

Project Case Study

Alice Housing

Halifax, Nova Scotia

1. Introduction

This case study of Alice Housing is one of a series of case studies of projects funded at least in part through the federal government's National Homelessness Initiative (NHI). The case study first describes the project including: conditions prior to implementation, what the project involves and its objectives. It then describes project implementation to date. Finally, it notes outcomes to date, including comments from clients where available.

Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) is producing these case studies in order to contribute to the government's understanding of how NHI is working in individual communities at the project level, to gauge the extent to which the objectives are being achieved at this mid-way stage of the three-year Initiative, and to determine what can be learned from the experiences of particular projects that may be applicable to others participating in the Initiative.

The case study is based on a review of the initial proposal for the project and other available documents describing the project and its objectives and how it fits into the community's plans to address homelessness, and on a series of interviews with people representing the following groups:

- managers and staff of the project
- clients of the project
- community organizations working in areas related to this project that might share clientele with the project or whose service to people who are homeless might be influenced by this project

2. Description of the Project

Conditions prior to project implementation

Alice Housing has been in operation since 1983 as a non-profit, transitional program that provides a combination of housing and support services intended to facilitate self-reliance and self-sufficiency for women and their children who are victims of domestic violence. Alice Housing provides 17 secure and affordable housing units for an average of one year to tenants.

The three programs offered include: safe housing, women's counselling and a family support program called Alice's Kids. Programs are available to both past and present residents with the exception of the safe housing component, which is available only to current residents.

The safe housing component and the women's counselling program are sustained through funding from Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, the provincial Department of Community Services and the Metro Halifax United Way. In September 1999, a part-time family counsellor was hired on a one-year contract through a grant from the provincial Department of Justice and the Isaac Walton Killam hospital for Alice's Kids. When funding ended, staff did not have time to look for funding to continue the program. Families of Alice Housing identified the need to continue the Alice's Kids program to deal specifically with the youth and children who have been abused and/or witnessed violence within their household.

The executive director, a program assistant and a counsellor are responsible for running Alice Housing, including property management as well as all of the work required to support the tenants and their families.

What the project involves

Alice Housing received \$112,356 through the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI) to hire two more staff, a family counselor to implement and coordinate the program designed for Alice's Kids, and an administrative assistant. As well, the project involves provision of additional security in the safe housing program through a telephone hook-up within the residence for women who are not able to secure telephone service due to past debt.

This funding proposal falls under the Halifax Community Action Plan on Homelessness.

Objectives of the project

The objectives of the Alice's Kids program, which is the main component of the project, are:

- To build the strengths of children and their families by reducing risk factors and promoting a nurturing environment.
- To embrace a safe and caring community value system, thereby re-socializing the children towards positive behavioral patterns.
- To develop self-esteem and self-worth in children by providing the means through which they can continue to resist any negative behavioural patterns presented to them in the future.

- To develop parenting programs aimed at enhancing parenting skills, directed towards reinforcing positive behaviours, supporting the community values of safety and caring support, and developing the self-esteem of children.
- To educate the children and youth towards an understanding of family violence through individual programs.

3. Implementation to Date

Alice's Kids is now functioning and providing healing opportunities for all of the 28 children and youth who have come to Alice Housing with their mothers to escape abusive households. There is typically a waiting list of 25-30 names, many of whom have children.

Staff at Alice Housing is now more able to be pro-active within the broader Alice Housing agency as well as in the general community. For example, the family counsellor gives each child individual counselling time as well as doing home visits. Children are encouraged to participate in a community activity of their choice such as Girl Guides, sports or extracurricular activities at school, and the family counsellor is able to act as a mediator should problems arise.

Alice Housing staff now have time to attend Children's Aid meetings on a regular basis and to do advocacy work, and have arranged for a Children's Aid worker to be the meeting-point for pick-up and drop-off of children by the partner's family members.

The family counsellor does a one-year work plan with each woman, helping her to look at her goals and where she would like to be in a year. Evaluations and follow-ups of the plan are now done on a regular basis. Staff also assists women with finding more permanent housing arrangements for their families. Alice Housing is now able to offer more non-therapeutic programs, which the women have requested, such as financial information sessions and filling out income tax forms.

The residence's intake forms have been changed and staff are able learn about the individual women and their particular family needs for follow-up and for referrals to other services provided in the community. For example, if a woman has been suicidal, now the staff are more focused on the type of support the woman needs.

The staff now has time to put together a Residence Information package stating the purpose of Alice Housing and the rules that are required to facilitate follow-through of the purpose. For example, women must be prepared to participate in something related to their healing, either through Alice Housing or another community agency. Alice Housing is now able to be "a program with a housing component, not a housing project with programs."

Ten women have used the request for funding to obtain a telephone. This has been very helpful for the women because now they have contact with the Alice Housing security, can access 911, contact the Alice Housing office and use hotlines when the office is closed. Having access to a phone has had a positive impact on the residents' sense of security.

4. Outcomes to Date

Preliminary observations

While it is premature to make any assessment of the impacts of Alice Housing on the lives of its many clients in the longer term, it is possible to make the following preliminary observations:

- Alice Housing can now be more accountable to the Board, past and present tenants, and the general community as a result of now having clearly defined rules and clarification about the services it can offer.
- Alice Housing staff now has time to establish a business plan and follow through with a planned corporate fund-raising campaign, which is seen as enhancing the agency's ability to sustain operations in the future.
- Staff now has time to go out to other community agencies and explain exactly what Alice Housing is about so referrals are more appropriate, and to attend Metro Inter-Agency Community Family Violence meetings. Through the meetings, Alice Housing is re-establishing links and partnerships within the community.
- Staff now has time to hold staff meetings. The meetings create a formal opportunity for staff to discuss issues related to the smooth running of Alice Housing. Alice Housing has three properties to care for and staff has time to plan for potential problems as opposed to primarily responding to crisis situations as they arise, as previously.
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- Compared to the past, Alice Housing now has time to offer planned, scheduled sessions to the women and their children. This is reportedly beneficial for everyone. The staff uses its time in a pro-active way and the women and children know when they will receive individual attention, thus helping to reduce the number of crisis situations that arise.

- The provision of two more staff has allowed for a more supportive presence in the office. Women now call and leave a message because they know staff will follow up on it. Before, women often did not call because they knew there was no one to respond to their needs.
- Alice Housing functions as a landlord, and in the past the Executive Director was the person who gave warnings and evicted tenants who broke house rules, while at the same time being the person offering them one-on-one counselling to help deal with their crisis. This created an uncomfortable situation for everyone involved. Now the person offering counselling is not the same person who carries out these landlord-tenant functions.
- Alice Housing staff is still busy and rely on all of the volunteer help they can get, but the working atmosphere is said to be much improved. Also staff can see the results of their work, and report that the women are starting to feel better about themselves and their children. Staff also said that “the burn-out rate of staff has lessened,” and they do not want to go back to the way it was before they received SCPI funding.

Client comments

In order to get a sense of the project’s impact on clients, the researcher spent a day at Alice Housing having informal conversations with four clients. The researcher asked clients what changes, if any, they have experienced as a result of the inception of the project or of additional services made possible by NHI funding. The responses are, by their nature, the subjective comments of those individuals willing to respond.

- All of the women interviewed said that they were very thankful for the additional staff at Alice Housing. As one phrased it, “Staff used to be so stressed and tired-looking, now two other staff are great; it makes a big difference because staff have more time for us.”
- Comments about the Alice Kids’ program included: “If not for Alice Housing I would not have my son; the counselling helped us both”; “I would probably be on the street and my son in Children’s Aid without it”; and, “My son is not an angry little boy anymore, now I have faith my son will turn out to be a good man.”
- Two women said, “I’m looking more into my future – now that I realize I have one.”

- One ex-tenant interviewed comes back to Alice Housing to donate her time, in order to give support to Alice Housing staff and tenants, and receive continued support herself.

Winter 2002