



Cultivating belongingness: In temporary supportive housing for older male veterans in Calgary, Canada

Christine A. Walsh, PhD¹, Alison Grittner, PhD², & Jill Hoselton, PhD(c)¹

¹University of Calgary, Faculty of Social Work

² Cape Breton University, Department of Social Work

November 14, 2024

Gerontological Society of America

Seattle Washington

Aging in the Right Place

Aging in the Right Place (AIRP) recognizes that where an older person lives impacts their ability to age optimally and must match their unique lifestyles and vulnerabilities.

AIRP involves supporting older adults to live as long as possible in their homes and communities.



- Photo taken by Participant 5

Land
Acknowledgment



Natalie St. Denis



Agenda

Veteran Homelessness
Homes for Heroes
Findings: Connections/
Belongingness
Conclusion

Homes for Heroes, Calgary, Alberta Participant 5

Veteran Homelessness in Canada

- Recent estimates indicate 3,000-5,000 Veterans have experienced homelessness in Canada.
- Approximately 2,250 Veterans use homeless shelters every year.
- Veterans make up 2.2% of the homeless population and represent 1.7% of the overall population.
- 87.6% of the veteran homeless population are male and older veterans are over-represented in the homeless population, with nearly 50% age 50+.



Homeless Man Pulling Cart. Copyright iStock Getty Images

(Ellis, 2019; Forchuk et al., 2022; Government of Canada, 2022)

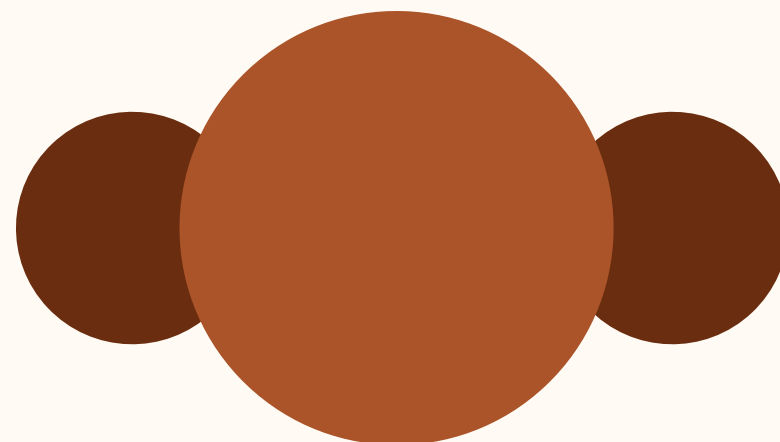
Pathways to Homelessness

Veterans

- Addiction/substance use (19.3 %)
- Housing affordability (15.6%)
- Illness or medical condition (15.6%)
- Job loss (14.6%)
- Conflict with spouse or partner (14.1%)
- Unsafe housing conditions (11.1%)

Non-Veterans

- Addiction/substance use (25.4%)
- Housing affordability (19.2%)
- Illness or medical condition (10.9%)
- Job loss (13.7%)
- Conflict with spouse or partner (14.5%)
- Unsafe housing conditions (9.9%)



(Government of Canada, 2022)

Veteran Vulnerability

“We know that there are many pathways into homelessness, such as poverty, lack of affordable housing, job loss or instability, mental illness and addictions, physical health problems, family or domestic violence, and family or marital breakdown. What sets veterans apart is that they not only deal with all of these same issues, but they also struggle with their transition from military to civilian life. I talked about the military being a unique culture. Well, now the veteran is trying to adapt to a new civilian culture, feeling as though they have lost their identity and doing so without the social support network that was always so important”

(Lowther, 2018, p. 1530).

Community Belongingness

Social isolation and loneliness are highly prevalent and significant determinants of well-being for older adults (Fakoya, 2020), older adults living in congregate settings (Lepane et al., 2022), and older homeless adults (Om et al., 2022).

A vast body of literature affirms that community participation is a significant “means of enhancing health, wellbeing, and quality of life in later life” (Sixsmith et al., 2017, p. 52)

Connection and belonging among older adults, which can buffer the social isolation and loneliness that this population faces (Fortune et al., 2021), particularly for highly stigmatized and marginalized populations (Warr et al., 2021).

Homes for Heroes Foundation



The villages for veterans consist of 15 to 25 individual “tiny homes” arranged in a park-like setting. All homes face inward to facilitate peer-to-peer support.

Each home is less than 300 square feet in size, but fully equipped with all the features of a larger home.

Each village incorporates a central resource center, social workers’ office, community garden, and other amenities.



Homes for Heroes Participant 6

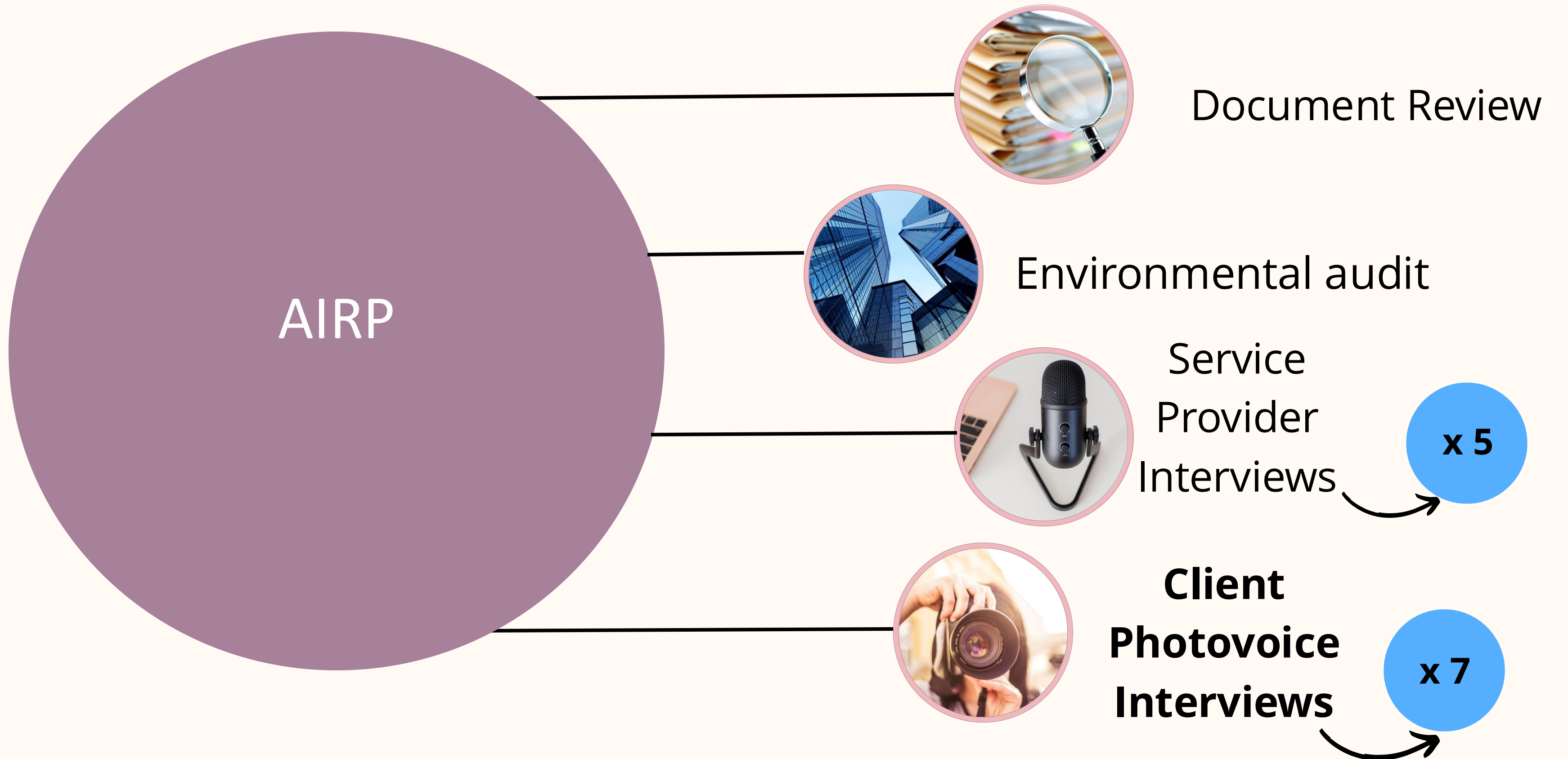
Purpose

Safe and inclusive temporary housing for older veterans with experiences of homelessness is a key community support intervention.

One of the targets for intervention is developing/enhancing community connection and belongingness.

Accordingly, this multi-methods study aims to understand the socio-spatial needs of older veteran shelter residents with particular attention to community connections.

Research Design: Data Collection Methods



What is Photovoice?

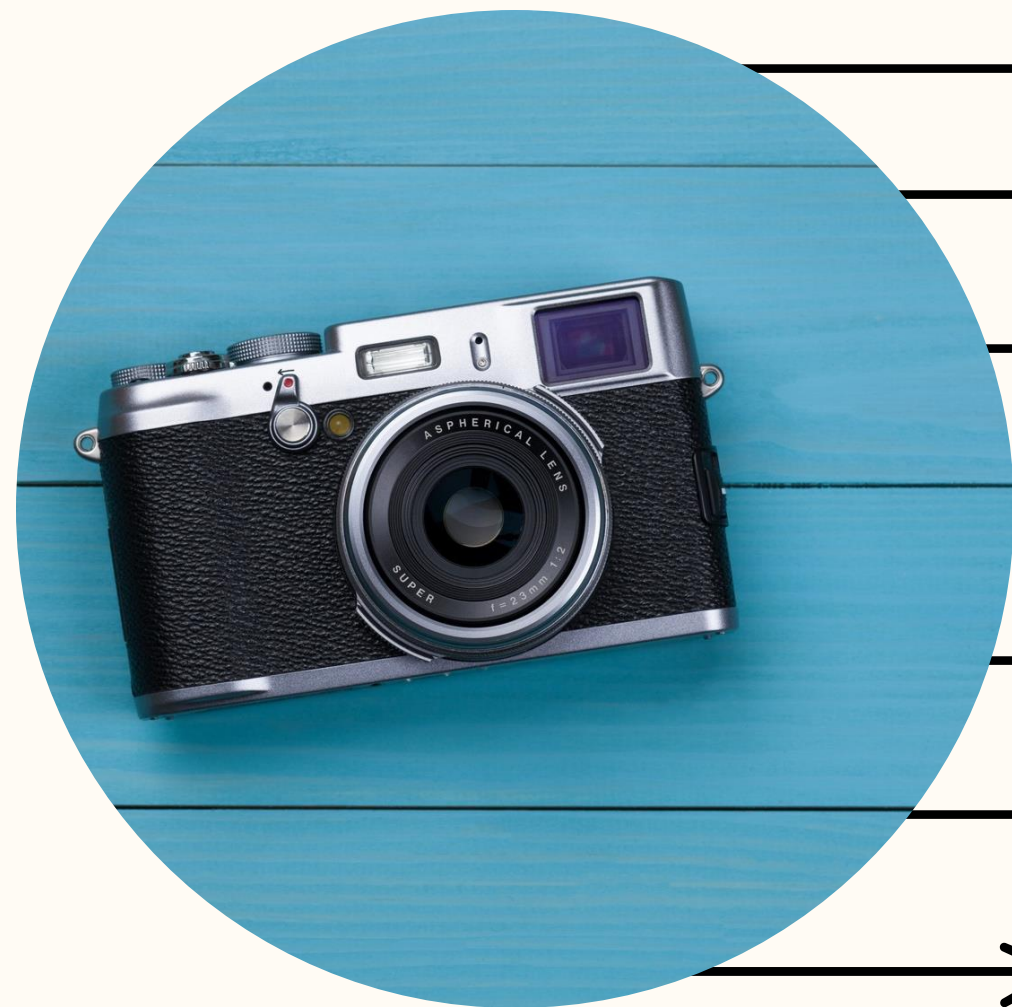
Photovoice is a qualitative method used in community-based participatory action research to document and reflect the reality of marginalized community members (Chaudhury et al., 2012; Wang & Burris, 1997)



- Clients took photos that represent AIRP to them, to visualize, and illustrate perceptions and perspectives.

Findings

Themes: Client Interviews

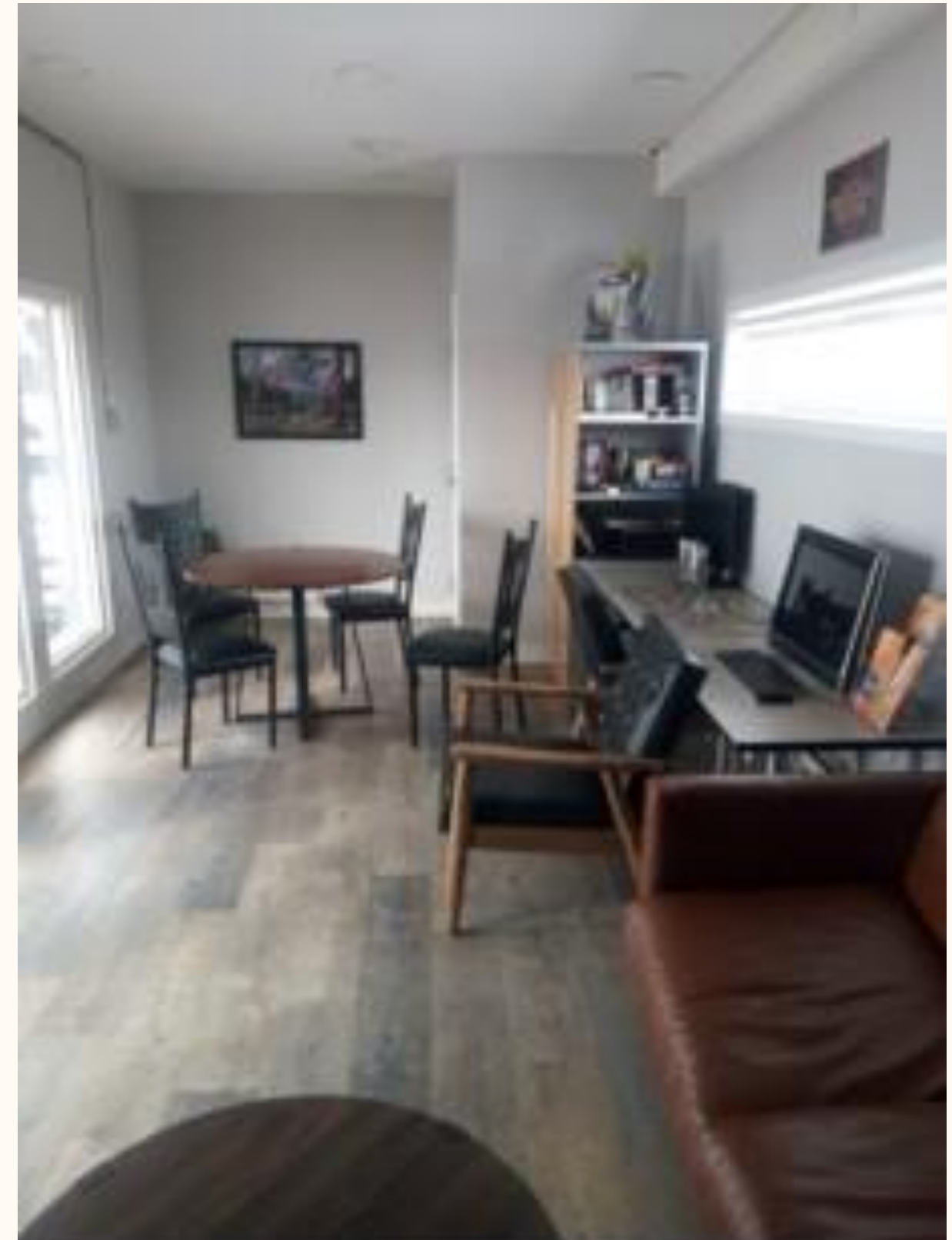


- Autonomy
- Belonging, Community, and Connection
- Ageism
- Routine and daily rhythm
- Safety
- Recognition
- Built environment

Belonging, Connection, and Community

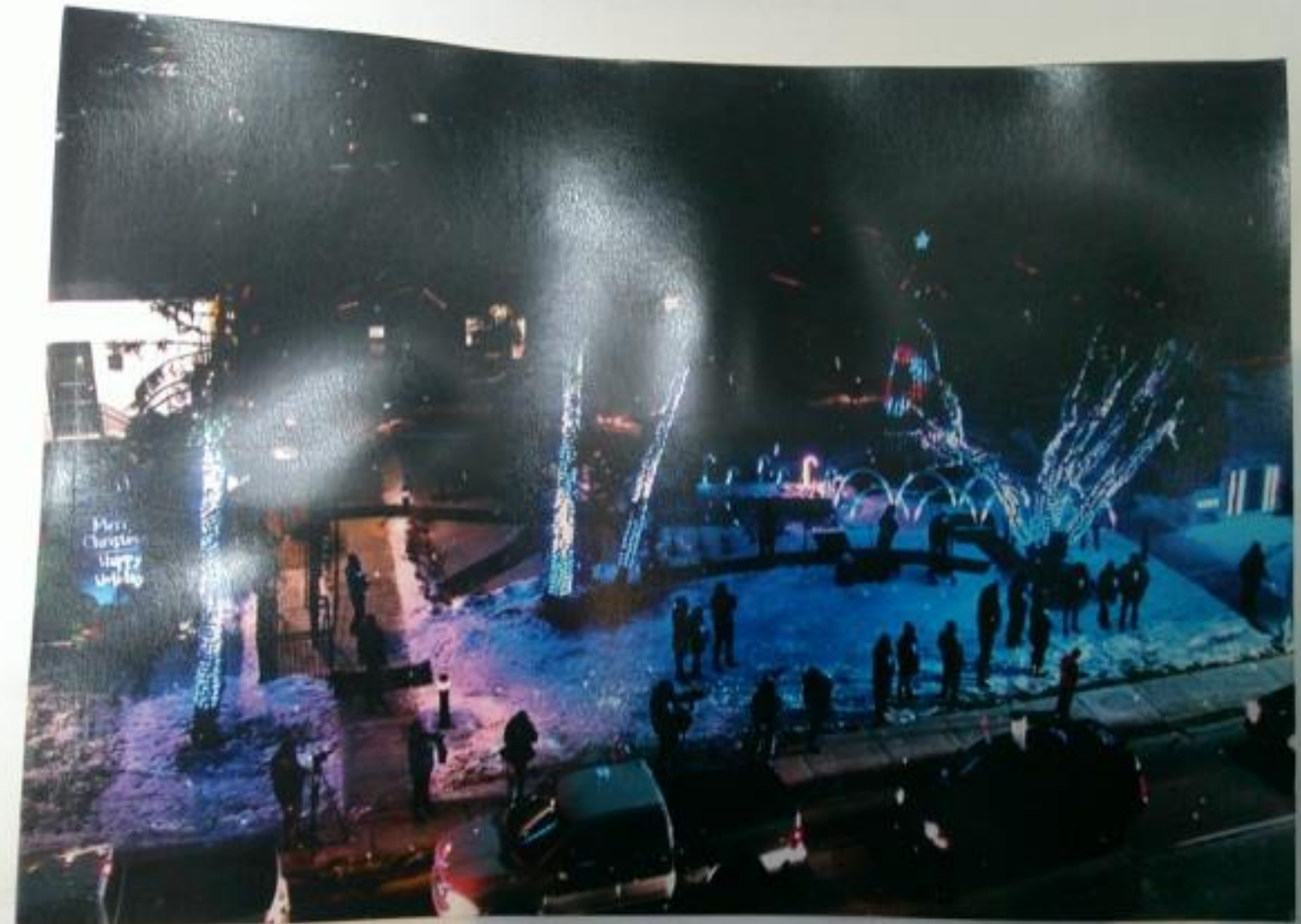
“So, I guess since as community being that we're so close, not everybody gets along, uh but there is a resource center, picnic tables, barbeque there's activities, there's uh, I guess it's resources that are to help us along day-to-day activities.”

-Participant 6



Belonging, Connection, and Community

“Overall view of the front yard of Homes for Heroes, and it's a spectacular work that went into these places to set this up, a lot of people. That's the guys in the house. And the guys out from that group that were doing interviews and stuff like that to I dunno', to what end, but they were out there doing that. And so, I was glad to be part of that.”



Belonging, Connection, and Community

"It's a photo. It's just a photo of me down in the yard. And the lighting and stuff that had been put up by... But it's quite significant in the differences. You know, the, the first, the first ones we look at, there was a real sense of camaraderie amongst people here. There was people that had met, we meet people that they had never met the whole time they were living in the complex, and they were out there and chit chatting and stuff. So, I think that it was important. The other part it is important is the fact that they took the time to recognize veterans. You know, and that was a good thing. They had the kids driving by and waving their hands and waving the flag. It was just fun."



- *Participant 5*

Belonging, Connection, and Community

"I didn't want to get to know the guys that far. I just wanted to be myself, get to know them too within reason...I just don't wanna get too close to the guys that much. Like they taught us in the military, I talked to a couple people who don't understand the military way of thinking. Don't get close to your comrades too much. You don't know. They said, well, you're military people. Yes, we military people. But when you're in combat, you're comrade could be shot, murdered or whatever. You're gonna' sit there, and bang, you're gonna have your whole unit gone. So don't get close. Get close, but don't get too close. So, this same thing here. We're getting close, but we're also staying our distance, cause we don't wanna get too close cause we know what's out. We already lost two guys here. Unit eight and unit ten. So, we got to know them, feel sorry for them. We feel sorry for us for losing them. Okay. But we're not gonna sit there and cry. Maybe it's worth crying inside. At the same token too, I just knew darn well we all gotta push on sooner or later."

-Participant 2

Belonging, Connection, and Community



“The interesting thing for me was the fact that the amount of time that was taken and a number of people involved in coming down our street to recognize our contribution to Canada as veterans. And that to me was a pretty moving scenario. There was a few of these kinds of things. I didn't get any of the really big pictures. Like the ones where you'd have like, about a hundred vehicles down the road. They were waiting to come up, but they all had signs on them like this, where the kids had flags and were waving them. The main point was that they were recognizing what we did as veterans...More recognition of us as veterans than not. And for me, that was, that was important. That was the first time that I really felt that what we did was recognized...”

-Participant 5

Conclusion

- This promising practice supports the development/enhancement of belongingness and community connection among older veteran shelter residents. Specific features of the spatial design and service delivery designed to promote “camaraderie” similar to residents’ military experiences were noted as contributing to belongingness, as did opportunities for connections to and recognition for their service by the broader community.
- Housing policy initiatives that promote aspects of AIRP and the right to adequate housing and appropriate services that recognize the unique needs and circumstances of older adult veterans are needed.

For further information please contact:

Dr. Christine Walsh
AIRP Calgary City Lead
cwalsh@ucalgary.ca

www.sfu.ca/airp
https://twitter.com/air_vabe

21