



THE BRIDGE: FROM PRISON TO COMMUNITY (Hamilton)
Healing the Community through Reconciliation & Reintegration

Evaluation of Services through Client Consultation

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Bridge Program in Hamilton provides discharge planning, transitional housing and rehabilitative support services for men who have been incarcerated to assist them in reintegrating into the community. Features of the program include discharge planning for men released from provincial institutions particularly the Hamilton-Wentworth Detention Centre; transitional housing providing short term accommodation for basic needs; case management to develop goals and action plans with clients; and family support in an atmosphere of safety and support for women and their families affected by incarceration.

The Bridge received funding from the Homelessness Partnering Strategy for a Corrections Integrated Discharge Support in order to ensure that soon-to-be-released individuals from the Hamilton Wentworth Detention Centre have greater access to the necessary elements of discharge planning.

Other partners in the project include Hamilton Housing Help Centre to assist with housing needs and Hamilton Urban Core Community Health Centre to assist with identification replacement.

This evaluation gathered the stories of men who had some level of engagement with discharge planning offered by The Bridge upon release from the local Detention Centre. One focus group was conducted with nine men and six men agreed to individual key informant interviews assessing how The Bridge and/or other organizations assisted them in transitioning from jail back into the community.

2.0 OVERVIEW of THE BRIDGE

The Bridge, From Prison to Community (Hamilton), became a formal organization after 20 years of providing pastoral support in the Hamilton Wentworth Detention Centre by churches of various denominations. It was clear at the time that more support for men in the justice system was necessary. An ecumenical committee helped to structure a Board of Directors in 1988 and the Bridge Program was incorporated in 1990.

Vision

The Bridge sees facilitated community reintegration and reconciliation for all men in the justice system and their families through advocacy, education and restorative justice in Hamilton.

Mission

The Bridge provides discharge planning, transitional housing, and rehabilitative programs for victims, ex-offenders and families, by promoting and enabling healing and reconciliation of those in our community affected by crime.

As a voice committed to the reintegration of returnees into the community through the philosophy of Restorative Justice, The Bridge:

- Provides leadership in the goals of reintegration.
- Provides a safe sanctuary for returnees.
- Serves as an advocate for rehabilitation through Restorative Justice.
- Helps ex-offenders improve in social, economic and educational matters to achieve a more positive lifestyle.
- Encourages the community to welcome returnees into society.

Core Values

- We believe in the commitment of staff to promote for the growth and accountability of our clients.
- We believe that our programs will contribute to the well-being of the community.
- We believe in volunteers who will provide compassionate support for the reintegration of clients into the community.
- We believe in challenging the community to become a welcoming, understanding place.
- We believe in a volunteer Board of Directors to embrace the vision and values of the Bridge, and also the requirements of various levels of government and outside agencies.

Transitional Housing

The Bridge House offers transitional housing for up to six men who have just been released from incarceration. It provides short-term accommodation, generally up to 90 days, as well as information and programming to assist in meeting basic needs.

The Bridge House was built in 1889 and sits at 319 Barton St. E., a block east of Victoria. It has been renovated and expanded many times over the years, and there are hopes for renovations again in the next few years.

The house has three stories and an unfinished basement where laundry facilities are provided for the clients. The first floor is occupied by offices and common areas. There are two offices, a storage room, a kitchen and three meeting rooms. The second and third floors each have three bedrooms for clients, and a shared bathroom and kitchen. The second floor has additional common space, and a veranda.

Residents of Bridge House are men who have just been released from incarceration, most commonly from the Hamilton-Wentworth Detention Centre. Most residents have been incarcerated on charges involving a penalty of less than two years. Residents are screened by the Discharge Planner and Executive Director to preclude men who would present a danger to the community and to use limited resources in the best possible way with clients who fit the programming best.

Case management at The Bridge involves both group and one-on-one support opportunities for men who have recently been released from incarceration. While some aspects are mandatory for residents of Bridge House, clients have the flexibility to engage in the aspects of case management work that suits their needs.

The Bridge has several group-based programs for criminalized men and their families, designed to meet individual needs. (Appendix 1)

FOCUS GROUP KEY FINDINGS

On March 25, 2014, nine men who are or have been involved in the justice system and accessed some or all of the services at The Bridge participated in a focus group. Some of the participants were currently staying at The Bridge House while others had previously stayed there and one had never been a resident. Each of them had some connection to The Bridge outreach services either in the Detention Centre or at The Bridge House. The conversation was facilitated using the following questions:

1. Transitioning from jail back to the community is a difficult process for many reasons. What were the biggest challenges you faced in this transition?
2. How did the services of The Bridge assist you in transitioning from jail back into the community?
3. How did other services in Hamilton assist you in this way?
4. What gaps or barriers did you find in the services offered by The Bridge?
5. Do you have any additional comments to make?

1. Transitioning from jail back to the community is a difficult process for many reasons. What were the biggest challenges you faced in this transition?

Housing and homelessness were identified as the biggest challenges facing men leaving jail or the detention centre. This was connected to the lack of financial resources and the requirements to get access to income which would assist in finding housing.

The process of the release “sets you up to fail,” said one respondent. It was noted how difficult it is “to just make it up the street to here [The Bridge]. Usually people don’t even make it to here from the bullpen.” Having the beer store right across the street from the Detention Centre on Barton Street was identified as a trigger for addictions and seen as another barrier to making it “from there to here.”

The participants agreed that many men end up in shelters and missions, “back where you started from,” and it’s hard to have a different life. “Once you are out that door they don’t give a shit about you,” said one participant. “They leave you hanging all the time.”

Participants discussed the challenge of facing discrimination and stigma, noting how difficult it is being “labelled as criminals.” Finding “doors closed” to housing and employment because of the stigma was most difficult for many of the participants.

“It’s harder to find a job when you have criminal record and you can’t get a license if you are a criminal,” said one participant. It was also noted that probation makes it hard to keep a job due to frequent probation meetings.

Health problems, including “mental anguish,” are challenges for many men. One participant who has diabetes was released without insulin or a prescription for it so, without a family doctor, ended up in the Emergency Room to get care.

The lack of connection to family for many criminalized men was identified as a very difficult challenge. Respondents agreed it was hard to re-establish relationships with family members, partners and children.

2. How did the services of The Bridge assist you in transitioning from jail back into the community?

Housing at The Bridge was the first service identified by the participants as assisting them in their transition from jail to community. “Beds are essential,” said one respondent. Some spoke of The Bridge as providing a “sense of home” or a “comfort zone.”

Men who had lived in the house said it wasn’t always full because “people don’t make it here,” referring back to the barriers that stand between the detention centre and the Bridge House.

Others noted the house isn’t perfect but “it is what it is.” Some conversation on fears from past residents at the house took place, noting there had been a reputation for the house being unsafe because of drugs or stealing.

However, the current experience was seen as more positive with co-residents “sticking together, not putting other guys in danger.” A high level of trust was noted with one participant saying, “We don’t even lock our doors.”

The various programs and services offered by The Bridge related to food access and counselling were identified as helpful in the transition from jail back into the community. Access to food vouchers and local food banks were identified as helpful as was the kitchen at The Bridge to store and cook food. The dinner program on Tuesdays and Saturday night movies were identified as good programs that helped in the transition.

Some of the services or direction provided by the staff that were specifically identified included assisting in areas of child custody, setting up Ontario Works and getting identification. Although there is no night staff provided at The Bridge, “24/7 counselling from James is a major

asset,” and a few participants shared stories of calling staff in the middle of the night for support. [James is the Executive Director.]

The support provided by staff, peer volunteers and sometimes “sharing ideas with other residents” was identified as helpful in the transition from jail to community. The attitude of the staff was seen as particularly positive. “They are genuinely not judgemental regardless of how we’re doing.” Others noted they are more comfortable speaking to volunteers and accessing peer support.

Two statements that summarized what many men expressed about their experience at The Bridge were, “If it wasn’t for this place I’d be in for life,” and “they have hope on the days we don’t.”

3. How did other services in Hamilton assist you in this way?

Only the local Salvation Army was identified as another local support to men leaving jail but it was noted by more than one participant that they didn’t provide “as much support as The Bridge.”

According to one participant, The Bridge is known in Alberta for the work it does with criminalized men. Another respondent said there are services in Penetang that are similar to The Bridge but nothing else locally to help with the transition from jail to community.

4. What gaps or barriers did you find in the service offered by The Bridge?

A lack of staff members at The Bridge to assist with counselling was identified by multiple participants as a barrier in service. More day staff was definitely seen as a necessity. “James can’t do it all,” one person said.

Not having a staff person on at night was cited as some as a barrier but others were quick to add, “We don’t need a babysitter.” Independence was identified as an important part of the transition period. Some participants said they face barriers when issues arise with co-residents that are dangerous situations or triggering for addictions and they can’t share them with staff.

More services such as programming such as counselling and other meal and activity opportunities were seen as necessary including a second house in a different setting. The reason for a second house stemmed from two concerns, the first being the need for a house in a better area that didn’t set the participants up for failure.

The second concern expressed was the “desperate need of a roof and plumbing.” Trouble with the water and a need to update the laundry facilities was also mentioned. The participants expressed distress about the building being in bad shape and “soon can be shut down.”

The final gap in service in the house was noted as a lack of cable and other ways to access television shows or movies for entertainment and distraction. Some residents said there had been DVD players purchased for each room but they were taken when the men left.

6. Do you have any additional comments to make?

The participants were divided on the issue of good support at The Bridge, saying it did provide a good support network but the residents often need more support than they're able to provide.

Participants highlighted the importance of having a place to go besides a shelter where "they put you in cubicles. The Bridge provides residents with a sense of privacy where, "I can lock my door and read my book."

Some respondents said it was important to "stick together and help each other" and how a community room on the 2nd floor could help with that. "Everyone should be leaving the place a bit better than the way they received it."

To make it easier to access The Bridge, participants said it would be good to have the choice of someone picking them up when they're discharged. "Some guys just don't make it to The Bridge." They also noted it'd be good to have help with groceries at times as well.

There was concern expressed about whether there was a succession plan for staff of The Bridge who have been there a long time and could leave at some point.

The lack of a housing plan for Canada was also identified as an important issue to address.

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

KEY FINDINGS

Over the course of three weeks in March 2014, six men who had been involved with the criminal justice system and had some interaction with The Bridge, agreed to be interviewed in order to bring a more specific voice to the stories of being a client or resident at The Bridge.

The interviews were guided with the following questions:

1. Transitioning from jail back to the community is a difficult process for many reasons. What were the biggest challenges you faced in this transition?
2. How did the services of The Bridge assist you in transitioning from jail back into the community?
3. How did other services in Hamilton assist you in this way?
4. What gaps or barriers did you find in the service offered by The Bridge?
5. a) How did staying at the Bridge House help you in your transition out?
b) How was staying at the Bridge House not helpful in your transition? What could be different at the house to make the transition easier?
6. What could the Bridge do differently that would make transitioning from jail to community easier?
7. Do you have any additional comments to make?

1. Transitioning from jail back to the community is a difficult process for many reasons. What were the biggest challenges you faced in this transition?

The interviewees agreed there is nothing to prepare someone for transition from jail to community. "It's hard getting used to freedom again" and at the same time, "not have anywhere to go."

Many of the participants noted having little or nothing when they left jail. One man had only a pillow case, his bible and reading material. "I felt very lucky to be introduced to The Bridge," through the discharge planner who told him about the services that were offered.

Another participant said his first day was full of anxiety. "Most guys don't make it to The Bridge, especially those battling addictions." He had family pick him up intentionally and take him to The Bridge. Through the discharge planner he put in a request to stay at The Bridge. He

continued saying there was no preparation in jail for the transition and only one social worker came to see him one week before being released.

2. How did the services of The Bridge assist you in transitioning from jail back into the community?

The majority of participants spoke directly about how The Bridge kept them off the street and out of jail. They credit the staff and the assistance they receive through them as the reason for their success. "They were hopeful for me even when I had lost hope," said one participant.

"The presence of staff in general helps during the day if we encounter any problems," added another. Counselling provided by The Bridge Staff was credited as a strong support, particularly having a phone number to call for support at any time if needed.

"The House keeps you out of the street, not going back to drugs or alcohol," noted another interviewee.

A majority of the interviewees said The Bridge provided support for them in accessing social assistance, both Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program. One participant said he was introduced to his Ontario Works worker, connected to the Eva Rothwell Centre for furniture and to Helping Hands for clothes. "The Bridge opened doors for me," he said, adding he had housing within two months of release and a job at The Bridge House as a maintenance person.

Another participant said it was the "comfortable atmosphere with shared brokenness with other guys," that assisted him in transition. "At least here I can start from an honest place." He says if he had stayed in a shelter he would be back in crime and drugs. The provision of basic amenities and "taking under consideration the residents' individual needs" shows the compassion of The Bridge staff and helps the men in transition.

Finally, a participant concluded his comments saying he was thankful because "the House helped me calm down a lot. Bridge was what I needed at the time. It allowed me to be me without ridicule."

3. How did other services in Hamilton assist you in this way?

Housing Help was identified by some as another resource they used during their transition time. Some participants who were residents at The Bridge at the time hadn't begun looking for other housing yet.

Others said they'd accessed food banks or shelter in the past through the Salvation Army, Good Shepherd, Mission Services or Wesley Urban Ministries. Connecting to Ontario Works was mentioned by one participant.

4. What gaps or barriers did you find in the service offered by The Bridge?

The need for general maintenance on the house was identified by multiple participants as a gap, one saying, “The House needs a serious facelift and some internal work.”

Another interviewee identified the lack of monetary support such as “no bus tickets are supplied if you need to run an errand,” as a gap in service.

Having a dietician or “someone from the medical field” was identified as a gap and something that would be helpful for the program participants.

Two participants said they didn’t know of any gaps or barriers because they didn’t like to ask for help. One of them hadn’t asked for help about housing because he was unsure if the staff had computers to print off the listings while the other said he accessed ODSP on his own. A third interviewee also said there were no gaps in service but added, “I know if I needed assistance with something the staff would assist me.”

Another participant didn’t see any gaps, saying he thinks the needs of the men are being met and “the program runs itself with minimal supervision.”

5. a) How did staying at the Bridge House help you in your transition out?

Many interviewees echoed one participant who stated, “Without The Bridge I would probably be in a shelter and in trouble.”

Multiple participants said it was The Bridge that helped them “adjust to real life rhythms, to the real world.” This included comments about the “home” environment at The Bridge and the ability to have a personal routine where “you don’t have to be out by 7 a.m. and return at 7 p.m., like most shelters do.” This also gave some men a sense of security.

Staff members were credited for their encouragement to have residents to participate in programs such as the breakfast and dinners offered a few times a week and to be back in the house by 10 p.m. One participant said, “staff comforted me enough to the point I was able to trust someone again.”

5. b) How was staying at the Bridge House not helpful in your transition? What could be different at the house to make the transition easier?

It was mentioned by a few participants that they would have liked to be able to have a friend or family member over “for coffee or a cigarette even for an hour, not to sleep over.” The days are long in the house for residents who are trying to stay in during the beginning of the transition to “avoid trouble” and it was noted that having a visitor would help fill that time, especially on weekends.

Some residents or former residents identified that some men “got away with disobeying rules of the house.” However, in two cases the participants said they would never “rat” on anyone by going to staff. One resident said he had a roommate that was using crack but couldn't tell if he was using in the house or not so he didn't say anything. He said he was annoyed by the behaviour but that it didn't trigger him so it was okay.

Location of The Bridge House was seen as problematic in transitioning from jail to community. One participant identified that “drugs and prostitution are at the front door” but, “if you close your drapes nothing happens.” Another said “the location is bad because of a lot of temptation but it's also close to downtown, to the welfare office, to the jail.”

A lack of resources to have more staff was also noted as a difficulty in transition. One person said it took 7-10 days to adjust to The House and in that time it would be good to have more staff to access. “Everyone has James' phone number, but when the House is full it's a challenge.”

Two participants identified a need for more connection with other agencies.

6. What could the Bridge do differently that would make transitioning from jail to community easier?

One of the most repeated ideas about what could be done differently pertained to release day. Although many noted the positive help of the Discharge Planner while inside the Barton Street facility, others said they never met anyone before they left. The idea of having someone meet the discharged client at the Detention Centre on release day was seen as a good alternative to assist people getting to The Bridge.

One participant said, “Someone should pick them up from prison, have a chat and coffee with them, hold their hand, show them around. Usually people get discharged on Friday morning but the House not open until 2pm. That's why usually most people don't make it to the Bridge.”

The need for more staff such as a social worker was one of the top identified needs for The Bridge to assist with transition. “James does his best...and Amanda [volunteer occupational therapist] comes every now and then” but there could be more.

Some participants said there was a need for someone to be at the House all the time “for counselling and for security.” On the other hand, another man said he wasn't sure if night staff would be helpful because it would feel like being babysat and “would be like jail again.” He called for a clear definition on the role of night staff.

In order to make the transition easier for those with addictions, one interviewee said he would like drug and alcohol program referrals if residents are found using substances while staying at the house.

A lack of funding for programming was identified by a few participants as a problem. Some had heard about possible outings such as going to the YMCA but it never happened. "Funding to do more things like fishing or a barbeque or baseball game would make the adjustment easier."

Another interviewee said it was important to "Get the guys outside as a team. You are sharing a kitchen and a bathroom with two strangers, coming from a jail atmosphere, you still don't know if you have to watch your back."

One of the participants was a newer participant and he stated he wasn't clear about the sort of services that can be offered by the staff other than breakfast and dinner. He expressed the need for more support from staff going to food banks because of his mobility issues that make it impossible for him to go alone.

6. Do you have any additional comments to make?

"When I heard the Bridge was at Barton, thought they were joking," said one participant as he began to assess the location of The Bridge House. He added, "with sex workers and drug addicts in the neighbourhood, it's very easy to get into trouble and back to jail."

Another client said even if he had the choice to bring his kids to The House, he wouldn't because he doesn't believe it's safe. This same person noted that he did not think night time staff would be safe on Barton Street in The House and more staff during the day would be better.

Another participant who lived at the house for approximately eight months emphasized "the place was fundamental and still is fundamental," especially due to his health condition. He doesn't feel unsafe in the neighborhood and lives just a few blocks away now. "What would happen if this place closes down? Now they have somewhere to go and be themselves and talk to people. Everybody needs that."

A few interviewees wanted to add how The Bridge provides a comfortable environment and is "a loving place." One person noted, "Change and numbers will not show well for this place, but for men who are broken members of society with stigma, this is the only place of its kind that helps. This place is unique, I have been in over 30 places, the Bridge is the only place where I am coming here voluntarily, and that means a lot."

5.0 Recommendations

All of the respondents in both the focus group and the key informant interviews identified that The Bridge House had a positive impact on them. It has been a safe hub, many people returning for support after they have moved to their independent units. The Bridge minimizes the chances for many offenders to commit crimes again and return to the detention centre. For many participants, going back to the house is a way of giving back the help they received and makes them feel useful and that they are contributing to the program. For some of them the Bridge is their “extended family.”

In order to improve the transition from jail to community, The Bridge can consider the following recommendations based on the conversations with men who have experienced the services of The Bridge.

Discharge Planning

Whenever possible, meet detainees at the Detention Centre on the day of their release to help them get to The Bridge. It is recommended that services hours be more aligned to the needs of the men being released with regard to timing and transportation.

Bridge House Safety

It is recommended that a location for The Bridge House that could provide more safety and be located further away from the Hamilton-Wentworth Detention Centre be considered.

Residents agreed that the deteriorating building is in need of repairs. It is recommended that a feasibility plan be developed weighing out the options of doing maintenance and renovations on the existing house or moving to a new location in better condition.

Visitors

Many residents expressed the desire to have family or friends visit them at The Bridge House during their stay. With conditions that don't compromise safety, it is recommended that The Bridge consider allowing residents to have friends or family over even for a short visit.

Staff

It was clear from participants that there is a lot of dependency on the Executive Director at The Bridge to provide support and counselling, day and night. More staff members at The Bridge, as funding allows, is recommended in order to provide the services and programming identified as necessary for transitioning by the participants in this consultation. The need for staff at night would require more study, looking at how other models of transitional housing for criminalized men operate.

Programming and Services

There is a need for better coordinated services for criminalized men being discharged in Hamilton. Many of the participants in the consultation did not identify services they have access to through the Housing Help Centre or the Urban Core Community Health Centre. More connection to these agencies by Bridge clients would be beneficial in transitioning. Further in-house services related to medical needs would also be helpful for Bridge clients.

There is a need to assist the men with building bonds of trust with each other and members of the larger community. Introducing recreational programming that could bring them together and further their reintegration into the community is recommended.

6.0 CONCLUSION

With criminalized men facing high levels of stigma and discrimination, the transition back into community is never easy. However, through programs and staff support at The Bridge, many clients have stories that highlight how much more successful their transition was made.

The Bridge provides a very important and unique service in Hamilton to men who have been incarcerated and are transitioning back into the community. With The Bridge House available to provide transitional housing for up to six men along with discharge planning and support staff who are very accessible, men who have been engaged with services from The Bridge credit the staff and programs with keeping them from reoffending.

Assistance with getting a source of income, usually Ontario Works, as well as finding more permanent housing is also a benefit identified by the program clients. Access to some meals in the house and having kitchen and laundry facilities is a key benefit during the transition time.

The services provided by The Bridge, while extremely underfunded, are very necessary in Hamilton and continue to provide criminalized men with the supports they need to heal and transition back in to the community. More coordinated efforts by The Bridge involving other service providers will improve assistance offered to these members of the community and their families.

7.0 Appendix 1

Programming at The Bridge

Tuesdays, 5:30 – 8:00 p.m.

The Dinner 'n Discussion program involves a meal, prepared by a volunteer with the assistance of the clients, followed by a discussion designed to help the participants think about their lives differently. Topics have included anger, dealing with emotions, apologizing, power, and trust. By exploring the issues in abstract, with whatever examples come up, clients can apply the concepts to their lives without necessarily sharing a whole lot about themselves. This is important as the group, by its nature, tends to be transitory, and so does not facilitate a lot of intimacy between participants.

Art Program

Fridays, 10:30 a.m. – 12:00 noon

When the dishes are cleared from breakfast, the acrylic paints and canvases come out, and clients are given the opportunity to create. Most of the participants have never done this before, and for some it is intimidating. However, participants often find that they can produce work they are proud of, and subsequently hang in their homes. Twice a year, in partnership with the Helping Hands Street Mission, we host a Celebrating Creativity show where the participants can show their paintings. Some have even sold works from that show.

Morning Start

Fridays at 9:00 – 10:00 a.m.

The Friday morning breakfast program is designed to be a light, social time that ensures that at least once a week, clients who may be struggling with depression, have a reason to get out of bed at a reasonable time. It features good food and a lot of laughter. It is also attended by a representative from the Housing Help Centre, who is available to discuss housing needs with clients.

Men's Den

Saturdays, 7:00 – 9:30 pm

Often people wrestling with addictions find weekends difficult, as it is a long stretch of time when there are fewer programs offered. To assist in meeting this need, The Bridge has been offering a men's social night Saturday evenings. This night usually features popcorn, a good movie, and laughs

Family Support

A safe atmosphere of support serving family members of people who have been incarcerated. The Bridge Program provides Housing and Rehabilitative Support Services for men who have been incarcerated to assist them reintegrate into the community. To provide a safe atmosphere of support for women and their families affected by the incarceration, and other circumstances, of members of their families.

Activities

Referrals in the community for housing, employment, income support, education, medical and legal issues, and counselling. Discussion through participation, telephone, and personal interviews on coping strategies such as self-esteem, positive attitudes, and relationship building. Meetings are held every Wednesday, 2:00 –3:30 p.m. at Bridge House.

Participants

Target Group—Women seeking emotional, economic and social support for themselves and their families. Eligibility Criteria – women who have been affected by the loss of family members through incarceration and other means. Referral—referrals from Bridge House Staff, volunteers, family members, other agencies. Waiting Period—Mostly immediate entry.