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CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES - MANITOBA

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Subsidized Housing With Supports Needs More Support: Lessons from WestEnd Commons

Stable and affordable housing is a central component in improving people's quality of life. In light of a severe housing shortage facing low-income renters, it is clear that Manitoba has work to do to ensure that all citizens have access to a warm and secure place to live. A successful housing model in Winnipeg deserves attention – it couples subsidized housing with social supports in order to help families to thrive. This model has seen success in Winnipeg's North End through the transformation of the public housing complex Lord Selkirk Park, and through the housing and wrap-around supports provided to newcomers in two locations of IRCOM House in Winnipeg's inner-city.

WestEnd Commons is another innovative housing project in Winnipeg that demonstrates the positive impacts of subsidized housing with social supports. Opening its doors in 2014, WestEnd Commons provides 26-units of social and affordable housing with supports within the walls of St. Matthew's Anglican Church in Winnipeg's West End neighbourhood. A three-year qualitative research project, *Here We're At Home: The WestEnd Commons Model of Subsidized Housing with Supports*, explores the impact that this model of

housing has had on the families living at WestEnd Commons. Residents made clear that living at WestEnd Commons has had positive impacts and provided significant benefits for their families. Families are strengthened, tenancies are stabilized, isolation is decreased, financial stability is increased, food security is increased, and mental health is improved. These findings demonstrate that government investment in subsidized housing with social supports can have significant positive impacts for people living on low incomes and help families to thrive.

WestEnd Commons is a non-profit organization that provides mixed housing. Twenty units are for families with low incomes. Residents receive subsidies from Manitoba Housing that enable them to pay rents geared to income (RGI). RGI rates ensure that renters pay no more than between 25 to 30 percent of their household income on rent. The remaining six units at WestEnd Commons are for families living on low to moderate incomes, where residents pay rents based at or below median private market rates.

Families in the twenty RGI units at

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“Subsidies work for low income. I know I couldn’t have been here this long without the subsidy. If I was paying regular rent I would have been out a long time ago.”

-WestEnd Commons resident

WestEnd Commons described the complexities and precarity of living in poverty, and how living in subsidized housing has helped to stabilize their families. One tenant said, “subsidies work for low income. I know I couldn’t have been here this long without the subsidy. If I was paying regular rent I would have been out a long time ago.” Residents described the impacts of subsidized rents as wide-ranging. A single parent who received no outside support said they would have to find additional employment to their already full-time job if they didn’t receive a subsidy, “cause I can’t afford regular rent.” Another family is now paying half the rent they were paying in the private market, enabling them to redirect this money to purchase food, medication, and necessary items for their children. Residents’ stability in their tenancies was strengthened due to the sliding scale of RGI rates. Families who are becoming more financially independent, but still need the support of subsidized rents, are able to remain stable in the same apartment.

Residents living in the six units paying median market rents (MMR) experienced more mixed results. The MMR rate is calculated at a city-wide level, and does not take into account that most rental units in the West End neighbourhood are significantly less expensive than in other parts of the city. Therefore, even the suites rented below MMR rates in WestEnd Commons do not have the accessibility and affordability needed for many inner-city residents. This blanket approach to pricing MMR units puts non-profit housing providers like WestEnd Commons in a dilemma because suites sit empty for months at a time due to being unaffordable for their location. WestEnd Commons sets these rents at less than the MMR level in an effort to make their

suites more affordable in relation to what is available in the neighbourhood.

Research has shown that more than low rents are needed to help families thrive – social supports are also needed to address the interrelated factors that contribute to poverty and social exclusion. The support model at WestEnd Commons is multi-faceted. Residents are seen as members of the community rather than solely as renters, and WestEnd Commons’ way of working flows from this understanding. WestEnd Commons considers the complexities of resident’s lives by responding on a case-by-case basis with flexible and supportive policies and procedures. The support model includes an on-site Community Connector staff person that provides support through daily interactions with residents, resource referrals, planning and implementing programming and events, training and casual employment opportunities, and facilitating community-building activities for tenants.

The findings that emerged from this study demonstrate the significant benefits that WestEnd Commons’ model has produced for its residents. Residents have an increased sense of stability in their housing that they had not experienced before. In contrast to their experiences with renting in the private market, residents no longer see eviction as the first option on the table when problems arise. WestEnd Commons takes a hands-on approach in each person’s tenancy, from accepting applications with eviction histories to finding alternative solutions to potential evictions.

Residents directly connected their increased housing stability with improved health and wellbeing. One resident said:

“Before, it was me stressing about what was going to happen to us. Were we going to get kicked out? Like, what are we going to do for food? Yeah, and now we have a place to live. Before I couldn’t stock up my cupboards; we were eating noodles and KD. Now I’m more worried about stocking up on the fresh stuff, like the veggies and stuff. It feels good to not be on the food bank anymore. It’s just the fact that the rent is more stable because of the subsidy that we’re allowed to have while we’re living here. And I found when I lived elsewhere I found it really hard to find happy moments. Here, I’m finding a lot of happy moments.”

Residents at WestEnd Commons experienced reduced stress, strengthened mental health, increased food security, and strengthened family units due to the combination of stable subsidized housing with social supports.

Using a social determinants of health lens, social isolation has been widely recognized as a source of poor health; it’s estimated that people experiencing social isolation and loneliness are 50 percent more likely to die prematurely than those with a strong social network. WestEnd Commons works to increase residents’ social inclusion through the programming and support provided. Many residents relayed experiences of deep social connections with their neighbours. The mutual support that residents give and receive allows them to maintain work and school responsibilities, strengthen their family units, and generally experience a wider network of support.

Parents particularly experienced the positive benefits of a built-in support system. One parent attributed the support they

received from other residents to stabilizing their mental health and keeping their child out of Child and Family Services (CFS): “For a single parent, you have help. I was so stressed. I was almost depressed. I almost called CFS by myself. When I moved to WestEnd Commons, the community and the people there, I kind of had some peace of mind. It really helped my emotional state.” Manitoba has a crisis with 11,000 kids in CFS care – government investment in subsidized housing with supports can act as preventative family supports to keep children out of care and with their families.

The social inclusion and support that is coupled with subsidized rents at WestEnd Commons has also helped families to become more financially stable. Of the households involved in the three-year research project, sixty-one percent achieved gains in employment, fifty percent furthered their education, and twenty-eight percent stopped receiving social assistance during their tenancy at WestEnd Commons. These gains were complex, as residents’ ties to the labour market were often still loose and precarious, yet still represent a positive shift in tenants’ financial wellbeing that can, in part, be attributed to the stability experienced at WestEnd Commons due to subsidized rents with supports.

Over the past three years, the residents at WestEnd Commons have experienced improved housing stability, stronger social networks, reduced isolation, improved mental health, increased food security, stronger labour market attachments, and greater financial stability due to subsidized rents with supports. Each of these is genuinely significant in the lives of families living on low incomes. This is a model of housing provision

that merits duplication. Yet in order for the model of WestEnd Commons to be replicated, subsidized housing with supports needs more robust and long-term support.

Housing precarity is a spectrum that goes beyond addressing absolute homelessness. It is important to frame the West-End Commons model as one of homelessness prevention. Canada's main funding mechanism to address homelessness is the Homelessness Partnering Strategy, which invests two-thirds of its funds in addressing chronic and episodic homelessness. It is a dire failure of political will that Canadians experience absolute homelessness, yet governments must also more robustly fund interventions that reach beyond absolute homelessness in order to address the at least 25,000 Canadians experiencing housing precarity and vulnerability to homelessness. Preventative measures against homelessness, such as the social supports coupled with subsidized rents provided at WestEnd Commons, ought to be regarded as a larger part of the solution. While it remains to be seen in practice, Canada's National Housing Strategy holds potential to be a step in the right direction - yet the success of many key components of the strategy depend on a committed provincial partner willing to provide matching funds and to be an active member around the table. It remains to be seen if Manitoba's Provincial Government will rise to the occasion. For the sake of families depending on stable housing with financial and social supports attached, such as the residents of West-End Commons, one hopes that they will.

Jess Klassen is a community researcher in Winnipeg. This "Research for Communities" summary accompanies the release of the final report of a three-year research project titled "Here We're At Home": The WestEnd Commons Model of Subsidized Housing With Supports.

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For the full report, see <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/here-were-home>

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