

***Elijah Osei-Yeboah,***  
***Evaluation and Shared Measurement Manager, End Homelessness Winnipeg***

### **Should Winnipeg use the famous Houston model for reducing homelessness?**

While Houston's remarkable success in homelessness reduction deserves commendation and recognition, including a replicable model named after their efforts, it is essential that we also acknowledge local efforts to tackle homelessness, and strengthen them. There have been recent suggestions that Winnipeg should adopt the Houston model to reduce and prevent homelessness.

In 2011, Houston, the most populous city in Texas, faced homelessness challenges akin to many global cities. For example, veterans had to wait for nearly two years on average to access low-income housing. In 2012, a pivotal moment occurred when the Obama administration chose Houston as one of the ten model cities to combat homelessness, offering financial aid and expertise. Since that critical moment, Houston has housed over 25,000 people who were experiencing homelessness (with most of them retaining their housing for at least two years) and reduced housing placement wait time and homelessness by 63%.

How did Houston achieve this feat, which has felt insurmountable in other cities across the globe? In a collaborative effort to address homelessness, the city sought input from various partners, culminating in the selection of Coalition for the Homeless, a local non-profit, to spearhead and coordinate initiatives. Although some sector organizations were initially hesitant to engage, their reluctance waned as they witnessed the evident progress achieved through this concerted approach.

Houston's success can also be attributed to using real-time data to evaluate the effectiveness of their homelessness reduction measures instead of their yearly homelessness count. Even though periodic counts can help determine trends in homelessness, the wait between two counts might be too long to allow for early intervention. Unfortunately, research has shown that the longer someone experiences homelessness, the more difficult exiting it becomes.

To make headway in homelessness reduction, Houston adopted a gradual approach, setting small achievable goals first. The city's initial target was housing 100 veterans within 100 days, which they successfully accomplished. Buoyed by this success, Houston aimed higher, housing an additional 300 veterans in the following 100 days. These achievements gave Houston the impetus to set more ambitious targets.

Furthermore, Houston's encampment response strategy stood out as effective compared to many other cities. While some cities perceive encampments as obstacles to urban planning and aesthetics, leading to forceful evictions without alternative housing arrangements, Houston took a different approach. The city collaborated closely with landlords, outreach teams, and encampment residents to provide appropriate housing solutions before dismantling encampments. Even for those hesitant to relocate, dedicated outreach workers elaborated on the benefits of embracing the opportunity for stable housing. This proactive and compassionate approach ensured a smoother transition for those experiencing homelessness.

The fifth and most important factor accounting for Houston's success was strong collaboration among partners, including all levels of government. Collaboration has been a proven strategy for tackling "wicked

problems”, meaning complex problems which cannot be solved easily, of which the Houston Model is yet one more successful example. Together, the four levels of government allocated \$100 million to support Houston’s 2021-2025 plan to house an additional 12,000 people experiencing homelessness.

Additionally, Houston embraced the Housing First principle, prioritizing housing placement before addressing associated challenges such as addiction, mental health, and trauma. They adapted a federal government vulnerability index for housing placement eligibility, provided individuals with complex needs with permanent supportive housing, while others with less complex needs were rapidly rehoused. The city covered the first year’s rent and assigned each tenant a case worker, offering a year’s grace period to either find alternative housing or take over the rent payment. Impressively, close to 75% of those rapidly rehoused maintained their housing successfully.

Even though Winnipeg has not adopted the Houston homelessness reduction model, there are many commonalities between the Houston model and Winnipeg’s own approach to homelessness reduction:

- End Homelessness Winnipeg was established in 2015 to provide backbone supports for tackling homelessness. The organization has adopted the Collective Impact Model, a means of collaborating with community partners.
- Homelessness Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS), a database that tracks progress on key homelessness indicators, had onboarded 84 programs and agencies by the end of June 2023, surpassing its 2025 onboarding goal of 45 agencies and programs.
- From April 1, 2021 to March 31, 2022, Reaching Home funded agencies housed 1,100 people in Winnipeg alone. Reaching Home is Canada’s federal government’s homelessness strategy.
- End Homelessness Winnipeg collaborated with a wide range of partners to design Coordinated Access, a system for matching people experiencing homelessness with needed resources/supports.
- Kíkinanaw Óma, Winnipeg’s strategy for supporting those living unsheltered was released in 2020. Through this strategy, End Homelessness Winnipeg brings together community partners to support those living unsheltered through advocacy, income supports, and appropriate outreach responses.
- Many local housing programs have adopted the Housing First philosophy.
- Canada Manitoba Housing Benefit assists over 900 people who were either experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness to pay their rent, as well as utilities every month.
- To ensure housing stability, Manitoba Non-Profit Housing Association provided 598 interest-free loans to tenants in Manitoba in 2022 to help them cover rent and utility arrears, cost of moving, among others.
- Some new housing programs have opened their doors to those experiencing homelessness, such as Shawenim Abinoojii’s 18-unit transitional housing for Indigenous youth in and out of care and Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata’s 22-unit low-barrier permanent supportive housing.

Indeed, Houston deserves applause for the tremendous success they have had in homelessness reduction. However, there are many similarities between the Houston model and Winnipeg’s approach to tackling homelessness. Instead of calling for adopting/adapting the Houston model, local homelessness prevention measures must be recognized and strengthened.