

# Module 5

## SUSTAINABILITY OF HOUSING FIRST

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*This product has been made possible through a financial contribution from Health Canada to the Mental Health Commission of Canada. The views expressed herein solely represent the authors.*

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# KEY MESSAGES

MODULE 3 — SUSTAINABILITY OF HOUSING FIRST



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## Key Messages

- **Sustainability** can be thought of as the continued operation of the intervention’s critical ingredients.
- Sustainability outcomes for Housing First include obtaining continued **funding** for housing and support services, maintaining **adherence to the Housing First model**, sustaining **stable housing** and improved **quality of life** for participants, ensuring that Housing First continues to be a **routine part** of the housing/mental health practice in the community, sustaining **community-level partnerships**, and **scaling up** Housing First to serve a wider geographic area.
- **Contextual factors** and processes that promote sustainability include organizational support and strategies for continued program operation.
- Contextual factors and processes that promote sustainability include the characteristics of the **organizational environment**, the **community environment**, the **“fit” among different community systems**, and the **political/policy context**.
- Programs may encounter sustainability **challenges** in the context of maintaining **funding and resources**, **“program drift”**, preserving the Housing First program model if the **host agency or funding mechanism changes**, and maintaining **community support**.
- Sustainability **strategies** include developing a **sustainability plan** at an early stage, doing **“fidelity assessments”**, maintaining strong **leadership**, effectively **managing risk**, and by **developing a knowledge translation strategy** that communicates program successes to decision-makers, using evaluation results or qualitative **“success stories”** of program participants.

# WHAT IS SUSTAINABILITY?

## MODULE 5 — SUSTAINABILITY OF HOUSING FIRST



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Photo: Shane Fester

# What Is Sustainability?

Sustainability of Housing First can be thought of in terms of continued operation of the intervention's critical ingredients. Additionally, there are contextual factors and processes that promote sustainability (e.g., organizational support, influences and strategies for continued operation of the program)<sup>1</sup>.

## Sustainability Outcomes

*Housing First has several different types of sustainability outcomes:*

### **1. Continued funding for housing and support services:**

Housing and support services (e.g., housing subsidies, funding for ACT and ICM teams) are fundamental to the Housing First approach. When funding is withdrawn or reduced, the key components of the Housing First approach are jeopardized.

### **2. Fidelity or adherence to housing and clinical services to the Housing First model:**

Sometimes programs drift away from the original model, thus compromising the integrity of the approach. This is why it is important to conduct fidelity assessments on an ongoing basis to ensure continued adherence to the Housing First model.

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<sup>1</sup> Scheirer & Dearing, 2011; Stirman et al., 2012

### **3. Benefits to project participants.**

If funding for Housing First is cut or reduced, and/or the program is no longer implemented with fidelity to the core principles of Housing First, benefits to participants, such as stable housing and improved quality of life, are likely to suffer as well. Housing First programs need to incorporate a minimum data set of outcome measures to ensure that participants continue to reap the benefits of the Housing First approach.

### **4. Housing First as an integral component of the service system.**

When Housing First becomes “normal” or “typical” in service-delivery, rather than a pilot project or a demonstration project, we say that it has become “routinized.” Adoption of Housing First values, policies, and procedures indicate that it is routinized. Additionally, this aspect of sustainability indicates that the Housing First program has a clear role and fit with other housing and homeless programs in the community.

### **5. Community-level partnerships.**

When the housing sector, mental health service-providers, funders, and other key stakeholders continue to work together to implement Housing First, the capacity of the community to respond to homelessness is sustained.

### **6. Dissemination, expansion and scaling up of the Housing First model across a wider geographic area.**

For system level sustainability, it is important to disseminate and scale up Housing first in other communities. In Alberta, Housing First started in Calgary. Over time, however, the Housing First has been adopted by many other communities in Alberta.

# Contextual Factors and Processes that Promote Sustainability

The organizational, community, systems, and policy contexts are important for promoting the sustainability of Housing First.<sup>2</sup> As well, individuals and organizations that support Housing First can engage in various educational, public relations, and advocacy activities to promote sustainability.

*Contextual factors and processes that promote sustainability include:*

## 1. Characteristics of the organizational environment in which Housing First operates.

Some organizational factors include leadership, fit with the vision, values and mission of the host organization, and beliefs of staff regarding the effectiveness of the Housing First approach. Having Housing First champions and supportive organizations are important for the sustainability of Housing First.

## 2. The surrounding community environment.

When community organizations provide in-kind resources, including staff, the Housing First approach is more likely to be sustained.

## 3. Fit among community systems.

Sustainability ultimately depends on creating and maintaining a fit or alignment amongst different community systems, which in turn depend on the host organization's ability to monitor and adapt the intervention to its surrounding context.<sup>3</sup> Building communities of practice is an important component in ensuring alignment amongst different community systems.

## 4. Political, economic, administrative, and policy context.

The wider political, economic, administrative and policy context in which the intervention operates is important for the promotion of sustainability.<sup>4</sup> Municipal, provincial and federal departments that fund and oversee the organizations that deliver Housing First need to be flexible about policies and procedures and work across sectorial boundaries. The Alberta Interagency Council on Homelessness is an excellent example of a body that facilitates this multi-sectorial cooperation.

## 5. Regarding the sustainability influences

On At Home/Chez Soi, the Mental Health Commission of Canada, researchers, local project staff, people with lived experience, and community/government partners played an active role since the beginning of the project to promote different facets of the sustainability of the project: continued funding, fidelity of implementation, and expansion and dissemination.

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1. Scheirer & Dearing, 2011; Stirman et al., 2012.

2. Shediac-Rizkallah & Bone, 1998; Shier & Dearing, 2011; Stirman et al., 2012

3. Scheirer & Dearing, 2011

4. Raghavan, Bright, & Shadoin, 2008



# CHALLENGES & STRATEGIES

## MODULE 3 — IMPLEMENTATION OF HOUSING FIRST



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# What are some key challenges to anticipate regarding sustainability?

Our consultations with stakeholders engaged in sustainability efforts revealed several challenges. We organize these challenges into three sections:

1. Maintaining funding and resources;
2. Preserving the Housing First program model when the host agency or funding mechanism changes; and
3. Maintaining community support for the Housing First model.

Each section describes several experience-based strategies from stakeholders with hands-on experience navigating sustainability issues, as well as knowledge gained from the At Home/Chez Soi project.



*For examples of sustainability strategies used by Housing First programs, follow this link to The Homeless Hub's ebook.*



**Download the book here:**

<http://homelesshub.ca/housingfirstcanada>

**Click here to read about:**

[Sustainability from Tim Richter of the Calgary Homeless Foundation](#)

1

## Challenge: Maintaining funding and resources

An ongoing sustainability challenge revolves around the critical need to maintain funding and resources for the program. As described in the funding mechanisms vary based on context and province. Some funding sources for Housing First programs may be short-term, which can present a challenge to sustainability. As short-term funding streams expire, there is a renewed need to advocate for Housing First and to educate new stakeholders about the approach. Further, in some jurisdictions, funding is split between housing and mental health services, creating challenges to long-term sustainability for Housing First resources. Provincial and local governments are continuously faced with pressure to reduce spending through austerity measures, which can also present a threat to long-term sustainability of Housing First programs.

What are some strategies for maintaining funding and resources?

## 1. Develop a Sustainability Plan at an Early Stage.

The best way to address challenges to continued funding to a pilot project is to develop a sustainability plan right from the outset of the new initiative. Then, as the pilot phase winds down, the program's leaders can be fully prepared to advocate with decision-makers by demonstrating the success of the program.

As part of the sustainability plan, Housing First program leaders encourage stakeholders to think about strategies for "graduating" program participants. As program participants improve, they may require a lower level of services; thus, it is important to cultivate partnerships with organizations that can provide these supports within a comprehensive system of care.

## 2. Knowledge Translation

If your program is undertaking research, evaluation, or some form of performance assessment, you will be in a better position to demonstrate success to decision-makers by translating this evidence into clear messages that funders can understand, focusing on outcomes that are important to them. This is known as "knowledge translation." The most effective knowledge translation strategies involve key decision-maker stakeholders engaging with the project from the outset, because involving funders up front increases their buy-in and ownership over the program, and their interest in your results. Funders and key stakeholders may be particularly interested in results that demonstrate cost-effectiveness.

Another especially effective way of advocating is to use success stories that demonstrate how Housing First has changed the day-to-day lives of participants, such as reconnecting with family members, and participating in activities that matter to them. The At Home/Chez Soi initiative, like many demonstration projects, was not in a position to show final results when the time came to make the case for sustainability and relied on interim reports for this purpose. Pilot projects have to be prepared to publicize progress reports about interim results and success stories to date.

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## Challenge: Preserving the Housing First program model when the host agency or funding mechanism changes

In some contexts, programs may be confronted by changes to the host agency or changes in funding mechanisms. When this occurs, programs face adjustment challenges that present threats to sustainability. New host agencies may have a different vision for the program, and program stakeholders must develop new relationships. Additionally, new funders and host agencies may be unfamiliar with Housing First, or resistant to key components of the Housing First approach.

What are some strategies for preserving the Housing First program model when the host agency or funding mechanism changes?

## 1. Maintain Strong Leadership.

Preserving the Housing First program from “program drift” is a challenge when an initiative moves beyond the excitement of the demonstration phase, and particularly so if the program becomes integrated into the usual system of care. If this happens, preserving the program leaders (e.g., the team leaders) is an especially important strategy for ensuring that the guiding philosophy and vision of the program is not lost, and that essential functions of the program are not compromised by funding cuts. Program leaders must have a clear understanding of the key principles of the program and be able to defend these to decision-makers. They should be able to coach team members to practice the model in a way that is consistent with the principles. As described in the evaluation module, team leaders should also develop a systematic way of assessing performance and outcomes to ensure that the program doesn’t drift from the model and continues to impact the lives of its participants in a positive way. Additionally, some programs recommended that leaders investigate flexible housing and homelessness dollars as bridge funds to obtaining long term, continuous funding, should initial funding mechanisms change.

### 3

## Challenge: Maintaining community support for the Housing First approach

As described in the Planning Module, it is critical to gain stakeholder and community support for the Housing First approach. Maintaining support for the Housing First approach is a crucial component of long-term sustainability. However, a common challenge faced by programs is diminishing support for Housing First. For instance, community support for Housing First can become a challenge if difficult tenancies are publicized, or if there is a crisis, such as a highly publicized police incident with a Housing First participant. Additionally, the community can exhibit fatigue or disinterest about the issue of homelessness over time.



*Read more:*  
[Planning Module](#)

## What are strategies for maintaining community support for the Housing First approach?

### 1. Effectively Manage Risk

Being able to normalize and anticipate risk is the key to getting “out in front” of any incidents and making sure that these don’t become the overriding public perception of your program. Effective Housing First practice involves maintaining proactive and responsive relationships with landlords so that difficult issues between participants and other tenants or members of the general public can be sensitively addressed.

### 2. Communicate Program Successes

Beyond avoiding bad press, you should be able to communicate success stories to the public and develop a reputation as community leaders and assets. One strategy is to develop a “speakers bureau” of participants who are trained and supported to make public presentations about their experience in the program, and can clearly demonstrate what the program has meant to them and how it has changed their lives. According to some Housing First program leaders, program success can bring more scrutiny. As the program becomes increasingly known and recognized by the community, ongoing transparency and accountability are especially important.

# CASE EXAMPLES

MODULE 5 — SUSTAINABILITY OF HOUSING FIRST



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Photo: Shane Fester



# Sustainability Case Examples

To illustrate key sustainability issues and lessons learned, two cases are presented below. In the first case, we present a sustainability example from Toronto. The Toronto site was involved in the At Home/ Chez Soi project and received funding through the demonstration project. As with each of the sites, the Toronto site was faced with the challenge of sustaining funding for the housing and clinical services to participants once the demonstration project ended. In the second case, we present an example of Housing First in Calgary. In Calgary, the Housing First approach was derived in the context of a 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness. Following a comprehensive planning and implementation process, there was a need to continue efforts and to develop long-term and sustainable funding mechanisms.



▲  
*To read case studies with additional sustainability examples, follow this link to read the Housing First ebook published by The Homeless Hub.*



**Read the book online:**

<http://homelesshub.ca/housingfirstcanada>

# Sustainability of At Home/ Chez Soi Housing First project in Toronto

## **The Development of a Local Advisory Committee and Sustainability Planning Group**

Toronto was one of the sites chosen to participate in the At Home/Chez Soi project. At the start of the national project, a research team was formed and in collaboration with the City of Toronto, a research proposal was made to MHCC and subsequently approved for Toronto to be one of the five sites in the project. In addition to St. Michael's Hospital's Centre for Research on Inner City Health and the City of Toronto, three local service providers were selected to establish teams, which would conduct the research and deliver the program. A Local Advisory Committee of external stakeholders was established and chaired by the MHCC Site Coordinator to offer advice throughout the project. The Committee had representation from the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term Care, Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, Veteran's Affairs Canada, the City of Toronto, as well as mental health and housing service providers, family members and people with lived experience. In the interest of developing the program with long-term sustainability, Faye More, MHCC Coordinator of the Toronto site, arranged presentations by other ministries such as the

Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing. As Ms. More explained, "Right from the outset, we had engagement with and regular participation in discussions of people who could potentially help down the road with sustainability for participants."

In addition to the efforts of the Local Advisory Committee, Ms. More formed a Sustainability Planning Group one year into the project to specifically focus on securing sustainability funding to maintain services for the participants in the project. There was a critical need to determine channels for continued funding after the demonstration project concluded. According to Ms. More, "It was a huge weight on everyone's mind- what was going to happen with the people who were housed when the project ended." The Sustainability Planning Group included representatives from relevant Ministries, Veterans' Affairs, as well as city officials and project leaders. With long-term sustainability as the goal, the group requested a number of meetings with relevant stakeholders, many of which take months to schedule. The group prepared informative materials and presentations about the program to bring to these briefings, which were circulated to the other sites as helpful examples.

From sustainability discussions and early reaction from potential funders, it was apparent that having some research results from the At Home project would be critical to making the case for continued funding; however, at the time in which key meetings needed to occur, the final research results were not ready. To address this problem, interim research results were prepared by the national and local teams, which proved critical to sustainability discussions with politicians and staff at the federal and provincial government levels and across parties. In Ontario, from the outset the most appropriate and most likely source for ongoing funding was the provincial Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, as it was supportive of and actively engaged with the project, and already funds similar mental health housing and ACT and ICM services across Ontario. The City of Toronto had competing demands for its federal and provincial housing dollars from other high needs groups in the community. The City also does not have the resources or mandate to fund the necessary mental health supports that the project provided and needed sustained along with the housing supports.

## The Sustainability Solution

Ultimately, the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term Care was the key to a long-term sustainability solution for Toronto site staff and participants, and therefore the primary focus of sustainability efforts for the last two years of the project, which included numerous briefings and meetings at the political and staff levels. Engagement also occurred with politicians of other parties at the provincial and federal levels who were supportive advocates. Near the end of the demonstration project in February 2013, the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care announced \$4M annualized funding for the program, which sustains on an ongoing basis, the housing and clinical supports for people enrolled in the intervention arm, who received Housing First from the project teams. There was and is a strong lobby in Toronto for maintaining and expanding the congregate housing approach. However, a critical consideration was the fact that the At Home/ Chez Soi Housing First project was a mental health program, which provided both clinical and housing services to meet the needs of people with serious mental health issues who are homeless. This places the project and ongoing program under the provincial health purview, opening up the most appropriate channels for policy collaboration and ongoing funding.

At the time of this writing, the Toronto At Home program continues to thrive, having transitioned in 2013/14 from a project mode with five partners to a program with three partners working as one HF program, funded by the Central Local Health Integration Network and the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. A current challenge is establishing flow-through for the program by graduating participants from the program who no longer need or want such intensive mental health supports, but who do need their rent supplement continued. Discussions are ongoing with funders and service providers to establish a process that will enable the program to focus resources on individuals most in need. The program continues to focus on graduation planning, particularly to maintain a focus on recovery, which is a goal for program participants.

## Lessons Learned

### *The Toronto site provides several key lessons for stakeholders interested in sustaining a Housing First program:*

- **Engage government:** It is critical to have government representation- both provincial and municipal- at an early stage of discussions to plan and deliver the program. Include government officials of all levels and who represent a range of programs (e.g. health, social services, corrections, police, courts, etc.) and populations (e.g. seniors, children, persons with physical and developmental disabilities, various cultures and languages, veterans, etc.) in the discussions. Incorporate their views and ideas throughout the process and keep them updated on progress and outcomes.
- **Involve the “right” partners:** By involving relevant stakeholders and community partners, programs will be able to move participants across programs, based on their needs.
- **Relationships are key:** Establish key relationships at an early stage, and focus on educating stakeholders about the program. Keep them informed and engaged at all stages, and encourage participation by developing a broad-based external advisory group. Funders, in particular, should be engaged and involved in the planning and implementation process.
- **Research and evaluation matter:** Consider the types of benchmarks that can best inform of results and will help to convince funders of the importance and effectiveness of the program. Plan the timing of some results to be shared alongside funding requests to provide an evidence base. For instance, housing stability, reduction in jail use and reduced court involvement are important, as these are cost factors. Hospital and mental health outpatient services, shelter use, and emergency service use are also important to track. Explain the context of costs to funders. For instance, alcohol and drug rehabilitation is a positive cost, in that it is indicative of client progress to deal with substance abuse issues.
- **Make the case with personal stories.** The personal experiences of program participants have a strong impact on potential funders. When funders learn about the personal impact a program is having on lives and the risks of discontinued funding, the case for continued funding becomes compelling.

# Sustainability of Housing First in Calgary: Calgary Homeless Foundation

***Summarized from: Gaetz, S., Scott, F., & Gulliver, T. (2013). Housing First in Canada: Supporting Communities to End Homelessness. Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press.***

In Calgary, community-based emergency supports were provided to homeless individuals without an integrated “system” in place. Thus, there was a need to develop a comprehensive and integrated plan to end the homelessness crisis. To provide the critical shift from a loosely coordinate patchwork response to a well-coordinated system response, the Calgary Committee to End Homelessness (CCEH) was formed in 2007, with the goal of developing a 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness. The CCEH included representation from service agencies, the private sector, the faith community, foundations, the Calgary Health Region, colleges and universities, the Aboriginal community, the City of Calgary, the Province of Alberta, and the Government of Canada (Gaetz et al., 2013, p.3).

The CCEH developed a plan, with Housing First as the guiding vision, based on research conducted by the City of Calgary on affordable housing and homelessness. The Calgary Homeless Foundation was selected to implement the plan (Gaetz et al., 2013). The Calgary Homeless Foundation (CHF) “became the central force in creating a shift toward the adoption of Housing First strategies in the city” (Gaetz, Scott & Gulliver, 2013, p. 17). The response to homelessness is organized by an independent, not-for-profit foundation, with funding from government and the private sector. The Province of Alberta provides funding for emergency services, including shelters and drop-in centres.



*To read the book go to:*

[http://homelessshub.ca/sites/default/files/HousingFirstIn-Canada\\_0.pdf](http://homelessshub.ca/sites/default/files/HousingFirstIn-Canada_0.pdf)

### The Sustainability Solution

After planning and beginning to implement the 10-Year Plan, it was important to secure long-term funding. To secure long term funding, stakeholders in Calgary needed to better understand the long term sustainability needs of the people served, including the characteristics of the population, the types of support needed and the duration required, and how “graduation” (ability to live in permanent housing without requiring a high level of support) might work for participants. Additionally, stakeholders needed a sustainability plan that accounted for participants who graduated from the program, but required services and supports again at a later time.

A key component of the sustainability plan in Calgary was providing evidence of continued effectiveness. In Calgary, significant efforts were

directed toward evaluation at an early stage, and it was important to sustain evaluation efforts over time. The CHF publishes updates about the plan to end homelessness, “including progress to date and milestones achieved, including: number of people housed, housing retention rates and changes in use of other social services” (Gaetz et al., 2013, p.16). Also key to sustainability efforts was linking the plan to a comprehensive affordable housing strategy, including direct investment, zoning, and creative financing and incentives for the private sector (Gaetz et al., 2013, p. 17). “It is important to demonstrate to funders and policy makers that the status quo-emergency shelter systems and ultimately health, social and correctional services-is not sustainable” (Gaetz et al., 2013, p. 17).

### Lessons Learned

*(summarized from a personal communication with Tim Richter and Katrina Milaney, & Gaetz et al., 2013, p. 18-20)*

- Sustainability is about Performance: Ultimately, high performing programs and communities that achieve results receive continued support. To achieve sustainability, from an early stage programs must reflect on strategies for ensuring performance of the Housing First program.
- A broad and diverse stakeholder coalition is key. The Calgary Homeless Foundation recommends recruiting a broad and diverse stakeholder coalition, including recruiting accomplished people from outside the homeless system to become Board members. Having a broad and diverse Board builds credibility in the community and with government, and is also helpful to fundraising efforts.

- “Become the voice of the issue”: It is important to “own the issue” of homelessness in your community and to also communicate the success of your Housing First program. The CHF initiated the majority of news stories on homelessness in Calgary, and set a goal of having at least one communication per week with stakeholders along with a “constant and active presence on social media.” Effective communication, including “leadership, presence, and brand” is critical to fundraising and obtaining public funding. Additionally, the Calgary Homeless Foundation recommends keeping in close contact with government officials through media and lobbying efforts. It is essential to build a supportive network of stakeholders. To do so, consider bringing in experts to speak to the community, mobilizing the news media, and communicating with the community to dispel myths.
- An integrated system is needed: Housing First can be most effective when delivered in the context of a Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness, which includes “prevention, housing development and changes to systems and policies that contribute to homelessness” (Gaetz et al., 2013, p. 18).
- Shift emergency services funding to funding for long-term solutions: Since much funding is dedicated to emergency services, such as shelters, there is a need to advocate for funding to be reallocated to long-term solutions, such as Housing First. Public funding is key, and private investment can complement this. Thus, it is important to seek multiple sources of funding (federal, provincial, and private). The Calgary Homeless Foundation also developed social finance opportunities with the ‘Social Enterprise Incubator’.
- Housing First must be linked with an affordable housing strategy: Affordable housing is critical to the long-term sustainability of a Housing First program. Affordable housing “can be expanded through a combination of direct investment (building new stock), zoning (inclusionary zoning, legalizing and regulating secondary suites), creative financing and incentives for the private sector” (Gaetz et al., 2013, p. 19).
- Evaluation contributes to Adaptability. The Calgary Homeless Foundation is committed to research and evaluation. This provides “a constant visibility of performance.”
- Become a “Knowledge Leader”- Leaders of the Calgary Homeless Foundation recommend becoming “knowledge leaders” by researching best practices on Housing First and related services. By solidifying your expertise on housing and homelessness, programs become “indispensable and trusted” by government. This also builds a program’s influence in terms of advocacy for policy change.



*To read the full Calgary case study, follow the link:*



*Click here:*

[1. Calgary Homeless Foundation case study](#)

[2. Social Enterprise Incubator](#)