

Report: Evaluation of Housing Loss Prevention Network

Submitted to the City of Ottawa
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I Background

About the Network

The Housing Loss Prevention Network (HLPN), through its member agencies, provides a range of services, selected to meet the needs of each individual client, to help them retain their housing. These include interventions with landlords, assisting with administrative processes, offering information, referrals to a broad range of existing support services, and acting as champions for clients, from first intake through to securing housing.

Although HLPN is called a network, it is more of an administrative grouping, bringing together community health and resource centres and two organizations previously dedicated to a broader range of housing related services, including housing loss prevention, defence of housing rights, and housing search, as primary partners. Through them, as is shown on the graphic that follows, the reach of the network extends to service-provision partners that are primarily community health and resource centres, ensuring that all areas of Ottawa are within the mandated reach of the Network.

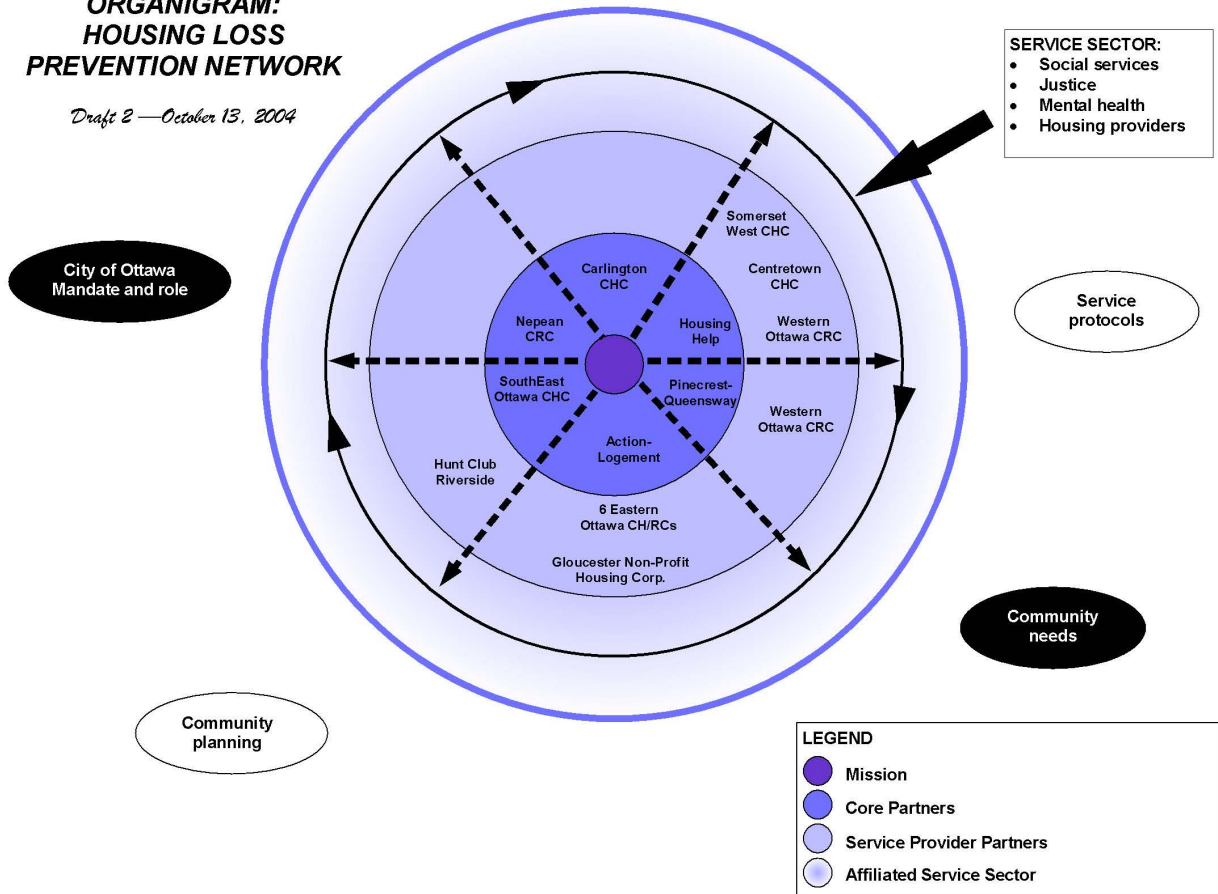
Federal and provincial funding flows through the City of Ottawa to one of the partner organizations, Pinecrest-Queensway Community Health Centre (PQ), and from PQ to the other first-tier partners. PQ is also responsible for collecting data from the other partners, and for processing invoices from partner organizations. As depicted in the graphic above, several of these primary partners have formal or informal relationships with a number of second-tier partners, and perform some administrative functions not covered by HLPN funding. Notably, Action Logement is responsible for managing services for eight agencies in the eastern part of the city – five community resource centres, one community health centre, and service through Action Logement’s main offices, while Housing Help provides housing loss prevention services for three centrally located community health centres.

A brief history

Agencies that later combined to become HLPN were involved in housing issues prior to their combination into a single administrative grouping. Provincial funding flowed through the City in 2000 to support housing search for homeless individuals and families, and included some staff resources in PQ, Southeast Ottawa and Carlington Community Health Centres, and for other services related

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to homelessness to Action Logement, Housing Help, Nepean Community Resource Centre, Sandy Hill Community Health Centre, and the Vanier Community Health Centre. In this round, however, the emphasis was on meeting urgent needs of people who were homeless, and not on prevention.

When the federal government announced funding under Supporting Community Partnerships Initiative (SCPI) program in 2001, a new emphasis on homelessness prevention emerged. Contractual arrangements with the City created some modest partnerships, between PQ and Housing Help, and between Southeast Ottawa and Action Logement. At the same time, an informal partnership was emerging among three community health centres – PQ, Carlington and Southeast Ottawa – to allow for some joint planning and evaluation work.

In 2003, the City was able to reallocate provincial funding to create a pool of money and call for proposals on homelessness. A small group of community health/resource centres (PQ, Carlington, Southeast Ottawa, and Nepean) and

two housing support service agencies (Action Logement and Housing Help) had each submitted separate proposals to the City. At the request of the City, a combined proposal was prepared, adding Action Logement and its proposed activities to the proposal from the community health/resource centres, creating HLPN. Finally, in 2004, with the second phase of SCPI funding, HLPN expanded to add Housing Help and submitted a joint application for funding that continues through this fiscal year.

It should be noted that for community health centres and for Action Logement and Housing Help, the funds were used to expand existing services, adding staff to housing loss prevention services that were already in place.

As SCPI funding comes to an end in March 2006, HLPN saw value in evaluating its work to date, and approached the City for funding to carry out such an evaluation. This dovetailed with community capacity-building work that the City had anticipated. This evaluation project was funded in June 2005.

II Methods of evaluation

The City of Ottawa asked that the evaluation criteria be developed in cooperation with HLPN members. Building on the planning work already done, and further refined by a meeting with HLPN first-tier agencies; the evaluation was to focus on two elements: services provided to clients and the model for service delivery.

A review of existing sources of data included :

- the data provided to the City on a quarterly basis, including narrative accounts;
- original documents relating to requests for proposals and submissions in response from HLPN members,
- accounts of planning meetings, and
- evaluations already carried out by researchers, notably Dr. Tim Aubry, for the first round of homelessness-related funding flowing through the City, and by Acacia Consulting who evaluated cost-effectiveness of homelessness prevention initiatives, including HLPN.
- literature on homelessness and its prevention drawn from in several English-speaking countries,(which ones?)
- homelessness action plans (or their equivalent) from other Canadian cities

New data was to come from focus groups and key informant interviews. Key informants were drawn from several groups: HLPN primary partners, housing providers, researchers, legal supports, the City of Ottawa, and subject-matter experts. Focus groups were held of front-line workers (one in French, one in English), clients (one in French and one in English), second-tier HLPN agencies,

and the Social Housing Network. All told, 22 key informant interviews were conducted, and six focus groups totaling 45 participants. Questions for all groups focused on their knowledge of and experience with HLPN services, their impact on demand for other services, identification of gaps, areas for improvement, the effectiveness of the model (as appropriate), and final thoughts or recommendations.

It should be noted that a goal of key informant interviews was to get a sense of whether evictions and/or demands for other services including legal aid, rent bank, rental arrears payment by Ontario Works, and emergency shelters had declined as a result of the services provided by HLPN. With few exceptions, that information was not provided, as key informants reported that the demand for services is a product of many factors, and new demand could emerge to replace demand from clients who have been successfully served by HLPN agencies.

As part of the evaluation process, HLPN member agencies have had an opportunity to review draft findings and recommendations and to comment at several stages.. These comments have informed revisions to those sections of the report. The process calls for a final presentation on the evaluation process and results to the City of Ottawa and HLPN members.

III Review of selected literature

Models of homelessness service delivery

The United Nations' International Year of Shelter for the Homeless, in 1987, brought homelessness into sharp focus not only for policy makers, but also for scholars and other researchers. Discussions began on causes of homelessness, paths to homelessness, and various models for providing shelter for people who were homeless. Before long, there was an emphasis placed on prevention. What follows is a discussion of some of the major trends and concepts in the research literature on homelessness and its prevention.

Considerable literature, in several countries, has examined the root causes of homelessness. A supply of affordable housing is an obvious contributing factor, from Scotland¹ to Kentucky², and probably in most communities in between. But it is not the only factor. Sophisticated checklists of characteristics of particular subgroups of people who are at risk of homelessness have been developed. For example, for families at risk of homelessness, contributing factors include having

¹ "Homelessness: An Action Plan for Prevention and Effective Response", Report from the Homelessness Task Force to Scottish Ministers, n.d. (2003?), retrieved on-line at <http://www.ghn.org.uk/keyinfo/homelessness/national/tffr.pdf>, September 16, 2005.

² "Homeless Prevention Plan", Kentucky Council on Homeless Policy, 2003, retrieved on-line at <http://www.homelesspolicyky.org/Plan/PreventionPlan.pdf>, September 15, 2005.

a young head-of-household, pregnancy or recent childbirth, domestic violence, involvement with the child welfare system, crowded living conditions and frequent moves.³ Similarly detailed characteristics are provided for youth. In other words, there are many paths to homelessness that have been identified, but almost all include inadequate incomes, and lack of appropriate affordable housing. Another strong contributor is a history with the criminal justice, mental health or child welfare systems, all of which disrupt housing stability in and of themselves, in addition to the other causes and effects associated with these systems.

As noted above, while first responses to homelessness were to provide emergency shelter and related services for those without homes, the emphasis soon shifted to prevention. Homelessness prevention, as defined in a recent Government of Ontario media release, includes activities intended to move people off the street and into shelters, to move people from emergency hostels to permanent housing, and to prevent homelessness by supporting people to retain permanent housing.⁴ For the purposes of this review, however, prevention was understood more narrowly to focus on helping people to maintain housing, and not become homeless.

One of the earliest texts on prevention approaches to homelessness originated with a physician, who undertook to examine homelessness as a health professional might examine an epidemic: root causes, key intervention opportunities, development of effective interventions.⁵ In a chapter entitled "Homeless-Making Processes and Homeless-Makers", the editor highlights sectors that have processes that contribute to homelessness: housing; employment; public assistance; health, mental health and substance abuse; and the family.⁶ This demonstrates the wide range of triggers for homelessness, and the challenge of developing a comprehensive prevention approach.

The theoretical literature questions the continuum of care model's effectiveness, characterizing this approach, at least at the federal level in the United States, as a linear progression from one part of the continuum to another, for example,

³ Williams, Francine, "Preventing Homelessness: What Works?", a presentation to the Policy Academy on Homelessness, 2004. Policy Research Associates. Powerpoint presentation. Retrieved on-line at www.hrsa.gov/homeless/pa_materials/pacific_basin/pb_preventing_homelessness.ppt, September 15, 2005. See also Lindblom, Eric. L., "Towards a Comprehensive Homelessness-Prevention Strategy," *Housing Policy Debate*, Vol. 2, No. 3, pp. 960-961.

⁴ "Helping the Homeless", a media backgrounder, Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, August 10, 2005.

⁵ Jaheil, René (editor), *Homelessness: A Prevention-Oriented Approach*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.

⁶ Jaheil, René, "Homeless-making Processes and the Homeless-Makers", in Jaheil, *Op. cit.*, pp. 271-272.

starting in an emergency shelter, moving to transitional housing, then more permanent housing, moving as well from a high level of intervention to a lesser level of intervention along the continuum.⁷ These particular authors argue that its linear nature is only one flaw in the continuum model, citing its focus on deficits rather than assets that a person who is homeless or at risk of homelessness might bring to bear, including family members, faith communities, and self-help strategies. An even more serious flaw, they argue, is that this approach does not put enough emphasis on prevention.

While continuum of care models have evolved to become more like a range of services available to meet a wide range of needs someone who is homeless – or at risk of homelessness – may need, there are still important distinctions between the case-management approach and the continuum of care approach. The major distinction drawn in literature is between offering a range of services related to housing provision (continuum of care), and providing guidance, or navigation, to an individual to access services that will address the root causes of his or her vulnerability to homelessness, in addition to meeting the housing need, over time (case management). For example, a study by the Urban Institute of 25 “continuum of care” models developed to access federal funding divided them into three groups in terms of access to services: fragmented, in which individuals might approach one service provider, which may or may not provide services, and may or may not know about or access other related and helpful services; “no wrong door”, in which people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness can approach any program on the continuum and get information about other services that might be helpful, and how to access them; and a centralized approach, which offers only a few points of entry, but provides all information about related services.⁸ Three-quarters of the models studied in this report fell into the first category, leading the researchers to conclude that most models did not provide streamlined access to information or services as part of the continuum of care.

Case management, on the other hand, has been defined as “services focused on identifying goals, developing action plans and coordinating resources to assist

⁷ Poole, Dennis L. and Carole B. Zugazaga, “Conceptualizing Prevention as the First Line of Offense Against Homelessness: Implications for the Federal Continuum of Care Model”, *The Journal of Primary Prevention*, Vol. 23, No. 4, Summer 2003. For a short summary of the federal continuum of care model, see “Guide to the Continuum of Care Planning and Implementation”, Housing and Urban Development Department, U.S. Government, retrieved on-line at <http://www.hud.gov/offices/cpd/homeless/library/coc/cocguide/intro.pdf>, September 10, 2005.

⁸ Burt, Martha R., et. al., Evaluation of Continuums of Care for Homeless People: Final Report, Urban Institute for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2002, retrieved on-line at <http://www.urban.org/Template.cfm?Section=Home&NavMenuID=75&template=/TaggedContent/ViewPublication.cfm&PublicationID=7855>, September 10, 2005.

clients in attaining greater self-sufficiency⁹, emphasizing the needs assessment and co-ordination service that is often seen to be lacking in a continuum of care model.

In its efforts over the past five years, with respect to funding services designed to address and prevent homelessness, the City of Ottawa has supported a wide range of services, including some case management, while also seeking to ensure that a full range of services is available to meet the needs of those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Models for prevention

It has been suggested that a comprehensive prevention model would necessarily begin with an assessment of which groups of people are most at risk of becoming homeless, where they are living prior to becoming homeless, and what events precipitate homelessness for these people.¹⁰ This author identifies extreme poverty as the common denominator among those who are homeless and those who are at risk, and reports that almost half of all homelessness is triggered by evictions, thereby making eviction prevention a high priority. A similar analysis and conclusion are offered in a good practice guide produced by the Office of Deputy Prime Minister in the United Kingdom.¹¹

Yet, a New York City report, examining family homelessness prevention, concluded that the highest priorities for improving prevention for families was strengthening cross-referrals between housing and social service providers.¹² Still another identifies discharge planning as a critical element in a prevention plan.¹³ A report can be found recommending almost every aspect of homelessness prevention services as THE most important, providing little light as to what really works.

A review of homelessness prevention initiatives in six U.S. cities was carried out by the University of Massachusetts for the Boston Foundation, which has funded many prevention initiatives in recent years. It focused on prevention “networks”

⁹ “Within Our Reach: A Community Partnership to End Homelessness”, Long Beach, California, February 2005, retrieved on-line at http://www.iurd.org/lb_homeless_research/glossary.html, September 11, 2005.

¹⁰ Lindblom, *Ibid.*, pp. 958-959.

¹¹ Elsmore, Karen, et. al., *Homelessness Strategies and Good Practice*, London Government, April 2003, pp. 3-6, retrieved on-line at http://www.alg.gov.uk/upload/public/Files/1/Homeless_strategies_and_good_practice.pdf, September 11, 2005.

¹² Family Homelessness Prevention Report, New York City Family Homelessness Special Master Panel, November 2003, p. 42. Retrieved on-line at <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dhs/downloads/pdf/preventionreport.pdf>, September 10, 2005.

¹³ Williams, *Ibid.*

that covered at least a city, that was cross-organizational with more than one funder, and that featured collaboration, all characteristics that apply equally to Ottawa's homelessness prevention efforts. This research found that contributors to success were: broad-based partnerships, including private sector and faith community organizations; community-wide outcome measurement, based on standardized data collection; cost-effectiveness of prevention; and promising results.¹⁴ All of these factors have been included in this evaluation of HLPN.

It is noteworthy that at least some of these characteristics are identified as goals in homelessness prevention components of municipal plans to address homelessness in Vancouver,¹⁵ York region,¹⁶ Nanaimo,¹⁷ and Calgary,¹⁸ among others. Similarly, some of these factors were included among factors that contribute to successful eviction-prevention programs, based on a study of 32 such programs in Canada, including HLPN.¹⁹ It is cited in more detail under findings.

IV Findings

This section of the report begins with an overview, and moves on to specific findings related first to the model of HLPN and then to the services it provides.

Almost without exception, the findings are positive: HLPN is an administrative and financial arrangement that benefits the City of Ottawa, and the services it provides are of great benefit to the X clients served. It conforms to recommended models and the recommendations in theoretical literature. Inside

¹⁴ Friedman, Donna Hague, et.al., *Partners in Prevention: Community-Wide Homelessness Prevention in Massachusetts and the United States*, Centre for Social Policy, McCormack Graduate School of Policy Studies, University of Massachusetts Boston, April 2005, p. 4. Retrieved on-line at <http://www.mccormack.umb.edu/csp/publications/PartnersinPrevention.pdf>, September 10, 2005.

¹⁵ *Homeless Action Plan*, City of Vancouver, June 2005, pp. 58-60, retrieved on-line at [http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/commsvcs/housing/pdf/HAP\(June2005\).pdf](http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/commsvcs/housing/pdf/HAP(June2005).pdf), September 7, 2005.

¹⁶ *Preventing Homelessness in York Region: Taking the Next Steps*, Community Services and Housing Department, York Region, 2003, pp. 3-5, retrieved on-line at http://www.region.york.on.ca/NR/rdonlyres/fkxacqg5svubrpj6rjmh4sk57n5k7beuyhf3hmxzyo6eo4weddnrzi2f45xc6ixm4bem6hmab5mbirl6xg3a6rddhh/Taking+the+Next+Steps_Web.pdf, September 10, 2005.

¹⁷ *Reducing Homelessness: A Community Plan for Nanaimo, BC*, Nanaimo's Working Group on Homelessness Initiative, October 2003, pp. 13-14, retrieved on-line at http://www.city.nanaimo.bc.ca/uploadedfiles/Site_Structure/Development_Services/Planning_and_Development/Community_Planning/NanaimoHomelessnessPlan2003.pdf, September 10, 2005.

¹⁸ *Community Action Plan 2004-2008: Building Paths Out of Homelessness*, 2003, p. 25, retrieved on-line at <http://www.calgaryhomeless.com/images/products/documents/1222/1611B97F-6373-438E-B0F9-8DF43D408604.pdf>, September 10, 2005.

¹⁹ Acacia Consulting and Research, "Cost Effectiveness of Eviction Prevention Programs", Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, March 2005.

and out, stakeholders find the model to be useful and the services to be helpful, not only in themselves, but in helping to extend the reach of other services.

There are gaps, however, in the internal and external information services. While the managers of all key partners were interviewed, second-tier partners, front-line workers, and clients from the central and eastern parts of the City were significantly under-represented. Based on other sources of information, however, there is no reason to believe the results would have been different, except where noted below.

Based on all sources of information -- the literature review, the documents review, Network data, and interviews and focus groups -- the findings are summarized in three broad sections: findings about the model, about the service provided, and about the broader policy and program environment.

Model

HLPN, rather than being a natural agglomeration of agencies, is more like an arranged marriage.

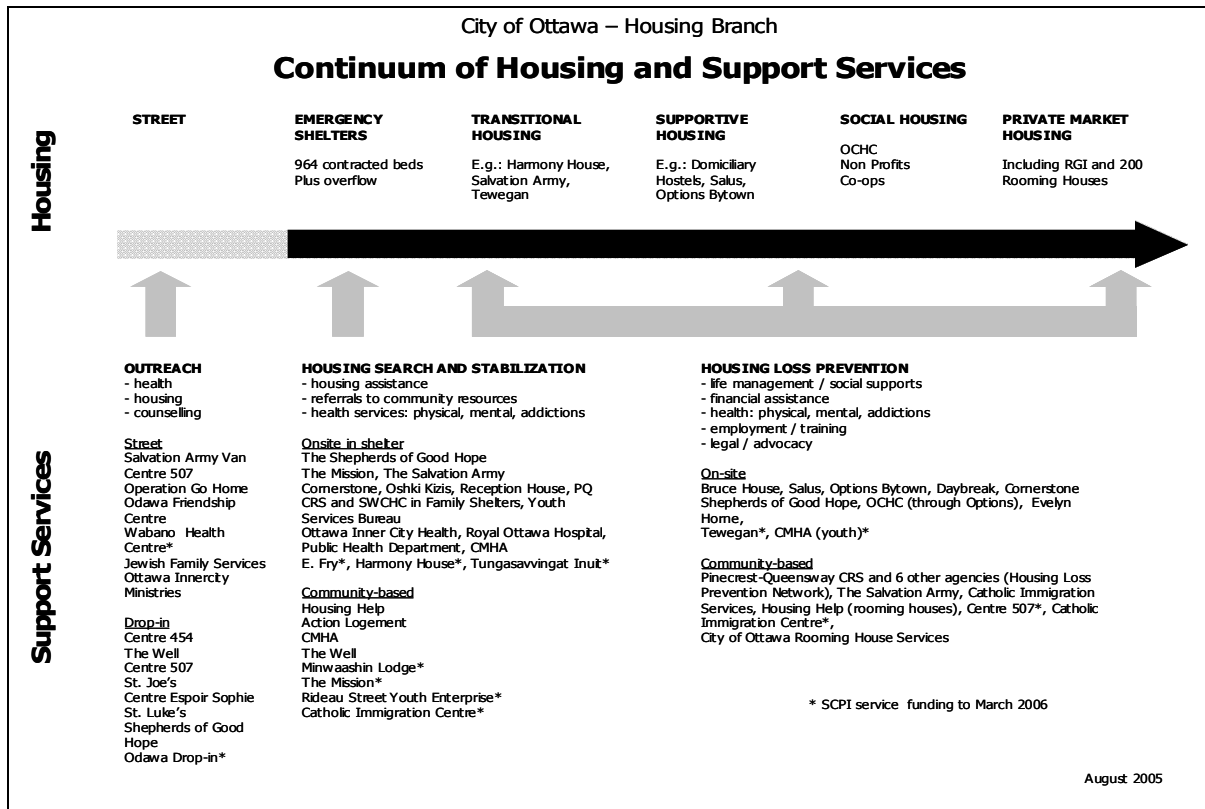
For provincial funding, the City originally received two separate proposals for services: one from the community health and resource centres, and the other from Housing Help and Action Logement, long-time providers of housing search, tenants' rights and housing loss prevention services in Ottawa. The community health and resources centres are large, multi-service agencies, with core funding and activities unrelated to housing. However, housing needs were often a factor in crisis intake situations. Housing Help and Action Logement are focused on housing, including housing search and homelessness prevention, and are smaller, less complex organizations.

The current arrangement was developed in response to a suggestion by the City that the proposals be melded into one. Effectively, the result is a hybrid grouping of agencies, combining two different kinds of organizations. In response to a request for proposals for SCPI funding, two proposals were submitted: one by HLPN, covering the western part of the City, and another by a consortium of community centres, housing providers and Action Logement (with Action Logement to play the co-ordinating role) for services in the eastern part of the City. The two proposals were combined into one, and constituted the expanded HLPN.

The benefits of the model, as envisaged, include comparability of data about services, administrative efficiency, information-sharing, accessibility of services, and cost-effectiveness. Each is considered below, in more detail.

Membership

As noted above, the current configuration of HLPN is a hybridization of two proposals, making it a funding and administrative arrangement, rather than a pre-existing network of service providers. It combines many -- but not all -- of the non-site-specific prevention services providers funded by the City of Ottawa. In the continuum of services, depicted below, HLPN agencies are among the community-based agencies listed under housing loss prevention. Presumably, a complete housing loss prevention network would include all those in that category on the continuum, who would collaborate and co-ordinate their activities to monitor needs and services, to share information, and to identify gaps and how they might be filled.



In the absence of such a network, HLPN attempts to carry out these functions within its own membership, but may be hampered by reduced awareness of related organizations and their roles in preventing housing loss.

Even beyond the City-funded organizations, other agencies are involved in housing loss prevention, including outplacement and other workers providing services to prisoners and those being held in hospitals or mental health institutions.

Data collection

An important feature of the Network was to be the collection of data using common forms. This was developed to meet the requirements established by the funders, and to allow for comparisons and a cumulative overview of the services provided by the Network as a whole. The data were to be collected by each of the principal partners, aggregated by PQ, and provided to the City of Ottawa.

Both the statistical and narrative data in the quarterly reports are helpful in providing a picture of the services provided, the number of people served, and the housing retention rates (all addressed under service provision below). However, the picture was not complete in the early days of the Network, as there were inconsistencies in the forms provided by the City of Ottawa in French and English. This has since been corrected, making data across agencies more comparable. Data provided by Action Logement and its second-tier partners are submitted in French.

Administrative efficiency

The administrative burden of managing the financial and data collection requirements of HLPN are considerable. Managers reported that their meeting time is dominated by administrative discussions, leaving little or no time for more substantive discussions about service delivery.

Members of HLPN are satisfied with the administration of the Network, a role assigned to PQ. However, PQ is placed in a potentially awkward position of being both the manager of the Network and an otherwise equal partner.

With respect to data collection, individual agencies, particularly those who are submitting data to the City of Ottawa directly under other funding agreements, report the time and complexity of maintaining the data and preparing it for submission, and suggested that submitting them directly would be more efficient for them. Similarly, the Network Administrator reports the complexity of providing HLPN-wide data. Changes in the reporting requirements over the life of HLPN have resulted in additional administrative burden and reduced ability to compare and cumulate data.

Data collection and reporting are only one aspect of the administrative challenges of HLPN's operations. Money also funnels through PQ, which can create relatively long lags between the time a member agency submits a required report and the time the money is released. PQ must await the submission of the reports of all member agencies, consolidate these reports, and

then submit the report to the City, which in turns releases the funds to PQ. This time lapse can create cash-flow problems in smaller agencies.

Finally, although the City provides its data-reporting forms in both official languages, the working language of HLPN is English, including its meetings and written communications. This imposes an additional burden on Action Logement, which has French as its principal operating language.

Information-sharing

HLPN agencies developed a common protocol for services related to housing loss prevention that is common to all partners. This protocol outlines principles, values and service standards for workers in the housing loss prevention program. Although the document itself was familiar to only some of the front-line workers, they confirmed that it reflected the way they are working on a daily basis.

Similarly, Network members developed a generic job description, which has been customized by each partner to meet their particular requirements. Other agencies with whom the Network works were not aware of this document, and expressed an interest in seeing it, to help clarify the role of the housing loss prevention workers.

Managers meet periodically to discuss Network business, providing an opportunity for the identification and discussion of challenges in the work of the partners. Further, front-line workers meet periodically, to compare notes, and discuss trends and challenges they are facing in their work.

Before the creation of HLPN, front-line workers of a broad range of agencies providing homelessness-related services, including those from HLPN agencies, met monthly. These meetings were convened by Dr. Tim Aubry, who was carrying out the evaluation of the City of Ottawa's homelessness programs, as part of his research method. Front-line workers from HLPN agencies and others described those meetings as having been vital to the sharing of information, and the development of shared learning, and expressed regret that they no longer take place. However, HLPN front-line workers indicated they were trying to expand their meetings to include other people working in the field of housing loss prevention.

The main disappointment described by health and community service centres front-line workers, in terms of information exchange, was that only one worker each from Housing Help and Action Logement were typically involved in their meetings. This resulted in a less complete identification and discussion of issues they are facing in their work with clients, and less access to the expertise of workers from those two agencies, who often have more experience and more

housing-specific expertise At Housing Help and Action Logement, base funding from other sources provides for some housing loss prevention services, and the multiple positions funded through HLPN have resulted in increased staffing for this purpose. However, the funding for the additional staff are spread among a larger number of workers in those two organizations, making it improbable that all or most of them could attend at any time.

Yet, from the beginning, Housing Help and Action Logement have provided the benefit of their experience to newer housing support workers at the community health and resource centres. As well, based on their provincial funding, they accept referrals from other HLPN partners, who typically turn to them when services required go beyond what is possible with HLPN funding, including representation in various legal and administrative tribunals.

Accessibility of services

A principal goal in forming HLPN was to ensure that everyone in Ottawa had access to housing loss prevention services if and when it was needed. By placing many of the workers in community health and resource centres, those who seek out crisis workers for health or other reasons have ready access to expertise to the housing challenges that may be contributing to the crisis. In fact, Action Logement was formed by community health centres for that very reason. The health and community resource centres first approached the city for housing-related funding because so many of the crises they were faced with had a housing component. The current configuration of HLPN means that everyone in Ottawa, no matter where they live, can get services from a housing loss prevention worker, as each person falls within a "catchment area" from one of the Network partners.

In practice, this has worked reasonably well, with some notable exceptions:

- Some people facing housing loss are not tenants, and are understood to be ineligible for this service or any other support.
- Some people who received eviction notices are working, sometimes full-time, and may not be able to connect with workers easily after hours.
- Some people facing housing loss live in more rural and remote areas, where public transit is not available or not convenient for getting to a worker.
- Some people facing housing loss are incarcerated, in jails, prisons, hospitals or other facilities, and are not able to access workers.
- In cases where a client is referred from a west end housing loss prevention worker to seek housing search services those services are not available in the west end and access to downtown may be complex, also the housing search workers tend to treat them as new client rather than

as a continuum of services already started by another worker within the network

Some of these gaps are the result of limits in the programs permitted by the funders. Others may be related to the nature of the agencies and their hours of operations. A more fundamental question, however, relates to the membership of HLPN and to the apparent lack of awareness as to its services in the larger community.

It can be argued that it doesn't matter whether clients know about HLPN. What matters to them is getting the help they need, and they find the help in a partner organization with which they associate the service they are receiving. Some other organizations in the broader community are aware of HLPN *per se*; these are mostly organizations that are familiar and comfortable with social and housing service organizations. For others, however, HLPN is unknown.

Without a higher profile, it is possible that many tenants in need of the services are unaware of its existence, resulting in greater reliance on shelters, and other related social and health services.

Cost effectiveness of services

Since the data provided do not include cost-per-client, or the costs associated with eviction, this evaluation relies on a Canada Mortgage and Housing report, *Cost Effectiveness of Eviction Prevention Programs* (Acacia Consulting, March 2005). This report is based on interviews with tenants and landlords to assess the costs associated with eviction, and on assessments of over 50 programs across Canada. Costs to private landlords, according to this report, include lost rental arrears, repairs, advertising and screening new tenants, and are reported in a range from \$1,000 to \$3000. Costs to social housing providers are reported to be about \$750. Costs to tenants, though not estimated at a dollar figure level, include loss of security deposits and/or last month's rent, moving expenses, higher rents in new location, and possible loss of belongings. Finally, the costs to human and health services include rising demand for shelters, and increased demands on other health, social and criminal justice systems. Although the costs of prevention are difficult to calculate, but efforts to date suggest an investment of under \$500 can prevent eviction and homelessness, and the costs identified above.

It also provides more in-depth analysis of a smaller number of programs, including the Housing Loss Prevention Network, which was described as combining "a favourable per-client cost and high impact relative to most other initiatives surveyed," creating the "potential to serve as a 'best-practices' model for other Canadian eviction prevention programs." (Acacia, 2005, p. 84)

Services

Virtually all stakeholders placed a high value on the services provided by HLPN agencies, praising the competence of HLPN front-line staff. This is particularly remarkable in the context of the constraints created by the HLPN model, and the characteristics of the clients they serve.

A growing proportion of clients require on-going attention to prevent their housing loss. These clients have one, or usually more, of the characteristics that put people at risk of homelessness: poverty, mental or physical health issues (including substance abuse, hoarding and addiction), lack of social networks, recent arrival in Canada (and often Ottawa), recent experience with the child welfare or criminal justice system, limited literacy and/or education, or abusive domestic situations. Particularly when more than one of these situations occurs simultaneously, the situation is complex.

In the language of social work, the threat of housing loss may be the presenting problem, but it may not be the most fundamental or profound issue the client is confronting. Therefore, even where other services exist that can help with the housing loss threat, HLPN workers find themselves assisting clients with navigating the range of systems that are involved: child welfare, police, income security, legal aid, health care, and more. The community health and resource centres are, of course, particularly well situated to handle these complex situations within their own organizations, because of the broad range of expertise available. The two broader housing-service organizations have a long history of knowledge of and collaboration with outside agencies, including community health and resource centres. Hence, both service-delivery models have their strengths in meeting this complex set of needs presented by many clients.

This case management approach, as noted above, is often contrasted with the continuum approach, in that clients may move along that continuum indefinitely, unless and until someone addresses the underlying issues. It is noteworthy that HLPN workers often combine the two approaches to meet the needs of the clients and to prevent the housing loss that can be anticipated without intervention.

A declining proportion of those that HLPN serves are one-time clients. Generally speaking, these households are either not eligible for assistance, e.g., they live outside the City boundaries or are home-owners, or they have problems that fall outside the rubric of housing loss issues, or they require a simple referral to another service that can assist them, for example, the rent bank, or legal aid services.

Range of Services

The services provided by HLPN are intended to focus on preventing the loss of housing. As noted above, two of the partners, by origin and intent, focus equally on housing search, and funds allocated by the Network are dedicated to part of the time of several workers, rather than to workers who focus solely on housing loss prevention. The line between the two realms, discussed further below, is a murky one.

While research has indicated that the most successful prevention services are dedicated to eviction prevention, HLPN is dedicated to housing loss prevention, which encourages the identification of the contributors to homelessness, and intervention where the contributors are present and crisis is not yet imminent. For many clients, this means assistance with transfers and housing search, whether or not the threat of eviction is imminent or present.

For example, if a tenant is in housing that is unaffordable, and is skimping on other necessities to pay rent, or is falling behind in rental payments, relocation may be the only reasonable step to prevent homelessness. Similarly, if a tenant is in conflict with neighbours and/or the landlord, and the conflict cannot be resolved, relocation is an important housing loss prevention step. Therefore, housing loss prevention can, and often does, have a housing search component.

Within both broad services lie a multitude of others. Some are discussed below.

Housing loss prevention workers, in the interests of helping tenants retain their housing, often support tenants in negotiations with their landlords. Workers have knowledge about legal rights and responsibilities of landlords under a variety of legislation including the *Social Housing Reform Act* and the *Tenant Protection Act*, and municipal by-Laws which allows them to assist tenants in addressing conflicts with landlords. These conflicts are generally related to rental payment or arrears, property standards, or conflicts with other tenants. Both private and social housing providers have described the value of having knowledgeable staff negotiating on behalf of tenants, while clients have reported on the successful resolution of such problems.

Since a significant obstacle to housing retention is affordability, and the supply of affordable housing has not increased, a lot of effort is expended helping clients deal with rents they cannot afford.

This can take the form of helping tenants make compelling cases to the Social Housing Registry (often reframing the very real needs of a tenant to conform to the criteria for gaining and maintaining priority on the waiting list). It can be in the form of assistance with the search for affordable housing or assistance from

Ontario Works for payment of rental arrear., Or it could be referral and accompaniment in some cases to others services including rent banks and money management training.

When a client is facing eviction for reasons associated with rental arrears or property standards and maintenance, all HLPN workers help clients to respond to eviction notices, to prepare for Rental Housing Tribunal hearings, and to get to the hearings themselves. Legal aid (through clinics and/or Duty Counsel) and Action Logement or Housing Help can both provide additional expertise and support for tenants facing eviction for these and other reasons, including representation of tenants before the Tribunal or human rights commissions. In a small number of cases, when the individual situation warrants it, any HLPN front-line worker may accompany clients through this process.

In the course of providing these kinds of services, workers may also be involved with physicians, other health professionals serving the same clients, and other systems, including schools, child welfare and police.

Staff

HLPN staff received consistently high praise from stakeholders: clients called them “gods”; colleagues and funders described them as professional and hard-working. Both current and past staff of HLPN and related services talked about their work and their clients with compassion and dedication. The only criticisms of HLPN workers came from a small number of landlords, who are often in conflict situations with clients served by HLPN staff, before the Rental Housing Tribunal, for example.

Staff themselves identified their interest in, and need for, additional training. They report learning mostly on-the-job, relying on each other to learn about other services in the community. They describe not being clear enough on services outside the core of prevention services. It was noted that Housing Help and Action Logement have more formal training for their staff, but similar training is not available for staff within the other core partners.

Both managers and staff described the frustrations and job insecurity attributable to short-term, insecure funding of the services. Even if the service is not imminently ending, workers are aware of the risk of loss of employment, and often seek and get jobs doing similar work in more secure positions, often with other organizations. The turnover also leads member agencies to spend considerable time recruiting new staff, sometimes from other member agencies.

At this point, given low community awareness of the network, referrals are the main form of reaching new clients at risk of losing their housing. Even where

workers have been able to do community outreach, clients focus on the name and face of the worker. Hence, if the worker has left, there may be an assumption that the service is unavailable, further diminishing awareness of the service.

Workload

As described above, a declining proportion of clients are one-time assistance situations, and more and more of them are dealing with complex interrelated issues of which the threat of housing loss is only one manifestation. Combined with this, the number of clients being served is rising, while the number of staff is not. Our evaluation tools did not permit us to assess any impact the workload may have on absenteeism or turnover.

This situation creates several spillover effects, including the infrequency of outreach work into the communities being served. Of course, the net effect of such outreach may be to create more demand for services, with a still static number of workers to handle the increased load. Yet, without doing the outreach, there is a real risk that those in need of the services may not be aware of their existence.

Another result of high workload demands is the infrequency of meeting with other front-line workers and organizing “in-house” training opportunities, both of which could support staff in their work.

Policy and program environment

Stakeholders referred again and again to the public policy and program context in which HLPN provides its services. Although this is not within the control of the funder or HLPN members, it has a substantial impact on housing loss prevention work.

In particular, stakeholders identified factors that are created by existing public policy and program designs and constraints: the lack of affordable housing and the inadequacy of incomes.

The lack of affordable housing, despite high vacancy rates, is a result of legislative and programmatic decisions at the federal and provincial levels of government.

Until very recently, neither the federal nor provincial government has invested in new social housing (municipal and private non-profit, and co-op housing) in many years. In fact, the closing out of some federal and provincial subsidies in

coming years will create greater pressure on social housing providers to find revenues from rental income to cover basic maintenance of older properties.”

The inadequacy of the shelter components of social assistance incomes in Ontario has resulted in further constraints on what housing is affordable to those who receive social assistance. It has not kept pace with real housing costs, particular in new housing stock, meaning that many, many social assistance recipients are paying considerably more than 30 percent of their income for rent. This effectively means that they are in unaffordable housing.

The specific rules on increases in rents within the *Tenant Protection Act*, provincial legislation, have meant an effective decrease in the supply of affordable housing. In private housing, the current rules create the possibility (or probability in low-vacancy situations) for rents to become unaffordable once rental units are vacated by current tenants. This increases the risk that the cost of units that were affordable for the last tenant will exceed the amount provided under social assistance to pay for such housing for the new tenant. The shortage of affordable private market housing puts additional stress on the supply of existing social housing.

Under the peculiarities of the *Social Housing Reform Act*, also provincial legislation, social housing providers are faced with increasing and decreasing choice in tenants. On the one hand, the waiting lists are long, often resulting in waits of years by those in need of social housing. On the other hand, the priorities set by provincial and municipal governments mean that the Housing Registry must offer one half of vacant units to those in three priority need categories, i.e. to those who are either fleeing violence, homeless or facing serious health issues. Some social housing providers report that these factors are changing the nature of their communities, in some cases making them less attractive neighbourhoods. Under the same *Act*, however, social housing providers can and do require detailed reporting of income that often exceeds the capability of the tenant to provide. This gives social housing providers a mechanism to revoke the tenant’s eligibility for subsidy, effectively increasing their rents to market rents.

A number of factors beyond the influence of municipal government are contributing to inadequate incomes. These include low social assistance rates, low minimum wages, increasing “irregular employment” that offers workers fewer hours of paid work per week (and often allows employers to avoid providing employee benefits), and declining employment opportunities in general for lower-skilled workers or those with limited skills in either official language.

While only the first two of these factors are within the direct control of the provincial government, and the others can be influenced but not dictated by

provincial and federal governments, they combine to reduce the income available to pay for rental housing. This in turn increases demand for rent-geared-to-income housing and private housing stock that is inexpensive, but often poorly maintained.

V Recommendations

During focus groups and key informant interviews, stakeholders were asked if they had recommendations for making HLPN and its services more effective. The recommendations that follow emerge from the responses to those questions, along with other research and findings reported above. In keeping with the findings, they are listed for the model, for the services, and finally for policies beyond the Network.

Model

As noted above, coordination and collaboration among housing loss prevention providers is both good practice, and apparently effective. The recommendations that follow are intended to refine the Network model and exploit it to achieve better results for all partners.

Membership

The current configuration of HLPN seems to be an uncomfortable fit, with the health and community resources centres forming one natural group, and Housing Help and Action Logement forming another. The differences are apparent in the areas of expertise of each organization, the allocation of person-years to staff members, and the proportion of staff funded under the arrangement attending front-line workers' meetings. In spite of the success of the Network, these differences undermine the potential that could be gained from a more coherent and/or inclusive grouping of agencies.

Also, HLPN fails to include all agencies funded by the City of Ottawa for homelessness prevention services. While the agencies are aware of each other, their data are not cumulated, and the links between them are between individual front-line workers in each agency. Again, this diminishes the possible benefits of having a Network that includes all agencies funded to do the same kind of work. Yet HLPN staff and front-line workers in other homelessness prevention services and beyond identified the value in more frequent opportunities to exchange information.

It is recommended that:

- 1. the City of Ottawa respect existing networks and groups with common interests and values, by allowing for and encouraging applications for*

funding from natural, self-identified groupings of organizations, including both community and health resource centres, and housing-related service providers, that can provide the services needed.

2. the City of Ottawa facilitate the creation of a broader housing loss prevention network, consisting of all agencies funded to provide services under this rubric within the continuum of housing and homeless services, and that it convene meetings of this network on a regular basis to encourage and enhance information-sharing and gap identification.

3. the City of Ottawa convene quarterly meetings of front-line workers of the newly expanded housing loss prevention network and agencies funded from other sources and support the creation of an electronic list-serve to allow for more frequent information exchanges and collaboration.

Staff training

Staff receive little or no formal training in some HLPN partners, and extensive training in other partner agencies.

4. It is therefore recommended that the City of Ottawa fund training for housing loss prevention staff, drawing on the existing expertise in both housing-related issues and cross-sectoral collaboration from among agencies already funded under housing loss prevention.

Access to services

There is no single phone number that residents can use to access housing loss prevention services, and therefore no single access point through which services can be obtained. This puts the onus on the often-fragile individual facing the threat of housing loss to find out about available services and to locate the correct service for his or her geographic location.

5. It is recommended that the City of Ottawa, based on discussion and collaboration with service providers, provide a single access number through which residents can find the appropriate service.

Staffing

HLPN management is carried out by individuals with considerable other management responsibilities. There are also tensions connected with having one

member of the Network have more responsibility and perhaps discretion than the others, as is currently the case for PQ within HLPN. .

6. It is recommended that the City of Ottawa encourage the dedication of one person from among a partnership of agencies to administer that partnership, who is not a staff person representing the organization within the partnership.

Services

As noted above, there is a high level of satisfaction with the current services provided by HLPN through its front-line workers. All stakeholders were specifically asked if there were gaps in services, or changes they might recommend to improve service.

Staff resources

As staff are facing a growing and increasingly complex client demand, it is possible, particularly where the number of workers or the number of days on-site with second-tier partners are limited, that staff resources are inadequate.

7. It is recommended that the City of Ottawa anticipate and budget for an annual review of data by housing loss prevention partnerships to determine whether the staff resources are adequate to meet the demand for services.

Current funding arrangements are contributing to turnover in staff, and to an increased demand for training of new staff.

8. It is recommended that the housing loss prevention service providers (including HLPN member agencies) and the City of Ottawa encourage funders of housing loss prevention services to provide longer-term, more stable funding for such services.

Outreach to tenants

For those tenants who find the housing loss prevention worker in their geographic area, the service is remarkable, and makes a significant, sometimes life-saving, change in their lives. Those who are unaware are not being served. While job descriptions include outreach, and front-line workers describe the benefits of outreach work, it is often sacrificed to the urgent needs of current clients.

9. It is recommended that the City of Ottawa and agencies or groups of agencies planning work in the area of housing loss prevention establish staffing

allocations that can meet the need for outreach to tenants in at-risk communities.

Stakeholders described the need for a particular outreach effort to those whose hoarding practices put them at risk of housing loss. These individuals, and their families, are often unaware of the risks they face, not just in terms of housing loss, but also in terms of health and safety for themselves and their neighbours.

10. It is recommended that the City of Ottawa and housing loss prevention service providers expedite the work of the Ottawa Community Response to Hoarding Working Group to develop supports for tenants whose hoarding puts themselves and others at risk.

Relationship-building

Some promising collaboration between some housing loss prevention services and landlords is taking place in pilot projects being undertaken by HLPN members. And Housing Help and Action Logement are participants in the Social Housing Registry and the Social Housing Providers Network. Despite these linkages, it was noted by some stakeholders among landlords and tenants that they were unaware of the specific role of housing loss prevention workers, particularly when other workers were supporting tenants in other aspects of their housing retention. Similarly, there are reported to be weak and intermittent linkages with service providers who are outside the housing and conventional social service providers.

It is recommended that:

- 11. housing loss prevention services build and maintain linkages with stakeholders, especially social housing providers who may have tenant support staff on-site.*
- 12. housing loss prevention services build and maintain linkages with outplacement workers in other institutions, to extend the reach and effectiveness of services.*

Focus on prevention

The goal of HLPN is to identify people at risk of housing loss before a crisis occurs. However, this work cannot be demonstrated to be as effective as work with clients in more imminent threat of losing their housing.

13. Given constraints on resources, it is recommended that housing loss prevention services give clear priority to clients at greatest and most imminent risk of losing housing.

Policy

Policy that is beyond the control of HLPN, its members, and even the City of Ottawa has a direct impact on the supply of affordable housing and the levels of income available to social assistance recipients and low-wage workers. The following recommendations are intended to define a role for the Network, its member agencies and front-line workers in helping to reduce the rising tide of those at risk of losing their housing. It is noted that front-line workers have expressed an interest in using their knowledge and experience to inform advocacy efforts.

14. It is recommended that housing loss prevention services, including HLPN agencies, and their front-line workers bring their own knowledge and experience to bear in encouraging governments at all levels to increase the supply of affordable housing, to amend or remove legislation that contributes to the decline in supply, and to amend policies and programs to contribute to higher incomes for those on assistance or on low wages.