Back to Normal… Really? Let's build new capacity instead!

The Tamarack Institute noted an unprecedented challenge concerning the need for services by people we refer to as the "newly vulnerable": those who thought were not in poverty but have been put at significant risk due to economic and social pressures linked to COVID-19. The disruption of the status quo emerging from the pandemic is an opportune time to advocate for change in support systems that currently do not account for the newly vulnerable.

We conducted a large survey across Canada that gathered information from over 1500 participants. The full report at short video presentations on our findings are here: https://www.povertyinstitute.ca/c19-newly-vulnerable . We then interviewed 16 stakeholders about the results in addition to asking them about possible best and worst case scenarios.

They told us that a positive change that the pandemic unveiled was an increase in creativity between organizations and communities that reshaped collaboration. During lockdown, communities collaborated in ways they might not have before to help community members. Collaboration and creative reshaping of service sector relationships have lasting positive effects on how organizations structure their programs and services.

Our participants disclosed how we are all vulnerable and a divide between vulnerable and newly vulnerable individuals does not serve many benefits when we think about aid and systems change. People who do not hit traditional bureaucratic benchmarks of poverty - who we initially called newly vulnerable - are best understood as people becoming more vulnerable. This is different from thinking about them as a different class or group because the pandemic made us realize that we are *all* vulnerable in ways we had not anticipated! The people entering into new levels of vulnerability have more skill at navigating systems and they thereby had better opportunities to access resources and services. What this means is that people who were marginalized prior to the pandemic shifted into increased distress and marginalized further from available supports that were increasingly accessed by more people.

Our participants told us that housing had a significant impact on vulnerability. When we listen closely, we hear how housing does not mean having a place to sleep because it means "wrap-around" support. The three components of the "wrap-around" meaning of housing are transportation, employment, and living space.
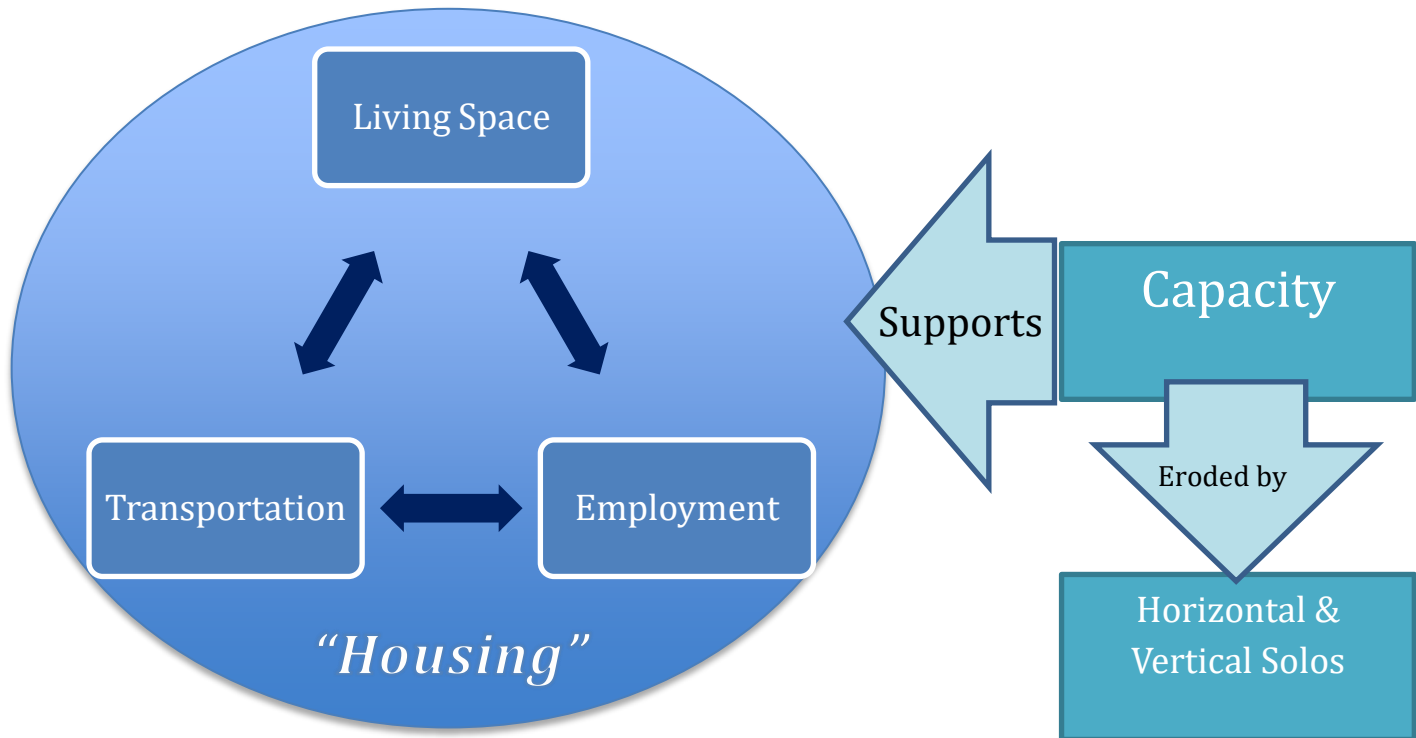
The support of housing increases via "capacity". Capacity in this context is not the number of services or programs, but the ability to sustain relationships and networking among *people* in supporting organizations. That is, the participants talked about how we often think about capacity in terms of increased funds and increased programs. It was enlightening how participants mentioned that there are funds available and there are community and potential private sector partners interested in developing creative solutions. The main obstacles are a lack of *people* who can get the work done and a lack of ability to network. The participants told us that people develop initiatives through networking and interpersonal relationships. Capacity is about people and opportunities to relate!

We heard how reductions in capacity, so conceived, are enforced by vertical and horizontal silos. Vertical silos occur when people positioned at higher levels such as federal, provincial, and municipal organizations and government can't hear the voices of persons working with vulnerable persons. This notion captures how people at different levels see situations differently and have a hard time with cross-communication. For example, one participant noted how they had lots of opportunities and ideas, but they did not have the people available to capitalize on opportunities by writing a grant. Those at the provincial level wanted to see the grant application to justify employing a person and this created a paradox that paralyzes the ability to build capacity.

Another example can be seen in how vertical silos are also enforced by community workers' need to present the current situation of deprivation as the worst possible scenario to those in charge. That is, the participants described how they needed to portray things as really bad in order to get attention from those in power, which made it

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hard to communicate successes without the risk of losing the resources needed to sustain a person's position. The result is a communicative practice of shaping communication to validate the needs people see on the front lines. That is, it is patently obvious to those on the front line that people and opportunities to network are crucial, but these are not obvious to many decision makers – time is spent validating the need for capacity instead of leveraging capacity!

Comparatively, we heard how horizontal silos involve separation among persons working at grass-roots levels. There are less divisions horizontally but there are divisions due to competition for funding. It was strongly agreed upon that if both vertical and horizontal silos in organizations do not change, efforts at poverty reduction will worsen over time.

To support housing, capacity is the most strategic place to start. Capacity reduces silos that can, in turn, support housing. More individuals and more robust networking can equalize the levels in vertical silos and bring together organizations in horizontal silos. Since increasing capacity impacts housing, improvement in capacity will lead to an overall positive change.

Tackling these issues is what we plan to do at our Action Summit on October 3. At this summit, we will be looking at this sort of data and information from follow-up interviews that we conducted. The summit brings together stakeholders to discuss potential actions and initiatives.

To register for the summit, point your browser to: www.ambrose.edu/covidmobilization. If you have questions, please free to send your queries to covidmobilization@ambrose.edu .