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INTERAGENCY COUNCILS ON HOMELESSNESS:
CASE STUDIES FROM THE UNITED STATES & ALBERTA

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INTRODUCTION

Interagency councils have been formed for a number of policy issues in recognition of the fact that many social problems are too complex to be solved by a single sector, agency or organization alone. Issues relating to child and youth welfare, homelessness and mental health are complex, interconnected and simultaneously involve multiple systems of care. Without coordination, the various systems can be disorderly, containing unnecessary duplication or even agencies and policies working at cross-purposes, all of which can prevent an effective policy response or even exacerbate the problem. Having a 'cluttered' and fragmented system not only makes service delivery inefficient and difficult to navigate for those who need help, but it also ends up having a substantial price tag as the cost of managing a social problem often exceeds the cost of preventing it (Hamrick & Rog, 2000: 355). As a result, there is a need for a coordinated, integrated effort to effectively and efficiently respond such that the various systems, often under the control of different ministries or even levels of government, are in some degree of alignment. In this regard, the objective of interagency councils is to bring together a group of various stakeholders and representatives from agencies, organizations and

sectors – inside and outside of government – to create a streamlined and collaborative response (Keast et al., 2007: 10–11). Put simply, interagency councils act as an organizational framework to ensure that the relevant sectors and policies are collectively working towards the same goal.

This chapter presents the origins and purposes of interagency councils in North America and contemplates the extent to which they have led to progress in identifying and implementing solutions to homelessness, both in the U.S. and in Canada. We begin by exploring the roots and organization of the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH). We track the key developments of the USICH, first in the context of an increased awareness of homelessness as a complex social problem, but also its role in a nation-wide push for interagency coordination in order to end, rather than simply manage, homelessness. We then proceed to briefly present Interagency Councils on Homelessness (ICHs) at the state level, particularly those found in Ohio and Texas to understand the diversity with which they can be organized, the criteria for success and the resulting

progress and outcomes. The third section of the chapter introduces the Alberta Interagency Council on Homelessness (IAC) as the first in Canada, identifying its origins, structures and functions, as well as its early successes and challenges going forward. We conclude the chapter by reflecting on what the Alberta IAC might mean for other Canadian provinces and the future of homelessness policy and governance across Canada.

INTERAGENCY COUNCILS FOR COMPLEX POLICY PROBLEMS

As a governance framework to encourage collaboration and resolve policy disjunctures, interagency councils have a long history of use. Apart from homelessness, perhaps the most significant issue area that has experimented with institutions of interagency collaboration is related to child and youth services. In order to effectively respond to social problems pertaining to children and youth, the systems of child welfare, juvenile justice, education, substance abuse and mental health have been targeted for integration, particularly in the U.S. Howell et al. (2004) explain the nature of this issue in their proposal for an integrated infrastructure for youth services: "[y]outh's problems tend to come bundled together, often stacked on one another over time. The need for an integrated response is buttressed by the fact that children and adolescents are often sent haphazardly through the fragmented systems charged with addressing their problems" (145). Here it is evident that the need for interagency councils is twofold: youth problems are complex and the system responsible for helping them is uncoordinated and inefficient, potentially making the problem even worse (Nichols, 2014).

Just as with child and youth issues, where problems manifest across different sectors and policy domains, addressing homelessness is likewise characterized by a complex array of interrelated policies and programs. Homelessness is an issue that includes multiple service systems that are often working at disparate purposes. Hambrick and Rog (2000) argue that the homeless serving system "has developed segmentally. Housing is separate from health services, which are separate from mental health services, which are separate from employment services and so forth. Each has a separate funding stream, a different set of rules and usually a separate location" (354).

In this way, effective and sustainable efforts to end homelessness cannot be achieved if the very system designed to provide them is disjointed. As a result, interagency councils to end homelessness have been proposed to create linkages between various agencies and organizations, and even whole levels of government, and to coordinate their efforts so that the homeless-serving system is easy to access and effective in

its response. These systems include healthcare, corrections, education, child welfare and emergency shelters, and are managed at different levels of government and non-profit community organizations. Often discharge out of sectors such as corrections and healthcare can result in individuals entering into homelessness if they are not properly supported (see chapters 3.2, 3.9, and 4.1 in this book). Hambrick and Rog (2000) suggest that every agency "makes a partial contribution, serving some part of the problem for some part of the homeless population" (354–355). Thus if someone experiencing homelessness seeks assistance, the system they engage with is often so complicated they face multiple barriers to receiving the help they need (Provan & Milward, 1995: 2). In other words, there is an array of agencies with disparate purposes that lack the coordination to actually create meaningful long-term change. Thus ICHs aim to reform the homeless serving system itself, but also to adopt a holistic, comprehensive approach that involves all key sectors that touch homelessness to come up with a more centralized plan with focused goals to create smoother and more sustainable solutions to ending homelessness.

METHODS

To understand the history and evolution of interagency councils in North America, we researched publicly available policy documents in the respective jurisdiction, as well as consulted previous academic research in the area. For the Alberta IAC, in addition to document analysis we conducted five interviews with current IAC members and bureaucratic support staff to complement the publicly available documents and reports since the IAC was created. Potential interview subjects were prioritized based on highest levels of involvement (e.g. chairs of subcommittees) and those with the longest history on the IAC and were conducted with the assistance and cooperation of the Alberta IAC bureaucratic secretariat. The primary focus of the semi-structured interviews was to ask participants to reflect on the design of the IAC, as well as governance successes and challenges. All interviews took place in spring 2015.

ICHs IN THE U.S.

ICHs find their origins in the U.S. nearly 30 years ago, beginning first at the national level. As an independent agency of the federal executive branch, the USICH is the primary means through which the U.S. government formulates its policies and responds to homelessness at the national level, with the fundamental purpose to foster collaboration, cooperation and coordination between public and private stakeholders, federal organizations, agencies and programs. The USICH was institutionalized in the Stewart B. McKinney Act (now the McKinney-Vento Act) in 1987 amid the early signs of the impact of welfare state restructuring and retrenchment that preceded the rapid growth of homelessness across many jurisdictions (Hambrick & Rog, 2000: 360–361). By the late 1980s homelessness was considered less a latent social problem and increasingly identified by advocacy groups as a systemic issue (Baumohl, 1996). As a result of various protest movements and campaigns across the U.S. homelessness emerged from the shadows as not only a major social problem, but also as a national crisis in which the federal government bore a responsibility to act (Bauhmol, 1996: xiv-xvi).

The McKinney Act was significant insofar as it was the first major response by the federal government towards homelessness in 50 years and it substantially increased the funding for homelessness programs. It was a critical turning point as it not only acknowledged that the government has a clear responsibility to respond to homelessness, but it also understands it to be a complex, interconnected social problem that cannot be fixed by one "simple solution" (Foscarinis, 1996: 163). The McKinney Act included more than 20 grant programs in areas such as health care, housing and food assistance, but most notably created the Interagency Council on the Homeless – renamed the USICH in 2002. It first comprised 15 federal agencies or departments[1] and later added five more. The McKinney Act also encourages planning and coordination in a similar fashion be implemented at the state and local levels.

The primary mandate of the USICH is to "review federal aid to homeless people, monitor, evaluate, and recommend improvements to federal, state, local, and private programs to aid homeless people, and provide technical assistance to such programs" (Foscarinis, 1996: 163). In order for the USICH to coordinate the federal response to homelessness and for funds to be released to McKinney Act programs, the Act required that there be a comprehensive plan to end homelessness containing guiding principles on which the USICH can base their policies and actions. They also set out specific timelines, areas of focus and goals for councils to follow. So, beginning with the Comprehensive Homeless Assistance Plan (CHAP), various plans have been introduced since 1987, including *Priority: Home!* in 1994 and, following amendments to the McKinney Act in 2009, *Opening Doors* in 2010. Each of the plans is briefly presented below to demonstrate the evolution of the USICH since its creation.

Priority: Home!

Priority: Home! The Federal Plan to Break the Cycle of Homelessness is the plan that came out of an executive order from President Clinton that required that a federal plan be developed in order to break "the cycle of homelessness and prevent future homelessness." The executive order declared that the plan should propose a continuum of care, which is designed to create an effective, navigable process for those experiencing homelessness in which all pathways lead to housing and help (Hambrick & Rog, 2000: 360–361). Rather than short-term emergency relief, *Priority: Home!* aimed at longer-term goals to improve the service delivery system in order to prevent homelessness. This included a three-pronged approach: emergency shelter, transitional housing and permanent and/or supportive housing (Couzens, 1997: 276–80).

The funding for the plan came from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and had long-term goals to "expand the number of housing subsidies and to provide comprehensive services" (Couzens, 1997: 277). These included wraparound supports such as treatment for drugs and alcohol, parenting, childcare and also funds to "improve coordination efforts for such programs between state and local governments" (Couzens, 1997: 278). Furthermore, it supported more coordination and linkages between programs such as health care and housing (Foscarinis, 1996: 171). The plan also suggested larger measures such as reforming the welfare system in order to prevent people from falling into homelessness in the first place, although these policy levers are outside of HUD's mandate and control.[2]

Ultimately, although *Priority: Home!* respects the initial efforts derived from the McKinney Act, it emphasizes that "the time has come to go beyond these initial efforts" (Secretary of Housing and Urban

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1. Among others, the partners of USICH include the Departments of Defense, Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, and Justice.

2. Despite the positive changes described in the plan, whether or not the funding would be provided to carry them out varied depending on the party in control of Congress. At the time Priority: Home! was released social spending on homelessness was, despite what is suggested by the title of the document, of lower priority as demonstrated by the dramatic cuts in spending in the mid-1990s. The plan also noted that although cooperation amongst service providers may be advantageous and desirable in theory, in practice competition between them in some cases proved to be a barrier to interagency collaboration (Couzens, 1997: 279).

Development, 1994: 46). *Priority: Home!* responded to criticisms of McKinney Act programs for being too fragmented in nature and therefore still difficult to navigate, but also for doing little to open up access to programs often restricted as mandated by Congress. To remedy this, the plan proposed longer-term, institutional coordination and restructuring in order to prevent homelessness instead of simply responding to it as an emergency problem with short-term solutions.

HEARTH ACT

Signed by President Obama in 2009, the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Rehousing Act (HEARTH) was the first major amendment to the McKinney-Vento Act and the work of the USICH. It marked a further step towards coordination and cooperation in preventing and reducing homelessness. A key aspect of the HEARTH Act was its consolidation of the three programs under the McKinney Act that are involved in the Continuum of Care (CoC) program: the Supportive Housing program, the Shelter Plus Care program and the Moderate Rehabilitation/Single Room Occupancy program. The objective of the CoC program is to "address the critical problem of homelessness through a coordinated community-based process of identifying needs and building a system of housing and services to address those needs" (Department of Housing Urban Development, 2012: 45,422). Essentially, the CoC program reinforces the theoretical underpinning of the USICH: solving homelessness is not simply about providing shelter, but involves a variety of other social, economic and physical factors that need to be addressed. From this perspective, the HEARTH Act signalled a move towards increased streamlining of various programs and providers, with the goal of "increas[ing] the efficiency and effectiveness of coordinated, community-based systems that provide housing and services to the homeless" (Department of Housing Urban Development, 2012: 45,422–45,224).

Opening Doors

The *Opening Doors* plan was developed following the enactment of the HEARTH Act in 2010. It marks the first nation-wide comprehensive plan to end homelessness in the U.S. Centred on the belief that "no one should be without a safe, stable place to call home" (USICHd, 2010: 7), the USICH developed this plan based on the principles that it should be collaborative, solutions-driven, cost-effective, implementable, lasting, scalable and measurable (USICHd, 2010: 8). Within these guidelines, *Opening Doors* sets out to achieve four goals: ending chronic homelessness in five years, prevent and end homelessness among veterans in five years, prevent and end homelessness for families, youth and children in 10 years and, lastly, to set a path to ending all types of

homelessness. Its purpose is to strengthen existing ties between agencies and to adopt a stronger collaborative approach to ending homelessness. Ultimately, the plan is a roadmap for action for the USICH and its 19 partner agencies.

The methods that the USICH aims to undertake in order to create collaboration across levels of government and sectors includes education of the public, states and localities and the involvement of citizens, including those experiencing homelessness themselves. Specific actions of *Opening Doors* include collaborative and cooperative measures across a variety of sectors and levels of government. For example, the Department of Education intends to enable homeless students to apply for financial assistance for college and the Departments of Health and Human Services and Veterans Affairs intend to work with the American Bar Association to remove barriers that prevent veterans from obtaining housing and employment (USICHd, 2010: 60). These changes hinge on the observation

that "barriers that get in the way of people getting the supports and services they need must be addressed. This includes… the complexity of navigating multiple programs that operate in isolation" (USICHd, 2010: 23).

Opening Doors not only aims to create partnerships and programs that aid those who are at risk of or are experiencing homelessness, but also offers a plan to create a simplified continuum of care; however, the central feature of *Opening Doors* is that stable housing is the first step to ending homelessness. All other elements of this plan stem from the essential belief that providing someone who is experiencing homelessness with stable housing enables them to better receive services instead of housing being rewarded after treatments and rehabilitation have been conducted. In this sense, housing serves as a "launching pad" from which clients can receive the help they need and be set on the path towards stability and independence, consistent with Housing First principles (USICHd, 2010: 4–5).

USICH PROGRESS

Equally important to discussing the USICH's foundational principles and goals, as well as criteria for success, is how effective it has been at reaching them. On the theoretical level, interagency collaboration, coordination and cooperation should reduce homelessness as gaps in service and cases of policy incoherence are minimized. However, whether or not this approach has had the desired outcomes in practice is a complex question to answer, given the multiple drivers of homelessness.

There are three ways by which the USICH measures the progress towards its goals: annual changes in the number of individuals experiencing homelessness, the number of veterans experiencing homelessness and the number of families with children experiencing homelessness. Yet simply measuring the annual amount of homelessness may be misleading, even if the ultimate goal is to minimize those numbers. Other factors that could shape these performance measures are whether the political parties in control of Congress allocate enough funds for the suite of homeless programs, as well as the state of the economy. A dip in the economy or even a natural disaster undoubtedly results in significant increases in homelessness. In this regard, annual measures of the amount of homelessness would not always reflect the success of the USICHs' or state ICHs' efforts, but rather larger structural and contextual factors.

A report released in 2014, four years after the release of *Opening Doors*, reveals that homelessness is declining in part due to the USICH's efforts towards cross-sectoral collaboration and coordination and adherence to the initiatives, principles and guidelines set in place by *Opening Doors*. Data collected via point-in-time counts show that homelessness nationwide was reduced by 10%, veteran homelessness by 33%, chronic homelessness by 21% and family homelessness by 15% (USICHg, 2014). The report proclaims the success of *Opening Doors* as more people entering into homelessness in each of these categories are connected to housing and supports. Yet, homelessness has been on the rise in some areas of the country and more systematically addressing youth homelessness remains an area that needs further development and research (USICHg, 2014).

Despite the efforts made by the USICH in the years since the implementation of *Opening Doors* the end of the report raises an important issue concerning the stability and guarantee that these collaborative, cooperative efforts can increase in the future. As mentioned, due to changing political winds that affect the administration and Congress, funding allocated to certain federal departments of the USICH has not always remained a priority on the national agenda. If this effort is not more or less consistently sustained or accelerated, homelessness will continue to be a pervasive social problem, even with the collaborative institutional architecture. In addition, despite the progress made to reduce homelessness, one of the main barriers that still exists is the shortage of affordable housing (USICHf, 2013: 30). Simply, without enough housing any amount of interagency collaboration and cooperation will not reduce the number of people experiencing homelessness.

STATE LEVEL ICHS IN THE U.S.

Although the USICH has made progress toward creating a coordinated system to respond to homelessness at the federal level, *Opening Doors* makes it clear that it is the task of the states and communities to create their own plans to increase collaboration in order to meet the goals described in the federal plan, particularly since many important policy levers relevant to homelessness are exercised at the state level, just as is the case with Canadian provinces. Naturally, the states are more cognizant of the specific needs and condition of homelessness within their area, and 41 states have created their own ICHs and local continuums of care (Couzens, 1997: 280).

The impetus for state involvement in homelessness began before the introduction of the McKinney Act in 1987 as states in the early and mid-1980s were already acting beyond the "disaster relief approach" that the national government had been using (Watson, 1996: 172). Since the introduction of the McKinney Act, states have been centres for interagency collaboration and coordination. They bring together service providers, local non-profit organizations, state governments and agencies in order to create a smoother, streamlined continuum of care for those experiencing homelessness in the state (Watson, 1996: 175). State homeless initiatives have been primarily funded by the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development through the consolidated grant program previously discussed under the HEARTH Act. Activities at the state level mirror those at the federal level in the sense that state ICHs aim to provide more housing and create their own state-tailored plans that align with the goals and principles in *Opening Doors*.

The purpose of state ICHs is essentially twofold: to build on the activities and objectives of the USICH and to report to the governor when implementing strategies (USICHb, 2003: 4). State ICHs have a chair and a vice chair which are appointed by the governor

or elected from within the council. The USICH's guide *Developing a State Interagency Council on Homelessness* emphasizes that state councils should also include mayors, city councillors, county commissioners and city managers to ensure its success (USICHb, 2003: 4–15). States have also developed 10-year plans with an emphasis on the elimination of chronic homelessness, consistent with the focus of the federal government. Similar to the USICH, state ICHs also work to establish partnerships at all levels, including non-traditional stakeholders such as faith-based organizations, business owners and the philanthropic community (USICHb, 2003: 14).

According to the USICH, the characteristics of a successful state interagency council include, among others, dedicated staff, membership inclusion of the core state agencies such as Housing, Welfare and Human Services and "active participation in the governor's office." Other criteria for success include the documentation and results-driven approach of the council's activities (USICHb, 2003: 16). With the broad framework of state ICHs articulated, it is helpful to see how they work in practice, and thus in the sections below we briefly outline the state ICHs in Ohio and Texas as brief illustrative examples before turning our attention to the newly created Alberta ICH.

Ohio

The Ohio Interagency Council on Homelessness and Affordable Housing was established in April 2007 by Governor Ted Strickland. Its stated mission is "to unite key state agencies to formulate policies and programs that address affordable housing issues and the needs of Ohioans who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless," with a particular focus on supporting the chronically homeless (Technical Assistance Collaborative, 2009: 1). It is organized around the Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) approach, which aims to provide housing with extensive supportive networks for those who are disabled or experiencing chronic homelessness. Ohio has been described as being on the "cutting edge" of housing and disability policy (Technical Assistance Collaborative, 2009: 6) and this is largely due to its PSH approach. Ohio's plan states that this initiative can be implemented anywhere as long as an affordable housing unit is available with proper wraparound supports to ensure the client remains housed (13). The main area Ohio focuses on through interagency collaboration therefore is creating an institutionalized link between affordable housing and health care in order to end chronic homelessness.

Ohio also demonstrates its understanding of systems planning in ending homelessness through its Returning Home Ohio (RHO) initiative. Based on the understanding that discharges out of correctional facilities often result in homelessness, RHO works with those being released out of Ohio prisons who are at risk of becoming homeless due to their history or their disabilities, providing access to the services they need to be successful. A report released in 2012 revealed that those who were RHO participants were less likely to be repeat offenders and be re-incarcerated (Rehabilitation and Corrections Ohio, 2014). Thus in response to the relationship between homelessness and discharge from correctional institutions, Ohio created a collaborative initiative in order to address this gap by coordinating these two previously separate systems.

The Ohio ICH has therefore exhibited success in terms of systems integration through collaboration by prioritizing explicit linkages to associated health and correctional systems that contribute to homelessness. Yet apart from addressing collaborative approaches to ending chronic homelessness at the state level, Ohio's plan has been somewhat controversial as it does not explicitly address the other types of homelessness as outlined in the federal *Opening Doors* plan. A comprehensive vision for system integration that captures the entire spectrum of housing and support needs is essential, and the case from Texas offers a window into such an effort.

Texas

Given its size, the efforts in Texas demonstrate how interagency collaboration is feasible in geographically large and populous states as well as smaller jurisdictions. The Texas Interagency Council for the Homeless (TICH) was established in 1995. Its activities include "surveying current resources for services for the homeless in the state," assisting in the coordination of state services for the homeless and "increasing the flow of information among separate providers and appropriate authorities" (Texas Department of Housing & Community Affairs, 2015). The TICH comprises 11 different agencies including the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs, the Department of State Health Services, the Department of Criminal Justice, the Texas Education Agency, the Texas Veterans Commission and the Texas Workforce Commission.

Texas' comprehensive plan to end homelessness is called *Pathways Home* and offers guidance on how the state can create a more coordinated and collaborative system to end homelessness. The strategies fall under four categories: affordable housing and supports, homelessness prevention, data, research and analysis, and state infrastructure (TICHb, 2013: 6). The preventative measures entailed in this plan include increasing "the coordination of state agency services to enhance the state's preventative capacity" and to "increase the capacity of state institutions to prevent instances of homelessness and shelter use upon discharge from facilities" (TICHa, 2012: 61).

The agencies that comprise the TICH collaborate and coordinate their activities to achieve nine goals, including surveying current resources, assisting in coordinating and providing statewide services, increasing the flow of information and coordinating with the Texas Workforce Commission to assist those experiencing homelessness with employment and training (TICHb, 2013: 5–8). In its 2013 progress report, the TICH details the successes that it has made in these areas. Notably, it proposed the development of a "data house" which would compile and integrate data on homelessness from the state's 15 different Homelessness Management Information Systems.

Increasingly, it made efforts to make linkages between the TICH and the hundreds of localized CoC programs that exist across the state. The TICH receives most of its funding from the CoC grant programs created by the McKinney-Vento Act. They have aided Texas in progressing towards efficiently and effectively assisting those who are experiencing homelessness. In fact, between 2005 and 2010 the number of individuals experiencing chronic homelessness decreased by nearly 20% (TICHa, 2012: 15). Significant successes were also reported as state agencies have demonstrated collaboration and coordination with local efforts, especially in the area of preventative measures. For instance, in 2009 the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs introduced the Homelessness

Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program which successfully prevented many people from falling into homelessness during the recession (TICHa, 2012: 15–16).

However, despite these successes the report acknowledges that they lack comprehensive and available supportive services that enable people to be successful and remain housed once they are rehoused. Further coordination and cooperation of state agencies may result in more effective resource allocation (TICHa, 2012: 50). Yet the failure of the TICH in this area is primarily attributed to a lack of funding. Thus while the Texas ICH has the more comprehensive systems integration vision and wider

collaborative effort than the Ohio ICH, it remains hamstrung by resource scarcity. Elected officials appear drawn to create and empower ICHs given arguments of efficiency when systems are better integrated, but often do not appreciate that the ambitions of ICHs – to end homelessness – are much greater than the goals set in the past and thus require substantial new long-term investments. Yet for the Texas ICH, and other state ICHs, the main barrier to success comes in the form of limited funds from the federal government, which we will see is also a challenge in the Alberta context, which is the first jurisdiction in Canada to adopt the ICH model.

A PLAN FOR ALBERTA
AND THE ALBERTA ICH

Alberta is a province that has had a large and rapid increase in population in recent history, putting pressure on the affordability of housing markets and public services. Homelessness in Alberta spiked dramatically in the mid-2000s alongside the energy-driven economic boom and thus policy makers began to confront the growing problem. Some of the main reasons why homelessness has proliferated in Alberta are the high cost of living, shortage of affordable housing and high rates of in-migration. Like all Canadian provinces, there was a patchwork of services to support the homeless population, but it was gradually recognized that homelessness has many faces and thus cannot be tackled using siloed agencies that work at disparate purposes. Enough research has demonstrated that homelessness results from a wide array of issues including family violence, disabilities, addictions and the inability to afford housing. Homelessness is also not a homogenous issue in the sense that it consists of the chronically homeless, the transient homeless (infrequently experiencing homelessness), the employed homeless, homeless youth and homeless families. With this understanding, policy makers in Alberta realized that there needed to be a fundamental shift in direction in how they viewed homelessness and responded to it – namely integrated cross-sectoral solutions in order to actually reduce homelessness over time instead of simply managing it.

To shift from the emergency-relief approach, Alberta began to examine ways in which homelessness could be effectively ended with longer-term solutions focused on housing, supports and the prevention of homelessness. In 2009 the Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness developed *A Plan for Alberta: Ending Homelessness in 10 Years*. The purpose of the plan is to create a roadmap with guidelines, objectives and principles on how to achieve interagency collaboration and how to implement the plan to end

homelessness. The premise of the plan is rather simple: ending homelessness is the right thing to do. 'Ending homelessness' means that no one will be homeless for more than 21 days before they are rehoused in permanent housing and provided with the supports they need to remain housed. The plan is centred on five priority areas including better information, aggressive assistance, coordinated systems, more housing options and effective policies. Within these five overarching areas are strategies to better develop data collection and methods, develop ways to prevent discharge from other sectors into homelessness, developing more housing opportunities, shifting shelters away from long-term housing of homeless and examining ways to reduce poverty. In order to meet the objectives entailed in the plan, there is a need for continued financial support from the Alberta government.

The *Plan for Alberta's* development and implementation began prior to the establishment of the IAC, chiefly through the Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness. During this time, studies and consultations were conducted on what worked well for the community and what did not, in order to advise a future IAC on what practices they should employ. From this perspective its predecessor, the Secretariat, recommended to government that a formalized IAC would be of value to facilitate systems coordination, streamlining and collaboration amongst different sectors and agencies to end homelessness.

Inspired by the interagency efforts emerging out of the U.S., in February 2013 the Government of Alberta created the Alberta IAC to provide the provincial government with policy-focused advice on the implementation of the 10-Year Plan. This is the first of its kind in Canada and thus is important to investigate as other provinces and jurisdictions in Canada contemplate similar interagency institutions. Supported by the efforts of the pre-existing Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness, the Alberta IAC is premised on the understanding that homelessness is a complex issue that needs to be solved through comprehensive solutions resulting from an interagency collaborative effort. In this respect, the IAC is a "unique partnership" that is "tasked with identifying systemic barriers, developing solutions, and providing strategic recommendations to the Government of Alberta" (Felix-Mah, et al., 2014: 1). Thus the objective of the IAC is to bring together these stakeholders in order to collaborate on provincial policy changes to advance the goals of the provincial plan, much like we have seen with similar institutions in the U.S. Specifically, its mission statement is to give policy direction, regulatory and program changes for the success of the 10-year Plan and is therefore an advisory board to the Government of Alberta, through the Minister of Human Services. The IAC aims to "lead the systemic and transformational changes" necessary to achieve the vision of ending homelessness by 2019 (Savoia & Stone, 2014: 5). This involves leveraging the "interdependence between partners, who may have different mandates, to create a seamless system where all partners share accountability in achieving agreed upon outcomes" (IAC, 2014 quoted in Joslin, 2014: 7).[3]

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3. Notably, seven Alberta communities have developed 10-year plans that go alongside the provincial plan including Edmonton, Calgary, Wood Buffalo, Grande Prairie, Lethbridge, Red Deer and Medicine Hat.

Organization and Activities

The Alberta IAC is comprised of 33 representatives from numerous sectors and organizations that are involved in housing and homelessness, including First Nations, Metis and Inuit organizations, family and community support services, housing management bodies, local government and provincial government ministries that are responsible for the delivery of social and income supports for vulnerable Albertans, affordable housing, health and corrections and representatives from the federal government. It is worth noting that the inclusion of senior government representatives on its own government advisory body like the IAC is not a typical practice. This forum thus provides an opportunity to generate new policy ideas with input from government and non-government experts before they are submitted to government for further consideration and analysis.

The Minister of Human Services appoints members to the IAC, monitors the actions and performance of the council and receives formal recommendations from the group. The IAC is expected to report annually to the Minister of Human Services on its activities and on the progress of *A Plan for Alberta* (Stone, 2013: 12).

Council members collectively assessed the challenges to the achievement of the plan and developed five key priorities to pursue:

1. Aboriginal people, youth, seniors, women fleeing violence, newcomers and people with disabilities have access to specialized housing and supports that are tailored to their needs and strengths;

2. Prevention of homelessness is adequately resourced and successful;

3. Sustainable investment strategies are in place to achieve the successful implementation of the 10-Year Plan;

4. Integrated case management and service delivery are characteristics of local homeless-serving systems; and

5. The root causes of homelessness are addressed through integrated service delivery and public policy.

Currently there are four subcommittees of the IAC, which are the primary vehicles through which it aims to achieve its priorities. These are: Integrated Housing and Supports Framework, Governance, Prevention and the Funding and Investment Committees. The committees have their own specific roles and functions that together work toward achievement of the goals stated in a *Plan for Alberta*. For example, the Integrated Housing and Supports Framework Committee has investigated methods by which greater integration of housing and services can be achieved and has reported its findings to the Government of Alberta. The Prevention Committee has contributed to Alberta's Poverty Reduction Strategy and has created a partnership with the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness to aid in their identification of homelessness prevention measures. Other committees have also made partnerships and worked towards increasing their collaboration. The IAC partnered with the Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research to produce the *Housing and Homelessness Research Strategy for Alberta* in 2014 and continues to guide its implementation. In this report, priorities identified are homelessness prevention and early intervention, effectiveness of intervention, and the continuum of housing and homelessness supports and services (Felix-Mah et al., 2014: 1–2).

Goals and Progress

There have been three reports on the progress of *A Plan for Alberta* since implementation began in 2009 (ASAH 2010; 2011; 2012). They were publicly released before the IAC assumed the role as advisory body to the minister in charge of the implementation of the plan. Yet looking at success in the form of mere numbers, since the implementation of the 10-year plan, as of March 31, 2015 over 11,000 Albertans experiencing homelessness have been enrolled in Housing First, over 3,800 have graduated from a Housing First program and 73% of those have remained housed since the beginning of the plan (Alberta Human Services, 2015). There have been fewer incarcerations and less time spent in jail as well as less interaction with the health care system for those who have participated in Housing First. There have also been more coordinated government policy response initiatives through the Safe Communities Initiative, Service Delivery Transformation and Information Sharing Framework (Alberta Secretariat, 2013). Other progress detailed in the three-year progress report include efforts in the area of developing better information. For example, the Alberta Homelessness Research Consortium was developed which funded 11 research projects between 2011 and 2012.

The Alberta ICH has only been operational since 2013, so it would be premature to make any definitive declarations about areas of success or failure. Yet it is also helpful to reflect on its contributions thus far, as well as the challenges the IAC has faced, particularly as other jurisdictions contemplate creating similar collaborative governance institutions to address homelessness at the provincial level. The research team interviewed a handful of key actors currently involved with the Alberta ICH to better understand its major activities and achievements, as well as the barriers or challenges to achieving the goals set forth by the IAC and the provincial *10-Year Plan to End Homelessness*. The interview data and excerpts are presented anonymously to protect respondents and to incentivize frank assessments of success and challenges of the IAC.

In terms of the major activities of the IAC, interview respondents nearly uniformly suggested that the key deliverables thus far have been the dozen formal recommendations the IAC has made to the Minister of Human Services – after considerable internal discussion, analysis and debate – as key steps for the government to take to end homelessness in Alberta. The nature of the advisory relationship between the IAC and the minister means that respondents were not able to divulge the precise recommendations, as this is protected by confidentiality rules in the parliamentary system. Yet we do know that there have been recent changes in government policy associated with what one respondent called a "full-spectrum" provincial housing strategy as well as internal work underway regarding institutional discharge policies that bear the stamp of the IAC, as another IAC member hinted. Yet a common regret expressed among interview respondents is that they have yet to receive any responses to their recommendations from the minister, and thus even the membership is unclear about the effect they have had on government policy. "The [IAC] is an advisory body, not in charge of policy implementation or even policy development," one respondent closely involved with the IAC reminds us.

Thus a major piece of the work of the IAC is to contribute their collective expertise based on their roles as leaders in their sectors and to make formal recommendations to the minister after conducting research, analysis and internal debate. One example of research undertaken to support this role is the *Rural Homelessness* report, funded by the Government of

Alberta in partnership with the IAC and the Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research, which was impactful as an educational piece – raising awareness that homelessness is not merely a big city problem – but also a policy and program piece. Even if the IAC had no direct role in implementation, it does have the capacity to reveal issues related to the implementation of the provincial plan that require a provincial policy response. Several interview respondents linked this report with the decision to expand provincial homelessness funding to rural areas never before reached.

Likewise the Government of Alberta launched *A Plan to Prevent and Reduce Youth Homelessness* in February 2015, which was endorsed and supported by the IAC during the approval process. One interview respondent closely associated with the IAC remarked that the youth plan is a notable achievement because it is "one of the only pieces of policy I have seen that actually articulates the roles of the 10 or 11 ministries as it relates to youth" rather than simply identifying vague connections across ministries. The IAC supported the creation of the youth plan, and its position that specialized populations require a specific response contributed to the creation of the *Plan to Prevent and Reduce Youth Homelessness in Alberta,* which places its priorities on prevention and awareness, early intervention, client-centred supports and research and evaluation (Alberta Human Services, 2015). This plan articulates that youth homelessness has different causes and characterizations than other types of homelessness and needs a comprehensive approach to reduce it. It aims to undertake a collaborative and coordinated approach to bolster prevention and housing and supports while creating smooth, healthy transitions from emergency shelters to rehousing and other supports (Alberta Human Services, 2015).

In terms of concrete outcomes stemming from the work of the IAC, this is an area in which the interview respondents were more divided. Some suggested that there have been few, if any, tangible policy or

programmatic changes since the IAC began advising the minister on system-level policy as it relates to homelessness, whereas others claim that there are achievements, but they are often not manifested publicly. With respect to the latter, one example offered by an IAC associate is that they made a strong case to government that "housing and homelessness were inseparable – that they needed to be considerable together," which was not how it was conceptualized prior to the creation of the IAC. And this is impactful, according to the respondent, because this type of paradigm change gets infused into subsequent government actions such as the provincial housing strategy. To another respondent, this type of conceptual change "has potential to have a long-term impact on the situation, but certainly won't have an impact overnight." IAC members interviewed suggested that they learned from senior bureaucrats in relevant ministries that their work on housing and supports integration is also being picked up within the bureaucracy. And further on the less visible manifestations of changes of thinking and even policy within government, one interview respondent remarked that there are numerous cross-ministry efforts stemming from IAC activities and recommendations.

Those more critical of the lack of tangible outcomes stemming from the IAC suggest that on the fundamental task of an ICH – to break up silos and achieve coherent alignment of services across sectors – the Alberta IAC cannot yet claim much success. Multiple interview respondents indicated that there has been limited sectoral realignment from corrections, child welfare or the health care system, the discharge policies and practices of which have major implications for homelessness. One of the critical voices suggested that the Alberta Plan to End Homelessness says that these sectors must not discharge individuals into homelessness, but "unfortunately we have not seen a favourable response from corrections in that regard, [and while] health understands it a bit more, [they have] not been active [enough] in the local communities [to have an effect]." Another respondent was more forgiving, suggesting that the IAC has largely

completed its mandate – to provide credible and actionable recommendations to the minister – and that the onus for implementation is on government, not the IAC. On the measure of outcomes, one respondent closely involved with the IAC suggested that it is sometimes difficult to make a case to the community about the work of the IAC because much of it remains confidential (as they are formally advising a minister), but also because IAC annual reports to be distributed to the community have not been approved by the minister. As such, "we can talk in general terms…about what we are doing [at the IAC], but nothing specific, which weakens our legitimacy [out in the community]."

ICH Governance Reflections and Lessons

The central lessons from the U.S. state-level ICHs examined earlier is that conditions for success must first involve a mandate and scope of activity that is expansive – the Texas ICH meets that condition, whereas the Ohio ICH faces criticism for too narrowly focusing on the chronically homeless, with much less attention given to prevention measures like those around income support, education and employment, which would be more characteristic of a systems planning philosophy. Indeed, the U.S. ICH guide for state ICHs suggests that successful state ICHs will include representation from and policy relevance to "mainstream income support, health care, behavioural health, human services, veterans, housing, corrections, transportation, education and labor departments and agencies" (USICHb, 2003: 11). The second key lesson from the Ohio and Texas ICHs is that funding scarcity, in particular federal funding, is a key barrier to sustained success. In both examples it is evident that choices are critically constrained by funding pressures, resulting in half-measures or inconsistent efforts that stall progress towards ending homelessness.

In addition to these larger lessons around mandate and funding from the cases, devising and operationalizing an ICH is not an easy task – a lot of decisions need to be made with respect to its authority, membership and governance structures – and thus there are also practical considerations associated with getting an ICH off the ground. As such, we asked our interview respondents involved with the IAC to reflect on the features of governance that work well, as well as those which represent barriers to the achievements of the goals of the IAC.

IAC associates interviewed uniformly identified that the governance model of the IAC as a "collaborative policy forum" that operates on the basis of consensus is perhaps the best feature. One respondent confirmed that the Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness looked at the U.S. interagency councils as examples, learning that effectively addressing homelessness required a lot of different partners to be involved, particularly those from the community. Another respondent indicated that while not every issue is resolved on a consensus basis, "there has been a tremendous amount of consensus around the table, which points to the members' willingness to part with their own agendas" after considerable discussion and exchange of ideas. Others confirm that the "consensus model is a good thing, [although] a majority vote would be easier, it is a better model to try to achieve consensus." It is remarkable that consensus is achieved regularly among 30-plus IAC members. One respondent claims that she was "initially aghast at the thought of a 30-plus council, but it has worked well." This is partly achieved because the most important work is done at the subcommittee level, which is

then approved or refined by the larger IAC. Although not formalized, the co-chairs and the subcommittee chairs meet before each full IAC meeting to discuss achievements, direction and challenges, which from a governance perspective is more manageable than 30-plus person strategy sessions.

In terms of leadership, there are both positive features of governance as well as features that may need to be reformed. Most interviewed suggested that having an MLA as a co-chair of the IAC is a very good thing, as "they can speak to the minister and government caucus as a colleague," which is important to keep the issue salient for elected decision makers. This is consistent with the findings in the U.S. ICHs that suggest that leadership from elected officials, in particular the respective governors' offices, is an essential component of success (USICHb, 2003:). One area identified by a number of the interview respondents touches on the varying levels of sustained commitment among the representatives of the associated provincial ministries on the Alberta IAC. Interview respondents were pleased to see the high level of engagement of one of the provincial government representatives and are hopeful that this level of engagement will be reflected among all provincial government representatives going forward. Multiple interviewees felt that lack of engagement could pose a risk to successful systems planning and integration at the provincial level. One respondent suggested that "if all [provincial government representatives] were like the [engaged one], the IAC could be way farther ahead on achieving its goals and priorities." Another claimed that "overall the intent is good – [it] is great to have senior level people involved directly in homelessness in the community, but there needs to be money and government to act on the recommendations... or else it doesn't work."

One barrier to the success of the IAC, identified by a number of interview respondents, was that while the IAC has a key formalized avenue to advise the Minister of Human Services, this does not extend to other ministers in charge of relevant files. To one respondent,

"when recommendations relate to other sectors [like corrections, for example], it can be difficult [to generate change] because the jurisdiction is outside of the department [of the Minister of Human Services] – it puts the onus on that one minister to work with his/her colleagues." Part of the challenge, according to one respondent, is that "some of the areas of work by the IAC tread on some [other] sectors, and they are uncomfortable with that. Everybody is on board [theoretically] until it impacts them," which is when the IAC encounters resistance, as their mandate is to come forward with recommendations that challenge the status quo. Another respondent reiterates that "we send a recommendation to the one minister, but we don't know how or if those recommendations are getting through to more than one minister [or Cabinet as a whole]."

In this vein, a number of interview respondents suggested that the reporting line could be enhanced as a means to improve the systems integration and change efforts. For example, some suggested that the IAC reporting to one minister may not be sufficient, and that they should either be able to advise or report to multiple ministers or even the premier in order to achieve a truly government-wide lens. Perhaps an even larger problem, according to multiple respondents, is the frequent turnover of ministers (and premiers) in recent years in Alberta, which "creates uncertainty and grinds everything to a halt." This is also a challenge identified in research and lessons from U.S. ICHs, which acknowledges the difficulties of elected official turnover, which can be mitigated by a governance structure that empowers the long-term committed ICH members from the community to maintain continuity and an "emphasis on partnership, not partisanship" (USICHb, 2003: 16).

CONCLUSION

In recent years, Canadian communities have realized that despite efforts to address homelessness, their responses have had mixed results. A 2013 Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness (CAEH) report proclaimed that "all levels of government – federal, provincial, regional, municipal and aboriginal – must show leadership, strategic engagement and investment…[and] that challenge now is to work together, across all levels of society, to coordinate and implement successful prevention and intervention programs and policies that will put an end to homelessness" (Gaetz et al., 2013: 33). The report emphasizes that although Canada has been recognizing the need to have a more collaborative, systems-based approach to ending homelessness, there still continues to be a lack of affordable housing. The lack of sufficient affordable housing remains a critical risk to the objective of ending homelessness in Canada.

However, the CAEH report does not propose the creation of a federal interagency council as in the U.S., presumably due to the fact that provinces control the main areas of jurisdiction relevant to ending homelessness. Similar to the American model of state interagency councils described in this chapter, Canadian provinces can adopt plans and governance institutions tailored to the specific needs of the homeless in their respective provinces. Although there have been laudable efforts in other parts of Canada to reduce homelessness, Alberta has demonstrated the most collaborative and strategic effort at the provincial level. A number of lessons emerge from the analysis of the first two years of the Alberta IAC that are not only important as Alberta refines its approach, but also as other provinces contemplate similar interagency governance institutions to promote systems planning and integration to end homelessness.

Features of the Alberta IAC that other provinces would be encouraged to mimic would be (i) genuinely inclusive, cross-provincial membership from community and government, (ii) a consensus model of deliberation and decision making, and (iii) elected official leadership on the council as a means to remain on the agenda of government. There are also features of the Alberta IAC that represent barriers to the goals of ending homelessness, including (i) frequent leadership turnover in the bureaucracy, IAC leadership and even the premier's office, that has stalled systemic change efforts, (ii) the single-minister advisory role of the IAC is a limitation and ought be expanded to other relevant ministers and (iii) the lack of public information disclosed about IAC advice and activity harms its public awareness and legitimacy within the community. While it may be attractive to some to contemplate a situation in which IAC possesses the institutional authority and legitimacy to make decisions on its own, rather than as an advisor to government, this represents a challenge to norms of public sector accountability, especially when major systems and public expenditures are at stake. We should resist temptations to exclude elected officials

from homelessness issues for the sake of more strategic policy and planning, and instead find ways to draw them into the debate such that it is an issue that remains a high priority on their agenda, regardless of the ideological orientation of the governing party.

As a pioneer of interagency councils to end homelessness in Canada, Alberta has shown promising leadership, but has also experienced the growing pains of trying something new and innovative. A forthcoming internal review of the Alberta IAC demonstrates a desire to reflect on the first few years and to identify refinements and opportunities to sustain the effort to end homelessness in Alberta. Systems planning and integration as it relates to homelessness demands that all Canadian provinces take stock of their suite of policies and programs and understand how they fit with each other. The Alberta IAC demonstrates that it is an appropriate venue for such discussions and reform recommendations. Likewise an interagency council at the federal level, as we have seen in the U.S., or some other national collaborative body, could lead to greater national collaboration and greater support for future provincial interagency councils.

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