

# Reframing the Approach to Homelessness

## What might Winnipeg and Manitoba Learn from Vancouver BC and Scotland UK?

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### Abstract



Homelessness is broadly defined and experienced across cultures and social strata. For this reason, there is no single response that will fully address the eclectic nature of homelessness, nor is it possible to truly believe all homelessness can be eradicated. The complexity of the issue makes it difficult to translate programmed approaches in different contexts, and limits the development of a blanket, one

size fits all approach. The varying nature of homelessness however, does not imply that we cannot learn from approaches in other towns, cities, and countries. Marilyn Hamilton's *Approaching Homelessness: An Integral Reframe* describes the evolution of homelessness and proposes a new integral framework policymakers could follow to develop more inclusive and flexible approaches.

This case study examines how policy falls short by being too narrow in scope. It compares Scotland's policy with Vancouver's due to the prominence of homelessness issues in these regions and the similar context in which it occurs; yet they are still different enough to provide an interesting contrast. The purpose is to examine how policies in these two regions reflect the basic assumptions of homelessness. The evaluation of policies will measure how each policy is successful and deficient based on Marilyn Hamilton's key framework principles. The conclusion highlights the strengths of each approach, suggests areas for improvement, and discusses lessons to be learned from the examples found in other policies.

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unsettled abandoned vagrant desolate outcast unhoused  
vagabond destitute exiled houseless forgotten displaced unwelcome  
forsaken dispossessed uncared-for wandering down-and-out

# Introduction

Based on Beck & Cowan's Spiral Dynamics system of complexity (1996), the relationship with home falls within the contexts of survival, belonging, command & control, authoritarian strictures, economic success, humanitarian equality, systemic flex & flow, and planetary commons. According to this framework, the meaning of home in cities stems from authoritarian structures of complexity where order is maintained through regulation and law. In our villages, cities and towns, home is related to a person's place within a social hierarchy reinforced by the elite who control the status quo. In this context home is equated with stability and creating an environment where people flourish. The home also becomes a traded good or asset, which increases feelings of wealth and stability, moving the meaning of home into the context of economic success and housing markets.

Beyond this level, conditions exist where diversity is embraced and 'home is a shared community of cooperative interests' in a context of equitable distribution of resources and opportunity. This view of home is less homogeneous and more accepting of diverse views. However, these more lax regulations led to, among other events, the deinstitutionalisation of psychiatric patients creating a new population of marginalized homeless people. Within systems thinking, home is a habitat where interconnectivity amongst humans can occur. It is a holistic and ecological approach that considers how relationships between the various systems influence the overall health and well being of the family system.

Hamilton (2006) suggests, "homelessness emerges from a vertical evolution of the complexities of habitats, life conditions, individual choices, capacities and social enforcements". Thus, the complex nature of homelessness, how it is defined, and the impact it will have changes with the ebb and flow of people's lives and the situations they encounter. Homelessness can emerge from relationships within social contexts, and individual factors such as emotional and mental health, and addictions.

Hamilton outlines an approach for reframing homelessness that can be useful for municipal governments looking to formulate an approach that addresses homelessness. The following are key points in the formation of this policy framework:

- Examine underlying assumptions about homelessness
- What interventions have we tried which have been ineffective?
- Do interventions address multiple levels of homelessness?
- Are interventions responsive to the individuality of homelessness?

Hamilton suggests, within homelessness policies there are common issues that must be overcome and views and perceptions of homelessness that must be challenged. For example, homelessness is often viewed as a maladaptation or pathology to a human system and something that must be solved. The development of policies must account for "homelessness traps" where poverty and homelessness become cyclical and resistant to change. "Rigidity traps" exist where service providers only use one model in addressing homelessness, omitting other levels of homelessness that do

not respond to this approach. There is a need to consider the levels of complexity, the individuality of life conditions, the interconnectivity, and the social dynamics that are feeding into homelessness. Policy will not be successful unless it abandons linear thinking framed around cause and effect relationships and prescribed solutions.

An important component of Hamilton's integral approach is the concept of mesh working, which expands the notion of forming partnerships to include education, feedback, and healing. Mesh working includes goals to:

- Scan to understand the levels of complexity that exist in the region
- Strive to learn more about the patterns in natural human systems
- Introduce monitors or feedback loops
- Work across disciplines in formulating strategies
- Have interventions in place to prevent homelessness
- Promote continuous learning
- Intervene to end homelessness by healing, educating, restoring and facilitating: individuals, families, neighbourhoods, cities, and societies.

## Vancouver's Homelessness legislation

Summary of the Regional Homelessness Plan for Greater Vancouver  
The Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness (RSCH) formed in 2000 to bring together a range of people and organisations working to address homelessness in Greater Vancouver communities. The RSCH developed and oversee the implementation of the Regional Homelessness Plan for Greater Vancouver. The Regional Homelessness Plan, titled Three Ways to Home, is a reflection of three components of a comprehensive solution to homelessness:

1. Affordable housing – emergency shelters, transitional housing, supportive housing, independent affordable housing
2. Support services – prevention, outreach, drop-in centres, mental health services, addictions treatment, research, planning & capacity building
3. Adequate incomes – employment assistance service and training, legislative reform to provide adequate incomes.

The Shelter Strategy is a ten-year plan in Greater Vancouver that focuses on providing all types of shelters in the region including transition housing, youth shelters, and safe houses. The plan sets forth recommendations on the number of shelter spaces needed, where these spaces should be located according to need, and the types of spaces needed to accommodate the diverse needs of the homeless population. The strategy recognises that the need for shelter spaces is driven by many factors including housing affordability in the region, income levels below the poverty line, and a lack of support services for people with special housing needs. (From Shelter to Home, Greater Vancouver Shelter Strategy 2006 – 2015).

The Strategy outlines five goals developed in response to the 1130 people without shelter on homelessness count night. They are as follows:

1. To improve the effectiveness of the emergency shelter system
2. Improve the services/links to move people from shelters to housing
3. Focus on services to help homeless people leave the streets
4. Increase the capacity of transition houses for women and families fleeing violence; and
5. Develop permanent solutions to end homelessness

A guiding principle behind the strategy is a Housing First approach that gives homeless people direct access to permanent housing in association with a range of support services. Mechanisms that can assist in achieving this goal include creating a range of affordable-housing options in the capital region, and providing harm-reduction and treatment services, income support and short-term help during the transition to affordable housing (Dickson, 2007).

## Scotland's Homelessness legislation

“Scotland's homelessness legislation has been described as the most progressive in Europe. The spirit of this legislation reflects a better understanding of how people become homeless and how it could happen to anyone. It reflects that people who are homeless need help to rebuild their lives.” The policy sets out to dispel the myths surrounding homelessness and respects a number of definitions and experiences of homelessness.

The Homelessness Task Force (HTF), established in 1999, published a list of recommendations in its final report. The HTF influenced the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 to include the following recommendations:

- Local authorities must provide at minimum, temporary accommodation for all homeless households
- Local authorities must provide permanent accommodation for all priority need households who are unintentionally homeless
- Local authorities must produce homelessness strategies
- Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) must provide accommodation for priority need households as requested by local authorities unless there is a 'good reason' for refusal

Tackling homelessness is a key part of fighting poverty and inequality in Scotland. The Scottish Executive is developing ambitious policies and legislation to prevent and alleviate homelessness and ensure that every homeless person gets help according to their needs. Councils are also involved; ensuring the right to permanent accommodation can be fulfilled in response to the legislation guidelines.

A key target is to ensure that by 2012 every unintentionally homeless person will be entitled to permanent accommodation. This will be achieved through legislation and investing in housing. However, there is recognition that homelessness is not just a housing issue and people need appropriate help and support to retain housing. Under the new act, all homeless people have the right to at least temporary accommodation along with advice and

assistance, and the intentional homelessness test has been eliminated.

The Homelessness Monitoring Group (HMG) was set up in 2002 to monitor progress of Homelessness Task Force recommendations. These recommendations have increased coordination between authorities to ensure meeting the health needs of homeless people and acknowledging the consequences of being homeless upon a person's health. There are recommendations that acknowledge that homeless and formerly homeless people can become unemployed and find it difficult to get work, and the aim is to address some of these employment issues. The HTF recommended that all local authorities produce a required homelessness strategy identifying the needs of homeless people in their area, and a plan to address those needs in a strategic and coherent manner, collaborating where necessary with other agencies.

The Supporting People Program, launched in 2003, is committed to improving the quality of life for vulnerable people through providing support services. The program offers housing related supports intended to prevent homelessness, hospitalisation, or institutionalisation, or help ease the transition from these areas to independent living.

## Strengths & Weaknesses

My collaborators were able to suggest weaknesses and strengths in each policy drawing from their experiences working within each policy framework. This feedback in combination with articles and briefs written in response to the implementation of these policies can be used to create a picture of the successes and shortcomings of these policies, and how well they fit into Hamilton's framework.

### **Strengths of GVRD homelessness policy**

The regional initiative, led by the Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness, is an incredible example of collaborative planning, or rather a network approach to planning. It was recognized early on that homelessness is not a problem that will be solved quickly, or by any one actor working alone. As a result, a network structure was built over the past few years, which links community agencies, service providers, federal representatives, provincial agencies and local governments to build solutions to homelessness together. The three levels of government sat down together every month to have constructive conversations is a huge success. The addition of community based agencies to the partnerships added to the strength of relationships. Since 2000, \$60 million in federal funding has been allocated, and the province collaborated in projects to build awareness and understanding of homelessness across the region. Five years ago, the provincial government was slashing funding for social programs, including housing. Today, the province is involved once again and is allocating funding where it is needed

### **Weaknesses of GVRD homelessness policy**

A key criticism of the regional homelessness plan is that it is more of a research document that lays out the gaps and needs in the region, than a plan that sets out goals and targets. The basic message you can take from the plan is that we need everything, everywhere. This provides flexibility in terms of what we can fund and advocate for, but it just is not useful for planning purposes.

The plan does not rank areas according to need, making it more difficult to determine where funds should be allocated. Target populations such as youth, seniors, and families are not prioritized, nor the types of services we should be providing to assist these populations. For example, there is no clear plan to move in a specific direction such as providing more supportive housing units, outreach workers, or drop-in centres. Related to this, we do not clearly identify a quantitative need for specific services, or how to move towards achieving these targets. There are no clear indications as to the number of supportive housing units or service centres needed in the region. This allows the province and other funding bodies to say they are addressing the need for supportive housing, when actually they are providing a drastically inadequate number of units. However with no clear targets outlined, the response cannot be criticised. Finally, we do not identify which municipalities in the region have the largest or most pressing need for which types of service. If we only have enough funds to build 200 units of supportive housing this year, there is no indication of where this development should be prioritized. The fact that we have scarce resources makes the need to prioritize and target those resources even more pressing, but our current plan does not do that.

### **Strengths of homelessness policy in Scotland**

One of the strongest aspects of homelessness policy development and implementation in Scotland is the establishment of the Homelessness Task Force (HTF) and the continuing influence of the Homelessness Monitoring Group (HMG). The HTF set a very clear and bold target to provide every unintentionally homeless household with accommodation by 2012. The establishment of the target has provided a focus for delivery that is generally not seen in politics and one that politicians can be measured against. Non-party political representatives, service providers, and/or representatives of national bodies sit on the HTF and HMG's. They act as professional advisors to the ministers and use a consensus approach that ensures a practical and holistic approach to legislation and guidance is applied.

This holistic view means seeing homelessness as a failure of a wider system of social policies. There is also a sound understanding of the impact homelessness has on wider social inclusion/exclusion issues. Health and homelessness are linked to ensure those experiencing homelessness receive adequate care. The Supporting People funding provides for additional practical support for people to settling them into homes when they have been homeless to minimise the potential of cyclical homelessness. It is very clear from the HTF's Action Plan, that they valued a partnership approach between a range of social policy areas to ensure the effects of homelessness

were minimised. In addition, there is a strong emphasis (albeit a struggle to implement) on prevention. One could argue that there are two reasons for this emphasis, one being the minimisation of impact of homelessness on individuals and communities, the other that it is cheaper to deal with. This is true with many governmental policy areas in the UK, where the emphasis is on value for money and efficiency.

A further strength is the commitment the Scottish Executive has to involve practitioners in the development of the implementation timetable. The consultation process is very open, providing sufficient time for organisations and individuals to participate. In addition, the Executive facilitates discussion between practitioners through holding sessions to inform their own thinking. Practitioners are playing a large role internally within the Scottish Executive itself with staff from local authority homelessness and housing teams being recruited to develop their thinking on future implementation.

### **Weaknesses of homelessness policy in Scotland**

While the HTF and HMG are very clear that a holistic approach is required, there is still ignorance surrounding what homelessness actually is and what impact it has on individuals, families and communities. This ignorance is not just within politicians and the public, but also amongst housing service providers. Homelessness according to many represents failure. It is also perceived as closely linked with antisocial behaviour, as media concentrates on those who live the most chaotic lifestyles (generally homeless single males with drug/alcohol/mental health problems). This in itself is not a problem with the homelessness policy per se, but it has a major impact on the implementation of policies. Local authorities controlled by locally elected councillors who represent the interests of their constituents statutorily provide homelessness services. The policy so far has been to separate homeless applicants from the rest of applicants and extend the classifications of people who will be classed as in priority need. In spite of this being done gradually, the allocations processes within local authorities and Registered Social Landlords are under severe pressure as the housing market becomes overheated and people are no longer as able to afford to move into owner occupation that meets their needs. At the same time, properties managed by the social rented sector are becoming less available due to the right to buy policy and through a mismatch of household size/type with property size/type. The average household size is reducing while the properties in management of social rented sector tend to be larger family accommodation in increasingly rental properties.

Once it is fully explained, people understand the rationale behind a holistic approach to tackling homelessness, however without the dissemination of such thinking there is an understandable backlash against the implementation of legislation. Very often, this is perceived as a top down approach to policy, while in actuality much of the policy is a result of practitioners influencing the original HTF reports and the HMG's action plan. The extent of the work that is required to meet the 2012 target is considerable, and there is a danger that the Scottish Executive is failing to take time to think things through as thoroughly as they could in order to meet the target.

The implementation of the policy lies with one only part of the Scottish Executive, the civil service, and the wider service are minimally aware and less involved. There is increasing pressure on service providers to think strategically and work in partnership to achieve the aims and targets, but the Executive are failing to demonstrate that they are able to join up their own thinking in some areas - homelessness being one.

Another weakness is the lack of affordable homes for rent. While there has been unprecedented investment in housing since devolution, much of this has been directed at low cost homeownership and social renting stock. This is where it has been possible to build due to land being available and the infrastructure (especially water) being in place. Therefore, there is a situation now where increasing numbers of households are eligible for temporary accommodation as the groups in priority need are extended. There is now increased pressure on temporary accommodation solutions because there are not sufficient permanent units to offer. Increasing numbers of local authority general stock is being taken over to help manage the increasing demand for temporary accommodation, which has in effect created a logjam effect where no one is moving on. It could be argued that practitioners have allowed this to happen by not being able to think out of the box to come up with creative alternative and strategies, and in many areas, the full extent of the effects of extending the priority groups was not fully appreciated. It could be argued that the policies have been put in place with an assumption that those who would be implementing them had the necessary skills and expertise to anticipate and plan as well as creativity and inspiration to tackle the problems effectively.

## Towards Integral Policies

The feedback provided by collaborators and an overview of the policies enables comparisons of these policies with Hamilton's integral reframe of homelessness. There are four areas of Hamilton's framework to explore to determine how these policies fit into the framework, and areas where they could be adapted and improved to create more integral homelessness policies.

*Do these policies examine underlying assumptions about homelessness?*

To an extent, both policies acknowledge that there is not one face of homelessness, and rather it can affect many people at different stages of life, and with unique needs. The Scottish policies seem to be more comprehensive, addressing family needs and the widening of priority need categories has promoted greater awareness of who can become homeless. In Vancouver as well, it is recognized that the homeless population can include a range of individuals from more vulnerable groups to middle class workers who rely on seasonal employment. This helps to challenge the stigma surrounding homelessness, and promotes awareness of the life conditions and events that lead to homelessness. However, stigma still exists and often emerges in the implementation of policies and allocation of services and funding toward homelessness policies. For this reason, many policies stress the economic benefits associated with allocating funding

toward homelessness initiatives, such as decreased health care costs and stresses on municipal services.

*Do policies examine ineffective interventions and re-evaluate interventions?*

The Scottish executives policy seems to provide the opportunity for feedback from frontline workers, but it is unclear how feedback is applied to policies or used to prioritise or re-evaluate the effectiveness of current measures. Hamilton suggests ineffective interventions should be replaced with effective ones., making sure that needs are being fulfilled without creating further problems such as victimising homelessness or failing to respond to differing needs and circumstances.

*Do interventions address multiple levels of homelessness?*

Hamilton suggests effective interventions will not only provide shelter, but heal physical and emotional scars and develop individual capacities. Both policies address multiple levels of homelessness and the different types of services and accommodations needed to support a diverse homeless population.

*Are interventions responsive to the individuality of homelessness?*

It seems that both policies are inclusive of individual experiences of homelessness, but it is unclear whether interventions are meeting the demands. It is one thing to recognize a group, but it can be more difficult to ensure service provision is adequate to meet their needs. It seems that the intentions for positive interventions are in place, but funding can sometimes be an issue along with constraints in the housing market that limit the provision of housing units. It is also difficult to provide services with fluctuations in the homeless populations and the subsequent inability to determine and prioritize the needs of the population.

## New Policy Developments

The Federal Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) unveiled in December of 2006 replaces the National Homelessness Initiative, which expired in March of 2007. The new HPS is a “housing-first“ approach and involves:

- Consulting with stakeholders from the private and non-profit;
- Partnering with the provinces and territories to determine how to allocate funding across Canada, while addressing the unique needs of diverse communities;
- Enhancing access to support networks in response to individual needs of homeless people to foster self-sufficiency and full participation in Canadian society;
- Targeting funding toward the development of transitional and supportive housing; and
- Tracking progress and sharing reports on the prevention and reduction of homelessness.

Key components of the strategy include the Homelessness partnership Initiative (HPI), Homelessness Accountability Network (HAN), and the Surplus Federal Real Property for Homelessness Initiative (SFRPHI).

The HAN provides an opportunity to strengthen the networks between the designated communities that are part of the Homelessness Partnership Initiative. There are three primary goals of the HAN: encouraging and engaging in knowledge development; supporting the creation of sustainable national and regional networks and partnerships; and enhancing progress evaluation methods and sharing of results.

The SFRPHI makes surplus federal real properties available to community organizations, the not-for-profit sector, and government projects designed to address homelessness. Federal departments and agencies are compensated, at market value, for surplus properties that are then transferred for one dollar to eligible organizations. Projects for surplus federal properties range from residential and non-residential emergency services to permanent affordable housing. These transfers are conditional to the maintenance of the service for five years.

## Lessons for Winnipeg

### *A clear definition of homelessness*

The way in which a policy defines homelessness is vital to the creation of an integral policy framework. The definition should be inclusive of different sub-groups in the homeless population, in order to set out the services that will be needed to best respond to needs. For example, in Scotland a person may apply for under homelessness legislation if they are at risk of becoming homeless, putting responsibility of the housing authority to find them suitable accommodations and decreasing the likelihood of being without shelter. This is a wider approach to the definition of homeless than the street counts completed in Vancouver that considered people already without shelter. This is a more absolute versus subjective definition of homelessness, and the policy goals reflect these chosen definitions.

### *Understanding categories homelessness to enable efficient service provision*

In both policies, it is recognized that some homeless people are more vulnerable and require different services. For example, the needs of a single mother who becomes homeless are different than an elderly male with addictions issues. If it is possible to obtain quantitative data, that indicates the percentage of the homeless population that falls under such categories, service provision can be more effective. It would assist in the proper allocation of funds, versus funding services that may not be as needed in the region. For example, if more supportive housing is needed it is not worthwhile to invest in independent occupancy units.

### *Clear prioritization of needs*

If priorities are not set, it is less likely that goals will be met. As seen here, Vancouver's plan seems to resemble Winnipeg's plan 20/20 in that it is broad statements that don't set specific goals or targets. The Scottish Executives policy on the other hand, has set clear targets that leave little room for interpretation.

### *Clear funding agreements*

It should be set out where funding will be drawn from, and what the budget allocations will be. A new fund announced by the government of Manitoba on April 25th, will provide new investments that will enhance public housing and homeless shelters. The total initial investment in the four-pillar approach of Manitoba's multi-year housing strategy is more than \$188 million. A pillar in the approach is the project: A Roof Over Each Bed, which will invest \$3.9 million in emergency and transitional shelter for homeless people in 2007-08. Homelessness will also become a new departmental focus in the housing portfolio. Funding to organizations like the Salvation Army, Neeginan, the Main Street Project and Hannah's Place at the Siloam Mission will see an increase of forty-four percent. This appears to be a positive investment in homelessness, and applied successfully these funds could have a positive impact on homelessness in Manitoba.

## Conclusions

Marilyn Hamilton's approach to homelessness is one that redefines the meaning of home and homelessness, and attempts to reframe the common policy approach to embrace different levels of homelessness and methods of addressing and working within these levels. Both Vancouver and the Scottish Executive's policies seem to fit within some areas of Hamilton's integral approach, particularly by their innovative approaches to collaborative policy development. Challenges are experienced in implementing policy and overcoming stigma, as well as establishing clear targets for a homeless population that experiences seasonal fluctuations and a large degree of underreporting. The definitions of homelessness in each example are quite different, and the initiatives being implemented reflect these differences. Both policies acknowledge that homelessness is more than a housing issue, and a great deal of resources is put into providing support services.

They are both positive examples of homelessness policy that take a more integral approach, attempting to accommodate the individuality of experiences and the ideal response in each given situation. Limitations on funding and resources will remain an obstacle that can be handled in new approaches to housing and focussing on capacity development, recognising that investment in homelessness will have beneficial outcomes in other areas of municipal expenditures. Winnipeg policy developers could learn from these examples, particularly the Scottish executives initiative to set clear targets and the objectives to meet them. The creation of both policies involved input from both formerly homeless individuals and front line staff with experience working with the homeless population. This is invaluable feedback for the development of any policy, especially concerning homelessness, as it is difficult to understand the diversity in experiences and the various levels of supports and services that may be required. New policy development in Canada and Manitoba provide a good backdrop for the development of our own integral approach to homelessness, and new funding commitments will be invaluable in the process. To address homelessness it will require a change in attitudes and a commitment to help those in need, recognising the benefits this will have on both individual and societal levels.

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