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Virtual Learning Together Series Webinar Recap

The Impact of COVID-19 on Housing & Homelessness

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Takeaways

Homelessness has increased through COVID-19. Through the first two waves of COVID-19, the sector focused efforts on pandemic emergency response (i.e., PPE purchase, isolation), and is now currently shifting towards a housing-focused response (i.e., opportunities to secure and maintain housing for individuals facing homelessness).

Multiple mechanisms for creating change in the housing sector exist, of which positive organizational scholarship, social learning, and health system improvement as a political economy could yield beneficial outcomes.

Recap

Randalin Ellery is the Director of Data Impact & Policy at the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness (CAEH). Randalin is focused on developing data and maintaining data infrastructure and visualizations, measuring impact, and connecting data to policy development. Randalin holds a Master of Arts in Sociology and International Development from the University of Guelph.

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Discussion

The Impact of COVID-19 on Housing & Homelessness

- The CAEH regularly collected information from communities across Canada throughout the pandemic and used the results to increase awareness about the crisis faced by the sector and inform government policy and funding decisions.
- Pre-pandemic, the sector was on a positive path to ending homelessness (i.e., National Housing Strategy, federal commitment to ending chronic homelessness, communities demonstrating measurable reductions), however, frontline staff bared the brunt of these efforts (i.e., opioid crisis, lack of housing supply, low wages, burnout).

- During the first wave of COVID-19, the main challenges experienced by the sector were lack of PPE, staffing, essential supplies and a lack of preparation. Very few communities had developed and implemented a plan for preventing and managing the spread of COVID-19, and the homeless sector struggled to connect with and receive guidance from local health authority.
- By April 2020, the sector responded quickly with limited resources; including 75% of communities opening an insolation shelter (community space, motel/hotel), of which their top three challenges were lack of PPE, staff and harm reduction. Supports from local public health authorities to homeless response providers included mostly advice, planning and response team, while offering less support through funding, PPE and harm reduction supplies.
- During the second wave of COVID-19, the homeless sector grew increasingly concerned about future sustainability as the number of people sleeping unsheltered were on the rise; the pandemic and opioid crises collided; and the winter months presented new challenges (i.e., rise in harmful drug use, limited access to supports and services, staff burnout).
- The third wave of COVID-19 was marked by staff burnout and shelter outbreaks; with 73% of survey respondents reporting having experienced at least one outbreak in an emergency shelter since the start of the pandemic.
- By the fourth wave, the homeless sector began adjusting to the ‘new normal’, while bracing for spikes in homelessness. The five main challenges included lack of health supports / collaboration, funding, maintaining location, client adherence to pandemic rules, as well as maintaining and securing staff. It was noted that all homelessness and chronic homelessness had increased since COVID-19, including the number of people staying in emergency shelters and encampments. 45% of survey respondents had noted that COVID-19 had been contracted by staff and/or guests at an emergency shelter in the prior three months.

Managing Change in Turbulent Times

- Building blocks of change include structure, mindset, experimentation and relation. Major changes are often achieved through networks of organizations and actors, and there are multiple mechanisms for creating change, including positive organizational scholarship, social learning and health system improvement as a political economy.
- A resource for change, Positive organizational scholarship (POS), includes positive deviance; emphasizing strengths, capabilities and possibilities; and an inclination towards goodness for its intrinsic value. The POS mechanism for change includes:

    - An emphasis on the attractivity of positive context and possibilities
    - Outcomes: organizational and individual vitality, meaningfulness, exhilaration, high-quality relationships
    - Motivations: unselfishness, altruism, contribution without regard to self
    - Enablers: processes, capabilities, structures, methods
- Social learning involves ongoing negotiation of identity, cultural meanings, and practices; emergent structure; self-organization; complex relationships; and fluid boundaries. The four disciplines or mechanisms for change involve:
    - Domain: commitment and learning agenda
    - Practice: collective curriculum that is visible and inspectable, strategies for continuous learning
    - Community: rules of participation, trust building and preservation
    - Convening: leadership of the social learning space, participation for productive inquiry, key resources
- The political economy as a resource for change requires an alignment of incentives and countervailing powers. It's mechanism for change includes:
    - Activation of countervailing powers
    - Emphasis on interdependence between micro-meso-macro dynamics
    - Creating challenges for unresponsive social structures
    - Resources as a privileged target for change

Resources Shared

Listed below are the resources mentioned during the webinar:

- HEC Learning Together resources

Webinar Recording

- Watch the full webinar here!

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