

Housing through Abbotsford Rental Connect (HARC)



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Report on Housing through Abbotsford Rental Connect (HARC)

1. Background and Context of Housing through Abbotsford Rental Connect (HARC)

The presence of people who live homeless in Abbotsford was for the first time, systematically and empirically confirmed in 2004 when the first community based homelessness point in time survey was conducted, coordinated by Mennonite Central Committee, British Columbia (MCC BC). Since 2004 regular point in time homelessness counts were conducted as part of the joint Fraser Valley Regional District (FVRD) and MCC BC tri-annual counts; always done to coincide with the Metro Vancouver tri-annual homelessness counts. The most recent point in time count was completed March 8, 2017, again as a joint Fraser Valley Regional District (FVRD) and this time MCC Community Enterprises Inc.

Table 1 provides an overview of the number of homeless persons surveyed in each of these point in time counts in Abbotsford since 2004.

Table 1: Changes in the Number of Homeless Persons Surveyed in Abbotsford (2005-2017)

	2005	2008	2011	2014	2017
Abbotsford	226	235	117	151	274

As part of the analysis of tri-annual point in time survey findings, the presence of longer term and/or chronic homeless persons has been confirmed. Through these analyses and several additional reports on housing affordability and housing and services needs over the past 13 years,¹ the shortage of affordable, suitable long term supportive housing has been confirmed. However, it also needs to be pointed out that

¹ See listing of reports at end of document

as a result of the above referenced community based research into homelessness, housing affordability and housing needs, the City of Abbotsford has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with BC Housing in 2008.

This agreement between the city of Abbotsford and BC Housing, and in partnership with local service agencies, has resulted in much needed additional affordable and supportive transitional housing units having become available in Abbotsford over the past 6 years. Examples include:

- Christine Lamb Residences in partnership with SARA
- George Schmidt Centre and an expansion of units and services at King Haven in partnership with King Haven/Peardonville Treatment and Recovery Centre's
- The Firth Residences in partnership with Elizabeth Fry Society
- Hearthstone Place in partnership with Abbotsford Community Services Society.

Additionally, this research based advocacy, coupled with growing involvement of the municipal government of Abbotsford, has seen Abbotsford benefitting from additional rental subsidies, an increase in homeless outreach staff, additional emergency shelter beds through the addition of the Riverside Road shelter operated by Lookout Emergency Aid Society and an increase in emergency shelter beds at the longstanding Salvation Army Centre of Hope.

The growing awareness about homelessness in Abbotsford coupled with new policy changes at municipal level have been instrumental in constructively addressing this matter and increased collaboration among service providers. Commitment from the City of Abbotsford to work collaboratively and constructively with service providers has been integral in persuasively engaging Fraser Health Authority, Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, and BC Housing. These strategic alliances have resulted in new momentum to respond system wide, to homelessness.

To this end the City of Abbotsford adopted a strategy in 2014 to address homelessness, the implementation of which is steered by the Abbotsford Homelessness Action Advisory Committee, a City Council appointed and resourced committee. The city of Abbotsford provided further impetus to its homelessness prevention and reduction strategy through the securing of Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) funding and the appointment of a Homelessness Coordinator.

From April 2015 to August 2016, the City of Abbotsford, Homelessness Coordinator and Research

Planner facilitated a series of multi-sectoral stakeholder engagement sessions regarding the barriers, needs, and opportunities to obtain housing by individuals, who are experiencing homelessness. This included the City of Abbotsford Homelessness Action Advisory Committee (HAAC) meetings, HAAC Rental Connect Initiative Focus Group, Housing First Best Practice Forum with over 170 attendees, the multi-stakeholder development of a Collaborative Roadmap for the Prevention of and Response to Homelessness in Abbotsford, and focus group sessions with individuals, who are experiencing homelessness. Through these initiatives the following key opportunities were identified for action:

- Address the patterned cycle of homelessness resulting from persistent barriers to obtain and sustain permanent, affordable, suitable housing options;
- Identify and survey rental housing needs and market factors in the community;
- Strengthen private landlord and tenant relationships;
- Build informed capacity with local landlords about BC Residential Tenancy Act requirements and best practices;
- Develop a pool of available rental options;
- Generate a clear and fluid intake and referral process;
- Explore the need of Rental liaison and retention services;
- Advocate for adequate levels of rental subsidies in our community;

The HAAC work has focused on employing Collective Impact Conditions and Housing First principles to build local capacity, strengthen working relationships, and shift focus of service delivery agencies from a programmatic to a systems approach with shared outcomes. Through this work, key housing and support capability areas have been identified that:

- Require strategic planning,
- Commitment of agencies to collaboratively generate action-oriented solutions, and the
- Sharing and leveraging of resources and knowledge

The shortage of affordable and suitable housing options as a significant contributing factor to homelessness across Canada and in Abbotsford is well documented.² In Abbotsford there is consensus

² See various point in time homelessness count reports listed at end of document

among service providers, homelessness advocates, persons who live homeless, and city officials that there remains a need for additional permanent supportive housing, coupled with ongoing wrap-around services and based on the principles of housing first.³

The need to find an innovative way to obtain additional housing options in Abbotsford amid an almost zero percent rental vacancy rate during 2016/17 has been confirmed through consultation with stakeholders in the beginning stage of the Coordinated Intake and Referral design process. Community stakeholders have validated the need for a coordinated intake and referral (CIR) process as part of Abbotsford Homelessness Response System, but have spoken loud and clear that affordable and suitable housing options are imperative for not only the successful implementation of the CIR process, but to also find housing solutions for people living homeless in Abbotsford.

Based on feedback received through peer engagement sessions there is a desire for something tangible to happen in terms of housing options for longer term and/or chronic homeless persons that present with significant and challenging mental health and/or addiction related barriers. Given the presence of “chronic” homeless persons in Abbotsford who live with a substance dependency and or mental illness, housing options in and off itself is not sufficient. Housing plus support is necessary to facilitate housing retention, along with working through and resolving tenant-landlord disputes and facilitate rapid re-housing as needed.

Thus, given the reality of an inadequate supply of social housing in Abbotsford and extreme low rental vacancy rates within market rental housing stock, Housing through Abbotsford Rental Connect (HARC) holds the promise of making available additional housing options for people who are experiencing homelessness by developing an inventory of units available within the rental housing stock. The program will pre-screen for suitability and house people with the provision of ongoing wrap around support to facilitate housing retention and rapid re-housing when necessary. To this end HARC is an important part of the Coordinated Intake and Referral (CIR) process that is about to be launched in Abbotsford.

³ See Appendix 1 for a brief overview of what housing first entail

2. HARC and Process of Community Consultation

Research to determine support for a “Rental Connect” initiative in Abbotsford has included participation and support from the City of Abbotsford, BC Housing, Fraser Health Authority, Ministry of Social Development, Service Canada through contribution agreement funding, key local housing and service providers, Abbotsford Police Department, Abbotsford Chamber of Commerce, Abbotsford Christian Leadership Network, Mamele’ Awt Qweesome TO’O Housing Society, representatives from the faith community, a group of realtors, and property owners.

In addition to consultation involving the aforementioned representatives, a rental connect collaborative has also been brought together, consulted with and reported to, over the past 4 months. This collaborative comprised of City of Abbotsford, Fraser Health Authority, Abbotsford Community Services, SARA, Raven’s Moon Resource Society, Cyrus Centre, Elizabeth Fry Society, United Way Fraser Valley, Vibrant Abbotsford, The 5&2 Ministry, MCC BC, MCC Community Enterprises, the Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation.

3. Components of HARC

Based on consultation conducted with community groups there is support for Housing through Abbotsford Rental Connect (HARC) as an innovative approach to providing housing options in a difficult housing market, further compounded by on-going supports needed to achieve housing retention of people facing a plethora of barriers. The consultation further confirmed that HARC should be a community-based program that works to act as an agent to find creative housing solutions for individuals and families experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of homelessness. HARC will act as a liaison between tenants and landlords, property managers or investors to ensure that rents are paid on time and that tenants are successful at being good neighbours. HARC will work very closely with CIR. For HARC to be successful the following components need to be in place and managed or liaised with on an ongoing basis.

3.1 Landlord Engagement

An important purpose of HARC is to engage landlords, property managers and investors to secure units for tenants who have been pre-screened by HARC for compatibility to the space and to the neighbourhood or location and to provide guaranteed rent to be paid on time each month. Additionally, HARC will provide a rapid re-housing service for tenants who are not well suited to a specific housing placement. HARC will also remove garbage and do minor repairs as needed so we can retain the rent unit for a more suitable occupant. Essentially, HARC will become a site manager for landlords. Housing support and retention workers will be visiting units regularly to ensure that the tenants are living as per the agreement they sign with the HARC program. Rental units will be identified across Abbotsford to facilitate a scattered housing approach and provide clients opportunities for social inclusion.

3.2 Tenants

HARC will secure units that are safe, structurally sound and affordable. The benefit for tenants are that they will be renting through HARC instead privately. This will provide an opportunity for those who do not have extensive references or who have other barriers that prevent them from securing housing. Once tenants have been pre-approved by HARC⁴ they will be strategically placed in units that are the best possible fit for a landlord/tenant relationship. The tenants will be eligible for rapid rehousing if the tenancy was not a good fit. Tenants may receive wrap-around supports by retention workers to enhance self-sufficiency, housing stability, as well as life skills.

3.3 Registry

HARC will develop and maintain a registry of landlords that will require eligibility and accountability for landlords who enlist.⁵ It will also allow for HARC to match tenants with landlords based on the acuity level of the prescreened applicant.

3.4 Wrap around Support and Retention

Wrap around support is intended to assist people in regaining and enhancing hope that their lives will be better with help and support. This inclusive support service is an opportunity to provide client

⁴ See Appendixes 2, 3 & 4 – HARC Application Form and HARC Rental Agreement and HARC Low Barrier Rental Agreement

⁵ See Appendix 5 – Landlord Roles and Responsibilities

centered direct service delivery to people who have experienced a wide variety of complex situations. Trained staff will assist residents in practical ways that is intended to help them maintain their housing and be a good neighbour.

- Create/identify wrap around supports already in place or that are needed to help someone with complex needs engage in the program in a practical way
- Provide or assist the household with connections to resources that help them improve their safety and well-being and achieve their long-term goals. This includes providing or ensuring that the household has access to resources related to benefits, employment and community-based services (if needed/appropriate) so that they can sustain rent payments independently when rental assistance/subsidy ends if the person is receiving one.
- Ensure that services provided are client-directed, respectful of individuals' right to self-determination, and voluntary.

3.5 Rapid Rehousing

Rapid Rehousing provides supportive services to quickly link people to temporary and permanent housing for individuals (and families) experiencing homelessness or at high risk for homelessness. Rapid rehousing assistance is offered without preconditions (such as employment, identification, absence of criminal record, or sobriety) and the resources and services provided are typically tailored to the unique needs of the household. The core components of a rapid re-housing program are:

3.6 Housing Identification

- Recruit landlords to provide housing opportunities for individuals and families at high risk or currently experiencing homelessness.
- Address potential barriers to landlord participation such as concern about tenant qualifications, potential behaviors or damage and ability to pay rent consistently.
- Assist households to find and secure appropriate rental housing.
- Manage landlord retention through responsiveness and moving (rapid rehousing) for residents that are well matched or where housing retention/landlord engagement is at risk
- Secure housing for three levels of client acuity – low, medium or high.
- Screen landlords and neighborhoods for best possible match up for strategic housing placements

3.7 Rapid Rehousing Case Management and Retention Workers

- Help individuals and families experiencing homelessness identify and select among various semi-permanent housing options based on their unique needs, preferences, and financial resources.
- Help individuals and families experiencing homelessness address issues that may impede access to housing (such as mental illness, substance misuse, hoarding, and legal issues).
- Help individuals and families negotiate manageable and appropriate lease agreements with landlords as they transition out of the enhanced program.
- Make appropriate (and time-limited) services and supports available to families and individuals to allow them to stabilize quickly in permanent housing.
- Monitor participants' housing stability and be available to resolve crises during the time rapid re-housing assistance is provided or client is part of HARC program.

3.8 Landlord Recruitment, Retention & Training

- It takes more than one housing strategy to end homelessness. Alongside a solid affordable housing development plan, creating partnerships with private market landlords is critical to moving people out of homelessness quickly.
- Whether homeowners have one or a handful of rental properties, these properties are part of their life savings — *their* retirement plan — and they need that investment to be secure. The risk, perceived or real, of renting to tenants who have experienced homelessness means that we must continue to be creative in bringing landlords in as partners in the work to end homelessness.
- HARC will ensure that the landlords have access to support “hotlines” and dedicated point persons responsive to their concerns and needs, and can expect prompt intervention with tenants when requested.
- An incentive for landlords partnering with HARC is the reduced time associated with advertising vacancies, finding qualified tenants and calling references, as well as alleviating fear of the unknown regarding tenants.
- The agency operating HARC will sign the lease for the unit. This will alleviate risks for the landlords having to take tenants to arbitration for damages. It will also offer the security of rents

being paid on time.

- An incentive that will be used to engage new landlords, from “mom and pop” property owners to larger property management companies, is a landlord mitigation fund. This will be an added protection for landlords who are willing to work with HARC to rent to someone with limited income, a poor rental history, addiction, mental health, other behavioural issues, or a criminal history. If there was excessive damage to the unit, loss of rent, or legal fees beyond the security deposit, landlords can be reimbursed for damages up to a specified amount. There is usually a limit to the amount that will be covered by the fund, and the program would require more than one quote for the repair work. A review of the literature indicates that programs using this incentive rarely need to access the fund, but reassures landlords.
- HARC will provide classes or one-to-one coaching to both landlords and tenants on their rights and responsibilities, such as fair housing, etc.

3.9 Housing Foundation

A housing foundation will be established to provide sustainable funding for HARC. Funding requirements, in addition to staffing and office space rental, relate to costs associated with repair and maintenance, a landlord mitigation fund, moving costs where needed, emergency funds for tenants’ rents and security deposits where they cannot be accessed through other resources, as well as other costs that may arise. Once fully established, the foundation could support in part or in full, the sustainability of the HARC program. In addition to being a vehicle for securing sustainable operational funding for HARC, the Housing Foundation’s mandate should include the growing of a housing investment fund. This could be leverage to obtain land, capital and operational funding from BC Housing for affordable rental units. Some of the rental units will be linked with on-going wrap-around support to ensure housing retention of people who present multiple barriers that work against housing retention.

3.10 Community Partners for Access to Housing

During the development phase of the HARC program several partners were identified as potential housing providers. HARC will continue to access and build on the following infrastructure:

- Vacant House Program – Developers awaiting rezoning, etc.
- Property Management Companies
- Homeowners/Landowners

- Realtors
- The currently 155 apartment buildings in Abbotsford where HARC will attempt to obtain at least one suite in each building. See attached map of apartment buildings.

4. Community Participation/Collaboration/Possibilities

A large ongoing component of the HARC program is engaging community partners. There are several agencies and organizations who have confirmed some level of participation with HARC. The City's Coordinated Intake and Referral (CIR) system is an element of Abbotsford's homeless response initiative which is where much of participants will flow from. The benefit to HARC when referrals come from CIR is that the applicants are already prescreened using the CIR assessment tool (VAT – Vulnerability Assessment Tool) with a determined acuity level.

There will be situations where pre-screened applicants will require their first month's rent, because their current rental amount was held by a previous landlord, or where they may require a security deposit. Many participants will require the BC Housing subsidies through Salvation Army, Abbotsford Community Services, or John Howard Society.

MCC BC's Rent Bank could provide security deposit and first and last month's rent.

Raven's Moon Resource Society could provide housing units to HARC.

Salvation Army and Lookout Emergency Aid Society could provide temporary shelter for those awaiting placement with HARC or those who are being rapidly rehoused.

Cyrus Center, Elizabeth Fry Society and SARA will collaborate with HARC to assist their clientele who will be housed with HARC or who will access HARC services.

Faith-based organizations expressed interest in finding ways to provide practical support to the HARC initiative e.g. underwrite one month or several months' rent or a portion thereof, provide furnishings and/or furniture to tenants, etc.

A database of responsive and committed volunteers will include church groups, concerned citizens, businesses, contractors and trades people. The goal is to be able to respond quickly to minor repairs such as painting, small electrical or plumbing issues so that tenants can be moved in as soon as a space is available. HARC is committed to providing safe, affordable and quickly accessible housing options for some of Abbotsford's most at risk people.

5. Staffing for HARC

The successful implementation of HARC depends upon qualified and experienced staff. Resources will be required to support a core staffing complement for HARC. The core staff require include:

- 1 x program administrator responsible for landlord recruitment, lease administration, and coordination of management of the leased units.
- 2 x full time housing support and retention workers responsible for timely support to tenants to facilitate housing retention and to facilitate rapid re-housing when necessary. In addition, the housing support and retention workers will attend timely to landlord concerns and intervene and resolve in a timely manner landlord-tenant disputes and conflicts. See job descriptions attached.

6. HARC Implementation Budget (Year One)

In the first year of the pilot program for HARC, the goal will be to secure 30 units with the following budget requirements:

- **Office space:** 500 sf ft at \$20/ sq ft = \$10,000
- **Staffing:** one administrator and two support and retention workers = \$130,000
- **Contingency:** \$10,000
- **Total:** \$150,000

7. Timeline for Implementation

August 2017 to November 2017 - Securing of funding for first year implementation

September 2017 - Report validation with collaborative research partnership

September 2017 to February 2018 - Establishment of Housing Foundation

September 2017 to March 2018 - Develop a comprehensive communication and marketing strategy to support the launch and implementation of the Abbotsford Rental Connect

November 2017 to December 2017 - Hiring of staff

January 2018 - Opening of office

8. Outcomes to be Achieved with HARC

Outcome 1 – Homeless persons cared for and better served. Resources are aligned for effective housing of persons who live homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. Given the presence of wrap around housing retention support persons are better equipped to succeed with housing.

Outcome 2 – Homeless persons are connected to primary health care, addictions and substance use services, and home health through various access points do to the support from HARC and retention staff. Reduction in accessing emergency services and fewer chronically homeless people are observed.

Outcome 3 – Persons now housed and receiving support will have access to finding meaningful ways to spend their time and become more socially integrated, through increased social networks and family-reunification; all of which can mitigate risk of fall back and encounters with criminal justice system.

Outcome 4 - More of Abbotsford's residents are pursuing employment opportunities or receiving suitable training to re-enter work force, self-esteem is raised, and self-sufficiency is achieved, decreased impact to other services (i.e. Police, Income Assistance, Courts, City Services).

Outcome 5 - Continue dialogue with community partners to resolve issues around harm reduction and create educational programs for both landlords and tenants about use and disposal of harm reduction supplies.

Outcome 6 - Safer communities. Improved health of residents. Increasing awareness and tolerance of community – better informed and less reactive and more proactive.

Outcomes 7 - The aboriginal community service providers recognize higher levels of connection of individuals to community and family. There is fewer vulnerable women and youth, who are homeless and/or re-unified with their families; Communities, agencies and individuals are empowered to work through systematic barriers towards successful re-integration in community.

9. Program Evaluation

At the end of the first year of the pilot project, the HARC coordinator will report the HARC evaluation to the Homelessness and Affordable Housing Coordinator of the City of Abbotsford where the information can be disseminated to appropriate audiences. To evaluating program efficiency and effectiveness, using objective and subjective measures, the HARC coordinator will report its findings

of outcome indicators based on the goals set out for the program. The following information in the chart below will be determined and reported.

Goals	Housing Stability for Tenants	Tenants Are Transitioning to Appropriate Housing	Improving Tenant Satisfaction, Well-Being, and Sense of Community	Landlord Satisfaction
Outcome Indicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Length of tenure • Unit turnover • Reasons for vacating 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where tenants lived prior to HARC program • Where tenants go when they leave 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement and participation with staff of HARC • Tenant satisfaction • Tenant well-being 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Landlords report satisfaction with support provided by HARC staff in dealing with tenant difficulties • Landlords receive rent payments on time • Landlords suffer minimum property damage

10. Recommendation

Based on what has been reported here the following is being recommended:

1. Align HARC with Coordinated Intake and Referral Model to provide streamlined intake and housing support
2. Convene the stakeholder collaborative to validate report
3. Launch HARC as a collaborative project of Raven’s Moon Resource Society, City of Abbotsford and Mennonite Central Committee of British Columbia (i.e. Rent Bank Program) with Raven’s Moon being the anchor agency to implement HARC.
4. Appoint a 5-person working group to take immediate steps toward establishment of an Abbotsford Housing Foundation. This working group to be convened by MCC Community Enterprises and be further constituted by Dena Kae Beno (City of Abbotsford), Sharon Forbes (Raven’s Moon Resources Society), the Executive Director of Abbotsford Community Foundation and Abbotsford Vancity Branch Manager.