SURFACING OUR STRENGTHS:
Co-creating Strategic Solutions with Women+ At Risk of Violence and Homelessness

Evaluation Report (March 2022)

Prepared by:
SHIFT Collaborative

Table of Contents

Introduction

The journey of the Surfacing Our Strengths housing solutions lab was an emergent and adaptive process. It required a balance of being adaptable while navigating the lab through the timelines set out for this project, all within the constraints and capacity challenges of COVID-19. Overall, this lab has led to important learning and ideas for practical interventions that have potential for a positive impact on housing supports and solutions for Women+ at risk of violence and homelessness in Greater Victoria. This evaluation report summarizes key themes and learnings from participants across the lab around four key areas: (i) Lab Impact, (ii) Lab Process, (iii), Lab Activities, and (iv) Cross-Cutting themes.
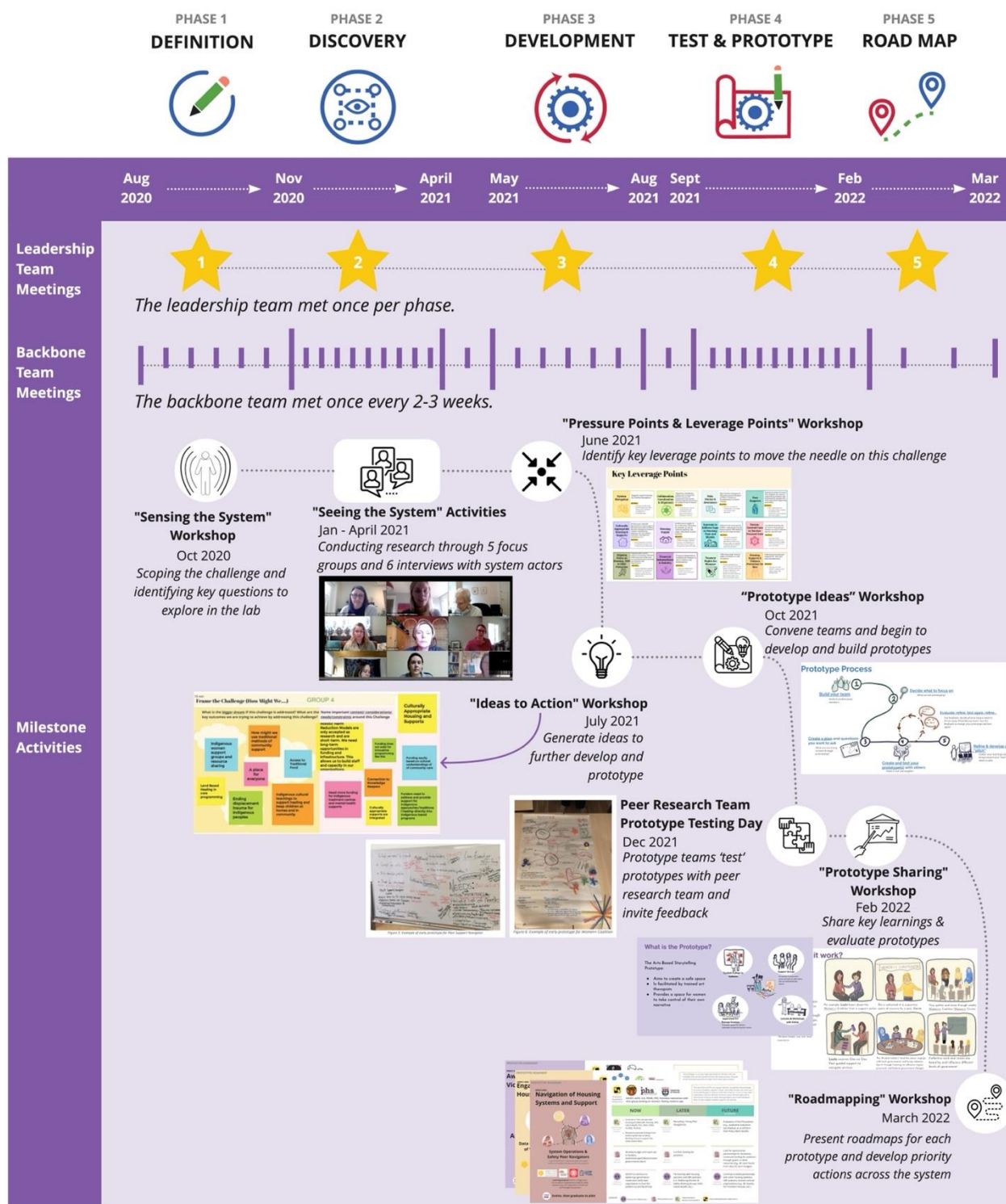
Evaluation Approach

Using a developmental evaluation (DE) approach allowed us to obtain 'real time' feedback on the design and implementation of the lab so that we could respond and adjust to new learnings and insights as they came up. Evaluation activities were organized around exploring five key areas:
- The Lab Challenge & Context
- Lab Platform, Process & Methods
- Collaboration Partnerships & Network
- Lab Prototypes, and
- Lab Impact.

Evaluation was embedded into activities throughout the Lab, including specific methods such as:
- DE evaluation sessions with the leadership and backbone teams:
  - Phase 1 and 2 DE session (May 11, 2021)
  - Phase 3 DE Session (Sept 28, 2021)
  - Phase 4 & 5 DE Session (March 7, 2022)
- End of Workshop Surveys with Lab participants, and
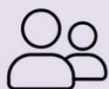- Evaluation survey and facilitated meeting for all prototype teams.

Our Lab Journey

	PHASE 1 DEFINITION	PHASE 2 DISCOVERY	PHASE 3 DEVELOPMENT	PHASE 4 TEST & PROTOTYPE	PHASE 5 ROAD MAP

Aug 2020	Nov 2020	April 2021	May 2021	Aug 2021	Sept 2021	Feb 2022	Mar 2022

Leadership Team Meetings

⭐1 ⭐2 ⭐3 ⭐4 ⭐5

The leadership team met once per phase.

Backbone Team Meetings

The backbone team met once every 2-3 weeks.

Milestone Activities

"Pressure Points & Leverage Points" Workshop
June 2021
Identify key leverage points to move the needle on this challenge

Key Leverage Points

"Sensing the System" Workshop
Oct 2020
Scoping the challenge and identifying key questions to explore in the lab

"Seeing the System" Activities
Jan - April 2021
Conducting research through 5 focus groups and 6 interviews with system actors

"Prototype Ideas" Workshop
Oct 2021
Convene teams and begin to develop and build prototypes

Prototype Process

"Ideas to Action" Workshop
July 2021
Generate ideas to further develop and prototype

Peer Research Team Prototype Testing Day
Dec 2021
Prototype teams 'test' prototypes with peer research team and invite feedback

"Prototype Sharing" Workshop
Feb 2022
Share key learnings & evaluate prototypes

"Roadmapping" Workshop
March 2022
Present roadmaps for each prototype and develop priority actions across the system

Lab Engagement At a Glance

43 ORGANIZATIONS across

11 SECTORS

60 PARTICIPANTS engaged

1 PEER RESEARCH TEAM with

6+ WOMEN+ PEER RESEARCHERS

6 INTERVIEWS and **5** FOCUS GROUPS

1 CHALLENGE PAPER

5 PROTOTYPES & ROADMAPS

What did we learn?

Impact of the Lab

85% of leadership team members strongly agreed or agreed that the lab was making progress on understanding the key tensions and influences on this challenge. A number of key themes related to the impact of the lab that were identified:

- **Taking a Systems Lens to this Challenge:** Overall, the lab supported learning about the challenge by identifying the underlying influences and the gaps and barriers that exist to address it. The lab supported taking a 'systems view' of this challenge and better understanding the 'lay of the land'. The multiple voices engaged in the lab provided insights into 'pockets of information' that no one organization was holding but, when looked at together, became clearer.

- **Making Progress in Systems Navigation**: Participants indicated that, because of the lab, they are now closer to being able to map (and therefore understand patterns and gaps) of systems and services that 'touch' the issue of Women+ at risk of violence and homelessness.

- **Foundations for Future Engagement:** The relationships, partnerships, and prototype ideas developed in the lab will form a framework (or 'launching pad') towards future collaborative work in this region to address this challenge.

- **Unexpected Outcomes:** Beyond the five prototypes developed in the lab, there were also unexpected projects that emerged, such as a partnership with the University of Victoria to create an app that will support navigation of housing supports and services in the Greater Victoria region.

  "[What was most valuable was] the ability to see which questions need to be asked and the way things start to come into focus where we can start influencing change."

  "[What was most valuable was] thinking about the idea of pressure points at several levels."

  "Thank you for helping us think clearly and help create these maps and questions!"

While the lab did create a better understanding of this challenge, and a roadmap for creating change, there was also feedback from lab participants regarding challenges that still seemed overwhelming and difficult to influence, particularly through policy change and funding:

  "I do find it frustrating that the problem is so big and that we're still at the mercy of federal and provincial policies and funding models that are unlikely to change."

"We have ample knowledge, etc., to make progress on these problems; the issue is whether or not anyone wants to apply resources to them."

Lab Process and Methods

The lab approach used was designed to draw on systems thinking and human-centred design methods to support lab participants to better understand and work with the underlying influence of the challenge. Our process balanced the structure of five clear lab phases and timelines—definition, discovery, development, prototyping and roadmapping—with the emergent and adaptive nature of this work.

Key themes from participant feedback include:

Lab Structure / Timelines		
	Strengths	Limitations / Challenges
Lab Format	Due to COVID, most lab engagement activities were done virtually; there was appreciation for creative and engaging virtual methods and some feedback that virtual engagement may have made participation in the lab more possible for some (e.g., if live outside of Victoria). *"Even in zoom format, there was depth of participation."* *"Engagement has been strong given the way we are working in the pandemic in this sector / in some ways easier to bring more people along because we aren't confined to a space, have been able to engage more."*	As the pandemic dragged on, Zoom fatigue increased and participants missed the relational, in person aspects of the work; prototyping was particularly challenging to do virtually. Virtual engagement also meant shorter more focused workshops versus longer in-person sessions that allow for more unstructured time for reflection and networking.
Lab Structure and Length	The five phases of the lab provided a necessary structure to what is otherwise a very emergent process; there was appreciation for being able to see where we had been and where we were going.	Overall, it can be challenging for some participants to commit to such an emergent process (e.g., "they don't know what's next.") There is a tension in doing relational work that is committed to centering people with lived experience in such a timebound process. Several participants indicated they would have appreciated longer timeframes, particularly for prototyping.

| | | These problems have deep roots; participants want to see change as soon as possible, but also acknowledgement that it will take time to make significant progress.

"Tension between linear timelines, and reality that this work does not happen in a linear way."

"Building capacity takes more time than the Solutions Lab timelines allows for." |
|---|---|---|

Lab Engagement		
	Strengths	**Limitations / Challenges**
Diversity of Participants	The lab 'opened the door' for building relationships with new partners and starting to build relationships between the transition houses and the homelessness serving sector.

Overall, there is a sense that there was a good mix of partners throughout the process and appreciation for hearing diverse voices.

"[What worked well] was the opportunity to talk about these issues with people with different perspectives/experience/knowledge"

"I feel that the diverse partnership and participants help us have a wider understanding of the issues with different perspectives, therefore allowing a variety of solutions. Thank you for being so open and excepting for all voices." | Several participants would have liked to see more representation from specific sectors, namely: government, transition houses, housing sector, and funders.

"I believe that there are more people in the community in critical roles in this area that could be at the table."

"I think we need more of a government presence than just CRD. We need policy makers in the room during the developmental stages in order to either explain current policies or help drive forward new ones."

"I would like to see some more representation from transitional housing staff that is specific to the needs of women."

"Is there a way to bring this to the real big players? governments, funders, housing developers? making them committed and doing real work?"

"I think we are missing the voice of someone from the housing sector/development in order to include the |

	Strengths	Limitations / Challenges
		limitations (policy, budgets, and city planning) to solutions we come up with."
Centering Lived Experience	There was strong appreciation for the Peer Research team's (PRT) leadership and involvement throughout the process, especially on the leadership team and in the prototyping process. Members of the PRT provided leadership to every prototype team. *"I loved that you included the voices of people with lived experience -- very very valuable."* There is a possibility of the PRT continuing on as an ongoing structure for future engagement. *"Maybe an outcome will be this structure of a Peer Research team as an ongoing structure - this might be a success that they can support engagements moving forward beyond the lab."*	COVID created challenges for engagement with people with lived experience, which was planned to happen in-person. Peer Research Team was brought into the leadership team in Phase 2; a key learning was to have involved them from the beginning. *"[We] would ideally have been able to reach out more broadly to other women from different experiences, but haven't been able to do this, so leaning quite heavily on peer researchers."* *"Learning - having voices in the room from the beginning is important."* *"Working with Peer researchers…it would have been nice to engage more, tangible hands-on experience with them would have been nicer."*

Lab Activities

Specific feedback about lab activities included:

Lab Activities		
	Strengths	Limitations / Challenges
Defining the Challenge and Discovery Phase	There was appreciation for clear questions about what the lab was interested in learning and the ability to build new relationships with organizations and individuals through the discovery process of interviews and focus groups. *"What worked well was] the ability to see which questions need to be asked, the way things start to come into focus, where we can start influencing change."*	Given project timelines, 'scrappy research' meant there was not time for in depth engagement or analysis. Given the complexity of the challenge it felt at times that we were just 'scratching the surface' before having to move on to the next phase of the lab.

Seeing the System & Identifying Leverage points	Overall, there was appreciation for bringing a systems lens to this challenge to be able to see patterns and gaps more clearly. Specifically, there was appreciation for the creation of the systems maps and personas; *"[what worked well were] the patterns and focus are becoming sharper."* *"I liked the persona exercise as it helped provide focus into the experiences the population being served might have."*	At times there were feelings of overwhelm and frustration with the scale and complexity of the challenge and with 'stuckness' of some influences in the system (policy and funding)

Prototyping Process	All prototype participants agreed that:
	  o The process was effective in creating new ways of thinking about this challenge and possible solutions (50% strongly agreed / 50% agreed)
	  o Through the prototype testing process, we learned valuable lessons that helped us to reframe / refine the prototype (30% strongly agreed / 70% agreed)
	
	What worked well:
	*"Having **clear steps** made it easier to identify the different issues and allowed us to develop more specific solutions for them."*
	
	*"Gathering perspective / participation from a **wide variety of individuals**, including those with lived experience, was also key to creating meaningful ideas and proposals."*
	
	*"We were able to go through **two prototype testing phase**s which allowed us to create a stronger prototype"*
	
	*"Having a **diverse prototype team** allowed us to build a robust prototype."*
		Main challenges named:
		  o # of meetings was difficult to maintain and time commitment overall was intensive
		  o Needed more time for the prototype process overall, especially testing
		  o COVID and virtual engagement made testing challenging
		
		*"Most of my group is **very busy** and so the number of meetings we needed to have was difficult to maintain."*
		
		*"**Timeline for the prototyping phase was also short** – especially when factoring in capacity, the need for flexibility when working with people with lived experiences, COVID, etc. "*
		
		*"My biggest criticism is the **timeframe involved.** It is a quick turn around and takes a lots of time away from other projects."*
		
		*"The most challenging part was the t**esting process**. as COVID made it difficult to connect with many people"*

Other Cross-Cutting Themes

Capacity Challenges Due to COVID

The pandemic exacerbated challenges of homelessness, and particularly for Women+ at risk of violence. However, it also put added pressures on an already stretched non-profit sector that supports insecurely housed populations in Greater Victoria. Many lab partners were faced with competing priorities and reduced staff capacity. For many partners, this meant participating in the lab while juggling increasing and competing demands on their time and schedules.

System Fragmentation / Silos /Lack of Collaboration

One of the main learnings from the lab was that, while this issue is on the radar of many organizations, there is a lack of cohesion across various sectors to address it effectively, namely: housing and homelessness, violence against women, and government. The lab built some capacity to 'move forward together' in a more structured way with a shared understanding of the priority issues to be addressed. One of the outcomes of the lab is the potential for creating more strategic and structured collaborations (e.g., working group) focused on Women+'s housing in the sector.

Systems Innovation is Relational Work

The aspiration of the SoS Lab is to address the roots of the complex challenges of housing for Women+ at risk of violence and homelessness and ultimately to create the conditions for systems change. It became clear in this lab that at the heart of creating innovation for systems change is working with people—people with living and lived experience and people that play diverse roles in the challenge and the potential solutions. As well, this work is inherently **relational.** It requires trust and safety so that participants can express themselves freely, be vulnerable, and connect with each other.

This lab took place entirely during the COVID pandemic. We were adaptive and overall received very positive feedback about virtual platforms, methods, and engagement experiences. However, many missed the '**human element'** of being able to do this work together and build relationships in person and share food and space with each other.

> *"I'm happy we are doing this work together, but I miss the human, relational element of building this partnership."*

> *"Would really love to come together, share food, being in each other's presence, learning and honouring protocol."*

> *"Can we ground ourselves by intentionally integrating a human element (off Zoom!) for lab partners?"*

One of the backbone team members said, "**radical innovation requires radical collaboration**" – radical collaboration takes time for building trust and relationships. A key reflection from lab

participants was that one of the intentions of the lab is to create new connections across diverse system actors, but (i) collaboration is happening in a culture of scarcity and urgency and (ii) it takes time and investment to build these relationships. A specific suggestion for future lab work would be to build in a "Phase 0" (3-4 months) that solely focuses on outreach to diverse partners, building relationships, trust, and safety for vulnerability with each other, without the pressure for completing project deliverables.

> *"[We] need time to simply build relationships **without the pressure of having to move through lab phases.** Book time to just sit and chat, meet each other in their organizations spaces–face to face…. This would allow for more diverse partners, rather than relying on relationships we already have."*