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# Housing First in Canada

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Supporting Communities to End Homelessness

Canadian Homelessness  
Research Network



the  
homeless hub

# Housing First in Canada: Supporting Communities to End Homelessness

Stephen Gaetz, Fiona Scott, Tanya Gulliver



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Housing First in Canada: Supporting Communities to End Homelessness is available on the Homeless Hub at:  
[www.homelesshub.ca/housingfirstcanada](http://www.homelesshub.ca/housingfirstcanada)

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# Introduction – Housing First

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*This document is designed to help create and enhance an understanding of Housing First practice, programs, philosophy and principles in a Canadian context. It is intended to provide practical guidance to service providers across the country on what Housing First is, and how it can be implemented.*

In March 2013, there was a five-year renewal by the Government of Canada of the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS). This renewal included a new focus on the Housing First approach as well as a financial commitment of \$119 million. This means that communities across the country will need to integrate Housing First into the array of homelessness and prevention services that they provide.

We begin this report with a **Framework** document which:

- Defines Housing First and explains its history
- Outlines the core principles of Housing First
- Explores the difference between Housing First as a Program versus Housing First as a Philosophy
- Discusses the key components of Housing First including models of housing and supports
- Shares data and research about the success and effectiveness of Housing First

Next, we provide eight different case studies from across the country. Each of these puts forth a different perspective and ‘take’ on Housing First to help create a broad understanding of the variety of settings and applications that Housing First may be used in. They range from programs with several years of service provision to one that is brand-new and just getting started. The case studies highlight models for specific sub-populations including

women and Aboriginal People. The case studies also show the importance of ‘systems-responses’ and ‘wrap-around services’. Housing First can’t just be done by the housing and homelessness sector; it requires active involvement from a variety of organizations and governmental entities.

The **Calgary Homeless Foundation** (CHF) Housing First model in Calgary, Alberta employs a systems-response method in which services are integrated. The CHF supports a number of Housing First programs and has some of the most robust data on successes due to the length of history and foresight. It is a good example of Housing First as both philosophy and program.

The **Infinity Project** in Calgary, Alberta is an example of a Housing First program aimed specifically at youth experiencing homelessness. It highlights the additional complexities of providing housing for a specific sub-population and the ways in which a Housing First program needs to be adapted in order to meet the distinct needs of a group. When read in conjunction with the Calgary Homeless Foundation it also helps increase an understanding of different models within one geographic community. The case study also highlights the way in which a service organization – the Boys and Girls Club of Calgary – which has been in existence since 1939, has evolved and changed its programming to reflect the new realities of the population it serves.

**The Vivian** Housing First program operated by RainCity Housing and Support Society in Vancouver, British Columbia, is a Housing First program run by women, for



women. It uses a congregate housing model and embeds Housing First principles and beliefs with a transitional housing model. They employ harm reduction strategies. The program works with women leaving corrections, women working in the sex trade industry, women with severe mental health issues and women with significant substance use issues.

The **Transitions to Home (T2H)** program in Hamilton, Ontario, shows how Housing First works in a mid-size city. It provides an example of how to bring stakeholders on board and how to provide effective data. It profiles a unique partnership with the police service resulting in coordination with their EMS Social Navigator position providing service to individuals with high needs.

The **City of Lethbridge and Social Housing in Actions’** Housing First program, in Lethbridge, Alberta, is based on the advice and examples of other programs in Canada and the U.S. The staff team has been documenting the key lessons learned in the implementation of a Housing First program and ten lessons are included in the case study. As one of the early adopters of a plan to end homelessness Lethbridge has seen a significant decrease in absolute homelessness, as well as a decrease in shelter usage.

The **Streets to Homes** program in Victoria, British Columbia, took the Toronto Streets to Homes program and adapted it for their community. It is a good example of the ability to adapt and replicate features of existing programs even when they are being offered in communities that are different than your own. Victoria’s program also provides options for affordable housing in an extremely tight housing market through their unique Private-Public Housing Initiative.

The **Community Action Group on Homelessness** in Fredericton, New Brunswick, provides a clear and fresh perspective of a program in development. It also provides an example of what planning for Housing First might look like in a smaller and more rural community.

The **Nikihk Housing First, Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society** Housing First program at Homeward Trust in Edmonton, Alberta, is a model designed to address the over-representation of Aboriginal people in Edmonton’s homeless population. Through the integration of cultural awareness and programming, it provides an example of how Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal agencies can integrate culture into a Housing First Program. The inclusivity of the governance structure is an excellent model for other agencies working to address the needs of specific sub-populations.

We conclude with a **Lessons Learned** section that summarizes the key learnings from the eight Housing First programs. It also highlights best practices from research including international sources and the Mental Health Commission of Canada’s *At Home/Chez Soi* program, which was a demonstration project on Housing First in five select Canadian cities (Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto, Montreal and Moncton).

Access the framework and case studies at  
[www.homelesshub.ca/housingfirstcanada](http://www.homelesshub.ca/housingfirstcanada)