Investigating Shelter (In)Justice in Peterborough

What we heard from 90 local homelessness system stakeholders

Report Authors: Mary Anne Martin, PhD and Naomi Nichols, PhD

Research Team: Samantha Blondeau, Jimmy Frickey, Sally Goodwin, Joey Lavictoire, Thamer Linklater, Marisa Mackenzie, Will Pearson

March 2023

What We Heard: 90 local stakeholders' perspectives on
Peterborough's Coordinated Access system
Page 2

Investigating Shelter (In)Justice in Peterborough

What we heard from 90 local homelessness system stakeholders

Table of Contents

What We Heard: 90 local stakeholders' perspectives on
Peterborough's Coordinated Access system
Page 3

Introduction

Peterborough is experiencing a housing and homelessness crisis, and recent statistics suggest that the problem is getting worse, not better.

The complex roots of homelessness extend far beyond this community to the broader political economy including provincial and federal decision-making, economic systems, and discourses framing personal accountability and what a place of belonging in society requires. Peterborough, like many communities across Canada, has the unenviable and daunting task of addressing homelessness in a challenging climate of low vacancy rates, skyrocketing rents and costs of living, a drug poisoning crisis, widespread precarious labour, and social assistance rates well below the poverty line — with the direct implications of the Covid-19 pandemic not yet out of sight.

> **Housing is enshrined as a human right in Canada. Nonetheless, about 300 people experience homelessness in Peterborough at any given time, according to municipal reports.**

In 2019, Peterborough implemented Coordinated Access — a federally-mandated model for organizing a community's response to homelessness. Through the implementation of Coordinated Access, Peterborough aims to eliminate chronic homelessness[1] by 2025.

In summer 2022, United Way Peterborough & District, as the community entity for Reaching Home: Canada's Homelessness Strategy, engaged the Research for Social Change Lab to conduct a review of our community's Coordinated Access system.

We are sharing our findings with the community in a variety of ways; this report is one component of our communication strategy.

A deep listening exercise: 90 interviews with local experts

As we conducted our research, we came to understand our project primarily as an exercise in listening. We sought first-hand accounts from individuals who are navigating the local Coordinated Access system for themselves (we call them "service users") as well as individuals who work in the local system, such as frontline staff, service managers, and government and policy staff (we refer to these people as "service providers.")

> **We interviewed 48 local service users and 42 local service providers to learn what's working and what's not with Peterborough's homelessness system. This report shares what they told us.**

We endeavoured to provide a non-judgemental forum for service users and providers to openly share their experiences, observations, and recommendations through confidential interviews and (for service providers) an anonymous online survey.

We interviewed 48 people with experience of homelessness in Peterborough and 42 people with experience working in or adjacent to the homeless-serving sector.

This act of listening felt productive and necessary to us. It was clear that many of the people we spoke with had never been asked for their perspectives on the homelessness crisis or the response to it, despite their significant expertise developed through lived experience. We kept our interviews semi-structured and open-ended so that participants could share whatever they thought was most important. The breadth and openness of responses suggest that participants welcomed the opportunity to share their stories.

> **To protect participants' identities, every person was given a pseudonym.**

---

1   Chronic homelessness is the experience of at least 6 months of homelessness within a year.

Introduction

*What We Heard: 90 local stakeholders' perspectives on
Peterborough's Coordinated Access system*
Page 4

Past, current, and future service users are the reason for this study. Their homelessness carries the failings of multiple systems in their bodies, minds, and spirits. Meanwhile, service providers in this system experience significant responsibility for community members' health, safety, and lives. We respect their dedicated work with limited resources, often beyond their pay grade, in challenging and dangerous situations. We have endeavoured to treat people's stories with care, honouring their trust in our process.

The urgency of the homelessness crisis cannot be overstated, but the work to address the struggles of people living without adequate housing in this community must be an ongoing, inclusive, collaborative, and creative process. We hope that this research contributes one piece to that process.
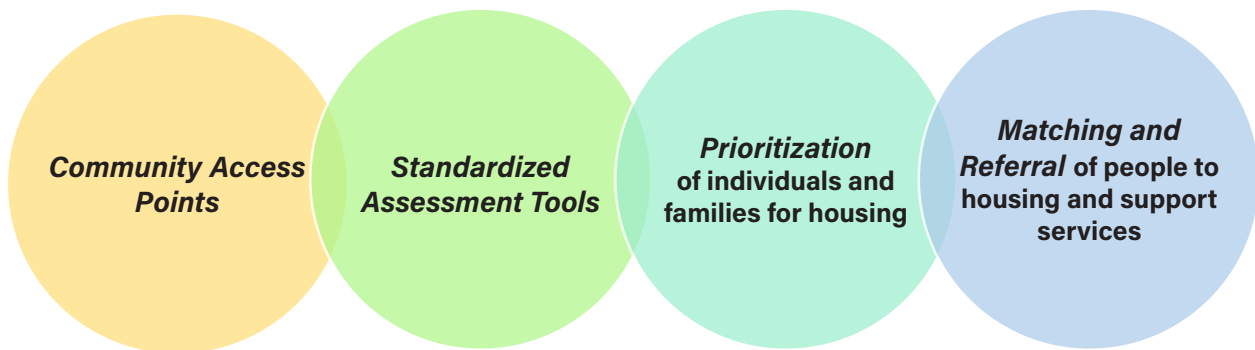
This report provides a high-level synopsis of what we heard.

What We Heard: 90 local stakeholders' perspectives on
Peterborough's Coordinated Access system
Page 5

A Bit More About Coordinated Access

According to Built For Zero, Coordinated Access is "a way for communities to bring consistency to the process by which people experiencing or at risk of homelessness access housing and related services within a geographic area."[1] Coordinated Access operates on the principle of "Housing First," where housing is regarded a basic right. It is guided by up-to-date data on both people in need of housing and available housing. Individuals in need of housing assistance go through a process that includes the following steps:

1. **Access** to the system by connecting with a worker trained to assess individuals and families. At this point, service users typically are entered into the HIFIS database and added to the By-Name List.
2. a) **Triage** to ensure the client is safe and to assist with prevention of either eviction or a shelter stay; and,
   b) **Assessment** of the person's housing needs, barriers, and resources. Peterborough workers use either the more comprehensive SPDAT tool or the shorter VI-SPDAT
3. **Prioritization** for housing supports
4. **Matching and referral** to appropriate housing programs with vacancies

Community Access Points — *Standardized Assessment Tools* — *Prioritization* of individuals and families for housing — *Matching and Referral* of people to housing and support services

It is important to understand that Coordinated Access does not address the causes of homelessness, nor is it accompanied by adequate housing resources to eliminate homelessness. Coordinated Access simply enumerates, assesses, prioritizes, and matches people who are already experiencing homelessness to available resources.

Emphasizing fairness in the distribution of scarce resources may help to ensure that certain groups are not excluded from supports they need. But a prioritization and matching process alone does not address low incomes, lack of affordable housing, insufficient health supports, low vacancy rates, skyrocketing rents, poverty-level social assistance rates, and other drivers of homelessness. Without also addressing these challenges, it seems unlikely that Coordinated Access will help to eliminate homelessness.

---

1   Built for Zero Canada. (2023). Coordinated Access. https://bfzcanada.ca/coordinated-access/

What We Heard: 90 local stakeholders' perspectives on
Peterborough's Coordinated Access system
Page 6

Findings: What We Heard

The 90 people we spoke with were all generous with their time and had myriad observations about what is working and what isn't working with Peterborough's response to homelessness. In this report, we are grouping their observations into three sections:

1. Service users' and service providers' observations related to the Coordinated Access system itself and the perceived efficacy of each of the four stages of the model as they are being implemented in Peterborough.
2. Service users' and service providers' observations concerning three additional key themes that were raised repeatedly in our conversations.
3. The results of the online survey we conducted with service providers.

First, we offer a brief summary of the findings from each section.

Coordinated Access Findings Summary

Community Access Points
(Page 8)

Service users and service providers both expressed concerns about the accessibility of the community access points. "In a system that claims to have no wrong door, it seems to have a lot of wrong doors," said one service provider. Many service users were unsure whether they were on the By-Name List.

Standardized Assessment Tools
(Page 10)

Service users and service providers shared concerns that the SPDAT tool is not trauma-informed. Service providers further observed that the tool produces unreliable results that can undermine the efficacy of the prioritization and matching process.

Prioritization
(Page 12)

Service providers described the prioritization process as unreflective of the needs they were seeing. They noted challenges with matching the people prioritized on the By-Name List with available housing resources. Many service users did not fully understand the process. (Especially the importance of regular meetings with a housing worker to maintain their position on the By-Name List.)

Matching and Referral
(Page 12)

Service providers struggled to match people with housing resources that were appropriate to their needs and could be sustained. Service users did not always want to participate in the housing programs they were matched to, nor stay in housing that was offered.

Findings: Summaries

*What We Heard: 90 local stakeholders' perspectives on
Peterborough's Coordinated Access system*
Page 7

Other Key Themes Findings Summary

Parks and Facilities Bylaw **(Page 14)**	People were adamant that the penalization and criminalization of homelessness via municipal bylaws undermines people's safety, does not improve shelter utilization or access to resources, and is making the homelessness crisis worse. It is a waste of government resources to continue to invest in a process that leads to incarceration rather than housing.
Harm Reduction **(Page 19)**	Service users and service providers want better adherence to harm reduction principles and policies across the housing and homelessness system. Currently, our shelters are not adequate nor accessible for people who are dependent on synthetic opioids nor alcohol. There are also service users whose sobriety is jeopardized by shelter use. Harm reduction is not a one-size fits all approach. We need sheltering options that reduce harms for people with different needs.
Staffing **(Page 20)**	We are "burning through employees" in frontline positions, which undermines consistency and erodes institutional memory. Given that the service providers we interviewed comprise the frontlines of an intersecting public health and housing crisis, they deserve remuneration, institutional supports, and professional development that parallels other emergency response personnel.

Survey Findings Summary

Lastly, we share the results of our online survey, which sought local sector professionals' thoughts on what actions were the most important to take to address homelessness in Peterborough. We conducted this survey to give more service providers a chance to share their views anonymously.

www.socialchangelab.ca

Findings: Coordinated Access
Community Entry Points

What We Heard: 90 local stakeholders' perspectives on
Peterborough's Coordinated Access system
Page 8

Coordinated Access System

Community Entry Points

Local service providers can add people experiencing homelessness to the By-Name List (BNL). They can also refer them to a Community Entry Point trained staff person who can do so — although they are discouraged from referring to any of the shelters unless the person requires immediate shelter. Community Entry Points with trained staff in Peterborough include:

- Brock Mission
- Cameron House
- Wolfe Street Overflow
- YES Shelter for Youth and Families
- YWCA Crossroads
- FourCAST
- One City
- CMHA HKPR
- Housing Resource Centre
- Peterborough Social Services

Instead of having a dedicated housing team, Social Services is now organized so that all workers need to work with their clients on housing. Many of the remaining access points provide shelter services. However, service providers described many reasons that people experiencing homelessness were not accessing shelters:

- Shelters are full[1]
- The person is recorded in the system as housed, making them ineligible; however, their housing is precarious
- The person has shelter restrictions
- Service users don't have a choice in which shelter they can access
- Lack of low-barrier access (e.g., sobriety required)
- Shelters are experienced as unsafe (e.g., because of hidden drug use, people dying, a desire to stay sober, or the presence of gang members)
- Lack of co-ed facilities to accommodate partners of different genders
- No spaces for housed men fleeing domestic violence
- People have difficulty navigating the system
- Shelters are seen as unhealthy
- People are subject to searches and surveillance
- No shelters that allow pets
- Having a gender identity that is not recognized in shelter spaces
- People are deemed ineligible because they aren't connected to Peterborough
- Shelters are not physically accessible
- People have experienced gender-based violence in shelters

Service users shared similar concerns as those of service providers regarding the adequacy and accessibility of the shelters. People explained that they were not accessing shelters because:

- Shelters feel like jails
- Shelter rules are infantilizing
- No beds are available for which they're eligible (e.g., a bed for an adult man)

---

[1]   Participants spoke of discrepancies between City reports of shelter vacancies and frequent responses from shelter staff that no beds were available. There were also discrepancies between vacancy numbers depending on who was calling the shelters.

*Findings: Coordinated Access
Community Entry Points*

*What We Heard: 90 local stakeholders' perspectives on
Peterborough's Coordinated Access system*
Page 9

- They are restricted from using the shelters in Peterborough
- They are told to use a shelter (e.g., Cameron House) that is far from work and services
- They have been sexually assaulted and need to remain with a partner or friend to feel safe
- Trans people and those in non-hetero-normative families struggle to experience inclusion and safety
- People who are recently sober or trying not to use drugs find shelters unsafe
- because of the many people at them who are substance-dependent
- People who are substance-dependent struggle with where to store substances and drug-use kits, given that these are not allowed in the shelters and removing items from amnesty boxes requires people to leave shelter premises for 5 hours
- Shelters are not accessible for people with some disabilities (e.g., physical disabilities; neuro-divergence)
- Their things get stolen

It is also the case that even when shelters are used, they do not serve as transparent entry points to the Coordinated Access system for many service users. People experiencing homelessness struggle to figure out how to gain entry to the Coordinated Access system.

For example, ten people we interviewed either were not sure if they had participated in the Coordinated Access assessment process (the SPDAT) or, if they had, were unaware of its relationship to the By-Name List. To our question about whether or not he was on the By-Name List before he was housed, Stan responded in a way that typifies this group:

> **Stan: No, that sounds familiar, though. Like, I feel like I should know what that is.**

Similarly, when asked if he had participated in an assessment or been added to the By-Name List, Randy remarked:

> **Randy: SPDAT rings a bell. I'm pretty sure I had to do one when I got to the Brock too. I'm pretty sure.**

Randy then specified that he did not believe he was on the By-Name List. Among these ten people who thought they may have been assessed, none were aware of the By-Name List nor the rules for maintaining an active spot on it.

A further nine individuals had no idea about Coordinated Access, the SPDAT assessment, nor the By Name List. Rick's response to our question is typical:

> **Interviewer: And then there's another list called the By-Name List. Are you on that?**

> **Rick: No. Never heard of it.**

The experiences of people we interviewed suggest that entry to the Coordinated Access system is compromised or confusing for some people in need of housing supports. The challenges of accessing Community Access Points were summarized by a service provider like this:

Findings: Coordinated Access
Community Entry Points

What We Heard: 90 local stakeholders' perspectives on
Peterborough's Coordinated Access system
Page 10

Caleb: **In a system that claims to have no wrong door, it seems to have a lot of wrong doors. We had to have staff who were paid to try and help people navigate it. And even then, it was really, really hard. Imagine you're in survival mode.**

People beginning to engage with the Coordinated Access system must be able to access the services that act as entry points. They must also be assured that the potential benefits of engaging, most notably housing attainment, will outweigh the potential disadvantages, such a losing the shelter portion of their social assistance cheques while waiting for housing.

> IMPORTANT: **A major deterrent to engaging with any agency to be added to the By-Name List is that it can lead to the discontinuation of the shelter portion of one's Ontario Works or ODSP cheques. Signing up for the By-Name List means risking the loss of hundreds of dollars of monthly income.**

In order to remain on the BNL, at least every 90 days an individual must check in with a service provider who can update the database to indicate that the individual still wants to remain on the list. However, we heard from multiple service providers that this database is not being kept up-to-date. As Payne, a service provider, observed:

Payne: **We could log visits and see when somebody had checked in with someone last. And I don't see those things being updated. I don't see housing history being updated. So I don't I know what the real purpose is, other than just tracking numbers.**

Assessments

The Vulnerability Index-Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT) and Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (SPDAT) are both used by service providers to assess vulnerability levels of individuals and families experiencing homelessness. Much has been written in the academic literature regarding the shortcomings of the VI-SPDAT as an assessment tool. Among other concerns, researchers have found the VI-SPDAT on its own to be deficit-based, reliant on assessor-client rapport, and inaccurate in reflecting client vulnerability.[2] In 2020, OrgCode, the creator of VI-SPDAT, recommended that community organizations begin phasing it out. It stated "the VI-SPDAT was never designed to be an assessment tool. It was designed as a triage tool where it explicitly states that assessment should follow whatever results come from the VI-SPDAT."[3] But no new tool was offered, and given that Reaching Home

2   Balagot, C. et al. (2019). The homeless Coordinated Entry System: the VI-SPDAT and other predictors of establishing eligibility for services for single homeless adults. Journal of Social Distress and the Homeless, (28)2, 149–157. https://doi.org/10.1080/10530789.2019.1622858
        Brown, M., Cummings, C., Lyons, J., Carrión, A, & Watson, D.P., Reliability and validity of the Vulnerability Index- Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VISPDAT) in real-world implementation. Journal of Social Distress and the Homeless, 27:2, 110-117, DOI: 10.1080/10530789.2018.1482991
        Slota, S.C. et al. (2021). Just Infrastructure? Field Research on a Standardized Assessment Tool for a Continuum of Care for People Experiencing Homelessness. 84th Annual Meeting of the Association for Information Science & Technology | Oct. 29 – Nov. 3, 2021 | Salt Lake City, UT.
3   OrgCode. (2021). A Message from OrgCode on the VI-SPDAT Moving Forward https://www.orgcode.com/blog/a-message-from-orgcode-on-the-vi-spdat-moving-forward

communities must implement a common assessment tool, most municipalities continue to rely on the VI-SPDAT.

Most service users had little to share about their experiences with the SPDAT, in part due to their uncertainty about whether they'd actually completed the assessment. Some service users shared that the SPDAT assessments can be invasive.

> **Tiffany: They literally ask you — and they bunch it with a different question — if you've done sex work, with other questions where if you answer 'yes' [you have to answer more questions]. If you're an addict, do you do drugs? Do you do this? Do you sell? Do you buy?**

Pablo, a service user, described the SPDAT as "a bunch of pointless questions that didn't apply to us." But the majority of service users were ambivalent about the process or unsure whether they had participated in it. Aiden's description is an emblematic response:

> **Aiden: It was a pretty lengthy actually thing, to ask you a bunch of different things to see whether you qualify for what type of housing and kind of go from there ... I just did it because they asked me to ...**
>
> **Interviewer: And then at that same time did you get put on something called the By-Name List? Or did anyone tell you about that?**
>
> **Aiden: Nobody told me about that, no.**

Perspectives from service providers on the SPDAT varied widely. We heard from some, as seen in the following quote, that it is a traumatizing tool to use with clients and yet results in few of them getting into housing.

> **Amy: The [SPDAT] questions are horrific. The experience you have to put somebody through, where they cry through telling a stranger their experiences with the questions on that test are horrific.**

One intended role of By-Name-Lists is to provide a detailed and up-to-date profile of every person experiencing homelessness in a community so that all relevant service providers can understand the person's needs and work together to address them.

But we heard from numerous service providers that out-of-date, sparse, incomplete, and inaccurate SPDAT assessments prevent the BNL from helping them to understand and support people well. Instead, multiple service providers emphasized the value of getting to know individuals better by building relationships with them over time through their other programs.

One formerly homeless individual, who has been asked to administer the SPDAT by a local organization, explained why he refused to take it himself and how this limits his access to housing that is associated with the By-Name List:

> **Devin: I will not go on the By-Name List, because you have to do the SPDAT interview. I've had to give the SPDAT interview to the different people. I disagree**

with it. It should be done by a clinical psychologist ... I don't like some of the questions because, if somebody goes out and gets hit by a bus because we talked about sexual like, "Have you ever been sexually abused by a member of your family?" And if that person, if that's a repressed memory, that person goes out gets hit by a bus, like and these social service workers are doing the test ... I don't like any of it. And it should be a trained person, like a psychologist or something giving the test.

For someone like Devin (or anyone seeking housing) it is not always clear how the SPDAT results are used to triage and connect people to housing.

Even for service providers who are using SPDAT scores as part of the prioritization and matching process, there remains some ambiguity. Service providers have noted that, while they can see the SPDAT scores for those on the By-Name List, they often find few assessment details that are helpful for matching people to housing programs. There was a concern that service users are underreporting Indigenous status and LGBTQ2S+ status, among others, because staff are not sharing the value of collecting such information with service users (for example, the availability of housing dedicated to these groups). However, one service provider did not believe that such forms of self-identification were even considered in the SPDAT scores.

Some service providers also pointed out that the SPDAT only offers a frozen-in-time assessment rather than evolving assessments to reflect people's changing realities. They explained that SPDATs also rely on both the skill of the assessor and the relationship that they have with the service user. They found SPDATs to be completed inconsistently and by staff without sufficient training and perhaps insufficient time. Given all of this, assessments provided by the SPDAT tool can fall far short of providing a helpful understanding for service providers trying to fill a housing program space. It was noted that assessment tools like the SPDAT need to be seen more as decision assistance tools than decision making tools.

A lack of meaningful assessment data means that providers often must work with people selected from the By-Name List to fill in these assessment pieces—and too often eventually realize that their housing program will not adequately meet that person's needs. The acuity levels provided through the BNL rely heavily on SPDAT scores that might not actually reflect a person's current reality. This can result in people being inappropriately served, not placed, or re-traumatized. Mis-housing people can lead to housing arrangement breakdown, erosion of relationships with landlords, and increased risks for other tenants of the house. However, we also heard from one service provider that data aggregated from SPDAT assessments was helpful at the organizational level for advocacy and fundraising and provided staff with validation that the work is hard.

Although service providers found that the administration and use of the SPDAT tool contribute to client and staff strife, confusion, and lost opportunities for good housing matches, it continues to be used.

Prioritization — And Matching and Referral

In Peterborough, service providers who operate BNL housing inform the City homelessness system data administrator when they have housing units or program spaces available. The official process is for the data administrator to sort the BNL

*Findings: Coordinated Access
Prioritization and Matching*

*What We Heard: 90 local stakeholders' perspectives on
Peterborough's Coordinated Access system*
Page 13

according to the decision-making matrix[4] and then select the top four people who are eligible for that particular program and the next four as alternate names for the agency to consider in filling that unit or program space. A variety of concerns around the matching and referral process of the Coordinated Access system were raised by both service providers who contribute names to the BNL and those who house individuals from it.

While some service providers who refer service users to the BNL said that their clients had generally been successful in getting housed through the BNL, others found that few or none of their clients were being housed this way.

This sense of ineffectiveness corresponds with what service users report. Recall that 19 of 48 people were unsure how the Coordinated Access process worked or were unaware of any of its component parts. Others report willingly participating, but not finding it a viable avenue to connect to housing, even though they belong to a priority group (in this case, someone over 64 years of age). As Ron notes,

> **Ron: They do [the SPDAT] every so often … And it's all about finding housing. Doesn't matter where, it can be the worst crack house in the city, and they'll shove you in it. Well, excuse me, I don't [want to] live in one of those buildings, I'll sleep on the street before I sleep in a crack house … part of my medications are narcotics, and that makes me a prime target for being mugged and [having] my meds taken.**

Others have similarly struggled to move off the By-Name List due to issues with appropriate housing stock. When a researcher asked Owen what happened after he did the SPDAT assessment, Owen said,

> **Owen: Like I'm supposed to be on the list with Fourcast … John Howard Society, CMHA, that too … They say they fucking don't have places.**

Some service providers who offer programs to people from the BNL reported that they continue to see the same names being pulled as prioritized for housing, but that few people from BNL pulls are a good fit for the available housing. It can also be hard to locate people recommended for housing. We heard that it can be challenging to contact people on the BNL, as they may have no phone, email, or address and that it takes time to deal with situations where people recommended for housing are not, in fact, a good fit for the available resources. Interviews suggested that the City may be starting to collect housing preferences from individuals on the BNL in order to get better matches.

Service providers expressed concern for those people who are pulled, sometimes repeatedly, from the BNL, but not selected for housing programs. It was suggested that multiple agencies that offer high acuity programming should be getting the same pulls so that the same people don't keep getting bypassed. It was explained by providers that agencies can only turn down a person three times before the City will only provide that

---

4   The matrix considers 1) whether the person is sheltered, 2) whether they are a youth or senior, 3) the length of time they have been homeless, and 4) their SPDAT score. We heard in interviews that Social Services may be reviewing the decision-making matrix since it was originally designed for addressing higher acuity. We also heard that there is a new family matrix that addresses considerations such as the effects of housing decisions on custody of children.

Findings: Coordinated Access
Prioritizing and Matching

What We Heard: 90 local stakeholders' perspectives on
Peterborough's Coordinated Access system
Page 14

one name,[5] meaning that the person could have been waiting and destabilizing for a year by that point.

This all raises the question of who ultimately gets to select the people who will be offered housing. Matching and referral processes can only be successful in addressing chronic homelessness once there are sufficient units, rent subsidies, and supportive housing programs. Until then, these processes are restricted to trying to ensure fairness in the allocation of limited resources. We did, however, hear that the increase in transfers of people between BNL housing units may be providing people with more suitable housing and preventing them from having to leave housing and go back on the BNL.

Federal, provincial, and municipal mandates for implementing Coordinated Access systems require leadership and tools for how to do Coordinated Access in ways that are fair and transparent. In the wake of the VI-SPDAT's discontinuation, communities have been encouraged to: determine and provide transparency on the values underpinning decisions being made through the Coordinated Access System and to determine what effects regarding homelessness they want to avoid for their residents and whom they want to protect first. In this, it has been suggested that addressing racial and other forms of structural inequity as well as incorporating "consumer choice, case conferencing, and evidence of effectiveness" for service models are all key considerations.[6]

Other Key Themes

This section shares more in-depth information regarding what interview participants told us about the local housing and homelessness system, organized around three key themes that participants raised with us repeatedly.

To organize participants' thoughts, we sorted them according to three categories: what works, what doesn't work, and what could work. Participants spoke negatively about the system more often than they spoke positively about it. According to our analysis of the interview transcripts, participants discussed what isn't working three times as often as they discussed what is working.

Key Theme One: The Parks and Facilities Bylaw

The City of Peterborough Parks and Facilities By-law makes it unlawful for anyone in a park to "erect or be within a structure, hut or tent." This by-law has been enforced on a regular basis by the City through the removal of people's tents and possessions if they do not move out of public parks. In March 2023, the City of Peterborough decided to contract a private security firm at a cost of $3,330 a week "to enforce municipal rules at homeless encampments in the city, instead of city bylaw staff, after about six incidents in

_____

5   However, another service provider stated that this rule is no longer being enforced by the City.
6   Shinn, M. & Richard, M.K. (2022). Allocating Homeless Services After the Withdrawal of the Vulnerability Index–Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool. Opinions, Ideas and Practice, (112)3, 378-382.

which city staff were threatened and had their property damaged."[7] Interview and survey participants felt strongly about this bylaw and its enforcement.

What Works Well

We did not hear from service providers about anything that works well regarding the enforcement of the Parks Bylaw, except that it has, as Heather stated, been a "huge learning opportunity" for City staff who might not previously have had a lot of "exposure to homelessness." There are, however, many other ways that City staff could be familiarizing themselves with the experiences of people experiencing homelessness—that do not involve the movement or loss of people's temporary homes. Service users similarly had nothing positive to say about encampment clearings, tickets related to bylaw infractions, nor any other measures in place to penalize or criminalize visible homelessness (e.g., fines for loitering).

What Doesn't Work

Multiple interview participants spoke of a weekly practice of City staff telling people living outdoors to move on and disposing of people's tents and possessions. To abide by this law prohibiting camping outside, people who are discharged from shelters or choosing not to live in shelters are constantly having to move and "hide."

Service users explained that encampment clearings are degrading and fruitless. Coli recalls being ticketed by a bylaw officer, even as she was removing her tent:

> **Coli:** I was taking down my tent here a week and a half ago. Taking it down! In the process of taking it down ... And I said, "I'm taking my tent down in front of you, and you're still going to give me a 'No Trespassing' [order] until next January 2023? That's fucking outrageous!

People who are homeless are unable to pay fines associated with bylaw violations. Unfortunately, for some people, this means they get a bench-warrant and can end up in jail. The use of 'No Trespassing' orders is another way to criminalize homelessness – a costly and ineffective intervention since people will move out of jail into homelessness again.

By the time Coli was given the 'No Trespass' order in the summer of 2022, she had lost her things several times before. She explained in the interview:

> **Coli:** When it first started happening, it was kind of just like word of mouth, and then like, we would hear about it. And then they would come and give you half an hour at 7:30 in the morning. You had half an hour pack your shit, or it's getting bulldozed. And the first time they showed up there, they had- I'm not joking, I remember this very vividly- they had 4 police cars. And tell me this isn't intimidation, okay. They had 4 police cars, 5 small city trucks, 2 dump trucks, 2 bulldozers, 2 bylaws.
>
> **Interviewer: For how many people?**

7   Peterborough Examiner. (March 14, 2023). Peterborough switches to private guards to enforce bylaws at homeless encampments. https://www.thepeterboroughexaminer.com/news/council/2023/03/14/ peterborough-switches-private-guards-to-enforce-bylaws-at-homeless-encampments.html

Coli: 4 tents. Can you say 'overkill much'? And how much of the taxpayer money has been spent on this, when there should be programs for us homeless folk? How many tents are going to be fucking donated that are just going to be fucking scooped up and thrown out again? Like give me a break. People have no fucking idea what they're doing. No clue. No idea. And it's just a vicious circle of bullshit and going nowhere.

People's stories illuminate how tent evictions destabilize their lives and do not lead to shelter use or to housing. As Caitlin noted, "it's stupid because every time you go anywhere you have to take everything with you." Our findings align with those of Canada's advocate on the right to housing: Removing people's tents is costly and doesn't work – people are simply displaced, destabilized, dehumanized and have to start again to try to rebuild their lives.[8] Andrea paints a vivid picture in her interview:

Andrea: The City wastes a lot of their money and their time trying to basically chase people around in tents, if I'm being honest with you ... just to remove one homeless camp. And then you gotta pay the cops. You gotta pay the city. You gotta pay the dump truck drivers. You gotta pay this people, that people ... For one homeless encampment to be removed ... It's just a big waste of money, as far as I'm concerned.

Interviewer: Have you had your tent cleared?

Andrea: Yeah.

Interviewer: What's that like?

Andrea: It sucks.

Interviewer: Do they give you notice?

Andrea: Not anymore. She just comes up and she shakes your tent and tells you to get up and go. We don't get along ... She's a city parks recreation supervisor woman.

Interviewer: So she just tells you to pack up and go. Does she give you time to pack up?

Andrea: [She gives you time,] As long as you start moving. If you argue with her, she brings cops. She'll actually get a dump truck in there and trash it.

Interviewer: And trash your stuff.

Andrea: Yeah, she's had forklifts come in and push the tents and stuff like that. She's just out of this world ... I lost all of my son's pictures. I just buried my dad yesterday. I lost a lot of his stuff.

---

8   https://www.housingchrc.ca/en/homeless-encampments-in-canada-a-human-rights-crisis

www.socialchangelab.ca

Encampment clearings result in the loss of personal belongings – things like photographs and mementos that offer hope and comfort as well as medication, food and clothing that are essential to survival. They also result in the loss of trust in institutions and faith that things will ever get better. We heard many heart-wrenching stories from people whose lives were thrown into dump trucks, multiple times. None of the people we interviewed who had had their tents removed opted to use the shelter system. The removal of tents by municipal staff simply confirmed their suspicion that being homeless makes a person an object of public scorn.

Service providers were similarly unambiguous about the practical and ethical problems the encampment clearings pose for people.

> **Kate: We don't let people stand still long enough and we take away their stuff all the time that they're constantly in survival mode to a different degree that you wouldn't be if you were just living outside. Right? So, I think that that's caused more instability in the community than we can even begin to understand. So, we have to figure out a way to stop doing that. [Pause.] Yeah, it's inhumane.**

> **Kristen: Yeah, and it's just wild to like live in a community with all of these agencies and supports and programs and week after week have the same people saying, "All my shit was taken again," or "The City said they weren't going to touch my tent this week. I went in for breakfast at Sally-Anne and my stuff was gone."**

> **Emilia: We're not meeting "housing as a right." Until then we need to stop criminalising and punishing people for not accessing housing that doesn't exist.**

> **Veronica: The police have been doing a good job in the tough situation that they're in, because they don't want to be the enforcement … The tenting in parks puts them in a very tough position when they're trying to create relationships and help. And then the City is requiring them to move people … I know they've always said that they don't want to be in that role. They really don't. They want to be community partners.**

Findings: Parks Bylaw

What We Heard: 90 local stakeholders' perspectives on
Peterborough's Coordinated Access system
Page 18

We heard that the enforcement of the bylaw has implications for the following groups:

UNHOUSED PEOPLE
- Increased risk of exposure and freezing to death
- Shamed for living in a way that they don't want to live
- When cherished possessions are taken, people are retraumatized, put into greater survival mode, and experience more instability
- People's health takes a backseat to other more immediate needs
- With no other option for where to go, people pitch tents again

CITY OUTREACH WORKERS
- Experiencing hostility and distrust from unhoused people and agencies

LOCAL AGENCIES
- Contacted by clients in crisis when their tents and possessions are taken
- Spend financial and staff resources trying to continue replacing people's tents and survival gear
- Struggle to find people who have been made to move

BYLAW ENFORCEMENT AND POLICE
- Workers at the encampments have been seen in tears
- Bylaw enforcement does not improve community safety and is thus outside the scope of reasonable police work
- City spending resources on staff and equipment to remove people and tents

What Could Work

Until people do not feel compelled to live outdoors, participants recommended that:

- The City CAO enact Section 13 so that people have a safe space outside to stay[9]
- The City designate one place where people can pitch and leave their tents and possessions, knowing they will not be taken. Such a place would ideally have washrooms, showers, food, security, and allow workers to support people on-site
- Conversations around encampments continue between community partners, including police
- People recognize that it is up to City Council to change the bylaw, and well within their capacity to do so
- A fulsome analysis by the City of the effects of encampment evictions

> **Survey Respondent: Even just legally allowing tenting in the parks would be life changing for many people.**

Overall, we heard that the enforcement of the bylaw provides practically no benefit, but does much injury. If its purpose is to protect people's safety and property, the question that needs to be asked is: Whose safety and property matters?

---

9   At this point, Section 13 has never been used, even though workers regularly report that they are being told the shelters are full, and the number of people on the By-Name List is always much above the number of shelter beds.

Findings: Harm Reduction　　　　　　　　*What We Heard: 90 local stakeholders' perspectives on*
Peterborough's Coordinated Access system
Page 19

Key Theme Two: Harm Reduction

Agency staff reported seeing frequent "extraordinary use" of injecting and smoking drugs among community members in order to stave off "the pain of withdrawal." The tainting of the drug supply means that people who use drugs are reacting to and withdrawing from multiple substances—and doing anything to avoid withdrawal. It is important to understand how substances drive behaviour.

Service users who use drugs expressed concerns that the harm reduction policies in place do not align with the realities of substance dependence and thus prevent them from using the shelter system.

As Hillary explained:

> **Hillary: As a drug addict, if you go [into the shelter] and you ask for a certain package to take out, you have to wait five hours before you can re-enter the building.**

Every time people retrieve something from their amnesty box – the only place shelter residents can ensure their things won't be stolen – they have to leave the premises for five hours. This poses problems. Hillary elaborates through a series of questions:

> **Hillary: When are you gonna smoke [a cigarette]? When are you gonna have lunch? Why can't you do that? You gotta turn your lighter in and just stupid childish things.**
>
> **Interviewer: Yeah, 5 hours is a long time in the winter, right?**
>
> **Hillary: Especially on a Sunday [when there are fewer places to go].**

What Works

- Accessible shelters that acknowledge diversity among those seeking emergency accommodations, including with respect to substance use
- Various harm reduction initiatives (including safer supply, safe consumption, harm reduction tent, and managed alcohol) are helping people to use drugs more safely and turn their attention to addressing health, housing, and other goals
- Participation of people with lived experience of substance use as staff or paid consultants in service planning and provision
- Recognizing that substance abuse is a survival mechanism (e.g., it helps people stay awake and safe or warm)

What Doesn't Work

- Absence of a safe consumption site for inhalation drug use
- Lack of shelter distribution of harm reduction supplies
- Shelters not permitting people to carry Naloxone in-house
- Prohibiting people from bringing substances into shelters
- A lack of storage for substances at shelters
- No-guest policies in housing programs can mean people using alone

Findings: Harm Reduction

What We Heard: 90 local stakeholders' perspectives on
Peterborough's Coordinated Access system
Page 20

What Might Work

- Ensuring Peterborough has both wet shelter emergency accommodations (where drug and alcohol use does not limit access) connected to safe consumption resources so that people can safely consume substances and dry shelter emergency accommodations (where onsite substance use is prohibited)
- A housing-led managed alcohol program
- Shelter staff training, esp. in Naloxone administration and distribution and staff being able to keep Naloxone on their person

Key Theme Three: Staffing

Many of the comments about staffing related to shelter staff. Overall, service providers identified a discrepancy between limited resources (low wages, training, experience, education, staffing complements) and the physically, mentally, and emotionally demanding nature of working with people with intense and complex needs.

> **Belinda:** I think that people get burnt out really quickly. When I look at some of the people that I'm referring to that shouldn't necessarily be here any longer, I think that's what's happened. They've been burnt out. They're very cynical now. If I just look at myself, I know I take my work home with me a lot. There's not enough compensation, for sure. There's not enough time to regroup yourself. There's always somewhere to fill in, there's always a gap. So, you know, someone's away, we're jumping in. So it's just again, it's a vicious cycle of us giving all that we have and then not getting anything back to refill ourselves.

> **Janet:** I think by the end, there was like a level of terror amongst all employees. And I don't think that's a stretch about what might happen on a shift. And we were just burning through employees.

> **Jessica:** The City can only get what it's paying for and it's not paying for much so it can't expect much. So, I think yeah, that's my number one message.

What Works

- Regular team check-ins for staff to get updates on service users' status and support each other
- Shelters moving from per diem funding from the City to a more fixed funding model that helped ensure payroll and expenses could be consistently covered
- Shelter staff training, e.g., non-violent crisis intervention and suicide intervention

What Doesn't Work

- Shelter staff going beyond their job descriptions and the funding agreement
- Substantial responsibilities for one or two staff
- Working with people whose needs are too complex for staff capacity
- Challenging hours
- It is challenging for shelters to provide opportunities for staff to come together for self-care and debriefing critical incidents (too many workers, open 24/7)
- Low wages and no pension/wellness supports for workers at shelters, despite having the same skill requirements and higher risk and stress as staff at other agencies

Findings: Staffing

What We Heard: 90 local stakeholders' perspectives on
Peterborough's Coordinated Access system
Page 21

- Lack of staff training to work with people with complex needs
- Understaffed, entry-level positions with very high risk (which may lead shelters to have strict rules around access)
- Staff becoming traumatized, burned out, or jaded by the work
- Staff experiencing food insecurity, housing insecurity, not affording self-care
- Shelters are losing good and experienced staff, keeping and promoting unsuitable, jaded staff, and always having to train new staff, who are often young and inexperienced
- Staff inconsistency (e.g., around service restrictions) resulting from strong personalities and limited staffing
- Big discrepancy in City jobs and City-contracted shelter jobs

What Might Work

- More funding, staffing, and resources for shelters
- Better salaries for shelter staff
- More staff meetings and chances to ensure all staff are on the same page for consistent practices
- Opportunities for workers to talk about their work and advocacy "on a different level"
- More staff training to understand the current realities of the community e.g., around trauma-informed care

Survey Results: Top Priorities to Implement Right Now

In addition to our open-ended interviews with 48 service users and 42 service providers, we also conducted an online survey for service providers only.

The survey asked local sector professionals to identify the actions they believed were the most important ones to take to address homelessness locally. Sixty-six professionals working in Peterborough's housing, homelessness, and adjacent sectors each selected 5 of 30 possible actions that must be taken to address homelessness. They prioritized:

1. More RGI units or rent supplements/subsidies
2. Advocacy for higher OW and ODSP rates
3. More supportive housing or high-staffed tenement for people with high acuity needs
4. Support for people living in public parks
5. More accommodating shelter spaces for people with various needs
6. Reframing housing as a human right

Notably, these selections pertain primarily to ensuring sufficient resources and a supportive policy environment, but overall do not involve the workings of the Coordinated Access system. They depart from a model that assesses and prioritizes people in order to match them with scarce resources. Instead, these selections insist on a mindset and commitment to ensuring that people broadly are housed.

What We Heard: 90 local stakeholders' perspectives on
Peterborough's Coordinated Access system
Page 22

Discussion: First, Do No Harm

Through this study, our team has sought to better understand whether Peterborough's housing and homelessness systems were helping or hindering efforts to realize local residents' right to housing, and how we can do better.

This report has provided an overview of the observations, insights, and recommendations of those who best understand the needs of people experiencing housing insecurity in this community: people who have experienced it themselves and the professionals who work with them. Many survey respondents indicated the need for more universal and preventative measures, such as reframing housing as a human right and advocating for more adequate provincial social assistance supports. However, our best understandings from interviews with service providers and service users indicate that their priority lies with the development of policies, practices, and procedures that, at the very least, do no harm.

This includes ending a number of practices that participants told us are causing harm to both service users and service providers.

It is important to end ...	Because it ...	Less harmful options might include
The discourse that adequate shelter access and vacancies exist for people experiencing homelessness.	Serves to blame individuals for not using shelters, prevents the use of Section 13 of the Parks Bylaw, and inhibits exploration of other emergency housing models.	A range of accessible sheltering options that reflect the diversity of the population experiencing homelessness rather than a one-size-fits-all model.
The enforcement of the Parks Bylaw.	Repeatedly retraumatizes some of this community's most vulnerable people.	Designating a public space for tenting, where washrooms, security, and support workers would be available.
The lack of safe inhalation services and harm reduction in shelters.	Risks the lives of people who use drugs.	Outdoor safe inhalation sites alongside advocacy for a permanent safe inhalation site; Harm reduction practices in shelters.
The divide for shelter workers between high-risk, high-responsibility work involving high-needs individuals—and low wages, benefits, and staff care.	Contributes to food/housing insecurity and unwellness among staff, burnout, and turnover, all leading to poorer service.	Training and wages commensurate with the level of responsibility, risk, and complexity of frontline service delivery.

What We Heard: 90 local stakeholders' perspectives on
Peterborough's Coordinated Access system
Page 23

It is important to end …	Because it …	Less harmful options might include
The loss of the shelter portion of OW and ODSP cheques when people are found to be homeless.	Prevents individuals from engaging with the Coordinated Access system.	
The "dumping" of people with challenging needs among institutions and agencies such as shelters and jails.	Leaves individuals with inadequate and unsuitable programming.	Accessible, high-quality health and social supports; 24/7/365 supportive housing.
Inconsistencies between the level of detail that referring workers include in SPDAT assessments and the level that workers providing housing need for effective matching to programs.	Leads to: the need for further assessment; unsuitable matches; and breakdowns in housing matches.	A new triage tool developed by and for the people who will use it in consultation with academic researchers trained in trauma-informed assessment practices and sufficient training on it for workers.

In general, it may help to have what one participant suggested: a "community reset" around ways in which the City can provide support, advocate, and work collaboratively with the community, including honest conversations around expectations of each other- and to use the data generated in this community as a guide in this process.

Next Steps

This report describes what we heard from the service users and service providers we spoke with. In the coming months, we will feed our findings back to the community to check our understandings. For example, at a forum hosted by a Question of Care in May 2023 called "Housing and Homelessness in Peterborough: A Forum on Systemic Issues, Structural Drivers, and Solutions to Homelessness Locally," we will share and check our findings and ask participants there to begin developing strategies for moving forward.

Our team continues to engage in popular education by complementing our "Get In Line: A guide to Peterborough's coordinated access and emergency shelter system" zine with other booklets, which report back what we heard about homelessness and: possessions, jails, encampments, SPDAT assessments, and other factors in the lives of people experiencing homelessness.

We will also complete deeper analyses of our findings to contribute to academic and political/government conversations.

In the end, we plan to provide Peterborough with a community-directed roadmap for addressing homelessness locally, with timeline, deliverables, and responsibilities for realizing the right to housing.

What We Heard: 90 local stakeholders' perspectives on
Peterborough's Coordinated Access system
Page 24

Appendix: Methods

Semi-structured Interviews (depth of perspectives of local experts living and working in the housing sector)
Service users and service providers were both asked about their experiences with the local housing and homelessness system, relevant rules and regulations, service terminations, and the usage of service bans/restrictions. Slightly different questions for providers working in government and policy regarded their connection to this system and the benefits of/constraints from/need for certain policies, processes, and programs. Service providers who provided demographic information primarily identified as: White; cis-women; and/or straight/heterosexual. There was even representation from frontline staff and management/senior management.

Online Survey (breadth of perspectives across the sector about what is needed)
Service provider respondents were asked to identify their role in the sector, whether they had current or previous need for housing services, and the actions they believe need to be taken to address local homelessness.

Literature Review
We synthesized evidence from academic and grey literature regarding the effectiveness of coordinated access systems and their components for housing-insecure people generally and populations who may be at particular risk for homelessness.

Limitations
The perspectives here do not represent voices from the Violence Against Women sector nor people working to provide support or bylaw enforcement at the encampments. We have also not yet been able to access By-Name-List (BNL) demographics from the City to develop more sophisticated profiles of who is homeless and who is/is not moving out of homelessness. Staff turnover and limited capacity may have contributed to these gaps. Also, we were limited in our ability to analyze the many survey responses that selected more than the requested number of choices.