THE ONTARIO HOUSING FIRST REGIONAL NETWORK COMMUNITY OF INTEREST (OHFRN-COI)

Evidence at a glance: Housing First and choice



Housing First (HF) is an evidence-based approach to ending chronic homelessness among people with mental illness and helping them address their complex needs (e.g., chronic health problems, addictions). HF combines rent supplements with support, typically in the form of Assertive Community Treatment or Intensive Case Management. Rather than providing "treatment first" before providing housing, the focus of HF is to provide people with housing immediately. Choice is a key principle of HF.

Why is choice so important in Housing First?

In HF, participants have choice and control over their housing and support. In terms of housing, participants are provided with a rent supplement, so that they can choose an apartment from the rental market in the community. For support, participants are not required to engage in treatment, but they must agree to a weekly home visit from a support worker.² In HF, housing and support are separated, so that support will continue to be provided wherever the person lives.

Choice is important for several reasons:

- ^{1.} HF views housing and self-determination as human rights. People have the right to choose where they want to live.
- ^{2.} A review of eight studies on the preferences of more than 3,000 people with mental illness, including individuals who were homeless, found that 84% preferred to live independently in their own house or apartment.³
- ^{3.} Research has found that having choice and control over one's housing and support services are associated with positive mental health outcomes.^{4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9}
- ^{4.} Choice and control over housing and support services is significantly greater for participants living in their own apartments than for those living in group living arrangements.^{7,8}

In summary, research has shown the beneficial aspects of people having choice or control over their housing and support.

How can you use this evidence?

- 1. Offering people who are homeless only congregate housing ignores people's preferences about where they want to live. The federal government's proposed portable housing benefit should be widely implemented to promote choice and control over housing and support.¹⁰
- 2. In New York City, the HF approach began by listening to the preferences of people who were homeless. When communities conduct Point-in-Time counts (i.e., 24-hour census) of the homeless population, they should include questions about the preferences of people for housing and support.
- 3. HF programs should be expanded and adequately resourced with sufficient rent supplements, well-trained staff and intensive support services, including Assertive Community Treatment.¹¹

This evidence summary is written by Dr. Geoffrey Nelson and Dr. Tim Aubry, co-leads of the Ontario Housing First Regional Network, Community of Interest, part of Evidence Exchange Network: https://www.eenet.ca/node/1257#about. This summary is not a full evidence review of the topic, but highlights the evidence from key articles and subject matter experts on housing first and homelessness.

Additional resource: Rain City Housing First Choice Video (8 minutes, 26 seconds): https://youtu.be/b0B66-phgfk

References

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The Ontario Housing First Regional Network Community of Interest (OHFRN-COI) is intended to assist communities across Ontario to develop, evaluate, and improve Housing First (HF) programs based on the Pathways model tested, adapted, and shown to be effective in the At Home/Chez Soi Demonstration Project. This CoI is supported by Evidence Exchange Network (EENet), which is part of the Provincial System Support Program (PSSP) at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. For more information, visit https://www.eenet.ca/node/1257#about.