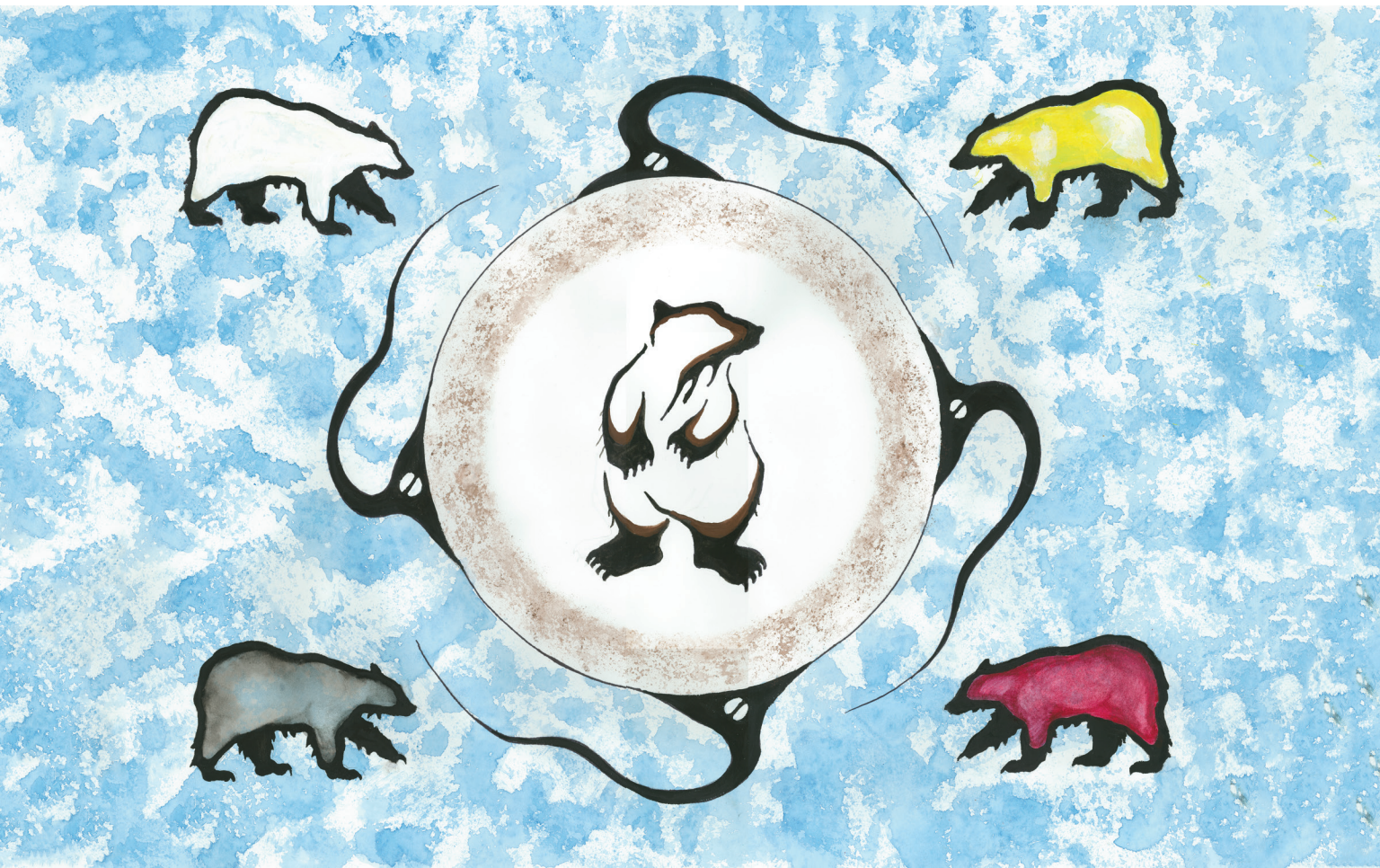




INSTITUTE OF
URBAN STUDIES

LOCALIZED APPROACHES TO ENDING HOMELESSNESS

Indigenizing Housing First





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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.

WITH GRATITUDE

With special thanks to the **Council of Elders** who guided this work. We have endeavoured to ‘put down our pens’ and listen closely to your teachings. Miigwetch, Ekosani, Thank you.

David Budd	Robert Greene
Don Robinson	Velma Orvis
Peetanacoot	Vera Pierre
Nenakawekapo	

With special thanks to the **Advisory Group** that guided and directed the research. We were able to do this work by drawing on our long history of collaboration and partnerships. Thank you.

With special thanks to all of the **homeless-serving organizations** working with Indigenous communities, from across Canada and elsewhere, that spoke with us. We have tried to incorporate and share your hard-earned knowledge. Thank you.

The authors would like to acknowledge and thank each of those who spoke with us. Your insights and introspection were very helpful in enabling us to put together a more complete story. Further, we thank you on behalf of the larger community for the work that you have done (and continue to do) and the positive impact of your efforts.

Miigwetch and Ekosani.

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To those without shelter, to those trying to find home, and to those who guided this work, the stories and lessons learned in this report are your stories and words. We thank you and are honoured to be entrusted with your wisdom and allowed to share your knowledge with others. Our hope is we do so in a manner that is respectful of the many communities and traditions represented in these pages.

This project builds on work begun many years ago, when local organizations in Winnipeg were approached to participate in the At Home/Chez Soi Research Demonstration Project (AHCS). AHCS was launched by the Mental Health Commission of Canada in 2009 to undertake work in five Canadian cities (Moncton, Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg, and Vancouver). In these places, many came together to seek answers and offer a means to end homelessness in Canada. Nationally, 2,148 people participated in the AHCS project, with over 1,000 provided with housing and support over a four-year period. Much of what we learned through AHCS is shared in this work.

Over the last decade, much was learned in this prairie city about how community organizations and local leaders (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) could come together and find ways of helping those in need of shelter find home and community. In 2008, a year prior to the launch, Winnipeg's AHCS leadership team was instrumental in critically questioning the largely American model of Housing First and seeking ways to localize it within a city with strong Indigenous and community leadership.

The approach in Winnipeg was distinct from that of other cities in the study, largely owing to the need to better reflect local ways of knowing and to be inclusive of Indigenous representation.

This work belongs to each person who was part of the AHCS project and to those who shared their stories as we gathered knowledge from other parts of Canada and elsewhere in writing this report. We honour those who are with us and those whose passing is remembered in the stories told to us over the last decade. We carry this knowledge forward to support positive change and help those without shelter find hope and home.

We are also honoured by the Elders who came together to guide this work and share their wisdom and teachings. Our journey on this project would have not been possible without their knowledge and willingness to offer teachings, guidance, and hope. Our project team consisted of Indigenous and non-Indigenous persons. We once again learned from each other, as we have for over a decade. However, it was the Elders who grounded us in the communities of Winnipeg and Manitoba. Through each teaching, story, and encounter, they offered understanding and faith that we can end homelessness in Canada. Perhaps the most important lesson for us to achieve was simply to listen; our first lesson from the Elders was to put down our pens, open our hearts, and really listen to their words. We are grateful to each Elder and hope we have honoured them as we now pick up the pen to write.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	4
Tawâw – Come in, You're Welcome; There's Room	6
Niiwin Makwag Niimiiwag – Four Dancing Bears	7
Nitohtamowin – Gathering Knowledge: Listen, Don't Write	8
Setting the Context: Housing First in Canada and Indigenous Perspectives	9
Definitions of Homelessness	11
The Project Governance Approach	12
Kîwewin – Pathways to Home	13
Introduction to the Seven Steps	14
Pamipiciwîw – A Long Journey: Guidelines to Localizing Housing First	18
1) Pre-Project Relationship-Building and Consultation Phase	19
Having a Vision	19
Building Relationships with Communities	19
Community-Based Program Creation	20
Community Relationships—and Trust—Take Time	20
Relationships with Wider System and Public	21
2) Leadership and Governance	22
Key Guiding Principles	22
Engaging Local Leaders and Decision-Makers	22
Governance Approach and Structure	25
Accountability and Ongoing Evaluation	27
Funding	27
Transformative Potential and Indigenous Sovereignty	28
3) Localizing Housing First within a Community Strengths Framework	30
Population Served	31
Local Community Context	33
Housing Market	35
Localizing Housing First: A Summary	37
4) Housing First Team Development	39
Lead Agencies and Building Community Capacity	39
Staffing	40
Hiring	40
Supporting Staff	41
Cultural Training and Reconciliation in Action	41
5) Considerations for Localizing Housing First	43
Service Delivery	43
Housing Delivery	51
6) Monitoring and Evaluation	58
7) Sustaining – Building Capacity in the Community	61
Ponipayiw – The Ending	64
Linking Findings with Practice	64
Niiwin Makwag Niimiiwag: Indigenizing Housing First	65
Next Steps for Housing First	65
Sources	66
Additional Resources	67

TAWÂW

COME IN, YOU'RE WELCOME; THERE'S ROOM

This report serves as a general guide for implementing and delivering Housing First, particularly in Indigenous community contexts. The objective is to offer a framework that places community localizing efforts at the forefront to help ensure the best fit is achieved for launching Housing First. The work shared here was governed by a Council of Elders and local leaders, who helped develop this set of observations on why and how it is important to adapt and localize Housing First to the community context. Our lens of analysis is rooted within an Indigenous perspective that draws on local experiences within Manitoba.

The first section of the guide draws heavily from the experiences of the Winnipeg Site of the At Home/ Chez Soi (AHCS) project, where local adaptations to the Housing First model alleviated some of the early tension experienced with implementation and delivery. In Winnipeg, Housing First was modified to better align with the needs of the local Indigenous population and to promote a capacity-building approach.

The second section of the guide presents considerations for localization efforts, which pull from extensive consultations, site visits and reviews of Housing First efforts in Canada and elsewhere. Over several months, we spoke with 68 representatives from communities that have launched Housing First about their challenges and successes, and we share their general reflections here.

This work was carried out in Winnipeg, which is located in Treaty No. 1 Territory in the traditional lands of the Anishinabe (Ojibway), Ininew (Cree), Oji-Cree,

Dené, and Dakota peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation. Our work is greatly informed by our understanding of issues in this territory and the nations that have occupied these lands for thousands of years. Our work is thus about honouring local knowledge while also reflecting on the broader contexts that can inform approaches to ending homelessness.

Our journey was shaped by years of experience working with and supporting those experiencing homelessness in Winnipeg. We draw from Manitoba's traditional keepers of knowledge and the Elders who guided us on this path. This understanding of traditional ways of knowing and being shaped the direction taken in this work.


It is fitting that this work began in 2018 with a gathering at Thunderbird House in Winnipeg's inner city. It was at Thunderbird that a group of Elders first met with the research team to talk and build relationships with each other. This is the same location where AHCS project leadership and researchers had met with Elders ten years previous, in 2008, to seek support at the start of the At Home/Chez Soi project.

Our first lesson was the importance of beginning with a meaningful conversation with local community leadership. We did not ask the Elders to confirm an approach for the work, but we worked to create one together. We also learned the importance of listening. Some might feel this is a simple and straightforward act; others would rightly contend that listening is part of a deeper form of connecting and building trust. At that juncture in the project, we put down our pens and listened.

NIIWIN MAKWAG NIIMIIWAG

FOUR DANCING BEARS

One of the greatest gifts offered to us along this journey was the name Niiwin Makwag Niimiiwag. We are profoundly honoured that the Elders allowed us to be part of a traditional naming ceremony in which the Winnipeg Site of the At Home/Chez Soi (AHCS) project became Niiwin Makwag Niimiiwag or Four Dancing Bears. This name came from a vision and connection to the early days of AHCS. It connects to the need to protect and care for others, as bears care for their young and provide shelter in dens. Within the Seven Sacred Teachings, bears represent courage, and for us this courage helped ground our work as we moved through this journey.

 *Housing First must not be seen as a program but as a feeling—to care, understand, support, protect, and shelter those who are temporarily vulnerable and in need, and to face the journey together with confidence and bravery.*

Niiwin Makwag Niimiiwag (At Home/Chez Soi Winnipeg Site) is also connected in many ways to Elder Tobasonakwut Kinew, who shared a vision with Freeman Simard in 2010. They talked about the AHCS project and the need to heal and protect the city and those involved in that study by marking four directions, spiritually encircling the city. On December 2, 2012, Elder Tobasonakwut Kinew made his journey to the spirit world.


His vision of a Four Direction Ceremony was left to Freeman Simard, Elder Velma Orvis, and others to realize. As Niiwin Makwag Niimiiwag was coming to a close in 2013, the vision was fulfilled when a group led by Elder Orvis placed flags in four directions, encircling the city. Each year since Elder Orvis has carried on this ceremony. We are honoured to carry this name, Niiwin Makwag Niimiiwag, forward in our work.



NITOHTAMOWIN

GATHERING KNOWLEDGE: LISTEN, DON'T WRITE

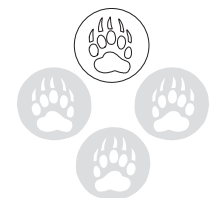
In gathering information, writing is often viewed as the main outcome, and many may assume the final report is the only product. For this work, our earliest teaching was the importance of listening. At our first gathering with the Elders we listened to their words as they shared. They shared with us that the importance of healing and supporting those without shelter is not simply providing a home. It is to know and understand the deeper histories of Indigenous peoples in Canada. It is about understanding historic traumas and the current resolve of Indigenous leadership, who have the right and self-determination to address the needs of their people. We learned, too, that the traditional lands we find ourselves occupying in Winnipeg and Manitoba, as well as the peoples of this territory and the ways of knowing, understanding, and doing, are distinct from elsewhere.

 *This teaching underscores the importance of the local. Often, national-level approaches lose impact if they fail to recognize and celebrate the distinctiveness of peoples and places by empowering each to shape their own approach.*

This report addresses the fundamental question:

How do you localize Housing First within an Indigenous context, and how can these local experiences help inform practice in other jurisdictions? We freely admit that we do not provide a complete answer to this question, nor can we. Our intent is merely to draw attention to the lessons learned in Winnipeg during the At Home/Chez Soi (AHCS) project, while illustrating further insights from discussions in many communities across Canada, as well as internationally. We also strive to inform local leaders from community and government on the importance of working together and learning from each other.

Our goal is to provide insights and information about why localizing efforts to end homelessness are important.



Before moving forward, we offer a number of assertions:

1. Indigenous peoples in Canada have endured a cultural genocide. This is the result of early colonization efforts; the Residential Schools era; forced adoptions of Indigenous children in the 1960s and onward, known as the “Sixties Scoop”; and the present era of racism and inequitable interactions with Justice, Health, and Child and Family Services departments. These current and historic traumas remain a persistent and contributing cause of Canada’s Indigenous population experiencing homelessness.
2. In Canada, Indigenous persons experience homelessness at a disproportionately higher rate than other Canadians. Much of this stems from the outcome of the historic traumas noted above. The loss of traditional territories and the lack of funding for housing and limited resources in home communities are also contributing factors.
3. The very definition of homelessness in Canada has historically ignored the distinct cultural and social dynamics at play within Indigenous communities. We use the Indigenous Homelessness definition advanced by Jesse Thistle and the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness to guide our understanding of and response to Indigenous homelessness.¹
4. Canada has increasingly become aware of the need for reconciliation. Our work is shaped by a desire for reconciliation, while noting that the past injustices against Indigenous people has gravely eroded trust and relationships. This must be taken seriously if we are truly to work toward meaningful reconciliation.

While this report offers much of what has been learned, more was learned than can be represented in these pages. This work created and strengthened relationships between the Elders, members of the Advisory Group, the research team, the Lived Experience Circle (LEC), and those from other territories who took this journey together.

Setting the Context: Housing First in Canada and Indigenous Perspectives

While estimates in Canada vary, there are an estimated 30,000 who struggle to find shelter each night. Many of these individuals find themselves in temporary accommodation, living in informal encampments or precariously sheltered in rooming houses or single room occupancy hotels (SROs). Indigenous persons are disproportionately represented within the population experiencing homelessness. In Winnipeg, the estimate is that 66% of the local population experiencing homelessness is Indigenous; among youth this rises to 74%.²

Over the last decade there has been a shift in policy circles to focus more attention on those experiencing a chronic state of homelessness. Recent research suggests that around 67% of people who have experienced homelessness report having a mental health challenge in their lifetime.³ This population typically consumes a tremendous amount of services and supports. It was this segment of the population that was the focus of the AHCS project, owing to the fact that previous interventions struggled to reach this often “hard-to-house” group. The early work of Senator Michael Kirby, and his 2006 report *Out of the Shadows at Last: Transforming Mental Health, Mental Illness and Addiction Services in Canada*, not only changed how Canadians viewed the relationship between homelessness and mental health but also led to the establishment of the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) and the At Home/Chez Soi project.

¹ See Thistle (2017).

² See Brandon et al. (2018).

³ See Goering et al. (2002).

Housing First emerged from the Pathways program, which was developed in the early 1990s in New York City. It sought to address the gaps in the provision of supports to those persons who were experiencing heightened difficulties such as addictions and acute mental health issues. Housing First represented a paradigm shift from the more widespread “continuum of care” model that involved earning the right to independent housing through meeting a series of preconditions, often including abstinence. Housing First took an established case management model known as Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) and attached a housing component. In Canada, AHCS partnered with the Pathways team in creating a made-in-Canada alternative. It employed a dual model consisting of ACT and Intensive Case Management (ICM). In a broad sense, ACT teams support persons with the highest needs, while ICM focuses on persons with more moderate needs.

Housing First endorses a harm reduction approach and does not focus exclusively on addressing addiction as part of the treatment plan. The Housing First model uses stable housing as part of the treatment plan, along with services that work toward addressing addiction through a recovery-oriented lens. Simply put, the goal of Housing First is to stably house a person, and then use this independent housing as a base from which to develop a recovery-oriented plan to work on other barriers to maintaining housing, such as addiction and mental health issues.

However, this view is not necessarily supported by local Indigenous ways of knowing. For example, from an Indigenous perspective, a drawback of Housing First is its focus on a Western view of independence.

As one member of the Winnipeg AHCS team stated:

“To start on the path of social inclusion one has to acknowledge that we are interdependent beings. That we all need each other for our sense of being—social exclusion and disenfranchisement contributes to un-wellness and isolation. This was and is the issue with scattered-site housing and the high rate of evictions that we saw in Winnipeg; it is a Western view of housing. There is no mention in Housing First of reconciliation; or of family, friends, or community; or an acknowledgement that we are all part of something [greater]. Addiction is a symptom of the complex trauma that people have faced throughout their lives; it is people’s coping response to stress. Until we acknowledge the purpose it serves, that all things are a medicine to help us get through the trauma and start on the healing journey, we will always have addictions.”

This is why Housing First needs to be undertaken from a localized, Indigenous perspective. Winnipeg’s community commented that Housing First has to be about balance, healing, strength, and thriving — so Indigenous people can understand how history impacts their lives — instead of the Western view that everyone is independent and masters of their own fate, the “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality.

Definitions of Homelessness

Defining homelessness has often been approached from the perspective of lacking shelter or sleeping in the rough. This has been viewed largely through a socio-economic lens of poverty, joblessness and the inability to obtain meaningful work, or as it is often stated “to lift one’s self out of poverty.” In more contemporary writing, attention has been paid to the connections Indigenous people have with homelands and kinship networks as well as to the dislocation from traditional territories that has led many to speak of a sense of “spiritual homelessness.” This concept more accurately reflects the unique circumstances, histories, and experiences of Indigenous persons.

In 2012, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH) began to explore Canadian definitions of homelessness:

Homelessness describes the situation of an individual, family or community without stable, safe, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means and ability of acquiring it. It is the result of systemic or societal barriers, a lack of affordable and appropriate housing, the individual/household’s financial, mental, cognitive, behavioural or physical challenges, and/or racism and discrimination. Most people do not choose to be homeless, and the experience is generally negative, unpleasant, unhealthy, unsafe, stressful and distressing.⁴

The above definition was intended to offer a starting point in Canada and to capture the complexity of a situation beyond simply being without shelter. Subsequent to the original COH definition, a second approach was launched to ensure there was a more holistic measure that better reflected the experiences of Indigenous persons and the realities of the Canadian population experiencing homelessness.

⁴ *Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (2012).*

⁵ *Thistle (2017).*

Led by Jesse Thistle, the following definition was advanced:

Indigenous homelessness is a human condition that describes First Nations, Métis and Inuit individuals, families or communities lacking stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means or ability to acquire such housing. Unlike the common colonialist definition of homelessness, Indigenous homelessness is not defined as lacking a structure of habitation; rather, it is more fully described and understood through a composite lens of Indigenous worldviews. These include: individuals, families and communities isolated from their relationships to land, water, place, family, kin, each other, animals, cultures, languages and identities. Importantly, Indigenous people experiencing these kinds of homelessness cannot culturally, spiritually, emotionally or physically reconnect with their Indigeneity or lost relationships.⁵

As Thistle describes, Indigenous homelessness pulls in deeper meanings and connections to land, people, community, and their relationships. While no single definition is capable of capturing the true spirit of the experience, Thistle’s approach has given Canada a more comprehensive understanding of homelessness among Indigenous peoples.

Thistle’s definition offers a starting point to understanding and embracing the responsiveness of local knowledge to address issues. “Solving” homelessness is not simply about placing a roof over someone’s head; it is perhaps as much an act of decolonizing traditional Western approaches and reflecting more deeply on Indigenous worldviews. This must also include acknowledgement of the self-determination and self-governance of Canada’s Indigenous populations and leaders to address and respond to the needs of their peoples.

The Project Governance Approach

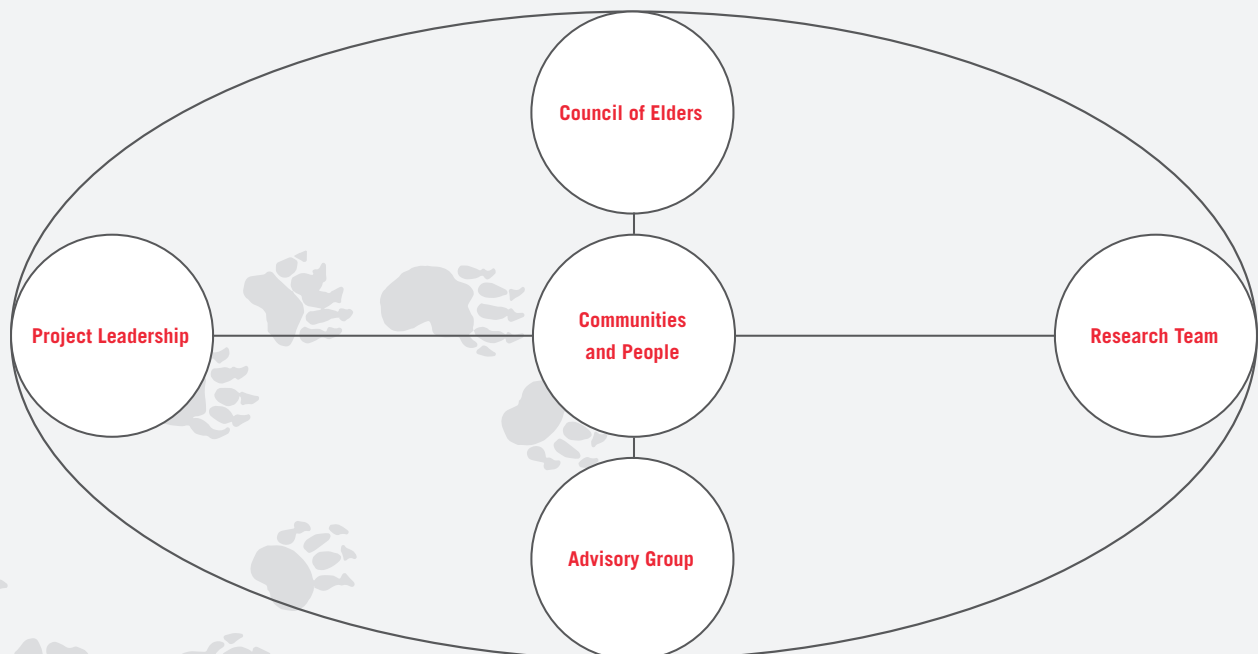
As noted above, we approached the work in this project from a local lens based on traditional knowledge, knowledge of Housing First, and lived experiences in community services and research. We sought out the team leads from the AHCS project, who represented the community-based organizations that delivered Housing First, to ask if it was appropriate to pursue this project. We then established an Advisory Group made up of AHCS team members and others to discuss ideas and approaches. The result was to have a co-lead model, with Betty Edel and Jino Distasio (both members of the AHCS project) as leads, with the entire team guided by a Council of Elders that helped create the pathway taken and supported us on this journey.

The Council of Elders was fundamental in providing ongoing guidance and advice. The Advisory Group provided early input on the development of the proposal and acted as a sounding board as the project evolved. We also engaged the Lived Experience Circle (LEC) on several occasions. The LEC is a group of peers from Niiwin Makwag Niimiiwag (the At Home/Chez Soi Winnipeg Site) who have been meeting monthly since 2010 in Winnipeg.

Members of the project team have many decades of experience working in the sector, and their greatest strength is their rootedness in the local Indigenous community. Their knowledge shapes this report, and we also share lessons from communities outside of Manitoba.

Our governance model was non-hierarchical in that we tried to gain an understanding from multiple perspectives and viewed our work as a shared responsibility to co-create an approach that was respectful of the many views among all those in the circle (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Diagram of Project Governance Structure



KÎWEWIN

PATHWAYS TO HOME

In this section, we briefly outline the manner in which Winnipeg came together to launch Niiwin Makwag Niimiiwag (At Home/Chez Soi Winnipeg Site). The path taken in the localization of Housing First in Winnipeg offers guidance and insights to other communities undertaking this work. The manner in which Housing First is set up, delivered, monitored, and ultimately sustained in any community is a deeply complex process that will challenge local leaders to fundamentally shift how and with whom they partner to deliver services and supports. Simply put, it takes a community, not a single agency, to end homelessness.

The seven steps described below serve as a chronological framework for the development of Housing First in Winnipeg. Between 2008 and 2014, community organizations in Winnipeg established, delivered, and sustained Housing First in a manner unique among the five cities of the At Home/Chez Soi (AHCS) project.

Winnipeg localization efforts were unique in that AHCS was a large-scale Randomized Controlled Trial and launched in a top-down manner, which contributed to tension among the local organizations trying to understand how to adopt and implement Housing First. The Winnipeg Site also benefited from organizations and local knowledge holders with decades of experience dealing with homelessness and poverty in the community.


It is important to note that in addition to the following seven steps, Winnipeg emphasized a Community Strengths Framework. This included four key principles that are explained in the coming sections: providing trauma-informed care; recognizing culture and diversity; being strengths based; and ensuring cooperation and collaboration. Each principle helped inform the seven steps and the overall philosophy of the Winnipeg Site.




Introduction to the Seven Steps

To understand how Winnipeg localized the Housing First approach, the following seven steps provide a brief overview of the path taken, from the early stages of coalition building to the ultimate struggle to sustain Winnipeg's Housing First teams as funding ended at the conclusion of the study.


1. **Pre-Project Relationship Building Phase:** In 2008, Winnipeg engaged in an early relationship-building phase. This was critical for shaping the development of the local model and in achieving longer-term sustainability. During this phase, the local community became aware of Housing First principles and practices (through workshops and community discussion). At the same time, the Mental Health Commission staff and other national and non-Indigenous actors became aware of the existing local Indigenous leadership in Winnipeg. This step was part of a nearly yearlong effort to build trust and bring together the people, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, who collectively questioned and challenged the New York Housing First model and whether it was an appropriate fit for the Indigenous population and the city. While much of this tension was resolved, it set a foundation for creating a Winnipeg model that sought to ensure a local lens guided the approach and was based on local experiences and needs.


 A key lesson of this early phase is to embrace and not fear tension, as this period of questioning was fundamental in building trust.

“A large part of the problem [with the AHCS national-level model] was that they did not understand reciprocity—that we all have something to share: knowledge, wisdom, local teachings that have been used for centuries. They only seemed to care about fidelity to a program not based in Indigenous knowledge.”


 Through this challenging phase, the local site was able to make key adaptations to the model while still achieving fidelity.


2. **Leadership and Governance Planning Phase:** Creating the right model for service delivery with strong leadership is an essential step. For Winnipeg, this included Indigenous community members and others co-sharing the management of the project. Winnipeg's approach was unique in its structure and aim to achieve consensus, which was at times challenging considering the number of stakeholders involved.


 A key learning from this phase is that having the right model equalizes power and enables local knowledge and is essential to ensure the voices of stakeholders are heard, considered, and acted upon.

 This phase involved working with departments and units within government that were often viewed as barriers to housing and supports for participants. Their inclusion at the leadership table was critical in changing attitudes about providing supports to persons deemed “too difficult to support” by systems that had otherwise excluded them.


3. **Localizing Phase:** it was essential to ensure the local community and the service teams created approaches informed by local experiences. The Winnipeg model used a cultural lens approach to ensure Indigenous values guided the project's structure. This included much reflection on Housing First principles through ongoing stakeholder engagement to ensure local experiences were included.


 *Localizing and adapting the Housing First approach is fundamental for success. Our view is that Housing First provides the scaffolding upon which localized structures and actions are graphed to sustain an environment necessary to end homelessness.*

 *This process should involve a comprehensive analysis of many factors, including local community and homeless population demographics, housing market conditions, community capacity, and governmental relations, as well as landlord engagement.*


 *It is also important to clearly understand local capacity. In Winnipeg, it was noted that underfunded Indigenous organizations are often at a disadvantage in not having the same capacity as non-Indigenous organizations. The nature, scope and scale of work being done by Indigenous organizations and Indigenous-serving organizations are significantly different than non-Indigenous organizations. This creates a challenging environment in which more work needs to be done to level the playing field.*


4. **Housing First Team Development:** To launch and manage Housing First requires a collective and inclusive framework to create appropriate structures. This includes hiring and training staff for service delivery, housing, and monitoring. For Winnipeg, this phase focused on collaborating with three local service organizations that collectively brought a century of experience working within Winnipeg's inner city. In addition, the AHCS Winnipeg Site was unique in its inclusion of a social enterprise lens, which helped foster local expertise and capacity through the creation and launching of Housing Plus and Manitoba Green Retrofit (MGR). MGR's growth over the study remains one of the few early examples of how a Housing First intervention successfully launched a social enterprise. Forming local partnerships and collaborating with local businesses to deliver supports and services was key to having the diversity necessary for success and to avoid needless duplication.

 *It is important to work with existing agencies that can take on the challenge of establishing and managing a Housing First team.*


 *The inclusion of a social enterprise can fundamentally shift how Housing First organizations take on aspects of housing and services that might otherwise be delivered by for-profit businesses and can also provide a revenue stream to underfunded agencies. These enterprises might include property management, moving services, furniture procurement, and repair of apartments.*


5. **Delivery Phase:** The AHCS Winnipeg Site functioned because of strong community partnerships consolidated and forged through intensive site development and implementation plans. The teams had extensive experience and successfully adapted services for the local community. Delivery was also informed by consultation with people with lived experience of homelessness.

 *The delivery of services should be guided by local and Indigenous leadership and informed by the needs of people with lived experience.*

 *Localizing Housing First can build capacity in the local community by harnessing local expertise.*


6. **Monitoring Phase:** AHCS required all five sites to assess and achieve Housing First program fidelity using a consistent approach. Within the local context, understanding the importance and challenges of research and monitoring and working with an often top-down national-level model was difficult to negotiate at times. Overall, Winnipeg worked hard to create a strong community-based network for recruitment and follow-up. The research, and sharing research findings, was important in supporting AHCS and ultimately contributed to sustaining the Housing First approach in policy.


 *The AHCS project had a manual for Housing First delivery, but in Winnipeg it was a starting point and did not define the approach; the local teams designed the approach.*


 *Do not be afraid of fidelity—it is only a guide, which can be adjusted and attuned to the local community.⁶*

“The fidelity model is rooted in a Western worldview model. Its mental health components are around a diagnosis with medication; it is not trauma-informed and has no mention of healing or of the role of oppression and colonization on a person’s sense of self. It relies on psychiatry and medications, while not recognizing the un-wellness a person experiences as related to the society in which they live.”

7. **Sustaining Phase:** A key component and objective of AHCS was to support broader efforts to sustain funding and multi-level government involvement post-AHCS. As the study entered its final months, there was angst among service teams, researchers, and participants, who feared the project’s end would result in support and service disruption. Ultimately, through government relations and advocacy work, the Winnipeg teams were sustained and the Federal Government invested in Housing First through the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS).

 *It was critical for all stakeholders to be involved in government relations geared toward sustaining funding.*

 *The AHCS Winnipeg Site and the national team delivered a strong and repeated message, incorporating evidence from the study, to government, policymakers, and the public on the importance of maintaining services. The local teams were unified in their desire to work together to continue to support people experiencing homelessness.*

 *Sustaining Housing First is difficult and depends on the local program and funding context. A lack of adequate resources and uncertainty can cause disruption and there is no easy way to address this issue.*

⁶ Goering et al. (2016).

“The problem was and remains that the Housing First sector is under-resourced compared to resources found in the mainstream institutions. We need to put a great deal of effort into educating the resourced systems and showing the importance of the Housing First work and knowledge— it is a good program to partner with as equals.”

Each organization and person contributed to the project, culminating in a largely successful project that adapted an American model to fit a Canadian prairie city. The fit was never perfect and there was much tension but, ultimately, Winnipeg proved that Housing First can be delivered within an Indigenous framework in a manner sensitive to community needs.



PAMIPICIWIN

A LONG JOURNEY: GUIDELINES TO LOCALIZING HOUSING FIRST

This report is intended to serve as a reference guide for localizing Housing First, drawing on the experiences from the At Home/Chez Soi (AHCS) project and more recent case studies and conversations from other jurisdictions. We began this report with an important framework and the role the Council of Elders played. The intent in sharing the Seven Steps outlined above was not to state that this is the path to be taken. Instead, this path worked and offered an approach that resonated in the Winnipeg community. While this report tries to orient the materials along these seven steps, it is fully understood that each community must establish its own path based on local leadership, knowledge, and traditions.

In communities across Canada and internationally, the delivery of Housing First has been directed towards building localized, Indigenous approaches that best serve the population experiencing homelessness. There is recognition in many communities that an Indigenous lens is essential for real and meaningful change to occur.

This section provides an overview of conversations held with key individuals who have been actively involved in the development of Housing First in their communities. Their wisdom and feedback was sought to provide greater insight into the vision, approach, and elements of making Housing First initiatives more effective within a local, Indigenous context.



1) Pre-Project Relationship-Building and Consultation Phase

Having a Vision

In many communities, having a localized or Indigenous vision for Housing First was a key first step. In Winnipeg's case, an "Indigenized"⁷ vision for its Housing First project was born from the reality and recognition that the clear majority of those experiencing homelessness were Indigenous. Therefore, any hope for true and lasting change had to be rooted within an Indigenous set of values, understandings, and subsequent actions. Other communities have come to similar conclusions, often responding to crisis situations.

- › Indigenous leadership (both political and organizational) must have a strong leadership role in developing the local vision.

Building Relationships with Communities

The Housing First model is based fundamentally in a worldview that is Western and clinical, which combines a medical intervention (Assertive Community Treatment or ACT, or Intensive Case Management or ICM) with a human rights stance on housing. However, community organizations delivering Housing First services emphasized that their focus is relational—grounded in the relationships between people and across communities. The approach is more than a programmatic adoption of cultural components or services.

- › A community-led approach to Housing First is fundamentally recognized as different, and based on relationships people have with each other and the traditional lands they occupy. Change has to be rooted within an Indigenous set of values, understandings, and subsequent actions.

Therefore, when developing Housing First programming with Indigenous communities, or "Indigenizing" the Housing First model, building these relationships is the most important step. Community organizations across Canada stressed the importance of good relationships, particularly with Indigenous communities, but also between the service provider and a person, between service organizations, and between service organizations and other system players (e.g., Health and Mental Health, Justice, Child and Family Services departments).

Inviting stakeholders to the table is important to ensure community commitment to program sustainability. Early efforts at bringing together a wide range of stakeholders and knowledge keepers, and breaking down silos, are critical. One service provider said: "The farther one gets into planning and implementing a Housing First program, the more it runs up against system gaps and partnership needs. So it helps to have those partnerships built in from the beginning."

Building and strengthening relationships with and within Indigenous communities was critical, but varied in terms of approaches and contexts. One community organization has an Indigenous Liaison position, whose role is to strengthen relationships, build community partnerships, work with the community, and develop relationships with nearby First Nations and with the urban Indigenous community. This Liaison reflected:

"Any city that's interested in being more mindful in how they work with the Indigenous community, I think that number one, they need to first find Indigenous people who are respected and well known—even if it's just within their own circle; those circles can be broadened. But somebody that is a leader and has the respect of the people. And then it's really about going out and developing those relationships and just trusting in the process."

⁷ The term "Indigenizing" as used within this document reflects a common description for putting an Indigenous focus on Housing First. However, it should be noted that there are discrepancies and disagreements regarding the use of the term, and whether it provides the best possible understanding of the concept.

Community-Based Program Creation

Housing First services should not be imposed on a community. Programs should be co-developed from the earliest planning stages and include full and ongoing community participation. The Housing First model should be considered the baseline from which to localize the model based on local context and community characteristics.

Indigenous communities have legitimate and important questions regarding Housing First and may question the model and the intervention approach. Projects that do not consider what the community wants, needs, or has often face challenges, or struggle with a mismatch between services provided and community needs. Even worse, failure to consult properly risks reinforcing mistrust, especially if there is no guarantee of long-term commitment. There is also a need to help build awareness of Housing First principles, and build or leverage capacity to undertake it in the community.

Generally, when introducing Housing First to a community, the following questions should be addressed:

- › What is Housing First (where did it start and what is being done in Canada)?
- › Who are the local leaders in the community and what role does the existing set of services play in supporting a Housing First approach?
- › What is Harm Reduction? Why use it? And why not abstinence?
- › How do Housing First services fit into the local community and culture?
- › How are people housed? How does it work?
- › What is the long-term commitment? How do we know the program won't end in a year or five years?

In the end, programs must come from and be delivered by the community, informed by partnerships with those who have knowledge of Housing First. Knowledge and capacity of Housing First within the community can then be developed or strengthened.

- › Local cultural considerations must shape the entire approach and guiding framework, from the creation and management through staffing, design, and development of services.
- › This is done by ensuring local community leadership is meaningfully included and engaged early and throughout implementation and ultimate delivery of Housing First.

Community Relationships—and Trust—Take Time

Working with a community to develop a localized Housing First intervention takes time. Developing necessary relationships with stakeholders and knowledge keepers, engaging the community in consultation and participation, educating the service community, and reaching out to the broader public all take time. The amount of time required is often underestimated or not fully taken into account.

- › The community engagement process can be very complex, with many stakeholders and many questions, so it is important to identify who should be consulted and how.
- › Community development approaches are very useful in undertaking this work. Building and maintaining such relationships is an ongoing process, not an end goal.

“Those things take time.... It's like any relationship that you have with anybody. You have to invest yourself in it. You have to be prepared to be real, and be humble, and take your time.”

Several organizations in Canada have created positions dedicated to this work.

- › The work of relationship building may look different depending on the local context; it may involve visiting with and supporting Elders, preparing and maintaining ceremonial spaces, or meeting with service providers to ensure system connections and knowledge sharing.

Though relationship building takes time, funders and program administrators are beginning to acknowledge the advantages of undertaking this work. It is important for a community to advise funders and administrators of the time required for adequate and appropriate community consultation and relationship building. This can ensure trust and commitment and contributes to greater program success and sustainability in the community over the long run.

Relationships with Wider System and Public

Relationships don't stop with local communities but extend to the entire homeless-serving sector, the larger system players, and the wider community. Within the homeless-serving sector, the adoption of Housing First, or Indigenous Housing First, often requires a philosophical shift within the entire sector. There may be large knowledge gaps that require significant outreach and education. Supporting community conversations and partnerships helps to ensure collaboration and access to services for the people who will be served.

Larger systems can also present significant barriers to housing and supports for Indigenous people and programs. Those systems (e.g., Housing, Health, Justice, Employment and Income Assistance, Child and Family Services) tend to be bureaucratic and siloed. Housing First programs can knit together sectors by creating connections, ensuring good system linkages, and advocating for the people being supported on their journey. Community organizations also noted that building partnerships with these systems can in turn impact the whole system.

Working with various departments and units of government early on can lead to shifts in attitude about providing supports to persons who might otherwise be deemed “too difficult to support.” Moreover, connecting with Indigenous partners and learning about Indigenous culture can normalize that knowledge and worldview within those larger systems.

“How we approach the development of Housing First services or systems really needs to be grounded in Indigenous communities. Sometimes on the [At Home/Chez Soi] project we used to talk about how Housing First is a program, but it's actually about systems change—you can't, fundamentally, do Housing First without changing and shaping the system, because it works across sectors, it breaks down silos, you have people who don't traditionally work together coming together... So there's lots of very practical ways the program influences and shapes the system. And I think that's particularly important in recognizing the needs of urban Aboriginal populations, is also grounding it in the knowledge and needs of those communities.”

Several Indigenous community organizations spoke to the importance of engaging the broader community—the public at large. Housing First is often not well understood by the public, who may react with apprehension and sometimes pushback. This can create additional challenges for programs, especially in locating and procuring housing. However, public education and engagement can work to support broader community commitment and understanding.

As noted throughout this section, the initial steps to launching and localizing Housing First require a substantive commitment among many stakeholders, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Stakeholders must find ways to leverage local knowledge, with a willingness to fundamentally change the manner in which those experiencing homelessness are supported. This takes time and commitment.

2) Leadership and Governance

This section highlights approaches to the governance of Housing First initiatives in a community. Adopting the right approach, and having key people around the table from the outset, can be central to equalizing power and can inform the success of the intervention and its sustainability over the longer term. If done right, engagement of appropriate stakeholders, knowledge keepers, and levels of government can also be capacity-building and transformative. The early phases of governance structure development in a community help lay the groundwork for inter-departmental collaborations that can potentially lead to the breakdown of silos and to positive systems change.

Key Guiding Principles

Community-based organizations and Indigenous representatives emphasized the importance of adopting a culturally-informed approach to governance—one that should extend throughout the network of Housing First providers and local decision-makers.

Three guiding principles were repeatedly reinforced as key to good governance:

- › Trust
- › Inclusiveness
- › Humility

Taking these principles seriously means “being mindful” of them and infusing them through all aspects of the governance model. To “Indigenize” a community’s approach to Housing First, a starting point is to shift to a mindset based in these values, in which “the job of the executive directors and associates is just to listen.” The beginning, development stages offer “the time to do it right and to create those structures that provide space for everyone.”

The following considerations can inform the development of an appropriate governance model, one which is not only culturally safe, but which grows out of or adopts a fundamentally Indigenous-centered approach.

Engaging Local Leaders and Decision-Makers

In the development of the governance structure, engagement with the local community and leadership is critical. How and with whom that engagement occurs shapes the development of the network of program delivery and impacts its success.

Who Is Invited to the Table?

In many communities that have adopted Housing First, the decision to do so arose out of feelings of crisis, or urgent concerns over chronic homelessness and a desire to try something new. Often, groups of relevant local decision-makers, representing various organizations and government departments, had already been established, and these groups were institutionalized into steering committees for Housing First implementation.

Whether formalizing an established group or creating a committee for the first time, the inclusion of local community-based leadership and representatives is critical. When working with and in Indigenous communities this involves the meaningful inclusion of Indigenous leadership to govern the process.

Governance by Indigenous Communities

One of the first steps to adopting an Indigenous-informed approach is to recognize that knowledge on what to do and how to do it lies with Indigenous people, and non-Indigenous leaders and decision-makers need to be comfortable asking for help and making space for that knowledge.

“That humility and asking for help is what’s missing on all levels. And that is why it is so important to have Indigenous staff, managers, leadership there, at every level.”

“We also started our work with the leadership of the organization, at the beginning we started by inviting them to come to a sweat with us. And the executive director ... was pretty nervous about it and thought that we should just go ahead and do that and he would catch up with us later. And then he did come and I think that was huge, it had a huge impact on him and on the other directors that came. And I think that was a really effective way to begin it. ... He said to us it was a life-changing experience for him.”

Ensuring all decision-makers are culturally informed increases the likelihood that the unique value Indigenous people and people with lived experience of homelessness can bring is recognized. Beyond cultural education/awareness-building, an Indigenous approach to governance involves actual Indigenous inclusion, at all levels—in management, on Housing First teams, and in decision-making bodies, especially those guiding the community’s strategic direction and funding decisions.

Representation on the local Community Advisory Board (CAB) is especially important; many communities are strategically moving toward mandating board membership that represents the target population (i.e., Indigenous and from specific Nations where appropriate), as well as including people with lived experience.

“Where do First Nations people have input on how the funding is spent for Indigenous homeless people? How many of the service providers that provide housing have Indigenous workers, and if they are workers, how many are in management?”

It is important to have Indigenous representatives in leadership and management positions within service organizations. Some communities felt this representation should be proportional to the population being served. In one community there is a separate Indigenous CAB in addition to a non-Indigenous one. It was established in part because it was felt that tables with limited Indigenous representation consistently allocate money to non-Indigenous organizations. One CAB expressed:

“Because four of our nine board members must be Indigenous, there is a lot of opportunity to get those shared perspectives, whether it’s from First Nations, Métis or otherwise. ... In terms of the way that they operate, I think it’s absolutely wonderful. The advisory council does need broader representation because we’ve kind of struggled over the last year with getting folks involved but again, a part of that, I think, is just that the folks that we would like to see at that table are such strong leaders in their own communities, so time is always a big issue.”

Volunteering time is an important issue. Indigenous leaders are often asked to dedicate time and knowledge to advisory service. Some highlighted issues related to “representation fatigue,” as certain community leaders are asked to serve multiple functions or represent an Indigenous voice across various boards or advisory groups. They also pointed to potential conflicts of interest:

“For us, the challenge is finding Indigenous people who have knowledge about what’s happening in the homeless-serving sector who can sit on the CAB, the Community Advisory Board, and who have time to do that, right? Because it’s actually a small pool of people ... that has enough knowledge to be effective but aren’t actually working in the agencies, so they can’t sit on CAB, right?”

Indigenous voices must be meaningfully engaged and represented in any Housing First governance structure, and if Indigenous individuals, especially Elders, are involved in an advisory capacity, they should be adequately compensated, as a form of respect and acknowledgement of the gifts Indigenous advisors and leaders offer. (However, the form of compensation must be thoughtfully considered. Money is appreciated, but if financial or other remuneration might negatively impact an individual who is receiving a retirement income or income assistance, then another form of compensation would likely be preferable.) If compensation is not given, it can risk reproducing a form of colonialism (even if inadvertently).

“What happens is you’re giving, again,... as an Indigenous person, I or one of my staff members, we’re constantly giving. We’re giving our knowledge. We’re giving our time. ... That would be my warning to Indigenous organizations. You’re going to be asked to be at every table, and then when you step back and think, what might this organization have paid to consultants to do the same? And what was given to us for our time and our knowledge and our sensitivity and our Elders. It’s really just the same kind of processes that have occurred since colonization, just a different pathway and a different structure.”

Understanding and Engaging with Local and Indigenous Leadership

Understanding the community context is critical to successful localized program implementation. Part of the adaptation process includes understanding distinct local protocols of working with and engaging First Nations leaders. A first step is to determine whether there are local “understood and accepted Elders’ groups, or ethics protocols, or universally accepted models of working” with different local Nations. Engaging local leadership also requires understanding the local political context, especially how it has been shaped by legacies of colonization.

A Housing First initiative and its leadership should have local community/Indigenous support, or ideally come from the community itself. This entails building relationships, seeking permission and guidance from Elders, and engaging appropriate Indigenous-run or other respected community-based organizations. Local community leaders and Elders can and should play a role in guiding the development of the Housing First structure and programming. One organization reflected:

“[In our organization] there was a really long history of toxicity, and the manager at the time has come a long ways but he was really resistant, ... [but] you don’t have to know, just come alongside, we will show you how to do this. ‘If you want to fix things,’ I said, ‘bring in an Elder.’ ... And an Elder came every Wednesday and she was pivotal in changing the environment.”

This also reiterates the importance of humility and the recommendation for non-Indigenous leaders to step back and be willing to “come alongside” in the journey toward a more culturally-informed implementation of Housing First.

Recognizing and engaging community leadership can also mean forming or consolidating relationships with local Indigenous bands or nearby reserves. One community conducted a survey and, realizing the majority of the people they were serving had migrated from nearby reserves, made sure “that all of those tribal groups were at the table.” Several communities cited their relationship with reserves in rural areas as important to processes of program development and to outcomes. Some also noted the importance of bridging the urban/reserve divide and connecting with reserves as a way of creating or leveraging existing opportunities for reserves to connect with their populations residing in urban areas.

Local Government and Political Engagement

Because of its interdisciplinary nature, adopting Housing First may provide an opportunity to capitalize on and consolidate relationships across government departments and across service providers in a community. Many communities recommended that Housing First decision-makers maintain ongoing communication with high-level government departments, and also engaging political leaders.

“I’m really grateful for the City, you know, that they’re making those changes to really pull from those community consultations and they’re attending. Like the Mayor came to our last one. ... There were other people from the City that attended that. But that speaks loudly, and makes a difference in us feeling supported, and in pushing for change.”

Political leaders can be champions who promote the “buy-in” of Housing First by the wider community. Early political involvement also opens the door for larger systems change.

Governance Approach and Structure

The governance approach and structure need to be developed through meaningful consultations with local and Indigenous leaders and representatives. Setting out the terms of reference and coming to a mission and vision that is culturally-informed is an important beginning step. One way of ensuring that a community’s approach to Housing First is culturally-safe and Indigenous-informed is to entrench it in the local mission, mandate, or strategic planning. This also promotes transparency and accountability:

“Our drive has really been to find ways to fund Aboriginal organizations to serve Aboriginal people. It’s been the word from our CAB from the start. And in those situations where everybody applied, we were fortunate enough to go back to our terms of reference for our CAB and our scorings... so we can be transparent as to what we’re doing and why.”


Communities use a range of governance models, with various strengths and challenges. Most establish (through extensive consultation and collaborative work) some centralized entity to act as an administrative arm for Housing First in the community. Often, this entity provides leadership on monitoring and evaluation and clearly delineates what core principles or approaches should be consistently required across various Housing First agencies or programs (versus what can be optional). This allows for coherence in diffusing, for example, a culturally-centered approach:

“We do strategic planning every four years. One of the things that was built into our last strategic plan was creating Indigenous positions and creating support services for our Indigenous staff but also our tenants, and that it needs to come from a centralized place. ... It’s just exhausting to have to [“Indigenize”] every single place.”

This central entity benefits from the advice of community-based advisory or steering committees, and is often responsible for maintaining dialogue with government departments and service teams.

Having some core or centralized principles and a collective strategic vision for Housing First in a community—or having a “backbone,” as some called it—is important. At the same time, communities overwhelmingly emphasized the importance of allowing a good degree of flexibility and autonomy to service organizations to determine how programming and delivery are carried out on the ground. The concerns of the community, and of the population being served, should be central and should inform decisions, and there should be frequent and consistent meetings with case managers and those working “on the ground.” Some communities have adopted what they refer to as “coalition” or “collective” governance structures.

Adopting a more Indigenous approach to governance means equalizing power and breaking down the verticality of relationships. This involves recognizing and respecting the fact that communities and Indigenous-run organizations know best how to work with and within their own communities, and ensuring they have the resources and latitude to design and deliver programming approaches that make an Indigenous vision live.

 In Winnipeg, the overall framework was provided, with criteria set for the programming, then each of the organizations was left to create their specific approach and set of supports and activities that they were best equipped to provide. This was seen to provide a level of independence within a collective understanding.

How Decisions Are Made

The “how” of governance is even more important than the actual organizational structure. It should not be approached as something necessarily hierarchical or vertical, but should be conceived of as walking alongside—as a journey made alongside Indigenous communities, with community leaders as well as those receiving services.

“What is really important is that the community sees that what [we do] is very much walking alongside community as opposed to, you know, top-down decision making. ... I hear very clearly the need for it to come from the community and for the community not just to be involved but to run the process, essentially, and then the outcome is what the community wants. ... And none of this ‘token Indian’ stuff, we’re pretty clear about that.”

This may involve a more horizontal and equitable approach to decision-making, for example through collaboration and consensus.

“We prefer in our language and our underlying traditions that really we don’t want a president, we need a chair. It’s not a chief, it’s a chair. It’s somebody who’s just going to run the meeting. Everything is round table, everybody has a voice, and there’s no decisions that are ever made singularly.... The decisions are made through a consensus model.”

The coordinating group that oversaw the project in Winnipeg, for example, tended to serve as an entity that facilitated the work of the respective organizations, and problem solved for issues even before they became issues. The dialogue that occurred was seen to be meaningful and strengthened the work of the project. Talking, listening, and working collaboratively was viewed as an Indigenous way of overseeing the work that needed to be done.

Steering and Advisory Committees

Nearly every community benefited from an Indigenous-informed or Indigenous-run steering or advisory committee or circle. The most successful examples have meaningful opportunities to engage with central leadership, to provide input, and to undertake a problem-solving role, and not merely distribute funding. Some are run like sharing circles and provide opportunities for decision-makers and representatives of service organizations to network, troubleshoot, and share ideas.



Regardless of what kind of structure is developed, it should be developed through meaningful community involvement and consultation.

Accountability and Ongoing Evaluation

Community consultation and involvement should be meaningful and ongoing, and mechanisms allowing for feedback should be incorporated into the structure. For example, some communities or organizations hold annual or seasonal feasts, during which community members can offer input on service delivery and programming. These are also valued as forms of monitoring and program evaluation.

“Gatherings are an opportunity to not only tell the story of what’s happening, but also to get feedback from the community. Usually at the end of the gathering what we do is we pull together a summary report and then from the feedback, and the things that we’re hearing from community about what’s important—those are the things that throughout the year we will use to inform the pieces of work that we’re doing.”

Local governance tables, such as the Community Advisory Board (CAB), are vital for playing a role of connecting feedback between those working on the ground and those in higher-level and funding roles.

“I think the major part of this with our movement in social services was the fact that the manager of income security sat on the CAB, and we had that personal connection with it, with them. But we were also informing the government all the time about the success and the challenges, and requesting meetings with administrators to keep that line of communication open. Really, our job has been to create those connections and advocate for the programs as much as we can.”

Again, program accountability can be enhanced through appropriate Indigenous representation and inclusion at those governance tables and within Housing First leadership.

Funding

While Indigenous involvement in governance and advisory roles is essential, having control of or a meaningful say in funding decisions is key. Understanding the history of the social service landscape is important to avoid setting up the funding flow in a way that creates or entrenches rivalries among providers. Competition for funding and the history of relationships among service providers and within the larger service systems can strain the relationship-building process. However, the governance structure—the mandate and collective vision of a community—can be developed in a way that contributes to breaking down silos and competition for funding:

“Our housing team has really been a major step in breaking those silos down. When I started working in the non-profit community it was fairly siloed and protectionist. And that’s normal. You really are protecting your funding. Rightfully so. I mean, you don’t survive if you don’t. But with this housing team, it started bringing people around the table to see that they’re not that much different. Any misconceptions were starting to fall away. And we’re seeing better working relationships between organizations.”

Another consideration is the level and speed at which investments move toward Housing First programming.⁸ With enough government support and a shared vision, the community may realize that “it’s not about this group of organizations necessarily trying to hold all the funding or get more and more funding, but just that there is a paradigm shift towards longer-term, more permanent solutions for people as opposed to ... [funding being] weighted towards emergency-type responses.”

⁸ Note that federal funding (under the Homelessness Partnering Strategy, now Reaching Home) is contingent on the inclusion of Housing First. This shift in direction required communities that were eligible for funding to quickly adopt Housing First.

The challenge of Indigenous representation and potential conflicts of interest was noted by several communities; they want Indigenous representation on the CAB, but if those individuals also work with or for a service organization, it is difficult for them to apply to the CAB for funding.

“One issue that we were really having is that there are so few [Indigenous] players in the community, that when funding comes out, they apply. And we don’t allow people to adjudicate if they apply. So all of a sudden, we’ve got a lot of funding, but decisions made for Aboriginal homelessness funding with Aboriginals not represented at the table.”

This is an important consideration when developing a governance structure and thinking through the flow of funding in a community. Some communities also design their funding criteria such that local community-based groups representing the primary target population are advantaged in the application process. The criteria might include, for example: “being seen in the community as an Aboriginal organization; being led by—if over 50% of your board—is Aboriginal; and if your primary clientele are Aboriginal... Our drive really has been to find ways to fund Aboriginal organizations to serve Aboriginal people.”

Some suggested that this should carry over to the funding allocation methodology. Funding can be aligned proportionally with the community needing it. For example, with a count indicating that 40% of their homeless population was Indigenous, one community decided, “Well, we should make sure our funding is 40% Aboriginal.”

One way of allowing for more self-governance through funding is by building in options for flexible funding. The idea with flexible financial assistance is that Housing First service agencies and the people they support are able to use the money in whatever way they find useful in terms of stabilizing their housing and their situation. Decisions regarding the funding and its coordination are carried out by the central entity or coalition.

Flexible funding also allows for agencies to divvy up funding based on local (and changing) needs; smaller areas might need more for acute cases if there are no other service referrals in town, for example.

One community offering flexible funding reflected:

“The very targeted direct intent was that clients would direct how money might be spent, which of course left programs with a question of, ‘How do we budget, how we really get a sense of whether somebody needs this amount or that amount?’ And what the organizations tended to find was that clients didn’t really ask for anything more than what they needed.”

Flexible funding models can be a form of stepping back, with clear lines of communication and opportunities for engagement, and letting groups “on the ground” speak to how best to achieve results. The work of Housing First and community capacity-building are processes that take time and depend on trust.

One Indigenous leader emphasized:

“The outcomes are the process, you know. That’s a hard thing to learn.... Yeah, and it takes a lot of time. Well, just, I don’t know, like what is it? A mentality of trust. Yeah, trust.”

To the fullest extent possible, this understanding should inform reporting requirements and outcomes expected by funders.

Transformative Potential and Indigenous Sovereignty

Communities can adopt a culturally-informed approach that incorporates Indigenous values. Beyond that, if a community’s approach to localizing or “Indigenizing” Housing First is done more comprehensively and in the right way, it can be both capacity-building and have transformative potential.

- › This means making Indigenous values foundational—that Housing First and its structures are not only reflective of or informed by them but actually built out of and through an Indigenous-driven approach.

“Incorporating Indigenous components into the Winnipeg context, it’s often been talked about in two ways. One is by having it be Indigenous-led and having Indigenous organizations delivering services, and the other is having Indigenous-specific programming with, you know, culturally appropriate elements and medicine picking and these sorts of things. But another piece is Indigenous cultural learning and reconciliation with non-Indigenous staff.”

- › Transforming the organization can be a starting point for transforming or “Indigenizing” larger systems. This involves recognizing continued legacies of colonization within systems, and then working to decolonize systems themselves. Recognition, as many stated, “is just the beginning of the work.”

“I want to see us have our own Indigenous framework, something that gets built right into the mandate of the organization, you know, so that everything from our human resources [through all aspects of the organization]—like, I want that to be in everything.”

Beyond organizational change, engaging political leaders can also open up space for a larger cultural paradigm shift.

“I really kind of see us more as a movement than as an organization. I think in our case right from day one when I was brought on board I really kind of stuck my heels in, dug my heels in and really was not interested in starting another organization. I really felt if the organization, that if the government wasn’t Indigenous and didn’t include political leaders, we would just remain a service organization always trying to do grunt work and not influence policy or structures, right? And so from the outset it was established that there be two reps from each tribal group, either like a band councillor or a chief.... And that has really had an impact because then they’re able to bring information to the Assembly of First Nations when all our chiefs meet. ... It really is important because in the end it’s the chiefs that become the primary lobbyists and advocates, because they have the door to ministers and government officials that we really only have in piecemeal.”

Recognizing Indigenous sovereignty, and making room for self-governance within Housing First agencies and the larger organizational governance structure, is a move toward reconciliation.



3) Localizing Housing First within a Community Strengths Framework

The ability to launch a Housing First initiative requires vision and leadership to create the right local environment, one that includes a strong community-driven governance structure (as discussed in previous sections). Also, community leaders and persons experiencing homelessness must clearly see themselves reflected in all aspects of any model considered. This has often been expressed by Indigenous leaders as “nothing about us, without us.” For Winnipeg’s implementation and delivery of Housing First in 2009, the following principles emerged as foundational for Indigenous leadership to feel a sense of localization and ownership of the process:

- › Providing trauma-informed care; recognizing culture and diversity; being strengths based; and ensuring cooperation and collaboration.

A decade later, these four principles have become rooted in Winnipeg’s current Housing First delivery models, and they were also present in other communities visited during this project.

The principles, expanded below, helped frame and ground the AHCS service delivery model in a manner that better reflected local realities. These principles might also offer some perspective for other communities to consider as they move forward in their own journey toward a more localized implementation of Housing First.

The principles are as follows:

- › **Providing trauma-informed care** that recognizes the effect of systems throughout the history of contact, beginning with the impacts of colonization.

- › **Recognizing culture and diversity** in knowing who you are and the methods used for healing throughout generations, such as:
 - The importance of reclaiming outlawed cultural practices. The loss of these practices has contributed greatly to the way things are today.
 - Recognizing people’s role in the community and how important they are as a whole person.⁹
 - Working on supporting people in reclaiming an understanding of their role and importance within a socially inclusive framework.
- › **Being strengths based** and emphasizing that people are on this planet for a purpose and everyone has knowledge, gifts, and wisdom to share. Recognizing that we are all in this together, and:
 - Being honoured when people let us in to walk with them on their journey to a good life.
 - Recognizing that people don’t need to be “fixed” and that they are not the cause of their own demise.
- › **Ensuring cooperation and collaboration**, and acknowledging that Indigenous people and organizations have the skills and knowledge to work with Indigenous people and that we need to expand and grow additional capacity in the community. This must include:
 - Staff training and having adequate infrastructure and resources to be able to work with people in environments in which they feel most comfortable and at home.

⁹ *It was shared that “Indigenous people’s role in the community is not well known by other cultures. The mainstream systems that people are involved with do not use this way to engage with people; it is more a view that there are people that are the ‘givers’ and those that are the ‘takers.’ There is no sense of reciprocity, no recognition that service providers have a good life because of people’s pain. There is no social inclusion in a society that looks at people as the givers and the takers—one side has something to offer, the other has nothing.”*

- Ensuring adequate and long-term funding, addressing the fact that part of the reason why we are where we are is that Indigenous organizations are underfunded with little room for long-term funding of projects.
- Having monetary resources to support people on their self-identified healing journey (including, for example, reconciliation with family and the ability to support the journey home).
- Understanding the need to engage non-Indigenous service providers to build relationships and trust to influence the wider system to understand the people they work with as whole people with histories who have negatively been impacted for generations.

A key aspect of this guide is to dispel the myth that the Housing First framework is rigid and overly focused on achieving fidelity. In contrast, what we observed is that increasingly, jurisdictions are finding innovative ways to better align the model with community-driven priorities and values. However, the recurrent challenge that emerged with localizing Housing First was often about understanding how to take a highly structured approach—based on core Housing First principles—to ensure the model becomes culturally-grounded and rooted in local priorities and the four principles noted above.

The following section highlights some considerations that have helped communities shape Housing First approaches within their local context. The outcome is a stronger focus on ensuring factors such as culture, community, and relationships play a leading role in creating a positive pathway toward recovery and ending homelessness within a locally driven environment.

- 🏠 *Housing First must not be seen as a rigid framework; while guiding principles should be included, local adaptations must be derived by and for the Indigenous community.*

Population Served

Housing First delivery should be centered on understanding the local population experiencing homelessness. For communities with high proportions of Indigenous persons experiencing homelessness two fundamental recognitions were observed:

- 🏠 *Individuals need to be supported by the Indigenous community through organizations that must lead and offer appropriate supports.*
- 🏠 *Supports are best provided from a full understanding of the impact history has and continues to play in acknowledging the person as a whole being and “one to be walked with, not fixed.”*

Understanding the local population experiencing homelessness is critical to help ensure the right agencies deliver Housing First, and that the most relevant programming is incorporated. Often, communities rely on their local point-in-time count or homeless census for an understanding of local population demographics. Some have used local surveys of those currently accessing services in the sector to determine who is experiencing or at risk of becoming homeless.

- 🏠 *The right information comes from many sources, including both traditional knowledge keepers and Elders, community members, and people with lived experience of homelessness, as well as from academic studies.*
- 🏠 *Strong cooperation and collaborations can help bring people together in a meaningful manner to support a better understanding of needs and solutions.*

Reliable data can help address disconnects between the realities understood by people with lived experience and by front-line workers, and those views held by local decision-makers or the public.

It is also important to consult with people with lived experience to draw on their expertise in terms of identifying needs and input on approaches and supports. Encouraging more cooperation is key to building an accurate assessment of the populations to be supported.

Some stakeholders engaged in this work cautioned that Housing First frameworks must not assume a generalized or pan-Indigenous approach: “When I asked them [funders] when we first started this work, so when you say ‘Indigenous,’ who are you serving, where are they from? Were they part of residential schools? Literally, not one organization knew that much about whom they were actually serving.” This speaks to the ongoing importance of understanding local community and being fully aware of the local population characteristics, their needs, and the best set of agencies to support a Housing First approach. For too long, service delivery and funding was not necessarily aligned with local needs. The result was that far too many non-Indigenous agencies were delivering services without meaningful awareness of the types of supports needed or the appropriate delivery methods.

Approaches should be developed in a way that recognizes the distinct local experiences while honouring the unique strengths of Indigenous peoples. We observed great diversity across Canadian Indigenous populations and local cultural practices, teachings, worldviews, ceremonies, and engagement with Elders. Approaches that are successful in one location may not necessarily translate well in other communities.

- › This again highlights the importance of bringing local leaders together and having the starting point for Housing First firmly set within community leadership who best understand local needs.

We also noted that the pathways into and out of homelessness are locally influenced. For example, in one northern community there is a large population of Inuit in the inner-city who are “struggling with homelessness because they have a relative receiving medical care in town and they don’t want them to be alone, to be away from them.”

With respect to the connection to health-related homelessness of persons, local communities must try to find the means to deal with the sudden onset of housing related shortages of persons traveling with family members for long-term care. This situation is present in many Canadian communities (large and small) where persons arrive for medical care from northern, rural and remote locations. While this situation may not relate directly to Housing First, it again highlights the need to have flexibility in the housing system to support a range of needs. It also requires Housing First teams to fully understand local factors that contribute to the numbers of persons experiencing homelessness. There have been cases where persons receiving care in one community have found themselves unable to make it back home for a variety of reasons (some of which do contribute to homelessness over the short and long term).

In other cases, urban homelessness has a link to a lack of on-reserve housing that pushes some out of home communities and into urban settings:

“In First Nation communities there’s no such thing as an apartment ... and houses are for family. So all those people, if they’re a single average person, particularly ones with addiction issues, you’re not living on the reserve because they won’t keep you and not necessarily because they don’t want you ... there’s no place for those people in a community that has no housing. So... when they come here there’s nowhere else to live but in the homeless shelter so they live on the street and they live in the bush.”

Ultimately, we must acknowledge that homelessness looks and is experienced differently in various community contexts, just as sources of trauma and challenges related to addictions (and different kinds of addictions) are distinct. Understanding the true nature of homelessness itself—and its root causes—has implications for assessing the type of housing and supports that may be most appropriate and effective.

The struggle to house persons experiencing homelessness in smaller communities can add significant strain to Housing First teams who are asked to work with a limited inventory of available housing. The result is affordable housing and options for all persons struggling are hard to come by, or in the case of northern towns can be extraordinarily expensive and limited. Within larger cities persons who have struggled with housing or have difficult tenancy histories are able to find more options than in small communities where fewer landlords contribute to some being unable to find housing easily.

Local Community Context

History

At the outset of this report, we included Jesse Thistle's definition of Indigenous Homelessness, which stresses the need to understand current homelessness within a wider colonial context that reflects distinct realities of being without shelter and disconnected from land and family networks. This perspective was captured in a Winnipeg interview in which one person commented:

“Homelessness is not just the sense that I don't have a home in Winnipeg, but also that sense of homelessness from people's traditional lands, so shaping our understanding, educating the whole project on what homelessness means to people, I think was really important.”

Acknowledging historical trauma and its role as a root cause of Indigenous homelessness is an appropriate starting point for communities and individuals as they begin their Housing First journey. Furthermore, efforts should expand their awareness of trauma and “be really weighing historical trauma in outreach and service and support.”

This again frames local responses around the four principles we started this section with, namely: providing trauma-informed care; recognizing culture and diversity; being strengths based; and ensuring cooperation and collaboration. These four principles were routinely observed in many of the delivery models included in this project.

Non-indigenous agencies applying these principles need to provide the space to those they are journeying with so that Indigenous people are comfortable enough to say, “You know what, we have been so screwed up by the system that we really don't trust you.” This quote reflects the reality of having to work in a manner that is truly more cooperative and collaborative. The system that has long disregarded the importance of adequately supporting, valuing, and funding Indigenous organizations should recognize the importance of Indigenous-led delivery of services.

In a separate framing of the same issues another person shared:

“My teaching was trust is given to everyone—distrust is earned. Basically, this is saying to me that over the generations the distrust has been earned—it has for many reasons, including outlawing teachings / taking land / taking resources / taking families, looking at people in a giving-and-taking relationship. No one acknowledges that we are where we are because one of the main tenets of colonization is to take from people—which they still do—but somehow they look at the people that they have taken everything from as the ‘takers’ and [colonizers] as the ‘givers.’”

Geography

To adopt Housing First locally, the size of a community and service area are important considerations. Many providers indicated that the coordination and staffing of Housing First initiatives should involve people from the area who understand the local history, priorities, needs, and strengths. This was emphasized in remote and northern communities but has value for all areas considering or implementing Housing First.

As services were developed, some communities acknowledged the uniqueness of working on unceded territory.¹⁰ This heightens the importance of understanding what it means for Indigenous individuals to be homeless on their own land, and this understanding should inform the way of working with individuals in such territories. One service provider expressed:

“I’m Indigenous, but ... I’m doing my work here on [a different] territory. ... Because here, this is unceded territory; there are no treaties, there are no agreements, and so we’re literally, like the organizations are illegally operating. And so it really took quite a bit of work to get [management] to wrap their heads around that, that it’s very important... And also recognizing that a lot of the people that we work with are homeless on their own land...”

Following local protocols also depends on understanding exactly whose territory is in question. One provider described the importance of this for engaging in particular ceremonies, such as naming the house in which a client was to be placed:

“The process I’m going through right now, [I need to talk to] language knowledge keepers. I’m just naming the house. That in itself is a whole process. What happens is a lot of times you’ll get urban communities that kind of think it’s okay... because they’re urban, but permission has to be sought from whose territory you’re on.”

The above quotes are included to offer a glimpse into a much more rich area of local contexts and traditions. Indigenous communities in Canada are immensely rich and diverse, with local unique traditions and protocols.

These examples provide further perspective on the need to ensure that all Housing First programs have the ability and flexibility to best reflect local geography and leadership. There is no one-shoe-fits-all model, and there will often be conflict and challenge, but the first step is always striving to best account for local conditions and match challenges with locally infused solutions. Our intent is to stress the need for local leadership to determine the best means by which to adapt the local implementation of Housing First.

The fact is, Canada has a vast geography, and some communities serve as transit or convergence points for surrounding First Nations or for Inuit people seeking services (be that health, education, housing, or employment or social services). It is thus important to understand how these mobilities impact the size, demographics, and characteristics of the population experiencing homelessness in a given community.

For some Indigenous individuals, the transition to urban life can be accompanied by homelessness and disconnection from culture, family and community. Understanding dynamic mobility patterns of some Indigenous people is important not only for those delivering services but also for funders who define jurisdictional boundaries for program activities. While outside of the purview of this work, health mobility of Indigenous persons can be negatively impacted by jurisdictional wrangling between federal health authorities and provincial agencies who have overlapping issues, with the provision of housing and health supports dependent on duration of stay away from home. This has negatively impacted both First Nations and Inuit persons arriving in urban centres for long-term treatment.

¹⁰ In Canada, ‘unceded’ land means that Aboriginal Title has neither been surrendered nor acquired by the Crown.

Social Service Context

Throughout Canada, many jurisdictions have a deep divide within the social service environment in addressing local issues with meaningful solutions to ending homelessness, eradicating poverty, and addressing unemployment. The history of the social service sector, and existing relationships within the sector, should be considered when advancing any program to ensure those with expertise are included. In Winnipeg, for example, within the social service sector “there were different perspectives on the Housing First approach itself ... you’re talking a model that was started in the States.” There was a sense of caution among many local leaders, who often questioned the manner in which Housing First could be situated within the local context.

The local service orientation can shape the way Housing First is adapted. Some communities may benefit from a more robust funding context, have more services available, or may have a greater stock of housing. Communities also noted the distinct barriers people face in accessing systems. Some barriers may result from discrimination or an individual’s history of interactions with a given organization or landlord. In smaller, more remote, and perhaps less “multicultural” contexts, there may be fewer service or referral options available, and challenges related to accessing systems may be more acute. This is one reason why it is so important to have the right systems-level partners engaged from the start.

People we spoke with also stressed the importance of assessing and building on the local capacity and expertise within the social service sector, especially as some organizations have long and established histories of working and building trust with homeless and/or Indigenous populations.

Working cooperatively and collaboratively is fundamental. As mentioned above, having the right governance model to bring the right people around the table at the outset is key to helping resolve some inter-departmental/agency challenges. Having more stakeholders share responsibility can potentially better resolve issues sooner and in a more transparent manner.

Housing Market

Housing is often a difficult component of Housing First given the capital-intensive nature of building and managing apartments. In larger markets, access can be limited by factors such as affordability, discrimination, and racism. In smaller communities the same factors can be present, but with much less availability and diversity in housing type or location. It was shared that many were shut out of housing based on stereotypes related to poverty and marginalization, based on, for example, whether they were receiving income assistance or in some cases on their physical appearance.

Housing First teams have thus had to address these challenges by shifting the manner in which they provide housing such as buying units, engaging in landlord relations, or simply being creative. However, ending homelessness, regardless of localizing efforts, is as much about addressing the shortage of quality and affordable housing as it is about programs and supports. Simply put, you need the right housing available along with a set of available supports. This includes Housing First housing specialists, property managers, social housing providers and the public housing sector. The only way for accessing appropriate housing is to ensure that the housing team is well supported by local experts and community leaders.

The local housing market is another important contextual consideration for Housing First. Many communities stressed that, even with a keen understanding of housing market conditions and their fluctuations, they had a greater than expected difficulty accessing housing. Finding housing is hard work and matching available housing with the needs and expectations of people can be daunting.

Across Canada, every community engaged in this project emphasized the challenge of a general lack of affordable housing. Shortages of housing were particularly acute in Vancouver and some northern communities (particularly where housing and vacancy rates are impacted by resource-related migration).

The limited stock for Housing First initiatives has led some communities and programs to adopt creative, sometimes less-than-ideal alternatives. “There’s housing,” one provider said, “but not for this population, at these rental rates.... That’s why we have participants living in hotels.” Another said: “If we can get them to living in a place where they’ve got their own room and their own bed and a place that actually has an address, we’ve done what we can for Housing First, because there’s no apartments.”

Some communities found it cheaper and easier to provide congregate housing in one building, and some used single room occupancy hotels (SROs) with some success. The lack of affordable housing also limits options for re-housing.

The above examples are cases in which local realities clash with Housing First principles. Many persons who experience hidden homelessness or become housed in suboptimal conditions run the risk of being in more vulnerable situations.

While SROs and other single-room options have been an important part of the affordable housing solution in many Canadian cities, they remain a less-than-ideal choice, especially in circumstances where the accommodations fall below an acceptable standard.¹¹

While a lack of housing and high unit costs present major barriers, another issue is how discrimination and negative perceptions of Housing First and its participants can limit access to housing. This is an issue that poses particular challenges for Indigenous people and other often marginalized cultural groups.

“I think the [Housing First] project recognized in a very practical way that, working with landlords, they were having to advocate and address two layers of stigma. Not just the stigma of people living with mental health issues and who were homeless, but also facing a lot of the racism and discrimination that Indigenous people face in accessing housing and accessing services.”

These challenges were especially acute in smaller communities or areas with a limited number of landlords (where there were few landlords, or where consolidated ownership of rental housing limited the number of landlords willing to engage with Housing First programs). For example:

“The community is just too small and people are too familiar with street involved folks. ... Our program participants are targeted all the time by neighbours. We’ve had a huge issue with accusations and reports by neighbours who are targeting people because they know they’re Housing First. We’ve also been targeted and harassed while trying to, like, visit units and stuff like that.”

¹¹ It is important to note that housing quality has been shown to play a role in promoting better health outcomes. The AHCS project developed and tested a survey instrument to assess quality and this can be used by communities to establish minimum standards (see Adair et al., 2016).

Understanding the unique barriers to access in a community is crucial, and these often require strong strategies of landlord engagement and public education to address NIMBY (not-in-my-back-yard) attitudes.

Providers noted that, because of local housing market conditions, they often meet Housing First model principles in every other category but are constrained from providing choice or scattered-site options to participants. Most people we spoke with stressed that the independent, scattered-site housing approach encouraged by the standard Housing First model is not always the best fit. Within stock that is available and accessible, housing units are not always the most appropriate, particularly for Indigenous people. Many communities recognized that Indigenous people often require or want “different types of units,” for example, housing with larger units that accommodate families with multiple children or that is designed in a way that offers opportunities for a sense of connection with community.

Migration to and from reserves and home communities should also be accounted for in an Indigenous approach. A respondent in one community noted practical considerations related to this:

“I think that, particularly important in recognizing the needs of urban Aboriginal populations, is also grounding it in the knowledge and needs of those communities. So, for example, people who return to their home communities during the summer—how do you, in a practical sense, manage rent supplements in someone’s apartment, and how do you support people to have those very fluid and community-based experiences?”

Overwhelmingly, our interviews stressed that there is a need for more—and more affordable, culturally-appropriate—housing in Canada. Some communities wished that Housing First funding allowed for capital investment in housing, so that in tight market conditions programs could buy or renovate the housing they need while building it in a style that best suits the populations they serve.

Localizing Housing First: A Summary

The intent of this section is to highlight several considerations for localizing Housing First in the Canadian context. What becomes clear is that any localization of Housing First must consider possible challenges for implementation. But this must be done by keeping the population being served at the forefront. Taking an Indigenous approach means understanding people through a community lens:

“Understanding who you are and where you come from and what your history has been. Every person has a story... they are part of a family, of a community, and a nation. They are someone—see them as a human being.”

It is also important to re-emphasize that adapting the approach involves undertaking a comprehensive analysis of local governmental relations, housing market conditions, and community capacity as well as understanding with whom you will be journeying. Establishing Housing First principles for operations, then enabling local Indigenous experience and expertise to create the most suitable programming possible is viewed as the most effective approach. Framing an understanding of history and the local context also means recognizing associated strengths.

Many respondents reminded us that, while it is crucial to acknowledge historical trauma and root causes of homelessness and addiction, factors such as culture, community, and sense of connection can lead to new and empowering journeys—for both individuals and the community at large.

Localizing efforts for Housing First thus remains pointed inward, and each community in partnership with local leadership must strive to work in a connected manner to resolve issues related to implementing a largely American model within the diversity of Canada’s populations.

We end this section much in the same manner as it began—by recognizing that effectively addressing homelessness is not just about the program, the supports, or even the housing. It is about the people presently experiencing homelessness who need to be placed first and foremost. This starts with understanding that each person is a whole person who has a story and a history. The groups and community leaders we spoke with care deeply about sustaining the right relationships to journey alongside each person. There is no one way to take this journey, but it begins with a conversation at the local level. It is important that we share such conversations in an open manner among communities so as to help support each other and perhaps learn from one another.



4) Housing First Team Development

Lead Agencies and Building Community Capacity

In previous sections, we note that Housing First must be rooted within a localized or Indigenous set of values and understandings to fully address the needs of the population experiencing or at risk of becoming homeless. In Winnipeg, what was emphasized was a Community Strengths Framework that included four key principles: providing trauma-informed care; recognizing culture and diversity; being strengths based; and ensuring cooperation and collaboration. These principles, built on the strengths of people being supported, helped lead to a successful implementation of an Indigenous Housing First program. The ability to do this stems from the individual and collective capacity of lead organizations that must be able to work collaboratively within the community in a manner that reflects local needs.

Organizations consulted in this project used different approaches, each drawing on their own internal capacity and experience. Many expressed a preference for Indigenous organizations to provide services to Indigenous people. There was wide agreement that, whatever agency is chosen to provide services, Indigenous or not, it should have extensive experience working with the individuals to be served and should be widely trusted in the community through established relationships and a long history of support.

It is critical that the internal capacity and experience of potential agencies be assessed carefully, and gaps acknowledged. Where possible, the agency should have a history of case management and service navigation. One agency, which had a strong record of case management, recognized they lacked expertise in finding housing and engaging with landlords.

To address this gap, they sought out an agency with this expertise and engaged in “quid pro quo” cross-training and learned from each other. In this case, “localizing” Housing First was an opportunity to build capacity within service agencies and the larger community.

For non-Indigenous organizations establishing programs that support Indigenous persons, most relied on advisory groups, such as a Cultural Safety Working Group, Indigenous Advisory Council, Cultural Lens Committee, or Lived Experience Circle. Many communities have used these structures to augment their approach, to better connect with the people being served, and to guide program development while being mindful of the cultural safety of Indigenous clients and staff.

- › Having strong local community ownership and meaningfully including those with lived experience helps strengthen an agency’s work in the future and build trust.

Beyond expanding capacity within existing agencies, Housing First implementation can build and further strengthen capacity within the community. In Winnipeg, for example, Housing Plus and Manitoba Green Retrofit (MGR) were social enterprises that emerged from a community-driven approach to provide housing-related supports to program participants. These organizations coordinated bulk purchasing of furniture and worked to ensure housing was in good condition (and left in good condition), adequately insured, and maintained. These examples illustrate a means of growing and leveraging the capacity of the community to care for its members, with a partnership between Indigenous and non-Indigenous members. Across Canada, there are many examples of service organizations developing social enterprises. These enterprises can expand the capacity of a Housing First program and provide ongoing employment opportunities as well as revenue streams for a program.

Staffing

“Loving, kind people who can show them to learn in different ways.”

While the intent of this report is not to prescribe a staffing formula, there is relevance in noting the types of positions observed within agencies delivering Housing First. Staff play key roles in working with individuals who participate in programming, and they contribute to ensuring an Indigenous vision for Housing First remains front and center. For many agencies, an Indigenous approach to staffing involved developing teams with specialized roles and resources, dedicated to incorporating a cultural lens in services and working from a trauma-informed care perspective.

A wide variety of these roles have been developed, with the following list including some examples:

- › Indigenous Culture Education Helper
- › Culture and Spiritual Liaison
- › Indigenous Community Liaison
- › Indigenous Client Service Worker
- › Elder
- › Elder Mentor
- › Cultural Mentor
- › Indigenous Community Liaison
- › One-on-One Mentor
- › Cultural Coordinator

While the above list is drawn from agencies providing Housing First with Indigenous persons, there is certainly much opportunity to explore how similar roles could support other populations in a localized model of Housing First.


Hiring

A localized approach to Housing First entails a fundamental shift in hiring requirements. A good example of such a shift comes from Winnipeg, where Indigenous leadership looked for kindness, empathy, and understanding first and foremost, followed by other job-related skills.

Kindness meant the applicant needed to have understanding, patience and compassion so as to not judge people. It meant having the knowledge to understand the ‘why’ behind a person’s healing journey as well as the ‘where’ they were on that journey. This type of job skill is hard to quantify but of great importance in working with a marginalized population.

All agencies interviewed noted the importance of having Indigenous staff working in any program or site. Indigenous staff members bring distinct knowledge, perspectives, and skills to the agency and the services they provide. One community leader noted that: “We’ve heard for decades now that there is need to have more Indigenous frontline workers or Indigenous people within those systems that work with Indigenous people.” The view was that the inclusion of Indigenous staff, as well as those with lived experience of homelessness, result in better outcomes and fewer negative interventions.

Winnipeg, as an example, approached agency development and staff hiring through a Community Strengths Framework, a strengths-based approach that recognized the importance of culture and diversity.

 *Staff with lived experience are very beneficial, as they come with the built-in understanding of the realities of persons experiencing homelessness along with cultural knowledge.*


To recruit more Indigenous staff, some organizations formed relationships with Indigenous educational institutions or hired practicum students. Management from agencies spoke of needing latitude to make exceptional hires to increase staff diversity and Indigenous representation, especially with regard to specialized “cultural” positions: “I needed to be able to hand pick staff and not get convoluted into all the issues... because there was going to need to be a whole paradigm shift in how we approached things. Obviously, an Elder would not be on that list of workers and have seniority anyway.”

Supporting Staff

Many agencies recognized the need for specific supports within the organization itself (particularly in non-Indigenous agencies), to provide opportunities for self-care, a culturally safe working environment, and decolonizing practices. There is widespread recognition that providing Housing First requires difficult emotional, psychological, and spiritual work, and there is a need for staff to have space and time for self-care.

Some pointed out that Indigenous or lived experience staff may be dealing with their own traumas. It was also observed that staff may experience discrimination and racism on the job, for example when engaging with landlords or the public.

One organization conducted a staff survey and found that there was a desire for a central person who could support Indigenous employees; they formed a delegation of Indigenous unionized employees and a Cultural Safety Working Group that advocates on behalf of those staff within the organization. Several non-Indigenous organizations offer “cultural” supports to staff, with agency members going on sweats, holding sharing circles, and shifting the very way work is done within the organization. Importantly, many of these supports are directed at and extend to all—not just Indigenous—staff, as a means of strengthening relationships and breaking barriers.

 *Good staff members are compassionate and passionate about their work. Work can be hard with vicarious trauma, so they must be able to talk openly about self-care, and be supportive of other staff.*

Cultural Training and Reconciliation in Action

All organizations spoke of orientation and training related to diversity and cultural education. Many also spoke of the importance of tailoring training to the local context. Service agencies spoke of the importance of orientation training for staff on cultural safety, and First Nations ‘History 101’. This kind of training often explicitly recognizes the knowledge of Indigenous staff within an organization who teach from a place of firsthand knowledge. Several non-Indigenous organizations stressed the importance, “especially around Housing First,” of “not just coming in and doing cultural safety and cultural sensitivity training, but they have to be partnered with anti-oppression and anti-racism,” and noted they have ongoing training and workshops for staff. One agency employed an Indigenous staff member dedicated to providing ongoing training. This helped clear up confusion among non-Indigenous staff about how Indigenous Housing First—and conceptions of “mental health”—may look different.

The above example highlights the importance of non-Indigenous agencies ensuring that their localization efforts best reflect the realities of the local population being supported, while working hard to ensure their training includes more than simply Housing First basics. As noted, this type of training must be delivered by qualified persons.

Several agencies mentioned that, initially, non-Indigenous staff were reluctant to engage in cultural and diversity training. Organizations stressed the importance of providing opportunities to have “difficult” conversations, to shift an often unspoken air of apprehension:

“Historically we’ve been really good at training our workers on how to provide that mental component to healing,... but the spiritual side has been treated like a grenade where, we don’t want to talk about it. ... You know, you don’t want to get into that conversation where it could get difficult and you don’t want to offend anybody. ... But just having our workers talk about this, you know, the Indigenous component, it’s not just for Indigenous participants. It’s for anybody.... If our workers can have that understanding about the holistic view of health and having those spiritual conversations, whether it’s Indigenous spirituality or any spirituality... and incorporate that into their practice, that’s a huge step in the bigger piece of what is health.”

Ongoing cultural education and training provide opportunities for these kinds of conversations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff and participants. They contribute to enhanced awareness and comfort levels. As a result, agencies have seen positive outcomes both in terms of the working environment as well as a carryover effect on program participants. Many stressed that such training should be accounted for in budgets and funding requests and be adequately staffed by qualified persons.

Some organizations we spoke with celebrated the transformative power of this kind of cultural sharing and relationship-building, with one asserting that it’s reconciliation in action:

“I’m sure it’s the same in any city with Housing First—that each agency tends to work in silos, right? And when they’re coming to these things, you know, whether its ceremony or [circle] process or medicine picking, or a pipe, or a powwow, or a sun dance, our institutional identities that we hold so tight, you know, our positions, and how many letters we have after our name, they’re stripped away. It’s almost creating this little support network of workers where they’re able to debrief... in a safe place. It’s neat to see that kind of thing grow. ... It’s reconciliation. Like when our faith-based organizations, our staff are coming to sweats and having a good time and stripping that away—one staff [member] said it’s not scary anymore. You know, and that’s huge, right? So, there’s bigger things at play here, too, than just Housing First.”

There is no simple pathway to hiring and training members of a Housing First team. Having a localized approach, however, requires more careful consideration of local identities. As briefly outlined above, Indigenous organizations are in the best position to provide support to Indigenous persons. However, across Canada, there remains a mix of service providers. Any agency should recognize culture and diversity and adopt a strengths-based approach. As one Cultural Liaison commented, “you know, learning about culture and the diversity of Indigenous culture is also really important. You have to be able to walk the talk. That’s the bottom line.”

For those agencies that are primarily non-Indigenous, it is important to ensure the right governance model that reflects a broader approach to inclusion, and that any staffing and training that require more cultural awareness be delivered consistently and by highly qualified personnel from the local community.

5) Implementing Localized Housing First

“Indigenized Housing First looks different, and that needs to be ok.”

This section looks more closely at several aspects of Housing First programs that have adapted operations either to be fully Indigenous or to incorporate significant Indigenous approaches to staffing, service delivery, and governance.

The intent is to offer a broad understanding of the dynamics of such programs, not delving into specific operational characteristics. We frame the review around Winnipeg’s Community Strengths Framework and four key principles: providing trauma-informed care; recognizing culture and diversity; being strengths based; and ensuring cooperation and collaboration.

- › Among Canadian providers, the advancement of an Indigenized Housing First framework was based on an Indigenous worldview that prioritizes relationships, recognizes trauma, and utilizes distinct structures of governance and operations.

Communities and organizations that have “Indigenized” Housing First place Indigenous culture and diversity at the heart of their work. Many spoke of the inclusion of a more holistic and community strengths framework. Others emphasized the importance of decolonizing programs, and how this manifests in community—in staffing, relationships, and practices that account for Indigenous ways of knowing and doing. Several organizations also referred to the need to balance Western and Indigenous models of care, and for leadership and staff to be comfortable working in both worlds.

This section begins by looking at intake and assessment and finds that many organizations struggle with using a highly Westernized approach to “ranking” or “placing” persons experiencing homelessness into programs. While this process is perhaps one of the most important steps in engaging people, it was repeatedly stressed that it must be done appropriately.

Local reactions to intake have resulted in processes being highly adapted or outright rejected by some organizations. This was seen as a fundamental right for local organizations, that they should have a choice in how to support persons experiencing homelessness by ensuring the first point of contact is one focusing on strengths and establishing good relations.


Following a look at intake and assessment, the focus shifts to the importance of relationships, culture, and key elements of housing delivery. Again, each section strives to highlight points of interest from organizations that have changed and adapted Housing First programs to better reflect local needs and priorities while ensuring a stronger sense of cultural alignment.

Service Delivery

Intake and Assessment

For many Housing First programs, intake and assessment may be the first encounter with a person experiencing homelessness. The time spent on this aspect of the process is critical for building a relationship and understanding need. It can also be highly traumatizing and emotionally charged for the person applying for service, depending on the type of intake and assessment tools used. It is certainly essential that this step be undertaken with the greatest care. This must include extensive staff training to undertake assessments and to communicate outcomes (e.g., whether it’s a direct placement into a program or not). Regardless, many persons undergoing intake run the risk of potentially being re-exposed to trauma and may require additional support.¹²

Any approach to intake should be one that is respectful and that promotes relationship- and trust-building. Some key observations that contributed to “success” in the Winnipeg approach included:

 *Having outreach staff on the streets and in the homeless community who were well known and trusted;*

¹² *It is important to note that in the Winnipeg At Home/Chez Soi project, the staff doing intake and assessments also required support and services for their wellbeing. The nature of questions and the fact that some people were randomized into care as usual and did not receive housing and supports resulted in a very stressful environment.*

- 🏠 *Having staff provide information and an opportunity for a conversation, or a direction to go in;*
- 🏠 *Ensuring the process treated all equally and with respect; and*
- 🏠 *Having resources and a protocol for those being assessed, as well as for staff, to ensure there are supports in place.*

Incorporation of local knowledge and experienced staff are essential to help understand the person being interviewed but, as expressed in the section below, many of the current approaches to intake lack an understanding of local culture and complexity. It is important to note that some organizations do not agree with using any type of assessment tool.

Assessment Tools

Indigenous organizations discussed many challenges with the standard assessment tools used during intake.¹³ These challenges range from conceptual and ethical problems to practical concerns about their implementation and effectiveness when used with Indigenous people. There has also been an increase in scholarly research examining the challenges of intake and assessment tools such as the commonly used VI-SPDAT.¹⁴

- › Many organizations have made local adaptations to these tools so they are more effective, responsive, and culturally safe when used with Indigenous persons.

Some Indigenous organizations stated that they are against assessment tools, as the concept of such a tool works against beliefs and values around equity and community. One person noted they “refused to prioritize one person against another,” especially based on an arbitrary requirement of homelessness for a set period of time as a criterion.

- › From our view, assessment and intake must begin with the person needing help, and the organization willing to walk with that person on their journey to recovery. This journey is often along a pathway that builds on the Community Strengths Framework and the need to help.

Organizations also noted significant challenges inherent in the design and use of assessment tools. One primary concern is re-traumatization.¹⁵ In addition, most intake tools are designed with the assumption they provide accurate information on an individual’s circumstances in a short period of time. This can be inappropriate for those suffering from trauma or for anyone who may not be comfortable with an invasive clinical tool. One Elder, for example, indicated that survivors of trauma may only reveal their history “bit by bit,” over many discussions, and only with a trusted person. Another Indigenous program leader commenting on the time required for an assessment noted, “You know, it takes us a half an hour just to say hello.”

The above statements echo the need to look past the narrowness of tools to focus more on the individual’s whole story and needs. Each person’s history and circumstances are unique and many are guarded in sharing until they have developed trust and relationships. This can be especially challenging in the provision of supports to Indigenous persons from non-Indigenous based agencies.

Organizations also noted that assessment tools tend to focus on the “unwellness” of an individual, asking only about challenges and not about positive experiences or strengths in a person’s life. This one-sided approach is not holistic and can be disempowering, with a tendency to reinforce negative aspects of a person’s life. Many counter this by focusing on a strengths-based approach locally adapted to help an organization understand needs in a manner respectful of each person’s unique story and circumstances.

¹³ *These may include, for example, the Vulnerability Index – Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT) or the Vulnerability Assessment Tool (VAT).*

¹⁴ *See, for example, Brown et al. (2018).*

¹⁵ *Assessment tools specifically caution interviewers of the danger of re-traumatizing individuals. Proper training in the use of a tool and sensitivity of the interviewer to an individual’s history and situation may alleviate some of this concern.*

Assessment tools have also been criticized for not specifically recognizing historical trauma or the “cultural components of homelessness” (e.g., recognition of the distinctiveness of Indigenous homelessness such as that advanced by Jesse Thistle). Many organizations commented that assessment tools often use clinical language and are based on assumptions about health and wellbeing, which do not always translate to local and lived realities. For example, one service provider indicated that mental health is not discussed as such among local Indigenous people, very few have been formally diagnosed, and few associate current trauma or PTSD with residential schooling. Moreover, assessment tools and the intake process can represent a system of power or authority, making some hesitant to participate. The broader lesson is that any community should take the time they need to talk through questions that may be invasive or inappropriate in the local context, and to discuss ethical considerations, before developing their intake process.

There are some positive stories emerging in response to the sometimes negative views of such tools. This includes innovative efforts by organizations serving Indigenous people, which are developing more holistic approaches. For example, Winnipeg experimented with an expanded interview process that includes a much broader range of questions. This includes additional areas about friendships, family, and positive experiences in a person's life. Other service organizations have added questions related to distinct experiences of Indigenous people that may impact homelessness, including questions about moving off of reserves or from home communities, or about family history or experiences with inter-generational trauma.

It is worth noting that there are assessment tools that have been designed specifically by and for Indigenous people.¹⁶ Housing First screening and assessment tools have also been adapted for use with youth, families, and survivors of domestic violence. It is important to find the right approach—one that best fits the local population and that strives to provide the necessary information to help support a person transitioning from homelessness.

- › Clearly, there are challenges with assessment tools that do not reflect the local population. This has been addressed by organizations taking the lead in creating tools that allow both those asking questions and those answering to see themselves reflected in a manner that allows for more meaningful outcomes to be achieved.

In addition to the tool itself, conducting an assessment requires a high level of skill and experience. While training is useful, experience in the homeless-serving sector was seen as essential to performing quality assessments. Furthermore, wherever possible, Indigenous caseworkers should conduct assessments with Indigenous people, both for cultural safety as well as more effective assessments.

As indicated in the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness *Screening for Housing First* report,¹⁷ screening and assessment processes and tools should reflect the needs of a community's homeless population:

“Be open to adaptations in how you use assessment tools to meet your local needs! Keep in mind that assessment tools supplement all of the other information you are collecting through contacts with clients and other service providers.”

¹⁶ One such tool is the “Hua Oranga”: A Māori Measure of Mental Health Outcome (see Kingi & Durie 1999). This is designed to consider aspects of mental health outcomes appropriate and relevant to Maori, and consistent with Maori concepts of health and wellness. It is a holistic model and includes four dimensions: Spiritual, Mental, Physical, and Family. As well as assessing the person who is homeless, the tool is also used with the family of the individual, and is focused on the wellbeing of all.

¹⁷ See Aubry et al. (2015, p. 4). <https://www.homelesshub.ca/resource/screening-housing-first-phase-one-assessment-road-map>

Be aware that many assessment tools are proprietary, and resistant to adaptations — but can be supplemented with other information. Having the right tools and staff to support persons experiencing homelessness is essential to embark on the pathway to housing and building long-term relationships. The next section shifts into elements of relationship building and considerations for housing.

Putting Relationships First in Housing First

“Success” in Housing First is all too often aligned with the percentage of persons remaining in stable housing, with “the higher the better” being the most common mantra. While achieving long-term housing stability is a critical consideration, what has been frequently omitted is the value of building and maintaining strong relationships as core to supporting housing stability and better overall outcomes for persons engaged in Housing First programs. This section examines the elements of building relationships through the lens of Indigenous-based programs to offer insight into service development and delivery. Building good relationships forms an essential aspect of casework, and they take time and care to nurture and maintain. For Indigenous Housing First providers, the very essence of relationship was elevated to a much higher level among the steps needed to house and connect with each person. For many teams, this included more attention on the roles of Elders and frontline workers, who each contribute to building self-identity, a sense of purpose, a sense of family, and a feeling of community. It is these factors that many spoke of as contributing greatly to a program’s success for both the individual being supported and the team providing care.

For example:

“Housing First and Rapid Rehousing, being very established in the medical and psychiatric community, are very clinical. And that is fine, that’s one approach. The Indian/Métis Friendship Centre, we saw their focus was relational. And considering the cultures, that was the right approach.”

“The feedback that we’ve been hearing is that relationship building, that sense of kinship, is really what is making the difference for a lot of people.”

These quotes emphasize the importance of relationship-building as a basis for understanding an individual and being able to walk with them on their journey. In the case of Winnipeg, having conversations with people to understand each person and their journey was essential, and worked to eliminate shame and guilt. This approach was one of talking and understanding—not as a therapist or social worker, but more so as an aunt or uncle. This was reflected in the spirit of the programming, as many spoke about treating people like relatives.

An Indigenous approach to Housing First acknowledges the importance of building relationships. This is achieved by understanding each person and their journey, and facing the trauma that is most often encompassed within this journey. Once there is the opportunity to talk and be heard, individuals can begin to heal and achieve balance. With more balance many will work toward increased stability. This ‘relationship-based care’ is about understanding each person as an individual, but it is also about collective healing. *It is the participants relationship with the worker and Elder that is the healing*, not a worker using the relationship to understand how to provide interventions.

The healing that comes from this relationship is about (for example) learning and understanding boundaries, autonomy, interconnectedness, self-respect, care for others, and hope. These, along with many others, are learned through the relationship and are the building blocks of healing and living in balance.

What emerged in discussions with service providers was that by the time an Indigenous person has lost a place to live, they have often lost a sense of self, of spirit and hope. Through relationship-building and walking with the person comes a recognition that someone cares. Accepting that someone cares can lead to acceptance of a renewed sense of community.

Establishing trust and building relationships comes from hard work and caring in all aspects of Housing First delivery. For example the “weekly home visit” in the Winnipeg At Home/Chez Soi project was used as an opportunity to strengthen relationships while maintaining consistency with Housing First principles. The general approach to the weekly home visit often focuses on checking in on the condition of the unit, with an emphasis on housing stability. However, for local groups, “home visiting” became a key cultural expression in which the visit was guided by local cultural norms and relationship building. The home visit was not simply about working to sustain the apartment (as in the fidelity model), but evolved into an experience focused on connecting and visiting with the person within a traditional sense of knowing and being.

Within Winnipeg’s Community Strengths approach, placing the person first and working alongside become critical for people being able to see themselves reflected in all aspects of the program. This approach contributes to building a person’s self-awareness; from a position of safety and stability people can then begin to reflect on their journeys and the teachings they have learned along the way. Emphasizing culture and diversity as well as building self-awareness and capacity remain central parts of the journey from survival to thriving.

Trauma-Informed Care




One of the most important elements of an Indigenous Housing First program is framing it within a Trauma-Informed Care approach. Almost every service organization interviewed remarked on the damaging effects of trauma, and the complexity of treating trauma when combined with mental health challenges or addictions. Many noted the cultural dimensions of these impacts, including the disconnection from culture and language and the erosion of traditional family and community relationships and ways of living. Others have stated strongly that it is trauma that drives and triggers addictions, and that homelessness becomes a symptom of trauma.

“Trauma doesn’t go away just because you have a roof over your head.”

The quote above is fundamental to reinforcing how important it is for Housing First to encompass much more than just housing and to continually focus on each person’s journey toward recovery. The importance of individual planning is central to Housing First, and this allows localized efforts to best reflect the realities of a community, including addressing trauma both current and historic.

Trauma-informed care is a strengths-based framework, one that is “grounded in an understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of trauma.” The approach emphasizes safety—physical, psychological, and emotional—of both survivors and providers, and a trauma-informed approach “creates opportunities to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment.”¹⁸

Community organizations emphasized the positive impacts trauma-informed approaches can have on wellbeing. With space and time, participants can begin to address anger and depression and can begin working towards healing and forming healthy relationships. Introducing or re-introducing culture can also help:

-  *Support working through the effects of colonialism and understanding a person’s history;*
-  *Grow a better understanding of one’s spirit and seek to rebuild balance in one’s life; and*
-  *Acknowledge that, to heal, one needs to know their past and history, the trauma that they have encountered, and the capacity to heal from it.*

This is intensive and difficult work which requires resources, and many organizations noted a lack of specific funding for trauma-informed care and long wait-times for participants to access professional services. Overall, many noted a need for health and homeless-serving systems to more fully embrace a trauma-informed approach to care and ensure there are adequate resources to support and fund operations.

¹⁸ See Hopper et al. (2010, p. 82).

Harm Reduction

The principles of harm reduction are fundamental to the Housing First philosophy. The values of harm reduction mirror the values of Housing First. Seeing people as *people* and contextualizing the experiences of substance use within the experiences of colonization is important. As the Aboriginal Coalition to End Homelessness states:

“Education is central to decolonizing understandings of addiction and substance use, so that harms are understood in terms of colonial and systemic conditions in which people have experienced grief, loss, and racism.”¹⁹

A harm reduction approach places emphasis not on the substances themselves, but on how their use is related to larger harms—in the Indigenous context, to those associated with colonization. Within this understanding, healing is larger than sobriety. Harm reduction asks that we put aside our assumptions about who can be helped and how healing happens.

For some, harm reduction presents a new way of working with people, and it is not always well understood. In a Housing First context, harm reduction extends past handing out supplies and into confronting the harm that social forces impose on people who use drugs. The harm of homelessness is one of stigma, criminalization and violence done against people using drugs to “punish” people for using. A core principle of Housing First is that everyone deserves a home. When working with diverse Indigenous communities and leadership, it is important to be mindful of how teachings align with the Housing First and harm reduction philosophy. There are different comfort levels working with harm reduction, but relationships forged through the delivery of Housing First programs can provide an opportunity for information sharing and education on these approaches.

Linking with the sector that responds to substance use is essential. For example, the Manitoba Harm Reduction Network has worked extensively to improve harm-reduction skills in home communities, and to link cultural practices to harm reduction. Too often the homeless-serving sector and addictions sector work in silos from each other and from Indigenous leadership.

There are challenges in explaining harm reduction, and community resistance is commonplace. Within Indigenous communities there are many abstinence-based perspectives. However, much like intake and assessment, there is no one standard model of care for Housing First. With respect to harm reduction, education becomes critical in helping ensure teams are equipped to support people on their journeys. While there is always room for a variety of views, teams must be able to offer the right mix of supports that may include recognizing the role abstinence plays. Equally important is that within Housing First fidelity and core principles, harm reduction forms a central part of the “tools” that have been shown to be most effective in supporting better outcomes.

Having the right evidence, grounded in its effectiveness for a given community, must be included within a Housing First approach. Over the last three decades, research on substance use has overwhelmingly shown that harm reduction strategies are the most effective ways to provide support to people using drugs.

Culture, Land, and Community

Culture is about more than cultural teachings or practices; it is about connection—to self, family, community, nature, and nation. It’s also about taking a strengths-based approach to Housing First that walks with each person collaboratively and collectively. An Indigenous approach to Housing First is one that recognizes the fundamental importance of culture and connection.

¹⁹ See *Aboriginal Coalition to End Homelessness (2018, p. 24)*. <http://aboriginalhomelessness.ca/>



The design and delivery of services are shaped by this approach, and may include:

- 🏠 *The introduction or re-introduction to ceremonies and teachings, so that individuals can understand who they are, where they came from, how history has impacted them, and how trauma has impacted them in their journeys;*
- 🏠 *A reconnection to the land, and a positive sense of history; and*
- 🏠 *The rebuilding of a sense of community, with movement from the street community to a new and engaging broader Indigenous community.*

This approach acknowledges all people are connected, and that the loss of connection causes trauma, which transforms lives. Many viewed the loss of culture and kinship as a primary driver of homelessness. This also speaks to the very definition of Indigenous homelessness; as Thistle describes: “Unlike the common colonialist definition of homelessness, Indigenous homelessness is not defined as lacking a structure of habitation; rather, it is more fully described and understood through a composite lens of Indigenous worldviews. These include individuals, families, and communities isolated from their relationships to land, water, place, family, kin, each other, animals, cultures, languages, and identities.”²⁰

It is through this broader lens that Housing First teams must work to more clearly understand and position both the immediate need for shelter with the more nuanced need to reconnect people with much more than just services or even housing. Adopting such an approach to Housing First service delivery thus means moving beyond cultural competence to an approach based in cultural safety—one that considers how social and historical contexts, as well as structural and interpersonal power imbalances, shape health, healthcare, and housing experiences.²¹ It means

understanding that the historical outlawing of cultural practices contributed to why things are the way they are today. Taking a culturally-safe approach to service delivery entails recognizing diversity and that cultural identity, and knowing who you are and your place in community, is fundamental to inter-generational healing.

Culture and Land

Many organizations emphasized the importance and effectiveness of culturally-grounded programming within an Indigenizing Housing First framework that (re)connects people to community and the land. This type of programming was seen as impactful and fundamentally shifts the model of Housing First away from a narrow definition of providing community supports to a much broader inclusion of connecting people to land and community (which may be far from urban settings).

Through relationships, walking-with, and understandings of culture, connections can be rebuilt, and trauma can begin to be healed. From this new journey stability in housing can emerge. For example, one organization spoke to the need to connect people and community through a community gathering space:

“Through the Friendship Centre they bring our cultural traditions like smudging and different ceremonies, which is a fabulous part of getting our culture back and living under more of a spiritually guided journey rather than a dictated [model]. It’s our Creator that really shares with us our path and then we walk in that path, and through our Elders they help us to continue to walk in that path. I think the biggest thing is the connectivity—that many of our families, and individuals that are homeless, are disconnected from the community.”

²⁰ Thistle (2017).

²¹ For a discussion of a “cultural safety” approach in healthcare delivery, see Ward et al. (2016).

The above quote highlights what was echoed by many others, which is that reconnection with the land, and being “on the land,” is critical to delivering culturally- grounded programming. Another agency representative noted that, especially when working with Indigenous people:


“Counselling and all of those kinds of practices are so much more effective when someone’s in their element. So that’s the most important thing I can stress about our program, being out on the land with people is where the best work happens.”

Embracing the importance of connections among people, land, and community remains at the heart of many Housing First teams in Canada. The examples included above represent a small set of approaches within a vastly more complex area of Housing First delivery that have become more culturally diverse over the past decade. Canadian Housing First teams have shown great leadership in adapting the model to better align with local values and approaches to supporting persons who had experienced homelessness.

Community and Family


Many organizations emphasized the key Housing First objective of community integration when working with Indigenous communities. Housing First is based on a client-centered philosophy, with services directed toward an individual based on a unique plan developed in collaboration with the case worker. Repeatedly, however, organizations also spoke of the need to think even more collectively and work collaboratively, noting that they must include families, extended families, and larger communities beyond the individual. Community and family engagement and family reunification can be life-changing, rewarding, and empowering for program participants. It is also important to understand how kinship and connection is already a strong ethic in the community of homeless people. They have survived because they have created connections and support each other. Working to support people’s understanding

of their cultural identity and role in the community is important in healing and for social inclusion.

 *Introductions to Elders and other community resources is a means for individuals to get to know others who can support them and provide greater capacity to join the larger community.*

Reconnections with culture, family, and community fit within the Community Strengths and integration approach, and teams should be supported to facilitate these. The value and fundamental importance of culturally-relevant programming must be recognized and supported by funders.

Funders often do not recognize these supports as “allowable expenses.” Some organizations have called for more flexible funding to allow greater participation by families and for community healing. Many also noted that cultural education and awareness needs to occur at a higher policy and systems level.

 *A community strengths-based approach facilitates a conscious regrowth of the sense of connection and community. Many organizations deliver services in a group setting to promote a sense of community and engage in land-based activities to support a sense of connection and awareness of the land.*

Lastly, the approach to Housing First delivery anticipates that program participants will eventually “graduate.” This may be a reasonable expectation for many people, but as service providers mentioned, some participants (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) face multiple barriers to “graduation” and “integration,” as traditionally understood. Housing First prioritizes the highest acuity people, who once stabilized in housing may continue to require many years of some level of support. Resources for these supports should not only be flexible, but also require some longer-term commitment.

Overall, Housing First continues to evolve in Canada, with Indigenous organizations nurturing practices that better reflect local needs and considerations. The result is that more people are seeing themselves

reflected in programming and supports. This also demonstrates greater connectedness to community, land, and traditions in a manner derived from and for Indigenous persons. Finally, while early Housing First efforts in Canada sought to closely adhere to fidelity with the standard Housing First model, this too has shifted to better encompass local realities in a more respectful manner.

Housing Delivery

Community organizations stressed the importance of relationships, family, and community connections when developing local housing strategies. This included the type of housing, which tended to be more thoughtful and reflective of being more than a roof over one's head.

The importance of housing cannot be understated; it is recognized as a key social determinant of health and wellness for all people. For Indigenous peoples experiencing homelessness, having access to culturally relevant, suitable, and affordable housing contributes directly to improved health, wellness, and stability.

However, providing appropriate housing is often challenging and dependent on many local factors. In Step 3 on Localizing Housing First, we note some difficulties related to the local housing context, including a lack of affordable housing, local housing market conditions, insufficient resources for housing, and barriers related to discrimination and racism. Many community organizations have made local adaptations and found innovative ways to address challenges to better reflect local needs.

Collective Living

Housing First models tend to emphasize scattered-site, one-bedroom apartments as the primary option to house persons. While this model works for most, community organizations repeatedly noted that this narrow view does not always fit Indigenous understandings of housing. For instance, some prefer more communal and family-centered living arrangements as opposed to single-occupancy ones.

Many also commented on the practical advantages and considerations associated with communal options. These include, for example, minimizing risks of isolation associated with living alone or in scattered-site housing located far from community and supports. The view was that such arrangements intensify feelings of isolation and loneliness, and may impede the healing journey.

It is important to note that a core principle of Housing First is community integration and choice of housing. For programs operating in large urban settings, supporting persons in neighbourhoods of their choosing is important. But this assumes that people have a tie to the local community. In contrast, many Indigenous providers commented on “community” being more distinct and often encompassing home communities and broader connections to others. As well, the disconnection from home community and land has unique impacts for housing choices and outcomes.

For some people, especially those with street-entrenched histories, a trusted, known community can be particularly comforting. Communal living arrangements can provide community and support feelings of safety. One Indigenous service provider reflected on how important this sense of community can be:

“When we set up our winter shelters, the temporary cold weather shelters, these guys thrive; they love the shelter. They love it because there’s regular meals, there’s community around them, they’re all together, they all know each other, they’re treated [well], they like the staff, they’re understood...”

Many organizations identified a need for congregate options outside of the core, to minimize isolation and provide community. Those organizations that have experimented with communal living arrangements have remarked on their success and positive outcomes for people.

Family, Visitors, and Housing

Reconnecting to community and family often challenges traditional Housing First approaches to shelter. The presence of family and visitors is often framed as a challenge by service providers and landlords, and is cited as a contributing factor for complaint and potentially eviction. Indigenous caseworkers and organizations noted the importance of understanding distinct cultural norms related to housing. For many Indigenous people it is unthinkable not to allow family to stay with them. As one service provider explained: "...people can't just say no, you can't say no to an Elder... culturally you can't say no."

This cultural norm is less anticipated by both Western tenancy laws and the traditional Housing First model, which emphasize an individual rather than family- or community-centered approach to service and housing delivery. Typically, in a scattered-site arrangement, the housing units are one-bedroom, with occupancy standards enshrined in policy that dictate only one person per unit. This introduces a tension between the housing model and the reality of Indigenous peoples' lives.

It is important to stress that Housing First programs internationally wrestle with the challenge of over-occupancy of apartments. This is a common occurrence in which persons exiting homelessness often feel it difficult to leave others behind. This becomes one of the more identifiable factors contributing to difficult tenancies and perhaps eviction or rehousing. It is also perhaps the most problematic in terms of attaining a solution.

Many organizations identified the need for Housing First programs to provide culturally-supportive or communal housing options that accommodate family when needed. Although there have been many experiments with communal housing within Housing First programs, providing it remains a challenge and a significant financial consideration to address.

Many programs have found ways to adapt their housing delivery models to allow more flexibility in allowing visitors and supporting family. Where possible, this has included providing large gathering spaces within or in close proximity to housing to facilitate engagement with family and community. This again presents a unique housing model but one that requires a distinctive funding model that moves beyond a simple housing subsidy to one that includes more innovative forms of housing that match the expectations of Housing First teams supporting Indigenous persons.

When housing an individual, a community-grounded approach often entails extending supports to the broader family, to assisting them in finding housing or accessing supports as well. Service providers noted that family dynamics and situations are often fluid, with family members moving in and out of the housing, and this requires a dynamic and flexible approach to working alongside participants. Within a community-based approach, assisting family is seen as part of building community and engaging family in the success of an individual and their tenancy.

Adopt a Community-Based Approach

As noted above, departing from the traditional model of providing single-occupancy apartments may come with different challenges and increased costs. The ability to allow for accommodation of family and friends or to have more gathering spaces requires a shift from the scattered-site model to perhaps more of a self-contained communal approach. Such a model may require Housing First teams to consider building and or managing housing instead of partnering with existing property managers for individual units.

Much like the emphasis on relationships, the importance of creating communities is also critical. This may involve accommodating larger, multi-generational, or extended family structures.

Within a building, it may mean flexibility around visitors and acknowledging street-communities. If a service organization has access to an entire building or wishes to use a congregate site model, opportunities exist to create community by providing communal spaces and programming that is reflective of or relevant to Indigenous peoples and cultures.

Many service providers also emphasized the importance of keeping communities together. As one organization stated, “so many of our shelter programs and transitional housing programs that we’ve developed over the years have separated people from their communities and we haven’t really, in many ways, made an impact on their longer-term housing stability.” This quote is an example of the mismatch between the need to keep people better connected to community-based services and to be near friends and family. It further speaks to the realities of undertaking such a pathway in light of difficult housing markets where choices are often limited by cost and distance (e.g., there can be affordable choices but they can be dislocated from services and supports, including access to transit).

What was also repeatedly shared was ensuring there is an emphasis on maintaining relationships and building healthy communities, rather than moving a person into a situation of isolation. This was done by placing a person into housing of their choice. If they are settling in a new community, this means supporting them not only with services and resources, but also through social and community connections. Community organizations are part of that social network fabric.

The lack of affordable housing often means that the only housing available is of poor quality, or found in neighbourhoods considered unhelpful for recovery. Many Housing First participants have expressed the desire to move out of areas that may re-trigger issues such as substance use.

All evidence points to the need to balance the need to balance approaches through a harm reduction lens that works individually with persons to support choices being made not only for housing but also for services related to addictions, managing triggers, addressing trauma, and connecting with local community (among others).

Ultimately, communities must weigh the benefits and strengths of any housing model to address local market conditions and other culturally-relevant factors. However, an overriding issue is the relative costs associated with the various approaches. This will require organizations to carefully consider each option and have a funding plan in place. What remains clear is that many organizations see increased benefit from housing being more than just a roof over one’s head.

Housing Staff

The successful delivery of housing services requires specialized staff and a plan to ensure there are adequate supports in place to manage and maintain housing. As noted previously, housing delivery takes many forms but often individual units are secured using a scattered-site approach. This model requires partnerships with external housing agencies (private, public, and non-profit) to obtain a range of housing types in various locations. This section provides a snapshot of housing services that have been adapted to better reflect local realities and Indigenous cultures.

For many persons entering a Housing First program, the provision of housing is often the first support they receive. The Housing Specialist position forms an integral part of the Housing First team. Housing Specialists play a dual role—not only assisting people to obtain housing but also working to build and maintain relationships with property managers. They use a variety of tools to sustain relationships and are often extremely knowledgeable about local market conditions and housing availability.

Depending on the program, Housing Specialists engage landlords on a near-daily basis. Some programs offer 24-hour emergency on-call service for landlords when problems occur in a housing unit (this is particularly popular with landlords who want direct access to a staff member). The At Home/Chez Soi Winnipeg Site offered training for landlords in harm reduction, as well as cultural and mental health awareness, and this was found to ease tensions and improve understanding of the people being housed. Cultural awareness education and diversity training can also ease tensions with landlords and other tenants. Opportunities for landlords to meet outreach teams and Housing First participants are useful at improving communications.

Organizations repeatedly remarked on the difficulty of finding and retaining Housing Specialists, who require particular skill-sets in building relationships with landlords and understanding and navigating the local market. They often suffer from high rates of burnout. The challenge of finding units, addressing problems, and perhaps rehousing people is an enormous undertaking and in difficult markets, this can be time consuming.

An important aspect of Winnipeg's Community Strengths approach was the development of Housing Plus to assume much of the burden of securing and managing the housing portfolio of nearly 300 units. The unique aspect of Housing Plus was the emphasis on working collaboratively to develop skills and build local capacity. This was accomplished by working with local non-profits and social enterprises in meaningful partnerships.

Having Flexible Options for Housing

Having flexible funding options for Housing First participants is an emerging area. This type of funding goes beyond typical rent subsidies to include additional supports to help increase stability.

Community organizations argued for flexible funding around housing as well as for services. For those that do have it, this flex-funding was typically used for problem solving and eviction prevention—managing situations and preventing people from being evicted. One program used their flexible financial assistance to do upgrades to housing or to improve security of housing, and thereby locked-in that unit with the landlord. Flexible funding for housing can also be useful to address barriers such as lack of damage deposits, or a when a Housing First participant is refused a damage deposit by social assistance. Flexible funding is also critical for getting housing units quickly in tight markets.

Several service agencies also spoke of the importance of using clear and accessible language in legal agreements and informational documents. In addition to reframing documents, several agencies have translated informational brochures and Housing First program documents into local Indigenous languages. Legal agreements (rental agreements, financial agreements such as direct deposit) in particular tend to be difficult to understand and may be phrased in language that emphasizes rules. One Indigenous Housing Specialist reflected:

“We saw the agreements that were set up; we said, can we change some of this wording? I mean it’s making like we’re God and omniscient and we have full control. You need to change the language to be more helpful and collaborative and they’re in charge of their own destinies and we’re here to help them.”

This quote reiterates the importance of adopting an approach that is collaborative, which honours people, and understands that each person has knowledge, gifts, and wisdom to share.

Adaptations Related to Housing Type

The design of housing—from its location, to the spaces provided, to the design of the building and rooms—can impact the success of Housing First participants. The standard Housing First model presumes not only that private market rental, scattered-site housing is appropriate for the people being housed, but also that such housing is actually available and accessible. Across Canada there is a noted lack of affordable rental housing for Housing First programs to access. Programs have been creative in finding solutions and responding to the specific needs of the people they are serving. The variety of responses speaks to the adaptability and flexibility of the model. These include the:

- › integration of Housing First into a shelter setting,
- › use of rooming houses,
- › use of student accommodations,
- › purchase and re-use of a bed and breakfast (with shared kitchen and communal spaces),
- › use of shared rental apartments,
- › use of modular housing (single units grouped together),
- › use of rented houses used for communal living (shared kitchen, washroom, communal spaces),
- › purchase and conversion of an apartment block into communal housing,
- › use of dorm-style communal living with shared facilities,
- › use of hotels,
- › purchase of duplexes/triplexes for shared and family housing,
- › use of subsidized Indigenous artist residences within a boutique hotel
- › use of purpose-built, owned apartment buildings, and,
- › use of custom built multi-floor, varied-acuity housing, specifically designed for the needs of the local Indigenous population.

This list includes both units that are rented for Housing First from the open market as well as units that are owned by community organizations providing Housing First services. Because of the lack of affordable housing and the additional barriers often faced by Indigenous people, many community organizations expressed the need and desire for custom-built and community-owned housing for Indigenous people experiencing homelessness.

However, funders often do not support the construction of affordable housing. One program manager from a northern community expressed a common frustration with the structural constraints posed by the limited housing market:

“If you can’t get housing and you can’t build housing and you can’t find housing, you need to relocate people to where there is housing because our Housing First opportunities are slim to none.”

Another respondent reflected on this frustration with forward-looking optimism:

“Maybe some point down the road maybe we can all convince our respective First Nations to pool some money together and we could create our own housing, you know. ... Maybe we could develop our own housing co-operative.”

These quotes speak to the frustration felt by many delivering housing services in Housing First programs, but also to the underlying importance of maintaining a cooperative, collaborative community strengths approach—and the desire and need for Indigenous self-determination in addressing Indigenous homelessness.

Repeatedly, and across the country, community organizations mentioned the need to buy or build housing specifically for Indigenous people experiencing homelessness. Many thought this would be the only way to respond to the lack of affordable housing and barriers such as discrimination. Owning housing offers the potential to provide culturally-grounded housing that also promotes community-building, in a way not typically available using the normal scattered-site model. This is a goal for many in the homeless-serving sector—to have culturally-supportive housing that enables the best possible supports for Indigenous communities. An additional opportunity was not often recognized—that of partnering with existing Indigenous Housing providers. There are many such housing providers across the country, and building these partnerships might address multiple needs, including the need for culturally-supportive housing, and may help to build communities.

Housing Design and Form

Finally, providers should consider the design and form of housing. Housing design and quality can impact participants' tenancy and housing experiences.²² Where possible, housing should be responsive to the cultures of the people living there.

Strict policies, small confined spaces, security systems, and even wall colour can mimic “institutions,” and this can be challenging for some people's healing journeys. As one Indigenous service provider commented:

“It really helps to provide them with an idea that they're not institutionalized — because they always liken housing to just another form of youth detention or another form of prison. They're told who can come in, who can't, you know, what time people can [visit], how long someone can stay, and the cameras are always on them. So they said that's what it is like to be housed.”

The Housing First model is designed to move away from an institutional approach, but “independent” housing and built housing that echoes an institutional environment can conflict with a person-centered and Indigenous approach to housing delivery. The approach of both service agencies and participants is to “create a sense of home,” or to create housing that is grounded in and reflects local Indigenous cultures. This has been done in many ways, including creating sacred or communal spaces, integrating art or design elements that reflect Indigenous cultures, or using design that incorporates natural materials or creates an interaction with the outdoors—such as courtyard or garden spaces with local plants important to the community. Organizations fortunate enough to own their own housing can integrate such elements into the building itself.²³ Regardless of the design or form elements used in the creation of housing, more important is the inclusion and participation of the community throughout the design process. This may require Indigenous designers or the use of cultural advisory committees to inform and guide the design.

Communal or gathering spaces are often spaces that enable community building and enhance relationship building. For many organizations, this communal space is located in their office space—taking the form of a drop-in centre, classroom, communal dining area, or ceremony space, for example. For those fortunate to own housing, this gathering space becomes the centre of the building:

“The core success of our program is first and foremost that we have a gathering space outside of units. So we have a, what we call a family room. And out of the family room is where it becomes, like, the centre of the home, as if you have your own home in the community, or your community home. Where people gather, where ceremony takes place, where there's feasting and eating and dancing and teaching and it's sometimes multi-generational.”

²² For an examination of the impact of housing quality, see Adair et al. (2016).

²³ For example guides to creating housing with Indigenous communities, see Fineblit (2015) and Hayes (2016).

Some Indigenous service agencies we spoke with talked about their future plans; for example, one envisions “a style of housing or a product of housing that’s built around that [communal] area, and concepts like that really speak to that national Indigenous definition of homelessness and it not being as much a roof over your head as about the relationships and connection.”

Housing, as viewed through an Indigenous lens, is distinctive from the traditional Housing First principles of scattered-site, independent units. What we have observed is a strong desire to create not just housing but communities that bring people and culture together. When using a scattered-site model, workers can connect participants to the Indigenous community—to neighbours, community centres, Indigenous businesses, etc. — around their new housing.

Creating housing that reflects culture and the needs of a local community can have a large impact on the success of the people living there. It can promote identity- and community-building and enhance culturally-grounded service delivery. One Indigenous Housing First team leader stated that:

“Our dream is that one day when you talk about [culturally] supportive housing it will roll off our tongue in the same way that we’re thinking about mental health support from [the health system], but for Indigenous people it’s the culturally-supportive housing, because there’s something that happens within that context that strengthens people and gives them a sense of purpose in life. And that purpose is linked to a collective consciousness.”

To localize housing within Housing First requires a significant shift in planning and funding. However, as expressed by many, the current model promotes perhaps too much isolation from community and culture. Bringing culture and housing together is at the very core of shifting away from traditional views of Housing First and into a more localized approach.

This section began with the quote “Indigenized Housing First looks different, and that needs to be ok.” What we have seen is that Housing First must change to better reflect Indigenous values. In order for Housing First teams in Canada to better reflect the local context, the development, delivery, and overall structure need to fundamentally change. They need to better reflect Indigenous views and be delivered by organizations that have the awareness and competencies to help end homelessness while allowing people to see themselves clearly reflected in all aspects of the program. As we propose, a Community Strengths Framework provides a good starting point.



6) Monitoring and Evaluation

“You need to be open-minded—don’t come in with dismissive expectations around success, and also clearly identify what ‘success’ is and should be.”

As the above quote reflects, there is a need to set clear expectations from the outset and strive for balance between local interests in achieving outcomes and those of funders. Reporting, evaluating, and assessing “outcomes” or measures of success, usually in the form of performance indicators, is troublesome and time-consuming for many organizations. Much of this stems from the challenge of having to provide data and monitoring reports to funders, researchers, or even boards. Community-based organizations consistently complained that they spend an inordinate amount of time reporting outcomes, many of which may have little relevance or meaning for local groups or Indigenous communities. They also noted tension related to the need to “beat the funding clock”—with annual funding based on achieving results tied to program criteria, as opposed to local views on progress.

Monitoring is often linked to sustaining ongoing funding—as a need to prove success through imposed rather than through locally developed measures of success. For example, respondents spoke about the tension of having to demonstrate increased employment activity by participants, when fewer interactions with the justice system or re-connections with family were seen as more significant indicators of success and transformation.

There is a need to more carefully situate measures within the local context early on while having realistic expectations about what constitutes “success.” The challenges with measurement were captured by one participant who stated: “We had to count things and activities. Relationship building is not an activity to simply be counted.” Another individual shared similarly that national-level measures “focused on inadequacies; they couldn’t understand what culture was and why it was so integral to our approach—no recognition of the importance of... not what was done, but also how and why.”

Perhaps most important was the view that funders often refer to the “Model” and fidelity, and not to the people within the programming. One Indigenous program manager noted that national measures often “used a Western, European perspective that concentrated on structures and processes, tasks and statistics, while the Indigenous response sought to reinforce people, understanding, and kindness.”

Careful attention is needed to ensure that approaches and indicators used to measure success do not induce further trauma or reinforce colonial views. Many respondents viewed monitoring and evaluation as having the potential to contribute to increased anxiety and stress for staff and clients. To address this concern, they spoke of finding ways to localize measures and focusing more on people’s self-determination to end homelessness.

- › Local measures of success and those of funders do not always align. This mismatch tends to obscure the achievements of local organizations that best understand what it means to demonstrate change. National-level indicators of success may also be less relevant or applicable to a local Indigenous population.
- › Local efforts need to take ownership of the methods and approaches to be used to assess or gauge how Housing First is functioning and from what perspective (e.g., people over process).

In addition, Housing First teams are often required to self-assess performance by utilizing the Housing First Fidelity scale. Housing First Fidelity is measured using a standardized tool that was refined in the At Home/ Chez Soi project and which contains 38 items in five domains.²⁴ The five domains cover key elements such as the ability to provide choice and the right mix of supports along with the separation of services and housing. The five domains are:

- › Housing to match clients' needs and preferences
- › Separation of housing and services
- › Recovery-oriented approach
- › Services to match needs
- › Program operations

The Housing First Fidelity scale was developed to provide a guide for program staff to gauge their approach against the Pathways and At Home/Chez Soi Models.²⁵ The Fidelity Scale provides important insight into various delivery models used by Housing First teams in Canada and elsewhere and helps programs understand whether their approach is consistent with the main principles of Housing First.

However, fidelity assessments can cause tension and concerns about program effectiveness, especially when compared against one another. Providers have raised questions about the cultural relevance of the scale, with the view being that it was focused more on program elements rather than people and unique local characteristics.

Some have argued for the development and use of Indigenous methodologies of assessment, which “place a whole different lens over the program.” This lens offers “a critique of trauma-informed care as it’s delivered currently.” From this perspective, current trauma can be linked to the legacies of colonization and ongoing impacts.

²⁴ See Goering et al. (2016).

²⁵ For the At Home/Chez Soi project, it was critical to ensure each of the 12 teams delivered Housing First in a manner that was consistent across sites and achieved strong fidelity with the Housing First model. In Winnipeg, a broader challenge with monitoring and evaluation was how it was imposed on the local teams, with criteria and fidelity measures predetermined by the Mental Health Commission of Canada and the National Research Team. This was heightened by the fact that, as part of a randomized controlled trial, each program had to adhere to a consistent approach.

²⁶ O’Campo et al. (2015).

While monitoring and evaluation are often viewed as problematic by programs, it is important to note that fidelity is not the only means by which to self-assess. Furthermore, for the Winnipeg At Home/Chez Soi Site, many issues were addressed by having a local leadership table that could “continually talk about situations and to work to problem solve before things got to be actual problems.”

- › For local efforts, the Fidelity Scale should be considered a guide and used in conjunction with community-based measures that better reflect local objectives, goals, and realities.
- › The development of local, site-specific self-assessment tools needs to be both encouraged and seen as an opportunity to allow organizations to align local objectives with the delivery of Housing First.

Ultimately, fidelity is an important instrument that can assist in determining whether Housing First delivered locally aligns with the core elements of the Housing First model. This is critical for programs whose funding requires fidelity to the model, or that are part of a research study that mandates adherence for comparative reasons.

Since the launch of At Home/Chez Soi, much more has been learned about how to tailor Housing First delivery and evaluation approaches. “It is important to ascertain not just whether the model’s core elements are being applied as intended (i.e., to assess model fidelity), but also how this is achieved in the face of local contexts and challenges”.²⁶ Ultimately, the goal should be achieving balance between delivering Housing First in a manner consistent with the core elements of the model while still assessing program “success” in a locally relevant and meaningful manner. Adopting a Community Strengths-Based Framework, one which adopts a trauma-informed and collaborative approach, is a good starting point in achieving this balance.

There are many resources on Housing First delivery and fidelity, including the *Housing First Toolkit*.²⁷ These provide an excellent set of items to use in monitoring and evaluating program delivery; however, they must be viewed within a broader context and should reflect local factors. Thus:

- › The *Housing First Toolkit* and other manuals should be viewed as a starting point. Local consultation and discussions are required to draw in measures that reflect local desires for how to understand the influence of Housing First on the community and how to achieve a balance between being true to the principles of the model while reflecting local desires.

While there is no one-size-fits-all solution to evaluation or measurement, it is important to stress the need for sound approaches. Working in partnership with researchers who understand community-based methods can help bridge the gap between reporting to funders while supporting local efforts to understand progress. Well-designed research projects with local ownership of process can achieve excellent results and share a range of outcomes. For projects without a research lens, self-assessment approaches can also be augmented and used to reflect the community's goals.

Community-based organizations share a strong desire to end homelessness by supporting each person on their journey. Recovery and healing is achieved not in numbers but in creating strong relationships that truly understand each person's story.



²⁷ See Polvere et al. (2014), <http://housingfirsttoolkit.ca/>.

7) Sustaining – Building Capacity in the Community

“We have to have a long-term, committed approach to this, and I look at it generationally.... If we look at it and say let’s test it out for a year or two or four and then we’ll reassess, we’re just setting it up to fail.... We have to do this responsibly and in a sustainable way.”

There are few organizations able to financially sustain operations over the long term without some type of disruption to funding or program delivery. Disruptions are often challenging, leading to difficulties in maintaining staff as well as causing undue stress to program participants who face uncertainty over the potential discontinuation of services and supports. This is problematic for case managers, who have built trust and relationships with people. When sustainability or staff change issues arise, there is a ripple effect that impacts participant and staff wellbeing.

This was evident in the At Home/Chez Soi (AHCS) project, where it was repeatedly noted that insecurity with respect to sustained funding as the project was ending caused stress and anxiety.²⁸ The threat to loss of support for participating individuals resulted in some reluctance to continue to place people in housing and impacted staff retention. This is a scenario that plays out often for organizations that rely on yearly funding.

- › Addressing sustainability involves significant effort among local community leaders, government officials, the private sector, and agency staff. There is simply no easy pathway. There is also no single solution to sustainability that offers hope for ongoing funding and program support, but evidence-based advocacy can help.

Sustainability begins with strong community leadership and the ability to draw on and grow existing capacity, not only to deliver services and supports but also to look to innovative means by which to offset costs.

For some organizations, this has included exploring the use of social enterprises to help deliver Housing First services and supports while at the same time growing economic enterprises in complementary sectors.

In Winnipeg, for example, Housing Plus and Manitoba Green Retrofit were launched to help provide supports and services related to housing. This included furniture purchases, maintenance and repairs, move-in and move-out services, and a range of property management supports (including landlord engagement and eviction prevention). All these services would have otherwise been delivered by agencies (either non-profits or the private sector) that would generate revenues. Across Canada, we found many examples of community organizations operating social enterprises to provide a variety of services, as well as to create additional revenue streams.

- › The use of social enterprises is by no means the solution to sustainability of operations, but it does present an innovative contribution and means of growing capacity and skills.

Smaller organizations face the challenge of not being able to scale up as fast as the private sector. Thus it is important to look for ways to invest in community skills development and strengthen organizations’ ability to provide training opportunities to grow and expand capacity.

Working toward sustainability is also about finding the balance between top-down government funding (with conditions) and the bottom-up needs of community-based organizations. The need to augment the funding of operations from multiple sources means agency staff can spend significant time reporting and securing funding through many applications and progress reports. Sustainability is hard work and often involves a maze of bureaucratic processes.

²⁸ See McCullough & Zell (2014).

Often, community organizations applying to the same pots of money find themselves in positions of competition. Stronger organizations are often able to craft better applications or have the resources to hire consultants. This can be a significant advantage over leaner groups, including many Indigenous community organizations, which struggle to draft applications off the side of their desks. Community-wide and collaborative approaches can help share these burdens, and this approach is discussed above in step 2: Leadership and Governance.

Many respondents noted the challenge of having government support in backing the concept of Housing First but not necessarily providing funding. Sustainability does start with strong buy-in from local community and its leadership, and this must be the starting point for building momentum toward broader buy-in and funding. This reiterates the need for good relationship-building and a strong and inclusive governance structure, as discussed in above sections.

Evidence of “success” is also central to sustainability efforts. As noted in the previous section, evaluation of Housing First is important to be able to influence policy and program development. Certainly, evidence from the At Home/Chez Soi project contributed to the broadening of the mandate of the Canadian government’s Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) to fund Housing First following the successful conclusion of the project. This outcome was achieved by AHCS team members relentlessly presenting to government officials and others on the merits of Housing First.

- › Evidence-based advocacy is important work and begins with sharing stories of local successes with local politicians and community leaders. This must be backed, where possible, with strong evidence to help deliver the message.

Over the last decade, numerous Canadian cities have also enacted plans to end homelessness. Such plans are important ingredients for successful lobbying efforts for funding. Again, connecting with groups developing or implementing local plans must be part of the evidence-based advocacy work necessary to ensure ongoing funding is directed at solutions—like Housing First—that are proven to be effective in ending homelessness.

From the perspective of the Winnipeg experience, and the many we spoke to across Canada, it is clear that adopting a Community Strengths Framework early on—one that takes a collaborative and trauma-informed approach, and which recognizes the importance of engaging local leadership and culture—is key to ensuring more effective and “successful” programming, thereby enhancing sustainability.

The final layer of sustainability is the linkage to broader issues facing Canada’s Indigenous population. We know that Indigenous persons remain disproportionately represented among those experiencing homelessness. While Canada has embraced Reconciliation as an essential means by which to address the injustices faced over the last two centuries, many consulted in this report stressed that working with local Indigenous communities to develop and sustain appropriate Housing First programs must be a part of a larger reconciliation story:

“When you look at reconciliation, it’s going to continue after we’re gone, it’s going to continue after our children are gone. So, we’re still laying that foundation, planting those seeds, right?”

Perhaps sustaining local Indigenous efforts at ending homelessness begins with recognizing that more must be done immediately to undo past harms, and that more funding needs to flow directly to Indigenous organizations delivering services. In the end, sustaining Housing First efforts to decrease the numbers of persons experiencing homelessness requires the efforts of many to ensure that we don't lose sight of the need to fund and support those frontline organizations.²⁹

A community's approach to localizing or "Indigenizing" Housing First can be done in a way that enhances sustainability and also leads to larger transformations. Expanding community capacity through sustained Housing First can be a healing journey for individuals and communities, and a broader move toward reconciliation.



²⁹ Additional discussion of Sustainability can be found in: Lu'ma Native BCH Housing Society, Infocus Management Consulting (2015). *Aboriginal Housing First – Readiness Pilot Project – the Bentwood Box.*

PONIPAYIW

THE ENDING

Since the launch of New York's Pathways to Housing program in the early 1990s, Housing First has undergone two major shifts. First, the sheer number of programs running worldwide has grown from a handful of cities to hundreds and growing. Second, the manner by which programs operate has been transformed from a strong adherence to Housing First fidelity to more recent efforts that better capture the unique needs of the local population being supported. This latter shift was summed up by a Winnipegger who stated how important it is for people to see themselves reflected in the services being offered and in the people working at the numerous agencies providing Housing First.

For our work, we confirmed the above points but added a new aspect to localization efforts, which was to view change and adaptation through an Indigenous lens. To accomplish this task, we began with a gathering of Elders at Thunderbird House in Winnipeg's inner city to help guide our journey forward. This commencement location was the same as when we first convened a decade previous to seek guidance at the start of the At Home/Chez Soi (AHCS) project in the spring of 2009.

In Canada, it is important to note that there has been significant change since the launch of AHCS with respect to the availability of funding and the number of programs geared toward ending homelessness. In 2009, few Canadian cities had heard of Housing First, let alone delivered programming. The original five cities of Moncton, Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg, and Vancouver were tasked with examining and adapting a largely American model for a diverse Canadian population, while also exploring local adaptations.

Among the five cities, Vancouver's focus on the experiences of persons in the Downtown Eastside and serious drug use offered strong evidence that persons struggling with deep addiction could be well served by Housing First. In Toronto, a specific focus on new Canadians and the challenges of stigmatization and language barriers helped prepare teams to support a growing and diverse population.

However, it was in Winnipeg, where our present work is grounded, that early resistance by Indigenous leaders greatly influenced the local approach, one which sought to ensure cultural practices and people were front and centre. We try to capture the spirit of Winnipeg's journey within the Seven Steps and the inclusion of a Community Strengths Framework. We have also worked to incorporate a growing number of voices from communities throughout Canada and elsewhere that have developed local models aimed at supporting those most in need.

Linking Findings with Practice

Perhaps most important in this work is acknowledging that there is no single model or approach to Housing First. We state this within the understanding that it is possible to deliver Housing First with strong fidelity to the core principles but do so within an expanded mandate. Moreover, we remain convinced that Housing First is the most effective means by which to end homelessness, but it needs to be firmly localized to have the greatest impact.



We also share confidently that Indigenous communities within Canada and globally are incredibly gifted and more than capable of harnessing local capacity and strength to deliver Housing First within a framework that best reflects local needs. Elders in Winnipeg shared the importance of this teaching by stressing that cultural practices in one community cannot be assumed to be transposable to another. In this vein, the Seven Steps offer a guiding framework, which begins with the essential role of ensuring local leaders are front and center in the development of any Housing First approaches (from governance through to sustainability). Simply put, communities know the strengths and gifts they bring forward to aid those in need. Housing First should thus be viewed as providing a framework from which to build a local approach. The simplicity of the model and its adaptability, as witnessed in Winnipeg and elsewhere, have proven that much can be achieved in addressing homelessness when implemented with a cooperative and collaborative approach.

Niiwin Makwag Niimiiwag: Indigenizing Housing First

When work began on developing this guide, we gathered Elders and leaders from the Niiwin Makwag Niimiiwag teams in order to work collaboratively on a plan. We wanted to share more about the legacy of Niiwin Makwag Niimiiwag, which was launched a decade earlier. Along the way, we have been humbled by the immense strengths of the Elders who guided this work and offered important lessons and teachings. We were inspired that the original Niiwin Makwag Niimiiwag leaders remain committed to ongoing efforts to support those experiencing homelessness. In fact, many who contributed to this work have also journeyed throughout Canada and elsewhere to talk about Housing First and share observations.

Additionally, in specific travels across Canada and discussions with teams operating in the United States and New Zealand, we came to realize that over the last decade the pathway to ending homelessness has become much more travelled.

Many more communities are not only actively using Housing First programs, but are also increasingly localizing efforts to ensure they reflect those being supported.

“Indigenizing” Housing First is not about reading a guide or toolkit and acting upon the recommendations. It is really about being more deeply connected to each First Nation, Métis, or Inuit community and its leaders, whose knowledge and wisdom bring forward histories and future paths. In our journey, we have spent a good amount of time listening to Elders and others who shared their gifts of knowledge and understanding.

For those working on future efforts or contemplating change, the best guides are the people within the community who come together to find a common pathway. Our hope is this effort offers some thoughts drawn from our own decade-long journey.

Next Steps for Housing First

Much has changed since Pathways began in the 1990s, and much has been learned. Funding has grown through various Federal Government initiatives, with local provinces and cities supporting plans to end homelessness. Overall, many have benefited from the evidence emanating out of AHCS and other interventions that positioned Canada as a global leader in the delivery and implementation of Housing First. This is certainly reflected in the fact that in 2009 there were fewer than ten cities delivering Housing First in Canada (including the five from AHCS), and now there are perhaps closer to 70 communities and well over 100 teams.

With a new Federal Housing Strategy and a specific program directed towards those experiencing homelessness (Reaching Home), future actions must work not only to help the 30,000 Canadians experiencing homelessness but also to prevent more from not finding their own home and community.

Books and reports don't end homelessness, people do.

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