

A Research to Explore an Inclusive Intervention Model for Persons with Homelessness Concerns

1.0) Background of the research

Homelessness is a complex and multi-dimensional issue which affects all ethnic and age groups in Singapore. Ng (2019) posited that there are three main explanations for homelessness: economic structural conditions, namely, poverty and unemployment; systemic barriers such as inadequate housing, shelters, and other services for people who need support; and individual circumstances such as traumatic life events, physical and mental health issues, addictions, loss of family relationships, and family violence. These three factors leave persons with homelessness concerns no choice but to continue to 'rough sleep' and face long waiting periods for public rental accommodation. This is supported by Wong (2020)'s observation that 'rough sleeping' could likely be a manifestation of more complex social problems of one's individual circumstances, such as family disputes.

Singapore adopts a many-helping hands approach towards tackling the issue of homelessness, involving the Ministry of Social and Family Services (MSF), agencies like FSCs and SSOs, and various community partners and healthcare institutions. Notably, the MSF set-up known as Partners Engaging and Empowering Rough Sleepers (PEERS) network is an important resource (Wong, 2020). Organisations in the PEERS network extend help to rough sleepers by allowing them to have a stable environment via interim shelters known as Safe Sound Sleeping Places (S3Ps) (Wong, 2020). Since late last year, more organisations have been coming forward to provide temporary shelters for rough sleepers to get back on their feet and work towards placement in transitional shelters and public rental flats (Wong, 2020).

Homelessness is a prevalent issue especially within FRCS FSC's service boundary. Findings from several previous years of FRCS FSC's annual client profile analysis reports highlighted accommodation as one of the top five presenting issues managed by the FSC. Agencies such as MSF PEERS Office, SSOs, other FSCs, community partners and healthcare institutions have made many referrals to FRCS FSC for persons facing homelessness concerns, such as those who are 'rough sleeping', lodging temporarily with family members, relatives, friends or acquaintances, facing eviction and being evicted from their homes or places of lodging. FRCS FSC's main goals are to explore shelter placement with these individuals and to work with them towards getting a more long-term or permanent accommodation option.

However, it is often that some of the persons referred to FRCS FSC continue to experience barriers in securing more long-term or permanent accommodation options due to their history of violence and existing mental health issues or illnesses. The problem of homelessness has also been exacerbated by the current COVID-19 situation. According to Wong (2020), the economic fallout of the pandemic has contributed towards an increase in the number of persons experiencing homelessness concerns due to a variety of reasons—becoming unemployed, being unable to afford rental space, and being unable to return to one's home overseas due to travel restrictions. Additionally, current solutions for

homelessness issues do not consider the community as an important stakeholder. This could limit the effectiveness of solutions as Ng (2019) postulated that achieving housing security for this vulnerable population will require much community ownership of such challenges, alongside improvements to economic conditions, policies, and services.

Given the limitations of the current model, we were motivated to conduct a research to develop a better understanding of the experiences of those with homelessness concerns and explore an inclusive intervention model that will address these concerns more holistically and effectively. The new model can also incorporate Ng (2019)'s recommendations to involve the community in taking ownership of complex social challenges associated with homelessness, encouraging them to find out more about homelessness issues, contribute what they can, speak up about their concerns, and participate in policy making. Such community involvement could challenge the general public's negative stereotypes about persons with homelessness concerns, thereby creating a safer environment for them (Ng, 2019).

2.0) Aim of the research

The FRCS FSC research and development team proposed conducting research on the topic of homelessness which would explore on an inclusive intervention model to address the service gap based on the current intervention model in addressing immediate and continuing issues around homelessness. The proposal was approved in December 2021 and the team has followed up with the research efforts since then.

The key research question is **“What would be an inclusive intervention model that could better support the homeless community in Singapore based on existing gaps or ‘hidden’ challenges to the current intervention models and services?”**

3.0) Research participants and methodology

The participants comprise the following:

External Stakeholders	Internal Stakeholders
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. SSO (Regional Support Team)2. MSF PEERS Office3. Religious Institutions<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Darussalam Mosque• Assyakirin Mosque4. Ground-up Groups:<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Homeless Hearts of Singapore5. AWWA Transitional Shelter <p>Profile: Participants are a mixture of social workers, social development officers,</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. FRCS FSC caseworkers<p>Profile: 10 caseworkers with varying years of experience were interviewed. All of them had some experience engaging clients with homelessness concerns.</p>2. Existing clients who are experiencing or have experienced homelessness concerns<p>Profile: 8 clients from FRCS FSC agreed to participate in the FGD. 7 of them were</p>

External Stakeholders	Internal Stakeholders
managers, department heads and volunteer leads.	experiencing secondary homelessness while 1 was rough sleeping. They have been homeless between several months to 6 years. The participants were mainly middle-aged males.

The research design comprises a mixed-method approach which involves the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data gathered through structured interviews, questionnaires and focus group discussions from internal and external stakeholders. We have been able to holistically assess our research question which enabled us to explore the general profiles of the various homeless individuals known to FRCS FSC, viability of the current service models and their possible service gaps, as well as other ‘hidden’ challenges associated with homelessness.

4.0) Overall service landscape

Based on the sharing, homeless cases are often picked up and identified by enforcement officers, SSOs, hospitals or FSCs and social service agencies. Usually, FRCS FSC takes the lead in conducting case management for homeless cases as there is a need for coordination between various agencies. Usually, the first layer of support such as family members and friends will be explored but if they are unable to assist, the next step will be for the caseworkers to engage the relevant agencies. The common agencies which the FSC coordinates with are HDB, MSF PEERs for S3P, SSOs, MUIS, and transitional shelters. To a lesser extent, the FSC may also engage hospitals, MSF Destitute Persons Service, Employment and Employability Institute (e2i), Lifelong Learning Institute (LLI), agencies which offer support group platforms such from We Care Community Services and Daughters of Tomorrow (DOT), and informal groups like Homeless Hearts which offer befriending services and interim financial and in-kind assistance.

FSC’s requests for support to these agencies and informal groups are usually responded to quite promptly, especially by the agencies. They make it quite clear what the support they can provide as well as the background information and supporting documents they require for their assessment.

5.0) Findings from the Focus Group Discussion–Caseworkers

5.1) Various factors that caseworkers perceive to have contributed to the issue of homelessness and associated challenges

- **Economic Structural Conditions**

It is accepted amongst caseworkers in FRCS FSC that unemployment and not being gainfully employed are factors which contribute to the homelessness concerns clients experience. Not being gainfully employed can refer to work difficulties like trying to maintain a regular income via irregular casual employment or experiencing financial insecurity and low income due to irregular casual work.

- **Systemic Barriers**

It is commonly agreed amongst the caseworkers that housing policies can be a barrier for homeless persons. For example, applying for a public rental flat usually requires the formation of a partnership via the joint singles or family scheme. It can be rather difficult to find a suitable partner to apply for the joint singles scheme, and an added challenge in the application is for the partner to produce the relevant documents which often may not take place. A homeless person may also face difficulties buying a flat because he or she will not be eligible to utilise a mortgage loan if one has already used it for previous HDB flat purchases. This homeless person may be reluctant to apply for a mortgage loan via the bank due to their lack of gainful employment.

Other than housing policies, the application process for buying or renting a flat might take longer than expected especially with the current pandemic, as shelters are already operating at near maximum capacity and HDB is experiencing an overwhelming number of applications for public rental flats. It takes at least a year for many applicants who are homeless to transit to a public rental flat. The pandemic has also influenced the housing landscape where buying a resale flat can be costly while a BTO flat may only be ready in the next two to four years.

Even for interim and transitional shelters, there are strict conditions during application where they can reject homeless persons, especially if they have a history of violence or/and are not treatment compliant for their medical, mental, and/or addiction conditions. If they happen to be placed in the shelters, there could also be instances of interpersonal conflicts with other residents. Hence, they would prefer to live out on their own as compared to communal living.

- **Individual Circumstances**

Caseworkers have cited several issues directly associated with the homeless individuals themselves which include marriage breakdown and divorce, extended family breakdown, alcohol and drug addiction, gambling addiction, loss of income, low wages, irregular work, poor physical health, living, and housing bureaucracy.

Usually, the issues contributing to individual circumstances for homelessness are intertwined. For example, the individual may have alcohol addiction that has caused a breakdown in his marriage, which is further compounded by not being gainfully employed due to poor physical health from excessive drinking.

5.2) Current intervention practices and possible areas for improvement

Caseworkers do agree that consultation with supervisors and peers help them to leverage on the experience and resources of colleagues who are more familiar in managing issues associated with accommodation. It was also mentioned that it is important to seek support during the direct work with such clients, especially in coping with their emotions and frustrations.

Caseworkers are also of the opinion that having good relations with various agencies as mentioned earlier may help to better address the concerns and needs of individuals in urgent situations. It could also be beneficial for the FSC to set up a dedicated team whose sole focus is to develop internal processes and be the point of contact for agencies. The team can perform case management to address the various issues faced by the persons with homelessness concerns and be responsible for managing a dedicated emergency fund to support homeless persons in their accommodation transitions.

Generally, the current landscape of services for persons with homelessness concerns lacks immediate solutions for those who require more urgent accommodation. Creative solutions may be needed to address such situations. For instance, it was suggested that unused spaces in the neighbourhood could be rented out.

5.3) Other observations from caseworkers

Homelessness used to be perceived as a societal ill where such individuals were the contributors to their own homeless situation. This negative perception has changed over the past years with increased awareness efforts by MSF, non-profits organisations and ground-up groups which highlight that the issue of homelessness can be attributed to a combination of factors, namely, economic structural conditions, systemic barriers, and individual circumstances. FRCS FSC caseworkers who have been working with persons with primary or secondary homeless concerns collectively agree that the attitude of the society towards the issue of homelessness has improved. While this change is noted and welcome, caseworkers also recognise that there is an ongoing need for improvements in the system which are supporting the individuals to address their homelessness concerns.

Referred cases of homeless individuals to the FSC will likely be followed up with either applications to temporary accommodation like placement in shelters, or coordinating assistance with other social service agencies for hostel stay. Such interventions, however, may not always be smooth. One common issue faced is mismatched expectations where a homeless individual believes that the caseworker is able to resolve his accommodation issue and when that does not happen, the former may project his frustrations on the latter. Often, the eligibility criteria for shelter placement can be the main obstacle, especially if an individual has a history of violence or/and not treatment compliant for their medical, mental and/or addiction conditions.

Regardless of the urgency, caseworkers will usually follow-up with individuals with unsuccessful shelter application outcome. It is quite often that a homeless individual can be unemployed and may have financial problems. Hence, case management is required between the FSC and other social service agencies to provide a more holistic support via

coordination of resources, which may lead to possible caseworker fatigue with much time and effort invested.

It is worth noting that though the current system may need to be relooked or is already being improved to provide a more holistic intervention, there is already an existing synergy amongst religious bodies and ground-up groups to facilitate better coordination of support for temporary accommodation. It can be said that with better synergy between agencies, caseworkers are able to better position themselves to advocate for the plight of homeless individuals.

6.0) Findings from the Focus Group Discussion–Clients

6.1) Various factors that clients perceive to have contributed to the issue of homelessness and associated challenges

- **Economic Structural Conditions**

It was agreed amongst the clients that the inability to work or be gainfully employed due to health issues can be the main barrier in servicing the mortgage for a flat, paying rental fees and staying in a hostel.

- **Systemic Barriers**

The clients experienced being placed at a shelter which is far from client's workplace. Hence, transportation cost is often a major concern.

Usually, the homeless individuals in the shelter will transit to a public rental flat. Getting a public rental flat is the common long-term goal for many homeless individuals.

The joint single scheme (JSS) is dependent on the proper application of 2 individuals with the relevant supporting documents, failing which, the application will be rejected. Such applications may require the homeless individual to navigate multiple systems such as HDB and CPF to acquire the relevant supporting documents during application. In addition, it is common for many applicants to undergo lengthy waiting period for approval and selection of the rental flats.

However, there is a new initiative called the joint single scheme (JSS-OR) which has started its pilot in early 2022, whereby singles can apply without the need to find a flatmate as the operator run JSS-OR will do it for you.

Apart from the public rental flat, it is quite a well-known fact amongst the clients that renting in the open market can be risky as it is not so well-regulated. The terms and conditions stipulated in the tenancy agreement are usually in the favour of the landlord. The landlord can choose to increase the rental fee and when the client (tenant) is unable to pay, primary or secondary homelessness may subsequently occur.

- **Individual Circumstances**

During the discussion, the common issues mentioned by the clients were family conflict, addiction issues, marital issue, and mismanagement of proceeds from the sale of housing. Apart from the management of proceeds, the other issues are the same ones which were shared by the caseworkers.

Clients with homelessness concerns might have been subjected to multiple transitions in their lives. For example, frequent change of temporary living arrangements while applying for more long-term housing solution, can aggravate personal struggles such as addictions and mental health issues. There could also be adjustment issues, including mismatched perception and expectations of staying in temporary accommodation such as shelters.

6.2) Current intervention practices and possible areas for improvement

Clients are aware that the FSC caseworkers will usually work closely with the agencies to coordinate the various resources and support which they require. For example, caseworker from the FSC will co-manage a homeless case with a caseworker from the transitional shelter. Usually, the FSC caseworker will advocate for client's needs and address other underlying issues such as family or marital problems, while the transitional shelter caseworker will work closely with HDB for client's transition to a public rental flat. The transitional shelter often has a career coach to provide job matching and training opportunities for the client. Client can also be known to the SSO which may have made the initial referral to FSC and hence, continuing financial assistance for client can be based on his or her motivation to work together with the various agencies involved to transit to a more permanent accommodation in the future. Clients seem to depend on the FSC caseworker's advice and ability to journey with them during such a transition.

Clients also cited that the frequent change of officers from SSO can affect their motivation as they may need to describe their plight repeatedly for the benefit of the new officer. Apart from that, clients do find the criteria for rental housing to be rather confusing and may not be reflective of current economic conditions such as rising cost of living. It would be beneficial for shelters and HDB to address such concerns to ensure clients continue to remain motivated to achieve their goal of getting a public rental flat soon. It is also worthwhile to note that as the agencies ensure the basic needs of the clients are being met, their development should also be looked into. For example, linking them up with skills upgrading and other relevant training courses can help keep clients abreast of economic shifts and changing work environment.

7.0) Findings from the Focus Group Discussion–Stakeholders

7.1) Various factors that influence stakeholders' efforts toward addressing homelessness and the associated challenges

- **Economic Structural Conditions**

Sometimes, in view of caseworkers' risk assessment and the long wait times needed before shelter placement can be approved, FSCs leverage on hostels or hotels for short-term accommodation. However, there are concerns surrounding the cost and financial sustainability of this solution because many homeless individuals are facing employment difficulties or experience disruption to their financial status due to the pandemic or other individual circumstances. This may place agencies disbursing assistance in the difficult position of deciding how much assistance to continue providing to clients, should clients choose not to follow through the agreed plans of progression or should they not be eligible for shelter or rental housing.

- **Systemic Barriers**

It is widely agreed that current service model is not that person-centred as clients have little control over 1) location of assigned shelter which may result in individuals facing higher cost of transportation to go travel to work 2) the need for personal or communal living which is especially important for those with physical or mental conditions that make it hard for them to assimilate into communal living arrangement and 3) the time that they can rest as some S3Ps are religious-based organisations with dual use of space (i.e. homeless individuals could stay in at night and would have to vacate by early morning regardless of their schedules).

Homeless individuals with mental health issues, addiction issues and a history of family violence face multiple barriers. Besides the lack of specialised accommodation options for them, current shelter operators may also have limited expertise in dealing with such profiles. Furthermore, some S3Ps may not have staff who are trained in working with clients on homelessness issues.

Permanent Residents (PRs) with low income also faced limited support options as they are not eligible for rental housing from HDB.

Though stakeholders see more coordination between several partners, it was also noted that at times, there is limited sharing of expertise within the shelter operators to enhance overall practice standards.

It is also worth noting that COVID-19 has resulted in further crunch on transitional shelters. Referrals to transitional shelters have increased and they had to cope with this increase by relying solely on their existing manpower. This surge in cases highlights the need for transitional shelters to be staffed with more trained professionals who can render case management services and/or running of day-to-day operations.

- **Individual Circumstances**

Stakeholders observed that homeless individuals do face challenges such as difficulty in replacing NRIC and other pertinent documents during application. This difficulty stems from a variety of reasons, including homeless individuals being unable to provide a permanent address, not having sufficient money to replace important documents, and having limited contactability due to lack of a cell phone or being unable to top up their phone credits.

Furthermore, homeless individuals may need help in navigating and pulling through several long administrative processes.

It is also observed that prolonged homelessness does affect the morale and mental health of homeless individuals and vice versa, leading to poor management of other aspects of life such as health maintenance. Not only that, homeless individuals with mental health, addiction issues and history of family violence are more likely to be rejected by shelters.

7.2) Current intervention practices and possible areas for improvement

In general, FSCs and SSAs may tap on PEERS to identify S3Ps for short term accommodation ranging from 3 to 6 months and FSCs and SSAs will assist clients in the application process. Clients would eventually transit to transitional shelters as S3Ps may not have the case management component. SSOs will also work with FSCs to follow up on status of HDB rental housing application, when needed. Besides exploring housing options, financial assistance and care management could also be rendered to the affected individuals.

There is a need for a concerted effort for the stakeholders in corresponding with clients, in managing and supporting failed appeals and working collectively with policymakers on concrete action plans around homelessness issues.

Whilst supporting homeless individuals through the transitions from S3Ps to transitional shelters to waiting for the approval of rental housing, stakeholders urged for increased resources and tapping on alternative platforms or funding in looking into interim assistance, financing of programmes, increasing manpower and training of professionals in homelessness sector.

Some stakeholders also raised the need for some flexibility to be practised across the board and not let criteria and prerequisites to become barriers for some to access the needed help. In the case of homeless individuals with mental health or addiction issues, it will be beneficial to look into specialised shelter options for them.

Lastly, it is hoped that the homeless individuals who have not been able to be supported via the usual service delivery system as mentioned above could still continue to be befriended and engaged in the community.

7.3) Other observations from stakeholders

Stakeholders are often working with a homeless community which is evolving and heterogenous in nature (e.g. displaced families, single-parent families, individuals with different marital status with family conflicts/employment instability or unemployment issues and of different age groups who have varying care/developmental needs and more recently, those affected by close border regulation due to the COVID19 pandemic).

It is established that homelessness is not an issue which could be addressed by the efforts of a single agency. Rather, it requires an extensive network and trajectory of management by several different stakeholders, looking into the different aspects of intervention. It is also agreed that it takes time for one to eventually attain a more permanent and stable housing option.

Thus, in the recent years, stakeholders have been trying to address homelessness concerns through 1) establishing collaboration and coordinated efforts among agencies, religious bodies, transitional shelters and ground-up initiatives in rendering help to homeless individuals; 2) raising media visibility and awareness to debunk myths and misconceptions and address public scrutiny around homeless individuals; 3) advocating for policy changes and better intervention model and; 4) acknowledging the need for comprehensive and planned management of homeless cases.

Despite the development and progress over the years, they have also elaborated on gaps related to economic structural conditions, systemic barriers and individual circumstances.

8.0) Discussion of findings

The findings obtained serve to reinforce that homelessness concerns are in fact complex and multi-faceted due to economic structural conditions, systemic barriers, and individual circumstances. Our research has incorporated the viewpoints of the various stakeholders such as the caseworkers from FRCS FSC as well as the agencies and ground up groups which are involved in addressing homeless concerns. On top of the clients' experiences, it is observed that the different viewpoints (caseworkers, agencies, and ground groups) are consistent with each other and consist of macro level perspectives on the challenges of the homeless community.

Based on the caseworkers', clients' and stakeholders' responses, we identified three main service gaps in the current homelessness service model:

- (1) Lack of immediate interim accommodation alternatives
- (2) Eligibility criteria excluding on certain populations and lack of expertise in working with these populations
- (3) Lack of flexibility for current shelter models which deters clients from tapping on the service

The limiting factors of the study were that we did not manage to secure the participation of HDB which could have shared more on the homelessness landscape and that the clients who were interviewed are still supported by FRCS FSC. Hence, we are unable to capture the experiences of the wider homeless individuals which may not be within the system yet.

9.0) Recommendations

We compiled the suggestions from all respondents and organised them according to the three main service gaps we identified. Hence, we propose the following recommendations to build an inclusive intervention model for persons with homelessness concerns:

Service gap	Key Recommendation(s)
Lack of immediate interim accommodation alternative	Exploring creative alternative solutions such as turning unused spaces in the neighbourhood into rental and/or shelter space
Eligibility criteria excluding on certain populations and lack of expertise in working with these populations	Supporting homeless individuals with risks such as mental health, family violence and addiction would require further enhancement of current shelters internal capabilities, especially the S3Ps to better manage the risks involved, and FSC exploring a partnership with the shelter to solely focus in managing such individuals via a comprehensive case management intervention
Lack of flexibility for current shelter models which deters clients from tapping on the service	Reinforce the importance of community ownership of the homelessness issue via public agencies, private corporations, and people in the community to address the homelessness stereotype prevalent in the society, alongside advocating for more flexibility in current policies and services.

Other general suggestions can include the following:

- Due to the varying issues and abilities of homeless individuals, it would be beneficial for the social service system to implement a comprehensive case management with tighter collaborations amongst relevant agencies to address the diverse needs and complex challenges of homeless individuals e.g. some may need handholding to navigate the different services
- Enhancing the current practice around homelessness issues by 1) raising the competencies of existing pool of social service professionals, 2) increasing funding for headcount of for manpower and 3) facilitating exchange and sharing of expertise and good practices amongst service providers