

EXPLORING EFFECTIVE SYSTEMS RESPONSES TO HOMELESSNESS



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INTRODUCTION

Carey DOBERSTEIN & Naomi NICHOLS

Homelessness is a systemic problem involving numerous sectors, institutions and agencies and, therefore, requires more integrated system responses in terms of governance, policy and programs. The widespread homelessness experienced in our communities indeed reveals deep structural inequities in our economy and society that ought to be addressed, but also represents a systematic governance failure characterized by a lack of ownership of this issue in and across government. The growing scholarly and practitioner movement towards systems integration thus refers to strategies and frameworks to improve collaboration and coordination between people, organizations and sectors that touch upon homelessness, including some that may not conceive of themselves as directly related to the issue.

A key problem is that most services and programs within this realm have been developed incrementally and have evolved in parallel: housing separate from social services which are separate from health services, corrections, mental health or employment and each has a separate funding stream, different set of rules and usually a separate service location. The resulting patchwork of services can be replete with gaps and inefficiencies that undermine efforts to help citizens exit from homelessness, no matter how well each program may function individually. And in some countries, senior-level government coordination incentive programs have been more focused on filling gaps in the system and less particularly focused on generating effective systemic changes in the relationships between agencies and funders (Hambrick & Rog, 2000).

As such, scholars and advocates increasingly point toward collaborative or network governance involving civil society professionals, government officials and researchers as a key governance mechanism toward systems planning and integration (Doberstein, 2016). Yet network governance for cross-sectoral collaboration presents its own challenges, given the diversity of interests and policy legacies that must be thoughtfully reconciled and untangled (Concordora, 2008). There are organizational and individual-level considerations with respect to governance design and management that matter greatly to the success of interagency and intergovernmental collaborative action (Smith & Mogro-Wilson, 2008). This problem is not unique to the public response to homelessness (see for example Allen and Stevens (2007) in relation to health and Wiig and Tuel (2008) in relation to child welfare) but it is especially relevant to this issue given the vast assortment of policy activity and programs across sectors and the multiple causes of and pathways to homelessness. Yet despite these challenges associated with collaborative governance, within the broader public administration literature there is a growing sense that coherence and cohesiveness of

policy ought to be a more important consideration for policymakers, with suggestions that “substantial public value is being lost to insufficient collaboration in the public sector” (Bardach, 1998: 11).

It is important to establish at the onset of this volume that systems planning and integration alone will not end homelessness. Adequate and sustained funding commitments from government in this regard are essential components upon which all of the contributions and findings within this volume hinge. Financial resources for housing and program investments are critical, though they are not the only resources that need to be reconfigured in systems integration efforts. Simply allocating more money toward housing and homelessness alone will not be effective without a strategic orientation and policy framework that ensures that the various sectors and public authorities are working toward the same end goal. Thus human resources, time, knowledge and expertise constitute important resources that must be critically examined in systems integration efforts alongside the issue of securing adequate and sustained financial resources. In this regard, cultivating a culture of collaboration is an essential ingredient to systems integration in terms of high-level governance and policy all the way down to service integration on the ground.

WHAT ARE THE GOALS OF THIS BOOK?

This edited volume finds its origin in our desire to move the discussion forward among those focused on homelessness toward a more intentional and coordinated suite of policies and programs. Consistent with the collaborative approach advocated in this book within the policy realm, we sought to draw on the expertise and experience of service providers, program specialists, government officials and academic researchers in various fields to assemble the first comprehensive examination of systems planning and integration efforts, with a particular focus on systems-level reforms underway in Canada.

One of the primary goals of this volume is to bridge the gap between scholarship on systems integration and the practice of it. Problems of coordination and integration are not unique to homelessness but it is especially relevant to this problem and thus we aim to draw upon scholarly contributions that can structure our analysis and provide the means through which

we can evaluate and improve our efforts. Equally important is to marshal stories from the ground to display the emerging and established efforts toward systems integration and coordination across Canada and abroad to reveal common challenges, opportunities and lessons.

Systems integration may appear to be a daunting task given the complexity of the broader homelessness system and the multitude of governments, overlapping authorities and competing interests. Yet we have assembled three dozen case studies written by practitioners on the ground and researchers in the field to demonstrate that systemic change is possible at various levels of activity within the realm of homelessness and associated sectors. We do not need to wait for the perfect conditions to emerge to resolve governance and service inefficiencies – our day-to-day work is always where sustained change is derived and upon which further efforts and refinements are built.

The assemblage of case studies all across Canada, complemented by a few international case studies, at the service, program and governance levels serve to reveal the connectivity between legislative mandates, policy frameworks, resources and sectors. Policy and programs may be created and evolve within a narrow space but their effects are certainly not limited to their own domain. The case studies cut across sectors that touch upon homelessness – including housing, health, child protection and enforcement – each consistently revealing that policies derived from the associated sectors have at times dramatic impacts on their ability to intervene and deliver services or programming effectively.

The final objective of this volume is to leverage the three dozen case studies to distill lessons about what is

working as well as the areas most in need of reform, in terms of early systems integration efforts. What are the common difficulties encountered by civil society and government when initiating these types of integration efforts? What are the first steps to take? How are inter-sectoral tensions resolved? What are the concrete strategies that have been employed on the ground to initiate and sustain systems integration and planning? What are common mistakes to be avoided? One thing this book project revealed immediately is that contrary to conventional wisdom, there is a lot of ‘systems’ style thinking and activity in Canada. We are not at ground zero. Yet as this agenda gathers momentum we need to identify the early lessons and identify the areas in most need of change to achieve sustained and effective systems integration.

MAJOR THEMES IN THE BOOK

Systems planning and integration efforts occur across numerous levels, from the actions of individuals working on the ground, to agencies collaborating and learning, to networks of agencies and governments engaging in deliberative problem solving, to intergovernmental collaborative policymaking. To reflect this diversity and to isolate the unique challenges and opportunities at each level, we have separated out the contributions to this volume along these lines. The following paragraphs outline the broad contours of this volume and preview the superb contributions from practitioners and scholars alike across Canada and abroad.

PROGRAM AND SERVICE-LEVEL COLLABORATION

The first section of this volume is focused on wide-spectrum service collaboration among agencies and government to integrate and coordinate their activities with the most direct and immediate impact on those accessing services.

In the first chapter in this section, Dressler reports on the Calgary Homeless Foundation's Coordinated Access and Assessment system in which housing providers collectively place clients in appropriate Housing First programs, after observing it in real time over eight months. Dressler then reflects on successes and challenges with the approach. Norman and Pauly complement the Dressler chapter on Calgary's system with an evaluation of Victoria's Centralized Access to Supportive Housing, finding similar patterns in terms of early results but also distinct challenges going forward in their context.

Hurtubise and Rose reflect on their six-month period of being embedded with an inter-organizational team composed of health workers, social workers and police officers in Montreal that provides follow-up on the streets and case management on a mid- and long-term basis as an alternative to the criminalization of homelessness. Kline and Shore document a wholly different approach to a systems integration effort in Pinellas County, Florida, centred around a large shelter that involves multiple levels of government, enforcement and faith-based organizations jointly engaging in a cultural shift away from previous practices in a challenging political environment.

In a short vignette, Charette, Kuropatwa, Warkentin and Cloutier document the early outcomes and learnings from Winnipeg's Bell Hotel supportive housing partnership model, demonstrating declining engagement with emergency, health and police services. In another short vignette, Hug zeros in on how a partnership model of housing and supports turned around a once-infamous building in Toronto, identifying the necessary ingredients of the partnership and the key factors that facilitated the collaboration.

SYSTEMS PLANNING FOR TARGETED GROUPS

To reinforce one of our key arguments that systems integration does not imply a single rationality or model to address the complex and distinct needs among those experiencing homelessness, in the next section of the book we present case studies of systems integration efforts with a particular focus on targeted groups, specifically women, Aboriginal peoples and youth. In this section of the volume, our contributors drill down into the specific needs of target populations to reveal the unique context of policy and program development, demonstrating that one rationality or approach will not work across diverse target groups but instead confirming the different pressures on the system that ought to be recognized to build a complex quilt that captures diversity of need.

With respect to systems integration targeting the unique needs of women, Kirkby draws on two different supportive housing models used in Toronto to illustrate that a gendered approach to service provision – one that is flexible and adaptable to take into consideration the context of women’s lives – results in improved service to participants and sustained engagement with programs. In another report from Toronto, LeMoine presents Toronto Public Health’s Homeless At-Risk Prenatal program for pregnant women, which hinges on informal coordination across various providers in the region and then distills the 10 most important activities that enhance service coordination.

Bopp, Poole and Schmidt illustrate the unique needs of Northern homeless women, focusing on three Communities of Practice in each of the territorial capitals as sites to support relational and programmatic systems change through collaboration and policy learning. In a short vignette, Schiff and Schiff likewise argue that the unique pressures in the North demand tailored, local-level responses and examine collaborative efforts in Happy Valley-Goose Bay that sought to develop innovative housing programs for high-needs Aboriginal women.

With respect to systems integration targeting the unique needs of youth, Puligandla, Gordon and Way from Homeward Trust in Edmonton present the Community Strategy to End Youth Homelessness and identify early successes towards enhanced coordination and collaboration amongst community and government providers, including the establishment of a Youth Systems Committee to co-design a future youth homelessness system based in integrated service delivery. Nichols complements this chapter by contemplating the cross-sectoral thinking, learning, planning and relationship building that must occur to build an integrated systems response to homelessness prevention for youth, suggesting that shared language, values and accountabilities are essential first steps. Nichols, in a subsequent chapter, describes the grassroots collaborative planning and change process spearheaded by the Street Youth Planning Collaborative in Hamilton and teases out the organizational and behavioural components of a change process that supports a fundamental shift in how people work and think in this context.

In a short vignette, Frisina evaluates a youth-focused mental health program in Hamilton, a model of care that reflects partnership, client-centred practices and a shared vision to effectively utilize resources and adapt service responsiveness for hard-to-reach youth. Lethby and Pettes report from rural Niagara Region on a youth program that highlights the concrete and measurable benefits of integrating social services targeting youth homeless populations and illustrates how prevention and systems integration can be successfully implemented.

INTER-SECTORAL COLLABORATIONS

In the third section of the volume, our contributors are focused on inter-sectoral collaborations or what is known as horizontal systems integration, which identifies the need for parallel sectors and agencies within government to strategize, collaborate and work in a coherent fashion toward a common goal.

In the first chapter in this section, Kovacs-Burns and Gordon draw on the concept of ‘determinants of homelessness’ to reveal the complexity of homelessness, the challenges living with it and the gaps in public policies to support a systems approach to successfully resolve it. The chapter ends with specific recommendations for communities to evaluate and expand their own systems-level responses. Brydon complements this by developing a method through which communities can collect and interpret data regarding inflows and outflows of homelessness as part of a systems effort to evaluate progress toward ending homelessness. Duchesne, Rothwell, Ohana and Grenier document an integrated community-academic partnership model in Montreal as an example of creating an institutionalized feedback loop at the community level that continually evaluates service effectiveness and creates a culture of research and self-reflection.

Schiff and Schiff explore the Community Advisory Board model within the Government of Canada’s Homelessness Partnering Strategy, suggesting that there are examples of its structure facilitating systems-level responses in communities, but also that there are untapped opportunities to learn from such boards across Canada. Evans then examines efforts in Hamilton to coordinate local services through the scaffolding of ‘soft’ (informal) community collaborative arrangements – which he calls community-based managerialism – over top ‘hard’ managerial arrangements or mandates, which he argues more effectively focused services on the chronically homeless but also reconfigured the local voluntary landscape.

Following that, Bucceri explores the fragmentation of homelessness and public health services in Toronto through the illustrative example of the H1N1 pandemic, identifying barriers to integration and specific strategies to overcome them. Finally, in a short vignette, Forchuck, Richardson and Atyeo assess the performance of a model of connecting housing with supports for veterans piloted in four Canadian cities, whereby housing and veteran-support agencies collaboratively redesigned and adapted their previous service approaches to better serve their target population.

HIGH-LEVEL GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The final section of this volume builds up to the highest level of analysis in terms of systems integration: the political and macro-governance realm. Homelessness is a public administration or governance problem as much as it is an economic or social problem. We are dealing with new public policy problems within old governance models. Clearly, governance models must support policy and program coherence from senior governments down to the service level.

Doberstein begins this section by articulating a conceptual framework to understand and guide efforts toward system planning and integration from a governance and policy perspective. His chapter identifies the necessary ingredients as well as the likely barriers to the pursuit of systems integration. Pleace, Knutagård, Culhane and Granfelt then flesh out this conceptual framework with a Finnish example. They describe the Finnish National Homelessness Strategy, the context in which it arose, the successes that have been achieved and the challenges that still face Finland in terms of devising and implementing an integrated strategy. Following that, Belanger reviews a classic macro-governance failure in Canada: Aboriginal housing policy in Canada since Confederation. Belanger identifies federal and provincial feuding and hardened silos as well as historical policy frameworks imposed upon Aboriginal Canadians as historical

barriers toward effective policy, despite considerable public investment in Aboriginal housing over the years.

Doberstein and Reimer then explore U.S. Interagency Councils as attempts to build system-level responses to address homelessness within and across governments, setting the context for their evaluation of the Alberta government's recently created Interagency Council to End Homelessness. The final two chapters remain focused on Alberta, where Milaney describes the Calgary Homeless Foundation's System Planning Framework and presents its development and related process features as well as shares learnings and issues that communities considering similar frameworks ought to contemplate. Finally, Turner reports on Medicine Hat, the self-declared 'First City to End Homelessness,' and shares lessons from developing the key features of an integrated system of housing and supports in a small city.

CONCLUSION

The final chapter of this volume attempts to synthesize the diverse conceptual and empirical contributions found within these pages, with the aim of identifying practical next steps and strategies to confront the difficult, but necessary, work ahead. While the findings presented in this volume demand that we confront the complex interplay between sectors and levels of government associated with homelessness, they also provide us with encouragement that dedicated people and organizations remain committed to ending homelessness with greater strategic intention than ever before.

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