“I need a safe place for myself ”: Issues of refugee claimants in transitional housing for people living with HIV/AIDS

John Gordon Home
London Regional AIDS Hospice

Supportive housing and compassionate care
BRUCE HOUSE
Logement avec services de soutien et soins humanitaires

LOFT

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PARTNERSHIPS

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- Bruce House, Ottawa
- John Gordon Home, London
- LOFT Community Services/McEwan Housing and Support Services
- Community Member
- Wilfrid Laurier University

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- **University of Toronto**
- **Wilfrid Laurier University**

Fife House-Transitional Housing Program

Bruce House-Transitional Housing Program

John Gordon Home-Transitional Housing Program

OBJECTIVES

Study Objectives:

- To identify the factors (individual and structural) associated with ‘housing readiness’ of PHAs in the transitional housing program.
- To better understand the practices and services of transitional housing.
- To explore the experiences and change in support needs and support structure of PHAs from intake into transitional housing to being successfully housed.

Presentation Objectives:

- Identify the specific needs and concerns expressed by HIV positive refugee claimants who sought shelter in one of the three transitional housing.
- To develop recommendations to strengthen the supports for refugee claimants accessing the transitional housing program.

METHODOLOGY

Multi-Site, Community-Based Qualitative Study

Participant Recruitment: Purposive Sampling Strategy

Three transitional housing agencies for PHAs in Ontario:

- Fife House Foundation (Toronto),
- Bruce House (Ottawa), and
- John Gordon Home (London)

Sample and Data Collection

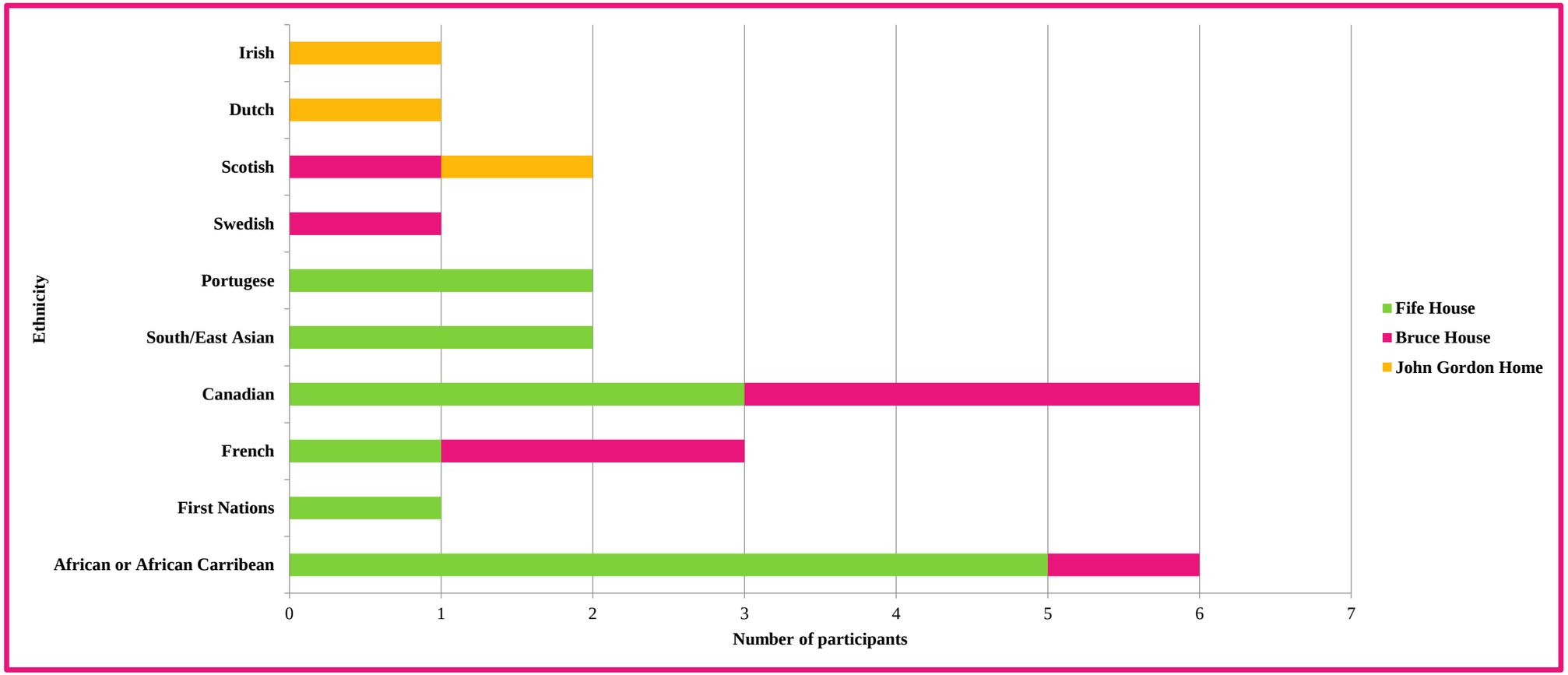
- Time Frame: 2-12 Months
- 47 in-depth Interviews : Phase-I (Entry)-25

  Phase-II (Exit)-22

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

	Fife House	Bruce House	John Gordon Home	Total
Number of participants (Intake)	14	8	3	25
Age (in years)	Average: 42 years Range: 26-62	Average: 49 years Range: 35-62	Average: 47 years Range: 43-55	Average: 46 years Range: 26-62
Gender	Male: 11 Female: 3	Male: 6 Female: 2	Male: 2 Female: 1	Male: 19 Female: 6
Refugee Status	5	0	0	5

PARTICIPANTS' IDENTIFICATION BY ETNHICITY



FINDINGS

Refugee claimants experience unique challenges:

The past experiences of refugee claimants create a unique set of challenges and barriers for them at an **individual level**. These challenges also impact their housing experiences and their ability to re-integrate into the Canadian society. These include:

- Safety
- Disclosure
- Isolation and Re-integration

However, they experience another set of **structural challenges** in Canada:

- Challenges with the legal system
- Barriers in finding suitable and sustainable housing
- Barriers in finding employment
- Barriers in seeking education

Isolation and Re-integration

Isolation was based on dislocation from family in their home country, however difficulties in re-integrating were based on experiences of fear and violence previously experienced, generally based on sexual orientation and/or HIV status.

Reflecting on how the instability of housing impacted him and impeded his re-integration, a participant said:

"…It feels very, very new to move into a new apartment. What I'm trying to say is that, it feels a little bit of very much uncomfortable to get used to the new community, to the new people and get used to saying, "Ok this is where I live now" right, because even if the shelter was very bad, it was my first home in Canada, so I actually shed tears, you know while I was leaving the shelter."

Safety

Experiences of violence and trauma linked to home country exacerbates fear of abuse and harm.

"…I needed a safe place for myself, a place where I can at least have my own privacy. That was the major, major thing that actually brought me here."

"I've been through a lot in my life… based on my sexual orientation from where I was coming from in Africa, I've always been hiding and I've been molested, I've had issues that I've kept to myself all my life and dealt with it…"

Disclosure

Fears of disclosure based on past experiences of violence that precipitated their abscondment also render them vulnerable and impedes their ability to trust the new system, in a new country.

“I never felt safe or comfortable because of my sexual orientation and due to the trauma that I experienced back home, right, so it was like a little bit, like living in a small Africa, in Canada, which every day was very difficult because I know I had a big problem that I’m thinking about, which is my health and I can share it with nobody, there was nobody to talk about that way, so I was just carrying it alone, so it was very very hard.”

Challenges with the Legal System

Refugee claimant generally find the legal system, lawyers, legal costs and the legal terminology intimidating in a new country.

“That’s the first thing usually that immigrants (referring to refugee claimants) encounter with some of the lawyers of this country. There’s no support…simplify for your client to hear what you exactly mean…whatever I had removed (referring to the report filed), he put it back, and you couldn’t argue, I mean… ”

“ I withdrew my refugee claim application because I don’t wanna fight. I want to fight but you know I wasn’t, I can’t afford it…if I have a good lawyer then I had to at least come with like five or six thousand dollars, which I don’t have…”

Barriers in Finding Suitable and Sustainable Housing

While in order to empower the residents to be more independent in their search for housing, may have its benefits, **lack of practical assistance can also become a barrier** and a reason for extreme stress especially for refugee claimants who are not familiar with the housing market and requirements in Canada.

“I saw ‘for rent’ sign online. I called them up, I went there…it was me and S, we were thinking of sharing an apartment together. We went there, I gave them $100, they demanded for a photocopy of my immigration document, plus my SIN care, which I gave them and until today they are nowhere to be found. That man, he left with the money and the photocopies of my documents…I have nowhere to move to.”

Barriers in Finding Employment or Seeking Education

A refugee claimant, well educated in her own country, expressed her frustration when she could not get OSAP or any other support to get Canadian education that could improve her chances at better jobs, said:

"…when I left home I was like yes, I have to improve my academic achievements, but then you get to such countries where it's a barrier, it's so set…if only they could give you sort of like a test-'well let's see how she does', than that would be better determining factor-oh let's give her a chance to be something better."

Another participant expressed how housing is linked to getting a job and vice-versa:

"It's the Canadian experience and all that, that's gonna make me start all over again. But if I don't have housing, it's unaccomplishable, all of these jobs."

Experiences at the Transitional Housing Program

Transitional housing has a positive impact on mental and physical well-being of refugee claimants :

Refugee claimants consider THP a safe place to take stock and re-establish themselves in a new country, with regards to financial, mental, and physical health.

“ …I got on medication, after 4 weeks…my viral load was undetectable…and my CD4 count increased immensely and I never had any health issues while I was there, not even headache…I guess I was happy staying here and I take my medication on time…”

Experiences at the Transitional Housing Program

Role in Re-integration

“THP has been so good to me and I know you have a time limit where you can stay and I, I don’t want to stay here too long… because now I’m integrating myself into the society more, I mean, into the Toronto community more, so I think I’ve gotten there. Not totally, but I think I am on the right track…”

Role in Building Connections

Referring to other residents within THP, a resident said:

“ Yes, I will move, what can I do-but adapting is very difficult. You know it was, yes there were challenges at THP, but then you knew very well at least it was home, there were people who you were able to talk to, sit around the table-but now I’ll be all by myself.”

Experiences at the Transitional Housing Program

THP empowers through practical skill development

“It was working towards independence, and I guess that can be a good injection to introduce to anyone who comes into THP the first time, say, okay can you please start saving towards rent…they should also try and inject it to people that are there-start buying your own pots, spoons…so that by the time you leave you have something to use in your apartment.”

Limited timeframe of THP can cause stress but also encourages proactive attitude

“I was ready to move because I knew I had a span of time to leave, and I was since the first day I moved in , that has been in my head, this is not a permanent place, it’s not a permanent house…I never lapsed on searching even though at that time I didn’t have the finances to like get a place of my own…I gave myself a target.”

Overview

- 60% of the refugee claimant residents were able to find employment and also moved into independent housing after THP.
- Two graduated from their education programs.
- One was due to be deported. One got his PR status. Three were awaiting their hearing at the time of interview.
- All of them were able to get on ODSP and accessed the Federal Interim Heath Card. One lost the FIHC due to his deportation order.
- Two are currently on stable HIV medication, one was still struggling to find suitable HIV regimen.

Conclusions

- Transitional housing program is seen by refugee residents as a place of reprieve and a first step to reintegration.

- Transitional housing program is seen as a segue to dealing with trauma and addressing related mental health concerns.

- Compared to other forms of housing, disclosure is a non-issue within THP, which gives refugee claimants a safe environment.

- Refugee claimants, due to experiences of loss, trauma or violence have a unique set of needs that require special focus in the transitional housing programs.

Recommendations

- Develop and strengthen partnerships with community organizations that have programs specific to refugee reintegration.
- Greater accessibility of counseling and other services specific to issues of loss, violence and trauma.
- Provide trainings to program staff specific to refugee issues.
- Incorporate a cultural sensitivity component in case management pertaining to issues of loss and trauma.
- Case management should incorporate referrals to Human Resource Development Canada (HRDC) skill building programs.
- Programs should include sensitivity orientation for all new residents.
- Lobby the government to develop more housing options and reduced wait times to access subsidized housing.

For further information:

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