

Housing First in Aotearoa New Zealand: Challenges and Future Directions

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Housing First (HF) is an international, evidence-based, practice approach to ending homelessness in many different countries.¹ Despite the international success and rapid implementation of this model in many countries, several writers explain the challenges around its localisation and implementation in some countries.^{2,3} This article discusses the challenges in implementing the HF model and provides recommendations and future directions for this model to end global homelessness in Aotearoa New Zealand (Aotearoa).

What is Housing First?

HF is an intensive and integrated approach to addressing the complex needs of homeless people through the provision of immediate access to permanent housing, followed by integrated support to meet their multiple needs for recovery.⁴ It is based on eight central principles:

- housing as a human right
- choice and control for consumers
- separation of treatment and housing
- recovery orientation
- assertive engagement without coercion
- harm reduction
- person-centred planning
- flexible support for consumers for required time⁵

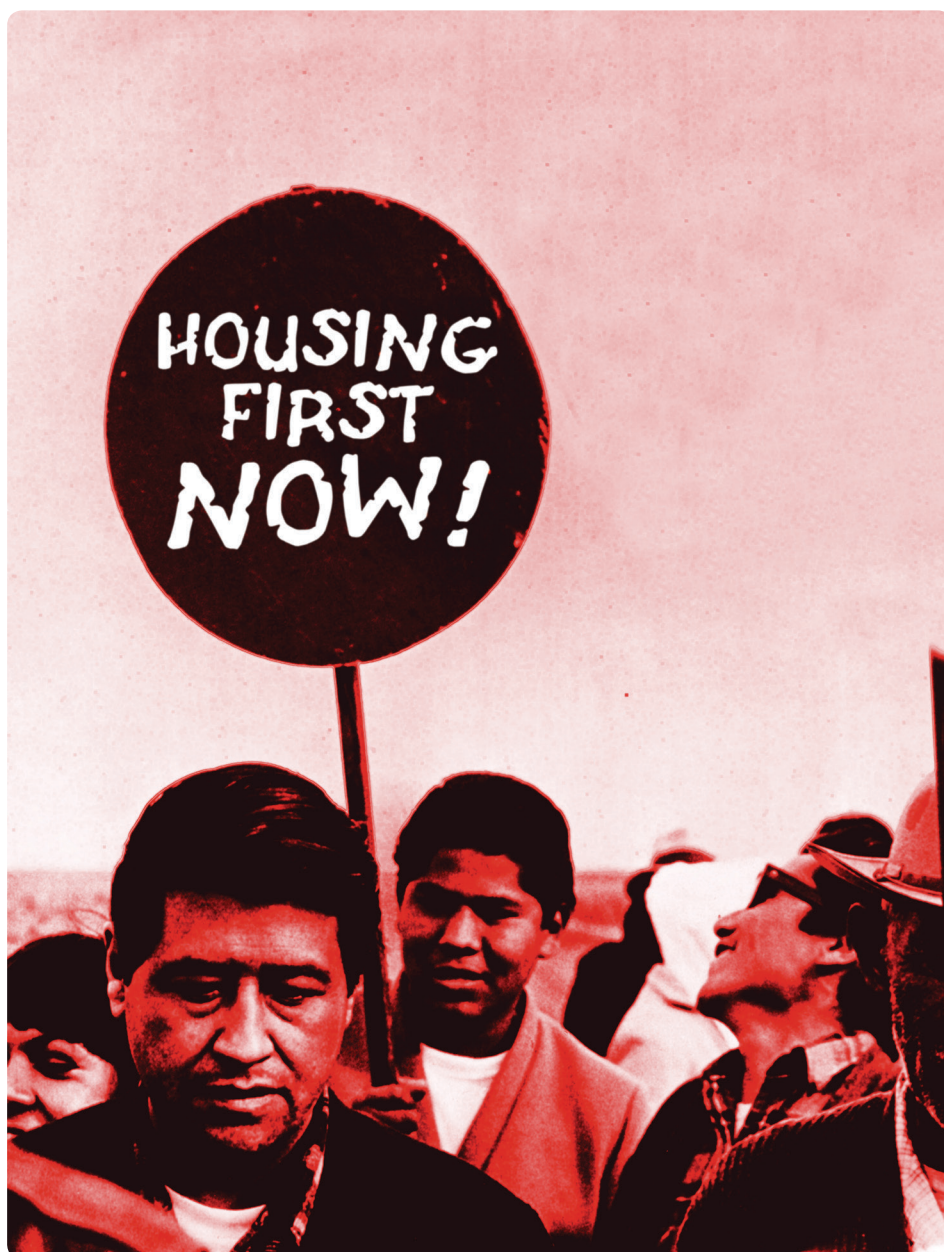
This model has developed as evidence-based practice in the United States, and is applied and used in many countries, including Australia.⁶

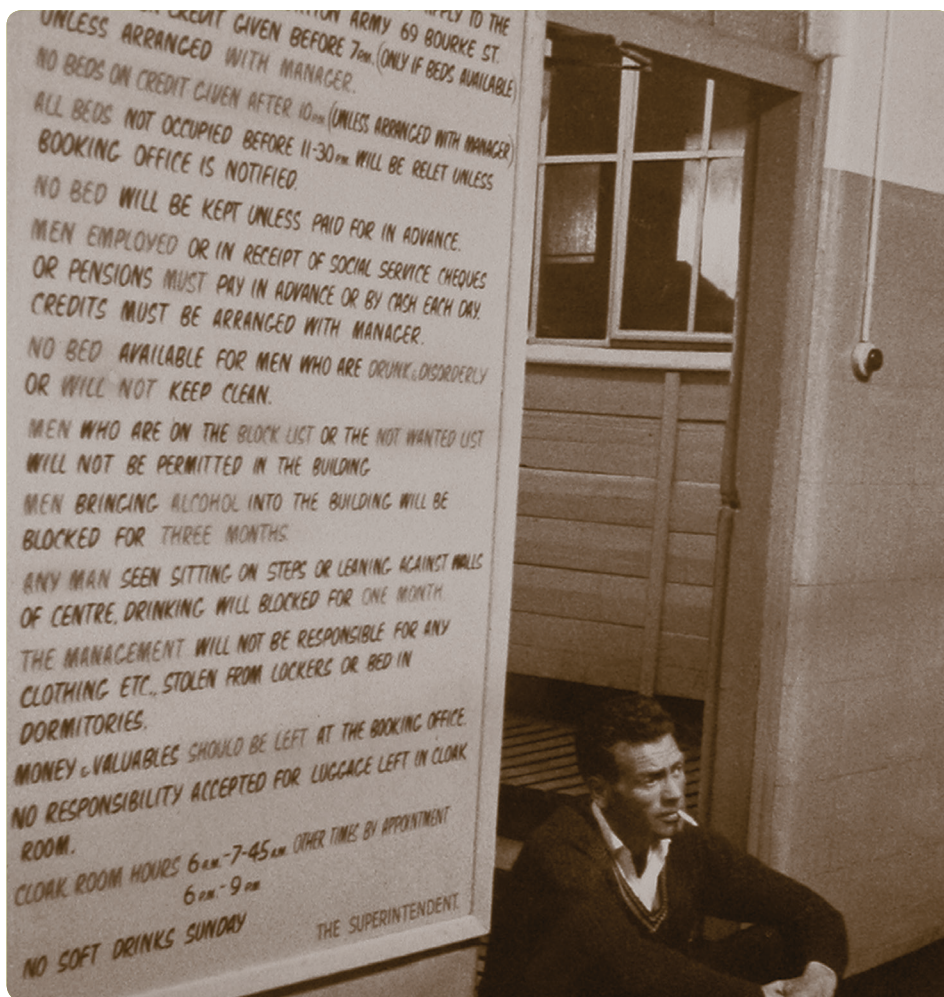
In Aotearoa, there is a movement towards implementing the HF approach to house people with chronic homelessness in many regions.⁷ This model has been implemented by the non-profit sector supported by government agencies to end homelessness in local communities.⁸ The HF

programme was introduced in Waikato/Hamilton in 2014, followed by Auckland, Christchurch, Tauranga, Wellington and the Hutt. It is now being introduced into Rotorua, Whangarei/Northland, Napier/Hastings and Nelson/Blenheim.

With an absence of strategy and system-level response, the HF approach has been adopted

as a lead policy by Aotearoa government. This approach has been supporting people with chronic homelessness to be housed in local communities.⁹ Further, the HF movement has challenged the notion of 'managing homelessness' to 'ending homelessness' among homeless and housing organisations and providers in Aotearoa.





Challenges of HF Approach in Aotearoa

Despite the internationalised approach used in many countries, several researchers question the HF approach because of inconsistency in the model's implementation and the outcomes created by differing housing affordability and supply situations, and the public attitudes in different countries.^{10,11}

One of the issues of HF implementation in Aotearoa is the growing shortage of affordable housing and the increasing demand for emergency housing.¹² As this approach places people experiencing chronic homelessness in permanent housing to make a meaningful response, the availability of independent, permanent housing or supply of affordable housing is a necessary component. Nevertheless, despite the recent announcement of the New Zealand Public Housing Plan to build 6,400 houses, numbers on the housing register have increased from 5,353 to 8,704 between June 2017 and 2018.¹³ A recent study shows that 82 to 91 per cent of people experiencing homelessness were turned away from emergency housing

in 2017.¹⁴ Further, the study shows that population growth has overtaken housing stock growth by 2.1 per cent between 2012 and 2017.¹⁵

Due to the migrants and refugees (which include climate change refugees)¹⁶ resettlement movement around the world, June 2018 showed a net gain of 65,000 migrants in Aotearoa.¹⁷ These factors might have contributed to a long waiting-list of public/social housing where some people experiencing homelessness are asked to wait for the affordable housing to be available while living on the street, in the car or temporary accommodations as the HF approach does not itself create any new housing supply.

Housing unaffordability is another challenge for the HF approach in some regions in Aotearoa. The study shows an approximate 30 per cent increase in housing prices across Aotearoa in the last five years with a 65 per cent increase in Auckland.¹⁸ The research also shows the rental housing market is limited, with an average rent increase for a three-bedroom dwelling of 25 per cent between 2012 and 2017.¹⁹

Although some people experiencing homelessness can access the Government's income-related rent subsidy via Housing New Zealand and registered community housing, others face difficulty to secure and/or maintain other types of permanent housing, including; private rental housing and home-ownership²⁰ as there is limited supply of public/social housing²¹ (Ministry of Social Development 2018) along with increase prices that have surpassed the benefits and accommodation supplements they receive.²²

Homelessness-related discrimination by the public, due to widespread public misconception about people experiencing homelessness, is another challenge in implementing the HF approach. HF providers act as property/tenancy managers in partnership with private landlords to provide and manage properties for people experiencing homelessness.

Nevertheless, a 2015 study shows a widely held view in Aotearoa is that homelessness is a lifestyle choice or personal failure due to laziness or lack of morale.²³ Further, another study shows that public attitudes toward people experiencing homelessness are barrier for their community integration and access to public services in Hamilton.²⁴ With such perceptions along with population growth and limited affordable housing, it is challenging for service providers to secure permanent housing from private landlords/overseas property owners to house people with chronic homelessness.

Recommendations and Future Directions

In light of these challenges, there are several recommendations and future directions for the HF approach in Aotearoa. One is to create a real-time, shared/integrated, affordable housing stock database across government agencies, non-government organisations (NGOs), social housing, private rental/homeowners and architect/building construction companies at local and regional levels. Creating a shared-housing development and stock database system among these stakeholders, may make it easier for government agencies and/or NGOs to seek and find both new and old affordable housing in local communities for

people experiencing homelessness, at the right time and right place.

Re-design of programme, including referral is another recommendation for the HF approach. Currently, the HF service criteria is for people experiencing homelessness for 12 months or more as the model is designed for people experiencing homelessness with high needs.²⁵ It is important to re-design the service to an immediate and/or crisis approach on a 24/7 basis by changing the target to those who suddenly become homeless due to issues such as family violence, especially after ending street-homelessness. It is also recommended this model be used as a preventative approach to support those people about to leave prisons, hospitals, or foster care to be housed.²⁶

It is also recommended that policy-makers and providers apply HF as a principle in housing policy and homeless strategy. With the development of KiwiBuild to develop the prefabrication industry to build 100,000 affordable and quality houses within the next decade,²⁷ it is important for people experiencing homelessness to be housed in the right place and area as soon as new affordable houses are built in local communities. It is also recommended that the non-profit sector, including international organisations develop more public/social housing, partnering with local architect/building construction companies, social enterprises,²⁸ Government agencies and/or tertiary educations to implement the principles of HF.²⁹

It is also recommended to utilise the system planning approach,³⁰ applying an alliance contracting framework and the principle of HF in all social, iwi and health organisations. Applying the system planning approach under an alliance contracting framework and using the principle of HF in all social, housing, health and iwi organisations is likely to lead 'the whole sector', not only to collaborate each organisation, but also to facilitate the movement toward ending homelessness in one unified system which will be multi-funded yet have one budget. Including local homelessness steering groups, emergency/community housing network groups and other relevant local, iwi and

international organisations in the HF community of practices is necessary to facilitate the movement further.

Lastly, organising a multi-agency public awareness campaign, and/or homelessness-related discrimination education are recommended to improve public attitudes and the management of people experiencing homelessness in Aotearoa. By tackling public misconceptions around homelessness, including; overseas property owners who own houses in Aotearoa, there may be more affordable housing available for these people. Merge café is an example of how to tackle public perceptions of homelessness via contact in public spaces.³¹

A transformation of service system and design, database, policy and the public attitudes along with further development of affordable housing is required to maximise the effectiveness and movement of the HF to make homelessness rare, brief and non-recurrent in Aotearoa.

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