A. Introduction

The 'Systemic Barriers to Housing' initiative was a project of the Housing Support Services Hub. The 'Hub', in turn, was a funded initiative of Homeward Trust Edmonton, supported by Alberta Housing and Urban Affairs. It was launched in 2008 as an interagency strategy to enhance the capacity of 13 member agencies[1] to secure housing, prevent evictions and increase the housing stability of the people with whom they work.

Early in the Hub's work, it became apparent to the team that systemic barriers were having an unintended negative impact on individuals' and families' ability to access and maintain stable housing. With funding from the Community Partnership Enhancement Fund, the Hub contracted external consultants in 2009 to document and investigate the systemic barriers to housing in Edmonton.

B. Components of the Systemic Barriers to Housing Initiative

The initiative included action in five areas:

- An **environmental scan** among community organizations to identify systemic barriers to housing, generating a set of 52.
- Research on **eight priority systemic barriers** (priorities selected by the Advisory Committee for the Systemic Barriers to Housing initiative) and stories of the impact on individuals and families.
- Preliminary **discussion of systemic barriers** between members of the Hub Council and government decision-makers within **three provincial ministries**.[2]
- A **forum** that brought together 80 people (half community and half government) in May 2010 to share the findings and look at **models and opportunities for ongoing dialogue** between **community and government** on systemic barriers to housing.
- Development of a new resource, *Pass it forward: a community resource for shaping government policy.* Intended to help community organizations identify the right people and the right doors within government to address systemic barriers related to practice, procedure, policy, and service gaps, and the most effective ways to bring forward proposals for change.

C. Methodology

Identified systemic barriers through practice experience

- Asked service providers within Hub member agencies to consider their practice experience and name concerns related to policies or rules that create unintended consequences.
- The emphasis in the scan of service providers was on experiential knowledge as one source of information that informs decision-making. The inquiry did not delve into the number of people who experience the same problem or probe for details behind each statement

Investigated a set of eight priority barriers

- Organized barriers according to short, medium, or long-term solutions. Hub advisors prioritized a set of eight for further investigation within the scope of this initiative.

---

[1] Housing Support Services Hub Member Agencies: Bissell Centre, Boyle Street Community Services, Canadian Mental Health Association, Capital Region Housing Corporation, E4C, Edmonton Community Legal Centre, Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers, George Spady, PAAFE, Schizophrenia Society, WJS, WINGS, YMCA

[2] Ministries: Alberta Employment and Immigration, Alberta Health and Wellness, and Alberta Housing and Urban Affairs.

- For the eight priority barriers, conducted research to clarify existing policies within Alberta and gather relevant examples of comparable policies and regulations in other Canadian provinces. Final report contains the research findings within each of the eight issues.

Facilitated dialogue with three relevant ministries
- In preparation for a series of initial discussions with provincial government ministries, gathered stories of the impact of the priority barriers on the lives of individuals and families.
- Arranged meetings between Hub representatives and government staff within three ministries. Discussed rationale behind existing policies, emerging barriers, the ministry's interest and current/planned work on these issues, and ways in which the community and ministry can jointly develop solutions.

Organized community/government forum toward sustained joint problem-solving
- Brought together 80 representatives, half government and half community, to share the findings from the Systemic Barriers to Housing scan and explore an effective model for ongoing joint problem-solving. Shared existing models, solicited participants' past experience with community/government dialogue, and identified opportunities.

Developed a sustainability plan
- The Hub launched the Systemic Barriers to Housing Initiative but the capacity to sustain an ongoing process of community/government joint problem-solving extended beyond its mandate. Consultants prepared a sustainability plan that could be adopted by an appropriate leadership body.

D. Voices represented
The Systemic Barriers to Housing Initiative involved interviews with 47 people in 20 agencies to gather input on barriers and stories, meetings with nine representatives within three provincial government ministries, and 80 participants in the May 2010 forum.

E. Concluding remarks
The Systemic Barriers to Housing Initiative exposed a wide range of practices, procedures, policies, and service gaps that create unintended but often serious consequences for people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. The barriers named were a starting point for exploration, without 'censorship'. Each statement and story was a reflection of a lived experience. For every issue, there are layers to be understood that would shed light on context, opportunities and constraints.

Each step of the initiative reinforced the value of bringing together community representatives and government for mutual understanding and to jointly develop solutions. Existing barriers and barriers yet to be identified can impede an individual or family's capacity to access or maintain stable, affordable, quality housing, and, in turn, create more problems in other aspects of daily life. The initiative revealed both an imperative to address systemic barriers and an opening to create a sustainable model for ongoing dialogue and problem-solving for the benefit of individuals and families.