Lived Expertise Prototyping Project

The Plan to End Chronic Homelessness

Social Development Centre Waterloo Region
August 11th 2023

Social Development Centre Waterloo Region has built a multifaceted team with both content and process knowledge about the **human rights approach to homelessness**.

We are a partner that has been building lasting relationships with the Region of Waterloo staff and Council and we are dedicated to supporting the necessary change management **allowing "the system to see and sense itself"** (Otto Scharmer), understanding that we are all being a part of the system .

Our project relies on a consistent participation of Region staff throughout the process to build the foundation for **transformational practice working with lived expertise** in a more equitable way, "where the change moves at the speed of trust" (Michael Tubbs)

We begin the process with recommendations that have been articulated in the last 5 years in our work with low-income or no-income populations experiencing precarious housing and homelessness, and **start prototyping projects from day one.**

The findings from this process are owned by the communities and partners who create it and will be integrated into the recommendations. At the same time, the Prototyping Project report will be shared in its authentic form and authentic language.

The collaboration between the community advocates and Region staff to be established through this process, will be **a turning point in the way we collectively respond to major challenges in the future** beyond the housing and homelessness crisis.

The Lived Expertise Prototyping project started mid-March 2023 and by July 2023, we went through the the following phases in the **U-Lab Process,** based on the work of the Otto Charmer and associates at the **Presencing Institute**:

Co-Initiating - building common intent, setting the stage; getting to know each other in our roles and as human beings; mutual interviewing; sharing individual and group intentions and questions.

Co-Sensing - be silent, observe, observe… defining priorities; 3D mapping to describe the current and the desired state; defining the process of the community led participatory action research to broaden our perspective on potential small-scale prototyping projects.

Co-Presencing - connecting to the source of the inspiration, holding community conversations with people with the lived experience of unsheltered and hidden homelessness; engaging in preliminary conversations with lived experts and front line workers supporting hidden homeless populations (immigrants, refugees, students).

The subsequent phase August - December 2023:
Co-Creating / Co-Evolving - prototyping the emergent future, learning from development projects, bringing in a new circle of lived experts and expanding the circle of transformation by embodying the seeing and acting from the 'whole'.

The participants in the process are the Regional Staff (**The Plan** Core Team), Social Development Center Waterloo Region (SDCWR) staff working on lived expertise projects, and lived experts from A Better Tent City (ABTC), Tent City, People's Action Group, KW Urban Native Wigwam Project (discontinued), Peregrine Outreach, and Disabilities and Human Rights Group.

Team members March - July 2023:

LIVED EXPERTS

Julianov Ichim

Rebekah Haynes

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Charles Nichols

Ashley Hynd

Sara Escobar

REGION OF WATERLOO STAFF

Peter Phillips

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SDCWR staff and associates

Aleksandra Petrovic

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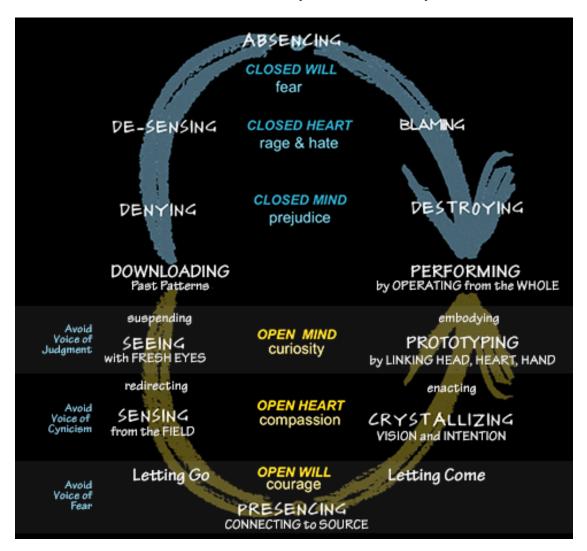
Andrea Areguy

Brian Doucet

Laura Pin

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U-Lab Process

Approach to Change, Otto SCharmer - *"You cannot understand a system unless you change it. You cannot change a system unless you transform consciousness. You cannot transform consciousness unless you can make a system see and sense itself."*

*The **Current State**: downloading past patterns, denying problems, de-sensing and living the separation of our bodies, minds and hearts, othering ourselves, others, nature; "absencing" due to fear while not being fully present to make the best decisions…*

*Moving towards a **Desired State** through curiosity, compassion, and courage to counter the "absencing", letting go/letting the old that does not serve us die; while **"presencing" with the heart, mind, body and spirit and making a leap to the emergent future.***

Co-Initiating

Co-initiating brought us to a place where we realize that we are more than our intellect and cannot make our best decisions, or do our best work, if our emotional and spiritual side are not balanced: more honest contributions, greater mindfulness of other people's boundaries and loss, greater mutual understanding, and a sense of a circle/a community where we see each other as fully human not just "numbers" or "cogs".

- **Developing a shared agreement** on how to work together and the "heart of the matter" points not to lose sight of.
- **Shifting how we listen**, the way we pay attention to what is going on in our bodies, hearts and minds is in itself life-changing.
- **Mutual interviews** revealed our hopes emerging from a sense of loss and hurt as we were all personally touched by homelessness regardless of our roles and appearances;

The Place Where We Are Right
by Yehuda Amichai

From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.
The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.
But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
Where the ruined
House once stood.

HEART OF THE MATTER STATEMENTS
What not to lose sight of?

1. homelessness and the issues that we're here to address
2. this crisis comes with significant loss (honour, acknowledge and hold without consuming everything)
3. there is a lot of value to lived expertise (those living at the heart of this crisis)
4. that we are all choosing to be here because we want to see/do something different
5. of each other, especially when external circumstances come up that make it challenging to see each other
6. the importance of being together, remember our strengths & that everything will be ok
7. finding the good in things and laughing where we can
8. even if things get challenging and frustrating, there is value to this work and taking another step
9. we all come from different experiences and accept that we all see the world differently; the gift of difference and what can be learned from difference

10. *Ensuring that this remains a safe space requires our ongoing attention. We are committed to having the necessary conversations that will bring us back together and help us to move through the obstacles.*

Guiding Recommendations

SDCWR team offered a summary of the engagement done by the lived experience associates/community connectors in the last five years as a starting point for the conversations with the project team. The same/similar recommendations have been shared by people with lived experience, frontline workers and leadership in organizations, including SDCWR, for over a decade, and we wish to acknowledge those calls to action and build on them.

INITIAL SET OF RECOMMENDATIONS (March 2023)

Based on Engagement of Lived Experience Experts

1. Recognize the unique value and irreplaceable role of lived expertise
2. Lived expertise should be included throughout the process
3. Ending chronic homelessness requires decriminalizing marginalized individuals/communities
4. Using the capacity of the whole community
5. Poverty and discrimination is there because we are perpetuating it (class division)
6. Hire people with lived experience as advisors and Peer Support Workers
7. Creating Safe(r) Spaces
8. Affordable and Accessible Housing Solutions

Available online at this link

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STREAMLINED RECOMMENDATIONS (May 2023)

Based on ongoing reflection

1) Recognizing the unique value of lived expertise in all phases of the project
2) Applying human rights approach that decriminalizes homelessness and poverty
3) Relying on the capacity of the whole community and addressing socio-economic (class) divides
4) Acknowledging diversity and different types of housing and communities where people have choice and control

The updated set of recommendations to guide our work can be found at this link.

The report includes description of the current and the desired states and is the source

for the development of principles to center lived expertise in development of the Plan.

Mutual Interviews

The exercise was a way to experience different roles that we play in creating shared intention for the whole of the project: a curious explorer, an honest story teller, and an impartial observer. We also sought to find out about the person in front of us, regardless of the power they may hold in the current system.

1) How has the experience of homelessness impacted you personally?

Even a brief personal experience of homelessness was devastating and stripping a person of dignity. Also, the assumption about who has and doesn't have a lived experience of homelessness is impacted by the roles we play in the current process.

A personal experience of homelessness can result in social isolation, impact early child development, and one's perception of their own culture. It is hard to quantify the impact of an experience of homelessness, and it changes over time and contexts. Even if the experience may not be present in someone's day to day life, a conversation can be a reminder and take someone back even if they worked through the experience.

> *"A certain vigilance sets in, not necessarily hyper protective or violent in that regard, however trauma can be present in all areas of life, and in the multiple sides of a person, the body, the mind, the spirit… like land mines never unearthed that activate when either us or others step on them."*

The harsh experience on the other side can be a "gift". It can turn into a strength to withstand the blows life throws at us. It primes you to be open and to hear out or support others.

> *"Past experience of homelessness means you cannot turn a blind eye to people in need. Generational compassion, father worked at the 'poor house'. Would go there after school. Forgot that history with homelessness. Looking at others, I see them, feel their pain and want to help. Share the space and resources I have to help others."*

2) What prevents us from eliminating homelessness? Why are we stuck (as communities, as a society)?

Social, political, and economic systems in our community, country, etc, are barriers to eliminating homelessness. Underlying causes that connect those systems come from our spiritual disconnect with the natural world and other human beings. We have lost the capacity to relate to the world around us and to feel the interdependence with all that exists.

Colonization has broken our humanness by bringing this spiritual "sickness" to humanity, both in the colonizing and colonized places, and killed many, as smallpox did in the North American context. The physical sickness killed fast, while the spiritual sickness is killing us off slowly. We

need to give up the existing governing structures, or radically renovate them. How can decision-makers make decisions when they haven't experienced the impact of homelessness, and when they remain removed from regular interactions with the people who are impacted?

Why We Are Stuck

Why We Are Stuck
- Colonization and privatization of the Land
- Discriminatory beliefs and fear mongering about those who are labeled "outside of the normal," those who are homeless, poor, and/or racialized
- One sided institutional risk management and liability frameworks
- Meritocracy, survival of the fittest and blaming the "victim" mentality
- Supposed scarcity of resources
- Disintegration of family and community
- Service systems unaware of the harm they perpetuate
- Decision-making removed from the realities of marginalized populations

"There are greater societal issues if we don't get to the root causes of homelessness such as, consumerism, capitalism, people being a paycheck away from being homeless, institutionalization of care, and prison-like shelter systems."

Full summary available online

How to Get Unstuck

(Acknowledge) Complete Imbalance of power (confusing private and public interests in decisions made behind closed doors; stop the loss of affordable housing or shelter beds as it is far greater than what you can build in today's context)

Recognize the harm and the criminalization the systems do (fencing off people at Roos Island and charges of the activists was an act of violence with multiple ripple effect in affected communities)

Do not distract people with conversations and plans; do not apply double standards for those with power and those without; commit to action to undo the harm and take concrete steps to create solutions today.

Acknowledge the wisdom and the strategies of the people living in homelessness, the front line workers and the community members who know what needs to be done to end homelessness.

Lens to Center Lived Experience.

"We value what lived experience folks value."

Lived Expertise is rooted in direct lived experience of people impacted by poverty and marginalization; in their understanding of the systems that create inequities; as well as in their advocacy work.

Lived Expertise leadership throughout – in planning, implementation and evaluation phases of plans and strategies that impact their lives.

Acknowledge ongoing trauma, loss and death – recognize how systems actively cause harm and remain unaccountable to people living the experience.

Everyone involved brings their whole self to this work of reconciliation - mind, heart, body and spirit to be able to take appropriate actions and rebuild communities of care.

Reform of government/governance and service systems through respect of human rights – redistribute power and resources to the lived experience groups, advocacy groups and community-based entities for the irreplaceable work they do alongside service providers.

Challenge the appropriation and privatization of the Indigenous land – partner with the Six Nations of the Grand River and local First Nations, Innuit and Metis communities – release public lands for alternative housing solutions outside of the private market.

Decriminalize poverty and homelessness – policing, bylaws enforcement, risk management, policies and procedures to be either removed (neo-vagrancy bylaws) or transformed to also benefit the poor and the homeless.

Rebuild communities and involve the capacity of the whole community – residents, support groups, activists being a part of the continuum of care, from informal to system supports complementing each other.

Co-Sensing

Co-sensing brought us closer to a place of shared understanding of each other's world-views and roles in the process and in the social structures. Listen and observe…

- **Introduction to community-based research and 'real life' ethics (Laura Pin)** with difference in what safety looks like for both interviewers and participants; power over as community researchers enter a space and power over within marginalized communities; right to withdraw from the conversation at any time; offering debriefing supports to both team members leading conversations and participants; lived experts defining the questions, and woning the data collected.
- **3D mapping** brought clarity to how we experience both the current and the desired states towards elimination of homelessness, understanding of the stakeholders involved, and setting the guiding principles and overarching types of potential prototype projects.
- **Identifying high level prototype projects -** even though the main streams of prototyping in the subsequent **co-presencing** phase will begin in July-August 2023, the project team explored **the potential prototype processes** emerging through our joint work with Region staff and service providers (Unsheltered Working Group, Encampment Operations Table, etc.).

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Silence

The Lakota Elder ([A Womb with a View](#))

"We Indians know about silence.

We aren't afraid of it.

In fact, to us it is more powerful than words.

Our elders were schooled in the ways of silence, and they passed that along to us.

Watch, listen, and then act, they told us.

This is the way to live. Watch the animals to see how they care for their young.

Watch the elders to see how they behave. Watch the white man to see what he

wants. Always watch first, with a still heart and mind, then you will learn.

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When you have watched enough, then you can act."

3D Mapping Exercise

FROM THE CURRENT STATE OF HOMELESSNESS
TO THE DESIRED STATE OF THE SOCIETY

Full report available online

Participants were asked to bring objects and images that represent their sense/understanding/view of the current state of homelessness in Waterloo Region.
Once assembled on the table, they were arranged by the group into a cohesive image that describes the current state of homelessness and the stakeholders associated with different parts of the image.

Shattered glass

    Picture of titanic

        Zip tie

            Statue with mouth closed

        Image of a house (row houses)

    Image of the rhino

Broken cigarette

    Court/arrest papers

        Drawing of the Grinch…

Placing objects to recreate the CURRENT STATE OF HOMELESSNESS?
The "scissors" that cut the humanity were brought by the "Titanic" during colonization and enforced by a genocide of Indigenous People and plunder of Indigenous Land. The "broken glass" structures/systems built on that legacy continue to separate people and do harm, valuing different populations differently. Today, the systems and the general population "figure with the closed mouth and eyes" still reflect those values and views and accept "charges/arrest papers, handcuffs" and armed enforcement of private property at the expense of the well-being of the marginalized groups. As much as the structures persist "rinascero" in upholding those outdated views and values, the resistance "rinascero" persists in the marginalized

communities for social justice and equity. The communities are alive "entangled threads" and vibrant "tree" in their diversity and messines, and continue to push back. We are now witnessing the expression of these equity seeking processes as different segments of the society come together around responses such as A Better Tent City that gravitate towards values of "love, home and community".

What is ending in this situation? What must die?

- Legacy of colonialism
- Denial among general population
- Fracturing and disintegration of communities
- Each stakeholder has to have a look at themselves - we all need to let go of something
- Violations of human rights and criminalization of poverty and homelessness

What needs to emerge to be born?

- Closing the distance between people and agencies, governments and the people on the other side of privilege and denial (general population)
- Hope and community, rebirth of human and spiritual connections
- New commons/new social contract

Moving/removing of objects to show DESIRED STATE

The timeline and the order of objects were inverted so that the change starts with the wisdom of Indigenous communities, the Six Nations, the people with lived experience of homelessness, as well as activist groups such as Land Back, Fight Back and the Unsheltered Campaign. The "Grinch" is seen as a symbol of both an average resident that is bound by values inherent in consumerism and divisive worldviews, but its grin can be turned into a smile. Equally, the activists :rinoscerous" who are feared and considered as disruptive can bring this needed transformation in both systems and the broader population. New forms of more inclusive governance are needed "love, home, community" that equally respect human rights of the underserved and marginalized populations and that are accountable to the whole

community. "Charges/arrests/handcuffs" for activists demanding human rights have to stop. The connection to the Earth "tree" as a common unalienable resource has to be restored, as much as our deep relationships to each other in all we do. Every segment of the society "figure with the mouth and eyes covered" needs to be part of the healing and restoration, to offer and to benefit from it. We remain entangled "cord" and leave the "Titanic", unaware and desensitized structures and systems in cut off and cut through "scissors". We will no longer need advocacy organizations such as Social Development Centre or WR Community Legal Services, once the are able to support and rely on the capacity of the communities and people self-organizing.

3D MAPPING REFLECTIONS - Stakeholders

The way the stakeholders were grouped in the presentation of the current and desired state are telling:

Current state starts with: the monarchy with global exploitation, colonial states, privatization of land and capitalism, consumerism and greed, governments (federal to municipal, including CoK and RoW, encampment operations table) along with education and health systems, politicians, police, bylaw enforcement, landlords, business owners and drug dealers/organized crime connected to systems… institutions and social agencies, shelter system (poverty pimps), all the way down to agencies such as Community Legal Services and SDC who are closest to the people (and necessary intermediaries in transition?)…and overall nimbyism in the community, etc.

Desired state starts with: Indigenous communities (Six Nations, local indigenous orgs and residents) and community members to lead the way forward through self-determination and equalization of power with renters and immigrants (homeless at Roos Island, 150 Main, 100 Vic…), then organized social justice groups and movements (unsheltered campaign, Yes in my backyard) along the international movement as the problem is global, followed by the healing/restorative communities/pilots like ABTC, Fight Back, Land Back, Allen Ryan People's Brigade, LEWGs; then education of the public and universal health care, the Shift, and the governments following suit.

The TREE - Radical Reconstruction

ONLY A COMMITMENT TO A RADICAL CHANGE OF THE INSTITUTIONS CAN ELIMINATE HOMELESSNESS

Presented the idea of the tree image where the:

ROOTS are invisible (root causes of the current state) and we work on them the least as they remain invisible through the culture and systems we live in that keep them hidden: colonization in the government and our organizations; theft and privatization of land; capitalism and exploitation of labour of the racialized and marginalized; criminalization of poverty and homelessness; Western thought and rationalism (Doctrine of Discovery legitimizing genocide of non-christian populations and theft of land and resources in the history of colonization).

TRUNK of the tree are the enforcing elements like laws, courts, police, bylaws, education and health systems, media…Involving different stakeholders in ways that perpetuate the systems of exploitation and dehumanization preventing us to return to the wholeness of our existence with the nature and each other. This level is more visible than the roots, and presented as a "natural" order, taken for granted as a testimony of progress; questioning it, brings consequences to individuals, while as communities, people can withstand the carceral logic more successfully, The hurt and the loss is spread through resistance to this process, impacting both people in institutions, general population and the marginalized. The Earth is suffering without a doubt (by destroying the natural world we are destroying ourselves).

BRANCHES and **FRUITS** are the superficial level of service delivery, policies, protocoles, rules and hierarchical relationships that we most often work on when we say we are bringing about change. However, with the strong trunk and the roots, superficial changes do not lead to a different and transformed reality..

- **In the prototyping process we have to address the roots and the trunk too.**

Principles for the Prototyping Work
(drivers for change)

What is the first step in bringing an emerging future to life?

➔ **Rebuild communities**
- Organize where you are and within your community
- Create collectives where everyone does their part

➔ **Reach out to the general population**
- Break the denial of the general population
- Action of the Grinch as opportunity for transformation not criminalization
  Imaginative (people working in systems) not fearful to build connection with lived experts

➔ **Transform service systems**
- People and agencies working together - working *with* the homeless
- People seen as people and not numbers
  - Individual circumstances
  - People don't fit in boxes
  - Judgment and slipping through the cracks
- Social and housing agencies: whole industry that profits off of homelessness, the whole shelter system (benefits in some ways but at a great cost to the people in the system like front-line workers and the low income people)

➔ **Transform governments**
- Accept the extent of criminalization and then dismantle criminalization
- Accept current limitations, although temporary, first step better than none
- Future not based on present/limitations
- Truth telling to bridge
- See people in institutions not as cogs in a machine

➔ **Involve People with Lived Experience**
- Go to people with ideas of how to create something new, hear what they say, go back to them, implement with them, again ask what needs to happen hext, improve, … cycling
- The grinch as a criminalized person seen as a threat for going against the status quo

➔ **Redistribute power to make a change**
- We will continue to talk (why no other community eradicated homelessness?) unless people take the power (power equalization in the local institutions first)
- Being mindful of what is in our realm to do - first steps on sharing power to be able to be heard and to contribute what we have to give

Cautionary Tales

What not to do at the planning stage:

- Allow current system and institutionalization to go unchanged
- Negating people's struggle and loss
- Watered-down solutions (avoiding the causes under the water level with the iceberg)
- Proceed autocratically - assume you know
- Criminalize homeless / poverty
- Indoctrination within the education system / media
- Making experts who don't live it run it
- Don't rush and make promises
- Private property taken as a given
- Paint a nicer picture than it is
- Point to other levels of government
- Repeat solutions that are not working / expecting a different outcome
- Say us vs. them (in many respects! Like legitimate service providers and illegitimate advocates and peer supports)
- Listen to discrimination and fear the same way we listen to lived experience

What not to do at the implementation level:

- Engaging community and then doing own thing anyway
- Deny people nutrition / basic needs and human rights
- Gatekeep
- Hire third party security officers
- Telling people they can't have friends over/ not breaking up community
- Not involving the community
- Tell people to fit into a recycling box
- Charges/arrest activists and advocates
- Telling people they need to shower before going to their room
- Offer useless services and make people run around for supports
- Give power points with no answers, respond with explanations when being called to collaborate
- Checking peoples rooms every 2 hours
- Different rules for different living places, inequity
- Not be able to run their own 'things' , working projects, take away agency and choice

High Level Prototypes (May 30)

1. **The SDCWR Lived Expertise Prototyping process - Allowing the System to See and Sense Itself**

   Creating a space and a process to build mutual understanding, trust and capacity to work together with LEs, frontline workers, advocates and RoW staff - and initiate lasting system transformation.

   Creating a safe and equitable forum for the community to discuss and build consensus about future actions - integration with the co-creators groups towards the implementation of the Plan..

   - **Weekly working sessions - U Process**
   - **Community conversations**
   - **Prototyping and learning by doing together**

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2. **Reviewing bylaws and risk-management process and integration of human rights framework - Decriminalizing homelessness and community supports to the homeless**

   Open a conversation about the overall regional risk-management process, and setting new parameters on how to support community-led initiatives on regional land.

   - Review of Region Bylaws to ensure Human Rights approach to unsheltered homelessness communities. (Region Encampment Operations Table expanded)

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3. **Continuum of Care - Collaboration across the community and service providers in offering direct supports to unsheltered communities**

   System accountability regarding funding for lived experience and community peer workers to provide direct supports, the oversight of impact through lived experience

involvement? Holding service systems accountable to the human rights approach and transfer of power to the community stakeholders to do this work? (Region Unsheltered Working Group reconstruction)

- Supporting unsheltered (hidden homeless) in working together with the Region to demonstrate benefits of healing/restorative practices rooted in a holistic approach and human rights based on local evidence.

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4. Utilizing land for quicker creation of alternative types of housing - challenging the appropriation and privatization of the land

 - Conversations about how legal and financial models have to change and public lands sanctioned to realize the respect of human rights.
- Charter rights to safety, security and life have to be ensured through self-determination of all.
- Integration with the Region Strategic Plan
- Consider "Community Governance"

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5. Intentional and self-governing community pilot - No single type fits all/greater diversity and involvement of communities in creation of housing

Demonstration of the hands on building and creation of intentional communities, rooted in pre-existing relationships and alternative types of housing models.
- Supports for an existing intentional community in creating their homes and self-governance mutual-support model
- Ensuring collaboration with service providers and mutual-aid groups
- Ensuring restorative justice approach model and integration with bylaws both regional and municipal

Potential and Concerns Regarding the Process

What excites me about this process:
- Transformative nature of community conversations led by lived experts and what that may look like for the research practices in the future
- Phase that takes us from conversation to doing
- Things moving forward to action
- Application and meeting new people and understanding relationships and networks
- Wins of communities organizing
- To be a part of this and know that we will do what we can to make a difference
- Partnerships
- Being in the group with people that are shining a light on the root cause of homelessness
- Hearing directly from people
- Conversations, knowledge and platform on a larger scale
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What concerns I carry for the continuation of the process:
- This process becomes a one-off
- Anxious in experiencing more loss
- Are we setting ourselves up to be tools for betrayal by the institutions
- Are we more excited than we can deliver back to the community
- How to get people to share and let them know we have their best interest at heart
- How to feel and what might happen along the way that will prevent us completing our work
- The group stops and cant finish the work because of the systems immovability
- Implementation on the regions side, utilizing knowledge gathered in **the Plan** itself
- Trusting and honoring time it takes to do this work fully

Co-Presencing

Co-presencing is connecting us to the *source* of inspiration; it broadens our perspective…

- **holding community conversations** - with people with the lived experience of unsheltered and hidden homelessness;
- **engaging in preliminary conversations with frontline workers and advocates** supporting hidden homeless populations (immigrants, refugees, students).
- **discerning preliminary themes to align with the already identified general prototypes,** engaging a research assistant in theme analysis, but also, the project team in reading interviews, "entering into a conversation" with the stories and people who shared them, to find resonance with what is emergent.

Community Conversations

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Dr Brian Doucet

Canada Research Chair in Urban Change and Social Inclusion
School of Planning, University of Waterloo

"The PECH group is developing a number of important prototypes that have emerged from this research and the many conversations team members have had. They are genuinely bottom up ideas that centre lived experiences within the solutions to end chronic homelessness. In this sense, they address the questions of 'what does ending chronic homelessness in the Region of Waterloo look like for those who are experiencing homelessness?" Any meaningful, long-lasting and transformative solutions must focus the question in this way."

Read the full letter.

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Dr. Laura Pin
Assistant Professor and Interim Director
Department of Political Science and LISPOP
Wilfrid Laurier University

"I have reviewed some of the preliminary data and prototypes emerging from this process and can say with confidence that the work of SDC and the Regional staff is capturing perspectives often excluded from policymaking concerning homelessness and housing insecurity. More than capturing perspectives, the emergent work is honest, multilayered, and focused on immediate action in the realm of housing and homelessness."t

Read the full letter.

➔ Qualitative vs. Quantitative Data

- *Quantitative data is less important in real life responses than building trust and give support to homeless individuals, households and communities: what, when and how they need it.*
- *Qualitative data is listening to what is happening in the present moment for ourselves, the other person and a range of relationships influencing actions to be taken.*

- *Collecting numbers and fractured information from the unsheltered people (seen as individuals not part of groups, communities and relationships) by the system is secondary, overstating the validity of information and understating the importance of human rights to housing, safety, life...*
- *Qualitative data cannot be replaced in healing and genuine human to human support since it is immediate, reflecting the beliefs and emotions as it unfolds, and allows for relationship building, removing the power of "institutionalized knowledge" over lived embodied experience:*

    - Real life stories
    - Causation: root causes vs. correlation
    - Nuances in understanding
    - Feelings, personality, and perspective
    - Look someone in the eye, humanize them, builds relationships
    - Understand why something isn't working
    - Connected story, broader narrative
    - Defining words and concepts along the way
    - Impacts, severity, and urgency for action and change
    - Intent and a full picture of emotion behind the words
    - Qualitative data as telling a story that's trustworthy, how to not make work pointless
    - What type of harm and to what degree, a diagnostic tool
    - PIT interviews find out more about homelessness through talking and listening than the survey
    - Rich detail how people slipped through the cracks
    - Backstory
    - Context
    - Meaning-making
    - Conveys flaws in the system
    - Hear about positives and key players, different than what systems work with
    - Decisions possible why choose something over something else
    - Curiosity about what the person wants to say, filling gaps
    - Ways someone was communicating, pauses, body language
    - Highlight relationships in unsheltered communities
    - Showcase sense of belonging
    - Conversation is innately collaborative and forms partnerships through solution finding
    - Lived experts who conduct conversations are the best placed to do the interpretations and analysis

Participatory Action Research

In the process of arriving at community conversations, Professor Laura Pin conducted two training sessions on participatory action research (PAR) where Lived Experts, Social Development Center staff, and Regional staff partook in discussions on equitable and community-led research methodologies. PAR-based "community conversations", a give and take, became the framework for engaging with the community, developing the interviewing process, including how to ensure community members' voices in finding solutions.

Using PAR

Prototyping (or piloting) – learning by doing, by testing out and assessing

To address homelessness in Waterloo Region...

1. What needs to be happening (but isn't)?
2. What is working and should be expanded?
3. What could be prototyped with the time and resources available?

During the training, Lived Experts noted the significance of power and ownership within traditional research methods. The histories and contextual components to which research operates is often harmful and extractive to marginalized communities, as well as lacking sufficient representation of community needs.

The community conversations were defined by the group as non-academic but academic-friendly, mindful of minimizing the harm while remaining conscious of the potential re-telling of traumatic experiences and still holding some of the traditional ways to collect demographic data, ethics review by the university or record conversations to prevent loss of data. Due to the values of the PAR process, honest and safe conversations between a Lived Expert and a community member were prioritized (immediate debriefs after the interviews, connecting to the counselor on the team, ensuring other personal supports were in place).

To further support and negotiate different elements of community conversations, Professor Brian Doucet consulted on a number of questions such as the loose question guide determined by lived experts, note taking, division of roles in teams (lived experts paired with staff in support

roles), whole team trial run, $40 gift card distribution at the start regardless of the person withdrawing from the interview, etc. The teams were also advised to think about which people in their networks would be joining the prototyping process as they held community conversations.

Each lived expert recruited people of diverse backgrounds among their contacts. The conversations happened in the environments familiar to their contacts, while everybody's safety needed to be considered and negotiated. Every group was given consent forms, an interview guide with demographic and open-ended questions, gift cards, and a recorder. Twenty-six community conversations were recorded (audio or notes where recording wasn't possible), which surpassed the projected limit of twenty, as there was an emphasis on ensuring diversity among community participants to capture various voices and needs among unhoused communities in both Kitchener and Cambridge.

Preliminary Themes

Chronic Homelessness

Working definition of chronic homelessness definition is limited and limiting

In the stories shared, it all starts with precarious housing; the consequences are far worse for children who are used to lack of safety and security where they live. Even if regarded as being housed, households living in unhealthy, substandard, crowded, and unsafe conditions do not have any control on where, how, with whom they live and are deprived of the autonomy that the majority of people in stable housing or home and property owners take for granted and cannot relate to. Chronic homelessness definition is limited and limiting. Some suggest we need to focus entirely on housing as a human right, and prevent vicious cycles of inadequate and unaffordable housing. It also limits us in seeing the big picture and mobilizing for bigger picture actions recognizing inherent injustices that avoid the systemic root causes of current economic, social and political inequities - who owns the land, who builds, what is being built and what the connection is between the private and the public interests.

Abuse and violence, ageism and ableism, often direct discrimination, racism and homophobia, in families and communities, including frequent practices of small or corporate landlords, create repeated harm and trauma that further diminish an individual's capacity to self-regulate or develop a healthy self-appreciation and reliance, leading to a spiral into self-medicating with accessible substances, while at the same time becoming prey to loan sharks, drug traffickers and prostitution. Youth being shuttled in and out of foster homes, families couch surfing, individuals sleeping in cars while on community housing waiting lists, all reinforce a feeling of abandonment and lack of worth. Many have repeated experiences of being in and out of rehab or jail, and with further difficulties adjusting to service rules and regulations, they seek safety in tents and rooming houses, or live hiding from angry homeowners, security, bylaw or police officers in the crevices of cities or in wooded and bushy areas.

The accompanying factor in today's stigma-riddled society is isolation. Isolation (to keep their kids, to protect themselves from abuse, to protect their immigrant status, to keep their jobs) is preventing many from seeking or accessing existing supports, or being heard in their exasperated calls for change in service frameworks. Over and over again, the fractured family environments are determining many life paths, but instead, many build strong and lasting relationships with their peers and friends, who become their families. No visitors policy is difficult to implement - as it would have to rely on mutual trust of everybody involved to ensure more humane spaces and dwellings for the individuals and relationships they need to feel safe and supported. Taking away a trusted relationship, be it a pet or a human, is like "taking a soother from a baby".

"Love" is a recurrent theme in many of the conversations we had and we wanted to hear from people who are un-homed how it resonated in their lives. It is hard to imagine that love is still a hard currency in highly volatile conditions of the unsheltered and criminalized communities. Love is also not part of the vocabulary in social services yet, but in community-based and more informal networks of support, it is more often than not the ingredient that saves lives and saves souls. Those who seek and find a place in temporary housing such as ABTC, despite an unusually permissive and warm approach, adapt in many ways to retraumatizing conditions and lack of control over their own livelihood, while adjusting to a constant influx of seekers for limited support and resources, or threats of becoming prey to outside criminality. Substance use is a short and debilitating break from reality; old and new survival conflicts impose constant vigilance; chronic health problems and unhealed injuries cannot be treated within the current health system without prejudice and judgment. All of these are aggravated by a downward spiral of mental health issues and the breakdown of a sense of self, until heat or cold, exhaustion or fighting, sickness and overdose end in loss of life. The lack of responses over decades by the health, social, governance and political systems to the lack of income security, employment protections, and rental housing, exemplified in the gentrification crisis, all are considered by many with lived experience and advocates as "state sanctioned violence".

This becomes clear if we look at the pervasive policies preventing people from getting ahead such as financialization of housing, rent decontrol, stagnant social assistance rates, lack of enforcement of both Residential Tenancies Act or the Employment Standards, and inability of the systems to address the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions Calls to Action at all levels of government.

Hidden Homelessness

"Further, the report estimated that as many as 80% of Ontario's homeless population experiences "hidden homelessness" such as couch surfing, sleeping in abandoned buildings or

camping under bridges and in remote locations." 2021 Auditor General's Report on Homelessness.

Reaching the hidden homeless is difficult or estimating the scope and numbers of people involved. The team decided to connect to the frontline workers who support populations who are either not accessing the shelter system or staying in it for long, such as immigrant and refugee populations, as well as youth and students, especially international students. Yet, in terms of the totality of those who strive to remain invisible to the criminalization, police, bylaw and security enforcement or "move along" tactics, we have barely uncovered the tip of the ice-berg of individuals who have been stripped of their human and Charter rights through concerted systemic and institutional discrimination and deprivation. More seniors, youth and immigrants are coming to shelter doors, and we still do not do the obvious thing – build housing for them that they need and choose.

As already stated, we tended to assume that hidden homeless individuals had to self-identify as homeless to be considered as such, and that conversations with settlement workers and with international students actually revealed that many rarely think of themselves as being homeless. In addition, the word "homeless" itself does not have the same meaning for a range of ethno-cultural groups because the concept does not exist in their countries of origin. Communal cultural contexts are far more permissive of cohabitation in different forms, while co-dependence for shorter or longer periods of time is a norm when compared to the individualistic and privacy-focused North American context. Communal and mutually-involved, spirituality-rich types of cohabitation are still dominant for certain immigrant communities, where they can have their family-privacy and at the same time access the immediate social groups and supports which are embedded in the physical space and building forms in which they live. This is especially apparent in the testimonies from refugees about refugee camps where similar configurations of dwellings would be clustered to allow for close relatives and families to live together amidst the broader ethnic and cultural mix. "Were it not for such communities, most refugees would not be able to survive years in camps".

Communal co-reliance, however, becomes a very different experience in the neoliberal North American context, embedded as it is in exploitative rental practices where landlords' lack of accountability and respect of Residential Tenancies legislation makes the situation way more harmful to people's well-being and relationships, while re-traumatizing migrant populations.

Our conclusion is that the definition of hidden homelessness does not necessarily include self-identification and needs to be looked at through a lens that includes lack of a lease in the person's name; repeated episodes of temporary accommodation; no financial means to secure housing; living in dwellings that are unsafe physically, psychologically, and emotionally; lack of knowledge about available supports or the means to follow through on accessing justice, housing or income support. The extent of undue harm, stress and lack of a sense of safety and security of life determines whether the person is homeless through this shared lived human experience.

Next Steps - Co-Creating

The prototyping process will require a care-full process in bridging between service providers in the housing and homelessness system on the one hand and lived experts and community advocates on the other. Channels of communication and mutual accountability are yet to be established so we can move the needle on homelessness elimination and social justice through joint advocacy and hands-on work to implement the solutions by dismantling the current exclusionary processes and practices.

- SDCWR Lived Expertise Prototyping group will be building out, exploring, and testing the prototypes by the end of the year
- The group will be broadened to include a second cohort of lived experts and community advocates who have been involved in respective work already
- The Prototyping work will involve additional Region staff and invite staff from organizations represented at the Co-Creator group to ensure collaboration and integration in different parts of the system

Using this mutually caring approach, the collaboration will result from "doing things" together, in contrast to the more dominant "planning tables" model, where players come together and work in a mostly reactive mode, within tight time constraints and resources.

We will need processes that loosen those constraints:

- Include diverse stakeholders to join the process of prototyping, particularly those perceived as "difficult" to work with, advocates and activists with lived experience;
- Allow for more time to build relationships and trust among different partners, alongside the appropriate allocation of resources;
- Relinquish tight structures and control of any one entity, especially the ones who possess the most power and resources municipality such as the regional and city governments;
- Adopt flexibility of procedures and protocols that enables unlike partners, Region staff and Council, service providers, mutual-aid groups and social justice activists, to create ways towards co-reliance, interdependency and mutual accountability as they do hands-on work together.