

The Life Skills Project: Client-Centered Approaches to Life Skills Acquisition for Homeless and At-Risk Populations

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Abstract : Homelessness is a widespread and complex problem in Canada and around the globe. Many Canadians will face homelessness at least once in their lifetime, with several experiencing subsequent bouts or cyclical patterns of housing precarity. While a Housing First approach to homelessness is a long-standing and widely accepted best practice, it is also recognized that the acquisition of life skills is an effective way to reduce cycles of homelessness. Indeed, when individuals are provided with a range of life skills—such as (but not limited to) financial literacy, household management, interpersonal skills, critical thinking, and resource management—they are given the tools required to maintain long-term Housing for a lifetime; thus reducing a repetitive need for services. However, there is limited research regarding the best ways to teach life skills, a problem that has been further complicated in a post-pandemic world, where services are being delivered online or in a hybrid model of care. More than this, it is difficult to provide life skills on a large scale without losing a client-centered approach to services. This lack of client-centeredness is also seen in the lack of attention to culturally sensitive life skills, which consider the diverse needs of individuals and imbed equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) within the skills being taught. This study aims to fill these identified gaps in the literature by employing a community-engaged (CER) approach. Academic, government, funders, front-line staff, and clients at 15 not-for-profits from across the Greater Toronto Area in Ontario, Canada, collaborated to co-create a virtual, client-centric, EDI-informed life skill learning management system. A triangulation methodology was utilized for this research. An environmental scan was conducted for current best practices, and over 100 front-line staff (including workers, managers, and executive directors who work with homeless populations) participated in two separate Creative Problem Solving Sessions. Over 200 individuals with experience in homelessness completed quantitative and open-ended surveys. All sections of this research aimed to discover the areas of skills that individuals need to maintain Housing and to ascertain what a more client-driven EDI approach to life skills training should include. This presentation will showcase the findings on which life skills are deemed essential for homeless and precariously housed individuals.

Keywords : homelessness, housing first, life skills, community engaged research, client- centered

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