

At Home/Chez Soi

Winnipeg Site

Later Implementation Evaluation Report



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Three-Page Executive Summary:

This report is the second documenting the implementation of the Mental Health Commission of Canada's At Home/Chez Soi project in Winnipeg covering the late 2010 to late 2011 period. It reports on the changes in program fidelity over this time, and reflects on continued and emerging strengths and challenges in the implementation of the project. The results of interviews and focus groups demonstrate that, while there are issues and challenges associated with the Site, there have been numerous positive results for participants, many of whom are moving towards recovery and stability. These successes are beginning to reveal the effectiveness of the Housing First model.

Focus groups revealed that service teams have built on relationships with individual participants through trust, respect, and a commitment to understanding them as individuals. Daily drop-in programs are seen as particularly successful, providing participants with a consistent, normal social circle. Other successful strategies include better identification of the proper supports for each individual, the ability to be mobile to meet with people in the community, advocating on behalf of participants, and working to teach participants independence. Increased knowledge in working with solvent users has contributed to a change of attitude towards this population and has generated specific support services for them, though challenges remain.

The Winnipeg Site has faced numerous challenges over the last year. Housing procurement remained the most significant challenge into the second year. There is a lack of affordable housing and this limited participant choice of housing to a more central concentration of units; in environments many consider unhelpful to recovery. Service teams have adapted to this challenge through some use of congregate housing, and changes in staffing to provide more housing-support. All stakeholders recognized more time should be spent on eviction prevention rather than constantly re-housing participants. More diversity in housing types was seen as a key missing component, particularly in terms of shared and communal living. Many stakeholders felt there is a need to broaden the definition of **housing** in the At Home program to include other choices. The ability to quickly house participants was hampered by factors including, participants' lack of a housing history or rental record, the lack of a damage deposit fund; and, there remains significant difficulties in housing (and re-housing) solvent users.

The teams identified severe addictions, especially to solvents, as a major barrier to housing stability; yet progress is being made. High rates of eviction, damage, and re-housing were all symptomatic of solvent abuse. Teams have made extraordinary efforts to work with solvent users. ACT has made significant inroads in working with this subgroup, procuring appropriate housing and providing services. There is recognition of a need for additional or different types of programming for solvent users; and an identified need for general substance abuse programs across the Site. Connecting participants to adequate external clinical services continues to be a challenge for all service teams.

Many stakeholders contend that those who have mental health challenges have been more successful than those with severe addictions. The difficulty of connecting participants to medical and psychiatric help was seen as a significant barrier to success for many participants and Wi Che Win felt that there are many undiagnosed participants.

The challenge of delivering sufficient services to participants was identified in Fidelity reports in 2011 and 2012. In response, Wi Che Win and NiApin created groups over the last year, which were successful. However, groups appear to have now declined or stopped for both agencies. Wi Che Win intends to restart group work and NiApin remains focused on its successful drop-in center.

Burnouts, staffing turnover and the use of temporary contracts have affected the ability of staff to build and maintain relationships with the participants and provide the necessary service levels. High eviction rates, and difficulties in maintaining contact with participants, have also affected success rates. All teams have developed strategies to counter this, including changes to staffing, more productive case-meetings, new management, and improved workplace culture. Site Coordinators recommended creating a pool of casual service staff to cover staff-leaves. Also contributing to improvements, caseloads have eased compared to the first year, and there is less need to respond to repeated crisis and re-housings. This has allowed teams to move into more long-term case-management solutions for participants, and this is already demonstrating results.

The Site has had great success with the inclusion of people with lived experience in the project. Teams report on the great value of the work they do working with participants. There is some concern, that high demands have been placed on people with lived experience, resulting in increased stress.

Working with external service agencies and bureaucracies continues to be a challenge for the Site. Teams have made good contacts with Employment Insurance Canada and, to a lesser extent, Child and Family Services. However, many external agencies have processes that work at cross-purposes to each other and the At Home project; causing frustration for the teams. More work strengthening relationships with external agencies would be beneficial to the project.

Most noteworthy for this report was the enthusiasm among service staff for the remarkable recovery that many participants have achieved. Many outcomes have changed for the participants including participants remaining in housing for two years, and many stories of participants seeking out education, volunteering opportunities and employment. Some participants have become more confident in advocating for themselves, and family reunification has been especially rewarding for some.

Personal change among participants is being observed. Participants are developing their own voice and strengths, and this is apparent with participants 'going to a doctor' or overcoming anxiety; to participants testifying in court or with the Residential Tenancy Board. Service teams have begun seeing participants '*going to a deeper level*' in their sharing and Site Coordinators remarked on the long-lasting impacts the project is having in communities as people begin to embrace Housing First.

Service teams noted some critical ingredients of Housing First: Acceptance, Empowerment and Responsibility, have become the philosophies of the teams. Personal staff qualities of non-judgmental kindness, respect, acceptance, and commitment, were also emphasized.

Landlords had mixed experiences with the project. They typically liked the programs and services offered: holding fees, provision of repair services through Manitoba Green Retrofit, assistance with moving problem tenants, and the education component. All landlords felt that At Home is a positive program providing advantages and opportunities to participants. Several identified that participants without addictions, were the least trouble for them. At the same time, the guaranteed rent offered by the program was seen as less of a benefit to landlords. All landlords wanted participants that were quiet, clean, and respectful of the property and neighbours. Almost all noted the importance of life-skills as a factor in participant success. Most landlords said that they tried to treat At Home participants the same, or better, than any other tenant.

Landlords attributed success stories to good supports and service workers; and there have been many successes. However, for the failed tenancies, landlords cited insufficient supports for participants, lack of life-skills, and addictions as contributing factors. There were reports from landlords that a few participants had not received the supports that the program promised, and this is partially supported by the Fidelity Reports. Landlords suggested transitional housing with life-skills learning services, and

more ownership on the part of participants in terms of choosing their housing and furnishings, would be beneficial to the project.

Landlords singled out solvent abusers stated that they had zero tolerance for solvent use contending it is a health and safety risk for everyone in the building. Landlords interviewed were averse to working with solvent abusers.

A common issue raised by landlords was the added layers of bureaucracy that working with the program entailed. This situation was aggravated by poor communication at multiple levels. Landlords offered a simpler line of communication as a solution.

Several landlords also commented that the project had not lived up to verbal agreements. The changes in holding fees, assistance in evicting problem participants, and the reduction in the services of Manitoba Green Retrofit were viewed negatively by landlords.

As the project moves into its final year, questions about sustainability have become increasingly important for participants and staff alike. Service teams are making every effort to be clear with participants that the project is working on continuation, but communication with participants has been a problem. Participants, of course, are worried that they will be on the street within a year, and this is causing anxiety. Staff as well, have expressed worry, but planning for the transition has begun with a push to get participants on the waiting list for Manitoba Housing.

All stakeholders interviewed for this report offered an enormous amount of information on lessons learned about the project, its implementation, and future directions. Several needs were identified including: programming to help tenants who have been evicted, addictions and trauma programming, and additional types of housing. Stronger relationship with outside service agencies, governments departments, and Aboriginal agencies were also often remarked upon.

Staff workloads and workplace culture have improved dramatically over the last year, especially with the initial intake now past. Improvements in communication across the Site have helped, as have the adaptations of the site including the further integration of Aboriginal culture by all teams, and the development of the service agencies, Manitoba Green Retrofit and Housing Plus.

Site leadership felt that the public is growing more aware about the prevalence of homelessness and attitudes are changing for the better. Lastly, we heard over, and over again that harm reduction works, and that the At Home project is working.