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“The Outside of the Inside;”
Experiences of Discovering Home and Community within the Region of Waterloo
By
Nicole Greig
Bachelor of Social Work, University of Waterloo, - Renison University College, 2013
THESIS
Submitted to the Faculty of Social Work
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Abstract

The primary purpose of this research study is to explore the narratives of individuals experiencing homelessness within Waterloo Region as well as the practices of those working with the homeless population. The experience of homelessness is often met with an intersection of complex issues including mental health, substance abuse, deteriorating physical health, trauma, etc. Within this study, the concept of “home” and “community” are explored through the lens of homeless men living with these complicated challenges within the context of Waterloo Region. This qualitative study consisted of semi-structured interviews with six service providers and twelve men who were currently or recently homeless. Social Constructivism was used as the theoretical framework within the study as this theory allows ample space for participant voices to be heard. Grounded theory was used to guide the examination of data, which allowed movement between stages of analysis. The findings of this study offer an exploration of the housing strategy currently applied within Waterloo Region. The study informs policy makers and service providers of the experience of homeless individuals and it advances our understanding of the diverse concept of home for those within the street community. Moreover, it provides an initial exploration into creative housing solutions that are not currently available within Waterloo Region. These findings are not only important for those working alongside the homeless population but they also demonstrate the overall importance within social work practice of remaining grounded in and guided by the experiences of participants.

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I would like to thank my fiancé and life partner for supporting me when I was overwhelmed. Thank you for showing me what home can be.

Finally, I would like to express my deepest appreciation to the participants within this research study who have shown their dedication to ending functional homelessness by their participation in this research study. For the service providers, I thank you for your commitment to the belief that everyone deserves a place to feel safe. For the individuals experiencing homelessness in the past or currently, I show my deepest gratitude for your courage in participating in this study and in the strength you show everyday. I thank you for allowing me to participate in your community. You have all taught me how to be authentically human and I have been deeply humbled in witnessing your resilience amidst great adversity. I have never met a community where vulnerabilities are so nakedly presented and I thank you for allowing me to witness that.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Despite significant changes within the approach to ending homelessness across Canada; men, women, families and youth become homeless everyday in Canada. In 2015, there was an estimated 235, 000 people who considered themselves homeless in Canada (The Canadian Press, 2016). In 2009, Canada began implementing the Housing First (HF) approach to ending homelessness with a pilot project within five cities including Moncton, Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg and Vancouver. This project, which will be described in more detail later on, was only the beginning of an adoption of the philosophy across every province. This philosophy holds the primary principle that an individual will be more successful in moving forward in their life if they are first housed (Gaetz, Scott, Gulliver, 2013). This model does not prescribe a series of tasks; rather, it is meant to be the guiding philosophy behind a community's approach to ending homelessness. Many quantitative studies within Canada and the United States have proven the effectiveness of the Housing First model; however, the qualitative accounts of the approach remain relatively unknown. The current study, which includes both service providers and individuals experiencing homelessness within Waterloo Region, seeks to provide valuable insights into the concept of home, community and creative housing solutions for the future. This experiential knowledge will assist in the ongoing efforts to end functional homelessness.

Definitions

To ensure the reader fully understands the topic-specific language, I have provided a variety of definitions of words or phrases that will be used throughout the current study. The following definitions are drawn from The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (2012):

Homelessness – “Homelessness describes a situation of an individual or family without stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means and ability of acquiring it. It is the result of systemic or societal barriers, a lack of affordable or appropriate housing, the individual/household’s financial, mental, cognitive, behavioral, or physical challenges, and/or racism and discrimination. Most people do not choose to be homeless, and the experience is generally negative, unpleasant, stressful and distressing” (The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2012).

Homelessness includes a variety of circumstances that individuals may experience:

- 1.) “***Unsheltered*** or absolutely homeless and living on the streets or in places not intended for human habitation” (The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2012)
- 2.) “***Emergency Sheltered*** including those staying in overnight shelters for people who are homeless, as well as shelters for those impacted by family violence” (The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2012)
- 3.) “***Provisionally Accommodated***, referring to people whose accommodation is temporary or lacks security of tenure” (The Canadian Observatory of Homelessness, 2012)
- 4.) “***At Risk of Homelessness***, referring to people who are not homeless, but whose current economic and/or housing situation is precarious or does not meet public health and safety standards” (The Canadian Observatory of Homelessness, 2012)

Precariously Housed – This term is commonly used to refer to individuals who are at risk of homelessness (The Canadian Observatory of Homelessness, 2012)

Functional Homelessness – This approach “describes the situation in a community where homelessness has become a manageable problem. That is, the availability of services and resources match or exceed the demand for them from the target population” (Turner, Pakeman, Albanese, 2017)

Housing First – “A recovery-oriented approach to ending homelessness that centers on quickly moving people experiencing homelessness into independent, and permanent housing and then providing additional supports and services as needed” (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2017)

STEP Home Program – “STEP Home (Support to End Persistent Homelessness) is a set of interrelated person-centered programs that has been providing options and supports to end and prevent homelessness in Waterloo Region since 2008” (STEP Home 2012-2014 Report)

Thesis Outline

The objective of this research study is to explore the concept of “home” and “community” with individuals experiencing homelessness and service providers within Waterloo Region. I will begin by positioning myself in relation to this topic and research study. Then, I will provide a review of the existing literature that examines the scholarship on homelessness, the Housing First philosophy and possible interventions to end homelessness. The research question and objectives will then be clearly stated, followed by a discussion of social constructivist theory. The constructivist grounded theory as applied to the analysis of the data will then be outlined. I will then share the themes that emerged during my data analysis and propose creative housing solutions as suggested by the research participants. Next, I will discuss the recommendations that

grew out of the study's discussion of home and the implications on the Housing First philosophy as implemented within Waterloo Region. This will be followed by a review of the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research. I will conclude with a discussion of the practical implications of this study for all those working alongside individuals experiencing homelessness as well as its practical significance to social work practice.

Social Location

My personhood is an intersection of memories, experiences, relationships and dreams. All of these unique aspects make up who I am as a researcher in the current study. Deena Mandell wrote that, as a social worker, we are the funnel through which our professional self flows (Mandell, 2007). My position within this research is undoubtedly influenced by my integrated self. Thus, I believe it is of first priority to describe who I am as the funnel that produced this work.

My fascination for understanding the concept of home began long before I consciously realized it. For much of my life, I have been attempting to discover a place I can call home. I grew up in a house where feelings were expressed through my father's emotional abuse and neglect. After ten years of inflicting pain, my father abandoned my mother and siblings to begin another family. While my mother attempted to create a stable place where myself and my siblings could find refuge, her own struggles often challenged that pursuit. My father continued to make me feel incredibly unsafe through his volatile actions and words throughout my youth and early adulthood. When I was a teenager, I ran away from my mother's house for a time due to our inability to find sanctuary together. Both of us were battling ghosts of the past and in doing so, we began

battling each other. Throughout that time, while I did not have a place I could call home, I found a community of people who supported and encouraged me in becoming a healthier self. As I entered University, like many students, I moved often and never felt a sense of stability or consistency. This nomadic lifestyle continued as I began working.

Over the past few years, I have been working alongside individuals experiencing homelessness within Waterloo Region. I provided intensive support to individuals who lived with a complex intersection of mental health issues, substance abuse, chronic homelessness, deteriorating physical health, deep trauma, etc. The support I provided was incredibly diverse and completely dependent upon the goals of the participant. I found myself constantly reacting to crisis situations and living in a state of chaos within my work life. While this role was extremely stressful at times, it also showed me an authentic community made up of loyal people who were vulnerable with their struggles and held the belief that everyone deserves a seat at the table. These experiences, both past and present, grew a deep inner conviction within myself that everyone has the right to a safe and warm place to call home.

In the last year, I have developed a home like I have never experienced before. I have begun to plant roots alongside my partner and I feel a powerful sense of safety in that space. I have found home and I am deeply committed to working alongside others in their journey of that same pursuit. These stories, my own and the ones I carry from the individuals I walked alongside in their experiences of homelessness, are the seeds that precede the current study. These stories hold vastly different details, but each of them require an ending: home.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Homelessness in Canada

Pearson, Montgomery and Locke provide a definition of a chronically homeless person as “an unaccompanied adult with a disabling condition – most commonly with a serious mental illness, substance-related disorder, developmental disability, or chronic physical illness or disability – who has been continuously homeless for one year or longer, or had at least four homeless episodes during the last 3 years” (Pearson, 2009, C., 404-405). The intersection of individuals experiencing homelessness forces the approach to be as diverse and multi-layered as the individuals themselves.

In 2015, there was an estimated 235, 000 people who considered themselves homeless in Canada (The Canadian Press, 2016). On any given night in Canada, there is approximately 35,000 individuals who do not have a safe, warm place to sleep (The Canadian Press, 2016). Approximately, 150, 000 individuals access emergency shelters in Canada annually (The Canadian Press, 2016). An additional 50, 000 individuals are considered “hidden homeless” which means that they do not have their own stable place to live but depend upon family or friends on most nights (The Canadian Press, 2016). Cumulatively, there are 4 million bed nights which is defined as “nights during which a shelter bed is occupied” every year across Canada (The Canadian Press, 2016). The federal government spends \$105.3 million annually on the Homeless Partnering Strategy which is designed to prevent and reduce homelessness (The Canadian Press. 2016). This number does not take into account the additional indirect costs of homelessness such as emergency hospital usage, police intervention, and incarceration costs. The reality is that it costs much less to house an individual and provide adequate support while they remain in housing than it to keep someone on the street.

Housing First (HF)

Housing First (HF) is an approach to ending homelessness that holds the primary principle that an individual will be more successful in moving forward in their life if they are first housed (Gaetz, Scott, Gulliver, 2013). In the *Housing First in Canada: Supporting Communities to End Homelessness* (2013) document, editors Gaetz, Scott and Gulliver (2013) begin with a framework for Housing First and explain the five core principles within the strategy. The first is “Immediate access to permanent housing with no housing readiness requirements” (Gaetz, Scott, Gulliver, 2013, pp. 5). Within this principle, individuals are provided assistance in finding housing immediately without having to prove they are “ready”. The second principle is “Consumer choice and Self Determination” (Gaetz, Scott, Gulliver, 2013pp. 6) which holds the belief that if the client is a part of the decision, the housing will be more successful. The third is “Recovery Orientation” (Gaetz, Scott, Gulliver, 2013, pp. 6) which focuses on individual well-being so that clients have access to a range of support after they are housed. Additionally, the fourth principle focuses on “Individualized and client-drive supports” which in action, are supports provided to an individual, based on their self-named needs, after they are housed. The final tenet of HF is the “Social and Community Integration” (Gaetz, Scott, Gulliver, 2013, pp. 6). This tenet is aimed at the commitment of HF to help individuals re-integrate into their community after they are housed. This document continues by presenting eight case studies of Housing First in Canada, exploring similarities and differences within the application. It also highlights key lessons learned in the journey of application thus far. This document was created by the Canadian Homelessness Research Network, a thoughtful group of researchers committed to ending homelessness in Canada.

The Housing First model is a philosophy, it is not a rigid set of steps, editors Gaetz, Scott and Gulliver explain in the *Housing First in Canada* (2013) guide that “Housing First can be a guiding principle for an organization or community that prioritizes getting people into permanent housing with supports to follow” (Gaetz, Scott, Gulliver, 2013, pp. 7). This document also suggests that the HF approach is embedded in the belief that every human being deserves housing and that individuals experiencing homelessness “will do better and recover more effectively if they are first provided with housing” (Gaetz, Scott, Gulliver, 2013, pp. 7). There has been an extensive amount of quantitative research done in across North America that prove the efficacy of this model, especially when working with individuals who have experienced chronic homelessness.

The concept of HF became popular in the 1970s due to a series of development programs in New York and Los Angeles (Gaetz, Scott & Gulliver, 2013). At that time, the approach was called “Pathways to Housing, the term “Housing First” was not introduced until the 90s. The birthplace of this concept was in a realization that for individuals experiencing mental health or addiction issues, homelessness often exacerbated these concerns (Gaetz, Scott & Gulliver, 2013). Within the Pathways model, clients were identified through either street outreach or hospital discharge. Then, they were involved in the process of choosing the type of housing they desired and the supports they thought they would require after they obtained housing. The housing locations were obtained through private landlords across the city using a scattered-site model. The supports provided once in housing were completely voluntarily and housing was not conditional upon accepting the after-care (Gaetz, Scott & Gulliver, 2013). The main objective of the Pathways concept was eventual full integration into the community (Gaetz, Scott & Gulliver, 2013).

Housing First in Canada

Within Canada, prior to the Housing First approach, individuals experiencing homelessness were expected to live within a series of residential homes and eventually progress to independent living. This process was ineffective for the most part and extremely costly (Evans, Collins, Anderson, 2016). This antiquated approach was criticized, as authors Evans, Collins and Anderson (2016) explain in their analysis of Housing First as applied within Alberta, for disempowering clients and comprising their independence. Thus, the implementation of the Housing First model in Canada shifted the care of individuals from institutions to the community, which was proven to be effective due primarily to decreased cost seen in several studies that implemented randomized control experimental design (Evans, Collins, Anderson, 2016). The implementation of HF in Canada was inspired by its success in the United States. In Vancouver, hosting the Winter Olympics in 2014 spurred one Housing First program. Additionally, in 2008, Alberta implemented the Housing First approach as part of their 10 year Plan to End homelessness (Gaetz (Ed), 2013). The first major application of Housing First was the *At Home/Chez Soi* initiative which ran from 2009-2013 and was funded by the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) (Gaetz (Ed), 2013). This project was scattered throughout Canada in five cities including Moncton, Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg and Vancouver. The funding for the project prioritized research and evaluation throughout the scattered sites. At the end of the project, a report was disseminated outlining housing outcomes, social and health outcomes and service use and cost outcomes. The report explained, “For the 10% of participants who had the highest service use costs at the start of the study, HF cost \$19, 582 per person per year on average” (Goering et al. 2014, 7-8). This is a reduction on average of \$42, 536 in the cost of services for the usual care of the

individual (Goering et al, 2014). Furthermore, “every \$10 invested in HF services resulted in an average savings of \$21.72” (Goering et al., 2014, 7-8). These reductions were seen in psychiatric hospital stays, general hospital stays, home and office visits with community service providers, emergency room visits, police contacts, jail/prison incarcerations, and crisis housing stays (Goering et al., 2014).

The numbers recorded directly portray the effectiveness of this philosophy within Canada. Unfortunately, longitudinal studies have not been completed as of yet to truly identify HF’s long-term success. However, due to its immediate success, the HF approach has been implemented across Canada and is changing the way that workers journey alongside individuals experiencing homeless. It is also important to suggest that the Housing First model is a guiding philosophy that may differ in application based on geographical needs. Specifically, within Waterloo Region, the HF model was introduced in 2013 in direct response to the Out of the Cold programs shutting down due to safety concerns. The Region partnered with local service providers to implement a tool called SPDAT (Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool). This tool asks a series of questions across multiple components, including mental health, addiction, trauma, abuse, history of homelessness, etc., to prioritize who to serve next and why (OrgCode Consulting, Inc., 2016). It creates a triage system to identify individuals who require more support than others. After the mass implementation of this tool across Waterloo Region, the StepHome program was implemented. This program began with 15 support workers within various organizations across Waterloo Region who each supported a caseload of 10 individuals that were considered the most acute based on the SPDAT tool. These individuals then provided long-term, ongoing support to these individuals. The program also provided a subsidy of \$300 a month for rent for each individual to broaden

their housing options. This program has been praised and criticized over the past few years by workers at all levels as well as participants. In my own experience working alongside individuals experiencing homelessness within Waterloo Region, the philosophical foundation of Housing First is not a new one. Workers and agencies across the Region have held the belief that everyone deserves a safe, warm place to call home for far longer than the Housing First strategy has been implemented. There has been deep concern in the introduction of the SPDAT tool and subsequent triage system of need. While it attempts to establish an objective result, it does not take into account the desires of the participant nor does it account for the subjectivity of the individual applying the tool. Additionally, the tool is problem-focused and completely disregards the strength and resilience of the individual; their unique personhood is replaced with a number. Since the application of this Housing First program has only been applied for a short time, only time will prove its efficacy within this Region.

Limitations of Housing First

While the Housing First (HF) philosophy has obvious effectiveness that can be seen within the statistics, there are some impediments to its success within every context. Homelessness is a complicated issue that may appear easy to fix; however, it is a complicated intersection of a variety of marginalizing issues that need to be adequately addressed. One major limitation to the HF approach is the lack of account taken for real-world issues such as safe, affordable housing availability and the complications that come with allowing space for stakeholder choice. Additionally, research shows that isolation becomes a major factor after housing which can lead to individuals choosing to leave their home to find community. Moreover, there remains a complex sub-group of

individuals that require a diversified approach to housing. Furthermore, beyond these limitations, there begs the question of what happens when funding simply runs out.

The first tenet of the HF philosophy, described earlier, recommends “immediate access to permanent housing with no housing readiness requirements” (Gaetz, Scott & Gulliver, 2013, pp. 5). Zerger, Pridham, Jeyaratnam, Hwang, O’Campo, Connelly and Stergeiopoulos point out that the term “immediate” has certain variations that could change depending on where it is being applied. While the HF model adamantly disputes the usefulness of interim housing; a study examining the outcomes of HF and other housing models found that just 40% of the successful participants gained “immediate” housing without having an interim safe space to stay in the meantime (Zerger, Pridham, Jeyaratnam, Hwang, O’Campo, Connelly & Stergeiopolos, 2014). Additionally, this primary tenet describing the importance of immediate housing does not take into account the lack of affordable, safe housing options for individuals. For instance, within the initial pilot project of HF in Canada, the AtHome/Chez Soi project, “housing availability was constrained by the lack of affordable housing within most of the five communities” (Macnaughton, Stefancic, Nelson, Caplan, Townley, Aubry, McCullough, Patterson, Stergiopoulos, Vallée, Tsemberis, Fleur, Piat & Goering, 2015, pp. 288). The HF approach, if done alongside an integration of affordable, creative housing options, would be a much more effective approach.

Stakeholder decision-making has been well-researched as the most effective method; however, within the real-world context, stakeholder choice makes acquiring housing immediately much more difficult. It can be difficult to fully explore an individuals’ options when there is an urgency embedded in the philosophy to attain

housing as quickly as possible. Srebnik, Livingston, Gordon and King conduct a study interviewing 115 consumers from 10 different agencies to identify their experience moving out of homelessness. The study explained that participants felt that they had very few housing options to choose from due to a variety of factors including landlord perceptions, lack of available funds, etc. (Srebnik, Livingston, Gordon & King, 1995). Additionally, O'Connell, Rosenheck, Kaspro and Frisman examined using a secondary analysis of data attempting to uncover the relationship between fulfilled housing preferences and quality of life. The study included 17 various housing features to identify participant preferences. Some of those features included affordability, proximity to bus line, attractive building, near family/friends, garage, compatible landlord, etc. The study showed that the proportion of preferred characteristics obtained in one's apartment had a significant correlation with their quality of life in a 1-year follow-up. Moreover, the study argued that there is not a set of "objective preferences"; but rather, individuals will be more successful long-term if their specific set of preferences are obtained (O'Connell, et al., 2006). The authors explain that helping an individual realize their housing preferences may not be adequate enough to assist them in significantly overcoming illness; however, they are more satisfied with their circumstances if they are shaped by the stakeholder's choice (O'Connell, et al., 2006). The authors explain that through their study of 115 participants, increased choice has the potential to maintain housing stability and overall quality of life satisfaction because the individual was involved in the process (O'Connell, et al., 2006).

Isolation also becomes a major factor for individuals when they move from living on the street to living within a home with the HF approach. As mentioned above, a main tenet of the HF is finding permanent and independent housing. This lack of focus on

community integration exacerbates the issue of social isolation. Macnaughton-Goering et al. explain that after studying the efficacy of the HF pilot project they found that, “once participants are successfully housing and removed from their street lives, participants lack purposeful activity, and thus face the question of “What’s next?”” (Macnaughton-Goering et al., 2015, pp. 289). While the HF approach suggests further support/services should be provided to individuals after they enter housing; Zerger, Pridham, Jeyaratnam, Hwang, O’Campo, Connelly and Stergeiopolos explain that the focus on housing within the HF model places a singular focus on housing, removing the focus of the intersection of challenges these individuals face. One worker suggests that this focus changes the relationship, “[S]ometimes we’re just seen as housing workers, so it’s really hard, sometimes, to work on the other stuff, like, work on the trauma, to work on the goals’; and ‘[housing] took away so much time in working with the [other] things that we needed to be doing”” (Zerger-Stergeiopolos et al., 2014, pp. 435). The HF model holds the primary focus of housing and does not allow the organic growth of relationship that can be crucial after housing is acquired.

While the HF approach can be successful for many individuals experiencing homelessness, research suggests that there is a sub-group of individuals wherein this particular approach simply is not effective. Macnaughton-Goering et al. explain that “there is a sub-group with additional needs, somewhere between 15 and 25% of HF participants, depending on how housing stability is defined, who have difficulty settling into housing” (Macnaughton-Goering et al., 2015, pp. 288). The authors suggest that these individuals may have complex issues including mental health, substance dependence, or trauma which make it difficult to extricate themselves from their street

community. It is important to recognize that this seemingly small subset is actually 47,000 (Macnaughton-Goering et al., 2015, pp. 288) lives who are someone's brother, sister, mother, or child.

Within Waterloo Region, the implementation of the HF approach led to subsidies for those considered the most acute within our communities. These subsidies provide \$300 additional dollars to rent every month for five years. While this has opened up the housing options immensely, it begs the question: what happens after five years? Additionally, today in 2016, the number of subsidies have run out. There are many more individuals who require the rental assistance to acquire safe housing; however, they are left without support because they were late to the line. The HF approach has wide applicability and effectiveness; however, the literature suggests that it needs to be adopted alongside interim housing options, creative housing alternatives, a commitment to worker-participant relationships, patience within consumer readiness and additional funding.

Possible interventions/recommendations

As mentioned above, Housing First has proven its effectiveness to reduce homelessness both in the pilot project and the current implementation across Canada. However, its single-dimensional approach does not take into account the intersectional nature of individuals experiencing homelessness. I contend that the HF philosophy, coupled with creative alternative housing options, the provision for time to build a trusting relationship between worker and participant and the use of interim spaces could truly be the combination that could permanently end homelessness.

Zerger, Pridham, Jeyaratnam, Hwang, O'Campo, Connelly and Stergeiopoulos suggest that interim housing may be a key tool to assist individuals in finding appropriate, stable housing. (Zerger-Stergeiopolos et al., 2014). These authors suggest that interim housing is distinctly different than transitional housing in that there are no specific readiness requirements to acceptance into this housing, which is congruent with the HF approach (Zerger-Stergeiopolos et al., 2014). In a review in 2007 by Pearson, Locke, Montgomery and Buron, 23 HF programs were studied. All but two programs used interim housing prior to placements due to lack of immediate, affordable housing (Pearson, Locke, Montgomery, & Buron, 2007). Zerger et al. also posit that post-placement locations may also help maintain stability when an individual is moving from one location to another (Zerger-Stergeiopolos et al., 2014). The authors examined individuals pre-entry into permanent housing. Due to extensive wait times for subsidized housing and lack of affordable housing in Toronto, it was difficult to maintain the initial principle of HF to find immediate, permanent housing. Additionally, Zerger-Stergeiopolos et al. suggest that because the participants expected immediate housing, they became greatly disappointed when the promise was different than reality. This disappointment affected the therapeutic relationship in a major way (Zerger-Stergeiopolos, 2014). Thus, the authors suggest the importance of interim housing in appropriate settings to support people in this complicated process.

In Vancouver, the implementation of Single Room Occupancy (SRO) housing has been widely successful. This form of housing is set up much like a residence at a university in that each individual has their own room; however, they share a common kitchen space. There are staff available around the clock and a harm reduction approach

is enforced so that individuals are supported as they are. This space offers a safe, affordable alternative to traditional forms of housing.

Individuals experiencing homelessness often have complex issues that cannot simply be served through housing. The Housing First philosophy, while effective for many reasons, needs to be adapted to serve all the complicated needs that individuals have. The HF model needs to be adapted to utilize the intersectionality framework so that it can begin to fully integrate the multi-dimensional identities of individuals experiencing homelessness. The addition of creative housing alternatives, additional funding and patience to allow relationships to grow organically between the worker and the client would make this approach much more successful. Not only will this adaptation be more effective but it also will reduce costs, both indirect and direct, and it gives legitimacy to the voices of those experiencing the marginalization.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In this chapter, I will discuss the methodology of this research project. I will begin by stating the research questions along with the main objectives of the study, followed by a discussion of social constructivism and constructivist grounded theory. Then, I will outline the qualitative research methods of this research. I will conclude with a discussion of my role as researcher and the ethical considerations of the investigation.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research project seeks to answer the following question:

1. What is the concept of “home” and “community” for individuals experiencing homelessness and housing providers within Waterloo Region?
2. What are the housing experiences of individuals experiencing homelessness?
3. What are the housing experiences of service providers working alongside the homeless population within Waterloo Region?
4. What are alternative housing options that are currently not being utilized within Waterloo Region as suggested by individuals experiencing homelessness and service providers?

OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

There are three main objectives of the current study. First, I wish to explore the concept of “home” and “community” for the research participants. Second, I hope to gain interactive knowledge through the in-depth interviews with the participants. Through dialogue and flexible structure, I hope to gain insight into their lives and experiences. Finally, using the expertise of the research participants, I hope to identify gaps in the housing system within Waterloo Region and illuminate opportunities for development.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Social Constructivism Theory

In understanding the lens I used to underpin the current study, I believe it is first important to understand the eyes that precede that lens. In the introductory chapter, I wrote about who I am today and the significant experiences that have influenced me throughout my life. So, while in the introduction I spent time to thoroughly outline my position in this world, I would like to summarize by explicitly stating that I am a white, middle-class, heterosexual female with education and professional experience within my chosen field. I was born and raised in Southern Ontario, Canada and have held many privileges as a result: I have had access to education, housing, food, financial support, employment, and travelling. I have journeyed through parental abuse, episodic homelessness and mental health challenges. I have also been fortunate to have a supportive community around me. I view my personhood as wholly integrated; I have been and continue to be shaped by experiences and relationships in my past and present. These experiences have birthed a desire to advocate for those that are seen but seldom heard.

My personhood is undeniably linked to the current study from the conception of the idea to the analysis of data and finally to the written form. In order to honour my own influence on the work while seeing the experiences of the participants fully, I implemented Social Constructivism, as defined by Mary K. Rodwell (1998), as the theoretical perspective. Rodwell (1998) explains that social constructivism “provides a mechanism for looking at another’s world” (Rodwell, 1990, pp. 6). Rodwell contends that social constructivism parallels with social work in many ways: “Just as in social work, constructivist strategy focuses on evidence of improvement in the participant’s conscious

experiencing of his or her world” (Rodwell, 1990, pp. 8). This congruence that is found within this theoretical framework requires an honouring of the participants narrative to provide knowledge and influence practice. I held a deep commitment to honouring the stories of the participants, which made social constructivism an appropriate fit.

Further, Rodwell explains that social constructivism allows the researcher to look at the “other” more fully; “Constructivist research provides a way to avoid racist, oppressive, or otherwise inaccurate information by assisting the inquirer to look at the world with more flexibility” (Rodwell, 1990, pp. 8). Additionally, “By managing relativity, it provides a mechanism for the practitioner to understand data differently, and by doing so, allows for expanded uses of information to guide how to deal with problems and clients suffering with those problems” (Rodwell, 1990, pp. 4). While in the beginning, this theoretical framework appeared to be the most authentic lens to look through in doing this research; in practical application, it was much more difficult. Without fully knowing, I had a deep desire to find answers. I wanted to uncover a solution that could be easily applied in order to end homelessness. However, through reflecting on the theoretical framework itself, I realized that humankind is much more complicated than that. Individuals experiencing homelessness are complex and each individual requires a different set of supports to obtain and maintain a home. Thus, as Rodwell explains, “There is no need for the *right* answer because a variety of possible answers can be considered” (Rodwell, 1998, pp. 4). The use of social constructivism forced me to rid myself of the need for a single solution and grasp that ending homelessness is found in the diversity and multiplicity of solutions.

Constructivist Grounded Theory

Out of my experience working alongside individuals experiencing homelessness, I have learned the importance of flexibility in approach. Prior to beginning the research process, I was worried about the rigid structure that is often applied within the institution of education. I wondered how the malleable, ever-changing world of the street would blend with the rigidity of research. One of the ways that this fusion was found was in the implementation of constructivist grounded theory as a “guide” within data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2006). More specifically, the method of analysis was the “constructivist” form of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000, p. 28) where there are “flexible guidelines” for analysis rather than following rigid grounded theory techniques (Cresswell, Hanson, Plano Clark & Morales, 2007, p. 250). Symbolic interactionism is a central component of constructivist grounded theory that focuses on the meaning that individuals attribute to their own experiences (Wuest, 1995). This component is congruent with the social constructivism theory that underpins the study.

There were many specific aspects of Constructivist grounded theory that were implemented within the current study to allow balance of flexibility and structure. Charmaz (2006) explains that “grounded theorists stop and write whenever ideas occur to them” (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 10). Within the current study, I used a journal to write down reflections and important instances during and after the interviews. Additionally, throughout the data analysis stage, I used the memo feature on the NVivo Software to write down ideas as they emerged.

Furthermore, intensive interviewing was used to explore the experiences of the participants. Intensive interviewing is a useful data-gathering method within a grounded

theory approach to qualitative research. Charmaz (2006) explains “the in-depth nature of an intensive interview fosters eliciting each participant’s interpretation of his or her experience” (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 26). This unique aspect of grounded theory aligned well with the subject matter of the current study. Moreover, within a grounded theory study, broad, open-ended, non-judgemental questions are used to “encourage unanticipated statements and stories to emerge” (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 26). This feature of grounded theory was the largest influence in the creation of the interview questions.

Grounded theory is based on a multistage method that continuously moves back and forth between gathering data, transcribing data and analyzing that data. As themes begin to emerge through this cycle, additional data can be collected and analyzed. Grounded theory is suggested to be used in areas where little theory has been developed or where existing theory is not related to the research study. Within the current study, there is limited qualitative research done on the experience of homelessness with the Housing First model implemented in the focus area. Thus, grounded theory offers an appropriate lens to use within the study’s data analysis. Furthermore, grounded theory is well suited for exploring areas that involve interactions between individuals and their environment and the impact of those interactions on their life journeys. This notion aligns well with the current study, which seeks to understand the concept of home based on the life experience of homeless individuals.

RESEARCH METHODS

Qualitative Research

This study attempts to explore the concept of home and identify gaps in housing within Waterloo Region. Thus, I have used a qualitative methodology consisting of 60-90 minute, semi-structured interviews. As Malcolm Carey (2012) notes, qualitative research “seeks to explore and address concerns of topics that bridge knowledge, meaning, tangible experience, emotions and reflexive understanding to the applied practice of social work” (Malcolm Carey, 2012, pp. 8). Within the current study, the exploration of experience among individuals is the foundational content upon which the results are found. Additionally, qualitative research requires a level of reflexivity throughout the research process and within the data analysis. Carey (2012) contends that within qualitative research, the researcher is permitted “to revise and reflect upon the research process or journey as it unfolds” (Carey, 2012, pp. 6). Allowing the researcher space to reflect on the interviews and data throughout the process was an extremely beneficial and healing part of the research journey for me.

In reviewing the literature, there is a limited amount of qualitative research done on homelessness when the ‘Housing First’ model is the guiding philosophy within the focus community. Thus, as Carey (2012) explains, “qualitative social research seeks to also explore and understand its subject matter or people from the perspective of those we are seeking to study and from where they are currently located” (Carey, 2012, pp. 5). As governments attempt to measure traumatic life experiences with numbers, the faces of human beings are often lost. It is impossible to quantify the chaotic experience of poverty. Thus, understanding the reality of poverty, and more specifically, homelessness,

is the only logical birthplace for this discussion. Raphael suggests that through a qualitative exploration of the unique experiences of poverty, researchers and eventually policy makers can have a more holistic picture. From his examination of diverse stories, Raphael (2011) finds that “poverty is about the experience of material and social deprivation that comes about as the result of public policy decisions related to the distribution of resources within the population” (Raphael, 2011, pp. 155). It is important to remain firmly grounded in the notion that every checkbox holds a much longer story and every number has a face, which is why qualitative methodology was implemented within the current research study.

Recruitment

Research participants were recruited in three ways. First, participants were invited to participate based on relationships that I developed both with local service providers and with individuals experiencing homelessness over the past few years that I have spent working alongside these individuals. Additionally, as the study progressed, participants began suggesting additional interested participants to be invited to the study. This form of recruitment, known as Snowball Sampling, was primarily used for individuals experiencing homelessness, as they would often explain their interview experience to their friends. I also put posters up at two community locations, the St. John’s Soup Kitchen and House of Friendship Men’s Shelter to invite interested participants.

All of the research participants, during the time of the study, lived within the Region of Waterloo. The Region of Waterloo is located in Southwestern Ontario, approximately an hour west of Toronto. It includes three cities: Waterloo, Kitchener and Cambridge. The entire region was included within this study due to its overlap of services

and strong links between the cities. Within this Region, especially within Kitchener, there are non-profit social organizations that hold strong roots within the community due to their extensive history. While many of the most well-known organizations have somewhat moved away from a religious affiliation; the community is strongly influenced by Mennonite heritage and values of helping those in need.

As I have used a grounded theory methodology within the analysis stage of the current study, the participants were selected through theoretical sampling (Carey, 2012). Theoretical sampling maintains that participants are chosen based on emerging themes within the research (Carey, 2012). Within the current study, I began interviewing participants who then offered suggestions directly or indirectly of other participants to invite to participate. The implementation of theoretical sampling (Carey, 2012) allowed me to explore alternative themes and experiences (Rodwell, 1998). The implementation of theoretical sampling within the current study also allowed a constant “movement back and forth” (Carey, 2012, pp. 137) between interviews, data transcription and analysis which provided a robust continuity of communication and validity of research.

Sampling

A total of 17 individuals participated in the current study; 12 individuals experiencing homelessness and 5 service providers working at various levels within non-profit organizations in Waterloo Region. Everyone that was invited to participate agreed. There was an additional individual who wrote me a letter from a penitentiary asking to participate; however, due to ethical concerns, he did not participate. The individual heard about the study prior to entering the penitentiary.

The individuals who made up the sample of this study came from a wide range of backgrounds and represented a cross-section of experiences. For the service providers interviewed, three individuals were front-line workers and three were in senior administrative positions within their organization. To ensure confidentiality for the participants, I did not include the length of time each individual has been working with individuals experiencing homelessness; however, many of the participants have extensive experience and history working alongside this specific population. For individuals experiencing homelessness, there was a broad age range and all of the participants come from very diverse backgrounds and situations. For example, two participants explained that they just recently received citizenship, which qualified them for more financial support while others had been in receipt of the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) for many years. Additionally, eight of the men interviewed had been disconnected from their biological families from a young age and were moved around within the foster care system, while four others remain close to their families even while experiencing homelessness. All of the men interviewed had been involved with the criminal justice system at some point in their lives; however, there was great variance in the length and reason for sentencing. Women, families and youth were not included in the current study because each of these groups hold vastly diverse challenges. I felt that to include all of these groups in such a small study would be a disservice to the varied stories that each individual holds. As such, I limited my scope to men.

Data Collection

The face-to-face interviews took place between January and March 2017 in various locations within the community. Four of the interviews with service providers

were held in their offices' and the additional two were held in an office on Wilfrid Laurier Kitchener campus. All of the interviews with individuals experiencing homelessness were held at 63 Charles St. East, which is the Charles St. Men's Hostel in private offices. Each interview lasted between thirty and ninety minutes. Some of the interviews were separated into two parts by request of the participant.

The interviews were semi-structured and followed two different interview guides: one for individuals experiencing homelessness and another for service providers. It was important to use two interview guides due to the varied experiences of these groups. I included broad, open-ended questions to allow space for the participant to fully explain themselves.

I audio recorded the interviews with a password-protected voice recorder. I then uploaded the audio files onto my personal laptop, which is also password-protected, and used the software XpressScribe to facilitate transcription of the recordings. Once the file was uploaded, I deleted the recording from the voice recorder. Then, I transcribed each of the interviews within one week after the interview and saved the transcription on a password-protected external hard drive.

After each interview, I documented my reflections of the interview and any other contextual information on a password protected file on my personal laptop (which is also password protected). These journal entries have been very helpful throughout the data analysis stage to add context and provide richer meaning to the words transcribed. I found through the transcription phase of analysis that so much meaning is lost with the abandonment of context. Thus, the journal entries reminded me of the nuances of communication that is often lost in written word. Some examples of journal entries included a description of the surroundings of the interview; for instance, one participant's

bookshelves were overflowing with books that centered on the topic of “community”. Additionally, in one interview, a participant pulled out his cigarette package and proceeded to pour the contents on the table between us. As the used cigarette butts fell out, he began organizing them based on size while continuing the interview without interruption. These moments, while separate from the transcriptions, hold informative knowledge in understanding the full experience of the participant.

Throughout the interviews, it was important to remain aware of the power differential that I experienced as well as the experience of the research participants. For the interviews conducted with service providers, specifically those in senior administrative positions, I felt that I had little control in the situation. However, upon listening to the interviews in the transcription phase, I realized that I held much of the power in the questions I was asking which often challenged the participants. Additionally, in interviews with individuals experiencing homelessness, I was very aware of the power I held not only in my current position as researcher but also in my past position as social worker within their community. I attempted to acknowledge the power I held in those moments and reiterate the confidentiality that was throughout the study to bring ease to the context.

The participants were extremely open and forthcoming in sharing their narratives in their respective social locations. I found that, particularly with those experiencing homelessness, there was a deep desire to share their experiences fully without the typical constraints such as time.

Data Analysis

A grounded theory approach was used as a guiding tool within data analysis (Charmaz, 2000, p. 28). The method of analysis was the “constructivist” form of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000, p. 28) where there were “flexible guidelines” for analysis rather than following rigid grounded theory techniques (Cresswell, Hanson, Plano Clark & Morales, 2007, p. 250). As Charmaz (2000) explains, this process of analysis is “a tool to enhance seeing but does not provide automatic insight” (Charmaz, 2000, pp. 15). Thus, the researcher continues to reshape the themes collected throughout the research journey to allow changes to organically develop. Within the current study, I conducted the data analysis while continuing interviews. I transcribed the first three interviews of both groups and then prescribed a code to each theme that emerged, based on the research questions. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed using the N-Vivo software, which is designed to analyze qualitative data. I used the memo feature to document anomalies and capture emerging themes within the first coding phase. Throughout all stages of analysis, the constant comparative method was implemented. This method involves searching for important details, such as a word, a descriptor, etc., within the transcriptions and labeling them according to that detail (Corbin & Strauss, 1994).

The initial open coding uncovered five central themes. The second round of coding took place after the service provider interviews were completed and six of the individuals experiencing homelessness interviews were completed. Member-checking with some of the participants occurred at this stage to ensure validity of data. The final data analysis illuminated five main themes with various subcategories beneath them.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher, I was the primary instrument within this qualitative study. While I ultimately chose the participants, I intentionally invited individuals at various levels within agencies to provide a broader scope. Additionally, through the use of posters, I provided the opportunity for anyone to participate. Furthermore, I designed the interview guides, conducted the interviews, transcribed the interviews, conducted various levels of coding with the help of the NVivo Software, and then provided an analysis of the participants' experience with the guidance of my thesis advisor, Dr. Ginette Lafrenière. Throughout this process, I have been reflexive about the power I hold as a researcher within this study. I have attempted to journey through this research with gentle humility to allow the stories and knowledge of the participants to be the true essence of the study. I recognize that due to my professional and personal history, I bring my own viewpoints and perspectives that may be different from the participants. Thus, I attempted to remain vigilant against my own position to bear authentic witness to those participating in the study. This practice of guarding against the influence of my own viewpoints has been one that I have been developing throughout my work within the homeless community. Within my professional life, I have had to be constantly reminded that my role is to walk alongside individuals I support; to redefine success every time I meet a participant; to remain committed to their dreams. This experience of remaining aware and slightly distant from my own position during the research journey, while it will never be comfortable, felt very familiar.

Additionally, it is my responsibility as the researcher to be the vessel through which the experiences of the research participants can be shared. This responsibility holds a number of actions. First, I must ensure that the findings are available for the public as a whole so my findings have been written in a form and language that is easily

understood. This is important because I deeply believe that everyone deserves the right to learn, grow and develop through education whether that be within a structured institution or elsewhere. Language can often be a barrier that separates people; the current study is meant to be the bridge that fills that gap. Further, it is my duty to discuss topics that were discussed by research participants even though they offer a critique of the current philosophy being implemented by the funding bodies within this Region. Finally, it is my deepest commitment to honour the lives and experiences of those currently living within the street community and those who have passed away due to the affects of homelessness through the current study.

Ethical Considerations

This research project received Research Ethics Board approval at Wilfrid Laurier University prior to any data being collected. Ensuring confidentiality and limiting possible negative affects were the primary ethical concerns for this study. The service providers interviewed were influential community partners who were, at times, providing their personal opinions rather than the viewpoint shared by their organization. Thus, their professional positions could be negatively affected if any of their personal information or private perspectives were made public. To reduce this risk I chose not to include the name, age range, or length of time the individuals' were working within the homeless community in the current study. Moreover, to ensure individuals did not experience undue harm through sharing their narratives, I provided a list of potential follow-up support if needed. Interestingly, the majority of participants expressed that through sharing their narrative, they felt more empowered.

Due to the nature of the current study, it was imperative to represent the experiences of the participants accurately. I had a unique identity both personally and professionally in this study. There were often pieces of the narratives that I could relate to in both groups of participants and I found, through reflection, that I had a tendency to emphasize those stories which corresponded my own. So, throughout the process, I attempted to recognize this bias and attend to it through various validity measures. I used member checking with some of the participants to ensure the accuracy of my analysis (Padgett, 2006, pp. 190). Additionally, I used peer debriefing with another student and my thesis advisor to ensure personal biases were attended to throughout the research process. During these sessions, I maintained confidentiality by not naming names of participants or specific data results.

Chapter 4: Themes

In the following chapter, I will provide information for each of the five broad themes related to the experience of homelessness within Waterloo Region that emerged during the current study. First, the theme “Housing First within Waterloo Region” will provide a critique from the service providers interviewed of the successes and limitations of the Housing First philosophy as applied to Waterloo Region. Next, the theme “Obstacles in Accessing Housing within Waterloo Region” will explore the challenges that prevent individuals from obtaining and maintaining housing. Third, the theme “Tensions in Defining Community” will explore what community means to service providers and those experiencing homelessness. The following theme, “Defining Home and Safety”, will uncover the experiences of home among the participants. The final theme, “Creative Housing Solutions” will provide insight into the ideas the participants had regarding alternative housing options that are not currently offered within Waterloo Region. Within each of the themes, I will highlight not only the most common experiences described by the participants, but also the tensions that existed among the participants. The figure on the following page illustrates each of the themes with their corresponding codes listed below. Following that will be a demographic cross-section of the research participants.

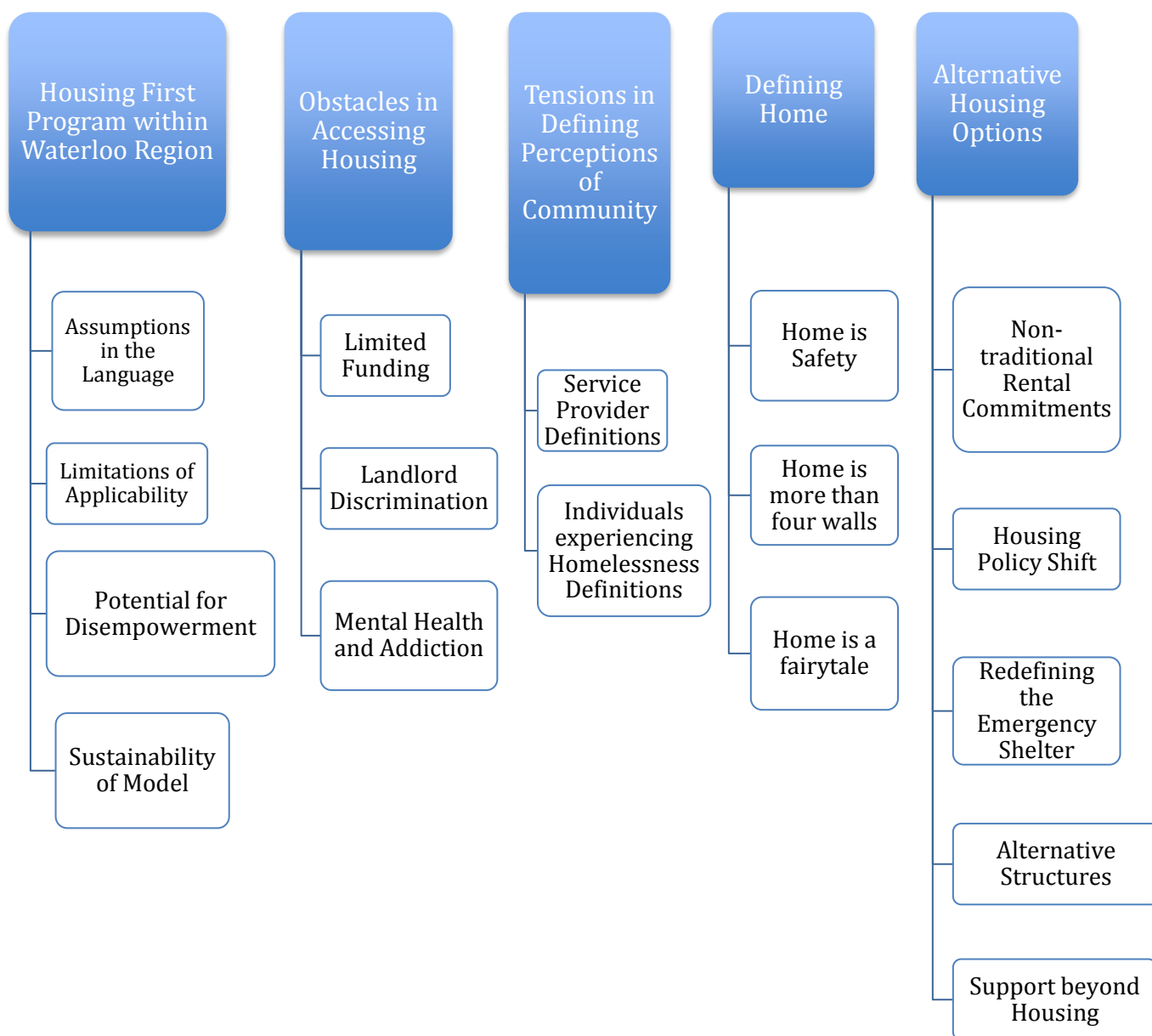


Figure 1: Themes and Related Codes

Demographic Cross-Section of Research Participants

Service Providers:

Pseudonym	Current Position
Participant A	Front Line Worker
Participant B	Front Line Worker
Participant D	Senior Administrator in Housing
Participant D	Senior Administrator in Housing
Participant E	Senior Administrator in Housing

Individuals Experiencing Homelessness:

Pseudonym	Age Range	Years Experiencing Homelessness/Precariously Housed
Participant G	50-55	10+
Participant H	40-45	8
Participant I	40-45	15+
Participant J	30-35	10+
Participant K	20-25	4
Participant L	30-35	10
Participant M	60-65	25+
Participant N	40-45	7
Participant O	35-40	10
Participant P	40-45	15
Participant Q	30-35	6
Participant R	60-65	15

Figure 2: Demographic Cross-Section of Research Participants

THEME 1: HOUSING FIRST WITHIN WATERLOO REGION

Housing First (HF) is an approach to ending homelessness that holds the primary principle that an individual will be more successful in moving forward in their life if they are first housed (Gaetz, Scott, Gulliver, 2013). The Housing First model is meant to be a guiding philosophy, it is not a rigid set of rules. Within Waterloo Region, the HF model was tangibly introduced in 2013. The Region partnered with local service providers to implement a tool called SPDAT (Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool). This tool asks a series of questions across multiple components, including mental health, addiction, trauma, abuse, history of homelessness, etc., to prioritize who to serve next and why (OrgCode Consulting, Inc., 2016). It creates a triage system to identify individuals who require more support than others. After the mass implementation of this tool across Waterloo Region, the StepHome program was implemented. This program began with 15 support workers within four non-profit organizations across Waterloo Region who each supported a caseload of 10 individuals that were considered the most acute based on the SPDAT tool. These individuals then provided long-term, ongoing support to these individuals. The program also provided a subsidy of \$300 a month for rent for each individual to broaden their housing options. Through the interviews completed with individuals both in front line roles as well as those in supervisory roles, there have been important analyses of the implementation of HF within this Region.

1.1: Assumptions in Language

There were a number of common themes that emerged as service providers recounted their experience with the Housing First (HF) model as implemented within Waterloo Region. Of particular importance was the language that this model perpetuates.

Even the name itself “housing first” doesn’t include the importance of supports.

Participant E explained:

And I know why it’s done that way because it sells politically. And I agree with getting the message out into the public that housing is that important, that it’s the first thing, or, its one of the first things, right? But that’s what’s – and it leads to slogans like “The end of homelessness is housing”. And that’s a partial truth because when you define home, you go into all things like emotional space and safety and all that kind of stuff and that ain’t four bricks and, you know, four walls and a roof. So the end of homelessness is housing and community.

Many of those interviewed within the current study explained that the language within this philosophy perpetuates unrealistic expectations and goals. The title “Housing First” completely disregards the crucial importance of everything else that makes a house, a home. It establishes unrealistic expectations by both program participants and the wider public that homelessness is an easy fix.

1.2: Limitations of Applicability

Another common theme that many of the service providers interviewed expressed was the limitations that currently exist within the model as implemented within Waterloo Region. The participants explained that while Housing First, as a philosophy, seems to work well for a large portion of the community, there are individuals who require a unique set of tools to be housed long-term that are simply disregarded within the model.

Participant D said:

For the extreme people we were just talking about, from my limited knowledge of the background of StepHome, I don’t think that they have, the mental health level that they are trying to support, I think it is beyond, in terms of what housing availability is within our community. We are asking our individuals to house

people that – and then support them but our realities don't match. I mean there's moments of clarity, if there is moments of clarity, you can hold onto that.

Participant D continued to explain that individuals with acute mental health concerns not only require a greater level of support but there is simply not appropriate housing to accommodate their unique needs. Participant D explained:

When I'm thinking about the space, I'm thinking about those extreme individuals you know, that rip down the drywall and strip the walls of the black copper wire and you know, we've had that before. Or people who just habitually start fires in their unit because whatever their seeing or hearing – yeah for those individuals, it's not a lot of them but for those individuals housing in our current community does not exist for.

In addition, another participant expressed that we are simply running out of housing for those individuals with acute support needs. Participant A explained:

So, we have people on the StepHome list and we are getting them housed and they cause damage to the unit, they bring their friends over, then we cant use that landlord again. So, we are burning out landlords and we are a small community in the grand scheme of things, we are not Toronto, we are not Edmonton – we are not these bigger places that have used Housing Frist. So we are causing landlord burnout in some capacity. Especially for the high, acuity individuals.

Furthermore, Participant A explained that within Housing First there is an assumption that housing is the only necessary component in building a home:

I think people are craving a place to feel safe, feel secure. I think they are craving a place where they can find rest with what they're struggling with and a place where people care about them and love them. Um, so they can love themselves. I don't know if people can fully articulate that cause what I experience sometimes is I worry that people equate a house or an apartment with safety and feeling good about themselves. But I think there is so much more to that. What I worry about

and with this housing focused language that is coming out because of the StepHome program, um, people I support are feeling “If only I have a house, all the other issues will fall into place” and I think that’s just not the case.

Participant E supported this lack of holistic understanding within the Housing First model, explaining:

...and to actually end...this is the end of homelessness. Housing is a piece of it but when people say housing is the answer to homelessness, they are telling a false message that’s only part of the story. If you sell it for the whole story you’re cutting it short.

As explored above, the participants explained that complexity of challenges that can impede an individual’s ability to obtain and maintain housing. Lack of training and support provided to workers along with the gap in appropriate housing options for complex individuals are major failings of the current application of Housing First within Waterloo Region. Within my professional experience with the street community, Waterloo Region has a significant amount of individuals living with a complex intersection of challenges. These individuals require equally unique housing options to meet their needs. The approach needs to be augmented to address the significant mental health, addiction, trauma histories and other complex issues that individuals are living with.

1.3: Potential for Disempowerment

Another common critique of the HF model was its potential for disempowering clients. Many of those interviewed explained that there is a changing culture around what to expect from a support worker. This culture seems to be shifting from walking

alongside an individual to doing for an individual. Participant B, a front line worker who has experienced this culture shift first hand, explained:

I think the basic tenets of housing first make a lot of sense. The idea that housing is a right, no question – housing should not be a privilege. However, some of the challenges are – sometimes it seems that the way it's being framed is like “my worker is going to find me housing and they are going to do this for me and if they don't, that's a failure of the worker as opposed to any other issue”. Versus we live in a city that doesn't have a requirement for how many subsidized units we have - people don't make a living wage – sort of the actual determinants of poverty and homelessness. My struggle again, housing first is a great idea but it's talking about a symptom. Homelessness is a symptom of poverty so if you eradicate homelessness, poverty will still exist. So it's a band-aid solution. Sometimes there's this idea that people get housing and then everything is just going to be great and we know that that's not true. WE know that housing isn't the answer for everyone and housing means lots of different things for people. So, I think that is a real challenge.

Furthermore, Participant A explained:

I think it's creating a culture of dependency for the individuals who are actually accessing the program. I think we are seeing a culture – we are seeing the street-involved culture changing, I'm not sure if its just because of the Housing First but I think it has an attitude that they are looking at their workers not as support workers but as “Saviours” to them. And I've seen people say “Oh my friend is getting housed” and now they are coming to me saying “Get me housed!” I think that language, from what I have talked with some of my colleagues who have been in the work longer before this shift has happened, talk about how that had never been before.

While not an objective of the Housing First philosophy, the disempowerment of clients is a common critique among the service providers who participated in the current

study. It is important to recognize this experiential perspective and its long-term affects on clients. The Housing First philosophy, as illustrated in this theme, is only concerned with the present moment, disregarding the lasting affects of its rapid approach. Within my own experience working alongside individuals experiencing homelessness, trust between myself and the participant was the most important aspect to finding housing and supporting individuals in maintaining housing. Without trust, after an individual is housed, disconnection from any support is likely and often leads to difficulty. After-housing support is crucial to support individuals with landlord communication and in development of necessary skills in maintaining housing.

1.4: Sustainability of Model

The Housing First model has been wholly integrated into the housing services within Waterloo Region for just over 3 years. The longitudinal applicability of it still has yet to be seen; however, the predictions of its continued success as it is applied today was deeply questioned by those interviewed due to lack of support for workers. Participant D talked about the importance of support workers but the lack of recognition for those supports:

So, the difficulty with it, or the struggle I have with it and where I think its falling apart is in the resourcing for the supports. And the recognition of how important the supports are.

Additionally, Participant A talked about the major burnout they have seen within the last 3 years:

I see a huge StepHome worker burnout – like I worry – I deeply worry about workers within that role. And I could go through, so, StepHome workers are at Agency X, are at Agency Y, Agency Z, Agency Q– I could go through to talk

about the burnout in each of those places. And we are not talking about one or two – we are talking about 10-12 people I could name on the top of my head experiencing extreme burnout. And that's in 3 years of this program running. So, that's – for me – showing why this won't last.

The burn-out of workers described above is deeply concerning. Workers need to be supported within this work to ensure consistency of support for clients. The theme of burn-out described in the interviews with research participants deeply parallels with my own experience. Working alongside individuals experiencing homelessness, while incredibly rewarding, comes with extremely difficult circumstances. Like many workers within this field, I have been threatened; I have feared for my physical safety; I have walked into countless rooms only to find individuals lying unconscious with a needle hanging from their arm. The naked truth is that the work is tough; however, walking alongside individuals whose wounds are sources of strength rather than weakness is also incredibly freeing. I found myself in a place of burn-out less than a year ago. I had once drawn so much joy from the beautiful vulnerability within the street community; however, the lack of support and minimal training led me to leave the work. This constant turnover does not only impact the worker but it also forces the participant to develop a new relationship with yet another worker. The impact of this demonstrated theme is significant.

THEME 2: OBSTACLES IN ACCESSING HOUSING

Apart from critiques of the Housing First model, both service providers and individuals experiencing homelessness expressed significant obstacles in accessing housing within Waterloo Region. Many of the individuals faced an intersection of

challenges simultaneously which often led to greater obstacles. Participant J poignantly explained the cyclical nature of poverty by stating:

If you don't have a home, you probably don't have a permanent address which means you can't fill out a job application – it's just the cycle of poverty.

2.1: Limited funding

For many of the participants, limited funding was a huge obstacle that was seemingly impossible to overcome. Participant H told about his life and explained that he used to work as a diamond driller where he would travel regularly all over Alberta. He explained that he would come back to Ontario to visit his parents on a regular basis especially when his work slowed down. Unfortunately, about 10 years ago he developed a physical disability and was unable to work anymore, especially within such a physically demanding work environment. He describes a vibrant, exciting life before that time. His parents died shortly after his diagnosis and he was left with nothing. He explained that he is currently in receipt of ODSP but it does not cover all of his medication nor does it come close to covering the rent and special diet he has to be on. He described that he camps over the summer and saves his money so that he can afford a one-bedroom apartment over the winter months. He explained that the money he receives on ODSP is simply inefficient to cover the necessities of life, including a healthy diet. He explained:

Not a goddamn chance I'm going to eat my appropriate diet.

Other participants explained that the amount of funds provided on both OW and ODSP were simply not close to enough to provide a good quality of life. Participant R stated:

With the amount of money we receive on Ontario Works, a decent quality of life is just not there.

The other experiences of living on OW or ODSP were much more disparaging.

Participant H explained:

They give me just enough to not hang myself

Moreover, Participant J stated:

They give me enough to appease me and keep me not dangerous.

Another participant explained the difficulty of competing interests when finding housing. Participant G described his experience by stating:

I've been in and out of jail for years, I've been institutionalized. Honestly, I've been out for a few weeks and I just want to go back. I get up everyday and look for a place for \$350 a month that my Probation Officer will approve? Impossible.

Thus, not only is the lack of affordable housing an obstacle within the Region; but also attempting to find a realistic housing option when one has a history of incarceration is an additional challenge that seems impossible to overcome.

Both individuals experiencing homelessness and service providers are aware of the limited housing that is available within Waterloo Region. Participant A, a front line worker, spoke to the increase in subsidies recently due to the acknowledgement of the highly priced housing market:

Just like, just, kinda a lot of people talking in the HAWS – there is actually talk about increasing the HAWS to more than \$350 because that is just not enough – on a structural level, we are actually changing programming because there is not enough affordable housing. And we are getting more HAWS about 40 more coming March 1st. So, that's another reaction to saying that there isn't enough.

Additionally, Participant B succinctly explained the limits of housing within the

Region:

We don't have safe, affordable, appropriate housing. So, there are not enough units. There are not enough landlords open to having people with complex needs. There are not enough workers to find housing for folks even if it existed. Um, and there isn't enough money to pay for – like – people's income is too low to have housing. And sometimes appropriate housing is actually a rooming house. That actually can be the most realistic choice. A house where it's okay to use and you know and sometimes it means a one-bedroom apartment where you're totally dependent, sometimes its long-term care.

It is clear that the lack of funding provided through Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) is simply not enough to support all of the needs of an individual. The amount provided through both the OW and ODSP programs force individuals to live with a reduced quality of life. As demonstrated through the quotes above, the limited income negatively affects the mental health of individuals over the long-term which only presents more challenges for the individual.

2.2: Limited Appropriate Housing Availability

Along with the limited funding provided to an individual in receipt of Ontario Works or through the Ontario Disability Support Program, a common theme among participants was the limited housing availability within Waterloo Region both within subsidized housing and within the regular housing market. One key challenge is the waitlist for subsidized housing. Participant H explained their experience with the housing list like this:

The subsidized housing list? Hurry up and wait.

Participant A explained a number of significant limitations of housing availability:

First is there is hardly any housing. The reality is that the market has not caught up with the low-income individuals. There is a tone of student housing, it seems like there is a lot of high income housing or at least going up, there are condos going, I don't know who is buying them up, I don't interact with that kind of market.

Additionally, Participant D reiterated some of those challenges stating:

It's a long list. So, we are a university town. So a lot of the affordable room rentals go generally to students. Landlords are looking for that particularly. Um, we have some supportive housing in the region but there is currently a 6-10 year waiting list for that. So if you are experiencing homelessness as much as you get priority status, there has to be some movement in the existing system in order for you to receive safe supportive housing. So that's a problem...and I think that there's a group of unique individuals for which housing just, as our current community has, doesn't exist. So there are all sort of unique housing happening like the bunkies but that is not permanent housing. I would like to see more unique housing that is meant to suit some of the more complex individuals.

Along with limited funding, housing availability is clearly a crucial element that needs to be addressed to end homelessness. Many of the individuals interviewed described a discontentment around the waitlist for subsidized housing, especially due to the unaffordability of privately rented housing.

2.3: Landlord discrimination

For many of the individuals interviewed, they spoke about the discrimination faced based on their appearance, their past or their source of income from landlords. They each explained that this was a particularly difficult barrier to overcome when accessing housing. Participant J stated:

Landlords see me and I look like Charles Manson – who’s going to rent to me?

Additionally, Participant K explained:

I have face tattoos, who is going to rent to me. It was a bad decision I made when I was in jail as a teenager and now I have to deal with it forever. I understand why no one will rent to me but where am I supposed to live.

Along with discrimination based on appearance, Participant K explained that he also gets judged based on his age. He explained:

I also get judged on my age. I know I’m young and I look a lot younger but fuck I need a home just like the 50 year old next to me.

Individuals also explained that they get judged if they are receiving social assistance. Participant B, a front line worker explained a recent experience:

I just recently got a call as a reference for someone and while the landlord was well-meaning, they said that they didn’t trust people on ODSP because they have had bad experiences before.

Participant A also explained their experience of landlord discrimination based on source of income:

The blatant illegal activity in terms of discrimination by landlords is another piece. I’ve had people say “Oh, you’re on ODSP? You need a guarantor” And they didn’t ask for that until ODSP was said. People who want, who will ask “Oh you’re on ODSP, what’s your disability?”. And then credit checks – credit checks are discriminatory, sometimes its legal but it’s still discriminatory. This is hindering the ability for people to find housing.”

The barrier of discrimination is only one more obstacle that individuals experiencing homelessness need to overcome to attempt to find a safe place to lay their head. Landlords do not have the legal right to ask their prospective tenants why they are

in receipt of social assistance; however, in my experience, it happens far too often.

Another key component to ending homelessness is discrediting myths and educating the community around mental health so that this kind of discrimination does not further isolate members of our community.

2.4: Lack of Education/Support around Mental Health and Addiction

Many individuals experiencing homelessness have a history of mental health and/or addiction due to significant trauma they have experienced often throughout much of their lives. Unfortunately, lack of additional support for an individual with mental health can hinder their ability to live independently. Participant A explained the importance of support to enable individuals to live well:

There is not enough programming for people with mental health and addiction issues. And not enough housing programming for that. And I think the programs we have are still somewhat incapable with dealing with people of the highest of the high acuity in our region. There is some people who we sit there and say we don't have housing for them.

Additionally, there remains a hierarchy to substance use, which promotes fear due to incorrect information within the public domain. Participant P explained their experience with this:

There's a hierarchy to drug users and I'm at the bottom as a needle user. Any landlord that sees a needle, freaks out – when they see a beer bottle, its almost encouraged.

Thus, the lack of adequate supports for individuals with mental health and the misinformation that is passed within the community leads to great obstacles to accessing safe, affordable housing within Waterloo Region. It is crucial that we provide education

to the greater community as well as empower individuals to become advocates when facing adversity.

THEME 3: TENSIONS IN DEFINING PERCEPTIONS OF COMMUNITY

For all of the individuals interviewed, a sense of belonging was important. The importance of community for some was developed due to extreme isolation and social marginalization whereas, for others it grew out of truly finding a meaningful space where they could feel comfortable and settled. Both experiences, whether positive or negative, established a desire within all participants to be a part of community. For service providers, hostility was seen as the antithesis of community; however, for those experiencing homelessness, this was merely a piece of living in community. The explanation of marginalization and isolation were not seen as separate from the concept of community, rather they were seen as different sides to the same experience – almost a necessary ingredient. My research saw the tension or contradiction between the service users and service providers in their concept of community.

3.1: Service Provider Concept of Community

A commonality among service providers interviewed was their concept of community growing out of their own personal experiences living in community.

Participant A shared:

So, I grew up with community as a constant. I never knew life without a community so it feels really normal to me and the more communities I interact with, I realize how absurd it is within our industrialized society.

Additionally, Participant D went on to explain that, for them, the concept of marginalization is purely an artifact made up by man. Participant D stated:

Oh, the other thing when I think about community I think about marginalization and who is in the community and who is not. I believe that marginalization is an artifact of human ideology and socioeconomic, well- no, it is an artifact of human ideology. Because I believe we are in fact all connected, we all belong.

Participant D continued to state:

Yeah I mean we are all a part of the ecosphere, we are all apart of the earth. How can we say that you're not here? So, this marginalization is just our social construct, it's not innate and it doesn't have to be that way. WE can change it if we want to.

When participants began to explain their concept of community as witnessed within the street population, their experiences often began with the positive support that can be found within the street community but then would turn to the negative aspects of that community. Their responses seemed to outline a tension they witness within the street community of support alongside hostility. Participant D explained:

Um, I've seen people ban together, I've seen people take care of one another. I see people who have been – who have been incredibly marginalized want to shield and protect each other. Also being incredibly terrible to one another at the same time too. And whether that be through survival or whatever the situation is, the pains and hurts and you know, addictions and whatever.

Participant A also explains their experience with the street community and the tension they have witnessed:

If someone has a roof over their head, they are usually supporting other people with a roof over their head. So, that is an interesting part. There is a strong knit community that both supports and sometimes exploits each other depending on the situation or the day. So, it's not always, I don't want to paint it in this glorious picture of a community, sometimes it can be very unhealthy.

One participant explained that, due to recent funding restrictions, their agency was forced to limit their drop-in space to invite only individuals staying in the shelter instead of the wider community. Participant D explained:

Um, I think through being ostracized, it ties people together and I think that when you enter into this community as an agency, a service provider, as a support person, when you can show um, solidarity or you know, a non-judgmental attitude, when you can walk alongside with people, people really do appreciate that. And that comes out definitely in terms of relationship and credibility for yourself in terms of in the community.

Along with individual support workers roles within the community, the participants explained their belief of the importance of the larger agency's role in holding space for the street community. Participant D explained the affect of funding restrictions on programs and how that affects the street community in a significant way:

So in order to change and direct resources in a particular way, things get cut. So, one of the things that we have slimmed down on is the availability for drop-in for people in the community. And I don't know if I'd want to necessarily reopen the doors to create that sense of community here because no one belongs in a homeless shelter. But currently right now there really isn't any other space for people that are struggling or you know are homeless or episodically homeless. There is no casual space. So...I think we fill a draw to that to want to be that space because there really isn't anything outside of the St. John's Kitchen.

Additionally, Participant B explained the importance of one communal space in making individuals feel safe in a chaotic life:

Community has to do with sense of belonging. And a sense of meaningful belonging in a group of people or in a space. Yeah – we've been talking a lot about kind of and they're all buzzwords, like social inclusion and what does that look like for people. Because I think we've seen, over the years, we get really

excited when someone who has been homeless for years and years, they get housed, they are so isolated, miserable and they choose to go back to the street. We get that all the time. And I've had folks that go into housing after living outside for so long and then they are lonely so they invite all their friends and then their housing is in jeopardy. And there is a sense of guilt too –like, I got housed and my friends are still out there suffering so I should take them into my home and take care of them. Which is beautiful and that connection on the street but it ultimately damages the person's housing. Right? And then they face eviction. So, it's really hard. It's really challenging. People are looking at the kitchen and saying "This is the place that if I overdose, there will be somebody around."

Another aspect that was suggested was the organized structure of community found within the street culture within Waterloo Region. Participant A explained:

So, the first thing you notice that there isn't much community to speak of if you are not talking about the street-involved community. But then you also notice within the street-involved community is a functional organism where people support each other, there's a hierarchy in that community, there are their own ethics and morals within that community and it's almost its own policing system in some sense.

As described above, service providers had a unique qualities that have developed within the street community within Waterloo Region. Additionally, the importance of respectfully holding space for those experiencing homelessness is an important responsibility of service providers.

3.2: Individuals Experiencing Homelessness Definitions

Through the interviews completed with individuals experiencing homelessness, there was a significant theme of social isolation found within many of the individuals interviewed. Participant O explained:

I have never felt that I had a place to belong, a place to feel safe. I've always been on the outside of the inside.

This extreme sense of marginalization was not isolated to one individual. Participant I explained of a recent experience he had in the hospital:

I got really sick and was going through chemo. No one in my family came to visit me. I had no one to put down as next of kin, that was a reality check. I gotta just take care of myself.

Participant M explained that his sense of community was primarily found in the workers that he had become close with. He explained:

I don't know what you mean by marginalization...I just know that X is one of my best friends. X and Y. You guys are the only people in my life that take my shit and keep coming back. I got no other visitors besides that. When you got a home, people just want to use you so I don't invite any of those ones in, I don't even want them to know where I live.

There was one participant who explained that he was able to find community within Kitchener because he had grown up here. Participant R stated:

You know, I love Kitchener. This is where I grew up and this is where I will die. I see this whole place as my community. I make my rounds – I visit a couple shops down the way where people know me and care about me. There was one time when I was hospitalized for a while and I didn't see them and one of the shopkeepers actually called around looking for me, making sure I was okay. I think that's community – when people care enough to take notice.

Within all of these varied experiences, individuals were able to explain an experience of community that they have had in the past. The experience of marginalization and isolation was a significant piece of individuals' narratives while this

was not described within the service provider interviews. This gap in understanding when comparing the groups shows a significant aspect of learning that must take place to ensure effective support.

THEME 4: DEFINING HOME AND SAFETY

For this research project, the concept of home provided foundational insight into the experiences of the participants. There were many commonalities in the descriptions of the intangible emotions that describe home. However, the similarities seemed to end as experiences diverged. Through further investigation within the interviews with those experiencing homelessness, home was described as an unattainable dream. This belief that the attainment of home is an impossible aspiration demonstrates the deep marginalization that individuals experiencing homelessness, particularly within this study, feel. They live everyday with the belief that they are so drastically different from the majority of society. This deeply-held belief is only perpetuated by the way they are treated, or mistreated, by the privileged in our world.

4.1: Home is Safety

Throughout the interviews, safety was the most common theme when individuals explained their concept of home. All participants, independently, discussed the primary component of home being a sense of safety. However, there were many diverging experiences of what makes an individual feel a sense of safety within a space. For some individuals, consistency made them feel safe. Participant M explained his experience of moving into subsidized housing after experiencing chronic homelessness over the last 25 years. He explained:

I feel safest on my bench – that’s where I’ve spent most of my time over the past twenty years. I have an apartment now but I still spend three nights a week on the bench – it’s my safe space.

Participant B described an individual they supported who felt safest in a hospital stating. They stated:

I had somebody who stated that he felt the hospital was his home. You know, he had lived in different places but when he felt crappy, he knew he could go into the hospital and feel safe. That was his safe place. He felt taken care of, people were kind to him. That was his grounding place.

Participant A also explained the consistency of a space being called home:

I think Agency X is a home for many because they might have lived in like 10 different places in the last year but Agency X has been the constant – so in some ways, that becomes their home.

Another important element in feeling safe for some of the participants was the affect that mental health and addictions have on their life. Participant H explained his need for trusted people around him due to his substance use. He stated:

Home is the shelter. I pay rent somewhere else but I know that if I overdose in the shelter, someone will find me...I won’t die alone.

While this individual technically has an apartment, he feels safest in the shelter where he trusts the staff to keep him alive. At the most desperate of times, safety becomes the supportive community around the individual. Participant N explained that due to his mental health diagnosis, the noise of people surround him makes him feel safest:

I grew up in foster care, then I went to juvie and now I’m here. I’ve never felt safe. I just got told I have schizophrenia – I don’t know what it means but

maybe it explains why life is so hard. I feel safe when there's people around, talking loudly – it makes the voices sound like whispers.

Participant J stated a similar experience:

My head makes me feel unsafe – I have schizophrenia. That's why I like loud music, it makes the voices more like a whisper.

Another way that individuals feel a sense of safety as described in the interviews, was the need for feelings of comfort. This feeling was described in both groups.

Participant A explained:

Home is this safe space that I have autonomy to do whatever in that space.

Additionally, a sense of belonging being integral to safety and home was described by two participants. Participant L explained:

Home is wherever I feel comfortable. Whatever circumstance you're in, you make it your home.

While Participant D, a service provider explained:

So, elements of home its where I belong, its where I feel safe.

Thus, while safety was the most common way that individuals across both groups interviewed described their concept of home, there were many different paths to obtaining that safety. Some participants explained their need for consistency while others described the importance of support surrounding them. All of these descriptions are integral in understanding the unique needs of each individual in feeling safe in their home. This concept of safety needs to be of greater importance when identifying possible homes for individuals experiencing chronic homelessness. Understanding the individual definition of safety may influence the long-term sustainability of housing.

4.2: Home is more than four walls

Throughout the interviews both with service providers and individuals experiencing homelessness, home was found to be far more than a one bedroom apartment. The concept of home for all of the participants involved much more than a tangible structure; rather it was a feeling. Participant B succinctly explained:

I think home is a feeling versus a place.

Participant M had been precariously housed for over 25 years. While much of his life remains fragmented in the stories he tells, some pieces remain clear. Participant M had been in and out of jail for a lot of his life and was an alcoholic for some time as well. Participant M lived mostly in southern Ontario but some of his life was spent travelling across Canada. About a year ago, Participant M finally moved to the top of the subsidized housing list and moved into a one-bedroom apartment in Kitchener. At the time of the interview, he had lived in that apartment for just over a year. He explained that he continues to sleep on a bench in downtown Kitchener three nights a week, no matter the weather. He explained:

Well, that's where I've spent the most time over the past 25 years – I can't just leave it. Just because I don't pay rent there doesn't mean I don't call it home.

This emotional connection to a space, regardless of its lack of traditional appearance was a constant theme throughout the interviews. Participant N described his experiences throughout childhood and early adulthood and how they impacted his concept of home:

You know I went into foster care really young. I hadn't seen my mom or dad for a long long time. I got diagnosed with schizophrenia a few months ago and I've been getting my shots and I'm starting to remember how nice it was when I lived

with my parents – I think that’s home. I recently got in touch with my dad and my grandparents and it was the first time I heard them say “I love you” – that is the closest thing to home I have found.

For all those interviewed, it is clear that home is far more than a tangible structure; it holds memories, emotions stability and love. Participant D shares a story of an individual and his concept of home:

Yeah. I think there’s – it brings me back to this old trapper in X who literally lives in the bush and this particular area in the bush is where he calls home and he pitches a tent everyday and takes it down. Um, but there is an area where he calls home. It’s not necessarily four walls and a door, it’s a tent in a particular part of the forest. And I think there’s people in the community that would probably say the same thing.

4.3: Home is a fairytale

For some of the individuals with a history of homelessness, home was something that felt inconceivable. For some, this was because they had never experienced a safe home or their experiences were quite short. For others, their life experiences continued to push them further and further to the margins of society; which developed a deep belief that they could not live like mainstream society. And still for others, there is simply no structure that fits their unique needs. Participant I explained:

I’ve been incarcerated for most of my life. I’ve been institutionalized. A lot of guys have no idea what home is because they have never experienced it – am I just supposed to imagine it?

The negative affects of long-term and persistent institutionalization is a common experience among chronic homeless men. Living in a structured environment like a prison or a hospital for a substantial amount of time affects an individual’s ability to

make decisions independently. When individuals are released from these rigid environments, the transition from total control to total freedom can be too much. In my experience working alongside individuals experiencing homelessness, I met many men who would explain that they were trying to get caught for illegal activity so that they could go back into the prison system. The criminal justice system does not ready individuals for life after prison; rather, it strips them of their personhood so that they are left with nothing.

Furthermore, for some individuals, the loss of family has led them to a place where they simply do not know how to create a home for themselves. Participant I continued by explaining:

Family and home is connected for me. Since my mom died, I don't really have a home.

One of the service providers interviewed explained their experience working with this population around housing. Participant D stated:

A lot of people that I would have met here and talked with have a different concept of what home is. Because they grew up through foster homes, they've never had a stable place. And all that kind of stuff. So they might have, like when I say home is a place where I feel safe. To me, I know what that is. And I think for some people that's a fairytale. That's sad. So, its either a fairytale or it's something they see over there but its not mine. You know? I'm outside the window, looking in.

These stories were deeply disturbing as individuals were unable to even conceptualize a home due to their experiences of social isolation and trauma.

THEME 5: ALTERNATIVE HOUSING OPTIONS

Within the other themes, there was tension in the responses between service providers and individuals experiencing homelessness; however, when discussing alternative housing options, a common ground began to show through.

5.1: Non-traditional Rental Commitments

A common theme through many of the interviews was a divorce from traditional month leases in order to respect the nomadic lifestyle that many individuals living on the street experience. Participant A explained:

Why does it make sense to always get people into month leases? Why is a month the ... maybe it works for a lot of society but it doesn't work for this group of society. So why don't we have housing that goes week to week or day by day. It might make policy makers uncomfortable but it also might work.

Within this discussion that questioned the traditional month lease discussion, motels became a common theme. Participants explained that motels are built to offer a day-to-day rental commitment as opposed to other longer-term options. Participant B explained:

The motels are sometimes that is it, that is all people can manage and it needs to be option that you can pay daily, weekly, monthly. I think that is a massive, a massive gap. We have people that have only managed to live at motels. I don't know what it is. I don't know if it is because there is lots of people around that you can form a community easily. Motels are a really cool option, especially for folks in the substance use community because there is often a transient nature to their housing.

5.2: Housing Policy Shift

Another key theme that was common throughout interviews with both groups was the idea of various policy changes that could benefit individuals experiencing homelessness. Some individuals suggested providing incentives for landowners to encourage housing alternatives. Participant R explained:

What if the government gave a subsidy to individuals for giving up a piece of their land. For those of us who want to live in our space and build our own home. People used to be able to do this.

Additionally, Participant L explained a law that would have benefitted his way of life:

Have you heard about the old Homesteader Law? It's when you can claim an acre of land far enough away from the highway and simply take it as your own. How great would that be? I could make that home.

Participant B suggested another policy shift:

I would love if our city had a policy that like every new build had to contain a certain number of subsidized housing units and whether that subsidy was through regional funding or the provincial funding.

Participant A also suggested a further dialogue between the responsibility held by social policy and what should be held by healthcare. Participant A stated:

There needs to be more robust discussions around what is social policy and what is health care policy. When we think about mental health – is that a social policy issue or a health care issue.

Introducing significant policy changes to affordable/subsidized housing could greatly impact the lives of individuals experiencing homelessness. Introducing tax exemptions for developers who allocate a percentage of their new builds to affordable or subsidized housing would be an incentive that could not only increase housing but also introduce a

balanced community made up of diverse people. This shift, along with other influencing factors discussed below could be the remedy to end homelessness.

5.3: Redefining the Emergency Shelter

Many of the participants suggested an alternative way to structure the shelter.

Participant A stated:

I really wanted shelters to look more like permanent housing. I think shelters work for some individuals or the shelter structure. Why don't we start looking at how individuals are transient and feed into the housing that way – where it's more of a group housing but it doesn't have to be permanent, where people can pay per bed or per day so it almost looks like a motel. Or a motel shelter type deal – where you have 24-hr staff. Why does it make sense to always get people into month leases?

Participant O explained his experience living within the shelter system and the confusing nature of calling it home:

This place is home for me – you know – the shelter. But I get restricted every other day and that doesn't feel very good. They give me food, they give me a bed – that's what home is, isn't it? But then they kick me out – it's really confusing.

5.4: Alternative Structures as Homes

There were additional ideas around creative housing alternatives that discarded the traditional stereotype of home and simply offered diverse options. There was a common theme present within every interview that showed the need for variety among housing, especially for those experiencing homelessness. Participant D explained:

That's right, that's right. I really find the thing about you need to have a lot of variety.

Participant D stated:

I would just look to creative ways of building, like container housing. One that I saw years ago in Toronto that I just thought about again, when I was at a meeting at X building. In Toronto, I think it was called, “city homes”? There was a housing development there that took an old warehouse and inside of it they built a village. They built kind of apartments on the side and a street down the middle. So, I imagine that it felt kind of like being on the street but it was in housing. I thought that was kind of cool.

Participant D also suggested:

So another kind of model that I would be curious about that we don’t have anymore around here very much I don’t think is what is called Single Room Occupancy. Essentially, tiny bachelor apartments. Yes, SRO’s. Years ago, when I started, in the mid 80s. There was that kind of a place here. And it was the YMCA.

Participant O was a research participant who identified having a deep connection to land. He shared that this love for nature grew out of his Métis ancestry. He shared his dream for housing stating:

My dream would be to live in the country – maybe New Hamburg – and live on a farmers land, maybe in a shed or above the garage. I would love to raise dogs. That’s my dream. Dog’s have always been so kind to me, no matter if I’m sober or using – they always want your love.

Another theme as an alternative structure was the benefit of smaller homes to make individuals feel more comfortable. Participant Q explained:

I’m living in one of the bunkies beside the Working Centre and it’s great for – maybe not forever, but it keeps me warm and dry and safe.

This theme was continued the suggestion by Participant B:

I know a guy that if he could live on his own, in the bush, he would be happy to do that. So, if there were ways for people to live that way, it would be really cool. Especially because it's so ironic that these people that are building their own shelters are being like turfed from place to place when there is this tiny house movement with all the hipsters – it's a parallel process.

The truth is that there is a movement among much of society to live more simply, to discard the complications that come with a large house. This simplistic way of life is something that individuals experiencing homelessness understand. While these individuals are often pushed to the margins, regarded as having nothing to offer; the rest of society is attempting to return to a way of life that they have been living for far longer. As we move to a world that honours simplistic living, maybe there truly is something society can learn from those we far too often dismiss.

5.5: Support Beyond Housing:

Another common theme among service providers was the need for greater support provided to individuals when they move into housing. Participant A explained:

So, if we are talking about funding, there should be more outreach workers. There has been no organization in Waterloo Region that looks at the rental market thoroughly. So, there is supportive housing and we can always use more supportive housing. So, there is organizations that provide supportive housing. There are organizations that will help you do some form of a housing search, there is Agency X, there's Agency Z. There is that support and there's even workers, not myself, but workers in the community who help intensively with someone to provide housing based. So, they help them as they are getting housed. There is zero social service organization that looks at the housing market as a whole, as an economic unit and looks at actually is there housing for low-income people. There is no organization that really holds, um, big housing conglomerates, accountable so that they are not discriminating to people.

Participant A also shared a dream within which the responsibility of support extends beyond paid workers into the greater community:

In my wildest dreams, I would think about just as people sponsor refugee families, why couldn't we put one of these into a community and have a community of volunteers, um, be their support system.

Participant B explained of a program that currently exists within Kitchener and the beneficial affect of 24-hour support. Participant B shared:

The Extraordinary Needs Program in Kitchener. So that came out a couple of years ago. It used to be the Working Centre home for Women in Transition and now Thresholds runs it. So that came out of lots of conversations with like hospitals, and thresholds, and the working centre and different folks to be like what do we do with those folks that are just so high needs that there's just nowhere else to house them. And some of them were in the hospital for years and someone was in FreePort for 9 years and they moved there. So the idea is the closest thing we will have to this kind of care. You have your own room, you don't have your own apartment but you have your own room, there is staff there 24 hours and there is nurse available all the time. That is as close as we can get and I think we do need more places because I am not for housing folks in hospital.

The excerpts above explain the importance of support alongside housing. Unfortunately, as described above, the current model does not implement support as readily as is needed.

CONCLUSION

The current study revealed several compelling themes related to the experience of both individuals experiencing homelessness and service providers within Waterloo Region. The participants provided a unique perspective on the implementation of the Housing First approach as well as obstacles in obtaining housing within this Region. The

participants spoke about their concept of community and the strong link between safety and home. Participants also described creative ideas for alternative housing options to meet the needs of such a unique population.

In the following chapter, I will propose three groups of related factors constructed from the mapping of the relationships among these themes. The groups hold the main objective of assisting in the journey to end homelessness.

Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings

The research question that formed the impetus of this study was: What are the housing experiences of individuals experiencing homelessness and the experiences of housing support providers in Waterloo Region? Using this question as a guide, the objectives of this project were to explore the concept of “home”, gain insight into the experiences of homeless individuals and identify solutions to the gaps in service as identified by the insight provided. Within the following discussion, I will first ground the findings in an understanding of intersectionality as it relates to the individual experiences of each participant. It is crucial to remain rooted in this concept as the findings are discussed. I will then discuss the limitations to the Housing First philosophy in its current application within Waterloo Region as suggested by the participants within the current study. Additionally, I will discuss the concept of home and its connection with safety as told by the participants’ narratives. This theme simultaneously provided answers and introduced new questions that show the complexity of the experience of homelessness. Through this theme, the powerful stories of resilience will be used to honour the participants and highlight the unique needs of each individual. Lastly, I will outline the creative housing solutions that were suggested which demonstrate a significant desire with both service providers and homeless individuals to work collaboratively in ending functional homelessness.

As governments attempt to measure traumatic life experiences with numbers, the faces of human beings are often lost. It is impossible to quantify the chaotic and intersectional experiences of poverty and homelessness. Raphael (2011) suggests that through qualitatively exploring the unique experiences of poverty, researchers and eventually policy makers can have a more holistic picture. From his examination of

diverse stories, Raphael finds that “poverty is about the experience of material and social deprivation that comes about as the result of public policy decisions related to the distribution of resources within the population” (Raphael, 2011, pp. 155). As the findings of this research study continues, it is important to remain firmly grounded in the notion that every checkbox holds a much longer story and every number has a face.

Intersectionality, which is a term originally coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, is a concept that “highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (Crenshaw, 2016, pp. 1245). Crenshaw contends, “a key aspect of intersectionality lies in its recognition that multiple oppressions are not each suffered separately but rather as a single, synthesized experience. This has enormous significance at the very practical level of movement building” (Smith, 2013). The birthplace of intersectionality was in the confluence of race and gender discrimination; however, through further study, the theory has proven to have the capacity to apply to a variety of stigmatizing factors. As J.C. Nash, a well-known professor and author in North America writes, “intersectionality rejects the ‘single-axis framework’” (Nash, 2008, pp. 2). Homelessness can often be seen as a single-dimensional issue that can be “fixed” through simply moving an individual into a house. However, using the lens of intersectionality, homelessness is simply the exterior issue that attempts to mask the underlying stressors that stigmatize an individual’s experience further. Thus, a home may be the answer to one problem but there is a multiplicity of other forces that only further the experience of marginalization. Nash also suggests “for intersectional theorists, marginalized subjects have an epistemic advantage, a particular perspective that scholars should consider, if not adopt, when crafting a normative vision of a just society” (Nash, 2008, pp. 3). Individuals experiencing homelessness are often

seen but seldom heard. Society tends to feel ashamed by the existence of these individuals, which results in a willful ignorance. However, as both Nash and Raphael propose, through listening to the lived experiences of individuals experiencing homelessness, our perspective will become rooted in truth rather than assumption. In the voices shared through this research, a contextual understanding can begin to show through.

Individuals experiencing homelessness are often not only experiencing the stigmatizing effects of living outside or in a shelter; rather they are often experiencing addiction, mental health issues, trauma, abuse, poverty, fierce discrimination and overall instability. Claudette Bradshaw, the Minister responsible for Homelessness, stated in the 2005 Canada Diverse Cities Report that diversity can often exacerbate the experience of homelessness within the current Canadian structure. She explained: “In Toronto, for instance, we see an increase in the number of new immigrants and refugees for using emergency infrastructure like shelters and food banks (Bradshaw, 2005, pp. 21)” She continued to explain that newcomers are facing some of the same challenges as other homeless individuals; however, she said, “they have additional challenges like linguistic and cultural barriers” (Bradshaw, 2005, pp. 21). Additionally, the current single-dimensional approach refuses to take into account the values of Aboriginal communities and how those experiences can impact the experience of homelessness and in how one can find home.

Canada has taken on a single-axis framework with the goal of placing individuals into homes and remaining blind to the other existing issues that may have been the catalyst that led to homelessness initially. Through the intersectional lens, we may be able to permanently end functional homelessness through listening to individual

experiences and allowing them to guide the process. Fisher-Borne, Cain and Martin (2015) suggest a movement from “cultural competence” to “cultural humility” which “advocates for self-reflection on ‘unintentional’ patterns of racism, classism and homophobia” (M. Fisher-Borne et al., 2015, pp. 172). This approach, the authors explain, “explicitly acknowledges power differentials between provider and client and asserts that problems do not often arise from a lack of knowledge but rather the need for change in practitioners’ self awareness and attitudes toward diverse clients” (M. Fisher0 Borne et al., 2015, pp. 172). A shift from simply attempting to accumulate knowledge to one that encourages entering into relationship through humility is crucial not only for the practitioner but within policy development as well. As the discussion continues, this foundational understanding that each individual often holds an intersection of oppressions is what grounds the suggestions that grew from the current study.

The discourse surrounding ‘Housing First’ as a strategy to end homelessness is primarily positive, especially when one looks at the quantitative studies that have been done in recent years. Through the interviews with participants, its application within Waterloo Region was somewhat criticized. All of the participants agreed that the guiding principle found in the Housing First philosophy is a belief that all workers and agencies champion. However, its implementation within Waterloo Region since 2013 was critiqued in three major ways. It is important to explore these concerns to understand the experiential impacts of the implementation on workers, clients and the community as a whole. First, the research participants suggested that the program has put far too much pressure on workers without the resources to sustain their work. Thus, the current expectations of workers are not sustainable over the long-term. One participant explained their experience of witnessing multiple workers decide to leave their role because of the

inability to maintain a healthy life balance due to the demands placed on them by this new program. While the quantitative data overwhelmingly suggests that using the Housing First philosophy will ultimately end homelessness, the difficult demands placed on workers displayed through qualitative research shows something drastically different. Working alongside individuals experiencing homelessness is a difficult job with many unique stressors. Doing this work without adequate training and support from the Region only makes the job more difficult. Within Waterloo Region, this program has only been implemented for a short time; thus, only time will tell how this affects workers in the long-term.

Another critique suggested by participants was the drastic change in the narrative they are hearing. Workers interviewed within this study explained that the nature of the program redefines the role of the support worker from *walking alongside a participant* to *doing for the participant*. If an individual is not housed, it has become the fault of the worker. Not only does this cause worker burn-out, as discussed above; but it also changes the dynamic between worker and participant from collaboration to expectation. Research participants suggested that this expectation causes eventual disempowerment of the client. It is no longer a journey to build capacity through relationship; it is a dynamic built on entitlement. This change is fundamentally counter to the Social Work Principles that all those working in the social work field are bound by.

The final critique of the ‘Housing First’ model as implemented within Waterloo Region are the assumptions that its language perpetuates. The participants explained that the overall narrative that is being publicized is the idea that when an individual moves into housing, the job is done. The research participants were clear to explain that if one explores the ‘Housing First’ approach more in-depth, it does maintain the importance of

after-housing supports. However, within its application, the importance of support is being lost. *Housing First* has become *Housing Only*. Participants explain that this gap in application is of particular importance for the most vulnerable within the street community who experience a complex intersection of severe addiction issues, mental health concerns and trauma. For these individuals, the focus on housing simply is not enough. These acute individuals are being completely ignored within the application of this program.

While home became the central feature of the study, community was often described as the larger circle that surrounds home. Community, across all of the interviews, was strongly associated with a sense of belonging. An important aspect to note was that all individuals interviewed, including service providers and those experiencing homelessness, were able to describe their community. As service providers began to explain their experience of witnessing community as lived out by individuals experiencing homelessness, they would often begin by sharing the positive outcomes of community. Many participants explained that they have witnessed individuals supporting each other, coming together in tough times, even protecting each other in moments. However, they also spoke about the unhealthy habits that are present within the street community including exploitation and mistreatment of each other. One participant explained that within the street-involved population there is an internal organized structure with its own code of ethics and policing system that is separate from the world surrounding it. The experiences that the service providers spoke about undeniably portrayed the existence of community within the street-involved population.

Another aspect that became apparent through analysis of the interviews with service providers was the role that workers or agencies play in the street-involved

community. Research participants explained that individual workers require a certain level of credibility before they will be trusted by the street-involved population. It was evident that workers felt they needed to gently enter into the community in order to gain integrity. It was also evident that agencies are simply unable to control or change the habits of the community; rather, their role is to hold space for this group of people. This understanding was imperative to the relationship between service providers and individuals experiencing homelessness.

Individuals experiencing homelessness that were interviewed within this study explained both their positive and negative experiences of community. Their responses suggested an acceptance of the innate chaos that occurs when involved with a group of people. They explained that the ups and downs experienced within community is not only normal but necessary to its development and maintenance.

While everyone interviewed was able to recall their experiences with community with the nuances of positive and negative memories, the concept of home was drastically different. For all of the individuals interviewed, home was much more than a tangible place. Everyone seemed to explain a feeling versus a place when they described home. There was an emotional connection to home.

As described above, an exploration of the concept of home became central to the study. The most common theme that was suggested by every participant in both the service provider group and the individuals experiencing homelessness was the association between home and safety. While both the intangible and tangible features of home were drastically different depending on the individual and their personal experience, safety was the strongest link between all participant interviews.

While correlation between home and safety was found to be the strongest link among the participants, the way in which an individual feels a sense of safety was drastically different. For some participants, consistency of one space made them feel safe. Participant M spoke about his journey being homeless for more than 25 years. He explained that for much of that time, he has spent his nights sleeping on a wooden bench behind a bank in downtown Kitchener. At the time of the interview, Participant M had been living in a subsidized one-bedroom apartment for the last seven months. He explained that he still goes down to that wooden bench at least three nights a week to sleep there no matter the weather conditions. He explained that the bench has been the most consistent place he has ever slept. He told me of his darkest moments within the last 25 years – losing friends, being beaten and left to die, fighting the demons of addiction and depression; the bench was his only constant through those moments. He described the bench much like a friend. He explained that the bench was the place he always knew he could return to without expectation. This story, along with many others, challenges the definition of transience. As workers, we attempt to categorize those we work alongside. We use words such as “transient” to describe individuals who do not live in our traditional idea of home. However, this story interrupts that label. It is not that this individual moves from place to place; rather, he has maintained a consistent space for more than 25 years. He has developed a connection to that place. Through an understanding of the need for consistency that is apparent in some research participants, we can then understand what they need to sustain safe housing long-term.

This narrative was not only shown through the interviews with individuals experiencing homelessness; but also within the service providers who participated in the current study. Participant B explained of an individual whose most consistent space was

the hospital. Thus, he felt a sense of safety when he was there. The desire and need for consistency is often dismissed by workers within this field because of the term “transient”; however, through investigation, consistency is of primary concern for many individuals who have experienced homelessness.

Another experience of safety that was described through the interviews was the unique influence of mental health and addictions. Participant J explained that he had just been diagnosed with schizophrenia which makes it difficult for him to feel safe within his own skin. This individual told his story of living in many foster homes during his childhood and then entering juvie as a youth. He explained that he began using crystal meth to help soothe the turmoil of the voices. Through support, he was able to get appropriate medication that could help make the voices softer so that he could live life. This individual explained that for much of his teenage and early adult years, his memory was fragmented and he was unable to assemble coherent plans for his life. After six months of taking his medication regularly, he was able to recall his father’s name. A few months prior to this interview, he called his father with the support of a worker. He explained the experience of hearing his father’s voice on the other end of the phone saying “I love you” was the safest he had felt in a long time. He explained that through finding his father, he has finally rediscovered a sense of home because it reminds him of his younger years before his diagnosis. For him, safety was not a tangible place, it was the feeling of those surrounding him.

Another powerful narrative of the influence of addiction on safety was the story told by Participant N. He explained that while he has been in and out of the shelter over the past few years, at the time of the interview, he was residing in a one-bedroom apartment. He explained that while he technically pays rent somewhere else, he often

returns to the shelter during the drop-in time. He explained that his addiction had become extremely powerful and it had began making him fear for his life. Unfortunately, he did not feel a desire to enter treatment but attempted to implement harm reduction strategies into his routine. He explained that he chooses to use at the shelter in the bathroom because while it is against the rules; he knows that if he uses too much, someone will be there who could save his life. He explained that at this dark moment in his life, he does not trust himself; so, he chooses to go to the place and people that he feels safest being surrounded by, despite the consequences. Both of these powerful narratives explain the affect that mental health and addiction has on an individual's sense of safety and ultimately: home.

While the link between home and safety was found to be a fundamental theme within the current study, it became clear through many interviews that individuals feeling the sense of home and safety was fleeting at best. Individuals explained that the long-term maintenance of home was simply unattainable for them because of the life they have led. One of the service providers interviewed explained that many of the individuals he supported in the past have never had a stable, consistent place; so the idea of home was simply a fairytale. This belief the individuals shared of their inability to obtain and maintain home and safety is truly devastating and requires attention.

The final important area discovered within the current study was the creative housing solutions suggested by participants. The ideas were broad and differed depending on the individual; however, all are important to understanding the complexity of housing and the major gaps that remain vacant today. The first suggestion made was more flexible guidelines around rental commitments. Many of the participants within the study explained that 12-month leases are far too long for some individuals, especially

those with acute needs. So, redefining leases and making them more flexible may be a useful solution. Participants also explained the success that have been found in the use of motels over the past few years. Since the Out of the Cold program, which was run as a temporary shelter by volunteers around the community for the coldest six months out of the year, shut down in 2013, the Region has been forced to provide funding to the Emergency Shelters for motel rooms due to the lack of bed spaces available in the community. These motels have been used for individuals that are often restricted from the shelters due to not following the rules. The motels offer a safe, separate, independent space for individuals to live with support. The implementation of this, as suggested by research participants, has been incredibly successful in stabilizing individuals much more effectively than the traditional shelter.

Moreover, participants suggested redefining the shelter system. There was a tension discovered between participants within the service provider group within this subtheme. Some participants suggested that the shelter is not meeting the complex needs of the homeless population by pushing individuals into housing before they are ready. However, others suggested that the shelter is simply meant to be a temporary space that is not meant to be comfortable. Participant D likened the shelter approach being like a McDonalds strategy – an individual comes in, takes what they need and gets out as quickly as possible. This tension portrays the unfortunate difference in opinion which far too often prevents change.

Another gap that was suggested was a housing policy shift. Individuals in both groups of participants suggested incentives given to developers and land owners to support affordable housing. Within Kitchener, specifically, there is a process of significant economic growth that is yielding change. While many see this as a positive

shift to the community, it is also driving housing costs far higher than ever before. Thus, through providing government-led incentive programs to the new developments, there can be a unification of new growth and respect for the current population. Alternative structures such as tiny homes were also suggested by both groups of participants as a possible solution to ending homelessness.

The final theme in creative housing solutions was the need for support. As explained throughout the current study, the Housing First philosophy does suggest the importance of after support for clients when they have moved into housing. However, this piece, as suggested in the findings, is losing importance through the implementation. As described above, obtaining and maintaining home is far more than four walls and a roof – it is finding safety. Workers with adequate support and training are crucial to ending functional homelessness.

The exploration of home among individuals experiencing chronic homelessness is clearly as nuanced and unique as the individuals themselves. The Housing First philosophy is far too simple both in concept and in application to fulfill the needs of everyone.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

In this chapter, I will discuss the limitations of this research and offer suggestions for future research in this focus area. Additionally, I will outline the implications of this research on ending functional homelessness within Waterloo Region. This will be followed by my overall conclusions that grew out of this research project.

Limitations of the Study

While the current study does provide an in depth analysis of the experiences of both service providers and individuals experiencing homelessness within Waterloo Region, there are several limitations to the research. The findings in this study serve as an initial step in the development of understanding the experience of individuals experiencing homelessness within Waterloo Region. There is limited qualitative research done on the experience of homeless individuals since the Housing First philosophy has been adopted across Canada. Thus, the current study was limited to individuals who identify as men experiencing homelessness or who are precariously housed; consequently, it does not include the experience of women, families, or youth. Further research needs to be conducted in order to develop a more robust academic representation of the diverse obstacles that all of these groups face.

Additionally, it is important to note that while the impact of culture, ethnicity, and race was organically talked about within the interviews; it was not the main focus of the study. I believe that the true impact of these identities are important and require a focused study to allow accurate representation for the voices involved. However, through the intersectional lens, the current research was grounded in an approach that attempted to

understand each participant as a unique individual facing multiple oppressions with a common experience of homelessness.

The size of the group that participated within the current study is simply too small to represent the diversity of experience that exist among those within the street community. It should also be noted that the experiences within this study were collected from individuals within Waterloo Region. Thus, the findings may not be generalizable to other geographical locations or even to the rural locations within the Region.

Additionally, the sampling technique within the current study was admittedly biased because the participants were largely made up of individuals that I worked professionally with in the past. There are many individuals that were not sought out to participate because they were not well known in my limited circle of support.

Moreover, while follow-up interviews were proposed with everyone involved in the current study to maintain research validity, this desire was difficult to achieve. Two participants within the study passed away before follow-up interviews could be conducted. Additionally, there were a few participants that were difficult to communicate with due to the transience of their lifestyle. It is important to recognize that all these factors affected the robust nature of the current study.

Suggestions for Future Social Work Research

As there remains a major gap in the qualitative research of individuals experiencing homelessness with Housing First as the guiding philosophy, there are many opportunities to conduct future research with this particular area of study. From the information suggested by the participants, there were many topics that proved interesting for future research; however, they were too far too specific for the scope of the study. For

instance, one might explore the housing market within Waterloo Region historically and its economic impact on the Region. Many participants spoke about the lack of affordable housing within this community. Those experiencing poverty are not the only group of the population that have expressed this sentiment; individuals in other economic classes have also suggested that cost of living within this Region is far too high. Thus, understanding the market with historical context could provide insight in how to enact affective change.

Further research that looks at the effectiveness of supportive housing versus subsidized housing is another area of focus suggested within the current study. While only a few of the participants had experienced living within subsidized housing, service providers spoke about the importance of support to assist individuals in maintaining their home. Within Waterloo Region, there is a small number of supportive housing locations and a variety of subsidized housing that does not provide additional support. An analytic understanding of the effectiveness of these two forms of affordable housing currently offered would be highly beneficial.

As noted in my discussion of the study's limitations, the current research focused on the male experience of homelessness. A qualitative study of the experience of homelessness within a community implementing the Housing First model done with women, families, and youth would benefit our community significantly. Each of these groups of people hold unique characteristics which is important to explore individually to ensure a complete picture is painted.

Biographical or life history research would also be of interest in order to explore more deeply individual experiences that led to homelessness. Each of the participants had complex journeys with an intersection of a variety of traumatic experiences. These complicated stories were told in fragments throughout the interviews;

however, due to time constraints, they were could not be fully illuminated in the current research. A more in depth study with participants would uncover numerous themes related to chronic homelessness and how to effectively support individuals in discovering home.

Another interesting area of study would be an exploration of the paths that preceded service providers in entering the work of supporting individuals experiencing homelessness. There was a common theme throughout the study with service providers in particular explaining common altruistic reasoning and life experiences that led them to this work. A more specified study exploring this theme would most assuredly uncover themes in understanding service providers' foundational and continued reasoning in pursuing supporting individuals experiencing homelessness.

Lastly, a theoretical examination of the concept of home would be another interesting area of study. While this particular focus would not be directly impactful in ending functional homelessness, it would create a foundational theory upon which housing alternatives could grow from. While within the current study, I began to delve into this topic; eventually, I realized that it was beyond the scope of this study. Exploring the theoretical concept of home from various perspectives and cultures would be highly beneficial.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to explore the experience of homelessness and workers supporting this population with the primary aim of uncovering creative housing solutions. There were three main objectives attempting to explore the concept of home and community, gain interactive knowledge and uncover gaps in service and housing

within Waterloo Region. Five service providers and twelve individuals with a history of homelessness were interviewed about their personal journeys and narratives around discovering home. Social Constructivism was used as the theoretical framework of the study. Grounded theory was used as a guide to the analysis of the research participant interviews. Based on the themes that emerged from the data collection and analysis, I have proposed three ideas to advance the aim to end homelessness.

Housing First lays a strong foundation, but people need homes that reflect their unique needs. “Home” does not mean the same thing for everyone and individuals need a range of options including but not limited to Supportive Housing, independent subsidized housing, market-rent options and even tiny homes. Additionally, it is imperative that we provide after-support to individuals after they have moved into their homes. Unique individuals need unique combinations of support for physical and mental health concerns, education, employment, access to harm reduction environments and community involvement. “Housing First” cannot be “housing only”. A house may be a common first step on the road to permanent housing, but different people need different supports for the challenges that can get in the way. Homelessness is a problem and housing is just part of the solution. Housing First is a proven success in supporting individuals but needs to be augmented with creative housing options and the supports to help people maintain housing.

As the researcher of the current study, I have grown tremendously during the research journey. The conception of this research study began when I was working alongside individuals experiencing homelessness. I was exhausted from witnessing extreme pain and far too many deaths. Through the interviews with both service providers and those experiencing homelessness, I was able to begin healing. While I continue to cautiously

work towards authentic healing, I will wear the wounds grown out of the lives I have seen lost from the varying effects of homelessness and I will use them to walk alongside others in finding home.

The results of this study contribute to the limited qualitative research done to explore the experience of homelessness under the Housing First guidance. It offers insight and ideas to assist the housing efforts within Waterloo Region. It is my greatest hope that this research will lead to increased knowledge of the concept of home, community and creative housing solutions with the objective of ending homelessness and finding home.

APPENDIX A – Interview Consent Form (Individuals Experiencing Homelessness)

Informed Consent Statement
Research Study: Creative Housing Solutions
Principal Investigator: Nicole Greig
Advisor: Dr. Ginette Lafrenière

INFORMATION

You are invited to be part of a research study that is collecting information about the lived experiences of those experiencing homelessness. I hope to look at your experiences with housing in Waterloo Region and what type of home you dream of. As a participant, you will be asked to discuss your experiences with homelessness and housing ideas for the future. This research is being done by Nicole Greig, a Masters of Social Work student at the Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University, Kitchener and is under the direction of Ginette Lafrenière.

This is a qualitative study involving both individuals experiencing homelessness and service providers. I will be conducting 60-90 minute interviews that will be audio-recorded using a password-protected device and then transcribed by Nicole Greig. The transcriptions will be kept in a locked location.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The records of your interview will be kept confidential and you will not be identified in any publication or discussion. Your name and any other names that you mention, will be changed or withheld so that you cannot be easily known. The audio recording will be kept on a password-protected device and the transcripts and notes from the interview will be kept in a locked cabinet with a password protected encrypted flash drive. Nicole Greig and Ginette Lafrenière will be the only persons who will have access to them.

At the end of the interview, you will have the opportunity to review the notes that the researcher RECORDED. If you have any questions or comments throughout the research process, you will have the opportunity to contact the researcher to provide your feedback or note any concerns. If you are unable to contact me directly, please ask a worker to contact me and I will come talk to you as soon as possible.

In the following consent form, you are asked if you would allow direct quotes to be used, please note that a pseudonym will be provided to replace your real name to protect your identity.

RISK

If you feel uncomfortable with any questions asked during the interview, or the feelings raised by those questions, you may refuse to answer them, and may end the interview at

any time. You do not have to provide any reason for not responding to any question or for refusing to take part in the interview.

Please be aware that there may be significant risk in discussing your personal circumstances and experiences within this interview. If, at any point, you feel in emotional/psychological distress, the interviewer will promptly stop the interview and provide a social worker for further support.

BENEFITS

While you will receive no compensation for your participation in this study, the research will assist in identifying housing gaps that currently exist within Waterloo Region. This will establish a starting point in understanding how to move forward to truly meet the needs of those within this community.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You may decline to participate at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, all of the information you provided will be destroyed. You also have the right to omit any question(s) you choose. If after the interview you decide to withdraw the information you shared, you must inform Nicole Greig by March 31st, 2017. In the following consent form, you will get a chance to choose your preferred avenue for receiving information.

You have the right to have all of your questions about the study answered by the researcher in detail so that you clearly understand the answer provided. If you have any questions about the research, the procedure used, your rights or any other research related concern you may contact the researcher or her supervisor, Ginette Lafrenière.

Your participation in this study will in no way affect the services you access at this location. The information you share will not be provided to anyone other than Nicole Greig and her advisor, Ginette Lafrenière.

FEEDBACK AND PUBLICATION

The information that you provide in the interview will appear in the thesis, which will be completed in the spring 2017. It is possible that the findings from this study will be provided, published, or presented to other bodies. If the information is provided, published or presented to other bodies, you will be notified via the avenue you chose within the consent form.

CONTACT

If you have any questions at any point about the study, you may contact the RESEARCHER, Nicole Greig by email at grei6270@mylaurier.ca. The project has been reviewed and approved by the University Research Ethics Board under approval #5187. If you feel that you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or

your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Dr. Robert Basso, Chair, University Research Ethics Board, Wilfrid Laurier University, 519-884-1970, extension 5225 or rbasso@wlu.ca. If you would like a copy of the findings, please contact Nicole Greig directly or indirectly by June 1, 2017.

If you have any questions or wish to withdraw your consent you can contact:

Nicole Greig
MSW Student, Faculty of Social Work
Email: grei6270@mylaurier.ca

or

Dr. Ginette Lafrenière
Professor, Faculty of Social Work
Lyle S. Hallman School of Social Work
(519) 884-0710 ext. 5237

APPENDIX B – Interview Consent Form (Service Providers)

Informed Consent Statement
Research Study: Creative Housing solutions
Principal Investigator: Nicole Greig
Advisor: Dr. Ginette Lafrenière

INFORMATION

You are invited to be part of a research study that is collecting information about creative housing solutions for individuals experiencing homelessness. The purpose of the study is to look at the insights provided and identify alternative approaches to housing that are not currently available within Waterloo Region. As a participant, you will be asked to discuss your experiences with homelessness and housing ideas for the future. This research is being done by Nicole Greig, a Masters of Social Work student at the Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University, Kitchener and is under the direction of Ginette Lafrenière.

This is a qualitative study involving both individuals experiencing homelessness and service providers. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted and audio-recorded using a password-protected device and subsequently transcribed by Nicole Greig. The transcriptions will be kept in a locked location. The length of time for the interview is about 60 to 90 minutes.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The records of your interview will be kept confidential and you will not be identified in any publication or discussion. Your name, organization, political affiliation, specific position, and any other names that you mention, will be changed or withheld so that you cannot be easily known. The audio recording will be kept on a password protected device and the transcripts and notes from the interview will be kept in a locked cabinet with a password protected encrypted flash drive. Nicole Greig and Ginette Lafrenière will be the only persons who will have access to them.

At the end of the interview, you will have the opportunity to review the notes that the researcher recorded. If you have any questions or comments throughout the research process, you will have the opportunity to contact the researcher to provide your feedback or note any concerns. In the following consent form, you are asked if you would allow direct quotes to be used. Please note that a pseudonym will be provided to replace your real name to protect your identity.

RISK

Should you feel uncomfortable with any questions asked during the interview, or the feelings raised by those questions, you may refuse to answer them, and may terminate the interview at any time. You do not have to provide any reason for not responding to any question or for refusing to take part in the interview.

BENEFITS

While you will receive no compensation for your participation in this study, the research will assist in identifying housing gaps that currently exist within Waterloo Region. This will establish a starting point in understanding how to move forward to truly meet the needs of those within this community.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You may decline to participate at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, all of the information you provided will be destroyed. You have the right to omit any question(s) you choose. If after the interview you decide to withdraw the information you shared, you must inform Nicole Greig by March 31st, 2017.

You have the right to have all of your questions about the study answered by the researcher in detail so that you clearly understand the answer provided. If you have any questions about the research, the procedure used, your rights or any other research related concern you may contact the researcher or her supervisor, Ginette Lafrenière.

FEEDBACK AND PUBLICATION

The information that you provide in the interview will appear in the thesis, which will be completed in the spring 2017. It is possible that the findings from this study will be provided, published, or presented to other bodies. You will be notified by email if the findings will be provided, published, or presented to other bodies.

CONTACT

If you have any questions at any point about the study, you may contact the RESEARCHER, Nicole Greig by email at grei6270@mylaurier.ca. The project has been reviewed and approved by the University Research Ethics Board under approval #5187. If you feel that you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Dr. Robert Basso, Chair, University Research Ethics Board, Wilfrid Laurier University, 519-884-1970, extension 5225 or rbasso@wlu.ca. If you would like a copy of the findings, please contact Nicole Greig by June 1st, 2017.

If you have any questions or wish to withdraw your consent you can contact:

Nicole Greig	or	Dr. Ginette Lafrenière
MSW Student, Faculty of Social Work		Professor, Faculty of Social Work
Email: grei6270@mylaurier.ca		Lyle S. Hallman School of Social Work
		(519) 884-0710 ext. 5237

APPENDIX C – Certificate of Consent (Individuals Experiencing Homelessness)

Certificate of Consent

I have read the preceding information, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it and any questions I have been asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study.

Print Name of Participant: _____

Preferred Name of Participant (if different than above): _____

Signature of Participant: _____

Date: _____ Day/month/year

I consent to the use of my direct quotations to be used in the final product. *Please note that if direct quotations are used, a pseudonym will be given in place of your real name to protect your identity fully.

Print Name of Participant: _____

Preferred Name of Participant (if different than above): _____

Signature of Participant: _____

Date: _____ Day/month/year

If unable to sign

I have witnessed the accurate reading of the consent form to the potential participant, and the individual has had the opportunity to ask questions. I confirm that the individual has given consent freely.

Print name of witness _____

Signature of witness _____

Date _____ Day/month/year

If the information is provided, published or presented, I would like to be notified in the following way:

Email: ☐ _____

Phone: ☐ _____

Mail (Please provide a permanent address): ☐ _____

Statement by the researcher:

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant, and to the best of my ability made sure that the participant understands what the research will include. I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to

the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily. A copy of this ICF has been provided to the participant.

Print Name of Researcher: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____

Date: _____ Day/month/year

APPENDIX D – Certificate of Consent (Service Providers)

Certificate of Consent

I have read the preceding information, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it and any questions I have been asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study.

Print Name of Participant: _____

Preferred Name of Participant (if different than above): _____

Signature of Participant: _____

Date: _____ Day/month/year

I consent to the use of my direct quotations to be used in the final product. *Please note that if direct quotations are used, a pseudonym will be given in place of your real name to protect your identity fully.

Print Name of Participant: _____

Preferred Name of Participant (if different than above): _____

Signature of Participant: _____

Date: _____ Day/month/year

If unable to sign

I have witnessed the accurate reading of the consent form to the potential participant, and the individual has had the opportunity to ask questions. I confirm that the individual has given consent freely.

Print name of witness _____

Signature of witness _____

Date _____ Day/month/year

Statement by the researcher:

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant, and to the best of my ability made sure that the participant understands what the research will include. I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily. A copy of this ICF has been provided to the participant.

Print Name of Researcher: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____

Date: _____ Day/month/year

APPENDIX E – Interview Guide (Individuals Experiencing Homelessness)

Demographic Questions:

What would you like me to call you for the purpose of this interview? (i.e. nick name, street, ect.)

What is your age?

What is your gender identity? (male, female, etc.)

Where did you sleep last night?

Are you currently employed? If so, what kind of work are you doing? How many hours do you work every week?

Are you currently receiving social assistance? If so, is it Ontario Works or the Ontario Disability Support Program?

-
1. First, let's talk a bit about where you have slept over the past year.
 - a.) Where have you slept most over the past year? (i.e. outside, couchsurfing, staying with friends/relatives, shelters, motels, etc.)
 - b.) In the last year, did you ever sleep outside? *If yes, continue to i.); If no, please continue to question c.).
 - i.) How often did you sleep outside?
 - ii.) Did you sleep alone when you were outside or did you ensure there were people you can trust around you?
 - iii.) Did you have a common spot in which you slept when you do sleep outside?
 - iv.) How safe did you feel when you were/are sleeping outside?
 - c.) Was there ever a night where you were forced to sleep in an unsafe place because you were turned away due to rules of stay (such as curfew, behavior, etc.)?
 - d.) In the last year, where is the place you felt most safe?

3. Have you ever stayed in a shelter? If so, what was your experience there? If not, why not?

- a) Have you stayed at the shelter in Kitchener? Have you stayed at the shelter in Cambridge? What was your experience at both? (qualify what you mean by “experience”)
- b) Did you feel that the housing services provided at the shelter were helpful? If yes or no, what makes you say that?
- c) Did you feel safe in the shelter?

4. In your experience, what are the housing options currently available within Waterloo Region?

- a) Are you currently on the subsidized housing list? If so, how long have you been on the list?
- b) Would you consider the shelter housing?
- c) Are you aware of the residential facilities in Waterloo Region? Is communal living something that you would be interested in?

2. Now, I am hoping to talk a bit about your housing experiences in the past. Have you lived in a place where you paid rent in the last year? If yes, continue to a.); if no, continue to question 3.

- a) Where was it?
- b) What kind of housing was it? A one-bedroom apartment, a bachelor apartment, a rooming house, other?
- c) Was it a safe neighborhood? For our purposes, “safe” means that you did not fear your neighbors, the street you lived on was quiet the majority of the time, and your landlord would respond appropriately to concerns within a week.
- d) How did you leave this housing?
- e) Where did you go from this housing?

3. What is your definition of homelessness?

- a) Would you consider yourself homeless? *If yes, continue to i.); if no, continue to question b.).
 - i.) Can you tell me a bit about what led to this?

- ii.) What have you learned throughout this time?
 - iii.) Is there something you wish you knew before becoming homeless?
 - iv.) Is there anything you've done while being homeless that you would change if you could?
 - v.) Have you made any friends while being homeless?
 - b) Is there a place in Kitchener/Waterloo where you feel most at home?
3. Now I am hoping to ask you some questions about home and what that word means to you.
- a.) What does the word "home" mean to you? Can you tell me about a time when you felt truly at "home"?
 - b.) Do you need friends close by to feel at home?
 - c.) What kind of housing have you experienced in your adult life?
 - d.) Have you used services such as Lutherwood's Rent Support program?
 - e.) What is the longest period you remained in housing?
 - f.) What have been reasons that you have lost housing in the past?
 - g.) Are there supports that could have been put into place to prevent you from losing your housing?
 - h.) Were you able to make friendships in the housing in which you found yourself?
 - i.) Did you have a good relationship with your landlord?
8. What does the word "community" mean to you?
- a) Is there a place right now that you feel a sense of community?
6. What would be your ideal "home"? If you had a magic wand and could create an ideal housing situation for you, what would that look like?
- a) Would you desire support after moving in?

- b) How would you find community after moving in?
- c) Would you desire to live alone or would you want to live with others?
- d) Is the safety of the neighborhood important to you?
- e) Is a compatible (qualify) landlord important to you?

7. In your opinion, what are some of the things stopping you from finding your ideal home?

- a) Does your ideal home exist at this point?
- b) Is income a barrier to finding your home?
- c) Would interim housing be helpful in the process of finding permanent housing?

8. Is there anything you would like to add?

APPENDIX F – Interview Guide (Service Providers)

Demographic Information:

What is your name?

What is the name of the organization you work for currently?

What is your title within this organization?

How long have you been working within this organization?

How long have you been involved with working alongside individuals experiencing homelessness?

Can you tell me a bit about how you came to this work?

1. First, I am hoping that you can tell me a bit about the services you provide.

- a) Who are the individuals you would primarily support?
- b) What other service providers do you mostly interact with in the community? Can you tell me a bit about those interactions?
- c) Are there services you would like to provide but can't due to funding restraints? If so, can you tell me about them?

2. What are the housing options you are aware of in this Region?

- a) What are the most appropriate/safe housing options you know of?
- b) Are there unsafe options individuals choose out of necessity?

- c) If there are unsafe options, how do you assist individuals in feeling safe in those homes?
- 3. What would you say is the largest impediment to finding housing within Waterloo Region?
 - a) In your opinion, is housing affordable for individuals on Social Assistance?
 - b) What kind of housing do individuals you support most likely move into?
 - c) What state is the housing in? Does this affect long-term housing?
 - d) What is your experience with the Subsidized Housing List?
- 4. What would you say is the biggest reason people lose housing?
 - a) What is your experience with landlords? Are they generally understanding?
 - b) Do people you support often leave on their own or are they evicted?
 - c) Do you find that landlords treat the individuals you support fairly?
- 5. Can you tell me a bit about your Do you feel that community is important to maintaining housing?
 - a) What is your definition of community?
 - b) What is your experience with community within the individuals you support who are experiencing homelessness?
 - c) From your perspective, are individuals able to maintain community while within housing?
 - d) How could the sense of community be enhanced for individuals within housing?

6. What is your definition of “home”?
 - a) Do you feel that your experience of “home” is different from the individuals you support?
 - b) How does one create a sense of “home”?
 - c) Do you think individuals can feel a sense of “home” without housing?
7. What is your experience with the Housing First program?
 - a) What are the limitations of this approach?
 - b) Can you tell me a bit about the successes you’ve seen in the Housing First program?
8. Have you ever considered alternative housing options that are not offered in this Region?
 - a) Is transitional housing something you think would be helpful in the Region?
 - b) What is your experience with the residential care facilities within Waterloo Region?
 - c) What is your experience with Subsidized housing in Waterloo Region? From your experience, are individuals often able to maintain housing within Subsidized housing?
9. What is the most rewarding part of working with individuals experiencing homelessness?
 - a) Have you ever felt burnt out from this work? Why?

- b) How do you maintain optimism when seeing the cyclical nature of homelessness?
10. Is there anything you would like to add?

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