

## **Housing Stock Protocol**

Approved Aug 11, 2010

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### **Purpose:**

To outline the approach used to assist Service Providers in helping their clients to choose housing.

### **Background:**

Housing and Support services will be provided based on the Housing First model. This model creates a recovery oriented culture that puts consumer/tenant choice at the centre of all its considerations with respect to the provision of Housing and Support services. It operates on the principle that all homeless individuals with mental illness should be offered the opportunity to live in permanent housing of varying types that is otherwise available to people without psychiatric or other disabilities. Neither Service Providers (SPs) nor Housing has the right to refuse housing access in the MHCC project – individuals enrolled into the project and assigned to the service + housing intervention shall receive that intervention.

The geographic scope for securing housing is the City of Toronto. Client choice of location within the City is of paramount importance. Client choice of housing is understood to be interpreted within the context of the Toronto rental market, and the parameters of the project<sup>1</sup>. For example, a principle is that participants be offered permanent housing consistent with housing available to people without psychiatric or other disabilities, such that participants can make housing choices just like anyone else in the market – choice means taking into consideration what vacancies are available at the affordable rent levels as defined by the project, and often having to make trade-offs on what housing amenities/location is preferred relative to what is possible.

The program has control over client access to housing stock, primarily by facilitating access to rental of independent apartments from community landlords. If housing is scattered site, a maximum of 15 %<sup>2</sup> of the total units in any one building can be dedicated to the program to ensure social inclusion and community integration.

Units shall meet basic requirements for condition. Units shall be self contained (own bathroom and kitchen). Searches will primarily target one-bedroom apartments, however, the City may include other unit types to respond to needs (such as bachelor units in high rent/high demand areas of the City). Clients may also choose to reside in social, supported, supportive or alternative housing and in those locales despite that the rent allowance may not be required (see Rent Rules protocol), the services shall

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<sup>1</sup> Offer tenants choice in housing location and units, within reason depending on availability and affordability (City of Toronto Contract with MHCC, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> MHCC sets the level at 20%, however, the Toronto Site proposal is for 15% based on our experience with projects of this type.

continue (on terms to be determined case by case between the Service Provider and Housing Provider). Legal rights to tenancy are in place. Whenever possible leases are in the name of the client, not the program, to empower consumers/tenants in their recovery and autonomy, and assist them in achieving full independence.

Rent allowances are provided so that participants pay 30% or less of their income for housing if in the private market. The target rents shall be in the range of \$1,000 or less, although variations in the 30% rule are permitted to access prime locations that in the opinion of the service worker and the client are affordable for the client.

Rent allowances are portable – “attached” to the client, not the unit. As such, the administration must allow for the flexibility of a client to move to different units or addresses in the course of their participation in the project. The provision of rent allowances must also adhere to all local/provincial legislation and must be designed such that they do not negatively impact an individual’s access to or provision of welfare.

## **Principles:**

The key project principles with respect to housing include:

Top Priority:

**client choice** - within the framework established for the project (i.e. a range of approaches available to assist SPs in supporting clients to access housing they prefer, with support from Housing Connections (HC) to manage all housing details; must be affordable generally at about 30% of income; rent allowance of just up to \$600 per month; unit must meet established criteria for quality, etc.; what the market can provide)<sup>3</sup>.

Other Principles:

**speed** – clients are housed as quickly as possible once they are enrolled (this is also important to ensure we achieve the longest tenancies possible in order to support the research and to maximize the beneficial aspects of the project for each client)<sup>4</sup>. It is

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<sup>3</sup> For more information on “choice”, see “The Intensive Case Manager and The Intensive Case Management Team in the Housing First Context”, Streets to Homes, prepared for MHCC National Training September 2009 – p.4 – 6 for a listing of considerations; and Pathways Housing First Program Manual, Canadian Edition, 2009; prepared for MHCC National Training September 2009 p.11 – “This housing model – known as “scatter site independent housing” – honours consumers’ preferences, and it helps them choose apartments in neighbourhoods they are familiar with ... naturally some housing and neighbourhood choices are restricted by affordability and suitability of available units.

<sup>4</sup> Pathways p.20 “Finding a safe, affordable apartment typically takes approximately two weeks. Every effort is made to show prospective tenants two or three apartments available for immediate occupancy [note: rational for Toronto’s use of Inventory and Pre-Approved buildings approaches]. More often than not, participants eager to end their homelessness select the first unit they are shown...In a small percentage of cases, engagement may take many weeks and even months before trust is gained and the participant agrees to accept an apartment.” See also Chapter 3, including “The discussions about participants’ preferences and constantly reviewed

understood that while most clients are likely to choose a unit from the stock of inventory units or pre-approved buildings, there are those who prefer other housing choices which may be unavailable at the time they are looking for a unit. The SP work to ensure these are reasonable locations based on the needs and wants of their clients, and will discuss the potential of delays and need for interim housing in the event that housing choices are not possible to accommodate quickly. HC will make best efforts to respond as quickly as possible to help SP house their clients in these other locations as set out in this protocol and the Housing Access protocol.

- **tenant as lease-holder** – the tenant assumes all of the rights and obligations of any tenant in the market, with the support of the service workers to help them be successful tenants
- **sustainability** – the housing model is a model that could reasonably be replicated in the future
- **stewardship** – the project is funded through taxpayer dollars, and therefore, every effort must be made to ensure dollars are used wisely and for the furtherance of the project objectives. Multiple agencies will be involved in decision making and funding approvals, therefore, roles and authorities must be clearly established.
- **alignment with other policies and protocols** - this policy and protocol must fit within the framework of other Toronto Site policies and protocols which may relate to this policy and protocol.

## Related Protocols & Documents:

- Interim Housing
- Access to Housing
- Rent Payments
- Moves
- Landlord/Services Relationship
- Toronto Site Proposal, Appendix 4: Rent Allowances, January 2009
- The Intensive Case Manager and The Intensive Case Management Team in the Housing First Context”, Streets to Homes, prepared for MHCC National Training September 2009
- Pathways Housing First Program Manual, Canadian Edition, 2009; prepared for MHCC National Training September 2009

## Roles:

### Service Providers:

The housing model for Toronto is based on the Service Provider (SP) having the lead responsibility for helping their client to find and keep housing.

### City & Housing Connections:

The role of the housing lead (City and through its sub-contractor, Housing Connections – City/HC) is to provide help accessing accommodation and payment of rent allowances as

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and weighted against the market realities and available units. The search for the perfect unit is kept in check by the availability of real (sic – “rental”) units and constraints of available funding.”.

well as other funds that may be needed from time to time and on a case by case basis (i.e. damages, moving, storage, etc.). The City of Toronto is the Housing Service Provider, and has contracted day to day administrative responsibilities to Housing Connections. HC will work directly with SPs to help SPs support their clients.

With respect to Housing Stock, key City accountabilities as set out in the City's contract with MHCC, and the City's contract with Housing Connections are to:

- Develop a portfolio of housing aimed at accessing decent and affordable (approx. \$1,000/month) units in a range of areas throughout Toronto:
  - develop and implement a targeted outreach plan to recruit housing providers
  - develop a housing provider agreement
  - establish an inventory of rented units (generally up to 10 units at a time, with priority given to areas of the City defined by SPs as high demand whenever possible)
- Develop policies and procedures to ensure the quality of that portfolio
- Support SPs with immediate access to housing for their clients
  - post information about units and vacancies
  - assist service providers in identifying and securing suitable housing
- Administer rent allowances (generally \$600/month), and pay allowances directly to landlords, as well as last month's rent deposit

## **Housing Stock Approach**

### **(1) Making the Housing Choice**

See the "Housing Access Protocol" for details on steps to be taken by SPs.

Making<sup>5</sup> the best possible housing choice from the start has a positive impact on housing success. Therefore, service providers and the lead housing resource would be trained through the national training offered about housing access and working with landlords, and service providers will be further trained by the lead housing resource on any specific protocols developed for Toronto building on the national training. The following will be discussed with all prospective tenants as part of the housing search:

- the area of the City the client wants to move to and why that area is attractive
- the type of unit desired, and some key characteristics (main floor or higher, balcony or yard, number of rooms, elevator, etc.)
- based on what the client can afford, what areas have rents in that range
- what level of daily support does the client feel they will need, and will the building/neighbourhood have that support available (for example, meal preparation, easy access to a drop-in for recreational and other supports)
- transportation needs – for example, a neighbourhood where most services and daily needs are in walking distance, or a neighbourhood without these services and needs but with good public transit services

A "Housing Choices Form" has been developed to assist SPs in working with their clients to scope out what preferred housing types and locations. This form is available on the HC web-site set up for the MHCC project in Toronto.

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<sup>5</sup> Source: MHCC Toronto Site Proposal, 2009 – Appendix 4.

## **(2) Approaches to Accessing Housing:**

There are a number of approaches established to support SPs in helping their clients to access the housing they prefer. The approach used will depend upon client preference because “client choice” is the priority principle.

The provision of housing options by the City/HC relies heavily on the securing of units in advance (the inventory) and advance agreements with large landlords (pre-approvals of buildings – see next section) to ensure that permanent housing is available for clients with minimal delays. Clients often choose from this inventory of units, as this is the best way to ensure rapid access to housing. Having vacant, furnished units available which the participant may access very quickly is an important aspect of the research project’s fidelity, and also helps maximize the housing benefit for each client<sup>6</sup>. In addition, as many “pre-approved” buildings as possible shall be sought – this maximizes the chances for clients to quickly access housing of their choice when the inventory isn’t sufficient, and reduces costs as the project is not paying rents for vacant units in pre-approved buildings.

Inventory units and pre-approved buildings are identified in keeping with the affordability and unit condition assessment framework identified for the project, including the parameters provided to service workers to assist them in helping their clients to make housing decisions, and with best efforts to find affordable units (in the range of \$1,000/month) in areas identified as preferred by clients by the SPs, where units are available in the market.

Recognizing that the inventory and pre-approved lists may not always provide housing options that the participant wants, provision is also made for customized searches (bottom up) by HC, by the SP & participant, or by both.

### **2.1 Housing Inventory**

See the “Rent Payments Protocol” for more information about rent payments on inventory units.

An inventory of units that are furnished and vacant shall be maintained and made available to SPs to access for their participants through the HC website. The intent of the inventory is to provide opportunities for rapid housing for individuals who prefer units on the inventory.

The inventory will generally have about 10 units available, and will be regularly replenished. Priority for inventory units is given to getting units in high demand areas (currently downtown and Parkdale).

Efforts will be made to provide a range of housing options and neighbourhoods – although the range will be limited by the size of the inventory (in particular, the cost of

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<sup>6</sup> It is intended that clients will experience a rapid end to homelessness (City of Toronto MHCC contract, 2009)

maintaining it). Rents shall be paid in full by MHCC until the participant takes over as tenant, at which time the tenant shall be responsible for their portion of the rent.

From time to time, where a participant needs long term interim housing, an inventory unit may be used for that purpose (see Interim Housing protocol for more information).

Where a participant moves into an inventory unit, the furnishings immediately become their property.

It is critical that the inventory be maintained, and responsive to feedback from SPs and their clients as to quality of units, locations, etc. In addition to efforts to seek housing in the conventional rental market, HC will seek units in the non-conventional market (smaller buildings, basement apartments, etc.).

## **2.2 Pre-Approved List**

Private market<sup>7</sup> landlords are asked to express their interest in participating in the demonstration project, and to identify potential buildings. Contacts will be generated from the thorough list of private market landlords the City already partners with. The lead housing resource would also provide dedicated outreach to private market landlords through out Toronto making them aware of the program and soliciting their interest to participate, in partnership with existing processes for accessing landlords. Buildings may also be suggested by service providers (see below).

The pre-approved list is available on the website set up for the project.

- SP's are given passwords to the website to check on buildings that have been pre-approved.
- The table indicates the address and closest intersections.
- Devinda at HC is the contact person for the SP's to call to see if there might be any vacant units.
- Devinda will then give the property contact name and number to the worker if there are any vacancies at present or forthcoming so the Worker can take the client to view.
- Pre-Approved buildings have a Housing Agreement already in place.
- Should the Worker have any difficulties, HC can act as liaison.

## **2.3 Customized ("bottom up") Searches by HC**

It<sup>8</sup> is expected that the bulk of units will be located in scattered, multi-residential apartment buildings. For tenants who prefer alternate housing types (such as smaller buildings, buildings not on the pre-approved buildings list or inventory, special housing needs such as supportive or accessible, etc), or unit types/locations not available on the inventory or pre-approved lists at the time of the housing search, the lead housing

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<sup>7</sup> Source: MHCC Toronto Site Proposal, 2009 – Appendix 4

<sup>8</sup> Source: MHCC Toronto Site Proposal, 2009 – Appendix 4

resource will seek to identify housing options that fit the criteria provided by the SP on behalf of their participant.

Where there is no unit acceptable to the participant on the inventory or in the pre-approved buildings due to specific preferences the participant may have (e.g. accessible unit, need for supportive housing, housing in areas of the city not included in the inventory or pre-approved list, etc.), a “bottom up” approach is available for the participant to identify the type/location of housing they want and to have HC look for housing options that would fulfill that request<sup>9</sup>.

The bottom up approach will generally lengthen the time it takes to access housing, because of the time needed to find a unit that meets the participant’s choice. For example, the project has no control over wait lists for specialized housing/supportive housing; and vacancy rates may be low and/or rents too high in the preferred building or neighbourhood. Housing delays are not in the interests of the client or the research requirements of the project (especially since the project is time limited, and the desire is to maximize the housing benefits for clients), however, despite the potential for housing delays, the approach is consistent with the priority principle of client choice.

HC shall work pro-actively with the SP to find such housing as quickly as possible. In the meantime, “pre-housing” may be appropriate for some clients (see Interim Housing protocol). This is not a failure of the SP or Housing – it is an acknowledgement that by putting the client at the centre and ensuring that choice is the priority principle, other project principles may not be achieved to the extent that we may have otherwise preferred (i.e. rapid housing, maximizing use of funds to provide housing, longest time possible in housing to support research, etc.). SPs need to ensure that the participant is aware of the reason for any delay.

Unit(s) identified through a custom search by HC for an SP shall be made available first to the SP. In the event that their client decides not to choose a custom search unit(s), such units shall be offered to other SPs for their participants to access provided the landlord consents, through the pre-approved buildings list or possibly as an inventory unit.

## **2.4 Customized (“bottom up”) Searches by SPs and their Participants**

From time to time, an SP and the participant may find on their own a vacant unit available for rent within the price range, which the participant may wish to rent. In such cases, if the landlord/property manager is willing to lease the unit, the SP and participant may enter into a lease even prior to approval of the unit by HC.

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<sup>9</sup> The treatment team informs the Housing provider about the location or neighbourhood preferences of new intakes, also about any special issues that would affect type of housing needed, e.g., significant other, pets, children, or special needs. It is expected that almost all consumers will choose an independent apartment of their own as their housing choice. However, if a consumer chooses to live in a housing program such as group home or Single Room Occupancy, the housing provider will assist the treatment team with that referral. (City of Toronto MHCC Contract, 2009).

In making such arrangements, the SP should have regard for:

- training provided by HC on working with landlords
- the rent level being affordable, including consideration of additional costs – if any – for utilities
- involving HC as quickly as possible to “sign up” the landlord
- ensuring landlord is aware that this is a project for which a share of the rent shall be paid through a housing allowance directly to the landlord
- pre-unit/pre-building inspection is not likely to be completed prior to entering into the lease – this is acceptable but may create future issues for the participant if there are problems with the unit/building which the SP will need to help them with (with HC’s help as needed).

For further information, see the Housing Access protocol.

An information package has been developed for SPs wishing to undertake bottom-up searches directly on behalf of their client, and is available on the HC website set up for the project. The process includes steps for the SPs, and responsibilities of the HC.

## **2.5 Suggestions by SPs for Additions to the Pre-Approved and Inventory lists**

To be effective, the inventory and pre-approved buildings must be responsive to need – feedback loops are necessary. As challenges have arisen in accessing housing in some parts of the City (in particular on subway lines, closer to downtown and in Parkdale), an additional housing worker has been hired and assigned to target these areas including non-conventional rental units (e.g. smaller buildings, units over stores, single condominium unit rentals).

The inventory was initially established based on feedback from SPs on areas which they felt would be most desirable. As the project is implemented, more is being learned about which areas of the City and unit types are preferred by participants. Ongoing feedback and recommendations will be sought from service providers on the types of buildings and locations that should be prioritized for inclusion on both the inventory and pre-approved buildings lists.

Vacant, affordable units may be recommended by SP for addition to the inventory and/or pre-approved buildings list. A process will be developed for this input, which will include a feedback loop and will be implemented through the hiring of a time limited additional housing resource. In addition, a process shall be developed and implemented to support feedback from SPs/clients on units visited and on desired locations.

## **2.6 Accessing Non-Private Rental Housing**

From time to time, at the direction of an SP, it may be appropriate to support a participant to access alternate, social or supportive housing. The City is not able to over-ride the waiting list for these types of housing. As requested, advice will be



provided from the City/HC to the Service Worker about accessing non-private housing. A portfolio of housing opportunities is available on the Housing Connections (social housing) main web site and through the Coordinated Access to Supportive Housing system; HC can assist with information about alternate housing options.

Where the rent is supplemented (RGI unit), the MHCC housing allowance is no longer paid. Services will still be provided, with the arrangement to be worked out on a case by case basis between the SP and the non-private rental housing provider (for more information, see the "Rent Payments" protocol).

### **3 Housing Standards**

Quality standards have been established for units. Supporting successful tenancies begins with having a home that meets reasonable requirements for its state of repair. The intent is also to avoid the risk of criticism of MHCC and the Toronto Site proponents of using tax-payer funds to subsidize units that do not meet reasonable standards of quality, and to respond to desires expressed by PWLE that housing be in reasonable condition and as safe as possible.

While<sup>10</sup> client choice is the most important principle, standards shall be applied to all units that may be selected, to ensure at least basic levels of quality and avoid having more than 15% of the building occupied by persons who were recently homeless:

- unit must be in compliance with City property standards by-law
- unit must be self contained (own washroom and kitchen, including appliances)
- service provider and tenant, with assistance of lead housing resource as required, to undertake an assessment of the unit, and the landlord must agree to remedy any defects as a condition of tenancy
- Toronto Public Health must confirm that there is no known, current bed bug issue or other concerns they may have with the property
- lead housing resource will review records available at the City and in discussion with the landlord to determine known occupancy of the building by persons housed through housing first programs (such as the Hostels to Homes Program, the Housing Allowance Program, the Streets to Homes Program, the Mental Health and Justice Program, and others) and buildings may be excluded from consideration on this ground.

### **4. Wait Lists**

From time to time, there will be a back up of participants wanting housing in a specific area of the City (for example, downtown and Parkdale). While efforts are made to access these locations on a priority basis for both the inventory and pre-approved lists, there will be time when need outstrips availability.

In such cases, available units and custom searches are provided to participants based on priority. The Site Operating Team has approved priority setting based on chronology

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<sup>10</sup> Source: MHCC Toronto Site Proposal, 2009 – Appendix 4.

(i.e. where there is more demand than units in a particular area, those with the housing requests in the earliest will be served before those with their housing requests in the latest). For participants who are being re-housed, their chronological date is the date that the re-housing request is received by HC.

If a unit has been located as a result of a bottom up search (see 2.4 and 2.5), that unit shall first be made available to the participant for whom the search was conducted, even if they are a lower priority.

### **Next Steps:**

- Develop a form & process for SPs to refer units for potential inclusion in the Inventory, and for HC to provide feedback
- Develop a process for feedback to HC on units visited and rejected by SP/client
- Provide this protocol, once approved, to SP's with request that the Protocol be reviewed with their staff.
- Ongoing updates to this Protocol will be done as required by City of Toronto staff.