

# Looking to Newfoundland and Labrador

## NL Housing & Homelessness Network

*“To be successful, this supportive housing and homelessness services sector strategy requires collective and coordinated action by the continuum of sector stakeholders, as all ultimately have a responsibility for and to the sector’s current and future workforce and the continuum of individuals and families who avail of its services.”*

—IAS Phase 2 Report



Over a three-year span, the IAS Committee undertook two significant research projects designed to identify how to address the recruitment and retention issues facing this sector.

### Overview and context

Historically, housing and services for the homeless in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) were delivered by government. In recent years, however, this has changed. Responsibility has largely shifted to the community-based supportive housing and homelessness services sector, which delivers a wide range of programs and services that include outreach, emergency shelters, transitional supports, and a variety of other services provided through a range of housing models. This sector helps individuals and families living on the street, the hidden homeless (e.g., people living in unsafe housing), those at risk of homelessness, individuals who require support to maintain their housing, and/or those who make use of shelters in times of crisis.

The focus on serving clients, which is uppermost in the minds of both funding partners and groups delivering housing services, has often meant that the needs of service workers in the supportive housing and homelessness services sector was relegated to the back burner. But increasing difficulties in recruiting and retaining workers in the sector, and issues relating to the training of these workers, led to a realization that we need to understand the factors that contribute to maintaining a workforce that is knowledgeable about housing issues and clients and skilled in serving these clients.

In general, it was felt by those in the sector that this sector's workforce was among the lowest paid and least-resourced in the broader nonprofit sector and that a collaborative partnership with government was needed to boost recruitment and retention.

To that end, in May 2008, the Newfoundland and Labrador Housing & Homelessness Network (NLHHN), in partnership with the Transition House Association of Newfoundland & Labrador (THANL)<sup>1</sup>, received funding through the Canada-Newfoundland and Labrador Labour Market Development Agreement to help develop a comprehensive workforce recruitment and retention strategy for the province's supportive housing and homelessness services sector. An Industrial Adjustment Services Committee on NL's Supportive Housing and Homelessness Services Sector (the IAS Committee) was established to lead this initiative. The committee consists of representatives from the sector's diverse stakeholder groups. Over a three-year span, the IAS Committee undertook two significant research projects designed to identify how to address the recruitment and retention issues facing this sector. This case study describes the work of the IAS Committee to date, and will be of interest to those in the nonprofit sector who are faced with finding ways to collaborate with government and with others in the sector to boost workforce skills. It will also be of interest to governments that work with the sector to deliver services and want to ensure that these services are provided by qualified staff without costly turnover.

## The story

The IAS Committee began by hiring an external consultant who assumed the position of chair and managed the project. Research in Phase 1 resulted in the April 2009 *Report of the examination of recruitment and retention issues in the supportive housing and homelessness services sector in Newfoundland and Labrador*,<sup>2</sup> which detailed a series of strategic

directions for the sector. These included a continued focus on issues related to recruiting and retaining relief workers, such as building government's awareness of the role of the sector; exploring how to achieve more consistency in funding and in job descriptions, classifications, and wage rates across the sector; and identifying any changing staffing requirements and new positions that would provide employees with more lateral and upward mobility.

The following strategic directions were chosen as the focus of the Phase 2 IAS research project, which took place in 2010:

- Identification of funding to develop a comprehensive model for training and professional development tailored to the needs of the sector.
- Development of a communications strategy to raise the positive profile of the housing and homelessness sector.
- Development of a career awareness module on the housing and homelessness sector for inclusion in NL's high school Career Development 2201 course.

### Informing a training and development model.

Phase 2 research identified the need to focus on entry level-training. Although new entrants to the sector bring passion and interest to their jobs, most organizations consulted felt that these new recruits are generally not well prepared for the work. There is no entry-level training designed specifically for this sector. Indeed, the lack of a post-secondary program in the province tailored to those interested in the housing and homelessness sector was seen as a key gap that puts the onus on organizations themselves to provide extensive on-the-job training to new employees.

Further, on-going service expansions (and growing and shifting needs among the client population) have placed new burdens on front-line service delivery workers. As well, the absence of sufficient

1. THANL includes transition houses across the province: Nain (Nain Transition House), Happy Valley-Goose Bay (Libra House), Labrador City (Hope Haven), Corner Brook (Corner Brook Transition House), Gander (Cara House), Marystown (Grace Sparkes House) and St. John's (Iris Kirby House). Further information is available from <http://www.thanl.org/>.

2. This report is available on NLHHN's website at [www.nlhhn.org/PDF/IAS%20Final%20REPORT.pdf](http://www.nlhhn.org/PDF/IAS%20Final%20REPORT.pdf).

and targeted professional development that allows workers to gain the skills they need makes it more difficult for organizations to retain workers.

The research findings suggested that a sector-wide effort to develop a professional development program would be the most effective approach and that this should include a distance-education model in order to reach more workers throughout the province. Any increase in professional development offerings would have to be accompanied by additional funding for organizations to send workers to training and to cover their duties while they are away. This is particularly important because research has indicated that less than one percent of the total annual budgets of organizations in the homelessness sector is allocated to professional development.

In mid-January 2010, during the Phase 2 research, the City of St. John's was working with federal, provincial, community-based and private sector partners to develop new affordable housing and related services on a parcel of land provided by the Government of Canada within a 65-acre redevelopment. Within the design of its building, the City was prepared to incorporate an accessible grade-level office/commercial space for a not-for-profit enterprise in support of housing and homelessness. The IAS Committee undertook to secure the necessary capital funding of \$1-million to create this space for NLHNN. In addition to offices and the social enterprise, it will contain a training centre.

**Professional communications strategy.** A second and concurrent initiative was development of a communications strategy and related materials. The IAS Committee engaged a professional media consultant, Upstream Marketing, to develop a retention and recruitment tool kit, which includes a promotional poster, a DVD ([http://Wanted Room For Everyone](http://WantedRoomForEveryone)), an information brochure, and a media strategy focused on obtaining positive coverage of the sector. The theme chosen for this strategy was "Careers That Change Lives."

**Development of lesson plans for the NL high school curriculum.** The final component of the project was the development of a housing and homelessness sector resource information kit

for inclusion in the NL provincial high school Career Development course. However, a meeting with the Department of Education indicated that there were sufficient course resource materials and that the Department was not looking for additional resources at that time. An alternative was presented – to develop a course module for a pilot program, Ethics and Social Justice 2106, that was being implemented for the 2009-2010 school year. Subsequently, lesson plans were developed that broadly focused on increasing student awareness of the housing and homelessness sector and the issues that it addresses and of giving students a better understanding of the root causes of homelessness and of people who are at risk of becoming homeless. NLHNN remains in discussion with the Department on how to implement the material in Ethics and Social Justice course.

*“The process of developing a labour market strategy for NL’s supportive housing and homelessness services sub-sector was rewarding in many ways. It brought many people and partners together from across the province to better understand our sector’s essential skills, to plan to address its future labour market needs – including training and professional development needs – and to develop new ways to recruit and retain people as part of our workforce. In short, it answered our questions and gave us practical solutions. I think the process we used is transferrable and could easily be adapted to other sectors and other parts of Canada.”*

–Bruce Pearce, Community Development Worker

## Lessons learned

The success of the IAS Committee and our lengthy record of accomplishments are partly due to the following:

- We clarified the role of each stakeholder at the outset (e.g., ex-officios, decision makers, observers) and set out clear decision making processes.
- We included representatives of the broader voluntary and non-profit sector (e.g., organizations focused on alleviating poverty or addressing complex needs) in order to build the relationships needed to both highlight the role and value of the housing and homelessness sector and support the sector's efforts.
- We ensured clear communications between and among all committee members throughout the process, which was not always easy due to the number of partners and vastness of the province.
- We remained focused on the reason for coming together – i.e., to guide and strengthen recruitment and retention practices, efforts, and initiatives.
- We strove to engage rural and urban members equally so that the recommendations coming forward were truly reflective of provincial needs.
- We realized that accurate data is required to help inform our sector's training and professional needs.
- The IAS committee was guided, but not constrained, by its terms of reference so that it was able to capitalize on emerging opportunities (e.g., funding, new partnerships, and/or new initiatives) such as the new training centre.

## Emerging themes and insights

Government is seeking the sector's input on its human resources needs and is interested in investing in training that will meet these needs. Recent evidence of this support is a decision by the NL government's Supportive Living Community Partnerships Program to contract with NLLHN to co-ordinate an intensive training package for emergency shelters and housing support services workers.

It has become increasingly clear during the past three years and as we continue our work through the NLHHN and the Regional Community Advisory Boards (CABS) that collaboration is the

core and the critical component for advancing any initiative in the housing and homelessness sector. The partnership must be deep and wide, with all participants understanding that they should "leave their organizational hats at the door." The focus must always be on those for whom the services are designed and delivered.

Recruitment and retention of employees in the housing and homelessness sector depends to a large degree on leadership within organizations and in the sector and on further recognition of employees' need for support. This could take the form of training and professional development, access to counselling and employee assistance personnel, support to focus on self-care, and having "the ear" of those in leadership positions. More broadly, government needs to recognize that professional development for the sector is central to effective and sustainable service provision and quality of service. Additional investment is required.

As well, succession planning is critical to the sustainability of services, organizations, and the sector itself. To date, this has not been an area of focus, but lack of attention to this issue could result in an interruption or decline in services, a weakening of sector organizations, and/or fractures in the sector itself.

The sector is always asked to demonstrate its effectiveness. Without sufficient resources dedicated to appropriate training and quality evaluation (including quantitative and qualitative measures) founded on reliable data, this is and will remain a significant challenge.

*"A collaborative, cross-departmental, cross-sectoral approach to professional development is the key to encouraging cost effective coordination of evidence-informed practices and high quality of services responsive to client's ever changing needs. Unfortunately, this type of community development work is time intensive and few organizations have the capacity to take the lead in making this happen."*

–Kimberly Yetman Dawson, Director, NLHHN



## Impact

The efforts of the IAS Committee have resulted in the following:

- An enhanced profile and understanding of, as well as respect for, the housing and homelessness sector within government and the community.
- Increased funding for infrastructure and services within the housing and homelessness sector.
- Increased attention to supporting existing housing and homelessness staff – e.g., investments in training and professional development, including provision of replacement costs for staff when attending training. This will be further enhanced by creation of the training and professional development centre.
- Increased opportunities for growth of the sector across the province because of the efforts of the IAS Committee supported by the NLHNN. In recent years, there has been a growth in community advisory boards on homelessness in the province and increased investments in community capacity building.
- In partnering with a private marketing consultant in creating communications material, we have developed a strong ally that understands and supports this sector. Through this relationship we have benefited from pro bono work and have had support from the firm's private sector clients who see value in investing in the housing and homelessness sector far beyond "charitable giving."
- Collaboration between and among housing and homelessness sector organizations, resulting in increasing opportunities to demonstrate to government the economic return on its investments in the sector.
- Legitimization of the housing and homelessness sector as a "real and true" integral component of the voluntary sector continuum.

IAS's research projects have provided further evidence of the collaborative and cooperative relationships and processes on which the supportive housing and homelessness services sector is founded. The IAS Working Group, comprising both government and community partners, has undertaken activities and initiatives that will help to address the tremendous human resources and labour market challenges facing this sector. This in

turn will contribute to the on-going development of a strong, cohesive, highly skilled, and diverse workforce in the supportive housing and homelessness services sector. This is critical to addressing the many challenges faced by individuals and families struggling with housing issues.

There is still significant work to be done. The training and professional development coordination model needs to be put into practice. A critical element of this will be finding opportunities to collaborate with the broader voluntary and non-profit sector and with government agencies, departments, and divisions. This will ensure that we can provide a suite of relevant training, access training space and trainers, and have opportunity to meet the range of on-going professional development needs identified by IAS research.

We are working closely with the City of St. John's to develop a training centre and have been successful in receiving funding from NL Housing Corporation, the City of St. John's, and the Government of Canada's Homelessness Partnering Strategy. We will soon be making application to NL Housing for an additional \$200,000, which will complete the project's funding requirements. Architectural drawings have been approved and excavation has begun on the site.

We are currently in the final stages of delivering a co-ordinated, provincially funded, one-time intensive training project for emergency shelters and housing support workers. We see this as a first fundamental step in helping to meet the current existing training needs of the sector.

We plan to continue our negotiations with the Department of Education with the goal of including a module on the housing and homelessness sector in the high school curriculum. In the meantime, we are distributing the Careers that Change Lives tool kit and making presentations to high school and post-secondary students.

We will continue to share lessons learned, effective practices, and key ways of engaging government partners and have taken advantage of the opportunity to do just that by making presentations at national annual conferences of organizations such as Canadian Housing Renewal Association and Imagine Canada.

The key messaging developed to help inform our Careers That Change Lives marketing material was truly insightful as it clearly indicated that those working in this sector may not be paid well, may not have job security, or may face stress, but they are nevertheless passionate about making a difference and helping to change lives.

**“It is rewarding helping people find homes, find jobs, and live healthy lives. It trumps any money making venture. Every day is something new.”**

—Housing Development Worker

## About the Author

Kimberly Yetman Dawson is Director of the Newfoundland and Labrador Housing and Homelessness Network ([www.nlhhn.org](http://www.nlhhn.org)). She holds a Bachelors Degree in Communications with a background in marketing and over 20 years’ community development experience working with nonprofits and various levels of government. She was Executive Director of the Simcoe County Alliance to End Homelessness and sat on the SEDI board. Kimberly is a current board member of the Canadian Evaluation Society, NL Chapter, The Mayor’s Advisory Committee on Homelessness, NL Statistics Agency’s Affordable Housing Committee, and HR Council’s Building Cohesion Project. She is passionate about helping vulnerable people and working collaboratively to end homelessness in Newfoundland and Labrador. Kimberly was born in Grand Falls-Windsor but spent most of her life in Ontario. She is happy to back home on The Rock where she belongs.

# HR Council for the Nonprofit Sector

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