

HOUSING AND SUPPORT IN THE COMMUNITY OF CHOICE

Addressing the Factors that Contribute to Migration and Subsequent Homelessness

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What image comes to mind when you think of a homeless person?

If you thought about a middle-aged person who came from a northern community then you might be surprised to find out that most of the people seeking shelter services in Brandon are young and come from surrounding communities. Children, usually accompanied by a family member, outnumber adults in people seeking assistance in locating housing.

We know that mental health problems and/or addictions are concerns for people who are homeless. Would you be surprised to find out that two out of three people seeking shelter services report problems with mental health or addiction?

Have you ever wondered why people would come to Brandon when housing is in such short supply? It turns out that housing may be as much, or even more, of a problem in the home community.

Moving to a larger city provides access to a wider range of education, employment, health, and social services. Moving also involves costs for people who move and for their home community. People lose supports provided by family and friends. People who were experiencing difficulty in obtaining employment or housing because of skill deficits will continue to be vulnerable in a new city, and will have lost existing supports. Unless skill deficits are corrected, people will not get the "fresh start" they are seeking.

Anyone who chose to come here came [because they thought that this was better.

If you're leaving your home community where you've got...parents or aunts and uncles or friends and coming to Brandon where you may not have a support system at all or a very small support system, that's much more difficult.

If you move away from your social network or your extended family and you have no childcare you might as well not try to attend any sort of institution of learning. There's no way you're going to attend classes, no way you're going to get a job if you can't get childcare either.

Migration also has consequences for the communities. A disproportionate number of young people on the Prairies migrate out of rural communities. The out-migration of youth contributes to an aging rural population and limits economic opportunities. Additionally, a declining

population base reduces ability to deliver specific services which in turn increases out-migration. In-migration of people at risk for homelessness is problematic for larger centers as they attempt to meet the needs of an ever-growing population.

Improving resources in home communities has the potential to reduce migration among people at risk for homelessness. When moving is the right decision, improving resources in larger centers is important to help people settle effectively in the new community.

This study was designed to find out more about people who are seeking shelter resources, and what supports would assist them to settle in the community of their choice. The study used several sources of information, including data collected by agencies that provide service to people seeking shelter services in Brandon, interviews with the service providers, and discussions with people who have experienced homelessness. We also spoke with service providers in partner communities.

The overarching message is that planning needs to occur on a more regional basis to ensure that people aren't shifted from one community to another. Decision-makers need to think about the location of resources and services to support vulnerable populations, including mental health and addiction services, employment opportunities, transportation, affordable and integrated housing, and related tenancy support.



What We Learned

Data for community planning

■ **Data collected by local agencies and is largely driven by funder requirements.** Content and definitions differ across agencies. Collecting a small number of specific fields, and using common definitions, would make it easier to combine information for community planning.

■ **Maintaining data quality can be difficult for small organizations with limited budgets and multiple competing demands.** Communicating the value of the information, documentation and training, and plans for routine back-up, would increase accuracy and completeness of data.

Who is seeking shelter services?

■ **People seeking shelter services in Brandon are mostly young (40-45%), come from Brandon and the surrounding area, and have Aboriginal ancestry (50-60%).** Many are families with children, and most are from western Manitoba. Two out of three reported addiction and / or mental health issues.

Access to shelter and transitional housing

■ **Shelters are full and too many of the people who are turned away are unsheltered.** In 2011/12, the occupancy rate for emergency shelter was 99%. In that same year, 508 people were turned away from emergency shelter, and one in five (17%) of the people who were turned away were unsheltered. Additional emergency shelter beds have opened since 2012, but demand has also increased. Fortunately women who are fleeing domestic violence are not turned away. If the Brandon shelter is full then arrangements are made through a network of women's shelters.

■ **Wait lists for transitional housing are lengthy.** Wait lists for transitional housing increased, and unsheltered

homelessness increased between 2007 and 2011.

Supporting people to remain in their home community

■ **Many rural communities have experienced rapid change related to large industries and immigration.**

■ **Services exist in rural areas.** The faith community has been core to meeting the needs of vulnerable people, often forming informal networks to provide support. Service delivery is complicated since geographic boundaries differ for formal services located in the same town. For example, Health Services in some communities link to Brandon, and Manitoba Housing Services link to Portage La Prairie.

■ **Some communities have developed creative solutions that would be of interest to other communities.** For instance, Minnedosa recently included a requirement for a determined number of affordable and integrated housing units into approval for a larger development plan.

■ **Moves often occur as people seek education, employment, health or social services.** Offering all services in all communities is impossible, but increasing or maintaining rural services can assist people to remain in their home community. In particular, availability of mental health and addiction services in rural areas would contribute to preventing migration for services. Mental health and / or addiction was an issue for two out of three people seeking emergency shelter. Communities continue to work toward providing as wide a range of services and supports as possible. Maintaining or building the population base contributes to maintaining services.

■ **Other moves are prompted by more modifiable factors, such as family breakdown, lack of housing in the home community, lack of**

personal or employment skills, or lack of transportation.

Housing shortages – Service provision is focused on the local level and, while Brandon providers were acutely aware of housing shortages in their community, we discovered that access to housing in the home community may be just as difficult, and may be worse. Addressing housing shortages needs to be considered on a more regional level.

The market is just squeezing everybody out. Anybody who doesn't have a very good rental history has a very difficult time getting into housing regardless of who they are.

Family breakdown – Family conflict may result in breakdown between intimate partners, or between and young person and family members. These moves are often unplanned, leaving people vulnerable to homelessness. Conflict may arise from unrecognized mental health or addiction issues. Addressing the source of interpersonal conflict can preserve families and prevent adverse outcomes such as homelessness. Even when moving is the right decision, avoiding a crisis enables a planned move and a more successful transition.

I think if they knew if they had a resource that, say my kids doing this I wonder what that could mean, then that could be preventative in a lot of arguments a lot of fights and a lot of disruption in family unity that happens which becomes the catalyst for kids leaving.

Lack of personal or employment skills – People often spoke about seeking a 'fresh start'. While this seems positive, the need for a fresh start often results from skill deficits that need to be addressed to support success in a new community. Lack of independent living or job skills result in 'burned



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Supporting people to relocate and settle in Brandon

bridges' in the home community with landlords or employers. Unless skill deficits are corrected, people will not get the 'fresh start' they are seeking. Providing resources to support successful tenancy, or addressing employment readiness skills, would create a circumstance where people can experience success and maintain social support networks, regardless of the community that they live in.

People don't have a lot of experience in independent living. ... they don't know how to care for a place, they probably get into trouble not paying their rent on time, all those sorts of things that landlords aren't crazy about, ... so they maybe end up getting evicted.

Transportation – Accessible and affordable transportation can enable people to live in a smaller center, but access a wider range of services.

If you have access to a vehicle and can afford gas then you can access a service center but if you don't have a vehicle, you're reliant on other people. You're reliant on having to pay whatever price they say you have to pay for a ride to the next town to get services and so it greatly reduces ... ability to stay in their community.

Transportation for some people is a huge problem, even just getting to Brandon from somewhere else I mean uh, you know the bus system isn't what it used to be. If you are on assistance you probably don't have a car and if you do have a car your car probably is a beater and it probably would cost it more to run it and operate [than] its worth.

That's also limiting in the sense that, if your support network is in Oak Lake, or Virden, or Minnedosa, you're not going to get home on the weekends probably very often. So ... even though you're not that far away you're as isolated as can be really.

The two main barriers to settlement in Brandon were identified as housing shortages and personal barriers. Supports to assist in settlement include additional housing, transition support, tenancy support, agency support, and inclusive communities.

■ **Housing** – Housing challenges relate to availability, affordability, accessibility, and appropriateness.

The housing shortage in Brandon is acute.

Shortages exist across the spectrum of housing. Home ownership is beyond the reach of many people with housing prices increasing by 150% between 2002 and 2012.

The vacancy rate in the rental market has been less than 1% for 10 years. Bachelor apartments, or housing with enough bedrooms for children are particularly problematic. Availability is likely to continue to decline as immigration increases.

Assisting clients to be more successful in obtaining housing only means that someone else goes without. The housing shortage cannot be resolved without an increase in housing stock.

Shortage leads to increases in cost. Employment and Income Assistance (EIA) rates of \$284 per month for housing fall far short of the cost, even for people who are sharing accommodation. Social housing has very long wait lists and, unless the person is a member of a priority population, people may never obtain social housing. Improvements in Employment and Income Assistance shelter rates and more social housing are also essential. Planned Employment and Income Assistance rate increases over the next four years will assist in meeting real housing costs.

Shortage also increases competition and creates difficulty for people who are vulnerable to

discrimination. Some groups, such as youth, families, and visible minorities have more difficulty competing for resources.

Even when housing is available and affordable, the housing may not be suitable for families.

In addition to space, families also require proximity or transportation to school, employment, resources, and childcare. Safety is a high priority.

■ **Transition support** – People migrating from smaller communities do not know what services are available in Brandon. Increasing knowledge about services for new arrivals, and among service providers in rural areas, would assist people in accessing needed resources in a timely manner. Services in Brandon were identified as great, but finite, resources. Service providers are working at, or beyond, capacity.

■ **Building personal skills and resources** – Maintaining tenancies is easier than finding new ones. Failed tenancies are a major contributor to homelessness. Skill development in areas such as presenting yourself when applying for housing, how to communicate with landlords, and getting along with roommates and neighbors, would assist in maintaining tenancies. People also need information on their rights and responsibilities, such as paying rent on time and caring for the home.

■ **Agency support** – Landlords prefer stable tenancies, and have been more welcoming of tenants who are involved with an agency that provides support. For example, in previous research, landlords and service users reported that being a client of mental health services was an advantage. Landlords knew who to call if there were difficulties. Other agencies also provide tenancy support.

■ **Inclusive communities** – Discrimination causes problems, regardless of community. Addressing discrimination against youth, families, and visible minorities, requires initiatives directed to supporting inclusive communities.

Targets for Action

- Building personal skills and resources
- Providing family support to reduce family breakdown
- Providing transition support
- Providing agency support
- Increasing affordable housing and supports in both rural and urban areas
- Developing / maintaining rural resources
- Providing access to transportation
- Building inclusive communities

Study Description

This study included a series of activities, including review of existing data, key informant interviews in Brandon, focus groups with people who have experienced homelessness, key informant interviews in partner communities, and workshops in partner communities.

Existing data – Data for a five year period between 2007 and 2012 was obtained from all local agencies providing emergency or transitional housing, or assistance in securing or maintaining housing. These agencies provided aggregate information from the data they collect related to characteristics of the population seeking shelter, shelter use, service needs and services provided. Where available, information was also provided on migration history, turnaways, and unmet needs.

In addition to accessing data collected by local agencies, access to data from HIFIS (Homeless Individuals and Families Information System) was also sought. HIFIS is a national information system containing core data on homelessness and shelter use,

demographic characteristics, service needs, and factors contributing to homelessness.

Key Informants – Key informants were identified and invited through the Brandon Community Advisory Board on Homelessness (CABH). CABH is an 11 member group with representatives from community organizations that are concerned about homelessness, including organizations representing: Aboriginal organizations (Brandon Friendship Centre, and Manitoba Métis Federation); Brandon Regional Health Authority (Mental Health Services, and 7th Street Health Access Centre); non-profit organizations (Canadian Mental Health Association, Salvation Army, Samaritan House Ministries, Westman Immigration Services, and Youth for Christ); provincial government services (Child and Family Services of Western Manitoba, and Family Services and Housing); and the Brandon Neighbourhood Renewal Corporation. Key informants from the YWCA Women's Shelter and Meredith Place also participated.

Participants responded to questions about reasons for migration and the choice of Brandon as a destination; barriers to settlement in Brandon and supports that would assist in

settlement; and supports that would assist in enabling people to remain in their home communities.

Focus Groups – Five focus groups were held to gather perspectives of people who were, or had been, homeless. Participation was sought from populations particularly vulnerable to homelessness, including Aboriginal people, youth, women fleeing domestic violence, and people who use services provided by the Canadian Mental Health Association. An additional focus group was held with an existing group of people who have experienced homelessness and serve in an advisory capacity to the Brandon Community Advisory Board on Homelessness. Staff from the Brandon Friendship Centre, Youth for Christ, Westman Women's Shelter, and Canadian Mental Health Association invited clients to participate. Questions were asked about factors that influenced: the decision to leave the home community; choice of Brandon; supports that would have assisted in remaining in the home community; barriers to settlement in Brandon and supports that would have assisted in settlement.

Partner Communities – Partner communities were identified by key informants in Brandon

as home communities for their clients. A number of communities were identified, all of which were within 100 km of Brandon. Researchers used the list to select three communities that, in addition to being a source of migration into Brandon, had potentially different issues leading to migration. Researchers identified key informants in each these communities using recommendations from Brandon key informants, and asked initial partner community contacts for names of other people in their community who should also be contacted. Participants were asked: what factors contribute to people's decisions to migrate; why people might choose Brandon as a destination; what barriers and challenges people face when relocating; and what supports might assist people in remaining in their home communities.

Workshops were then scheduled in each partner community to share results, and initiate planning about ways to support individuals to live in the community of their choice. Workshop participants included key informants from the community and additional community stakeholders identified by key informants.

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