

## “Take Whatever You Can Get”: Practicing Housing First in Alberta

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Full reference: Jalene T. Anderson-Baron & Damian Collins (2018): ‘Take whatever you can get’: practicing Housing First in Alberta, *Housing Studies*,  
DOI: [10.1080/02673037.2018.1535055](https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2018.1535055)

## Abstract

Housing First (HF) is an increasingly widespread and influential response to chronic homelessness. Programs using a HF approach typically rely on market apartments to house homeless clients as rapidly as possible. This reliance means HF programs are dependent on the availability and affordability of market housing. Little attention has been given to how shortages of affordable rental housing influence the practice of HF. To address this gap, we undertook qualitative research in Alberta, Canada. Interviews with service providers revealed that high rents and low vacancy rates had profound impacts on program operations, and complicated efforts to follow HF principles. Clients often experienced delays in being housed and felt pressure to accept the first apartment they were offered. In response, HF programs devoted resources to improving relationships with landlords. Ultimately, however, reliance on market housing undermined programs' ability to fulfil the potential of HF in the Alberta context.

Key words: homelessness; housing affordability; Housing First; Alberta

## 1. Introduction

Housing First (HF) is an increasingly widespread and influential approach to addressing chronic homelessness (Gaetz *et al.*, 2013; Woodhill-Melnick & Dunn, 2016). It operates on the premise that housing is the first need of people experiencing homelessness on a long-term or episodic basis. To address this need, most HF programs rely on scattered-site housing in market apartments, coupled with separate services based on client choices (Baker & Evans, 2016). At the centre of this approach is a fundamental (if usually unspoken) assumption that programs can access market housing and cover rental costs on an ongoing basis. However, very little consideration has been given to how the availability and affordability of market housing influences the *practice* of HF. How do programs implement HF when vacancy rates are low and rents are high? To what extent can they follow core principles of the HF approach under these circumstances? And, just as importantly, what difference do shortages of affordable housing make for HF clients, especially in terms of wait times and rehousing experiences? In addressing these questions, this article also speaks to the larger and fundamental issue of whether and how HF can be implemented in a way that ‘maintain[s] fidelity to its ethos [while] also taking into consideration local necessities and specificities’ (Lancioni *et al.*, 2018, p. 40).

Evidence for HF’s effectiveness stems primarily from the Pathways to Housing program, founded by Sam Tsemberis in New York City in 1992. The majority of research into HF examines programs that follow the Pathways Housing First (PHF) model – including the largest field trial of its effectiveness, Canada’s \$110 million *At Home/Chez Soi* project (Goering *et al.*, 2014). PHF was innovative for offering rapid housing in market apartments to long-term homeless clients with a dual-diagnosis of mental illness and addictions, followed by separate support services. It imposed two main requirements; each client was to meet regularly with a staff member, and to pay 30% of their income towards rent. Especially in North America, PHF has often been ‘viewed as the “authentic” housing first model’ (Baker & Evans, 2016, p. 27). In practice, however, HF has developed ‘innumerable variations’, and often functions as a malleable idea and fuzzy construct, rather than a highly-prescribed approach to housing and service delivery (Baker &

Evans, 2016, p. 28). As Lancione *et al.* (2018) argue, the plasticity of HF has enabled it to be adapted to diverse contexts, contributing to its mobility as a powerful set of discourses and practices. In turn, as HF travels, it is continually '[brought] up against practices, thinking, customs, desires, resources and systems that tend to modify it' (Lancione *et al.*, 2018, p. 46).

In this paper, we report on qualitative research conducted in Calgary and Edmonton, metropolitan centres in Alberta, Canada. Housing affordability challenges in Alberta are most marked during cyclical economic booms, which routinely lead to steep rent increases and low vacancy rates (Evans, 2015). At the same time, provincial social assistance (welfare) payments are very low, especially for those deemed employable (less than \$8000 per year for single adults in 2016), and are not adjusted for inflation (Kneebone & Wilkins, 2016). In this context, thousands of people in Calgary and Edmonton live in emergency shelters, on the streets and in informal encampments.

This situation is reflective of a broader national context, whereby an increasing proportion of Canadian households, particularly renters, struggles to afford housing. Despite repeated calls to increase the stock of affordable rental housing, it remains scarce in cities across Canada (Gaetz *et al.*, 2014). In addition, low levels of social assistance in all provinces leave many recipients without the income necessary to secure even minimum-quality housing. Tweddle *et al.* (2017, p. 41) report that, almost without exception, "welfare incomes fall well below the designated [low-income] cut-offs for all household types and in all jurisdictions." In many provinces – including Alberta – social assistance payments are below 50% of these cut-offs, which serve as *de facto* poverty lines.

Over the last decade, responses to homelessness in Alberta have centred on Housing First. In 2007, Calgary became the first Canadian city to adopt HF as formal policy, followed by Edmonton the following year. In 2008, Alberta became the first province to adopt a 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness based on HF. Subsequently, HF was taken up as the central response in the federal homelessness strategy, which funds communities across Canada to implement local HF programs (Woodhall-Melnik & Dunn, 2016). Homelessness service delivery in Alberta's

cities thus occurs in a context where all three levels of government formally endorse and fund HF. Numerous housing service agencies across the province deliver HF programs, including (at the time of this research) 12 in Edmonton and 10 in Calgary. Collectively, they have rehoused 15,000 people since 2007 (Government of Alberta, 2017a).

## 2. Housing First

HF is often characterized as a “principled” approach to addressing homelessness (Gaetz *et al.*, 2013; Goering *et al.*, 2014). A related claim holds that, collectively, these principles constitute a “philosophy” (e.g. Lancione *et al.*, 2018; Waegemakers Schiff & Schiff, 2014). However, there is no universal agreement on HF’s defining principles. Various authors have identified tenets they consider to constitute its “core components” (Woodhall-Melnik & Dunn, 2016) or “ethos” (Lancione *et al.*, 2018). With regards to PHF, Sam Tsemberis outlined four essential elements in a 2010 chapter (Tsemberis, 2010a), and eight principles in a manual published the same year (Tsemberis, 2010b). As HF has been adopted in diverse contexts, other sets of principles have been articulated. For example, the *Canadian Homelessness Partnering Strategy* (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2014) identifies six principles of a “HF approach” – which differ in wording and emphasis from those originally associated with the PHF model (see Table 1). Adoption of these six principles is formally mandatory for all programs receiving federal HF funding in Canada (including those in Calgary and Edmonton).

**Table 1: Housing First Principles**

<b>Pathways Housing First</b> (Tsemberis, 2010a)	<b>Pathways Housing First</b> (Tsemberis, 2010b)	<b>Housing First Approach</b> (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2014)
<b>1. Consumer choice.</b> Clients actively participate to choose their housing arrangement and support services.	<b>1. Housing as a basic human right.</b> Every person is given support and a chance to succeed in an apartment of his or her own. Clients do not have to earn housing.	<b>1. Rapid housing with supports.</b> Clients are directly assisted to locate and secure permanent housing as quickly as possible. Housing readiness is not a requirement.

	<p><b>2. Respect, warmth and compassion for all clients.</b> Create a healthy, positive, forward-looking relationship and program culture.</p>	<p><b>2. Offering client choice in housing.</b> Clients must have choice in terms of housing options and the services they wish to access.</p>
<p><b>2. Separation of housing and treatment.</b> The program uses a scattered-site, independent housing model and rents in market housing. Clients have access to time-unlimited support.</p>	<p><b>3. A commitment to working with clients for as long as they need.</b> Once clients enter the program, staff must convey a consistent message of commitment. If support is no longer required, a client may 'graduate'.</p>	<p><b>3. Separating housing provision from other services.</b> Acceptance of any support service, including treatment programs, is not required to access or maintain housing. Programs must commit to rehousing clients as needed.</p>
	<p><b>4. Scattered-site housing; independent apartments.</b> The program rents suitable, affordable, decent apartments scattered around the city from property owners in the community.</p>	<p><b>4. Providing tenancy rights and responsibilities.</b> Clients are required to contribute a portion of their income, preferably 30%, towards rent, with a rent subsidy covering the remainder. Clients have rights under the applicable landlord and tenant act.</p>
<p><b>3. Recovery orientation.</b> Clients choose their own goals and define their needs. The program also utilizes a harm reduction approach.</p>	<p><b>5. Separation of housing and services. All clients have ready, reliable access to treatment and comprehensive support services.</b> Most services are provided in a clients' natural environment and service is time-unlimited.</p>	<p><b>5. Integrating housing into the community.</b> Scattered-site housing in both public and private rental markets should be promoted. Other housing options such as social housing can be offered when available and if clients choose.</p>
	<p><b>6. Consumer choice and self-determination.</b> Clients are given an active choice in their housing arrangement, goals, treatment, etc.</p>	

<b>4. Community integration.</b> This is promoted through the scattered-site housing approach and by supporting clients to reconnect with family, meet neighbours, and participate in their community.	<b>7. A recovery orientation.</b> Clients' service plans are based on their own treatment goals.	<b>6. Strength-based and promoting self-sufficiency.</b> The end goal of the program is for clients to stabilize and successfully exit the HF program.
	<b>8. Harm reduction within the context of client-defined goals.</b> Focus is not placed on stopping substance use but rather how drugs and alcohol may interfere with the clients' goals.	

Despite differing numbers and variations in emphasis, the two descriptions of PHF outlined in Table 1 articulate four common principles. The first is *consumer choice*, which applies to housing, as well as engagement in treatment and pursuit of personal goals. Clients may choose to live in buildings and locations that best support their own goals for safety and recovery (Zerger *et al.*, 2014). Choice in these areas has been found to promote housing retention and mental health (Greenwood & Manning, 2016). The second principle is a *recovery orientation*, including acceptance of a harm reduction approach. Clients are more likely to stay motivated and engaged with service providers if service plans are based on their own treatment goals. They are also able to have open conversations with service providers about psychiatric symptoms or substance use (Tsemberis, 2010a, 2010b). Together, these principles provide a strong foundation for client self-determination in HF (Woodhall-Melnik & Dunn, 2016). *Community integration* is the third principle, valued for reducing clients' social isolation and stigmatization, and increasing their opportunities for recreation and employment (Gaetz *et al.*, 2013). Conventionally, this has been promoted by way of a scattered-site housing model that encourages clients to engage with surrounding communities (Tsemberis, 2010a). However, there is growing interest in congregate approaches to HF, whereby clients are housed and supported in shared buildings. Somers *et al.* (2017, p6) note that both approaches may foster community integration, albeit by different means: scattered site housing entails joining "an established community" with a mix of homes and residents, whereas congregate settings offer

“a new community” with on-site programming and tenants who share a history of homelessness.

Finally, *separation of housing and services* is prominent in both descriptions of PHF. Clients *may* choose to pursue treatment for health issues or problematic substance use once they are housed, but this is not required (Tsemberis, 2010a). A recent systematic review of HF program outcomes (Woodhill-Melnik & Dunn, 2016) found strong and consistent evidence that this approach is successful in achieving significantly higher levels of housing retention than other program models; however, evidence for improved mental health and reduced substance use in HF programs relative to alternatives was inconsistent. Similarly, *At Home/Chez Soi* reported housing retention rates twice as high in HF programs as in Linear Residential Treatment, while clients’ mental health symptoms and substance use problems improved by a similar amount in both programs (Goering *et al.*, 2014).

Comparing this set of four PHF principles with those articulated by Employment and Social Development Canada, there are clear parallels with respect to *consumer choice in housing*, *community integration* (via scattered site apartments), and *separation of housing and services*. However, there is no direct inclusion of *a recovery orientation* and no references to harm reduction (although the absence of sobriety requirements is acknowledged). Instead, there is an emphasis on promoting self-sufficiency, which is linked to the ‘end goal ... for clients to stabilize and successfully exit the HF program.’ While the notion of a successful exit may imply recovery, it might equally be used to justify the imposition of time-limited support and expectations of graduation from HF (Anderson-Baron & Collins, 2018).

### *2.1 Pathways Housing First and other models*

To measure how closely programs follow PHF principles, various fidelity scales have been developed (see, e.g., Stefancic *et al.* 2013). Several studies have demonstrated significant associations between higher fidelity programs and superior outcomes for clients in areas such as housing stability, problematic substance use and engagement with services (Gilmer *et al.* 2014; Goering *et al.*, 2015). Higher fidelity may also be effective in reducing the costs associated

with clients' use of public services (Gilmer, 2016). However, fidelity scales and the positivist forms of measurement they enable have limited utility in contexts such as Alberta, where most programs do not purport to follow the PHF model.

This departure from PHF reflects a broader international trend, whereby HF is not a single model, but a broad set of approaches that are modified and adapted to local circumstances. The resulting proliferation of HF-based approaches is sometimes labelled "model drift" (Baker & Evans, 2016; Pleace, 2011; Stefancic *et al.*, 2013). It follows that HF cannot (and should not) be reduced to PHF. Understanding what HF actually consists of requires setting aside preconceptions about what it is or should be, and 'examining this program/policy as it is accomplished in practice' (Hennigan, 2017, p. 1434).

Although some HF programs have adopted congregate housing arrangements (Woodhall-Melnik & Dunn, 2016; Somers *et al.*, 2017), most retain the PHF approach of housing clients in independent market apartments. This recourse to the market is a key commonality among diverse HF programs. In this respect, HF 'attempts to reintegrate individuals into the capitalist marketplace through offering an apartment lease' (Hennigan, 2017, p. 1420). The main rationale for this approach, as articulated by Tsemberis (2010a, p. 47), is that the 'community norms and social pressures' found within mixed neighbourhoods help to sustain normative behaviours, promote recovery, and encourage social and economic inclusion. Positive social bonds and a sense of inclusion in turn support housing stability and client wellbeing (Johnstone *et al.*, 2016). However, reliance on rental markets may leave HF programs vulnerable to rising rents and low vacancy rates.

## *2.2 Housing Market Context and Housing First in Practice*

Housing market conditions are known to influence the prevalence of homelessness at the local scale. Community-level research in the United States has "consistently identified significant relationships between increased rent levels, decreased vacancy rates, and increased homelessness" (Byrne *et al.*, 2013, p. 609). Rent levels have particularly strong positive

associations with local homelessness rates. For adults living in poverty, Byrne *et al.* (2013) found that a \$100 (USD) increase in median rents was associated with a 15% increase in homelessness in metropolitan areas, and a 39% increase in non-metropolitan areas. A statistical model developed by Hanratty (2017) indicated that a 10% increase in median rents was associated with a 9% increase in local homeless numbers. Given this connection, both studies indicated that increasing incomes (via social assistance, housing subsidies and/or employment) was critical to addressing the affordability problems that are major drivers of homelessness. Kneebone and Wilkins (2016) reach similar conclusions in the Canadian context, finding that modest increases to social assistance rates (of \$1500 per year) or rent subsidies (of \$1200 per year) would reduce demand for emergency shelter beds by about 20%.

Much less is known about the impacts of housing market conditions on *programs* that seek to end homelessness. The cost and availability of rental units is likely to impact HF programs at two critical junctures: intake and placement (where their ability to house clients rapidly, and to offer choice in housing, may be severely compromised) and exit (as affordable units are essential if clients are to retain housing after HF supports end). To date, these issues have received limited attention in accounts of HF. Zerger *et al.* (2014) provide a rare insight into the HF placement process, with reference to the Toronto *At Home/Chez Soi* site. Whereas an early PHF program was successful at moving 52% of clients into housing within one week (Tsemberis *et al.*, 2003), the goal in Toronto was to house participants within three months of enrollment, and only those who waited more than four months were classified as experiencing delayed entry. A large majority (84%) was housed within four months, due in part to structured communication between case managers, housing workers and clients. However, placement could be slowed when HF programs prioritized client choice in housing over rapid access, which were perceived as “two competing HF mandates” (Zerger *et al.*, 2014, p. 46). Research on housing outcomes after program exit has begun to be considered in the US, with Byrne *et al.* (2016) reporting on risk factors for repeat homelessness among veterans leaving rapid re-housing programs.

Several Canadian commentaries have outlined the necessity of an adequate supply of

affordable housing for HF programs to function (Doberstein & Smith, 2015; Gaetz, 2011; Shapcott, 2011). Longer reports have noted that programs encounter challenges in matching new clients to suitable accommodation (Waegemakers Schiff, 2014), and that they are reliant on rent supplements to access and maintain market housing for existing clients (Gaetz *et al.*, 2013). This reliance stems from HF clients' contributions towards rent being capped at 30% of their incomes, which in itself is seldom sufficient to secure housing (Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness, 2013; Polvere *et al.*, 2014). An assessment of *At Home/Chez Soi* recognized the lack of affordable housing as a barrier to program implementation across all five sites (Nelson *et al.*, 2014). Reflecting further on the Canadian context, Katz *et al.* (2017, p. 141) note that HF programs are reliant upon 'a limited supply of what can be a weakly regulated, often poorly maintained rental stock.' In Australia, Bullen and Fisher (2015) found that shortages of affordable housing led to lengthy waitlists in HF programs, and otherwise eligible clients being deemed unqualified. However, HF could still be effective where agencies were assertive in finding housing and in supporting clients while they were waitlisted.

Beyond operational questions, a theoretically-informed body of literature on HF gives some consideration to issues of affordability. Sparks (2012) argued that HF emphasizes the personal failings of homeless individuals (in terms of mental illness, addictions, etc.) over the role of the housing market in producing homelessness. For Harris (2017), this disregard is *intentional*; it reflects a conscious choice to overlook structural challenges in favour of simplistic explanations for homelessness grounded in individual pathology. This can allow poverty and inadequate housing supply to remain unaddressed in policy contexts dominated by HF (Pleace, 2011). Indeed, HF is not *intended* to 'alter the structural conditions that reproduce and distribute housing insecurity and deprivation' (Willse, 2010, p173), but rather seeks to work within existing systems to (re)house the victims of these conditions. Our study was situated in a context in which economic conditions undermined rental housing affordability, exacerbated homelessness and created challenges for the operation of HF programs.

### 3. Research context and goal

In Canada, there is no standard definition of affordable housing, but the term commonly refers to adequate housing offered at a price where, after rent and utility costs, a household is still able to meet other basic needs on an ongoing basis. In the context of homeless and marginally-housed populations, adequate housing would often consist of basic rental apartments (bachelor suites or one-bedrooms) at a price that is reasonable for persons on very low incomes (earned from social assistance and/or low-wage labour). Here, “reasonable” would likely be defined with reference to the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) standard, whereby housing must cost less than 30% of before-tax household income to be considered affordable. However, neither the City of Edmonton nor the Government of Alberta have adopted such a precise figure, and define affordable housing as that which ‘is modest in terms of floor area and amenities, that meets household needs and that has rents or payments below Average Market Rent in the community or area in which the unit is located’ (Community Plan Committee, 2012, p. 64).

In Alberta, demand for affordable housing has been fuelled by high levels of domestic and international in-migration. At the same time, processes such as gentrification and condominium conversion have reduced supply (Collins, 2010). Despite large investments in plans to end homelessness, affordable rental units remain sparse. In 2008, the provincial government committed to the creation of 8000 new units of affordable housing. However, five years later, funding had been allocated for less than 2000 units, very few of which were actually constructed (Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness, 2013). This combination of factors contributed to high average rents and low vacancy rates, prior to the economic downturn in mid-2015 (see Table 2). These trends contribute to producing and sustaining homelessness; they may also inhibit the operations of HF programs, in terms of their ability to secure housing that is affordable, based on their own funding plus clients’ contributions towards rents. The specific goal of this research was to assess how shortages of affordable housing in Calgary and Edmonton influence the practices of HF programs.

**Table 2: Characteristics of Case Study Cities**

<i>Year</i>	<b>Population (millions)</b>		<b>Homeless Counts</b>		<b>Avg. monthly rent (2-brm apartment)</b>		<b>Avg. monthly rent (bachelor apartment)</b>		<b>Rental Vacancy Rate</b>	
	<i>2012</i>	<i>2014</i>	<i>2012</i>	<i>2014</i>	<i>2012</i>	<i>2014</i>	<i>2012</i>	<i>2014</i>	<i>2012</i>	<i>2014</i>
Calgary	1.12	1.12	3190	3555	\$1150	\$1322	\$776	\$906	1.3%	1.4%
Edmonton	0.82	0.88	2174	2307	\$1071	\$1227	\$742	\$843	1.7%	1.7%

(Sources: CMHC 2012; 2014; Turner, 2015)

#### 4. Methods

Data collection involved in-person interviews with two groups of participants in Edmonton and Calgary. First, key informant interviews were conducted with service providers - professionals working in front-line or managerial roles within the homelessness system. These interviews were semi-structured in character, with questions focussed on the day-to-day actions that agencies and their staff carried out to implement a HF approach and/or deliver services to clients. We did not pre-determine what this approach consisted of, in part because only two of 22 HF agencies across the two cities specifically followed the PHF model. Service provider participants were prompted to reflect in detail on housing market conditions in their city and how it influenced the operation of HF programs.

In both cities, biographical life history interviews (see May, 2000) were conducted with service users – people with lived experiences of homelessness or severe housing need, who were past, current or prospective clients of HF agencies. Questions encouraged participants to discuss what affordable housing meant to them, what the main barriers to accessing housing were, and whether they had ever lost housing because of inability to pay rent. They were also asked to reflect on their interactions with HF programs (from initial contact through to being housed and receiving a rent supplement, etc.).

In terms of recruitment, service providers were initially contacted by e-mail, based on public contact information. Those who expressed interest in participating were contacted again to set up interviews. In some cases, the initial contact passed on information to others at their

agency, and additional (or alternate) participants were identified in this way. For service user participants, the primary method of recruitment involved posters and cards placed at housing agencies, shelters and libraries within the two cities. Members of this group were offered a \$20 gift card as an incentive for participation.

In total, 35 participants were interviewed in Edmonton and Calgary. This number included 22 service providers (11 in each city), who collectively represented eight HF programs (four in each city). It also included 13 service users (seven in Edmonton and six in Calgary), with diverse housing circumstances at the time of interview. Overall, four were currently housed and receiving HF support, six were currently homeless (four waitlisted for HF services, one former HF client, one eligible for HF support but not connected with an agency), and three were precariously housed (one former HF client, one waitlisted for HF, one eligible for HF support but not connected with an agency).

Interviews were conducted between July 2014 and March 2015, and ranged in length from 30 minutes to nearly two hours. Approval for this project was granted by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. Prior to being interviewed, participants received written and verbal descriptions of the research, and were then asked to sign an informed consent form. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission, which was granted by all but one participant (for this exception, detailed hand-written notes were taken). To protect the anonymity of interviewees, in the results presented below, they are identified by codes which indicate only their city (C for Calgary; E for Edmonton) and participant group (SP for service provider; SU for service user). We make particular use of service provider perspectives, as their professional roles granted them sustained insights into the systematic nature of housing affordability challenges, and the associated consequences for HF programs.

Interviews were transcribed in full, and then analyzed using the “framework” approach (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002). This method was developed specifically for applied policy research and is grounded in the original accounts of participants in a manner that allows for between- and

within-case analysis. Our analysis followed the five-step process set out by Ritchie and Spencer (2002) in order to enable the systematic indexing of themes, and the identification of associations and patterns within the data. To enhance rigour, we held community feedback sessions in both cities, to check that participants' accounts had been appropriately interpreted and expressed.

## *5. Findings*

### *5.1 Market conditions*

All service provider participants were concerned by the limited availability of affordable rental housing, and the impacts this had on HF programs. Most believed the issue had worsened over recent years, due to decreasing supply and increasing demand:

One of the issues we were dealing with at the time was the conversion of rental stock to condos, and that continues to go on. ... We were losing rental stock and nobody was building rental stock. Now there has been some building since, but we're still experiencing ... a very close to zero vacancy rate, which makes it difficult. (C-SP3)

...there is no rental housing being built, let alone affordable rental housing. There's no new stuff coming on. In fact, older more decrepit buildings are being bought up and being redeveloped into ... you know, upscale condos. So that's not helping. (C-SP11)

People are just drawn to Alberta for the money. And they are separated from their families from all over Canada or North America or wherever, and it's stressful and you can't find a place to stay and maybe things are working out with your friends – and all of a sudden it doesn't. (E-SP8)

One participant suggested that because the rental market was *so* constricted, the efforts of HF programs may have been contributing to new cases of homelessness for those who were

already precariously housed. This was because both groups competed for the same (limited) stock of 'marginal housing':

You're taking your people who are homeless, getting them into that marginal housing, and then the people who are barely making it as is are falling out at this end. ... You can take people out of homelessness, but if you're not stopping new people from falling in, it's a cycle that will never end. (E-SP11)

In addition, service providers emphasized the inadequacy of social assistance on which almost all HF clients rely. The key provincial program – Alberta Works – allocated a 'core shelter amount' of just \$323 per month for a single adult in private housing (\$436 for an adult couple; \$546 for a single adult with one child) (Government of Alberta, 2017b). Service providers were aware of the severe disconnect between these income levels and high rents:

Alberta Works gives them \$323 for rent. There's not even a room, I haven't even found a room rental for \$323. ... It's like, I'm finding people the worst room rentals and they are like \$600, \$800 for the one [bedroom], or if it's a bigger room \$850. ... If we could get people on subsidies faster or if we could just find a place where this \$323 actually made sense, then we would have huge turnover I think at [emergency shelter]. (E-SP3)

And for people who are on income support ... affordable housing [is] still not affordable enough. Like not even close. So, there might as well be no affordable housing for those people. Like what does it matter to them? \$600 is still twice too much. \$900 is three times too much, it doesn't matter. (E-SP1)

This mom received \$977 [including \$546 for shelter] from Alberta Works last month. Her rent is \$1350, so right there I mean that's not even covering her rent. ... She was feeling extremely frustrated this morning and I was saying, "...but you aren't supposed to be comfortable on Alberta Works. It's supposed to be so uncomfortable that you get out

there and you get a job.” But she's going, “They don't even give me enough to cover the basics. I'm not talking about money to go the movies. I'm talking about basic needs - covering my rent and food. I can't even do that.” (C-SP7)

In general, housing was understood to be affordable in Edmonton and Calgary only where rents were geared-to-income (as in social housing), or when agencies could provide rent subsidies to offset the cost of a market apartment (as in HF programs). It was considered impossible for a homeless person to secure an “affordable” unit in the market without some form of assistance. Moreover, agencies *themselves* struggled to secure housing that was of appropriate quality, and some were forced to work with ‘slumlords’ or to rent units in the least desirable neighbourhoods:

The cost of rent is huge. It's wherever we can find them [apartments]. Because of the housing crisis, we're finding that, I'm gonna use this term, that slumlords are the ones that are willing to take our clients. (E-SP2)

[There's] a slum landlord who owns an apartment building out on the west end. And I mean ... HF participants must make up at least three-quarters of their suites. ... And even then, it's \$1000 [per month] for a one-bedroom suite! (E-SP4)

[Affordable apartments] are in bad areas of town. It's really hard because yeah, they are subsidized, but then there's no walkability and so they [clients] need bus passes. (E-SP5)

Reliance on undesirable housing stock and/or neighbourhoods potentially undermines the HF principle of community integration, in that these options are stigmatized, and less likely to promote positive social norms. This said, they allow HF programs to continue to work, something that becomes increasingly difficult in constricted housing markets:

I mean it makes the work harder, let's be honest. It slows down intakes, it makes the work harder... (C-SP5)

...and makes us panic if someone does get evicted for some reason right. Or if all of a sudden we're not renewing these leases, it's like shoot, this could potentially mean people on the street and we want to take care of the people in our program but we also have people waiting to get housed. Yeah, there's not a cushion, right? (C-SP6)

In this context, agencies encountered specific challenges to delivering services in a manner consistent with commonly-recognized principles of HF. It is to these challenges that we now turn.

### *5.2 Client choice and competing demands*

Although service providers' understandings of HF varied, most stated that the principle of client choice in housing was valuable. There was a general consensus that clients deserved the opportunity to make decisions about their own living arrangements:

I think it [choice] is important, I think it's really important. One of the things that I learned when I first started this program is that people will choose a place in an area where they have fond memories. ... They don't want to move to a place where, ... where they have had a lot of history with other drug users and dealers and maybe they've had a history of working the streets. (E-SP8)

I think it [choice] is everything. Because it's the type of housing ... They [clients] are still humans too and I know people think they don't have these rights or they should just be grateful for what they have, but people are people and they want what they want. (E-SP5)

I think there's a lot of value to being able to choose ... there's a lot of autonomy and a lot of ownership in that for a client. (C-SP8)

However, *offering* clients a choice in housing was anything but straightforward in practice. For many service providers, facilitating choice involved compromise, strategizing, and making the best of any opportunities in the housing market:

Unfortunately, it's a timing issue a lot of the time, because the availabilities are so low, we find apartments, we schedule viewings, we take people to those viewings, and if they say "yes," it's like we apply right there on the spot and hope we hear the next day kind of thing. So, yeah I mean we do try to give people choice but that choice is still very limited because of the vacancy rate. (E-SP1)

We gotta raise the question, "where do you want us to put you?" ... Based on availability ... the market is very competitive. The vacancy rate is less than 1% ... So, those options may be there but what if it doesn't work? "Is there another alternative for you, or how else can we do?" ... So we have to be realistic within the budget. We look at all those constraints and all those questions. (E-SP6)

Such comments pointed to ambiguities in what it actually means to give or provide choice in expensive rental markets with low vacancy rates. The range of affordable options may be so constrained that meaningful choice becomes difficult for agencies to offer. Indeed, some participants concluded that these circumstances had rendered client choice essentially impossible:

There's so many [challenges] to choose from (laughs). I think the availability is the big one. Just being, if you're looking for housing you don't have the luxury of being choosy, you take whatever you can get. And that's an unfortunate reality that we face. (E-SP1)

Client choice is important. And there have been times we've been able to provide choice, but with the – I would say – shrinking rental market, that choice hasn't always

been there ... So their initial apartment may not be so much choice - but we will work to get to where they want as suites come up. (C-SP5)

It [choice in housing] doesn't work, no. There was a time when it did, there was a time when apartments were kind of a dime a dozen so to speak.... The rules have changed over the years ... a program could keep so many floater apartments available, but we can't do that anymore. And the vacancy rate is too low, and when we get an apartment we need to have it filled and we need to hold onto it as best we can. (C-SP8)

Several service providers described arrangements in which the principle of client choice was entirely over-ridden by other concerns. In one instance, a Calgary HF program owned apartments, and prioritized keeping these rented over any notion of choice. In another Calgary initiative, the *rapidity* of housing was emphasized over choice, to the extent that new clients would not be accepted until an apartment was available. In both instances, clients had no agency in the housing process; they were housed in pre-selected apartments that were ready for move-in:

We have our apartments, we try to build those up as we are acquiring more clients. ... We know which unit they are going to go into. ... It's whatever's available, just because we can't let apartments sit empty without the rent being paid, so we have to try and keep them as full as possible. (C-SP8)

We will not do an intake unless we have a spot to put them. We're different than most of the agencies in the city where they'll open up a case management spot and meet with them in community. We base our intake process on, once you're accepted we want you to have a place to move into right away. (C-SP6).

Several participants also questioned what it meant for clients to 'choose' housing, when the alternative to accepting what is first offered is likely remaining homeless. They noted that

clients were aware of the housing market situation, and that this played into their willingness to accept any apartment:

Most clients understand the market too. They'll say "listen, all my family live in the northwest, but I'm at the [shelter]". I will take far southeast if that's what you have right now. One day I'd love to but, heck, I'd rather - I choose southeast over the [shelter]. (C-SP6)

When you have a client who is what they call "sleeping rough" they are not going to be like "I am adamant, I want to live in Clareview and that's it." It's not going to happen. And even when we have clients who have identified a certain area and we can't find apartments or rental units in those areas, we offer them ... like it is up to them whether or not they take it, but them recognizing it's their only option, they will take it. (E-SP2)

### *5.3 Landlord challenges*

A key theme in service providers' narratives linked constrained rental market conditions to challenges with landlords. Some participants noted that the limited supply of rental housing and higher demand was contributing to a "landlords' market", in which landlords could be highly selective about tenants. This made it harder for HF programs to access and retain apartments:

In Alberta it's the boom and bust, right? And when it's bust, we don't have a lot of issues getting apartments because really the landlords appreciate the fact that the rent's gonna be paid every month, damages will be taken care of, all those kinds of things. But when it's booming they can be a lot more discriminatory. We've actually lost a few leases just in the last month.... (C-SP8)

It's a landlords' market right now. So where our families also have a real hard time is the landlords can pick and choose who they want in their units. (C-SP7)

During a housing shortage they [our clients] are never going to be the best candidates for an apartment. Landlords don't want people on welfare. (E-SP10)

Adaptations to these challenges included strengthening working relationships with landlords, treating landlords like customers, and sheer dedication to the process. Critically, every HF program had created staff positions dedicated to securing housing, with job titles such as housing locators, landlord liaisons and housing outreach workers:

I think it's been really great that we've had people who have been able to liaise with landlords. ...be friends with them and try to build that relationship between the landlord and the client and the program, to help landlords understand where our clients are coming from. (E-SP8)

"Housing Locator" is what we call them. And we learned about four to five years ago to separate the roles. And they advocate for the landlord, they don't advocate for the client. Social workers can do that. You can have that friction at work but it keeps that away from the landlord. Landlords stay happy, they'll continue doing business with us. (C-SP2)

We also have a "Housing Liaison" - okay so he goes out, strikes up relationships with landlords and tries to get them to rent to our families. He is actually fairly successful. (C-SP7)

High quality case management was also valuable in ensuring continued access to apartments. This was because many landlords considered it a positive to rent to tenants who were supported and 'supervised' by HF agencies:

We're creative, we're assertive, we partner, ... we have a lot to offer a landlord as well. Assured rent, damage deposit, multiple visits, we get them out during the day so they're not floating around the building. So, you know we have found that being super assertive, we have been able to meet our housing needs but it is, I mean, it's tight. (C-SP5)

#### *5.4 Service user perspectives*

In some cases, programs would not accept a new HF participant unless they already had an apartment available. However, most programs operated waitlists, and service users reported waits ranging from one month to two years. Long waits undercut the principle of rapid housing, which is sometimes considered pivotal to HF (see Table 1), but are consistent with the challenges identified by service providers, above:

Then I got involved in [HF program] and within a month they find me a bachelor suite. Rooming house. (E-SU5)

Yeah when they said I had all the paperwork and I was accepted, now let's find a place, was about four months ... I was constantly being told, "oh this week, this week, this week" which I found aggravating because ... I never knew when I was going to be housed... (E-SU1)

With [HF program], it had been two years to get in. (C-SU8)

The level of involvement in the housing process and choice that service users felt they had ranged from those who were taken to view numerous apartments with a support worker prior to making a decision, to programs that had apartments on standby for participants to move into directly:

My worker at the time told me I was able to look at anything anywhere. And go anywhere in the city I wanted from there, but I chose to stay in this area and that was one of the options and I liked it right off the bat. It was the only place I looked at but I was happy with it. (E-SU1)

They just say we have a unit for you and you either accept it or you go to the bottom of the list. (C-SU8)

They had one place lined up already, so I said let's go check it out so I didn't care. It was big. A big suite for a one bedroom. I loved it at first, but then after a while it kind of got to be really lonely cause it was dark and all that we had was a balcony and one window. And the kitchen was closed off. And there was no windows, it was just dark all the time. It was like freaky. (E-SU7)

Another service user drew attention to a key dilemma that HF program clients may face in a constrained housing market. Specifically, this participant was given the option of viewing multiple apartments, but this offer came with the disclaimer that not taking the first apartment could mean waiting indefinitely for another to become available:

She said, "I'm going to show you one, if you like it you like it, if not you have to wait." So I said "I don't care, I'll take it." I didn't even see it yet, and we were on our way, so I looked at her and said "okay go." Cause I couldn't handle the [shelter]. (E-SU5)

In this instance, the client felt that the "choice" offered was between the first apartment seen, and continued homelessness. This is arguably no choice at all, and contrary to the emphasis on self-determination that is part of the ethos of HF (see Woodhall-Melnik & Dunn, 2016).

## 6. Discussion

This research has addressed a gap in academic and policy knowledge of the housing market's

fundamental role in shaping the operation of HF programs. Alberta was a valuable context in which to explore these issues further, given well-established HF policies and programs, and recurring challenges with housing affordability in the rental markets of Edmonton and Calgary. Service providers offered rich accounts of how these challenges impeded their ability to implement HF principles. The foremost threat was to client choice in housing. Most service providers believed this principle to be integral to the HF approach, and almost all programs attempted to provide choice to clients. However, the constrained housing market led to a variety of compromises, and in some instances the availability of affordable rental units was so limited it was simply impossible to offer clients a choice.

These factors had profound impacts on service users' experiences of being housed, with fewer apartment viewings and/or pressure to take the first housing offered. Many clients were influenced by their urgent need to obtain housing, and awareness of difficult market conditions. In this context, housing choice was often highly restricted – something also documented by Zerger *et al.* in Toronto, where many HF clients 'had instead settled for the first housing option they were given out of fear that they would miss their chance to be housed and/or because their current living situation was unbearable' (2014, p. 46). Although client choice is relatively easy to articulate (see Table 1), and its benefits are well documented (see Greenwood & Manning, 2016; Tsemberis, 2010a), in contexts where clients are desperate to obtain housing and very little is available, the principle may come to lack substantive content.

Shortages of affordable rental housing in Edmonton and Calgary also appeared to bring two HF principles into conflict with each other: agencies could pursue *either* housing choice *or* rapid housing, but not both. Put simply, when client choice was pursued, wait times for housing increased. Conversely, when agencies emphasized moving their clients into housing as quickly as possible, choice was restricted (or abandoned altogether). Which principle was prioritized in any given case was primarily a matter of choice for each HF agency. Some programs openly prioritized rapid housing in order to streamline their processes and prevent their own apartments from sitting empty. This represents a significant departure from the PHF model, in that it does not use scattered-site market apartments and renders notions of choice essentially

irrelevant.

Rapid housing is a common goal of the PHF model, as well as a HF principle articulated by Employment and Social Development Canada (2014). However, there is no agreed-upon definition of what timeframe this refers to, or the process HF agencies should follow to ensure it is achieved (Zerger *et al.*, 2014). In this research, timeframes (from intake to placement) ranged from 30 days to two years for those programs that operated waitlists. Shortages of affordable rental stock and difficulties in securing apartments (e.g. in a “landlords’ market”) contributed to inconsistent but generally increasing wait times for housing. The extra effort required to find appropriate housing, and to acquire/maintain landlord support, made the ‘work’ of providing HF harder and more time-consuming.

Implementing HF is an ongoing process, in which creative strategies are often necessary in response to changing circumstances (Gaetz *et al.*, 2013; Zerger *et al.*, 2014). HF agencies cannot exert influence over market dynamics, but can work to improve landlord recruitment and engagement, as was clearly evidenced in this research. Every HF program had developed staff positions dedicated to working with private landlords to secure housing. The significant commitment of agency time and resources reflected both general market dynamics, and the reluctance of some landlords to take on HF clients. It was a key strategy for enabling HF to continue to function in a challenging context.

This research was conducted in a policy environment characterized by robust and progressive commitments to ending homelessness across all levels of government. This has translated into widespread support for HF programs, but corresponding plans to increase the supply of affordable housing have not been realized. In addition, social assistance rates remain very low, and continue to be eroded by inflation, greatly impeding the ability of recipients to secure rental housing. Moreover, affordability declined markedly during a period of strong economic growth that prevailed until mid-2015. While this “boom” subsequently turned to “bust”, such cycles are a recurring feature of Alberta’s resource-dependent economy. Another marked upswing, with associated pressure on the housing market, would be consistent with recent history (Evans, 2015). As such, HF programs in Alberta operate in an environment in which they

are likely to encounter significant shortages of affordable housing on a cyclical basis. In this context, long-term adherence to HF principles is difficult, and further innovation may be necessary to realize the central goal of securing permanent housing for the homeless. For example, although use of scattered-site, independent housing is key to the PHF model, greater acceptance of other housing options – including HF-program owned sites, congregate living arrangements, and living with roommates – may be necessary. Congregate housing models can offer greater on-site support and programming, and stronger connections with peers, which can be beneficial to client outcomes (Somers *et al.*, 2017).

## 7. Conclusion

This study was conducted in two cities experiencing profound shortages of affordable housing – a context that will not exist in every environment where HF programs operate. However, such shortages are by no means unique to Alberta and are likely to complicate the implementation of HF programs elsewhere. Most HF programs rely on market apartments, leaving them vulnerable to rising rents and falling vacancy rates, particularly in cities with a residual social housing sector and few permanent supportive housing options – a common scenario across Canada (Gaetz *et al.*, 2013). Over time, these programs need to identify ways to adapt to or overcome the associated challenges. This research identified several such adaptations, including the creation of landlord-oriented staff positions, and the selective prioritization of rapid housing over client choice. Tension between immediate access to housing and client choice has also been reported in Toronto (Zerger *et al.*, 2014). In that case, the latter principle tended to be prioritized over the former. Further research is required to explore the range of responses developed in other contexts, both within and beyond Canada. These studies should be attentive to the role of private landlords – key actors in shaping access to the rental market, who remain under-examined in HF research.

While adaptation is a necessary part of HF implementation, it can also raise concerns about further drift away from the PHF model on which most evidence of effectiveness is based. While HF has proven to be a highly malleable approach to addressing the problem of chronic homelessness (Baker & Evans, 2016), there are surely important questions to be asked: How

are different principles to be weighted when contextual factors bring them into conflict? When does adaptation erode the distinction between HF and non-HF approaches? At this point, the standard set forth by Tsemberis (2012) – namely, that modifications to HF are permissible when undertaken for client-centred motives – becomes an important analytical position. In our research, most programs maintained a strong client focus in their tenacious efforts to secure housing. However, in a minority of instances, programs appeared to focus more on utilizing their own apartments than on client needs *per se*.

Hennigan (2017) has recently emphasized the role of the housing market in “disciplining” HF clients – in that it mandates certain social and economic behaviours. Here we see that HF providers are also disciplined, going to considerable lengths to find and retain housing. At times when the rental market is relatively inaccessible, programs may be required to deal with slumlords, to accept housing in bad neighbourhoods, and to adopt a general attitude of ‘take whatever you can get.’ These adaptations are likely to limit programs’ potential to promote positive community integration, a key HF goal. If HF is to remain a “principled” approach to addressing homelessness (see Gaetz *et al.*, 2013; Goering *et al.*, 2014), it is necessary not only to examine the adaptations of HF programs, but also to problematize the contexts in which they operate. Doing so will draw attention to the necessity of increasing both the supply of affordable housing (particularly in non-market forms, which can be insulated from rent increases) and social assistance levels (so as to give more purchasing power to the poorest members of society). Without significant progress in both of these areas, the reliance of HF programs on market apartments needs to be questioned, as the promise of ending homelessness is unachievable when high rents and low supply put those apartments out of reach.

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