



Everyone needs a home

Homes First Innovations and Growth

1983: Shuter is the first government funded housing specifically designed and designated for the use of single adult homeless individuals. This required an Order in Parliament and was made possible by a loan from Canadian Mental Health Association.

1987: Shuter is awarded the Ontario Award for Outstanding Model Project during the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless.

1988: StreetCity opens as an innovative model incorporating the security and support elements of a shelter while providing residents with the rights and responsibilities of tenancy. Given the isolated location and general social exclusion of the residents, StreetCity was designed, as far as possible, to operate as a small community with a food store, bank, and employment opportunities. This unique project received a great deal of attention from both international and Canadian housing analysts and media. This attention included numerous tours by international visitors, a full-length documentary, a Journal segment, and a book by anthropologist Rae Bridgeman, *StreetCity – Rehousing the Homeless*.

StreetCity included innovative community economic development practices. Projects included the Tuck Shop, the Catering Crew, and StreetCity Bikes. This evolved into a relationship with The 761 Community Development Corporation, which assumed management of StreetCity Bikes and, in partnership with HFS and other shelters, developed a relationship with Miller Waste Management that resulted in opportunities for our residents to re-enter the mainstream workforce.

1995: Strachan House incorporated successful elements from StreetCity in a groundbreaking architectural design that received a Governor General's Metal of Excellence in architecture.

Savards was a result of an extensive development process involving a wide range of service providers with specific expertise in serving extremely marginalized and underserved street women with mental health issues. (Hostel Outreach Program, StreetCity, Street Haven). Like StreetCity, it captured a great deal of interest, nationally and internationally, and was a subject of another Rae Bridgeman study and book, *Safe Haven: The Story of a Shelter for Homeless Women*. The Savards model can best be summarized as operating along a continuum ranging from high support/low expectation to low support/increased expectation, based on the needs and abilities of individual clients.

Pleasant Manor, a renovated hotel north of Regent Park, employed an innovative selection process for allocating units. Originally designed as a relocation site for StreetCity residents, it was maintained for that purpose even after the decision was made by City representatives and the HFS Board to keep StreetCity open. The tenant selection process was a staff-facilitated, self-selection process. Applicants (all of whom were tenants in good standing at StreetCity) met weekly over a period of three months to discuss how the transition to self-contained housing would affect each of them,

what supports they would need, as well as what potential difficulties that might arise. They also drafted an initial set of building rules to address security concerns, etc. During this process, individuals became more aware of what their actual housing needs and skillsets were and based the selection on this. By the end of the process, there were only two individuals carried forward on the waiting-list. The success of this model is evidenced by the number of original residents, as additional StreetCity, and Strachan House residents successfully housed at Pleasant Manor. Prior to the opening of Pleasant Manor, it was very difficult to get StreetCity or Strachan residents into housing, even other Homes First housing.

1996: Community Garden at Strachan. Strachan residents partnered with local gardeners to remediate a derelict lot and develop community garden space. HFS was instrumental in securing the lot, while a crew of Strachan resident did most of the heavy lifting for the remediation. Once a neighbourhood garden association was established, HFS bowed out of the project.

1999: The shelter named Ordinance was in operation for only a short time but had some unique elements. It was one of the first funded Out of the Colds and was built by a consortium of volunteer contractors and tradespeople.

2009: Shuter participated in a pilot project that saw medical supports delivered directly on site for those who have difficulty accessing outside services. Community Care Access Centre (CCAC) continues to operate an office at Shuter, where CCAC provides a daily Personal Support Worker care and nursing care twice weekly.

Homes First began the operation of the St. Clair Shelter. Before HFS began managing this Shelter, it primarily served temporarily homeless working people and still includes many. HFS broadened this shelter's mandate to ensure access for individuals who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, and/or who have mental health issues and/or who are refugees.

2010: HFS, CAMH, and Pilot Place (Pilot Place is an organization that provides services to individuals with schizophrenia) joined in a tri-partite coalition to provide housing and on-site services at Shuter to individuals with long-term histories of hospitalization. The 18 residents at Shuter continue to live successfully in their units. There has been an observable increase in the integration into both the Shuter and greater community demonstrated by the residents increased presence, participation, and socializing activities.

2011: HFS began an exclusive partnership with CAMH to place 15 previously long-term hospitalized clients at Meegwetch. The residents have integrating well into the Homes First community, as well as within the local community.

The Community Development Program was initiated in 2011 through the vision of the Board of Directors. The initial work of this program was to effectively respond to the needs of several Homes First locations in terms of programming, outreach, and community engagement designed to relate to the strengths and interests of Homes First residents.

The Community Development Department has expanded its focus to that of creating meaningful programming for residents and communities, especially when we operate new projects in new neighbourhoods.

2013: HFS initiated its Volunteer Program, with the goal of helping people stay housed through an integrated two-way volunteer program at Homes First that gets residents, neighbours, and donors engaged in their community. The Volunteer department works closely both with Human Resources to provide student placements and is now integrated into the Community Development to create volunteer programs and provide opportunities for our residents.

2014: HFS received funding from the City of Toronto's Hostel Services for the Strachan Housekeeping Program. This program was designed to provide one-on-one and hands-on assistance to the residents of Strachan House. The program deals with issues of hoarding, bed bugs, and other pest problems, as well as general housekeeping, which includes regular cleaning of the unit and washing of laundry; thus, ensuring a safe, clean, healthy, and permanent home for those who are at the greatest risk of homelessness by directly alleviating the issues that often lead to eviction.

To better support Homes First residents at all of our properties, the Property Department developed a dedicated Pest Control and Hoarding Program and staff to provide these supports throughout our portfolio.

Also in 2014, Homes First residents shot a documentary, "Between the Lines" investigating some of the most pressing problems that Toronto's marginalized drug users face. In their own words, they talk about the factors that contribute to their substance use including stigma, poverty, and homelessness. They explore how harm reduction helps them address these problems and gives them hope for the future.

The Diabetes Prevention Program was initiated. The program was a peer-to-peer initiative providing Type 2 Diabetes education to our residents. Our peer leaders ran workshops at Homes First sites and in the community to spread awareness about the disease. This program ran from 2014 through to 2019.

2015: With the support of the Sprott Foundation, Homes First developed a program called Hope and Health for Savards. Over a three-year period, the main objectives were to improve the overall health of Savards residents, reduce the number of women who live long-term at the shelter, strengthen collaboration with other community agencies, improve residents' connection to family, friends, and community, as well as to reduce use of emergency care and cost to the provincial health care system.

We established a new partnership with University Health Network and Queen West Community Health Centre to increase the overall health of the residents of Strachan and Savards by providing in-house mental health, psychiatric, and medical care, as well as reducing the use of emergency care and cost to the provincial health care system.

As part of our Community Development Program, a program called "Writing for Recovery" took place. This was a peer-led writing program at Strachan and Savards which engaged residents in leading workshops and incorporated harm reduction education and training.

2016: Another successful program funded through the Sprott Foundation, was the Intensive Case Management Worker position at Savards which enabled the housing of 52 women in 2016, including three women who had lived in the shelter system in excess of 10-years each.

Writing for Recovery wrapped up in November of 2016, culminating in the publication of an anthology titled *Streets to Script*, containing poems and stories from 15 Homes First residents. Overall, 69 residents participated in the writing group at Strachan and Savards. The book launch was held during our annual Winter Solstice event.

A formal partnership was developed with the University Health Network to provide in-house clinical care to all the women at Savards. This program provides access to a mental health worker who provides assessment, diagnosis, and counseling, as well as access to a psychiatrist.

In the autumn of 2016, Homes First produced a well-received film, “Everyone Needs a Home – A View Inside Strachan House”, which premiered at the Canadian Alliance on Ending Homelessness conference. This film was made possible by the efforts of a volunteer film crew.

We developed a healthy and nutritious food program at Strachan House which was funded by the Rotary Club of Toronto, the Tippet, and the T. R. Meighen Family Foundations. This funding served as a catalyst to launch this initiative that is greatly needed by our residents, some of the most vulnerable people of Toronto. This program was tested over a three-year period, after which it was absorbed as an essential service within the organization.

The Kennedy Shelter opened in December 2016, as a sixty-bed women’s emergency shelter. Within two weeks, the Shelter was at capacity and continues to operate at nearly 100% capacity every day. In late 2017, an additional thirty beds were added to the lower level of Kennedy Shelter and these beds were at capacity within a few days, indicating a great demand and need for a women’s-only homeless shelter in the Scarborough area.

2017: Homes First became part of a pilot program, the “Assertive Follow-Up Support Services”, in which different organizations formed teams to provide mobile, face-to-face follow-up supports to various housed individuals throughout the City of Toronto. This program was created to assist clients who are currently housed but who had experienced long-term homelessness and could benefit from the provision of additional support services to help maintain their housing.

Toronto Urban Health Fund provided funding for a 3-year harm reduction and capacity-building program. The program was designed to increase harm reduction knowledge for our staff and residents at our four largest housing sites and to increase access to harm reduction supplies.

Homes First received funding from the Scarborough Addiction Services Partnership, a program of the CAMH, to run a part-time addictions and life-skills program for one year.

The City of Toronto and the five Greater Toronto Area Local Health Integration Networks (LHINs) established a Resilient Tenancy and Services Work Group to build opportunities for the City and LHINs to work together to align housing allowances (rent supplements) with health support services. Beginning in June, the group granted Homes First the opportunity to use ten housing allowances (ongoing monthly payments) to help offset the cost of rent for some of our residents.

Five of Shuter’s Homes First residents who were capable of living with less supports moved out into the community and received the follow-up support provision, which freed up the space for five other individuals who are aging/seniors that have complex mental and health needs and require housing with higher supports to move into Shuter.

2018: Homes First opened George Street Respite, across from Seaton House. This shelter, among the other services on this block was serving the highest needs individuals in the city; most shelter-users had complex mental health and substance use needs. This program, originally scheduled to operate just through the winter months, stayed open through till May 2019.

A service partnership with Inner City Health Association was developed to provide primary medical care at our Kennedy Shelter. Doctors and nurses provide essential medical services to the residents of the Kennedy and St. Clair Shelters.

Homes First partnered with Journey Home Hospice, Inner City Health Associates, and St. Elizabeth Health Care to provide those without homes a place to die peacefully, rather than on the streets, in hospitals, or in shelters. The hospice is located at Shuter and began with four units and has since been expanded to fourteen units.

Homes First partnered with Dixon Hall and Ecuhome to begin “The Rooming House Project”. This project provided housing stabilization and improved the overall well-being of the tenants of Toronto Community Housing Corporation’s rooming houses. This program worked to build community, and used one-on-one case management to identify, support and achieve tenant goals. The Rooming House Project included a team of specialists in Housing, Harm Reduction, and Hoarding & Pest Control who identified and addressed client needs. Areas of focus included income and financial literacy, access to health and medical care, food, and social supports. This program was funded through the City of Toronto’s Tenants First Program. Homes First Society’s participation with the project ended in 2020 and this program’s managers are now with Dixon Hall.

In November, the City of Toronto invited Homes First to open a 225-bed Winter Respite program at the Queen Elizabeth Centre on the Exhibition grounds. This program was operated as an extremely low barrier program serving individuals who typically did not access the traditional emergency shelter services. Primary health care, psychiatric, and harm reduction services were all part of this program. The “QE” ran until April of 2019.

The Kennedy Women’s Shelter was one of five shelters chosen by the City of Toronto in 2018 to pilot a new service model, which involved the creation of a supervised team of Intensive Case Management Workers along with a Community Engagement and Client Program Coordinator. This model provides a structure for housing including focused case management and health service integration, while also helped develop a new client assessment tool – “STARRS” – that will soon be used sector-wide.

2019: Homes First was awarded two permanent shelter programs and one winter respite program housed out of 545 Lake Shore Boulevard West. One program served 50 couples, one served 100 adults (co-ed), and a winter program serving 75 men.

Additionally, Homes First began operation of a 200-bed shelter program called The Willowdale Welcome Centre at 5800 Yonge Street, specifically to serve the refugee population. This successful program was the first of its kind on this scale outside of refugee-specific serving organizations.

2020: In response to the pandemic and because of the necessity of physical distancing at existing shelters, capacity was reduced throughout the shelter system.

In April of 2020, a building adjacent to the Willowdale Welcome Centre, “Building B”, was opened in response to a request from the City to help support adult singles displaced from other shelters as part of their need to reduce beds in response to Covid. Capacity eventually reached 79.

As the pandemic prevented new refugees from arriving, the Willowdale Welcome Centre gradually converted into a traditional shelter. (At no point were clients discharged on to the street; it always used a “soft close” through referrals to other programs.) The main Willowdale building, “Building A”, became a 125-bed program for traditional shelter users.

In partnership with the City and other social agencies in Toronto, Homes First took over vacant hotels and began operating shelter programs out of these new locations. We opened shelter programs at the Delta Hotel at Kennedy and the 401 in Scarborough, as well as the Strathcona Hotel on York in the core of the downtown area. Both programs combined provide almost 400 shelter beds.

Also in 2020, Homes First opened the Better Living Center Winter Respite program on the Exhibition grounds. This program serves 100 individuals with a focus on providing services to individuals who have been living in encampments throughout the City. In addition, we began operating a 32-bed Warming Centers on behalf of the City to be activated on cold weather alert days; however, we have been asked on several occasions to keep the Warming Centre open for extended periods to reduce the strain on the shelter system.

2021: Homes First began the operation of a third hotel program, The Esplanade. Together with the other hotels, Homes First is supporting approximately 700 single adults and couples in our hotel programs. And although these programs allow for social distancing, other challenges do arise. For example, due to the private nature of the accommodations enhanced Harm Reduction protocols (regular wellness checks and in-house peer programs) have been implemented.

In the Fall of 2021, the building adjacent to the Willowdale Welcome Centre, “Building B”, was utilized as a 50-bed Warming Centre. As at the Better Living Centre, although intended to run only during an Extreme Cold Weather Alert, we have been asked on several occasions to keep the Warming Centre open for extended periods to reduce strain on the shelter system.

In the Spring of 2021, we opened our newest, permanently funded emergency shelter located near the intersection of Lawrence and Morningside in Scarborough at 4117 Lawrence Avenue East (“The 4117”). This shelter serves both men and women who may be singles or in couples. Designed with a capacity of 89, the number of beds has been reduced to 55 to ensure the space between clients meets the City’s Covid mandates for social distancing.