WHAT WE HEARD...

Talking to People

ABOUT HOUSING & HOMELESSNESS IN HAMILTON

October 2012

Everyone has a home...Home is the foundation

- The second in a series of reports to inform the creation of a Housing & Homelessness Action Plan

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REPORT SUMMARY

Our Community Engagement Strategy has been such an important part of the Action Plan process. This report shares findings from our different Community Engagement activities, including stories, quotes, themes and analysis from interviews, surveys, roundtable discussions and a community gathering. It contains suggestions that made it into the final strategies (sometimes with the exact wording) and other ideas that did not make it into the Plan because they deserve to be heard.

This report is intended to reflect the stories and ideas we heard from the people we consulted, which we hope will benefit the broader community, and other communities who are doing similar processes.

This document is organized to report on the process and results of our Community Engagement Strategy activities.

This Action Plan is intended to be 'person-centred'. By person-centred, we mean that people and their experiences should drive the way we respond to issues of homelessness and housing problems.

This Action Plan is intended to be 'person-centred'

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Tony started out renting apartments and sharing places with roommates when he was young. He eventually married and bought a house where things felt stable and secure. He divorced, lost his job in manufacturing, started using drugs and ultimately lost his house which started a long journey of homelessness. Tony was using drugs heavily, staying in shelters and sleeping on the streets and in places not meant for habitation (like abandoned buildings). He went on social assistance (Ontario Works), rented apartments and lost apartments for a variety of reasons and turned again to sleeping on the streets and staying in shelters. Tony recently got support to get on disability and got into social housing.

-From: Homeownership to Sleeping the Streets – a Housing Story

INTRODUCTION

Housing is a fundamental human right. It is the foundation for the economic, social and physical well-being of Hamilton residents. It is the central place from which we build our lives, nurture our families and ourselves and engage our communities. In other words, it is our home.

The City of Hamilton is working with the Affordable Housing Flagship and the broader stakeholder community to develop a new 10-year Housing & Homelessness Action Plan for Hamilton.

The Action Plan will address the full range of housing issues for households with low and moderate incomes from homelessness to affordable homeownership. The Action Plan will be both a strategic plan and a work plan that will guide decisions that have an impact on homelessness and affordable housing in Hamilton and will include targets to help measure our progress.

> "Having a place crash out when you are fighting to keep it (was the worst). I lived with my two kids – lost that apartment, worse than sleeping with 30 guys in the same room, worse than living on the side of a mountain – knowing that I disappointed those kids."

- Interview Participant

This new 10-year plan will be action-oriented and person-centred.
This report is one of a series of reports to provide context and data that will help inform the development of the Action Plan.

This report shows our Community Engagement Strategy in action. The purpose of this report is to:

1. Report back to the community. This document captures the breadth of information collected and ensures that the stories and ideas we heard are not lost.
2. Share our work and our processes with other communities and sectors who might be interested in what we learned from our Community Engagement experience.

Some key definitions and considerations:

This document says 'we' and 'us' a lot – who are the 'we'?

For the most part, the 'we' refers to the people who did the work of collecting the input for the Community Engagement Strategy – City of Hamilton employees. Sometimes, though, the 'we' might refer to the broader City of Hamilton or the larger community

What is 'Community'?

A community is a collective of people that share something in common – geography, an interest and/or a culture. When we talk about the "community" in this document, we are talking about the different players in housing and homelessness including (but not limited to): service providers, businesses, government, decision makers, the general public, researchers and, absolutely, people who have lived the experience of housing insecurity and homelessness

What is Community Engagement?

Engagement describes a process of asking people and hearing their ideas and stories. For the purpose of this document, we are talking about the process that we went through to hear the stories and ideas of the community of people who live in Hamilton and have some interest (based on work or life) in housing and homelessness.

What is 'Person-Centred'?

Being 'Person-centred' is a value that makes people and their experiences central to all planning and development considerations. It means that people should be supported in ways that make sense for their unique circumstances and their economic, cultural, and gender-based lives.

Engagement describes a process of asking people and hearing their ideas and stories.

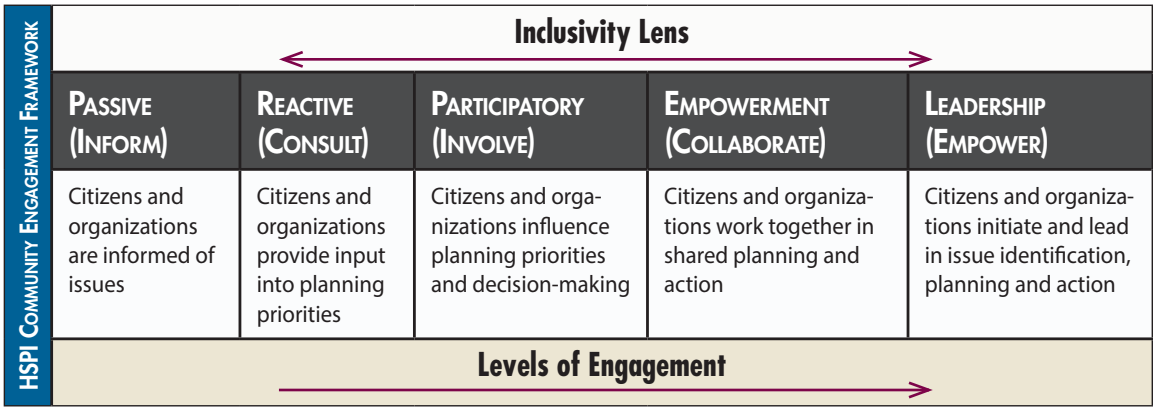
Many Perspectives from the Community

Early in the process, we recognized that hearing from a variety of perspectives would make this plan meaningful and help create real change. To write this plan, we needed to hear from a range of different people.

Link to Human Services Planning

In the beginning of our process, we looked at the good work of the Human Services Planning Initiative (HSPI)[1] and used their Community Engagement Framework to help guide the process. Please see the following website for more information on Human Services Planning:

http://www.hamilton.ca/HealthandSocialServices/SocialServices/HumanServicesPlan.htm



Adapted from Hashagen 2002 and Sydney Department of Planning 2003

[1]The Human Services Planning Initiative (HSPI) is an initiative that the City and the community are working on together. The goal of the initiative is to develop strategies that will help the community create a plan for delivering and investing in human services now. (From the Human Services Planning Initiative webpage - find more information at www.hamilton.ca/humanservicesplan).

The HSPI Community Engagement Framework was developed to help researchers and planners think about how much they are willing and able to engage the community in their efforts.

Work in the field of housing and homelessness has often remained on the more "Passive" end of the inclusion continuum – past efforts have included providing information and asking for input. Some historical examples do demonstrate

more participatory levels of engagement, but those efforts have not been sustained. The Action Plan processes (through the activities detailed in this document) have been in the "Reactive/Consult" and "Participatory/Involve" areas of the above framework and we have detailed some strategies that will move us further onto "Empowerment/Collaborate" and toward "Leadership/Empower".

Why do Community Engagement?

There are two key reasons why we dedicated a good deal of energy and resources in this area. First, the Housing and Homelessness Planning Group (a committee of stakeholders who have been advising this process) challenged us to be bold and to make sure that we talked to many people who have current or past experience with homelessness or housing issues.

Second, the Action Plan will be more relevant and have more impact if we understand what real people want and need in terms of housing.

During Phase I of the Action Plan and to find out how we can develop solutions to homelessness and housing insecurity, we connected with more than 800 individuals who have had lots of different experiences.

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"…a lot of people have never lived the life so how can they say you should do this or you should do that? They've never been there."

- Interview Participant

Overview of Ideas

Connecting with 800 different people means that we heard many stories, many concerns and many potential solutions.

While we heard a real diversity of stories and solutions, we can pull out three common ideas

1 People reminded us that **safe, affordable and stable housing is a critical human need.** The challenges that people face include not being able to afford housing, but that is not all. Addictions, mental health issues, family breakdown, abuse, poverty and unstable employment all contribute to housing insecurity. Also, the benefits of stable housing go beyond the four walls and a roof. Stable housing is good for physical and mental health, good for employment stability, for family connectedness and for civic engagement.

2 Even though we know the benefits of stable housing, **people still experience barriers to housing.** We heard from people that they did not know how to access help, waited for a long time for supports and housing and felt discriminated against when trying to access housing. We also heard, many times over, that people cannot afford good housing and that social assistance and minimum wage rates were not adequate to live in stable and good quality housing.

3 We were challenged by many of the 800 individuals we connected with to **make this plan action-focused.** The time has passed for research and plans that do not change the situations of people who are in need. Also, there needs to be a variety of perspectives that help us make a plan truly action-oriented.

> "Now that I'm housed my health has improved. I don't shake as much and I'm well-fed."

- Interview Participant

> "(Do) not just listen to people but take up and implement their suggestions, proposals, etc. Involve (people) in actual decision making and implementation of decisions made."

- Community Check-In Participant

1 COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROCESS AND RESULTS

We talked to more than 800 individuals in Hamilton through a series of different Community Engagement activities including:

a. Preliminary Consultations
b. Hiring a Community Facilitation Team
c. Citizen Advisory Committees
d. General Public Surveys
e. Community Roundtable Discussions
f. Interviews
g. A Community Check-In Gathering

This document is organized to report on the process and results of our Community Engagement Strategy activities. Each section below details one activity and includes information about the process, who we talked to and what we heard.

The Project Team took the ideas we heard from the community, reviewed what is currently working in our community as well as promising work from other communities, and came up with our 54 strategies that form the Housing and Homelessness Action Plan. Please visit the website **www.hamilton.ca/housingactionplan** to see the first phase of the Action Plan.

a. Preliminary Consultations

What we did

In May 2011, Paul Dowling Consulting completed an overview of the Housing and Homelessness service system which provided a foundation of research and data for the Action Plan. They talked to people who work, plan and access the system of supports related to housing and homelessness.

Who we talked to

We contacted a total of 383 people – 169 people participated in focus groups or interviews and 214 responded to surveys.

Paul Dowling Consulting talked to the following groups:

- Employees from Wesley Urban Ministries – Claremont House Special Care Unit and Wesley Youth Housing

- Employees from Good Shepherd Centres – The Family Centre, Mary's Place and Good Shepherd Square
- Employees from St. Matthew's House
- Employees from Urban Native Homes Inc. – Koo gaa da win Manitou
- Members of the Street Youth Planning Collaborative
- Members of the Affordable Housing Flagship
- Members of the Hamilton Executive Directors' Aboriginal Coalition Inc.
- Members of the Hamilton Emergency Shelter Integration and Coordination Committee
- Members of the Emergency Food Action Committee
- Members of the Hamilton Funders Network
- Members of the Hamilton Addiction and Mental Health Collaborative (Housing Working Group)
- Members of the Community Advisory Board
- Stakeholders from Housing Supports
- Stakeholders from the Disability services
- Stakeholders from the Corrections sector
- Stakeholders from the Seniors sector
- Stakeholders from the Physical and Mental Health sectors
- Tenants and service consumers
- Shelter users and people with experiences of homelessness
- City of Hamilton Employees
- Stakeholders from the Food Security sector

What we heard

The consultants' analysis showed that over the past 10 years, government investment from senior levels has strengthened the Housing and Homelessness system in Hamilton. However, lack of funding stability, inattention to the root causes of homelessness and poverty and the variety of unique issues that different populations face continue to challenge the housing and homelessness system.

Their recommendations include the following:

- Develop meaningful ways for consumers to be involved in the planning and design of housing and homelessness supports and programs.
- Make sure that the system of services works for people by:
  - Ensuring that no entry point is the wrong one,
  - Providing support in navigating the system and
  - Finding ways to make sure people do not have to repeat their stories many times over.
- Increase and continue advocating for more housing investment from senior levels of government and making sure that land use planning processes work for affordable housing development.

City of Hamilton_2011

b. Community Facilitation Team

What we did

In October 2011, we hired three Community Facilitators. The idea was to have people work alongside the project team who were not employees in government or housing and homelessness service agencies. They consulted on our process, lead the process of collecting surveys in different community spaces, analyzed data, co-facilitated focus groups and were instrumental in planning our Community Check-In Gathering. The three Facilitators we hired each brought a different community perspective to the project.

Who we talked to

We partnered with the City of Hamilton Employment Services to find our Community Facilitators. We received 20 applications and ultimately hired three people.

What they said

Under the 'Key Lessons' section of this report (see Pages 37–39) each of the three Community Facilitators – Ed McRae, Sharleen Ramon and Naseem Sherwani – have written personal statements about their experience.

c. Citizen Advisory Committees

What we did

The City Council has a number of Citizen Advisory Committees that advise on a range of different issues.

We visited eight Citizen Advisory Committees and asked them to comment on the issues they thought were important to consider in this process. The Citizen Advisory Committees we visited were:

- Committee Against Racism
- Advisory Committee for Persons with Disabilities
- Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Advisory Committee
- Immigrant and Refugee Advisory Committee
- Seniors Advisory Committee
- Status of Women Advisory Committee
- Tenant Advisory Committee
- Food and Shelter Advisory Committee

Please see Appendix A for our Citizen Advisory Committee Discussion Guide.

Who we talked to

We connected with 85 different people through our Citizen Advisory discussions. While we did not collect their demographic information, the membership of the Committees generally reflected the populations they were meant to represent. Through those discussions, we spoke with people who represented the following communities:

- Women
- Persons with Disabilities (physical and mental)
- Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender people
- Tenants
- Immigrants and Refugees
- Seniors
- People of Colour

It is important to note that many identities overlap – for example, we spoke with women who are immigrants and we spoke with seniors who are tenants.

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What we heard

Our conversations with the Citizen Advisory Committees included many questions about the Action Plan process and issues to consider when thinking about unique populations of people who face housing and homelessness.

Two common issues that were raised within the Citizen Advisory Committee discussions were:

People's unique identities have an impact on their housing. People have increased barriers and different access to housing based on unique factors.

People, regardless of identity, worry about feeling safe and secure at home. Nearly every group talked about safety as a key issue that they face in their various housing situations. The way people talked about safety, however, was different depending on their experience – some people talked about wanting to feel safe from crime while others talked about wanting to be secure against racism or homophobia.

Some people talked about wanting to feel safe from crime while others talked about wanting to be secure against racism or homophobia.

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Transgender people have unique issues that make housing affordability a problem. At the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Committee we learned that people who are beginning to transition their gender (by dressing as their identified gender, taking hormones, undergoing surgeries) often cannot keep their jobs and, therefore, lose their housing because they are not as able to 'pass' as their identified gender. This, in turn, makes their housing unstable.

-From: the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Citizen Advisory Committee

One member of the Immigrant and Refugee Advisory Committee described a situation when he was very new to Hamilton. He went to rent an apartment and was told that because he did not have an established credit history in Hamilton, he would need a co-signer. He did not have anyone who could fulfill that role and offered to pay for the entire year's rent at that time. He was denied the apartment.

-From: the Immigrant and Refugee Advisory Committee

We also heard a number of ideas for solutions, many of which are incorporated into the strategies that are the Action Plan. Three ideas that we heard in the Citizen Advisory Committees were:

1. We need to make sure that employees within our service system are well-trained to deal with a diversity of people and their unique housing experiences,
2. People need help knowing where to go to get support with their housing and
3. We need tailored housing options.

> We were told at the Advisory Committee for Persons with Disabilities that we need to think about the unique needs of post secondary students with disability issues. Many students with disabilities have to travel to campus, sometimes quite long distances because the wait to get into accessible and affordable housing is too long and they've long since graduated once the housing is offered.

-From: the Advisory Committee for Persons with Disabilities

Rosa moved out on her own when she was 17 years old. She rented a room with a family and considers that to be her best housing situation to date. She felt safe and comfortable there. She moved in with her boyfriend and had to leave because of escalating abuse. After spending a month in a shelter where she had to repeat her story again and again in order to get her needs met, Rosa moved into a cheap and poor quality bachelor apartment with a person she met at the shelter. When her ex-boyfriend visited her in the apartment, he was shocked at the bad quality and told her she was moving back in with him. That made her feel 'special'. The abuse started again quickly. Rosa had applied for social housing while she was in the shelter and was offered a unit while staying with her ex-boyfriend. She accepted a one-bedroom unit and was really happy at how clean and nice it was. She was surprised when she found herself feeling anxious and worried soon after moving in – feeling lonely and realizing that having this stability and consistency in her housing meant that it was up to her to build her life.

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-From: Repeating the Same Difficult Tale Again and Again – a Housing Story

d. General Public Surveys

What we did

We recognize that everyone needs to be involved in the discussion about housing and homelessness but often the general public is not consulted. In November and December 2011, our Community Facilitators went out to community places to ask the public questions about their opinions on housing and homelessness and solutions they thought we should hear.

We conducted surveys in person in the following places:

SURVEY LOCATION	Number of Surveys
Benetto Recreation Centre	34
Sackville Hill Seniors Recreation Centre	88
Dundas Community Pool	76
Valley Park Community Centre	72
Ryerson Recreation Centre	35
Central/West Apartment Building	29
Steelworkers Union Hall	39
Dominic Agostino Riverdale Recreation Centre	30
Ancaster Rotary Recreation Centre	67
TOTAL	**479**

We chose these sites based on geographic and income diversity.

For a copy of the General Public Survey, **please see Appendix B.**

Who we talked to

We asked survey respondents to fill out a few questions about their demographics. Some highlights of those demographics include:

- 60% of respondents were female.
- Nearly half of the respondents were between 30 and 59 years old.
- Almost one-fifth (18%) of respondents had incomes below $25,000 and almost one-fifth (16%) of respondents had incomes above $100,000.
- More than one quarter (26%) of respondents were renters.

The demographics of the General Public Survey respondents mostly reflected the overall population of Hamilton.

What we heard

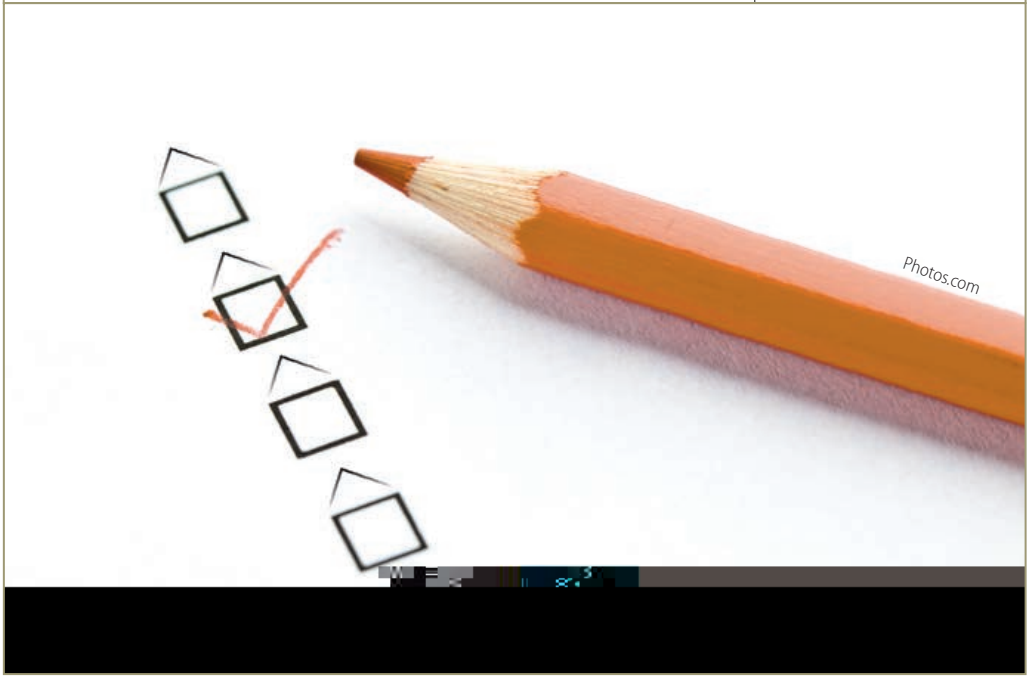
We asked four questions in our General Public Survey. Those questions were:

1. How important do you think the issue of homelessness is for the Hamilton community? Please rate the importance.
2. How important do you think the issue of housing is for the Hamilton community? Please rate the importance.
3. Does homelessness and affordable housing affect you in any of the following ways? Please check all that apply.
4. Think about housing and homelessness, what are the three biggest challenges in Hamilton, in your opinion? Do you have any ideas about how to solve the challenges you talked about?

A synopsis from the results of each question is outlined on the next page

- 95% of respondents said that the issue of homelessness is an 'important' or 'very important' issue for Hamilton.
- 93% of respondents said that the issue of affordable housing is an 'important' or 'very important' issue for Hamilton.

HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS EFFECTS

The majority of respondents answered that housing and homelessness affect their community and where they choose to live. It is important to note that respondents could choose multiple answers.

EFFECT	TOTAL OF RESPONSES
They affect me personally	69
They affect people in my family or my close friends	116
They affect my community	271
They affect where I choose to live	130
They affect where I go in my community	106
They do not affect me	71
Other	22