

## **Exploring Supportive Housing in Waterloo**

Andrew Bell, Cindy Rudowski, Megan Wilson, Veronica Taylor, Greg Baars

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Jennifer Robinson

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### **Authors' Declaration**

We hereby declare that we are the sole authors of this research paper. To the best of our knowledge, this work contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made. We understand that our project may be made electronically available to the public.

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to better understand permanent supportive housing and the work that Supportive Housing of Waterloo (SHOW) does in supporting individuals experiencing homelessness in the Waterloo Region. Using a community based action research approach, qualitative data was collected through focus groups with SHOW employees. This study's focus groups were conducted with two distinct groups of SHOW employees; supervisors and frontline workers. The analysis focused on identifying staff perspectives or markers of success within permanent supportive housing to highlight day to day successes when supporting residents. Through the examination of staff experiences, this study contributed to a deeper understanding of how permanent supportive housing programs operate and their impact. This data can further be used to develop an understanding surrounding approaches to support individuals experiencing homelessness. The findings from this study can also guide future studies around Supportive Housing of Waterloo (SHOW) and other permanent supportive housing organizations and initiatives.

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### **Land Acknowledgement**

Conestoga College is situated on the Traditional Territory of the Chonnonton, Anishinaabeg, and Haudenosaunee Peoples. We honour the original Caretakers of this land and acknowledge their enduring relationships, rights, and responsibilities that continue today. Our community is enriched by the enduring knowledge and deep-rooted traditions of the diverse First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.0 Purpose**

The purpose of this research project was to examine and define what makes supportive housing a distinct and effective option for addressing homelessness. This research was guided by the question: From the perspectives of SHOW employees, what are the key markers for success? This question aimed to investigate and develop key success markers for individuals living in supportive housing that are given wrap-around support in housing units, which is the foundation of permanent supportive housing (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2025). The research aimed to gather staff perspectives that were not included in SHOW's annual impact reports. By focusing on the staff perspectives of individuals who work directly with residents, the research aimed to better understand the benefits of permanent supportive housing and highlight the key components of what makes SHOW effective in non-traditional ways.

### **1.1 Supportive Housing of Waterloo**

Supportive Housing of Waterloo (SHOW) is a community organization that provides affordable housing units through their three apartment-style buildings in the Region of Waterloo. These housing units also incorporate a wrap-around support system including meal services, harm reduction and other, case-by-case support services. SHOW's mission is heavily guided by housing first initiatives and harm reduction is at the core of their mission (Supportive Housing of Waterloo, 2025). Permanent supportive housing is an initiative that helps to provide individuals experiencing chronic homelessness with affordable housing assistance and support services (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2023). In this study, researchers collaborated with SHOW employees to develop a structured research strategy, focusing on identifying appropriate

methods and data sources to effectively address the research question and support future research on supportive housing.

## **1.2 Research Approach**

Through the analysis of qualitative data from SHOW employees, we identified the core components that drive the program's effectiveness and set it apart from other supportive housing models. The primary data collection was done through focus groups with SHOW employees, rather than with SHOW residents. This helped to limit risk and ethical concerns for the residents living at SHOW facilities. Through this process, we gained insight and were able to codify the key performance indicators that may not have been initially evident when considering what supportive housing does.

The aim of this research project was to create a more comprehensive understanding of the benefits of supportive housing, as well as SHOW's principles and practices surrounding housing first approaches. By highlighting the impact of Supportive Housing of Waterloo (SHOW) on residents through the perspectives of staff, the research aimed to inform potential donors and the broader public. Through the use of focus groups with staff at SHOW, we collected qualitative data that clarifies several benefits of supportive housing.

The project began with a proposal to SHOW, followed by a review of literature pertaining to homelessness and supportive housing. Research ethics approval was obtained prior to primary data collection, and then moving to the analysis phase. After analysis, the key themes and ideas gathered from the transcribed data were compiled into a formal report and presentation to highlight the key information gathered from the research to present to our community partners, as well as colleagues. This process took place over 6 months, between November 2025 to April 2026.

### 1.3 Community Based Action Research

The research team was tasked to work with SHOW to collaboratively create a community-based action research project. Action research is often used to investigate practice, usually for frontline workers, and using the research to improve conditions based on what was discovered (Hatch, 2024, p.37). The primary purpose of action research is to act as a tool to solve problems with a community, professional, or personal lives (Hatch, 2024, p.37).

There exist many benefits in Participatory Action Research.

The first benefit is including community members as a part of the research team.

The research is conducted with the community rather than simply on the community. Research team members help to decide how to collect data and what kind of data to collect. They may help with participant outreach and data analysis.

They hold the academic research team members accountable to their community (Gibbons, 2015, 0:15)

This approach to project design involves collaboration between researchers and participants in all phases of the research (Robinson, 2025, week 5). SHOW has been involved in many stages of the research project. The need for the project was driven by the community partner. Research questions were developed in consultation with SHOW and the research team. Some staff at SHOW are alumni of Conestoga College's Bachelor of Community and Criminal Justice. These alumni members have prior experience conducting participatory action research. Involving SHOW with the design of this project means that the design is based on the co-construction of knowledge with professional accountability, which helped produce an effective research design.

The second benefit of this approach to research is that it will lead to action (Gibbons, 2015, 1:09). Ultimately the goal of this research project was to provide our community partner with more information that articulates the impacts of SHOW's housing-first approaches. This additional information was intended to support SHOW in communicating their work to the community and potential funders. During consultation, there were two key terms discussed. The first key term, "Big wins", can be considered as objective criteria such as providing shelter for X amount of people. These statistics may be required for revenue streams such as government grants. The second key term, "Small wins", are subjective criteria that are harder to measure and articulate. Examples can include gradual behavioural shifts in residents. There may not exist an empirical method to demonstrate the significance of small wins. This research project was designed to benefit the community by helping SHOW articulate both of these "wins". These results will have led to the action of acquiring more information that our community partner would use as they have seen fit.

#### **1.4 Potential Outcomes**

The goal of this project was to better understand what contributes to success within SHOW's supportive housing model by gathering the perspectives of employees and supervisors. By focusing on staff experiences, the study aimed to identify important markers of success that may not always be visible through traditional outcome measures and to inform future research surrounding the topic.

#### **1.5 Layout of Chapters**

This paper is structured into five chapters, each with a distinct focus. In this introduction we have explained the key definitions and conceptual framework needed to understand what SHOW is, what the research process looked like, and what type of research we have performed.

The second chapter explores literature available on the subject of homelessness and the methods used to address it. It particularly focused on the causes, systemic issues and different approaches to dealing with homelessness. The third chapter examines and breaks down the study design and methodology as well as the participant recruitment, data collection procedures and ethical considerations.

The fourth chapter explores the findings and analyses the key findings. Finally, we conclude by making recommendations for future research, outlining the limitations of our own research and making any key conclusions that can be taken from the information we gathered in the study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### 2.0 Introduction

The purpose of this literature review is to support our research question: From the perspectives of SHOW employees, what are key markers for success? This literature review covers five themes of homelessness: what leads to homelessness, barriers to accessing supportive housing, housing benefits, success factors of supportive housing, and the politics of housing. The literature review acts to reinforce our research project by identifying needs and gaps in Canadian housing support, identifying potential solutions grounded in theory and research, and uses analysis to reveal political patterns and contradictions. The connection between the literature selected and permanent supportive housing are explored throughout this chapter.

### 2.1 Foundational Theories

Understanding homelessness and the barriers to supportive housing require examining broader social factors that shape individuals behaviours and outcomes. Although many theories help explain these dynamics, two in particular align best with SHOW's population: Social Disorganization Theory and Strain Theory. Both of these sociological theories provide a framework for understanding how factors such as structural inequalities and limited opportunities can contribute to factors leading to homelessness.

By applying these theories, it shows the importance of long-term supportive housing initiatives, such as SHOW. SHOW promotes long-term, permanent housing solutions rather than short-term transitional housing, prioritizing stability, community connection, and improved well-being.

### ***2.1.1 Social Disorganization Theory***

Social Disorganization Theory, developed by sociologists Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay (Wickes & Sydes, 2017), explains how conditions in the community deeply influence crime and social stability (McLeod, 2025). It suggests that neighbourhoods that are characterized by population turnover, poverty, and weak social ties often struggle to maintain social order and ultimately increase crime and social instability (McLeod, 2025). Rather than looking at criminal behaviour as a moral failing, the Social Disorganization Theory emphasizes how weakened social structures and limited community bonds create environments where communities struggle to maintain social order (McLeod, 2025).

This perspective highlights the importance of stable, connected communities in promoting positive social outcomes and reducing crime. Community members who lack consistent housing, reliable support systems, and relationships within their community face greater vulnerability to homelessness, poverty, and resorting to survival-based behaviours. Therefore, strengthening community stability and re-building social networks are key components to facing these challenges (McLeod, 2025).

The permanent housing model that SHOW implements reflects many of the principles highlighted in the Social Disorganization Theory. By prioritizing long-term housing rather than short-term transitional housing, the program provides those at-risk of or experiencing homelessness with a stable residency and access to integrated support services (Supportive Housing of Waterloo, 2025). These initiatives help re-build social connections and community stability that is often weakened by housing insecurity and chronic homelessness.

### ***2.1.2 Strain Theory***

Strain theory, developed by Robert Merton, proposes the idea that deviant behaviour may occur when individuals experience pressure to achieve valued goals, including financial stability, employment, and personal success, but lack the resources and opportunities to achieve said goals (Nickerson, 2025). This gap between societal expectations and accessible opportunities then creates a strain, which can lead to adopting unhealthy strategies, including deviant and survival-based behaviours to meet their needs (Nickerson, 2025).

Many individuals experiencing homelessness face structural barriers that limit their ability to achieve the typical goals that are socially valued. Poverty, unemployment, mental health challenges, and limited access to stable housing can restrict opportunities for both social and economic advancement. As a result of this, individuals may experience significant challenges when navigating systems that offer limited support or opportunity (Nickerson, 2025).

Supportive housing initiatives can help alleviate these pressures as they provide both stable housing and access to community support. SHOW aims to reduce the structural barriers that contribute to strain through their offered services, providing the residents a greater opportunity to focus on personal growth and well-being (Supportive Housing of Waterloo, 2025). By addressing the underlying conditions that create strain, housing programs such as SHOW can reduce the likelihood of individuals engaging in survival-based or deviant behaviour, which creates a safer community.

Social Disorganization Theory and Strain Theory illustrate how both structural inequalities and limited opportunities contribute to housing instability and marginalization. These theories help demonstrate how permanent supportive housing can address underlying

conditions that contribute to homelessness, supporting both individual well-being and broader community stability.

## **2.2 Factors Leading to Homelessness**

Homelessness is rarely the result of one factor. Instead, it is often developed through a combination of economic pressures, personal challenges and broader social conditions that make it difficult for individuals to maintain stable housing. Pathways into homelessness frequently involve overlapping structural and personal factors such as financial instability, health challenges and limited access to housing and social supports (Van Berkum et al., 2025).

Economic instability also increases housing insecurity when individuals lack access to affordable housing options or financial support. (Rukmana, 2020) explained that housing shortages and rising living prices placed a lot of pressure on individuals with low or unstable incomes on rent and basic living expenses. As a result, many individuals spend a large portion of their income on rent and basic living expenses. This left little financial flexibility to manage unexpected costs. When individuals are unable to keep up with these financial pressures, they face eviction or are forced into temporary or unstable housing situations (Forchuk et al., 2025).

One major factor contributing to homelessness is economic instability. Rising housing costs and income insecurity have made it very difficult for many individuals to afford stable housing. Individuals experience job loss, unstable employment or unexpected financial hardship, struggling to meet basic housing costs. Structural issues such as poverty, unemployment, and housing shortages significantly increase the likelihood of homelessness (Rukmana, 2020). These economic pressures make it extremely difficult for individuals to recover from financial setbacks, especially when affordable housing options are very limited.

Mental health challenges and substance use also increase an individual's vulnerability to homelessness. Individuals experiencing homelessness face higher rates of mental illness, chronic health conditions and substance use disorders compared to the general population (Mejia-Lancheros, 2021). These challenges create barriers to maintaining employment, accessing services and securing stable housing. Research shows that individuals experiencing homelessness experience poorer health outcomes and increased exposure to health risks which further complicate their ability to achieve housing stability (Richards & Kuhn, 2023).

Mental health challenges affect an individual's ability to access housing and support services. Individuals experiencing mental illness may find it difficult to navigate housing systems, maintain consistent employment, or access healthcare and social services. Individuals experiencing homelessness face complex health needs that require coordinated medical and social support (Richards and Kuhn, 2023). Without access to these supports, individuals experiencing mental health challenges struggle to maintain stable housing over time.

Neighbourhood and community conditions can also influence housing stability. Areas experiencing poverty, unstable housing markets and limited social services may struggle to support residents facing financial or personal challenges. Homelessness is more common in communities where housing systems are unstable and where social institutions are not strong enough to support residents who are experiencing troubles (Rukmana, 2020).

Another important factor contributing to homelessness is the interaction between structural barriers and personal challenges interacting with one another. Individuals who are already experiencing financial hardship face greater risk of housing instability if they also experience health concerns, mental illness or limited access to social services. (Berkum et al.,

2025) emphasizes that homelessness develops when these different pressures occur at the same time making it difficult for individuals to maintain housing without external help.

These factors rarely occur independently. Instead, homelessness develops through multiple overlapping pressures including financial troubles, health challenges and limited social support. Understanding these factors helps explain why supportive housing programs play an important role in addressing homelessness and improving long term housing stability.

### **2.3 Benefits of Supportive Housing**

Addressing homelessness may not be as simple as finding every person living on the street and getting them into a shelter. Homelessness can be looked at as finding new ways to strengthen housing from the bottom up. This idea of looking at homelessness through a number of different lenses is something at the core of the Canadian approach to dealing with the issue (Dionne et al., 2023). This issue of identifying and classifying homelessness is at the core of identifying the health implications of being unhoused (Fornaro et al., 2022). The Canadian understanding of homelessness draws from research showing that there are a number of ways to define homelessness (Dionne et al., 2023).

The Canadian government has had a difficult time in identifying all unhoused individuals as there are a number of ways to define homelessness. Namely: “Persons living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out; Persons in supported accommodation for the homeless; Persons staying temporarily with other households; Persons living in boarding houses; Persons in other temporary lodgings; and Persons living in ‘severely’ crowded dwellings” (Dionne et al., 2023). Homelessness is not just about having a roof and walls, it is about living in a way that allows for a person to thrive. In this way, we can further expand the understanding of approaches to homelessness.

In light of this understanding of what makes homelessness complex, a Housing First (HF) strategy has been adopted in Canada. The approach has been guided by the At Home/Chez Soi program of 2014 (Smith & Kopec, 2023). At Home/Chez Soi used a Housing First approach which focused not on pushing people into addictions and substance treatment before housing can be acquired, but instead on giving the unhoused person a home as well as wrap-around support to bolster the efficacy of the program (Smith & Kopec, 2023). This reimagining of typical support for homelessness helps to highlight the Housing First approach to addressing homelessness. These approaches create bulwarks against some of the key criteria around being homeless (ie. sense of security).

Though clear, convincing evidence was hard to find, some strong associations between housing and health can be derived (Fornaro et al., 2022). All-cause mortality, external-cause mortality (i.e. accidents, or self-harm) have been shown to be higher for people experiencing homelessness (Fornaro et al., 2022). PSH programs have also been shown to create better health outcomes (Aubry et al., 2020). The validity of that health related data is in some question, and the researchers acknowledge this is a limitation of the current body of knowledge (Aubry et al., 2020).

Permanent supportive housing has been linked to better quality of life and some evidence of reducing costs to the community through things like reduced emergency service use (Aubry et al., 2020). The bottom line is that using PSH as part of a more robust housing strategy, coupled with better data gathering and analysis, can create a more cost-effective housing strategy. This also may have broader implications for the health of those experiencing homelessness in any of its forms. There is also clear evidence that permanent supportive housing (PSH) improves housing stability by up to 54% (Aubry et al., 2020).

There seems to be a great need for further data collection and analysis around people experiencing homelessness. The examples and information we have around the effects of the TAU approaches is becoming clear (Dionne et al., 2023; Fornaro et al., 2022). We have a better understanding of what homelessness looks like through the Australian model (Dionne et al., 2023). We know that supportive housing can lead to better outcomes for PEH and there are programs that have shown this in a Canadian and broader North American context (Smith & Kopec, 2023). Providing housing before anything else needs to be the priority as that has been shown to have a great benefit for PEH. Supportive housing provides further benefits and allows for targeted approaches to dealing with homelessness.

#### **2.4 Barriers to Accessing Supportive Housing**

In Canada, homelessness is described as “an individual, family, or community without stable, safe, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means and ability of acquiring it” (Gaetz et al., 2012, para. 1). Though this definition comes from 2012, it was also updated in 2017, and has been supported in further, more recent data from Statistics Canada, which include other, more specific definitions of homelessness (Statistics Canada, 2025). Supportive housing organizations like SHOW play a crucial role by providing long-term housing combined with support services to help achieve individual and community safety (Supportive Housing of Waterloo, 2025).

Beyond the various factors that contribute to initial homelessness, accessing supportive housing remains a major challenge for individuals (Kerman et al., 2023; CAMH 2022; CMHC, 2024). This section presents five major obstacles that keep homeless individuals from accessing supportive housing, ultimately contributing to their reliance on emergency shelters, or being without shelter altogether (Kerman et al., 2023; CAMH, 2022; CMHC 2024).

One major barrier for those experiencing homelessness is how high-risk and survival-based behaviours affect access to housing (Kerman et al., 2023). These behaviours often include substance use, overdose, self-harm, violence, property damage, or illegal income-generating activities like selling drugs, creating safety concerns within supportive housing units (Kerman et al., 2023). Research suggests that individuals who engage in these behaviours are often labelled as “challenging” and “high need”, resulting in exclusion from permanent supportive housing (Kerman et al., 2023). The unfortunate truth is, these high-risk behaviours are prevalent among those struggling with mental health challenges and homelessness, as these conditions often intersect (Kerman et al., 2023). For many, prior traumatic experiences with authority, such as police involvement or service systems, creates mistrust, concerns of program effectiveness, and fear of housing loss (Kerman et al., 2023). As a result, some individuals respond to perceived safety threats by avoiding these interactions, fearing negative outcomes (Kerman et al., 2023). The literature emphasizes the idea that high-risk behaviours create significant challenges for people experiencing homelessness to access supportive housing and can affect their stability within these settings (Kerman et al., 2023). Ultimately, these factors create a critical gap in the housing system, and those with the greatest need face the steepest barriers to secure supportive housing.

Mental health concerns represent another barrier that significantly limits access to supportive housing (CAMH, 2022). Similar to high-risk behaviours, mental health challenges, which are common within the homeless population, create obstacles to applying and accessing housing (CAMH, 2022). The CAMH Housing and Mental Health Policy Framework highlights that individuals experiencing homelessness who also live with mental illness face disproportionate barriers to housing based on a shortage of housing units designed to

accommodate those with mental health challenges (CAHM, 2022). This shortage reinforces a cycle of housing instability, where those with both homelessness and mental health vulnerabilities struggle to access it the most.

Another significant barrier identified in the literature is the reliance on technology within supportive housing systems (Radó et al., 2024). Many individuals experiencing homelessness face significant obstacles in acquiring and maintaining access to smartphones, computers, Wi-Fi, charging outlets, and other digital resources (Radó et al., 2024). Limitations such as these hinder communication between clients and support service providers, potentially leading to missed opportunities for supportive housing (Radó et al., 2024). The study further emphasizes the lack of support for technological use, particularly among older adults and those with limited prior experience with technology (Radó et al., 2024). These findings highlight that technology barriers prevent many homeless individuals from engaging with housing services, as well as contributing to the inequities in access to supportive housing.

Beyond the individual barriers indicated, structural and procedural barriers embedded within housing systems also contribute to supportive housing obstacles (CMHC, 2024). The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation's Systemic Barriers Framework provides an examination of how housing systems themselves create obstacles to access stability, especially for vulnerable populations (CMHC, 2024; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2023). Issues within the housing system such as limited housing supply, unaffordable housing, delays in building residences, long waitlists for subsidized housing, along with broken service systems, are disproportionately affecting people experiencing homelessness (CMHC, 2024). For example, due to low vacancy rates in rental market properties, housing competition has intensified, allowing discriminatory requirements such as IDs, references, advanced deposits, and credit checks. This

creates a huge barrier for those in unstable living conditions and with limited funds (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2023; CMHC, 2024). Furthermore, barriers to remaining in housing are often linked to the availability of supports including mental health support, housing and financial guidance, and social workers, as having access isn't enough without adequate supportive infrastructure (CMHC, 2024; Aubry et al., 2019). Research demonstrates that those who receive supportive housing with services such as intensive case management experience significantly greater housing stability compared to those receiving standard services (Stergiopoulos et al., 2015). Another study shows that supportive housing improves mental health outcomes, quality of life, and community integration, which emphasizes the importance of ongoing supports (Aubry et al., 2019). These systemic issues demonstrate that supportive housing is unattainable for many individuals experiencing homelessness, often because of the broader structural challenges within Canada's housing system.

Lastly, geographic context can present additional challenges for the homeless population, particularly those living in rural and remote locations (Forchuk et al., 2025). Alarming, homelessness rates in rural and remote areas are equal or higher than in urban areas (Forchuk et al., 2025). Rural homelessness is often less visible to the public, but those unhoused face countless barriers that are not as relevant within populated communities, including limited transportation, fewer service providers and an inadequate number of housing options (Forchuk et al., 2025). Due to the scarcity of supportive housing and outreach programs in these areas, even those who qualify for assistance may struggle to maintain housing without resorting to unachievable measures, such as relocating or travelling long distances (Forchuk et al., 2025). These challenges highlight how place-based barriers further limit supportive housing, leaving rural individuals disproportionately marginalized in an already strained system.

## 2.5 Success Factors and the “Why” of Supportive Housing

Supportive housing is one of the most effective interventions to offer to individuals who are experiencing homelessness or housing instability, particularly when with complex mental health or substance use needs (AMHO, 2024; Lachaud et al., 2025). Its success extends beyond the ability to simply provide shelter, it includes a combination of factors that promote stabilization, a psychological well-being, and integration into the community (Rollings & Bollo, 2021; Crisanti et al., 2021). It is important to understand these factors and its functioning in order to evaluate the impact of supportive housing programs.

One of the key factors to the success of supportive housing is to provide integrated support services. By combining housing with supportive services like case management, mental health and addiction supports, life skills training, and assistance in accessing community supports, housing stability and daily functioning improves (AMHO, 2024; Lachaud et al., 2025). The use of these services reduces the likelihood of the residents returning to homelessness due to the structured path to support and self development (AMHO, 2024; Crisanti et al., 2021). Even small successes, like attending a counselling session, submitting a benefit application with minimal assistance, or participating in a skills workshop are progress that builds over time which enhances both stability and well being (Rollings & Bollo, 2021; Crisanti et al., 2021). The coordination of services in the housing environment allows the residents to operate in the complex system more efficiently, manage health needs, and build valuable life skills (AMHO, 2024; Lauchaud et al., 2025). From a Strain Theory perspective, supportive housing directly addresses the pressures that emerge when individuals cannot achieve basic needs through legitimate sources (Merton, 1938). By providing long term housing and supportive services,

programs reduce the pressure that would otherwise lead people to engage in criminalized or negative methods of coping (AMHO, 2024; Lachaud et al., 2025).

The environmental design of housing is also important in the effectiveness of the program. Elements like privatized units, safety, shared social spaces, and trauma-informed designs have positive effects on mental wellbeing, engagement, and satisfaction (Rollings et al., 2021; Crisanti et al., 2021). This provides residents with autonomy and dignity by providing personal control as well as opportunities to interact socially (Rollings et al., 2021). When housing allows individuals to feel safe and at ease, it allows them to progress slowly by using shared areas, developing routines, and building relationships with other residents. This in the long run can promote long term stability and quality of life (Crisanti et al., 2021). Strategic environmental design can also reduce stress and assists in recovery from past trauma which contribute to the advantages of integrated service delivery (Rollings et al., 2021). The Social Disorganization Theory can be applied to explain these environmental conditions by indicating that housing structure, social connection, and collective efficacy are the factors shaping behaviour and well-being (Shaw & McKay, 1942). Supportive housing that promotes socialization, safe communal spaces, and supportive networks can address factors of social disorganization that are inherent in marginalized communities (Crisanti et al., 2021; Rollings et al., 2021).

The concept of psychological integration that is used within supportive housing which reflects the degree to which residents experience the feeling of belonging, inclusion, and connection to their housing community (Crisanti et al., 2021). Building social connections with the neighbours, staff and support networks lead to better mental health outcomes and increased engagement in services among residents (Crisanti et al., 2021; Rollings et al., 2021). Small steps

like participation in events or speaking to each other informally will lead to increasing feelings of belonging and identity within the housing community (AMHO, 2024; Crisanti et al., 2021). Psychological integration is supported through housing retention as it fosters attachment to place and a desire to achieve stability (AMHO, 2024; Lachaud et al., 2025).

There are system level benefits of supportive housing, like decreased emergency shelter, hospitalization, and other costly social services (AMHO, 2024). Even though the larger scale outcomes of health, such as decrease in death rate are difficult to attribute to only a particular intervention, smaller successes such as the increased use of health services or improved functionality in the day to day, are significant steps that reduce long term system strains (AMHO, 2024). These programs reduce neighbourhood social disorganization while addressing the pressures identified in Strain Theory by providing stable housing and supportive services to those in need. This shows that the combination of environmental, social, and support factors is crucial to achieving long-term positive outcomes (Crisanti et al., 2021; Merton, 1938).

## **2.6 Politics Surrounding Homelessness**

### ***2.6.1 Stigmatization and “Not In My Backyard” (NIMBYism) Attitudes***

People experiencing homelessness are imperiled by intense stigmatization and criminalization in their community and often face discrimination in public spaces if their appearance and behaviour are coded as homeless (Webb & Dej, 2024). This discrimination can be referred to as NIMBYism, which is an acronym for “Not In My Backyard”. This is defined as the personal view that housing and services for people experiencing homelessness, and the people experiencing homelessness, should not be in close proximity to residential areas (Webb & Dej, 2024). NIMBYism stems from community concerns over matters such as property values, and public safety risks. It predates the housing crisis in Canada where it originated as residents

simply wanting to have a say for developments in their community. “Residents passionate about their communities want to have a say in what gets built and where, said Geoff Kettel, the president of the Federation of Urban Neighbourhoods” (Balintec, 2023). Examples of these community concerns include condo development casting shadows or if public services can keep up with the growing community (Balintec, 2023). Webb & Dej (2024) argue that NIMBYism is a social attitude rooted in the logic of political configuration of citizenship, specifically the construction of the Other founded on property ownership and economic contribution to the community.

NIMBYism is expressed by community members stigmatizing and criminalizing people experiencing homelessness therefore justifying their apprehension towards local developments for emergency shelters, social housing, and harm reduction clinics (Webb & Dej, 2024). This phenomenon has been reported to be quite prevalent as an issue. Habitat for Humanity (2022) conducted a survey where 54% of Canadians reported that NIMBYism is one of the main barriers to affordable housing, and that 71% agree that people worry about the impact of affordable housing on their property values and neighbourhood (p. 2). The stigma is partly explained by how modern citizenship was configured under capitalism to demarcate the criminalized “other” from the law-abiding populace, determined by place identity and cultural memory shared by community members (Webb & Dej, 2024). Webb & Dej (2024) sought to understand the ideological basis for NIMBYism through the lived experiences of people experiencing homelessness in Ontario. They found that the stigma towards people experiencing homelessness can be traced from the political configurations of modern citizenship, in which the normalized citizen emerged as the ideal form of citizenship, which endeavors to self-actualize

their human potential through property ownership, economic productivity, and civil behaviours (Webb & Dej, 2024).

Stigma and discrimination is harmful. A longitudinal study by Mejia-Lancheros et al. (2021) found that without stable housing, it is difficult to improve other dimensions in life such as family stability, social support, income stability and social inclusion. They also found that stigma and discrimination are often internalized, which contributes to low-esteem, self-efficacy, and social withdrawal. Due to its harmful nature, the homeless population focuses their actions to conceal their community-perceived spoiled citizenship and avoid conflicts (Webb & Dej, 2024). However, they are under constant threat from external and internal stigma and discrimination.

Community impacts on homelessness are a prevalent political issue. There is a need for social support organizations to articulate their positive impacts to the community. “Leslie Evans, executive director of the Federation of Calgary Communities, says ... most residents often become more open to development after learning how it benefits the community.” (Balintec, 2023). Identifying success factors in SHOW can help eliminate community stigmatization. SHOW will be able to use these identified success factors to help residents understand how it would benefit their community, resulting in less community push-back, stigmatization and thus leading to increased public support of the work SHOW does for the community.

### ***2.6.2 Conceptualizing Freedom: Positive, Negative, and Republican Liberty***

Positive liberty is the freedom to self-actualize one’s full potential, self-actualizing being defined as achieving one’s potential once all basic needs are met (Webb & Dej, 2024). Homeless people struggle to meet their basic needs without housing, and therefore this lack of positive liberty results in the inability to reach their full potential. Rojas et al. (2023) highlight Maslow’s five categories of needs: Psychological, Safety, Love and Belonging, Esteem, and Self-

actualization. Their research finds that the needs are not satisfied sequentially, and they reject that there exists a hierarchy of needs. Regardless, these needs are critical towards life satisfaction. With or without a hierarchy, there is no ability to satisfy any of these needs without positive liberty. As a result, the homeless population are perpetually disadvantaged with poor life satisfaction and are unable to achieve their full potential.

Negative liberty means the freedom against interference of others, including the state (Webb & Dej, 2024). Heavy stigmatization from the community leads to the homeless population to face constant oppression and dehumanization from the public. NIMBYism is a prevalent example of how the homeless population does not have negative liberty. They are not free from the interference by the community.

Republic liberty refers to the freedom against arbitrary domination from the state (Webb & Dej, 2024). Homeless encampments in Canada often face forced displacement. The largest homeless encampment in the Waterloo Region has been facing pressure by the municipality. “The Ontario Superior Court of Justice has declined the Region of Waterloo’s application to have tents and living spaces removed from a property it owns at 100 Victoria Street in downtown Kitchener” (Sharkey, 2023). The Region of Waterloo had attempted to enforce a bylaw which would have resulted in the displacement of the encampment’s homeless population. The encampment has only been protected due to the court’s ruling, where the Region of Waterloo was required to provide enough space in shelters to be able to enforce their bylaw (Sharkey, 2023). Other municipalities have had different results. In 2024, Guelph Ontario’s new Public Space Use bylaw came into effect, which displaced many homeless shelters (City of Guelph, 2024). Ultimately, homeless people lack positive, negative and republican liberties which result in treatment as second-class citizens (Webb & Dej, 2024).

### ***2.6.3 Classifying the Risks of Homelessness and Government Priorities***

An Australian study (Parsell et al., 2020) examining government responses to homelessness before and after Covid-19 inspired a future Canadian research project (Evens et al., 2023) to examine how the Canadian government is reluctant to do more than the bare minimum to address homelessness.

The Covid-19 pandemic led to fast and significant changes in government approaches to homelessness. Parsell et al. (2020) argue “that prior to the coronavirus pandemic, government responses to homelessness were characterized by a “poverty of ambition”: they defaulted to the most basic of services such as food and shelter and treated the homeless as flawed and deficient” (p. 1681). During the pandemic, homelessness began to be treated as a public health crisis because of the threat of contagion and the risk posed to the health of the general public (Parsell et al., 2020, p. 1681). Australia changed their response towards homelessness and they began to move homeless people into self-contained units (Parsell et al., 2020, p. 1681). However, “the benefits to the people who are homeless will be retracted when the public health risks are no longer evident” (Parsell et al., 2020, p. 1681).

Evans et al. (2023) builds off how the poverty of ambition will likely remain unchanged (p. 1682). They relate the poverty of ambition to the myth of the benevolent state: “A false assumption that the government acts out of a primary concern for the welfare of all its citizens, that its policies represent an effort to find solutions to recognized social problems, and that the government efforts fall short of complete success only because of a lack of knowledge, countervailing selfish interests, incompetence, or lack of courage” (Evans et al., 2023, p.1682). This article posits that these emergencies (Covid-19 and severe winter weather) reveal “a paradigmatic pattern accompanied by an underlying logic: doing the bare minimum to keep

homeless people alive and minimize any disruption they may cause while maintaining status quo” (Evens et al., 2023, p.1682). “Despite displaying progressive traits, such as Housing First, Canada has been reluctant to do more than the bare minimum to address homelessness even under extreme conditions such as the pandemic” (Evans et al., 2023, p. 1691). Evans et al. (2023) argues that a deeper genetic programming in liberal biopolitics causes this underlying logic (p. 1691).

The effect of changing the risks of a social issue led to immediate and temporary government actions. By labelling homelessness as a risk to the general public, homelessness became a higher priority and were given access to housing. Evans et al. (2023) state that there is mounting evidence suggesting that permanent affordable housing is the solution to homelessness. However, Evans et al. (2023) describes the systemic reticent efforts from the Canadian government as doing only the bare minimum to keep the homeless people alive. Understanding government priorities, and how fragile support systems are, reinforces the need for supportive housing.

### ***Conclusion***

This literature review was aimed at finding the current context surrounding people experiencing homelessness. Through the lens of Social Disorganization Theory and Strain Theory the literature highlights instability in communities, as well as limited access to socially valued opportunities, and how this contributes to housing insecurity (Nickerson, 2025; Van Berkum et al., 2025; Wickes & Sydes, 2017).

Another key finding in the literature is that of the different pathways to homelessness, namely, economic instability and mental health challenges that can create intersecting issues that make it hard to obtain or maintain housing (Forchuk et al., 2025; Rukmana, 2020).

This body of research has created a clear understanding of the most effective approaches to dealing with homelessness, mainly the approaches of supportive housing, and housing first (Aubry et al., 2020; Smith & Kopec, 2023). That said, there are many barriers to supportive housing models being implemented more consistently in Canada (Kerman et al., 2023; CAMH 2022; CMHC, 2024). Beyond these structural barriers are social barriers as well. The stigmatization that has been well documented can be seen as an extension of NIMBYism (Mejia-Lancheros et al., 2021; Webb & Dej, 2024).

The bottom line this literature has clearly highlighted is that permanent supportive housing, coupled with better affordability around homes could be an effective framework to deal with the housing crisis (Aubry et al., 2020; Smith & Kopec, 2023). These tools are overlooked due to social and structural barriers seen in Canada (Mejia-Lancheros et al., 2021; Webb & Dej, 2024). This underlines a need for further research into this issue, along with programs aimed at meaningful change in the realm of housing affordability.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### 3.0 Methodological Approach

#### 3.0.1 *Virtual Focus Groups*

Virtual focus groups were the methods chosen for this research project. This inductive approach to primary data collection was intended to let the research be driven by the collected data. Findings from inductive processes are generated from the ground up, where researchers can find hypothetical categories in patterns or relationships in the data collected (Hatch, 2024, p.12). The research team decided to use qualitative data as our sample is small and the lived experiences of people offer rich data. Each lived experience is essential for qualitative data as these experiences influence the perspectives, experiences, and actions of participants (Tolley, 2017). This research project used the lived experiences of SHOW staff with the goal of understanding their perspectives and experiences in the context of the benefits of SHOW. Questions are open-ended, allowing participants to bring forward any data and its rationale. The strength of qualitative approaches is that it gives participants the chance to share their unique perspectives (Hatch, 2024, p.120). Therefore, it was best to use open-ended questions as opposed to close-ended questions to allow for the opportunity to share their complete thoughts.

This methodology aligns with the overarching themes within community-based action research. Researchers initiate open questions and the community, the staff, engage in a free narrative to generate inductive data. The staff are integral aspects of the data, and they are the ones that provide what they believe is relevant to the topic at hand. With open questions, the community/participants therefore have a role in the research process, which integrates the benefits of community-based action research.

### ***3.0.2 Benefits of Focus Groups***

Focus groups can bring different kinds of information by facilitating group interactions that generate information and insights that may not have been uncovered through individual interviews (Hatch, 2024, p.29). Participants are able to fuel conversations and add-on to what other participants are speaking about. This ability to generate new ideas through group facilitation is one highlighted strength of focus groups. Focus groups align well in participation action research because they facilitate a cooperative environment where participants can work with each other to generate data. Both focus groups and action research share similar benefits as they both co-create knowledge in a cooperative environment (Robinson, 2025).

Another reason that focus groups were chosen as the qualitative method is because of efficiency. It is more efficient to analyze data from a few focus groups rather than numerous individual qualitative interviews. This project had a goal to analyze three focus groups of 4-6 participants, resulting in a total of 12-18 participants. Analyzing qualitative data is time-consuming. Focus groups allow for the collection of deep qualitative data from more participants per session (Robinson, 2025).

The focus group questions, as seen in appendix D, were drafted following the principles of “Developing an Interview Guide” (Robinson, 2025, week 4). The first question was designed to be an easy to answer question and allows researchers to assign a code to their identifiers when transcribing. The middle section explores personal opinions on the impacts of SHOW. The final was meant to indicate to participants that the session is closing and allows for them to speak of any missed topics they feel are important.

These questions are considered safe for all respondents to answer. They are explaining workplace experiences, which is most likely not new information to the other participants in the

focus group. However, the work at SHOW can be stressful when working with the vulnerable population. To mitigate psychological risks, the research team used strategies as outlined in Ethics Considerations (s. 3.2).

### ***3.0.3 Assigned Roles in Focus Groups***

There were two primary roles for the researchers in these focus groups. The facilitator was responsible for managing and guiding the discussions. They had introduced the guidelines for the focus group, highlighting the need for one person to speak at a time. One concern of focus groups is that some people will talk more than others. The facilitator will have ensured that everyone has had the chance to speak on each of the topics explored. The second researcher role during the focus groups was the mediator. Their responsibility focused on what the participants were saying and helped with any probing questions where it was appropriate. The mediator would have identified when someone begins to repeat the same information. During the focus groups, the facilitator will have been the person who speaks directly to the participants. The mediator will have made suggestions, such as probing questions and other logistical concerns such as time management, directly to the facilitator. The purpose of these roles were to minimize confusion from participants and ensure equal opportunity.

Conducting the focus groups online was promoted by our community partner to best accommodate the staff's scheduling. Benefits of virtual focus groups include accessibility for participants. Participants chose the environment where they attended their focus group. This flexibility allowed for minimal risks to participants as they had the autonomy to choose a space where they felt is appropriately private and comfortable for them. Another benefit to virtual focus groups was the ability to record and transcribe the meeting using built in tools of the software. The research team has decided to record both audio and visual along with auto-

transcriptions. To ensure accuracy of the transcriptions, the research team will review each of the three focus group recordings.

### **3.1 Participants and Recruitment**

A total of 4 participants, 3 supervisors and 1 front-line worker at SHOW were able to attend the focus groups.

Participants were recruited using a recruitment email form (see Appendix A) Participation was voluntary and no incentives were provided. Informed consent was also established through email using a consent information form (Appendix C) and another consent form to be signed and returned prior to participation (Appendix B).

### **3.2 Ethics Considerations**

#### ***3.2.1 Power Imbalances***

The research team achieved approval by Conestoga College's REB board. Dividing the focus groups into three sessions was chosen due to ethical concerns over power imbalances. The team wanted to schedule one of the focus groups for managerial staff only. Without this, there are risks to participants if they speak freely of their opinions in the workplace when their supervisor is present. The other two focus groups consisted of frontline workers at SHOW. Another benefit of dividing management from frontline workers is that by eliminating these risks, participants will have been more forthcoming and less hesitant during the focus groups which ensures quality data collection.

#### ***3.2.2 Ensuring Confidentiality***

To ensure confidentiality in the focus groups, the data was used with codified identifiers. The findings from this research was published for academic use and shared with the community partner that employs the participants. To protect participants, coded identifiers were assigned to

ensure anonymity and reduce potential risks, including repercussions related to participation or absence, the content of their responses, and the exposure of their personal identities.

By having coded identifiers, only the researchers can identify who has participated in the research and can contact them for consent in future research opportunities. Finally, participants have the right to withdraw their consent at any time. Coded identifiers let the research team identify any data they have provided to be deleted. The personal identifiers chosen are their full names and their email addresses. These identifiers are necessary to assign participants to the coding process. Email addresses are required to send in signed consent forms and allows for the ability to contact participants before, during and after the research project.

### ***3.2.3 Uniformed Communication***

To ensure uniformed communication, the research team drafted a focus group script, consent form, simplified consent form, and a recruitment email script (see appendixes A-D). These scripts ensure consistent REB-approved communication to the community partner and participants.

### ***3.2.4 Voluntary Participation***

All participation is entirely voluntary, and there is no retribution for choosing to attend or not attend. This decision also ensures confidentiality of participants. To ensure confidentiality, the research team will be hosting the virtual focus groups. Minimizing risks to participants ensured confidence in participants to share their lived experiences at SHOW. Ensuring confidentiality in a participatory action research means that the community partner will not have access to coding methods. The community partner will be presenting the results of the research project and all data they will have access to will be coded to protect the identity of participants.

### 3.3 Procedure

This study used qualitative data collection approach through focus groups conducted with staff of Supportive Housing of Waterloo (SHOW). Using a qualitative methods approach allowed the researchers to gather descriptive information from group discussions and individual insights, offering an in-depth analysis of staff perspectives related to the effectiveness of SHOW's permanent supportive housing model and its markers of success (Robinson, 2025, week 4).

Recruitment was conducted through Supportive Housing of Waterloo (SHOW). SHOW supervisors distributed recruitment emails to staff members inviting them to participate in the study. The recruitment email included an explanation of the research project as well as attachments containing the focus group questions, consent form, simplified consent form. Simplified consent form (Appendix C) sent to ensure that the study was clearly understood. Interested participants were asked to return a signed consent form to the research team prior to participating in the study. Participants were given approximately two weeks to review the recruitment email and confirm their participation.

Primary data collection consisted of three scheduled focus groups. Participants were organized into separate focus groups based on their roles within the organization in order to minimize potential power imbalances. Each focus group was planned to include four to six participants. All focus groups were scheduled to take place virtually through Microsoft Teams. This is the best method of data collection for this particular study because it allows participants to build on each other's responses in a group setting. This promoted deeper discussions and insights that may not necessarily have presented itself through individual structured interviews (Robinson, 2025, week 4).

Each focus group session lasted approximately 60 minutes and followed a semi-structured format using a set of open ended questions to guide discussions (see appendix D). Participants were provided with the focus group questions in advance by email. At the beginning of each session, participants were reminded that participation in the study was voluntary and that attendance would not be reported to SHOW management or supervisors in order to protect confidentiality. Participants were also reminded of their rights to decline answering any question and to withdraw from the study at any time. Ground rules for respectful participation were reviewed, including allowing one participant to speak at a time and maintaining.

Focus group discussions were audio recorded, participant consent, to ensure accurate transcription. Researchers also took written notes during the sessions to verify the accuracy of the transcribed data. Once transcription was finalized, the recordings were permanently deleted. The transcribed data were stored securely on Conestoga College's OneDrive cloud server. Participants were not identified in transcripts or reporting of findings, and coded identifiers were used to protect participant confidentiality.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

The data collected for this project has been analyzed using qualitative content analysis, informed by grounded theory principles, which emphasize an inductive approach where themes are not pre-determined, but rather emerge from the collection of data (Noble & Mitchell, 2016). While this study does not aim to generate a completely grounded theory, principles of grounded theory are used in order to guide inductive coding and theme development. This approach includes a systematic review of the data, open coding, creating categories, abstraction, and identifying patterns (Robinson, 2025, week 2). Following the focus groups, the transcripts were

systematically reviewed using an open-coding process to identify the meaningful units of text related to the research objectives (Robinson, 2025, week 2).

During the open-coding process, labels have been assigned to pieces of data that reflect the key ideas, experiences, and outcomes that are discussed by the participants of SHOW. This process was conducted by the researchers using a consistent coding framework, ensuring both clarity and transparency in data interpretation. The codes were then organized into broader categories, which allowed the researchers to identify the ideas that recurred across the various focus groups. During the abstraction process, categories were refined further into themes that represent both the impacts and outcomes of the permanent supportive housing program that SHOW offers, which includes stability, well-being, and community connection.

To strengthen the credibility of the findings, the results from the focus group analysis were compared with document analysis, including reports, government documents, and academic literature. This process helped support the credibility of our findings, as we compared multiple data sources. The final themes were interpreted using Social Disorganization Theory and Merton's Strain Theory, which aim to provide theoretical context and support interpretation (Wickes & Sydes, 2017; Nickerson, 2025)

This study is a qualitative research design and therefore prioritized focus group and document-based data rather than numerical data. As a result, the analysis focused on identifying common themes and patterns in participants' responses rather than statistical relationships. Data analysis was completed using manual coding techniques which are supported by Conestoga's technological tools such as Microsoft Word and Microsoft Excel. Here, we organized transcripts, codes, categories, and themes in a clear and organized manner.

## **Chapter 4: Proposed Analysis and Discussion**

### **4.0 Analysis**

The qualitative content analysis for this research project was largely based on grounded theory principles. The intention of the research was to collect qualitative data during focus groups, and generate key themes discussed with SHOW supervisors and employees to highlight their perspective surrounding “small wins” and to contribute meaningful insights from their experience working directly with individuals living in permanent supportive housing units. The intention was to gain a comprehensive understanding of what the impact of the work SHOW does and to guide the results, conclusion, and future directions pertaining to permanent supportive housing initiatives and addressing homelessness.

By using a coding process, trends and recurring ideas were recognized and categorized into themes that reflect the successes and the challenges of SHOW’s work. The goal of this analysis was to develop a thorough understanding of the impacts of the work that SHOW does, especially related to addressing homelessness, assisting individuals with a variety of complex needs, and utilizing housing first and harm reduction approaches. The themes that emerged from the data were used to direct the results, contribute to the discussion, and influence future directions for research surrounding permanent supportive housing and its impact.

### **4.1 Results**

The analysis from the focus group data from both frontline workers and supervisory participants revealed several consistent and interconnected themes that reflect the impact and complexity of permanent supportive housing. The importance of rapport and trust building with residents was emphasized by both groups. Participants discussed that relationship building is a fundamental part of supportive housing, and that it often takes considerable time to develop due

to residents' past experiences with trauma and systemic failures. Long-term stability and engagement is highly dependent on this, and was described as non-linear and highly individualized. Additionally, participants emphasized that supportive housing is often described as life saving for residents and serves individuals with a variety of needs such as complex mental health, addiction, and physical health challenges. Participants also highlighted that supportive housing at SHOW is non-transactional, meaning that housing is not dependent on behaviour changes. This helps to establish more genuine relationships and a sense of trust between staff and residents.

#### ***4.1.1 Effectiveness of Housing First and Harm Reduction***

The effectiveness of the Housing First model and harm reduction approach was another major factor that was made apparent. Frontline staff and supervisors emphasized that stable housing must come first before recovery or future planning. Living in survival mode prevents people from focusing on improving themselves, and housing is a human right. Harm reduction was recognized as a more realistic and effective approach in comparison to abstinence-first models. This is because it allows residents to ask for help without the fear of judgement or pressure. Participants noted that this adaptability often resulted in higher motivation and long term positive change. Participants also highlighted that SHOW functions as a 24/7 support model, which allows for continuous care and is essential for ensuring housing stability for individuals with complex needs. Supervisory participants further explained that their approach to the housing model contributes to extremely low returns to homelessness among residents, which reinforces the idea that long-term stability is a key indicator of success.

### ***4.1.2 Stigma***

Stigma was found to be a huge barrier on multiple levels. Participants expressed that stigma persists across institutions, such as healthcare, as well as the broader public and even amongst residents themselves, depending on age and lived experience. Misconceptions about supportive housing are fueled by this stigma, which has a major impact on how residents are treated both inside and outside of the housing environment. Participants in the study also revealed that a lack of awareness and comprehension of supportive housing models frequently results in the program being misrepresented or undervalued. Participants also mentioned that communicating the principles of supportive housing to different audiences can be challenging, specifically when discussing harm reduction. In order to prevent misunderstanding or resistance, the message requires adaptation on its delivery.

### ***4.1.3. Challenges of Front-line Work***

Another key theme was the challenging nature of front-line work, specifically in relation to single-staffing, high-emotional demands, and the need to manage several tasks at once. Participants described the work as often feeling overwhelming and under-recognized in the community. They also portrayed the line of work as requiring strong communication skills, adaptability, and crisis response. Despite these challenges, participants highlight the rewarding aspects of the job, specifically seeing tenant progress. A strong team environment and internal support among staff were also identified as important factors for sustaining this work.

### ***4.1.4. Redefining Successes in Supportive Housing***

Additionally, both groups emphasized the need for success in supportive housing to be redefined. Traditional measures of success like independence or abstinence were not seen as an adequate reflection for the work that SHOW does. Participants stressed the importance of

highlighting “small wins”, like building trust, maintaining housing stability, and engaging with supports and other residents. Even though these results show that the program is successful, supervisory participants claim that it is challenging to measure success using traditional metrics, such as the number of people housed or number of people who have transitioned out of supportive housing. Participants also highlighted that supportive housing at SHOW contributes to broader system-level impacts, including reducing the reliance on emergency services, but these outcomes can be difficult to quantify. This makes it challenging to communicate program impact to funders and stakeholders. Participants also disclosed that there is often an ethical dilemma in communicating the impact of SHOW, which emphasized the need to balance storytelling with respect for resident autonomy in order to avoid exploiting residents' stories for funding purposes.

#### ***4.1.5 Significance of Integrated On-site Supports***

Another important piece of the supportive housing approach is the significance of integrated on-site supports. Participants shared that having access to services like daily programming, mental health support, and healthcare inside the housing environment reduces barriers and increases engagement. This is especially important with residents who have more complex needs or mobility issues. Participants also emphasized the importance of wraparound services and coordination between various community organizations to make certain that residents are receiving comprehensive care catered to their specific needs. Social engagement and connection were also found to be essential elements of stability. Participants shared that a lack of connection can lead to heightened vulnerability and regression. This was very clear during periods of isolation, like the COVID-19 pandemic. This period of time demonstrated the negative impact on resident well-being that reduced social interaction had. Participants stressed

that these services contribute to rebuilding a sense of community, which is essential for long term stability and reducing isolation. Community-building initiatives, such as shared meals and social activities, were described as important strategies for gradually engaging residents comfortably. These initiatives also help residents in re-learning daily life skills and reintegrating into the community. Some participants also noted that residents may also experience feelings of loss and guilt when transitioning off of street-based communities, which shows that this process is complex in nature.

#### ***4.1.6 Value in Lived Experience***

The value of lived experience was highlighted as an important factor when working with residents, in order to build trust and credibility. Frontline participants shared that at times when it is appropriate, sharing lived experience helps build connections and break down barriers, sometimes in a more successful manner than formal schooling alone. Participants also advised that trust is often built with specific staff members rather than the organization as a whole, making staff retention and consistency crucial, as staff turnover can have a significant negative impact on residents and can re-traumatize individuals by triggering feelings of abandonment. Participants emphasized the importance of maintaining a humanizing approach, where residents are treated as individuals and not cases, and proper care measures are taken to ensure they don't feel observed or exploited.

The results revealed that supportive housing is a relationship-based model that prioritizes trust, stability, and long term support. While SHOW's impact is significant and often life-saving, it remains difficult to measure and is often under-recognized due to stigma, structural barriers, and limitations in traditional evaluation frameworks.

## 4.2 Discussions

The findings from this study help answer the research question by identifying key markers of success in supportive housing from the perspectives of SHOW employees. Rather than defining success through traditional outcomes such as refraining from drug use or finding independence, the results suggest that success is better understood through relationship building, housing stability and gradual engagement with support. This shows that supportive housing works on a more individualized and long-term model of success that reflects the complex needs of residents. These findings can be understood through the theoretical frameworks outlined in the literature review, particularly Social Disorganization Theory and Strain Theory. The emphasis on relationship building and housing stability reflects key aspects of Social Disorganization Theory, which highlights the importance of stable environments and strong connections in promoting positive outcomes (McLeod, 2025). This suggests that the stability provided through supportive housing helps rebuild weakened social structures and community connections, which are often disrupted by homelessness. Within SHOW's supportive housing model, the provision of permanent housing and consistent support from staff helps rebuild these social connections and create a sense of stability that is often missing for individuals experiencing homelessness. This aligns with the Strain Theory, as many residents face ongoing structural barriers such as poverty, mental health challenges, and limited access to opportunities. Rather than defining success through immediate independence or abstinence, SHOW's approach reduces this strain by prioritizing housing and allowing individuals to progress at their own pace. This demonstrates how supportive housing can lessen the pressure associated with unmet societal expectations by providing the resources and support needed to work toward stability. The focus on small,

incremental successes demonstrates how reducing pressure and providing consistent support can help individuals work toward stability over time (Nickerson, 2025).

#### *4.2.1 Individualized Treatment*

Mental health treatment has recently been shifting focus away from diagnosable disability and moving towards recovery (Eads et al., 2021, p. 890). Recovery incorporates more of a broad view of mental health experiences, looking to aspects that go well beyond the traditional views on mental health (Eads et al., 2021, p. 890). These extended aspects include the “small wins” that are challenging to articulate. The shift towards recovery highlights the need to consider the small wins, and challenges the traditional approaches and measurements of success. Past qualitative research has shown that traditional mental health labels do not capture uniqueness, hopes for a life of sustained recovery, and that recovery goes beyond the framework of “diagnose and treat” and extends to the deeper meaning of their whole self (Eads et al., 2021, p. 902). Individualized treatment does not work with generalized quantitative information as it cannot address uniqueness. A focus on recovery highlights the need to redefine traditional measurements of mental health successes, which was reinforced by results in this study. Success factors should include the unique and holistic needs of an individual (Eads et al., 2021, p. 902). This study shows that it is challenging to articulate the small wins found in supportive housing when examining the benefits through a treatment lens. There are extensive benefits to SHOW’s supportive housing program which promotes individualized recovery. They are challenging to articulate as these successes exist beyond the scope of mental health treatment.

Individualized treatment is a process that incorporates hope, meaning in life, and a redefined sense of identity (Eads et al., 2021, p. 902). This process aligns with the literature in the study. Social disorganization theory highlights the importance of stable, connected

communities to promote positive social outcomes (McLeod, 2025). These aspects of social disorganization theory promote recovery in individualized treatment. These strengthened social ties increase hope, meaning in life, and strengthen a sense of identity. This study shows that small wins such as residents connecting with staff or other residents has been viewed as a critical success for some hard-to-reach residents in their recovery.

Strain theory's focus on individualized pressure to achieve goals while lacking resources to achieve them also aligns well with individualized treatment (Nickerson, 2025). Because mental health challenges can act as a barrier to success, there is often a pressure to treat it. However, research on individualized treatment noted that some participants saw their mental health symptoms to be a form of healing that they rely on, rather than it being a disorder to be controlled (Eads et al., 2021, p. 902). Individualized treatments work with the unique needs of people, which may include reliance on mental health or even substance use. Harm reduction principles used by SHOW are integrated to relieve some of the pressures their residents face. Conditional services, such as abstinence requirements, may fuel individual pressures in vulnerable people. Individual treatment plans, such as harm reduction and supportive housing, reduce the pressures for vulnerable people, making recovery more appealing, approachable, and reducing the risks to deviant behaviour.

#### ***4.2.2 Trust and Rapport***

One of the most significant findings was the importance of trust and rapport between staff and residents. This shows that supportive housing is fundamentally relationship-based, where meaningful progress depends on the strengths of these connections. Residents who have experienced trauma or systemic failures may take time to build trust, but once settled it allows for openness and engagement with services. This aligns with the literature that emphasizes the

role of stability and social connection in improving outcomes for individuals experiencing homelessness (Crisanti et al., 2021).

#### ***4.2.3 Housing First Model and Harm Reduction***

The findings also support the effectiveness of the Housing First model and harm reduction approach. Participants emphasized that individuals are unable to focus on recovery or long term goals while they are still in survival mode. This suggests that providing stable housing first creates a foundation for improvement, reinforcing the idea that housing is a basic necessity, rather than something that must be earned. This is consistent with research showing that supportive housing increases housing stability and overall well being when combined with integrated supports (Aubry et al., 2020).

Examining the benefits of a housing first model through the strain theory, there are a lot of benefits to this type of support. Strain theory highlights the gap between social expectations and accessibility, which creates strain that risks adopting unhealthy strategies such as deviant or survival-based behaviours to meet their needs (Nickerson, 2025). Supportive housing bridges this gap by providing basic needs to their tenants. Once basic needs are met, people are able to shift focus from survival into planning for the future. This helps to eliminate strain which contributes to a safer community. SHOW believes that housing is a right. This belief is reinforced when examining social issues through strain theory and incorporating the benefits of supportive housing.

#### ***4.2.4 Peer Support in Supportive Housing***

Another important finding was the role of social connection and peer support within supportive housing environments. The results show that supportive housing is not only about providing physical shelter, but also about creating a sense of community. When residents

experience stronger connections with others, they are more likely to feel supported and stable, while isolation can make it harder to maintain progress. Residents with a stronger sense of belonging within supportive housing experienced better mental health, greater engagement with services and improved housing stability (Crisanti et al., 2021).

The benefits of peer support are reinforced through social disorganization theory. Weakened social structures and limited community bonds create environments where communities struggle to maintain social order (McLeod, 2025). The ability to strengthen social bonds and establish a sense of belonging in the community creates a powerful change to those experiencing homelessness. SHOW's unique permanent supportive housing model gives the opportunity for tenants to connect with other residents and staff members and build relationships at their own pace. Housing permanence allows for long-term relationship building which leads to creating and maintaining powerful social protective factors for tenants.

#### ***4.2.5 Redefining Success in Supportive Housing***

The findings further suggest that success in supportive housing must be redefined. Traditional measures of success, such as abstinence or complete independence, do not fully show the progress being made by residents. Instead the small wins were emphasized, including maintaining housing, building trust, and engaging with services. This highlights a disconnect between how success is typically measured by external stakeholders and how it is experienced within supportive housing programs.

#### ***4.2.6 Stigma***

Stigma toward residents of SHOW was also identified as a significant barrier, affecting both residents and the perception of supportive housing within the broader community. This shows that negative attitudes and misconceptions continue to influence how these programs are

understood and supported. These findings are shown to be consistent with literature on stigmatization and NIMBYism. Public attitudes towards homelessness can shape community responses and limit support for housing initiatives (Webb & Dej, 2024).

As outlined in the literature review, stigma is harmful. It is often internalized, which contributes to low-esteem, self efficacy and social withdrawal (Mejia-Lancheros et al., 2021). This study has found that despite being housed, tenants still face threats from external and internal stigma. When tenants provide their address, community or public supports may recognize that it is supportive housing, which can lead to stigmatized discrimination. This behaviour compromises the tenant's negative liberties, their freedom against interference of others (Webb & Dej., 2024). Supportive housing seeks to eliminate stigma to those experiencing homelessness. External groups still continue to stigmatize the population despite their improved living conditions. The ability to articulate successes in supportive housing can help reduce these barriers. Simply housing people will not eliminate the stigma they face.

The findings demonstrate that from the perspectives of SHOW employees, key markers of success include trust and rapport, housing stability, social connection, engagement with support, access to integrated services, and recognition of small incremental progress. This study shows that supportive housing is a complex, relationship based model that focuses on stability, trust, and individual gradual progress instead of fast quantitative data.

## Chapter 5: Future Directions/Conclusions

### 5.0 Limitations

There were various limitations in this study that could have affected the findings. The lack of participation was a key limitation for this study, as only a limited number of individuals were able to take part in the focus groups. This could have been due to scheduling conflicts, which is a difficult task given the shift-work nature of employment at SHOW. Due to the small sample size, the findings may not be generalizable to other supportive housing contexts (Robinson, 2025, week 4).

Additionally, the study did not include resident perspectives, therefore the ability to capture the lived experience of residents at SHOW was limited. Qualitative analysis also presented limitations. Focus group discussions produced various interpretations, and different team members highlighted different aspects of the focus groups, which could have introduced a bias into how the data was coded and analyzed (Robinson, 2025, week 4).

Collecting that amount of qualitative data also presented challenges, specifically since this was our first time as researchers facilitating a study of this size and collecting, transcribing, and coding data. As this study was a qualitative research study, the transcripts, notes and information gathered from the focus group generated a large amount of text information to analyze, which increased the risk of missing elements or misinterpreting details (Robinson, 2025, week 4).

Looking at ethical considerations, participant confidentiality was a large aspect that was considered. Consent from participants was obtained and the confidentiality guidelines were clearly outlined, however, due to the nature of focus groups, confidentiality could not be fully

guaranteed. This could have had an impact on how participants chose to share their experiences and thoughts during the focus group discussions.

Steps were taken to lessen the impact of these limitations in order to address them. To ensure accuracy and consistency in data coding and interpretation, our team conducted regular check-ins. The focus group moderator facilitated the conversation and asked pre-determined questions to make sure all participants had a chance to contribute to the discussion. While this took place, the second researcher took detailed notes in order to confirm that the transcription from the audio recording was accurate and limited any potential errors. Given that the focus groups were conducted over Microsoft Teams and that online transcriptions can produce errors, especially with multiple participants potentially speaking at once, this step was crucial to our study. To ensure accuracy and security, the focus group data was carefully organized and securely stored in OneDrive.

## **5.1 Recommendations**

Due to the scope of this study, data was collected from both frontline workers and supervisory staff, but did not include the perspectives of residents currently living in supportive housing at SHOW. Future researchers may decide to collect data directly from residents in order to gain perspective of their lived experiences, how they view support, and definitions of success within supportive housing. By incorporating residents' voices, this would provide a more comprehensive understanding of program impact and help ensure that the findings are reflective of those directly affected.

Secondly, it is recommended that future research further explore methods of measuring success within supportive housing. Participants in this study identified significant challenges that SHOW has when quantitative measures and statistics, such as number of individuals housed or

transitioned out of housing programs. Future researchers may build on these findings by developing and testing alternative evaluation methods that can better capture the long-term stability and trust-building process that SHOW offers, and improve how program outcomes are communicated to funders.

In addition, future research should examine strategies to support staff retention and consistency within supportive housing environments. Findings from this study highlighted the negative impact of staff turnover on residents, particularly in terms of trust and re-traumatization. By further exploring workplace supports, team dynamics, and organizational practices, it may help identify ways to improve staff stability and the overall effectiveness of supportive housing.

It is also recommended that future researchers expand on the role of community-building and social connection within supportive housing. This study identified social interaction as a key component of resident stability, and future research could explore this through specific programs (e.g., group activities, shared meals, etc) and how they contribute to engagement, well-being, and long-term outcomes.

Another recommendation is for future researchers to further explore public perceptions and the stigma that surrounds supportive housing and harm reduction models. Participants noted that misunderstanding and stigma remain significant barriers when speaking to the public about SHOW. Further research in this could help identify effective communication and education strategies to improve public awareness and support for these programs.

Lastly, future researchers should continue exploring the broader impacts of supportive housing, particularly in relation to system-level outcomes, such as reduced reliance on emergency services and healthcare systems. This could also help examine how funding structures and resource distribution can better support the long-term, relationship-based nature of

SHOW. By collecting data in this area, it may strengthen advocacy efforts and support the expansion of supportive housing initiatives.

Overall, these recommendations aim to build on the findings of this study by addressing the existing gaps and supporting the continued development of supportive housing models that prioritize long-term well-being, stability, and trust.

## **5.2 Conclusion**

The findings from this study have highlighted a variety of key themes from the viewpoints of SHOW employees. Through gathering staff perspectives regarding the key markers of success at SHOW, this study was able to collect insights into the complex, relationship-centered model that supportive housing creates. These benefits are not always captured in traditional statistics and data-driven research. The intention of this research study was to highlight and underline the commendable work that SHOW does for the residents that live in their facilities. They create trust, community and scaffold support around their residents in a way that allows them to thrive.

The results of this study show that there is a need to redefine success when it comes to helping individuals experiencing homelessness. This would reduce overreliance on traditional statistics based on a person obtaining and maintaining their own housing, but would instead focus on looking at the small, incremental wins SHOW residents experience. Less tangible success in the world of individuals experiencing homelessness would allow for the general public to better appreciate the vital role supportive housing could have in reducing the population of individuals facing homelessness.

This type of housing, coupled with wrap-around supports requires more resources, for a longer period. That said, for the people that reside at SHOW facilities, this support will continue

to be necessary for the long-term. Though they may not fit within the general public's standard of “self-sufficient”, if they are in SHOW residences it means they are housed. They are instead in a supportive community of their peers, being cared for by SHOW employees. The SHOW employees who participated in this study showed they truly value their position, and work to help build rapport and trust with their residents.

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## Appendix A: Recruitment Email

Dear SHOW staff,

Our research project is focused on exploring the work of supportive housing through staff insights. To help convey what supportive housing is, and the important work SHOW does, we would like to hear your perspectives as staff. .

Why should you participate?

This is a community-based project collaborating with SHOW and a team of students from Conestoga College. This project aims to explore the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of supportive housing, as highlighted by SHOW's work.

It is an opportunity to voice your opinions either positively or negatively on the work and the limitations of the work supportive housing may offer..

What does it look like?

It will be a 1-hour online discussion with the research team and your colleagues. The research team will introduce a question. Afterwards, we invite everyone to speak their thoughts on the subject. By being in groups, you can build off each other’s ideas.. We will be asking (#) of questions in the discussion session.

Do you need to participate?

No, and you will not be penalized for choosing to do so. All participation is entirely voluntary.

Is it safe to share my opinions?

Yes, as our research team will keep your input confidential. There's been a lot of consideration of risks to participants when designing the project. We have also grouped staff members in environments with colleagues. Management will not be asked to attend online discussions with front line staff, and we will not share who participated in the discussions.

What if I change my mind?

No problem! In that case, we would erase all your data. You're welcome to change your mind at any point, including during the online meeting.

How do I participate?

Please email: [abell0710@conestogac.on.ca](mailto:abell0710@conestogac.on.ca) with your signed consent form (attached to this email). Afterwards, we will reply to that email with a Microsoft Teams meeting link.

If you have any questions, please email us using the same email address. We have attached the consent form, a simplified one, and the questions to help you prepare.

We hope to hear from you. Thank you for your interest in this project. Once again, your feedback and participation are important for the success of this project. We believe it to be worth your time as this research will benefit SHOW.

## **Appendix B: Consent Form**

Date: January, 2026

Project Title: Staff Insights: A Descriptive Approach to Professional Perspectives on Supportive Housing

Principal Investigator: Jennifer Robinson, Bachelor of Community and Criminal Justice (Honours), Conestoga College, jrobinson@conestogac.on.ca

Students Investigators: Megan Wilson (mwilson1733@conestogac.on.ca), Andrew Bell (abell0710@conestogac.on.ca), Cindy Rudowski (crudowski7952@conestogac.on.ca), Veronica Taylor (vtaylor2700@conestogac.on.ca, & Gregory Baars (gbaars6661@conestogac.on.ca) Bachelor of Community and Criminal Justice (Honours), Conestoga College

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to provide a clear and accessible understanding of what SHOW does, how it operates, and the impact it has on the community. Although permanent supportive housing is increasingly viewed as an essential response to homelessness in Ontario, there is limited information available to donors, investors, and other stakeholders about the specific outcomes of individual programs and the features they value most. This study will identify staff-observed markers of success to help better understand and communicate the impact of its work in the Region of Waterloo.

### **STUDY PROCEDURE**

Participants will be taking part in a focus group. Researchers will transcribe the focus group during focus group times. Following the focus groups, collected information will be analyzed to identify key themes and insights.

### **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Participants may decline to answer or participate in any part of the study if they wish. Participants are free to withdraw from the study at any point free from penalty. However, please note that once data has been collected and included in the study's final analysis, we cannot guarantee the removal of individual responses. In the case that you would like to be removed from any future publications or presentations please reach out to the principal investigator immediately. The right to revoke consent can be done at any time. Upon revoked consent, any information with their coded identifiers will be deleted after transcripts have been finalized and focus group recording is deleted.

#### BENEFITS AND RISKS

The anticipated benefit of participation in this study is that participants will have the opportunity to share their perspectives on resident progress and supportive housing outcomes. Findings may help SHOW strengthen impact reporting, funding applications, and communication with stakeholders. Risks for this study are very minimal but may include mild discomfort when discussing workplace experiences. There is a psychological risk when recalling past experiences of working with vulnerable populations. SHOW staff will be sharing their experiences with residents, whose present behaviors, or traumatic histories, can risk psychological harm in participants as they share their perspectives during the focus groups.

Confidentiality measures and are in place to reduce any social risks. Voluntary participation and rights to withdraw consent or the right to not answer a question act as protective factors against any psychological risks.

#### CONFIDENTIALITY

SHOW will be identified as the participating organization, however individual participants will not be identified in any reports or publications. All focus group data will be stored in a

Conestoga shared OneDrive. Only the principal investigator, faculty co-investigator, and student investigators will have access to the password protected OneDrive folder. Data collected in this folder will remain for the standard 7 years after completion managed by Principle Investigator: Jennifer Robinson.

#### CONTACT INFORMATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE

If you have any questions regarding the nature of this project or require additional information, please contact the student investigators, using the contact information attached to this letter.

This project has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board at Conestoga College. If you have any concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Conestoga REB Coordinator at rebcoordinator@conestogac.on.ca

Having read the Information Letter containing the details regarding this study:

I agree to participate in the research project Informing Understanding of Supportive Housing of Waterloo conducted by principal investigator Jennifer Robinson, and student investigators, Megan Wilson, Andrew Bell, Cindy Rudowski, Veronica Taylor and Gregory Baars, associated with Conestoga College. By signing this consent form I agree to the following:

- I have read and clearly understand the information provided in the Information Letter
- I voluntarily agree to participate in this study
- I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time, free from penalty
- I understand that the research team will take all precautions in protecting my privacy and confidentiality

#### FUTURE RESEARCH

Do you consent to the use of your de-identified data for future research projects? Y/N:

Participant Name : \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix C: Simplified Consent Form**

You're Invited to Share Your Insights!

Project Title: Staff Insights: Understanding the Impacts of Supportive Housing

Date: To Be Determined

Student Researchers:

Megan Wilson (mwilson1733@conestogac.on.ca), Veronica Taylor

(vtaylor2700@conestogac.on.ca), Greg Baars (gbaars6661@conestogac.on.ca), Andrew Bell

(abell0710@conestogac.on.ca), & Cindy Rudowski (crudowski7952@conestogac.on.ca) -

Bachelor of Community and Criminal Justice (Honours), Conestoga College

Why Are We Doing This?

We want to better understand and highlight the amazing work SHOW does every day.

Supportive housing plays a vital role in addressing homelessness in Ontario, but so many funders, community members, and stakeholders don't always see the full picture. This project aims to capture your professional insights about:

- What makes SHOW successful
- How supportive housing truly impacts residents
- What outcomes matter most from a staff perspective

Your knowledge and experiences will help tell SHOW's story in a meaningful and impactful way.

What Would Participation Look Like?

You would take part in a small focus group discussion where you can share your thoughts and experiences.

- The session will be transcribed (written out) for analysis

- We will review responses to identify key themes and insights
- The focus will be on understanding patterns, not evaluating individual staff members

#### Your Participation is Completely Voluntary

- You can choose whether or not you participate
- You can skip any questions you don't want to answer
- You can withdraw at any time without penalty
- If you withdraw before transcripts are finalized, your coded data will be removed

Please note that once findings are fully analyzed and included in the final reporting, we cannot guarantee removal of specific individual responses.

#### Benefits and Possible Risks

##### Benefits:

- Opportunity to share your professional perspective
- Contribute to stronger impact reporting and funding applications
- Help SHOW better communicate its success to the community

##### Risks:

- Minimal risk
- Some topics may cause mild discomfort when discussing workplace experiences
- Confidentiality safeguards are in place to reduce risks

#### Confidentiality

- SHOW will be named as the participating organization
- Individual staff members will not be identified in any reports or presentations
- Data will be securely stored on a password-protected Conestoga OneDrive

- Only the research team will have access
- Data will be retained for seven years as required by research guidelines

Questions?

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact:

Andrew Bell

Email: [abell0710@conestogac.on.ca](mailto:abell0710@conestogac.on.ca)

Consent

By signing below, you confirm that:

- You have read and understood this information
- You voluntarily agree to participate
- You understand you can withdraw at any time without penalty
- You understand that confidentiality measures will be taken to protect your privacy

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Please RSVP by completing this form by Monday, February 23, 2026

### **Appendix D: Focus Group Questions**

1. Are you full time or part time? How long have you worked with SHOW? And what made you want to work with SHOW?
2. What characteristics of SHOW's housing program do you consider most important? Why?
3. Are there any impacts of SHOW's work that you feel are under-recognized?
4. What parts of the program do you find are the most important in understanding what SHOW does for its residents? (offer clarity to this question - who are you seeking understanding from?)
5. What challenges do you see SHOW facing when demonstrating its impacts to the public?
6. Is there anything else that you would like to mention that we haven't yet discussed?