
A Client Perspective Program Evaluation of Highbanks Society

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This reports outlines the findings of a client-centred evaluation of the Highbanks Society. Highbanks Society is a Calgary not-for-profit organization founded in 2001 that provides subsidized housing and support to young, single mothers between the ages of 16 and 24. The organization operates five housing units¹ and offers three further units in conjunction with a municipally owned subsidized housing project.

In the fall of 2010, the founding Executive Director began to withdraw from her operational role to become the Board Chair and the organization identified her successor. This period of leadership transition offered an optimal juncture in which to evaluate the efficacy and relevancy of current procedures and programming. The following evaluation will inform the Highbanks Society Board and staff how to best evolve and grow their organization. After seven years in operation, there is an opportunity to explore the experiences of both current and former residents of Highbanks Society around the organization's key pillars: education, self-development and peer support.

Methods

This evaluation used a qualitative research design for several key reasons. The number of individuals served by Highbanks Society is small and therefore inappropriate for a quantitative analysis. Furthermore, each resident has her own unique journey and experience within Highbanks Society. Attempting to understand the unique experiences of individuals lends well to a qualitative approach. Specifically, this evaluation utilized Institutional Ethnography (IE), a social science, methodological approach developed by Canadian sociologist, Dorothy E. Smith (Smith, 2005).

IE uses the subject's experience to understand how social relations are organized (Campbell & Gregor, 2004). In doing so, IE looks beyond the behaviours of the individual and creates ideas to improve organizations and systems instead of "fixing" individuals (Devault, 2006). This makes IE useful in evaluations since it de-emphasizes personal performance making it more likely for individuals to feel comfortable participating in the evaluation. Furthermore, since IE is based on personal experience, those involved in the evaluation are more likely to relate to the results, which in turn make them more likely to consider and use the results (Devault, 2006).

In an evaluation application, IE begins with the experience of the clients of an organization. In this evaluation, the experience was described through qualitative interviews with current and former residents of Highbanks Society. After the experience is articulated, IE uses further data collection and analysis to find out how the organization influenced the experience. The researcher using IE does not simply

¹ At the time of data collection for this evaluation, there were only four units. The fifth unit, along with expanded common areas, was opened in June 2011 as part of a renovation project at the Bowview Site.

describe the experience, she sets out to discover, “How does this happen as it does?” (Campbell & Gregor, 2004, p. 7). The organization’s influence on the experience may or may not be obvious to the clients. In this evaluation interviews with staff and a review of organizational documents were used to illuminate the effects of the organization on the residents’ experience at Highbanks Society and as a young, single mother pursuing and education.

Findings

The predominant concepts that arose from this evaluation were community and balance. The concept of balance revealed itself multiple times in this evaluation. The resident is faced with balancing many life issues such as motherhood, school, relationships, work and transitioning into womanhood. From an organizational perspective, Highbanks Society is trying to create a balance between supporting and assisting the residents and fostering their independence and personal growth.

This evaluation identified that affordable housing is what initially draws most of the residents to the organization. The residents are also drawn to the housing sites because they are situated in a safe and convenient location and the apartments themselves are esthetically pleasing. Although the affordable rent is the initial draw to the organization, the residents clearly articulated that the community created at Highbanks Society had the most positive impact on their experience with the organization.

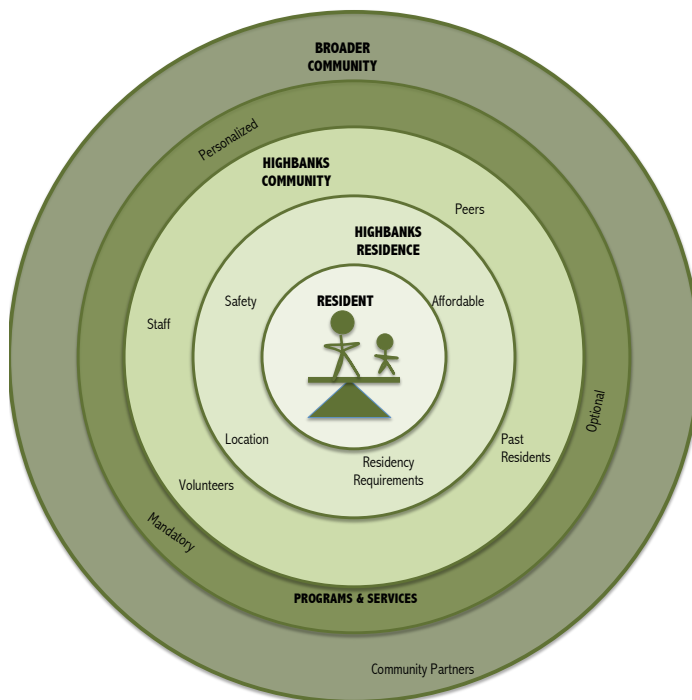
Every resident that was interviewed used the word “community” to describe the organization. The most important members of this community are the other young mothers in residence. They provided support, advice and friendship to each other. Most of the respondents also considered the staff, especially those on site, as part of the community. The residents felt the staff were accepting and nonjudgmental and this granted them status as part of the community.

The programs and services provided by Highbanks Society are also an important part of the organization. Highbanks Society does not simply provide housing; it also assists its residents through a diverse menu of mandatory, optional and individualized programs and services. The offering of services and programming distinguishes Highbanks Society from other subsidized housing. Furthermore, the mandatory programming actually plays a significant role in building the Highbanks Society community.

Highbanks Society and its residents are linked to the broader community. Many of the services and supports to residents are provided through connections in the broader community. A large part of Highbanks Society’s work, and a piece that is highly valued by the residents, is connecting the mothers with resources in the community.

The key findings are represented in the model below and further expanded on in the full report.

Figure - Organizational Model



Considerations

The intent of this evaluation is to use the experiences of the residents and an understanding of how those experiences are shaped to spark ideas to create an even better resident experience in the future. Based on the integration of information from interviews with residents and staff and organizational documents, this section outlines key influences on residents' experiences that Highbanks Society Board and staff should consider as they plan for the future of their organization.

This first group of considerations relates to the services and programming provided by Highbanks Society.

- The residents of Highbanks Society are balancing many roles and responsibilities. When the organization considers requiring new programming it needs to ensure that the obligations do not become overwhelming to the residents.
- Required programming is important in building the Highbanks Society Community.
- Personalized services that are specifically designed to meet the individualized needs of each resident are highly valued by the residents.
- Maintain and develop community partnerships as an effective and efficient means to support Highbanks Society residents.
- Expand outreach to those who would have been eligible for the program but were unable to live at Highbanks Society because of a lack of vacancy.
- Provide regular mental health services to the residents.

- Both the “grandparent” type (the On-Site Guardians) and the peer role (the Community Coordinator) play significant roles in creating the Highbanks Society community and it is unlikely the community would become as strong if either one of these roles were missing.
- Saving plans are valuable for future preparations.
- The extracurricular fund is valued help for personal wellness.

There are also considerations that focus at the organizational level.

- Define and maintain a focus on helping young mothers who are “willing and able.”
- The staff, contracted staff and volunteers at Highbanks Society are an integral part of the Highbanks Society community. If any individual leaves their job at Highbanks Society, the organization cannot simply replace the expertise.
- Find ways to formally engage residents in planning for the organization’s programming, services and the guidelines for residency.
- Put in processes for regular review of the guidelines, policies and procedures of the organization. The residents should be part of their development and review.
- Leverage the experience of past residents to further support current residents.
- There is more demand for the services provided by Highbanks Society than the organization can meet. The organization’s commitment to providing personalized support and a sense of community to its residents is a human resource intensive model. Therefore growth must be considered carefully.
- A consistent use for the three additional units in the municipal housing project should be defined.
- Review the current visitation policies to reflect a respect for and trust in the residents

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1. Introduction

1.1. Project Client and Question

Highbanks Society is a Calgary not-for-profit organization founded in 2001 that provides subsidized housing and support to young mothers between the ages of 16 and 24. In the fall of 2010, the founding Executive Director began to withdraw from her operational role to become the Board Chair and the organization identified her successor.

This period of leadership transition offered an optimal juncture in which to evaluate the efficacy and relevancy of current procedures and programming. The following evaluation will inform the Highbanks Society Board and staff how to best evolve and grow their organization. After seven years in operation, there is an opportunity to explore the experiences of both current and former residents of Highbanks Society around the organization's key pillars: education, self-development and peer support.

1.2. Background

In Canada, the teenage birthrate² has declined over the last quarter century (Dryburgh, 2007). Still, in Alberta, almost 28 of every 1000 girls between the ages of fifteen and nineteen become pregnant. Almost half of these girls decide to give birth (McKay & Barrett, 2010). In the city of Calgary, this equates to almost 500 teenage births per year with a majority of girls choosing to keep their babies (Sexual & Reproductive Health, 2010). These young women and their children are especially vulnerable to the cycle of poverty and homelessness (Health Canada, 1999, as cited in Sexual & Reproductive Health). Bette Mitchell, a parenting educator, therefore founded Highbanks Society in 2001 in an attempt to support young mothers to break this cycle and reach their full potential through:

- Safe, affordable residences
- Access to education and community resources
- Parenting support and encouragement
- Peer support
- A sense of community

Highbanks Society's vision is to provide "a community where parenting youth and their children feel respected, nurtured and valued. Highbanks will be recognized as a premiere organization that provides the environment where the development of

² Teenage pregnancy is defined as a pregnancy that occurs in a mother that is between 15 and 19 years of age.

skills and confidence lead these young families to become independent and productive members of society“ (About Highbanks, n.d.).

The Society operates five subsidized housing units³ for young mothers who require support while finishing their education. These units are co-located in a low-rise apartment know as the Bowview site. The site has retail tenants on the main floor but is located in a mainly residential neighbourhood that is close to two major post-secondary institutions. Each apartment is self-contained and the residents have access to common areas including a lounge with kitchen, laundry facilities and a playroom.

Highbanks Society also has a partnership with Calgary Housing Company (CHC). CHC is a municipally-owned, subsidized housing project. Highbanks has access to an additional three units in a high-rise apartment approximately five blocks from the Bowview site. This secondary site is referred to as the Fourteen Street site. Apartments on this site are intended to provide more independent living for residents who have completed their time at the Bowview site but continue their educational pursuits. They continue to have access to the same supports as those at the Bowview site and are expected to participate in required programming. At times, new Highbanks Society residents have been placed directly into the Fourteenth Street site.

A volunteer board and a part-time Executive Director are responsible for the daily operations of the Society. Highbanks also employs a full-time Community Coordinator and two on-site guardians plus contracted providers who offer parenting education and mental health counseling⁴. Numerous volunteers support the organization in key areas such as financial record keeping, fundraising, communication and resident support. Highbanks Society also has a vast network of community partners that provide support to the residents. These partners provide expertise in areas such as medical services, literacy training, career counseling, budgeting and legal assistance.

The young women must apply for residency and are required to be in full-time secondary or post-secondary studies or vocational training. The women may reside at Highbanks for up to two years. Highbanks currently houses seven residents. Over its seven years of operations, over 30 young women and their children have lived at the two sites and the average length of stay is 12 to 18 months (C. de la Rocha, personal communication, March 31, 2011).

³ At the time of data collection for this evaluation, there were only four units. The fifth unit, along with expanded common areas, was opened in June 2011 as part of a renovation project at the Bowview Site.

⁴ The provision of mental health services by a contracted psychologist is a new service as of September 2011. At the time of the evaluation this services was offered on a less regular basis by a volunteer psychologist.

New residents participate in a six-week orientation where they are introduced to the various programming and supports offered by the Society. After orientation, residents are required to attend monthly meetings with a parent educator and monthly skill building classes that cover topics such as cooking, budgeting and stress reduction. Other supports are offered on an optional basis and are often tailored to the specific needs of the individual resident. This optional support includes, but is not limited to, psychological counseling, financial advising, primary health care, literacy and legal advice (C. de la Rocha, personal communication, October 21, 2010).

2. Methodology

2.1. Methodological Approach

This evaluation used a qualitative research design and qualitative research methods for several key reasons. The number of individuals served by Highbanks Society is small and therefore inappropriate for a quantitative analysis. Furthermore, each resident has her own unique journey and experience within Highbanks Society. Attempting to understand the unique experiences of individuals lends well to a qualitative approach. Specifically, this evaluation utilized Institutional Ethnography (IE), a social science, methodological approach developed by Canadian sociologist, Dorothy E. Smith (Smith, 2005).

IE is not a common approach within program evaluation, however it has been successfully used for evaluations in the human service domains (LaVelle, 2010) and it has features that align with the objectives of this evaluation. IE uses the subject's experience to understand how social relations are organized (Campbell & Gregor, 2004). In doing so, IE looks beyond the behaviours of the individual and creates ideas to improve organizations and systems instead of "fixing" individuals (Devault, 2006). This makes IE useful in evaluations since it de-emphasizes personal performance making it more likely for individuals to feel comfortable participating in the evaluation. Furthermore, since IE is based on personal experience, those involved in the evaluation are more likely to relate to the results, which in turn make them more likely to consider and use the results (Devault, 2006).

IE is a methodology that "strives to understand how everyday life is organized and influenced by social relations. An inquiry using IE always starts with the subject's experience and keeps that subject at the centre of the analysis" (Campbell & Gregor, 2004). This evaluation is positioned from the residents' perspective, confirming IE as both an appropriate and useful methodological approach.

Furthermore, while IE always starts with the experience of the subject, the focus of the inquiry is how that experience is influenced by broader social relations. In IE, these social relations are more than just the interaction of people. They are they systems, organizations, procedures and rules that can influence a person's everyday life. An individual may be completely unaware of the impact some of these social relations.

Institutional ethnography departs from other ethnographic approaches by treating those data [individual experiences] not as the topic or object of interest, but as "entry" into the social relations of the setting. (Campbell, 1998,p. 57)

In an evaluation application, IE begins with the experience of the clients of an organization. In this evaluation, the experience was described through qualitative interviews with current and former residents of Highbanks Society. After the experience is articulated, IE uses further data collection and analysis to find out how the organization influenced the experience. The researcher using IE does not simply describe the experience, she sets out to discover, “How does this happen as it does?” (Campbell & Gregor, 2004, p. 7). The organization’s influence on the experience may or may not be obvious to the clients. In this evaluation interviews with staff and a review of organizational documents were used to illuminate the effects of the organization on the residents’ experience at Highbanks Society and as a young, single mother pursuing and education.

For example, as will be described later in this report, the residents felt a sense of community at Highbanks. In the interviews that were conducted the residents spoke about who was involved in that community, but few articulated how that sense of community was created. Interviews with the staff and reviews of organizational documents (such as job descriptions and policy manuals) revealed that one staff member spends the majority of her time fostering this community. Staff also informed the evaluation that programming and the initial format of some programming was specifically designed to foster the sense of togetherness amongst the residents. This illustrates how specific actions of the organization affect the residents’ experience in a manner that residents did not consciously recognize.

2.2. Data Sources

2.2.1. Qualitative Interviews

The primary data in IE is an account of the subject’s everyday life experience. In this project I conducted face-to-face interviews with 11 past and present residents of Highbanks Society to collect information on their experience with this organization.

I invited all current (n= 7) and former residents for which contact information was available (n= 14) to participate through a group e-mail sent by a Highbanks Society staff member. A hard copy of the invitation was also placed in the Highbanks Society office. This office is part of the main Highbanks Society space, so it visited by some current residents on a daily basis. Some past residents also pass through this area when the visit or volunteer. Initial response was slow, so the Highbanks Society staff decided to post the invitation in a secure Facebook group that only residents can access. The responses to the invitation were much higher after this resource was used. The invitation asked residents to contact me if they were interested in being part of the evaluation. See Appendix I for the full invitation protocol.

Five of the seven current residents and six former residents completed an interview. At the beginning of the interviews, I described the nature of the study to participants and had them sign consent forms in which I asked for permission to audiotape the interview.

The interviews were completed at a time and location convenient for the resident with or without their child present. Two interviews were conducted over the telephone. A small stipend of \$20 was available to compensate residents for any expenses they may occur as a result of participating in the study. In total five stipends were provided. It was not provided in cases where the interviews were conducted at the residents' school when their child was already in daycare or the interviews were completed in their homes with their child present. In these cases a cup of coffee was appreciated, but the stipend was not necessary.

The interviews were guided by an interview schedule provided in Appendix II. After conducting and analyzing the interviews with current and former residents, I conducted interviews with four Highbanks Society staff members. The purpose of these interviews was twofold. First, I wanted to present some of my initial findings to understand if staff saw or felt similar things occurring in the organization, and if so whether or not they perceived them in the same way as the residents. Second, after the interviews with residents and reading through the Highbanks Society programming documentation, I had some specific operational questions about the organizations. These questions arose when different residents gave me slightly different versions of how things work or when what residents told me differed from what I read in the programming documents. Since questions were targeted to each staff member's role, each interviewee was asked different questions. The results of the staff interviews are integrated into the findings and discussion sections of this report.

2.2.2. Document Review

Highbanks Society supplied relevant documentation for evaluation that included a resident handbook, policy and procedure manuals, orientation packages, resident newsletters and an organizational logic model. The documentation did not include any personal files of the residents. A list of reviewed document is available in Appendix III.

The most important reason for the document review was to help me understand the operations of the organization. The review was also intended to determine any discrepancies between written texts and verbal responses in the interviews. Any discrepancies between the written texts and verbal responses were discussed in the staff interviews. For example, one resident told me no alcohol was allowed in any suites. The Resident Handbook states that drug and alcohol abuse will not

be tolerated but speaks nothing of alcohol in the suites. The staff interviews clarified that alcohol is allowed in the suites of any resident that is of legal drinking age. Another example of a discrepancy is the frequency of CHATT⁵ nights. The Policy and Procedure Manual stated they are to occur twice per month while the Resident Handbook states they are to occur monthly.

The document review also raised questions about the history and operations of the organization that were again clarified in the staff interviews. For example:

- What was the initial staffing model?
- What was/is the process for becoming a Highbanks Society resident?
- When did the Fourteenth Street site come on board?
- What was the intent of adding the second site?
- How is the second site actually used today?
- How does a program become mandatory?
- What are the roles of specific staff positions?

2.2.3. Highbanks Presentation

Once the analysis of the data was completed and a conceptual model was prepared, an informal presentation was given to a small group of Highbanks Society staff, volunteers and Board members. One resident who was not part of the evaluation process was also present. The purpose of this presentation was to get their impressions and reactions to the conceptual model before the final discussion and considerations were established. The presentation can be found in Appendix IV.

2.3. Methodological Limitations

The primary limitation of any study is the ability of the researcher. Although I have many years of qualitative interviewing experience, I had not done this type of interviewing for several years. The first interviews I conducted were probably not the same quality as the later ones.

This qualitative evaluation included interviews with approximately one-third of the young mothers that had ever lived at Highbanks Society. While not all resident experiences have been captured the interviews that were conducted showed a high level of internal consistencies. In qualitative research, this is often referred to as a saturation of the data and suggests an appropriate stopping point in the data collection phase (Marshall, 1996).

⁵ These are regularly scheduled meetings that all residents (from both sites) are required to attend.

Resident's involvement in the evaluation was completely voluntary, and therefore the sample was self-selected. When a sample is self-selected there is always a risk that some members of the population with particular traits or experiences have excluded themselves from the project. However, my sample included young women with a variety of experiences at Highbanks Society including different lengths of stays, stays at both sites, different backgrounds, different ages when living at Highbanks and different ages at the time of first birth. Nevertheless it is possible that those with particularly negative experiences decided not to participate in the study.

2.4. Analysis

The analysis of data in this evaluation was completed in a manner common to many qualitative investigations. Analysis in a qualitative investigation begins as soon as the first piece of data is collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990). After each interview, I made field notes with my impressions of the important points made by the interviewee. The interviews were transcribed within a few days of them occurring. The transcripts were then reviewed and coded into manageable segments (Lincoln & Guba; Miles & Huberman; Patton). As the process continued, and I better understood the experience of the residents, those codes were grouped, and regrouped and regrouped to create the major themes arising from the evaluation (Lincoln & Guba; Miles & Huberman; Patton).

While, the use of Institutional Ethnography (IE) in this evaluation did not affect the techniques that were used for analysis, it altered my analytical thinking process. The purpose of IE is to use an individual's everyday experience to understand how that experience is shaped by the social relationships around it (Campbell & Gregor, 2004). Using an IE approach in this evaluation made me ensure that the resident was always in the centre of the analysis. It also made me continually ask, "How is Highbanks Society influencing this experience?" In order to answer this last question, I had to combine the information from the resident interviews, the staff interviews and document review. The questions I asked to the staff were specifically developed to help me understand how the organizations' policies, procedures and actions influenced the experiences I was learning about from the residents.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Introduction

Highbanks Society provides housing, services and supports to young single mothers. The evaluation of the organization used a qualitative methodology known as Institutional Ethnography (IE) (Smith, 2005). In IE, the literature review is important for two reasons (Campbell & Gregor, 2004, p.51). Firstly, as in any project, it is important to review the literature to understand what is known about the subject. For this evaluation, an understanding of what is known about programming for young single mothers, including what is effective and what outcomes have been achieved, is crucial. Given the two key principles of Highbanks Society are housing and education, special attention had to be given to these subjects in the review.

Secondly, IE attempts to understand everyday life in the context of social relationships. Therefore, the literature must be reviewed in order to understand the prevailing social contexts related to the topic of interest (Campbell & Gregor, 2004, p.52). The articles in this review have been reviewed to become familiar with how young single mothers have been portrayed in the academic literature.

3.2. Literature Review Criteria

The major search term used was “teenage mother or single mother.” Three searches were completed using the major search term with the Boolean phrase AND. These searches were:

- “Teenage mother or single mother” AND “service”
- “Teenage mother or single mother” AND “education or higher education”
- “Teenage mother or single mother” AND “housing”

Related terms were used to expand these searches. They included “teen mom,” “teenage mom,” “parenting youth,” “adolescent mother,” “adolescent mom” and “young mother.” The searches were carried out using Google Scholar and the following databases EBSCO Academic Search Complete, Social Work Abstracts, PsycINFO and MEDLINE.

Several limiters were used in the search. The articles had to be peer-reviewed and available in English. Only articles published in the last 20 years (1990 to present) were included and articles published in the last five years were emphasized. However, two major review included in this review provided some historical background on the emergence of the “teenage mother” label (Mittelstadt, 1997; Wilson & Huntington, 2005). Only articles relating studies of developed countries were included. Despite the significant body of literature on single motherhood in developing countries, this review was limited to developed countries due to the vast

economic, social and cultural differences between the Calgary context and developing countries.

Even with such limiters, several hundred possible articles were returned. The abstracts of these papers were reviewed to extract those articles most relevant to this literature review. Many of the returned articles dealt with programming that focused on pregnant teens. Since Highbanks Society does not specifically work with this population, these papers were excluded. Manuscripts focusing on physical outcomes of teenage births were also removed from the review. Finally, since teenage pregnancy is often viewed as an issue or problem, a large number of the articles in the initial searches related to the prevention of teenage pregnancies. Again, since this is not a focus of Highbanks Society these papers were also disqualified.

3.3. Summary of Findings

3.3.1. Services

Studies on teenage mothers reported on in the academic literature generally fall into two categories: small community-based programming with qualitative evaluations and government-based programming with outcome measurements founded on administrative databases and surveys. There are differences in how the programs are delivered. There are also differences in the methods used to evaluate the programs. Nonetheless, some general themes do arise. The literature shows the importance of individualized programming, the significance of program facilitators and the need for social support.

Highbanks Society's model of providing service includes both group and individualized services. Group interventions have been shown to impact on educational outcomes (McDonnell, Limber and Connor-Godbey, 2007; Philliber, Brooks, Phillips, Oakley & Waggoner, 2003; Sadler, Swartz, Ryan-Krausse, Seitz, Meadows-Oliver, Grey & Clemmens, 2007). For example, a review of 53 state and community run programs for parenting teens in New Mexico indicated that young women enrolled in the programs achieved higher education and better employment than comparison groups (Philliber, et. al.).

However, these evaluations of group-based programs also found that individualized services such as case management played an important role in the success of these programs. Philliber, et. al's (2003) review found the most successful programs in this study were those that included home visits and one-on-one supports.

Sadler et. al. (2007) also found that daily one-to-one contact and support were key success factors in educational attainment, parenting competence and social

support. They followed young mothers over the two years of a school-based program and used both standardized assessment tools and interviews with participants in the evaluation's methodology.

A case-control study by McDonnell, Limber and Connor-Godbey (2007) also showed the importance of one-to-one support for parenting teens. They found the young women who were part of the Pathways Teen Mother Support Project showed better academic achievement, health behaviour and social support than those who were not part of the project. One-to-one support and case management were identified as the significant contributing factor to these positive outcomes (McDonnell, et al.).

Similar results were found in a study that followed young mothers over the two years of a school-based support program. This evaluation used both standardized assessment tools and interviews with participants in its methodology. The evaluators ascertained that daily one-to-one contact and support were key success factors in educational attainment, parenting competence and social support (Sadler, Swartz, Ryan-Krausse, Seitz, Meadows-Oliver, Grey & Clemmens, 2007).

Highbanks Society uses its extensive network of community partners to provide its residents with the personalized support that they require. Work in both the United States (Griffin, 1998) and the United Kingdom (McLeod, Baker and Black, 2006, Shaw 2006) suggest part of the success of individually designed supports lies in such collaboration between the agency supporting the teenage mother and community partners. Since most agencies do not have the expertise or resources to provide all the services a teenage mother might require, partnerships are necessary (Griffin; McLeod, Baker & Black). Strunk (2008) conducted a literature review of the role of school-based health clinics in supporting teenage mothers. She found that connecting the young mothers to community resources was the most common service and the most valued service provided by school health clinics (Strunk).

Service evaluations that included interviews with young mothers showed that who delivers support and how it is delivered are critical factors in the mother's satisfaction with the program. The evaluation of the National SureStart Program in the United Kingdom found that teenage mothers wanted programming that provided a supportive environment where they were treated with respect and allowed to make their own choices (Austerberry & Wiggins, 2007). The evaluation also showed that teenage mothers found the facilitators attitude towards them more important than professional expertise (Austerberry & Wiggins). This finding was substantiated by SmithBattle's (2009i) work. In her work where she followed adolescent mothers for twelve years, she discovered that teenage mothers most valued home visits from nurses when they were able to build a personal

relationship and connection to the nurse. Teenage mothers were less likely to keep accepting home visits from nurses that were procedure and protocol driven (SmithBattle).

In another United Kingdom study that interviewed 30 teenage mothers, Cooke & Owen (2006) also found that the attitude of program facilitators was paramount. Teenage mothers wanted facilitators that guided them towards independence (Cooke & Owen). The importance of facilitator attitude towards the young mothers was also found in qualitative evaluations of local programs in the United States (Cooke & Owen, 2006; Cox, Bevill, Forsyth, Missal, Sherry, & Woods, 2005; Griffin, 1998; Stiles, 2005). Each of these evaluations was of different group based programs in different areas of the United States. Each evaluation found that if the teenage mothers felt like program staff judged them, they were unlikely to engage and would in many cases leave the program (Cooke & Owen; Cox, et. al.; Griffin; Stiles).

The type of the support supplied by a program was also important. While teen mothers identified basic needs such as childcare (Sadler, et al., 2007; Smithbattle, 2006; Stiles, 2005) and transportation (Stiles; SmithBattle), the need for emotional support was also viewed as foundational. In other words, without emotional support they would not be able to deal with the day-to-day stresses of being a young mother (Austerberry & Wiggins, 2007; Cox, et al., 2005; Stiles). This emotional support could come through a variety of people including professional support, friends and family (Austerberry & Wiggins). In a five-year longitudinal study of American teenage mothers, Hurd & Zimmerman (2010) found that “natural mentoring” correlated with better mental health outcomes for teenage mothers. Natural mentors are “nonparental supportive adults who are part of adolescents’ social networks (e.g. extended family members, neighbours, family members’ friends” (Hurd & Zimmerman, p.791).

Peer support from other teenage mothers was also identified as important. Many teenage mothers stated it was one of the main reasons they attend group programming (Cooke & Owen, 2006; Cox, et al., 2005; Griffin, 1998; Lewis, Scarborough, Rose & Quirin, 2007; Stiles, 2005). McDonald, et. al. (2008) evaluated a group-based program for young mothers that was offered in eleven Canadian cities. The evaluation showed that increased social support was one of the major outcomes of the program. The program also showed increased parenting confidence and improved mother-baby bonds. The authors attribute some of this success to the use of teenage mothers as part of the project team (McDonald, et. al.). In two other studies that used focus group methodology, the participants reported that being involved in the focus group itself was helpful because it connected them with other young women in a similar situation (Cox, et al.; Stiles).

3.3.2. Education and Socioeconomic Outcomes

Teenage pregnancy has been viewed as an event that destines young women to a life of socioeconomic disadvantage. In a review of the Canadian and American literature related to the socioeconomic outcomes of teenage pregnancy, Bissell (2000) found that in comparison to those women who delayed childbirth, teenage mothers had less education, lower paying jobs, more unemployment, higher reliance on welfare and more experience of living in poverty. In a more recent review of the American literature Basch (2011) found many these disparities still existed. She found teenage mothers were 10-12% less likely to finish high school than those that delayed childbirth and the majority of them ended up living in poverty (Basch).

Both of these reviews, along with a review of the United Kingdom situation (Coleman & Dennison, 1998), noted that many teenage pregnancies occur in girls who already live in socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (Basch, 2011; Bissell, 2000). The notion that pre-pregnancy background may have more influence on young women's long-term socioeconomic outcomes than their age at first pregnancy was first put forward by Geronimus & Korenman (1992) in the early-1990's. They looked at twin sisters from disadvantaged neighbourhoods where one had given birth as a teenager. Their work showed negligible differences in the educational outcomes between the twin sisters (Geronimus & Korenman).

More recent statistical data from both Canada and the United States provide further support to the impact of pre-pregnancy background on outcomes for teenage mothers. A 2008 Statistics Canada report claims that teenage mothers who manage to complete a high school degree or equivalent have similar labour market participation and rates to women who wait until adulthood to have children. The same report suggests that if a woman completes the equivalent of high school, being a teenage mother does not increase the likelihood of living in poverty (Luong, 2008). Also, an analysis of the American National Longitudinal Education Study (NLES) found teenage mothers' educational disadvantages occurs before they have a child because of poor socioeconomic conditions and educational starting points (Mollborn, 2005).

After following a group of teenage mothers for over a decade SmithBattle (2005) also believes that socioeconomic situations before pregnancy have a strong influence on the outcomes following teenage pregnancy. She believes that postponing pregnancy would not necessarily change the long-term social and economic future for girls from disadvantaged backgrounds (SmithBattle 2005, 2009ii). In qualitative interviews conducted by SmithBattle (2007i, 2007ii) many teenage mothers reported that motherhood became an inspiration that brought them back to school in the pursuit of further education. Herman (2006)

interviewed young mothers from a disadvantaged background who had multiple children or were pregnant with a second child. She also found that many young women in the study had returned to school as a result of becoming a mother.

VanStone, Nelson & Niemann (1994) and Halemen (2004) both interviewed young American women who were teenage mothers and were pursuing post-secondary education. Both research projects found that teenage mothers pursue education for two main reasons. First, they see it as a path to economic success and a way out of poverty (Haleman; Herman, 2006; SmithBattle, 2007i; VanStone, et. al.). Secondly, teenage mothers see education as a way to build self-confidence and self-reliance to ultimately become a positive role model for their children (Haleman; SmithBattle, 2007(i); VanStone, et al.).

Although many teenage mothers want to pursue further education they come up against many barriers. The most fundamental struggle is finding a balance between wanting to create a better future for their child and wanting to be the child's primary caregiver (SmithBattle, 2006). In developed countries policies supporting maternity benefits are expanding due to the increased understanding of the importance of the child-mother bond in early years. Yet teenage mothers are rarely encouraged to take time to bond with their child and are instead pushed by programming and policy to return to school or begin working as soon as possible (Austerberry & Wiggins, 2007). Teenage mothers also have many practical concerns such as childcare and transportation (Dawson, 1997; Herman, 2006; SmithBattle; SmithBattle, 2007ii; VanStone, et al., 1994). VanStone, et al.'s (1994) study of single mothers attending university found that support from faculty and peers, along with structured programs such as psychological counseling, were key to academic success.

Youngblut and Thomas (2000) found similar barriers when they spoke to teenage mothers who were unemployed but wanted to be employed. The participants spoke about the tension between wanting to provide for their child by working yet wanting to be physically and emotionally available for them. Childcare and support from friends and family were seen as necessary for their success in obtaining employment (Youngblut & Thomas). This suggests that once a teenage mother has obtained an education, she may still continue to face the same issues and barriers as she moves towards employment.

The availability of social support is critical for young mothers trying to pursue education or employment. These social networks, or "private safety nets" as Harknett (2006) refers to them, are "the potential to draw upon family and friends for material or emotional support as needed" (p. 172). The longitudinal Fragile

Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCCWS)⁶ showed the importance of these private safety nets for single mothers trying to make ends meet (Kalil & Ryan, 2010). However, the study also suggested that private safety nets are not reliable and do not change long-term economic outcomes for women or their children. The authors argue for community-based programs that mimic the private safety nets by providing emergency financial support, childcare and food to help provide more stability to the single mother and her children (Kalil & Ryan).

Using an administrative database of over 2800 single mothers, Harknett was able to correlate larger incomes, more employment and less welfare with higher levels of social networks. These associations held true even when she accounted for prior economic situations. This reinforces the notion that prior socioeconomic situation has more impact on future conditions than age at first pregnancy.

Finally, in a study of teenage mothers in the southern United States, May (1992) compared the social support between mother attending high school and those not attending high school. May (1992) found that those that attended high school had significantly higher social network scores and were more likely to seek help. Social supports are important in allowing teenage mothers to complete their education and being in school is a major pathway to those connections (May).

3.3.3. Housing

Stable housing is important to teenage mothers. Stevens (2006) conducted a qualitative study to understand what being healthy means to a group of teenage mothers in northwest United States. One of their definitions of being healthy was “having what you need” (p.32). For all the participants this included having a safe place to live (Stevens). Meadows-Oliver, Sadler, Swartz and Ryan-Krause (2007) found stable housing has a positive effect on outcomes for teenage mothers. They compared teenage mothers that were homeless with those that had stable housing. The sample came from a school-based parenting program that was offered in large urban centre in northeastern United States. The study found that homeless mothers had more depression, more life hardships⁷ and more social isolation (Meadows-Oliver, et. al.).

Having stable housing has also been found to be a critical factor in teenage mothers’ educational attainment (Cooke &Owen, 2006; Haleman, 2004; Herman, 2006; SmithBattle, 2006, 2007ii, 2009). Analysis of the American National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) showed that young mothers who had stable

⁶ FFCCWS is following over 5000 children in large U.S. cities. More than 75% of these children were born to unwed mothers (Kalil & Ryan, 2010).

⁷ Life hardships were described a negative events that create stress. Some examples sited were change in financial resources, loss of friends, change in social activities and changes in living environment.

housing had less of an education deficit than those young mothers without stable housing (Melhado, 2007).

Stable housing does not necessarily mean living with family. In their review of the literature, Coleman and Dennison (1998) found that in many cases, especially for older teens, living with the baby's grandmother correlated with greater stress on the mother and poor intellectual outcomes for the child. Eshbaugh (2007) also reviewed the literature on co-residence of teenage mothers in their parents' home. She found that some work suggests co-residence provides teenage mothers were better educational and economic success, but other work suggests that co-residing teen mothers have poorer parenting skills because the grandparents often assume this role. The author concluded that the advantages or disadvantages of living with ones parents are dependent on the individual teen mother, her relationship with her parents and her availability of resources (Eshbaugh). Although these reviews suggests the importance of varying housing options for parenting teens, the housing literature related to teen parents is limited.

The literature on services for parenting teens has little reference to programming that supports or supplies housing. This may be because many of the services with a residential component only focused on young mothers while they were pregnant and shortly after they give birth. Since articles related to pregnancy were excluded in the initial searches such work would have been omitted from this review. There was some work related to the broader category of single mothers. Most of these studies focused on the causes of housing shortages or homelessness in older single mothers or two-parent families (Cimasi & Wejnert, 2008; Clampet-Lundquist, 2003; Goldberg, 1999; Gottlieb, 1992; Mulroy, 1990; Winship, 2001). Some work also discussed the dangers of residing in public housing (Berger, Heintze, Naidich & Meyers, 2008; DeKeseredy, Schwartz, Alvi & Tomaszewski, 2003; Jefferson & Jarrett, 2004). The articles do not discuss the characteristics of housing that were preferred by single mothers or housing-related programs intended to support single mothers. After these exclusions, only two articles specifically focusing on teenage mothers' housing needs and preferences were included in this review (Cooke & Owen, 2006; Graber & Wolfe, 2004).

Graber and Wolfe (2004) described a model based on co-housing communities developed during the 1970's in Denmark. In the Family Support Village Center, single mothers with children under the age of ten could move from communal living units to rental units and finally, to rent-to-own homes. Throughout the process the women receive peer support from other single mothers and are supplied with support services related to personal development, job training and employment. Based on the experiences of other co-housing developments, the authors expected improved academic outcomes for the children, better mental

health for the mothers and a less transient community. While no formal publication of results could be found, the 2010 Annual Report of the Family Support Village Center stated 47 women and 83 children lived in the village. The report stated that 83% of these women increased their self-sufficiency, however no details were provided on how this was measured (“Annual Report”, 2010).

One qualitative study by Cooke and Owen (2006) focused on teenage parents’ experiences and preferences for housing. They gathered information from 20 teenage mothers living in an urban center within the United Kingdom through semi-structured interviews and focus groups. A unique aspect of this study was the fact that three young mothers were involved in the planning of the study.

The article gave some insight into the reasons that teenage moms were looking for housing. Some simply had no family support either before or as a result of becoming pregnant. Others had family support but economic and housing issues, such as crowding, prevented them from staying with family. Finally, a small number had to leave because of domestic violence (Cooke & Owen, 2006). In most cases, the young women experienced multiple moves over the course of their pregnancy and the early lives of their child.

Regarding preferences for housing, they found that young mothers wanted “choice, continuity and privacy, balancing support and independence” (Cooke & Owen, 2006, p. 57). The participants were asked to select their preferred housing arrangement from a choice of five models ranging from independent living with home visits to foster care for mother and baby. The preferred choice of the participants was independent living with support from a worker. As was seen in many of the service studies reviewed (Cooke & Owen, 2006; Cox, Bevill, Forsyth, Missal, Sherry, & Woods, 2005; Griffin, 1998; Stiles, 2005), the non-judgmental attitude of the support workers was crucial to the teenage mothers. The workers needed to be supporting the mother’s independence and growth, not trying to control her and her choices (Cooke & Owen). The overall second choice of the mothers was what the authors referred to as a “core and cluster” housing model. This model is remarkably similar to the Highbanks model. It includes self-contained apartments with a core support staff. Residency in this model is time-limited. The time limitation was a concern to the participants as continuity was highly important to them. However, the participants felt that the peer support inherent in this model would be welcome and valuable (Cooke & Owen). While none of the participants personally chose foster care, they did believe that this might be a good option for those that are most vulnerable such as very young mothers or those who experienced domestic violence (Cooke & Owen).

3.4. Discourse on Teenage Mothers

Institutional ethnography (IE) investigates a topic in the context of social organizations (Campbell & Gregor, 2004). Academic literature on a topic creates part of the social context around that subject matter. Within the teenage parent literature there is a subsection that specifically deals with the academic and policy discourse in the area. This section summarizes how the academic literature on teenage mothers has contributed to the contemporary views of young mothers.

In an analysis of the literature, Coleman and Dennison (1998) found both politicians and researchers have some fault in creating negative stereotypes of teenage mothers. They discussed how politicians and other commentators have referred to teenage mothers as “scroungers on the state” (p. 306). Mittelstadt (1997) also looked at the political rhetoric around teenage mothers in U.S. education policy discussions. She found that when teenage pregnancies were viewed as a welfare crisis, education changed from a human right to a requirement for teenage mothers. She also found that this shift actually reduced the options teenage mothers had for completing their education (Mittelstadt).

In the case of academic research, Coleman and Dennison (1998) found that most discussion on teenage parenting came from a “deficit model.” Wilson and Huntington (2005) also reviewed the literature on teenage mothers and found that adolescent motherhood was usually characterized as a social or public health issue. They were unable to find any literature that characterized young motherhood as a joyous event. Instead, they found the literature was presented in the context of welfare dependency and social exclusion rather than the context of supporting parenting (Wilson & Huntington).

In a study of health providers in New Zealand, Breheny and Stephens (2006) interviewed practitioners that worked with teenage mothers on a regular basis. They found that health professionals consistently viewed teenage mothers as adolescents and therefore as “naïve, distracted and self-centered ” (p.112). The health professionals’ were unable to reconcile these adolescent characteristics with those of a good mother. The authors concluded that these stereotypes have a negative impact on young mothers’ relationships with health professionals, which in turn takes away a potential avenue to support teenage mothers (Breheny & Stephens).

Wilson and Huntington (2005) also noted that the voice of teenage mothers is relatively rare in the research. Furthermore, when their voices are included, it is typically in qualitative studies of small size and convenience samples. This research is often not considered robust enough for evidence-based policy decisions and therefore is not included in policy discussions (Wilson & Huntington). Pollack and Caragata (2010) found that the lack of single mother input into research and policy discussions has led to Canadian welfare policies that focus on state-derived

outcomes. These outcomes usually did not correlate to better lives for mothers and their children (Pollack & Caragata).

Prevailing stereotypes were also found to affect the process of seeking assistance from welfare (Pollack & Caragata, 2010). Many single mothers in their study felt that welfare caseworkers had bought into the stereotypes of single mother as “wounded souls” or “lazy and underserving” (p.267). The women in the study spoke about having to be “good clients” which meant being passive and acquiescent (Pollack, 2009). Some participants suggested that signs of self-efficacy made workers question their need for welfare support (Pollack).

Pollack (2009) noted that continually coming up against such stereotypes could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Haleman (2004) made similar observations. In a study of teenage mothers attending university, she found that when these young women failed in school, employment or parenting, they blamed themselves. None of her participants were able to articulate any institutional or societal barriers that may have been working against them (Haleman).

The discourse on adolescent mothers may have been best summarized by Austerberry and Wiggins (2007) when they stated that teenage mothers are typically treated in the literature and policy discussions as failing students or parents instead of young women who are parents. This discourse continues to shape how teenage mothers are treated and supported in developed countries.

3.5. Conclusion

This review examined the current literature on teenage mothers and services, housing and education. Teen pregnancy and motherhood has often been defined as an epidemic or a crisis due to the poor social and economic outcomes that are often associated with teenage motherhood. However, more and more research is showing that these outcomes may have more to do with disadvantaged life circumstances that existed before pregnancy rather than conditions that arise after childbirth. Most of the research related to teenage mothers and their social and economic outcomes has been based on “objective measures” such as completion of high school, rates of poverty, utilization of welfare and prevention of secondary pregnancies. However, when the voice of the teenage mother is incorporated, we begin to see that for some young women, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, motherhood may become a bridge to adulthood and become an inspiration to change the future.

Yet, the voice of the teenage mother remains limited in modern academic research. Work that does include the teen mother perspective is often criticized because it consists of small, convenient samples from specific environments. However, despite these limitations some broad and consistent themes arise:

- A desire for a balance of support and independence
- The significance of peer support and contact with other single moms
- The importance of programming that takes into account the individuality and specific circumstances of the individual
- The critical value of being treated in a respectful and non-judgmental manner by those who support them.

4. Findings: The Highbanks Experience

This section of the report provides a summary of the evaluation's key findings. The first section provided an overview of the document review. The following sections outline the information that was gleaned mainly from the resident and staff interviews. The section is intended to outline the main factors that influence the residents' experiences at Highbanks Society.

4.1. Document Review

The two major documents in the review were the *Policy and Procedure Manual* and the *Resident Handbook*. The *Policy and Procedure Manual* available for review was from 2003-2004. Almost one half of the manual is related to staff and volunteer policies. For instance, there is a policy about volunteer orientation, but nothing on orientation for the residents.

The section outlining policies for client services is largely focused on the landlord/tenant relationship. While policies on this topic are important, the manual misses some of the important service features Highbanks Society provides and has some vague descriptions related to resident requirements. For example, there is no mention of the educational savings program and the policy on educational requirements is quite vague. The latter states, "All Highbanks residents will be gainfully employed actively participating in an educational/training program or actively seeking education, job training or employment. Employment will only be sought as a secondary goal to educational or training pursuits" (Policy CS 3.2 – Employment & Education). No specific details are provided on the definition of "active participation."

The *Resident Handbook* supplies more information, stating that residents must have a minimum 95% attendance record in their educational program. Such inconsistencies leave open the possibility of misunderstandings between the staff and residents. The handbook does detail the landlord/tenant relationship and provides a summary of the resident requirements. While the goals of Highbanks Society are stated in an introductory section, the handbook is a more practical guide to the living standards at the organization. A new *Resident Handbook* is about to be released. This new version keeps this practical information but contains more related to the residents' personal goals and reflections. These new sections will coincide with the orientation process that the new residents attend.

What was stated in the *Policy and Procedure Manual* and the *Resident Handbook* were generally in-sync. However, there were some discrepancies such as the frequency of CHATT nights. This is likely the result of policy updates not being able to keep up with evolving operations. Discussion with the staff revealed that updating the *Policy and Procedure Manual* has been on the organization's "to-do list" however due to the demands of operating the organization and the added workload brought about by recent renovations, the manual revisions have been put on the "backburner." Work on revising the manual has recently begun.

The orientation package used by Highbanks Society was also reviewed. It showed what type of information was being provided to new residents in their first weeks at Highbanks Society.

This helped to clarify the resident requirements and services provided so that information about these topics could be probed for in the interviews. The website and monthly resident newsletters also provided valuable information about what was currently happening at Highbanks Society. Again, this was important to provide context to some of the things residents spoke about in their interviews. The website was also valuable for learning about the history of the organization and a bit about how it has evolved over time.

4.2. The Resident

The central focus of this evaluation and Highbanks Society is the resident. The most important finding is that each resident has her own story. All of the residents are young, raising a child and pursuing education; however they have taken different roads to arrive at this point in their lives and will take different roads as they move forward. Both the resident and staff interviews also revealed that the levels of support from friends and families outside of Highbanks Society vary significantly from resident to resident. The residents expressed that the understanding and respect of their unique situations is a large part of what makes them comfortable at Highbanks Society.

Consistent with the literature on teenage mothers (Cooke & Owen, 2006; Cox et.al, 2005, Griffin, 1998; Lewis et. al., 2007; McDonald, et. al., 2008; Stiles, 2005), the other component critical to residents' comfort at Highbanks Society is the access to peers who are also young mothers. Peer support is critical to these young women. Many of the residents that were interviewed spoke about how their social interactions changed when they became mothers. They were no longer able to go out with friends as they had in the past creating a sense of loneliness. As expressed in the following quotes, for some this felt like they were "missing out."

I think everybody's story is obviously really different but, you know, being able to relate a little bit and understanding how hard it is, because I mean part of you feels like you kinda missed out. Like no, I don't feel that all the time, but sometimes you do.
- Past Resident

I like being able to talk to the girls like in the evening. So ya, its nice to have someone to talk to because you really can't go out with your friends. It gets kind of lonely. So that's the part I like most.
- Current Resident

I never really felt completely and totally...I...I didn't feel isolated at all. There was always someone that I could call if I needed anything.
- Past Resident

Many of the residents interviewed also described how it is difficult to meet other young mothers and how having direct access to other women who share the same joys and struggles is one of the most meaningful aspects of Highbanks Society.

One thing I really like about Highbanks, and I know that a lot of other girls said the same thing, is that you can just go there and be what you are and everybody there understands what you are going through.

- Past Resident

The interviews also showed that the Highbanks Society residents provide more than just friendship to each other. Since the young women living at Highbanks Society are often at different points of their parenting journey their peers become a sort of informal mentor. This is expressed by one of the residents:

It's really nice having other girls and stuff that are going through what you are going through. Most them going through have already been through what I am going through, so it's nice to be able to learn from other people.

- Current Resident

The residents rely on each other for parenting advice, problem solving, positive reinforcement and non-judgmental emotional support.

Since I've been at Highbanks it...I just kind of see that all these other people are doing the same thing and its just good for..I just feel like I have more support I guess.

- Current Resident

[The best part is] the community probably and having people to talk to and just having people there to, umm, help our and get advice from.

- Current Resident

Finally, and likely most important, is the concept of balance. The young women interviewed for this evaluation were balancing numerous roles and responsibilities. The multiple demands on their time and energy can be a source of stress and anxiety. When one former resident was asked, "What is it like being a young mom trying to finish school?" her response was, "exhausting." Another former resident responded:

It was tough. It still is. It doesn't get any easier I tell you. You have a lot of balls that you need to keep in the air.

- Past Resident

The demands of being a single mother trying to complete her education were felt by all evaluation participants.

I go to school five days a week. I am balancing my home, my family, my boyfriend, my friends, like trying to have a social life. It can be stressful.

- Current Resident

It's really hard [raising a child on her own]. I go to school all day and then I go straight to work. I am very busy. At least I don't have to take night classes any more.

- Current Resident

Despite the difficulties of raising a child, the residents interviewed did not feel that the broader community viewed them in a negative light. This was surprising given that the majority of literature regarding teenage mothers comes from a deficit perspective. Reviews of the literature were unable to find examples where teenage motherhood was seen as a joyous event (Coleman & Dennison, 1998; Wilson & Huntington, 2005). Yet, at Highbanks Society motherhood is celebrated. The community marks the birthdays of the children. They also commemorate the accomplishments of the residents.

The residents clearly want Highbanks Society to be aware of the many issues they must balance and then take this into consideration when planning services and programs. Several of the residents felt that the program requirements of Highbanks Society sometimes puts great stress on this balance. As one resident stated it sometimes feels like the requirements to attend programming go against the importance that is places on working towards their education.

Its like they want you to do well in school, but they want you to do all this stuff and...its overwhelming. Plus you have to be a parent.

- Current Resident

All of the residents that were part of the evaluation understood the need for some programming and knew it was their responsibility to attend. However for some, the topics seemed irrelevant and therefore so did that particular programming.

'cause for some of them [the CHATT nights] I feel like we don't really...they are not really helpful for me, they're more stuff I know...and because they are mandatory and you have to attend them they're really just a waste of time I could be doing one of the million other things I have to do.

- Current Resident

Only current residents expressed this feeling. Interviews with the staff confirmed that more programming had been added in recent years as more opportunities from partner organizations have become available.

Another facet of balance that came out of the interviews with the residents is striking a balance between wanting and needing support and their desire to be fully

independent. During the six-week orientation process⁸ the residents are systematically told about the services and programs available to them. New residents are also provided with a handbook that covers the policies and procedures of Highbanks Society. The documentation from the orientation and the handbook provide information on specific expectations and programs but do not, at least not in a way visible to the evaluator, provide specific discussions of supporting the residents' independence. The orientation process is also a chance for the Community Coordinator, the Executive Director and the new resident to get to know each other. It is this latter process of talking and learning about each other that seems to make residents aware of Highbanks Society's desire to help them become independent. As one resident stated:

They want us to have our independence. Like they want to help us out as much as they can but at the same time they want us to be independent and learn on our own.

- Current Resident

The residents who participated in interviews want to live independently but have a strong awareness of how difficult that can be. Most residents stated they do not want to be, "given the answer." They therefore rely on the resources that Highbanks Society provides to help guide them towards that independence. One current resident relayed the story about when her young child became ill. She was in a bit of a panic, so she called one of the Highbanks Society staff. The staff member was able to calm down the resident and then ask her questions about her child. These questions allowed the resident to process the situation and to decide what was the best action to take for her child. The resident was grateful that the staff member did not just take over the situation.

The interviews also suggest that as the residents moved out on their own, they became more aware of the importance of learning how to make their own parenting decisions. Some young mothers interviewed felt they already knew quite a bit, but realized once they got into Highbanks Society how much more support there was for her and her child. Not only the support from Highbanks Society but supports available in the community.

When I first came it was kind of losing a bit of freedom 'cause I had been on my own. In the end like it helped me gain my freedom because if I hadn't have lived there I don't know if I would know how to find things to help us and to choose which is best for me, for me and my [child].

- Past Resident

⁸ This process is has been in place approximately one year. Prior to that similar information was provided in a less structured process.

Other mothers interviewed seemed to have little experience parenting before they came to Highbanks. As shown in this quote, they spoke about having to learn the skills and confidence of decision-making regarding their child.

When I lived with my mom...you know, she was my, almost like my [child's] mom. She made the calls. At Highbanks I became the mom. I had to make the calls, you know? I got advice, but I had to decide. This is what you are supposed to do when you're a mom.

- Past Resident

4.3. Highbanks Society Housing

4.3.1. A Safe, Affordable and Pretty Place to Live

The main reason interviewed residents came to Highbanks Society is the low rent. Rent at Highbanks Society is less than 25% of current market rent. For some residents the decreased cost meant they were able to stop or reduce their work time to focus more on school and their child. This quote represents the feelings of many of the residents interviewed:

If I didn't have Highbanks at the time I would have had to go out and find a job and get an apartment and I wouldn't have time with him and I wouldn't have time finish school 'cause I would be working so hard to make sure we had a roof and food and all that stuff.

- Past Resident

For others, Highbanks Society provided an opportunity to move away from family and have more independence in raising their child. And for some it meant they could leave an abusive or less than ideal relationship.

The residents appreciated that the Highbanks Society apartments were in a safe and vibrant community. The community is located close to several educational institutions, including a high school specifically for pregnant teens and young mothers. It is also located centrally in the city with easy access to public transit.

Residents also spoke about the importance of the physical space of the main Highbanks Society. The apartments have been created by designers and come fully furnished. The residents explained how the comfort and “prettiness” of their apartments made them feel valued. They were happy that they had a nice place to start raising their child. They enjoyed being there and were therefore more likely to spend time at home focusing on their child and their schoolwork.

I wanted my child to have a comfortable life, not a life where I was like struggling to get by. And this was pretty much the only option I found

that you can be a young single mom and get by doing well instead of [being] in some sketchy place.

- Current Resident

4.3.2. Second Site

Highbanks Society's Fourteen Street site is part of a larger subsidized housing project in the city. Highbanks Society partnered with the project to provide a second step of housing for those that have finished two years in the Bowview site. However, it has also been used to directly house some residents when space was unavailable at the main site.

The residents who had experiences in the Fourteenth Street Site had mixed views. They enjoyed the greater freedom and independence of living away from the Bowview site; however they felt somewhat distanced from the Highbanks Society community. They no longer had direct access to the staff and volunteers who are regularly at the Bowview site.

I just feel like I can grow now like I feel independent. Like there was a sense of community [at the Bowview Site] so I was comfortable, but here now, I have to build my own community.

- Current Resident

I feel like maybe one of the disadvantages of me being at the 14th Street building is that I can't just open up my door and say, "Hey, like do you guys wanna come over and have the kids play."

- Current Resident

The young mothers still felt welcomed by those at the Bowview site but the physical distance, though only a few blocks or a phone call away, made them less likely to interact with other members of the Highbanks Community. Furthermore, although Highbanks Society occupies three apartments at the Fourteenth Street Site, they are not co-located. This means Fourteenth Street residents are less likely to interact with their peers who are only one or two floors away.

The Fourteenth Street site is quite a contrast to the main Highbanks Society apartments. Because they are positioned within a large subsidized housing complex, they are not as esthetically pleasing as the Bowview site and they do not include any communal spaces. The building is also used for emergency housing so disruptive arguments, parties and police visits are not uncommon. Residents with experiences in this setting did not feel it was the best place to be raising their child.

I didn't want to live in [the Fourteenth Street site] 'cause of all the people and just the stress and it's just not the place for me...you could totally feel the stress there. I am not saying they're bad people, but it's just that they're all thriving off negative vibes and it's just not healthy.

- Past Resident

4.3.3. Requirements of Residence

In addition to standard tenant responsibilities, such as paying rent on time, Highbanks Society residents must meet other requirements. All residents must be in school or vocational training and they must participate in mandatory programming such as monthly Community of Highbanks All Together Talking (CHAT)⁹ nights and sessions with a parent educator. There is also a specific visitation policy that outlines when and how guests are permitted. The full policy as it appears in the *Resident Handbook* can be found in Appendix V.

Within the interviews all residents indicated they were aware of these requirements when they moved into Highbanks Society. However, almost every resident had concerns about the visitation policy. They understood that some controls need to be in place for the safety and comfort of all residents. At the same time, they also felt that Highbanks Society is trying to promote independence and responsibility but the policy reflects a lack of trust.

One thing I would change...I don't know how to change this, but it would be nice if it was made a bit easier to have friends and boyfriends...like I am not saying boys should be able to sleep over or we should be able to have parties or anything...but the rules are a little closed. It doesn't feel like they trust you.

- Current Resident

One resident gave the example of having a male on her group project team for school. She explained how it would be nice to have the team do their work at her apartment so she could be with her child, but since she is still in her probationary phase, she is not allowed to have any males in her apartment. She felt that the visitation policy hindered her schoolwork, which is also a residency requirement for Highbanks Society.

Another resident gave an example of a time when both she and her child were sick. A female friend from outside of Highbanks Society spent most of the day helping her out. She said it would have been nice to have her friend sleep over so that the friend could get up in the night with the baby and the resident could get some sleep to help her recover from her illness. However, because of the

⁹ These are regularly scheduled meetings that all residents (from both sites) are required to attend.

visitation policy, which does not allow overnight guests without prior approval, her friend had to leave by 11:00 pm.

The other residency requirements did not raise as many concerns as the visitation policy. However, concerns were raised about the consistent enforcement of those requirements. Many felt that there was no consequence for not following rules or that some were held to the rules while other were not. These perceived inconsistencies were seen as undermining the community at Highbanks Society.

If you have one rule for one girl you have to have those rules for all of them, so you know you feel like its all fair...everyone is equal.

- Past Resident

Every rule that was set I followed all the time. Umm... just because I do appreciate everything that they've done. So I got to a meeting and there were like two or three of the girls weren't there and it was just like frustrating to me.

- Current Resident

4.4. The Highbanks Community

Residents cited the sense of community as the best aspect of Highbanks Society. Every respondent used the word “community” to describe the organization. The most important members of this community are the other young mothers in residency. The residents appreciate having other young women in similar circumstances and in close proximity from whom they can draw on for advice and support. The young women find that their non-parenting peers often do not understand the demand and concerns they have in their life. Many residents also spoke about the benefits of having other children nearby with whom their child could interact and play.

The best part so far, I think is just getting to know a lot of the girls and having these connections with them now that – ‘cause I don’t have any friends that have young kids or kids in general.

- Current Resident

Most of the residents also consider the staff, especially those on site, to be part of the community. Residents stated they never felt alone because there was usually a staff or volunteer around to talk with if their peers were unavailable. The attitudes of the staff towards the residents is what granted them community status. The residents felt staff were accepting and nonjudgmental. The literature has found these characteristics to be critical in people providing services and supports to young mothers (Austerberry & Wiggins, 2007; Cooke & Owen, 2006; Cox, 2005; Griffin, 1998; Stiles, 2005; SmithBattle, 2009ii). The residents felt the staff is generally there to listen and suggest, not tell them what to do. Sometimes the residents felt the staff

acted a bit like parents, but they generally felt this was done with the residents' best interest in mind.

And it's nice to have that sort of push to do things 'cause they do nag, which sometimes gets annoying. But it's nice to have that push. -Current Resident

The interviews with Highbanks Society staff revealed that they feel that one of their major roles is to help the residents' goal set and move towards those goals. As revealed in the orientation documentation and staff interviews, goal setting actually begins in the program orientation. These quotes below from some of the residents show the importance of setting these goals and having the occasional push towards them.

Sometimes they just call and say, "you know, we'd like to maybe see how you are doing, make sure that everything's going okay, how are your goals coming?"
- Current Resident

[Highbanks Society] makes me want to thrive more. Yeah, I just want more for my kids you know, and I want more that I never got. They help me break down how to get there.
- Past Resident

I just got in and she was like, "Well, what are you going to do? What would you like to do? You know, you have to go back to school" and stuff like that. They push school.
- Past Resident

The on-site guardians played a special role in many, but not all, of the residents' experiences at Highbanks Society. The guardians' role in enforcing house rules was mentioned in the interviews, but more often their role was described as "a great neighbour," "the parents I never had," and "grandparents." As described by one past resident, "They're like parents to me but grandparents to my [child]."

The guardians contribute to the safe feeling of Highbanks Society, act as confidants, and help with many of the residents' children. They play a pivotal role in building the community by hosting regular dinners to bring all the residents together. Here is how one resident describes the dinners:

They are sooo nice. She makes dinner every other Tuesday....I mean Monday. She is so cute and she's like from the east. Kind of like an Italian grandmother with her family around the table that want...that gives us so much food. They are fun evenings.
- Current Resident

The final group in the Highbanks Society community is the past residents. Many residents stay engaged with the organization after they have moved out. The

majority of past residents have maintained at least one close relationship with one of the other residents they lived with. Most of the past residents also want to maintain a connection to the organization. Sometimes they are looking for further support and assistance, but mostly they want to maintain the connections they created during their time at Highbanks Society. The past residents also told me they want to find more meaningful ways to give back to the organization such as mentoring programs with current residents.

4.5. Services and Programs

Highbanks Society is not just a low-rent housing facility. It provides services and programs to its residents. These services and programs are part of the defining features of the organization. In talking to the residents and staff, the programming seems to fall into three categories: mandatory, optional and personalized. The organization speaks about “required” or mandatory programming in some of their documentation. Staff use a similar language to describe some of its programming. The other programs and services offered by Highbanks Society are not formally grouped, however for the purpose of this evaluation is helpful to separate out optional and personalized programming as they were described differently by the residents.

Mandatory programs are those required as a condition of residency at Highbanks Society. These include monthly CHATT evenings and monthly home visits with a parent educator. The CHATT meetings are regular meetings that may consist of informational sessions or social activities. These sessions are for the residents only and childcare is provided.

The residents valued the social aspects of the evening. Most commented that the most valuable aspect of these sessions is how they forced them to get out at least once a month and take some time for themselves. Although they sometimes found the topics redundant because of their personal experience or life stage, the social aspect was almost always valued.

In relation to the parent educator sessions, most residents commented on the educator herself, not the content of the sessions. The young mothers felt the educator was approachable and caring. They stated it was nice to have someone validate that they were doing a good job with their children.

[The Parent Educator] she just reinforced me...like I know that I am doing a good job...but its nice to have someone tell you that you are doing a good job.

- Current Resident

I felt totally comfortable with her. We were able to talk about anything and everything and she was a lot of help. Like I...I always had a list of questions for her and she was always able to answer them.

- Past Resident

When asked about the specific content, some found the information the parent educator provided very helpful while others felt they already had that information from other sources such as their physician, books, peers or other resources.

The current residents also talked about other mandatory programs such as the MUM (Moms U Matter) program, a cooking program offered by a community partner, and GLOW (Girls Leading Others Wisely), a self-development program offered through yet another community partner. While the reactions to these programs from the residents were generally positive, concerns were raised about an increase in mandatory programming because this places more pressure on their already demanding lives. Interviews with the staff confirmed that they felt these community-partner programs were opportunities to provide relevant and high quality content to the residents. They tried to optimize the residents time by holding them as a replacement for regular CHATT nights, however sometimes extra evening were required because of the program format.

Optional services were open to all residents, but attendance or utilization of these programs is not a requirement of residency. The optional service most often mentioned was access to a mental health services through a chartered psychologist. Most residents valued this service, however not all residents could access the psychologist consistently. Interviews with the staff revealed that mental health services were not part of the core offerings of the organization. When the new Executive Director, a former teenage mother, started she secured some volunteer services from a registered psychologist because of her belief in the importance of the mental health of the mother. However, because the psychologist is a volunteer her services were only offered on a limited basis. The residents believed that the psychologist's services should be available more than one evening per month. In order to work on any issues they had, they felt they needed to access her more often.¹⁰

At the request of the client, I also asked about Highbanks Society's partnership with a local medical clinic. Only one resident was utilizing this service. The other residents were unaware of this service, but each had already established relationships with a medical provider. The residents did say that this was an important relationship, especially with a young child, and although they did not access the clinic currently, they felt it was important for the opportunity to be available.

¹⁰ Prior to this report being completed, these services are now offered on a regular basis through a contracted provider. Mental health counseling remains an optional service the residents can access.

Optional services also included benefits residents could access once their probationary period was complete. The two benefits most often mentioned were the educational savings match program and the extracurricular fund. Almost all residents tried to take advantage of both of these programs. The educational savings match program allows residents to make monthly contributions to a savings plan that is matched by Highbanks Society up to \$1500 per year of residence. These savings can then be used towards cost associated with post-secondary education. The extracurricular fund provides residents with an annual sum to be used for personal wellness programs. The guidelines on this benefit are broad and the resident has freedom to choose something of interest to her. Examples of the use of these funds provided by the staff included gym memberships, yoga classes, mother-baby exercise classes, music lessons for the mom and meditation classes.

Personalized services are those that were chosen to specifically meet the needs of an individual resident. A variety of services were mentioned in this category including locating much needed furniture and baby equipment, driver training, literacy courses, educational and vocational guidance, legal assistance and financial planning. Highbanks Society has on-going connections to many individuals and organizations that provide these kinds of support. However, if the client identifies the need for a different support, the organization works to find ways to connect the resident to the services she needs. After a link has been made for the client, the organization also stays in touch with that connection to maintain the potential of future access for other residents.

These were seen as the most important services Highbanks Society offered because they helped the resident meet her primary needs and respected her personal path. This assistance was usually provided as a series of options. The residents were glad to have choices and to have people to discuss those choices with before making a final decision.

I just need some help with options...you know. I am a young mom, that doesn't make me a dumb mom.
- Past Resident

4.6. The Broader Community – Support is out There

As mentioned previously, the most valued support provided by Highbanks Society is the personalized services. Highbanks Society provides these customized services by linking residents to programs and assistance already available in the community. Residents told me how surprised they were at the many supports available in the community and how they doubted they would have ever been aware of most of them without Highbanks.

Highbanks has connections...I know that half of the stuff that I use I would have never known about in a million years that it was available to me. And I think that is what's important is knowing that there are things out there that are available, not just because I'm a single mother, but to aid you in whatever you need.

- Past Resident

The residents also told me they valued having choices and options in the supports they utilized. Discussion with staff revealed the importance of their many community partners in providing these services. The Executive Director of Highbanks Society feels that one of her main roles is developing and maintain the relationship with these partners. The founder also told me that Highbanks Society is lucky to have a strong core of volunteers and committed financial supports that allow it to be selective about funding opportunities and sources. The organization ensures it does not accept funding with "too many strings attached" that would jeopardize its autonomy and ability to work with a multitude of community partners. Without the strong network of community partners and deep knowledge of community programming, Highbanks Society would not be able to provide such a broad range of support and opportunities to its residents.

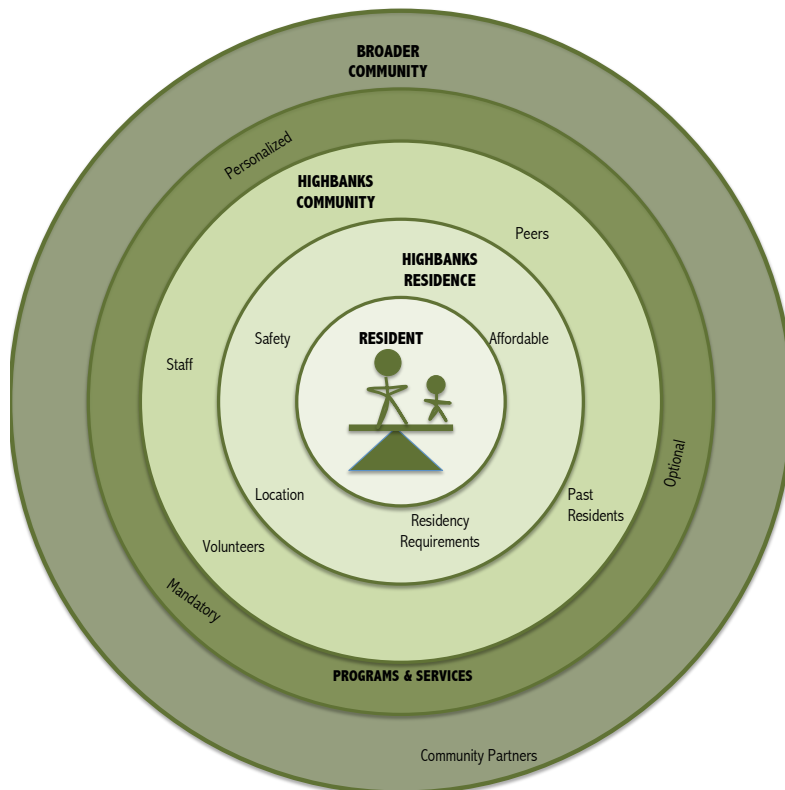
5. Discussion

This section brings together the findings of the evaluation to provide a more integrated view of how the residents' experience is shaped and influenced by the organization. As an evaluation of an organization progresses there are often one or two ideas that arise as the central themes for the project. The concepts of community and balance were the most prominent in this evaluation. A third area of importance is the programming and services provided to the residents by Highbanks Society. Although the residents did not typically bring up this topic, the question guide was designed to ask specific programming and service questions. This section presents a summary framework that was designed to encompass the findings of this evaluation that could also be used to describe the key components of Highbanks Society. Following the summary model is a more in depth discussion of the findings.

5.1. Framework : A Model for Organization

This evaluation is based on the perspective of the residents. Because the resident is the central focus of Highbanks Society, the resident is also the inner circle of this model. The resident is represented with her child to reflect the Society's mandate that residents have already given birth and are the primary caregivers for their child. More importantly, it represents the central role the child plays in the resident's life.

Figure - Organizational Model



In the model, the resident is positioned on a balance. The concept of balance appeared multiple times in this evaluation. The resident is faced with balancing many life issues such as motherhood, school, relationships, work and transitioning into womanhood. From an organizational perspective, Highbanks Society is trying to create a balance between supporting and assisting the residents and fostering their independence and personal growth. The organization needs to understand and acknowledge this tension as it designs its programming and services.

The provision of low-cost housing is a defining feature of Highbanks and is represented in the model by the second circle encompassing the resident and her child. This evaluation uncovered that affordable housing is what initially draws most of the residents to the organization. The residents are also drawn to the housing site because it is situated in a safe and convenient location and the apartments themselves are esthetically pleasing. This segment of the model also represents the requirements for residence, or the rules they must follow while they live at the Highbanks Society sites. These have a significant impact on the young mothers' experience at Highbanks Society.

The next circle represents the Highbanks Society Community. Although affordable housing may be the initial draw to the organization, it is the community created at Highbanks Society that most positively impacts the residents' experience with the organization. The mothers described this community as accepting and non-judgmental. For all residents, the other young mothers, their peers, are the most important part of the community. But for many of the young women their community also includes staff, volunteers and former residents.

The programs and services provided by Highbanks Society are also represented in the model. It is important to capture them in the model because they are a significant part of what defines the organization. Highbanks Society does not simply provide housing; it also assists its residents through a diverse menu of mandatory, optional and individualized programs and services.

In many cases, Highbanks Society provides these supports through connections in the broader community. Hence, the final circle in this model represents the broader community. The residents and the organization do not exist in isolation from the community that surrounds them. In fact, a large part of Highbanks Society's work – and a piece that is highly valued by the residents – is connecting the mothers with resources in the community.

5.2. Seeking Balance

The model based on the data collected in this evaluation has a balance at its centre. Balance has been placed in the middle of the model because it is an important concept for both the residents and the organization. The most obvious balance identified in this report is the struggle residents find between their various roles and many responsibilities. In describing their lives as a single mother, these multiple demands were most prominent.

The residents praised Highbanks Society for being a great support in addressing many of the demands upon their time and energy; however many of the current residents expressed concerns that too many programming opportunities were actually adding to their pressures.

They'll have other mandatory stuff and its just like you know, too much when you are going to school, you have your child to look after, plus your child is not with you at these things so that's time away from them. - Current Resident

Interviews with the staff revealed that some of the additional requirements for residents stemmed from the needs of their community partners. When programs were offered through a community partner, that partner sometimes needed to guarantee a certain number of participants. Therefore, Highbanks Society had to make the program mandatory to meet the numbers. The partnerships with community organizations are critical to Highbanks Society's success and part of what the residents value. Therefore, the organization has to perform a balance between the requirement of their partners and the needs of their residents.

The residents are also on a balance between support and independence. Residents understand that being a resident of Highbanks Society is providing them with opportunities and supports that are unavailable to many young women in similar situations and they appreciate this support. They want the supports to propel them forward not hold them up. This is part of why having choices is so critical for them. They believe that making the final decisions about their personal path is important in their movement towards independence.

The residents want the organization to recognize their desire for independence. Both through observation and through staff discussion it appears that in a caring organization, such as Highbanks Society, it is sometimes difficult to support the resident instead of doing something for her. The residents also admit that at certain stressful times they may lean towards having something done for them instead of working though it with support. The organization must be aware of these struggles as they work with the residents.

I think they [Highbanks Society] can almost help the girls too much where they are not going to be able to, you know, in two years they'll still be used to getting all this help instead of figuring it out on your own...you know.

- Current Resident

There was a final organizational balance not identified by the residents, but observed during the process of the evaluation. It is the balance between governance and operations. In a small organization such as Highbanks Society, people often play multiple roles and the lines between operations and governance are blurred. For example, several members of the organization's board also have specific operational roles including direct interaction with the residents. In a small organization such as Highbanks Society where everyone involved is passionate about the organizational goals, it is unreasonable to believe that these lines could be absolute. However, if some negotiated parameters are not put on governance's involvement in operations, it may create stresses in the organization. Given the intimate nature of the organization, the residents may pick up on those stresses.

5.3. The Highbanks Society Community

It has been said that you cannot be well alone. This evaluation has shown that Highbanks Society is promoting the wellness of its residents by creating a community and sense of connection. The community is small but diverse. Residents have multiple options to find support within this community and a variety of ways to be involved in the community.

One segment of the community that might be underutilized by the organization is the former residents of Highbanks Society. Although many former residents stay in contact with Highbanks Society and volunteer with the organization, several past residents expressed a desire to be involved in more significant ways. They have grown since their experience at Highbanks Society and feel they could play a significant role in the organization by sharing their journeys with current residents.

I have learned a lot since [living at Highbanks Society]. I was young and not as mature. I really didn't appreciate it while I was there but I sure would like to share some of the things I know now. I know that would have been great when I was first a mom.

- Past Resident

Despite its strength and importance, the Highbanks Society community does not occur spontaneously. During the staff interviews, the point was made that many of the residents come into Highbanks Society never having been a part of any community so it is difficult for them to build a community. Highbanks Society puts many resources into building the community. Staff interviews revealed that the full-time Community Coordinator's primary role is learning the residents' stories and becoming intimately connected with them. Based on the analysis of the resident

interviews it is apparent that she deals with them in a caring and non-judgmental fashion. Through these actions, she has gained their trust and can thus nurture the community by establishing connections where residents might not do so on their own.

The On-Site Guardians also play an important role in creating the Highbanks Society community. Residents interviewed said their presence at the site creates a sense of safety and security. They also create opportunities for informal resident gatherings by hosting communal dinners on a regular basis. Like the Community Coordinator, the residents who were interviewed describe the On-Site Guardians as loving and non-judgmental.

The research literature shows us that an individual's ability to be respectful and non-judging is more important than professional expertise in providing services and support to young, single mothers (Austerberry & Wiggins, 2007). Highbanks Society is no different. Those interviewed talked about the staff's ability to connect with them, listen and be supportive without judging. Even in discussions about the Parent Educator or the Executive Director, the residents' comments were about their demeanour and personalities, not about any expertise they possess.

Respect and compassion are not just important in the staff. It is also important for the residents to show these characteristics. At times, not every resident fit into the community. Some former residents experienced times when not all residents were at the same point of commitment to their educational or vocational goals. When all the residents are not committed to similar goals, it can impact the community in a negative way.

They were having a lot of issues with the ones that they're not mature enough. It's like they weren't able to handle [being on their own] and it kind of, it sort of divided us.

- Past Resident

Further questioning in the interviews revealed that the residents are not looking for a unity in age, but for all residents to be focused on the goals of bettering themselves and working towards educational goals. The residents have little patience for those who do not understand and appreciate the unique opportunities that Highbanks Society provides. Residents who are perceived by their peers to be "taking a free ride" are not ever fully accepted into the Highbanks Society Community. As one former resident put it:

You have to take advantage of the program like good advantage, not like bad advantage where its just cheap rent and a just somewhere to sleep or to have your stuff. If that's all you're doing you're really not part of it all.

- Past Resident

These examples show the importance of each member of the community. Residents feel that because the Highbanks Society community is small, one or two individuals who do not believe in the organization's philosophies and goals can disrupt the community. Staff and volunteer positions go far beyond a job or task description. The personal characteristics and traits of each staff member have a vital impact on the community.

Staff interviews revealed that they attempt to have residents with diverse backgrounds and life situations. This contributes to learning and growth opportunities in the community. However, staff also noted that young women residing at Highbanks Society must be at a certain level of commitment towards their educational goals and at a level of readiness to move towards greater independence. As one staff member stated, "she must be ready, willing and able."

5.4. Programs & Services

Without the programming and services aspects, Highbanks Society would simply be a subsidized housing project. The most important services from the perspective of the residents were the individualized programming that connected them with supports and services in the broader community. This is consistent with the literature which indicated one-on-one support and/or case management showed better results for single mothers related to educational, parenting and social outcomes (Philiber, Brooks, Philips, Oakley & Waggoner, 2003; McDonell, Limber & Connor-Godbey, 2007; Sadler, Swartz, Ryan-Krausse, Seitz, Meadows-Oliver, Grey & Clemmens, 2007). The residents involved in this evaluation each had a different and unique story. While each one of them was committed to similar goals, there was not one route to that endpoint. Residents valued getting what they needed to help them succeed which ranged from simply having someone there to talk to, to learning to read to fighting for sole custody of their child.

The residents also revealed that it important that support provided options not answers. Individual residents had multiple paths they could take to reach their goals. They wanted Highbanks Society to help them understand the routes available and the potential advantages and disadvantages, but ultimately they need to pick their direction,

They are like 'oh, well here's some books or a [web]site or this what I did with my kids and...then you talk to the girls there, you know, and you get all these different opinions and then you put it in your own way.

- Past Resident

The residents interviewed valued the support because it helped to ease some of the many responsibilities they face. However, the young women interviewed ultimately wanted to be independent and self-sufficient mothers.

The drive to become independent and self-sufficient was inspired by becoming a mother. As noted in the literature (Herman, 2006; SmithBattle, 2007(i), 2007(ii), 2009(ii)), many of the young mothers at Highbanks Society felt that the birth of their child pushed them to become a more driven person who could provide a better life for their child. As one mother explained...

I said, 'you know, I need to go back to school and I have to better my life for my [child]'s sake,' you know?
- Past Resident

While their child is often the driver behind their educational and vocational pursuits, the mothers I interviewed made it clear that they needed to help themselves before they could help their child. The mothers I interviewed spoke about taking care of their mental and physical health. As exemplified in the quotations below, the mothers believe being healthy physically and mentally are critical to being a good parent.

You can give a mom a million and one parenting courses but at the end of the day if she doesn't have self esteem, self confidence they won't matter.
- Past Resident

The importance of health, you know, especially when you're a single mother...you're a mom, you need to be there...you need to take care of yourself.
- Past Resident

The need for support of the mother came through in some of the service discussions. The most enjoyed aspect of CHATT nights was "just getting out." The favourite topics at these evenings related to self-esteem and self-development. A majority of those interviewed spoke about the need for regular access to a mental health professional. Many respondents also took advantage of the Extracurricular Activity Fund to do activities to support their own health and wellness. This quote sums up feelings expressed by many of the participants:

I think its good 'cause I think we spend so much time with our kids all the time that it's nice to just be able to kind of go for an hour a week and do whatever.
- Current Resident

Respondents spoke about the two mandatory programming pieces, CHATT and visits with the Parent Educator. In both cases the social aspects seemed to be more significant than content to the residents.

I thought like the meetings and stuff [CHATT], sometimes, yeah, they were boring or whatever, but it was still good to get out...brought girls to a group and you realize there are others out there like you.

- Past Resident

Some of the current residents expressed concerns about the frequency of CHATT nights and other required programming. No resident thought these programs should be eliminated, but felt that if held too often, they would become a burden. The residents also wanted a say in the activities at CHATT nights. Many felt there were chances to input their ideas for content while others felt the opportunities did not exist or were limited. The latter feelings tended to be from the current residents. Interviews with staff revealed that they felt that they are very open to topic ideas from the residents. However, many of the recent CHATT nights have been replaced with partnership programming such as MUM and GLOW. These sessions are part of a pre-defined programs and therefore the opportunities to have input into content are less.

Most residents enjoyed their monthly visits with the Parent Educator but as with CHATT nights and other mandatory requirements, the residents want the organization to consider the frequency and need for these appointments in the context of other demands and other sources of the same or similar information. For example, two residents suggested that as their child aged, the developmental milestones do not happen as quickly as the early years of life. Both suggested that, as the child ages a visit every six months may be more appropriate than monthly visits. They also felt each mother should make this decision for herself.

6. Considerations

This evaluation of Highbanks Society was completed at time of leadership transition and a time of planning for the future. The intent of the evaluation was to understand the experience of those young women who are living and who have lived at Highbanks Society residences. The hope was to use these experiences to spark ideas to create even better resident experiences in the future.

This section presents a series of observations based on findings of this evaluation. They have been divided into those related to the programs and services provided and those more in relation to organizational issues. The Board and operational teams at Highbanks Society will ultimately decide the relevance of these to their on-going operations and planning. The young women that were part of this study wanted choices not answers. In keeping with this spirit, this report does not provide absolutes to the organization, but many options for it to consider.

6.1. Services and Programming

- ***Consider the balance in resident's lives:*** The residents of Highbanks Society are balancing many roles and responsibilities. When the organization considers requiring new programming it needs to ensure that the obligations do not become overwhelming to the residents or take time away from other important responsibilities such as studying and spending time with their child.
- ***Required programming is important in building the Highbanks Society Community:*** Peer support is paramount for the residents. Maintaining regular required group interactions, such as CHATT nights, are an important component of creating this peer support network. For the residents, the social interaction is often more important than the discussion topics at these events.
- ***Continue personalized services:*** Services that are specifically designed to meet the individualized needs of each resident are highly valued by the residents. They appreciate having multiple options and opinions that assist them in making their own choices.
- ***Maintain and develop community partnerships:*** The residents require a variety of supports and services. Liaising with community partners to meet these needs is both effective and efficient. Furthermore, these partnerships connect the residents to the broader community that will help them as they move towards greater independence and ultimately leave Highbanks Society.
- ***Expand outreach:*** Highbanks Society has a limit on the number of residents it can accept. In the past, the organization has sometimes offered its group

sessions to young mothers who would have been eligible for the program but were unable to live at Highbanks Society because of a lack of vacancy.

The organization is sometimes presented with the dilemma of guaranteeing a certain number of attendees at a community partner provided session and balancing the demand they place on their residents' time. Highbanks Society may want to offer more of its group programming to young mothers who are not residents of Highbanks Society. This may help the organization meet attendance requirement of their partners and the non-resident mothers are likely to benefit from the both the information supplied in session and the peer support provided by the group.

- ***Provide regular mental health services:*** Many of the residents of Highbanks Society arrive with personal issues that are threats to their overall wellbeing. Regular access to a consistent mental health professional would be highly valued by the residents of Highbanks Society.
- ***Community Builders are necessary roles with in Highbanks Society:*** Highbanks Society is all about the community it creates. Many of the residents do not have the experience or skills to build the community on their own. When residents first arrive at Highbanks Society they relate to different people. Both the "grandparent" type (the On-Site Guardians) and the peer role (the Community Coordinator) play significant roles in creating the community and it is unlikely the community would become as strong if either one of these roles were missing.
- ***Saving plans are valuable for future preparations:*** The residents are grateful for the educational savings plan. They felt that it helps in their preparations for eventually being on their own by creating some financial safety net but more importantly by teaching them to budget for savings.
- ***The extracurricular fund is valued help for personal wellness:*** Residents value having access to the extracurricular fund. They know the importance of working on their personal well-being, but when funds are limited their child comes first. Having access to this fund allows them to take some time for themselves.

6.2. Organizational

- ***Define and maintain a focus:*** Highbanks Society was designed to help young mothers who are "willing and able" (Staff Interview). Highbanks Society has built itself to support young mothers who have already made a commitment to bettering themselves through education or vocational training. Highbanks Society must keep its focus. Residents spoke about frustrations and conflicts

when all the residents are not working towards similar goals.

There are many young mothers in Calgary that need help and it is difficult to turn anyone in need away. Highbanks Society can work with its community partners to connect young mothers not yet ready for Highbanks Society to more appropriate services.

- ***It is not just a job description:*** The staff, contracted staff and volunteers at Highbanks Society are an integral part of the Highbanks Society community. In the interviews, the residents mentioned these people by names not roles and in many cases could not describe any specific details of the roles. For the residents it was all about the person in the role. If any individual leaves their job at Highbanks Society, the organization cannot simply replace the expertise. They are replacing a member of a tight-knit community.
- ***Find ways to engage residents in planning:*** Highbanks Society is a much more than a place to live. It becomes a significant part of the residents' life. The residents want to be involved in defining that community. The organization should look to find ways to formally involve the residents in planning for the organization's programming, services and the guidelines for residency.

Challenges exist in bringing the residents together for planning. The community is constantly changing as residents come and go throughout the year. Also, residents have made it clear that too many meetings and programs are overwhelming to them. However a regular time for planning with residents, even yearly, allows the organization to work in a systematic and proactive manner to ensure that the guidelines and policies for living at Highbanks Society are optimizing the residents' experience.

- ***Put in processes for regular review of "responsibilities" that include current residents:*** The policy and procedure manuals appeared to have never been updated or reviewed. In the case of the visitation policy, the staff informed the evaluation that this policy was put in place to deal with a specific problem situation that occurred some years ago. The policy has not been reviewed since.

Any guideline, policy or procedure introduced has an impact on the residents' experience. Responsibilities that are implemented must be clearly articulated, have a well-defined rationale and be reviewed on a regular basis. And since these are integral to the residents' experience at Highbanks Society, the residents should be part of their development and review.

In the spirit of promoting the independence of the resident the language used should also be considered. Should the residents be living under rules and regulations or should they have certain responsibilities as a resident?

Finally, it is important that residents are consistently held up to the responsibilities that they have agreed upon. One of the few negative comments about Highbanks Society was a perceived lack of consistency in the application of rules. To protect privacy some issues necessarily have to be dealt with behind closed doors. However, the organization must understand how perceived inconsistencies, whether real or not, affect the experience of the residents. Having the residents more involved in defining the responsibilities and any consequences may help to limit feelings of unjust treatment.

- **Leverage the experience of past residents:** The past residents that were part of this evaluation were grateful for the support and assistance they received from Highbanks Society. Most of them want to give back to the organization in a meaningful fashion. They have all evolved emotionally since their time at Highbanks Society and feel they can help the current residents by sharing their experiences.
- **Consider growth carefully:** There is more demand for the services provided by Highbanks Society than the organization can meet. Highbanks Society's commitment to providing personalized support and a sense of community to its residents is what sets it apart from other organizations. It is a human resource intensive model.

If the organization is considering adding further housing units it must ensure that enough human resources are available to continue the vital roles of internal community building and bridging the residents with external community resources.

Multiple sites make it more difficult to develop and maintain the community. The residents expressed that even a separate floor can hinder their involvement in the community. Any growth must carefully consider these facts. Maintaining a single site for new residents is the best-case scenario.

- **Define the use of the Fourteenth Street site:** The evaluation showed that those at the Fourteenth Street site are often not as involved in the community as those at the Bowview site. The advantage of this site is that it provides more independence. However, the setting at the Fourteenth Street site is not as comfortable and safe as the Bowview site. This makes some residents feel that moving to this site is a step backwards instead of a step forward. A consistent use for these units should be defined taking into account these findings.
- **Review the current visitation policies:** Almost every resident interviewed expressed concerns about the current visitation policies. They all understand

that some guidelines need to be in place to ensure all residents feel safe and comfortable. However, they want the guidelines to reflect that the organization trusts and respects its residents.

7. Conclusion

This evaluation was undertaken to understand the experience of young mothers living at Highbanks Society. It was hoped that understanding their experiences would provide valuable information for the organization to use as it transitions into its second decade of existence and plans for its future. The information of this evaluation can also be used to advise other groups who have shown an interest in developing similar programs in other locations.

Eleven young mothers participated in this evaluation. Although this only represents about a third of young women who have been a part of the Highbanks Society community, there was a consistency in results. Every resident valued her experience at Highbanks. Some past residents spoke about wishing they had valued it more when they were there. While the low rent is the initial draw to the organization, it is the close-knit community of peers, staff and volunteers that keep residents at Highbanks Society.

The biggest struggles that exist for the residents, and the organization, relate to balance. The residents must balance their many roles and responsibilities. They also seek to find a balance between being supported by Highbanks Society and becoming more and more independent. The organization has to be aware of these balancing acts and find its own balance of supporting the residents and setting them up to fly on their own.

Jim Collins in his work on understanding what makes good organizations become great organizations defined a great organization as follows:

A great organization is one that delivers superior performance and makes a distinctive impact over a long period of time” (Collins, 2005, p. 5).

The results of this evaluation suggest that, from the perspective of the people it serves, Highbanks Society is on its way to becoming a great organization. If they continue to place the resident and her child at the center of an organizational community and they are always mindful of the balances faced by the residents they will surely make it to great.

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Appendices

- I. Recruitment Protocol
- II. Resident Interview Guide
- III. Document Review List
- IV. Highbanks Presentation – Initial Findings
- V. Highbanks Visitation Policy
- VI. Resident Recommendations

Appendix I – Recruitment Protocol

Current and Former Residents

- 1) The client (Highbanks Society) provided all current and former residents an invitation letter via e-mail. A hard copy of the letter was also posted on the information board within the Highbanks Society main office. This is an area that is frequented by the current residents and some past residents of Highbanks.
- 2) The information letter included the Investigator's contact information. Those interested contacted the investigator to receive further information and set up an interview time.
- 3) The maximum number of participants in each of these two groups was not been reached after two weeks, so a second invitation was be sent via e-mail by Highbanks staff to all current and former residents. It was also posted on a secure private Facebook group. Again, the letter included the investigators contact information and asked those interested in participating to contact the investigator directly. The investigator answered any questions the resident may have and set up an interview if applicable.
- 4) A third and final invitation to be sent via e-mail to all current and former residents approximately 1 week after the second invitation (3 weeks after the initial invitation) was planned for. This letter was to provide a final date for expressing interest in participating. However, since adequate sample size was reached, the final reminder was not sent.

Staff and Volunteers

- 1) Staff were informed verbally of the project through operational meetings. Based on the information from the interviews with the residents, the investigator identified the key staff and volunteers that she would like to include in the study.
- 2) The Executive Director of Highbanks gained permission from the staff members and volunteers to provide their business contact information to the investigator. Contact information for those that provided permission were supplied directly to the investigator.
- 3) The investigator contacted these individuals via e-mail to provide further information on the study, gauge interest and set up an interview if applicable.
- 4) If the investigator did not receive a reply from the staff or volunteer within one week of her initial e-mail, the investigator sent a second and final e-mail invitation with a deadline for responding.

Appendix II – Resident Interview Guide

Introduction:

Okay, so we have just gone through the consent form so you understand that the purpose of this interview is for me to understand a bit about what it is like to be a resident at Highbanks. I want to hear about your everyday life as a resident of Highbanks.

I really just want to have a conversation with you about your everyday life. I will ask some questions to help guide our discussion, but feel free to tell me as much or as little about specific experiences you have had at Highbanks. There are no right or wrong answers to any of these questions. You are the expert here. If something I ask does not make sense, just let me know. Also, I will be taking some notes during our discussion just as reminders for myself. Don't feel like you have to wait for me to write something down, just keep talking.

Do you have any other questions before we begin? Okay. I will begin recording now. Is this okay?

Opening Question

- Let's start by you telling me how you came to live at Highbanks?
PROBES: Did someone tell you about it? Did you find it on your own?
What made you apply?
How long have you lived at Highbanks?

Core Questions

- Can you tell me a bit about what it is like to live at Highbanks?
PROBES: Look for procedures within Highbanks: Formal and informal.
Discuss formal programming versus naturally occurring "programming"
- I know that Highbanks offers a variety of programs. Can you tell me a bit about the ones you have been involved in?
PROBES: Which do you find most useful/valuable?
Are there any you didn't like or didn't find useful?
Can you tell me why you feel that way?

NOTE: In this question, the participant will lead discussion on programming, so we can determine what is most important or top-of-mind for her. If not brought up spontaneously by the participant, I will probe on these specific health and wellness focused programs that are central to Highbanks:

Chaperones (Hattie & Joe)
Evening with Psychologist (Richelle)
Extra-Curricular Activity Fund
Parent Educator (Maggie)
Bowness Medical Centre

- Can you tell me a bit about what it is like to be a parenting teen and trying to complete your education?
PROBES: Look for general context of teenage parenting and specific ways in which this is affected by Highbanks.

- As you may already know the vision of Highbanks is to provide “a community where parenting youth and their children feel respected, nurtured and valued.” Can you tell me what this means to you?
 PROBES: Look for local context within Highbanks and external context of the broader community

Closing Questions and Demographics

- If you were in charge of Highbanks:
 - What is the one thing that you would not change at all? Why?
 - What is the one thing you would change and how would you change that? Why?
- Is there anything about your experiences within Highbanks that I have not asked you that you think are important for me to know?

NOTE: ONLY TO BE INCLUDED IF INFORMATION IS NOT PROVIDED DURING COURSE OF INTERVIEW

Just before we finish up, I just have a few specific questions about you. I just need to get a sense of the range of people I am talking to. None of this information will be used to identify you in my reports.

- How old are you/how old were you when you lived at Highbanks?
- How long have you been/were you a resident at Highbanks? What years were you a resident of Highbanks?
- How old is/was your child (when you lived at Highbanks)?

Thank you for your time! As I mentioned when we went through the consent form, I may need to contact you in case I need clarification of something you said or to seek more information on specific topics that have come up in the evaluation. These follow-ups would be less than one-half hour. Would it be okay if I contact you, only if necessary?

Finally, I will be preparing a report as a part of this project. I am planning on sending the summary of that report to each participant. Would you be interested in receiving a copy? If so, I will take your e-mail address so I can send it to you at the end of the project in early fall.

Appendix III – Document Review List

Highbanks Society website (<http://www.highbankssociety.ca/>)

- Reviewed for new information throughout the course of this project
- Included annual reports (2009 – 2011)

Highbanks Society Logistic Model (n.d.)

Highbanks Society Policy and Procedure Manual (2003-2004)

Highbanks Society Resident’s Handbook

Highbanks Society Orientation Package

Highbanks Society Resident Newsletters (January – June 2011)

Highbanks Society Application Package

Highbanks Society Client Service Review Reports (January – May 2011)

Highbanks Society: Holistically Supporting Calgary’s Parenting Youth

Appendix IV – Highbanks Society Initial Finding Presentation



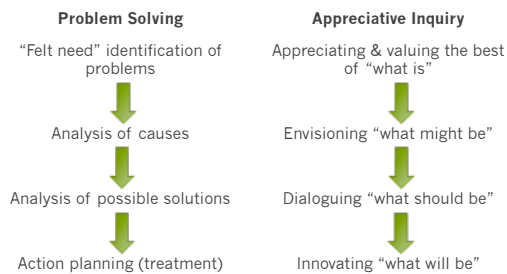
Review Perspective



- Qualitative
- Resident-Centered
- Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry

from Hammond, SA (1998). *The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry*. 2nd Edition. Thin Book Publishing Company: Bend, Oregon.

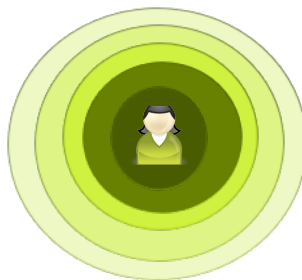


Methods



- Document Review
- Qualitative Interviews
 - Current Residents (n=5)
 - Past Residents (n=6)
 - Staff (n=4)

Proposed Framework



Findings



- Residents
 - each resident has a different story
 - value each other
 - balance
 - balancing multiple roles and responsibilities
 - need (and want) to be supported without being coddled
 - need support but want independence

Findings



- Housing
 - rent
 - safe place – nice place
 - 14th street site
 - other subsidized housing
 - rental agreement
 - requirements
 - visitation
 - consistency of application

Findings



- Highbanks Community
 - peers
 - accepting and non-judging
 - staff and volunteers
 - not just a job description
 - Hattie & Joe

Findings



- Services & Programs
 - part of uniqueness
 - personalized
 - mandatory
 - optional

Findings



Community

- residents are part of a larger community
- need to be connected to that community
- connection to broader community is key success factor for the organization

Resident Recommendations



- Consistent access to Mental Health professional [4]
- More say in topics of discussion (CHATT) [2]
- Look at visitation policies based on relationships & comfort of others [7]
- Program is not for everyone, selection process to screen for this
- Reduce length of orientation
- Include parent education sessions
- Don't overwhelm residents with programming

Resident Recommendations



- Keep personalized aspects [2]
- All staff, volunteers, partnering agencies need to be open and non-judgmental – provide options, don't tell me what to do
- Residents are at different stages, so some information is repetitive – keep this in mind for mandatory programming
- Keep CHATT mandatory
- Focus on more mature residents
- Focus on peer support not programming
- Expand program – lots of demand [2]

Resident Recommendations



- More focus on the mom – getting her strong & confident
- Implement a community mentor program (as by Elizabeth House)
- Have transition plans in place for when residents move out
- Provide meaning volunteer opportunities for former residents
- Lots of program options (not mandatory)... "sometimes we don't know what we want or need."
- More "real-life" stuff to prepare for moving out on your own

Thank-you



- Cecilia
- Bette
- Stephanie
- all the residents, past and present, and staff who gave their time for the review

Appendix V – Highbanks Society Visitation Policy

This policy is taken from the Highbanks Society *Resident Handbook*.¹¹

All visitors must leave the building by 10:45 pm each night. Visitors are NOT permitted to stay overnight without special permission from Highbanks Staff or the On-Site Guardian.

Only overnight female guest are permitted on the weekends (Friday and Saturday nights) with prior notification to the On-Site Guardian. Exceptions may be made at the discretion of the Program Director or Executive Director.

No male visitors are allowed upstairs in the Bowview Apartments without prior permission from the Program Director or Executive Director (NOT the On-Site Guardian). Should a resident wish to have a male guest upstairs, she must first complete a **Male Visitor Request Form** and the resident must **introduce the guest** to either the Program Director or Executive Director.

Family and guests of residents are expected to observe and respect Residence Rule while visiting. Visitation privileges may be revoked at the discretion of the Executive Director if the above outlined Residence Rules are not observed and respected.

¹¹ A probationary period of three months exists for new residents at Highbanks Society. During this time, no male guest and no overnight female guests are allowed. Allow the *Resident Handbook* has not been updated to reflect this aspect of the visitation policy, it is communicated in to the residents in their orientation sessions.

Appendix VI – Resident Recommendations

The final question of the interview asked residents, “If you were in charge of HB, what would you do? What would need to stay unchanged and would need to change?” This is a list of those responses in no particular order. They have not been “analyzed” in any way, just listed. When a recommendation was repeated, a number was noted in brackets behind that recommendation.

- Look at visitation policies based on relationships & comfort of others [7]
- Consistent access to Mental Health professional [4]
- More say in topics of discussion (CHATT) [2]
- Keep personalized aspects – everyone is different, so everyone needs different types of support [2]
- Expand program – lots of demand [2]
- Program is not for everyone, selection process to screen for this
- Reduce length of orientation
- Include parent education sessions
- Don’t overwhelm residents with programming
- All staff, volunteers, partnering agencies need to be open and non-judgmental – provide options, don’t tell me what to do
- Residents are at different stages, so some information is repetitive – keep this in mind for mandatory programming
- Keep CHATT mandatory
- Focus on more mature residents
- Focus on peer support not programming
- More focus on the mom – getting her strong & confident
- Implement a community mentor program (as by Elizabeth House)
- Have transition plans in place for when residents move out
- Provide meaning volunteer opportunities for former residents
- Lots of program options (not mandatory)... “sometimes we don’t know what we want or need.”
- More “real-life” stuff to prepare for moving out on your own