

THE IMPORTANCE OF A LEADER (City of Lethbridge, Alberta)



The City of Lethbridge's Community and Social Development Group wanted to add an emphasis on housing and homelessness to its portfolio of services. They incorporated a Housing First specialist position, to focus on the Housing First initiative, provide clinical and operational support to funded programs, and pull the whole system of care together. Partnership development was part of the mandate of the position. The Housing First specialist became a leader for the City and the community.

According to the specialist, the key to partnerships is to foster a healthy system of care that includes outside partnerships and relationships with service providers that the City doesn't fund, but that are key to providing quality services from the Housing First perspective or that are Housing First-friendly. The role of the Housing First specialist is to liaise between the funded programs system and the outside service provider system, and expand that network of connections to create a holistic team.

To achieve this, a number of actions were taken:

Education and training on intensive case management

The City tries to educate their funded programs on the importance of staying connected to external service providers and always including them. The City has developed a Housing First standards of practice manual and provides a set of policies and procedures supporting the standards. One of those policies requires that funded programs:

- 1) communicate monthly with their external partners, whether they need to or not; and
- 2) keep all partners and stakeholders informed of any significant changes or events that affect their clients, to avoid surprises.

Complex case consultation meeting

This meeting takes place every two weeks with as many of their partners as possible, including the Housing First teams. The meeting is to:

- share information about what is happening with each agency;
- ask questions about joint participants;
- stay informed about arising difficulties; and
- discuss needed changes in the system.

Housing First committee

The Housing First committee includes key players and facilitates opportunities for information sharing, connecting and liaising between partners.

“I think that a real key in developing partnership and being collaborative, is getting rid of all the intricate differences in the language that people speak, and create an environment where everybody is speaking the same dialect.”

The value of having a Housing First specialist

Having a Housing First specialist working for the City means having someone always present to address difficulties partners are not able to resolve themselves.

“I become that sort of go-to, common link that I can come in, and provide mediation if necessary, and assistance in smoothing out those ripples and wrinkles in whatever the issue is.”

It also means having an experienced person able to brainstorm the process of developing the partnership network. His role is to add potential partners to the agencies already committed. It is a “web” exercise that expands as much as possible. It starts with contacting an organization to present the partnership vision, answering any questions that might arise, and making sure that the organization is completely informed and able to see whether what they do fits

in. (However, the fit does not have to be perfect.) Any contribution can make a difference. That strategy, according to the Housing First specialist, led to other organizations being pulled in. Soon, a larger group started talking about how they all fit together for the benefit of their clients.

The importance of communication

For the specialist, the biggest challenge with maintaining partnerships is the potential lack of communication. The solution is to constantly pull people together: “bring them together, sit down, have some discussion, recharge and recommit.”

“Keeping people, you know, face to face as much as possible is beneficial. We lose things when we spend so much time just trying to communicate by email. And part of it is because it’s hard to know what the feeling and the tone of things are behind certain emails too. And the more you can get people to actually physically speak to one another and be in front of each other, I think the stronger those partnerships are.”

Keep options open

Everyone is potentially a good candidate for partnerships. According to the specialist, as soon as people start questioning whether somebody is an appropriate partner or not, they end up

shortchanging possibilities. As an example, he mentions how easy it was to bring the police service on board, despite the differences in the way they work and manage their workload. The City of Lethbridge created the Downtown Policing Unit (DPU) specifically to better address some of the downtown issues. This unit became a very valuable ally and partner in the whole system. Many of the funded agencies and other partners have developed processes and systems using the DPU in situations other than emergencies. The DPU also became a vital source of information. They flag people in their system who they know are clients and can notify the agency working with the client if something happens. Conversely, it’s valuable for the DPU to receive information from agencies because it helps police officers to put aside their criminal outlook on clients and discover other facets of a person’s life. A well-oiled system does not leave out those you are trying to serve as partners in some capacity. Peter Block said: “We would have less meetings and the ones we do have would

take less time if we included the people we were talking about in those meetings.”

Collaboration is contagious

The Housing First specialist believes that the value in bringing as many people as possible together is that it becomes contagious. Someone comes to a meeting and sits in a room where there are multiple people who seem to be engaged, connected, and adding something of value. It becomes very difficult to not want to be involved.

The importance of initial leadership

There is a need for initial leadership in developing partnerships. However, the professional at the City of Lethbridge maintains that it is very important to be open-minded about who should take that lead. Sometimes, the chair of the partnership has to remove himself or herself if the energy or excitement starts to fade: “It is all about thinking about what is in the best interest of the people you’re trying to serve, as opposed to pridefulness and territorialism.”

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