

From Heroes to Homeless: Canadian Veterans' Pathways to Home



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Abstract

Older adults (50+) constitute an increasing population of those experiencing homelessness within Canada. Veterans, a sub-group of older homeless adults, is also increasing and are two to three times more likely to experience homelessness compared to the general population in Canada. Current estimates suggest that there are 2,400-10,000+ homeless veterans in Canada. As part of the Aging in the Right Place (AIRP) partnership, a tri-city, multi-methods study, we sought to understand what risk factors are present within temporary supportive housing program (tiny home barracks), identified as a promising practice, in Calgary, Alberta. We conducted a secondary data thematic analysis of photovoice interviews with seven older adult residents and qualitative interviews with five service providers in a promising practice shelter in Calgary, Alberta, to understand what features of shelter and services support older formerly homeless veterans to age in the right place. Findings were organized into four themes: 1) community membership, 2) physical and mental health challenges, 3) characteristics of the physical space, and 4) veteran experiences. Findings from this research can be used to inform policy and programming to support stable housing and support the transition to civilian life among veterans.

Context

Older adults constitute an increasing population of those experiencing homelessness within Canada (Government of Canada, 2021; Homeless Hub, n.d.). Veterans, a sub-group of older homeless adults, is also increasing in Canada (Chase et al., 2023). Veterans experience both episodic and chronic homelessness (Gaetz, 2016) and with current systems and trends, have a greater risk of homelessness than non-veterans (Chase, et al., 2023), regardless of the amount of time served (Amor, 2021).

Methodology

We conducted a secondary data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) using data from a primary research study that examined promising practices in shelters across the housing continuum (Figure 1) for older adults experiencing homelessness in Canada. Perspectives of seven older adults were obtained via photovoice interviews (Wang & Burris, 1997) and in-depth qualitative interviews with five service providers were used to examine the practices of temporary supportive shelter, Homes for Heroes to promote AIRP.

Study Setting

Homes for Heroes consists of a communal village with 15 fully functional and fully furnished independent units, of approximately 275 square feet (Homes for Heroes Foundation, n.d.). These veteran villages are created with connection, community, and comradery in mind, located close to public transportation and equipped with a community garden and resource/amenity center.

Findings

- We identified four overarching themes, described below with direct quotes:
- Community Membership:** Pertains to the overall context of belonging, connection, and community (Figure 2).
 - ❖ “So, I guess since as community being that we’re so close, not everybody gets along... I guess it’s resources that are to help up along...” (Participant 6).
 - ❖ The support of everybody else around here is pretty good. We all kind of help out each other” (Participant 3).
 - Veteran-Specific Health Challenges:** Focuses on veterans’ health concerns and their ability to address theme.
 - ❖ “Well, I was suffering post-traumatic stress, and I had agoraphobia, and I couldn’t even leave my room. And I thought, well militia is only part-time, and it just got out of hand [laughs]. Here I am with a psychological problem. I can barely, you know, take care of myself outside of [the] military...” (Participant 4).
 - ❖ “When I came back, I thought I was fine for about two or three months and then I had PTSD. I’ve been fighting it ever since” (Participant 4).
 - Physical Space:** Explores the built environment including its design, accessibility, privacy, and so forth (Figure 4)
 - ❖ “We’re limited to what we can have. Either I get rid of the electric scooter and then get an electric wheelchair. Okay fine. But I can’t have both of them in the same place” (Participant 2).
 - ❖ “We are deliberately keeping them tiny, for that transitional period from being housing it in stable, like couch surfing or living out of your car or living rough, like where you don’t have a lot of your space...And I think that helps with the hoarding as well, because there’s not a lot of storage space” (Provider 1).
 - The Veteran Experience** Refers to the transitioning from military to civilian life (Figure 3).
 - ❖ “I came from a small town, worked hard, made other people’s dreams come true and not mine. Why?...I don’t care about legacies. I don’t care about material things...” (Participant 6).
 - ❖ “Something happened to me mentally. Not kidding. I’m not the same person I was three years ago. I changed. I evolved as I human...The Dark Knight of the Soul came out in me. I broke. Time does that” (Participant 6).

Implications

- Implementation of Policies:** The findings highlight the gaps in the existing programs and services provided to veterans in Canada. Policies regarding the improvement in the provision of affordable housing are needed.
- Collaboration of Services:** A better understanding of the challenges and temporary housing provisions for veterans can lead to the integration of services and support that enables veterans to successfully transition to civilian life.

Land Acknowledgement

We respectfully acknowledge the traditional territories of the Indigenous people of the Treaty 6 and 7 regions of Northern and Southern Alberta.

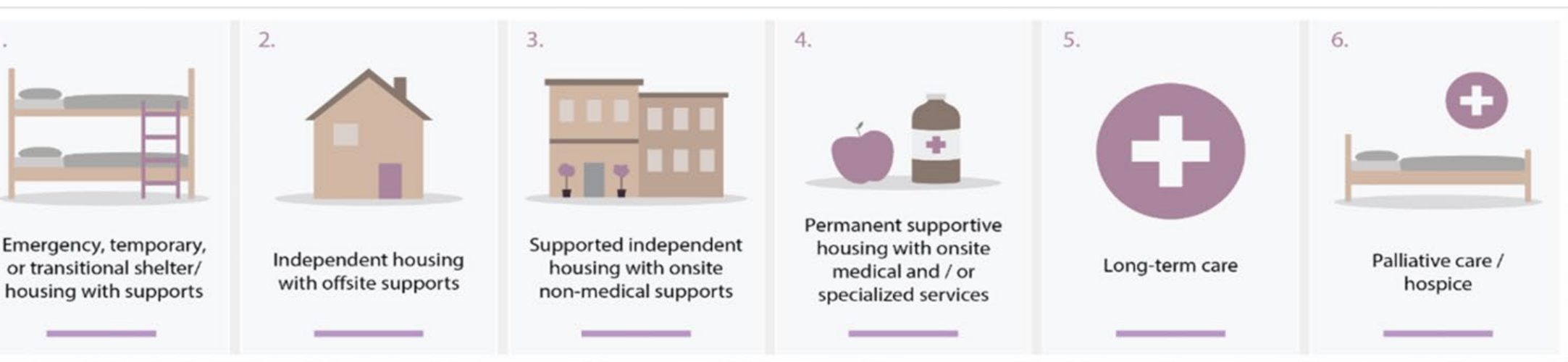


Figure 1: Housing Continuum

Making Change Together

Homelessness is a complex human rights issue that requires population-specific solutions. Transition from active duty to civilian life is complex and multi-layered. Resources directed at the prevention of homelessness during the transition are needed to ensure a successful transition. One such approach is the provision of temporary supportive housing, with a multidisciplinary approach to address potential risks and protective factors for becoming unhoused. Drawing on the Aging in the Right Place (AIRP) partnership we sought to understand the policies and practices that promoted AIRP within a promising practice temporary supportive shelter for veterans in Calgary, Alberta.



Figures 2, 3, & 4: Photovoice images taken by shelter residents

Figures 5: Homes for Heroes Foundation
<https://homesforheroesfoundation.ca/calgary/>

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