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COLLABORATIVE APPROACHES TO ADDRESSING HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA: VALUE AND CHALLENGE IN THE COMMUNITY ADVISORY BOARD MODEL

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Over the past decade, Canadian municipalities have experienced the emergence of formalized systems-level collaborative approaches to addressing homelessness and housing issues. The implementation of such approaches has been widespread and, to some extent, standardized based on the design of 'community advisory boards' (CABs) created by the federal government through the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS). These local committees have significantly affected systems-level strategic planning to address homelessness in urban, rural and remote areas across the country. Despite marked impact and some success, these groups also face challenges related to effective collaboration and governance. This chapter explores the history of CABs in Canada. It provides a reflection on the need to conduct process and outcome evaluation of CABs in order to understand the usefulness and challenges associated with this approach to systems-level planning.

Collaborations generally refer to the alliances that are created at a local, state or national level, by two or more groups or organizations for the intended purposes of effecting systems-level change. To that end, they may

converge around mutual goals, strategies, activities and often share resources to achieve mutually agreed on objectives (Backer, 2003). Collaborations have generally been viewed as the activities of local organizations that assemble in order to address one of a variety of issues: networking, increasing organizational visibility, leveraging resources to create greater impact and building overall capacity of the organizations to increase services (Backer, 2003). The broader literature on community collaboration recognizes that, although collaborative entities might be successful in many ways, there is a need for ongoing structural and process evaluation in addition to documenting successful outcomes.

This discussion is framed in the context of the distinction between service-level and systems-level coordination. While coordination and collaboration may be part of the same process, conceptually and practically they address different aspects of planning and implementation and thus they have different implications for policy, planning and service delivery. Service-level coordination focuses on cross-sectoral (which can include interprofessional) alliances and agreements with the explicit aim of

coordinating service delivery. In the context of homelessness, service-level coordination includes the implementation of case management services to assure that clients receive comprehensive support services from multiple service providers, or to the utilization of Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) or Intensive Case Management (ICM) teams in the context of “housing first” approaches (McNaughton et al, 2011). This coordination can also refer to the development of formal agreements between organizations delivering coordinated services to a specific population, such as in-home supports provided by caseworkers from a mental health agency, to those living in scatter-site apartments in arrangement with the housing agency that supplies the living units. By contrast, systems-level collaboration focuses on policy development and planning, establishing priorities and creating the conditions for service-level coordination to occur. It

normally involves the agreement at senior management levels of organizations to adhere to a set of practice principles upon which the service coordination can be scaffolded. Systems-level collaboration occurs, for example, through homelessness coalitions and committees focusing on community-wide analysis to establish priorities and planning. In this discussion we focus on collaborations for systems-level activities.

We begin with an exploration of the multiple and diverse aspects of systems-level homelessness collaboration in Canada. First we trace the history of formalized, local systems-level collaboration to address homelessness in Canada. This is followed by a brief examination of international literature on evaluating collaboratives to provide some direction for future growth and preliminary reflections on the benefit of evaluation to optimize collaborative efforts.

CABS: COLLABORATIVE APPROACHES TO ADDRESSING HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA

The National Homelessness Initiative

Much of the formalized context of local-level collaboration to address homelessness in Canada can be traced back to the creation in 1999 by the federal government of the National Homelessness Initiative (NHI), situated in the department of Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC)¹. The design of the NHI was partly based on an interest in creating partnerships between government and community organizations to identify and deliver ‘local-level solutions.’² Delivery of the NHI involved establishment and facilitation of collaborative community-planning processes. A main initial aim of these processes was the development of ‘community plans’ which were intended to direct the delivery of NHI program funding according to the unique issues identified by individual municipalities. Development of community plans was largely supported under two NHI program components: the Supporting

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1. HRDC was replaced by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) in 2006 and subsequently renamed Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC).
 2. See Evaluation Directorate - Strategic Policy and Research Branch - HRSDC (2008). Summative Evaluation of the National Homelessness Initiative - May 2008 Report # SP-AH-693-05-08E. H. R. a. S. D. Canada. (Ottawa, HRSDC). Accessed April 21, 2015 at http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2013/rhdcc-hrsdc/HS28-149-2008-eng.pdf

Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI) and the Regional Homelessness Fund (RHF). The other NHI program components consisted of: Urban Aboriginal Homelessness, National Research Program, Homeless Individuals and Families Information System and Surplus Federal Real Property for Homelessness Initiative. Evaluation of the NHI program in 2008 used document reviews, administrative data, key informant interviews and surveys from a convenience sample which lauded its success and encouraged continued funding (Evaluation Directorate, 2008). In this report the agency noted that it could not readily locate membership contacts and information for all CABs, a disconcerting problem for federal policy makers and funders. This examination was also limited by its inability to include informants from all CABs (58% representation), and the notable exclusion of Quebec entities in its survey and interviews. This omission of a Quebec voice continues to impact understanding of CABs in the francophone context. The report can provide a picture of the functioning and impact of some CABs but falls far short of a fulsome examination of their various strengths and challenges.

Communities were given latitude in developing local priorities and some control in the delivery of NHI program components. SCPI was a major program component of the NHI. Through SCPI, 61 communities were designated to develop projects and deliver funding to address priorities identified in community plans. Each locality was given a choice between two program delivery models: the Community Entity (CE) model or the Shared Delivery (SD) model. Under the CE model, the community (in consultation with HRDC) would designate responsibility for development and delivery of the community plan to a community organization. Under the SD model, HRDC³ would work in partnership with a cross-section of community representatives to implement community plans through selecting, funding and monitoring projects. In most instances both of these approaches resulted in the eventual establishment of community advisory boards (CABs) to undertake this mission.

3. The federal government has changed the name of this department several times in the last 15 years. We have used the acronyms current at the time that relevant policies and practices were enacted. At the present time the department is known as EDSC (Employment and Development Services Canada, or Services Canada)

The Homelessness Partnering Strategy and CABs

In April of 2007, the NHI was replaced by the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS). While many components of the NHI remained intact, the focus shifted strongly towards concepts of collaboration and community ownership. HPS describes itself as “a community-based program that relies on communities to determine their own needs and to develop appropriate projects” (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2011: para. 1). The mandate of HPS focused on the 61 designated communities as well as provisions for some rural, northern and off-reserve Aboriginal communities.⁴ While most communities were defined municipal entities, a few larger areas were designated as ‘community and developed Regional Advisory Boards’ (RABs). Within its structure, HPS collapsed the multiple NHI programs into three main components: Homelessness Partnership Initiative (HPI), Homelessness Accountability Network and Surplus Federal Real Property for Homelessness Initiative. The HPI essentially replaced SCPI in terms of supporting development of the CABs, community plans and community implementation. HPI created a standardized and formalized approach to systems-level⁵ homelessness collaboration which is unique to Canada. Under the program, each designated community was expected to create and maintain a CAB which would supervise the creation of its own community plan. In some communities, this board came under the umbrella of the municipal government, in others it consisted of a group of representatives of local services providers. Under HPI, the 61 designated communities receive a pot of funding to distribute in support of developing and implementing community plans. This funding was also usually contingent on matching dollars from provincial and local authorities. CABs then utilized community plans to determine how to deliver the available HPI funding in their community in order to meet the objectives of their plan.

CABs in Designated and Non-designated Communities

HPI continues to be the federal program that drives initiatives to address homelessness and to funnel federal dollars into local designated communities for this purpose. It also provides some limited funding for municipalities that are not included in the 61 designated communities. These non-designated communities were initially referred to as Aboriginal (off-reserve) and Outreach communities. In 2011, they became referred to by HPS as ‘Rural and Remote’ communities. Some non-designated communities have also developed CABs to guide the development and implementation of community plans. A primary difference between the 61 designated CABs and Rural and Remote CABs is that the latter do not receive an annually renewable, dedicated pot of funding to implement their plans. CABs in rural and northern non-designated communities do not have access to or responsibility for delivering an ongoing stream of funding as do those in designated communities. Instead, they must apply to HPS for funding on an as-needed basis through the Rural and Remote funding stream. Although funding is limited for implementing community plans, due to their role as strategic coordinators of homelessness services in their communities, northern and rural CABs do have some ability to influence funding priorities from federal, provincial, municipal and private funding sources (Schiff, 2014; Schiff & Brunger, 2015). As such they are similar, although more limited, in mandate and function to CABs in designated communities.

More recently, CABs have begun to communicate with each other to advocate for needs and issues as a collective. Over two-thirds of the 61 designated communities have participated in one of two national meetings (2013–2014) which were independent of

4. Explanation of the process utilized for selecting designated communities can be found at http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/homelessness/funding/designated_communities/index.shtml and a list of designated communities at http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/success_stories/homelessness/01/page03.shtml

5. ‘Service-level’ coordination focuses on cross-sectoral (or inter-professional) collaboration with the explicit aim of coordinating service delivery. By contrast, ‘systems-level’ coordination focuses on planning, or creating the conditions, for service level coordination to occur. Systems-level coordination occurs, for example, through homelessness coalitions and committees focusing on community-wide analysis and planning.

federal government and HPS activities (CHRA, 2013). In this formative process they began to urge HPS to face lack of housing as the primary cause of homelessness and to examine other housing approaches that have been successful across various Canadian municipalities for many years. However, a number of CABs have not participated and there is no representation from Quebec. Recently, HPS has posted summaries of community plans for large and small communities, but has not made public the community plans for any of the CABs. It can be difficult to determine the extent to which they have developed a comprehensive plan to address homelessness in their communities. Although many have reportedly submitted plans, it is also unclear as to how many of these communities have operating CABs and the extent to which they have been able to implement programs to address local issues of homelessness. This again raises questions about the need for independent formative and structural evaluation to help improve implementation, operating conditions and outcomes for these groups.

Evaluations of HPS CABs

In 2008, HRSDC acknowledged the need for guidance in terms of governance structures and processes for CABs (2008) and it began with some consultation with selected CABs to produce a set of guidelines for elements of a well-functioning CAB (ESDC, 2013). Further consultation with some of the 61 designated communities in 2011 produced a series of recommendations on main aspects of a well-functioning board. The 2008 self-evaluation concluded that CABs have been successful in developing community plans, delivering HPS funding and “improving the coordination of services and supports in their communities” (Evaluation Directorate, 2008:19). However, this report lacked a substantive Quebec presence in the interviews and surveys used to assemble data, and was vague about the actual number of CABs contacted and included in the evaluation. This makes it limited in its applicability to entities across the country. The consultations also fell far short of a fulsome evaluation by trained and independent evaluators on what works and in what context. This echoes what Backer (2003) reported: that many collaborative approaches lack evaluative studies, which leaves them as celebrated but not validated initiatives.

A few other studies have investigated issues related to homelessness collaboratives in Canada. A PhD dissertation by Doberstein (2014) examined the structure and dynamics of Toronto and Vancouver CABs and concluded that the more institutionalized and inclusive Vancouver organization was a key factor in its effectiveness in implementing a homelessness policy and programs that have reduced Vancouver’s homelessness. Schiff (2014; 2015) and Schiff and Brunger (2015) examine issues related to challenges and successes of CABs in northern and non-designated communities. The Greater Vancouver CAB was the focus of an independent study that looked at the collaborative process and the impact of representatives of service organizations in decision making regarding HPS funding allocations (Doberstein, 2015). It concluded that their process showed considerable collaborative efforts (Doberstein, 2015). Results of that study suggest that collaborative approaches in the form of CABs might create particular impact in terms of policy development and implementation.

The only truly comprehensive and independent outcome evaluation of a CAB (examining impact and effectiveness) is that of the St. John’s (NL & LAB) group which was completed in 2012 as part of its first 10 years of operation (Goss Gilroy Inc., 2012). This

evaluation included key informant interviews, a focus group, survey of members, case studies and a document review covering the CAB's history. It noted that the CAB had made a marked impact in several areas: building partnerships and leveraging other monies to increase infrastructure, facilitating data collection, providing planning support, supporting research, and increasing community awareness of homelessness. Among outcome indicators the evaluation examined the CAB's (positive) impact on its ability to meet clients' needs, on member organizations and other community organizations, the community and government.

Apart from this report and the Doberstein report on the collaborative funding process of the Vancouver CAB (2015), there is a near absence of literature examining impact, effectiveness and challenges experienced by Canadian homelessness collaboratives. Less than half of the known community plans are readily accessible for public discussion and little is known about communities that have been unable to produce a comprehensive plan or to effectively

implement a plan's recommendations. This is in sharp contrast to HPS directives that CABs need to be open and accountable (HPS, 2013). Implicit in this is the conclusion that some communities are unable to find adequate ways to implement an effective CAB to address homelessness and that there is no effective mechanism for addressing this lack.

These reports all indicate that homelessness coalitions in Canada might experience challenges related to effective collaboration and governance. In addition to issues of accountability for government initiatives, the wide literature base on evaluating the impact and effectiveness of community collaborations recognizes that, although collaborative entities might be organized and successful in many ways (Provan & Kenis, 2008), there is always a need for ongoing structural evaluation (Backer, 2003). While homelessness collaboratives in the U.S. and UK have benefited from formal, independent evaluation, there could be valuable lessons learned from their experiences and findings.

EVALUATING THE IMPACT AND EFFECTIVENESS OF HOMELESSNESS COLLABORATIVES

Evaluating Community Collaborations

When formal collaborations involve multiple organizations with diverse missions and the individual styles of multiple players, the task of identifying evaluation foci, strategies and outcomes becomes complex and often difficult to navigate. System-level coordination through community collaborative processes operate across a diversity of focal areas (e.g. healthy living, policing, homelessness and food security, among others) and share many structural similarities.

Over the past several decades, initiatives to evaluate these types of entities have been slowly emerging as they find themselves accountable for a variety of outcomes (Sowa, 2008). Foster-Fishman et al (2001) synthesized the literature on various types of community-based collaborations and articulated a detailed list of individual, group and organizational competencies and capacities that need to be considered in examining the structure and functions of collaborative entities. They include on an individual level

knowledge, skills and attitudes that allow for effective interpersonal and group work; the capacity of the organization (collaborative) with respect to leadership, internal and external communication, resources and mandates; and the ability of the collaborative to arrive at unique, innovative (not duplicative) programs and initiatives.

Evaluation of collaboratives is a complex task that includes individual-, group- and system-level analysis. A synthesis of previous research by Mattessich & Monsey (1992) identified factors related to characteristics of membership, communication, process and structure as well as the environment that all had direct influence on building and sustaining successful coalitions and collaborative initiatives. A further review by Taylor-Powell & Rossing (2009) elaborated on the previous work and noted that “the level of organizational and/or community ‘readiness’ to undertake collaborative work, including such factors as awareness of need for an integrated approach, resource availability, flexibility in organizational structure and communication, history of collaborative work, favourable political and social climate...” (5) is critical to success. It may be important to first help establish the community’s capacity for change as well as the potential of a collaborative to foster change” (6). Thus the evaluation process cannot be measured solely in outcomes, as the extent to which it becomes a formative process that readies a community for change is an important pre-determinant of ultimate outcomes.

A different perspective on evaluating collaboratives comes from the social policy field where it is encompassed in discourse around network governance. When viewed from a policy perspective (rather than the social psychology views of Foster-Fishman et al), the analysis and outcomes are more likely to be put in systems and government policy development terminology (Provan & Milward, 2001). Notwithstanding the change in focus, researchers from both perspectives, as well as those in social services administration, concur on the need for more robust understanding of the various forms of these collaboratives and a deeper inquiry on the models that lead to effective outcomes (Foster-Fishman et al, 2001; Provan & Kenis, 2008; Snavely & Tracy, 2000).

Recently, some literature on evaluating community collaborations has emerged out of the U.S. which focuses specifically on homelessness ‘coalitions’ and collaborative entities in that country. Hambrick and Rog (2000) published one of the earliest comprehensive examinations of coordination in the U.S homeless sector. They argue that coordination “has been a (if not the) dominant theme at all levels” of government in the U.S. (353). They identify service-level coordination (as appears in the form of various case management and service provider team approaches) as well as systems-level coordination occurring through homeless coalitions and councils. Much of the subsequent literature discusses homeless coalitions or ‘councils’ in the context of the Continuum of Care (CoC) funding stream in the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) which, in 1994, began to mandate development of networks among agencies as a pre-requisite for funding (Macgill, 2011).

Macgill (2011) provides an overview of much of this emerging but limited body of literature through an examination of compiled applications to the HUD CoC funding stream from 2008. Out of the 457 CoC mandated networks in existence at the time, a random sample of 30 were selected to evaluate organizational structure and process. The results confirm previous findings about the elements which create challenge and success in these organizations.

- Lewis et al. (2009) and Ivery (2008) find that larger organizations, due to greater human and resource capital, have more capacity to participate in collaborative processes. This may disadvantage smaller and more specialized programs that serve unique populations of homeless persons, and leave them out of funding or policy making decisions.
- Provan & Milward (2001) identify issues created when networks become “too large” in that the capacity for the coalition to create meaningful collaborations declines.
- Ivery (2010) indicates the importance of stable leadership and points to the significance of governance structures in creating effective collaborative processes. This also underscores the vulnerability of coalition stability in times of changing leadership. The extent to which leadership changes are also impacted by political leadership changes further amplifies the importance of strong and continued leadership.

Magill (2011) indicates a further finding: that clarity in structure and process creates a more engaging environment for maintaining members’ interest and bringing new participants to the table. This is reminiscent of theory on cross-sectoral collaboration in general (Backer, 2003; Butterfoss et al, 1993; Fishman et al, 2006).

One study out of the UK focuses specifically on rural systems-level collaboration in the homeless sector and identifies some issues not found in the U.S. literature (Cloke et al, 2000). In this work, the authors discuss the significance of pre-existing discourses on homelessness in dictating the strategies used to address issues. Those with little social or political power who espoused contrary discourses were unable to rework social relations to have their ideas respected in the collaborative process. This meant that those individuals or organizations with power could manipulate the agenda of a coalition to their own interests and understanding of the issues surrounding homelessness. Cloke et al. (2000) conclude that merely repackaging existing resources and social relations will not fulfill goals of creating more pluralist forms of governance. They also point to the need for government investment of human and capital resources as important to make partnerships work. This study was set in a rural context and may have particular relevance in areas where there are more limited resources, fewer key players in the collaboration and where local attitudes may be shaped by a few powerful individuals. While these dynamics will also factor in larger urban settings, their relative importance may vary with the addition of multiple stakeholders and various political voices.

DISCUSSION: VALUE AND CHALLENGE IN THE CAB MODEL

The existing literature on evaluating community collaborations and the few evaluations of Canadian CABs provide some insight into some of the challenges experienced by these groups. We point to three particular challenges: issues related to funding for CABs and their funding priorities; autonomy in decision making processes; and need for formal, independent evaluation.

Funding

CABs were initially promoted by HPS as the local organizations that would provide analysis of homeless problems in a given municipality or region, and then determine how the problems would be addressed. They were expected to develop a community plan that would identify issues and prioritize solutions. They were also charged with determining which housing proposals should receive federal HPS funding with the contingency that federal dollars needed to be matched with local and provincial funding. This was meant to assure the integration and collaboration of local and provincial efforts. CABs were expected to establish mechanisms for determining the size of the homeless population in each region and quantify the demographics through a homeless management information system that would eventually be linked to a national database. Under the guise of local control and responsibility, the devolution of housing responsibility to a partnership between CABs and provincial ministries in charge of housing, concomitant with federal cost sharing, effectively put the responsibility for housing on the local rather than federal level. This was not followed with revenue sharing or revenue generating mechanisms that would allow local entities to implement plans without additional burden on municipalities. Effectively, CABs became a political mechanism that released the federal government from being the major financial contributor to social housing or a national housing policy. There was promise, with the original directives that local boards identify community priorities, that the delegation of authority and responsibility would accompany the devolution of fiscal input. Sadly, this has not happened.

Autonomy and Local Decision Making

Another challenge is that CABs are not always in charge of determining the direction of their initiatives and programs. Schiff and Brunger (2015) point to some specific concerns in northern, non-designated community contexts. While historically the implementation of and identification of homeless issues and planning was devolved to the community level, recently HPS has shifted its expectations of local plans and their enactment. When the boards were established they were charged with finding local solutions to local problems. In the last couple of years, HPS has taken a firm command of the direction in which communities must move to address its problems housing homeless people. What began in 2012 as a directive to implement a “housing first” approach to ending homelessness, has escalated to a set of directives that places the housing of the most chronically homeless as the first priority of all communities.

With the release in 2012 of the preliminary results and in 2014 of the final results from the Mental Health Commission’s study, *At Home/Chez Soi* (Goering et al, 2014), which focused on a “housing first” approach to sheltering chronically homeless individuals with mental illnesses and concurrent addictions, HPS moved to adopt this philosophy as a national mandate to housing. Despite the fact that this study only focused on one sector of the homeless population, lacks comparison with other supportive housing initiatives existing in some Canadian cities and had outcomes that are less robust than reported in previous American studies using the same “Housing First” model, HPS established a policy to apply housing first as an approach across all populations. Effectively, this has once again shifted the dynamics as the federal government has actively stepped in to mandate that “Housing First” is the preferred national housing model and has instructed CABs to place priority on those initiatives that use this approach. The mandate is

reinforced by the requirement that 65% of all funding be allocated to “housing first” initiatives. This recent directive reinforces the position that HPS sets the policy while expecting local CABs to comply, often with little or no prior consultation.

When placement of a target of 90% of chronically homeless, those with the longest and most persistent length of homelessness, termed ‘housing first individuals,’ has been met, the community may move on to a second set of less seriously displaced. HPS also provides a long list of directives as to what is admissible as a program qualifying for “Housing First” funding and which programs and services constitute acceptable initiatives. It also mandates a plan to move people rapidly to permanent supports that are not part of the HPS effort and must come from existing local and provincial programs. Finally, while the Housing First model requires ACT or ICM teams to provide supports, HPS deems the ACT team to fall under the purview of the health care system and will not allow for their funding. This further hobbles the work of the CABs, especially since homelessness and health are intricately related (Hwang, 2001).

These directives have resulted in considerable turmoil for CABs around the country. On the one hand, they have been mandated to complete and execute plans to end homelessness. On the other hand, HPS has taken control of housing priorities and approaches by unilaterally assigning the priority group and its approved methods for housing. Notwithstanding the fact that the Housing First approach has been shown to be effective with one group (those with a mental illness and co-occurring substance use, and not with all people in the homeless population) and that the evidence is modest but not overwhelming (Goering, 2012; Rog, 2013), it has removed local control and input in the decision and execution of this mandate. This is a complete reversal of

the intent of CABs as originally envisioned, but does not remove them as significant actors as they are still responsible for raising matching funding for all programs and designating which programs will obtain funding. Finally, HPS has directed that all Housing First persons should be housed and shifted to other programs by the end of its current funding cycle in 2019, again with no evidence that this is possible or feasible in many instances of chronic homelessness. Essentially CABs have been allocated considerable responsibility but have moved from quasi-independence to federal control of their mission and mandates.

Process and Effect Evaluation

The broader literature on community collaboration and the evaluative studies out of the U.S. and UK point to the value of formal, independent process and effect evaluation. In the context of HPS CABs, for municipalities and designated regions to qualify for funding to address homelessness and to extend the impact of meagre resources, the additional task of evaluating their process and outcomes is often tabled in favour of allocating funds and resources to achieve the aims of the collaborations. While HPS has developed a report on “Elements of a Well-functioning CAB/RAB” (2013), which includes a number of recommendations of CAB/RAB recognition of accountability for its organization, functions and products, there is no mention of the need to evaluate individual CABs or how the accountability should be operationalized. As Backer (2003) suggests, in order to continue to operate effectively, collaborative entities have a need for ongoing process and outcome evaluations.

CONCLUSIONS

The CAB model has significantly affected systems-level strategic planning to address homelessness in urban and rural areas across Canada. Despite these impacts, there has been little research examining the nature and effectiveness of these organizations. Due to the Homelessness Partnering Strategy's focus on designated communities for their own internal evaluations of CABs, there is even less known about systems-level homelessness collaboratives in rural, northern, and other non-designated communities. There is evidence that points to challenges experienced by CABs related to funding, autonomy and structural evaluation. Systems-level homelessness collaborations in Canadian communities might need more support for formative evaluation, organizational structuring, coordination and research. There is also a need to understand the relative effectiveness of different approaches through comparative analysis at regional, national and international levels.

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