



Case Study: Furniture Banks

Overview of Tool and How it Connects to Homelessness Prevention

Operating across the Greater Toronto Area, Furniture Bank is a social enterprise charity that picks up furniture and houseware donations from homes and businesses and offers these items free-of-charge to persons transitioning out of homelessness, women and children leaving abusive situations, veterans, and refugees and newcomers to Canada – i.e., “anyone in need of a fresh start.” Founded in 1998, Furniture Bank serves all communities in the Greater Toronto Area. It is leading the development of a network of furniture resource banks across North America, including 16 in Canada (www.furniturebankcanada.org).

How does Furniture Bank work?

Families in need of household goods are referred by over 200 community organizations in Greater Toronto. Once community agencies secure a family’s housing, their case worker requests an appointment with Furniture Bank and details are provided to assist with planning. Each family arrives at the showroom for their appointment and are matched up with a community volunteer. With the volunteer’s assistance, the family has 45 minutes to shop for their furniture and household items, check out, and confirm delivery details. Many agencies pay the delivery fee (max. \$250); others require the family to pay for delivery. A Furniture Bank trucking team delivers the family’s items the next day and helps with basic set-up.

What makes Furniture Bank effective?

Furniture Bank has specialized in performing a critical function in the Housing First Model – turning a house into a home. A family needs 15-25 items of furniture to build a dignified home. Furniture Bank’s trucking teams collect and deliver these items to families in need. Over 50 volunteers support families with dignity to choose items they want to make a house their home.

Furniture Bank has embedded a social employment program into its operations to create full-time paid jobs for persons who face barriers to employment.

There is also a complex system to support Furniture Bank: trucking, a call centre for dispatching and logistics, point of sale, marketing and IT, volunteer services, and the staffing complement required.

Strategic partnerships are essential to its operation (e.g., municipal governments, community agencies, logistics companies, furniture retailers and manufacturers).



What difference does Furniture Bank make?

Today Furniture Bank is one of Toronto's largest social enterprises, impacting a range of social and environmental issues in their normal operation. Across Greater Toronto Furniture Bank has supported over 100,000 people to turn houses into homes. By providing people with necessary furnishings and household items, Furniture Bank has a profound impact on people's healing, stability and dignity to move forward in their lives.

Furniture Bank's current facility is limited to serving 20 families every day. Having a home is key to moving past the lowest rung of Maslow's hierarchy of needs towards having a sense of comfort, dignity, belonging and social inclusion.

Stories illustrate the impact Furniture Bank has made on the lives of families:

- Sarah: <https://www.furniturebank.org/house-to-home-meet-sarah/>
- Sharyn: <https://www.furniturebank.org/house-to-home-meet-sharyn/>
- Martin: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZONnvFUGQc>.

With 53 staff members Furniture Bank serves over 10,000 clients transitioning out of homelessness each year totalling over 100,000 clients since 1998. From an environmental lens, Furniture Bank plays a significant role in waste reduction having collected over 450,000 furniture items diverting over 15,700 tonnes of waste from the landfill in its operation.

There have been three Social Return on Investment (SROI) studies on Furniture Bank. The most recent study by the Ontario government quantified its SROI as \$11.11 for every dollar invested.

Key Lessons Learned

Executive Director Dan Kershaw emphasizes the importance of investing in measurement methods immediately. As one organization Furniture Bank impacts poverty, employment, housing, and the environment. Designing a system to measure and report on these multiple impacts is crucial to demonstrate the organization's overall impact.

To foster strong partnerships, he also advises speaking to potential stakeholders in their own language. This enables each stakeholder to understand the role Furniture Bank plays in creating and supporting a healthy community from their own perspective.