



## At Home/Chez Soi

# Research Demonstration Project in Mental Health and Homelessness: TORONTO SITE

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October 2011 Update

### "Housing First"

- A housing approach for people who are experiencing homelessness and mental health problems.
- Provides good, quality housing as the first step to recovery.
- Guided by two important beliefs: housing is a basic right for all people, and people should make their own decisions about their lives.

### What is *At Home/Chez Soi*?

*At Home/Chez Soi* is a 5-city national research project exploring ways to help the growing number of homeless people across Canada who have mental health problems. In all, over 2200 people are enrolled in *At Home/Chez Soi*. Of these, over 1200 are receiving housing, in addition to support with their transition to housing, and help in reaching their own goals.

Through this research we will learn about participants' outcomes related to housing, health status, functioning, quality of life and service use as well as the economic costs associated with this approach. Researchers will meet with participants over 2 years to learn about these outcomes.

The Toronto team includes:

- Across Boundaries: [www.acrossboundaries.ca](http://www.acrossboundaries.ca)
- Centre for Research on Inner City Health, St Michael's Hospital: [www.crich.ca](http://www.crich.ca)
- City of Toronto: [www.toronto.ca/housing](http://www.toronto.ca/housing)
- COTA Health: [www.cotahealth.ca](http://www.cotahealth.ca)
- Toronto North Support Services: [www.tnss.ca](http://www.tnss.ca)

## 580 people are now enrolled in *At Home/Chez Soi* in Toronto.

Here's what we found out about participants when they enrolled:

### The typical participant is a middle-aged man who is from a racialized group, and has been homeless on and off for several years.

- 69% of participants are men, 29% are women, and 2% are transgendered.
- 8 out of 10 are between the ages of 25 and 55.
- Nearly 1 in 5 (19%) have been homeless for 10 or more years over their lifetime. 41% have been homeless for 5 years or more.
- Almost all (93%) were living in shelters or on the street (i.e. absolutely homeless) when they entered the study. The rest were precariously housed with at least one recent period of absolute homelessness.
- More than half (53%) are from a racialized group.
- 6% of ACT clients and 10% of ICM clients in Toronto are Aboriginal.

### Participants in this study have faced challenges of many kinds in their lives; challenges that likely directly contributed to their homelessness.

- More than half would likely be given a diagnosis of a psychotic disorder by a medical professional. The remainder have other mental health problems, such as depression or post traumatic stress disorder. Many have/had drug and/or alcohol problems.
- Only half (51%) have completed high school and almost all (94%) are unemployed.
- More than a third (37%) had involvement with the criminal justice system in the past six months. Often these are petty crimes that are related to living in public spaces.
- 1 in 5 reported having some problems with self care.
- More than a third (37%) reported having some difficulty in performing their usual daily activities.
- Nearly half (41%) said that they experience moderate pain or discomfort daily. For another 16% this pain or discomfort was described as extreme.

## Participant Experiences

Some of our *At Home/Chez Soi* participants have offered to share their experiences with you:

**Jeff (not his real name) says that his old life was like a “vicious cycle”, without any supports.** He used to drink heavily, and had many criminal charges.

Jeff stopped drinking when he moved into his apartment with *At Home/Chez Soi*, and has stayed sober for over a year. “Supports have helped me do better, and being on the right medication helped a lot too,” Jeff says. “The worker on the project helped me save money - now I can buy furniture I really wanted but needed to save for.”

“My biggest goal going forward is to try to make the best of the next year and a half in the project,” Jeff told us. “I’ve signed up for carpentry school now - two semesters of 16 weeks each. I have this time to keep going in the same direction. I’m trying to build on all my successes in the project.”

**D.B. (not her real name) says she used to cry and feel depressed every day. Her shelter worker pushed her to move forward & enroll in *At Home/Chez Soi*.**

“The *At Home/Chez Soi* staff, especially my case worker, have brought a lot of changes for me,” D.B. told us. “When I was at the shelter, I couldn’t cook, and sometimes the food they gave us wasn’t enough. I had to go to bed when the shelter staff told me to. I couldn’t get my privacy.”

Now, D.B. has her own place, and her case worker comes by every week to see if she’s okay or needs help.

“I see a big difference in my life,” D.B. says. “God opened a way for me.”

**Judy (not her real name) spent more than a year in a women’s shelter after losing her housing and spending some time in hospital.** This was her first experience with homelessness.

With *At Home/Chez Soi*, Judy says she enjoys the privacy of a home that she missed very much at the shelter.

With her housing and supports in place, Judy feels ready to return to the community activities she participated in before she became homeless. She plans to volunteer again at a local church in the community kitchen, where she will help to prepare meals for a homeless drop-in.

Judy is also looking forward to taking a class at the University of Toronto.

## Initial Impacts

The research team interviews all study participants every three months. Of the 580 participants, 290 are receiving housing and supports. Here are some highlights from what this group has told us so far:

- **HOPE FOR THE FUTURE:**

The project is allowing participants to think beyond their immediate survival needs (like where to sleep, where a next meal will come from), and look toward the future. Now that “getting back on track” seems possible, many participants are motivated to make the necessary life changes to achieve their goals. However, some participants worry that they may feel isolated in their new place, or may never feel completely well. Participants also feel a sense of urgency about the needs of other deserving people, and about the future of the project and its resources.

- **TURNING POINT:**

Several participants describe the project as a “turning point”, or “high point” in their lives, because it’s giving them a strong sense of hope.

- **GIVING BACK:**

Some participants envision being able to “give back”, “contribute” or otherwise be of service. “I could be of service or something, instead of just doing what I’m doing,” said one man.

- **HEALTHIER RELATIONSHIPS:**

Participants see the project as an opportunity to establish a sense of community and to strengthen their social connections - either by disentangling themselves from unhealthy relationships, or by re-establishing lost relationships with significant others. However, some participants are concerned that they may not yet have the skills or capacity to form healthier relationships.

## Project Updates

### Research:

June 29, 2011 was a celebration day: we enrolled the 580th person in *At Home/Chez Soi* in Toronto! Now that enrollment is finished, we can start to share “baseline” information about the lives of participants before they joined the study. The research team will keep on meeting with participants every three months until March 2013, to find out how people are doing in terms of their health, housing, quality of life and their use of the service system.

**LIFE STORIES:** We are working with 60 participants to write their “life stories”. This can be an important step in recovery, when individuals take control of describing their lives. Their stories will also help service providers, policy makers and ordinary Canadians gain a much deeper appreciation of what it feels like to experience homelessness and mental health problems, the diversity of people who are affected, and what can lead to change.

**RESEARCH ON STIGMA:** An important focus of the research is discrimination and stigma, and on developing anti-racism/anti-oppression services for participants from different ethnic backgrounds. We’re reporting on how homeless men and women in Toronto cope with and develop strengths in relation to racism and other forms of oppression. This research will be completed in 2013.

### People with Lived Experience Caucus:

Of core importance to *At Home/Chez Soi* is that people who have lived experience of homelessness and mental health issues be involved, so that the project meets their needs, and so their viewpoints are reflected in research. Our Caucus for People with Lived Experience is an independent forum where participants can openly talk about *At Home/Chez Soi*. There are 14 members. Some sit on the *At Home/Chez Soi* workgroups (e.g. Research, Housing, and Ethno-Racial Services), the Site Operations Team which manages the local project, the new Documentary Work Group and the Local Advisory Committee. Our Caucus hears updates from the different groups at monthly meetings. Then they discuss issues and make recommendations to take back to the groups. The Ontario Council of Alternative Businesses (OCAB) provides meeting space and organizational support.

We have improved *At Home/Chez Soi* already. For example, based on our Caucus’ recommendations, TAU\* participants now receive more money (“honoraria”) for doing research interviews. Working with the Research team, the Caucus also held 3 sessions for Toronto participants to talk about their Housing First experiences (e.g. how they feel about the new housing, case workers and landlords.)

\*TAU means “Treatment as Usual”. TAU participants deserve a lot of appreciation and respect in *At Home/Chez Soi*. Even though they do not get a new apartment or a case worker, they still do regular research interviews that explain how homelessness affects health and well-being.

## Goodbye and farewell

Two key people left *At Home/Chez Soi* this year, to move on to new positions.

Katherine Chislett has left the City of Toronto to take a position with another municipality. Katherine was instrumental in designing and implementing our *At Home/Chez Soi* project. We’ll miss her expertise and leadership in solving the problem of homelessness in Toronto.

Kate Mason has moved on from the position of Research Coordinator, after two years of incredible hard work and dedication, successfully implementing the enrollment and research programs for *At Home/Chez Soi*. Kate acted as a key liaison between the various project partners throughout the study’s development. We wish Kate all the best in her new community-based research project.

## Services:

The Service Work Group has tackled a wide range of issues in support of our Toronto-site service teams and participants over the course of the past year. We developed service protocols to guide decision-making for the moving and storage of participant furniture. Our group was fortunate to welcome an expert in Risk Assessment from CAMH, Mike Pett for a 2-hour training. Our current focus is now on how to implement a proposed Participant Advisory Committee where our participants will have the opportunity to provide feedback to the Project.

## Housing:

The Housing Working Group and the team at Housing Connections have been very productive this year! Each month, we've helped about 15 formerly homeless individuals find and move into their own apartments. Even better - most participants have maintained their housing for more than six months. The longest tenancy so far in *At Home/Chez Soi* is 21 months! This is a milestone we're really proud of.

We also developed several housing guidelines to support the *At Home/Chez Soi* team now and into the future. These are posted on a secure page at the Housing Connections website. For example, the Access to Housing Protocol describes steps to help participants select a suitable apartment. The Eviction Prevention Protocol has strategies to ensure positive landlord/tenant/project relationships. The Housing Stock Protocol explains how a stock of housing units for *At Home/Chez Soi* is developed in Toronto's challenging housing environment. In May 2011, we held training sessions on all the new housing guidelines and policies for all the *At Home/Chez Soi* support workers.

## Mental Health Commission of Canada:

On March 7th MHCC Chair Michael Kirby and the Toronto Site team gave a project progress report to an audience of 90 people at Enoch Turner Schoolhouse, location of our national launch.

On August 30th four senior MHCC staff including Louise Bradley, CEO, visited Toronto Site for the day to meet participants, project staff and Caucus members. MPP Christine Elliott also joined us for an update on project activities.



Mental Health  
Commission  
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## Beyond 2013

Several research studies suggest that the "Housing First" model can result in:

- Improved long-term housing stability;
- Reduced rates of costly public services including hospitalizations, hospital emergency visits, incarcerations;
- Improved quality of life.

However, there is a lack of experimental research evidence about how effective or cost-effective Housing First could be in Canadian settings. *At Home/Chez Soi* will produce much-needed evidence that will help guide Canadian policy and program approaches for homeless people with mental health problems.