



Modular at 321 Dovercourt Rd., Toronto

INCREASING ACCESS TO SUPPORTIVE HOUSING DURING COVID-19:

Projects in Calgary and Toronto

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This Capstone is part of a Major Degree Project for the Master of City Planning program at the University of Manitoba. It was conducted with guidance from Dr. Orly Linovski, Dr. Rae Bridgman and Lissie Rappaport (RPP candidate).

OVERVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted many Canadians. Phrases like “stay-at-home” and “practice social distancing” have popularized conversations throughout 2020. However, the virus has not affected everyone equally and has graver impacts on marginalized groups, including those who experience homelessness and who lack a place to isolate safely. These

populations also face other barriers, such as accessing healthcare and social services that can contribute to their vulnerability to the pandemic (Tam, 2020).

This study examines two supportive housing initiatives that have taken place during the COVID-19 pandemic, and it compares the processes and challenges of both projects. The research sets to identify lessons that others looking to increase supportive housing can use. It attempts to illustrate that crises, like the COVID-19 pandemic, can become moments of opportunity and stimulate new housing considerations, long-term policy changes and reorient government investments.

Supportive housing can be defined as housing with available supports to help individuals live independently. Supports are often provided by community-based organizations and can vary from mental health services, addictions and other social services.

(Perkins, 2016; Rog et al., 2014)

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What strategies have cities across Canada been adopting to increase the stock of supportive housing during the unfolding of COVID-19?

How have these strategies been implemented and what lessons do they offer to those in other cities?

HOW WERE THESE ANSWERED?

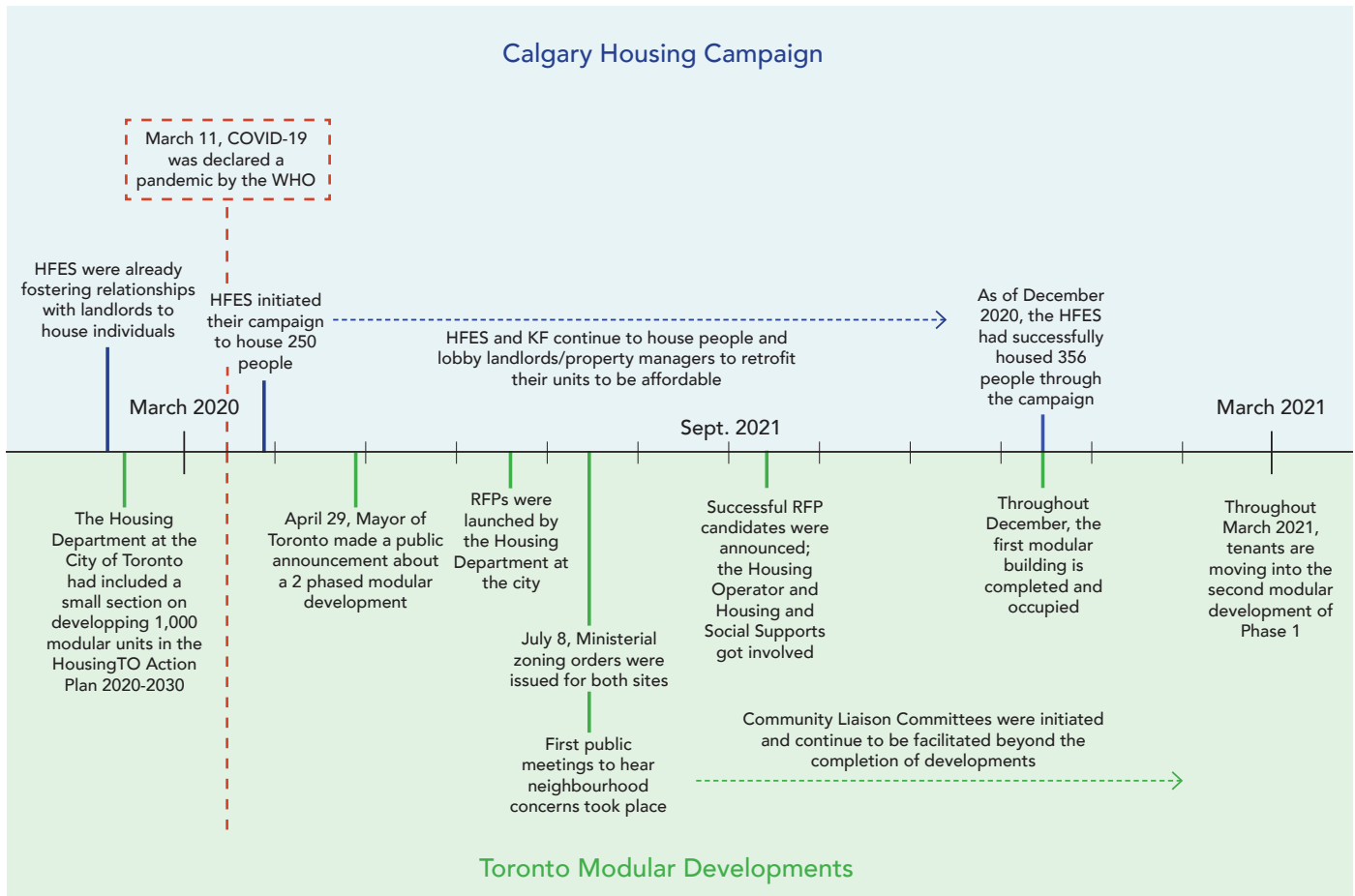
A collective case study research design was adopted to set forth explanatory research for each housing project. It also provided the opportunity to compare and contrast both strategies. The data for the research was collected from five semi-structured interviews and a document analysis of relevant materials, such as zoning bylaws, staff reports, municipal housing plans and homelessness reports. These methods allowed for an exploration of the projects' processes and the actors involved. The two initiatives were selected through an initial media search which included webinars and news articles.

CASE STUDIES: two supportive housing projects

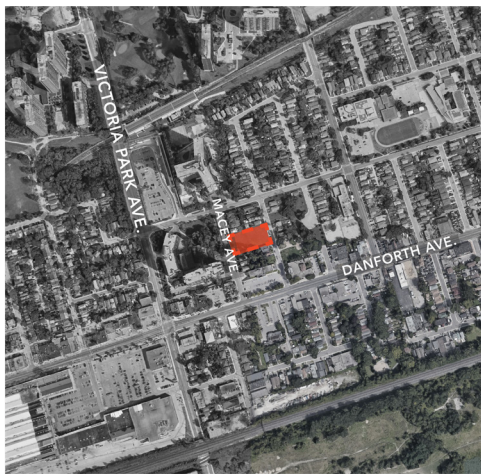
- 1 Housing Campaign in Calgary** was launched by a non-profit organization, Housing-Focused Emergency Shelter (HFES). HFES lobbied local landlords and property managers to modify their rental apartments into affordable units for those experiencing homelessness. HFES launched a city-wide housing campaign, with a memorable hook, with a goal to house 250 people experiencing homelessness during COVID-19.
- 2 Modular Housing in Toronto (Phase 1)** was initiated by Toronto's Affordable Housing Department (TAHD). The TAHD organized and coordinated the first stages of constructing two modular complexes on city-owned land, located at 11 Macey Avenue and 321 Dovercourt Road. These complexes amounted to 100 modular units for individuals experiencing homelessness. The TAHD helped expedite the planning process and launched a request for proposal (RFP) to recruit two non-profit organizations, one to act as a landlord and the other to provide social support. The Housing Operator organizations and the Housing and Social Supports organizations were both selected in September. They were given primary responsibility for the modular developments once they were completed and occupied by residents in early 2021.

MAPPING THE PROCESS

Timeline and progress for both housing initiatives from March 2020 to March 2021:



Modular sites for Toronto project:



11 Macey Avenue


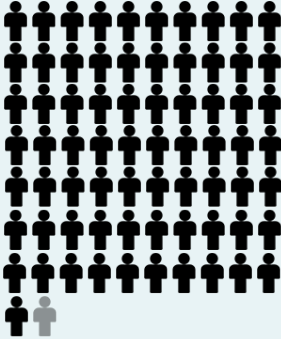





321 Dovercourt Road

Both sites, 11 Macey in Scarborough and 321 Dovercourt in Toronto's West End District required ministerial zoning orders (MZOs) issued by the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing at the Province of Ontario to rezone the sites rapidly, overriding municipal zoning bylaws.

NUMBERS & RESULTS

Comparison of the results and outcomes for both supportive housing initiatives:

		Housing Campaign in Calgary	Modular Developments in Toronto (Phase 1)
Examining the numbers	Number of persons housed between March 2020 - March 2021  = 5 persons		
	Number of new developments constructed  = 1 new building	No new buildings were constructed for the campaign.	
	Number of actors involved in the project	3 primary actors involved <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing-Focused Emergency Shelter (HFES) • Key Funder • Independent Landlords and Property Managers 	8 primary actors involved <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Toronto's Affordable Housing Department (TAHD) • Housing Operator • Housing and Social Supports • Mayor of Toronto • Toronto Alliance to End Homelessness • Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing • CreateTO • NBR Modular Solutions

The projects vary from each other immensely. The Toronto project resulted in 100 new supportive housing units and housing 100 individuals in two new modular buildings. In contrast, the Calgary project involved retrofitting existing apartments to provide affordable apartments to over 356 individuals who experience homelessness. The Calgary project also required fewer actors than the Toronto project.

The differences are also evident from a process standpoint. The Calgary project included a pre-determined course of action, whereas the Toronto development required an RFP process to identify suitable actors to take responsibility for the modular units.

IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES

Challenges that were highlighted in throughout the interviews:

		Housing Campaign in Calgary	Modular Developments in Toronto (Phase 1)
Challenges identified	Funding and financial support	The influx of financial support during COVID-19 was helpful, but lack of sustained flexible funding does not cover the costs needed to provide ongoing social supports; therefore, high acuity individuals could not be housed.	No operational dollars were included in RFP packages, which created a challenge for the Housing and Social Supports organization to coordinate additional expenses.
	Zoning		After the site selection, both lots at 11 Macey and 321 Dovercourt needed to be rezoned rapidly - an MZO was necessary.
	NIMBYism		Neighbourhood concerns were raised in the early phases of the modular developments.
	COVID-19	HFES needed to pivot their services at the beginning of the pandemic, including addressing several positive COVID-19 cases which impacted their work on the campaign. They were also required to offer virtual apartment viewings.	The pandemic affected the Housing Operator and Housing and Social Supports organizations in recruiting staff. It also impacted the intake of tenants, only 2-3 tenants could move into the units a day. The TAHD also shared public meetings were a challenge at first due to it being the first virtual format for the city.

Two significant challenges were present in both projects: (1) inadequate funding that does not cover all operational costs, (2) the pandemic impacted the work and staffing for organizations and pushed them to pivot to virtual formats. During the interview process, interviewees talked about the ability to obtain more financial flexibility from funders due to the pandemic; but shared a lack of a sustained investment may hinder the future success of their initiative.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Relationships between levels of government, housing providers, community organizations and advocacy groups that were created and strengthened during COVID-19 should be sustained moving forward. The relationships among the housing and homeless-serving sector are critical in developing supportive units in the future and building resilient communities.

Housing departments within municipal governments should create a rapid supportive housing mandate, aiming to develop a quota number of units every year consistent with the need for new units. In addition to this mandate, municipal governments could implement a housing plan, like Toronto's HousingTO 2020-2030 Action Plan, that set out objectives to increase access and the number of supportive housing units.

Municipal governments should include operational costs for housing providers and housing supports in their RFP packages to strengthen the project from the start and continue to support it long-term.

To meet the government's goal of ending homelessness, sustained and increased funding for long-term housing solutions for people experiencing homelessness is needed. As seen throughout these projects, the influx of available resources during COVID-19 helped these projects succeed. It is also essential for this funding to be provided in an unrestricted manner, allowing non-profits and housing providers the flexibility to decide where and how the dollars should be spent.

Provincial governments should evaluate the benefits of establishing an MZO or order with similar influence. With this authority, lawmakers would have the ability to quickly rezone land for supportive housing. However, this sort of order should be employed with caution and with use restrictions, as it can overthrow general zoning regulations and reduce opportunities for an appeal.

“ For a lot of people this could be the first time they have a key to a unit that they can close the door to, to me that's the biggest indicator of success. ”

- TAHD representative

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Front page image

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11 Macey Avenue image

Google Earth Pro. (2021) *11 Macey Avenue*. Manipulated by Justin Grift.

321 Dovercourt Road image

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