

FINAL REPORT OF THE VULNERABILITY ASSESSMENT TOOL EVALUATION

NARRATIVE SUMMARY OF QUANTITATIVE
RESULTS AND QUALITATIVE FINDINGS



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Centre for Research on Educational
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PATHWAYS PTH HOUSING FIRST INC.

Pathways PtH Housing First Inc. trains direct service organizations, conducts research projects, and influences policy related to Housing First and homelessness. Through its founder and CEO it is currently participating in national studies of homelessness, mental illness, and addiction, and contributed numerous articles and book chapters on these topics, including the Housing First Manual. Pathways has been instrumental in training, technical assistance, and evaluation for HF in Canada, as a consultant for the Mental Health Commission of Canada's (MHCC) At Home/Chez Soi research demonstration project, and its current HF Training and Technical Assistance initiative. With Dr. Tsemberis, Pathways is continuously engaging with communities and agencies considering Pathways' model nationally and around the world.

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The Centre for Research on Educational and Community Services (CRECS) at the University of Ottawa collaborates in research, evaluation, and training with organizations in the educational, social service, and health sectors to improve social programs and policies for citizens, especially those facing social exclusion.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

This report is prepared for BC Housing as part of the evaluation of the Vulnerability Assessment Tool (VAT). The VAT was created by the Downtown Emergency Service Centre in Seattle, Washington, to objectively determine the vulnerability of their clients to continued housing instability. The VAT involves a structured interview to assess an individual experiencing homelessness or marginal housing on 10 domains: survival skills, basic needs, indicated mortality risks, medical risks, organization/orientation, mental health, substance use, communication, social behaviours, and homelessness.

METHODOLOGY

BC Housing and non-profit housing societies in Vancouver have been using the VAT since 2014 to assist in the placement of clients into supportive housing units. BC Housing initiated this evaluation to determine to what extent the VAT has been achieving its objectives, identify lessons learned, and inform whether stakeholder should continue to use the VAT. Although the VAT has been tested on its psychometric properties, there have been no published reports on its use within service agencies and its use with clients. Therefore, this evaluation serves an important function in understanding the functionality of the VAT.

The methodology for this evaluation involved a mixed methods design. Quantitative data was collected from administrative records provided by BC Housing for seven housing facilities and analyzed in order to demonstrate trends. Qualitative data was collected from building managers of the seven housing facilities, assistant managers, tenants and VAT assessors.

KEY FINDINGS

The following are key findings of the quantitative and qualitative results. In reviewing these findings, it should be noted that they reflect the process used at a particular point in time for seven congregate model supportive housing buildings and to fill more than 500 units in new buildings. The influx of housing placements was not typical of the current situation of using the VAT to fill housing vacancies as they come up. This context should be considered in the interpretation of these findings. A further review of the VAT process should be considered which takes into account its current application.

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

- Clients were generally scoring on the low- to mid-range of the VAT, which indicated that clients were assessed as having low to medium vulnerability.
- There were no significant differences in total VAT scores based upon age and gender. However, older clients displayed greater vulnerability in terms of medical and mortality risks compared to younger clients, and females had greater vulnerability than males in terms of survival skills and mental health.
- Non-Aboriginal clients were assessed as having a slightly greater vulnerability than Aboriginal clients. This finding was surprising and requires further study. Possible explanations could be the circumstances of tenancing more than 500 new units of supportive housing within a short time period, or perhaps the assessments are not capturing the unique experience of Aboriginal clients. BC Housing recognizes there is an over representation of the Aboriginal community in the homeless population and is committed to working with its government and community partners in the development of culturally appropriate services.
- The VAT is being used properly to assign clients to an appropriate support level.
- Homeless and SRO clients had similar VAT scores, which indicates they are displaying similar levels of vulnerability. Both groups had higher scores than clients at risk of homelessness.
- Clients who were not allocated housing had higher VAT scores than those allocated housing. This may be due to the limited number of high-support spaces available across the seven buildings and limited capacity to provide an appropriate intensity of support for high-need (i.e., level 3 support) clients, and the objective to ensure a workable tenant mix. This does not imply that clients with higher VAT scores were not housed elsewhere. Clients not allocated housing in one of the seven buildings were likely eventually housed by BC Housing in another development.
- The VAT has some ability to predict who will be successful in housing as clients with higher VAT scores had shorter tenancies. The data also indicated a high degree of tenant stability as the average length of stay was 18.9 months (out of a total maximum of two years available for the study period), 100 out of 129 tenants remained in their housing at the time of the evaluation, and another 15 had moves considered to be beneficial.

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

The qualitative results provide an in-depth analysis of the administration of the VAT and its application with housing clients in relation to the objectives identified below.

Fairness/transparency

- The VAT has significantly improved fairness and transparency of the tenant placement process by establishing a “common language” and systematic process for tenant selection that most housing providers have “bought into. This is a significant achievement in an environment where there are many buildings, administered by housing providers with varying approaches and philosophies.

Efficiency/burden/experience

- The process was regarded by stakeholders as definitely worth the time spent, and as eliciting rich information and allowing a reasonably accurate picture of the tenant to emerge in a relatively short time.
- The VAT interview itself was viewed as a positive experience by most of the tenants, and was experienced as safe and understandable, though there were some concerns about the consequences of providing forthright answers, and about certain questions eliciting some discomfort.

Consistency

- For the most part, interviews were being carried out consistently, though there was some variability with respect to how some assessors were using the questionnaire, and possibly with respect to ratings. With the expanding base of assessors, it will be important to bring an increased focus to quality assurance and ongoing training.

Support planning

- The VAT can be used effectively to match housing and support levels for individual clients and is able to determine the proportion of clients considered low, moderate and high vulnerability. While the tool is a good resource for opening up a conversation about support planning, the VAT itself is not a clinical tool and it assumes additional case management planning will be done with tenants once they are housed.

Impact

- Stakeholders, including tenants, viewed the VAT process as having a generally positive impact on creating stable tenancies and a workable tenant mix. The tool/process (including the addendum interview) is seen as valuable for matching

prospective tenants with a building that is a good fit and has an appropriate level of support. Tenants viewed the process as enabling them to be placed in settings where they were generally satisfied with their housing and which contributed to their recovery. Concerns were expressed by some tenants about the mix of tenants (e.g. tenants with unmanaged mental illness or addictions) and about disruptive behavior in or around the buildings, (drug dealing, vandalism, sex work, etc.).

Challenges

- One of the main challenges identified in the evaluation is the ability to house people who have higher and more complex support needs. It should be noted, however, that buildings were targeted to include 10% of clients at the level 3 support level (high level of supports being required) and in fact 12% of the units were allocated to these clients. Additionally the seven buildings selected are operated by a range of non-profit housing providers with a diverse range of experience and expertise in housing a homeless population with complex needs.
- The complexity of the support needs, especially for people with mental health and addiction challenges, highlights the importance of establishing partnerships with health authorities to ensure that the appropriate level of clinical services is provided.
- In terms of the interviewing process, respondents mention that there is an informal pre-screening happening, based on experiential knowledge of which individuals may be a good fit. While overall, the VAT process has significantly improved consistency, there is a need to improve transparency about certain aspects of the process (e.g. pre-screening, and the waitlist process for individuals who have a VAT interview but who are not housed).

LESSONS (WHAT WORKED WELL AND LESS WELL)

WHAT'S WORKED WELL

- The new system has significantly improved the fairness and transparency of the tenancy placement process by creating a common language and understanding of the process and an objective picture of vulnerability
- The tool is seen as eliciting rich, relevant information in a relatively short period of time
- There is a high degree of consensus in the community about the value of the tool and the process
- The tool/process (including the addendum interview) is seen as valuable for matching prospective tenants with a building which is a good fit, and has an appropriate level of support

- The process is seen as valuable in terms of creating a workable tenant mix at the buildings that use it
- The skill and sensitivity of the assessors themselves is seen as a significant strength of the system

WHAT'S WORKED LESS WELL

- There are still some issues with transparency of how the system works (e.g. pre-screening for a VAT interview, what happens to people's place on the waitlist if they don't get access to housing)
- Some questions in particular (e.g., about family relationships) are seen as triggering discomfort, which may be exacerbated when prospective tenants are not clear about the purpose of the questions, or when there is no opportunity to debrief
- The VAT write-up "narrative" seems to be inconsistently delivered and/or used, which may constitute a "missed opportunity", given that the information is seen by many as a valuable opportunity to "open up a conversation" about support planning; the VAT itself is not a clinical tool, however, and the process assumes additional case management planning will be done with tenants once they are housed
- The emphasis on tenant mix (and diminishing supply of high-support spaces, and concomitant lack of appropriate intensity of clinical support in certain buildings) has meant that there is a barrier to housing people with high VAT scores
- While the pool of trained assessors is growing, there is a need to develop a more systematic approach to training and quality control amongst VAT assessors

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based upon the results of this evaluation, we recommend the continued use of the VAT in BC Housing funded supportive housing.

The remainder of the recommendations are broken down into two categories: 1) Improving the administration and interpretation of the VAT and 2) System planning/design.

ADMINISTRATION AND INTERPRETATION OF THE VAT

1. Develop the capacity to link VAT data to tenant data to be able to rigorously examine the relationship between VAT scores and tenant outcomes (e.g. housing stability).
2. Assess the use of the VAT and how it applies to vulnerable populations, including Aboriginal clients, women and youth to determine if the VAT is adequately capturing the vulnerability of these groups.

3. Work with the Ministry of Health and relevant health authorities to develop a process for assessing the ongoing vulnerability and functioning of tenants after they are housed.
4. Create a Quality Assurance process for VAT assessors.
 - a) Establish a system for periodic audits
 - b) Establish a system of supplemental training
 - c) Periodically survey new tenants regarding their experience with the VAT
 - d) Establish a community of practice so that more experienced assessors can support newer assessors
5. Increase understanding of the purpose and intent of the VAT both for prospective tenants and service providers.
6. Continue the practice of having more interviews at a neutral location (e.g. Orange Hall) rather than at the housing site. This includes conducting the VAT assessment outside of the MOU buildings and holding the supplementary building addendum interview at a later time for candidates who are assessed as potentially eligible for housing based on the VAT interview.

SYSTEM PLANNING/DESIGN

1. Use VAT data for planning and/or broadening the range of housing and support service options for supportive housing applicants, including:
 - a) Aligning support services strategically within housing to address the levels of need among supportive housing applicants
 - b) Developing a range of supportive housing building options which includes purpose-built smaller units, congregate living spaces and scattered site housing with mobile clinical and non clinical services, including ACT and ICM teams