A ROAD TO HOME: WORKING WITH HOMELESS IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

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There is nothing more certain than the need for human beings to be able to access a place that they can call "my home". For migrant populations this fact is multi-dimensional and has a relevance that impacts all the steps of the integration process. A public housing policy that can make sense for newcomers is one that is flexible and capable of ensuring a healthy housing path. A healthy housing path requires supports that ensure people are not falling between the cracks or being taken advantage of by unscrupulous individuals that prey on the lack of knowledge of newcomer communities.

So what dœs "a healthy housing path" mean? It is important to recognize that no matter what the reasons for migration, there has always been a dream behind that act. Individuals tend to idealize their new land and create an image of the new society that many times differs a great deal from reality. Housing is one of those realities that cannot be overlooked because it will determine the newcomer's first impressions of what a society can offer to them. If poor housing conditions remain a reality for migrant communities due to affordability, their dreams are shattered and an overwhelming feeling of being socially excluded takes precedence in their minds. "The initial reception of an immigrant plays an important role in whether integration will be successful or dysfunctional – it helps determine "sink" or "swim" (Danso, 2001)"

There is no disagreement in the public discourse that access to affordable housing provides a jumping board that influences the economic and social integration of newcomer communities. If newcomers spend more than 30% of their income towards shelter when trying to establish in a new society, this has a direct negative effect in the capacity to advance and rise above poverty.

So the remaining question is: can or will Canada establish a national housing policy that will benefit newcomers? And what will a national housing policy mean?

A national housing policy needs to have an over-arching principle of Housing as a Right and under that principle the assurance that all people of Canada can benefit from it. If we consider housing as a right, the access to safe, secure and affordable housing needs to be part of it.

WHAT ARE THE GAPS AND HOW HOMELESS MIGRANTS SEE THE ISSUE

In a recent research conducted to review our Street to Homes project, which offers specialized long term follow-up support to homeless immigrants and refugees, the researcher noted that none of the interviewees directly attributed all their failure on the system. There seemed

> *"to be a sense of frustration with self and their ignorance of how the system works. It was as if they took personal responsibility for not knowing what they could have done to prevent their being homeless to start with. They considered that they were the 'best judges' of certain aspects of their immigrant and housing experiences and only through an understanding of these aspects could a service provider offer a holistic service."*

All service providers dealing with newcomers need to include housing assessment at all service levels. Through the interview the researcher also discovered that hidden homelessness is a fact of life for immigrants. Service User W:

> *"I devised a plan. I would offer to work night shift, that way I had a roof over my head by night, then during the day I would go to the job help centre and meet with my job counsellor. I pretended I was still looking for a job so that I could go there daily and at least I had a "home" during the day. So, I would spend days there and work by night. I did this for over four months. One day my job counselor casually asked about my housing situation. It was then he discovered I was homeless and referred me to a housing worker, and that is how I came into the Streets to Home program".*

HOW TO PROVIDE CULTURALLY COMPETENT SERVICES

Awareness & understanding: Working with foreign born homeless individuals, regardless of the number of years they have been in Canada, has a particular reality that can be attributed to their process of integration. The process and circumstances of coming to Canada have a compound effect when facing challenging changes in personal circumstances.

All other realities such as immigration status, refugee trauma, post traumatic stress syndrome, communication barriers, ethno-racial background, family composition, gender, age, sexual orientation and mental health/addiction, need to be considered when looking into the solutions or the capacity of the individual to resolve.

Furthermore, the receiving society plays a critical role as an enabler agent, particularly when providing all its citizens, regardless of their immigration status, with the resources to facilitate integration and minimize social exclusion.

Workers need to assess the possible hidden factors of migration to understand the reason for homelessness among migrant individuals. An awareness of the impact of migration noted above, in addition to cultural competence, can ensure that workers move in the right direction when providing housing stabilization services.

There is no "one style fits all" way of providing services; the uniqueness in these cases resides in the capacity of the service provider to untie the past to understand why the person found themselves in the present circumstances.

Development of expertise: A culturally competent worker is the one that uses a holistic service approach that is client-centered and appropriate for people from any cultural background. The worker is not required to be an expert in each of the individuals' cultures. The worker incorporates in the delivery of services a broader view of the specific needs of the individual and provides services with a knowledge base of understanding that the client's culture can influence his/her interactions with the society at large. The worker is aware of his/her own cultural biases and how these can hinder the relationship between worker and service users. A culturally competent worker draws on the service users as the principal source of information to understand their cultural background and never assumes, judges, or acts on behalf of the person unless the individual is aware of and understands the implications of the actions taken on their behalf.

Furthermore, the worker understands the impact of discrimination and is capable of assessing how service users have dealt with it, if encountered in the past. A culturally competent worker develops an acute understanding of the possible visible or invisible barriers migrants face and accurately assesses the person's world view to understand the specific needs and the individual's capacity to respond.

Elements to consider: Migrant communities and Canadians at large will benefit if there is:

1. A portable housing income supplement for people living in poverty.
2. National Housing anti-discrimination laws and support systems to enforce them.
3. Universal access to settlement and housing services regardless of immigration status, especially those educational preventive services that explain Canadian laws, rights and responsibilities.
4. Access to traditional settlement service providers and Housing Help centers, which are the best equipped to continue delivering specialized supports to newcomers.
5. Universal funding to programs supporting immigrants, not just pilot projects. These programs must include ancillary services, such as access to interpreters, escort and mediation services to prevent landlord discrimination, education about the housing system and financial literacy. For some groups additional supports are an important first step to prevent marginalization and discrimination. For example, the lack of knowledge of how things work in Canada can be a significant barrier - from the basics of how to use household appliances to the intricacies of community participation in neighborhoods, tenant associations, etc.
6. Access to transitional housing that can allow mobility, so newcomers are not forced into inflexible, long term tenancy agreements when they suddenly find themselves in need of moving due to changing life circumstances.
7. Building affordable housing!