



# **Negotiating Homelessness: Voices from Streets to Homes**

## **RESEARCH**

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**The Streets to Homes Follow-up Support to Immigrants and Refugees Program  
as delivered by COSTI Immigrant Services**

**Written By Princie Sibanda,  
BSc (Hons) Econ, Cert Mgt, MPL  
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**Canada**



## **WE BELIEVE**

“Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of him/herself and of his/her family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his/her control.”

THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS – ART. 25-1

## **About the author**

Princie Sibanda is a Social Planner and a graduate from Queens University School of Urban and Regional Planning. He has worked in international development field for almost a decade and has been a front line community worker for years, most recently as Settlement Services and Humanitarian Issues Program Coordinator at the Canadian Red Cross. He currently does private social planning consulting. Contact him at [princiebm@hotmail.com](mailto:princiebm@hotmail.com).

©COSTI Immigrant Services  
North York Housing Help  
1700 Wilson Avenue • Suite 114  
M3L 1B2 P.O. Box 88  
Toronto - Ontario  
Phone 416.244.0480 • Fax 416.244.0379  
[www.costi.org](http://www.costi.org)

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# Negotiating Homelessness: Voices from Streets to Homes

## Objectives

Active client involvement in housing service delivery is relatively novel; in particular, the involvement of homeless immigrants and refugees living in socially and economically deprived areas is still unusual.

This report sought to achieve 2 main objectives:

1. Research the Streets to Home program as delivered by COSTI Immigrant Services to contribute to a wider understanding of future preventative initiatives that can reduce incidents of homelessness and build stronger settlement support services to a population that has compound barriers.
2. Undertake a review of literature on the obstacles frequently encountered by refugees and immigrants in the Streets to Homes program (COSTI component) and make recommendations on how these can be used to inform policy.

This study explores the views of immigrants and refugees, how they negotiated their way from homelessness. Why “negotiated”? The use of the term is deliberate. It seemed from my interviews with the sample of homeless immigrants and refugees that I talked to that they considered themselves constantly under scrutiny because of their status and had nowhere to turn to because they had no friends or community supports to turn to. While this is often the case with this population group, it was striking that none of

them directly attributed all their failure on the system, but there seemed to be a sense of frustration with self and their ignorance of how the system works. It was as if they took personal responsibility for not knowing what they could have done to prevent their being homeless to start with.

## Design

To achieve these 2 objectives, staff from COSTI's Streets to Homes program was interviewed, and staff identified clients who spoke at least a conversational level of English. All clients who were willing to participate were interviewed. Interviews using a topic guide (**Appendix I**) were carried out with 5 immigrants/refugees (current active clients). Their views on their active involvement with the immigration system, housing services in Toronto and working with COSTI Immigrant Services are presented here.

## Results

The service provider in this study did not view themselves as teaching the immigrants and refugees on how to settle in a new country but considered their role to be more that of partnership, explanation and sharing. They considered that clients themselves were the ‘best judges’ of certain aspects of their immigrant and housing experiences and only through an understanding of these aspects could a service provider offer a holistic service. As Georgia Williams, a housing worker with the Street to Homes program at COSTI notes, “When immigrants and refugees fall through the cracks in the housing sector and become homeless, it’s never one thing. There are a lot of issues that may involve identity, documentation, the law, language barriers and so forth. Active client involvement in their housing trajectory is essential to ensuring they remain housed”. Client involvement requires an appreciation and understanding of the immigrant’s prior experiences. Clients interviewed in this research considered their social, psychological and behavioural issues in Canada to be as important as their housing needs. The interviewees also raised issues concerning the importance of service providers listening to new immigrants and refugees.

## Conclusion

This study showed that homeless immigrants and refugees considered their personal experience and knowledge of their history to be an important aspect of the housing service provider's learning which should be translated into programming. They were happy to share this knowledge and keen to emphasise the importance of having their voices heard. The challenge for housing providers and general settlement workers is to ensure that this is achieved through a continuous recognition and training of housing service providers on cultural competency. Organisations like COSTI Immigrant Services have to be innovative in handling the needs of an increasingly different immigration and refugee population than existed three decades ago. This paper also recommends a conceptual model, built around the concept of *'ubuntu'* (African philosophy of human relations) and discusses its relevance to housing research. The nature of housing attachments to ubuntu is examined through the lens of similar work by Stanlake Samkange (1980) and Hazel Easthorpe (2004). The paper then continues with an outline of the importance of the concept of *'ubuntu'* for housing researchers and concludes with some suggestions for program modifications and policy recommendations. While discussions about *'ubuntu'* have been a key preoccupation of conflict resolution specialists for some decades, housing researchers have barely touched on the subject. Yet, at this juncture - a time of increasing immigration, expanding xenophobia and increasing homelessness among new immigrants and refugees in Canada - the



importance of the concept of *ubuntu* for housing researchers must come to the fore. The literature on '*ubuntu*', especially the literature which sees '*ubuntu*' as a particularly significant type of rendering 'home', provides insight into the relationship between places and people's sense of belonging; the dynamics of confrontation with new culture in immigrant hosting countries; and the socialization of homelessness. It also points to the need for a more integrated approach to housing research that looks beyond the scale of the individual to household, to community, and to the international scale. This report concludes that immigrant and refugee homelessness is inextricably linked to structural social forces and the reasons for their flight from their home countries, and unless these issues are addressed in service provision, housing hard-to-house immigrants and refugees will continue to be an elusive goal.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Through SHIFT, the Government of Canada's Homelessness Partnership Initiative, the United Way Toronto and the City of Toronto have shown the importance of learning from experience. It is a great opportunity to test and improve our ideas in practice by working with people who can make change happen. The collaborative experience that COSTI has enjoyed with the SHIFT team on providing funding for this project is the kind of innovation urgently needed to bring about a change in the lives of homeless immigrants and refugees in our cities. It supports the creation and sharing of new approaches to old problems. Using the results demonstrated in this research funded through SHIFT, we hope to strengthen the scope for input from service users and strengthen the ability of frontline housing staff to be sources of innovation and collaboration. Working with SHIFT staff has refocused our understanding of innovation. Rather than simply driving change through new processes, better technology and the imposition of good practice from above, we need increasingly to look to the everyday interactions between people and public services for new ideas. Community agencies need to move from a model based on predicting needs and producing plans to meet them, to one based on meeting needs in real time through participation and listening to the voice of the client. If best practices in delivering housing services to homeless immigrant and refugees, like the ones at COSTI remain invisible, isolated and unquantified, it will be impossible to construct a coherent policy agenda for supporting, sustaining and investing in such hidden work. Our utmost appreciation goes to the City Street to Homes staff for their cooperation.

## Introduction

This research offers an insight into the hearts and voices of those immigrants and refugees who have been on the streets and experienced homelessness. Many social scientists have theorized on why people, including immigrants and refugees, end up on the streets but many of them have provided a view from the position of conservationist in our dilemma, which ignores a homeless immigrant perspective. It is generally argued that gaining authentic access to immigrant and similar type of communities that have developed a self-protective insularity is essential if we are to gather evidence that accurately reflect the actual beliefs, feelings and experiences of community members [Spiegel et al, 2007]. Our goal is to add to the body of knowledge on homelessness by focusing on the voices of the immigrants and refugees themselves; how they perceive their situation, the reasons for their flight to Canada, the stresses they face, their coping strategies and their perceptions on housing service providers in the Greater Toronto Area. The immigrants profiled here are some of the most under-researched. They do not, for the most part, have the usual problems of academic credentials not being recognized because, save for one of the interviewees, they do not possess university type of credentials. Their stories are those of the average person trying to work hard and make a living in a new country with myriad challenges associated with being an immigrant or a refugee. Hearing their voices not only completes our understanding of their situation but also enables us to better serve their needs. How did these immigrants

and refugees become homeless? What is it about their prior immigration experience that continues to influence their housing situation in Canada? Do their housing choices depend on the nature or type of service provider? How do they cope with the daily necessities of food, clothing and health care? What do they think of housing services and community agencies? Hidden in their answers to these and other questions is the answer to the core question of whether immigrant and refugee homelessness can be mitigated and if so, how. By listening to the voices of former homeless immigrants and refugees who have gone through the Streets to Homes program, we can begin to reflect on their life experiences and find means of bridging the gaps in service provision for this population group.

## Toronto's Streets to Homes Program

Toronto's Street to Homes program was started in 2005 as a pilot project to move hard-to-house people into permanent housing directly from the streets. This is a departure from the entrenched North American tradition of a "treatment first" approach to housing. The treatment first approach involves the service provider making judgments on the homeless person's "housing readiness." According to Nick Falvo (2008) the assessment continues as the person progresses from emergency shelter to transitional housing to permanent housing with few if any supports. To reach this goal, the person must generally abstain from drugs and alcohol and in some cases take physician-prescribed psychotropic medication. Noncompliance with any of the conditions can result in a delay in the transition or expulsion altogether.

For many homeless people, the conditions in the "treatment first" model have been described as onerous and unrealistic at best. Critics have also queried whether these conditions in fact constitute a good litmus test for housing readiness. Despite growing evidence that this approach to housing, training and reintegrating the homeless fails to reduce homelessness, it is in fact expanding, informed by two conflicting tendencies (Bill Edgar et al., 2002: 11). The first is the ideology of individualism that requires acceptance of responsibility in return for access to services. The second centers around the debates on the nature of control and discipline.

The first is based on a contract between the service provider and the homeless individual. A homeless migrant shows up at a shelter and signs a contract, rarely negotiated, and becomes responsible for their “normalisation”, their integration into mainstream society (particular attributes that make this a less viable option for refugees/immigrants include the psycho-social effects of trauma in some cases). They conform by learning the principles of regulation, time management, meal times, curfew hours and accepted social behaviour (which may be foreign to most newcomers to Canada). The second, as a condition of being housed, they are “colonised”. This view is based on the understanding of societal power structures and processes that oppress and colonise individuals. The lack of involvement of the homeless in the design and operation of services creates the conditions for resistance in which the notions of normalisation and reintegration can, potentially, be challenged and reformulated (Foucault, 1979). As one of the participants in this study pointed out, they felt better living in the streets than at a homeless shelter.

Out of the criticisms of this approach has grown a new model, “Housing First”, which provides the homeless person with immediate access to permanent housing. Unlike the “treatment first,” this approach does not involve 24-hour, onsite staffing, although staff periodically visit participants at their homes and offer support services.



The City of Toronto's Streets to Homes program focuses on ending, rather than managing street homelessness. It has been operating since February 2005 and has so far housed more than 1,200 people directly from the street. The primary mandate of Toronto's Streets to Homes program as an alternative to the "treatment first" approach is to serve homeless people who live outdoors. This includes individuals "who live in parks, ravines, under bridges, on sidewalks, laneways, alleys, stairways, building alcoves, squats and living in vehicles". Streets to Homes works one-on-one with homeless individuals to create individualized housing plans that respect clients' personal preferences and autonomy.

Only three rules apply to Streets to Homes clients (City of Toronto, 2008).

- Rent gets paid directly to the landlord
- Clients must agree to follow-up supports once housed
- Clients must fill out a form for social housing. This is critical because most clients are initially moved to private units which cost more than 30% of their income.

Streets to Homes has brought together a number of community agencies, healthcare workers, non-profit and private sector landlords who previously may not have worked together, in an effort to end homelessness in Toronto. COSTI Immigrant Services is one such agency that the Streets to Homes works with. COSTI's role is to provide follow-up services to the immigrant and refugee client base that comes through the program. This is the way the program works: City of Toronto staff, working with Streets to Homes

program negotiates between tenant and landlord a rental agreement. A housing worker from a community agency like COSTI is then tasked with providing follow-up support services for approximately 12 months, with varying degrees of intensity depending on the client's needs. At the end of the one year period, the individual is expected to be able to live independently or transition into a more appropriate case management service as the case may be. The former homeless individual is therefore both a City of Toronto and a community agency client.

The development of housing programs with community support services is not new. Community organizations dissatisfied with the services and activities proposed by the non-profit and the private sectors took it upon themselves to explore alternative ways to combat the destruction of the social fabric [Bélanger and Lévesque 1992]. This approach to housing services just had not, prior to the Streets to Homes program, been applied to immigrants and refugees as a specific subpopulation in Toronto. What makes this approach also different is that the service users are not necessarily put into social housing, as with previous programs with community support. Housing placements range from non-profit housing, rent-geared to income and even market rent. Keeping the homeless clients housed is therefore a bigger challenge due to potential affordability problems that may arise with this varied range of landlord.

While the narratives below are not indicative of all Streets to Homes clients, this represents commonalities in the shared experiences of refugees and immigrants that came through Streets to Homes and were served by COSTI Immigrant Services.

## **COSTI Immigrant Services and Streets to Homes**

COSTI services are designed to meet the specific needs of clients who face cultural, linguistic and socio-economic barriers to suitable housing. The follow-up support services to immigrants and refugees that come through the Streets to Homes program centers on the client, landlord and community. Being funded as a pilot project at this stage, one of the aims of the program is to dispel myths and raise awareness of the realities that affect immigrants/refugees. It also is striving to contribute to a wider understanding of future preventative initiatives that can reduce incidents of homelessness and build stronger settlement support services to a population that has compound barriers.

## **IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IN CANADA**

According to the Statistics Canada data, as of 2006, there were more than 6.2 million immigrants in Canada, accounting for about a fifth of all households in Canada. 1.1 million new immigrants arrived between 2001 and 2006, up from 276 000 between 1996 and 2001. In the period 2001-2006, immigration was responsible for two-thirds of Canada's population growth. While Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal together housed one third of all Canadian households, they were home to 59.3% of immigrant households and 73.3% of recent immigrant households (CMHC, 2004) in those CMAs. When immigrants arrive in a new country, housing is central to their integration. It acts as a stabilizing factor in having access to the basic necessities of life. Depending on the municipality and the location of that housing within the municipality, it may also determine eligibility to community and social services essential on the early days of arrival.

## Who is a refugee or an immigrant?

The United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees defines a refugee as any person who, owing to a well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his/her nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country. While refugees and immigrants face very similar settlement issues when they arrive in their host communities, there are some important differences which may impact on their housing situation.

- Refugees do not choose to leave their homeland. They flee in response to a crisis. They have little choice about where they go and by what means they will travel, whereas most immigrants tend to choose the timing and the mode of transport of their move.
- Refugees flee in response to a crisis and frequently have no time to pack or to distribute possessions. They are generally traumatized and more ill-prepared than immigrants for settlement in their new host country.
- Refugees often flee without any documentation whatsoever. This may affect their housing options when they initially arrive.

Despite these differences, both immigrants and refugees may experience stigma and prejudice in their resettlement country in relation to cultural differences, disease prevalence, perceived low education levels and perceived burdening of the welfare system. The clients I interviewed occupy the broad range of spectrum of newcomers ranging from asylum seekers, sponsored immigrants and non-status immigrants who regularized their status after arriving in Canada as visitors.

## Challenges in housing immigrants and refugees

The empirical tradition of research taken in this report has as its primary purpose a role to establish facts and to prescribe effective action once problems are acknowledged. A number of problems affecting immigrants and refugees have been identified in numerous studies. These include:

- Language barriers: immigrants and refugees frequently come to Canada with very little or limited spoken English. English spoken in other countries may also have local differences
- Lack of recognition of foreign work experience and academic credentials
- Discrimination based on country of origin and number of years in Canada
- Age and family status, especially with regards to access to housing
- Racism

In this paper I touch on a broad range of challenges faced by immigrants and refugees but group them under the two main themes identified by the interviewees: barriers to employment or economic opportunities and access to housing due to affordability and gate-keeping.

## The Dream of Convergence

Most immigrants come to Canada hoping for a better quality of life. From the highly skilled and educated professional to the seasonal worker in the farm, they all cherish



the North American dream of economic prosperity. While Canada still offers a lot of opportunities for immigrants, these have been diminishing and taking longer to realize. 25 years ago it took 8 years for the average immigrant salary to approach the average for their Canadian born counterpart person, now it takes 15 years to bridge the gap (Baker and Benjamin 1994). A decent job with a living wage is what the participants I talked to needed to help them avoid being on the streets. Even the low paying jobs in construction, cleaning or security were not available to some COSTI Streets to Homes clients prior COSTI intervention. They did not know where to look for information on jobs and sometimes did not get a job until their housing situation deteriorated so much that they found themselves on the streets.

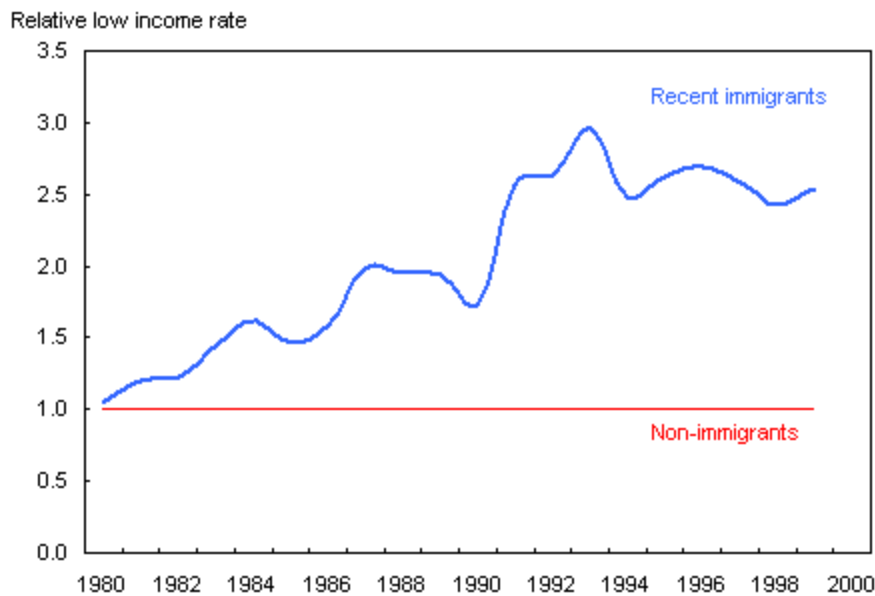
*I did not know anyone, except my wife and she could not help me find housing when we fell out because I did not have a job. A job maybe would have prevented me from being homeless if I had found it sooner. Because of the space and living with 2 grown up kids in a tiny space, we were always fighting with my ex-wife. I didn't know anything or anyone.*

There are some logical explanations. Recent immigrants are entering the labour force at a greater earnings deficit compared to immigrant cohorts than that came a decade ago. However, this is an incomplete picture. The US has a similar “earning gap” at entry point for new immigrants but does not have Canada’s dissimilation rates. Not only has the earnings gap been increasing in Canada but it has also been highly pro-cyclical—immigrants who arrived just before or during the recession in the early 1990s have

experienced higher levels of earnings instability than earlier cohorts (Ostrovsky Yuri 2008). In a study that sought to analyse the convergence rates of immigrant and non-immigrant earnings from 1980 to 2000, researchers discovered that despite an increasing number of university graduates among immigrants, the relative earnings of immigrants did not improve from 1990 to 2000, and the low-income rates among immigrants rose substantially by the end of the decade (Frenette and Morissette 2003). Statistics Canada confirms this trend in its recent study.

**Table 1: Low income rates of recent immigrants**

Low income rate of immigrants living in Canada for 10 years or less (relative to non-immigrants)



Source: Statistics Canada

All the participants interviewed in this study pointed to low or no income as a major contributor to their homelessness situation.

*If I had found a program like the COSTI Streets to Homes sooner, to make me aware of the realities of working in Canada, I might have been better off and maybe not ended on the streets. Odds are stacked against you when you are an immigrant. Even though I was well educated and spoke English and I was willing to work, the biggest challenge was remaining financially stable to survive from day one with very limited resources. I was stressed and developed some insecurity that made it even harder for me to seek help.*

*Service User E*

It is helpful to put this in context. Before 1980, the low income rates for immigrants and non-immigrants were roughly the same. The low income rate rose dramatically for immigrants between 1980 and the mid-1990s, when immigrants were 2.5 to 3 times more likely to have low incomes than non-immigrants. Statistics Canada points a finger at the difficulty in entering the labour market. All other factors, such as language, education, country of origin, number of years in Canada, age and family status, accounted for only about 15% of the rise. Among persons aged 25 to 54 with a university degree, unemployment for recent immigrants has consistently been at least triple the rate for the Canadian—born. In 2001, the rates were 7.4% versus 2.3% for men and 10.5% versus 2.7% for women (Statistics Canada).

Independent researchers however have argued that the country of origin has been a bigger factor than earlier thought (Frenette and Morissette 2003). The increase in

earnings gap and low income rates for recent immigrants has coincided with an observed increase in the number of visible minority immigrants. Even after controlling for individuals' age, experience and level of education, there are some striking differences among highly educated immigrants from different countries. With some exceptions, educated immigrants from Africa, Latin American and Eastern European countries are more likely to end up in unskilled jobs than immigrants from Asia and industrialized European countries (Murdie R.A, 2002, Matto A, 2008, Reitz, 2001 Baker and Benjamin, 1994). In 1971, 61.6% of newcomers to Canada were from Europe. Only 12.1% of newcomers who arrived in the late 1960s were Asian-born. The proportion of Asian-born new immigrants increased to 38.9% in the late 1970s. By the late 1980s, one-half (50.9%) of the newcomers were born in Asia, as recorded in the 1991 Census. As a result of the changing immigrant source countries, the proportion of the foreign-born population who were born in Asia and the Middle East (40.8%) surpassed the proportion born in Europe (36.8%) for the first time in 2006. Increased ethnic, racial or cultural discrimination is therefore possibly related to changing source countries. Formerly, most newcomers came from the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands and Portugal. As Service User E put it:

*Even though I have a degree from the US and have stayed between the US and Canada almost all my life, I have not been able to find a job in my field, or even a low-paying job. Being an immigrant from Africa, a lot of things are stacked against you. You cannot access most government jobs, and in the private sector it's almost as if everyone is against you.*

While coming from South or Southeast Asia increases the probability that a recent immigrant will hold a low-education job, coming from North America, Northern or Western Europe or Oceania reduces this risk considerably. There is not enough data at the moment to analyse systematic discrimination against immigrants from certain countries in the labour market in Canada or how this has changed over time, but there is evidence of ethnic discrimination in society more broadly (Pickcott and Sweetman 2005). It may be that some of these issues (e.g., language or discrimination) are more prevalent among immigrants from the more recent source countries (Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa), and a shift to immigration from these countries has increased the importance of these issues for immigrants as a whole, resulting in a decline in entry level earnings. This shift in the source of immigration to Canada since the 1970s was due to a number of factors, such as changes in Canada's immigration programs to build on social, humanitarian and economic goals, and international events affecting the movements of migrants and refugees (Statistics Canada).

## **The Housing Market for Immigrants and Refugees in Toronto**

Little research has examined the housing pathways of recent immigrants to Canada. Exceptions include a survey of the initial settlement experiences of sixty refugee claimants in Toronto (Junaid, 2002), a City of Toronto study that raised a number of issues concerning access to housing by refugees (City of Toronto Housing Department, 1992), a study of housing obstacles faced by a sample of Kurdish and Somali refugees in Vancouver (Miraftab, 2000), an evaluation of transitional housing provided by Toronto's Romero House (Ryan and Woodill, 2000) and the experiences of Sponsored Refugees and Refugee Claimants in Accessing Permanent Housing in Toronto (R. A. Murdie, 2002).

Lack of affordable housing has been an ongoing trend in Canada. All the participants in this research pointed to lack of affordable housing as the highest contributor to their homelessness. There is after all an intuitive correlation between income and affordability. All the participants in these interviews were in core housing need. In assessing whether a household has a genuine housing need, three standards are normally used:

1. Whether the dwelling needed major repairs.
2. Whether it had enough bedrooms for the size and composition of household members.
3. Whether it cost the household 30% or more of its total before-tax income.

Part of the work of follow-up services for Street to Homes is to help the clients get into social housing. The participants to this report all mentioned being stressed by the high percentage of their total income they spend on rent keeping them at the brink of being homeless again. CMHC Rental Market Survey statistics show that market rents of about three quarters of the units in major cities are higher than shelter allowances for refugees and other low income groups who rely on social assistance. These allowances have not changed for years. As of 2001, CMHC estimated that among renter households, 43.1% of recent immigrants are in core housing need, compared to 26.1% of core housing need in the non-immigrant population.

## Gate Keepers

Immigrants may also be denied access to housing or discriminated against because of their colour, accent, perceived lack of resources and immigration status.

*I would be told that a place had been taken when I appeared and they saw I was a black person. I would have phoned the place and been assured of its availability, but suddenly its gone when they see me. Being a refugee also does not help, in addition to being a person of colour.*

Service User E.

Gatekeeping, as shown below, may take the form of formal or informal processes and systems.

**Table 2: Barriers to housing faced by immigrants and refugees**

		BARRIERS TO HOUSING	
		Formal	Informal
CRITERIA	Overt	Screening for information on criteria (debts, income, evictions and so on)	Discouragement from applying
	Covert	Individual judgements (“you don’t fit in”) (“We’ll call you back”)	Holding back information on vacancies, non-decisions

Source: Adapted from Sahlin 2001:58.



Gate keeping, especially in market rent accommodation and the heartless exploitation of newcomers who are ignorant of their basic rights in the workplace has become so institutionalized that it has locked our imagination to the extent that we tend not to challenge the status quo. The people I talked to did not desire to be on social assistance. They are not lazy either. They were willing to do any job to pay their bills. Their housing was kept clean (most of the interviews were done at interviewees' houses to get an appreciation of their state of housing and also to reduce unnecessary costly travel on their part). COSTI Streets to Homes program has made huge strides towards reconciling the differences of the gatekeepers and newcomers through the provision of culturally appropriate mediatory services for the new immigrants and their landlords. This has helped in ensuring all refugees and immigrants that have come through the program remain housed to date. The bigger challenge is in developing a system wide model of service delivery that embraces these core concepts of cultural competence and support while reinforcing the immigrant/refugee's right to housing by challenging the barriers that stand in the way of immigrant and refugee access to housing.

### **Immigrant and Refugee Right to Housing**

The discussion on gate keeping leads to a natural question on the distinction between access to housing and the right to housing. Access to housing refers more to affordability. It is a principle that society agrees to be bound by: that everyone should have access to housing at a price they can afford. It does not guarantee the right to housing. Immigrants and refugees, as a consequence of being human, have inalienable

and universal human rights as elaborated in the 30 articles of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These rights include freedom, security and dignity. Housing, in the context of human rights, is normally considered as a 'secondary' right. This does not diminish its importance. Gate-keeping stands in the way of immigrant and refugee access to housing they would normally "afford" by creating illegal barriers like a couple months' rent in advance.

## The Adaptation Process

Immigrants go through an adaptation process when they settle in a new country that has a direct bearing on their housing situation. The U-curve model (Lysgaard, 1955) of cross-cultural adjustment is the classic approach to describing how people adapt to a new culture or society. The model emphasizes the difficulties derived from the changes that take place in the individual's social and cultural structure after a move to a new environment. According to this approach, adjustment takes place in three stages:

1. In the first stage, known as the honeymoon period, immigrants experience positive feelings of excitement and euphoria soon after moving to the new country.
2. In the second stage, as time passes, emotional, health, and functional difficulties arise because of homesickness, culture shock, and difficulties in adapting to the new country.
3. In the third stage, after a period of coping, immigrants experience a gradual transition to a feeling of confidence and satisfaction that develops as they achieve the required balance in the new society.

Other researchers have proposed a fourth stage of reconstruction, where the person starts to develop their own sense of rootedness in their new environment. What are the implications for this acculturation model for immigrants and refugees?

There is wide agreement in the literature that the process of adjustment required for immigrants and refugees to rebuild their lives is difficult and complex (Kim, 1988; Masuda, Lin, & Tazuma, 1980; Westermeyer, Neider, & Vang, 1984). The first years after immigration are associated with poorer physical and psychological well-being, followed by a later rise in acculturation and accumulation of resources needed for well-being (Anson, Pilpel, & Rolnik, 1996; Semyonov, Epstein, & Davidov, 2003), as well as a decrease in social difficulties over time (Westermeyer, Neider, & Callies, 1989; Zlobina et al., 2006)<sup>1</sup>. Depending on the support they get at each stage, immigrants and refugees may end up losing their housing and on the streets. A system that understands these stages and responds to the settlement experience in an appropriate manner will be much more effective in helping this population group get and sustain housing. The process however is not static. It is fluid and not all immigrants and refugees experience the various stages the same way. The immigrants and refugees who shared their experiences are representative of people at various stages in the adaptation process and exemplify what can potentially go wrong if the system is not responsive to these situations. Wholesale solutions that treat immigrants and refugees as if they are a monolithic group may further worsen the situation. By understanding the adaptation process, housing workers will develop an appreciation of the social relations, the

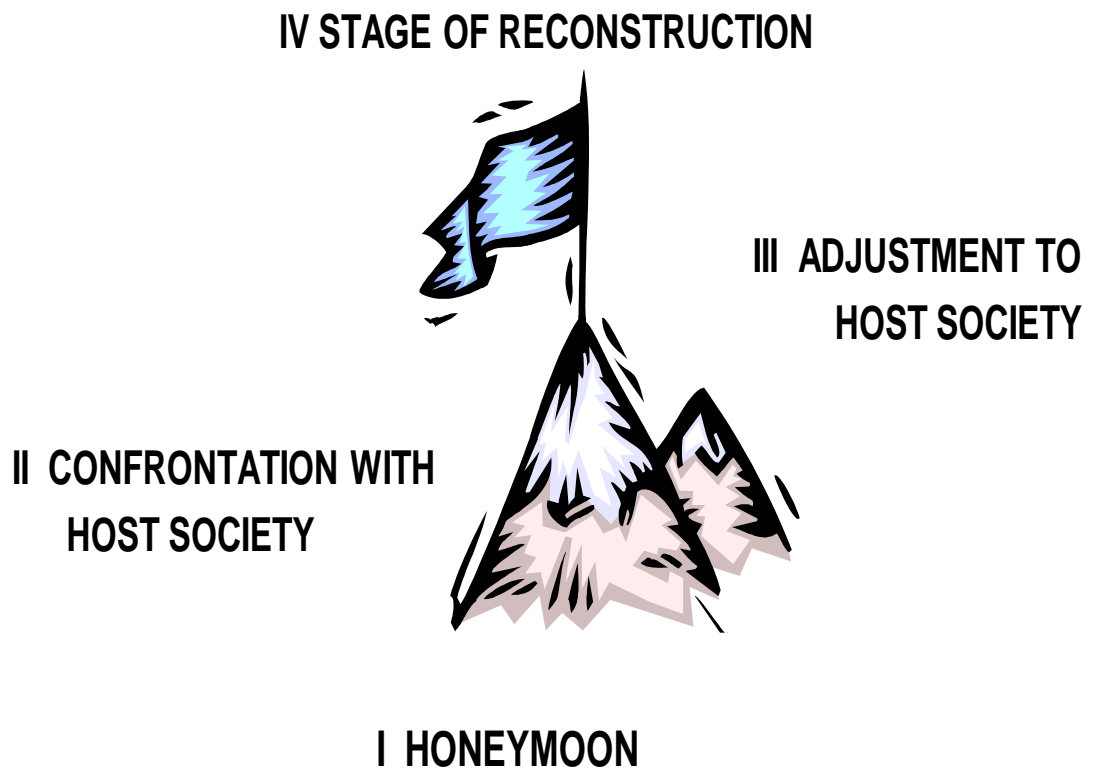
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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Markovizky G and Samid Y, 2008 Time Adjustment *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 39:6 pp 782-798

psychology and the emotions of immigrants and refugees and better assist them move towards their integration into the housing markets.

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## The Process of Adaptation



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Source: COSTI Immigrant Services

## **STAGE I: THE HONEYMOON STAGE**

This is the time when immigrants initially settle in their new country. It is characterized by anxiety, excitement and the promise of a better life. In some cases, some immigrants may have friends or family to help them in adjusting, but for most, it is a totally new experience. Refugees are more likely not to perceive this as a honeymoon of any sort. They arrive with a few resources or none at all. Immediately homeless, they end up in the homeless shelter system or couch surfing with members of their community if they are lucky. Immigrants, who usually have low income, frequently have very few choices on where to rent and end up in neighbourhoods with the highest criminal rates. This may further contribute to housing instability. They also have to move more often than their Canadian born counterparts, affecting the stability of schooling for immigrant children as attendance to schools is partly a function of household location.

## **STAGE II: CONFRONTATION WITH THE HOST SOCIETY**

After going through the initial excitement of the honeymoon stage, immigrants are faced with the reality of adapting to their new community. They have to understand what the housing system and immigration process is like and how it works. They may even attempt to adapt coping strategies from their home countries or culture that may not work in the Canadian local context. The first confrontation they face in accessing housing is usually in the form of formal and informal gatekeepers. Basic material needs are often not satisfied and security of tenure may be an illusion, with people struggling to maintain, and in some cases losing their place in the housing system and becoming

homeless again. Lack of housing may also heighten personal, cultural and psychological insecurity among new refugees. A qualitative study exploring resettlement issues of Muslim refugee women during their first five years of arrival in Perth, Australia [Casimiro, Hancock and Northcote 2007] concludes that lack of housing has “exacerbated the stress and strains already experienced by Muslim refugee women from the usual hardships and disruptions that accompany the migration experience and adaptation to life in a new country. Feelings of isolation and insecurity amongst this study group were further heightened by cultural factors (for example, being a Muslim woman in an increasingly secular society) and increased social tensions post September 11.”

### **STAGE III: ADJUSTMENT TO HOST SOCIETY**

Once the immigrants develop an understanding of their new community, go over some of the initial language and basic cultural barriers, they begin a process of adjustment. This may, as in cases below, be an ongoing process that comes at a price through confrontation with the law or landlords. At this stage, immigrants are reasonably equipped to meet most basic challenges of living in a new country. However, lack of knowledge of Canadian institutions and cultures, lack of knowledge of the housing system and ignorance of social housing still plagues immigrants and refugees at this stage. It is a major learning curve. What David Hulchanski terms ‘cultural brokers’ are developed. These may be community agencies or Canadian born contacts or other people from the same community helping the new immigrants to access services.

#### **STAGE IV: RECONSTRUCTION**

Over time, immigrants are able to exercise greater choice about where they live, as they secure new rights and resources. Some may develop a strong attachment to where they initially settled to the extent that they find accommodation in those neighbourhoods, but often, they move to a different place as the poor living conditions, lack of privacy and concerns about safety and security begin to command a higher priority with a sense of rootedness. They move away from being in state of place, trying to understand their new environment. Rootedness, simply put, is “a knowing that is a result of familiarity through long residence, while a sense of place is a knowing that is a result of conscious effort” (Tuan 1980:8).



## In Their Words

This research sought in part to find the reasons behind the movement of these immigrants and refugees from their home countries and to see if this was related to their current or former housing situation and what help they need not to be ever homeless again. Here I echo the main themes that came up in their narratives.

### Hidden Homelessness

Service User W is a 42 year old immigrant from the Caribbean, who plied his trade in the security industry there. He came to Canada to live with his Canadian wife whom he had met while visiting his brother in the US. The marriage failed almost upon arrival in Canada. Unknown to him, his new wife already had two grown children already living with her. His story is a painful reminder of what happens when the system or community agencies look at homeless people through a narrow lens.

*Someone told me about a job help centre. I went there as I needed a job. My job counselor really helped and I got a job at a security firm. However, the hours were irregular and sometimes they would not offer me some shifts. I was willing to do more work but I wasn't getting it. Sometimes I would get about 6 hours a week, and on that salary, I still could not afford an apartment. I devised a plan. I would offer to work night shift, that way I had a roof over my head by night, then*

*during the day I would go to the job help centre and meet with my job counselor. I pretended I was still looking for a job so that I could go there daily and at least I had a “home” during the day. So, I would spend days there and work by night .I did this for over four months. One day my job counselor casually asked about my housing situation. It was then he discovered I was homeless and referred me to a housing worker, and that is how I came into the Streets to Home program.*

The above reflects an approach taken by most community agencies in assisting population groups who are unaware of some of the services that may be of help to them: “If they don’t ask, I won’t tell”. At the very least, Service User W should have been detected from the onset if a thorough needs assessment had been done to start with, before assisting him with his primary concern with employment at the time. Agencies dealing with immigrants and refugees should incorporate in the intake process questions dealing with the client’s present housing situation.

**Immigrant family status important in housing: “*She refused to help me*”**

Almost all the participants had a compelling family situation in their immigrant or refugee experience that contributed to their homelessness.

*I arrived in Canada in January 2006, already married to -and sponsor by- a Canadian woman. I discovered on my arrival that she had 2 kids living with her. The space was tight, we had no privacy and a point came when I felt I couldn’t stay there much longer while maintaining my dignity and privacy. I had no choice*

*but to move out. She (wife) refused to help me get an apartment as I was not working at the time.*

*Service User W*

*I stayed with my sister when I initially arrived. While it worked for a while, there was not enough room in the house and that resulted in even more stress building up in the house. There was always tension. When she had a baby, and now there were 3 of us in the house, it became clear that the space was way too small. There wasn't much I could do. Being so physically close because of space worsened an already deteriorating relationship with my sister. I had no choice. I had to move out. I spent a couple of months on the streets and couch surfing with a couple of friends until one day I bumped into a newspaper ad about Toronto Housing who in turn referred me to COSTI.*

*Service User E*

**Managing expectations: *"I thought I would fare better here than back home....."***

Before Service User E, an African immigrant, became homeless, he had great dreams and aspirations. Housing was the least of his worries. He had a sister living in Canada, and having lived for most of his life in the US; he was fairly conversant with North American culture and spoke excellent English. He had just gotten a degree from a US university and majored in political science. His expectations were well grounded. As noted above, a number of studies in the 1980s noted a convergence of Canadian

immigrant labour force towards their Canadian born counterpart's salaries and increasing their rates of year-round employment.

*Canada is better than the US. I thought I would fare better here. That is why I moved to Canada, to get a better job. It hasn't worked out that way. I could not find a job anywhere. I needed to get help with finding employment when I got here but I had nowhere to turn to. COSTI helped when I found them but it was a bit too late to prevent me from being on the streets.*

*Service User E*

The honeymoon stage for his coming to Canada may be over for Service User E but it was after a life changing experience of homelessness. It took him a while to realize that while Canada may still offer a lot more opportunity than most countries, it is not easy as a foreigner to grasp a new system and be able to achieve independency and get a job without an enabling process. Being naturally introverted, it was even harder for him to approach his community for support. At the time of the interview, even though he was housed, he expressed being stressed on most days. The mismatch between dreams and reality, if not managed at the initial stages through settlement counseling, can indeed have serious housing and health implications. This is consistent with a bigger study commissioned by the City of Toronto on the Streets to Homes program. The area of social interaction was one where many individuals reported having difficulties, in re-establishing social networks appropriate to their new neighbourhoods and circumstances (City of Toronto Shelter, What "housing first" means to people housed under Toronto's Streets to Homes program)

**Homeless Immigrants and refugees become invisible: “People look at you with that stigma look”**

One of the coping strategies for immigrants and refugees who are homeless seems to be that of denial and then eventual withdrawal from all community supports. As such, they become invisible and go unnoticed in the count for the homeless, which makes it harder to have targeted preventative intervention strategies for this population group.

*When the relationship with my sister went sour, I had nowhere to turn. I am a very private person naturally but I also did not know of any housing or job places that assisted immigrants. People always look at you with that stigma look if you have nowhere to stay or have no job. I had to keep appearances and somehow survive out there.*

*Service User E*

*I am not a statistic or a client number. I am a person.*

*Service User A*

**Refugees and Immigrants feel invisible and lack knowledge of their legal rights: “*They took the blood out of my life*”**

Service User A had a poignant story of his homelessness situation as an immigrant that further emphasizes the importance of educating immigrants of their legal rights in Canada. Service User A is from East Europe and is very eloquent and consistent in his thoughts and narrative.

*I have experienced two episodes of homelessness in Canada. I deserted my country in 1997, lived for four years in another European country and met some Canadians while I was there. I moved to the US in 2001 and came to Canada in 2002. I stayed at a native shelter when I initially arrived then after a month I moved to a refugee shelter in Toronto. Soon after, they helped me find a place and I lived with a friend for about a year. It was during that year that while working in the cleaning business I injured my back. I used to clean 22 floors, all the units in all the 22 floors, including the common areas. After I got injured while at work, I was told I had no sick plan or any workplace insurance. My employer advised me to get a credit line to take care of my medical bills. No one told me there was such a thing as social assistance, and I had no savings. That was my first round of homelessness. I could not keep up with the payments for my credit line. I eventually gave up work altogether because of my back injury, so I had no income. The doctors could not help as I was told the MRI that I needed was too expensive. Working for a small family business I thought I would get a more*

*humane treatment but I have never seen such exploitation of a newcomer. They took the blood out of my life. When I came here, I had a five year plan. I was willing to do any job, including construction, because I knew if I made it through the first five years, I would go and work for an NGO or in the movie business. But I never made it past the first year. Four months after my injury, unable to work and with no compensation of any sort, I lost my apartment. I pretty much lived on the streets between 2004 and 2006, sometimes staying with friends and occasionally living in homeless shelters. Towards the end of 2006 I decided to go back to my home country for treatment.*

**More culturally competent frontline workers needed: *“I preferred to sleep in the streets than get help from a homeless shelter”***

Most immigrants and refugees I spoke to seem to have exhausted all the community supports before they turn to the streets. The problem is the community supports are few and hidden, and the homeless shelter system does not seem a viable option for some of them. Even though refugee specific shelters in Toronto like Sojourn House have exceptional services tailored to meet the housing needs of this population, they have a chronic shortage of space. Most immigrants and refugees never even get to hear about these places.

*After a brief stay at the shelter, I preferred to sleep in the park than get help from a homeless shelter. Homeless programs in mainstream shelters do not do what they are supposed to do. You cannot help homeless people by profiting from their*

*misery. They say it costs \$75-80/day to keep someone at the shelter. Surely, if they gave us that money, we would not be homeless. Even the support services at a homeless shelter are not designed to help you become independent. You are still treated like a client number, a statistic.*

#### *Service User A*

The above captures the essence of Service User A's narrative regarding professional help he felt he was getting in negotiating his way out of his homeless situation. A couple of issues were evident from his narrative:

- He is not trusting of the main stream service providers as he feels that it does not address his needs and help him into stable housing.
- The approach taken by service providers is blind to his culture and sexual orientation. Before talking to this researcher, Service User A asked to be excused, and changed from his pants and shirt to a white feminine gown. It was as if this was his way of communicating who he was. It was after he felt comfortable in his dress state that he seemed to communicate. It was as if he were subtly relaying a message: "I am willing to cooperate if you recognize and respect me as this individual. If a service ignores or fails to acknowledge me, I will not acknowledge it; I may as well sleep in a park".

Providing housing for someone who has been through this uprooting, long and arduous journey requires different skills than would be needed to help a Canadian born person who has never experienced the trauma of flight and has a more personal connection to this country.



## **Most immigrants and refugees cope well with independent living but need support**

***“They don’t help people on the streets like me....”***

*My family has been in Canada for over 27 years. I was brought to Canada by a family relative, as a visitor when I was 17. Unknown to me, I was to be later adopted and asked to work in the family business which was a restaurant/night club. My sister was also adopted. I had to live with my “relatives” and work in the family business as I could not go anywhere without immigration papers. When my immigration papers came in 1998, I moved out with my sister as I could not survive on my own. In 2001 I moved out on my own.....and with pretty close to zero budgeting skills, by the end of the year I was homeless. I spent 2001-2002 on the streets. Somehow I got an automotive apprenticeship job that paid about \$8/hour...and that kept me going for a while. Maybe it was my social life, maybe it was my difficult landlord or maybe it was not having someone to advocate on my behalf but I found myself homeless again in 2008 for about 8 months. I would look for housing, be asked to come and view a place, but when they saw me, they would say the place has already been taken. There are a lot of programs I know to help people like me but very few people who will understand the path you have taken, how you came to Canada the language barriers (I had to talk to Service User C through an interpreter). I found the Streets to Homes program at COSTI very receptive to my needs. With Streets to Homes, the process for everything seems faster whereas before, all numbers I tried to use for my needs did not work or even exist or I was turned down. I was so frustrated. I have been*

*here for about 10 years and you talk of help from my Latin community in Toronto? I don't even know where they are, or even if there is a community, I doubt they help people on the streets like me. Every single day in Toronto you discover something more different, more difficult.*

Most refugees and immigrants do not require long periods in shelters or institutionalization for their housing needs. A review of research on the secondary housing market like shelters and subsidized housing shows that these do not solve the homelessness problem but actually reinforce it (Sahlin I, 2003). The secondary housing market has grown substantially in the last decade without any visible positive impact on homelessness outside it. It in fact focuses more on serving the landlord in recruiting, examining, assessing and creaming housing applicants than on assisting the immigrants and refugees in accessing and maintaining their housing. Immigrants and refugees can integrate themselves into the community under certain conditions. Their capacity to take charge of their own welfare and basic needs like housing and food must be strengthened. They should also be able to enjoy some degree of liberty, autonomy and control in their living environment. Streets to Homes program achieves this through the provision of fairly independent living, but keeping a close eye for cracks that may develop before they become serious problems. Immigrant and refugee housing patterns, as shown by Service User W and Service User E, are rarely the outcome of self-segregating tendencies. The way they exercise housing choice is often dependent upon the support and assistance of friends, relatives and community-led services. Unless

cultural competency is seen as a key element in service delivery, most interventions to house the “hard-to-house” in this sub-population group would ultimately fail. Organisations that invest in cultural competence are more likely to achieve better housing outcomes for this population group than mainstream services that are culturally blind.

### **What is Cultural Competency?**

While it is a long standing principle in health and settlement services, not much has been written on cultural competency in housing service provision. Cultural competence is not an end but a constantly moving target that housing service providers should be striving for. A “culturally competent” housing service provision system, borrowing from the mainstream health care definition (Lavizzo-Mourey R, Mackenzie E 1990), can be defined as one that acknowledges and incorporates—at all levels—the importance of culture, assessment of cross-cultural relations, vigilance toward the dynamics that result from cultural differences, expansion of cultural knowledge, and adaptation of services to meet culturally unique needs.

A culturally competent housing system is also built on an awareness of some of the barriers that immigrants and refugees face. Furthermore, the field of cultural competence has recognized the inherent challenges in attempting to disentangle “social” factors (e.g., socioeconomic status, supports/stressors, and types of shelters where refugees and immigrants are placed on arrival) from “cultural” factors vis-à-vis

their influence on the individual. As a result, understanding and addressing the “social context” has emerged as a critical component of cultural competence.

*“Most of the work we do here at the COSTI is acting as the cultural bridge. My job is to impart life skills that enable immigrants and refugees to understand the new social environment they are in. Give them a simple understanding on how the system works, without adding to the confusion they are already going through with their immigration process. I spend most of my time advocating for the client in all sorts of services that helps them maintain and stabilize their housing. My job is not complete if the client goes through this program and still cannot advocate for themselves. I have to impart those life skills to them to enable them to manage their lives and navigate the system on their own. I get all sorts of calls from my clients ranging from opening a bank account to mediating with landlords. Unfortunately some mainstream housing services have no awareness of some of the other seemingly minor cultural issues that may well result in the person back on the streets”.*

Georgia Williams

COSTI Housing Worker

## TOWARDS AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH: *Ubuntu*

Given the gaps in services, lack of uniformity or universal standards in the reception of immigrants and refugees and in the absence of a municipal or federal initiative in housing refugees and immigrants in Canada, a new approach to the problem of housing this population is needed. Given the experience with the COSTI Streets to Homes clients, and listening to how they negotiated their way out of the streets and what they felt were gaps in services, one word comes to mind that sums up what is missing in service provision: **Ubuntu**. Housing First, as a model, echoes these words from Nelson Mandela:

*A traveller through a country would stop at a village and he didn't have to ask for food or for water. Once he stops, the people give him food, entertain him. That is one aspect of Ubuntu but it will have various aspects. Ubuntu does not mean that people should not address themselves. The question therefore is: Are you going to do so in order to enable the community around you be able to improve?*

The intellectual elite could argue that **Ubuntu** is neither scientific nor academic. Housing service providers might feel a service model based on **Ubuntu** could not possibly be sophisticated enough to apply to a fragmented system of agencies with no history of collective funding and with different mandates. Here we argue that Ubuntu is precisely what is needed to move service provision to a more consistent and humane standard in housing new immigrants and refugees.

## UBUNTU AS A GUIDING PRINCIPLE FOR HOUSING IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

“Homelessness is not just a housing problem, it is a people problem”.

Hulchanski D.

The above quotation by the renowned Toronto scholar and housing researcher strikes at the heart of the problem of housing immigrants and refugees. For a long time this population group has been criminalized, racialised, treated as the ‘other stranger’ or completely ignored in policy discussions on housing. There is no shortage of service providers for immigrants and refugees. A recurring theme from my discussions with the small sample of immigrants and refugees is that they failed to connect with a body that understood their immigrant status and how it affected their housing options. How can **Ubuntu** inform discussions on housing service provision?

**Ubuntu** is an elusive term to define. **Ubuntu** is an African philosophy that points towards the values of the community rather than those of the individual. It conjures up the idealized village in which the whole community accepts responsibility for the rearing and education of children; ensures care for the old, the sick, and the impoverished; organizes communal agricultural production; and shares the crafts, stories, music and dance of the oral culture (Msafiri 2008).

**Ubuntu** has been defined in several ways but the evolution of the concept itself has taken 3 main strands:

1. Ubuntu theology, inspired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu.
2. Ubuntu as a guiding principle for conflict resolution, democracy and governance.
3. Ubuntu as an alternative to neo-liberal globalization as espoused in global intellectual property and information ethics debate.

The idea that this concept can be applied on to housing adds a fourth strand to this discourse:

4. Ubuntu as an alternative to housing service provision. As famously remarked by Hulchanski D (2000), “homelessness is not just a housing problem, it is a people problem”.

What does this African philosophy of human relations teach us about housing services?

Stanlake Samkange (1980) highlights the three maxims of Ubuntuism which are relevant to this discussion.

- The first maxim asserts that 'To be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish respectful human relations with them.'

- The second maxim means that if and when one is faced with a decisive choice between wealth and the preservation of the life of another human being, then one should opt for the preservation of life'.
- The third 'maxim' as a 'principle deeply embedded in traditional African political philosophy' says 'that the king owed his status, including all the powers associated with it, to the will of the people under him'. It is a way of life which deems that society must be run for the sake of all, requiring cooperation as well as sharing and charity.... Ubuntu consequently, is the quality of being human.” (Broodryk 2002:13 in Foster D 2006).

Homelessness of immigrants and refugees cannot be explained simplistically and atheoretically. Homeless refugees and immigrants occupy shifting and different positions in relation to their housing situation and immigration status. This ranges from non-documentation, health, gender, and race to language issues. Consequently, any helpful response from a housing service provider perspective cannot be simplistic or atheoretical either. **Ubuntu** provides a framework for responding to the urgent need to house immigrants and refugees as a special interest group and Streets to Homes is an example of how this has been achieved.

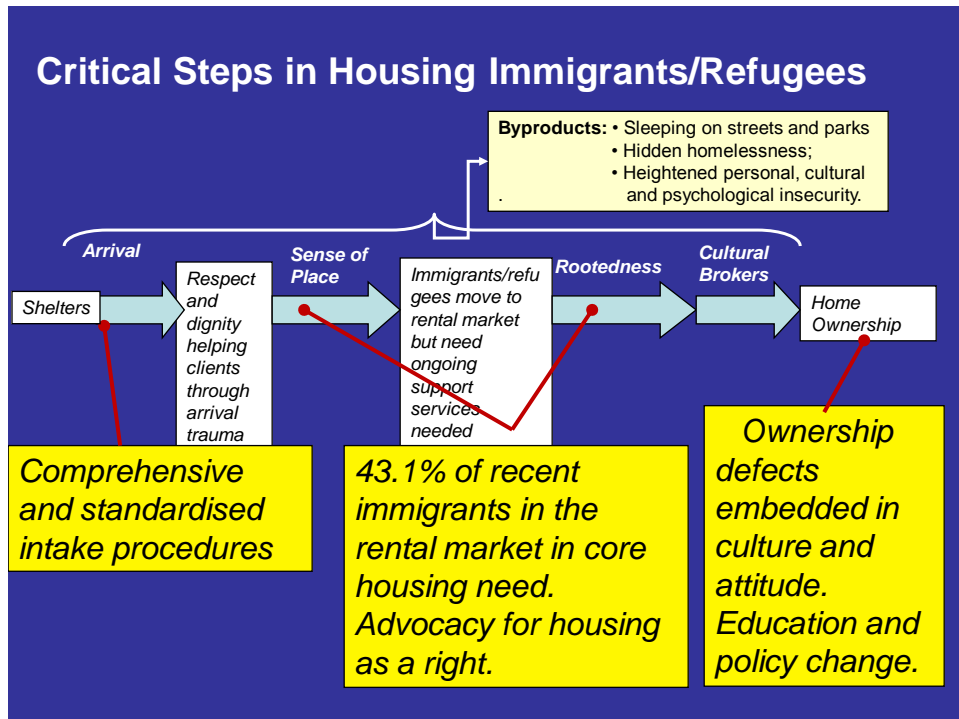


Without losing sight of eradicating housing inequalities, a useful intervention by housing help agencies is to tackle those aspects of housing provision that are easier to modify than those that are not. The people aspects in service delivery are therefore very important within the context of **ubuntu** framework. It is not the intention of this paper to overhaul immigrant and refugee service delivery in Ontario. While this may be a noble goal, it will require greater resources and policy changes that this study did not address. A change in culture when working with this population group though is an achievable goal.

**Ubuntu** as an approach to housing service provision can be seen as an overarching goal in the pursuit for inclusion and a client centred approach to housing through the various stages that immigrants and refugees go through in their housing trajectory. As shown below, **ubuntu** can be viewed as the enabler, the facilitating arrow that moves the immigrant or refugee through the various steps from initial arrival in a shelter to home ownership. It is a way of lending a helping hand through the process of settling into a new space for immigrants and refugees. In a way, it is a culture that is long overdue in housing services.

**Table 3:**

**Ubuntu, Facilitating the Movement of Immigrants and Refugees in Housing**



## Practical Applications: Ubuntu as an engagement of dignity and respect in housing

*Ubuntu* is premised on the principle that ‘I am only because we are, and since we are, therefore I am’. Writing from a personal experience of an African community setting, I can attest to the richness of respect and dignity in African culture. Proverbs such as “*Inxeba lendoda kalihlekwa*” (you do not laugh at another man’s injury) are used to warn youngsters on the hazards of laughing at another person’s misfortune in life. Elders never tell a lie; “*bayaphosisa*” (they make mistakes) builds respect for elders, even those that may be strangers, from one’s younger years. Respect is the ability to engage with strangers in a manner you would like them to engage with you if you were in a similar situation. It demands honesty and an appreciation of the other. More directly to the point, and of cardinal value to the central thrust of this chapter, du Toit writes the following about *ubuntu* with a clear application for the theme of this paper:

In Africa, a person is identified by his or her interrelationships and not primarily by individualistic properties. The community identifies the person - and not the person the community. The identity of the person is his or her place in the community. In Africa it is a matter of ‘I participate, therefore I am’<sup>2</sup>... Ubuntu is the principle of ‘I am only because we are, and since we are, therefore I am’.

Ubuntu is African humanism. (Du Toit 2004:33).

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<sup>2</sup> Here du Toit references Shutte 1993:46-51.

How do we get to know the needs of immigrants and refugees? How do we get to earn their respect? How does this get conceptualised in housing service provision?

Culture and attitude play a role in how services are delivered. If housing services are not delivered in a culturally competent way, they risk further marginalising the very people they are meant to serve. Respect and dignity especially at the reception or initial stage in housing service provision for the homeless creates more than just “shelters” and “affordable housing”. It builds trust and confidence in the belief that there is a possibility of a home away from home. A number of researchers have conceptualized housing in 2 distinct forms:

1. As brick and mortar, the physical structures that protect us from nature’s elements.
2. Secondly, it can be viewed as a special kind of “place” (Easthorpe 2004). This conceptualization looks at the emotional, psychological and cultural aspects of housing. In that respect, ‘home’ is closely linked to refugee and immigrant resettlement and is an important indicator of integration (Bezanson, 2003:28). It brings new ideas about identity formation and social interaction. The bonding newcomers feel towards a place, given how they are received, may explain why some immigrants end up on the streets, refusing to be placed in main-stream shelters and other forms of social housing as one of the clients interviewed.

Immigrants who fail to develop a 'sense of place' or 'belonging' in a community usually feel they are not treated as equals or are not "understood" by mainstream service providers. Ubuntu-based programming developed to reframe the experiences of these immigrants and refugees, positively affirming their experiences and building not only a sense of belonging but also an awareness of the challenges they face and how to navigate the system in their new environment would go a long way towards preventing homelessness. An Ubuntu-driven model has the potential to be incorporated with relative ease into existing programs.

Research that has looked at immigrant homeownership (Andrejs Skaburskis, 1996) notes that there is a remarkable difference in homeownership between Canadian born Toronto residents and immigrants. That gap remains even after controlling for the effects of the usual economic and demographic determinants of tenure choice. The persistence of the deficit across different household types points to structural defects, embedded in culture and attitude. These cultures and attitudes determine how the tenure options are perceived and how minorities view their future prospects. People do not always act as rational beings; their economic decisions are also affected by their attachment to places. If this perception is true, it may explain why some immigrants and refugees are reluctant to approach housing help services. It is therefore the primary role of a housing program to explore some of these underlying fears and needs in accessing support services for housing and build trust. Equally important would be the belief that refugees and immigrants are members of the community, and that no one, regardless of

their immigration status, should have problems accessing services because of preventable barriers like language for instance.

The maxim *ubuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (A person is a person through other persons) articulates a basic respect and compassion for others.... As such, it is both a factual description and a rule of conduct or social ethic. It not only describes human being as “being-with-others”, but also prescribes how we should relate to others, i.e. what “being-with-others” should be all about (Louw 2001:1).

### **Practical Applications: Ubuntu as preservation of life**

It is well documented in certain African communities that some people would travel long distances to die with their own or share in their suffering or die in their defense. Housing is a human right that has to be protected. Canada has recognized that adequate housing is a fundamental human right by ratifying the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). The right to a roof over one’s head is essential to the preservation of one’s dignity and health. In its Report (Right At Home 2008:8), the Ontario Human Rights Commission pointed out that many of the problems in rental housing and access to housing are symptoms of systemic human rights violations and a prevalent lack of awareness that can and must be addressed without further delay. The report notes that stereotypes and biases based on race and race related grounds create significant barriers in housing. The Centre for Equality Rights in

Accommodation (CERA), an Ontario-based non-profit human rights organization that promotes human rights in housing and challenges discrimination has over the years reported that it receives more calls from racialised newcomers compared to other newcomers. This may be because racialised refugees and immigrants experience discrimination based on immigrant status as it intersects with race and other race related characteristics.

Newcomers and immigrants may be exposed to stereotypes – for example that they “won’t pay their rent, are sponging off the system, are terrorists, have far too many children or are violent”. Gatekeepers alluded to elsewhere in this paper may even ask refugees and immigrants to pay up to 12 month’s rent in advance or obtain guarantors with substantial incomes as a precondition of being able to rent a unit (in Right at home 2008:23). These practices continue despite a decision of a Board of Inquiry that these policies disadvantage newcomers to Canada and that discrimination because of citizenship and place of origin are illegal under the Ontario Human Rights Code (Right to Housing). As others have argued, homelessness then, is “not just a denial of right to housing. Rather, it is a denial of the basic right to a location, of access to ‘somewhere’ for basic human function and thereby a denial of freedom (of opportunity and autonomy of action), of security (individual and welfare safety) and of dignity (respect) (Wadron Jeremy, 1993).

It is the role of advocacy groups and community agencies to advocate for the rights of immigrants and refugees at societal (macro) level by continuously engaging the municipalities and the federal government on the issue of homelessness for this population group. Discrimination, left unchallenged, creates “oppressive communalism” which robs persons viewed as “outsiders” of their identity and rights as in the case of Service User A. Core to the principles of ubuntu is the preservation of life above all else. If the marginalized find themselves with nowhere to turn to, they develop their own communities and find ways of surviving. Gordon Laird (2007) poignantly captures this in his vivid description of the Tent City saga as the outcome of policies that do not value the lives of individuals.

The people in those dark places form their own communities and encampments, usually hidden in ravines, alleyways, under bridges. And sometimes, they strike camp out in the open. People have camped among the trees and ruins of Toronto’s derelict waterfront for decades, but the sheer scale of Tent City set it apart. From the late 1990s until September 2002, this small camp on the contaminated land of an old iron foundry grew rapidly, right in sync with an unprecedented surge in homelessness across Canada. It drew all kinds of people and all kinds of attention. Something so visible, unorthodox and utterly lacking political clout was bound to draw fire, a squatter’s camp that became an uncomfortable reminder of a much larger homeless crisis. In its final year, Tent City struggled amid an onslaught of media coverage, an influx of newcomers, the ravages of addiction, and the looming possibility (some said inevitability) of closure. All the while, residents lived their lives: some worked, idled, or made art; some sold drugs or sold themselves; several were found dead in their shelters; some found love, got married, and, in at least one instance, had a baby; some disappeared, or left, never to return. Many agreed that, for all its problems, Tent City was still better than overcrowded homeless shelters, welfare bureaucracy, and an estimated 12 year wait for social housing. And there were some, whose spirits were bold enough, who simply didn’t want to live anywhere else. Tent City was a place that was all about freedom, dignity and abundant supplies of \$5 crack.



Unfortunately immigrants and refugees are not as visible or as socially organised. They are often not aware of their social and political liberties and cannot engage the system at the same level as the Canadian homeless population may, as was in the Tent City saga. Being largely invisible homeless, immigrants and refugees go unnoticed.

**Practical Applications: *Ubuntu* as sharing**

Bishop Desmond Tutu once remarked that “a person with **Ubuntu** is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good; for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes with knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are” (in Timothy M, 2006). It is worrying that in 2008 there still seems to be systemic blindness to the needs of refugees and immigrants. Even though they are some of the more researched sub-populations, and a lot is known of their “needs” and ‘barriers’, very few options in the way of housing services have been developed with them in mind. The few Toronto refugee specific shelters that exist are almost always full and immigrants and this population almost invariably end up in the homeless shelter system or couch surfing with friends when they initially arrive in Canada.

Sharing is more than offering tangible benefits like space. It also includes affording the individuals a chance to participate in shaping their future. Immigrants and refugees, have unequal access to housing opportunities and options. For most of the COSTI clients, it was more of a chance encounter that they heard about the Streets to Homes program. COSTI could be innovative and partner with like agencies to build a culture of awareness and outreach to a community that is not only invisible but has insulated itself against society (***“they do not help someone on the streets like me....”***).

Sharing information resources with immigrants and refugees at an early stage in their settlement process is a precondition to overcoming information asymmetries in the housing market that lead to differential incorporation. In their paper “Access to Housing in a Canadian City: Experiences of Three Immigrant Groups” Hulchanski D. J, Murdie R et al (1997) trace the pathways to housing of the Somali subpopulation. They found that Somalis did not have equal access to all available housing vacancies. By equal they meant that “households in similar circumstances with similar resources did not have similar access to the available stock of housing vacancies”. While some of these barriers were legal, most were not. Level of income, colour of skin, sources of income and religion were found to be significant barriers.

As immigrants and refugees participate in their own welfare and housing, they develop not only the skills necessary to survive in their new community but this can also help educate the community on the wealth of skills, knowledge and culture this population brings. Community agencies serving refugees and immigrants need to build this capacity to share resources and empower their clients at an agency level. Promoting this as a best practice at an interagency level would be a key innovation in the delivery of housing services that COSTI is well positioned to take a lead on, given their experience with the Streets to Homes program. It was positively refreshing to note that even the City of Toronto has recognized this as key to the Streets to Homes program. All the interviewees for this report said they had a degree of choice of where to live, having been given a choice of up to three neighbourhoods on where they wanted to stay. Client participation in housing is important to their successful settlement in their new “home”.

The Ubuntu-model is not a panacea. It will not solve all immigrant and housing problems. We only need to look at what is happening right now across the African continent to be reminded of the wars, hunger and genocide that still exists despite the Ubuntu-worldview broadly embraced by many communities in that region. What this African philosophy does is to broaden our understanding and compassion for those that come to live among us. This is what it has done for generations to Africans. Ubuntu sheds light on the importance of settlement through the principles of inclusivity and a sense of shared destiny between peoples. It provides a value system for assisting those who arrive at our doorsteps with little or no resources at all. It provides a rationale for

agencies and their municipalities, on how to establish programs and build institutions which will promote inclusiveness. In short, it can ‘culturally re-inform’ our practical efforts to help immigrants and refugees feel “at home”.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The first two recommendations come directly from participants, and the others are reflections from the data in general:

1. **Invest in existing frontline (“in the trenches”) support**— housing workers, shelter staff, job counselors and outreach services— must be the first supportive and culturally competent service providers that homeless immigrants and refugees meet. These frontline workers can demonstrate creative and compassionate initiatives for immediate responses to basic needs. As one of the participants so eloquently put it: *“At COSTI I felt like my worker from Streets to Homes understood my situation and did not make judgments on me as a person. We need more people like her in the system”*. The majority of the interviewees spoke passionately about the significance of such resources and the humane way in which they were treated at COSTI. The understanding that certain groups have special needs has guided the development of social work interventions for decades. Immigrants and refugees are a special needs group and need tailored interventions for their housing needs.

*“Most immigrants and refugees, no matter their level of education, are almost always re-training, either in understanding how the system works or how they can adapt their skills to suit the local workplace. Take the case of Mr. W. He*

*could not articulate himself well and as a result, the employer was not even aware he wanted to work more hours to stabilize his income and hence his housing situation. At one time, he was getting as little as 6 hours a week but after talking and advocating with his employer since he came into the Streets to Home program, he now works a full 35 hours a week. He is going through a divorce, attending school, adapting to a new culture, it's never one thing. It's always a myriad of factors. Most of the work we do with Streets to Homes is recognizing the needs or issues that may make the person fall out of housing and mitigating these before they become major obstacles. I spend hours a week on the phone with clients".*

2. **Advocate for safe and affordable housing:** Safe and sustainable housing is essential for seeking out employment opportunities that may help refugees and immigrants from falling through the cracks. Innovative structural housing initiatives like Streets to Homes that include independent housing with follow-up support services are essential to help those immigrants and refugees that have become homeless to connect with the competent service providers in the absence of other family or community supports.
  
3. **Preventative services:** Initiate preventive structures that tap into what the immigrants themselves said were the true reasons for their homelessness: lack

of job opportunities or information on job resources, family separation and access to information on resources already available in the community. The reinforcement of security-related migration policies has resulted in the perception of the foreigner, and especially the irregular migrant and refugee claimants, as a category outside the circle of legality. We need thoughtful educational strategies to disentangle myths and stereotypes as to why immigrants and refugees end up homeless.

4. **Tap into immigrant and refugee strength and resiliency:** If there is an opposite of stigma in the case of the immigrant and refugee experience, it must be their strength and resilience. If an immigrant came at age 17, was unknowingly adopted, worked in a night club on arrival in Canada, without speaking a word of English, he surely must have some survival instinct to have overcome such odds. One of the interviewees from Latin America travelled on top of trains by night through the treacherous route from his country to the US. He was caught in the US and deported. Again, he made the perilous journey in search of a better life until he arrived in Canada. Not everyone who makes that journey from his country makes it through alive. A lot die in the forests, some fall off trains; some are arrested and placed in detention along the way. Those who arrive, like Service User D must surely have strength and resilience. While cultural competency is essential to tapping into this strength, it is only a part of the solution. A lot of the failure of the clients I talked to had to do with being

overwhelmed by a 21<sup>st</sup> Century system of bureaucracy that they have never encountered before. They may have braved the wildlife and human disasters and even war and poverty to get to our shores, but the monster called BUREAUCRACY is too daunting for some for them. The simple effort of opening a bank account, without an advocate, can be insurmountable. Registering for services over the phone or online is foreign. Language is a huge barrier. An understanding of these challenges and the strength of what they have had to overcome in arriving in Canada is informative. They need someone to hold their hand and guide them through our complex maze of housing and social services network, before they even think about day to day struggles of food and clothing. Harnessing this strength and resilience to help the immigrants overcome the initial problem of working through the system happens at different levels.

5. **Towards an integrated model of service delivery:** Housing service providers and agencies that deal with immigrant and refugee populations, should undertake a comprehensive needs assessment at the intake stage. This statement would seem to express an element of common sense that should be evident to all. However, the reality is that much work with immigrants and refugees is done in silos. A standardized approach across all agencies concerned with housing immigrants and refugees would ensure gaps in services are identified sooner across the organization and a proper referral is made.



The service user's experiences captured in these narratives points to a bigger structural problem in housing services for immigrants and refugees. The services and resources necessary to meet the housing and human needs of homeless immigrants and refugees are contained within a fragmented system of disparate service organizations that are underfunded. Agencies serving immigrants and refugees should adopt clear written protocols in the form of handbooks or guidelines for caseworkers to follow on how to address issues related to immigration status and access to housing. This could include brief descriptions of immigration status and how it impacts eligibility for housing services, guidelines for maintaining client confidentiality, and referral lists of immigrant-serving agencies. The strengthening of the relationship between housing workers and other support services in the immigration experience, like job counselors, policy makers and academics can enhance practice approaches vis-à-vis service delivery, policy development, education, advocacy, and voice. Such distinct yet interwoven dimensions will provide immigrants and refugees who are homeless with the proper support and a fighting chance to climb out of homelessness and, equally significant, provide opportunities for them to become citizens rather than clients, cases or worse, invisible and insignificant bodies.

6. **More research is needed on the family status of homeless immigrants and refugees:** All of the participants in this review had experienced traumatic family relationship breakdowns which seemed to have affected their housing either

before or after they came to Canada. Further research should include a larger, more diversified sample to explore cultural differences in how immigrant and refugee families experience housing help interventions. Some additional areas that require examination include the reasons immigrants and refugees come to the attention of housing workers, especially those undocumented, immigrants and refugee claimants who use community-based intervention services like COSTI Streets to Homes.

- 7. Canadian immigration policy should consider housing:** While Canadian immigration policies are structured at the federal level, the consequences of these policies are most felt in the housing markets of major cities where immigrants settle. This poses a significant implication for immigrant housing. This rationale refers to the political decision making process in a democracy to achieve certain social objectives even if this involves a trade off with the efficient operation of the market. Unraveling the links between immigration and the housing market in specific locales is a complex task. There is a surprising absence of housing policy in immigration debates, despite increasing research which suggest that housing is a necessary feature of an immigration attraction and retention strategy (e.g. Garcea, 2006: 16). As a social good, housing for immigrants and refugees should be addressed at the federal level in immigration policy discussions. I concur with a recent study that municipalities do play a role

too (Wachsmuth D., 2008). They should explicitly and substantively address the specific context of recent immigrants in macro-level housing policy initiatives.

# Final Conclusion

**“Of all their needs in the new society relatively few influence immigrants’ adaptation and life-chances in such a profound way as does housing.”**

**Danso and Grant (2001: 2)**

While all factors affecting the quality of life cannot be addressed through housing provision (e.g., poverty; unemployment), the COSTI Streets to Homes program has appeared to positively address those aspects where it can make a difference. These include personal safety and security of tenure; a decent, affordable home environment; the provision of support services as needed (and wanted); opportunities for making friends; and socializing within an environment characterized by tolerance and acceptance. Above all, the culturally sensitive nature of their service delivery has resulted in 100 percent of clients going through the program maintaining their housing. Championing innovation in the future will mean developing these capabilities within the wider housing sector.

One of the most courageous leaders during the South African struggle for liberation against apartheid, Steve Biko, wrote these words before his untimely death:

... [Western society] seems to be very concerned with perfecting their technological know-how while losing out on their spiritual dimension. We believe that in the long run the special contribution to the world by Africa will be in this field of human relationship. The great powers of the world may have done wonders in giving the world an industrial and military look, but the great gift still has to come from Africa – giving the world a more human face (Biko 1978:46).

**Ubuntu**, as shown above, is important in enhancing the capacity of community agencies to look beyond the narrow lens of refugees as the other “strangers” but embrace them as fellow humans, with all their rights, including housing, as enshrined in the Charter.

**Ubuntu** is also important for policy planners concerned with housing integration of new immigrants. Policy makers need to look beyond the housing market in their investigations since housing is intrinsically tied to the social fabric of a community. The successful settlement of new immigrants and refugees is likely a major social and political challenge facing major cities and neighbourhoods in Canada in the foreseeable future.

As put so succinctly in a recent manual by Carolina Gajardo, Manager for Housing Services at COSTI Immigrant Services (A Road to Home - Working with Homeless Immigrants and Refugees, 2008)

*Foreign born homeless individuals, regardless of the number of years they have been in Canada, have a particular reality that can be attributed to their process of integration. The process and circumstances of coming to Canada have a compound effect when facing challenging changes in personal circumstances.*

*All other realities such as immigration status, refugee trauma, post traumatic stress syndrome, communication barriers, ethno-racial background, family composition, gender, age, sexual orientation, mental health/addiction, need to be considered when assessing the service users' capacity and personal strengths to resolve the issues face.*

*Furthermore, the receiving society plays a critical role as an enabler agent, particularly when providing all its citizens, regardless of their immigration status, with the resources to facilitate integration and minimize social exclusion.*

*Housing workers need to assess the possible hidden factors of migration to understand the reason for homelessness among migrant individuals. An awareness of the impact of migration noted above, in addition to cultural competence, can help workers move in the right direction when providing housing stabilization services.*

*There is no "one style fits all" way of providing services; the uniqueness in these cases resides in the capacity of the service provider to untie the past to understand why the person found themselves in the present circumstances.*

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## APPENDIX 1

### SHIFT Research Outline

#### Streets to Homes Follow-up support to Immigrants and Refugees

Our program was selected to be part of SHIFT because we were currently implementing an innovative program with the following characteristics:

- Contributes to reducing homelessness
- Builds on existing ideas but is also creative and/or experimental
- Results in positive change in the quality of life of those being served
- Demonstrates new ways in which programs are designed and delivered
- Uses resources in new ways
- Inspires others and/or has a broader impact outside the program or organization
- Has measurable results

The services are designed to meet the specific needs of clients who face cultural, linguistic and socio-economic barriers to suitable housing. In this pilot phase we aim to dispel myths and raise awareness of the realities that affect immigrants/refugees. We would also like to contribute to a wider understanding of future preventative initiatives that can reduce incidents of homelessness and build stronger settlement support services to a population that has compound barriers.

Part of the SHIFT support plan to the participant agencies was to provide seed money to review and/or evaluate the program. Based on the fact that our program is funded only as a pilot, we thought that it was critical to have a research based foundation to enhance the sustainability of the program. We believe that new innovative projects benefit from a standard practice of research and evaluation that is objective and conducted by a professional researcher. It validates the anecdotal feedback when compared to data and personal interviews with service users. It becomes an important tool for program sustainability and policy recommendation.

The questions to be asked will encompass the following to ensure we can establish the specific needs for the existence of the program and the impact in the life of individuals that have struggled with issues such as isolation, loss of financial and social status, loss of family and community supports and post-traumatic stress as a result of their pre and post migration.

1. General demographic information; age, gender, etc.
2. Pre and post migration history
3. Health
4. Housing history
5. Language proficiency

6. Previous S2H Settlement services received
7. Support systems available previous to S2H
8. Impact of receiving one to one case management





9. **COSTI**  
Immigrant Services **INFORMATION ABOUT AN  
INTERVIEW**

**Project: SHIFT-COSTI RESEARCH**

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

Researcher's Name and contact number: \_\_\_\_\_

*Dear Participant:*

By this letter, I invite you to participate in this project.

This research involves collecting information to be used in a review of the Housing Help Assistance part of the Street-To-Homes program as administered by COSTI Immigrant Services. My goal for this project is to record your life experiences related to housing in Canada and how that may be related to your immigrant/refugee status. In order to do this, I am interviewing you and completing a questionnaire. With your permission, your voice may also be recorded to ensure I accurately capture your narrative. Your interview should take from 1-2 hours. My research results will be presented in a report that will be submitted to Carolina Gajardo, Manager of the Housing Help Program at COSTI, North York.

Please be advised that your participation is voluntary. You can stop the interview at any time, stop voice recording at any time or refuse to answer any questions which are objectionable or which make you feel uncomfortable. I do not believe that there are any risks to your participation in this research project.

By signing the consent form and checking the statements you agree with, you are agreeing to participate in this project. Your confidentiality will be protected by means of concealing the names and identities of the participants.

You will receive a gift in the amount of \$30 for your time. If you change your mind about your participation in this project you may request that all voice recordings be destroyed.

**Copyright of Interview Material:**

Only my supervisor, Carolina Gajardo and I will have access to the data. Data will be retained indefinitely in a secure location with specific instructions that it can not be used without your prior written approval.

If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about this project, please contact Carolina Gajardo at COSTI Immigrant Service, North York Housing Help Centre, 416-244 0480 Ext. 224

Thank you for your participation in this project.

Sincerely,

Princie Sibanda

Researcher



## CONSENT FORM FOR INTERVIEW

INTERVIEW OF: \_\_\_\_\_

INTERVIEWER: \_\_\_\_\_

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

LOCATION: \_\_\_\_\_

I \_\_\_\_\_, have read the letter of information which explains the purpose of this research. I understand that I will be providing information for a project called “SHIFT-COSTI Interview” as part of program review at COSTI. I understand that the purpose of this interview is to record my life experiences and housing situation. I have also had this letter explained to me in person.

I fully understand the terms under which I will participate in this project, and I understand that to sign this form and check statements means that I agree to participate in this project. I know that I can contact Carolina Gajardo at COSTI Immigrant Service, North York Housing Help Centre, 416- 244 0480 Ext. 224 if I have any questions, concerns, or complaints. I am fully aware that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time.

My questions concerning this interview have been answered to my satisfaction. \_\_\_\_\_  
(initial)

I HEREBY AGREE THAT THE INFORMATION OBTAINED FROM THIS INTERVIEW CAN BE USED FOR THE PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH.

I UNDERSTAND THAT MY NAME OR THE VOICE RECORDING WILL NOT BE USED OR SHARED WITH OTHERS FOR OTHER PURPOSES THAN THIS RESEARCH.

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

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

Please check one or more of the following statements:

\_\_\_ I grant permission to record my voice during the interview

\_\_\_ I do NOT grant permission for voice recording during the interview

\_\_\_ I HAVE RECEIVED \$30 FOR MY PARTICIPATION