Two Years of Shelter Diversion: Learnings and Lessons

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Executive Summary

This report examines the effectiveness of a Centralized Shelter Diversion program in the Niagara Region, Ontario, Canada between April 2019 and April 2021. The dataset consists of information gathered by a team of Shelter Diversion workers who had 2,643 interactions with 1,181 unique people as they sought access to shelter provided by the RAFT's Youth Shelter, Southridge Community Church's Adult Shelter, or the Boys and Girls Club of Niagara's Nightlight Youth Shelter. The report plots the near-term pathway into homelessness and factors which affected our ability to effectively divert people from shelter to safe and appropriate alternative housing. It also includes a critique of prioritizing shelters as the first point of contact of people looking for housing support. Findings indicate that successful diversion is more likely when a person has never accessed a shelter before and has greater personal agency. The report also advances a theoretical premise for "Homeless Identity" that provides additional understanding of:

1. How homelessness can be prolonged through exposure to the shelter system
2. How this prolonged exposure contributes to people identifying as homeless, and
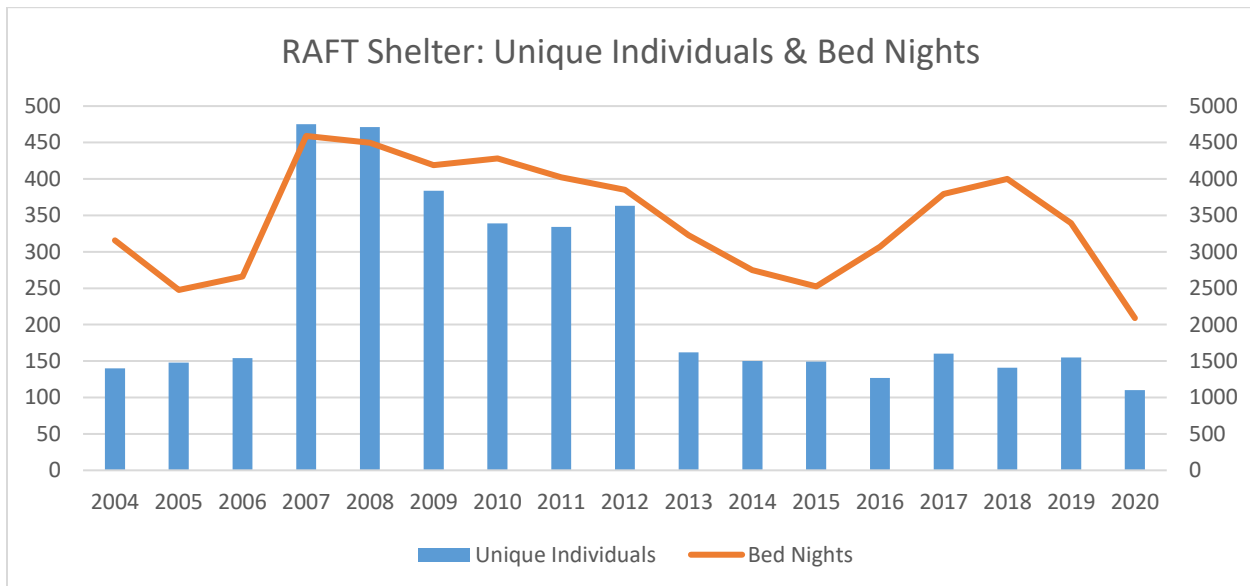3. The role Shelter Diversion can play in mitigating this process.

Summary Learnings and Lessons (pg. 24)

I.   **Shelter Diversion is an effective prevention program that provides cumulative benefit the longer it is operating.**
II.   **Shelter Diversion's success supports using Homeless Identity theory for the development of effective homelessness programs.**
III.   **Shelter Diversion's success rate can be increased by reducing the number of people repeatedly accessing shelter and increasing personal agency.**
IV.   **Assessments used in homelessness services should be strengths-based and respectful.**
V.   **Shelter Diversion is relatively easy and inexpensive to implement.**
VI.   **Shelter Diversion is best implemented by a centralized team.**
VII.   **Shelter Diversion is a cost-effective homelessness prevention service.**

Introduction to the RAFT

The Niagara Resource Service for Youth (RAFT)[1] was founded in 1994, as a drop-in resource center for teens in St. Catharines, Ontario. With the aid of the federal government, the RAFT opened a 4-bed hostel, in 2002, to shelter homeless youth (aged 16-24). Demand for these beds consistently outstripped our capacity and led to numerous expansions in beds offered, culminating in 2007 with the purchase of a new building with 24-beds[2]. Starting in 2007, the RAFT started looking for a better solution to homelessness then simply adding beds and launched its first prevention program: Youth Reconnect[3]. Between 2008-2013, the RAFT saw a 70% decline in the number of youth accessing our emergency hostel due to the regional expansion of RAFT's Youth Reconnect program. Over the next few years, the population of youth accessing our hostel leveled off from a high of approximately 500 unique youth in 2008 to a range between 130-160 unique youth from 2013 onwards[4]. It was clear at that point, that Youth Reconnect, while incredibly successful, would not be able to completely prevent youth homelessness. This situation was monitored, and attempts were made to understand where the gaps in our prevention net were. A number of different initiatives started at that time, with the goal of addressing the needs of the youth still accessing our shelter. Initial efforts focused on how Youth Reconnect interacted with the community, and primarily schools. After a couple of years, without any noticeable improvement we determined that Youth Reconnect was functioning as effectively as possible and something else was needed.

Figure 1.

RAFT Shelter: Unique Individuals & Bed Nights

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[1] Early on the teens accessing our program decided to rename the organization "Resource Association for Teens" or RAFT and this is the name that stuck and by which we are popularly known.
[2] Put another way, between 2002-2007, a 6 year period the RAFT saw a 500% growth in its shelter capacity!
[3] Youth Reconnect is a community-based prevention service which works with youth, often students, to secure their housing prior to them requiring emergency shelter, program brief provided on pg. 29.
[4] Since starting our Shelter Diversion program in 2019, we have seen a reduction in total numbers of youth accessing our beds and in 2020 our range is now 100-120 unique youth per year. As of April 2021, this reduction has been sustained and will likely be lower than 2020 by year-end.

In 2015 and the years that followed we were confronted by a drastic increase in their length of stay or "bed nights" (Figure 1.) as we sought to further reduce the number of youth accessing our shelter. Eventually, the total number of bed nights reached levels last seen in 2008 when the number of unique individuals accessing the shelter was more than double. Unbeknownst to us at the time, 2015 was the year that Niagara joined the rest of the Golden Horseshoe's affordable housing crisis, marked by skyrocketing housing prices, rental conversion to condos, and an overall reduction in the number of rental units. As a consequence, our focus shifted from reducing the number of youth in our shelter to addressing this more pressing issue.

Over the next few years, the RAFT adapted its service provision to view family and kin as providers of affordable housing as opposed to discounting them as places of conflict. **It is worth noting that family and kin are the single largest provider of affordable housing in Canada and the United States for people aged 14-30 years of age, a trend which has been increasing steadily since the 1970s.** With this new understanding of the affordable housing market, we focused efforts on connecting youth with family and kin. After this change the average length of stay peaked in 2018 and is now trending toward the lowest level on record. The lessons learned during this period became critical as we turned our attention back to reducing the number of unique individuals requiring a shelter stay.

In 2018, while attending an annual retreat of the National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness, I saw a Shelter Diversion presentation by Argus House of Cambridge, Ontario. They presented an early evaluation of their Shelter Diversion pilot which was then entering its second year. The early results of their program were impressive as was their understanding of the presenting issues of the youth accessing their shelters. Their description of the youth accessing their shelter was comparable to the population of youth who were still accessing our shelter and I contacted them about modeling their program in Niagara, to which they agreed wholeheartedly. Seed funding for a one-year pilot was secured by February 2019 through the generosity of Gales Fueling and the BluKup Foundation. The Niagara Region provided additional funds to support training and the development of a database. Argus Housing consulted on the development of our Shelter Diversion program, sharing their process and the Shelter Diversion tool, and allowed the RAFT's staff to be embedded within their Shelter Diversion team for a week in March 2019 for training. The RAFT launched its Shelter Diversion pilot on April 1st, 2019.

Centralized Shelter Diversion: Returning Shelters to their Original Mandate as an Emergency Service

Originally, shelters were designed to host people for short stays in an emergency and offering basic supports of a bed and meals; colloquially referred to as "Three hots and a cot". Overtime the homeless-serving system grew organically with shelters taking on the responsibilities of being the first point of contact and locus of support for people seeking homelessness services. Inadvertently, this organic growth created some unintended effects. For example, many people in rural areas are forced to migrate to larger urban centers for support at shelters, leaving behind potential family, community, and peer supports. The ultimate goal of Shelter Diversion is ensuring that all intakes into shelter qualify as emergency intakes and thereby return the shelter to its original mandate. **Importantly, Shelter Diversion is NOT about saying "no" to shelter or blocking people's access.** Rather, access is coordinated through a process called Centralized Shelter Diversion.

Centralized Shelter Diversion begins when someone is looking to access the RAFT's or partnered agencies' shelters. The process is centered on a structured, strengths-based interview performed by a trained Shelter Diversion worker. The individual's housing need is assessed and alternative, safe and

appropriate accommodations are sought prior to accessing the shelter. Due to limited funding and because homelessness can occur 24 hours a day 7 days a week, the RAFT's Shelter Diversion Coordinator devised a Shelter Diversion mini-tool which is used by shelter staff during the off-hours and on weekends. A follow up full assessment is performed on the next business day by the Shelter Diversion worker. Shelter diversions are considered successful if the individual is diverted before shelter intake or within 48 hours of shelter intake. Every interview from the mini-tool and full assessment is recorded in a database, which was used to form the basis of this evaluation report.

Pilot and Expansion (April 2019 - April 2021)

The RAFT invited the participation of Niagara Region's Homelessness Services department and a Shelter Diversion Task Group began holding monthly meetings to monitor the pilot, ensure alignment of Shelter Diversion with the objectives of Niagara's Homeless and Housing Action Plan (HHAP), system transformation 2.0, and subsequently the introduction of the Built for Zero (BFZ) initiative. During the Task Group's monthly meetings, the RAFT's Shelter Diversion Coordinator presented monthly statistics and all data was reviewed and discussed. Early indicators were promising, with Shelter Diversion succeeding to safely divert approximately 40% of youth seeking access to our shelter. An early positive outcome of the Task Group's monthly data review was the identification of individuals who recently travelled to Niagara and were seeking access to the shelter system after finding themselves without accommodation. Many of these individuals would be able to return to housing in their region of origin but lacked the means to return. The Task Group was able to secure flex funding to provide the purchase of one-time fare, to assist them in returning to their home regions and housing.

Based on the success over the first 6 months, the Shelter Diversion Task Group explored expanding the pilot to include another shelter provider who had shown early interest: Southridge Community Church's Adult Shelter (Southridge) with a capacity of 55 bed, serving the adult (aged 18+) homeless population. The RAFT developed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) outlining the responsibilities and duties for each partner and laid the broad service framework. Southridge was provided the database and selected one of their staff to be trained by the RAFT's Shelter Diversion Coordinator. In preparation for the launch, the RAFT and Southridge hosted a meeting of Southridge's senior leadership to determine how to integrate Shelter Diversion into Southridge's current operating procedure and determine what, if any, policy changes were required. The MOU was agreed upon and a date was set for a general staff meeting to announce the Shelter Diversion project and introduce staff to the new procedures, including a feedback procedure to address any developing concerns or procedural obstacles. Representatives of Southridge were also invited to join the Shelter Diversion Task Group, where their data would be included in the overall pilot review. Southridge officially launched their Shelter Diversion program in November 2019.

In April 2020, the RAFT and Southridge, as a collaboration, were awarded a Shelter Diversion contract from the Niagara Region, which included the capacity for expansion and to provide training and resources to other shelter providers outside of the Centralized process. The Boy's and Girl's Club of Niagara's Nightlight Youth Services (Nightlight) shelter in Niagara Falls for youth aged 16-30 agreed to participate in the expansion of Shelter Diversion. Unlike the expansion to Southridge, existing staffing was sufficient to incorporate Nightlight's 8-bed shelter. In all other ways, the expansion mirrored the Southridge experience: an MOU was signed, a staff meeting was held, and an invitation for Nightlight's

representative to the join the Shelter Diversion Task Group[5] was extended. Nightlight officially launch Shelter Diversion in August 2020.

<u>Data and Analysis</u>

The data for this report was captured every time a person sought access to the RAFT's or our partner agencies' shelters. The RAFT's dataset spans a two-year period (April 2019-April 2021), Southridge's dataset spans 16 months (November 2019-Apirl 2021) and Nightlight's dataset spans 9 months (August 2020 – April 2021). All data was collected in an Excel database using a RAFT designed template specific to Shelter Diversion. The entire database was analyzed using Excel and Tableau 2021.1. All data presented as a percent was rounded to the whole number, 0.5-0.9 was rounded up and percent data is accurate within 3%. The analysis examines the overall data and disaggregated data into youth (aged 16-24) and adults (aged 25+). The dataset captured the experiences of 1,181 individuals who had a conversation with a Shelter Diversion Worker. Part I develops the overall picture of who is accessing shelters, how people access shelter, why people are accessing shelter, and the near-term pathways into homelessness. Part II will investigate how successful Shelter Diversion was and what factors are important to achieving success.

<u>COVID-19 Considerations for Data</u>

During the reporting period, starting in mid-March 2020 in Niagara, a number of adjustments and changes occurred which affected the shelter system due to COVID-19. At the time of writing, Niagara is experiencing the third wave of COVID-19 and is currently in lockdown and there is a high probability that COVID measures have affected shelter use. At this time the effects of COVID-19 cannot be isolated, but this report can act as a baseline for a future report. The data is presented as it was captured and no attempt has been made to filter or adjust the observations or conclusions developed to account for potential COVID effects.

<u>Interpreting the Results</u>

The analysis in this report is specific to Shelter Diversion, what makes it successful and what detracted from success. Understanding what makes Shelter Diversion successful will require a critique of the homelessness sector's reliance on shelters as the first point of entry. Underlying this analysis of the program is an understanding of homelessness <u>before</u> accessing structured homelessness services and homelessness <u>after</u> interaction with structured homelessness services. The RAFT's experience delivering homeless services for the past 26 years has shown us that providing support prior to people accessing shelter and importantly in their home communities is the best way to positively address homelessness[6].

Interpreting results as opposed to simply presenting results requires value judgements which are ideally developed from experience and education. If you are a service provider or are familiar with this sector, you may be concerned with the absence of certain factors in this evaluation, such as individuals' mental health, addictions, Indigenous identity, race, sex and/or gender marginalization. These are very real individual factors that can contribute to the cause and experience of homelessness or increase risk of homelessness. However, it is my developing view that these individual factors are not sufficient to fully explain ongoing and chronic homelessness. A number of years ago, I was introduced to the concept of

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[5] Due to the COVID-19 pandemic the Task Group was meeting virtually.
[6] This type of programming is commonly known as prevention, early intervention, and/or upstream programs.

homelessness as an identity and this theoretical premise has shaped my understanding of longer-term homelessness and provides valuable insight into the RAFT's program development. Homelessness Identity theory is not widely used as a lens through which to investigate homelessness and because it underlies my interpretation of the results of Shelter Diversion, a brief introduction to the theory is warranted.

Brief Introduction: Homelessness Identity Formation Premise

The RAFT's programming theory is based on an emergent understanding that <u>homelessness is sticky</u> and exposure to homelessness, specifically repeated exposure to homelessness and services provided to help people navigate homelessness, can be correlated with the assumption of an enduring homeless identity. Our understanding of this process is principally founded on the work of David Snow and Leon Anderson's *Identity Work Among the Homeless* (1987) and expanded upon by Alice Farrington and W. Peter Robinson's *Homelessness and the Strategies of Identity Maintenance* (1999). Snow and Leon's work illustrates the value of identity construction by people who are homeless to generate self-worth in marginalized circumstances and how this impacts role, identity, and self-concepts. Where initially, the homeless identity is externally focused (others view you as homeless and alter their behavior towards you) but over time this identity can become internalized (with your behavior and choices now reflecting in the assumed identity). Building on this insight, Farrington and Robinson constructed a provisional model which measure duration of time homeless divided into four phases, with each of the phases corresponding to the progressive development of a homeless identity.

The first two phases proposed by Farrington and Robinson are particularly important to understanding the benefits of Shelter Diversion. The first phase is the *Aspirant Exiters* (< 1 year spent homeless). This group is characterized by a belief that their homelessness is temporary, and they do not identify with other "homeless" individuals. The second phase are the *Deniers* (14-18 months spent homeless), this group also denies a homeless identity and speak of being able to exit homelessness to housing, but these denials are becoming difficult to justify given the length of their homelessness.

People in the broader community or society often do not understand the conditions which create and prolong homelessness and wonder why a person doesn't just find housing. They may assume the person experiencing homelessness is making the decision to remain homeless. Being homeless means living outside of societal norms and it is understandable that the longer this condition lasts people experiencing homelessness will adapt to survive. The longer a person survives as homeless, the more likely that they will reject societies' housed norms. A person driven to live outside of society and marked as an outsider could reasonably choose an identity that provides <u>a sense of place and understanding of self</u> which once assumed outweighs the perceived benefits or trappings of identity and life beyond homelessness (i.e. a housed identity). The adoption of a "Homeless Identity" provides perceived benefits for navigating the conditions of homelessness, offering <u>new</u> norms, values and specific knowledge associated with living homeless. Farrington and Robinson's third and fourth phases outline the progression into this new state of episodic and chronic homelessness, which is ultimately characterized by people who have been unable to exit homelessness and are actively not engaging or selectively engaging with homeless services.

Utilizing this model, we can start to see why homelessness is sticky and why repeated exposure to homelessness and the shelter system is the pathway to chronic homelessness and the acceptance of being homeless. According to the model, we have a window of opportunity to intervene and either stop

a person from experiencing homelessness or to break the cycle of homelessness before a person accepts homelessness as their reality.

PART I

Who is accessing our shelters?

Interactions, Unique Individuals, Age, and Gender

2,643 interactions generated by 1,181 unique individuals, of whom 379 were youth (aged 16-24) and 802 adults (aged 25+). 2,008 interactions were initiated by people identifying as male of whom 429 were youth and 1,579 were adults. 616 interactions were initiated by people identifying as female of whom 221 were youth and 395 were adults. 19 interactions were initiated by people identifying as transgendered of whom 10 were youth and 9 were adults.

Figure 2. – Ages by Number of Interactions & Percentage

Age Categories	Number	Percentage
16-18	95	4%
19-20	146	6%
21-24	342	13%
25-29	365	14%
30-39	635	24%
40-49	507	19%
50-59	374	14%
60-69	128	5%
70-79	25	1%
80+	3	0%
Unknown	23	1%
Total	2643	100%

When gender is considered by number of interactions 23% of the total population (N=2,643) identify as female of whom 36% are youth. When gender is segregated into Youth and Adult, the population that identifies as female Youth is 34% and 20% Adult.

Given that the dataset is representation of every individual who sought access to the three partner agency shelters since Shelter Diversion started operating, it is not surprising that the number of youth/adults and gender are a close approximation of the actual distribution within the adult and youth co-gender shelters in Niagara with a 3:1 ratio (Male/Female) for adults and 2:1 for youth. While this provides greater confidence in the applicability of the finding, it is likely that women and families are underrepresented lacking the inclusion of a women or family specific shelter. Caution should be given to the observations and findings in this report when making inferences to either of these two groups.

Shelter usage (N=2643)

When considering the use of shelter by people, the single most important consideration was how often it was used. The data showed that 576 interactions (22%) were by people New to Seeking Shelter and 2,068 (78%) had at least one previous stay in a shelter in their lifetime. This can be further subdivided into youth and adults, where youth 259 interactions (39%) were New to Seeking Shelter and 316 adult interactions (16%) were New to Seeking Shelter (Figure 2.). This strongly correlates to the pervious

information that adults had a greater rate of repeat shelter use when compared to the youth. However, it is noteworthy that overall a significant majority of adults and youth had accessed shelter at least once previously. Especially when considering that youth in our dataset span a *maximum* of 8 years (aged 16-24) and within that time 61% had already had a previous stay in shelter. This observation speaks to the difficulty of exiting homelessness once entering the system.

Why People are Seeking Access to Shelter (N=2,643)

Our Shelter Diversion tool provides 6 categories[7] defining the reason for a person seeking access to shelter, this data is entered by interaction and is self-reported. The 6 categories are:

1. Homeless/On the street – (ex. being homeless at the time access to shelter is sought)
2. Risk of Homelessness – (ex. inappropriately housed, couch-surfing, staying at a motel)
3. Relationship Breakdown – (ex. family conflict, fleeing violence)
4. Service Outflow – (ex. Shelters, Hospitals, Custody, Residential treatment)
5. Evicted – (ex. Evicted from an apartment or room where rent has been paid)
6. System Seeking (ex. voluntarily leaving housing to access shelter for the purpose of accessing the shelter)

Combined data by Category Ranked

Reason	Number of interactions	Percentage
Risk of Homelessness	670	25
Homeless/On the Street	611	23
Service Outflow	574	22
Relationship Breakdown	483	18
Evicted	281	11
System Seeking	24	1
Total	2,643	100

Adult (aged 25+) by Category Ranked

Reason	Number of interactions	Percentage
Homeless/On the Street	496	25
Service Outflow	495	25
Risk of Homelessness	410	21
Relationship Breakdown	296	15
Evicted	263	13
System Seeking	24	1
Total	1,984	100

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[7] Reason for Intake Categories are RAFT designations.

Youth (aged 16-24) by Category Ranked

Reason	Number of interactions	Percentage
Risk of Homelessness	260	39
Relationship Breakdown	187	29
Homeless/On the Street	115	17
Service Outflow	79	12
Evicted	18	3
System Seeking	0	0
Total	659	100

The adults in our dataset's top two reasons for seeking access to a shelter are; Homeless/On the Street and Service Outflow which accounts for 50% of interactions. It is possible to combine both of these categories, as they are largely related, where Homeless/on the street is defined as being homelessness and Service Outflow captures entering shelter after having exiting from shelter, hospital, treatment, jail, etc. Within the Service Outflow category, the majority identified <u>shelter</u> as the service they had utilized the most. Clearly, at 50% of the interaction, we find a population that is heavily involved in homelessness and the systems supporting homelessness. This figure also serves to advance the understanding that there is a dynamic at work in the experience of homelessness and what resources people used that influenced whether they became entrenched in the system. The dynamic is further highlighted when we consider the next largest category for adults and is fully highlighted when the youth experience is considered.

The next largest category for adults is Risk of Homelessness at 21%, which implies that approximately one-fifth of people have retained some ability to decide where they are accommodated. This group highlights the complex pathway into homelessness: it is unlikely that a person moves directly from being housed to being homeless. However, this fifth of the adult population have sought to retain some housing (ex. motel, staying with a friend, etc.) but unfortunately either the location is not safe, or they have "overstayed their welcome" and are now accessing the shelter system. The interplay developing here between choice and the ability to choose, where ability relates to exterior conditions can be framed as a person's personal agency[8]. This interplay will be discussed in Part II, when I look at how the data relates to successful diversions. At this point, the data suggests that the personal agency in the adults in the Risk of Homelessness category had been sufficient to prevent becoming absolutely homeless and given this, it is very likely that their progression into more chronic forms of homelessness could be averted if we were able to offer them housing support in the community prior to seeking shelter.

In the youth population we see a group that has a far greater level of personal agency in their accommodation with 39% reporting Risk of Homelessness as their reason for seeking shelter. When this data is matched with the second largest category for youth, Relationship Breakdown at 29% we can see
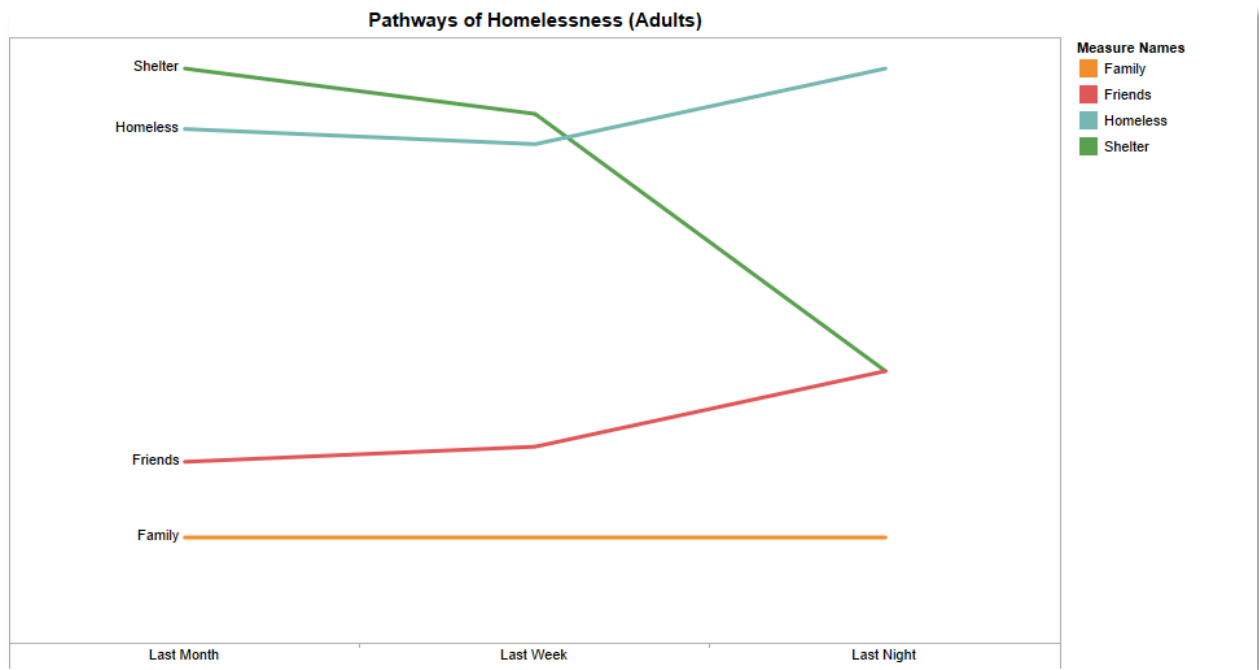
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[8] The RAFT understands Personal Agency as a person's freedom to decide, assuming that freedom of choice is an option, where they will stay for the night. It is our understanding that Personal Agency is supported by: 1) personal connections (Family/Kin, Friends, etc), 2) good health (Physical and Mental), 3) adequate income. Our understanding of Personal Agency is <u>not</u> a value judgement of a person's choices, it is a judgement of the resources and options a person had at the time that a choice is made.

the pathway that youth follow into homelessness and shelter use. Relationship breakdown captures the breakdown in families where the majority of youth reside. The data shows that youth are likely to suffer a relationship breakdown in their family that leads them to seek out friends and other acquaintances to secure housing. However, as with adults referenced above, they have sought to retain some housing, but this option has become untenable or unsafe and left them with no other option than to seek shelter access. Constructed in this way, we can deduce that 68% of youth in our dataset have seen a conflict within the family as the primary driver into precarious housing first and then into homelessness and shelter. This construction is supported by the *Without A Home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey (2016)* which reports: "that 77.5% of youth indicted that a key reason they left home was an inability to get along with their parents" and also supports the observation that: "The pathways into homelessness are complex and non-linear". Following this logic, leads us to the next two largest categories, Homeless/On the Street and Service Outflow comprising 28% or just over a quarter of the population. As discussed above when considering the adults, we can understand that this is a group which is embedding in the system and homelessness and are aging toward chronicity. Likely unchecked, this group will become the 50% of adults for whom homelessness is now a way of life.

Pathways of Homelessness

Considered in tandem with the *Why People are Seeking Access to Shelter* data above, seeing the pathway completes and complements this discussion (Illustration 1 & 2). We can see that 50% of the adults in our dataset were either homeless or had largely utilized a shelter (Illustration 1) over three near-term time periods (last month, last week, and last night) and this represents the pathway of homelessness. In the adult population, the majority of people were homeless or staying in shelter a month, a week, and the night before they sought access to shelter. These details show a population that is heavily reliant on shelters and the homelessness system generally. The data in Illustration 1, further shows that if we are unable or unwilling to provide prevention supports to adults in the community prior to entering shelter than supports will be required post-shelter if we are going to make significant reductions in adult homelessness. The data shows a large percentage of adults are caught in the system, cycling between homelessness and shelter and back to homelessness or shelter, which is the definition of chronic and episodic homelessness. **This provides an answer to the question "Why does adding shelter beds increase homelessness?". Clearly, adding shelter beds, without attempting homelessness prevention or supporting housing stability after shelter only increases the numbers of people who become caught in the system.** As noted above, once caught they are likely to repeatedly cycle back and forth between homelessness and shelter, making any <u>investment in expanding shelters an investment in expanding homelessness</u>. Providing only emergency shelter and enforcing policies which increase the likelihood of short, non-productive shelter stays will ensure a large chronic homelessness population. This pattern will become better defined when we review the dataset from the perspective of factors for success in Part II. Also worth noting is the percentage of adults who are suffering relationship breakdowns and risk of homelessness, illustrated below in the percentage of adults who are staying with family or friends prior to attempting shelter access. This suggests that programming that looks to connect and mediate family/relationship disputes will lead to better and sustainable housing.
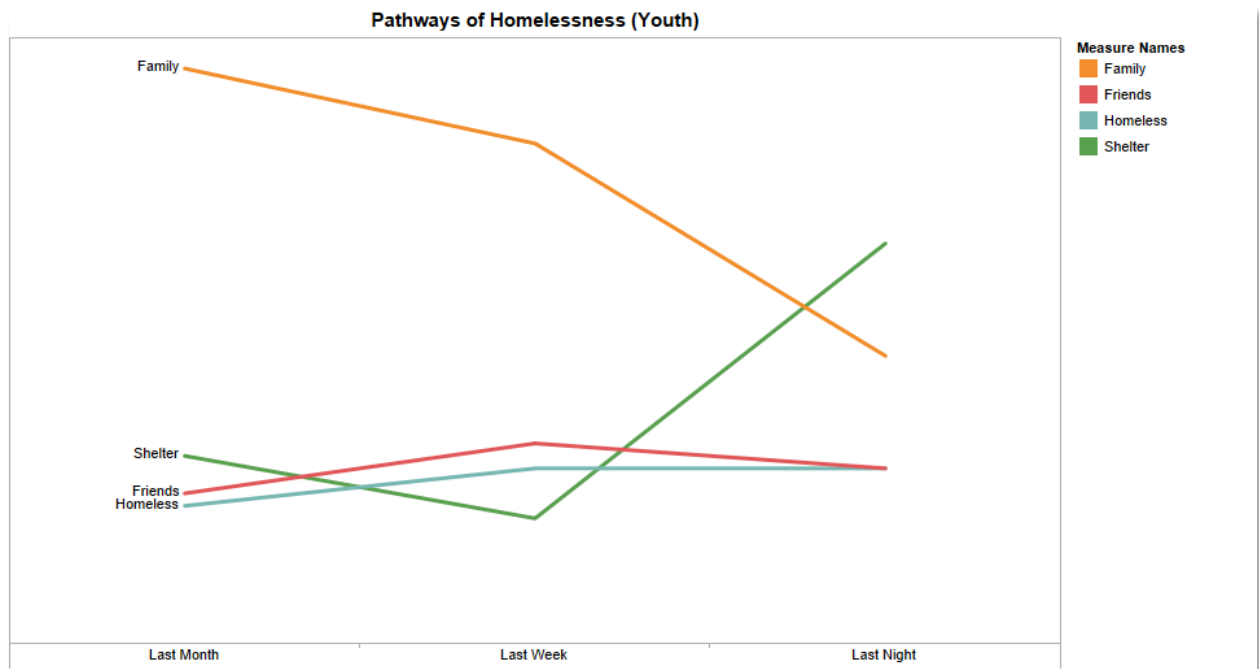
Illustration 1.

The youth picture (Illustration 2.) offers us a counterpoint perspective when viewed against the adult population data. The counterpoint is largely one where entrenchment in homelessness is not the reality and the cycle of homelessness is just starting to take hold. By and large, youth are staying with family right up until they require shelter and in some cases are moving from family to friends and then to shelter homelessness, which supports the current literature on the pathway into homelessness. This pattern also shows that the youth seeking access to our shelters share the common experience of being housed with families. Given that most youth in North America are housed with families, families should be considered as a first housing option, when safe and applicable. [9]This large percentage of youth housed with family further indicates that providing prevention either to the family or at their schools[10] will directly reduce the number of young people seeking shelter[11]. However, if these opportunities to intercede and prevent homelessness are missed then, like the adult population, we can see entrenchment and future chronicity taking shape, with 26% of youth being either homeless or staying in shelter a month prior. As noted in the *Introduction to the RAFT* section earlier, it was this group of youth who were still accessing shelter and our desire to break the cycle of homelessness that led to the introduction of the Shelter Diversion program. The concept of entrenchment and the role it plays in longer term homelessness will be examined in more detail in Part II.

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[9] https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-631-x/11-631-x2019003-eng.htm

[10] Schools because youth living with their families are mostly likely still attending school. Other promising areas of interaction may be services and activities in the local community where housed youth gather.

[11] Incidentally, this fact has been known at the RAFT for over a decade and is the main assumption supporting our Youth Reconnect program, which itself has reduced our shelter use by 70% since 2008.

Illustration 2.

This near-term longitudinal data illustrates that the pathways of homelessness provide us with a good visual understanding from which to examine the data described in this section. It also helps illustrate the effect of time spent homeless has on future homelessness and shelter use, which supports the Homeless Identity theory presented earlier. In Illustration 1, we see that the majority of adult's seeking shelter have a history of homelessness and are exhibiting shelter use as described in the later phases of the Farrington and Robinson model[12]. Meanwhile, in Illustration 2, we see that most youth currently have a history of being housing and significantly with family[13].

The youth in our dataset are likely Phase 1 (Aspirant Exiters) and still identify with the norms of being housed. **Utilizing the theory's premise, we would expect that our ability to successfully divert or house people looking to access shelter will be directly correlated to their duration of homelessness and the number of times they have cycled into shelter and homelessness.** At this level of analysis, the theory provides a meaningful way to understand homelessness and specifically prolonged homelessness once a person is engaged in the shelter system. Shelter diversion directly impacts this process and if the theory holds, these impacts will reduce the number of people and duration of homelessness. We will now proceed to investigate the dataset for successful diversions and the relationship between duration of homelessness and number of times a person has accessed shelter.

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[12] This model was presented in the Homelessness Identity Formation Premise pg. 7 of this report.
[13] Family & Kin the most important foundation for personal identity, especially for young people.

PART II

<u>Successful Diversion</u>

Overall Shelter Diversion achieved a 17% successful diversion[14] rate (461 successful interactions) during the study period. When this is divided into our two populations (youth & adults) a significant deviation is observable. **We achieved 36% successful diversions with youth and 11% successful diversions with adults.** These results compare favorably to our initial targets developed from information supplied by Argus, we targeted a 10% success rate of adults and 35% success rate for youth. We will proceed to look at these rates in more detail but at the outset, there are a couple of important observations:

- Using the Argus model, with some local adjustments, we were able to largely duplicate their results. This is an early positive indication that the Shelter Diversion model used is scalable with a fair level of confidence for results.
- Shelter Diversion is approximately 3 times more successful when applied to the youth population compared to adults.

<u>Factors of Success</u>

Within each population, there are notable factors that increased the likelihood of success. These factors are:

- New to Shelter
- Personal Agency
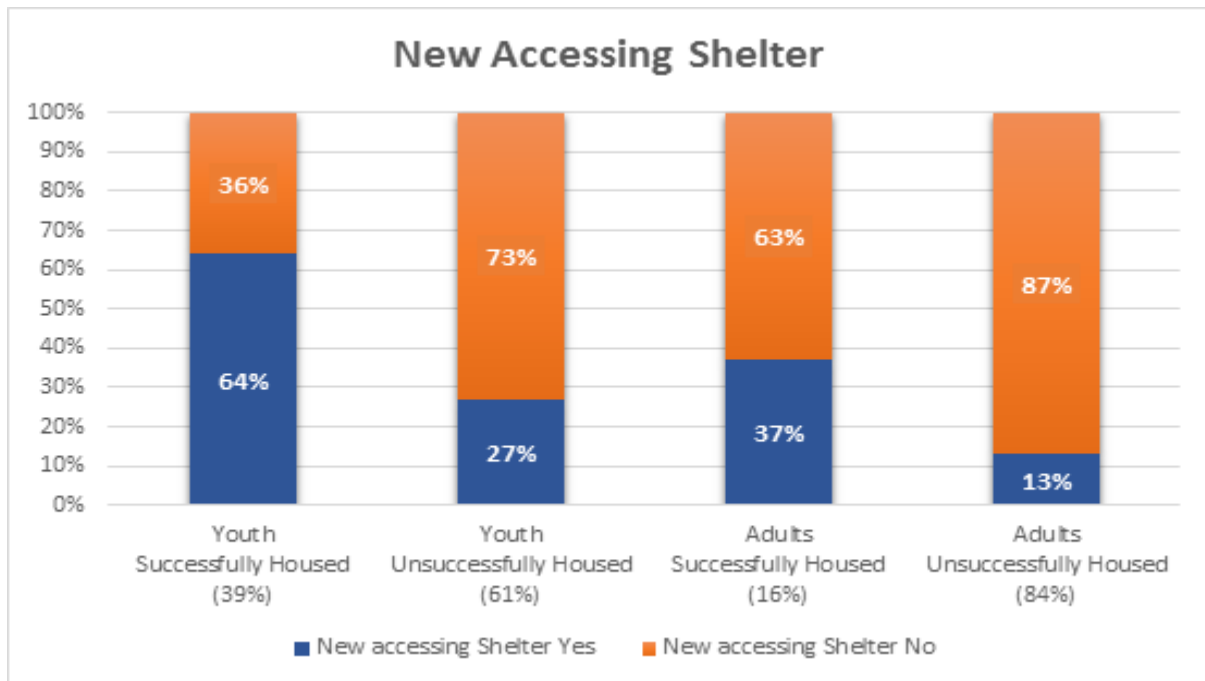- Unique vs. Repeating Shelter Use

New to Shelter

As mentioned previously in *Shelter Usage*, 39% of youth and 16% of adults had never accessed shelter prior to interacting with our Shelter Diversion program. With youth, we achieved a 64% success rate if the youth had no previous history of shelter use, a rate that dropped to 27% for youth who had a history of previous shelter use. In the adult population, we achieved a 37% success rate if the adult had no previous history of shelter use, a rate that dropped to 13% for adults with a previous history of shelter use.

The data shows we were able to achieve greater levels of success in both scenarios for youth with no history of shelter use and youth with a history of shelter use when compared against similarly defined adult populations. Beyond the simple observations of success, a deeper look offers some interesting considerations, see Figure 3.

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[14] Diversions are considered successful if a person seeking shelter is diverted before access or within 48 hours of intake to a shelter.

Figure 3. – Shelter Access compared with Housing outcome

The important take away is not so much the overall success but where we are more likely to have achieved it. In both populations, people "New to Shelter" achieved substantially greater levels of success, roughly 2:1 for youth and 3:1 for adults. We were an entire degree more successful with adults than youth when comparing success across similar populations attributes. Yet, we cannot capitalize on this success with adults because as a percentage the number of adults who are new to shelter is so low at 16% compared to youth's 39%. The obvious conclusion from observing the relationship between New to Shelter versus Previous Shelter Users and success is that decreasing the number of people who have previous shelter use will drastically increase the success rate of Shelter Diversion. **Making shelter use reduction a priority will have significant positive impact on homelessness, given that 61% of the youth and 84% of the adults have had previous history of shelter use.**

Personal Agency

When we examined the pathways into homelessness, we noted an observable delineation between youth and adult personal agency[15]. That delineation showed 50% of the adult population was either homeless or had recently stayed in shelter compared to 29% of youth. Meanwhile, 68% of youth were at risk of homeless or were involved in a relationship breakdown compared to 36% of adults. It was premised that people with greater personal agency would have greater success being diverted than people with lesser personal agency because they were already homeless and/or using shelters. This finding is supported when we compare the success rates for diversion illustrated in Figure 4.

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[15] To Recap: The RAFT understands Personal Agency as a person's freedom to decide, assuming that freedom of choice is an option, where they will stay for the night. It is our understanding that Personal Agency is supported by: 1) personal connections (Family/Kin, Friends, etc), 2) good health (Physical and Mental), 3) adequate income. Our understanding of Personal Agency is not a value judgement of a person's choices, it is a judgement of the resources and options a person had at the time that a choice is made.

Figure 4. – Greater/Lesser Personal Agency by Reason and Diversion success

Greater Personal Agency

Reason for Seeking Access to Shelter	Adult		Youth	
	% of Population	% Successfully Diverted	% of Population	% Successfully Diverted
Risk of Homelessness	21	23	39	34
Relationship Breakdown	15	27	29	40

Lesser Personal Agency

Reason for Seeking Access to Shelter	Adult		Youth	
	% of Population	% Successfully Diverted	% of Population	% Successfully Diverted
Homeless	25	7	17	3
Service Outflow	25	12	12	7

In all cases where people had greater personal agency our ability to successfully divert them from shelter was significantly improved. If we take the average rate of success, we see that where adults presented with greater personal agency, they had a 2.5x greater likelihood of being diverted than adults with lesser personal agency. Similarly, when considering our youth population the likelihood of successful diversion was 7.4x greater for youth with greater personal agency.

In what is becoming a common refrain in this analysis, our ability to reduce homelessness is dependent on where on the homelessness pathway we intervene. When looking at the percentage of the population that have greater or lesser personal agency, we see the familiar dynamic of adults being much further along the pathway than youth. According to our data, 50% of adults and 29% of youth had lesser personal agency compared to the 68% of youth and 36% of adults who had greater personal agency. Reviewing the data through a personal agency lens supports that service prior to homelessness is strongly recommended and challenges current efforts which primarily focus on chronic homelessness. **Waiting until people of have become chronically homeless robs us of the significant multiplier effect for success that earlier intervention affords.**

Unique vs. Repeat shelter use

In Part I, we reviewed the relationship between unique and repeat clients with the main takeaways being that repeat users accounted for the majority of interactions and that the adult population generally had a higher percentage of repeat users. We will now consider the impact on the success of Shelter Diversion.

Unique youth were 53% successfully diverted compared to the 21% successfully diverted youth with multiple interactions. The majority (67%) of youth were unique clients, but 61% of interactions with Shelter Diversion workers were with repeat clients, which resulted in a lower overall success rate of 36% (see Figure 5.).

Figure 5. – Relationship between Unique or Repeat Shelter Use and Diversion outcomes

Clients – Unique & Repeating (Youth)

Repeating
33%

Unique
67%

By Interactions – Unique & Repeating (Youth)

Unique
39%

Repeating
61%

Clients Successful Diverted/Unsuccessful Diverted (Youth)

Successfully
Diverted
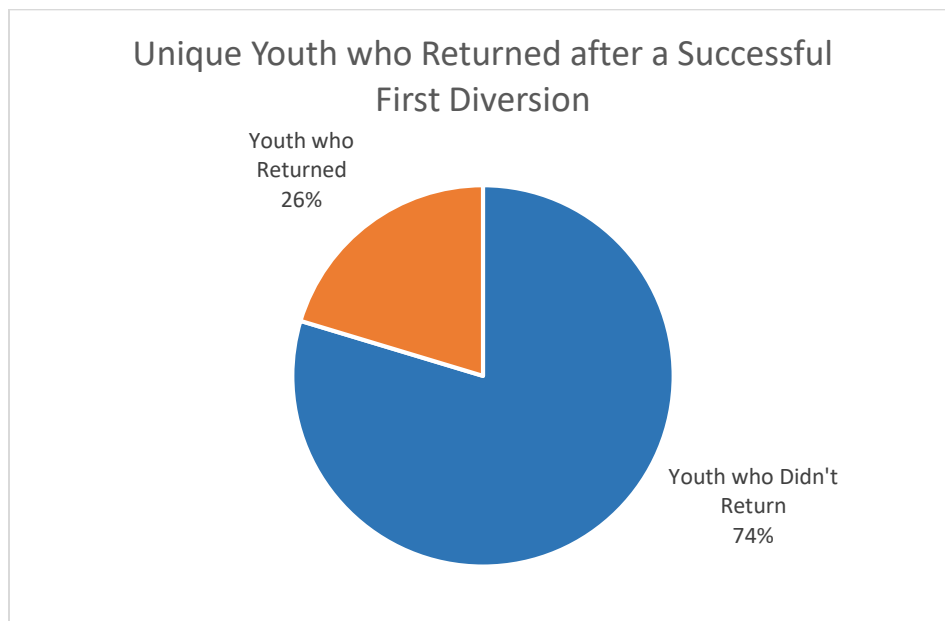36%

Unsuccessfully
Diverted
64%

The relationship between repeat clients and number of interactions is critical to reducing, if not ending homelessness generated by shelter use. Just over one half of all unique youth clients are successfully diverted the first time they seek access to shelter but only one quarter of our repeat clients are eventually diverted. Our success rate is slightly better when we segment the unique clients into clients with no history of shelter use and those who have used a shelter in the past.[16] Unique youth clients without a history of shelter use achieve a 60% diversion rate, approximately double the overall rate.

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[16] In our dataset all clients are considered "Unique" the 1st time they have an interaction with a Shelter Diversion worker, but it is possible that clients have accessed a shelter in the past prior to our introduction of the Shelter Diversion program. The terms "Unique" and "Repeating" are descriptive of interactions with our Shelter Diversion program.

These observations are key because they mean that the longer a shelter diversion program is running the fewer "new" youth are accessing shelters becoming repeat guests and this ultimately leads to reduced numbers in the system.

A final observation about the success of Shelter Diversion is that unique individuals, who are successfully diverted, largely do not go on to seek shelter later.[17] **Only 26% of unique youth who were successfully diverted the first time have sought shelter again** (Figure 6.). This information shows how many people are attempting to access shelter who have options but lack the support to utilize those options. It is understandable that a person would seek shelter in the moment of crisis when they are confronted with not having a place to sleep that night. Rarely are the decisions we make in the moment of crisis good long-term solutions. Yet even at these moments, when a person's decision-making time horizon is measured in hours or even minutes, connecting with a Shelter Diversion worker often leads to better long-term accommodation options.

Figure 6. – Unique Youth Successfully Diverted First Time by Return to Shelter

Turning our attention to the adult population we see the same processes, however, where 67% of youth were unique guests, for adults the percentage drops to 55% unique. The evidence in this report explains why this lower number of unique adults is expected. Adults are more likely to be further along the pathways of homelessness and as a group have decreased personal agency. Consequently, 88% of interactions with adults were with those that repeatedly accessed shelter, compared to 61% of interactions with youth. This is compounded by the fact that Shelter Diversion is less effective for unique adults than youth (23% vs. 53% successful diversions), meaning more adults enter the shelter system and have a greater likelihood of becoming repeat guests. **These observations illustrate why overall Shelter Diversion is more effective with youth as compared to adults.**

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[17] The RAFT's Shelter Diversion Coordinator can determine if any of our successfully diverted clients have accessed the shelter system at a later date, which is how this stat is generated.

Considering the evidence presented, this is a good place to reflect on why we wait until people need to access shelter before offering assistance. Quite plainly, the responsibility is ours; as a system we collectively make decisions which affect how people access service and when. We know prevention and community-based supports allow us to address the systemic inequalities for people. It is a decision not to offer prevention programs and post-shelter supports in the community and instead force people to access services through shelters. The way forward requires different decisions be made. Too often we look for ways to address problems and needs that are the result of previous system-level decisions, creating a patchwork of "fixes". A commitment to ending homelessness requires we decide to focus on prevention and sustained exits. **Further, addressing systemic inequalities as opposed to the needs created by them is respectful, just and will reduce homelessness.** Understood in this way, offering Shelter Diversion is a move in the right direction as an effective prevention program for reducing homelessness.

At this point, we have looked at the data to identify when shelter diversion is successful and how we can increase the likelihood for success or equally understand what prevents our success. Further, it is understood that a successful diversion is diverting someone looking to access shelter to a safe and appropriate accommodation. We now turn to the question: What is the impact of success?

The Flywheel of Homelessness

In business jargon, the concept of the flywheel (Collins, 2005) is often used to explain how system inputs can turn the flywheel: the more inputs the faster the wheel turns and the greater amount of success. However, in our case, we are looking to stop the flywheel of homelessness and so we must reduce the inputs which drive the wheel. We have clear evidence[18] that accessing shelter increases the likelihood of future and repeated access and hence increased identification with homelessness**. Understood this way, our Shelter Diversion program, by reliably diverting 50%-60% of unique and new youth from accessing shelter, is reducing the input into the system, thereby slowing the flywheel.** Once this first challenge is addressed and the number of people accessing shelter is reduced; our second challenge is focusing attention on the guests who have past experiences of homelessness and repeat guests who collectively make up the majority of our shelter occupancy. As the flywheel slows and more attention and support can be given to those with histories of homelessness, we will achieve greater successes which will cause the flywheel to slow even more. Eventually the only guests accessing shelter are those for whom the shelter was designed and with our expanded capacity[19] we will be able to rapidly secure them housing.

In practical terms, one of the main reasons why shelters have not been successful in reducing homelessness is because they are serving guests for whom the shelter was never designed to serve, are overwhelmed by the demand for beds, and are consistently operating at or beyond full capacity. In that environment, a shelter's ability to serve their guests is dramatically degraded. Lacking the staffing to accommodate operating at 100% or more forces shelters to prioritize safety through rule adherence over finding and securing housing. This leads to guests being discharged for rule violations as

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[18] Evidence which is both theoretical premised in the Homeless Identity research and empirically as shown by the data analysis in this report.

[19] "Expanded Capacity" understood as increased amount of time staff have to support guests achieving housing and less time spent enforcing rules. Never mind the increased mental wellness of both guests and staff when the shelter is not consistently operating at over 100%.

overwhelmed staff see guests as potential threats and informally triage who they offer support to. **Guests who, as shown in this report, have reduced personal agency are caught in a cycle between shelter and homelessness.** These are the clients who are repeatedly accessing our shelters and may, according to the hypothesis around forming a "homeless identity", eventually stop accessing shelter support entirely and enter the final phase of long-term rough living. The flywheel of homelessness impacts shelter occupancy, guests, staff and society.

Income: An Interesting Deviation

It is worthwhile discussing why income has not factored in this report so far. Most people claimed to have an income, so overall it was not shown to have an impact either for or against diversions. That said I do believe this data to be somewhat misleading because the income claimed by people was almost entirely generated from government benefit programs (Ontario Works, Ontario Disability Support Program, Canadian Pension Plan, etc) and less than 1% of the entire sample identified any form of employment income. **Thus while, almost everyone had an income, the money was not sufficient to increase their personal agency enough to create the conditions that may have secured a place to stay**. Given that greater personal agency is a key factor for successful diversions and preventing ongoing homelessness, the income provided to support minimal well-being (e.g., government benefits) needs to cover the basic costs of housing and food.

There is an interesting deviation found between adults and youth, when we consider the percentage of people who declared an income. Overall the youth population claimed an income but when considering only successful diversions, one half of youth claimed no income. Again, this might seem counterintuitive as we would expect people without income to be at greater risk of homelessness. Indeed, the major homeless assessments/screening tools used in coordinated access ask about income and a lack does indicate a higher risk profile. There are a couple of ways this deviation can be explained. Firstly, as noted the majority of people's claimed income was through government benefits and that this income is phenomenally insufficient. Secondly, the youth who claim no income and were successfully housed are youth who have been housed with family and have not experienced the homeless system. **This second explanation agrees with the observations so far that accessing the system puts increases risk of homelessness and that families are providers of affordable housing.**

Where People go who are Successfully Diverted

Having reviewed who is seeking access to shelter, what factors contribute to their successful diversion, and the impacts success has on the system, we will now examine where people are successfully diverted to. However, before reviewing this data it is very important to reiterate that **Shelter Diversion is NOT about saying no to shelter or blocking access.** This fact is stressed through training and Shelter Diversion data is reviewed monthly to ensure that people diverted are being diverted properly to safe and appropriate accommodations. It is not hard to imagine a scenario where "troublesome" guests are diverted or how the process could be used to actualize bias. No matter how well diversion is supervised, a great deal of responsibility rests with the Shelter Diversion worker to ensure all diversions are appropriate. Any person-serving system is open to abuse and discrimination, either intentionally or unintentionally, so every effort must be made to ensure the system is fair to all[20]. This observation is

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[20] The RAFT recognises that there are circumstances where the interests of the organization and a client are conflicted. As an example, when someone access our shelter we sign a contract with them outlining the services

perhaps the strongest argument in favour of a dedicated Shelter Diversion worker as opposed to a generalized shelter diversion process added to the existing duties of our already harried shelter staff.

Turning to a review of the diversion data the first observation is that for most of our clients, diversion is not successful, with 64% of youth and 89% of adults proceed to shelter. That said, it is clear based on the evidence, that an understanding of the different circumstances and factors at play in the diversion process make it possible to increase the number of people who can be successfully diverted. Looking at the people who were successfully diverted the accommodations for youth and adult are ranked and mirror each other:

1. Family
2. Friends
3. Independent housing

This is interesting because it is potentially a counterintuitive finding. I have mentioned that in 2015 the RAFT started to see increasing lengths of stay and that these levels approached levels last seen when we sheltered 2 to 3 times as many youth. This led us to examine where we were looking for housing and we found that we had been largely discounting family in favour of independent housing (ex. apartments, room rents, etc.). By bringing family and kin into the housing conversation we have seen year-over-year declines in the length of stay for our youth in shelter. Given that families and kin were not previously largely considered by a youth serving agency it is not surprising that family as the main source of successful diversion for adults is counterintuitive. In addition to providing better information to our Shelter Diversion workers (and our other services) on where to start the search for safe and appropriate housing it also challenges our understanding of who our clients are and what their relationships are like. I believe it is also fair to note that working with families can be more complicated than securing a room to rent or an apartment. This more complex approach is likely to require more time and patience which, as discussed, might be more than can be expected from our overwhelmed system and staff.

This information has implications across many aspects of our services from Shelter Diversion to shelter, prevention and support programs. It further opens the debate on "affordable housing" as I have yet to hear families and kin mentioned in the affordable housing discourse. It is possible to speculate that the current discourse on affordable housing is driven by the experience of large urban centers and that given the known migration of people leaving rural or smaller cities that family and kin become too distant to be easily considered as an option. Early on in our diversion work, our Shelter Diversion Coordinator noticed that people who migrated to Niagara could be successfully diverted and housed if we could arrange funding for their travel. This is how we decided to provide a flex fund specifically for this purpose, and having examined the evidence it shows that this decision was both practical and successful.

When the dataset is broken down, we can see that factors for success outlined previously are all in play for both youth and adults. When considering the people who were successfully diverted to family,

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we offer them, specifically a bed, meals, and housing supports. However, if a guest is violent, the RAFT will discharge them, effectively breaking the contract. The RAFT places our need for a safe environment over our contract to provide a guest with services. While we believe this is a justifiable reason for ending our contract, it does illustrate how conflicts of interest do exist. Every effort should be made to ensure that all conflicts of interest between the organization and client are handled fairly, with benefit of the doubt given to the guest.

friends, or independent housing, most are unique (95+%), have greater personal agency (cause of homelessness was either Relationship Breakdown or Risk of Homelessness), and had been staying with either family or friends a night, week, and month ago. These factors for success are interconnected with very little deviation. To illustrate, according to our data there is a higher probability that a youth who has multiple stays in shelter and who has not been staying with family or friends over the month prior to seeking shelter, is less likely to be successfully diverted.

I.   **Shelter Diversion is an effective prevention program that provides cumulative benefit the longer it is operating.**

The evidence and outcomes show how effective a centralized Shelter Diversion program is and being able to replicate the success rate achieved by Argus provides confidence that this success is sustainable. Over two years, The RAFT and our partners were able to successfully divert 36% of youth and 11% of adults as they sought access to our shelters. It has further been shown that of those successes which were "new to shelter" 74% <u>did not</u> seek shelter access at a later date. What is important is how this success was achieved and what it means longer term. This report and the data reviewed shows that reducing shelter use is a critical and <u>achievable</u> first step to ending homelessness. The decisions we have made for how the system operates and where most services for homelessness are currently provided have created the flywheel of homelessness. Every new bed added to the system energizes the flywheel to spin faster, which leads to an increase in the number of people who cycle in and out of shelters (repeats) and ultimately become chronically homelessness. Preventing new individuals from entering the system is a <u>major victory</u> that has cumulative benefits, effectively de-energizing the flywheel. In less theoretical terms, fewer new people entering the shelter will directly reduce the number of people who are at the shelter, in the near term this creates capacity within the shelter allowing staff to focus on providing housing support instead of rule adherence. Over the longer term, fewer new people mean fewer people who may become entrenched in homelessness, eventually leading to a reduction in people cycling through the homelessness system on their way to chronicity and identification with homelessness. These near- and long-term positive effects are cumulative, becoming more pronounced the longer Shelter Diversion is running.

II.   **Shelter Diversion's success supports using Homeless Identity theory for the development of effective homelessness programs.**

Homeless Identity as first described by Snow & Anderson in their foundational work "*Identity Work Among the Homeless: The Verbal Construction and Avowal of Personal Identities* (1987) provides the intellectual framework for understanding why homelessness can become so intractable for some. Being forced to navigate the complex norms, knowledge and performances required to survive homelessness including repeated interaction with structural homeless services over time, may lead people to eventually adopt a "homeless identity". That is, an enduring part of their personal and collective identity or self-understanding becomes preoccupied with what they need to know, do and be in order to survive life without a home.

The development of a "homeless identity" may be correlated with the amount of perceived exclusion and discrimination experienced based on their stigmatized condition of homelessness. Once this identity is adopted episodic and chronic homelessness becomes much more likely and greatly degrades the ability of services to house people stably[21]. A homeless identity can be

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[21] Stability of housing is an important distinction. It is possible to house people who identify as Homeless who will actively breakdown their housing arrangement. It is possible for a program to be considered very successful at housing people yet completely fail at supporting people to remain housed. Being placed in housing is not the same as long-term housing stability.

antithetical to being housed, which leds some people to abandon their housing as they seek to make their physical arrangements agree with their understanding of self. This is suggested from the surprising early finding that at least one in five recipients of "Housing First" accommodations would not remain in their free, low barrier housing, choosing instead to return to the street (Stefancic & Tsemberis, 2007).

As people proceed through homelessness they may reach a stage where they actively disengage from homelessness and housing services entirely, preferring the freedom and the personal esteem that can sometimes accompany living "rough" outdoors with some degree of success. Diversion is thus an important intervention to prevent individuals from beginning this process of identity transformation and institutionalization to the norms of the homelessness service system.

Importantly, this is not to say that people who develop an identification with "homelessness" are necessarily a lost cause or unworthy of resources. Rather, transformations in self-understanding or "identity" are a significant and long-lasting process. The process to help someone with a "homeless identity" understand themselves in other ways again, as someone who can and should live indoors and who is accepted by their housed peers, can be equally as arduous as the process they went through to identify with homelessness. Given this, is it surprising when some people hesitate or outright refuse to make that return journey? This is the foundation of my contention that a single individual-level factor or an experience might be sufficient to cause homelessness yet is not sufficient to consistently explain ongoing and chronic homelessness. Only when we see the original, systemic factors and experiences that led to a person becoming homeless can we provide the necessary support to end their homelessness. Avoiding both the beginning and recurrence of these homeless identity journeys is the greatest success for Shelter Diversion.

III. Shelter Diversion's success rate can be increased by reducing the number of people repeatedly accessing shelter and increasing personal agency.

It is possible for Shelter Diversion to achieve greater rates of success when people are new to shelter and have greater personal agency. Based on this, every effort should be made to ensure that a person only requires shelter once, if at all. It is strongly recommended that prevention work further upstream be included in any plan that targets ending homelessness. Upstream prevention in tandem with Shelter Diversion will provide the greatest efficiency. Prevention specifically needs to focus on increasing personal agency (ideally by reducing systemic inequalities) and needs to show tangible effects to increase income to a level that provides <u>actual</u> agency, supports and proper interventions for good health, and finally authentic connections with people and community. Currently, family, kin, friends, and peers are the largest group of people that are underutilized in the system and offer the greatest hope for ending homelessness. Failing that, for the people that could not be diverted, providing a housing focus in shelter which looks to increase personal agency to bolster housing will be effective. The research confirms that people newly exposed to homelessness and shelter are very confident that their homelessness will be brief and it is during this time when housing focused work will be most effective. However, research also shows that this time is precious and fleeting.

Finally, post-shelter supports in the community are required to ensure that the majority of people exiting shelter remain housed. Our data shows that guests who repeatedly access shelter, while less than the number of unique guests, represented a majority of shelter occupancy and are significantly

less successfully diverted. Post-shelter support will mirror the efforts in prevention with a focus on maintaining personal agency. Post-shelter supports should be offered with the "lightest touch"[22] presuming that these supports are for a limited duration but with the understanding that people can reconnect with support if their housing becomes unstable in the future. This report shows that Shelter Diversion can be started as a successful standalone program without other prevention or post-shelter supports, but adding these supports will greatly improve overall success.

IV.   Assessments used in homelessness services should be strengths-based and respectful.

Supporting greater personal agency for people looking to access our service requires that all interactions respect the dignity of people. Respect starts with our first meeting and introduction between the Shelter Diversion worker and the person looking to access a shelter, with our Shelter Diversion tool. The Shelter Diversion tool is strength-based, it seeks to understand why a person is in danger of homelessness. It does not try to numerate from a list of predetermined deficits which presuppose personal failings. Instead, it seeks to understand the current situation and looks back to how a person was recently successfully housed[23]. Using this as the starting place it engages the person in deciding how they would like to proceed. This is respectful, success-oriented, and collaborative as opposed to predetermined, insulting, and othering. How we decide to engage with our clients will determine how successful we are.

V.   Shelter Diversion is relatively easy and inexpensive to implement.

The RAFT was able to implement and sustain a Shelter Diversion program with very little financial investment and planning. Implementation required just a couple of months. The RAFT's (and our partners') only change was to our intake procedure, which required the intake staff connect the person looking for a bed to our Shelter Diversion worker. To start the program, funding was used to develop a database and provide our Shelter Diversion staff with intensive training in the role. Ongoing costs are largely wages and benefits for the Shelter Diversion worker plus some overhead for supervision and data analysis. Expanding was also relatively easy, requiring a partnership in good faith, a detailed Memorandum of Understanding outlining the roles and responsibilities of the partnership, engagement with partner agencies' staff to provide information, and a feedback procedure. In Niagara, we currently have two full time Shelter Diversion workers supporting three shelters equal to 75-85 beds. Since the start of COVID-19, our workers have been working from home and we have found that this change has not impacted our success.

VI.   Shelter Diversion is best implemented by a centralized team.

There are a number of considerations supporting this recommendation:

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[22] Lightest touch means that Homeless service provider's focus should be on housing and provided only to the extent required or requested by the client. Further, we should look to our community to support clients beyond housing and our scope of service (ex. Addiction supports provided by an addictions service). Once housing has been stabilized, we are able to end our specific support.

[23] As a service provider I have found it interesting that we (service providers) are quick to celebrate a person's success and importantly our role but we are as quick to assure that when a person fails, the failing is theirs alone. They failed, not us.

1. Given the relative ease to implement and that one worker's capacity is likely greater than what is required to serve an individual shelter, it is more efficient to have a centralized team of Shelter Diversion workers serving the entire shelter system.
2. While easy to implement, Shelter Diversion staff require specific training, ongoing oversight, and consistent delivery. It is critically important that Shelter Diversion not be used as a tool for denying people access to shelter. Every effort must be made to ensure that all diversions are to safe and appropriate housing and would not put a person back in a dangerous situation they may have been attempting to escape.
3. A centralized team will have a critical mass of interaction which support excellence in service delivery. Shelter Diversion is a specialized support and should be the sole focus of the staff and not an additional responsibility.
4. A centralized team can add value to a Coordinated Access system. Shelter Diversion staff can quickly identify priority people and connect them directly to the appropriate supports. They can also determine what shelter or other supports are best suited to support them.

VII.   Shelter Diversion is a cost-effective homelessness prevention service.

The cost effectiveness of prevention services is notoriously difficult to calculate. How can we add up costs for something that did not happen? One way to answer this question is to compare the prevention intervention with the known cost of providing a service. We know both the cost of our shelter diversion program and we know the cost for providing shelter. Looking at the two years that our Shelter Diversion program operated, our two Shelter Diversion workers successfully diverted 461 people from shelter. Meanwhile, the RAFT's shelter provided beds for approximately 280-300 youth over the same two years. In effect, Shelter Diversion was able to reduce the need for shelter in Niagara by the equivalent of two RAFT Shelters per year. This estimate is on the lower end because the Shelter Diversion program was not expanded until November 2019 and August 2020 respectively. All in, a Shelter Diversion program fully staffed[24] and operating for the year will cost less than operating one medium sized shelter over the same period. Providing a Centralized Shelter Diversion program will allow for consolidation within the shelter system and prevent the trend of adding beds and shelters to the system. It is advisable that a region or community starting a centralized Shelter Diversion program begin planning for shelter consolidation to ensure the efficient reallocation of funding.

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[24] Currently, our Shelter Diversion program consists of two Full Time staff. It is estimated that to extend Centralized Shelter Diversion to the rest of Niagara's shelters would require four Full Time staff.

Postscript: RAFT (April 2021 – Future)

In the 13 years since the RAFT started its first prevention program, Youth Reconnect, we have seen a dramatic reduction in number of youth who are homeless in Niagara. Yet as noted earlier, that effort was not enough to end youth homelessness. Shelter Diversion was piloted in an attempt to address our failure. The results after two years are very encouraging and represent the most sustained reduction in youth homelessness since our introduction of Youth Reconnect. This report is about how we arrived at Shelter Diversion and its results as a program but there is a bigger picture. The main deliverable for Shelter Diversion is its ability to support our goal of ending youth homelessness. After two years, I am confident that Shelter Diversion is supporting this goal; we are failing less and the youth we support are succeeding more.

In 2019, the RAFT sheltered 155 individual youth for a combined 3395 bed nights. In 2020, those numbers have been reduced to 110 individual youth for a combined 2090 beds nights. A reduction of in the number of individual youth staying in our shelter of 29% between 2019 and 2020 and importantly a reduction of 38% in combined bed nights. In April 2021, the RAFT shelter achieved a significant first-12 days without a single intake! As we approach the mid-point of 2021, we are currently trending toward another year of double-digit reductions. On March 23rd 2021, the Region of Niagara conducted its federally mandated Point-in-Time (PIT) count, a snapshot of homelessness in Niagara at a single point in time. When this data was compared to a similar PIT count from 2018, the Region reported[25] that youth homelessness was reduced by approximately 50% and significantly that the percentage of people who reported experiencing homelessness for the first time before the age of 18 was reduced to 24% from 36% in 2018. These results at our shelter and at the regional level are what we would expect to see if the flywheel of homelessness is indeed slowing.

The lessons learned in this process will further enhance our efforts. Shelter Diversion was never about simply diverting people from shelter, it is about achieving our mission of ending youth homelessness in Niagara. That work continues. In our shelter, we will focus on the youth who repeatedly access our beds, the youth most likely in the process of identifying as homeless. We will learn what we can do to support them better, so that every youth only needs us once. We will take the knowledge gained around the benefits of greater personal agency and learn to apply them across all our programs.

We will learn, we will make new decisions; we will end youth homelessness in Niagara.

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[25] COM 17-2021, June 15th, 2021 *Homelessness Point-In-Time Count Report* submitted to the Region of Niagara's Public Health and Social Services Committee

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Youth Reconnect – A community supporting schools program

The Youth Reconnect initiative is a community-based prevention program that enhances school attachment for Students and allows them to reside in their home community. This initiative is developed to aid students who find themselves either precariously housed and in imminent danger of becoming homeless. A situation which forces teens to choose between either remaining in school or acquiring their basic needs for shelter, food and clothing.

The initiative, in partnership with school-based supports, helps students access resources and increases their self-sufficiency, by assisting teens to maintain school attendance, secure housing, and develop a social safety net in their home community. Youth Reconnect provides family reunification, advocacy services, housing and income supports, life skills training, one-on-one mentoring, and emergency hostel access. Provided in partnership with other social service agencies, the initiative focuses on helping students to maintain housing and reduce high-risk behaviours while continuing to attend school.

Youth Reconnect can be accessed by any school official who is concerned that one of their students maybe in crisis or has expressed a concern about their housing stability. Once notified, a Youth Reconnect worker will meet with the student, and often with the school official, to determine what level of community support is required. Support is confidential and requires the voluntary participation of the student.