CANADIAN OBSERVATORY ON HOMELESSNESS

POSITION PAPER

DEFINING & MEASURING AN END TO HOMELESSNESS

Considerations for the National Housing Strategy

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Currently, there is no internationally recognized definition of an end to homelessness, the type of indicators and targets, and a verification process for communities. This is also the case for Canada.

The concept of "ending homelessness" has had significant impact on public policy and service responses in recent years. Just consider the number of "ending homelessness" plans, strategies, policy directions, and funding announcements not just in Canada, but internationally.

In light of the recently launched National Housing Strategy with a clear recognition of housing as a human right and commitment to ending homelessness, we want to ensure that measurable targets and goals drive toward the elimination of homelessness. However, without a clear sense of what homelessness actually means and what an "end" looks like, how will we ever know where we stand on progress towards this objective?

Clearly, if we are truly interested in ending homelessness, then we need to move beyond a sole focus (and performance metric) on chronic homelessness, as the National Housing Strategy suggests. This is because we cannot, and should not, wait for people to become chronically homeless before we help them. This is a fundamental violation of their human rights. In fact, if we really want to end homelessness, we need to ensure that people do not become homeless in the first place through a preventive focus that ensures they have access to appropriate supports and housing.

One of the main problems with focusing narrowly on chronic homelessness is that we can exclude key populations who are extremely vulnerable in other ways, including women fleeing violence, Indigenous Peoples in substandard housing, couch surfing youth, young people vulnerable to criminal and sexual exploitation, and racialized communities and newcomers. Waiting for these groups to become chronically homeless before we offer them serious help to avoid or exit homelessness is expensive and damaging to individuals, families and communities.

In addition, the important work on defining Indigenous homelessness, from an Indigenous-lived experience lens speaks to the important considerations tied to definitions and their powerful impact. Thus, a Canadian definition must resonate regionally and across populations; it must align with the lived experience voice and look beyond quick fixes if we are to truly leverage this historic moment in social policy for our country.

Finally, we need to consider that chronic homelessness underrepresents dynamics involved in small, medium-sized and regional centres as well as rural and Northern remote communities where hidden homelessness is very common.

While focusing on chronic homelessness must always be a central priority in community strategies to address homelessness, if we want to *truly end homelessness, we need to do more.*

Why Does a Common Definition Matter?

Defining an end to homelessness is more than semantics. The way we define and measure progress shapes public policy, funding, and service provision with real impacts on the lives of those experiencing housing instability and homelessness.

A common definition with measurable indicators can help us articulate what local homeless systems aim to achieve in a consistent manner, and allow for comparable analysis of efforts across jurisdictions. This will contribute to continuous improvement and enhanced performance towards common objectives, informing funding decisions and policy change. A common definition can also help us address concerns and skepticism about "what it really means to end homelessness."

From 2015-2017, the University of Calgary School of Public Policy, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, and the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness supported a collaborative process to develop a national definition of an end to homelessness (Turner, Albanese, & Pakeman, 2016). In developing the proposed definition, the content of 60 existing plans and strategies were analyzed from Canada, U.S., Australia, and Europe, specific to defining an end to homelessness and any corresponding measures and indicators used. A small sample of interviews with those with lived experience were also conducted to ensure our approach resonated.

Through this process, we also proposed key measures and indicators that can be used to track progress. The final paper proposes a definition and key outcomes measures to support communities working towards an end to homelessness. This work is being used as a springboard for consultations over the coming months with service providers, policy makers, funders, researchers and those with lived experience as part of the COH's Making Zero Count project.

Let's explore further what an end to homelessness would entail as a starting point for deliberation.

The Concept 'Functional Zero'

It is important to make a distinction between the notion of an "absolute" and "functional" end to homelessness – also referred to as Absolute and Functional Zero, respectively.

The Functional Zero approach describes the situation in a community where homelessness has become a manageable problem; the availability of services and resources match or exceed the demand for them. These resources are also optimized, performing as intended with maximum efficacy. For example, a community may declare they have ended homelessness when they have enough supportive housing, shelter beds, service workers, and funds to assist the number of people accessing the services. In many cases, the key outcome that is measured is simply whether people are housed or not, rather than whether their precarity ends or their quality of life improves sufficiently to reduce further risk of homelessness.

Alternatively, an Absolute Zero would entail the complete eradication of homelessness. Absolute Zero would suggest that communities that reach this point have the same amount of people experiencing homelessness: zero. Absolute Zero is grounded in fundamental human rights concerning housing, safety, food security and well-being.

The narrower Functional Zero approach can be seen as politically appealing because progress towards an end of homelessness is achievable and measurable, without "really" eliminating all homelessness or the damage that ensues when people experience homelessness. However, one of the things that we heard loud and clear from our consultations with people with lived experience was that minimal standards of "housed" vs. "not housed" were not enough; that the actual experience of homelessness does not end simply by virtue of having four walls and a roof over your head. In other words, we need to consider more broadly those factors that contribute to not just being housed, but to being home.

In the end, we argue that Functional and Absolute Zero shouldn't be seen as binary opposites or a choice we have to make.

In fact, we can consider achieving Functional Zero as a step towards the vision of Absolute Zero, though the latter may be more aspirational and visionary. Aspiring to an Absolute Zero outcome is commonplace in other issue areas, whether we are talking about workplace accidents, police violence or hunger, for instance. We agree that in the ideal world, we would completely eradicate all risk to ensure no one ever experiences homelessness again. As we move towards this vision, we are able to articulate and measure progress to adjust our strategies in real-time. We argue that this approach is more consistent with the National Housing Strategy's focus on housing as a human right.

FIGURE 1 - FROM FUNCTIONAL ZERO TO ABSOLUTE ZERO: MOVING ALONG THE CONTINUUM

The Problem of Homelessness

FUNCTIONAL ZERO

Ending Homelessness
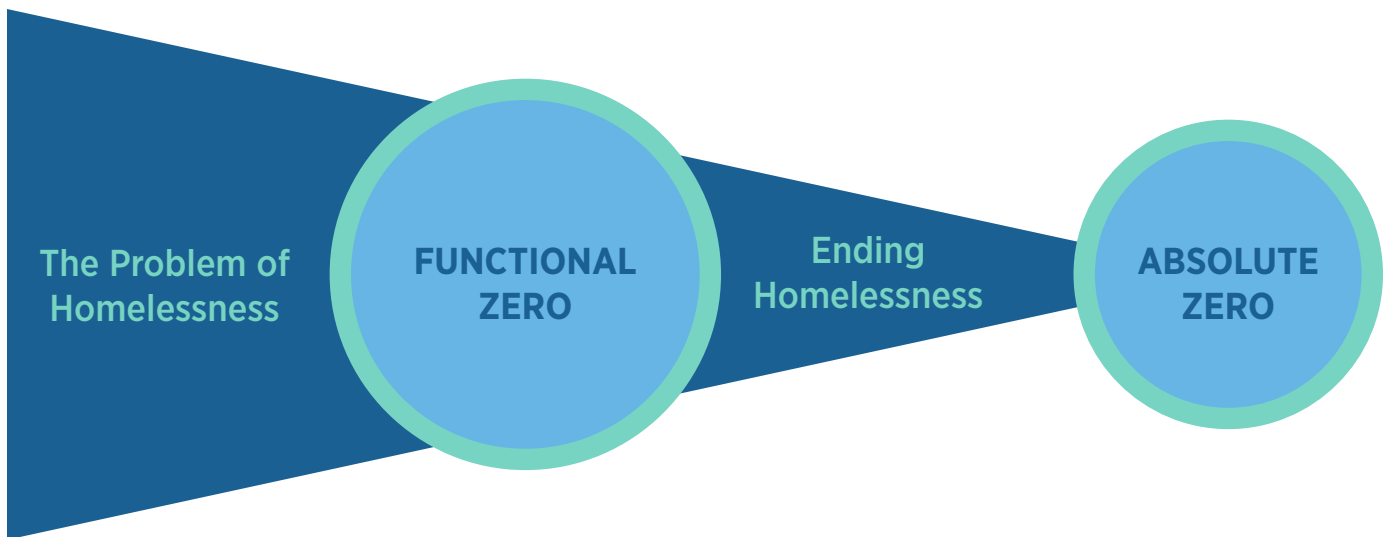
ABSOLUTE ZERO

A Framework for Defining a Functional End to Homelessness

The proposed definition of Functional Zero we are advocating moves us farther along the continuum towards Absolute Zero. It is conceptualized within a socio-ecological model that distinguishes the varying levels at which homelessness needs to be addressed. These represent networks of interactions across different, interdependent dimensions.

A starting place to consider this definition of Functional Zero is the widely recognized [Canadian Definition of Homelessness](#) published by the COH. The strength of this definition is that it moves well beyond a recognition of only those who are in emergency shelters or who are "sleeping rough" (absolute homelessness), to a consideration of those who are provisionally accommodated (for instance sleeping rough or who are exiting public institutions with no home to go to) as well as people deemed to be "at risk" of homelessness. By broadening the definition beyond the visibly (and chronically) homeless, we bring into question the overall goal of ending homelessness and how to achieve it.

In taking a socio-ecological approach, we need to consider both structural/systemic as well and individual and relational factors, which interact with one another in complex ways and impact someone's housing situation. Structural and systemic factors include societal and policy-based issues include poverty, the housing market, and trends in unemployment. Individual factors include mental illness, addictions and health difficulties, etc. The manifestation of these factors will also depend on the particular lifecycle stage and the structural context at play.
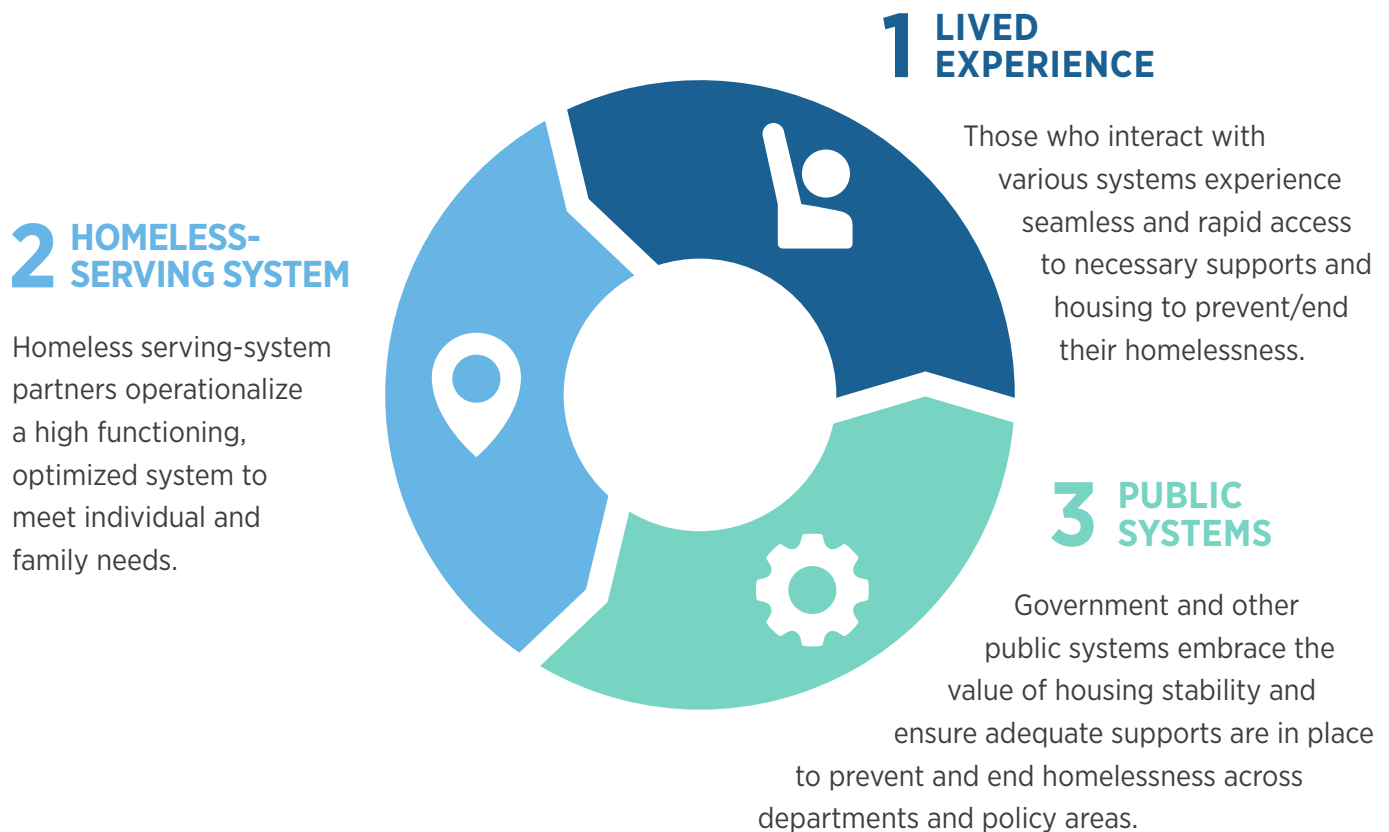
To end homelessness, we know a comprehensive strategy that tackles the structural/systemic, community, institutional, interpersonal and individual causes is required. In this manner, a framework for defining a functional end to homelessness must recognize the boundaries of homeless-serving system is but one element in the dynamics involved in homelessness; as much focus as we place on its workings, its impact is invariably limited .

Key public systems, particularly child and youth services, health, corrections, and income assistance, are well known to have key roles in mitigating or perpetuating homelessness. Further, broader policies and attitudes in society influence such discrimination impacts access to housing and supports. It is unrealistic to expect that the homeless-serving system in a city can manage such external drivers at the macro-economic level, though it may have the ability to exercise some degree of influence. An end to homelessness requires changes across these levels, even if we are limited from a data perspective on local communities' homeless response for now.

We are proposing that to achieve Functional Zero, that standards and performance measures are needed across three key dimensions to account for these complex interplays.

- *Dimension 1:* *Lived Experience - Those who interact with various systems experience seamless and rapid access to necessary supports and housing to prevent/end their homelessness.*

- *Dimension 2:* *Homeless-Serving System - Homeless serving-system partners operationalize a high functioning, optimized system to meet individual and family needs.*

- *Dimension 3:* *Public Systems - Government and other public systems embrace the value of housing stability and ensure adequate supports are in place to prevent and end homelessness across departments and policy areas.*

FIGURE 2 - DIMENSIONS OF FUNCTIONAL AND ABSOLUTE ZERO END TO HOMELESSNESS

1 LIVED EXPERIENCE

Those who interact with various systems experience seamless and rapid access to necessary supports and housing to prevent/end their homelessness.

2 HOMELESS-SERVING SYSTEM

Homeless serving-system partners operationalize a high functioning, optimized system to meet individual and family needs.

3 PUBLIC SYSTEMS

Government and other public systems embrace the value of housing stability and ensure adequate supports are in place to prevent and end homelessness across departments and policy areas.

Proposed Functional Zero End Standards and Measures

The draft of standards and performance measures above are envisioned as a starting point for dialogue and will be refined on a go-forward basis. A community can describe itself as having achieved Functional Zero with respect to homelessness when it has met the criteria using a consistent process.

Our work in 2018 is to test these measures at the community level. This is not about testing communities; it's about testing the definition and measures in practice.

Thanks to funding support from the Government of Canada's Homelessness Partnering Strategy to initiate our Making Zero Count project, we have the resources to spend time on the ground with system planner organizations to work through these measures one by one, with the intent of creating a nuanced understanding of how best to support system planning and performance management and how best to articulate a common framework for Functional Zero. At the same time, Turner Strategies, Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and A Way Home Canada will be working to build the capacity of consultants, community planners and communities to engage in the very difficult work of systems planning that is evidence-led and grounded in human rights to achieve this definition of Functional Zero and build toward Absolute Zero.

It makes no sense to force definitions and metrics without a deep understanding of local context and dynamics. Functional Zero in northern Canada will be different than in Toronto, Victoria, or diverse rural areas. Our work will inform the next iteration of the Homelessness Partnering Strategy with real-life assessments of the definition in practice.

We extend a sincere thanks to the seven diverse partner communities who have agreed to assist us in this important work.

Ending homelessness means we must address chronic homelessness. It also means we need to focus on prevention. Ultimately, our approach to defining an end to homelessness begins with a human rights-centred approach that seeks to improve the lives of people who are at risk of, or who have experienced homelessness, so that everyone has access to the housing and supports they need to truly find a way home.

To find out more, visit www.homelesshub.ca/EndingHomelessnessNHS