

HOW SYSTEM THINKING CAN TRANSFORM AN ORGANIZATION

THE DAVID BUSBY CENTRE CASE (BARRIE, ONTARIO) AND THE SIMCOE COUNTY ALLIANCE TO END HOMELESSNESS (SCATEH)



Located in Barrie, Ontario, the David Busby Street Centre (DBSC) focuses on reducing the impact of poverty, homelessness, insufficient employment, addiction and mental health issues through outreach and services to participants in the city of Barrie and area. The DBSC has been in operation since 1993. It offers a drop-in centre, centralized intake and mobile outreach programs, serving over 2200 unique individuals and families annually. The Centre is an active member of the Simcoe County Alliance to End Homelessness (SCATEH), and its executive director, Sara Peddle, currently chairs the SCATEH.

SCATEH is a local movement to prevent and end homelessness in Simcoe County through coordinated strategies, advocacy and awareness. The alliance recognizes it takes a whole community coming together to change social conditions.

A Simcoe County-wide non-profit coalition of over 70 individuals and organizations,

SCATEH undertakes three core activities:

- coordinating the system of care to end homelessness;
- advocating for client access to systems and seeking policy change to support ending homelessness; and
- raising awareness of homelessness in Simcoe.

As a coalition, SCATEH is uniquely positioned to make a collective impact. Efforts are directed toward developing a coordinated system of care to address homelessness in a proactive and strategic manner. There is evidence that a coordinated system works and SCATEH is committed to partnering with the community.

Over the years, SCATEH has developed durable partnerships within its member organizations. The central steering committee is responsible for coordination and implementation, and for making strategic and operational decisions. Comprised of chapter representatives and advisors from government and the United Way, the steering committee strikes work groups as needed and oversees and coordinates these groups.

SCATEH has five chapters: North Simcoe, South Simcoe, Orillia and Area, Barrie, and South Georgian Bay. The chapters carry out SCATEH's mandate with direction and coordination from the central steering committee. However, regional diversity precludes a cookie cutter approach to partnerships and Housing First. SCATEH has been working hard to provide the cross-training

“(…) the switch to Housing First is a major commitment: SCATEH embraces a Housing First philosophy and efforts are underway to move from philosophy to program . We are still educating people on what Housing First is and what it means for our area. As much as it’s common sense to some, it’s not to others. And we are turning things on their head a little bit, from a social work side of things. We are now telling people to somewhat de-professionalize; to be relatable. So there’s a cultural shift in the environment of how we deliver homeless services. Having a person who hones in on that, looks at the trends, the research and training that is available is important.”

necessary to implement the Housing First Strategy for all SCATEH associate agencies through the Simcoe County chapter—for example, training for the Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool; motivational interviewing; Aboriginal sensitivity training; self-care training, and grief and loss workshops . SCATEH also manages projects to build Housing First capacity across the region, including hiring a Housing First housing locator to engage landlords and develop housing stock.

“No wrong door” policy

One initiative that is very interesting from a Homelessness Partnering Strategy perspective and that has changed the organization is the “no wrong door” policy. In 2010, in her role as executive director of the Busby Centre, Sara went to Cambridge and saw a model for a hub of services. It was a great facility that included a drop-in centre, a community kitchen, an entire floor devoted to long-term self-contained units

and another floor providing an emergency shelter. When she returned to Barrie, she shared her enthusiasm with her colleagues and arranged for a presentation in Barrie by a Cambridge founder, Anne Tinker, to “build inspiration in the Barrie community.”

The project took off and to get community partners together, the Centre hired a consultant to help develop the hub of services. At that time in the community, a few agencies needed space and they decided to work together towards a shared space project. A space was found with assistance from the newly developed Barrie Pathways group. From this hub project, a “no wrong door” approach was developed and continued to evolve. Working again through SCATEH, the idea was to offer a decentralized access point—a few different access points that would funnel back—to ensure that clients received the level of support they needed or that they were offered appropriate housing , regardless of their entry door.

Developing a coordinated system of care

To reach this goal, everyone involved had to agree to participate in a coordinated access and housing navigation support working group for their area. SCATEH has more than 70 partners throughout the County of Simcoe, so it was not an easy task to rally everyone around the same goal. A specialist was invited to meet with their whole constituency to start the process, talk about systems design and give a different perspective on how to set things up better. Teaching people the value and mechanics of system design from a Housing First perspective helped drill the work down, provide some best practices and set up a system where people are not turned away if they go to the “wrong door”—and where if they do, they can be redirected to the right place with a warm transfer.

The biggest challenge was to establish the system. Through meetings, it was realized that there was an important core group of agencies that were working with people experiencing deep poverty and homelessness. Being “educated” on the reality of the system, on who was doing what, made things clearer for all the partners. When everyone went back to their respective agency, they had a common project in mind, with timelines to respect and goals to accomplish. Educating people is a long-term process. For SCATEH, the strategy was to start with the front-line workers, who would then

relay information in different formats. For example, instead of relying on paper documents, videos are produced to share information.

After the initial training, another meeting was scheduled within a week to determine a plan of action and the role each agency would play in the evolving coordinated access and housing navigation process. It was soon realized that there were very good relationships already in place, which was empowering for everyone. Of course, there were some challenges too, but the key to overcoming these was to have honest conversations with one another about the rules of engagement. This led to a clearer definition of roles and assignment of specific tasks.

Two-way communication

The whole process is ongoing, as participating agencies refine their resources and partnerships in the communities. An important purpose of partnership is to make sure that information moves in both directions, which in turn improves service delivery. For SCATEH, each chapter reports on what is happening (current trends, challenges, best practices, etc.) in their area at a monthly central steering committee meeting attended by community partners. Information about specific projects must also go back to all partners. Communication must be ongoing, whether by newsletter, a quick email to everybody, or circulating steering committee and chapter meeting minutes

on the latest project developments and inviting partners to raise questions or concerns. SCATEH also took advantage of its twice-yearly forum meetings to share information, set specific goals and mobilize the community. The forums allow participants to reflect on the current situation and decide where adjustments are needed, and to explore how communities can help each other.

Time and momentum

Reflecting on the process, the Busby Centre’s executive director admits that lack of time is an important obstacle. Agencies are over-committed in so many different ways. People are tired but excited at the same time. The leadership recipe is equal parts smaller agencies for creativity and flexibility, and larger agencies for creativity and resources. Another challenge is to keep the momentum going among partners. Lead agencies need to get creative in how to keep partners engaged in the work. The key is to steward partners and make sure that, even with written agreements, each one understands the task to be done. Despite the difficulties, working with partners is an opportunity and the Busby Centre understood this.

“For the SCATEH Barrie Chapter, one of the processes that we put in place is a decentralized access system. All of the shelters, our existing Central Intake programs, and the Housing Resources Centres participate in the decentralized access points to initialize assessing the individual/family acuity level. These assessments are reviewed and triaged by the Housing Resource Centre and the agencies that have capacity for home based case management supports. Therefore cases are assigned to case managers working in diverse organizations and the housing worker (if needed) for follow-ups and further support. If the housing worker and the case manager are working together, then they’re able to get that person into housing, and then build those supports around him or her. The case manager becomes the broker of the needed services to establish community support network. In other words, it funnels in to a centralized process and then funnels back out to the most appropriate case management and housing.”

“(…) When you do have those windows of opportunity where you start to see some synergies start to happen, you don’t just walk away from that. I think that’s a really important piece. We’ve been fortunate that there’s a couple of different community partnership tables right now that have been really synergizing.”

Building such an alliance required patience. Although partnerships can happen quite easily, programming can take more time (one to two years or more). A lot depends on the capacity of the organization to make decisions, to stay motivated to instill change, and to make sure that the alliance continuously moves forward. For SCATEH, the biggest achievement in building a strong network to make the Housing First initiative work was to instill a cultural shift in the organization. Changing the culture means changing the way people think about and do their job. It means questioning practices and accepting the insecurity that comes with that. It means assuring the staff—even the most pessimistic—that things will work out for the better. It means educating people and spending time debriefing them through both difficult and encouraging times. It means committing to understand the philosophy and the process of Housing First.

“(…) it’s a shift, it’s a real shift in thinking. You’ve got people that are used to being in offices with these people and compartmentalizing their crisis. Now, working on things in the new way, being in their home, especially with the high needs folks, it might mean watching a TV show for a bit in order to build that rapport. And it might be that for a couple weeks. It doesn’t mean you’re not doing your job, you know. Like I’ve had that too. Well, I just don’t feel like I’m doing my job. You are.”

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