



STREETS TO HOMES

Toronto shifts its focus from managing homelessness to ending it

At 2.5 million people, Toronto is Canada's largest city, home to a diversity of neighbourhoods and community interests—and until recently, a homelessness challenge with the size and complexity to match.

In February 2005, Toronto City Council made a commitment to end street homelessness by approving a number of recommendations, realigning funding and changing the way the City worked with the many non-profit homeless service providers. The core component was the Streets to Homes (S2H) program, which embodied a unified approach and a “housing first” philosophy—meaning that housing should be available without prerequisites such as going through a shelter or a treatment centre.

S2H's unique approach includes intensive case management across more than 30 partner agencies. The program has developed relationships with large property management firms to identify vacant units and agree to rent them at a reduced rate. This provides landlords with a steadier stream of income, while decreasing their administration, marketing and maintenance costs. Because Social Services pays S2H client rents directly to the landlords, the rent payments are more reliable than from some tenants, thus lowering administration costs. Also, units are scattered throughout the city so residents are not concentrated in any one area. Altogether, 69 per cent of S2H clients are in private market accommodations, most without government subsidies. A key aspect of the program is that clients choose where to live.

Meanwhile, providing clients with housing gives them improved quality of life, decreased dependence on emergency services and better access to social services and community non-profit organizations—whose important role is reinforced rather than replaced by S2H. By partnering with community organizations, S2H builds on their individual strengths, local knowledge and innovation.

Some examples: a mobile multi-disciplinary street outreach team, which includes a psychiatrist, nurse, housing worker and other experts, conducts street-level assessments of individuals; a community agency provides vocational assessments and pre-employment projects; a social-purpose enterprise offers furnishings to help new S2H clients make their apartments look and feel like home; 15 non-profit organizations provide follow-up support to all clients once they are in housing; one non-profit organization specializes in outreach to homeless Aboriginal people.

Since its start in February 2005, S2H has helped more than 2,100 people to find housing. The numbers continue to grow as more partners and more landlords come on board. The program is catching on in other Canadian and international communities as well. S2H has

Key facts

- Target group: homeless people living outdoors
- 2,100 people housed after three and a half years

Contributors

- City of Toronto: system management, program leadership and funding
- Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services: funding through the Consolidated Homelessness Prevention Program
- Human Resources and Social Development Canada: funding through Supporting Communities Partnership and National Homelessness Initiatives

helped more than 100 other jurisdictions understand or replicate its innovative approaches. Ultimately, S2H has grown because it's working: research among S2H clients indicate that almost 90 per cent of housed clients remain housed, with access to the resources they need on the road to independence.

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