

“Angels of Mercy”



A Brief Program Review of Mission Services of London - Streetscape

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Abstract

Initiated in 1998, in anticipation of inpatient mental health bed closures, Streetscape is intended to provide a team case management approach until referrals to other community resources are attained for clients with serious mental illness (SMI) and/or addictions issues and experiencing multiple and complex barriers to housing stability⁴. Due to the program experiencing expanding caseloads and funding pressures, a program review was requested. A brief program evaluation design was followed involving both reviews of existing program logic models and program data, as well as collection of new data. New data was obtained through observation and interview-based collection from clients, staff, and community organization partners over a period of 8 weeks, involving 5 staff, 9 clients, and 7 community organization staff representatives.

Existing program descriptions, logic models, and data indicate that the program functions based on an assertive outreach model, bridging both Housing First and Assertive Community Treatment principles. This demonstrates how the program exists at the nexus of housing stability for people experiencing homelessness, and community mental health support for those with SMI. This serves as a strength as both models are based on similar concepts of assertive outreach and the program demonstrates improved client outcomes³. This also serves as a challenge as staff face barriers common to both Housing First and ACT programs, such as follow-up services not being dependable¹, limited housing availability, lack of financial assistance for clients, and few programs for people with co-occurring mental and physical illnesses².

Overall, the program demonstrates many positive outcomes congruent with the program logic model. The staff are viewed as 'Angels of Mercy' who give a voice to those who lack one. For clients, they are the last frontier of hope in the context of housing loss and/or major mental illness. Staff, clients, and community partners recognize that both housing stability and mental health support would not happen for these particular clients without the existence of Streetscape. There are also opportunities for improvement. These include pragmatic considerations such as workspace, staff reimbursement for costs, and separation from drop-in space activities, as well as strategic considerations such as clearly defining the program as meeting both Housing First and ACT goals, revising job descriptions accordingly, and giving consideration to congruent caseloads (and subsequent plans for 'off-loading' clients). At the community level, we strongly recommend increased funding to allow Streetscape to both continue and expand the important role it plays in supporting a uniquely vulnerable population around housing stability and mental health.

Objectives

The purpose of this program review is to provide recommendations in the context of the following 5 themes:

- ❖ Program Objectives
- ❖ Model of care/care delivery
- ❖ Strengths/Successes
- ❖ Weaknesses
- ❖ Barriers to access/care

Methods

A brief program evaluation design was followed involving both review of existing program logic models and program data, as well as collection of new data. New data was obtained through 14 "day-in-the-life" observations and interview-based data collections from 9 program clients, 5 program staff, and 7 community organization partners from a front-line perspective.

Sample

- ❖ 5 program staff
- ❖ 7 community organization staff representatives
- ❖ 9 program clients

Discussion of Findings

Program Objectives

The Mission Services of London (MSL) procedure manual at present reveals that the Streetscape program is intended to provide flexible supports that facilitate the development of skills to enable individuals with a serious mental illness (SMI) and or addiction issues and those who experience multiple and complex problems to live in an environment of choice with the least amount of intervention. The Streetscape staff role is to liase and support network development with the broader mental health community. In this role, staff are expected to provide crisis intervention, assertive outreach, client engagement, skill assessment and programming, service/program planning and coordination. Overall, Streetscape is to operate as a space where staff can respond to urgent individual social or psychological needs of service recipients with SMI.

Based on observation and in-person data collection throughout the program evaluation, it is highlighted the main goal of the Streetscape program as understood by staff is to focus on advocacy for human rights. The staff are perceived as “flexible sounding boards” for crisis assistance, maintaining stability, and helping clients build relationships with community partners. Staff recognize that they provide case management whereby they “help people simplify the real problems that clients are experiencing so that I can offer them options towards empowering themselves and giving them hope towards their future”. One staff defined their role as, "It sounds sad, but I am paid essentially to treat people like humans".

On paper, StreetScape services follow the "Housing First" model as defined by the federal government: "A recovery-oriented approach to ending homelessness that involves moving people who experience homelessness into independent and permanent housing as quickly as possible, without preconditions, and then providing them with additional supports and services as needed." (Procedure Manual, Streetscape, 2018). It was noted that while the written objectives of the program focus on the first 1/2 of the definition, "moving people who experience homelessness into independent and permanent housing as quickly as possible, without preconditions", the reality is that the majority of the work being conducted by staff is the second portion of the definition, "additional supports and services as needed". This is an important consideration when thinking about how program objectives filter down into job descriptions. Based on our findings from program providers, community partners, and service recipients, the objectives need to continue to remain congruent with "Housing First" as a philosophy while also capture the diverse nature of supports offered by the team. Community partners acknowledge that StreetScape staff are the key ingredient to meeting program objectives, and that these objectives are aligned with community need.

Model of Care & Care Delivery

Model of Care

Program documentation, observations, and staff interviews suggest that multiple models are being used in an interchangeable manner to collectively meet the needs and goals of the client: psychosocial, rehabilitation, crisis, intensive case management, Housing First, and harm reduction. The similarity of the team model to that of an ACT team was noted in that the Streetscape staff are acting in the capacity of an interdisciplinary team supporting people to live well in the community. An ACT team is:

"A community mental health team relies on an interdisciplinary team to provide a continuum of integrated intensive case management (ICM) and Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) services to meet both the immediate and future intensity of services required by the client. Services are organized to allow for flexibility of movement between levels of service - ICM and ACT - while maintaining continuity of care. Services provided by the team are individualized for each client. Clients may require support with medications, symptom monitoring and management, physical health needs, substance use issues, finances, housing or shelter, access to basic needs such as food and clothing, activities of daily living, educational issues, work or meaningful activity, legal issues, social activities, family issues, and support networks. On-call support is available 24 hours per day". (ConnexOntario, 2018)

Care Delivery

The clients recognize that staff members assist them with the following needs in their day-to-day operations:

- paperwork (legal documentation, letters of support, applications)
- social services and finances (budgeting, appointment set-up, appointment accompaniment, attaining housing, access to addiction services, system navigation, laundry services, communication with others)
- emotional support (check-ins, giving hope, non-judgmental listening, coffee, working out life problems, 1-to-1 interaction, communication with client)

From the client perspective, Streetscape staff members deliver a multitude of support services. First and foremost, staff members assist clients with housing problems. This housing support is coupled with assisting clients to access services, such as detox and counselling, legal services, and psychological support. The clients report that even though "I am a self-advocate, there are resources I am not aware of". Clients are proud to say that "staff are easy to talk to, comfortable around them, feel that they're trustworthy to divulge their difficulties in life to".

The day-to-day operations start with morning staff check-ins and debriefings. Staff plan and schedule appointments, complete necessary client paperwork, connect with community partners as needed, and submit the government-related documentation needed for funding purposes. With the clients, staff focus on the 'little things', whether that may be making sure that they have food for the day or being adequately dressed for the weather. Staff advocate for the client's health needs by helping them schedule and attend appointments to family doctors, psychiatrists, hospitals, and beyond the healthcare system, the courthouse, the jails, and housing tribunal. The staff recognize that their client's health needs are beyond meeting the physical requirements and so they focus on their psychosocial needs as well. Staff focus on helping to solve their client's problems before they even become problems making them a proactive rather than a reactive service. Overall, Streetscape staff are considered jump and go crisis workers who establish relationships with their clients, free of any barriers, to assist them in finding their voice and helping them meet the necessities of life in the context of housing instability and SMI.

Strengths & Successes

Strengths:

As part of the StreetScape team, staff members individually bring collective strengths. They are well-rounded and knowledgeable staff with a diverse personal history. They offer empathy, active listening, a calm demeanor, positive personalities, patience, and with a non-judgmental attitude to engage in abstract thinking in order to best serve diverse and complex client needs. The commonality of the StreetScape staff is their desire to give back to the community. The values of program embedded by the Mission Services of London (MSL) aligned with many of the values and beliefs expressed by the staff. All staff share a vision to focus on helping marginalized populations by creating a space in which they can have their voice. In the eyes of the community partners, StreetScape staff members are viewed as:

- Angels of Mercy
- street smart
- nonjudgmental
- accepting
- understanding
- go-to people
- caring
- diverse (male and female staff)
- don't believe in 'No' for an answer (in the context of providing assistance in crisis)

Services that the community partners recognize that Streetscape staff provide include:

Psychological and emotional support

- i. counselling

- ii. mentorship
- iii. presence

Access to services

- i. schedule appointments, keep their appointments
- ii. transportation assistance
- iii. triaging to appropriate services
- iv. eviction related assistance ex. secure storage of belongings

Housing support

- i. pre, during, and post eviction assistance
Ex. counselling, post-eviction planning, tribunal representation, and assistance with transportation + service triaging
- ii. Assisting the Sheriff with individuals being evicted that have SMI/addiction

Legal Services

- i. part of the defence council
- ii. assessment of client
- iii. client testimonials
- iv. treatment plans, discharge plans

Community Connections

- i. court system reliance on SS staff by clients, lawyers, and judges
- ii. good communication → used as a personal reference
- iii. collaboration with corrections services & Sheriff's office

Successes

The program successes are rooted in the collaborative strength of the team members. They are reputable sources of support in the eyes of their community partners and are acknowledged to excel at the work that they do because they do not make promises that they cannot keep, they don't turn anyone away, and are honest with everyone who they engage with. They are known for building the relationships with clients who are perceived as difficult, in order to obtain and maintain their housing situations. Staff are available, meeting clients in the community if needed and thereby breaking down barriers to access. For the clients, they are the last frontier of hope. Clients come to them when there is nowhere else to turn. They have no intake criteria and clients are not discharged based on “non-compliance” with goals. Staff members provide a family-like relationship and become the clients' sounding board, their systems navigator, and help them with the issues that they cannot yet identify until they may become self-sufficient. In the words of one client, "I could not do this without you".

Streetscape provides the services that the community asks them to provide. Staff are viewed as an informal link and because of this flexibility, they are reliable and accountable to provide on demand consulting and are known as the 'go to program' for those that need a supportive safety net. From the client's perspective, the staff members are flexible and easy to access for most of those who are already connected.

Weaknesses & Barriers

Weaknesses

Flexibility, open doors, not discharging clients, and supporting clients needs whatever they may be does come at a cost. Staff expressed that they would like additional support and guidance at the management level to more clearly define their roles. As well, they were seeking greater awareness of their overall work contributions both from management and within the organization. In return, staff were willing to learn more about the operational demands of the organization so they could align their work with management needs. For example, understanding the budget situation and how resources are being allocated, and thereby improving their understanding and satisfaction with meeting reporting requirements.

Significant staff focus was around clarity of job descriptions. We see this as congruent with our recommendations regarding having very clear program objectives. These program objectives then become the foundation for clear job descriptions. Clear job descriptions allow for effective staff evaluation processes as well as clear documentation of work completed. Other pragmatic considerations include the work environment. With staff often openly accessed by anyone coming through the resource centre, or indeed having to staff the resource centre space, they found it hard to meet the tasks consistent with large case loads doing both housing stability and mental health support work. To the point of large case loads, aligned with staff considerations, it is our recommendation that funding be obtained to increase the staff compliment. Where other Housing First programs supporting individuals in intensive case management are at a ratio of 10:1, staff at Streetscape had ratios close to four times as high. A final pragmatic consideration is better support for incidental expenses, such as parking when supporting clients in court.

While clear role descriptions are recommended, we would note that the nature of the job does not follow a linear fashion. Therefore, we would suggest that there is the potential for role descriptions to be too narrow to fit the scope of housing support work, which would be a detriment to how this program is valued within the community.

Apart from more manageable case loads, increased funding could provide staff with the opportunities they are looking for around improved personal development and self-care. Personal development could include assisting staff to further understand the reason for completing various assessment tools with clients, and how these tie to goals of mental health services at a provincial level. This would have a two-fold effect of increasing staff satisfaction with tasks like database entry, while also potentially improving the quality of data entry (also supported by decreased case loads). Staff would like further formal education to keep up-to-date with the demands of the

changing community landscape. The staff recognize their place in the program and organization but would also like to find ways to be engaged in more generative discussion around program planning, community planning, and community relationships.

It is noted as both a strength and a weakness that while the original program goals was that StreetScape was a referral service, it has now become long-term intensive case management with a housing stability focus. This is proving to be a vital and valuable service, but it is also important to capture what the direction of the program is going to be so that management and staff are on the same page. For example, a clear definition of success for clients should be developed to capture more than just housing status.

Beyond the challenges currently faced by the program, clients expressed areas where they would like to see greater support as:

- female-oriented services
- increase staffing for more 1-to-1 interactions
- education sessions
- family relationship support
- pet therapy (in the resource centre)
- safe medication storage (ex. Rx narcotics)
- warm transfers from one staff member to another when necessary

Barriers

To review the program objectives, clarify the guiding principles, and create alignment in job descriptions is internal and achievable. To obtain outside funding for additional staff resources, on the other hand, is no simple task. Space limitations, the needs to support other community mental health programs such as the resource centre, and the lack of space in community partner programs to make referrals out are real and persistent barriers. However, we have noted the strong value that both clients and community partners see in the Streetscape program. We also note that there is limited knowledge of all the work that Streetscape staff do beyond an insular circle of service providers and service recipients. Therefore, we believe that dedicated branding and communications process could easily tell the value of the program to funders. Because Streetscape provides both housing stability and community mental health support, there is a potential to access new or enhanced funding from a variety of ministries.

Study Limitations

The following are study limitations recognized by the program evaluators:

- limited project timeline

- lack of full access to database entry systems
- small client sample size interviewed

Future Impact

The potential future impacts of this program evaluation are to assist the program in clarifying its services, and to encourage increased awareness of the Streetscape program to obtain funding to scale services to the current program needs.

Recommendations

The following is a list of recommendations based on the program evaluation findings:

1. *Staffing*. Additional staff to allow for the enhancement of services towards the intended program objectives and improve service availability. This will allow Resource Centre staff and others to refer clients to the Streetscape program as needed.
2. *Role Clarity*. There is a generalized job description currently available that represents the global aspects of the Streetscape staff. The mixed housing stability and community mental health support aspects of the work should be clarified, as well as defining specialized roles where they currently exist.
(Ex. Court House Outreach Worker or Housing Tribunal Outreach Worker)
3. *Staff Education*. Frontline staff are unaware of how funding is allocated and what is entailed to receive this funding. It would be prudent that all staff understand how the government funding is acquired and allocated to minimize the stigma associated with 'unnecessary' paperwork (ex. OCANS or GAIN-SS).
4. *Mobility*. Re-evaluating technical services to be more mobile such that database entries can be completed offsite.
5. *Office space*. Dedicated private individual office space for staff to engage in intensive case management free from drop-in interruptions.
6. *Service Collaborations*. In the context of staff limitations, Streetscape is encourage to formalize any potential collaborative relationships with other organizations working in the sector in order to increase shared capacity.
7. *Resistance to assistance*. To develop a process for 'one offs' that captures the work put into that client by staff but doesn't require the extensive paperwork involved as though that client is on the caseload. This also includes not putting the client on the caseload if it is a one-time request & those clients that are currently on the caseload but don't want assistance/ "not ready yet to do the work".

8. *Web & social media presence.* Part of a branding process to build awareness of the valuable work of Streetscape should include a clear online presence with up-to-date program information and a clear message of the program objectives.
9. Biennial program review and updates with client and staff input

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