Not a "forever model": The curious case of graduation in Housing First

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates how Housing First (HF) is practiced in Alberta, Canada, with a focus on the concept of graduation. The dominant HF model, Pathways, holds that client support should be time-unlimited. However, HF is highly mobile and increasingly characterized by ambiguity and drift away from Pathways principles. In Alberta, one prominent example of drift is the notion that clients can and should graduate – that is, "exit" HF programs after a certain time. Interviews conducted with 45 participants in three Alberta cities in 2014-15 revealed commonplace, but contested, graduation practices. Interviewees noted that graduation can be necessary to make room for new clients, and may be expected and encouraged by coordinating organizations. They expressed varied concerns about graduation, and the negative influence it could have on client relationships and housing stability. In particular, they emphasized clients' ongoing dependence on rental subsidies, and the risk of relapse into homelessness.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past 25 years, homelessness in Canada has become an increasingly visible and pressing problem. Over 200,000 Canadians experience homelessness every year, and for up to 15% of this diverse group, it becomes a recurring or chronic condition (Gaetz, Donaldson,

Richter, & Gulliver, 2013). The emergence of this crisis can be traced to policy decisions in the early 1990s – especially drastic cuts to affordable and social housing programs. These cuts contributed to a major decline in the supply of affordable housing across Canada, which has since been amplified by various housing market factors, including rampant gentrification and the conversion of rental apartments to owner-occupied condominiums (Collins, 2010). In addition, a combination of "wage suppression, benefit reduction, growth of part time work and the deindustrialization of the Canadian economy" (Gaetz, 2010, p. 22) has undermined the ability of many low-income earners to afford housing. This "perfect storm" of public policy changes, housing market factors and economic shifts created the conditions for a nationwide homelessness crisis (Laird, 2007, p. 7).

In line with national trends, homelessness in Alberta increased dramatically from the mid-1990s. While attributable in part to the general factors outlined above, this increase was also caused by issues unique to the province. In particular, episodes of strong economic growth, fuelled by extractive industries, contributed to sharp increases in cost-of-living as well as high rates of international and domestic in-migration. Evans (2015) describes a "paradox of plenty" in Alberta, whereby these episodes fuel migration, which increases demand for rental housing, while constraining supply through escalating building costs and high rates of condo conversion. Homelessness is one consequence of this paradox, and has become an ingrained issue in urban centres, most notably in the major cities of Edmonton and Calgary (Turner, 2015).

Over the last decade, policy responses to homelessness in Alberta – and Canada more generally – have moved towards a Housing First (HF) approach, consistent with an international "paradigm shift" that is placing rapid access to regular housing "at the forefront of homelessness policy and program planning" (Johnson, Parkinson, & Parsell, 2012, p. 2). HF has become the "new orthodoxy" guiding responses to chronic homelessness (Hennigan, 2016, p. 2). In Alberta, the provincial government and seven urban centres have adopted Ten Year Plans to End Homelessness (10YPs), which prioritize moving people from homelessness into independent rental apartments, with appropriate supports to remain housed. Further support

stems from the federal government, which has also endorsed and funded HF programs across Canada.

HF operates on the premise that housing is the first need for someone experiencing homelessness, and that other issues can be better addressed once an individual has obtained safe and secure housing (Goering et al., 2014). It is a major shift away from the previously dominant policy response to homelessness – known as the staircase model, or linear residential treatment (LRT) approach. It treats housing as a privilege and rests on the assumption that clients must become "housing ready" prior to being offered a permanent, independent place to live. Housing readiness typically entails abstinence from alcohol and other drugs, and compliance with a treatment plan (e.g. for addictions, mental health issues). LRT also requires clients to work their way up a continuum of housing services (the "staircase"), beginning in emergency housing (Padgett, Stanhope, Henwood, & Stefancic, 2011). This approach has significant limitations, including that many individuals ultimately fail to progress "up" the steps needed to reach permanent, independent housing and out of chronic homelessness (Tsemberis, 1999). HF was developed, in part, to address these shortcomings. Common principles of HF include rapid re-housing (without tests of readiness), separation of housing and treatment services, client choice in housing, and access to standard tenancies (Tsemberis, 2010; Waegemakers Schiff & Rook, 2012). There is an inherent geography to this response, in that HF clients are removed from the public spaces and institutions of the city, and housed in private apartments, which are typically scattered across a wide area. The consequent "privatization" and dispersal of this population may align HF with street clearance objectives at the same time as it provides acutely vulnerable people with access to housing, in a non-moralistic manner (Baker & Evans, 2016; Hannigan, 2016).

Although the core tenets of HF can be described relatively simply, the term itself is increasingly used in ambiguous and inconsistent ways. As Baker and Evans (2016) describe: "Housing First is at once a philosophy and a social movement; it is a policy approach and a style of service delivery; it refers to a precise model with specific features and a family of loosely related

models" (p. 27). The "precise model" referred to here is Pathways to Housing, developed by Sam Tsemberis in New York City. The Pathways Housing First (PHF) approach entails providing chronically homeless clients with independent market apartments scattered throughout a city, and providing separate supports for as long as required to enable them to remain housed. The evidence base associated with HF – in terms of its ability to achieve high levels of housing stability for clients, and to reduce their use of expensive public services – is strongly tied to the PHF approach.

As HF has proliferated rapidly within and beyond North America, "drift" away from the characteristics of PHF has been observed (Pleace, 2011; Stefancic, Tsemberis, Messeri, Drake, & Goering, 2013). Thus, while the PHF approach continues to be "widely referred to as *the* housing first model, in practice there are innumerable variations" (Baker & Evans, 2016, p. 28). These variations stem in part from the ways in which HF is both a highly mobile form of urban policy, and an intervention that is necessarily shaped by local contexts. As such, there are spatial challenges to fidelity. In a major European study, Greenwood, Stefancic, and Tsemberis (2013) found commitment to PHF principles was tempered by external factors (e.g. shortages of affordable housing and intensive services), meaning no program was an exact replica of the PHF model. In particular, the ability of programs to offer client choice was constrained by affordability challenges, and barriers to accessing both market and social housing. Busch-Geertsema (2014) also reported on the adaptation of PHF principles to local housing and service provision contexts in Europe, which in one city included a 12-month limit on client support. Both studies emphasize that significant drift away from aspects of PHF did not prevent programs from achieving key goals such as housing retention, or from adopting the name 'Housing First'.

While one body of literature charts the increasing fragmentation of HF, a second unpacks its foundational premises and question its ethics. Central to this more critical stance is the observation that HF is grounded in a specific economic case for managing chronic homelessness – a narrow and instrumentalist logic that prioritizes re-housing a subset of the homeless

population in order to reduce public costs (Evans, Collins, & Anderson, 2016). Thus, just beneath the apparently enlightened and humanitarian surface of HF lies a "broader neoliberal demand for cost-effective, lean poverty governance" (Hennigan, 2016, p. 2). The monetized framing of homelessness has focussed attention on the consumption of public services by the long-term homeless, and the potential to reduce this burden through permanent re-housing. For Harris (2017, p. 345), re-housing is a form of "triage" which "leav[es] the economic factors that produce homelessness untouched." Moreover, by problematizing homelessness in terms of (over-) consumption of medical and emergency services, HF also appears to represent the underlying problem as one of individual afflictions and deficiencies, rather than societal failure to ensure supply of adequate, affordable housing (Katz, Zerger & Hwang, 2017).

HF operates *within* the same market structures that make housing unaffordable to many, via its reliance on independent market apartments to house clients. Public rental subsidies make these apartments at least temporarily affordable for clients, but the housing stock itself is often limited in supply, weakly regulated and poorly maintained – including in Canadian cities (Katz et al., 2017). Clients remain vulnerable to eviction – a potential disciplinary mechanism encouraging self-regulation (Harris, 2017) – and continue to be priced out of the housing market more generally. HF is thus no "silver bullet" for ending the homelessness crisis (Katz et al., 2017): in and of itself it neither prevents homelessness, nor ensures that those who receive housing and supports can do much more than "graduate from the trauma of homelessness into the normal everyday misery of extreme poverty, stigma and unemployment" (Tsemberis, 2010, p. 52).

Against the backdrop of a growing literature articulating the ambiguities, limitations and complex politics of HF, this research investigates ways in which HF is *practiced* in Alberta, from the perspectives of both service providers and service users. We focus in particular on *practices of graduation*, which relate to the imposition of time limits on support for HF clients. These practices are widespread, although far from standardized. Critically, they are understood by both HF service providers and clients to jeopardize housing stability, and thus the policy

commitment to "ending homelessness". This commitment is embedded in local, provincial and federal plans, but can become disconnected from on-the-ground practices of service delivery, which also reflect local challenges and priorities.

PATHWAYS, PRINCIPLES AND FIDELITY

HF is a response to homelessness that is defined by commitment to unique principles. Adherence to these principles across different programs, cities and countries is central to the notion of *fidelity* in HF (Pleace & Bretherton, 2013). Fidelity is valued for the way it ensures that evidence of HF's effectiveness in one location is transferable to others. It may also ensure that HF programs are, in broad terms, rights-oriented: the principles of HF reflect an underlying view that housing is something to which homeless people are entitled, rather than something they must earn through behavioural compliance and sobriety (Greenwood et al., 2013).

The term fidelity typically refers to the degree of exactness with which new programs adhere to the principles of the PHF model. Tsemberis (2010) authored a PHF implementation manual, which included specific information on these principles, as well as steps on how to put them into practice and gain community support for implementation. Subsequently, Stefancic et al. (2013) developed and validated a PHF fidelity scale, which set out detailed criteria, including: eliminating barriers to housing access and retention; fostering a sense of home; facilitating community integration and minimizing stigma; using a harm reduction approach; and adhering to consumer choice. Several studies have investigated the links between program fidelity and client outcomes. Gilmer et al. (2014) found that clients in high-fidelity programs in California who were offered a choice in their housing arrangements and were assisted to secure housing that met their individual needs spent more time in their apartments, and less time homeless, than those in low-fidelity programs. In Canada, Goering et al. (2015) reported that higher fidelity was significantly associated with improvements in clients' housing stability, community functioning and quality of life.

The issue of HF service duration – that is, the length of time that clients remain within a program – has received limited attention in the literature. The PHF approach is generally

associated with "time-unlimited support." For Tsemberis (2010, p. 18), one of the eight key principles of PHF is "a commitment to working with clients for as long as they need" including through times of hospitalization, incarceration or further homelessness. Support should only be reduced or discontinued when no longer required by the client, "at which point they may graduate" (Tsemberis, 2010, p. 18). Similarly, other articles describing the key characteristics of PHF refer to its "open-ended" quality (Pleace, 2011, p. 117), and state that "support is not time limited, thus enabling long-term continuity of care" (Johnsen & Teixeira, 2012, p. 187).

In Stefancic et al.'s (2013, p. 246) fidelity scale, one of the key criteria that must be met for programs to receive a high rating is "permanent housing tenure," which entails "no expected time limits…, although the lease agreement may need to be renewed periodically." Further underscoring the point, the scale also includes a "commitment to rehouse" (p. 247) item, emphasizing that HF programs should offer new apartments to evicted clients. However, in discussing the international proliferation of HF, Johnsen and Teixeira (2012) identify the imposition of time limits on both service provision and housing as a common deviation from the PHF approach, especially in Europe. They critique this development, noting that it may inadvertently dis-incentivize progress, as clients avoid steps towards housing stability that could lead to (early) withdrawal of support (Johnsen & Teixeira, 2012).

The concept of time limits, then, has been acknowledged in the academic literature on HF - where it is typically characterized as a departure from PHF principles. The specific term "graduation" is seldom referenced in this body of work, appearing only rarely in reference to the idea that clients whose lives are stable may *choose* to leave HF programs (see Tsemberis, 2010). This said, graduation has been discussed in the grey literature describing HF practices in Canada (Gaetz et al., 2013; Waegemakers Schiff, 2014). In some Canadian programs, graduation is a mandated process (and outcome) once clients have reached certain criteria for independence, such as maintaining housing for a specified length of time. These practices are not *necessarily* inconsistent with Tsemberis' understanding – for example, Gaetz et al. (2013, p. 16) define graduation in terms of the ability of HF clients to "live in permanent housing on a

relatively independent basis" when *they* no longer require a high level of case management, while noting that these clients may still require financial subsidies to remain housed. This said, some programs identify graduation as a goal that staff and clients should or must work towards, including within relatively short timeframes. In this respect, case management within HF can come to echo other modalities of care, in which clients are pushed to reform themselves in particular ways (Evans, 2012; Hennigan, 2016).

Notions of graduation as an expectation or requirement are traditionally associated with LRT programs. For example, Stanhope and Dunn (2010, p. 278) characterize these programs as offering a "residential continuum, where people would graduate from more restricted housing models, such as group homes, to less restricted housing, such as independent apartments with supportive services." Tsemberis (1999) also refers to graduation within linear programs, noting that with each successful step up, staff support is typically reduced. In HF, graduation has a different connotation, referring to "exit" from a program, although possibly with some ongoing access to less intensive supports and/or rental subsidies (Gaetz et al., 2013). It is against this backdrop that we move to discuss our research into the practices of HF in Alberta.

STUDY CONTEXT
The overarching goal of this study was to examine how HF is interpreted, adapted and implemented in Alberta, through the everyday practices of housing agencies and their staff. We did not conduct a formal fidelity assessment – in part because few programs in Alberta claim to follow the PHF model upon which notions of fidelity are based. Instead, we sought out the perspectives of both service providers and service users (clients) on the everyday practices of HF programs, and the ideas, priorities and contextual factors that underpin them. The concept of graduation (as a mandatory or expected outcome) emerged as a major finding of our investigation into these practices.

Our research entailed a qualitative, multiple case study approach. Multicase studies possess the same benefits of a single case design in capturing real world contexts, but with the additional advantage of enabling research to identify how a program or phenomenon performs within

different environments (Stake, 2013). Specifically, they can provide insights into how a phenomenon, process or outcome is influenced by contextual factors that vary between cases. Ultimately, multicase studies allow for the development of more extensive descriptions and explanations of issues than a single case (Chmiliar, 2010).

The selected case studies were the major cities of Edmonton and Calgary, and the smaller centre of Medicine Hat. At the time of the research (2014-15), housing markets in Edmonton and Calgary were characterized by high rents and low vacancy rates, with correspondingly large homeless populations (see Table 1). Medicine Hat was included as a point-of-contrast, due to its lower rents and a higher vacancy rate, and smaller homeless population (in both absolute and relative terms).

Table 1: Study context: three Alberta cities

	Edmonton	Calgary	Medicine Hat
2014 Population (Government of Alberta, 2014)	877,926	1,195,194	61,180
2014 Average Monthly Rent for 2-bedroom Apartment (CMHC, 2014)	$1,227	$1,322	$795
October 2014 Vacancy Rate (CMHC, 2014)	1.7%	1.4%	4.1%
2014 Homeless Individuals Counted (Turner, 2015)	2307	3555	64

The policy context for HF service provision in these three cities involves a complex overlap of municipal, provincial and federal plans. With regards to time-limits and graduation, these plans are inconsistent, with one set broadly replicating the PHF approach, and another set emphasizing that clients can and should exit HF programs. The former group includes the Provincial 10YP (Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness, 2008, p. 17), which does not specifically address time limits, but recognizes that different clients require varying levels of

support to "maintain their housing and restore stability," and emphasizes that those with the highest needs require "robust, ongoing support in order to remain stable and avoid becoming homeless again." Also in this group are the 10YPs for Edmonton and Calgary. The Edmonton plan stands out for stating that "prescribed time limits will not be set" (Edmonton Committee to End Homelessness, 2009, p. 28) on HF services, and that the provision of permanent housing "is not time-limited" (p. 62). At the same time, it envisions that clients with relatively low needs will be '"graduating out" of supported housing into more independent living situations' (Edmonton Committee to End Homelessness, 2009, p. 28); the immediate context for this statement suggests that "graduating out" would be voluntary, consistent with the PHF model. The equivalent plan in Calgary (Calgary Committee to End Homelessness, 2008) specifically adopts the PHF model, but makes no mention of service timeframes (unlimited or otherwise).

A second group of documents envisions HF as a time-limited intervention in clients' lives. The federal *Homelessness Partnering Strategy* (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2014, n.p.) articulates "promoting self-sufficiency" as a principle of HF, and posits an "end goal" in which clients "stabilize and successfully exit the program". Also in this group is the Medicine Hat plan (Medicine Hat Community Housing Society, 2014, p. 27), which describes HF as providing time-limited forms of support, with higher-needs clients receiving 1-2 years of support before moving to independent living or permanent supportive housing, and lower-needs clients receiving "a time-limited subsidy and supportive services, usually one year or less".

In each of the three cities, a single community-based organization is the designated "system planner" responsible for implementing plans to end homelessness. They receive municipal, provincial and federal grants, with provincial payments representing the single largest income stream (62-77% of total revenue in 2015). These organizations direct and coordinate responses to homelessness in their respective cities by funding HF providers and operating support services such as information management systems; they also develop and manage their own stocks of supportive and affordable housing (from which some rental income is derived).

METHODS

Data collection for this research involved in-person interviews with two groups of participants. Key informant interviews were conducted with service providers – referring to professionals who worked in front-line or managerial roles. Interviews were semi-structured in character, with questions focussed on the day-to-day actions that agencies and staff carry out to implement a HF approach, and deliver services to clients. Three specific questions were asked about graduation practices, and the ways in which these interconnected with local housing market dynamics.

Biographical life history interviews (see May, 2000) were conducted in-person with service users – referring to people with lived experiences of homelessness or severe housing need, and who were past, current or prospective (often wait-listed) clients of HF agencies. Questions encouraged participants to recount their experiences of homelessness, housing unaffordability, and engagement with housing services (especially HF). Lines of inquiry concerning satisfaction with HF programs and ability to secure housing without support led to responses that spoke to the concept of graduation. Current and former HF clients (as well as prospective clients with previous experience in HF) had a generally high level of awareness that HF supports in Alberta were often far from open-ended.

In terms of recruitment, service providers were initially contacted by e-mail, based on information available on the websites of relevant agencies. 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 was information posters and cards placed at housing agencies, shelters and libraries in the three cities. Members of this group were offered a $20 gift card as an incentive for participation.

In total, 45 participants were interviewed in the three case study cities, including 29 service providers (11 in Edmonton, 11 in Calgary, and seven in Medicine Hat) and 16 service users

(seven in Edmonton, six in Calgary, and three in Medicine Hat). The service providers collectively represented 10 HF agencies; all received funding for (and public recognition as) Housing First services, although only two self-identified as PHF programs. Of the service users, housing arrangements at the time of interview were varied: five were currently housed and receiving HF support; six were homeless (four wait-listed for HF services, one former HF client, one eligible for HF support but not connected with an agency); five were precariously housed (three former HF clients, one wait-listed 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. Ethical approval for this project was granted by the Research Ethics Board at [Name Redacted]. 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 indicating only their city (E, C or MH) and participant group (SP for service provider, SU for service user).

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 takes into account its specific information requirements and emphasis on using data to answer questions. Additional features of "framework" include that it is grounded in the original accounts of participants and allows for between- and within-case analysis (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002). Our analysis adhered to the five-part "framework" process, which enables the systematic indexing of themes, and the identification of associations and patterns within the data. To enhance rigour, we organized community feedback sessions, in order to check that participants' accounts had been appropriately interpreted and expressed. These sessions were held in Edmonton and Calgary, and involved a short presentation and distribution of an

executive summary, followed by questions and discussion. Unfortunately, there was insufficient interest among participants to hold such a session in Medicine Hat.

RESULTS

The practices of HF in Alberta are shaped by formal and informal expectations around time limits and graduation procedures. The accounts of service providers revealed commonplace, but contested, expectations and requirements that HF clients will graduate. However, no standard approach to graduation was evident; the 10 HF agencies involved in this research fell on a spectrum from those that envisioned HF as a short-term form of assistance with a relatively fixed graduation deadline (n=2), to those that generally expected clients to graduate, but did not impose specific timeframes (n=6), to those that offered support for as long clients wanted it, consistent with the Pathways approach (n=2).

Five recurring ideas (sub-themes) were identified in participants' discussions of graduation. All five were discussed by service providers, and two were also commented upon by service users. With some partial exceptions, discussed below, these ideas did not vary significantly between the three case study cities. Instead, what emerged was considerable variation between *programs*, as well as ambiguity around the *concept* of graduation itself. The first sub-theme, relating to *how graduation works in practice*, clearly illustrated both these points. Two agencies followed the PHF approach of time-unlimited support:

So we don't expect clients to graduate, but we do have some that get well enough over time that they don't seem to need as much intensity and regular visits and you know like they start to be able to take off on this other life trajectory that just seems really good for them. … if they transition to less intensive services out in the community that's fantastic. But it's not like, they'll have to get back in line to get into the program and start all over again [if they need help]. (E-SP6)

You know we can't just assume it'll be stable the rest of their lives, just like you or I. We have to assume there's going to be some challenges in people's lives. And for a lot of our folks, because

they do have major mental illness … something can trigger something in their illness, or they might have a relapse, and that's when we're there, right? As far as housing stability, I feel like so many of our folks have their house once and they stay for years, you know. And they are fine, with those supports in place. (C-SP6)

Other participants worked for HF programs that expected or anticipated graduation to varying degrees, and after support of variable duration. In some instances, they envisioned HF as a short-term form of assistance – in stark distinction to the Pathways approach. Criteria for assessing readiness to graduate after a short period of housing could include case management goals and indicators of client progress, although at two Medicine Hat agencies, the timeframe was definitive:

Our support is a minimum of 12 months but there's no set maximum. At the 12 month mark we try to see if people are ready for graduation, and that's based on stability in their apartment, no problems with neighbours or landlords, their income is steady – all that stuff. (E-SP1)

Our program is shorter too. So it's usually four to six months, I've had people who have graduated in three months, there is still someone in my program who has been there for a year, so it just depends on what they need because things come up as you go along. (MH-SP1)

Typically, we are looking at 12-18 months. And then, off they go kind of thing. (MH-SP2)

Reflecting further on these practices, several service providers identified varying levels of connection between HF agencies and their (former) clients following graduation. While in some cases, graduation ended the relationship, in others connections were retained, because of a recognized need for some level of ongoing oversight and support. For example, several agencies continued to check in with clients after graduation to ensure they did not lose their housing: '*one of the things that we've identified with our staff is that we want them to look at maybe you know [after] six months, we need to find them affordable housing without rental*

assistance' (E-SP2). Such follow-up could be minimal, as one HF client described: '…*the file closes. Then, you know, yes [a HF support worker] checks in at six months and the one year mark, but you're on your own.'* (C-SU8)

In two instances, individual service providers described arrangements they had made to continue providing support to "graduates", based largely on their own initiative. In the first example, the participant offered support to a former client outside of regular work hours, while in the second, the participant ensured that former clients were transferred to another program within the original support agency:

Well there is a relationship here, we built together … do I want him to fail? It's like I put that time and effort and resources in there. I know I shouldn't … I don't get paid for that. But it won't hurt to just stop by and say 'Hi, are you okay? What's it that's going on here? Can we resolve this?' (E-SP11)

I provide additional support and of course when they are graduated they can still be part of this program. So then at that point, I usually end up taking on a lot of what a follow-up support worker would have done anyways. (E-SP5)

Second, participants offered their thoughts on *why programs adopted graduation requirements or expectations*. Two overarching (and inter-connected) reasons were identified: first, graduation can be necessary to make room for new clients in a program; second, system planning organizations can expect or strongly encourage HF programs to graduate clients. With regards to the first of these explanations, participants explained:

Some days it is like 'oh there's so many new people, who can we get off the list?' (E-SP11)

It does the homeless population no service if a person [client] doesn't move forward, because nobody is going to take that spot. (E-SP5)

We had one meeting where a whole bunch of names were listed off, and it was 'these are the people who are homeless. … This is what we need to do, this is how many people need to be housed, let's get on with it' kind of thing. [But] if our programs were full, then [we] would delegate to other programs…. Or we take [lower-needs] clients because we can actually make an argument after eight months, saying 'you know, she took the bull by the horns and out she goes.' (MH-SP2)

In terms of system planning organizations' expectations, these appeared to be strongest in Edmonton, where service providers frequently discussed how the graduation outcomes of different HF programs were taken as a measure of their performance:

I: Do you ever feel pressure to graduate people? From your funder?
SP: Definitely. I think there's definitely certain times, depending on what numbers they are looking at. There's 10 programs in Edmonton that do Housing First, so if they are comparing programs to each other and maybe one is doing better and one is doing worse, you're going to hear about that.
I: Better meaning more graduates?
SP: Yeah, better meaning more graduates, because that means [the system planner] can put more people through the process. (E-SP1)

SP: There's this huge push to graduate people…. We're the only agency out of everybody who's actually been able to even remotely stay within [the system planner's] targets. They want [us] to graduate 6-8 people a month. […]
I: Do you feel like the pressure to graduate puts agencies against each other in some ways?
SP: Oh big time. The reports that get sent out by [system planner] that show every agency and what they are doing [to meet graduation targets], oh big time …. I mean the fact that I'm meeting with other agencies and that's like unheard of [because of competition] is so sad. (E-SP4)

While some participants identified pressures to make room for new clients, and to meet system planning organizations' expectations, others struggled to identify underlying reasons for graduation practices. For many frontline workers, graduation was simply the way HF operated, and something they were required to do. Interestingly, no participants pointed to public policy documents as the basis for graduation; as noted above, these policies tend to address the issue only briefly, and in contradictory ways. For example, the Alberta 10YP makes no mention of time limits or graduation, while the province's official homeless statistics website prominently records the number of HF graduates: 4,448 as at the end of 2015 (Government of Alberta, 2016).

A third sub-theme discussed by both types of participant centred on *the problems with graduation* when it was expected or mandatory. One service provider critiqued the practice on the basis that it was detrimental to the relationship HF providers sought to build with clients:

[This agency] talks about how much they want it to feel like a community and a family and all these things, and they really put a lot of time in to make sure the people in their programs know like, 'we're always here for you, blah blah blah'. But then they try to end, terminate or graduate the people they are working with, and they [clients] self-sabotage over and over just so they can never leave. And I'm just like, well, … maybe family isn't the best analogy to use if you're wanting people to actually then one day never need to talk to you again. (E-SP3)

Another participant elaborated on how the prospect of graduation could distress clients, leading them to take various actions in order to continue receiving HF program support:

Part of the problem is that once the clients find out they are going to graduate, all of a sudden crisis will happen. Here's a prime example, we had … this lady [who] was doing great. We were going through the grad process with her, we were getting close to the very end of it, and as my FSW [follow-up support worker] is walking out the door and saying you know 'we're so proud of

you, you did so great' this woman breaks down and discloses all kinds of trauma. And so we're going okay, now we're back to square one. So we can't graduate her, right? The other one is, when we get close, when we say 'okay we're really close to being done,' they will stop communicating with us, right? So it's like this fear. (E-SP2)

One participant in Medicine Hat worked for an agency that had developed strategies to reduce the potential for self-sabotage and to prepare clients for graduation:

We work really hard on talking [with clients] about graduation the whole way through – 'we aren't just hanging on to you for life and you're never going to be independent, right? Because you get dependent on me and then I leave and you're like "noooo".' So I think we do really well with that – moving people through, [but] not forcing them or pushing them too fast. (MH-SP1)

Several service providers discussed how the timeframe of support their program offered was inadequate. While not necessarily opposed to graduation when it was appropriate for the client, they expressed concern over clients being moved on from program support after a relatively short period of time:

Even the 12-month goal of participation in our program is way too short. That you know, homelessness isn't solved by living in a house for 12 months. (E-SP1)

If you take someone out of them being chronically homeless, the likelihood that they are able to be independent within a year, that thought to me is mind-boggling. That we would even think that's an option. (E-SP8)

Service users also remarked on the disconnect between their need for support, and graduation timeframes. One described the benefits of time-unlimited support in a PHF program, while another articulated the need for assistance beyond 12 months:

I think it's definitely a good program. I mean it's helped me. And the good thing about it, there's no rush. There's no like, 'OK this is for six months and then you're out.' And they allot you as much time as you possibly need to get therapy, help with addiction problems. Which is some of the things why you end up qualifying for the program in the first place. (E-SU1)

I know, for example, it was very helpful to have someone come take me to my psychiatrist appointments or grocery shopping or whatever it was … it was good to have someone taxi me around free of cost, to my important meetings. And that stops after a year as well … So I hope it changes to a forever model. This would make better sense... (E-SU2)

Such concerns were closely related to concerns about the outcomes of graduation, particularly in terms of the potential loss of housing, which would completely undermine the work of HF programs:

They cannot graduate! I mean realistically where the funder [i.e. system planner] is saying 'graduate graduate graduate' – well, are you saying 'evict evict evict' or 'homelessness homelessness'? It defeats the purpose. … We have a conscience, man. We can't just kick people out because they say so. (E-SP5)

My last position was just graduating [clients] for the most part. [I worry] big time. It's that same fear when you put somebody in an apartment for the first time and you walk away and you're like, just please. Holding your breath. …. I think we haven't had anybody come back in [after becoming homeless again] but it's only a matter of time. (E-SP4)

Fourth, service providers talked about *housing stability after graduation*. Across Alberta, HF programs work with clients at intake to secure an income – almost always a form of public assistance, whether federal Employment Insurance or (more commonly) provincial income support. Clients who are eligible for the latter, by virtue of unemployment or permanent disability, receive two main monthly payments – "core essentials" to cover general living costs,

and "core shelter" to cover housing expenses. Critically, the housing component is set at just $323 for a single adult in private housing ($436 for a couple). As this sum is seldom sufficient to secure an apartment (see Table 1), almost all HF clients require a "top up" in the form of a provincial rental supplement. This subsidy is available to both clients in HF programs, and those who have graduated. However, graduates are generally only *guaranteed* the subsidy for one year, at which time a renewal process is required, and their funding may or may not be continued. In addition, it is unclear if the rental subsidy program itself will continue indefinitely. The associated uncertainties were seen as a key threat to housing stability:

And I do have a lot of concerns around money, the subsidies that are being issued. And whether or not an individual - if there's time limits. And if when those time limits expire, then what happens? (C-SP9)

[There's] a whole bunch of people who if the subsidy went away they would return to homelessness almost immediately. (E-SP1)

So of course it comes into my mind that you never know when this will end … I would hope … that when that times comes when that money is going to run out, that there will be some planning involved … of course it's so hard to think about - because yeah when you graduate someone it's like 'oh yeah yeah they are good' but then 'oh that could end.' (MH-SP1)

Service providers emphasized that an ongoing rental supplement was essential for most HF graduates to stay housed, as they would encounter severe affordability challenges without it. In general, they considered it rare for clients to be able to afford market rent, in large part because most remained unemployed: '*Work? I've never seen that happen. … I saw no one go back to work. I remember that [all graduates] would enter the [rental assistance] program*.' (E-SP11). Given ongoing unemployment, and the low level at which the "core shelter" component of provincial income support is set, graduates were extremely vulnerable to future homelessness if their rental subsidy was withdrawn. However, one service provider struck a

different note, reporting that a large proportion of clients could be supported to take on full rental payments upon graduation:

Actually our numbers for graduating clients without rental assistance are higher than graduating clients with rental assistance … they are able to cover the rent on their own. We look at - we have a plan with them, right? … Employment programming, life skills programming, we want to connect them in those areas because that just supports their growth. (E-SP2)

Five of the service user participants in this study reported that they had experienced homelessness at or after graduation. Of these, one was homeless at the time of interview, having lost his apartment two years after graduating from a HF program, due to becoming unemployed and unable to afford rent (E-SU5). One was insecurely housed in Edmonton, following a mental health breakdown and eventual eviction while receiving a low level of support from a HF program elsewhere in Alberta (E-SU2). A couple had lost the apartment they acquired through a HF program in Medicine Hat after a paperwork misunderstanding, in which their post-graduation rental assistance ceased without their knowledge, leading to an eviction (MH-SU1 & MH-SU2). In this case, they qualified to receive HF support again, but had been on a waitlist for nearly two years. The fifth participant had recently been rehoused in a HF program, after being evicted once her previous HF support ended. Throughout a four-month homelessness episode she was out of contact with the program and did not know that she was eligible for rehousing (E-SU7).

A fifth and final sub-theme centred on an alternative to the status quo, whereby most HF programs expect clients to graduate into market housing (albeit with the rental subsidy described above). Specifically, service providers across all three cities highlighted the need for *more permanent supportive housing*. While HF programs are often considered "supported housing" in that they offer support services to individuals living in independent apartments, "permanent supportive housing" refers to housing options with a higher level of support, often available 24/7 in congregate housing models. Permanent supportive housing options are time-

unlimited, may be more tolerant than typical landlords, and offer support services not found in market apartments, such as on-site mental health care, medication assistance, and group programming. Participants articulated a dire need for such housing options, in order to assist high-needs clients after graduation from HF:

If that person isn't physically/mentally capable of caring for themselves and they never will be, then we start looking at permanent supporting housing options, which there is definitely a lack of in the city. (E-SP1)

[There's a] big demand for permanent supportive housing as well. That we just recognize that some people are going to need help the rest of their lives. And if we put the help in, they are going to be successful. If you put them in the market place alone, despite our best efforts to try and get them up to speed and independent - if we take away the supports, they falter. (C-SP10)

Look at permanent supportive housing. For people in our program – social housing isn't going to cut it for those individuals. They need a different housing structure altogether with support services. (MH-SP4)

These comments are noteworthy for the way they highlight that many HF clients require ongoing support – often of a relatively intensive nature – if they are to succeed in remaining housed. This point, while entirely consistent with the HF literature – especially that associated with the Pathways model (e.g. Tsemberis, 2010) – conflicts with the emphasis on graduation in HF programs in Alberta, leading these participants to advocate an alternative housing form for their clients. Service providers repeatedly called into question why graduation is prioritized by many HF programs, when a significant proportion of graduates is unlikely to be successful in market housing, and perhaps even in social housing (of which there is a severe shortage). The current approach appears to carry with it a high risk of repeated homelessness, particularly for clients with complex needs who are likely to need help for "the rest of their lives."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A substantial body of HF literature emphasizes the commitment to ongoing support of clients. A small number of previous studies has observed the use of time limits or graduation expectations within HF programs that depart from the PHF model. However, none has focussed specifically on this issue, and very little is known about why such limits may be adopted, how they work in practice, and what challenges are associated with this significant departure from the PHF principle of time-unlimited support. This article has contributed to addressing these questions through a detailed examination of HF practices in Alberta. Of the 10 HF programs involved in our research, eight had adopted graduation expectations or requirements, highlighting the extent to which the PHF principle of open-ended support is not replicated in Alberta.

Graduation is by no means a standardized process or expectation among HF agencies in Alberta; service providers described programs that fell on a spectrum from those that were open-ended, supporting graduation only if a client was ready and seeking independence - to those that envisioned support as short-term, prioritizing graduation anywhere between six months and a few years. In many cases, graduation practices were complicated and ambiguous – as well as disconnected from policy frameworks (particularly the 10YPs for Edmonton and Calgary, as well as the overarching provincial plan). Uncovering these disconnects speaks to the value of creating grounded accounts of HF informed by service provider and client insights; the actually-existing emphasis on graduation could not have been uncovered through "discourse and desktop analysis" alone (see DeVerteuil, 2014, p. 875). Participants' accounts also revealed that graduation did not necessarily entail a complete cut off of client support. The diversity of approaches and expectations around graduation recorded in this research provides further evidence of policy drift in HF. Critically, even those programs that imposed very short time limits on support *identified* as HF agencies, and received funding from service planner organizations to deliver HF services.

Overall, most service providers who participated in the research were opposed to the idea of imposing graduation requirements, and associated expectations that case management involve "moving people through" (and eventually out of) the HF system. They expressed varied concerns about this practice and the negative influence it could have on clients' wellbeing and trust in HF agencies. Several spoke of clients who sought to avoid graduation through disengagement or "self-sabotage", thereby confirming Johnsen and Teixeira's (2012) concern that graduation requirements can dis-incentivize progress.

Service providers also emphasized that graduation can undermine the positive housing outcomes that have been a distinguishing feature of HF (see Goering et al., 2013). They observed that "graduates" could readily lose their housing because they still required supports, or because they remained economically marginalized and dependent on a rental subsidy. In Alberta, all HF graduates receive at least one year of rental subsidy, which generally acts to prevent immediate relapses into homelessness. However, their long-term housing is highly precarious, as both service providers and service users attested. Although service users did not comment at length on graduation, several expressed their preference for time-unlimited support, and – critically – five articulated life histories in which graduation was implicated in their loss of housing.

In these accounts, we see the potential for graduation to pose a critical threat to housing stability, and thus the fundamental promise of HF that clients will be "readmitted into the proper, housed public" through permanent occupation of private residential space (Hennigan, 2016, p. 2). After graduation, housing appears to be at best "potentially" permanent, assuming that both clients' lives and rental subsidies remain stable. The imposition of graduation expectations and requirements calls into question the extent to which HF offers clients an escape from the mobility that often characterizes homelessness: a HF-supported apartment may become just one more temporary stopping point in lives already characterized by involuntary circulation between street life, insecure housing and public institutions (see DeVerteuil, 2003). At stake here is not only housing security, but also a secure place within a

residential community, and the opportunities for community integration and social connections that this presents (DeVerteuil, 2003; Tsemberis, 2010). At minimum, graduation introduces an additional layer of ambivalence to HF, inviting comparison with other, more established forms of homelessness management in which support and treatment co-exist with logics of control and exclusion (DeVerteuil, 2014).

The exact reasons for the emphasis on graduation among HF programs in Alberta remained opaque, including to participants. To some degree, it was a response to the demands of local context – specifically a housing and economic system that continues to generate new cases of homelessness, and thus demand for HF services. For many programs, it was necessary to graduate existing clients in order to admit those who were currently homeless (and often on waitlists for entry to HF). Some level of adaptation to local circumstances is common among HF programs, and may be beneficial to their long-term success and sustainability (Busch-Geertsema, 2014). For Tsemberis (2012), such changes are not inherently problematic, provided they are undertaken for consumer-centric reasons. In this case, however, graduation may involve prioritizing the needs of one group of consumers (future clients) over another (current clients). The threat to the latter group was starkly highlighted by two service providers who expressed incredulity that clients could recover from chronic homelessness after only a year of housing and support. The rather stripped-down, short-term version of HF offered by some programs in Alberta might also be interpreted in light of the neoliberal politics that have hitherto operated somewhat below the surface of HF policy. When agencies are expected or required to end client support within a specific timeframe, the pernicious logic of "lean poverty governance" (Hennigan, 2016, 2) becomes rather more apparent. Future work could productively examine how HF agencies – like other homeless service providers – both implement and resist "unjust logics of control" within the broader context of "a devolved and residual welfare state" (DeVerteuil, 2014, p. 876). This could include investigating the procedures and criteria by which clients' (supposed) readiness to graduate is assessed.

While fidelity has been an influential notion in some Canadian applications of HF (Goering et al., 2015), in Alberta it appears to have limited purchase. No official or mandatory HF model has been formulated in policy documents, and moreover these documents are inconsistent on the issue of time limits. HF programs appear to have a degree of autonomy to adopt procedures as they deem fit, although system planner organizations can impose their own expectations. In Edmonton, the relevant organization was perceived by participants to place a strong emphasis on graduation – a position that is *prima facie* inconsistent with the municipal 10YP, which mandates a time-unlimited approach. In this context, we contend, there is limited utility in expending further ink on measurements of fidelity (see Hennigan, 2016); it is more productive to conceptualize HF as a varied and contextual set of practices that may bear only tangential connection to the archetypal Pathways model.

Unpacking the inconsistencies and ambiguities of HF as actually practiced is a complex task; as Baker and Evans (2016, p. 27) observe, the term Housing First "demarcates an evolving constellation of ideas, examples and beliefs institutionalised at multiple scales." Attentiveness to local context is critical to understanding this evolution, including the malleability and diversity of HF practices, as well as potential disjuncture between policy and practice. In Alberta (especially Edmonton and Calgary), the conditions of the local housing market at the time of our research – in terms of escalating rents and low vacancy rates – generated pressure to graduate in order to admit new clients, at the same time as they jeopardized the housing stability of those who had graduated. With very few social housing or permanent supportive housing options to fall back on, market apartments offered HF "graduates" a precarious foothold in the housing market, and one that was usually dependent upon rental subsidies. In this scenario, the core claim of HF – that it can stably rehouse the chronically homeless – is surely in serious jeopardy.

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