2.6 Quick Reference: Briefing Note/Policy Brief Writing for Job Applications

Many of the jobs that MPA candidates will be applying for are in governments or organizations connected to government. Policy capacity and the ability to communicate are important skills that government requires emphasize. In many cases, candidates will be asked to write a policy brief as part of the application process. Here is a typical requirement from one government:

Ministry of Finance

Master-Level Policy Co-op Position

INTERVIEW ASSIGNMENT

Please prepare a presentation or a briefing note on an important policy issue of your choosing. The topic should be based on what you think is a critical policy issue currently facing Ontario.

The assignment should include:

- *a short summary of the issue;*
- *general background information on the issue;*
- *2-3 evidence-based policy options the government could consider to address the issue (this can be in the form of visual graphics); and*
- *a recommendation of which policy option the government should implement and why.*

If you choose to prepare a presentation, the deck should be no longer than 10 slides.

If you choose to prepare a briefing note, it should be no longer than two pages. You can include one or two appendices with supporting data or information, in addition to the note.

During the interview, you will be asked to brief the interview panelists on the issue you have selected and the policy option that you are recommending be implemented to address it.

Please email your assignment to xxxx@government.ca 24 hours prior to your scheduled interview time.

Steps to Take in Preparing this Policy Brief

Requiring a Policy Brief and presentation is becoming increasingly common in public sector job interviews. As an applicant you have the benefit of the academic background in policy and its development. Use that basic training that you have already received. The follow steps are key to a successful policy brief.

- **Read the Instructions and Stick to Them**
    - Make sure you read the Instructions
    - Check when you are finished that your submission follows the prescribed requirements.
- **Identify the Issue:**
    - Chose an issue that is **topical** to the government or organization to which you are applying. That will show a sensitivity to the environment, e.g., do not choose a national defence issue for an application to a municipality.
    - Chose an issue that is **current** and relevant to the employer.
    - Chose an issue that is **manageable** in that it is not too large or amorphous to lend itself to solutions, e.g. the policy challenge to end poverty is important but way too large for this context.
- **Define the Issue:**
    - Define the issue is one sentence, using key words that will form the background of all your presentation.
- **Build the Policy Brief**
    - Follow guidance provided in this section of GovTalk
    - Keep an eye on length.
    - Choose your format: written brief or PowerPoint
    - Avoid combining the two with excessively detailed and crowded PowerPoints
- **Prepare Your Presentation Notes**
    - Your PowerPoint is not your verbal presentation
    - Review your submission and highlight the key messages
    - List you key points to be delivered verbally

The following is a good example of a thorough policy brief. However, if the applicant gets to the interview stage, remember to be prepared to speak to the overall brief in a few minutes.

Briefing Note for Consideration

Subject: Proposed response to Ontario's strained emergency shelter system.

Issue

Occupancy rates in many of Ontario's homeless shelters are over 90%. This has been an ongoing issue. High-occupancy rates restrict shelters' abilities to respond to sudden increases in demand. If shelters are unable to meet demand during winters, unsheltered individuals risk overexposure injuries. Shelter crowding also places residents at an increased risk of contracting airborne illnesses. This has contributed to poor COVID-19 outcomes for homeless Ontarians.

Background

Provincial-level data on shelter occupancy is not readily available. National-level data from Employment and Social Development Canada shows that shelter occupancy rates in Canada were above 90% between 2009-2016.[1] National level data beyond 2016 is not available.

Toronto's shelter occupancy rates averaged 94.9% in 2017, 93.8% in 2018, and 94.6% in 2019.[2] Toronto's daily occupancy report for March 25th, 2021 recorded the majority of the city's shelter programs operating above 90% occupancy. Several programs were also above 95% capacity.[3] Appendix A shows the full occupancy report.

Shelter occupancy data from other Ontario municipalities is lacking. However, the following reports confirm that shelter occupancy rates are high in other municipalities as well:

- _In a CBC interview, the Ottawa Mission's shelter reported average occupancy rates of 107% from May to September 2018.[4]

- _A 2016 report found the annual occupancy rate of two Thunder Bay shelters to be 134% in 2015. Occupancy rates for these shelters peaked at 140% in 2014.[5]

- _A 2017 report found the occupancy rate of London's shelter system to be 98% in 2016.[6] In 2018, a Women's and Family Shelter in London reported occupancy rates fluctuating between 120%-200%.[7]

A 2013 study found that clients experiencing chronic and episodic homelessness occupied over 50% of available nightly shelter beds per year in Ottawa and Toronto.[8] Chronically homeless individuals are those that experience homelessness for durations of 6+ months. Episodically homeless individuals are those that experience 3+ episodes of homelessness within one year.[9] Episodes are periods of homelessness that last under 6-months. Despite high shelter usage, these groups only accounted for 12-13% of total yearly shelter users in the study.[10] Longer and/or more frequent shelter stays resulted in disproportionate shelter usage for these groups. They spend longer periods in shelters due to difficulties transitioning back to stable housing.

Emergency shelters are designed to house clients for a maximum of 90 days.[11] They do not provide long-term solutions to chronic and episodic homelessness. The reliance of chronic

and episodic homeless populations on emergency shelters results in significant shelter strain. Long-term solutions for these populations are needed.

Options

Moving forward, the Ontario government should prioritize providing solutions to reduce long-term shelter demand. The proposed options require significant upfront investments but will reduce long-run shelter strain.

Option #1: Increase Investments in Housing First Programs:

Housing First is a service provision model where homeless individuals receive long-term housing, with additional supports. Housing First programs have no preconditions for service (eg. sobriety requirements). Recent studies have evidenced the effectiveness of Housing First in transitioning clients to long-term, stable housing.

Housing First programs provide the following services:

1. They place clients in existing affordable and/or market rentals (with rent supplements).

2. They provide clients with supports to help improve their health, mental health and addiction issues.

3. They provide clients with supports to help improve their employment prospects and community integration.

A 2014 Canadian study of Housing First in 5 Canadian Cities, including Toronto, found that:

- _Housing First programs greatly improved housing stability for high-needs individuals.
- _Housing First clients spent 73% of the 2-year study in stable housing.
- _Conversely, the study's control group only spent 32% of the study in stable housing.[12]

If programs prioritize chronic and episodic populations when allocating services, these groups will need fewer nightly shelter beds. Given their disproportionate use of emergency shelters, this could significantly decrease occupancy rates. Housing First clients also experienced fewer emergency room (ER) visits, fewer hospitalizations and fewer arrests than the control group.[13] Reduced hospitalizations, ER visits, and justice system interactions may result in significant provincial savings in the long-run. These cost savings could help offset the cost of investing in Housing First. A 2020 study estimated that every $1 invested in Housing First in Calgary resulted in $1.17 – $2.84 of savings.[14] The study analyzed programs operating between 2012–2016.

Option # 2: Increase Investments in New Affordable and Social Housing:

Housing affordability is one of the most frequently cited causes of homelessness in point-in-time surveys (PiT) across Ontario:

• _In Toronto's 2018 PiT, 14% of respondents identified inability to pay rent/mortgage as a primary cause of their homelessness.[15] This was the second most frequently cited reason.

• _In Hamilton's 2018 PiT, 78% of respondents identified financial limitations as a primary barrier to housing.[16]

• _In Kingston's 2018 PiT, 49% of respondents identified unaffordable rents as a primary cause of their homelessness.

Increased investment in new affordable/social housing will result in fewer individuals becoming homeless due to affordability issues. This will reduce future shelter demand, easing shelter system strain in the long run.

Two types of affordable housing should be prioritized. Rent-Geared-to-Income (RGI) units and units priced at 80% of average market rents. RGI units set rents based on the tenant's ability to pay—rents are typically set at 30% of gross monthly household income.[17] RGI units will increase affordability for the widest range of income-levels. However, they will require ongoing government subsidies to offset the difference between what tenants pay and units' assessed values.[18]

RGI units are preferable in high rent markets like Toronto. Units priced at 80% of the average market rent are still unaffordable for many low-income individuals/households in these markets.

Affordable housing is overseen by municipal service managers.[19] The province is not directly involved in the provision of affordable units. However, there are a few levers that Ontario could use to increase the supply of affordable rentals.

Two levers being recommended are:

1. Allocate surplus public lands to affordable housing development. Provide land to developers at a discounted price, contingent on the development of affordable housing. Rents must be held to affordable levels for a minimum agreed-upon period (eg. 20 years). This will provide an incentive for private sector involvement in increasing the affordable housing supply.[20]

2. Provide forgivable capital loans to fund affordable housing development. Developers/operators must meet specified conditions to be eligible for loan forgiveness. Conditions will include holding rents to 80% of market value for a minimum agreed-upon period and/or to provide a specified number of RGI units. A similar funding program was available from 2014 – 2020, under the *Investment in Affordable Housing* program.[21]

Recommendation The government should increase investments in Housing First programs. Recent evidence shows that Housing First increases long-term housing stability for homeless populations. If targeted appropriately to chronic and episodic populations, shelter strain will be significantly reduced. Chronic and episodic individuals use a large percentage of yearly shelter beds but are a small portion of the total homeless population. Providing long-term solutions for them is the most effective way to reduce shelter strain. Furthermore, the cost-savings associated with Housing First may be considerable in the long-run. Increased investment in affordable housing (option #2) will not provide supports for chronic and episodic populations. Due to their complex needs, these groups require these supports to effectively transition to stable housing.

Contact: Hans Christen Anderson, 416-344-8976, Hans.Anderson@rmail.ca

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