



MAP HOUSING WORKING GROUP MEETING MINUTES

March 25, 2021 - 1:00 pm online

PRESENT:

James Grunau, Doug Peat, Barry Growe (Journey Home Community), Derek Chu, Mohammed Zaqout (Kinbrace), Richard Belcham, Tammy Johnson, (inasmuch), Jenny Lam (Options), Ann Barnard Ball (New Hope Community Services), Caro Lander (Belkin House), Kevin Van Buskirk (Covenant House), Joni Rose (MUNI), Marzieh Nezakat (MOSAIC), Lindsey (PHS), Demetrius Schwab (UGM) Dustin Lupick (HSABC), Jenny Moss (MAP)

Chair: Derek Chu

Welcome and land acknowledgement.

MAP HWG welcomed three new attendees for this special session:
Demetrius Schwab (Union Gospel Mission)
Kevin Van Buskirk (Manager of Crisis Program (shelter), Covenant House)
Lindsay & Christine Knodel (Resident Liaison – Portland Hotel Society)

- The Agenda for this meeting was approved.
- The February 18, 2021 HWG Meeting Minutes were approved.

Updates

- Update on Roundtable with BCNPHA: Doug

Date for the event (TBC by BCNPHA) - Tuesday June 14 for a conversation with 8-12 housing providers and MAP. Planning a more formal webinar in the Fall with BC CHARMS input and we discussed the potential for ongoing conversations throughout the year.

- Update on BC CHARMS project: Marzieh

- Systems requirements document was presented to Advisory Committee and received useful feedback, so it is being finalized.
- With the Advisory Committee, BC Charms is looking to put in place a sustainability plan that satisfies the requirements of the Province and MAP.

- Over 100 interviews with claimants and providers were conducted providing great content for the report – Marzieh shared from the report’s claimant stories which describe the challenges of their experiences as well as their milestones and achievements.

- Update on CCR Workshop Planning: Surge in Arrivals – Jenny Moss

Spring Consultation (May/June) Workshops

Suggested a workshop on Planning for an Increase in Refugee Claimants – the idea was well-supported so a planning group of Derek, Jenny M (MAP BC) with Claire Roque (Diocese of London, Ontario & former CCR President) and Edgar Valderrama M. (FCJ Toronto) have met. Richard Belcham has agreed to address the participants and there will be group discussions based on regions to encourage initiating the same planning across Canada as we are embarking on here. It is hoped that this larger network platform will also share ideas and best practices.

Date: Friday May 28 at 9am PDT

Q: are government personnel allowed to attend?

Response (from later request) – Yes, very welcome.

Business

Update on Ministry’s FAQ Response on BC Bid – Derek

(Joni (MUNI) withdrew)

Derek outlined the response from MUNI to our letter of inquiry – there was no direct response - it came solely via a FAQ, which was less than we had hoped for.

Derek asked for suggestions on how to move forward with the Provincial government on this.

- wondered if anyone else was planning to apply, or had heard of any other organization able to manage these funds as a renovation?
- possible that some housing providers are looking at it – we could see if we could partner to secure some units for transitional housing for claimants.
- Kinbrace had considered the idea of signing a rental agreement for 5 years – but there is not enough time in this market to secure a reasonable deal and convince a landlord to sign a 5-year lease.
- it is also a big risk – since it’s for 5 years – and no guarantee that you will get the funding as it’s not certain. City of Abbotsford are not prepared to sign a 5-year lease.

Question: when the Bid will come out – no idea at this time (JM: subsequent: Bid was posted April 7)

Co-chair: should we respond again?

- can we try and understand the Ministry’s course of action – are there reasons why its framed this way? Are there already plans afoot?
- Possibly, and the Ministry is clear it does not want to ‘own’ anything after projects – so capital funding is out of bounds.

- It is a great opportunity for any organization that has housing and serves vulnerable populations to get funding to renovate, and then dedicate some units to claimants just for 5 years in order to qualify.
- Co-chair: Should we talk with BCNPHA? If they had available units, we could talk to them about possible renovations with these funds dedicated to claimants. Can we ask for a meeting with them? This seems to be a project for housing providers who have aging units, not us.
- Co-chair: or does anyone have a relationship with any of the housing providers like Affordable Housing Society who might have some stock we could make use of? Would group be OK if Doug and I approach BCNPHA to see if we could partner with any of their providers with housing stock to apply for the funds?
- It would be a good idea if the partnership is with a MAP agency who has experience working with refugee claimants.
- Suggested we also frame it in terms of emergency planning so we would say we are looking for space to respond in an emergency as well.

Approved – Derek and Doug will follow up with BCNPHA.

Continued Discussion on Preparing for an Influx of Refugee Claimants

Derek - MAP HWG has been tasked by the MAP Executive to discuss at a deeper level the needs/resources and gaps in housing refugee claimants if there was a sudden increase in arrivals.

Derek asked Richard to provide background and describe the scenario (from MAP meeting that morning):

Richard: Our purpose is to map what housing and services we currently have, and what we would do if (hypothetically) double the number of 2019 claimants arrived = 6,000 claimants in a year, 4000 of them in first 6 months. We discussed the issues that need planning, and for each one:

- We looked at how to encourage agencies to search for resources and partnerships.
- And we would uncover gaps that need to be addressed with resources from a higher level.

Survey (out April 6) will help us get a better idea of capacity, opportunities and gaps; and that is the first step. Here at HWG – with our housing expertise and outside-the-sector partnerships we can put together a good idea of resources and gaps. E.g. temporary housing solutions, and any potential housing opportunities involving partners.

Co-chair: Thanks to the shelters for attending this meeting – although we realize that housing refugee claimants in shelters is less than ideal (for both parties). Although, for example, Belkin House already does a great job of responding with built in services. In addition to shelters we have our transition housing agencies too, and the goal to move them into more traditional long-terms housing.

AND if there's a huge increase we may need to look at mass housing – not something we are familiar with. Claimants don't always mix well with BC homeless because of factors like dual diagnosis of illnesses, increasing number of aged.

Government question: Will the results of the survey be shared with government?

Response: Yes, allowing for some obvious confidentiality we will share the aggregate data. The survey responses will populate a scope that will structure our discussions of a feasible plan to respond, including formulating a plan to pass on to government for emergency communication and funding.

- This will be most useful for government and encouraging that we can work together on this.

Question: to Joni Rose about government's own plans, or at least if we are moving in the same direction?

Response: Yes – we are going the same way.

Derek: These will be our tasks:

- fill out the survey with your agency team
- discuss with your team/boards and start asking the question. What would we do as an organization?
- What resources would each agency be able to put together? (Possibly dedicate part of their 2020/21 surplus to an influx response.)

Great opportunity to start brainstorming together how we could respond. E.g. if a shelter could set aside # of beds separately for claimants what can the service providers be prepared to do to support those claimants and the shelters? Hope that for our next meeting the agencies will come forward with their suggestions. (Derek made some suggestions about what Kinbrace might consider in partnership)

Question: What is the point about claimants not mixing well with general shelter population? You should articulate this better as it's an important point for the plan, and other housing questions. (Request to Barry to describe from his shelter interviews)

- 1) Often claimants have not had experience of coping with people with substance abuse or violence and don't know how to respond when they are forced to live together.
- 2) Families with children have difficulties if there are violent neighbours nearby. Refugee claimants are not necessarily adept at adjusting to this type of violence and trauma; their past experiences are different.

Comment: – Sometimes refugees are victims of trauma in their own country – if they witness more trauma in shelters they can be re-traumatized. Often worse affected are single men who people assume will be OK. There is a huge contrast between what they have heard about the safety of Canada and the reality of living in a shelter.

(Belkin House) – Very complex issue - almost everyone in shelters has some sort of trauma – not limited to refugee claimants. Belkin has a lot of security so it's calmer and we don't see much violence. But yes, refugees do come from areas where alcohol is not used or drugs.

In terms of violence the rules at Belkin state that Mothers with kids have to be with their children in sight at all times, or they cannot stay there.

Issues with refugee claimants in Belkin House:

- Half the shelter population is refugees, and they are displacing others who need shelter beds.
- Often staying for longer periods (2-3 months)
- Often educated and able to navigate the system which means the shelter staff are under-used.
- Often cannot find more stable housing if they are not supported by agencies (like Mario did at IRS). This walking beside needs to happen if shelters are going to be able to support refugees successfully. Claimants feel less traumatized if they have the support of a specialized settlement worker helping them with their many needs.

Co-chair question: In the scenario of an influx would your shelter be prepared to work with an outside agency to support claimants by dedicating some beds in exchange for help?

Belkin House – The provision of outside agency support is the best-case scenario. But if we were to increase refugee numbers then we have to displace other programs – and that would only be possible if we had more capacity, or another program was downsizing. Currently unlikely.

Comment: Because we're now online, maybe agencies farther away can help support with wraparound services?

UGM: Our shelter is not set up to cope with refugees – and we are full – even for locally homeless. We would prefer diversion to another location at all times. Would be wary of creating more spaces at shelters for refugees rather than increasing transition housing capacity because otherwise we displace more locally homeless.

Would love to have dedicated staff who are experts to move refugees to more appropriate housing outside DTES.

And UGM hasn't seen refugees suffering in the shelters – they seem to create good relationships with the staff and deal with it quite well.

Personal story: Went to 2 shelters – one low barrier and another was a high barrier shelter.

At (Belkin) he had to wake up at 4-5 am to get a space there. Ran for 2 weeks doing this. Struggle was seeing needles on the floor and not understanding what they are. He had to rope his luggage to himself to prevent thefts that were extremely common.

I discussed with other claimants in Ontario & Quebec who made irregular and risky land crossings and went into reception centers where they met with people with whom they shared the same experience and the same culture, and inevitably became friends. This helped them with the transitioning.

To transition out of the shelter you need a friend, or someone to vouch for you to be able to find rental space. Totally confused by the behaviour of those around him – threats, theft, -I didn't understand how to respond to the frequent nighttime threats. Even thought that maybe it was normal. or a government test of him. It would have been better to have had the support of other claimants.

Co-chair: Our goal is not to get more claimants into shelters, but the idea is if there was an increase what can we do to make sure they are housed and they are not on the streets?
Unfortunately, we know that shelters will play a role.

We have 100 beds in transition housing – even if doubled to 200, that’s way short of the need expressed in the influx scenario.

We would like to know if the shelters have contingency plans for a big increase in any circumstances.

Comment – Maybe we need to look beyond shelters – to a possible reception center that could be a long-term – legacy of a surge. May solve some of the inbuilt problems in the system.

Think wider. Maybe a combination of innovative short-and long-term solutions that would help both the shelters and refugee claimants and be more attractive to government to support.

Government comment – The call for funding for rental could be useful for this – maybe this could be possible to provide a longer-term solution as well as emergency housing.

Co-chair – Thanks to Moe for sharing his experience, to Marzieh for collecting lived experience stories, and to the shelter providers for their candid responses.

MAP Exec – We will discuss again once we have the survey done – it will flag issues for discussion.

Agency Updates

James (Journey Home) They have started contacting agencies about input for the reception center design. Timing of this and planning housing for an influx is an important coincidence.

Richard agreed that it will be an important resource.

Dustin (HSABC) – We will send survey out to HSABC members to complete.

Mohammed (Kinbrace) –We are looking for any pro-bono mental health resources (besides VAST) for some clients.

Caro – please give shelters more time for surveys to be returned.

Jenny Moss (MAP) – **MAP Information Working Group ‘In Focus’ lecture** will be very appropriate to this topic: **Dr. Efrat Arbel (Peter Allard School of Law, UBC)** will speak on ‘**Canadian Refugee Law – Who is it Protecting?**’

Dr Arbel will consider the Safe Third Country Agreement and its history as well as changes that have been made to Canadian refugee protection during the pandemic and if they are likely to be maintained afterwards. Thursday April 15 at 7pm. More information and Register at: <https://mapbc.org/in-focus-lecture-canadian-refugee-law-who-is-it-protecting/>

Adjourned 2:15 - Next meeting: Thursday April 22 – to look at the results of the survey. Chaired by Doug.