



SYSTEMSPLANNING
COLLECTIVE

SYSTEMS PLANNING TO PREVENT AND END HOMELESSNESS:

Community Progress and Priorities Across Canada



The Systems Planning Collective (SPC) was founded by A Way Home Canada, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and Turner Strategies to enhance the quality of community-based systems planning in Canada with the goal of accelerating our collective progress towards preventing and ending homelessness and fundamentally improving outcomes for people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. The SPC draws from the collective research, policy, planning and practice expertise of the three organizations to have broader impact and accessibility to communities needing support in their systems planning efforts.

What is Systems Planning?

Systems planning at the local level is the process of strategically mapping, coordinating and delivering services, supports, and programs with the rights, needs, desires of the client/user at the centre. Its aim is to create an integrated system of care, in which various actors and systems work together towards solutions to complex social problems. When applied to the issue of homelessness, the unifying high-level goal of systems planning work is to prevent and end homelessness.

The SPC's uses a rights-based approach to systems planning as articulated under the Housing First philosophy (Tsemberis, 2011), including population-specific adaptations such as Housing First for Youth (Gaetz, 2017). This approach requires an understanding that homelessness cannot end with housing and social service programs, and/or the homelessness-serving sector alone. Community-based systems planning to address homelessness involves the development of local action-oriented frameworks that align various stakeholders within and outside of the homelessness sector to set goals, implement strategies, and deliver and evaluate results. These frameworks articulate exactly when and how systems - such as health, justice, education, child welfare, etc. - should interface with each other and the homeless-serving sector to achieve the goal of preventing and sustaining exits from homelessness. Systems integration (Turner & Krecsy, 2019) and deep engagement with people with lived experience, public systems, government, funders, and non-profit and private sectors are keys to the success of systems planning efforts.

By adopting a systems planning approach, communities can better coordinate themselves to intervene before individuals and families experience homelessness, and provide the financial, housing and social supports that will contribute to successful, long-term exits from homelessness.

Purpose of the Community Systems Planning Needs Assessment

As Canadian communities seek to set ambitious and achievable targets for preventing and ending homelessness, there is an increasing understanding of the need to engage systems and sectors beyond those typically associated with housing and homelessness. Physical and mental health, child protection, justice, education, Indigenous relations and other public systems that may not have a formal mandate to address homelessness clearly intersect, intervene, and have a role to play in the outcomes for individuals at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

The federal government's homelessness strategy, [Reaching Home](#), is set to launch in April of 2019, which will require communities to develop system plans that engage public systems, the private sector, and other players that can contribute to homelessness prevention and sustained exits. However, communities across Canada are at varying stages of planning work, some more robust and action-oriented than others. There is a need to take outcomes-driven, community-based systems planning knowledge and skills to scale nationally.

In order to support communities in setting and reaching their goals for preventing and ending homelessness, the SPC has conducted a needs assessment of Community Advisory Boards (CAB) and Community Entities (CE), as well as local Housing and Social Service Stakeholders responsible for delivering on local housing and homelessness priorities. The CAB/CE survey was targeted at members of CABs and CEs to gain their perspective on local systems planning as the groups that determine the local homelessness priorities and administer federal funding accordingly.

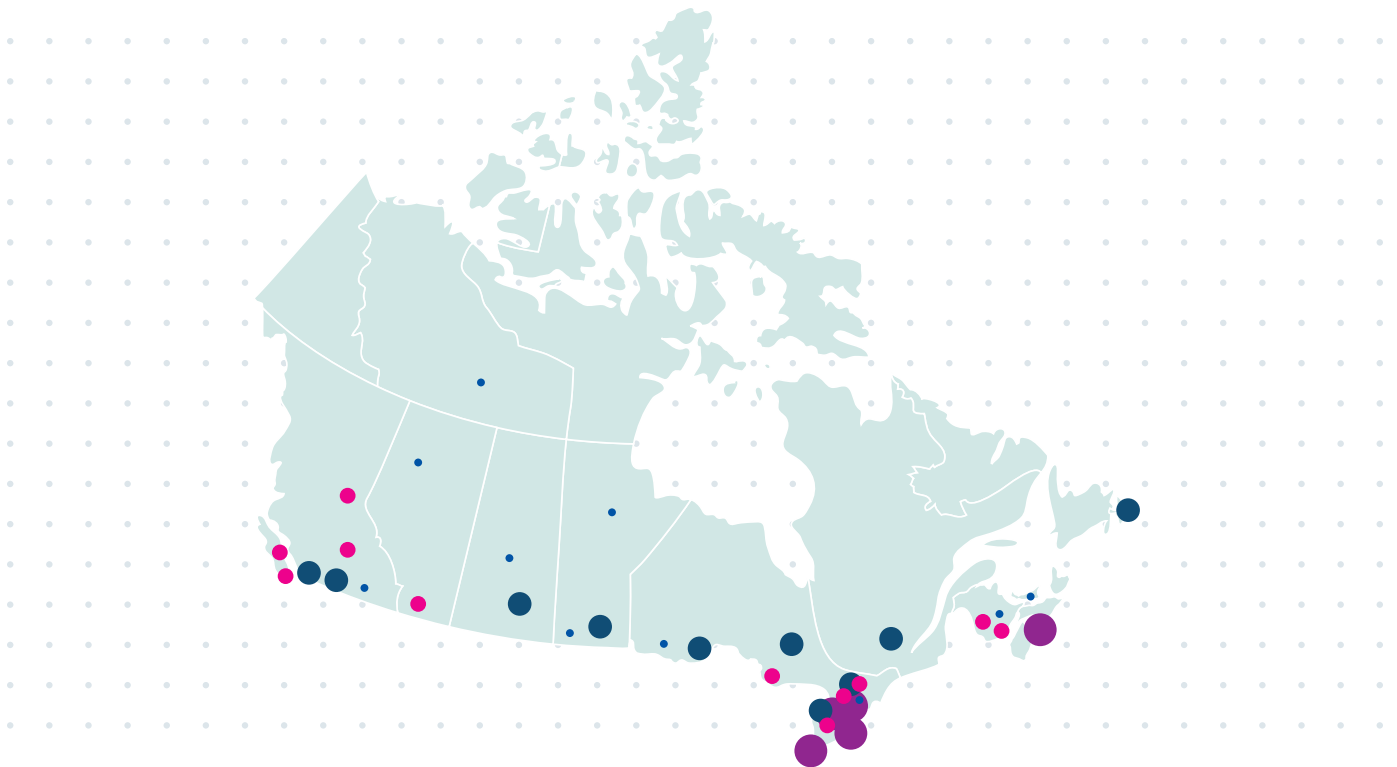
The second survey of Housing and Social Service Stakeholders contained similar content and questions, but was aimed at capturing a wider range of managers and frontline workers that are not representatives on CABs or within a CE. Their responses help identify perspectives on local systems planning work from outside of the federally mandated planning bodies under HPS and identify local strengths and gaps in their communities' efforts to address homelessness.

Survey Samples

Participants in the surveys were drawn from a call to CABs and CEs in communities across Canada, with 66 complete CAB/CE surveys and 37 complete Housing and Social Service Stakeholders surveys. The sample included those that are HPS Designated Communities and those that are not. Twelve participants stated that their community intended to apply for Designation under Reaching Home. Of the participants that provided their community's name, there was a range in size and geography (see figure 1 for a sample of communities that provided their names).

The survey respondents had represented a range of job titles including advocates and housing workers, but most respondents were housing and social service managers, directors, and executive directors. A number of CAB chairs, co-chairs, and board members also participated in the survey.

Figure 1



Variance in the stage and depth of planning efforts

“Some of us in smaller communities with little provincial funding are so far away from this model that you are outlining in this survey. We are community minded and we work with everyone from Health to Social Services, but there is not the money or time to develop this kind of system unless some serious help is provided.”

- Survey Respondent

Respondents' community size and location ranged, along with the status of their planning work. While some communities are further along in their efforts to coordinate efforts and move toward systems planning, others are only just beginning to take their homelessness system coordination work to scale or do not have a dedicated planning group. For those communities that have not made progress implementing a planning group, a common challenge is having the dedicated funding and staffing resources to carry the work forward.

For those that have planning groups, participants identified a need for technical support and enhanced resources to advance their work. In these communities, moving from planning to action, implementation, and scaling are particular challenges.

“This network has been established on paper but does not function.”

- Survey Respondent

“We have existing, very high-level plans in place that state the need for systems planning and its components. We also have some of those components established, like a centralized intake for housing first programs and a HMIS used within the emergency shelters, but these various efforts are not working together or coordinated.”

- Survey Respondent

Almost 60% of all respondents reported not having a work plan with clear deliverables, timelines, and accountabilities. Similarly, over half of Housing and Social Service Stakeholders and 33% of CAB/CE respondents stated that their planning group did not have a shared vision, mission, and guiding principles for their work, with another 29% indicating that this document required updates in order to match current community needs. This gap widens further, with 44% of Housing and Social Service Stakeholders reporting no work plan existed at all. This may suggest that the closer to the ground people are, the less aware they may be about the way their work is part of a shared set of outcomes. Yet, it is these same staff, closest to the ground, who can have a significant role in operationalizing a functioning, coordinated systems approach.

Support needed to move from system planning to *Systems Planning*

Many communities have begun planning work to address local housing and homelessness needs, but they require more support around how to do this strategically, get broader buy-in from other sectors, systems and stakeholders, and track their progress. While many communities have 5- or 10-year housing and/or homelessness plans, the degree to which those plans are implemented, revisited and updated varies.

Similarly, communities require support to identify the roles of other systems in their homelessness planning and the need for coordination and planning between them, not just within. Further, the implementation of that systems integration work was clearly an area of need.

“We have representation from [the provincial housing corporation], but not decision makers. The people they send to our meetings are well-intentioned but not empowered.”

- Survey Respondent

“City administration/staff not involved; council representation lapsed; no leadership here to date (appalling); lacking provincial services/ministry representation except mental health/addictions; no concerted joint planning to draw in sectors etc. to date.”

- Survey Respondent

It is generally understood that there is a need for systems integration, but communities need support to identify and include the right players in public systems and others outside of the homelessness sector. When asked the level of formalized engagement with public systems, between the majority of respondents indicated that there was little to no engagement with the following systems: justice (55%), health (60%), child welfare (61%), and education (66%). Respondents consistently noted higher engagement with public social services, with 72% reporting moderate to high engagement. Increasing systems integration is particularly critical for communities to be able to meet goals around homelessness prevention and diversion.

Fifty-one percent (51%) of respondents noted the need for meaningful, authentic inclusion of more diverse voices at their planning tables, particularly Indigenous leaders and community members and people with lived experience of homelessness.

“HIFIS is a work in progress, that is not fully utilized.”

- Survey Respondent

Forty percent (40%) of CAB/CE respondents noted that their community did not have reliable real-time data to be able to facilitate systems mapping, increase accountability, and match clients based on eligibility for service/support. Most communities do not have a handle on the diverse and numerous resources those at risk of or experiencing homelessness can benefit from locally or regionally. This leads to missed opportunities for clients to receive appropriate referrals and for funders who are unable to make appropriate decisions about service duplications/gaps at a system level, rather than within their own portfolios.

When asked if their community’s planning work included costing analysis, projected impacts, measurable targets and performance indicators, 64% responded “No”, 20% felt this work needed to be strengthened and only five respondents (9%) felt confident in this work. While some communities may have had support in this area during planning phases, usually engaging consultants, most have not been able to build in house capacity or tools to engage in scenario planning and adjust investments/performance management in real time using systems modelling approaches.

Only 20% of CAB/CE respondents stated that their community had data collection in place to assess homelessness trends locally. Data coordination was noted as an area requiring increased capacity. Where HIFIS existed, it did not appear to be maximized, and is limited when only a handful of homeless-serving agencies participate. This means that even in communities with HIFIS or HMIS (Alberta), visibility of the complete homeless-serving system is limited due to participating agencies’ and funders’ lack of willingness to share data. No instance of a community-wide HMIS was located in Canada - most implementations were limited by funding streams and no clear line of sight to systems integration was in place: in other words, while there is recognition that we need to better understand how different funding streams intersect and perform against common objectives, current data management is not yet in place to support this model.

It is clear that many communities need and want support in further maximizing the data and coordination potential of HIFIS, particularly for services outside of the homelessness eco-system. Further, even with formalized and comprehensive data collection, communities need assistance harnessing that data to drive action and call for policy and systems change.

Communities' understanding of how to leverage AI and machine learning in the homelessness sector is very rudimentary at this point. While some interest might take root in communities with connections into the tech sector, the lack of consistent data to feed such 'prediction' machines is not available to the extent needed to push a leap forward. Further work on resolving the perceived and real privacy challenges will be essential to advance the role of data in the sector.

Challenge to move beyond addressing chronic homelessness

“...There is little support to the family sector and to seniors. The entire focus is on high acuity chronic homeless. This means that the rest of the sector is left hanging in the wind....”

- Survey Respondent

Respondents also expressed a need for dedicated, tailored supports and approaches to key populations at risk of homelessness (ex. youth, Indigenous peoples, families, seniors), that more comprehensively and accurately reflect community needs. While the emphasis on high acuity, chronic homelessness is critical, strategic and targeted systems planning and implementation serves as a cost-effective upstream approach that responds to a diversity of populations experiencing increased risk of homelessness. As communities pursue goals around reductions in chronic homelessness, efforts to prevent inflows and sustain outflows will be critical.

Chronic and episodic homelessness are often considered the initial target population for communities as they attempt to reduce homelessness. However, research has shown that vulnerability for long-term experiences of homelessness is missed when using chronicity as the primary factor for prioritization. This is particularly evident in the case of youth, where the risk of long-term homelessness and cumulative experiences of trauma increases the younger a person is when first experiencing homelessness,

and the longer they remain homeless (Gaetz, O'Grady, Kidd & Schwan, 2016). Community respondents indicated that there is a critical need to identify the steps to move beyond chronicity alone and integrate prevention and tailored approaches for key populations into their planning work. One participant in the CAB/CE survey noted frustration with the focus on chronicity, stating:

“This focus on chronicity has not done anything except take people from shelters into housing programs. Housing had become more hospice like addressing people who should be picked up by the right systems yet have been dumped into homelessness instead.”

- Survey Respondent

Systems need to be retooled to identify and mitigate individual risk factors for homelessness, responding with an immediate and appropriate matching of services and supports. The current emphasis on chronicity results, both in slowing the process of people moving through the system into housing quickly, as well as an inability to target causes of homelessness in the first place. Rather, this form of prioritization requires an escalation of one's vulnerability in order to receive services. The same respondent echoes this, later stating that their process to serve people at risk of homelessness:

“is backlogged by the [Coordinated Access and Assessment], waiting lists for intakes, focus on chronicity, and permanent supportive housing. There is little in place that prevents homelessness. Systems continue to rely on shelters for discharging and releasing. Low to medium acuity homeless individuals have no chance at preventing their homelessness. They aren't going to be assisted until they are homeless.”

- Survey Respondent

It is clear that the language of prevention and addressing the needs of key subpopulations is taking root, based on responses regarding whether communities are integrating prevention in their planning work. However, additional follow up with communities is required to determine the actual extent of this work and fidelity to the most current research and evidence-led models for planning and practice in homelessness prevention and targeted strategies for subpopulations, such as youth and Indigenous peoples.

It is important to trace the emergence of this focus on chronicity/vulnerability/acuity. When Housing First came into Canadian practice during the mid-2000s from the US, it did so alongside a recognition that our current approaches did not have clear goals and program models to ensure efficiency and achieve desired objectives of ending (vs managing) homelessness. One key downfall was that our services were not coordinated and did not have a clear path for clients to get matched to services and prioritized for services. This gave impetus to diverse ways of sorting clients using different tools (SPDAT, VI, Calgary Acuity Scale, VAT, etc.) - the aim here was to allocate limited housing and supports to clients who were deemed as system priorities.

The logic made sense: for instance, if our Plan to End Homelessness called for decreasing the number of shelter beds, it makes sense to prioritize those with higher likelihood to be long terms shelter stayers - hence using chronicity - or acuity, etc. - as the key measure to prioritize. However, the challenge with the approach is that without any complementary other foci, and without adequate resources to assist other groups of clients in need - it had a two-fold effect: it created unintended incentive for people to present or achieve chronicity/acuity/vulnerability to be more 'competitive' in the scoring and get access to limited help, and it also left entire populations behind who did not qualify for the assistance at all - primarily those who scored lower on the various needs/acuity/chronicity/vulnerability assessments.

This of course creates considerable tension in the community as clients and service providers struggle with the new norm of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. Ultimately, we need to build eco-systems of care that reach well beyond what we currently consider the homeless serving system: we need to develop service pathways that prevent and reduce homelessness risk and ensure everyone in need has access to the resources they need to achieve wellbeing sustainably. Rather than sticking to a zero-sum game, the rights-based approach challenges us to challenge the dogma of scarcity and find solutions that are holistic and person-centered.

There is willingness to pursue systems planning across Canada, and a number of challenges to overcome to get communities to where they need to be to see results. Beyond financial and human resources, which are critical to moving local systems planning work forward, participants have identified a number of priority areas that require comprehensive technical support, training, and resources.

Performance Management – Determining if planning efforts are driving improved outcomes for people experiencing and at risk of homelessness and, if not, how to change course. Tools are needed to help communities determine the health of their systems planning work.

Change Management – Moving beyond the coalition of the willing and bringing those individuals, groups and systems that are resistant to change around to see their role and alignment within systems change. Guidance needed to identify tactics that can get challenging players not only to the table, but actively supporting and championing systems change.

Creating Action Plans – Breaking the cycle of community plans that do not inform or drive action. Using the plan development process itself as an opportunity for testing and making changes to policy, planning and practice that drive improved outcomes for people experiencing homelessness.

Policy Development – Communicating what is working well and identifying roles, and asks of various orders of government. Training and resources needed on how to use planning efforts as a catalyst for policy change.

Government Relations – Bringing decision-makers to the table and providing them with clear asks and responsibilities. Strategies on engaging each order of government in systems planning work.

Private Sector Engagement – Leveraging the private sector to advance systems planning work. Identifying ways for the private sector to fund and/or contribute to homelessness prevention and exits in a way that is sustainable and achieves better outcomes.

Relationship/Trust-Building – Building trust and nurturing relationships to

facilitate more cohesive planning efforts and identify new champions for the work. Engaging people that are not yet around the table and having them be enthusiastic and willing contributors to the work.

Systems Integration – Establishing and/or improving the interface between public system and the private and non-profit sectors. Creating a system of care with good communication and information flows that put the individual/client at the centre.

Systems Mapping – Having a complete database of programs and services that can be coordinated and leveraged for greater impact in planning and increase accessibility for community members.

Financial Scenario Modelling – Using data to identify local infrastructure, program and staffing needs and developing accurate and realistic cost models. Improving communities' ability to craft specific asks of funders and government, and track progress toward housing and programmatic goals.

Actionable Data & Analytics – Enhancing the data collection capacity of communities in real-time to be able to identify trends, track progress, and adjust planning efforts accordingly.

There is a desire to pursue systems planning for prevention and sustain exits from homelessness that is amplified by [Reaching Home](#). However, regardless of the size of the community or their level of coordination within their homelessness system, communities are feeling stuck and need support to see what comes next to drive change locally. Getting communities unstuck and helping them to chart a path forward that aligns with federal priorities, meet their local needs, and utilize assets and opportunities will be essential. Participants identified a need for a clear step-by-step guide to get move them toward comprehensive systems planning.

“Motivation has been provided by Reaching Home. We know we have to do this. We could use some smart help - analytical, critical, and apolitical.”

- CAB/CE Survey Participant

The members of the Systems Planning Collective bring years of experience working one-on-one with communities and governments to hone and refine their planning efforts, policy and data tools, and systems change. The data from this survey points to a significant need to strategically mobilize this collective knowledge to more communities for greater uptake and impact. Increased learning opportunities, technical support, and tools and resources will position communities to be able to fully implement and make progress toward local and federal priorities.

Survey participants indicated significant interest in receiving technical support, training and resources from the SPC on the following subjects:

Basic Systems Planning Capacity (68%) - Systems mapping, performance tracking, HMIS implementation, coordinated access and assessment

Advanced Systems Planning (83%) - Financial modelling, data analytics, performance management, quality assurance

Government Relations (63%) - Engaging with municipal, provincial/territorial, and federal governments

Systems Integration (83%) - Coordinating efforts with health, corrections, child welfare, etc.

Systems Integration (80%) - Understanding and leveraging resources outside homeless-serving system

Best Practices in Program Design/Operations (62%) - HF, Foyer models, affordable housing/supportive housing, mental health supports, etc.

Leveraging Private Sector (71%)

Building Trust in the Community (57%)

Other areas of interest identified included:

- Indigenous specific content and culturally appropriate approaches
- Effective peer support models

Systems Planning Curriculum - Module Pilot

Based on the identified community priorities and areas of interest, the Systems Planning Collective is developing modules to form a comprehensive curriculum with complimentary tools and resources to mobilize systems planning knowledge, hone related skills, and take actionable steps toward change and improved local outcomes. The modules will be separated into two streams: (1) Systems Planning Basics and (2) Advanced Systems Planning. To begin, the SPC will pilot a series of four modules with Designated Communities - two from each stream.

The aim of the modules will be to effectively mobilize systems planning knowledge on policy, planning and practice to communities across Canada. The pilot module webinars will be made available to all Designated Communities and open to non-designated communities looking to start, advance and/or improve their local systems planning work. Opportunities for feedback on the webinars will be open to all participants through a follow-up survey.

Additionally, a sample of participants representing a diversity of community sizes and locations will be invited to provide more in-depth feedback on the webinar and supplementary content (including resource lists, guides, infographics, etc.) through interviews and/or focus groups. This sample will be asked to provide their impressions of the utility of the modules for their local planning work, as well as how to improve and refine the content.

The learnings from this pilot phase will determine the optimal format for the modules' content to have uptake and move to implementation, as well as additional support and resources required to wrap around communities as they pursue comprehensive systems planning work.

The four pilot modules include:

Systems Planning 101 (Basics) - In this module, users will gain an understanding Systems Planning work. The module explores why Systems Planning is essential to preventing and ending homelessness; what Systems Planning is and is not, and; the underlying principles that guide Systems Planning.

This module will include: Webinar; One-Page Backgrounder; Infographic; Resource List.

Planning for Change (Basics) - This module explores the change management required to navigate the challenges and opportunities of systems change. Tools and resources are provided to identify and address the concerns and fears of various systems planning stakeholders, as well as generating buy-in around transforming responses to homelessness.

This module will include: Webinar; Resource List; and Guide(s).

Engaging Stakeholders (Advanced) - In this Advanced module, participants are instructed on ways to expand their local systems planning network beyond the "usual suspects" in the homeless-serving sector. In this module, participants will learn to identify the potential roles and responsibilities for different sectors, organizations, and community members to catalyze and sustain systems change. Content will be developed on meaningfully engaging different stakeholder groups (people with lived experience, government, public systems, funders, etc.).

This module will use: Webinar; Facilitation/Consultation Guides

Governance Models (Advanced) - This Advanced module compares and contrasts various governance models that can be used in local systems planning to address homelessness. Participants will be able to determine the best fit governance model for their community, as well as key considerations for implementation, accountability, and sustainability.

This module will use: Webinar; Organizational Charts; Resource List.

Homelessness is a fusion policy issue with implications for multiple orders of and systems within government, as well as the non-profit and private sectors. Meaningful engagement of those various sectors and systems is required to move from reducing and managing the homelessness to preventing and ending homelessness.

Communities desire increased participation, coordination, and alignment in their planning, particularly with an eye toward the upcoming federal strategy, [Reaching Home](#). Despite desire to see improved outcomes for those at-risk of and experiencing homelessness in their communities, efforts are thwarted by limited resources and expertise to identify and chart a path forward that will lead to lasting change. The Systems Planning Collective, in response to increased calls for support and guidance, is committed to working with communities and leveraging the strengths of its partners to take the latest knowledge in systems planning, policy and practice to scale and empower them to transform their responses to homelessness.

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