



HELPING AT-RISK YOUTH SECURE HOUSING, EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION FOR OVER 20 YEARS

## Coordinated Access for Youth

### Aligning the Housing and Homelessness Plan with the *Towards Recovery* recommendations

#### BACKGROUND

2018 presents a unique opportunity for Newfoundland and Labrador to achieve unprecedented cross-department and cross-sector alignment around the changes needed to improve outcomes for at-risk and homeless youth. For those youth, the implementation of both a provincial Housing and Homelessness Plan and the recommendations of the All-Party Committee on Mental Health and Addictions could mean a shift towards integrated, coordinated, and flexible support on a pan-provincial scale.

There is already a clear recognition both in government and within the community sector that a more geographically distributed system of care will be important to produce better outcomes for youth. As it currently stands, young must often move to St. John's to access services, disconnecting them from their families and their support networks and exposing them to additional risk. Moving to a system with more supports available closer to home would allow the earlier, prevention-focused interventions that are clearly established as best practice. It is also important to note that separations from family, community, and culture are particularly traumatic in the case of Indigenous youth. Building a more distributed and integrated system of support can, therefore, play an important role in reconciliation.

Integrated approaches to support have been successfully piloted with adult populations. The End Homelessness St. John's Housing First System Coordination Initiative (HFSCI) began in 2016, with a goal of rapidly moving at-risk and homeless individuals in through the evidence-based Housing First framework<sup>1</sup>. While this first step towards addressing the general population experiencing homelessness is necessary for an emergency response, a parallel youth-specific coordinated access system is needed to effectively address causes, conditions, and consequences of homelessness for young people that are unique from the adult population.

At-risk and homeless youth often come from traumatized environments consisting of family conflict, abuse, neglect, disruption to education, poverty, and child protection systems where multiple foster or group home placements have compromised the ability to obtain essential independent living skills and stable mental health. With young people under the age of 25 at varying stages of development, this lack of experience with independent living and stable relationships correlates with future chronic adult homelessness<sup>2</sup>. Experiencing homelessness places youth at increased risk for acute and chronic mental health and substance use issues, worsened physical health, sexual exploitation and violence, criminal victimization, involvement in the criminal justice system, chronic adult homelessness, and early mortality<sup>3, 4, 5, 6, 7</sup>. Furthermore, these outcomes impose extreme and extensive lifetime costs on numerous government systems.

The outline of an efficient response to these issues is woven into the many recommendations in *Towards Recovery: A Vision for a Renewed Mental Health and Addictions System for Newfoundland and Labrador*, and into the *Housing First for Youth* model around which a national consensus has already emerged across community agencies, the federal government and numerous provincial and municipal governments. In combination, they reflect a best practice integrated system of care for young people in this province.



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These steps also align closely with the 2016 National Youth Homelessness Survey, published by the Canadian Observatory and A Way Home Canada, which recommends the following areas of work for an effective path to addressing youth homelessness:

- Prevention
- Housing First for Youth
- Systems Integration
- Addressing Educational Challenges
- Fostering Resilience and Mental Health Supports
- Fortifying Natural Supports

In St. John's, Choices for Youth has also successfully leveraged these areas of work to increase labour market attachment for youth not engaged in education or training. There is every reason to think that an effective province-wide integration of services could be leveraged in a similar way.

This integrated systems approach in coordinated access models is already used across dozens of communities throughout Canada to effectively address the diverse and developmentally anchored needs of vulnerable youth. Where Newfoundland and Labrador can step out into a national leadership role is by building on these models to create a province-wide coordinated access process that recognizes the needs of our uniquely distributed population. The creation of a Housing and Homelessness Plan is a chance to set this goal into policy and put Newfoundland and Labrador on track to make a real difference in the lives of both urban and rural youth. With thoughtful planning grounded in *Housing First for Youth* principles, coordinated access for youth will closely align priorities in the housing sector with the recommendations of *Towards Recovery*.

## IMPLEMENTING HOUSING FIRST FOR YOUTH

The core element of the *Housing First* philosophy – immediate housing with no preconditions – is a well-understood feature of youth supportive response systems throughout national and international communities, including Newfoundland and Labrador. Practitioners and researchers alike have long recognized, however, that housing first interventions designed for adults are often ineffective in adequately addressing needs specific to youth and emerging adults. With the average age of first homelessness in this country being only 16<sup>2</sup> communities are increasingly adopting coordinated interventions to reduce risks for chronic homelessness into adulthood. Currently implemented in communities across Canada, the *Housing First for Youth* program model has been instrumental in helping communities shift away from expensive emergency responses and towards effective prevention models. To bring the *Housing First for Youth* model to Newfoundland and Labrador, interventions with youth must adhere to five core principles<sup>10</sup>:

1. **A right to housing with no preconditions:** access to housing is the first step towards stability in overcoming challenges and increasing self-sustainable independence.
2. **Youth choice, youth voice, and self-determination:** when young people are actively engaged in making decisions about their own future, positive outcomes are achieved for individuals, their community, and social support systems.



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3. **Positive youth development and wellness orientation:** effective housing and support program approaches throughout Canada and internationally have shifted towards practices that provide protective factors linked with resilience, recovery, and lifespan stability for young people. These practices promote safety, caring and supportive relationships, opportunities to participate, and supports to identify and achieve goals.
4. **Individualized, client-driven support with no time limits:** individualized and adaptive support plans co-developed with young people ensure responses address their needs before struggles become chronic or acute and compromise individual and public safety.
5. **Social inclusion and community integration:** when youth experience a sense of safety and belonging, stability and wellness increase along with positive community integration. This effectively reduces chronic dependency on resources and enables self-sufficiency.

The *Housing First for Youth* framework recognizes that young people (generally defined as those aged 25 or younger) achieve the most successful outcomes from targeted and well-coordinated supports that integrate developmental and protective factors into preventative and emergency response interventions. Bringing this developmental-informed framework into Newfoundland and Labrador's Housing and Homelessness Plan is critical to support sustainable improvements in the lives of young people and to reduce widespread community impacts and costs of youth homelessness. Joining the growing group of jurisdictions in Canada who utilize youth-specific housing and homeless plans will position Newfoundland and Labrador to insert our specialized provincial knowledge into global housing first for youth initiatives.

Two core principles link integrated supports with Housing First for Youth: **harm reduction** and **trauma informed practice**.

Broadly speaking, "harm reduction" means that young people are met where they are at through service approaches aimed at minimizing harm. Young people are provided with resources and tools to attain maximum safety in their current circumstance while additional support planning is used to identify and map out longer term stability and wellness goals. Harm reduction serves as a buffer to prevent harm, making emergency responses more effective through approaches that build the foundation for sustainable change.

Closely interrelated is the concept of **trauma-informed practice**: this involves building programs around the knowledge that almost all clients will have experienced substantial trauma that will have had a major impact on how they interact with the world around them. Specifically, adversity in childhood and adolescent years directly negatively impacts the developing brain in regions associated with learning, memory, and emotional regulation. Trauma-informed practices promote the regulation and reduction of biological stress, providing respite for new brain cells to repair and advance healthy developmental processes. This kind of environmental safety is associated with increased stability, independence, and recovery from mental illness<sup>9</sup>.

This conversation goes far beyond the provision of housing. Integration of principles behind *Housing First for Youth* into the provincial mental health and addictions care system is essential for supporting evidence-based wrap-around interventions that have demonstrated time and again successful outcomes for both young people and the communities they live in. *Housing First for Youth* works when there is coordination of developmentally-



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informed resources, critical for addressing diverse medical, mental health, addictions, and independent living supports. Provincial-scale **Coordinated Access for Youth** will tie these many systems together.

## ESTABLISHING A COORDINATED ACCESS FOR YOUTH PROCESS

From the very first recommendation (support for young families) through recommendations 2, 3, 4, 5, 14 and 46, *Towards Recovery* is very clear that improving outcomes for young people is a major component of the comprehensive changes coming to mental health and addictions care in Newfoundland and Labrador. As these shifts are implemented, many of these services will serve as the backbone for the wrap-around supports necessary in a *Housing First for Youth* model.

Beyond changes to services, *Towards Recovery* also envisions many changes in how services are accessed. In particular, there will be a strong move towards service integration. Coordinating services means **coordinating access** to these services – and the same process that serves young people accessing mental health and addictions will also serve youth with housing needs. Critically, there is a great deal of evidence to support the development of a distinct, youth-specific coordinated access model<sup>13, 7, 9</sup>.

Coordinated access for youth is a widely established best practice in systems throughout Canada and North America for ending youth homelessness. While there are a variety of implementations, all share the broad goal of reducing the burden on young people needing supportive or housing services, prioritizing access to programs with limited space, and bringing together all the many community and government agencies engaged in providing them with support.

For example, the Winnipeg Plan to End Youth Homelessness implements a comprehensive coordinated access and integrated continuum of care model. Acknowledging that youth homelessness in particular is a complex social issue with exceptional consequences for youth, neighbourhoods, and communities, the Winnipeg model identifies three pathways to youth homelessness:

- Structural factors (e.g., colonialism, discrimination, poverty, and housing affordability),
- Systemic factors (e.g., involvement with child protective services, healthcare systems, mental health and addictions, education, employment and income assistance, and justice)
- Family and Individual Factors (e.g., abuse, neglect, domestic violence, parental substance use, rejection of gender and sexual orientation, pregnancy).

Using these pathways to understand young people's diverse trajectories, this model then uses four evidence-based areas in which a young person can be appropriately prioritized for support:

- Access (including to emergency supports such as crisis response, rapid re-housing, host homes, etc.)
- Prevention (supports for families, resources within schools, helping youth exit systems)
- Housing (a continuum of transitional, supportive, and independent options)
- Supports to Thrive (life skills, education, employment, recovery, and well-being supports)

A coordinated access process in Newfoundland and Labrador may not look exactly like Winnipeg's, or any other - but having planning approaches rooted both in the diversity of pathways into homelessness and the diversity of



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possible responses is a necessary direction to move in. By diversifying the number and types of access points, communities across Canada are adopting a “No wrong door” approach that enables young people to be connected to services that match their developmental needs. This closes gaps for young people unfamiliar and disconnected from services and offers quick access to needed supports. Newfoundland and Labrador can do this at the provincial scale. A recent series of province-wide consultations undertaken by Choices for Youth<sup>11</sup> highlighted a consistent desire for coordination from communities in every region of the province.

Implementing coordinated access across Newfoundland and Labrador will help ensure that all youth in this province benefit as much as they can from the housing and supportive resources available to them, both in their home region and in St. John’s. Noteworthy, one thing CFY heard during its consultations around the province was the need for better integration between rural and urban systems of care as young people move back and forth from St. John’s. Coordinated access will enable that to happen.

#### IMPLEMENTATION IN THE HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES SECTORS

There are several key policy and program changes that are shared requirements for the implementation of a *Housing First for Youth* framework and the recommendations of *Towards Recovery*. Much of this work will involve the Department of Children, Seniors, and Social Development (CSSD) aligning their programs and policies with these frameworks. The key changes needed are:

- **Integration of services provided to youth by multiple agencies and community-sector organizations:** vulnerable youth currently face a web of program eligibility criteria, overlapping assessments, and disconnected services. An integrated model changes this by wrapping a package of services from different agencies around a young person. Integrated services and assessments should include mental health care, addictions care, primary health care, income support, employment, family support, housing, food security, and recreational programs.
- **Creating a multi-level Coordinated Access process that recognizes how young people move through physical locations and developmental stages:** Coordinated Access processes are implicit in the development of integrated service models. The work done to bring diverse and specialized agencies together is the same work required to create a single point of entry for young people. This process needs to be built around the geographic realities of Newfoundland and Labrador, in which there will always be a flow of young people back and forth from larger centres to smaller ones. An effective Coordinated Access process will ensure young people are not lost in the shuffle when those moves happen, and will consider transportation needs and supports.
- **Move away from age-based transitions:** “ageing out” of youth supports before young people are ready has a diverse spectrum of acute and chronic consequences, from homelessness to mental health struggles to unsafe relationships and victimization. Young people move through developmental stages at different rates and require targeted and stable resources to facilitate independent living and recovery. The impacts of traumatic stress on the developing brain are particularly harmful for the many who face adverse childhood histories, making reliable developmentally-informed social and therapeutic supports critical for healing, regenerating, and strengthening development into early adulthood<sup>9</sup>. If



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flexibility within these systems do not exist, it is incumbent upon us to facilitated healthy transitions between systems for these young people to ensure they are not at increased risk of experiencing homelessness.

- **Focus on family interventions:** programs designed for young parents, and for the parents of vulnerable youth, prevent intergenerational cycles of adversity and sustain family relationships. More broadly, a systemic shift is needed away from apprehension as a primary tool and toward the prevention of these apprehensions through giving biological parents access to the same resources foster parents have and supporting preventative work with the whole family unit. Families and bolstering the support around them must be seen as part of preventing youth homelessness.
- **Recognize unique needs:** youth have many distinct needs that set them aside from the adult population - in particular, they are at great risk of experiencing social isolation, disproportionate representation across systems, and victimization. Subpopulations, such as LGBTQ2S and Indigenous youth, are at much greater risk for social- and systems-based oppression and exclusion from existing community resources. Population-specific supports and intersectional approaches are required to overcome barriers for housing, employment, education, and social safety.
- **Always connect to housing:** no intervention in a young person's life is effective if the youth returns, post-intervention, to unsafe, unstable, or nonexistent housing. Connection to housing supports must be built into all models of care that engage youth to address this basic foundational need required to address any other challenges or barriers in a young person's life.

## IMPLEMENTATION WITHIN THE HOUSING SECTOR

With the strong connection between improved mental health/addictions outcomes and improved housing outcomes, the Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation has a keystone role to play:

- **NLHC staff as co-conveners of the Coordinated Access for Youth process:** it is critical that Coordinated Access be about *both* housing and service access. With that in mind, NLHC staff should be co-conveners of the Coordinated Access process along with community organizations and other government departments impacting youth
- **Creating housing choice for youth:** real choice in housing for youth only emerges when the whole continuum of housing is built out. In this province, there are three top priorities:
  - **Expanding the supportive living program:** there is a severe shortage of supportive living options for youth, especially outside of St. John's, and community agencies have plans ready to fill this gap. Sustainable operations depend on an increased investment in the Supportive Living Program
  - **Building more affordable units:** to ensure that youth transition out of supportive housing into independence, an increase in distributed affordable units throughout the province is critically needed.
  - **Repurposing underused properties:** policies and procedures are needed to enable vacant or underused properties to be leased or gifted to community organizations who can then adapt

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properties to help meet young people’s needs. There are many creative and unique solutions in this area and community partners are willing to take the lead

- **Implementing an eviction-prevention framework:** initial responses to deliver timely wraparound supports are needed before a young person loses housing; this eviction-prevention framework should ensure that no young person is evicted into homelessness.

As NLHC reviews it’s affordable housing stock and partnerships with community agencies across the province, it will be critical to look at the whole spectrum of options available to youth. As shown below, *Housing First for Youth* involves ensuring that range is well-developed to meet the diverse needs of at-risk and homeless youth:



## BRIDGING THE PLANS

Adopting *Housing First for Youth* and harm reduction frameworks as part of a provincial Housing and Homelessness Plan and a coordinated access process that knits together housing and mental health/addictions supports will fundamentally transform young people’s engagement with systems of support in this province. Additionally, the same integrated system of access and services will support many of the outcomes identified by *Premier’s Task Force on Educational Outcomes*.



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Getting this right will set Newfoundland and Labrador apart as a leading jurisdiction on integration of services, preventative care, and recovery-oriented supports. Community agencies are ready to partner to make this a reality.

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