

June 12, 2017

Hon Chris Ballard
Ministry of Housing /
Ministry Responsible for the Poverty Reduction Strategy
17th Floor, 777 Bay Street
Toronto, Ontario M5G 2E5

Dear Minister Ballard:

RE: Feedback on the Portable Housing Benefit Framework

In our role as Co-Chairs of the Ontario Community of Interest on Housing First, we are writing you to provide feedback on the “Portable Housing Benefit Framework” that is currently in development and under consideration by the Ontario Ministry of Housing. We had an opportunity to discuss this framework with Mr. Jason Mallett, Senior Policy Advisor for the Ontario Ministry of Housing. He suggested to us to write your office with our feedback as your ministry was still in the process of consultation prior to its release.

Overall, we are very impressed with the proposed framework and we believe that it is an essential component of a long-term affordable housing strategy in Ontario. The portability and client-centered nature of the approach providing individuals and families with choice in where they can live is a particularly important aspect of this benefit. Moreover, the calculation of the benefit amount taking into account household income and local housing markets will help ensure its fairness and effectiveness in facilitating housing stability for people accessing it regardless of their financial situation or where they live.

Both of us were members of the National Research Team of the At Home / Chez Soi Demonstration Project that tested the effectiveness of Housing First for people with serious mental illness and a history of homelessness in five Canadian cities, including Toronto. The findings from this study were unequivocal in demonstrating that Housing First can solve homelessness for a majority of this population. Moreover, the costs associated with these programs were offset by a reduction of use of health, social, and justice-related services. A critical ingredient of Housing First programs developed in the At Home / Chez Soi project entailed rent supplements allowing individuals to pay only 30% of their income towards rent in scattered private market housing.

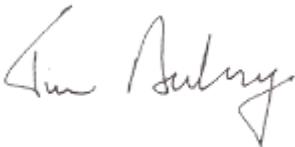
In the context of our efforts to develop and scale up Housing First programs across Ontario in response to the findings of At Home / Chez Soi project, we have some concerns about the extent the proposed portable housing benefits will be available to individuals in these programs. Unfortunately, many communities in Ontario are finding it difficult to access a sufficient number rent supplements for their Housing First programs because of the limited resources for this

purpose accessible from municipalities, the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, or the Homelessness Partnering Strategy of the federal government. Our concern is that the proposed “Portable Housing Benefit Framework” is not aligned across these sectors or necessarily with the recent work undertaken by your ministry in the area of supportive housing.

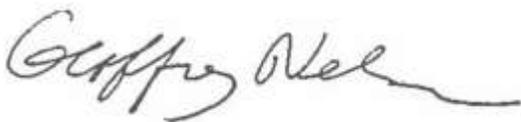
Specifically, although there is mention of various existing rent supplement programs, there is no mention of the “Portable Housing Benefit Framework” in the “Ontario Supportive Housing Policy Framework” released in March 2017. As a result, we wonder how easily communities will be able to make available some of these portable housing benefits to Housing First programs that target people experiencing chronic homelessness. As well, Housing First depends on rapid access to housing, and we wonder how quickly people experiencing chronic homelessness will be able to access the housing benefit if they are on a waiting list for social housing. We would urge the Ministry in adopting this framework to make it sufficiently flexible so that individuals these programs can be eligible and be given priority for these benefits.

We hope this feedback on portable housing benefits is helpful. As we mentioned, we are fully supportive of this kind of mechanism as a strategy for assisting Ontarians to access affordable housing. Ultimately, we believe that they will serve to prevent and end homelessness as well enhance the quality of life of individuals and families who are living on limited incomes.

Sincerely,



Tim Aubry, Ph.D.
Professor, School of Psychology
University of Ottawa
Co-Chair, Community of Interest on Housing First in Ontario



Geoff Nelson, Ph.D.
Emeritus Professor, Department of Psychology
Wilfrid Laurier University
Co-Chair, Community of Interest on Housing First in Ontario