



Evaluation of Diversion Services Pilot Programs in Calgary

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This document has been prepared for
the Calgary Homeless Foundation

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Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Summary of Key Learnings	8
Agency-specific Learnings	14
A General Model for Shelter Diversion	23
Recommendations	28



Introduction

Shelter Diversion

Shelter diversion is unique among other permanent housing-targeted interventions for individuals and families experiencing homelessness because of the point in time in which the intervention occurs. Shelter diversion (“diversion”) focuses on people as they are seeking entry into shelters – meeting individuals at the front door of Calgary’s homeless-serving system-of-care (CHSSC), as opposed to prevention efforts that target people at imminent risk of homelessness, and rapid re-housing that targets people who are already homeless.¹ Diversion is a strategy that helps youth, individuals, and families avoid shelter stays by helping them identify immediate alternative housing arrangements.¹ Shelter diversion helps preserve the availability of shelter beds for those who have no other options,² diverting individuals and families from emergency shelter by providing individualized support *before* they enter the shelter system.³ Essentially, diversion works to exhaust all other options before a client enters shelter and, if required, connect clients to other services and financial assistance that help them return to permanent housing.⁴ Ideally, individuals will be housed within 30 days.⁵

Diversion has also been tested as an approach to help families who are already homeless.⁵ In these cases, diversion engages families early in their experience of homelessness to reduce the amount of time they spend homeless. The focus is to help diversion clients get past the immediate barriers they encounter to obtaining safe housing. Due to these variations in philosophy, diversion is less of a specific “program” than it is an approach or process.⁶ Diversion can be used with different program modalities; in all cases, however, diversion is a light-touch, fast-paced, solutions-focused flexible combinations of support.⁵

Diversion has been identified as one of the most important practices in the emergency shelter system, and experts in this area suggest that every community must have the capacity to intervene and divert people from entering the homeless system.⁷ There is increasing evidence of diversion as an emerging practice being tested in a variety of communities.^{3,8}

Diversion Services Pilot

Between January – July 2020, The Calgary Homeless Foundation (CHF) funded a short-term pilot of diversion programming. The pilot provided funding for organizations to provide a broad category of services, including: provision of financial, utility, and/or short-term rental subsidy; short-term support or support coordination; connection to services and/or benefits; housing search support; moving support; and/or information and service referrals. While the initial pilot period spanned January – March 31, 2020, participating programs were subsequently given the option to apply for an extension (and additional funding, if needed) to continue delivering programming through to the end of June 2020.

In accompaniment to the pilot, CHF hired a team of consultants to take a developmental evaluation approach with the six agencies to provide a more solid understanding of the impact and appropriateness of diversion programming within the Calgary context and to capture key learnings about how the pilot projects were implemented.

It is important to note that approximately halfway through the six-month pilot projects and the accompanying evaluation Calgary was impacted by the global COVID-19 pandemic. This had significant impacts on all the agencies and how/if they were able to continue providing diversion services as planned. This also impacted how the evaluation project was undertaken, requiring that some planned activities be adapted to respond to a new virtual environment as well as the increased burden placed on the agencies' time. Efforts were made to capture how COVID-19 impacted the pilot projects and this is described later in this report.

Approach

This project utilized a developmental evaluation approach to scoping, gathering, and understanding the collected information. This approach was taken because of the interest by the project sponsor, the CHF, in understanding the full range of innovative or alternative services that are directly linked to shelter diversion. A developmental evaluation approach is highly relevant in dynamic environments where innovation, adaptation and learning what works is taking place.⁹ This is different than a 'traditional' approach to evaluation, which is generally built around a linear, logical approach and are bounded within stable parameters. The outcome of a successful developmental evaluation process is 'informed change' in what is being implemented and evaluated.

The pilot included six organizations who were selected through a competitive application process:

- Alpha House
- Aspen Family and Community Services
- Boys & Girls Club
- Calgary Drop-In & Rehab Centre
- Centre for Newcomers

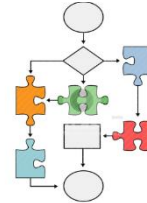
This evaluation explores:



Lessons learned about the emerging contributing factors for program success



Lessons learned from the six diversion pilot sites



Emerging theory of change and logic model for shelter diversion



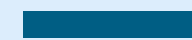
Recommendations based on learning and literature

Sources of information for this evaluation:

- **Document review** of the original project proposals for each of the six pilot agencies
- **Focus group** with CHF Systems Planners and staff
- **Two sets of interviews** with the pilot site service providers conducted within the first month of program delivery and at the mid-point in the pilot
- **Interview with** the City of Hamilton's Homelessness Policy and Programs Senior Project Manager
- **Online survey** completed by five of the six pilot agencies (response rate = 83%)
- **Rapid review** of existing literature to investigate best and promising practices for diversion

Report Overview

This learning report highlights four key areas that were produced through this developmental evaluation. The first section investigates the lessons learned that were shared between the agencies throughout the duration the pilot. The second section summarizes more individualized learnings drawn from each of the respective agencies, along with a client case story and a summary of intake and exit assessment data pulled from CHF's Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). Following the agency profiles is a generalized process map that provides a visual depiction of diversion programming along with a logic model and theory of change that have been developed based on the learnings developed during this project. The report concludes with project limitations and a series of recommendations for CHF.



Summary of Key Learnings

1. Diversion can change the course of an individual or family's experiences of a housing crisis

If one were to consider how an individual experiencing a housing crisis would be served by the pilot agencies prior to undertaking the diversion pilot project, their personal pathway would have taken a very different turn.

- Most of the individuals or families who presented at the shelter door would have become general shelter clients, which is understood to become a risk factor for shelter chronicity.
- Lower and mid-acuity clients, who may not have complex co- or tri- morbidity, and are most likely experiencing an episodic housing crisis, may not have their unique issues met because they require specific interventions that should be identified and implemented quickly.
- Youth would have become general shelter clients, which may exacerbate their housing crisis and increase their vulnerability and shelter chronicity.
- Immigrant and refugees would not have the benefit of an approach targeted to their unique needs and circumstances because shelter agencies are not equipped to provide culturally appropriate services or an understanding of their settlement, legal, and economic circumstances.

Diversion is not saying “no” to sheltering families that have exhausted all their options. Rather, diversion works to prevent families from experiencing the stress and trauma that may be associated with accessing an emergency shelter where other safe and appropriate residential options exist.⁶

Research suggests that diversion should be tried by at least having a problem-solving conversation with everyone seeking shelter to determine whether it is viable, desirable, safe, and appropriate to divert them elsewhere.⁷

2. There are indications that the initial contact between a client and a diversion service should be as early as possible into a client's experience of homelessness

Each of the three shelter agencies has a common initial contact point with clients – at the shelter door or immediately after shelter intake. An initial rapid diversion service assessment allows for the agency to identify clients who may be a good fit for diversion services, who then have specific diversion workers assigned to their case. In the case of the DI, diversion clients are also sheltered on a separate designated floor, which has proved to be so beneficial that the agency is considering dedicating one of their three overflow buildings specifically for diversion clients in the future.

The other three programs are housed in multi-service organizations that have a vested interest in supporting target populations who are in a new or imminent housing crisis. Each organization offers their expertise in working with youth, families, or immigrants/refugees, and are working in some sort of collaboration (or intending to in the case of the Centre for Newcomers) with shelter agencies so that they can 'catch' clients early in their shelter stays. Strong collaborative practices between agencies facilitate success in these programs.

Some programs are more intentional about focusing on clients who have limited or no experience with homelessness, including: the Calgary Drop-In Centre, the Boys & Girls Club, Aspen Family and Community Services, and the Centre for Newcomers; The Alpha House and Mustard Seed, however, identify potential diversion clients who have more frequent experiences of homelessness or longer histories of shelter stays.

The impact of a client's history with homelessness is not fully understood as it relates to their success with diversion services; however, the literature and early indications from the agency interviews alludes to the notion that agencies who divert clients who are new(er) to homelessness may experience better success because of a set of pre-conditions of their housing crisis and/or individual characteristics that may potentially increase their success in diversion programming.

Assessment and service delivery for diversion services would ideally begin at the system entry point. In systems with coordinated intake process, entry point would be the designated intake center(s) of "front door". In systems without coordinated entry processes, the entry point would be whatever program the individuals/family comes to first for shelter assistance.¹

Every system should integrate diversion as the first response to individuals in a homeless crisis. The goal is to help individuals get past the immediate barriers in obtaining safe housing, securing housing right away if possible.⁵

3. Clients who are successfully diverted from shelter and moved into a stable housing situation share some general characteristics and/or pre-conditions to their housing crisis.

All the agencies spoke about client characteristics that identify them as ideal or suitable diversion services clients. They are:

- Little or no previous experiences of homelessness
- Episodic homelessness, most often related to life circumstances out of their control
- Previously demonstrated housing independence
- Exhibits motivation, 'higher functioning', hope, and intention to maintain housing
- Has some sort of income stability or the potential to quickly acquire stable income through government supports or employment. Skills with budgeting or learning to budget were also identified by two agencies as important factors.
- For clients who use substances, a willingness and motivation to detox and/or access drug counseling also indicate suitability for diversion supports.

At this stage in project implementation it is impossible to draw any conclusions about correlations between these client characteristics and their success achieving diversion outcomes; however, this is a potential opportunity for further inquiry.

Research suggests asking the following questions to assess client fit for diversion:

1. Where did you sleep last night? If they slept somewhere where they could potentially safely stay again, this might mean they are good candidates for diversion.
2. What other housing options do you have for the next few days or weeks? Even if there is an option outside of shelter that is only available for a short time, it's worth exploring.
3. What issues exist with you remaining in your current housing situation? Can those issues be resolved with financial assistance or other support? If the issues can be solved with case management, mediation, or financial assistance, diversion is a good option
4. Is it possible/safe to stay in your current housing unit? What resources are needed to do that? If the client could stay in their current housing with some assistance, systems should focus on a quick prevention-oriented solution that will keep the client in their unit.⁶

4. There are a core set of supports that are common across all diversion pilot sites.

There were some agency-specific adaptations to how diversion is delivered but there were a core set of diversion service activities that were common across all program sites; these included a combination of the following:

- Housing plans, diversion services agreements, goal planning
- Housing location assistance and preparation for viewings and communicating with landlords
- Financial assistance – for housing, moving, transportation costs. Some agencies contribute financial assistance towards education upgrades or trades ticket attainment.
- Income support navigation
- Supporting natural supports connection
- Other light case management activities such as referrals, system navigation and advocacy.

Diversion uses several familiar prevention and rapid re-housing approaches such as financial assistance (e.g., rental supports, utility arrears, etc.), short-term support or support coordination, conflict mediation, connection to services and/or benefits, and housing search support. Since many of the same approaches used with diversion are the same as prevention and rapid re-housing, these cases often tend to work together. ⁸

5. The data elements gathered from program-to-program varies; however, there is opportunity for a common set of indicators to measure diversion outcomes

Appropriate evaluation and measurement should be focused on ability to prevent episodes of homelessness and help stabilize individuals and families in permanent housing. They should also be assessed based on their ability to support homeless-serving systems to improve their outcomes.¹ Key indicators that have been measured by agencies, both locally and in other jurisdictions include:

- Types of services provided.
- # and types of referrals made to mainstream services.
- Type of financial assistance provided.
- Type of follow-up service provided.
- Length of shelter stay
- Repeat episodes of homelessness
- Exit destination for diverted clients

Based on other pilot studies, several recommendations regarding evaluation and measurement of diversion were made. These include:

- Diversion programs should be evaluated based on their ability to prevent an episode of homelessness
- Diversion programs should help stabilize families in permanent housing
- Diversion programs should reduce the size of program wait lists
- Diversion programs should be assessed based on their ability to help the homeless-serving system-of-care improve their outcomes – reducing the number of households that become homeless is a key community outcome.⁸



Agency-specific Learnings

Lessons Learned from Alpha House

- The Alpha House, along with the Mustard Seed, will work with diversion clients who are more frequent and/or longer-term shelter users.
- A few weeks into the pilot, Alpha House decided to shift the diversion program from their shelter to their outreach team. This shift occurred because of the COVID-19 pandemic response, which required adaptations to how the shelter building was utilized. The capacity to work with clients through outreach was more suitable during this time as capacity and admissions to the shelter were decreased.
- Early in the project shelter staff mentioned the benefit of having close access to the agency’s detox program to identify potential diversion clients. It is unclear how transitioning to an outreach-based program has impacted the ability to identify prospective clients, as well as program delivery or outcomes.

Client Story

“Jim” is a senior and has his own vehicle, which he was living out of for over a year. After an initial conversation with the diversion staff at Alpha House they concluded that he might be a good fit for diversion programming because he is motivated to find his own place, interested in “settling down,” and does not require case management. After learning about Jim’s housing history and timeline of homelessness, the diversion workers helped Jim to identify some goals, which included applying for seniors’ support programs, and to arrange viewings for accommodation. After being discharged from Calgary’s Assisted Self-Isolation Site (ASIS) Jim moved into transitional housing. He continues to look for other housing

Program Details

of clients: 19
of exit assessments: 18
Average age: 43
Male: 84%
Female: 16%
Average days until exit: 39
Average cost/client: \$327

Top Service Referrals:

Case management: 12
Addictions services: 12
Housing Search: 7
Connection to community services: 4
Financial services: 2
None: 3

Top Financial Assistance:

Transportation: 4
Security deposit: 3
Rental assistance/subsidy: 3
Other: 1
None: 9

Lessons Learned from Aspen Family and Community Services

- The diversion pilot has opened greater possibilities for the work Aspen can do with families, both in terms of staff resources and the financial assistance Aspen can provide. The pilot has allowed the staff to ask a family: “what do you need,” granting them more opportunity to support these families.
- Most of the families Aspen works with through their diversion program are identified by a family shelter and are characterized as having minimal-to-no history of shelter use. These include families where there are dependents in or out of their care, and pregnant women.
- Aspen considers families suitable for diversion if they are “sustainable,” meaning that they have income or have potential to gain income.
- Aspen’s diversion work with families is anticipated to take approximately three months (but up to six months), depending on the individual family context. Each family has unique circumstances and resources that determine the extent and length of time they could benefit from working with diversion workers.
- Compared to individuals, diverting families can pose additional challenges related to finding suitable housing that can affordably accommodate a family.

“I think we are saving the system by getting people before they fall into it. Getting into shelters and other systems is way more expensive than giving someone \$1000 and some of our time to support them through some system navigation and giving them encouragement. We know that homelessness is traumatic, especially for kids, and so staying out of shelter is so much better. We should be doing everything we can to keep families out of shelter, especially if they are able to be independent.”

Program Details

of clients: 43
of exit assessments: 7
Average age: 39
Male: 33%
Female 67%
Average days until exit: 46
Average cost/client: \$2750

Top Service Referrals:

Connection to community services: 5
Financial services: 4
Housing Search: 3
Case management 2
Other: 2
None: 0

Top Financial Assistance:

Rental assistance/subsidy: 6
Security deposit: 5
Food card: 2
Other: 2
Moving costs: 1
None: 0

- Aspen is hoping to shift their diversion programming earlier in the timeline of a family’s housing crisis to connect with families through referral or outreach, rather than once they have already sought shelter. This would mean that a family’s first point of contact would refer them quickly and directly to Aspen’s diversion program before sending the family to a shelter. This requires substantial collaboration and Aspen works diligently to educate, coordinate, and collaborate with partners such as shelters, crisis agencies such as the Distress Centre, and others.
- COVID-19 has made it more challenging for the agency to work with families because they are not meeting face-to-face. Goal planning is challenging to do over the phone and language barriers only exacerbate these challenges. However, Aspen has found that because there is a focus on getting families out of shelter as quickly as possible to prevent infection spread there is more (and faster) collaboration than before. The pandemic has also slowed government agencies, making applications for financial supports take longer. The agency also began observing quicker family breakdown in situations where families were “couch surfing” with extended family, which they attributed, in part, to the general stress around COVID-19.

Client Story

The “Barrett” family were referred to the shelter by The SCORCe after experiencing homelessness in the form of couch surfing and a hotel stay, which they could no longer afford and thus sought access to a family shelter. After connecting with the diversion worker at Aspen, the family was assessed to determine their sustainability, including their available income, protective factors, and possibility of natural supports. In this case, the Barrett’s were positioned for success as diversion clients, requiring only a light amount of case management and limited financial support. Aspen spent approximately 20 – 25 hours with the family establishing a budget, accessing various supports and services, searching for a house, and then engaging with the landlord. Financially, Aspen provided them with a security deposit, first month’s rent, moving and set-up costs. The family was housed and had maintained their housing three months after exiting the program.

Lessons Learned from the Boys & Girls Club

- The Unity Project was created to provide youth one-on-one support from an outreach worker with the aim of increasing youths' natural supports and access to safe and stable housing. Early in its implementation the BGCC identified that about 50% of Unity clients were new to homelessness and did not necessarily require intensive and long-term support.
- With diversion pilot funding the BGCC identified the opportunity to work with youth who have lower chronicity and who may not require intensive professional supports or case management.
- The BGCC focuses on new clients between the ages of 18-24 who are accessing Calgary's emergency shelters or who self-refer into the program. Suitable clients for diversion supports are profiled as those who requires a 'lighter touch,' who may only require a financial subsidy and specific case management
- BGCC has been able to quickly respond, often connecting clients to supports within days, if not hours, which means that clients can reduce or delay the need for shelter use. The collaboration between the BGCC and shelters, and the Drop-In Centre in particular, has been crucial for this to succeed.
- While other programs also identify natural supports as both important to a clients' success and a potential sheltering opportunity, the BGCC places a substantial emphasis on the Natural Supports Framework because many of the housing crises experienced by youth are due to a breakdown in friend or family relationships.

"My first question is: 'Who are your people'? and I am always surprised to hear from them that they have some aspect of natural supports they can rely on". This is so important with youth, because it gets them connected and less isolated, which is a big deal, so they don't lean on shelter users."

Program Details

of clients: 33
of exit assessments: 17
Average age: 21
Male: 70%
Female: 27%
Transgender: 3%
Average days until exit: 20
Average cost/client: \$382

Top Service Referrals:

Case management: 9
Financial services: 7
Housing Search: 7
Connection to community services: 6
Employment services: 4
None: 2

Top Financial Assistance:

Security deposit: 5
Rental assistance/subsidy: 4
Moving costs: 2
Food card: 1
Transportation: 1
None: 7

- The COVID-19 pandemic caused the BGCC to halt intake to the program in mid-March as the DI stopped accepting clients. The move to a virtual work environment has made diversion work challenging because it was hard to work with clients without meeting face-to-face. This was addressed, to some extent, by using some additional funding to provide phones or tablets to youth so that they could stay in touch. Most of the diversion work during this time has focused on keeping youth as stable as possible while waiting to resume housing search and income stability.

Client Story

“Walter”, aged, 19, entered the Diversion program through a referral from the Mustard Seed. They had been evicted from their home due to an invalid tenancy agreement with their landlord coupled with a loss of employment. They arrived at the Mustard Seed seeking shelter and support with basic needs. Walter had been experiencing episodic homelessness since age 16 although they had never stayed in shelter, instead relying on connections to natural supports that could temporarily house them for the past few years. A breakdown between Walter their natural supports led to them not having a place to go when they were evicted. They had experienced stability in housing historically and had the skills to be capable of living independently, making them a good fit for diversion. The diversion worker helped connect Walter to Alberta Works and financial services and supported them to update their resume and obtain employment. Staff also accompanied Walter to a couple house viewings and worked with Walter to help them understand their tenancy rights and ensure that they were protected under a new lease agreement. The staff spent about 12 hours in total with Walter and they were able to move into a new home after two weeks in shelter. The diversion worker also helped Walter obtain food and furniture, and to reconnect with the natural supports who were previously unable to support them. In this case, financial support in the form of a damage deposit and first month’s rent helped the client quickly obtain housing and they are now focusing on maintaining their employment, relationships, and obtaining a GED.

Lessons Learned from Centre for Newcomers¹

- The number of individual clients is not a true indication of how many people were served by the loan program. In almost all loan files, there was several people living in the household that benefited from the housing stability that the loan provided.
- The Centre for Newcomers has created a stringent screening process because of the volume of clients who could benefit from the loans and have reserved them for individuals they rate as “medium or high” needs. They tend to be people who are unable to access income in other ways, for example refugee claimants or people who do not have work permits.
- In their application assessment process, the agency has been able to identify people who are ‘low to medium’ risk for a housing crisis, and do not provide loans for these individuals. These tend to be people who have employment but need credit counselling or budgeting support. They are usually referred to relevant CNC programs.
- The agency states that this is one of the few loan programs that can assist refugees and individuals without a work permit who are experiencing significant systemic issues to housing and employment, with few ‘strings attached’. Therefore, this is a true diversion program in that it is intervening as soon as possible before further system entrenchment. This has become particularly salient during the time of COVID-19 because these individuals are unable to access further income supports but are experiencing heightened housing crisis. For example, most of the loans shifted towards supporting Cargill Temporary Foreign Workers who were quarantined but could not pay rent because they were no longer working.

¹ Data for Centre for Newcomers was more limited than for other agencies due to HMIS data quality issues reported by CHF. The agency also did not participate in the online survey and therefore no client story was able to be produced.

Lessons Learned from Calgary Drop-In and Rehab Centre

- In theory, the DI's program targets new clients who have been in shelter less than 90 days; however, in practice the program targets all new clients accessing the shelter immediately upon that client entering the building.
- The DI has a designated diversion area in the shelter where beds are reserved for diversion clients. Diversion clients occupy this area for 21 days while being supported by the diversion worker. This has the effect of isolating clients from long-term shelter users, reducing the likelihood that shelter users will become entrenched in shelter culture (and homelessness). After 21 days if a client has not been successfully diverted, they join the general shelter population.
- As a result of the COVID-19 disruption, diversion services were paused with the first reported COVID-19 case at the shelter. However, because of the program's demonstrated success the DI is assessing the feasibility and model of using one of its overflow shelters as a diversion-only space for clients in the future. This may be used in collaboration with other shelters.

Client Story

“Brandon” was new to homelessness and so he became a perfect fit for the diversion programming at the DI. Having lost his housing because of employment loss, he was accessing the DI's services for the first time. Brandon was new to Alberta, however, and unsure how to navigate the supports that exist for individuals in his circumstance. The Diversion Team at the DI was able to assist him with applying for Alberta Works and securing a room to rent within the city. In total, the DI spent approximately five hours supporting Jim and helping him avoid a prolonged shelter stay and experience of homelessness. It was later learned that Brandon was also successful at obtaining employment and was pursuing his own independent rental housing.

Program Details

of clients: 132
of exit assessments: 105
Average age: 43
Male: 82%
Female: 18%
Average days until exit: 18
Average cost/client: \$859

Top Service Referrals:

Housing search: 32
Employment services: 11
Connections to community supports: 11
Case management: 9
Financial services: 7
None: 13

Top Financial Assistance:

Security deposit: 36
Rental assistance/subsidy: 32
Transportation: 3
None: 11

Lessons Learned from the Mustard Seed

- Flexible diversion funding has not necessarily allowed the Mustard Seed to work with more clients, but it has allowed them to work with “more speed,” supporting clients to secure housing quickly and more efficiently. For example, individuals who are working can access damage deposits, enabling them to move into housing faster than having to save up the money to do so.
- Clients who access their Integrated Service Centre tend to stay in shelter for shorter periods of time, which is consistent with observations from the Mustard Seed’s general population. The Integrated Service Centre offers advocacy, employment supports, tax clinics, wellness clinics, health, and mental health services.
- Unlike some of the other programs, the Mustard Seed will work with diversion clients who have more frequent and/or longer-term shelter stays. These clients are identified as being suitable for diversion based on a target list generated by the shelter staff.
- Significant barriers due to COVID-19 have arisen for the diversion program at the Mustard Seed. For example, several seniors’ housing providers have stopped taking new clients. Very few individuals at the time are unable to find market housing. They are continuing to work with individuals but finding housing has become an increasingly significant barrier.

Client Story

“George” is a senior who has experienced numerous periods of homelessness. He was initially resistant to receiving help as he had always been self-sufficient, and he remained hopeful that he would find employment and housing on his own. The diversion staff approached George because of his age and because he presented himself as both capable and independent. George had previously moved into a rental apartment without receiving any support, but he was taken advantage of by the landlord and forced to return to the shelter within 3 weeks. While George was reluctant to accept help at first the diversion staff kept engaging with him and worked to build his trust. In total the staff spent about 15 hours with George and were able to connect him with additional community resources and help him move out of shelter and into housing of his own.

Program Details

of clients: 173
of exit assessments: 89
Average age: 48
Male: 74%
Female: 24%
Transgender: 2%
Average days until exit: 26
Average cost/client: \$306

Top Service Referrals:

Connections to community supports: 70
Housing search: 53
Counseling: 10
Employment services: 9
Hospital: 8
None: 1

Top Financial Assistance:

Security deposit: 44
Transportation: 3
Food card: 3
Rental assistance/subsidy: 2
Moving costs: 1
None: 28



A General Model for Shelter Diversion

Diversion is increasingly seen as a fundamental complement to addressing homelessness in communities. Diversion uses a number of familiar prevention and rapid re-housing approaches, such as financial assistance (e.g., rental supports, utility arrears), short-term support or support coordination, conflict mediation, connection to services and/or benefits, and assistance with housing searches.¹ Evaluations of diversion projects conducted in other jurisdictions have identified that the most common types of support provided through diversion processes are assistance with housing searches, budgeting for appropriate housing, and providing information about moving.⁶ The three most common types of financial assistance identified through studies include security deposits, one-time rent payments, and rental application fees.⁵ The most common supports and financial assistance provided align with many of the results summarized in the exit assessments of the local pilot projects, demonstrating support for a general model of shelter diversion.

Shelter diversion is not a complicated intervention. While agencies approach their diversion programs in different ways, they ultimately all build off a core set of features. Inductive interviews with each of the pilot agencies focused on surfacing their respective approaches to diversion by asking the agencies to outline their process and the way clients are identified, recruited, assessed for fit, and subsequently supported. These accounts were then summarized in a visual process flow diagram that was tailored to each agency, who were then given an opportunity to review and provide feedback on their diagram to ensure accuracy. Once complete, these diagrams were compared against each other as well as best practices identified in the literature and a set of common characteristics were identified. These provided the components of a general process for diversion, which is presented in Figure 1.

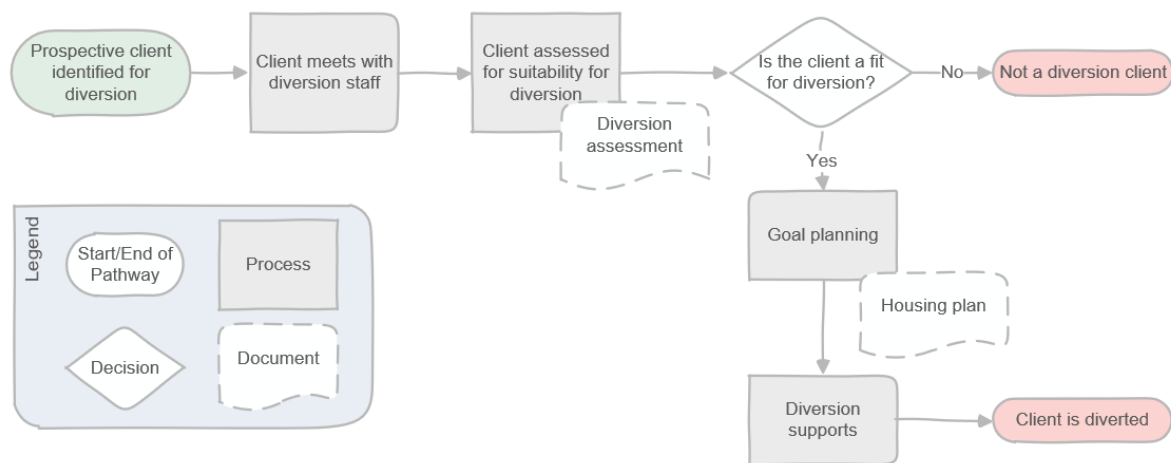


Figure 1 General Process for Shelter Diversion

Process Component	Description
Prospective client identified	Clients who are entering the homeless-serving-system for the first time are flagged as potential clients for diversion. In some instances, this can be facilitated by a coordinated intake processes that can ease the burden on individual agencies. This coordinated intake point can occur at the initial point of access to the homeless assistance system. ¹
Client meets with diversion staff	An initial meeting with the client and the diversion staff is conducted in-person or by phone within days, if not hours of a client being identified. Resourceful diversion staff members that are well-trained are essential to successful diversion. Staff should be familiar with the intake and assessment processes, have experience with landlord mediation and conflict resolution, and be knowledgeable about rental subsidies and financial literacy programs. ⁵
Client assessed for suitability for diversion	Some form of diversion assessment is conducted to determine if the client is likely to be successfully diverted. In Calgary these assessments are program-specific, however many other communities use a common assessment tool to ensure the same assessment strategies are being used by all service providers and staff. ¹ Key questions to include in this assessment have been included earlier in this report. In Calgary this stage also includes standardized intake interviews that contribute to the HMIS.
Client is not a fit for diversion	If a client is not a fit for diversion then they may be assessed for fit with another housing program, referred into CAA, or admitted to the general shelter population.
Goal planning	Clients who are assessed to be a good fit for a diversion program then participate in some form of goal planning with the diversion worker. Developing short- and long-term goals and housing plans help individuals or families strategize about where they will sleep tonight/tomorrow while also planning for long-term housing stability. ⁸
Diversion supports	Clients who are in the diversion program may receive several supports, including: systems navigation, accessing financial supports, basic needs, physical and mental health, light case management, service referrals, accessing employment, housing searches, landlord advocacy. Availability of flexible funding is critical to successfully diverting families, ¹ although the actual use of financial assistance may not always be necessary for successful diversion. ⁷ Cooperation with service providers outside the homeless-serving-system can also help families stabilize or find new housing. ⁸
Client is diverted	The goal is to divert a client from shelter into some form of stable housing situation, ideally within 30 days. ⁵ In some cases, ongoing support is provided to help clients maintain that housing after move-in.

Theory of Change for Shelter Diversion

In addition to mapping the general process for diversion programming in Calgary a theory of change and logic model were developed to describe shelter diversion. A theory of change explains how a series of activities are understood to produce results that contribute to the program's intended impacts.¹⁰ A logic model is a visual illustration of a program's resources, activities, and expected outcomes that can be used to depict the relationship between the various components of a program.¹¹ A draft of the logic model was developed based on the results of the rapid review and the learnings produced through the agency interviews. This logic model was subsequently provided to the agencies to validate and provide feedback. Each agency was asked if the logic model depicted their program and to provide suggestions to improve the model to ensure alignment. The final logic model is presented in Figure 2.

When individuals and families are engaged as early as possible in their housing and homelessness crisis, supported with housing planning, and connected to services and flexible financial assistance that help them maintain or return to permanent housing

Then more families and individuals will have their immediate housing crises resolved, fewer will enter and be entrenched in the homeless system, allowing for an increased ability to target intensive interventions to those with higher acuity and needs, resulting in a systematic response to ensure homelessness is a rare, brief, and non-recurring experience.

Logic Model for Shelter Diversion Programming

Assumptions: Intake processes will be able to identify clients who are an appropriate fit for diversion services. Clients will participate in diversion programming. There will be ample affordable housing opportunities to place diversion clients in. Financial supports will be made available to clients timely and appropriately.

External Factors: Supply of affordable housing options. Political and economic forces. Social constraints and stigma.

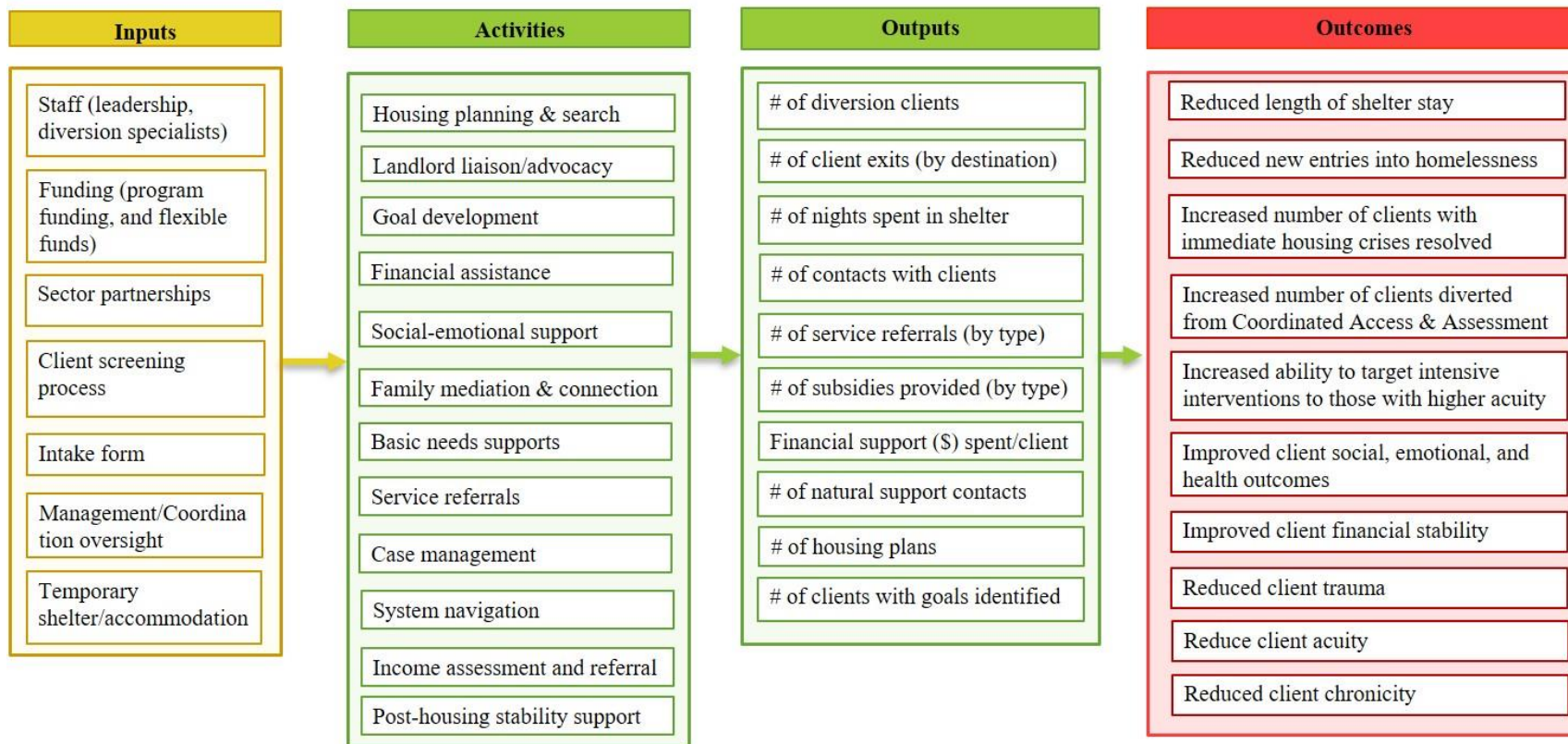


Figure 2 Logic Model for Shelter Diversion Programming in Calgary

Project Limitations

It is important to note that approximately halfway through the pilot and accompanying evaluation the global COVID-19 pandemic started to impact Calgary. This placed an unprecedented and unpredictable strain on the CHSSC, including those agencies involved in the pilot projects. As a result, many of the initial plans were altered to respond to the pressing needs of the public health crisis. This also impacted the planned approach for this evaluation and required that adaptations were made mid-project, affecting the availability of some data as well as the mechanisms by which data were gathered.

This project was also limited by the quality and availability of HMIS intake/exit assessment data for one agency. The same agency also did not participate in the online follow-up survey that was distributed to the agencies following their second round of interviews. As a result of these two data issues, the profile for Centre for Newcomers is more limited in scope and detail.

Recommendations

- 1. Revise intake and exit assessment to help agencies assess clients for appropriate fit** and to identify where clients are diverted to upon exiting the program. Provide agencies the ability to supplement the standard assessment with their own additional questions/requirements. Consider eliminating the 3-month follow-up assessment if data gathering continues to be difficult and data quality remains low.
- 2. While there are common program elements that should be standardized, consider some program variation to suit client and agency contexts.** It is ideal that diversion services are delivered via several agencies because of the increased ability to reach more people, and the increased agency capacity to serve them. Increasing agency understanding about the common program elements that could improve their diversion services would be useful, as well as allowing agencies to deliver these services within their own context and utilize their experience with targeted populations (such as individual adults, youth, families or immigrants/refugees/migrant workers).
- 3. Work with agencies to build capacity around utilizing the natural support framework in their diversion approaches.** Based on data from pilot sites, drawing on natural supports as a diversion pathway is at times a possible solution to client's homelessness crisis. Building capacity around using a natural supports approach to diversion work would strengthen workers abilities in implementing this approach in their practice.
- 4. Consider developing an overall flexible funding stream that supports a range of approaches.** As exemplified in the agency profiles and supported in the literature review, many of the same approaches used with diversion are the same as prevention and RRH. Often, these three programs work together. Given the overlap and complimentary nature of these three programs, we

recommend developing one single flexible funding pool that agencies could use to support various approaches, based on client profile, and need. This flexible funding would support a client-centred, housing first approach to homelessness.

5. **Work with agencies involved in the ongoing delivery of diversion services to harmonize outcome measurement** using a common set of indicators, allowing for better comparisons between programs and reporting on diversion programming in Calgary, as a whole. Reconsider the extent to which the current 3-month follow-up assessment is producing quality, reliable data.

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