

THE SYSTEMS PLANNING COLLECTIVE

*The State
of Systems
Approaches
to Preventing
and Ending
Homelessness
in Canada*

**A PRELIMINARY REPORT &
FRAMEWORK FOR SYSTEMS
TRANSFORMATION**

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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SYSTEMSPANNING
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INTRODUCTION

Today there appears to be a greater understanding that social challenges, including homelessness, have deep, systemic and structural roots and are not just the product of individual choices and interpersonal factors.



There is a growing body of research on homelessness prevention, and works such as the [Indigenous Definition of Homelessness¹](#) and [A New Direction: A Framework for Homelessness Prevention²](#) highlight the complexity and wholistic nature of the causes, experiences and impacts of homelessness. Calls for “systems change” are widespread and interest in systems thinking/change work as a field is growing in Canada and abroad. Yet, communities and governments alike have not arrived at a shared definition of what systems change means or is desired when it comes to addressing homelessness.

Public policy, community planning efforts, campaigns, and frontline practice have in many communities and governments sought to retool the homeless-serving system around the values of person-centred care and evidence-based/-informed practice. Improving service coordination and the accompanying data infrastructure to help communities understand and respond to homelessness have resulted in an uptake in approaches, such as Coordinated Access Systems, By-Name Lists and data collection and management systems (e.g., HIFIS 4; HMIS). Evidence-supported program models and approaches, such as Harm Reduction, Housing First and Permanent Supportive Housing, have also emerged as leading interventions to address chronic homelessness with promising adaptations for other populations (see [Housing First for Youth](#)).

Less understood is how to support the capacity of communities and governments to work across systems (not just the homeless-serving system) to shift from crisis response/management to rights-based homelessness prevention and sustained exits from homelessness. When communities reach the limits of their ability to optimize the homeless-serving sector and coordinate across the programs, services and housing therein, what are the remaining barriers, roadblocks and challenges that stand in the way of ending homelessness, and creating equitable and just community safety and well-being? How might we define the goals and process of systems change and transformation to prevent and end homelessness, particularly if we wish to be rooted in equity, justice and accountability? These questions have become the preoccupation of the Systems Planning Collective (SPC), and are the impetus for this Preliminary Report.

¹ Thistle, J. (2017). *Indigenous Definition of Homelessness in Canada*. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

² Gaetz, S. & DeJ, E. (2017). *A New Direction: A Framework for Homelessness Prevention*. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

REFLECTION ON THE SPC'S PAST WORK AND ONGOING DIALOGUE with people with lived/living experience, frontline practitioners, and Indigenous (First Nations, Metis, and Inuit) and non-Indigenous community leaders, organizations and governments have led us to ask:

- Where are we headed as individuals, organizations, communities and governments?
- What relationships do we need to tend to on this journey and what roles do we play?
- What knowledge and information do we already have and/or need to get us to our destination?

WE FIRST GIVE READERS AN INTRODUCTION to the Systems Planning Collective, the goals of the report, and some of the influential trends and forces driving the conversation around systems transformation to prevent and end homelessness.

WE THEN INTRODUCE A FRAMEWORK FOR SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION that provides the structure for the body of the report including:

- Systems Thinking & Awareness
- Systems Planning, Implementation & Evaluation
- Systems Change & Accountability
- Systems Transformation towards Systems Justice

Each section captures many of the key questions, tensions, and opportunities within the space of cross-systems work to prevent and end homelessness in Canada. Finally, the conclusion of the Preliminary Report identifies the actions that can be taken by individuals, communities and governments under each component of the Framework for Systems Transformation.

Our intention as the Systems Planning Collective is to further explore the ideas within this report and co-develop action-oriented tools, resources and training and technical assistance that communities can take up and adapt to their local systems transformation efforts.

ABOUT THE SYSTEMS PLANNING COLLECTIVE

Starting at the beginning of 2018, the Systems Planning Collective (SPC) was formed in an effort to align and leverage the community planning work of [A Way Home Canada](#), the [Canadian Observatory on Homelessness](#) and [HelpSeeker Technologies](#). Drawing on years of experience working with communities and Indigenous/non-Indigenous leadership and governments across Canada, and after a few key collaborative projects, the SPC underwent a strategic planning process to reflect on the gaps and opportunities to better support communities in their cross-systems efforts to prevent and end homelessness.

The SPC spent several months speaking with national partners, and people leading cross-systems efforts to address homelessness across Canada about their work and what they felt was still needed. Communities noted significant resources and supports dedicated to the existing work of improving the effectiveness and impact of the homeless-serving sector (e.g., supports through the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness' [Built for Zero Canada](#)), however, their efforts to work across systems outside of the sector often felt isolating and daunting. The SPC launched a Community of Practice (CoP) in the Fall of 2020 to hold much-needed space for imagination, generative discussion, and support for systems transformation.

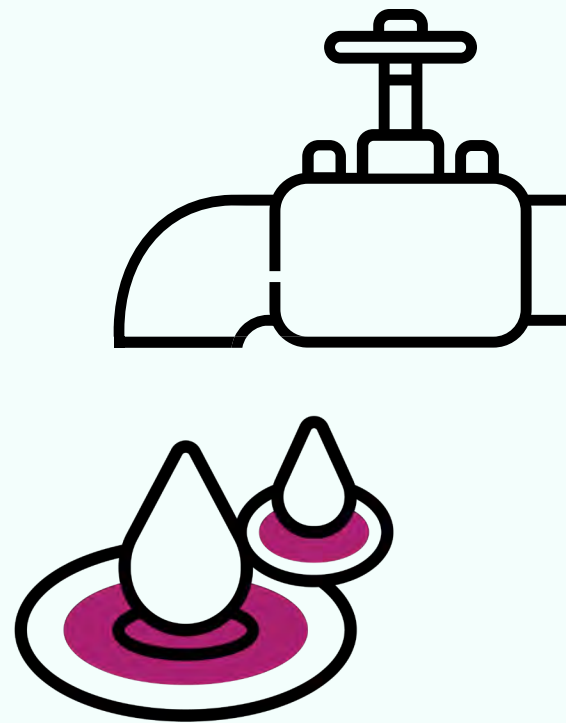


Early conversations with prospective CoP members shed light on a key distinction for our approach as the SPC. For some time the SPC's focus was exclusively on how to do effective community-based systems planning, which is a useful approach to setting shared goals and targets for program/housing needs and financing efforts to end homelessness. **However, systems planning is only one part of the broader work of systems change and systems transformation, which without a focus on equity, justice and accountability is destined to fail.** The SPC supports a vision for systems transformation that centres equity, justice, and accountability, which we believe involves three significant, interrelated shifts in approach at the individual, organizational, community and systems levels:

- from eligibility to rights-based responses;
- from emergency/crisis response to prevention, and;
- from a focus on the homeless-serving system to cross-systems solidarity.

Putting equity at the centre of our decision-making processes and resource allocation necessitates rights-based approaches that meet people where they are to connect them to a continuum of supports, including and beyond housing, over models that prioritize and exclude people based on funding priorities/eligibility and valuations of chronicity and acuity. Putting justice at the centre necessitates directing resources toward preventing and sustaining exits from homelessness rather than only providing support once people and communities are in crisis. Putting accountability at the centre necessitates working in solidarity to share collective responsibility for the roles each system and sector plays in causing, addressing or preventing homelessness.

These are lofty, but vital goals, and the path forward is not set or always clear, but the SPC is committed to seeing this journey through in solidarity with justice-seeking groups and community partners, governments and all those who hope and work for better futures for themselves and their communities.



“It’s not working. Not 100 years ago, and not now. That comes from the charitable model, to some degree. What we’re not doing is chasing the taps, shutting off the taps feeding into homelessness.”

-CoP Member





THE SYSTEMS PLANNING COLLECTIVE'S COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE (COP)

The CoP is composed of people from all across Canada working within municipal governments, local/provincial/territorial coalitions, and community organizations who are leading efforts to address homelessness and related challenges. Some members self-identified as Indigenous and some noted having lived experience of homelessness. There is also strong representation of youth-focused prevention initiatives within the CoP. The SPC Project Management Team that provides logistical and facilitation support to the CoP includes representatives from A Way Home Canada, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and HelpSeeker Technologies. This group is by no means completely representative of the range of perspectives in Canada, and our goal is to grow the CoP and connect with people from other systems, sectors, other related initiatives and lived experiences to further strengthen and diversify the knowledge exchange and content creation.

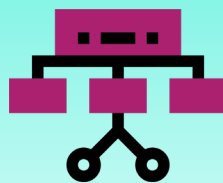
ABOUT THIS PRELIMINARY REPORT

This Preliminary Report captures insights from a literature scan and conversations that have emerged out of the SPC's Community of Practice meetings and Key Informant interviews with CoP members and partner organizations working to prevent and end homelessness. We present a range of topics, tensions, opportunities and questions that communities and the Systems Planning Collective will continue to unpack together and translate into action-oriented tools and resources.

The aim of the report is to elevate ideas that spark interest, discussion and inspiration among:



1. People who are leading, working within or who have an interest in their local approaches to preventing and ending homelessness.

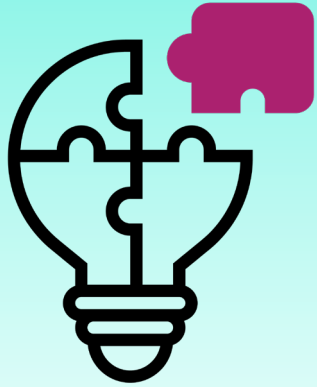


2. Funders, policy-makers and elected officials across all orders of government trying to make sense of how to best support community-based efforts.



3. Advocates, academics and community organizers who may be able to mobilize research and action in the areas outlined in this report.





The contents of this report are presented at a high level with the goal of exploring the topics and questions in greater depth with the SPC's Community or Practice and across our members' and partners' efforts. At the end of the report we outline next steps and opportunities.

INFLUENTIAL TRENDS AND FORCES

This Preliminary Report has emerged in response to a number of influential trends and forces that are driving conversation and action with direct impacts on our thinking and approaches to homelessness. Below are some reflections on each trend and force as they relate to systems transformation work to prevent and end homelessness.

MOVEMENTS FOR EQUITY AND JUSTICE

A throughline across each trend/force is the call for renewed and deepened awareness and action on equity and justice that have been driven by the resurgence of the Movement for Black Lives, the Land Back movement, Anti-Asian Hate movements, as well as the advocacy of organizers from the 2SLGBTQIA+, disabled, Black, Indigenous and racialized communities. Colonial and white supremacist worldviews and policies are not things of the past and continue to cause intergenerational harm, despite intentions to seek reconciliation. This is borne out in the disproportionate impacts of homelessness on Indigenous, racialized, and 2SLGBTQIA+ people. We have a responsibility to reckon with (1) the ways in which inequities are perpetuated through policies, practices and resource and power distribution that either cause or are meant to respond to homelessness, and (2) the structural and systemic changes that are needed to not only pursue reconciliation, but justice in our efforts to end homelessness.

COVID-19 PRESENTING NEW CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE

The sweeping impacts of COVID-19 on individuals and communities cannot be understated, though have not been experienced equally. At the individual/interpersonal level, isolation and disruptions to income, employment, housing and living have sparked crises within the crisis of the pandemic, including great concerns for mental health and well-being, substance use, and interpersonal violence. The impact and responses to the pandemic have also reproduced and amplified racial and gender disparities. Greater employment and housing precarity came at the same time as restrictions on capacity of emergency shelters and drop-in spaces for people experiencing homelessness.



Congregate living environments, such as shelters and long-term care facilities, are under significant scrutiny with high rates of COVID-19 spread that have community members feeling even less safe and sure about entering these spaces. Some people experiencing homelessness have opted to stay in hotels that communities are using while shelter capacity is reduced. Other community members see neither the shelters nor the hotels as tenable options, staying in urban encampments and receiving support from local mutual aid networks. Tensions and frustration with the supports made available to people living in encampments have continued to mount. It is an ongoing challenge to provide a person-centred, [rights-based approach to working with people living in encampments](#) in concert with the longer-term affordable housing goals of municipalities.³

Community of Practice members expressed that the impacts of COVID-19 on their efforts to address homelessness were unique to their location and dependent on the prevalence of the virus. Some smaller, more remote communities that have only seen a handful of cases at a time (e.g., the East Coast and Northern communities), saw COVID-19 drive greater cross-systems collaboration, without significant disruptions to their service delivery. Others, particularly large city centres with greater dependence on emergency shelters, have seen COVID-19 derail their long-term plans and prevention efforts. Short-term bursts of funding to address immediate COVID-related needs/challenges have also not left room for getting out of crisis thinking. There is widespread hope for change as a result of the pandemic, noting the impact of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit and other funding supports that, with a greater focus on equity in design and implementation, could inform the adoption of a Basic Income program.

DATA AND TECHNOLOGY INTENTIONS VS IMPACT

Efforts to harness technology for social impact are taking off at a rapid pace, leveraging new developments in the capacity for data collection, as well as wider access to technological devices. The ongoing roll-out of [HIFIS 4](#) provides an opportunity for some communities and service providers across Canada to access digital tools at little to no cost. Mobile apps and web-based applications from HelpSeeker Technologies are making it easier for people to find and access information and resources in their communities, while giving community organizations access to information to improve their service delivery and quality. Currently, however, the uptake of tools and the data that is collected and shared within and across organizations, jurisdictions and systems is inconsistent. Similarly, we have yet to unlock the full potential of leveraging administrative data from the many systems that directly or indirectly relate to homelessness.

The full potential of data and technology have yet to be realized, and there are important questions to answer as communities seek to identify and use evidence- or data-informed approaches to addressing homelessness. For example, how does equity and justice inform and factor into the development and implementation of tools and data collection methods? Similarly, recent and ongoing discussion about the equity of assessment tools and their use in prioritization has unearthed critical questions about the purpose and function of assessment, what data is and should be collected and why, and who needs what data to effectively connect individuals and families with what they want and need.

³ Buchnea, A. & McKittrick, M. (2020). Responding to youth homelessness during COVID-19 and beyond: Perspectives from the youth-serving sector in Canada. Toronto, ON: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press and A Way Home Canada.

A VARIED POLICY LANDSCAPE

Indigenous Governance

The dynamics of working with Indigenous governance bodies/structures are complex and highly contextual, but incredibly important to justice-oriented, cross-systems approaches to preventing and ending homelessness. There is a rich and diverse array of traditional governance models, policies and practices across Indigenous nations, which the Indian Act, 1876 sought to disrupt and dismantle to centralize control over Indigenous Peoples and lands within the federal government. Hereditary, traditional leadership and governance continued and have endured until today, but must contend with the federal government's mandated system of elected chiefs and councils. Beyond Indigenous governance on-reserve, there is also the important and often-overlooked dynamic of the roughly 900,000 urban Indigenous peoples in Canada. Power and resource distribution for urban Indigenous leadership and initiatives on housing and homelessness are generally not proportionately funded, particularly given the overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples experiencing homelessness in urban centres. The resurgence of Indigenous sovereignty and self-government, ongoing tensions about who has authority on issues such as housing and homelessness, and distrust of colonial governments that have consistently failed to enact justice all reinforce the need for authentic nation-to-nation relationship building and solidarity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities and governments.

Federal: The National Housing Strategy

The federal government plays an important role in funding and providing support to local initiatives to prevent and end homelessness through the policies and programs within the [National Housing Strategy](#). Much of the funding for creating new or preserving existing accessible, affordable and sustainable housing flows through the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC). CMHC also funds research and development to identify innovative approaches to housing and homelessness. CMHC funding streams are open to a broad range of applicants from the public, non-profit and private sectors, and while collaboration is encouraged, local homelessness response efforts and the CMHC funding accessed within the community may not always be completely aligned. There is potential for disconnection between a community's collective/collaborative processes and strategies to set priorities to address homelessness and housing affordability and the broader pool of applicants within the community that access CMHC funding.

Within the National Housing Strategy, the federal government has a homelessness strategy called Reaching Home, which administers a smaller pot of funding directly to 67 Designated Communities in Canada. This funding is provided with directives that set the federal mandate/goals for addressing homelessness, with varying degrees of influence on practice at the community level. Some communities shape their local approach to homelessness around the federal directives, while communities, for example in Quebec and Alberta, have their own frameworks or approach to setting priorities and goals. Community of Practice members also noted that in practice there is misaligned governance between Reaching Home and the broader National Housing strategy, a challenge that merits further discussion.



The federal Reaching Home strategy has to date encouraged communities to implement Coordinated Access Systems (CASs) to bring together the homeless-serving sector to match programs/services to individuals in the community, with a focus on chronic homelessness (the first community-level outcome area). CASs are intended to create central access points and use a common assessment tool to create a By-Name Prioritization List for communities to draw from as programs/housing become available.⁴ Communities are able to address homelessness in populations outside of those chronically homeless (e.g., youth, Indigenous peoples, etc.), and are also encouraged within the directives to focus on whole-community responses, prevention and sustaining exits. However, greater support for communities is needed as they bump up against challenges of working across systems to push for prevention approaches. This presents an important opportunity for the Systems Planning Collective and the Community of Practice: to help define the next steps for communities receiving Reaching Home funding.

The Government of Canada also legislated the progressive realization of a right to adequate housing in the National Housing Strategy Act in June 2019. A legally recognized right to housing is an important step toward a rights-based approach, ensuring that the federal government must have a National Housing Strategy in place, and that systemic rights violations can be addressed. However, the current legislation does not provide legal recourse for individuals who are unhoused or at risk of losing their housing. At the same time, inconsistency at the individual, community and provincial/territorial levels about what the right to housing or rights-based approaches mean in practice can cause tension and divergence.⁵

The Reaching Home directives include FOUR mandatory community-level outcome areas Designated Communities must work towards:⁶

- 1.** Chronic homelessness in the community is reduced.
- 2.** Homelessness in the community is reduced overall and for specific populations
- 3.** Communities choose as many as needed, but must include Indigenous homelessness. New inflows into homelessness are reduced; and
- 4.** Returns to homelessness are reduced.

⁴ Employment and Social Development Canada. (2020). *Reaching Home: Canada's National Homelessness Strategy Directives*. Retrieved from the Government of Canada website: <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/homelessness/directives.html#h2.3-h3.4>

⁵ Morrison, J. (2020, July 5). Right to housing is now law in Canada: So now what? *Canadian Housing and Renewal Association*. https://chra-achru.ca/blog_article/right-to-housing-is-now-law-in-canada-so-now-what-2/

⁶ Employment and Social Development Canada. (2020). *Reaching Home: Canada's National Homelessness Strategy Directives*. Retrieved from the Government of Canada website: <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/homelessness/directives.html>

Provincial/Territorial

Community of Practice members noted a concentration of power and decision-making at the provincial/territorial (P/T) level for policy, funding and practices around homelessness. P/T governments are responsible for a range of services and supports across a number of relevant systems including employment, housing, education, child protection, legal/justice, and health. These systems all have direct and indirect roles in creating and maintaining or reducing and preventing homelessness. Clear links exist between provincial/territorial systems and flows into homelessness, often related to no or ineffective transition and exit planning.

Provincial and territorial approaches to housing and homelessness vary, are not always aligned with federal priorities or the priorities of other funders, and are often subject to changing government mandates with short 4-year election cycles. Long-term planning and advocacy for policy change without immediate benefits/quick wins are curtailed by a lack of political will and limited engagement with complexity and the interconnected nature of homelessness. Disconnects between and changes to federal, provincial and territorial policy and priorities are left to be navigated by organizations and community initiatives.

Municipal

Municipalities play various roles in homelessness system leadership and priority setting across Canada, and often shape local goals for housing stock and manage social assistance and housing programs. Past devolution of powers from federal and provincial/territorial has increased pressure on municipal governments to respond to the impacts of the lack of affordable housing, with limited revenue creation tools at their disposal and hesitancy to raise property taxes. The National Housing Strategy offers opportunities to alleviate some of this pressure, but still needs provincial/territorial alignment and political will to be fully realized at the local level.

There is also a challenge of policies and approaches being urban-centric and not developed in consideration of strengths and needs of smaller communities that have fewer formalized supports. There is a call for greater emphasis on approaches that are better-suited to rural and remote contexts to help keep people in place rather than having to relocate to urban centres for support.



TOWARD SYSTEMS JUSTICE

EQUITY, JUSTICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY ARE CENTRAL TO SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

Despite efforts to better coordinate the homeless-serving sector, communities are unable to stem the flow of people into homelessness because of persistent systems barriers and systems failures. Systems barriers may be both real (i.e., bureaucratic barriers to accessing entitlements/supports; poor coordination between government and non-governmental systems/services) or perceived (i.e., wariness around sharing data within/between sectors), but both limit the ability for people to receive timely, person-centred support. Systems failures tend to manifest as the lack of discharge/exit planning from public systems or negative and inequitable experiences and outcomes while receiving support or care from public systems.

A consistent thread throughout our conversations with people working in various capacities in their communities to address homelessness was the need for fundamental changes to get out of the current crisis response. This systems change, or even further, transformation, must be deeply rooted in equity,⁷ the pursuit of justice, and a commitment to accountability if it is to have lasting and positive impact for communities most affected by homelessness. The potential implications of centering our systems transformation efforts on equity, justice and accountability are significant, and there is a need for honesty about whether governments, funders and organizations are invested in pursuing this complex and long-term vision within our communities. To quote one of our Community of Practice members:

“

We're going to need to get to a place where we collectively acknowledge that we're in systems change work, or to stop trying and put our energy elsewhere. If we're not all invested, there's going to be burnout. It's no longer okay for people or government officials to say they're invested, but then not communicate in their departments to implement that change and be responsive to partners and Indigenous communities.

It's not helpful to say you're invested but then not follow through. Which means they'll have to give up power, negotiate, give up control. And I'll do the same thing to get to that space.

”

⁷ Petty, S. & Leach, M. (2020). Systems change & deep equity: Pathways toward sustainable impact, beyond “Eureka!,” unawareness & unwitting harm - An interview with Sheryl Petty and Mark Leach. *Change Elemental*.

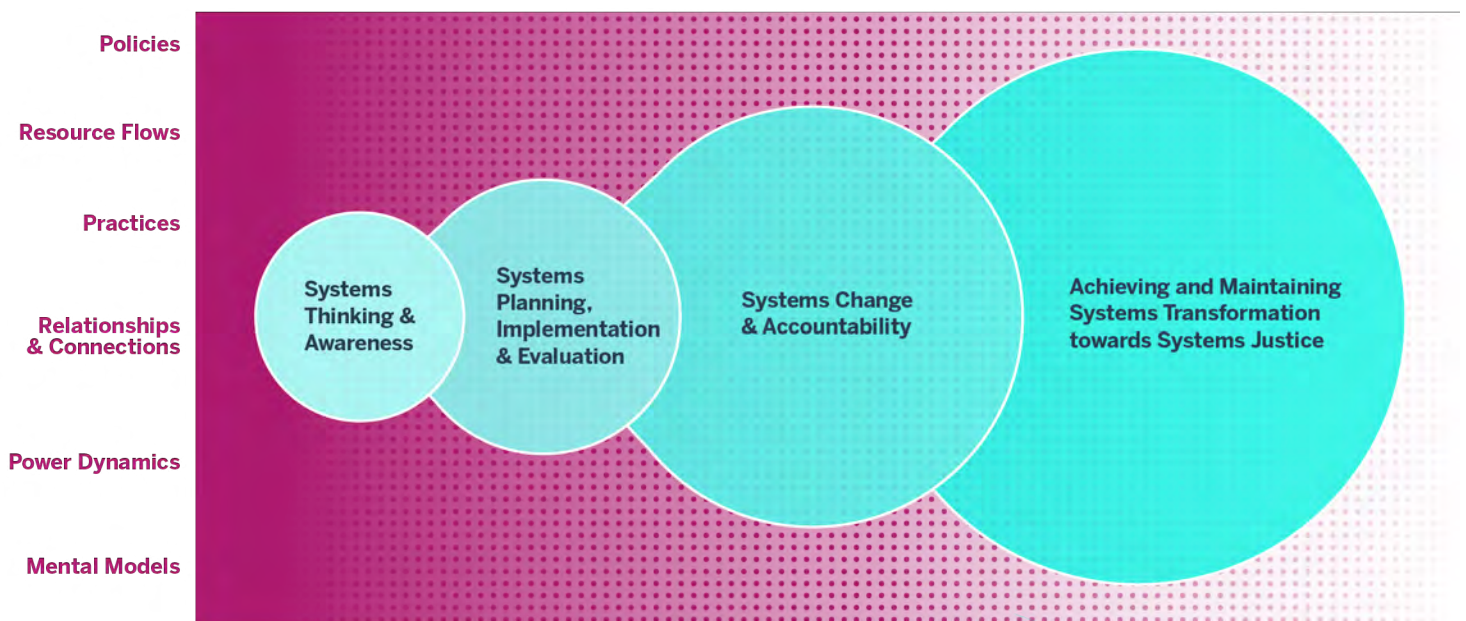
The Community of Practice articulated a number of critical actions for systems transformation and systems justice, including:

- Defining and enacting meaningful involvement of LivEx⁸ at every stage of the work;
- Upholding the leadership of Black and racialized community members/groups and sovereignty of Indigenous Peoples;
- Intentionally and equitably redistributing power and resources.

Understanding how to carry out these critical actions within the movement to prevent and end homelessness will require partnerships, collaboration and solidarity across diverse groups and efforts. We will need to break down silos and leverage the strengths of social justice efforts that are related to homelessness and community well-being more broadly.

A FRAMEWORK FOR SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION TOWARD SYSTEMS JUSTICE

The following framework is a starting point to articulate our vision for pursuing systems justice and the complex, dynamic, relational work involved. It was developed out of numerous community-grounded conversations as well as the broader discourse on homelessness prevention, systems change, and equity. As we engage with communities and governments further around the ideas represented within this model, we are committed to remaining open to re-evaluation and change with new understanding and knowledge.



Important to Note:

- This framework is grounded in commitments to equity and justice
- This work is non-linear and complex, often requiring action across these spheres with emphasis on different components at different times.
- The conditions and spheres are interdependent, often mutually reinforcing or interacting in context-specific ways
- There is no one-size-fits-all, but we can learn from one another to share experiences and knowledge that can be taken up or adapted

⁸ We use the term “LivEx” throughout the report to refer to people with living or lived experience or expertise of homelessness.

SYSTEMS THINKING & AWARENESS

Main area of activity and change: Individual; Philosophical

Identifying and critically engaging with dominant mental models - the beliefs, values, assumptions, etc. that are central to our actions and practices, both intentionally or unintentionally. In this sphere, activities may focus on seeing and understanding the systemic roots of homelessness. There is emphasis on both the inner work needed to address biases or deeply held beliefs/assumptions, as well as public discourse that holds homelessness in place in our communities.

SYSTEMS PLANNING, IMPLEMENTATION & EVALUATION

Main area of activity and change: Organizational; Community-Level

The process of taking stock of the current state of relationships, roles, functions and responsibilities and working across systems and sectors to design and coordinate toward a better desired future state. Assessing the equitable distribution of power is a critical component of this sphere of work to ensure redistribution is intentional.

SYSTEMS CHANGE & ACCOUNTABILITY

Main area of activity and change: Systemic; Decision-/Policy-Makers; Funders

Changing the ways systems relate to one another and the people they are intended to serve through cross-systems solidarity, power and resource redistribution, and shared accountability to support the wholistic well-being (including and beyond housing status) of individuals, families and communities.

SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION TOWARD SYSTEMS JUSTICE

Main area of activity and change: Structural/Societal

Communities and governments are working in solidarity across systems to implement and sustain wholistic, rights-based, prevention approaches to addressing homelessness and related challenges.

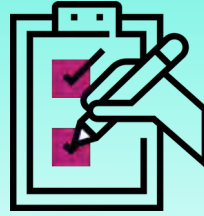
This framework acts as a container for the ideas, questions, and tensions raised in Community of Practice calls, interviews and the SPC's broader collective work. [FSG's The Water of Systems Change \(2018\)](#) offered up a useful entrypoint into discussing the current state of systems approaches to preventing and ending homelessness in Canada, which articulates well within the model. The conditions (see box below) are featured within this report, each coming into greater focus within the various spheres of systems transformation work. We explore each of the spheres in turn, discussing their relevance to preventing and ending homelessness, and identifying critical questions that we plan to address through the SPC's collaborative work.



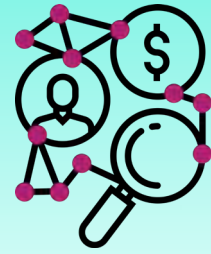
According to Kania, Kramer and Senge (2018), the Six Conditions of Systems Change⁹ are defined as:



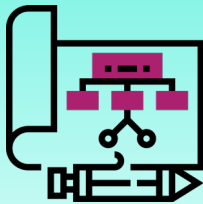
POLICIES: Government, institutional and organizational rules, regulations, and priorities that guide the entity's own and others' actions.



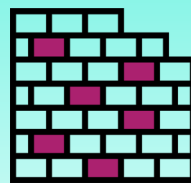
PRACTICES: Espoused activities of institutions, coalitions, networks, and other entities targeted to improving social and environmental progress. Also, within the entity, the procedures, guidelines, or informal shared habits that comprise their work..



RESOURCE FLOWS: How money, people, knowledge, information, and other assets such as infrastructure are allocated and distributed.



RELATIONSHIPS & CONNECTIONS: Quality of connections and communication occurring among actors in the system, especially among those with differing histories and viewpoints.



POWER DYNAMICS: The distribution of decision-making power, authority, and both formal and informal influence among individuals and organizations.



MENTAL MODELS: Habits of thought—deeply held beliefs and assumptions and taken-for-granted ways of operating that influence how we think, what we do, and how we talk.” (p. 4)

⁹ Kania, J., Kramer, M., & Senge, P. (2018). The Water of Systems Change. FSG. https://www.fsg.org/publications/water_of_systems_change

THE STATE OF SYSTEMS

APPROACHES TO PREVENTING AND ENDING HOMELESSNESS

1. SYSTEMS THINKING & AWARENESS

Identifying and critically engaging with dominant mental models - the beliefs, values, assumptions, etc. that are central to our actions and practices, both intentionally or unintentionally. In this sphere, activities may focus on seeing and understanding the systemic roots of homelessness. There is emphasis on both the inner work needed to address biases or deeply held beliefs/assumptions, as well as public discourse that holds homelessness in place in our communities.

Overview: Systems Thinking & Awareness

CHALLENGES/TENSIONS

- Persistent negative public perception and lack of understanding of homelessness - need to shift narratives on what homelessness is and, therefore, how to approach it
- Government and funders often looking for one-size-fits-all or simple solutions, but lack of engagement with complexity limits our ability to create changes needed
- Narrow view of homelessness as a mere lack of housing limits the scope of systems that should be involved in the solutions

OPPORTUNITIES

- Centring Lived Experience in our work and decision-making pushes us toward talking about systems narratives and prevention
- Prime conditions within the conversations about the right to housing, equity, [Indigenous Definition of Homelessness](#), [Land Back](#), [National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls](#), the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#), to shift thinking on rights-based approaches to homelessness
- Prevention focus can get us out of crisis mindset and merely managing the problem to think long-term and strategically together



Questions to Explore Together

Q1: How do we help people make the connections between overarching systemic and structural forces and their direct impacts on individuals and communities to create compelling narratives for change?

Q2: How do we help people engage with complexity and see themselves in a transformative justice-oriented vision for the future, from community members, to frontline workers, to community organizers, to funders and policymakers?

Q3: How do we hold space for engaging in challenging, vulnerable conversations within and across our communities to critically examine and fundamentally shift the mental models that inform and shape our thinking and actions to address homelessness?



73% of our homeless population is Indigenous. The whole concept of home and homelessness is so much deeper than being without shelter. It's displacement from land, displacement from family and culture, all of those things. In many ways, this stereotypical idea of what it is to be homeless [...] I think Indigenous people don't always identify themselves as being homeless. - CoP Member



KEY CONDITION FOR CHANGE AT PLAY: MENTAL MODELS

The mental models that underlie and directly/indirectly inform the practices and policies we create to address homelessness manifest at the individual, organizational, community and government levels with varying effects. Some of the mental models that emerged in conversations with community members included:

Individual Blame: Despite greater understanding of the complex interplay of systemic, structural and individual/interpersonal factors that cause and shape the conditions of people's experiences of homelessness, there continue to be attitudes, myths, and worldviews that shape and limit our approach to homelessness.

Paternalism: Paternalistic worldviews, attitudes and relationships, in which some groups assert power and control over others, manifest in many ways in the work to address homelessness and social challenges more broadly. Paternalism can shape who is included/excluded in LivEx engagement and the ways in which LivEx are involved in decision-making processes. It also shows up in the complex administrative barriers/burdens funders place on community organizations and initiatives (particularly Indigenous-led) who are coordinating the work to address homelessness locally and/or delivering programs and services. Paternalism is deeply rooted in colonialism and limits Indigenous self-determination and decision-making. Community of Practice members also identified that provincial orders of government assert paternalistic control over municipal government decisions around housing and homelessness. Ultimately, a lack of trust, choice, and self-determination at all levels impacts the ways in which we work together to address homelessness.



Resource Scarcity: Perceptions of resources as limited and scarce result in laborious tasks required of people and organizations seeking to gather and coordinate funding to address homelessness. Limited, short-term funding and government/funder mandates often drive models of service delivery that operate on the basis of eligibility and prioritization, rather than person-centred care that upholds individual rights.

Sense of Urgency: Homelessness is an urgent and important issue, yet this sense of urgency can oftentimes keep communities locked in the status quo of managing the crisis and pushing for more of what already exists. Action or change tends to be driven by crisis/emergency, and is rarely lasting or transformative. For example, the COVID-19 crisis has driven many communities to act quickly to boost or reconfigure their temporary emergency response, but the urgency has generally focused on the need to comply with public health guidelines and has not resulted in systems change to move away from congregate emergency shelters and temporary fixes. There is a need to temper urgency with creating room for coming together, building relationships and trust, and identifying the direction communities want to head together.

Reductive, Binary Thinking: The tendency to view homelessness as solely an issue of housing is not person-centred and can lead to metrics or indicators for success that do not account for wholistic individual and community well-being. As noted by CoP members, funders and governments may only ask for “stories for money”, demanding compelling narratives that demonstrate the life-changing impacts of small pots of funding or short-term interventions, without a desire to understand the long-term holistic effects of policies or programs, nor the individuals' strengths and resourcefulness that led to success. Communities want to break free from binary, simplistic measures of success (e.g., “housed” vs. “not housed”) and move toward person-centered goals and outcomes.

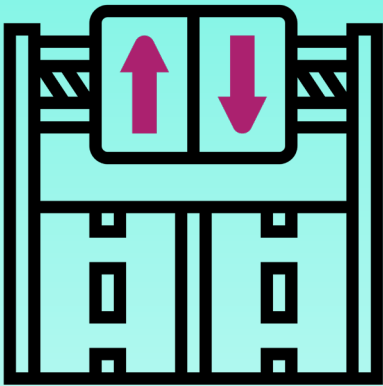
Fear of Change: Uncertainty about what a future focused on equity and homelessness prevention will mean for people working within existing systems and approaches who may need to change or give up power can cause people to cling to what they know. It can also lead to a disconnect between the verbal support for systems change and transformation and the actions needed to realize that change. It is incredibly important to help people see themselves in the change and desired future state, particularly when identities and livelihoods are caught up in their work and roles as they exist within the status quo.

Desire for Quick, Easy Solutions: It was noted that governments and funders still tend to want rapid results and quick wins that fit neatly within their mandate or term in office. It is difficult to fund and keep momentum on long-term strategies and approaches that engage with the actual complexity of homelessness and create lasting positive change power dynamics and mental models. Community initiatives take time to build relationships with and educate government officials, bureaucrats and funders about the causes, conditions and solutions to homelessness to create buy-in. At the same time, they find themselves having to regularly adapt and change, or in some cases start over with new governments, leadership, mandates or funding priorities, which can slow or disrupt the momentum for systems transformation.

Misaligned Values and Goals: There is not always alignment across community organizations within the homeless-serving sector, let alone within/across various orders of government and governmental agencies. Organizations that are rooted in self-perpetuating charitable models and are not connected to or are unsupportive of broader community initiatives to drive systems change and transformation can fragment and create tensions in communities. This is perhaps because the values and goals that drive/motivate different organizations and initiatives are not aligned, or perhaps are not commonly understood to find ways to collaborate and work across differences.



Conflict/Criticism Avoidance: It was noted by the CoP that people tend to shy away from addressing conflict and asking difficult questions head-on, and there is a need to reframe conflict as having the potential to be transformative. Working across differences, having honest and vulnerable conversations, and having humility when we fail is essential to systems change and transformation work that leads to healing. There is also a need for space for individual reflection and time to process being confronted with having done something wrong or even harmful.



“

I think we shy away from that (conflict). It's one of those mental models. If we see conflict as something to avoid, rather than something that can be transformative. We have to pass through those points of conflict in order to come into a new reality. - CoP Member

”

A Different Outlook within the Community of Practice: It is important to note that many within the homeless-serving sector and community members and leaders with and without lived/living experience view homelessness differently. Rather than an intractable issue of individuals that needs to be managed, the Community of Practice members view homelessness as systemic, but solvable. There is tremendous opportunity to create solidarity within and outside of the homeless-serving sector, building on some of the positive, “life-giving” mental models that are taking root within communities, which we expand on in the Systems Transformation toward Systems Justice section.

2. SYSTEMS PLANNING, IMPLEMENTATION & EVALUATION

The process of taking stock of the current state of relationships, roles, functions and responsibilities and working across systems and sectors to design and coordinate toward a better desired future state. Assessing the distribution of power is a critical component of this sphere of work to ensure redistribution is intentional.



Overview: Systems Planning, Implementation & Evaluation

CHALLENGES/TENSIONS

- One-sided or transactional relationships that tend to be formed out of urgency and necessity, not authentic collaboration
- Tendencies to work with who you know to quickly respond to funding opportunities - does not create space for creating new important relationships
- Variability in who leads the work to coordinate on homelessness in communities, and sometimes lacking clear leadership
- Difficulty sustaining momentum for change
- LivEx, BIPOC, 2SLGBTQIA+ generally not at the centre of decision-making or power
- Data collection and prioritization tools are being used that are not equitable
- Inconsistent understanding of practices like harm reduction, Housing First, etc.
- Tools/resources can be urban-centric and not reflective of small urban centres and rural/remote communities

OPPORTUNITIES

- COVID-19 has driven new/greater cross-systems collaboration in some communities
- Partnership and leveraging collective power can help remove systemic barriers at the local level
- Assessing power dynamics and relationships in communities from the start to identify imbalances/inequities can help communities create plans to redistribute power, heal relationships, and move forward equitably in right relationship with each other
- Getting better understanding of the links between data, equity and rights
- More knowledge exchange through opportunities such as the communities of practice can alert decision-makers to trends and spread and deepen understanding of promising/best practices and approaches to homelessness that are reflective of and adaptable to community contexts

Questions to Explore Together

Q1: How do we move from transactional and reactionary relationships to reciprocal, trusting and authentic relationships?

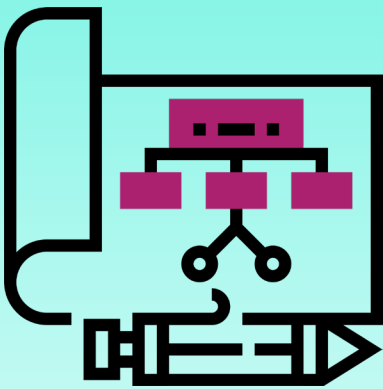
Q2: Who leads this cross-systems work to prevent and end homelessness and with what authority?

Q3: What redistribution of power is needed and what might this look like in practice, particularly from a decolonized perspective?

Q4: What does cross-systems solidarity for rights-based prevention approaches look like in practice, and what are the distinctions between coordination and integration?



- Q5:** What does it look like to involve LivEx throughout the decision-making process with proper compensation and without tokenism?
- Q6:** How can community planning, campaigning and grassroots advocacy approaches work together to advance equity and systems justice?
- Q7:** How do communities move from planning to the successful implementation of their plans?
- Q8:** How do communities take stock of and record what has been learned locally and in other contexts to allow for knowledge exchange and improvement?
- Q9:** What is a rights-based approach to data that creates positive impact and influences decision-making?
- Q10:** What does Indigenous data sovereignty and decolonizing data look like in the context of community planning to prevent and end homelessness?
- Q11:** What can support greater understanding of and fidelity to programs and practices that are evidence-based, while creating space for important contextual adaptations?



KEY CONDITION FOR CHANGE AT PLAY: RELATIONSHIPS & CONNECTIONS



My approach is to build up a relationship so I can call you out on stuff, not in a spirit-taking way, but to call you out to be brave and look at the world in a different way, to work on it. It is about relationships, if you're not in good relationships with someone and you call them out, they can walk away, they have no stake in it. It is harder to walk away once that relationship has been made. - CoP Member



Relationships and trust (or lack thereof) are a key factor in advancing or holding back the work of systems transformation. The quality and strength of relationships within and across systems are highly context-dependent - not everyone is starting in the same place or experiencing the same challenges. The following are some of the insights around various relationships and connections that are influential in communities' work to address homelessness.

People with Lived/Living Experience or Expertise (LivEx): LivEx representation and inclusion in decision-making is not consistent across communities. Some communities have advisory councils made up of LivEx, while others continue to struggle to find meaningful ways to engage LivEx. CoP members expressed interest in more support and knowledge exchange about best practices for LivEx.



Indigenous Community Members, Leaders and Governments: Relationships with Indigenous peoples and communities are often strained by colonial governments' historic and ongoing broken trust and intergenerational trauma. The work at the community level to build trusting, relationships that are founded on respect, equality and reciprocity takes time, which is often limited through short budget cycles and funding timelines from governments and funders. CoP Members want to be better allies to Indigenous-led systems transformation, and not absolve themselves of responsibility to provide support and exchange knowledge.

Within the Homeless-Serving Sector: Much attention has been placed on improving the coordination and connectivity between organizations within the homeless-serving sector. Coordinated Access Systems and accompanying By-Name Prioritization Lists are seeing wider uptake thanks to the efforts of Built for Zero Canada and the federal Reaching Home program. Even still, some communities in the CoP noted struggles to bring everyone in the sector on board with rights-based, housing-oriented approaches, such as Housing First and its adaptations.

Between Sectors: The relationship between the homeless-serving sector and other sectors such as domestic violence, was noted to be dependent on who was invited to the table. Surprisingly, not all communities' homeless-serving sectors have strong or real-time relationships with housing providers, or the domestic violence sector. The private and philanthropic sectors can also be assets to communities' efforts. Landlords, developers, business owners, are often dependent on community organizations or initiatives fostering intentional relationships.

Grassroots Advocates: Not all efforts to address homelessness in a community fall neatly under one umbrella. Grassroots advocacy and mutual aid responses often emerge in response to local or provincial/territorial policy changes that have noticeable impacts on communities. For example, COVID-19's impact on emergency shelter capacity and fears of virus transmission in shelters have led to the growth of encampments, particularly in city centres, which gave rise to grassroots advocacy and mutual aid groups. These groups' efforts are seen as well-meaning and adversarial, though there is interest in how these grassroots efforts can support the widespread implementation of the right to housing.

Public Systems: Some communities have formed good working relationships with local public systems (e.g., health, corrections/justice, education, child protection, etc.), though the quality of these relationships varies and is often dependent on the advocacy and relationship-building done by community members and organizations, which tends not to be compensated. Community of Practice members noted that often they feel like they are picking up the people that are falling through the cracks of public systems, which is unnecessary and frustrating.

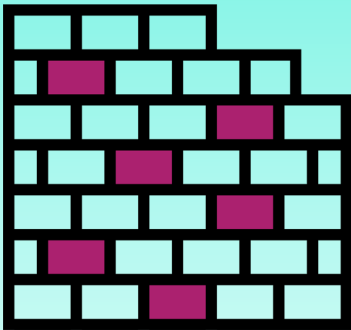
Municipal Governments: Some municipal governments are strongly connected to their local approach to preventing and ending homelessness, providing staff support and funding, and developing community housing and/or homelessness plans in many cases. There can be tensions between the role of the municipality as a funder and the influence on community priorities for addressing homelessness. Risk aversion and lack of political will in some municipalities is a limitation on transformational change, however each community context is unique. Some CoP members that work within municipal governments have been able to drive forward progress on collaborative, person-centred approaches.



Provincial & Territorial Governments: The CoP discussed disconnects between what governments say they support and what happens at the community level. There may be stated support for local approaches to addressing homelessness, but people engaging in this cross-systems work feel that they are left to liaise across misaligned policy mandates, election cycles, and siloed government departments/ministries. It was also noted that strained provincial/territorial relationships with Indigenous governments and community members hinder the ability of community initiatives to build trust and relationships with Indigenous groups.

Federal Government: A number of communities represented on the CoP receive federal Reaching Home funding and support, though not all. The relationship with the federal government is generally managed through the Community Entity and Community Advisory Board who are responsible for setting local priorities for and administering the federal funds. Even within communities that receive Reaching Home funding, the influence of the federal strategy is variable depending on the community and province/territory, with some, such as Alberta and Quebec, more resistant to federal mandates/agenda-setting.

General Public: There are varying degrees of awareness, understanding and support for local initiatives addressing homelessness. Despite charitable attitudes and volunteerism to address the immediate material needs of people experiencing homelessness, there is still a tendency toward NIMBYism (Not In My Backyard). Objection to affordable housing developments, safe injection/consumption sites, and other essential services in central community locations, perpetuate social exclusion and marginalization. Stronger communication and public awareness of the impacts of local initiatives to prevent and end homelessness are needed to dispel harmful myths and biases.



KEY CONDITION FOR CHANGE AT PLAY: POWER DYNAMICS

Each person or group has power that shifts in relation to their position, context or situation. Power and authority can be formally or informally conferred to specific groups/people to make decisions, set priorities, and play leadership roles. It is important to understand the power dynamics at play within a community and how they can facilitate or create barriers to pursuing systems justice. In this section we identify how some of these power dynamics may influence the work of preventing and ending homelessness at the local level.

Systems Leadership & Decision-Making: Communities take different approaches to systems leadership, such as variations of working groups/committees/tables of organizations working together, Collective Impact coalitions with one organization acting as the “backbone support” to facilitate, align and convene work, or municipally led initiatives supported by paid staff focused on coordinating collaborative work. CoP members shared that systems leadership initiatives are delegated varying amounts of decision-making power, typically from municipal governments, and a lack of clarity about the boundaries and permanency or long-term sustainability of their work.



Role of Funders and Boards: Within community organizations and local homelessness initiatives, funders and not-for-profit/charitable boards are influential players in either limiting or creating room for innovation and transformational change. Funders often set the terms and priorities that community initiatives must fit within in order to receive support, but may not always have the information they need nor the multi-year funding models to support innovation and systems change. When livelihoods and funding are tied up in existing models and approaches (e.g., number of people staying in shelters determines funding received), there can be resistance from organizational governance to shifting the status quo. Often, there is no integrated strategy between government and non-government funding bodies, which can result in investments that fail to lead to positive, sustained outcomes and impact.

Federal Community Advisory Boards & Community Entities: The dynamics in communities between homelessness initiatives and federally-mandated Regional/Community Advisory Boards (CABs) and Community Entities (CEs) - which set the local priorities for and oversee the distribution of federal funding - are vastly different depending on the community. The federal homelessness strategy, Reaching Home, includes directives that the CABs ought to be inclusive and representative of the community's homeless population groups. While some communities' CABs are open to innovation and forward-looking, some CoP members expressed that their local CABs were made up of individuals who are heavily invested in the status quo or who will not push for systemic change. In some communities the CE may be viewed as a funding gatekeeper creating a challenging dynamic for collaboration. It will be worth exploring whether and how CABs and CEs might support and facilitate systems change and transformation.

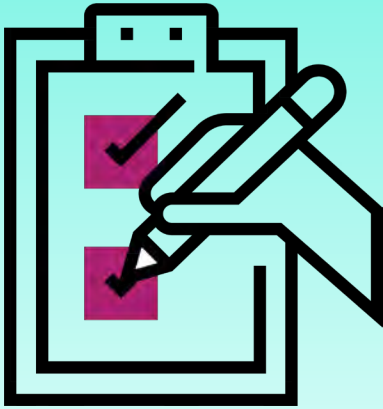
Redistribution of Power: The CoP members returned to the discussion of redistributing power a number of times in our convenings. This has implications for their own work, with high likelihood of them having to give up power themselves, yet there was expressed commitment that these are necessary shifts in power to LivEx, BIPOC and other people that have been historically disempowered and systematically excluded from decision-making.



“The fact is everyone needs to give up something”

-CoP Member





KEY CONDITION FOR CHANGE AT PLAY: PRACTICES

Practices encompass the range of individual or collective activities that are aimed at addressing homelessness and the tools, resources, guidelines and processes used to carry out these activities. We look at some of the common community-level practices or areas of practice that emerged in discussion with the Community of Practice:

Planning, Campaigning & Grassroots Advocacy: Beyond individual organizations that provide homelessness programs and services, CoP members made distinctions between collaborative initiatives/strategies to address homelessness, which seem to fall into three categories: Community or Systems Planning, Campaigning, and Grassroots Advocacy. The CoP discussed the merits of planning and campaigning, with planning having the potential for longer-term strategic vision or framework and campaigning approaches (such as those supported through Built for Zero Canada), creating momentum around specific, time-limited goals. As mentioned, grassroots advocacy tends to emerge in response to significant crises or emergencies, though these efforts are not always connected to the broader initiatives to address homelessness. We do not yet know how planning, campaigning and grassroots advocacy best work together to advance equity and systems justice.

Moving from Planning to Implementation: Many communities have local plans to address homelessness, usually hiring outside consultants with varying amounts of content expertise to do the work. There is little guidance about what contributes to creating a plan to end homelessness that will lead to lasting positive impact and change. Some plans are aspirational and do not set goals or targets, while others are well-defined, but the relationships and political will within the community is not there to carry the work forward. Too often the creation of the plan becomes an end within itself, and the resources and knowledge needed to move into implementation do not always materialize. Once plans are launched, communities can struggle to sustain the momentum needed to do the actual long-term work of implementation.

Adapting Approaches, Tools and Resources to Local & Specific Contexts: CoP members noted the importance of ensuring our tools and resources resonate with communities outside of urban centres. Rural, remote, and fly-in communities, as well as Indigenous communities that are in close proximity to urban centres are often an afterthought or footnote in the content and resources that are developed, which fails to acknowledge the strengths and potential within these communities. At the same time, content that resonates with diverse Indigenous communities should avoid being pan-Indigenous, creating space for local and specific knowledge.



Data Infrastructure: Data infrastructure includes the type of data collected, the methods and tools used to collect the data, the individual/group practices of collecting data, and the use of data once collected. Data infrastructure varies significantly by province and territory, community, and even at the agency level. Harnessing the potential of quality data is a promising area of research and development, and the homeless-serving sector and various orders of government alike are becoming more data-literate. Piqued interest in better tools and use of data have created space for important questions and conversations about the kind of data we actually need to collect and how it will be used, equitability of data collection tools/practices, data governance/sovereignty (especially for Indigenous Peoples), and data-sharing.



INFORMATION SYSTEMS AS ENABLING INFRASTRUCTURE

Access to and use of information systems including Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems or Homeless Information Management Systems (HMIS) varies by community and is largely dependent upon the funding structure in place within the community/sector. The Reaching Home mandate to use [HIFIS 4](#) could level the playing field from which communities collect, use and share

rich information, especially if HIFIS is able to provide person-centred technology solutions which other sectors are implementing, such as app-based and digital journey solutions found within the newcomer and settlement sector.^{10 11}

¹⁰ CanSettle <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=ca.infinity88.cansettle>

¹¹ K2 - Pathway to Settlement System <https://finleyandassociates.com/client-spotlight-alberta-chicken-producers/>

Assessment and Prioritization Practices: Communities use assessment tools to identify the service needs, and ideally the strengths/assets, of people experiencing or at-risk of homelessness to identify which programs/services might be the best fit. These assessments are supposed to be shared across the homeless-serving system and be person-centred to facilitate access to service, rather than create barriers. However, in communities where resources are spread thin, many people are in crisis, and/or affordable housing options are limited, attempts are made at identifying who has the greatest need or faces the greatest risk and should be prioritized for service. The result is the creation of priority lists, which in some communities can function as additional waitlists when housing options are insufficient. The tools used for assessment factor into prioritization to varying degrees, though recent research on assessment tools and their use in prioritization have drawn attention to racialized and gendered inequity in outcomes.¹²

¹² Cronley, C. (2020). Invisible intersectionality in measuring vulnerability among individuals experiencing homelessness - critically appraising VI-SPDAT. *Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness*. DOI: 10.1080/10530789.2020.1852502

Service Coordination: Coordinated Access is an approach supported by the federal government that is widely adopted by communities across Canada as an approach to improve how people connect with services and supports. Reaching Home has provided communities with [guidelines for developing their local Coordinated Access System](#), which presents a vision for a system that should be streamlined and person-centred. In practice, service coordination ranges from formalized tables that bring key players together to review cases with data sharing agreements, to less formal interaction between community organizations (particularly in smaller communities where the number of services is limited). There is ongoing discussion to understand what structure and practices work best for whom and in what contexts.^{13 14} For example, what works for some adults experiencing homelessness, like a single entrypoint, is not always effective for young people, women, 2SLGBTQIA+, or Indigenous Peoples.

Gaps in Service Delivery for Prevention and Sustained Exits: CoP members shared that their communities still see a gap in prevention and sustained exit services and supports for people living on the edges of homelessness. There tends to be a focus on visible homelessness and people that are accessing the homeless-serving sector. A lack of understanding about the extent of hidden homelessness or how to connect with people that have not entered the system, results in a very limited continuum of housing and supports for people at-risk of or experiencing homelessness. The youth-serving sector is seeing tremendous innovation and strides in understanding prevention and sustained exits with national leadership from A Way Home Canada, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, and [Making the Shift Youth Homelessness Social Innovation Lab](#).

Outcomes Measurement & Evaluation: Housing status is often used as the primary indicator for success in the homeless-serving system which, on its own, does not capture the holistic and longitudinal impact of interventions/approaches. CoP members identified that homelessness is more than a loss of physical housing, and Indigenous conceptualizations of homelessness include disconnection from land, culture, and community.¹⁵ Research and practice innovation on youth homelessness has identified the importance of designing and implementing programs to impact a range of individual outcomes areas including access to education and income, housing supports, health and well-being, community integration and social inclusion, and other complementary supports. Community-level outcomes, such as reductions in interactions with emergency services (such as hospitalization, emergency shelters, and police custody/jail) and connection to services that improve health and well-being, are also important to consider in the evaluation of communities' efforts.

¹³ French, D., Buchnea, A., & Morton, E. (2021). *Youth-focused coordinated access systems: consideration from the field*. Toronto, ON: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press and A Way Home Canada.

¹⁴ Bomberry, V., Maracle, Y., Mayo, S., MacLaurin, T., & Montana McCormack, C.S. (2020). *Revisiting coordinated access: Fostering Indigenous best practices towards a wholistic systems approach to homelessness*. The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton.

¹⁵ Thistle, J. (2017.) *Indigenous Definition of Homelessness in Canada*. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

Fidelity to Key Concepts and Practices: CoP members discussed the concepts and approaches to homelessness that are inconsistently understood and applied across individuals, organizations and governments. The right to housing, harm reduction, Housing First and Housing First for Youth, prevention, affordable housing, the definition of homelessness and a number of other topics are still not commonly understood. Even concepts that have been clearly defined are inconsistently taken up on the ground. Change management work is needed to ensure there is effective communication about these core concepts, principles and approaches among frontline staff, community organizers, and funders. There is also work to be done to understand who is defining these terms and what fidelity looks like.

“*Who’s defining the words? I remember going last year to [community]. A big announcement was being made of affordable housing that was being built. I realized that it was a partnership between private [sector] and government but their definition of affordability is that they did median wage for that area and it was \$100,000 a year. So, their affordability was, “Well, ok if the wage is \$100,000 a year...” - CoP Member*

3. SYSTEMS CHANGE & ACCOUNTABILITY

Changing the ways systems relate to one another and the people they are intended to serve through cross-systems solidarity, power and resource redistribution, and shared accountability to support the wholistic well-being (including and beyond housing status) of individuals, families and communities.



Overview: Systems Change & Accountability

CHALLENGES/TENSIONS

- Colonialism embedded in funding structures, forcing Indigenous organizations to compete for funding, and non-Indigenous groups to set relationship and trust building aside in the scramble to access funds
- Capacity is limited when resources are spread so thin - especially for Indigenous-led work
- No accounting and limited resources for the infrastructure, facilitation and engagement needed to actually do cross-systems work well
- Over-reliance on voluntary contribution within the charitable sector (up to 50% of funding at times) creates instability¹
- Turnover and retention of staff and leadership can derail efforts, but are unable to offer well-paying, permanent positions to keep people on
- Lack of accountability and leadership for systems change within governments with differing election cycles and misaligned or changing mandates
- Education is an important system, but difficult to engage without resources to help them look up from their work - concern about young people returning to school post-COVID
- Government and funders' fear of duplication precludes initiatives that may address systems gaps/failures, but are overlooked because they are within the government's mandate already

OPPORTUNITIES

- Greater federal investment in housing and homelessness with openness to distinct community approaches that build on common tools
- Data can be harnessed to drive social impact approaches instead of further entrenching charitable models
- Child welfare and justice systems are more aware of their relationship with homelessness, which creates openness to accountability and clarifying roles, with examples such as policies and practices for youth exiting care and youth justice diversion showing great promise
- Advocate bureaucrats can make a difference - a lot of emphasis put on elected officials, and the bureaucracy could use more attention
- National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls¹ is connected to the rights-based approach we are talking about, and the Indigenous Definition of Homelessness² can also help disrupt colonial approaches to homelessness
- Having LivEx at the centre of our work can help push us out of our silos

¹⁶ Turner, A., & Escamilla, C. C. (2020). Alberta's Civil Society Pre-and Post-COVID-19: What's Government Got to Do with It?. The School of Public Policy Publications. <https://www.policyschool.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Civil-Society-Turner-Escamilla.pdf>

¹⁷ National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. (2019). Reclaiming power and place. The final report of the national inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women and girls. The National Inquiry. https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Final_Report_Vol_1a-1.pdf

¹⁸ Thistle, J. (2017.) Indigenous Definition of Homelessness in Canada. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

Questions to Explore Together

- Q1:** How do we alleviate the administrative burden put on communities and organizations to pull together and report on federal and philanthropic funding?
- Q2:** What is the real investment (funding, time, personnel, etc.) needed to build authentic relationships?
- Q3:** How can communities assess the equity of resource distribution and work toward redistribution?
- Q4:** How can communities make room for imaginative space, while identifying concrete actions for change and transformation?
- Q5:** How do we ensure governance bodies involve future-oriented innovators, not just people who are invested in the status quo?
- Q6:** How do we onboard other sectors and systems into the work of preventing and ending homelessness?
- Q7:** What does systems accountability look like across systems with different mandates and responsibilities?
- Q8:** How do we pivot to prevention while ensuring people do not fall through the cracks in the transition?
- Q9:** How do we use COVID-19 as an opportunity to make our communities more resilient?
- Q10:** How do colonial structures and systems step out of the way of and/or support Indigenous leadership?

KEY CONDITION FOR CHANGE AT PLAY: RESOURCE FLOWS

Financial, human, informational and material resources can be allocated, distributed and concentrated in ways that do or do not foster systems justice. Communities are challenged by the task of sustaining and maintaining efforts and positive impacts over the long-term as they cobble together and chase after resources. Here we summarize some important tensions that the CoP discussed around the flow of resources within their communities:

Securing Funding Not Conducive to Authentic Relationships: It is no revelation that the non-profit and charitable sector is put in the position of having to compete against one another for funding, causing tension rather than collaboration at times. Additionally, tight timelines and limited capacity or expertise to develop effective funding proposals can result in those better-resourced and experienced at seeking funding to continue to receive funding over others. Indigenous communities and organizations that have fewer resources and land to leverage are particularly at an unjust disadvantage when applying for some funding. The tight turnaround times for funding proposals also rarely leave room for intentionally developing new, authentic partnerships, leading organizations to work with existing relationships, which may only further perpetuate the status quo. Forming new relationships is essential work, especially with BIPOC and LivEx partners, but can often be transactional rather than transformational. The infrastructure, facilitation, and engagement efforts that can lead to greater impact and meaningful collaboration are not well accounted for or funded.

“We’re asked to be collaborative in a competitive world”

-CoP Member



Unsustainable Human and Financial Resources: The ways that organizations and initiatives addressing homelessness and other social challenges are funded does not only negatively impact relationships, but puts the long-term impact and momentum for change in communities at risk. There are few and far between multi-year funding opportunities, so organizations and community initiatives spend significant time and resources pulling together baseline funding. Ensuring that programs are delivered consistently and to a high standard is a constant challenge. CoP members also shared that they had trouble retaining staff and leadership when they are only able to offer entry-level salaries unlike private or public employers. This ongoing state of flux with staffing and funding priorities of governments and private/philanthropic funders are key factors in creating instability in the social impact world. While some organizations are able to navigate changes in staff, leadership and funding well, others can see their efforts suffer or flounder.

Reliance on the Charitable Sector: CoP members spoke to how communities often rely on the charitable sector that is dependent on the good will of wealthy donors to stay afloat. Donors may not always be making informed decisions about where their resources will have the best impact in their communities, and perpetuates the precariousness of the social impact sector. There are also fundamental qualms with relying on charitable approaches that at best temporarily alleviate the symptoms of homelessness and poverty, but may not drive systemic/structural change. There is now real potential for harnessing data to drive social impact approaches instead of further entrenching charitable models.

Lack of Funding Transparency/Communication: There is not always a shared understanding of where funding is going within a community and from which funders, which poses a challenge for coordination and resource distribution. CoP members spoke of funding allocations from funders and different orders of government or bypassing local collective conversations about community priorities and needs, resulting in further disconnected efforts.

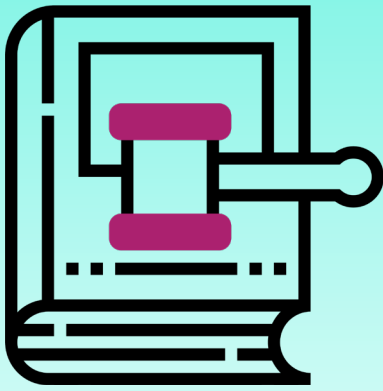


...we found out some staggering numbers of investments in (community) but they are actually going to the private sector for things that are private sector interest that we weren't even aware of as the regional government ... resources are flowing to private sector and by-passing these conversations that we're having in our community...which maybe wouldn't be such an issue if the private sector was at the table. - CoP Member



Inequitable Distribution of Resources: Data infrastructure to show where/to whom funds are going within a community is generally inconsistent, however social impact audits can reveal disparities and inequities in the distribution of financial resources across a community. For example, if the majority of the population of people experiencing homelessness in a community is Indigenous, it is important to know whether the funding distribution reflects this reality by directing funds toward Indigenous organizations and initiatives. More than financial resources, knowledge and human resources are not always equitably distributed or accessible, which can contribute to an over-reliance on or deference to better-resourced groups. CoP members discussed how the redistribution of resources needs to be intentional. When disparities are uncovered, collaboration is needed to create a plan to redistribute resources rather than offloading responsibilities without support and overburdening already stretched groups.





KEY CONDITION FOR CHANGE AT PLAY: POLICIES



The state is creating homelessness, [...] so policy has to do something. If our youth protection services and foster care systems are creating homelessness, then those systems need to be changed. [...] If you're leaving detention centres, and you don't have a place to go, there's no direct route to a home. [...] Even the exit from a detention centre needs to think about homelessness. Women in [domestic] violence shelters - when they leave, what happens? Some of the women that we're seeing now in the hotels are women who left shelters who had no place to go. We're booting people without an exit strategy. - CoP Member



There are a range of rules, regulations, and priorities that inform and influence the work to prevent and end homelessness at the community level. Each order of government, public system and institution directly and indirectly contributes to the causes and potential solutions of homelessness, yet their roles, responsibilities and accountability mechanisms are not always well-defined. The following are some of the themes around policy that emerged:

Lack of Systems Accountability: Communities have and continue to organize themselves to better provide services and supports to people experiencing homelessness, yet they are often in a position of cleaning up after systems that are exiting people into homelessness. A CoP member noted that even when policy changes are made that are meant to address harms caused by public systems or institutions, the accountability is placed on frontline workers without further resourcing or support. When these policy changes fail to create positive outcomes, the blame can too easily be placed on the people on the frontline. Until there is systems accountability at all levels within and across government and until we “turn off the taps” of people entering into homelessness, communities will continue to be stuck in crisis management and we will not achieve systems justice.



And I also think, government and leaders, what gives them a sigh of relief that the work is being done, so they can be less risk averse. That there are no holes in the net, that we trust each other as allies, and will hold each other accountable. - CoP Member



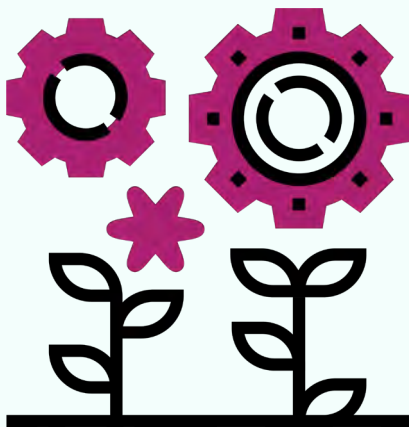
Colonial Approaches to Problem Definition & Goal-Setting: Efforts to define the challenges and set goals for addressing homelessness are well-intentioned, though CoP members cautioned that colonialism can be perpetuated when the issues and goals are predetermined without the centring of Indigenous voices. This can lead to communities feeling “stuck” when it comes to engaging with Indigenous partners, especially if relationships and trust were not attended to in advance of engagement on specific problems/solutions/



targets. We now have more frameworks, resources and information (e.g., [National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls](#), the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#),¹⁹ the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#), and the [Definition of Indigenous Homelessness](#)) that can help disrupt colonial approaches and hold us accountable to working in nation-to-nation ways between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples.

Silos and Disconnection Between Policy & Practice: There was a noted disconnect between the ideals put out at the highest levels within government and what plays out at the community level. For example, government support of data-driven approaches to homelessness like Coordinated Access Systems does not necessarily translate to smooth and successful uptake in the community. This is further exacerbated by silos within and between governments and the service delivery network. CoP members commented on the power of centring lived/living experience voices to help us see beyond silos. Additionally, it was noted that it is important to be building relationships with bureaucrats that are interested in addressing homelessness and can help make connections and get information to who needs it in decision-making positions.

Systems Change not Top-Down: Systems change starts in communities and should be lifted up to systems leaders, funders and governments. However, communities have experienced “political gatekeeping” from higher orders of government whose mandates and funding change and limit the flexibility of communities to respond and drive systems change in their own contexts. People in leadership and decision-making positions need to work with people on the ground to be “path-clearers”, rather than throwing up additional barriers to change.



“Real systems change happens way closer to the ground... It’s helping that good work happening on the ground and the issues that are surfacing...how does the province’s role become path clearing?”

-Key Informant Participant

¹⁹ Note that the implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) through Bill C-15 is not universally supported by all First Nations, Metis and Inuit leadership, due to a lack of nation-to-nation collaboration and concerns about the interpretation of the declaration by the state.



4. SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION TOWARD SYSTEMS JUSTICE

Communities and governments are working in solidarity across systems to take rights-based, prevention approaches to addressing homelessness and related challenges.



...there's an element of tenacity and grit and those things that are often framed negatively by people who aren't with you in the systems change work. And your tenacity and grit and perseverance becomes a thorn in other people's sides. There's an opportunity to frame those as positive characteristics. It takes a lot of tenacity and integrity to persevere through.. hold the space around conflict, or what is perceived as conflict, or hard conversations that need to happen. There has to be a collective acknowledgement that there is willingness or openness to having the hard conversations that get us from a to z. It's not a seamless ride from a to z. It's going to be a bit bumpy and that's ok...When we get out of the way of our unsuspecting champions, or welcome new faces to the table, ... that's when the solutions pop up. - CoP Member



There are a number of positive developments that can be built upon as we look ahead to systems transformation and systems justice:

Evidence-Informed Practice, Innovation & Continuous Learning: Communities have made great strides in understanding how to evaluate the impact of their work to be able to inform the design and implementation of homeless-serving systems, programs, and services. Bridging research, data, and design approaches have contributed to creating a more accurate picture of the local state of homelessness. This also includes valuing different forms of evidence, particularly LivEx stories and voices. There is a general willingness to adapt, change, innovate and move beyond the status quo, that has only been furthered and strengthened through initiatives, such as the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness Built for Zero Canada. The evidence base for various interventions and approaches continues to grow as communities test out new ways of connecting people to supports and learn from their experiences, successes and mistakes.

Rights-Based, Person-Centred Approaches & Well-Being Orientation: There is broader uptake and awareness of rights-based, person-centred approaches to preventing and ending homelessness. Additionally, communities are seeking more holistic approaches to addressing homelessness and related issues through an individual and community well-being orientation. This shift in thinking and approaches can be credited to LivEx folks that have disrupted simplistic, paternalistic and colonial understandings of homelessness and the ways forward.





I would think individual well-being, that wholistic framework I think is gaining traction. A lot of people are talking about it. The ecological model, from the public health side of things. I think there's greater awareness of the complexity, to act simultaneously, in many spheres. And the whole notion of wellness or wellbeing is both superficial and substantive is communities, depending which conversations you are having. Rights based approaches seem to have promise...lots of movements (Black Lives Matter, Land Back) are moving us towards a different consciousness. - CoP Member



Openness to Difficult Conversations & Engaging with Complexity: As expressed and supported by the CoP, the folks working for systems change to prevent and end homelessness demonstrate an incredible amount of “tenacity and grit”. Similarly, over time there has been a notable shift within and outside of the homeless-serving sector to not only be aware of, but engage with the complexity of homelessness. Vulnerability and humility to navigate change within ourselves, organizations, communities and systems takes sustained energy and commitment, which we believe exists in every community, though may need to be drawn out further.

Desire for Authentic Collaboration and Partnership: Building and tending to relationships is at the heart of systems transformation work, and we have been inspired by the creative ways people and initiatives have formed partnerships to better serve their communities. While working across different systems and ways of thinking/doing can be daunting and challenging, the impact and quality of the work is strengthened and communities can move further, faster.

Communities' visions for systems transformation are still unfolding as we engage in conversations and connect with others working in the space. There is no clear or set path for moving forward, which requires an openness to emergence and changes in perspective along the way - including within what is presented in this Preliminary Report. The following themes give some early indications of what Systems Transformation may mean or look like at a conceptual level, which we will continue to explore in greater depth moving forward with the Community of Practice and related SPC work.

Imaginative Space to Drive Systems Transformation: Many CoP members and their communities are in a holding pattern of managing day-to-day crises, particularly during COVID-19. A constant thread in the CoP calls and conversations with individual members has been the need for an “imaginative space” where they can see glimpses of what could be and take action building on what currently exists. The opportunity to connect with others working in similar roles, have challenging conversations, exchange knowledge, and learn from each others' experiences is invaluable for making connections between the sometimes abstract or distant vision for the future and concrete actions that can drive systems change and transformation.

Person-Centred Continuum of Care: Community of practice members recognize the need to deliver an adaptable, flexible and responsive continuum of supports to meet people where they are at on their journey and to keep them in place in their community of choice. This involves a turn away from deficit orientations to looking at strengths, and seeking to make homelessness rare, brief and non-recurring, while not pushing people out of programs and supports too soon. This also necessitates LivEx voice and participation in the design, decision-making and implementation of plans and approaches to address homelessness.





“When we’ve taken the time to have the discussions with people - rather than asking all the time about barriers, what about asking what’s really working. Let’s talk about what’s really working, because maybe we should build on those, or have an impact on barriers through those.” - CoP Member



Solidarity for Systems Justice: Moving toward systems justice involves moving away from programmatic approaches and a focus on systems pathways to wholistic well-being. Communities require trust and shared accountability to move the work forward in solidarity with systems, funders and governments. This means there needs to be greater accountability for the roles each system and the individuals within them play in preventing and ending homelessness.

Healing within the Transformation Journey:

There is healing potential at the individual, inter-personal and systems levels within the journey toward systems transformation. Work is needed across all conditions for systems change and in all spheres of systems transformation, including examining our mental models and practices, focusing on building trust, creating mechanisms for shared accountability and intentionally redistributing power and resources.

“We’re still healing from an abuser that told us we’re incapable”

-CoP Member on Indigenous-led work to end homelessness

Driving Key Structural Changes: It is impossible to untangle homelessness from broader structural issues such as poverty, housing affordability, and systemic racism. Therefore, it is anticipated that broader structural change conversations and actions will happen alongside and be mutually reinforced by systems transformation efforts to prevent and end homelessness. For example, basic income came up numerous times within the CoP, particularly given the impact of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit during COVID-19. Similarly, various allied efforts to dismantle white supremacy and colonialism are needed simultaneously to ensure that systems transformation truly leads to equitable systems justice. There should not be disparities and inequities between people of different races, abilities, gender identities, sexual orientations, or any other vectors of identity.

Questions to Explore Together

Q1: What is our vision for systems justice and what is the transformation that needs to happen to realize that vision?

Q2: Where are we seeing examples of our vision for the future being enacted on the ground now?

Q3: How do we bring everyone together around a common vision for systems transformation and justice that creates space for diverse local approaches and innovation while driving community well-being for all?



CONCLUSION - WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

KEY TAKEAWAYS: STATE OF SYSTEMS APPROACHES PRELIMINARY REPORT

THE CHALLENGE:

- Cross-systems work to transform responses to homelessness to be rights-based, prevention-focused and person-centred is complex, relational and dynamic with no set path forward.
- Communities and the homeless-serving sector feel stuck managing day-to-day crises that are reproduced at the systems level without time to exchange ideas and imagine a better, equitable future state.
- Some may say they support systems change and transformation, but either (a) don't know where to start or how to approach this equitably, or (b) end up reinforcing and perpetuating the status quo they are deeply invested in.

THE OPPORTUNITY:

- There is greater openness to having difficult, revealing conversations and (re)evaluate what communities, systems and governments are doing through an equity lens.
- Examples of systems change and transformation exist at the local level and can provide insight and learnings for others at various stages of cross-systems work to prevent and end homelessness and pursue individual and community wellbeing.
- People want to take action to realize the transformation they hope to see in their communities.

A CALL FOR SOLIDARITY AND ACTION IN THE PURSUIT OF SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION AND SYSTEMS JUSTICE

Using the framework for Systems Transformation as a guide, the following are areas for action to be considered at different levels of change, from individual up to societal. These will continue to be explored, refined and revisited through our collective work.

SYSTEMS THINKING & AWARENESS: CHANGE AT THE INDIVIDUAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL LEVELS

- Reflect on the mental models (assumptions, biases, worldviews) that may be informing our individual, organizational and community philosophy or approach to the work of preventing and ending homelessness, and identify where a shift(s) in thinking and awareness needs to occur to promote equitable, rights-based, cross-systems approaches.
- Engage in dialogue and activities with diverse perspectives/groups (especially LivEx) that create deeper awareness of the interconnected, complex nature of homelessness and how to engage with that complexity effectively.

SYSTEMS PLANNING, IMPLEMENTATION & EVALUATION: CHANGE AT THE ORGANIZATIONAL AND COMMUNITY LEVELS

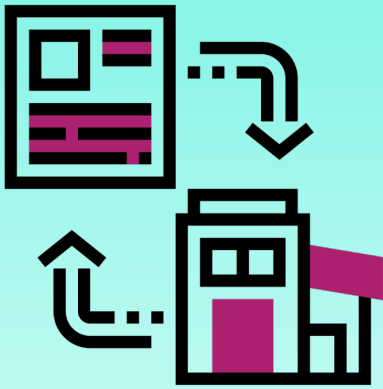
- Assess the quality and strength of relationships and connections, as well as the power dynamics and imbalances at play within your organization and community to make a plan to improve and seek equity.
- Evaluate the goals and actual impacts of the organizational and community practices to address homelessness to identify what should be retooled/reoriented toward equity and homelessness prevention.
- Develop and implement community-driven, integrated, evidence-informed strategies/frameworks and the data infrastructure to be responsive to changing needs of the community and create a wholistic continuum of care that is rights-based and prevention-oriented.

SYSTEMS CHANGE & ACCOUNTABILITY: CHANGE AT THE SYSTEMIC AND DECISION-MAKING/FUNDING LEVELS

- Identify the systems barriers and systems failures that are contributing to homelessness or could do a better job of preventing and addressing homelessness, and create accountability mechanisms that ensure all systems take responsibility for their roles.
- Assess the equity of resource distribution compared to the populations that are experiencing homelessness and
- Give greater trust, flexibility and sustainability to cross-systems community initiatives to set priorities and direct funds/resources in ways that make sense for their community

SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION & SYSTEMS JUSTICE: CHANGE AT THE STRUCTURAL/SOCIETAL LEVEL

- Hold space for and value connecting with others in your community, region, province/territory, as well as nationally and internationally to exchange knowledge and craft a shared vision for systems transformation and systems justice.
- Work in solidarity with initiatives that are directly/indirectly connected to preventing and ending homelessness.



INVITATION INTO EMERGENT DIALOGUE, LEARNING & ACTION

If upon reaching the end of this report you feel validated, and perhaps a bit daunted, we are right there with you. We have a sense of what we might encounter as we dig under the surface of systems change and transformation to prevent and end homelessness in Canada. There is so much to unpack that would not fit neatly within a single report.

The title of “Preliminary Report” suggests that this is only the beginning and that there is more to come. While a larger, more fulsome report may be an eventuality, we believe there is value in the process of working through the ideas presented within this report. The SPC will take a phased approach to explore ideas, test assumptions, identify actions, and iterate content, tools/resources to support this work as it emerges in real-time at the community level.

There is a significant need for knowledge exchange and definitional work to bring clarity not only to our goals for equitable systems transformation to prevent and end homelessness, but the terms we use, practices we apply/engage in and roles/responsibilities that are or ought to be carried out. Additionally, we will need to identify the implications of systems transformation upon policy, and power/resource allocation and distribution.



THE SPC PLANS TO SUPPORT THIS EMERGENT WORK IN THE FOLLOWING WAYS:

Community of Practice

- Facilitating dialogues and knowledge exchange across a diverse group of people that are making strides in cross-systems approaches to preventing and ending homelessness;
- Holding space for imagination and creativity as well as vulnerability and humility;
- Creating a community of support to navigate the challenges and celebrate the successes of systems transformation at the local level.
- Championing cross-systems, rights-based prevention approaches in local, provincial/territorial and national contexts.

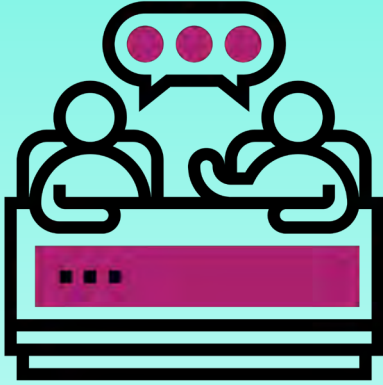
Indigenous-Led Systems Transformation

- Working in ethical partnership with Indigenous organizations, initiatives, communities, leaders, Elders and Knowledge Keepers to hold space for intergenerational, nation-to-nation dialogue, learning, solidarity and action;
- Building on the foundational work of the [Definition of Indigenous Homelessness](#) to exchange knowledge and lift up examples of the wholistic, systems practices and approaches that bring the definition to life;
- Supporting Indigenous-led systems transformation tools, resources and approaches that resonate with and are useful to diverse urban, rural/remote, and Northern Indigenous communities.

Knowledge Mobilization

- Creating content, tools and resources to capture and share the learnings from across the SPC work;
- Elevating concrete examples of community-based systems transformation through webinars, website content, case studies, etc.;
- Translating learnings and insights from different sectors and initiatives that are working to advance rights-based, prevention approaches to homelessness and individual and community wellbeing more broadly;
- Developing and providing training and technical assistance to support communities' and governments' systems transformation work.





We want to encourage those engaging in the difficult work of building cross-systems partnerships and solidarity for preventing and ending homelessness that you are not alone!

The journey toward systems transformation will be a shared one, and we see the potential for furthering these conversations and driving action together. If this Preliminary Report resonates with you, inspires you, or raises new questions or thoughts, the Systems Planning Collective would love to hear from you.

Follow along or join us on this path in whatever ways make sense for you and help us build the relationships and foundations that will bring us closer to systems justice.

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