
Book Review: Beyond Shelters – Solutions to Homelessness in Canada from the Front Lines

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Published in: *The Philanthropist*

ISSN: 2562-1491

Date: October 28, 2019

Original Link: <https://thephilanthropist.ca/2019/10/book-review-beyond-shelters-solutions-to-homelessness-in-canada-from-the-front-lines/>

Date of PDF Download: May 17, 2021

Beyond Shelters – Solutions to Homelessness in Canada from the Front Lines, ed. J. Hughes. James Lorimer and Co. Toronto, 2018; 256 pp: ISBN 9781459413559

The collection of essays *Beyond Shelters – Solutions to Homelessness in Canada from the Front Lines* (edited by James Hughes) highlights the role of homeless shelters and their “collective power for good” (p. 8). The essays introduce the reader to a diverse ecosystem of Canadian shelters and describe some of the significant changes in ideology and approach that many shelters have undergone over the last quarter of a century. The title, *Beyond Shelters*, reveals a dual theme in the essays – shelters are not enough to solve homelessness in Canada and the shelter of the future must move beyond basic accommodation in its efforts to address this complex issue.

Canadian shelters are diverse in whom they serve and how they work. The essays in this collection cover the range of Canadian geography and the differences in access to social and economic resources between rural and urban Canada. While most of the essayists work in homeless shelters, the book also includes case studies from organizations addressing the housing needs of women leaving violence. These examples highlight the challenges of narrow mandates and funding in a context where homelessness and violence are often interconnected. One-size-fits-all approaches do not work when considering the complexity of causes and experiences associated with homelessness. Some of the essayists hint at, if they do not directly name, intersectionality as a framework with which to examine both the provision of shelter

services and the causes of homelessness. (Intersectionality recognizes that people experience overlapping and compounding discrimination based on aspects of social identity, such as race, class, gender, ability, sexual orientation, etc.))

Many of the authors acknowledge the well-founded criticism of a system that historically has been more about charity than advancing equity. The Canadian shelter system originated in a Christian model of providing basic necessities to the disadvantaged as a reward for good behaviour or for complying with treatment. The essays of most interest delve into exploring housing as a human right, rather than a “gift” to be given to those considered worthy. This approach challenges underlying structures of power and privilege in the social services sector writ large, and the homelessness sector in particular. Several authors describe the importance of becoming partners in a client’s journey, rather than perpetuating a relationship of service providers to service recipients.

This shift in power reflects a shift in thinking and ideology in some shelters, leading to adjustments to programming and resource allocation. For example, harm-reduction and trauma-informed practices are tangible approaches that shift power from the “giver” of services to the recipient. These approaches can both advance human rights and generate more successful outcomes for clients and communities. But these changes did not come easily to the organizations that have transformed their approaches, requiring self-awareness and courage from those who have adopted these practices.

Matthew Pearce from Montreal explores the culture change required in shelters to move from providing emergency accommodation to being agents of “social transformation” (p. 82). This shift requires openness to change and willingness to innovate within an institution, including (in some cases), the need to examine the roots of the Christian service provision model. In particular, this may entail abandoning the assumed moral high ground with which some in the field identify. Transformational approaches include honest self reflection, a commitment to building trust and respect through relationships, and upholding the dignity and self actualization of those who access shelter services.

The same self awareness that is required to shift culture and power within shelters must be employed to examine the relationships between the shelter system and Indigenous people. Like other Canadian systems, shelters have historically perpetuated colonialism, and in many cases still “generate dependency and result in institutionalization” (p. 198) that replicate colonial mechanisms such as residential schools and child welfare systems. Arlene Haché shares her experiences as a former homeless woman and founder and operator of a shelter. For Haché and for many other Indigenous people, the experience of homelessness is more than being without a roof – it is dispossession of land, exclusion from community, and a manifestation of racism. While many of the authors point to social and economic inequality caused by discrimination, sexism, and racism, Haché challenges the reader with the boldest language in the collection, naming white privilege and white fragility as a root cause of the exclusion of Indigenous people. This analysis should spark a difficult but critical conversation that all in the sector can benefit from having.

As the non-profit sector employs critical self-awareness about power, privilege, and fragility it is increasingly examining root causes and systemic approaches to complex issues. The theme of moving “beyond shelters” is evident in a number of essays that contend that shelters must be part of a broad approach to address flawed systems and respond to societal shifts. Michel

Simard suggests that, while adequate services and programs are required, so too is a vision for social equality and fairness to enable critical shifts in systems and society to prevent and end homelessness.

Thus, shelters can and should play a role in shifting systems and society. Brian Duplessis from Fredericton decries shelters that limit themselves to service provision, saying that they must also advocate addressing the underlying problems of social policies and systems that keep people in abject poverty: the Housing First model, though laudable, is often not enough to break the cycle of poverty. Although the social and systemic work is long-term and arduous, shelters can play a critical role in it through collaboration and working beyond silos with other civil society players.

No examination of a non-profit system would be complete without acknowledging the challenge of funding and resources. For example, although women's shelters are not typically funded to undertake violence prevention, many have seen this work as necessary to adequately "move upstream" and stop the steady flow of women into shelters. Similarly, in order to address homelessness, we must collectively address the root causes of exclusion, dispossession, and discrimination. While this is not solely the work of homeless shelters, that system can play an important leadership role in advancing this work.

Sam Tsemberis, the architect of the Housing First approach, reminds us that political will depends on the support of cultural values. Picking up on this and taking one last clue from work on violence against women, Heather Davis posits that "if every member of society understood the capacity we have for violence in our culture and the conditions of inequality that make violence against women inevitable, violence would no longer be tolerated" (p. 61). Those of us working on homelessness and poverty should feel emboldened by these words. We must also collectively challenge the beliefs, attitudes, and power imbalances that normalize and perpetuate disparity and exclusion.