Affordable Rent		2				1
Jobs	1				1	1

