

Involving Homeless and Formerly Homeless Clients in Projects and Programs to Address Homelessness

INTRODUCTION

The research report *Involving Homeless and Formerly Homeless Clients in Projects and Programs to Address Homelessness* examines client involvement within the programs and services offered by agencies that address homelessness. Jim Ward Associates prepared the report in 2001 for Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation and the National Secretariat on Homelessness.

The underlying premise of the study is that providing users of homeless programs and services with food and shelter maintains their status quo but does little to lessen their economic and social marginalization. By contrast, having clients participate in programs and services such as governance committees, as well as paid and volunteer work, can increase opportunities for personal growth and ways out of marginality. The report provides many examples where this has happened. It is the author's hope that the study will encourage agencies to look more seriously at client involvement as a way to help homeless people help themselves.

RESEARCH PROGRAM

This study examines case studies of agencies practising client-involvement approaches in 12 locations across Canada: Halifax, Fredericton, Trois-Rivières, Montréal, Toronto, Hamilton, Winnipeg, Regina, Calgary, Edmonton, Vancouver and Victoria. These agencies were chosen because they provided a range of services and types of programs, as well as a diversity of homeless user groups. Adult male, adult female, youth, family and First Nations' sub-populations were served at these facilities. The types of services provided included emergency shelters, drop-ins, supported housing, newsletter production and education, training and counselling.

The researchers interviewed the managers and front-line staff at these sites and conducted focus group discussions with approximately 10 randomly selected homeless clients at each location. They interviewed a total of 48 staff members, involved 114 clients in discussions and made general observations during site visits.

A major part of the project focussed on determining the primary areas of client involvement at these sites. During the interviews and focus group discussions, eight major types of client-involvement activities were defined. These included Board and committee work; policy input, consultation and planning; voluntary and paid part-time and full-time work; research and evaluation; building development, design and renovations; creative activities; community projects; and training and mentorship.

FINDINGS

Boards and committee work

While seven of the 12 sites involved their clients in Board and committee work, most of this involvement occurred at lower-level committees such as client committees and ad hoc committees without Board connections. Some of the explanations given for the lack of client participation at the Board level or in Board meetings were that clients seldom got fully involved, that they missed meetings and that they were highly transient.

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Another reason cited for lack of client involvement was that agencies tended to embrace the “Carver model” of Board structures. The conventional wisdom in social agencies is to interpret the Carver model as meaning that Boards should be made up of experts who apply their special expertise, (e.g., legal, financial) within the system and the context of a particular agency. Many of the staff saw the Carver model as being an obstacle to client involvement.

Policy input, consultation and planning

In the area of policy input, consultation and planning, eight of the 12 sites involved clients in this type of activity. However, since clients were involved at the Board level at very few sites, much of this participation took place at lower-level client committees that deal with program and activity planning and development, and with day-to-day operational issues such as opening and closing times, barring policies, and so on. Such activities did not relate to the major direction of the agency.

Work

During the focus group discussions, clients at the various sites said work was the most frequent type of involvement. The work was both volunteer and paid, part time and full time, and primarily in unskilled and semi-skilled areas such as cleaning, maintenance and kitchen help. The Trois-Rivières and Montréal sites engaged clients in journalism, sales, computer operations and counselling, while the Vancouver site used them in newsletter development and gardening. Often, both current and former clients participated in these activities.

Research and evaluation

Very few of the sites involved clients in research and evaluation activities. However, Halifax was in the process of developing an exit interview for clients. This type of involvement could help provide an evaluation of programs and activities serving homeless people. Trois-Rivières and Montréal involved clients in research and needs assessments as part of their writing work for community newspapers. At the Winnipeg site, clients had experience in carrying out an evaluation process and in participating in discussion groups and surveys that evaluated different approaches to addressing youth homelessness.

Building development, design and renovations

Four of the sites involved clients in some aspect of the development, design or renovation of buildings. The Halifax site was considering hiring clients as contractors to carry out renovations and the Fredericton site had already done so. In Calgary and Edmonton, clients were involved in the development and design of buildings.

Creative activities

Six of the 12 sites used creative activities as a way to develop opportunities for personal growth through artistic expression. In Trois-Rivières and Montréal, clients wrote for community newspapers, while in Toronto they participated in an arts and crafts program. Creative activities in Winnipeg, Edmonton and Vancouver included painting a mural, writing poetry, recording songs for a CD and sculpting. The Vancouver site also established a Humanities 101 course as a joint project of the Downtown Eastside Residents Association and the University of British Columbia. A former client was responsible for coordinating the program.

Community projects

Client involvement through community projects took place at three sites. Both the Toronto and Vancouver sites involved clients in community garden projects. In Edmonton, clients developed crafts for fundraising and were encouraged to become involved in community activities including job bartering, a food bank and a service that provided help to sex-trade workers.

Training and mentorship

At several of the sites, training and mentorship activities provided opportunities for clients to develop linkages with people in the community. For example, the Fredericton site was creating a program that would partner clients with people who live and work in the city. The purpose of the program was to help clients develop connections that could lead to job and self-improvement opportunities. In Regina, a training initiative helped raise awareness, particularly among First Nations peoples, of ways to escape or stay out of economic marginality. In Victoria, training took the form of part-time work through an outreach program that could lead to full-time work.

CONCLUSIONS

The following are the major conclusions drawn from this study of homeless and formerly homeless client involvement in the agencies that serve them, based on the 12 sites.

Boards and committee work/Policy input, consultation and planning

There is relatively little participation by clients at the Board level, more at the informal or ad hoc committee level, and more involvement yet in the areas of policy input, consultations and planning. Therefore, Board-level activity offers the greatest possibility for agency change towards increased client involvement. Agencies that are serious about client involvement need to bolster their efforts in this area. The most straightforward route to success would be the establishment of ongoing client committees that serve as the “thin edge of the wedge” towards greater client involvement in governance.

A “Town Council” and smaller-scale “house meetings,” like those at the Toronto site, offer an effective model for client involvement. Such a structure can provide opportunities for raising client concerns, serve as standing committees of the Board, and act as training grounds for potential Board members. Another route to greater Board involvement is ad hoc client committees created to address specific client concerns. To be effective, however, such committees must truly be entry points to parts of the governance structure deeper in the organization and serve as training grounds for them.

Work

Work was the most widely used of all the areas of involvement. It was also the area in which clients had the greatest interest and is probably the most important way to help them escape a life of total marginality.

The type of work most likely to be successful is work within the agency as opposed to work in the wider community, since the agency has more control over internal jobs. For organizations with the mandate to provide real opportunities for their clients through involvement, the ability to provide protection and support for the jobs is an important consideration in creating successful employment.

Research and evaluation

Research and evaluation activities hold the greatest untapped possibilities for client involvement. They can serve as useful avenues for upward social mobility as they provide a range of opportunities for skills development that could lead to further work in research or community development.

Building development, design and renovations

Building development, design and renovations offer many practical opportunities for client growth. However, only a handful of agencies were using this approach, and a slowdown in affordable housing and shelter construction meant that fewer and fewer agencies were doing so.

Creative activities

Creative activities appear to work best when they are not just a way to fill time but are linked to practical action in the community or to advocacy.

Training and mentorship

There is room for growth in the use of training and mentorship as a means of involving clients in agency activities. Particularly promising is the mentorship model in use at the Fredericton site, which could be replicated in other locations.

What works best

Guidelines for each type of activity have been summarized in the following table.

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WHAT WORKS BEST

Involvement area	What works best	Pitfalls to avoid
Board/Committees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Write the principle of client involvement into the agency bylaws and policy documents. Ensure the principle is stated in such a manner that lack of staff time cannot be an argument for not involving clients and that organizational commitment becomes a given* - Designate a 'client involvement staff person'* - Have a 'client involvement' budget line - Ensure there are active client committees and use them as the "way in" to Boards and committees of the Board - Institutionalize the use of ad hoc committees to deal with specific client concerns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Staff presence in what should be client venues, e.g. client committees - Unnecessary avoidance of potentially conflictual situations - Insufficient support (e.g. moral and administrative) of newly-involved clients
Policy input/consultations/planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use client consultations in major organizational decisions thereby going beyond lower level input into program and activities - Incorporate client policy input into institutionalized ad hoc committee structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unproductive tensions over conflicting value systems, e.g., between clients and staff
Work - volunteer, part-time, full-time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Avoid 'work as therapy' model - Use a volunteer to part-time to full-time work approach - Build-in a preparation and training component - Ensure whole organization is "on side" - If agency is unionized ensure the union buys in - See work within the agency as being a key part of the strategy rather than work outside the agency - For some agencies a period of absence between the client role and the staff role serves to diminish issues of confidentiality and role conflict 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Volunteer work as exploitation - Involved clients becoming authoritarian and "power-tripping" vis-à-vis peers - If an absence requirement is used by the agency, this can break the continuity between volunteer and paid work involvement
Research/evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use research and evaluation activities of the agency as involvement opportunities (paid work) - Recognize the fact that research into the needs and concerns of homeless people can be done effectively by other homeless people, as can evaluation of programs and activities serving homeless people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Belief that high levels of formal education are necessary for effective client involvement - Involved clients becoming authoritarian and "power-tripping" vis-à-vis peers
Building development/design/renovations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Include clients from the outset when new buildings or renovations are planned, in the design and in the actual building - Be fully informed of clients experience and skills in the building industry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Agency assumptions that the necessary skills are not present in the client population
Creative activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Move creative activities from therapies to involvement in advocacy issues wherever possible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creative activities as simply 'time fillers'
Community projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use community projects to link with other community groups, such as students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unproductive tensions over conflicting value systems
Training/mentorship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Link training, wherever possible, to real internal job opportunities - Use mentorship approaches to link homeless clients with people in the wider community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Insufficient support(e.g moral and administrative) of newly-involved clients

*Applies to all areas of involvement

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

As seen by the clients, the involvement experience brought important positive change to their lives, particularly in terms of feeling appreciated, feeling at home, and having a better sense of self-worth. It also led to concrete opportunities such as real paid work and entry into schooling or training.

The two main motivators of client involvement were the opportunity to influence the nature of the agency and the opportunity for clients to feel good about themselves.

For their part, agency respondents felt client involvement must be based on an approach that is highly informed about the individual client's interests and abilities. There is also a need to have identifiable and reachable goals, to link with a client's interests, to provide the client with a sense of involvement in the project, and to have flexible expectations.

At the organizational level, three characteristics have an important influence on the possibilities for client involvement: size, diversity of services and activities, and philosophical milieu. Of these, philosophical milieu is the most important. Agencies that embrace the philosophy of community involvement and advocacy on behalf of marginalized people are most likely to encourage and be successful in involving clients in their programs and services.

Also essential is long-term planning that treats client involvement as an important aspect of the way the agency does its work. A continuum of involvement that encourages clients to progress from low-level to higher-level activities is also important. It could, for example, move them through volunteer to paid work or from program volunteer to client committee involvement.

The researchers also identify a number of barriers to successful client involvement. One of these was staff concern about clients being able to have access to the written records of other clients. The chaotic personal lives of many of the clients was also seen as an obstacle to the ongoing contact and commitment required for clients to be involved in a meaningful way.

Another concern was authoritarianism or “power-tripping” by involved clients (an issue common to any form of empowerment.) For client involvement to be successful, particularly in the work area, agencies must develop an effective strategy for nipping authoritarian tendencies in the bud. Successful client involvement requires training to ensure that those who, up until recently, have been without power can now use that limited power in a way that does not threaten the status of ex-peers.

Organizational resistance and lack of staff time can also come together as obstacles. Upper-level organizational (Board and management) resistance can manifest itself in the absence of staff budget lines to ensure involvement happens. Without the minimum of one full-time staff person devoting her or his time to the development and implementation of a client involvement strategy, it is unlikely such a strategy will happen on any scale.

Involving clients in real opportunities for personal growth can lead to positive change in their lives. There are practices to adopt and pitfalls to avoid that can improve an agency's chance of success. This report will serve as a primer for anyone interested in learning more about what works and what doesn't from the direct experience of 12 Canadian providers of programs and services for the homeless.

Research Highlight

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Housing Research at CMHC

Under Part IX of the *National Housing Act*, the Government of Canada provides funds to CMHC to conduct research into the social, economic and technical aspects of housing and related fields, and to undertake the publishing and distribution of the results of this research.

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