



The IUS *In-Brief* Series



The Lived Experience Circle

An Advisory Committee of the At Home/Chez Soi Project's Winnipeg Site



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WINNIPEG

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The IUS In-Brief Series provides new space for thought on urban issues from a variety of perspectives: from academic research to journalistic investigation, from editorial comments to public stories. The In-Brief series is intended to provide concise comment, thought and informed discussion on a range of urban issues. We invite submissions: ius@uwinnipeg.ca

The Institute of Urban Studies is an independent research arm of the University of Winnipeg. Since 1969, the IUS has been both an academic and an applied research centre, committed to examining urban development issues in a broad, non-partisan manner. The Institute examines inner city, environmental, Aboriginal and community development issues. In addition to its ongoing involvement in research, IUS brings in visiting scholars, hosts workshops, seminars and conferences, and acts in partnership with other organizations in the community to effect positive change.

Cover image: the Lived Experience Circle core members:

Back Row: Joe H., Al W. (Chair), Ernest M., Robert B.
Front Row: Jody N., Linda P., Doreen D.K., Freeman S.

Background

The *Lived Experience Circle* (LEC) was formed in 2010 as an advisory group to the Winnipeg site of the *At Home/Chez Soi* study. *At Home/Chez Soi* is a study on homelessness and mental illness, and is the largest of its kind ever undertaken world-wide. In 2009 the Federal government allocated \$110 million to the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC), to conduct this five-year study on mentally ill homeless persons in five cities in Canada: Moncton, Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver and Winnipeg.

The *At Home/Chez Soi* project is designed to test the *Housing First* model of service delivery. *Housing First* stands in contrast to the *Continuum of Care* model, where people had to display “housing readiness”, such as sobriety and adherence to medication regimes, before they received housing.

The *At Home* project **provides housing first**, along with services, based on the understanding that it is difficult if not impossible to stabilize one’s conditions without access to a home. This model has been found in the past, as it was in the *At Home/Chez Soi* study, to be superior to the *Continuum of Care* model with regards to housing retention rates, and the well-being of participants.

The LEC is comprised of a group of volunteers drawn from participants of the *At Home/Chez Soi* study which meets monthly at the University of Winnipeg’s *Wii Chiwaakanak Center*, a training and skill development center located at 511 Ellice Ave., Winnipeg. The Circle has benefitted greatly from the support of the staff and director, and for the use of this facility.

The committee was initially funded by the MHCC, and subsequently administered by the University of Winnipeg’s *Institute of Urban Studies*. This funding includes honorariums, bus tickets, lunches, and the cost of the events put on by the committee. We are grateful to both of these organizations. Without their support

the LEC would not exist. Throughout the study the MHCC and its research arm have stressed the invaluable knowledge and the unique perspective of people with lived experience of homelessness and mental illness.

Principals and Traditions

The LEC is based on Aboriginal spiritual principles and culture, hence the designation of the Circle. The “symbolism of the Circle, with no beginning or end, and with nobody in a position of prominence, serves to encourage people to speak freely and honestly about things that are on their minds.”¹ Generally a token such as

a feather or a talking stick is passed around clockwise and each member of the Circle can speak, or in the event they do not wish to speak they may pass the feather or stick along to the next person.

There are three types of Circles. The sharing Circle where people share what is on their mind, a healing Circle where people can speak freely of things that are bothering them, and a Circle used to mediate

problems between people. Generally the LEC uses the sharing and the healing Circles.

We also follow the seven sacred teachings of Love, Respect, Courage, Honesty, Wisdom, Humility and Truth. It is these teachings that guide how the LEC treat one another, and all people we come into contact with.²

“The Lived Experience Circle is one of the most important outcomes of Winnipeg’s At Home project that has had a lasting impact. The LEC is positioned to continue to provide a voice for a group of peers that have been invaluable to the local and national project as well as the wider community. Their role continues to be a clear indication of the importance of peer engagement” - Jino Distasio



LEC Members making cedar bundles for the solstice celebration.

What the LEC does

The main functions of the LEC are: to provide advice and direction to policy makers and researchers on matters related to homelessness in Winnipeg; to provide community education; and to put on community events.

There is also a peer support component, in that the LEC is a group of people who have been, or are currently experiencing the trauma of being homeless. The support amongst the group and its guiding principles allows for frank discussion on issues such as racism, personal trials, and on-going difficulties that the members are experiencing.

SHARE THE EXPERIENCE

“Share the Experience” was a unique educational opportunity conducted in the autumn of 2012. Mock booths (made of cardboard) were set up offering social services for members of the public to try to access; under scenarios that homeless individuals with mental health challenges might experience. One such scenario was a mother with two children, schizophrenic and in crisis, trying to access counseling services. She was denied with no more than a, “Sorry, I can’t help you. You will have to go on a waiting list.” She replied, “How long is the wait list?” and was told, “At least six months.”

As is often the case in the real world, the service provider was less than helpful. The purpose of this event was to show the difficulty that homeless people have in accessing services, due to lack of identification, eligibility criteria, wait lists, and the cultural norms which may conflict with the system.



Booths for Service Access.



People lining up for services at Share the Experience.

FINDING THE GOOD.

“Finding the Good” was a gathering of more than 20 service providers at the Indian-Métis Friendship center in early 2013. The purpose was to help provide community members simplified access to acquiring government-issued identification, or mental health and addiction services.



Service Provider at Find the Good.

COMMUNITY EVENTS

The LEC has organized and been involved in a number of community events. Run by LEC members in the first two years of the study, annual community barbecues attracted well over 200 people each year who come from the surrounding community. The barbecues were located adjacent to a Manitoba Housing complex as well as in close proximity to the major homeless shelter facilities in the city. This allowed people to get together and share a good meal; things that are scarce for some low-to-no income community members. The barbecue was run entirely by committee members, with several members obtaining their food handling certificate to facilitate City health requirements.



LEC and community members at the community barbeque.

FOCUSING THE FRAME

Several members of the LEC were involved in a project called “Focusing the Frame” which lasted over several years of the At Home/Chez Soi study. This photo-voice project was an opportunity for formerly homeless individuals to show what their new-found housing meant to them and the positive change it had in their lives. Those who chose to join in this endeavor were given cameras to visually represent these changes and then provided captions to explain what each picture meant to them. The outcome of this project was a series of display panels which were shown at several At Home/Chez Soi events and homeless conferences both nationally and internationally, and were very well received.

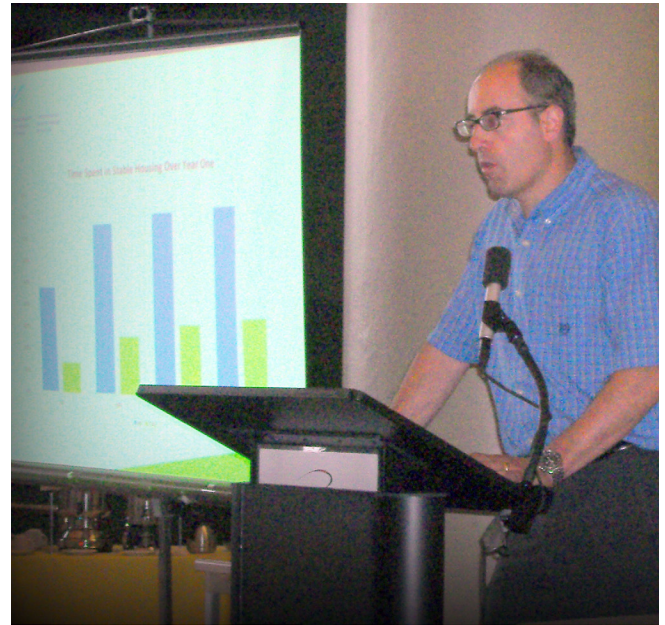


Panels from Focusing the Frame.

Two *Peer Organizers* (PO's) which were to assist the photographers were drawn from the At Home study participants. The value of working with peers rather than professionals added to the success of the project as the experiences of the PO's often mirrored those of the photographers and the PO's produced their own panels as well. A photographic consultant was hired to assist teaching photographic techniques and to produce the final product, and he too has experienced homelessness and worked extensively in the mental health field.

Informing Research

Another main function of the LEC is to provide guidance and direction to the Mental Health Commission of Canada and the At Home/Chez Soi research team.



Dr. Jino Distasio Director of the Institute of Urban Studies presents research findings.

Most recently the LEC has given its feedback on the Manitoba Government's Ten Year Plan to End *Homelessness*. It also provides information and guidance to the research team; such as providing feedback for the recent report to the Federal government on *Successful Tenancies and Eviction Prevention*. Throughout the study, the Mental Health Commission of Canada and the research teams have stressed the invaluable knowledge and unique perspective of people with lived experience.

COMMUNITY EDUCATION

Another effort worthy of note is the role that several members of the LEC have had in informing the public on the issues of homelessness and mental illness. These members have bravely put themselves in the public spotlight on radio, television, newspaper and in a National Film Board production called “Here at Home.”³



LEC member Joe Hatch speaking at a press conference on homelessness.

The courage of putting oneself on display in an effort to change the attitudes of the public and policy makers cannot be stressed enough. These brave souls risk much, as their families, friends, and neighbors see a part of the person that they may not have known and may not find easy to accept.

In addition, several members have attended knowledge exchange events around the country as people-with-lived-experience in an effort to assist organizations in understanding what it really means to be homeless and mentally ill. Tragic stories emerge to be sure, but also stories of hope and redemption.

Why lived experience?

Everyone’s situation or illness is unique. Only those with similar experience can truly empathize or understand what another is going through. Whether it is mental illness, physical illness, homelessness or any number of things, those without these experiences can sympathize but not empathize.

In the case of the LEC, we try to provide support to people who are still homeless, and perhaps suffering from mental illness. We understand the degradation that social and economic systems can put mentally ill homeless people through, and we are aware of the systematic, cultural, (such as discrimination towards Aboriginal peoples), and political issues which fail to adequately address the needs of this portion of the population. After all, we are talking about human beings, not some abstract concept of homelessness or mental illness.

The Future of the LEC

The future looks bright for the Circle. With a sustained nucleus of members, and the goal of bringing others into the fold, it is hoped that we can maintain the resiliency and momentum of the group. New efforts are being discussed to become more hands-on in the community such as volunteering at local shelters and food kitchens/banks, holding another service fair such as Find the Good, speaking to junior high and high school classes, and other initiatives to be determined in upcoming planning meetings.

The LEC has played an integral role in the At Home / Chez Soi study. Providing access to services, educating policy makers, informing research as well as the general public on issues of homelessness and mental illness has been a great success for the LEC, and they should be applauded for their efforts.

People need to hear stories about the trauma of mental illness and homelessness in order to learn about their everyday lives. The LEC is working hard to bring these issues to light.

Notes:

- ¹ Muin’iskw. 2014. “Mi’kmaq Spirit.” <http://www.muiniskw.org/pgCulture2c.htm>
- ² Native Women’s Centre. 2008. “Traditional Teachings Handbook”. Hamilton, ON: Native Women’s Centre. http://www.nativewomenscentre.com/files/Traditional_Teachings_Booklet.pdf
- ³ Available at: <http://athome.nfb.ca/#/athome>



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