20,000 Homes Campaign

Functional Zero Chronic Homelessness

Question and Answer Document

Updated

July 13, 2018

INTRODUCTION

The 20,000 Homes Campaign (20KHomes) has identified a goal to end chronic homelessness in 20 communities across Canada by July 1, 2020. **The 20KHomes Functional Zero Chronic Homelessness Q&A includes definitions and provides answers to commonly asked questions about functional zero as it relates to the 20KHomes Campaign**. This document is primarily intended for 20KHomes communities and complements other information included on the 20KHomes website.   This document will continue to be updated as needed to further clarify information and/or to include additional questions.

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QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. What is the Canadian definition of homelessness?

The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness created the Canadian Definition of Homelessness in 2012 and updated it in 2017. In this document homelessness is defined as, "the situation of an individual, family or community without stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means and ability of acquiring it". The definition document also describes a typology of homelessness that includes 1) unsheltered, 2) emergency sheltered, 3) provisionally accommodated, and 4) at risk of homelessness. **This definition** has been largely adopted across Canada and **has been adopted by 20KHomes**.

Chronic Homelessness Definitions

2. What is the Federal Government's current definition of chronic homelessness?

Through the HPS Directive 2014-2019: "Chronically homeless refers to individuals, often with disabling conditions (e.g. chronic physical or mental illness, substance abuse problems), who are currently homeless and have been homeless for six months or more in the past year (i.e., have spent more than 180 cumulative nights in a shelter or place not fit for human habitation)". **This definition that has been adopted by 20KHomes**.

3. What are provincial definitions of chronic homelessness?

Some provinces may not have definitions. Those provinces that do have a definition for chronic homelessness have either adopted the Canadian federal definition or have more closely aligned with the US definition.

For example, Ontario's A Place To Call Home: Report Of The Expert Advisory Panel On Homelessness (October 2015), "Recommendation #2: The Province adopt the Federal Homelessness Partnering Strategy definition for 'chronic homelessness'." Which was then included in the Homeless section of the Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy Update (2016).

 Alberta Human Services - Definitions of Homelessness (2012): Chronic Homelessness "Those who have either been continuously homeless for a year or more, or have had at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years. In order to be considered chronically homeless, a person must have been sleeping in a place not meant for human habitation (e.g., living on the streets) and/or in an emergency homeless shelter".

4. What is the US definition of chronic homelessness?

The US federal Housing and Urban Development (HUD) released a new definition effective January 2016 which can be summarized as, "To be considered chronically homeless, a person must have a

disability and have been living in a place not meant for human habitation, in an emergency shelter, or a safe haven for the last 12 months continuously or on at least four occasions in the last three years where those occasions cumulatively total at least 12 months". (http://www.csh.org/2015/12/hud-defines-chronically-homeless/)

Ending Chronic Homelessness Definitions

5. Where is the Canadian federal government at in defining an end to chronic homelessness?

The federal government does not currently have a definition for ending chronic homelessness.

Announced as part of the 2017 budget, the federal government identified its interest in halving chronic homelessness as part of the new National Housing Strategy as recorded by The Star:

- Government estimates peg the number of chronic and episodic homeless at 25,000, meaning the Liberals expect that 11 years from now, federal spending will have cut that number to 12,500. https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2017/04/22/liberals-aim-to-cut-homelessness-by-50-per-cent-with-new-reduction-targets.html
- In The Star Opinion article by Adam Vaughan (parliamentary secretary to the minister of Families, Children and Social Development) and Jean-Yves Duclos (minister of Families, Children and Social Development and minister responsible for Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation) reiterate aim to cut chronic homelessness in half https://www.thestar.com/opinion/commentary/2017/05/04/canadas-renewed-commitment-to-housing.html.

This interest in reducing chronic homelessness by 50% was confirmed when Canada's National Housing Strategy: A Place to Call Home was released in November 2017.

The federal government is currently measuring chronic homelessness through two venues. The first is the voluntary national coordinated Point-in-Time Counts (e.g., 2016 and 2018) in which one of the core questions is related to chronicity "In total, how much time have you been homeless over the past year? [Best estimate], Length _____ days/weeks/months, Don't know, Decline to answer". The second way is through the National Shelter Study 2005-2014 using period prevalence data through the Homeless Individual and Family Information System (HIFIS).

In addition, they have funded the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness through the Homelessness Partnering Strategy Innovative Solutions to Homelessness (ISH) Fund for the "Making Zero Count: Defining an End to Homelessness" project (see further information in Q#6).

6. Where is the national conversation at in defining an end to chronic homelessness?

Over the last two years, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH), the University of Calgary School of Public Policy (SPP), and the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness (CAEH) have supported a collaborative process to develop a definition of what it means to end homelessness in Canada (broadly – not necessarily specific to chronic homelessness).

In the summer of 2016, the COH launched a consultation to seek feedback on a proposed definition of ending homelessness found in the working paper "Discerning 'Functional Zero': Defining and Measuring an End to Homelessness in Canada". See also this blog post from Alina Turner (University of Calgary; Turner Research & Strategy Inc.) from May 2016. Based on feedback, the Canadian Definition of Ending Homelessness was released in early 2017 which included the following definitions for "functional zero" and "absolute zero":

- Functional End - A Functional Zero end to homelessness means that communities have a systematic response in place that ensures homelessness (unsheltered homeless, sheltered homeless, provisionally accommodated or imminent risk of homelessness) is prevented whenever possible or is otherwise a rare, brief, and non-recurring experience.
- Absolute End - Absolute Zero refers to a true end to homelessness, where everyone has access to supports and appropriate housing so that no one becomes homeless (unsheltered homeless, sheltered homeless, or provisionally accommodated) or at risk in the first place.

From 2017-2019, the COH "Making Zero Count: Defining an End to Homelessness" project seeks to further develop, create tools, and test the current definition. An Advisory Board has been formed to support the process. Project activities include hosting an Indigenous Roundtable in conjunction with the 2017 National Conference on Ending Homelessness and working with five communities to further develop the definition and tools (Kelowna, Regina, Winnipeg, Waterloo Region, and Saint John).

In December 2017, Ange Neil posted this blog entitled "A Lived Experience View of Functional and Absolute Zero". Also, in December 2017, Stephen Gaetz, Melanie Redman and Alina Turner released their own position paper through the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, "Defining and Measuring an End To Homelessness: Considerations for the National Housing Strategy".

The CAEH, through 20KHomes, is using a specific definition for a functional end to chronic homelessness (see Q#8.3 below). As the Making Zero Count process evolves, this functional zero chronic homelessness definition could be included as part of the larger definition of what it means to end homelessness in Canada or is offered as an alternative/additional definition.

**7. Where are the Provinces at in defining an end to chronic homelessness?**

Ontario identified a goal of ending chronic homelessness in 10 years (by 2025) in its Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy Update (2016). Ontario then passed regulations in the fall of 2016 and released Guidelines for Service Manager Enumeration in March 2017 requiring service managers to enumerate homelessness every two years beginning in spring 2018. One of the core enumeration questions required by the Province will measure chronic homelessness: "In total, how much time have you been homeless over the past year? [Best estimate], Length _____ days/weeks/months, Don't know, Decline to answer". The Province does not currently have a definition for ending chronic homelessness but is participating on the Advisory Committee for the Making Zero Count project mentioned in Q#6.

**8. Who has a definition for an end to chronic homelessness?**

Three groups have clear measures:

1) **The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (as mentioned above) -** Criteria and Benchmarks for Achieving the Goal of Ending Chronic Homelessness

2) Built for Zero - definition described in the picture to the right. This definition aligns with the USICH definition above. Currently focused on single adults only.
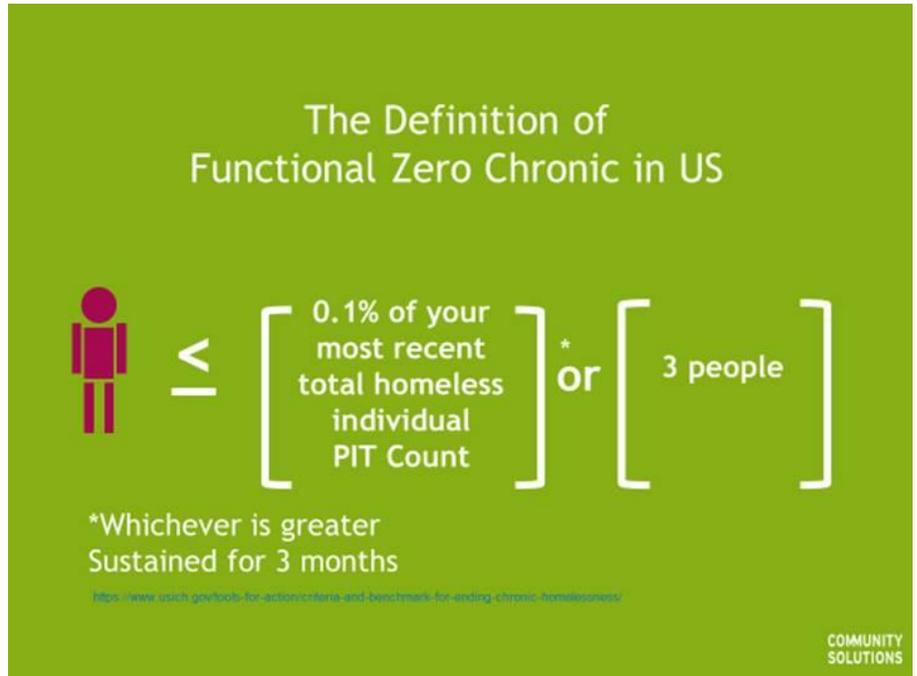
3) 20KHomes – definition described in the picture to the right. Definition adapted from the Built for Zero definition above. Based on individuals (focussed on single adults and youth but communities could also choose to include individuals in families). Goal to reach a functional end to chronic homelessness in 20 communities by July 1, 2020.
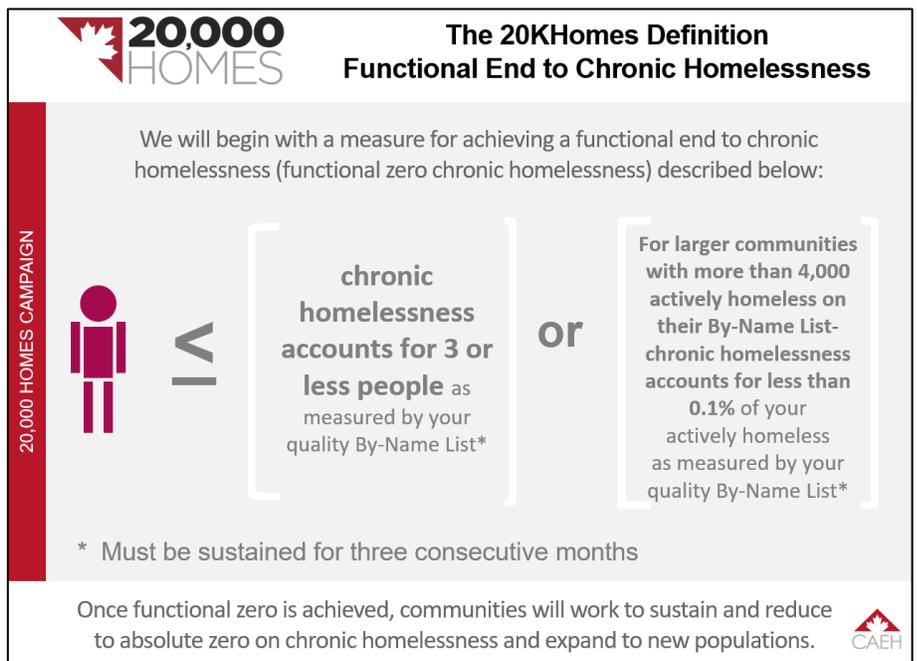
See this short Canadian video from CAEH on By-Name Lists and Functional Zero for Chronic Homelessness.

9. **Why has 20KHomes adopted this definition of functional zero chronic homelessness? (described in Q#8.3 above)**

This is an <u>outcome-focussed</u> definition that:

- Is simple to measure and easy to understand;
- can be consistently applied across different community contexts based on real-time and reliable data through a [quality By-Name List](#);
- is a strong indicator that a community's local system is functioning effectively to prevent and end chronic homelessness; and
- can continue to be utilized monthly to monitor whether functional zero chronic homelessness is being sustained.

10. **Why is 20KHomes focussed on ending chronic homelessness first?**

20KHomes has identified prioritizing those with the greatest need beginning with those experiencing chronic homelessness (as outlined in Q#15) as we work with communities to build coordinated homeless systems focused on preventing and ending homelessness for all people.

Starting with people experiencing homelessness with the highest needs (e.g. chronic homelessness) is consistent with the right to housing and federal policy and has the greatest possible impact on:
- people experiencing homelessness - reducing premature aging, chronic health conditions, injury, victimization, and early death
- local homeless systems – focussing efforts and limited resources to relieve pressure on shelters and to retool our systems in ways that will better serve everyone
- other systems - reducing use of ambulance, hospital emergency rooms, policing, and corrections
- taxpayers and donors – has the highest financial return on investment

Focusing on chronic situations or conditions, allows communities to work across populations groups (e.g., youth, men, women, families, veterans, indigenous). And we know it's possible. We now have the evidence-based research, tools and program models to support people to get housed and to stay housed. Three communities in the US have already ended chronic homelessness using the same coordinated system, quality improvement and measurable data approaches we have adopted within the 20,000 Homes Campaign.

11. **Why is the 20KHomes Campaign aiming for functional zero on chronic homelessness rather than absolute zero?**

The 20,000 Homes Campaign's ultimate goal is absolute zero on chronic homelessness and the Campaign will continue to support communities to get there. However, a measure of functional zero chronic homelessness is identified as the initial goal as it recognizes:

- Chronic homelessness has historically comprised anywhere from 5%-20% of many community's homelessness population. Reducing chronic homelessness to 0.1% of the homeless population or three or less people and sustaining that number for three or more months demonstrates significant progress in designing a local system that ensures chronic homelessness is rare, brief and non-recurring.
- Inflow of chronic homelessness onto a community's By-Name List may be somewhat unpredictable. For example, despite a community's best efforts, they may not be able to identify, engage and house someone within the month in certain situations (e.g., when someone arrives from another community, has been discharged from an institution without sufficient notice or planning, returns from an inactive status, or unexpectedly loses their housing).
- Sometimes it takes significant time to engage and build trust with someone experiencing chronic homelessness or to engage additional community partners to provide the appropriate level of support.

12. Have any communities achieved functional zero on chronic homelessness?

Currently, three communities in the United States have been confirmed through Built for Zero and the federal government as ending chronic homelessness including: Bergen County, New Jersey; Lancaster County, Pennsylvania; and Rockford, Illinois (to hear how they did it – see this webinar). Several other communities are actively reducing their numbers on chronic homelessness. The following report highlights the impact of Built for Zero between 2015-2018, Getting to Proof Points: Key Learning from the First Three Years of Built for Zero.

No community in Canada has yet been confirmed through 20KHomes as achieving functional zero on chronic homelessness. Progress in this area is being tracked on the 20KHomes website.

13. What happens if a community achieves functional zero chronic homelessness and then their numbers increase again?

Once a community is confirmed as having reached functional zero on chronic homelessness they move into the work of sustaining those gains. Sustaining requires continued commitment and on-going system improvements to respond to ever-changing community dynamics. While it is possible that a community's numbers will fluctuate in the sustaining phase, they do not lose their status as having achieved functional zero on chronic homelessness. However, in order to maintain their sustaining status, they must continue to meet the functional zero chronic homelessness definition. If a community's s numbers increase above the functional zero threshold, they must again reach and sustain functional zero for three months to be recognized as sustaining.

14. What definition of "homelessness" and "housed" is being used in 20KHomes?

Homelessness - 20KHomes uses the definitions of sheltered, unsheltered and provisionally accommodated as per the Canadian Definition of Homelessness outlined in Q#1.

Housed - 20KHomes uses the definition of stable, safe, permanent and appropriate as included in the Canadian Definition of Homelessness outlined in Q#1. Housing should align with the Housing First principle of choice and self-determination and could include many options such as a single apartment, shared housing, family home, or long-term care (as long as it is stable, safe, permanent, and appropriate).

15. What definition of chronic homelessness is being used in 20KHomes?

20KHomes follows the federal definition of chronic homelessness (see Q#2). However, given the aim of 20KHomes is to house the most vulnerable people experiencing homelessness, communities are encouraged to focus on housing people who are chronically homeless as well as those with the highest acuity.

If communities in Alberta are only able to produce data based on the Alberta definition of chronic homelessness (see Q#3), they may continue to do so, noting this in their data submission.

16. What happens if the Government of Canada or the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) changes their definition of "chronic homelessness"?

The 20,000 Homes Campaign uses the federal definition of chronic homelessness and would work to align with any new federal definition if it changes.

17. What happens if the results of the Making Zero Count project (mentioned in question #5 and #6), planned to be released in 2019, have a different or expanded definition(s) from the 20KHomes definition (identified in question #8.3) for measuring an end to chronic homelessness?

20KHomes will review and consider the results in consultation with Campaign communities and other stakeholders to decide how to move forward with a definition for ending chronic homelessness for the purposes of the 20KHomes Campaign to July 1, 2020. The question would be considered again for any plans beyond July 1, 2020.

18. What about communities who achieve a functional end to chronic homelessness? What's next?

Once a community achieves functional zero on chronic homelessness, they take what they have learned and apply it to another priority population (e.g., youth, families, Indigenous Peoples, veterans, or next acuity level). The ending homeless definition for these groups will look different (see Q#19).

19. Who has a definition for an "end to homelessness" generally?

Definitions for functionally ending homelessness (beyond that for functionally ending chronic homelessness) are outlined below under the headings of Canada, the US Federal Government and Community Solutions.

Canada

- For the work taking place nationally in Canada, refer to Q#6 and Q#8.3.
- Province of Alberta – A Plan for Alberta: Ending Homelessness in 10 Years (2008, pg.14), "Ending homelessness will mean that even though there may still be emergency shelters available for those who become homeless, those who become homeless will be re-housed into permanent homes within 21 days".
- Medicine Hat – At Home in Medicine Hat: Our Plan to End Homelessness (2014, pg. 10), "An end to homelessness means that no one in our community will have to live in an emergency shelter or sleep rough for more than 10 days before they have access to stable housing and the supports needed to maintain it."

United States Federal Government - The US has done considerable work defining an end to homelessness for a variety of populations and/or conditions as they work to implement "Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness". This federal plan was first released 2010 and updated in 2012 and 2015 with plans to release the next update in summer 2018. The initial plan set goals to end veteran's homelessness by 2015, chronic homelessness by 2017, and family and youth homelessness by 2020. As they worked towards these goals, they have created and evolved the following definitions for an end to homelessness:

- Criteria and Benchmarks for Achieving the Goal of Ending Veteran's Homelessness
- Criteria and Benchmarks for Achieving the Goal of Ending Chronic Homelessness
- Criteria and Benchmarks for Achieving the Goal of Ending Family Homelessness
- Criteria and Benchmarks for Achieving the Goal of Ending Youth Homelessness

Community Solutions - Community Solutions Built for Zero is aligned with the US federal government definition for functionally ending chronic homelessness but has an alternate and more rigorous measure for functionally ending veteran's homelessness (they do not yet have a definition specifically for families and youth, but definitions for these populations could align with the veteran's definition). See blow.

A functional end to veteran's homelessness has been achieved when the number of veteran's experiencing homelessness is less than the past six-month average monthly housing rate (so that on a monthly basis, the community capacity to house veteran's experiencing homelessness is greater than the number of veteran's experiencing homelessness).   For a further explanation, see this short [video](#) from Community Solutions on By-Name Lists and Functional Zero for Veteran's Homelessness.

 In their recent report, [Getting to Proof Points: Key Learning from the First Three Years of the Built for Zero Initiative](#) (2018), Community Solutions outlines the differences in definitions and also considers key strengths and weaknesses, as with the veteran's definition outlined below:

"The strengths of this definition are obvious: it is simple, clear and objectively measurable. It is also tied to a community's actual data, which requires each community to track and monitor veteran homelessness over time. The definition also has weaknesses, however. For one thing, the definition does not consider length of time homeless, which means a community could have the same, small group of veterans stuck on its streets month after month with no incentive to house them. (We have yet to see this phenomenon, but it is possible.) We have begun to consider revisions to the definition of sustainability, one of which might simply be that no veteran ever experiences homelessness in a community for more than a single month. This would make the number of veterans experiencing homelessness less important, provided they could be housed very quickly— stock and flow analysis in its purest form."

20. Why is the definition for functionally ending chronic homelessness different from that of functionally ending overall homelessness?

A functional end to chronic homelessness should be measured differently from that of a functional end to overall homelessness for one key reason: unlike youth, family, or veteran homelessness, chronic homelessness is primarily a function of time and condition, not affiliation. Everyone is considered "homeless" the day they hit the streets; whereas, people must go without a home for more than 180 days in the past year to be defined as chronically homeless (see Q#2-Q#4). A good community system has ample time to connect people to housing before they meet the chronic definition, which means a hard zero (or very close) on chronic homelessness should be possible.

21. Are there any ideas or resources related to the concept of functional zero homelessness with a "gendered lens"?

Stated another way, how is or can definitions for functionally ending homelessness be inclusive of all people along the gender spectrum (e.g., men, women, transgendered, two-spirit)? A definition of functional zero must first consider what is meant by "homelessness" and what is meant by "housed". The current definition of homelessness is outlined in Q#1 and recognizes many different typologies of homelessness under the headings of unsheltered, emergency sheltered,

provisionally accommodated, and at-risk of homelessness. The definitions of what is meant by "housed" is included in Q#13 and includes a wide range of housing options. Definitions for functional zero are outlined in Q#6, Q#8 and Q#19.   It is currently understood that these definitions are inclusive of all people along the gender spectrum.

22. Are there any ideas or resources related to the concept of functional zero homelessness with an "indigenous lens"?

As with Q#20, this consideration would need to begin with a definition of homelessness that is culturally sensitive to the histories of indigenous people and the impacts of colonization. See the [Definition of Indigenous Homelessness in Canada](). The other key consideration is what is meant by "housed" – see Q#13 for the current 20KHomes definition. This question is also being considered as part of the Making Zero Count project (see Q#5 & Q#6).

23. What have been some key considerations for communities that have functionally ended homelessness?

Two key considerations include:

1. **The importance of sustaining** – Its not, "set it and forget it" or a box that gets checked - it takes continual problem-solving and on-going effort and resources to sustain a functional end to homelessness. The approaches used to reach a functional end to homelessness will not necessarily be the same ones that are needed to sustain those gains.
2. **Communities may still observe people "in the streets"** - that are either experiencing or perceived to be experiencing homelessness. Even for communities in the US that have been confirmed as functionally ending veterans or chronic homelessness (see Q#12), they have not necessarily sustained an "absolute end" to homelessness (see definition in Q#6). Also, people may perceive that someone is homeless when in fact they have a home – making inaccurate assumptions about their housing situation based on a disability, the way they are dressed, or their activities.