

Wellesley Institute Labs

Lab Report No. 1: Principles & Elements for Supported Housing in the GTA

Introduction

On July 30, 2015 Wellesley Institute hosted its first Idea Lab. The topic was Principles and Elements for Supported Housing in the GTA. This report discusses the process of planning and the execution of the first Wellesley Institute Lab. It discusses what worked well, what didn't work so well, what could be improved, and it includes participant feedback.

Incredibly important to the lab process is knowing what the challenge is that we want to address. The challenge at the heart of the lab therefore has to be well formulated, strategic, and tactical.¹ Another important element of a lab is that it is an experimenting process and not a planning process. For the aims and objectives of Wellesley Institute Labs in general, we want to generate research ideas through idea "experimentation" so to speak. In that, we are not brainstorming, nor are we planning a program of research, but rather executing thought experiments within a challenge topic to arise at research questions that need to be pursued with further study. That said, Wellesley Institute Labs are also flexible, iterative, and open to design experiment.

The overall goal of this lab was to articulate good policy approaches in a given sphere and work collaboratively to reach consensus.

This lab report documents the lab planning, process, tools and learnings from the lab, and is not a report on the content of the lab.

Planning & Exercises

The goals for the lab shifted throughout the planning process, which likely lengthened the process by many hours. Originally the goal for the lab was to develop a path of research in the area of Supported Housing. However, at the same time, another upfront goal was to convene and collaborate with our stakeholders in this area from service providers to government.

The planning process included developing thought exercises alongside developing the goals for the event. What would have worked more efficiently is to have a very clear goal settled on, and then work on the thought exercises that would be practiced throughout the day. Because these two pieces were planned in tandem, what ended up happening was a development of unique exercises designed specifically to steer the conversation through opening up for many ideas, and then narrowing down to filter and group ideas. The groups sat in assigned seating to ensure that people were working cross-

¹ <http://www.social-labs.com/the-ten-most-common-mistakes-in-setting-up-a-social-lab/>

sectorally, having people with a mix of roles and backgrounds together, in this case government, providers, other experts and people from the health and municipal sectors.

We had a lot of back-and-forth during the planning about the number of participants. In the end, we had 11 external people plus six Wellesley Institute participants (one facilitator, two content experts, and three note takers). We could have accommodated 15 external people without compromising the format of three small groups and would have had a slightly better cross-section by doing so. In future planning we must anticipate unavailability and some last minute substitutions.

Background notes were sent a few days in advance. These brief materials articulated the purpose of the day, identified some of the existing landscape and issues, and posed several questions to inform the discussion. Advanced orientation for the note takers regarding the content issues helped to make sure the conversation was captured properly.

We designed four exercises:

1. **Barriers & Emerging principles:** Using three pre-design system maps, the participants, in three groups, were asked to identify barriers to accessing services as revealed by the maps and the principle that would address this barrier. Each group had 20 minutes with each map, equalling 60 minutes of discussion and identifying barriers and emerging principles.
2. **Clustering & Agreement:** Next exercise was to get all the groups to find the shared principles among them and refine these principles as generally agreed upon principles for a supported housing system. This took shape as a report back and record exercise with the large group.
3. **Buckets Exercise:** On the wall are 6 buckets. Each group will have two near their table. Each bucket has an organizing category. Based on the agreed upon principles from the previous two exercises, the groups will fill the buckets with ideal elements that make up a supported housing system. This is an idea generating exercise. Groups will switch so everyone can enter an element into each bucket.
4. **Top 3s:** Everyone takes 5 minutes alone and selects their top 3 most important elements. This is a sorting and clustering exercise. We will record these top 3s and ask: what are we missing, are there elements that disagree with each other, are there elements that disagree with our principles?

Execution & Observations

The morning started off strong. People were engaged and energetic. It became clear early on that we had the right number of people in the room for the goals of the day. There were three tables, each with four participants and one note taker. There was one facilitator for the day. Because the whole event was populated by content experts, this particular lab didn't need extra content experts in the fold.

The first exercise used the pre-made system maps developed by Greg Suttor as conversation guides, tools for focusing the conversations around the room, and organizing them into 20 minute segments.

Some felt that the maps were very helpful, others not so much. However, as an overall tool, they worked well to help move the conversation forward.

The conversation was good and the energy was very good. Once we started the report back and clustering exercise, people had a more difficult time with narrowing down the principles. Part of this was due to an inadequate definition of what exactly a “principle” was. However, we were still able to get many guiding principles down and agreed to.

The morning work wasn’t quite finished as planned when we started the afternoon session. People networked at lunch and seemed to very much enjoy that element. People convened together in the board room to eat together, which surprised us a bit, but was really good that the engagement from the morning carried on into lunch.

During the lunch break we re-jigged the afternoon exercises a bit to accommodate the missed expectations of the morning. It was doable to re-imagine the afternoon exercises given the nature of the objectives. What ended up happening was a less structured exercise for extracting elements from the principles.

Again, a more strict and clear definitions of “Design Elements” would have greatly helped. The energy dipped at each table a bit, but most notably at one table that had to be assisted by the facilitator to get back on track. The feedback portion of the afternoon was much too long. Perhaps shorter exercises that engaged a more creative part of the brain may have kept the energy up in the afternoon. Possibly a morning work session, lunch, and then short afternoon feedback and discussion format would have worked so that people were doing the hardest thinking work at the beginning of the day and feeding off each other in the afternoon and coming to agreement.

Feedback and Evaluation

Overall the lab captured the sentiment that people were looking to move the agenda on supported housing forward in a shared way.

Nine out of 11 participants filled out evaluation forms. On a scale of one to five with one being strongly disagree and five being strongly agree, all participants filled out fours and fives in response to the following statements:

- “I enjoyed this event”
- “the communications leading up to the event were clear and easy to understand”
- “ The facilitator was well equipped to lead the event”
- “I would attend another event led by this facilitator”
- “I liked the format of the event”
- “There was adequate opportunity to share my thoughts and opinions”
- “I learned something/gained insight at the event I can use in my work”

Positive feedback included:

- Good facilitation (people indicated they would attend another event with the same facilitator)
- People liked the tone of the event
- People like the systems approach
- People were happy with the diversity and variety of attendees
- For most people, the event “exceeded expectations”
- People said the conversations were “rich” and “open, curious and non-dogmatic”
- “Directed table work excellent”
- People liked the balance between small and large group discussions
- People were happy there was an inclusion of government partners

Areas to Improve included:

- Creating a shared starting point
- Other sectors were missing
- Hard to get going on the second exercise
- Too much time spent reporting back from small groups
- Wasn’t clear on planned outcome for event

Outputs

The lab resulted in a set of guiding design principles and elements for a supported housing system in the GTA. This was elaborated on and typed up into a report and distributed to our participants and posted online. Of equal importance was the convening of stakeholders who engaged with Wellesley Institute and each other in a fulsome and structured conversation regarding this important issue facing the GTA. The connections made for the Institute also will bear fruit.