Perspectives on the Housing First Program with Indigenous Participants

Conducted by Blue Quills First Nations College
Research and Program Evaluation Partnership

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Dr. Ralph Bodor, PhD, RSW
Derek Chewka, MSW, RSW
Meagan Smith-Windsor, BA
Shari Conley
Nicole Pereira

www.homewardtrust.ca

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INTRODUCTION –
Perspectives on the Housing First Program with Indigenous Participants

In the summer of 2010, Homeward Trust Edmonton (HTE) proposed to explore their Housing First Support Program delivery to Aboriginal people. The project was to be a strengths-based qualitative research project that would assess the successes of the program, as well as identify gaps in services, and/or challenges in service delivery for Aboriginal peoples. In July of 2011, the Blue Quills First Nations College - Research Team (BQFNC-RT) submitted two reports – the attached thematic document and an "Interactive Text" – a 35-minute play rooted in the voices of the people interviewed for the assessment. The Perspectives on the Housing First Program with Indigenous Participants report and the Interactive Text grew out of an Indigenous Research Methodology that focuses on ceremony and stories as the foundation of Aboriginal epistemology. Ceremony generates space for making enquiries and is essential to gaining knowledge through the sharing of stories and experiences through Circle Process. HTE and BQFNC wishes to honor the individuals who agreed to be interviewed, as well as the BQFNC and Housing First teams for their dedication and acceptance to the project. Therefore, in the spirit of reciprocity and friendship, we present their stories and share our teachings.
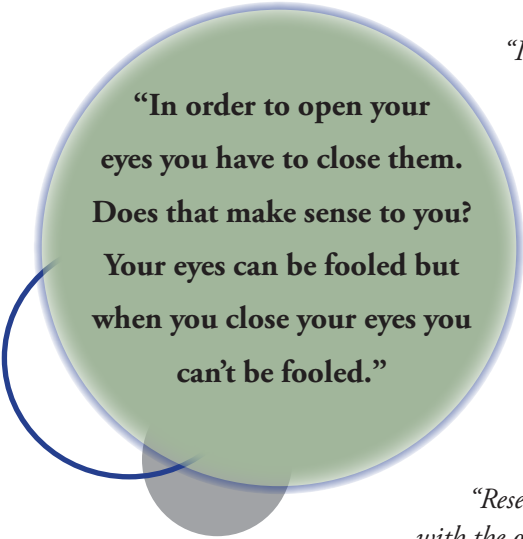
Aboriginal people comprise only 5% of the Edmonton population, yet they account for almost 40% of the city's homeless population. Homelessness in the Aboriginal community is complex and multi-dimensional; the social determinants that contribute to homelessness such as poverty, addiction, mental health, and social justice issues are well-documented. Existing models of housing support services that combine intervention with the provision of safe, affordable, and appropriate housing often do not adequately deal with core needs associated with the negative consequences of colonization, including the intergenerational trauma from Residential Schools, the Sixties Scoop, and other hallmarks of systemic marginalization and oppression of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. The Housing First model, due to its client-centred and harm reduction approaches, is evolving towards adoption of a decolonization process in the way it is delivered. HTE provides training on indigenous culture, history, colonization and decolonization to staff in funded agencies and throughout the sector.

In August 2011, after completion of the report on Perspectives on the Housing First Program with Indigenous Participants, Elder Francis Whiskeyjack led a sweat lodge ceremony to seek guidance for HTE on establishing an Aboriginal Housing First team. Since then, Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society has been granted funding to spearhead operations and in 2012 will be providing culturally grounded Housing First services to Aboriginal people in Edmonton, in addition to supporting Aboriginal clients served by other Housing First teams. This is a starting point for wider application of the findings from the Perspectives on the Housing First Program with Indigenous Participants Report, not only by HTE, its funded agencies, and community partners, but any organization or service provider aiming to enhance the relevancy, respectfulness, and appropriateness of services for Aboriginal clients.

Adequately meeting the needs of Edmonton's Aboriginal homeless population requires a flexible, responsive and inclusive service delivery system. By acknowledging, honouring, and embodying the unique perspectives of Aboriginal stakeholders, HTE – in alliance with many excellent agencies and collaborations driven by and built upon the strengths of the Aboriginal community – will achieve its goals of ending homelessness in Edmonton and contributing to a vibrant future for our Aboriginal community.

Indigenous Research and
Program Evaluation Methodology

"In order to open your eyes you have to close them. Does that make sense to you? Your eyes can be fooled but when you close your eyes you can't be fooled."
    – research participant cited as Vince in Makokis, 2005, p. 67

Ceremony, Circle Process and Relational Accountability seem to form the heart of an Indigenous Research Methodological approach. Like a sweet grass braid, they are intertwined yet separate and each forms an integral part of the research process. As stated in the *Blue Quills First Nations College Research Ethics Policy*:

"Research is about seeking knowledge, about forming relationships with the ones who know and the ethics that guide that search can only be understood in a spiritual context. ... In ceremony, the ones who are learning, who are receiving teachings and knowledge, are oskâpewisak ekwa oskîskwewak — this is the role of the researcher — the helper, the learner. They take direction from the ones with the knowledge. Once they have learned, their teacher will send them out to be a teacher, with a responsibility to carry the knowledge for future generations and respecting the original practice, intent and use." – p. 1

Ceremony, Circle Process and Relational Accountability exist in harmony with the Natural Laws and the Seven Teachings in the research process.

Circle Process

Traditional Indigenous knowledge systems are not objectively separate from life — they are embedded in life and the norms of being and knowing. As such, the Circle Process research methodology is a way of 'being' (as opposed to 'doing') research, that manifests through ceremony. The circle is not a metaphor for understanding — it is an experience of shared understanding. It is only when all of the perspectives around the circle are brought together through open dialogue that we can truly see and understand that which lies in the center of the circle.

Circle Process incorporates spirituality in the forms of Ceremonial Protocols, ways of being informed by the Teachings and Natural Laws, the balance and connection of the Medicine Wheel and the principles of Relational Accountability. Circle Process strives to make the unknown known through ceremony. As a ceremonial experience, Circle Process is fundamentally transformative (Schnarch, 2004) wherein the transformative impact of the research process touches all involved. Commitment to Circle Process is a subconscious and/or conscious commitment to the transformative potential of the research process.

Research participants are offered tobacco and cloth and are invited, literally or figuratively, to the circle. In the case of a literal circle, research participants are invited to a talking circle to share their stories around a guided topic after an opening prayer by an Elder. The circle process will proceed until it is felt that all has been covered. Sometimes this is one time — often this is two or three times around the circle (Makokis, 2005, p. 54). In the case of a metaphoric circle, research participants are

invited to the meaning of the circle, placing the item of scrutiny at the centre of the circle. In this process, all vantage points to the object of scrutiny are invaluable. Circle Process creates and transmits meaning through social construction connected intimately with action. Understanding is arrived at through communication, interaction, interpretation, ceremony, relationship and negotiation — defined as the Circle Process.

The research team is subject to, and works within, the ceremonial Circle Process as well. Circle Process is transformative to the research team. Researchers surrender to the potential transformation of personal beliefs and values. Ongoing support through the transformative process is offered by team members to each other. Circle Process is also manifested in the interpretation of the gathered stories where meaning is identified in a Circle Process of the research team which then later includes dissemination of the research findings to the circle of research participants. The nature and scope of dissemination is determined by the stakeholders in the research process.

Ceremony

Commitment to the transformative potential of the research is typically initiated in a pipe ceremony hosted by a traditional pipe carrier. The ceremonial pipe is the embodiment of the Natural Laws, thus intentionally invoking the elements associated with the Natural Laws in research held in ceremony.
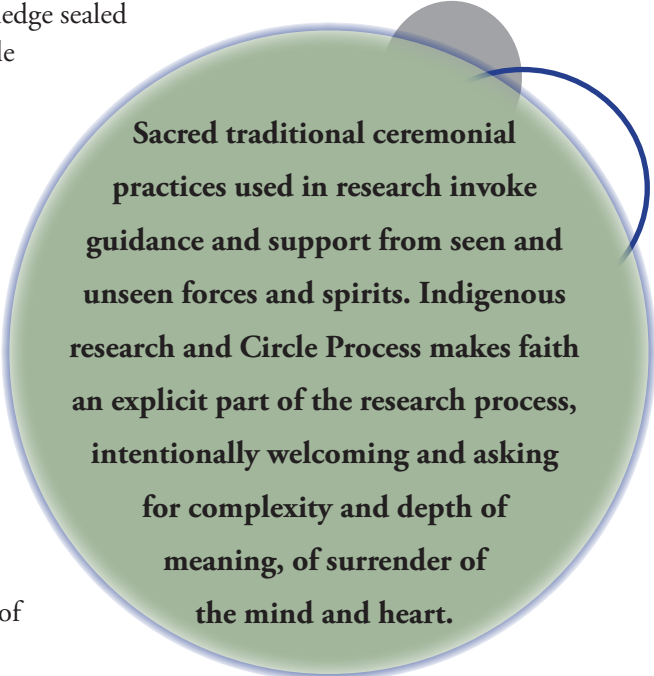
> *"The bowl of the pipe is the rock and represents strength and determination, the stem comes from the tree and represents honesty, the sweet grass, representing kindness, is used to light the pipe and the land and animals, representing sharing are found within the pipe teaching itself."*
>
> – Makokis, 2005, p. 46

Tobacco and cloth are presented to the Elder and the research process is initiated in a circle with members of the research team and/or research participants in attendance. With the sacred contract for the creation and transmission of knowledge sealed in a circle of ceremony, the research process continues in Circle Process with both research participants and the research team.

Ceremony is the heart of Indigenous epistemology. Ceremony is understood *"as our epistemology, our epistemological system, our way of knowing, our way of gaining knowledge; the method that we use to gain knowledge"* (Makokis, 2005, p. 84). By aligning research with ceremony, core meanings of Indigeneity are brought to the surface.

Sacred traditional ceremonial practices used in research invoke guidance and support from seen and unseen forces and spirits. Indigenous research and Circle Process makes faith an explicit part of the research process, intentionally welcoming and asking for complexity and depth of meaning, of surrender of the mind to the heart.
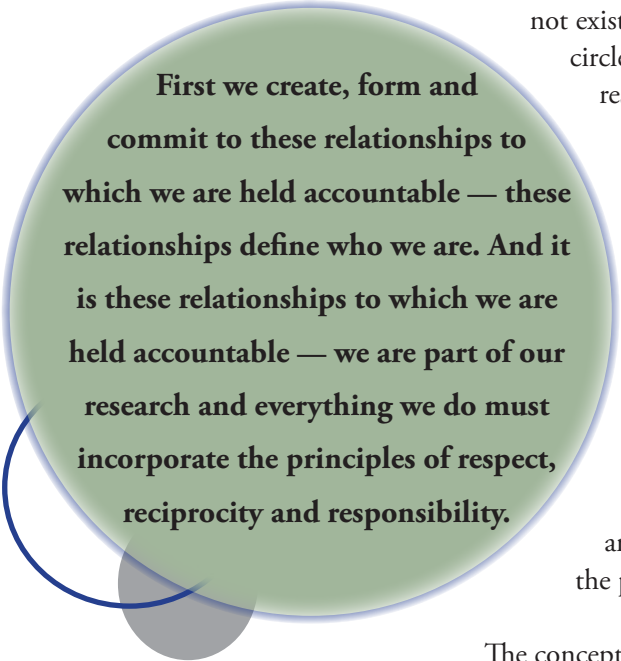
Sacred traditional ceremonial practices used in research invoke guidance and support from seen and unseen forces and spirits. Indigenous research and Circle Process makes faith an explicit part of the research process, intentionally welcoming and asking for complexity and depth of meaning, of surrender of the mind and heart.

Makokis (2001) states that *"the journey starts from the mind to the heart"* (cited in Makokis, 2005, p. 42). This place of surrender of the mind to the heart, of humility, of not knowing, is essential in the Indigenous research methodology. There is a surrender to the greater knowing that is borne in the sacred transmission of knowledge through relationships embedded in the sacred circle.

Relational Accountability

Relationships are key in an Indigenous epistemology and ontology. Nothing exists outside of relationships. Knowledge does not and cannot exist without a relationship between at least two beings. The relational aspect of Circle Process is vitally important. Without the relationships embedded in the circle, the knowledge cannot and does not exist. Attention to the sacredness of the relationships within the circle is tantamount. Ethical accountability in an Indigenous research methodology takes on a broader and deeper meaning to include accountability to the ancestors who transmitted the knowledge, to the participants in the circle process, to the larger community and to future generations. Creation and transmission of knowledge is a sacred trust as that which is 'known' is carried on behalf of all those who have created the 'knowing'.

> **First we create, form and commit to these relationships to which we are held accountable — these relationships define who we are. And it is these relationships to which we are held accountable — we are part of our research and everything we do must incorporate the principles of respect, reciprocity and responsibility.**

Relational accountability lies at the core of this research/ evaluative process. First we create, form and commit to relationships — these relationships define who we are. And it is these relationships to which we are held accountable — we are part of our research and everything we do must incorporate the principles of respect, reciprocity and responsibility.

The concept of relational accountability is explored by Shawn Wilson (2008) in his book *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Shawn is an Opaskwayak Cree from northern Manitoba and he suggests that *"relationships don't just shape Indigenous reality, they are our reality"* (p. 145). In our research we must be accountable to all of our relationships including our relationship to the Creator, the land and all living things. Relational accountability also speaks to the relationship of our ancestors and to the ones that come after us. Finally, it also pertains to the relationship between our friends, families and communities and to the relationship we have with ourselves.

Shawn suggests that one of the Cree words that form the basis of the concept of relational accountability, is "*otcinawin (breaking of natural law)*" (p. 107). Simply put, *"if one person deliberately mistreats other creatures, that action will invoke natural justice"* (p. 107). The other word is "*pastahowin, which means breaking the sacred law*" (p. 107). To summarize, humans *"who are capable of knowing the difference, are accountable for all of their actions to all of their relations"* (p. 107). When we are working with people involved in our research and evaluation, we commit ourselves to living the practice of relational accountability. We acknowledge that we will not work in isolation and that our approach is one that will be respectful of all our relations.

Medicine Wheel/Natural Law/Seven Teachings

Medicine Wheel

The research methodology is anchored in ancient ways of knowing, including the Natural Laws and the Medicine Wheel. These ways of knowing are ways of 'being and becoming' and flow through the research process in the context of day to day actions. *"Not only do they have to go to ceremonies and pick up the knowledge but then they have to find a way to internalize the knowledge and turn it into a day-to-day lived experience"* (Stewart as cited in Makokis, 2005, p. 88). Thus, the Indigenous researcher knows the Natural Laws and the Medicine Wheel as ways of being that manifest in daily actions.
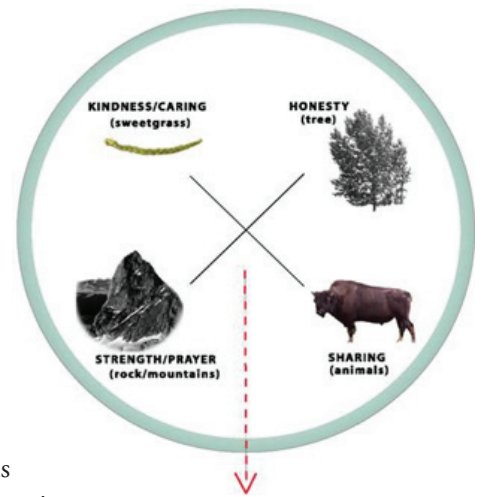

Figure 1: Natural Law graphic BQFNC (2000) acknowledges P. O'Chiese's teachings

Natural Law

From this place of humble surrender of the mind to the heart, the research methodology is anchored in ancient ways of knowing including the Natural Laws and the Medicine Wheel. These ways of knowing are ways of being and flow through the research process. Indigenous ways of knowing are ways of becoming, which then manifest in day-to-day actions.

Seven Teachings

The Seven Teachings are intended to guide our conduct with one another. They are associated with various animals that represent the stories and meaning behind each of the teachings. Just like us, each animal has its own special gift.

The Seven Teachings incorporate:

- **Love (Eagle)** – always act in love. Love the Creator. Love the Earth. Love yourself, your family and your fellow human beings.
- **Respect (Buffalo)** – Respect all life on Mother Earth, respect Elders and people of all races. The essence of respect is to give.
- **Courage (Bear)** – Listen to your heart, it takes courage to do what is right.
- **Honesty (Mistapehkew, Big Man)** – Never lie or gossip. Be honest with yourself and others. Speak from your heart. Be true to your word.
- **Wisdom (Beaver)** – Everyone has a special gift. Show wisdom by using your gift to build a peaceful world.
- **Humility (Wolf)** – Think of others before yourself. Humble yourself to the Great Spirit by being thankful.
- **Truth (Turtle)** – Always seek truth. Living the truth is living the Seven Teachings.

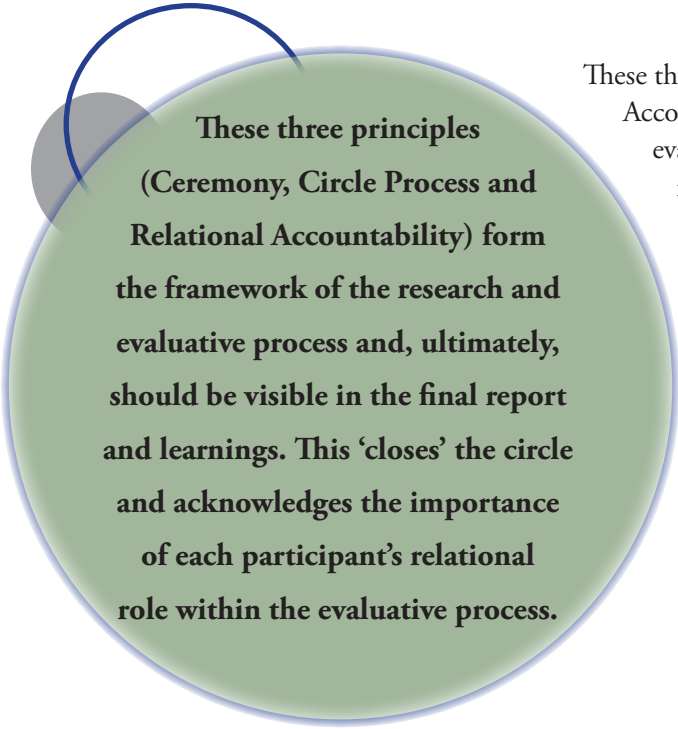*– Teachings interpreted by Dave Courchene, Turtle Lodge*

It is important to acknowledge that these are 'teachings' and the list above is only that, a list, and does not contain the actual teachings. These must be received from an Elder.

Summary

The need for research and program evaluation from an Indigenous world view is a movement against colonization and is necessary because only through Indigenous methodologies can we fully understand the consequences of oppression and colonization. It is only through Indigenous methodologies that we will understand the appropriate responses to oppression and colonization. Western models of research tend to not only reinforce the concepts and process of colonization — they may also exclude other methods of knowing and learning. Yet Walker (2003) suggests that, *"a growing number of Indigenous scholars maintain that valid research involving Indigenous people must be based in research paradigms that are congruent with Indigenous realities and ways of knowing"* (p. 740). Aboriginal methodologies ensure that the goals and results of the study can be useful to Indigenous communities (Menzies, 2001). Baskin (2005) states that:

> *"Gathering our own stories through Aboriginal research methodologies becomes our Indigenous medium. It involves how we gather our information, the stories we choose to tell and how we communicate them. Indigenous research methodologies also concern who does the gathering and communicating, for uppermost is the responsibility to anti-colonialism and the promotion of Aboriginal world views."*
>
> – Baskin, 2005, p. 2

These three principles (Ceremony, Circle Process and Relational Accountability) form the framework of the research and evaluative process and, ultimately, should be visible in the final report and learnings. This 'closes' the circle and acknowledges the importance of each participant's relational role within the evaluative process.

These three principles (Ceremony, Circle Process and Relational Accountability) form the framework of the research and evaluative process and, ultimately, should be visible in the final report and learnings. Incorporating the learnings of a Circle Process into the day-to-day operations of the agency 'closes' the Circle and acknowledges the importance of each participant's relational role within the evaluative process.

Finally, the project should end as it begins — in the context of ceremony.
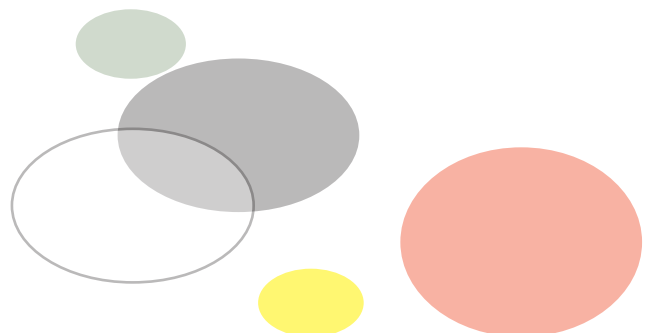
Homeward Trust
Circle Process

Stories and Storytelling

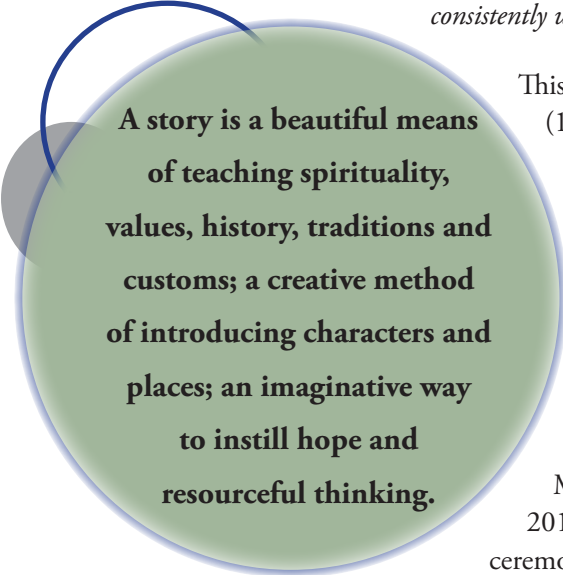The concepts of storytelling and Circle Process are included to provide insight into the distinct and sacred nature of Indigenous Research Methodology. Telling your story in a setting that is non-judgmental, uninterrupted and safe is the basis for letting go and getting validation and support from those around you. There is a relational process to storytelling and as suggested by Desmoulins (2006), when writing about Elder's stories: *"stories do three things: orally convey cultural and personal experience through metaphorical language; set traditional practices known as traditional knowledge alongside narrative inquiry as complex understanding; and, opens up spaces of knowledge production within the academy of dialogue"* (p. 122).

It is this last area that is our main focus. It is within the process of dialogue and storytelling (and story-listening) that we experience knowledge production. In each of the interviews, encouraging the participant to feel supported to verbally share their story and experience of housing allowed us to create an understanding of housing services to Indigenous peoples in Edmonton.

The use of storytelling and listening as a conceptual framework towards reaching a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of the participants engages traditional knowledge-building approaches. The equality and empowerment of being listened to in such a setting as the circle, gives voice to those who would not normally speak or otherwise express their true feelings. People are able to deal with their emotions and begin the process of letting go of past events. Respect for each person in the circle and especially the storyteller is the basis of storytelling as a knowledge building tool for Indigenous research and evaluation.

Stories serve multiple purposes. *"Grandparents asserted that telling stories to their grandchildren was important. Stories act as mechanisms through which grandparents can teach succeeding generations how to live consistently with tribal values"* (Robbins, 2002, p. 66).

> **A story is a beautiful means of teaching spirituality, values, history, traditions and customs; a creative method of introducing characters and places; an imaginative way to instill hope and resourceful thinking.**

This is echoed by Coulter, Michael & Poyner (2007), who quote Schram (1994):

> *"A story is a beautiful means of teaching spirituality, values, history, traditions and customs; a creative method of introducing characters and places; an imaginative way to instill hope and resourceful thinking. Stories help us understand who we are and show us what legacies to transmit to future generations."* – p. 105

Research and evaluation based within an Indigenous Research Methodology begins, occurs and ends in ceremony. On October 20, 2010, the Homeward Trust Circle Process research project began in ceremony. Homeward Trust's Elder "Mahkoos" was asked for a ceremonial blessing of the research process. A number of Homeward Trust and Blue Quills representatives attended the ceremonial initiation of the research project. In this ceremonial process, the spirits and blessings of the four directions of the Medicine Wheel were brought into the research process. It is hoped that we can, from this ceremonial place of centeredness, present our research findings from a place of humility and with respect, honesty and determination.

The Storytellers and the Stories

Twenty-five Indigenous recipients of Homeward Trust Housing First programming were invited into the research process. Participants were current or former recipients of the Housing First program who had, at program entry, met the program's criteria for homelessness. Participants were selected by Homeward Trust front-line staff with attentiveness to gender and ranging lengths of tenure in the Housing First program. Participants ranged from those previously reliant on kinship accommodation without access to independent housing to those with episodic homelessness spanning up to 25 years.

> **Participants overwhelmingly opened their homes to the research team with notable willingness to share and be open.**

Homeward Trust Housing First managers were introduced to the goal, intent, methodology, timeline and expected deliverables of the research project. Housing First managers and front-line staff were asked to assist with the recruitment and retention of Indigenous clients, non-Indigenous service providers and a number of Aboriginal service providers.

Homeward Trust staff, Housing First managers and front-line Housing First staff were instrumental in recruiting participants. Housing First staff collected twenty-five signed consent to release information forms that were transferred to the Blue Quills First Nation College (BQFNC) research team. A representative of the BQFNC team contacted all potential participants and invited their participation in the research project. After a brief overview of the research process, questions and expected format of the interview, participants were invited to self-select a location of convenience for the interview. Interviews began on December 8, 2010 and finished on March 8, 2011. Fourteen of the twenty completed interviews were conducted at the participant's home. Participants overwhelmingly opened their homes to the research team with notable willingness to share and be open.

Of the original twenty-five recruited participants, two withdrew their interest in participating in the research project, two were unavailable within the research project's timeline and one was removed from the group due to a concern about informed consent.

Indigenous and non-Indigenous Homeward Trust service providers were interviewed as well. Eight non-Indigenous service providers participated in a facilitated Circle Process. One-on-one interviews were conducted with two Homeward Trust funded Indigenous service providers. Two interviews were conducted with Indigenous service providers outside of the scope of Homeward Trust funded services. And finally, two separate Circle Processes were facilitated with Homeward Trust's Aboriginal Advisory Committee and with four senior Homeward Trust staff.

All participants were guided through an informed consent process and offered tobacco and cloth to honour, in ceremony, our request that they share their knowledge about the Homeward Trust funded Housing First program. Interviews lasted between 25 minutes and three hours in length. Circle Processes lasted between one and a half and two and a half hours each.

Interviews and Circle Processes were informally structured around a questioning guide developed based on a preliminary literature review of the Housing First literature. In an iterative process, after each conversation with the participants, the interview questions were refined to better access a depth and breadth of meaning related to housing and Aboriginal identity. Interviews and Circle Processes were audio recorded and transcribed. All Indigenous recipients of Homeward Trust funded Housing First programming were offered a $10 Tim Horton's gift card.

In addition to the academic literature reviewed in the following literature review section, a selection of literature from Homeward Trust was also reviewed including the following documents:

- The Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness (2008). *A Plan for Alberta: Ending Homelessness in 10 Years* (October, 2008). Author: Edmonton.

- Homeward Trust Edmonton (2010). *A Place to Call Home: Edmonton's 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness: Update Year 1* (April, 2010). Author: Edmonton.

- Homeward Trust (2010). *A Place to Call Home: Edmonton's 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness: Executive Summary* (2010). Author: Edmonton.

- Homeward Trust (2010). *Edmonton's Housing First Plan 2009/10*. Author: Edmonton.

- Homeward Trust Edmonton (2009). *2009 Annual Report*. Author: Edmonton.

- Sorensen, M. (2010). *2010 Edmonton Homeless Count*. Homeward Trust: Edmonton.

Understanding the Stories

Each member of the Research Team autonomously reviewed the collected stories and determined themes. These themes were then shared between the team members to explore commonalities and differences in understandings and interpreted meanings. The independent analysis provided vital inter-rater reliability in the analysis process. Common themes and unique understandings were extensively explored in conjunction with an appreciation of the unique aspects of Indigenous culture, history and context.

> **Sharing knowledge and learning is particularly important in Indigenous research. ... Homeward Trust has plans to host a feast and ceremonial celebration to officially commemorate the end of the research project and to share the learnings.**

Sharing the Stories

Sharing knowledge and learnings is particularly important in Indigenous research. In this context, Homeward Trust has plans to host a feast and ceremonial celebration to officially commemorate the end of the research project and to share the learnings. The Research Team has also created an interpretive script that compliments this written report. While this written report aligns strongly with Western expectations of accountability, the interpretive script was created to capture and honour the participant's voices and knowledge in a different way. The interpretive script shares the learnings from the Homeward Trust Circle Process from the four directions, presenting and representing the learnings creatively through artistic expression of core meanings of this Circle Process.
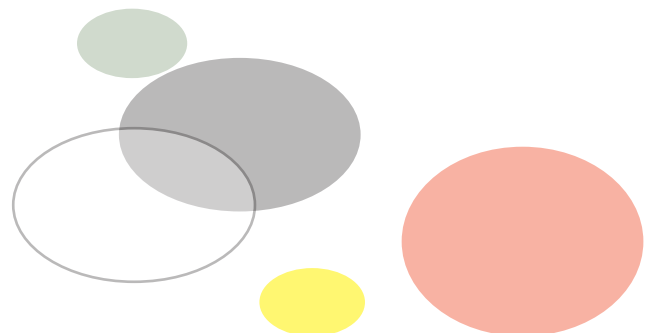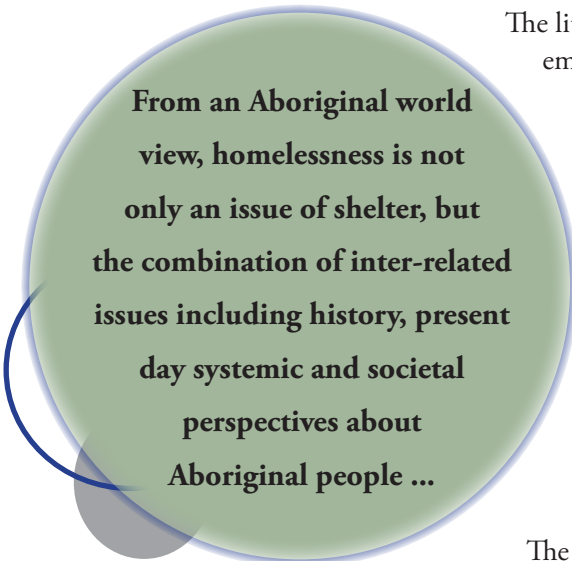
Literature Review

Housing First is a paradigmatic departure from the 'treatment first' model, also commonly known as the 'continuum of care' model that arose in the 1980s as a response to deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill into the community (Kertesz, Crouch, Milby, Cusimano, & Schumacher, 2009; Padgett, Gulcur, & Tsemberis, 2006; Pearson, Montgomery, & Locke, 2009). The Housing First paradigm arose in the 1990s, gaining operational exposure in New York City's *Pathways to Housing* project (Kertesz et al., 2009; Padgett et al., 2006). The Housing First literature is formative and largely based on qualitative, mixed method and comparative research associated with the *Pathways to Housing* project in New York City (Kertesz et al., 2009). Housing First literature in Canada is restricted to the findings of Raine and Marcellins (n.d.) Toronto report entitled *What Housing First Means for People – Results of Streets to Homes 2007 Post-Occupancy Research*. There is no Housing First literature that explores the disproportionate representation of Indigenous persons in the research design or findings.

Preliminary Housing First research findings suggest that the Housing First model is more effective in achieving housing stability for program recipients when compared to 'treatment first' interventions (Kertesz et al., 2009; Padgett et al., 2006; Pearson et al., 2009). Housing is also noted as a promising fundamental building block for ontological security marked by *"constancy, daily routines, privacy and having a secure base for identity construction"* (Padgett, 2007, p. 1925). Both treatment first and housing first models derive from a Western world view aimed at integrating individuals and families into the mainstream economic, political, social and cultural milieu.

From an Aboriginal world view, homelessness is not only an issue of shelter, but the combination of inter-related issues including history, present day systemic and societal perspectives about Aboriginal people ...

The literature exploring systemic issues to homelessness is only starting to emerge (Turner, Goulet, Oelke, Thurston, Woodland, Bird, Wilson, Deschenes & Boyes, 2010). From an Indigenous perspective, the understanding of and interventions addressed at homelessness need to be holistic.
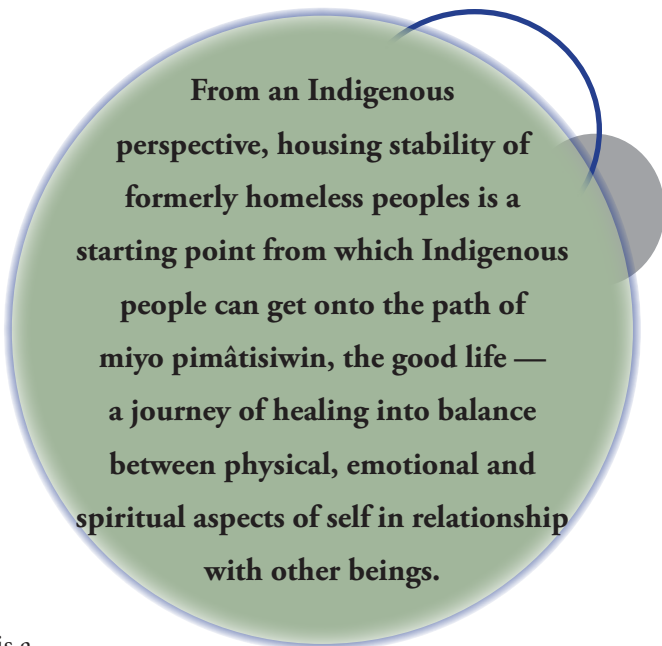
"From an Aboriginal world view, homelessness is not only an issue of shelter, but the combination of inter-related issues including history, present day systemic and societal perspectives about Aboriginal people, as well as the cultural losses of Aboriginal people in the areas of physical, emotional, mental, spiritual and emotional balance."
– Turner et al., 2010, p. 2.

The understanding of and interventions addressed at urban Indigenous homelessness need to be systemic. Grass roots Indigenous voices are stating that *"responses to homelessness for Aboriginal people require attention to physical space as well as political and emotional space"* (Baskin, 2007 as cited in Turner et al., 2010, p. 2). *The Congress of Aboriginal Peoples* calls attention to the systemic factors contributing to Indigenous homelessness including *"those who have suffered from the effects of colonization and whose social, economic and political conditions have placed them in a disadvantaged position"* (UNNS, 2001 as cited in Turner et al., 2010, p. 3). Preliminary linkages are being established in formative literature between Indigenous homelessness and intergenerational trauma associated with political, historical, social and economic factors (Turner et al., 2010). Indigenous concepts of stable housing and home relate directly to historic institutionalized processes that have created identity confusion and cultural and relational alienation for Indigenous peoples.

Ruttan and colleagues (2010) note the historical context of Indigenous homelessness. Traditionally, Indigenous peoples *"found home on the land and in culturally patterned relationships of reciprocity, learning, ceremony and knowledge"* (p. 68). Since the late 1800s, Indigenous peoples have been subject to the terms of the Treaties and have been settled on reserves. Since the formation of reserves, housing for Indigenous peoples has been regarded as "unsafe", providing a larger context for institutional allegations of neglect and abuse enforced by forced removal of children to residential schools and child welfare (Ruttan et al., 2010, p. 68).

From a Western perspective, housing stability of formerly homeless individuals and families is a first step towards individual self-sufficiency in society. From an Indigenous perspective, housing stability of formerly homeless peoples is a starting point from which Indigenous people can get onto the path of miyo pimâtisiwin, the good life — a journey of healing into balance between physical, emotional, mental and spiritual aspects of self in relationship with other beings.

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Indigenous Identity

Good Tracks (1973) points out the spectrum of individual and collective Indigenous identities ranging from assimilated to traditional. There are a myriad of historical, political, cultural, economic and social influences on an individual's, organization's and community's Indigenous identity. From an Indigenous world view, Indigenous autonomy in decision-making and respect for individual and collective Indigenous autonomy is tantamount (*Good Tracks*, 1973). From this perspective, each individual will determine the identity that is appropriate for him/herself — an identity that may be fluid dependent on the circumstances.

Also from an Indigenous perspective are teachings related to blood memory, cellular memory and colonization. From this perspective, there is an inherent blood and cellular memory associated with all Indigenous peoples with Indigeneity but also with colonization. Knowledge of 'who you are' is embedded in everyone's cells and blood — the process of healing recovers that blood and cellular memory of 'who you are' at the core.

However, Indigenous blood and cellular memory are also tainted with the unresolved inter-generational trauma associated with colonization. On one hand, blood and cellular memory is whole and centred in Indigenous identity. On the other hand, blood and cellular memory is out of balance and suffering due to unresolved intergenerational trauma. Establishing reconnection with blood and cellular memory is thus a biological decolonization process of healing and letting go of the traumatic legacy of colonization embedded in Indigenous people. In this context, traditional Indigenous culture is the default while respecting individual and collective autonomy to choose less traditional forms of expression of Indigeneity.

Colonization and Decolonization

McKenzie and Morrisette (2002) note that *"colonization is the primary form of oppression because it affects Aboriginals' consciousness, self-worth, self-identity, community identity and cultural identity"* (McKenzie & Morrisette, 2002 as cited in Verniest, n.d., p. 6). Gagne (1998) goes further to suggest that *"colonialism is at the root of trauma because it has led to the dependency of Aboriginal peoples to settlers and then to cultural genocide, racism and alcoholism"* (Gagne, 1998 as cited in Quinn, 2007, p. 73).

The impact of oppression on consciousness, self-worth, community and cultural identity is defined as internalized oppression (Bishop, 2002; Mullaly, 1993 as cited in Verniest, n.d.). Characteristics of internalized oppression include *"loss of personal identity, a sense of inferiority or low self-esteem, fear, powerlessness, suppression of anger, alienation, isolation and guilt or ambivalence"* (Mullaly, 2009, p. 223).

The decolonization process is an individual and collective one that leads to increased self-determination, social, economic, cultural and political independence and identity development (Verniest, n.d.). Decolonization processes are often strategic and range from *"Aboriginal self-government in areas of social, economic, cultural and political systems to consciousness-raising regarding oppression. The process of decolonization will be different for various Aboriginal populations because of the diversity among Aboriginal peoples and their beliefs"* (Verniest, n.d., p. 8).

Mullaly (1993 as cited in Verniest, n.d.) recommends a therapeutic focus on the individual and group's environment as opposed to individual and collective pathology. Shifting the focus to the environmental context surrounding pathology raises *"the client's consciousness in order to become a part of a collective consciousness striving for change"* (Mullaly, 1993 as cited in Verniest, n.d.). Bishop (1994 as cited in Verniest, n.d.) notes that the processes of increasing consciousness and healing are unique to each individual and group and that *"it is essential that social workers do not place healing in a hierarchy that will compare one form of healing to another"* (Bishop, 1994 as cited in Verniest, n.d.). As Bishop states, *"no healing is wrong"* (Bishop, 1994 as cited in Verniest, n.d.).

Individual and collective forms of healing are needed for decolonization liberation in a holistic way (Verniest, n.d.). Without individual and collective holistic interventions, *"clients run the risk of participating in the cycle of oppression they are trying to change"* (Verniest, n.d., p. 20).
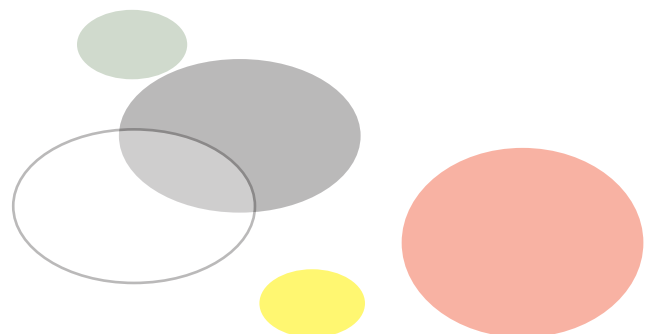
Telling the Stories — Housing First Clients

Diverse Histories and Indigenous Representation

Participants represented a diversity of identities including Indigenous and Métis individuals from Coastal and Northern British Columbia, Northern and Central Alberta and Northern and Central Saskatchewan. A diversity of histories was also represented including various age groups ranging from newborns to late fifties. Six women and fourteen men were interviewed and eight Housing First homes had young children living in the home.

Some common histories prior to the Housing First program echoed the findings in the Housing First literature and included multiple moves, a poor credit rating and a lack of references. Many disclosed a history of alcohol and substance addictions and having a childhood history in institutionalized care including foster care, group home or residential school.

For some, entry into the Housing First program was from kinship accommodation, but the majority entered the program from the street or from an addictions treatment facility. Some disclosed personal histories of mental health concerns. Of the three young families interviewed, one came from kinship accommodation, one from market accommodation and one from the streets. Some came from unstable and unsafe housing on the reserve. Some came from a history of gang involvement.

Indigenous Identity Development

Related to but distinct from the empowerment process associated with participation in the Housing First program, participants also experience an empowerment process relative to Indigenous identity.

Related to but distinct from the empowerment process associated with participation in the Housing First program, participants also experienced an empowerment process relative to Indigenous identity. The phases of Indigenous identity development are not as clear and distinct but are instead far more complex. Participants come to the program with a diversity of Indigenous identities, all influenced by a larger current and historic sociopolitical context of colonization outlined in the literature review section.

Individual Indigenous identity development takes place in the broader context of historic institutional practices aimed at forcing Indigenous peoples to reject Indigenous culture and identity. A participant shared this perspective in the following way:

"... it kind of goes back to all the ... I'm thinking about colonization, PTSD, residential school. All of that stuff is how we've been set up, all of that time taking all of those things away. Even the hunting and fishing and gathering kind of things that we used to do is not a way of life anymore because ... but that's how we survived, right? So now it's ... it's how do you shift that and how do you support that and ..."

The current sociopolitical context arguably allows Indigenous peoples to practice and embrace Indigenous culture and identity. But to do so, Indigenous peoples must overcome the legacy of historic punishment, humiliation and death for adherence to Indigeneity.

> *"First Nations people have always had a grudge against the government ... it's I guess government people you know? Not necessarily Child Services, Social Services people or whatever it's just that's the way it's always been and that started way back in the ... you know I would say 60s/70s where it's just lack of communication I think. And slowly the Elders now are realizing that it's communication and where the communication starts is teaching our children."*

Another obstacle is learned helplessness, as outlined by the following participant:

> *"My grandmother and grandpa, they were alcoholic and the kids were removed and moved to residential schools and I mean, I think up until ten years ago, my aunts and uncles literally just thought that's just what happens. This is just what happened and this is how life is and especially up there because it's so isolated and so just unaware that this is not okay, that this is happening and this is not a normal response to dealing with issues, using alcohol or a healthy way to deal with it rather. So I think just not being aware of what else is out there and continuing the cycle and so therefore, they're over represented because there was this whole people group that got traumatized and so therefore, there's going to be ramifications from that."*

Further, Indigenous peoples are now faced with the pragmatic decision to embrace Indigeneity or not in a sociopolitical context where Indigeneity is a minority of the mainstream population. Indigenous peoples must embrace Indigenous identity within a broader context of racism and negative stereotypes towards Indigenous peoples.

A participant spoke of the internalization of societal and institutional racist messages about Indigenous individuals and communities:

> *"There's so many negative First Nations out there it's ... ugh ... and me doing what I do as a doorman/security dealing with my own people, eh? It's been a struggle for me and it's actually had a negative outcome, thoughts for me towards my own kinda people, eh? I was constantly ... when I grew up as a teenager I was constantly fighting in high school and it got to the point finally, when I got to university, people treated me with respect. 'Cause I was just another minority on campus but when I was going to school I was the only Native in my high school. I thought I was the only Indian out there (laughing). I realize now that I wasn't and it just gave me a negative outlook on my own people and to this day I still sometimes have a negative outlook."*

Sustained daily exposure to racism has a negative psychological impact on participants. One participant said: *"... but First Nations are ... I don't know ... it's a constant chip on their shoulder and I've been through the same thing and I probably still have a bit of a chip on my shoulder."*

Another participant outlined this challenge in the following way:

> *"There's often a negative connotation associated with things Native and Aboriginal and so that gets internalized and just over represented which is ignorance on the people that are seeing that as to why that's happening. That's actually a systemic thing."*

Within these historic and current circumstances, Indigenous individuals are faced with the complicated decision as to whether to embrace Indigeneity or not. A participant shared it in this way:

> *"There is a disconnect with Aboriginal clients and their culture. I think there's a sense of shame. I think there's a sense of, "I don't really want to be a part of that, like I'm Canadian, like I don't need that, that's from fifty years ago." And so I find there's a big disconnect from that and my guess, I mean I don't know, but my guess is that there's a sense shame."*

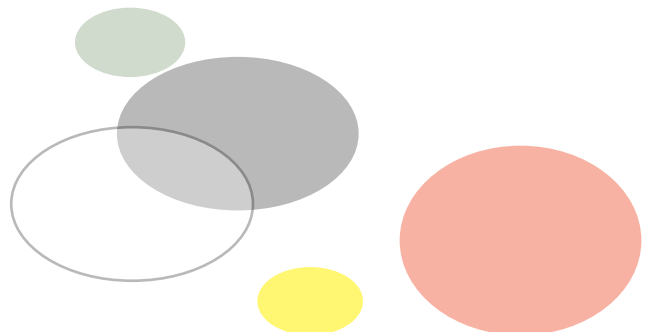Once an individual decides to embrace Indigeneity, the ways to learn about Indigenous culture are limited and come from various traditions. Finding a 'fit' can be a challenging process for Indigenous peoples, especially in an urban context. As a participant indicated:

> *"How do you get that balance back [between Indigenous and Western ways] … It's very tough in the city."*

Reconnection to Indigenous culture is also challenging on the reserve. A participant shared that:

> *"It's a struggle living on the reserve. Nobody wants to help anybody, even if you have family. They don't want to help, even to do a simple errand like … they just, it's too much trouble. So as far as my husband and I go, we are better off being in the city on our own and away from family than we are on the reserve, supposedly with family. As I said, my kids are all in care, my boys."*

There's often a negative connotation associated with things Native or Aboriginal and so that gets internalized and just over represented which is ignorance on the people that as to why that's happening. That's actually a systemic thing.

Once an individual decides to embrace Indigeneity, the ways to learn about Indigenous culture are limited and come from various traditions. Finding a 'fit' can be a challenging process …

Another participant stated the disconnect from culture on the reserve in the following way:

> "Yeah 'cause I think ... I don't even think we really even get in touch with our culture too much when we visit my dad on the reserve because they live on the reserve but they don't really practice too much cultural anything there."

Indigenous peoples are also affected by the negative impact of colonization on Indigenous governance structures. Traditional Indigenous governance models have been forcibly removed and replaced by Western governance structures that further alienate Indigenous peoples from Indigeneity.

> "A long time ago, when somebody needed housing, when somebody needed food, when somebody needed health care, they got it and it didn't matter who you knew or who you're going to vote for come election time. But now, it's who you associate with. If you're friends with the Chief and Council, perfectly fine and dandy. If you're not friends with the Chief and Council, then you're out of luck, and it shouldn't be that way. I think the people on the reserves, they need to re-evaluate themselves."

This participant shared frustrations with corruption at the governance level in the following way:

> "There is so darn much corruption on the reserve, it's almost like we're living in bloody mafia. And when you go and ask them why and point out that's it's not fair, they'll just laugh at you, tell you that you don't know what the hell you're talking about. They'll god darn threaten to go out there and phone the cops and say you're starting trouble. We actually have third world living conditions on some of the reserves. As I said, the house that we were living in was one of the oldest houses on [name of reserve deleted]. There shouldn't be any reserve in Canada with black mould in the housing but there is an awful lot of that. There's a lot of inadequate housing. There's a lot of kids in foster care because of the housing issues."

Some spoke of the impact of politics of exclusion from Band members on the reserve towards those who have married into, married out of or placed in child welfare care away from the reserve. These politics of exclusion are associated with an internalized understanding of the government's definitions of "Indian" as defined in the Indian Act. A participant shared the impact of exclusion from her own band in the following way:

> "Because I'm an orphan and I grew up in foster care, my so called biological family, my cousins, they act like they don't know me. So there is no support on my band for anything."

The colliding colonizing factors of child welfare, internalized definitions of "Indian" by band members and inter-racial marriage create complications around understandings of Indigeneity:

> "... my children only have ... they're only half Aboriginal. Their father is not Native and that's a whole big can of worms. It's another reason why they won't help, prejudice. My children don't belong on the reserve 'cause they look white, they get picked on. And they don't belong in white society because they're registered treaty and they don't look treaty ... (long pause) ... so they have to fight for whatever they want."

The same mother shared the story of her children in care and herself being refused benefits and access to the Band's Treaty Day:

> *"But that was a very, very clear indication that even though we are registered band members of that band, we are not. … We don't belong there. And that's what I mean about the politics on the reserve."*

Band governance adherence to definitions of "Indian" in the Indian Act uniquely affect Indigenous women who marry off the reserve:

> *"A Band Councillor came to our house and he told us: "Well you guys are going to have to find your own housing. There's only a limited number of housing on the reserve and there's nothing available on reserve that we can give you. You're going to have to go for your own housing elsewhere." So at that point I tried with my band. … And I got told because I married off my band and married onto (another band), I was (another band's) responsibility; my band can't do nothing to help us. So once again, we went back to Chief and Council and told them that (the other band) said that you guys have to help us, they can't help us and again, we're told "no funding".*

Despite a litany of internal and external challenges to Indigenous identity development, some participants still see these traditional Indigenous values as inherent and that they have not eroded with time and due to colonization:

> *"Just that … I know Native people always seem to be very helpful to other families and stuff . Like it's always, like if there's children or whatever, everyone looks after the children, like in a tribe. There's a lot to learn, like we've learned about it, Native traditions and what different animals are and lots of stories like the Elder would always tell us stories about their things. So … (laughter) … I don't know what to say."*

Indigenous identity development is simultaneously a process of unlearning blood and cellular memory associated with colonization while relearning inherent blood and cellular memory of Indigeneity.

Colonization and Decolonization

Colonization is evidenced in a number of behaviours and attitudes including *"loss of personal identity, a sense of inferiority or low self-esteem, fear, powerlessness, suppression of anger, alienation, isolation and guilt or ambivalence"* (Mullaly, 2009, p. 223). Systemic dependency is common for Indigenous peoples, creating a dependency on a source of funding aligned with the oppressor. Indigenous peoples have varying levels of awareness of the systemic factors influencing systemic dependency. Some are sagely aware of their current placement relative to colonization and oppression.
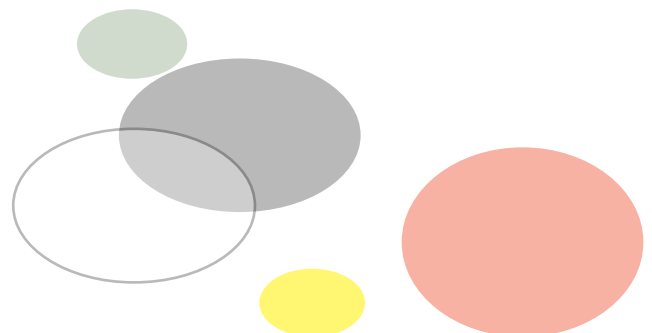
A participant shared this awareness in the following way: *"I figured out I'm a product of the system and I still use the system so I haven't escaped it yet."*

Another shared it in the following way:

> *"Well like you know, when I wasn't selling drugs I'd go on welfare, stuff like that and if I wasn't on that, I was in jail so I was kind of still in the system type of thing and that's one thing that I want to break, try and break."*

Some participants speak of the role Homeward Trust plays in helping colonized individuals to break from patterns of systemic dependency, of contributing in a positive way to the process of decolonization:
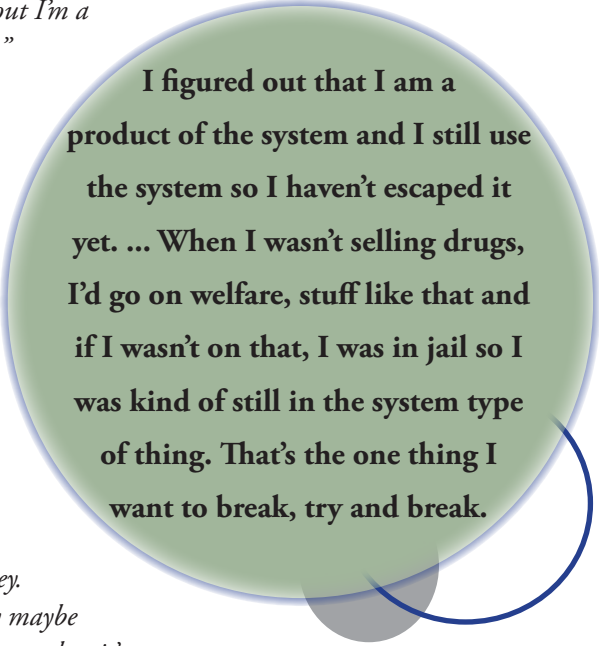
> *"There's a lot of abuse of special services like that. People just want free money or whatever, as long as they're using that money. I'm forgetting all the help that person needs, but pay the money maybe for them or take a little bit of the responsibility away from them so that it's actually going to a specific purpose, not to hold their hand or whatever to do it. But if they actually want to do something, like go to school or whatever, pay all their fees for them, pay all their supplies for them and pay their rent for them or whatever, so that … on the condition that if you're not going to school, if you're not using, doing what you said you were going to do then suspend it or whatever.*
>
> *Which is fair as fair I feel. I'm not there to … I don't want to sound like I'm criticizing anybody or judging anybody, but the money and the services are there for a specific purpose and there's lots of people that just aren't aware of what steps they need to take to be able to reach that goal. And people like Jasper Place and Homeward Trust, they give you some guidance as far as "well let's do this first and then we'll do this". They work with you to tell … tell them what you want to do. Like I told them what I wanted to do. I wanted to do what I'm doing now so … and the day-to-day things, like I need to get some food, I need to do this or pay this bill or get this ID.*
>
> *So between us, we all came up with solutions for these things. Every problem that seemed like a big deal then, is not a real problem now, day-to-day living things that every person has to deal with. So, I'm very thankful to them, like I don't know if I'm coming across as the way … saying it the way, but I'm thankful to them to take a chance with me and to allow me to get the things that I wanted for me, for my life and to reach my goals and I feel that I'm there."*

Some front-line staff share personal frustration with the "welfare mentality":

> *"We've been wronged so someone needs to pay a little bit. There's this underlying, "well you owe us, you owe us," which I understand when someone's been wronged. They feel like, "I've got something coming to me." But there seems to be this cyclical attitude of like, "I need to get what's coming to me in Canada," you know the handout. Some people call it the welfare mentality."*

I figured out that I am a product of the system and I still use the system so I haven't escaped it yet. … When I wasn't selling drugs, I'd go on welfare, stuff like that and if I wasn't on that, I was in jail so I was kind of still in the system type of thing. That's the one thing I want to break, try and break.

Indigenous Identity Development while Subject to the Colonizing System

Historic factors created the need for a decolonization process, but the decolonization process must exist while ongoing colonization of Indigenous peoples occurs. A participant speaks of the systemic connection between historic residential school practices of colonization and current child welfare practices of colonization:

> *"I don't know who it was that thought residential school would be a great idea. It seems to me that social services have picked up on that idea and when they have kids in care, they are maintaining that the children do not see families."*

The traumatic impact of child apprehension has a contemporary negative impact on individual, community and Indigenous identities. A participant spoke of the apprehension of children as a *"downward spiral into a bottomless pit"*:

> **The traumatic impact of child apprehension has a contemporary negative impact on individual, community and Indigenous identities. ... Apprehension of children is the "downward spiral into a bottomless pit."**

> *"My daughter, ever since they took her kids on her, has started using crack. She's getting into awful relationships with guys that beat her and try to kill her. And my ex-son-in-law has got a trial coming up, he's due for sentencing on the 28th of February this year on an attempted murder charge and he's looking at life and this is only his second offence; he's twenty years old. So taking children away from people that love them is not doing the children or the family any good, it's a downward spiral into a bottomless pit."*

This participant makes a systemic connection to her daughter's circumstances to institutional colonization:

> *"It's a cycle, it's a never-ending cycle in my family. My daughter, having grown up in foster care, she doesn't know how to set up a household. She knows how to clean, she knows how to take care of her kids but there is no stability. She doesn't know how to stay in one place, it's living out of a backpack. She'll stay here a few days, she'll go to her boyfriend's family's place for a few days, just back and forth, back and forth. In order to have stability and to stop the cycle, she should have god darn stayed in one place to begin with. When she was little ... children can adjust when there's minimal disturbance in their family life but when you're bounced around in foster care, from foster home to foster home to foster home, as I said with her, there was over twenty placements, there's just no stability. She never learned stability and then when she has ... she became a mother and she had her own kids, she really, really struggled with stability."*
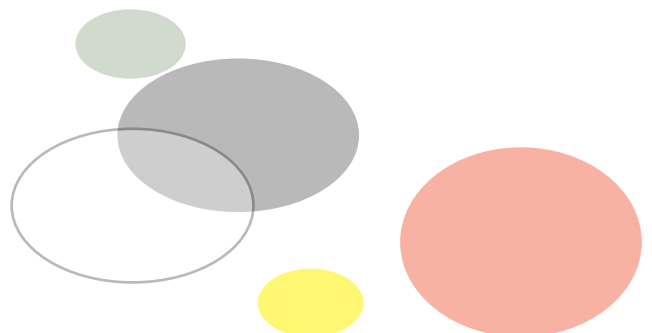
The same participant spoke of the "cycle" relative to her son-in-law:

> *"Since January, what's stressing me out so badly right now is that my son-in-law is looking at a life sentence for an attempted murder charge. I cannot see how he can be looking at a life sentence when he doesn't even remember what happened. He's got a little baby boy, the baby boy is only four months old. That little boy is in foster care because his dad is looking at … his dad right now is on house arrest and that little boy is in foster care and if his dad goes to jail for life, that kid might possibly be in care the rest of his life. That's what I mean by it's a cycle, a never-ending chain … (long pause) … His mother … when he goes to jail, his mother's not going to be able to maintain their apartment because his working, he pays half the rent and with the amount of money that she makes, she puts the groceries in the house. There's going to be another housing problem … boom …"*

The same participant spoke of the "cycle" as it relates to homelessness instead of reunification of children released from government care:

> *"My children are going to have a lot of problems, they do have a lot of problems. They are going to have more problems when they come out of care because they're not going to be able to come home to me if I'm still living in an apartment. We can only have visitors for one week and the size of this apartment is a one bedroom apartment, can only have one or two visitors. Nobody else has been in here, it's too small and if they come out of care and we're not living in a place big enough for them to come to, then they're going to be homeless. Most children get released from care when they're eighteen years old."*

A participant spoke of the impact of colonization on housing and custody of children:

> *"When our house burnt down, my husband and I actually lived in a tent in the winter time because it was February 2 when the house burnt down. We actually lived in a tent for two weeks until Chief and Council finally decided that … it kind of looked bad on them that we're living in a tent so they decided to get us a motel room. They covered our meals, they were supposed to have covered our meals and our room but they couldn't even pay that bill when it came due so we got kicked out of the motel room and had to go back to that chicken coop that they're renovating and they said it was not fully renovated when we moved back there. They had done the … the heat was done, the power was half done and there was no water, they just got the plumbing in there in May so there was no washroom. It's 2010, 2011 now and living on [name of reserve deleted] Reserve is the same thing as back in the nineteen hundreds, even prior to that when people were living in tents, eighteen hundreds. For all these years, supposed to be progress, for a lot of families on reserve, there is no progress."*

The same participant stated the problem in a different way: *"well when a person doesn't have a home, social services takes their kids away, [name of tribal council deleted] takes their kids from them instead of trying to help with the housing issue, instead of trying to help with whatever the family needs help with."*

Some spoke of the intergenerational legacy of child apprehension and placement in foster care, group home, or residential school, alcoholism and family violence. One spoke of the lifetime impact of childhood apprehension:

> **... myself I remember ... like to this day all of us, we remember the day that we were taken away. ... That's something that will stick with us but over time you learn to deal with that whether it be counselling or seeing an Elder or prayer.**

"Some of us have a lot of bad memories about it like my older brother and my other sister … myself I remember … like to this day all of us, even the ones that passed away, we remember the day that we were taken away. I was two and my sister was under two and she remembers the day that we were taken away. That's something that will stick with us but over time you learn how to deal with that whether it be counselling or seeing an Elder or prayer. For myself if I'm going through a rough time I always find that prayer works. That's what got me through the cancer. And sometimes when I'm frustrated with my son that's usually what helps. I'll light some sweet grass and just pray cause what else are you going to do, you know?"

Another indicates that child apprehension was the negative turning point in her life:

"Social services came in and wrecked my home basically. Before that I had stable housing, didn't have a problem with alcohol or drugs or anything and then under a false accusation that somebody made against the guy that I was with, who is the father of my sons, social services came in and took my sons away from me and they just bounced them from home to home."

One spoke of the intergenerational legacy of child welfare with seven of her children and two of her ten grandchildren in care: *"Most of my kids, they grew up in foster care, I grew up in foster care."* Another shared the impact of child welfare in a different way:

"I was adopted off my reserve so … when I was four years old so I never really, I guess, gotten to know my original people, my band, my family, my original brothers, sisters, parents. So I've never really known that much about being Aboriginal. Raised by a white family, I couldn't have asked for a better childhood, a good stable family and so I've never really known that much about being Aboriginal until I was in like my thirties. I started looking into a little bit and find out where I was from and where my band was from and I got my status. So it's just been in the last ten to fifteen years that I've really identified with Aboriginal people in general and gotten to know a little bit about that culture."
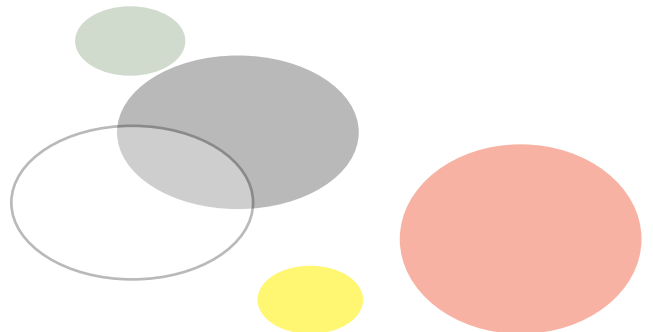
Related to childhood apprehension and placement in a white foster home is limited exposure to Indigenous peoples and culture. Participants commonly experience a disconnect from Indigenous peoples and culture until exposure is initiated later in life, often associated with addictions treatment in an Indigenous treatment facility.

> *"When I got adopted into a white family, and all my life … (inaudible) … white people and most of them white people didn't have pictures of Native people so they told me, "You're gonna end up on welfare, you're gonna end up drunk, you're gonna end up on the streets, you're just gonna end up a typical Native" and I promised myself I wasn't going to be that because why would I let you guys tell me … it was more of a pride thing. "F you, you're not gonna do it, you not gonna talk me into doing it." That was the biggest draw for me, not to touch alcohol and not to touch drugs because of that."*

Another spoke of this tension in a different way:

> *"I had gotten into a bit of a … not an argument well I guess you could call it an argument … with my adoptive parents and I was given the choice of making the decision to choose my culture over their religion and to this day we just don't speak and I don't know if I ever will speak to them, or when I'm ready I guess. But it's too bad."*

Importance is commonly placed on the nurturing impacts of environments to a greater degree than credence to the impact of one's inherent nature: *"'Cause they say you know you're a product of your own environment from which you were brought up with so that's kinda how that's working right now, a little bit of background about myself, eh?"*

Some spoke of gratitude towards Poundmaker's Lodge in offering the first opportunity for many to connect with their culture through ceremony, cultural teachings and Elders:

> *"When I was a kid, I remember when I was young in grade school, me and my sisters and brother, we were the only Native people in our school. So it was kind of … at one point it was almost embarrassing to be like that. It's not a thing to say now right, but you almost hid it away. It was always interesting to me, the culture but without any chance to really learn about different areas of it, but it helped me … at Poundmaker's it was really interesting … (inaudible) … it's more like a big family the Native thing to me."*

Active curiosity or exploration of Indigenous identity commonly followed a recent experience with Poundmaker's Lodge.

Participants commonly have a history of alcohol and drug addiction challenges. Participants often speak of an intergenerational legacy of alcoholism. One shared his anger directed at the intergenerational legacy of alcohol:

> *"My dad died later on from drinking, diabetes and a bunch of other things were wrong with him. Two of my brothers got killed by drunk drivers and not a big draw when so many family people have died from drinking. So more than anything else it was anger towards alcohol that is what kept me from it."*

Another shared that alcoholism, death from alcoholism and violent deaths related to alcoholism were common in her family: *"The foster home I grew up in, there was alcohol ... a lot of alcohol in it. My biological family, they were all full-blown alcoholics and they are all six feet two in the ground because of the alcohol."*

One spoke of the Indigenous oral teaching relative to the Indigenous genetic inability to digest alcohol:

> *"For us as First Nations ... physically First Nations are allergic to alcohol and that is one of the worst addictions there is for First Nations is alcohol. We can physically not handle alcohol. Doesn't matter what tribe you're from, where you're from ... First Nations God has made it plain and simple that Natives cannot handle their alcohol period. Nobody really looks at it that way but statistically they cannot. That's something that I've learned over the years but it's taken me a decade to learn a lot about addictions and having my son's mother, my little guy right now, his mom is struggling with addictions and physical disabilities and mentally too. Addictions can take a perfectly sane person and turn them into a basket case 'cause I've seen it through my boy's mom, eh?"*

For some, mention of Indigenous identity is associated with the daily exposure to racism due to the colour of their skin. For others, Indigenous culture and spirituality is a strong anchoring point around which all other concerns revolved. For most, Indigenous culture, spirituality and identity was not a verbalized priority.

For some, mention of Indigenous identity is associated with daily exposure to racism due to the colour of one's skin. For others, Indigenous culture and spirituality is a strong anchoring point around which all other concerns revolved. For most of the participants, Indigenous culture, spirituality and identity was not a verbalized priority at the time of the interview. *"I don't think I'm too in touch with my Aboriginal heritage."*

Two participants discussed their Indigenous identity in the following way:

> *"Male: it's not something that comes into everyday life I guess.*
>
> *Female: "Yeah, it's something that we've talked about, both being Aboriginal people. That we want to make that more a part of our lives now because we haven't in the past and for his [child's] sake definitely want to get more in touch with our Aboriginal roots. Right now it doesn't … it means something obviously but it's not … I don't really know where to go with it, what to do with it basically."*

Another factor related to Indigenous identity is that the lines between Indigenous and non-Indigenous sometimes become blurred:

> *"There was an Aboriginal guy sitting there and a Caucasian girl sitting on the computer and they came and booted her out because it was for Aboriginal students only and he stood up and the gentlest young man I've ever … spewed, "This is my wife, this is the mother of my children, you have no idea, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah" and he never set foot in there again, ever, not in the entire … he took a lot of students away from there himself, because he … his wife was treated so badly and I think that when you look at the north and the influx of people moving from north to the south, there is so much inter-marriage in the north …"*

The complexity of Indigenous identity development in the context of colonization and decolonization requires a number of supports. Participants commonly express the need for counselling services, services that aren't readily available on the reserve: *"things are better in the city and at the reserve there is no counsellor, there's no transportation, the only counselling is at the … is in the cities and towns and when you don't have a vehicle, it's hard to get counselling."* Connection to Indigenous cultural resources is also needed in the decolonization and Indigenous identity development process.

All of these factors influence individual Indigenous identity development of participants, staff and managers associated with the Housing First program.

Spectrum of Indigenous Identities

Indigenous identities of participants range from hostility towards the "red road" to strong alignment with traditional Indigenous beliefs and traditions on a daily basis including smudging, listening to powwow music and prayers. Among the participants, there was one who strongly rejects Indigenous culture:

> *"Well for me personally, I'm not a traditionalist by any means. I do not follow tradition, I don't believe in it at all, I don't … I'm not going to … well I don't want to judge it. At the same time, I wouldn't spread it to other people and share it with other people."*
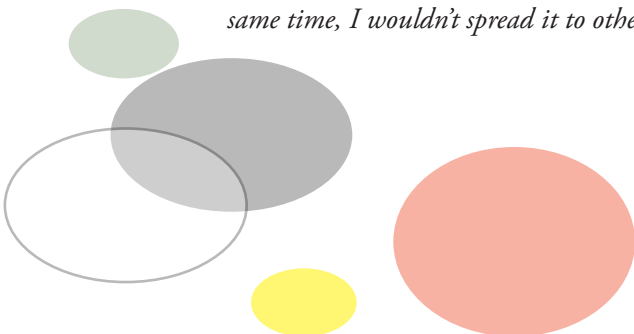
For this participant, a graduate from residential school, the "red road" is a "distraction" understood in a similar way as a "crack culture":

> *"It's a distraction, it's a culture, it's a deterrent. We create our own cultures. Let's take the crack culture for instance. I was in TO, lived in TO and I was a crack head too back then. And it struck me one day that why am I into this and start breaking into vehicles like I did and start stealing off people, start lying to people. It's a culture that people start to develop, their own culture and as soon as I figured that out, you know it was easy to quit, it was easy to let go of it."*

This participant also spoke of being highly influenced by external pressures: *"I'm easily influenced by friends, by words, by people."* When asked the question, "what culture is meaningful to you?" He replied: *"no culture, the culture of praising the Lord, the culture of understanding the Lord … the culture of obedience."*

For this participant, rejection of the "red road" and embracing assimilation relates to internalized racist messages about Indigenous peoples:

> *"For me, I want to join the mainstream, I don't want to be labeled as someone who's in special need of these programs geared towards only Aboriginal because I believe I can fully mix in with society without having to worry about my blood. But understand that a lot of my people … well as you can see I don't have long, shaggy hair, I'm not unkempt, I've been to college, I guess more formally educated then most of my people are so I've got, I guess you could say, a better grip than most of them do. (long pause)*
>
> *But I have an Aboriginal friend who was supposed to go to a meeting in Red Deer, it's a business meeting. He's trying … he's getting into college and he's trying to take a course on revenue or something of that nature but he was too shy … He was too scared because he has long, shaggy hair and he doesn't dress formally. I told him, don't let those people intimidate you, don't let them judge you, just go there, ask questions, don't be afraid to ask questions and make sure you ask the right questions but don't be afraid to ask the wrong questions too, I told him. … (inaudible) … I'm not going, I told him, "It's okay, don't worry about it, there's something else you can do too". So I try to give him that encouragement even though I need help myself, I'm still struggling but I believe I'll make it."*
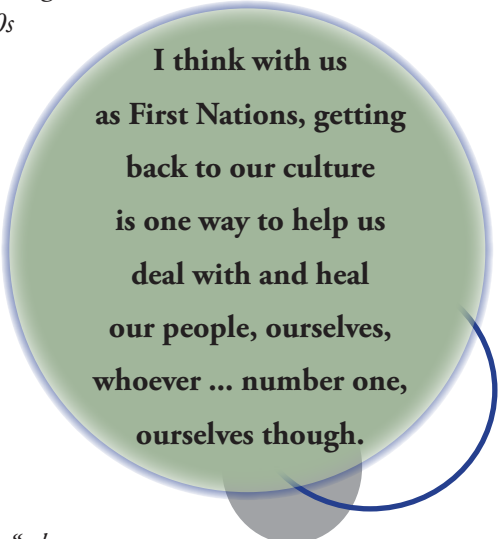
On the other hand, some participants spoke with a notable pride about Indigenous identity:

> *"Being First Nations, and over the years learning about my culture — and I'm still learning to this day and until the day I die — I probably won't know all of it but to have the responsibility of choosing between my culture and somebody else's religion I just don't think that's right. This is what I am. I'm a First Nations and fortunate enough for both my sons, they're both treaty Indians as well, and that means a lot to me anyways. To them they'll eventually learn more about it but that's you know my background from before I was adopted. Our mother couldn't take care of us so she did what was best for us and now communicating with my older siblings and my youngest sister too we're pretty grateful for what happened to us."*

Some participants spoke of different age-based cohorts relative to Indigenous identity and to the broader project of healing collective Indigenous identity. A participant spoke of his understanding of Indigenous identity with different aged cohorts:

> "Right away I thought anger but I'm like, nope just let it go ... forget about it, eh? Us as First Nations that's what we gotta learn to do. But the people that are in my generation that are in their 30s and their 40s right now, they're learning to let go. But the people that range from their 20s to I guess their 30s in that age group ... they're bitter people. Gangsters, just real crappy thoughts ... it's discouraging but I guess it's all in how you look at it. It's bad though.
>
> It's all in how you think about it though. Through the right train of thought, which is you know not an easy thing to do, but positive thinking. I think with us as First Nations, getting back to our culture is one way to help us deal with and heal our people, ourselves, whoever ... number one ourselves though."

Another participant spoke of historical progress that affects Indigenous identity development:

I think with us as First Nations, getting back to our culture is one way to help us deal with and heal our people, ourselves, whoever ... number one, ourselves though.

> "In my generation, Native people went to school but they were saying, "what the hell for?" Excuse my language, "what for?" Because the non-Native person's going to be running that. Who's the head of the, do they have corporations sometimes, non-Native. Who's getting the good jobs? Non-Native. So why should I go to school and train myself for this and that and then I'm not going to get ... I'm still going to be digging ditches. Nowadays now, it's more ... you're seeing some of the corporations, like the business of that ... are Native owned, they are also Native run and staffed by the Native people, trained Native people and so that's ... to me that gives the younger people, say "Hey yeah, if I train myself I can become president of that place or VP or something like that, I could run that place". Five, six years training, school, I could look towards getting something like that. Not before, before you ... so what, these people are headed, they're the ones running it, non-Native people.
>
> So nowadays it looks good, that's what I'm saying. The more young Native people that go back to school, they're actually going to school, they're seeing that they can actually get a job as a VP or any of that. That gives them more incentive, yeah, I can get up there and do that. Like I say, the young people I talked to at NAIT, that's the way they're thinking. So that's excellent I think, to me that's ... (inaudible) ... like I say I'm sort of, I'm getting too old there, I'm starting to talk like one of those old fuddy duddies there ... (laughter) ..."
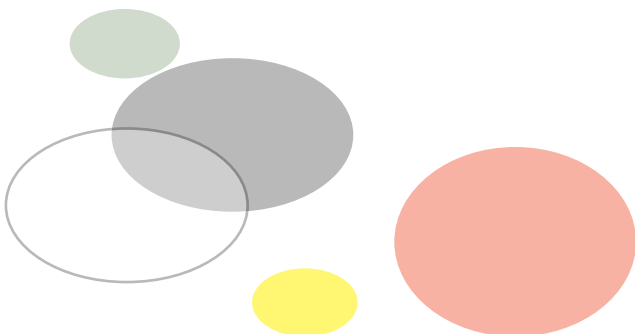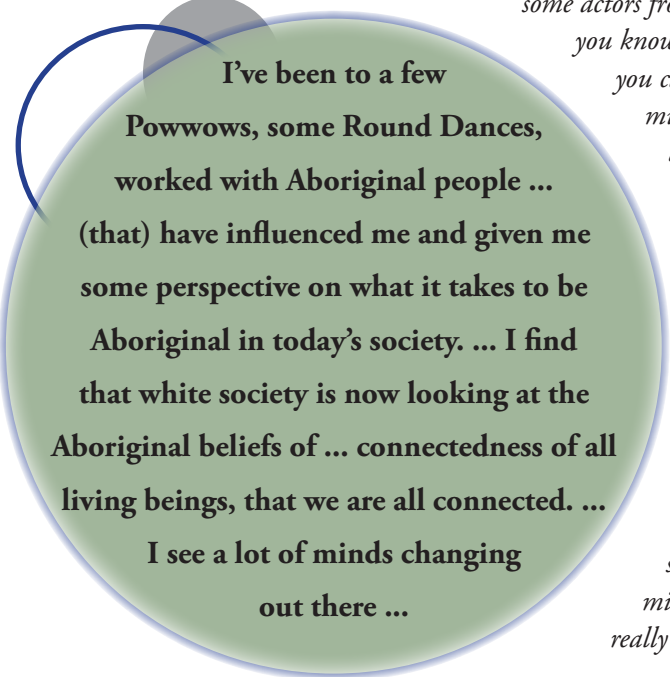
This participant had a sense of responsibility to reconnect with his Indigenous identity for "the younger generation":

> "I'm starting to realize that yeah, I am not supposed to just take. Hopefully if I succeed through this housing program and carry on, like I say, others will see that and go on. To me that's …now that's what I'm doing it for basically is for the younger generation now. They see that old man can do that, we can do that and we can do that too and it's … I was just about the oldest one … I was the oldest one in my class. Makes me feel good too, looking up to me, course it made me feel kind of old too but it's good to see that the young people were looking up and saying, "oh yeah". First they thought I was one of the instructors or an Elder and then I said, "no, I'm taking the course". "What?" It surprises them that an older person can actually go back and retrain and so hopefully they do the same thing. What I want them to see is that … not to wait so damn long to actually go back and get your training and get out there and do the work where it took me this … just so many years to come to the realization that "Hey, gotta get out there and do something". You can't sit back on your butt there and … all the time and do nothing, accept handouts or something like that. To me that's, not anymore, like I said, it's the Elder in me is coming out, can't see that no more."

Indigenous role modeling was felt to play a strong role in reconnection with Indigenous identity:

> "Oh I've been to a few Powwows, some Round Dances, worked with Aboriginal people, doing a little bit of publishing, a little bit of design work, gotten to know some actors from TV and movies, a few people here and there, you know. I've crossed paths with them and the … I guess you call them role models and actors and dancers, musicians, things like that, that have influenced me and given me some perspective on what it takes to be Aboriginal in today's society and what they've had to struggle through and what they continue to struggle through and kind of where they've come from to get to this point and … (inaudible) … actually. And they've really helped in their beliefs and I find that white society now is looking at the Aboriginal beliefs of … I don't know how to say it … connectedness of all living beings, that we're all connected. White society is starting to identify with that and saying, "That's right, that's true". So I see a lot of minds changing out there now in society that were really rigid, you know."

> I've been to a few Powwows, some Round Dances, worked with Aboriginal people … (that) have influenced me and given me some perspective on what it takes to be Aboriginal in today's society. … I find that white society is now looking at the Aboriginal beliefs of … connectedness of all living beings, that we are all connected. … I see a lot of minds changing out there …

Participants commonly felt compelled to reconnect with Indigenous identity, to reconnect with Indigenous blood and cellular memory on a large scale and to heal the blood and cellular memory associated with colonization. Participants commonly felt the need for Indigenous leadership in these healing efforts. A participant stated this calling in the following way:

> *"I think it's up to the Native people in general now to actually get up there and prove or show them that this perception of the Native people is wrong."*

Another participant spoke with conviction on the need for internal motivation by Indigenous peoples to take a leadership role in the healing of Indigenous identity process and project:

> *"It's time that we … the Native people quit saying, "hey, poor me" sort of thing and get out there and show them in that, "hey, we get out there and work, we get out there and train." This leads to … at NAIT there, there is a lot of Native students and they're young Native students who are actually training and bettering their education, training for … I think there's some engineers, electricians, there's some … all different sorts of training in NAIT. That there's young Native people who are going through years and years of school now because they want to be … get off the reserve type thing and actually work, actually better themselves.*
>
> *Well the way I look, they were talking to me almost like an Elder. Sit down and talking, they were telling me how many years they've, I've gone through this year and this year of schooling and I still have another two or three years to go. I said, "that's good." I say, "it's about time the Native people got up, sittin' off their butts, get out there and do. …" And new people are starting that, the young people are starting that and they even said, "yes, we want to start that, we want to get away from that and actually get to work and get trained and stuff like that and become our own, manage our own lives kind of thing."*
>
> *And as far as, like I say, towards housing, stuff like that, that's … I think that's … if a person uses that; the housing, uses it as a stepping stone sort of thing, eh? I'm trying to do that and this is a stepping stone for me that has put me on my feet, back on my feet. Just give me a house, give me a place, everything … give me the incentive sort of to get myself re-trained and get out there and actually support my own life and everything and that to me is what the housing did for me."*

Another participant spoke of this shift with Indigenous peoples as it relates to his perception of decreasing levels of addictions and homelessness among Indigenous peoples in Edmonton:

> *"I think us as First Nations are finally making decisions now that a lot of the people are older and their addictions aren't controlling them anymore 'cause a lot of it is addictions. A lot of the homeless people that I see … 75% of them that I see are all First Nations and it's discouraging sometimes to see that and over the years I've seen that too, eh? It's a rough thing to see our First Nations to go through that. But anyhow now there's a difference being made too."*

Another participant sees this collective change in Indigenous identity in the broader sociopolitical context of North America:
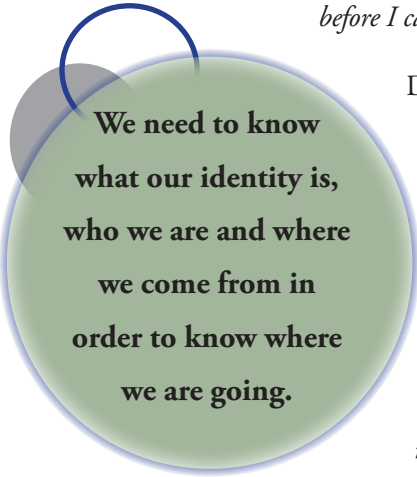
> *"I think it's good. I think it's about time that what the Aboriginal people have been believing and you know, talking about for so long is finally coming to pass, and you know, being accepted widely across Canada and the U.S. So I think it's good. It's a positive step forward for Aboriginals and white society. It's one step closer to bridging the gap. Good thing."*

Healing Indigenous Identity

Similar to how participants are along a spectrum of Indigenous identities from assimilated to traditionalists, participants are along a spectrum of interest in, willingness, motivation, and skills to reconnect with Indigenous identity. Reconnection with Indigenous identity needs to be done relationally by connecting with other Indigenous peoples informally and formally, through ceremony, through Indigenous organizations, through connecting with the Spirit World. Based on the commonly daunting history of relational trauma experienced by participants in the past, reaching out to establish trusting, healthy relationships may be a challenge.

Similarly, in the context of current and historic influences of racism, being a cultural minority and intergenerational transmission of trauma and grief, Indigenous peoples have many internal and external challenges that need to be faced to reconnect with Indigeneity. A participant spoke of this challenge in the following way:

> *"How do you survive, how do you gain back your own power by saying, "yes, I am who I am and I don't need anybody else to tell me that right, but I need to know who I am first before I can say I know who I am."*

We need to know what our identity is, who we are and where we come from in order to know where we are going.

Despite these odds, participants express interest in reconnecting with Indigeneity. A participant spoke of Elder's teachings relative to knowing "who we are":

> *"I know that sometimes we have to do things a little differently and I always think about the Elders and what the Elders have been saying for a number of years now. And there's a couple of things that they say is ... and I don't know why I need to say this piece, but one of them ... one of the things that they say is that the women need to begin to heal and then the men will follow and I think that's a really important piece. The other thing is that they're always talking about we need to know what our identity is, who we are and where we come from in order to know where we're going."*
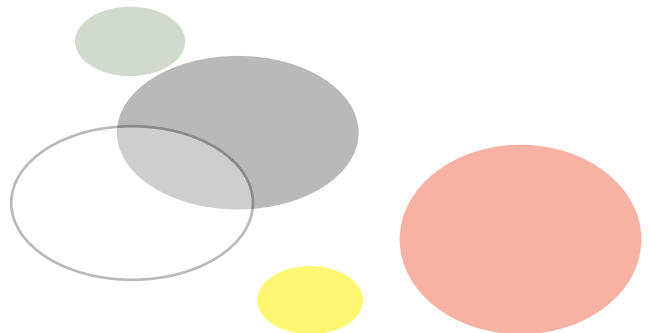
The healing journey to know "who we are and where we come from in order to know where we're going" is unique and distinct for each individual and community. Despite the validity of any healing path and journey, healing Indigenous identity typically has a number of identified aspects including relational connection to Indigenous peoples, cultures, ceremonies and connection to other Beings including the Spirit World, consciousness-raising about colonization and the decolonization process and the corresponding healing of internalized racism.
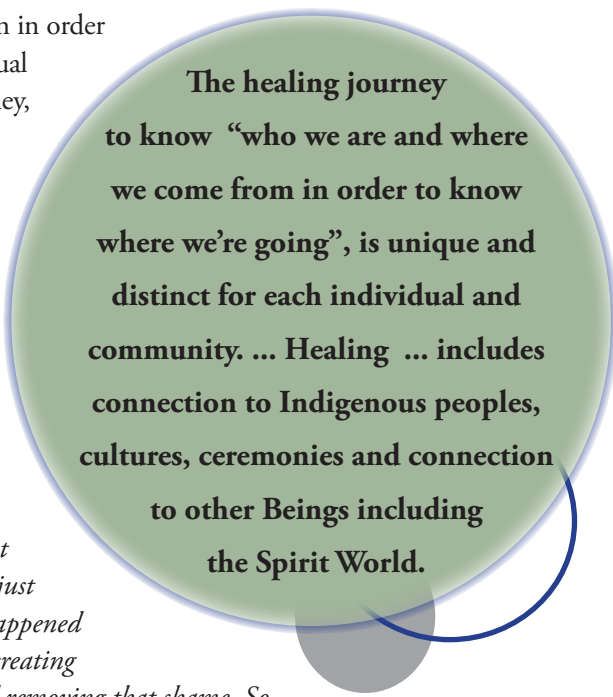
A participant shared a perspective on the importance of learning "where we come from" in the learning of the history of colonization of Indigenous peoples:

> *"I think a lot of Aboriginal people are even unaware of what has happened and why they're over represented. And maybe just teaching them, this is what happens … or this is what has happened and then just building on that and just building a sense of creating somehow a sense of pride or fostering going back to that and removing that shame. So explaining this is what's happened and this is what we can do to move forward and this is how we can reconnect. So maybe providing some sort of workshop or I don't know, to clients. I don't know if that is doable or will work but yeah.*
>
> *Because I know for me, up until like five years ago, I was like, "that happened fifty years ago, get over it, stop being a victim." And then last year I was like, "oh dang, I'm being affected by what happened." I have a different type of, "oh I'm a fighter, let's make the best of it." But I mean I haven't experienced as much trauma as a lot of people have in relation to most of the population, but in relation to a lot of people that have come — parents that have been in residential schools — they've experienced a lot of trauma, so just teaching them that this is what happened and this is what we can do to move forward. I think everyone has choices and so it's presenting them with that and how can we build up their confidence and pride and that's who they are right."*

Another spoke of his personal decolonization process of healing from his hatred of all white people:

> *"When I was nineteen, I hated white people. I hated white people more than you could possibly imagine, there was so much hate. I would rather walk up to you and smack you just 'cause you're white. I had so much hate and anger because of the racism I grew up with. It took a year from nineteen to twenty until I realized that not every white person was this way that I got treated. Not every white person … (inaudible) … I got chased down the road with a baseball bat and chains, ten guys just 'cause I was Native and the addiction that I have, it's just small compared to the hatred that I used to have for white people. But that's where my spiritual side with my Christian faith comes. I believe that God helped me heal that and I believe that that can be healed too, the addiction part."*
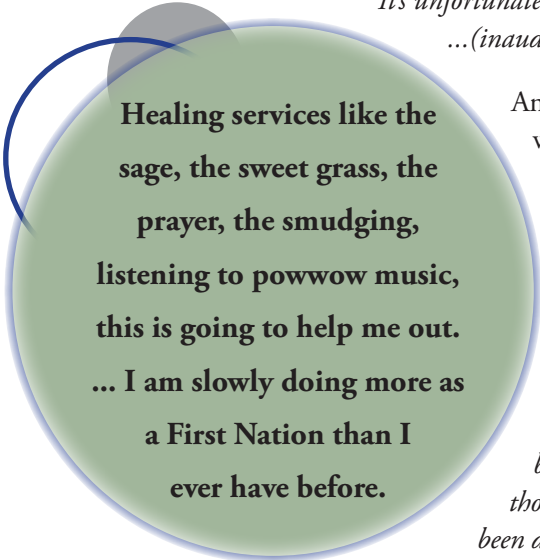
The healing journey to know "who we are and where we come from in order to know where we're going", is unique and distinct for each individual and community. … Healing … includes connection to Indigenous peoples, cultures, ceremonies and connection to other Beings including the Spirit World.

Spirituality and a connection to spiritual energies are important to some participants. Some connect strongly with a Christian faith, some connect with both Christianity and Indigenous spirituality, others connect strongly with Indigenous spirituality and some are beginning to explore the meaning of spirituality and spiritual energies in their life. A participant shared his strong connection with Indigenous spirituality in the following way:

> *"That spiritualism brings peace, brings unity to the ones that are involved with that, part of it so that's part of the culture, it's very important. Because of that piece, because of the unity, it draws people together. You go to a round dance and the people are there to really enjoy it. They just come out with a … (inaudible) … which is, where the guy's there dancing, the people are doing the jig or all the different things that they do. There's just a camaraderie that just is there. You go into some of the communities and they have dinners and feasts all the time just for that community because they need … we need that in any culture.*
>
> *It doesn't matter, we need that community, we need that camaraderie and with the Aboriginal people, especially when there's so much, so many people looking down on us because we're Aboriginal, because of things we've done, some of our parents have done and all the other … what they still see, have to stick together 'cause … (inaudible) … It's unfortunate but mostly nobody else will help if we don't help ourselves. …(inaudible)… together but we can't do it by ourselves."*

Healing services like the sage, the sweet grass, the prayer, the smudging, listening to powwow music, this is going to help me out. … I am slowly doing more as a First Nation than I ever have before.

Another shared his connection to Indigenous spirituality in another way:

> *"Getting in touch with Aboriginal services. Healing services like uh the sage, the sweet grass, the prayer, the smudging, listening to powwow music this is what's gonna help me out. I think it will help other Aboriginals out but whether or not they choose to go down that path … to the heck with ceremonies it's powwows, round dances … I'm slowly doing more as a First Nation with cultural aspect than I have ever before. It's too bad that it took me 10 years to realize that though. Like I said I'm 41 and when I was 31 I should have been doing what I'm doing now but I didn't so. You know, I'm not gonna kick myself in the ass for it I'll just take what I've learned now and hopefully I can teach it to my son."*

A participant shared his recent reframing of his relationship with spiritual energies:

> *"I have a feeling, like I have a feeling when a person … I can feel their energy, if it's negative or if it's positive, I can feel that, eh? I never understood that for the longest time and I'm just starting to sort of look at that part of my life, where it's coming from and I think it's helping me grow a little bit."*

Some participants mentioned participation in Indigenous ceremony including smudging, prayer and sweat lodge ceremonies. Some engaged in smudging and prayer alone at home. Those who mentioned participation in communal smudging and sweat lodge ceremonies were likely to have done so at Poundmaker's Lodge. An Indigenous front-line staff offers ceremony to her Indigenous Housing First participants by offering to smudge the accommodation before the client moves into the Housing First accommodation. Connection to Indigenous ceremony on a regular basis does not appear to be common among participants.
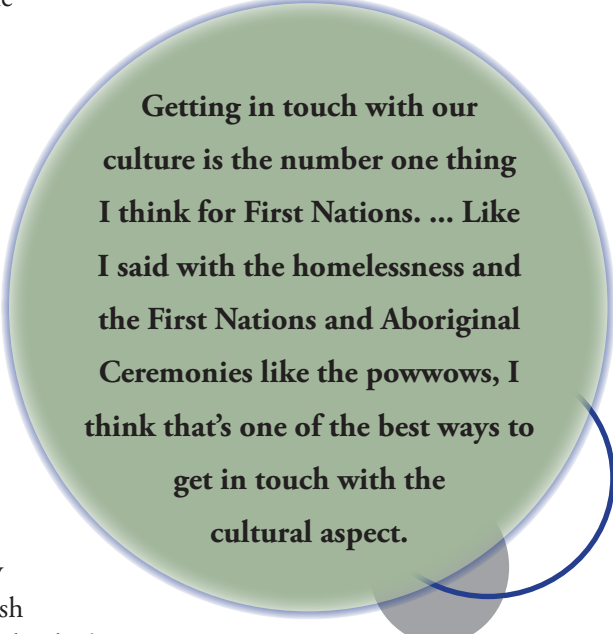
Connection to Indigenous culture is seen as an important thing to do for all Indigenous individuals and communities and is seen by some participants as a necessary aspect of healing from homelessness:

> "Getting in touch with our culture is the number one thing I think for First Nations. And the younger people have to realize that though. But now more and more though I think things are changing. Like I said with the homelessness and the First Nations and Aboriginal Ceremonies like the powwows, I think that's one of the best ways to get in touch with the cultural aspect … for me anyways."

Getting in touch with our culture is the number one thing I think for First Nations. … Like I said with the homelessness and the First Nations and Aboriginal Ceremonies like the powwows, I think that's one of the best ways to get in touch with the cultural aspect.

Despite the desire to connect with Indigenous culture, few participants are connected in a formal way. Connection to Indigenous culture is largely self-initiated by participants. Participants commonly spoke of a strong connection with and respect for Poundmaker's Lodge. Some continue to go regularly to meetings and ceremonies at Poundmaker's Lodge. Others wish to continue to go regularly to meetings and ceremonies at Poundmaker's Lodge, but without transportation to the remote site outside of St. Albert, this is not feasible for most participants.

A participant spoke of his self-initiated drive to connect with a local Indigenous organization:
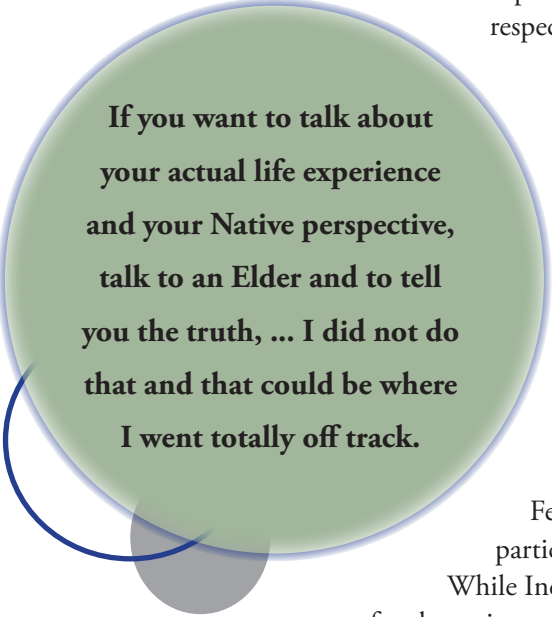
> "The [name of organization deleted] but they were closed half the time I went. They were just having budget problems so they just couldn't be there. I don't know what kind of support or what kind of counselling specific for Native people or Aboriginal people or whatever. So that would be helpful to find out or to have a place so you know you're coming to an Aboriginal family or man or woman, have that kind of thing already set, have that kind of research set. Okay, well this is where they're coming from, maybe they're from reserve, well then we get them connected somehow because I'm sure there's reserves around here that have places in town, that's how it is back home. Maybe I'm wrong, I don't know but it would make sense."

This is a role Homeward Trust and Housing First staff can play, a theme developed further in forthcoming sections.

Connection to an Elder is seen as an important aspect of Indigenous identity development and healing by some participants. A participant spoke of his respect for Elders in the following way:

If you want to talk about your actual life experience and your Native perspective, talk to an Elder and to tell you the truth, ... I did not do that and that could be where I went totally off track.

"If you want to talk about your actual life experience and your Native perspective, talk to an Elder, that to me is essential. And, to tell you the truth, when I was younger, I did not do that and that could be where I totally went off track, 'cause I didn't consult with the Elder. I didn't sit down and talk, I didn't really recognize an Elder as ... I used to say, "what does he know, he's an old man anyway or an old woman, what the heck eh, they don't know what the heck's going on now," which for me is too bad."

Few of the Housing First staff are Indigenous. As such, Indigenous participants are interfacing with non-Indigenous Housing First staff. While Indigenous participants overwhelming express respect and gratitude for the caring and professional characteristics of the front-line Housing First staff, some participants would like to see a larger representation of Indigenous peoples in Housing First staff roles. Participants had different visions for what this might look like, and the feasibility of such an approach. These themes are discussed further in forthcoming sections.

Relative to Indigenous identity development and healing, Indigenous peoples are commonly regarded to need to connect with other Indigenous peoples. Due to the over-representation of Indigenous peoples in the homeless population, Indigenous participants likely had interaction with Indigenous people while homeless. Those who are street homeless and likely struggling with addictions are come to be known by participants and staff as "bad" friends. This will be discussed further in this section, but for the current discussion, it is important to note that these are relationships with other Indigenous peoples may or may not be replaced with "good" relationships with "healthy" Indigenous peoples.

While the role of role modeling was recognized by some participants as important in healing Indigenous identity, routine, informal relationships with other Indigenous peoples is also important. When Indigenous peoples are asked to leave a potentially Indigenous homeless community to live in Housing First market accommodation that is likely dominated by non-Indigenous neighbours, interacting with non-Indigenous staff, there may be an aspect of Indigeneity that contributes to challenges to both the Housing First adjustment process and to Indigenous identity development, healing and decolonization. This will be discussed in greater detail in other areas of this report.

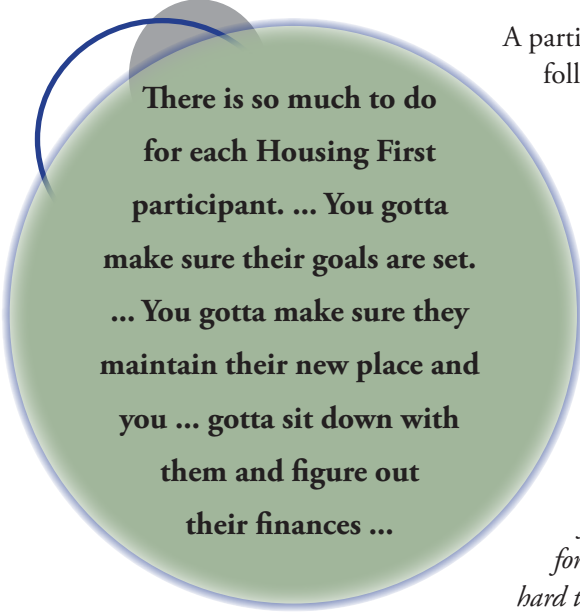# Telling the Stories — Housing First Staff

Front-line Housing First staff are divided into two main roles — the front-line and the follow-up worker. A participant shares an understanding of these separate and distinct individuals and roles:

> "I guess they have two different kinds of workers, ones that help getting people into a home and then another worker that will continue working with us after we've got into a place."

Participants spoke with appreciation towards both types of Housing First workers, with a strong focus on the follow-up worker. The following participant shared her perspective on the difference between the two roles:

> "Well when I first started, I did housing and I did support which didn't work well because they're very different. They're both difficult jobs, the housing aspect of it is very stressful. People are sleeping outside, you're always in a mode of how I'm going to get them in, it's very high intensity stress type job. The other aspect of it though is it's very exciting because you get to rescue these people out of like sleeping under the park bench with their cart and so it's a very high stress and high excitement I would say. So that with support work; support work is more difficult in the sense that you have to maintain this relationship for a year but you can also sit down and just have a conversation about where they're at, what goals they can have, it's very slower paced so it's less stress in that way but it's more stress in that you have to maintain that relationship."

Perspectives about, and experiences of front-line and follow-up workers were gathered through the stories of participants. Front-line and follow-up workers are seen to have very stressful jobs due to large case loads, social services sector pay and demands associated with working with tertiary level clients with complex needs: *"We deal with clients' mental illness, addiction, who have basically been in survival mode and so you're the safest person that they probably know and therefore, they take it out on you right."*

A participant shared insight on the workload demands associated with the follow-up worker role:

There is so much to do for each Housing First participant. ... You gotta make sure their goals are set. ... You gotta make sure they maintain their new place and you ... gotta sit down with them and figure out their finances ...

> "There's so much to do for each participant. Now we're supposed to have 20 on our case loads — I have 18 right now — and there's so much to do just for one client. You gotta make sure that their goals are set, they have to have three goals that need to be set by them, and what else? ...You gotta make sure they maintain their new place and you gotta set up a ... I'm so tired I can't even think right now ... you need to set up ... you gotta sit down with them and figure out their finances and you know say okay well this much is going to pay your power or your telephone, this is for your groceries, this is for your cigarettes if you smoke, this is for any clothing you need. So they don't get a whole lot so it's very hard to get that all done and I know most of our clients get only $260 from SFI and on AISH they get a little bit more $1100 and something."

The role is commonly regarded as a highly stressful job which places high emotional and time demands on the staff. A participant explained the emotional stress in the following way:

> "It's emotionally taxing, that's why I'd say it's difficult because you're hearing these horrific stories of what brought them to this place which is usually trauma, abuse, addiction, rejection and I mean people don't get into this because they're heartless. People get into this because they care about people."

The empathy required of staff in this role is simultaneously the asset that places them at largest risk of burn-out.

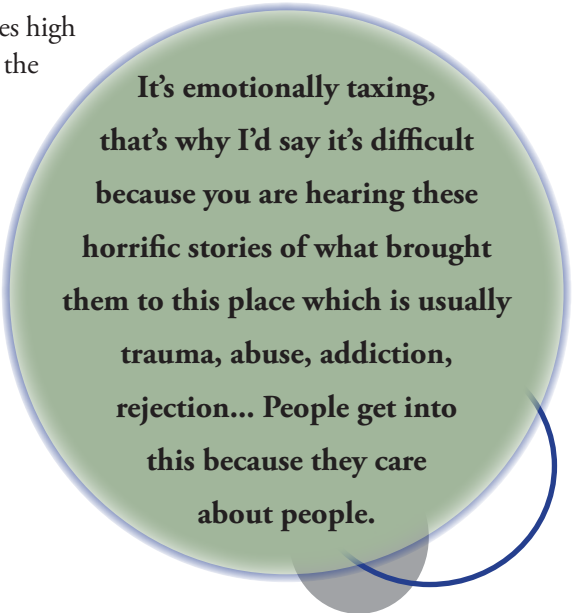One participant was literally having a hard time staying awake during the interview:

> "Like this is the worst timing for this interview cause I am just so tired. I'm extremely tired especially in the last five days. So if you see me that I'm just barely holding my eyes open it's because a lot has happened in the last week and a half with one of our clients burning their house ... their apartment down ... well he wasn't in it and his girlfriend was there and she did it. So it's yeah ... the last week and a half have been very very hectic so you know I'm just tired."

Front-line Housing First staff have disparate structural and personal supports for these boundaries. A participant who is a manager commented that:

> "This is an incredibly difficult job and so if their stress is high and they can take a day off, just allowing that, self care, teaching of self-care, teaching of boundaries from management level. If you don't need to take a call at ten pm, if their pipes haven't burst and they're just asking about a bill, let the voice mail take it. So dealing with emergencies after hours, not, "oh I want to talk to you about my day". It's like no, that's your time so just teaching them about that, proper boundaries and that it's okay to turn your phone off at five and just check the messages. If it's an emergency yes, respond. I've had to deal with emergencies after hours. That's the job but if it's a non-urgent issue, it can wait until nine tomorrow morning. And so just teaching them that and supporting them when they've had a rough day and they're feeling really upset about something they've heard that a client said that's just being there to listen and just being a sounding board."

This participant sees that emotional and time demands placed on workers can be managed with appropriate boundaries:

> "So I find on my team, they don't get a lot of phone calls in the evening and weekends because they've set those boundaries and they've taught their clients about that."

At this time, it is not clear what structural supports exist within Homeward Trust funded agencies to enable customized Indigenous services for Indigenous staff and clients. This issue is explored in greater depth in forthcoming aspects of this report.

Front-line staff spoke of intense emotional demands associated with the work, simultaneously stressing that the challenges of the job were an asset of the position.

Indigenous staff are more likely to have additional emotional demands placed on them in working with this client group due to their Indigenous identity including cellular and blood memory of colonization and current vulnerability to racism. As an Indigenous staff person stated:

> *"I actually didn't realize that I was directly affected. I always thought that, "okay, I'm not directly affected by it, my aunts were and their kids and stuff were because they were in residential school but my mom grew up in a foster home". It never occurred to me though that her unhealthy patterns and her disconnect from all family, I'm not connected with my family on an emotional level except for my younger cousins because there's huge anger and tension between the siblings. Like my mom and her siblings because they've been traumatized, like there's just a lot of anger, a lot of hurt and so there's a really big disconnect there.*
>
> *It never occurred to me until last year that I'm actually experiencing the results of a lot of that. I'm disconnected from them, I don't have any family. It's me and my sister, I'm cut off from a lot of my siblings and so it's like it's ... my mom's mentally ill, disconnected from her family, very unhealthy patterns of moving every six months or so, can't hold down a job and so I mean I think a lot of that, if she had a supportive environment, a loving family, people around her, I mean she'd probably still be mentally ill.*
>
> *Who knows if that was nature, nurture, whatever, probably a bit of both but it would have been ... it would have looked different and so I definitely think that experientially, it wasn't even until last year that I realized like, "oh man, like all this pain and experience that I have in dealing with my mom and not having anyone around and feeling very disconnected is a result from two generations ago." And I don't like taking on the victim mentality that I'm a result of the system because I'm not. I've made my life better but there are still incredible barriers and heartache and I've just recently connected the two that what I'm experiencing is actually result of generations of dysfunction. So that was kind of an eye opener I guess."*
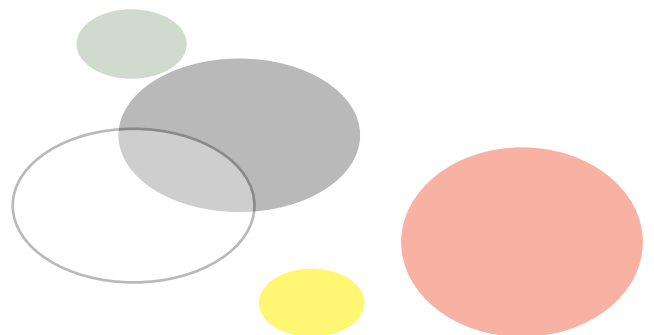
An Indigenous staff person has the dual challenge of supporting a tertiary level Indigenous client in their Indigenous identity development and decolonization process in concert with their own. As an Indigenous staff participant indicated: *"I'm not very connected with my culture. There is a sense of disconnect for me for sure."* This Indigenous staff person speaks of the relevance of intergenerational transmission of Indigenous trauma in her own personal life:

> *"... solidified my decision that this is going to stop here and so I'm foraging a strong bond with my sister, I do have other siblings that I'm not in contact with because I grew up with my mom and my sister and the rest of the kids were from my dad but the realization solidified within me that I am going to change this, me and my sister, we're family and then when I decide to have kids, it's going to look different."*

With this participant, the line between helping "them" and herself sometimes becomes blurred. This blurring of boundaries between self and other is also evidence of Indigenous blood and cellular memory and an Indigenous world view where all beings are interconnected with relational accountability to all:

> *"So really educating them and not allowing that disconnect. There's a lot of anger, a lot of division and estrangement which I think just obviously exacerbates any problems that arise and so the revelation just kind of increased my desire to ... it stops here. What I can change and contribute, that's what I'm going to do 'cause I'm definitely not a victim. I'm like I'm a fighter right, so what can I do to make this better because I'm still being affected by things that happened two generations ago and how can I make it better then what it has been."*

Indigenous staff in the unique situation of supporting tertiary level clients while they themselves are also subject to current racism in society. An Indigenous staff participant referred to her own experiences of racism known as "the treatment". This participant shares the impact of racism on her professional role: *"the one thing that I find hard about this job is that when I go and meet landlords they see me as Native first and they treat me disrespectfully."*

This participant had a positive experience of support from a colleague when she was faced by this racism:

> *"It's like I don't exist and they [landlords] want a number of somebody they can talk to. Somebody that's preferably not Native ... so umm ... we used to have another Housing Outreach Worker and I talked to her and I let her know. She's not Aboriginal, but I told her what was going on that they're refusing to talk to me, they want to talk to her because you know they're racist. And so [name of worker deleted] talked to them and said, "Listen you're gonna have to talk to [name of interviewee deleted] because once they're housed you guys have nothing to do with me no more — you have to deal with the follow-up support worker which is [name of interviewee deleted] so you're gonna have to talk with her." So they didn't much like it but they had no choice."*

It is unclear what ongoing Homeward Trust funded agency structural supports are available to Indigenous staff in the face of perceived or actual racism.

Despite professional roles that put staff at high risk of burn-out, staff are commonly regarded by Housing First clients as genuinely caring and having all the time in the world: *"He took a lot of his own time to do stuff, he really helped us. …Well he didn't work in business hours, he made sure that we just got everything we needed to get done."*

Staff are commonly regarded by Housing First clients as genuinely caring and having all the time in the world. "He took a lot of his own time to do stuff, he really helped us. … He made sure we just got everything we needed to get done."

Staff commonly make Housing First program recipients feel special:

"They don't judge 'cause a lot of people out there, they judge right away and with [names of workers deleted], they didn't judge me, they didn't, "Oh you're dirty, you're from the street kind of thing." They're just like, "Okay, well how can we help you? Yeah, how can we help you? Yeah, just how can we help you?" And that's how they started."

Another participant shared positive impressions, respect and gratitude for the follow-up worker role and caring and professional personalities in those roles in the following way:

"He made us feel like we weren't being a burden at all. He was super nice, really friendly and the kind of person you could feel real comfortable with. It was really nice to have somebody like that at the time that we were going through as well, just because he did make you feel really comfortable so you didn't feel like really crappy about the whole situation."

Another spoke of his follow-up worker going above and beyond the call of duty to build a healing relational connection with him: *"Well like she'll … when she knows I'm sad, she'll say, "Well do you want to meet for coffee", stuff like that and she just … she's not like most people I've met in the past where they just … it's all phony."* It was very important to this participant that his worker is *"for real and she's very professional about it."*
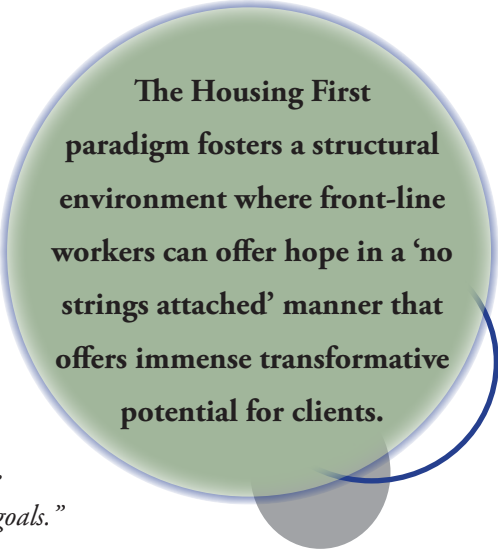
Participants commonly attribute the friendliness and acceptance experienced in the program to the front-line workers:

"I actually like this program, it's really … like I said, it's really … it's helping us a lot and there's no … it's like friendly, you know, it's accepting. It's not how the other programs are, I don't know, maybe it's just the workers or, I don't know what their criteria is but …"

There are also paradigmatic factors associated with this experience of friendliness and acceptance that relate to a shift in paradigm from a treatment first to a Housing First model of service delivery and from a model based on the British Poor Laws versus those based on more contemporary values. These issues are explored in greater detail in forthcoming sections of this report.

Staff are commonly recognized to have a high degree of empathy for clients, engaging in a mentoring relationship with the client that is foundational for building hope. The Housing First paradigm fosters a structural environment where front-line workers can offer hope in a 'no strings attached' manner that offers immense transformative potential for clients:

> *"They give people hope so ... they gave me hope as far as realizing that I didn't need to be stuck in that situation. If I wanted to change my life I needed to change or I could change it. But knowing that there's people that will help you without any ... like I said before, like in string you know what I mean or wanting anything in return, they just want you to have a better life for you and they will help you anyway that they can to reach those goals."*

The Housing First paradigm fosters a structural environment where front-line workers can offer hope in a 'no strings attached' manner that offers immense transformative potential for clients.

While front-line staff are overwhelmingly perceived to be helpful, some participants spoke of tension between the values of the front-line worker and themselves. In one case, the client perceived that his worker was pressuring him to go to regular recovery meetings: *"yeah [name of worker deleted] wanted me to go to AA like every ... twice a week or whatever and then once a week ... nah, that's not for me."* This participant described this in another way by saying that *"we just butted heads, she wanted me to go to AA twice a week or whatever. You know since I got in this place, I drink a lot less, I really do."*

Participants commonly expressed confusion regarding the sobriety requirements associated with participation in the Housing First program. A participant shared his understanding of sobriety requirements in a different way:

> *"According to my counsellor there, if there's a relapse, he said it's alright as long as you're not going back to the same way that you were before, like drinking everyday or staying drunk and not trying to go to work or doing anything, just ... if you're going back to the same way you were, it's the same drug or something like that, like I said, again, that's going to look bad."*

In another case, the personal value system of the front-line worker seeped through in informal conversation that made the client feel judged:

> *"Just, she'll make her opinion know just about anything that we're talking about, like a lot of ... Obviously parenting is a big part of our life. It's our first child and we're still kind of muddling our way through some things. And like depending on what it is, she'll say what she did or what her mother did or stuff like that and although sometimes I do appreciate it, sometimes it's just not what I would say, not what I would agree with. That's about it."*
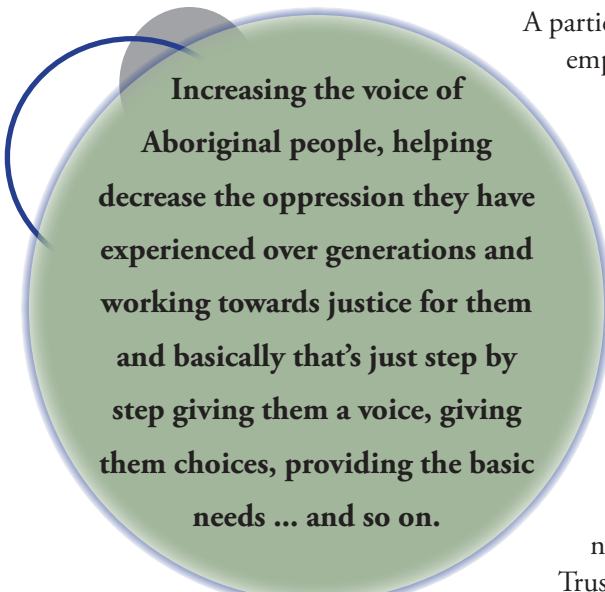
Another spoke of being told by a front-line worker that overnight guests were not allowed:

> *"When I first got my place, I wanted to be helpful to people, which was not a good thing for me because I almost lost my place because of having people over. One of the conditions is that you can't have overnight guests and stuff like that. Which is good because it's protecting the people from losing their own place, right?"*

These examples demonstrate at times unclear messaging from Housing First front-line staff towards clients about the Housing First treatment model. In a sociopolitical environment where a Housing First model is the minority compared to a treatment first model, and in agencies which may have treatment first policies and procedures, staff may be placed in conflictual personal and professional positions where clarity about the Housing First model is seamlessly endorsed. This issue is explored in greater depth in forthcoming aspects of this report.

The Housing First model has a particular relevance to Indigenous peoples due to the historic and current sociopolitical context of colonization. The experience of colonization for Indigenous peoples has included, and does include, the removal of choice, autonomy and power from Indigenous peoples. In this context, it is imperative that an empowerment, Housing First model that is aligned with a decolonization process is seamlessly endorsed and practiced with Indigenous clients.

A participant stated the particular relevance and importance of empowerment of Indigenous peoples:

Increasing the voice of Aboriginal people, helping decrease the oppression they have experienced over generations and working towards justice for them and basically that's just step by step giving them a voice, giving them choices, providing the basic needs ... and so on.

> *"Increasing the voice of Aboriginal people, helping decrease the oppression they have experienced over generations and working towards justice for them and basically that's them by just step by step giving them a voice, giving them choices, providing the basic needs of their needing and so on."*

Given the extent of institutional involvement commonly present in Indigenous people's lives, Housing First staff are called upon to have particular skills in systems navigation and advocacy with Indigenous clients. It is not clear what mandate or training exists from Homeward Trust to support front-line staff with navigating systems and advocating for client's rights in those systems. For example, a participant shared that his daughter who is a permanent ward of the province of Alberta has been living with him for a whole year: *"... but then we've actually been together for a whole year and this was the longest that we've ever been in a place."* There is an opportunity to engage with the Children's Services Children's Advocate in order to shift legal custody and access with this child. Lacking mandate clarity, this is a missed opportunity.

Additionally, front-line staff are required to be aware of and connected to a diversity of resources in order to do their job effectively. Staff commonly connect clients with instrumental needs. A participant shared the importance of a professional advocate for his receipt of a food hamper from the Food Bank: *"Yeah, it seems that without an organization faxing in a request for a basket that it's pretty hard to get a basket at the food bank."* Workload and feasibility are potential barriers to staff being able and willing to engage in systems navigation and advocacy related to non-instrumental needs on behalf of their clients.

Another opportunity for systems navigation and advocacy support is with the reserves. A participant highlighted this need in the following way: *"I don't really like my reserve right now, I'm kind of upset with them."* When asked to explain the reasons for this discontent, the participants shared that: *"basically the last time I tried contacting them, I was trying to get help with my schooling and it seems to me that they basically just told me that they're not going to help me, I'm less than a real Indian, drop out of school."* He went on to explain that he felt:

> *"... pretty upset, I basically don't want help from them anymore. It seems like a slap in the face and an excuse and like I would rather go school and help myself out, rather than take help from them. When I talk to my dad about it, last time he told me that I should really bring up my mom's name because she was very strong willed and anytime she needed something from them, she would go into that Band office and she would fight with them until she got what she wanted or what she knew she was entitled to and I'm not that so much."*

Cross-Cultural Awareness

Front-line staff come from a spectrum of awareness regarding Indigenous identity and culture. As one front-line staff stated: *"with the Aboriginal people that I'm honestly not fully aware of and it would be good to learn more about that but I feel like in my service I don't really differentiate much."* On the other hand, another staff stated an advanced anti-oppressive awareness:

> *"Colour blindness as ... being a way that can unintentionally cause harm to people of minority backgrounds. 'Cause a few people here have mentioned that the idea that it doesn't matter what race a person is, we treat everybody equally. And I think sometimes it's important to recognize that or to emphasize maybe that equally doesn't necessarily mean the same and that we could cause harm by not recognizing somebody's difference. That sometimes it's important to recognize somebody's difference in order to respect them because without meaning to, when we don't recognize people's differences, we often default into seeing them as we see ourselves and if we see them as we see ourselves. But in fact they are different, then they might be harmed by that."*
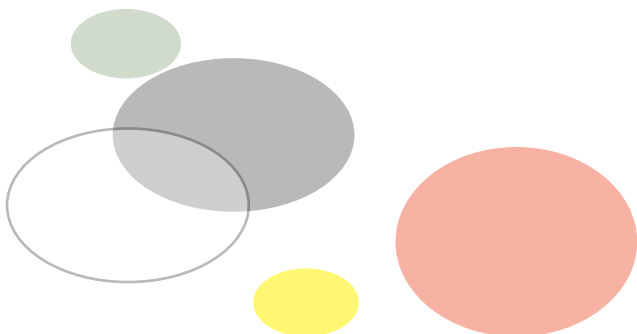
Front-line staff are aware of a variety of conflicts that are created for their Indigenous clients linked to differential epistemologies and ontologies between the Indigenous and Western world views:

> *"I do find that there does seem to be some cultural clashes if I could say that loosely, where some of the things I think that's kind of status quo for them and versus what would be status quo for expectations that we're having or ... of whatever it's coming down the pipe from our upper people that make the decision. We don't always ... we're not always on the same level, they don't always kind of mesh so I am ... personally, I am trying to gain a better understanding of their culture and what are some of the norms for them that we ... like I myself, might not be aware of or maybe I won't have a total understanding of it. Stuff that would ... to me it would be like a no brainer, to them it's like, "what the heck are you talking about?" And just trying to get a better overall understanding as well then I believe that would really help with communication in trying to ... unfortunately to get something accomplished and they have desires and needs for them where how can we work together to do what we need to do but also respect that they are needing or desiring and kind of be able to be on the same page working together."*

Specific cultural differences relating to family, community and understanding of and relationship to time have been noted by front-line staff participants relative to their Indigenous clients:

> *"I know there are certain things with Aboriginal people like one thing that just popped into my head was, I think culturally, they're a lot more family oriented and so one of the barriers they have to our type of program is we house them independently, individually. And so a lot of the issues that sometimes creep up is they have a really hard time saying no to family or saying no to friends that they've made on the streets, coming into their homes and so that's a challenge for ... I don't know if it's more than other cultures but I think that it might be just because of their cultural values."*
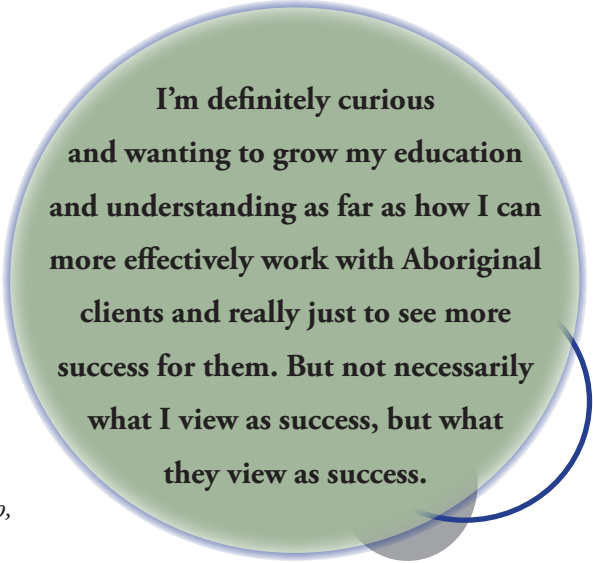
Staff express a variety of abilities to understand Indigenous ways of knowing and being. A front-line staff spoke of the difficult personal challenge of accepting a kinship-based model of family as opposed to a nuclear family model of family: *"it just gob stops me right, like my kids are my kids and that's something I find is a major cultural difference. But I do think it's really cool that they do take care of each other right, this is the norm for them and that's just something that I'm not used to."*

Another spoke of cross-cultural communication barriers:

> *"I find they get really upset really easily so I don't know if I'm being insensitive without even knowing it or if they're just very outspoken or what. But I was actually just thinking about that today because I've had an incident with a client to, just like no matter what I say, it's like she doesn't hear what I'm talking about. And so I'm just like, just even trying to understand how to better communicate or how to say things in a way that doesn't become offensive even if I don't feel like I'm being offensive. Maybe I am and just to be able to better understand where she is coming from or whoever, where they're coming from."*

Despite clashes in world view and communication challenges, front-line staff commonly express a willingness, and eagerness in some cases, to engage in Indigenous cultural training:

> "I'm definitely curious and wanting to grow my education and understanding as far as how I can more effectively work with Aboriginal clients and really just to see more success for them. But not necessarily what I view as success but what they view as success. And just trying to find more independence, more wins for them and just a better quality of life at all, whatever that means, right? And then not saying I know what that means or every program knows what that means really for them too, and that's culturally speaking as well."

Some spoke of a need for formalized training in Indigenous culture:

> "That would include learning the different treaties, learning the proper protocol to speak to an Elder, have 'em you know … they need to be told stories about, you know, things that have happened and they need to listen so that these stories they'll remember … they'll remember when they're working with an Aboriginal client that oh this client may have had this happen to them … let me treat them as if it has because chances are it has."

Others spoke of the benefits of facilitated talking Circle Processes to explore issues associated with Indigenous culture, identity and colonization. A participant shared this in the following way:

> "I think there'd be a lot of benefit from a lot of discussion. If there was ever a forum or some level of being able just to discuss on different areas with different things. And that's why I think this [research project] is really a cool project and I hear it's not just one side. I mean it's like, "hey let's talk to people that work with Aboriginals and stuff to other agencies or other people that are hands on working with Aboriginal clients too and get an actual kind of three sixty rather than just saying, "well what do you guys think, what's going on?" Yeah, I think it would be great to get a broader perspective of just, you know, effective working environments and just a lot of education. A lot of discussion would be pretty awesome I think."

Another spoke of intentionally customizing the Housing First intervention to address and empower suspected Indigenous cultural values:
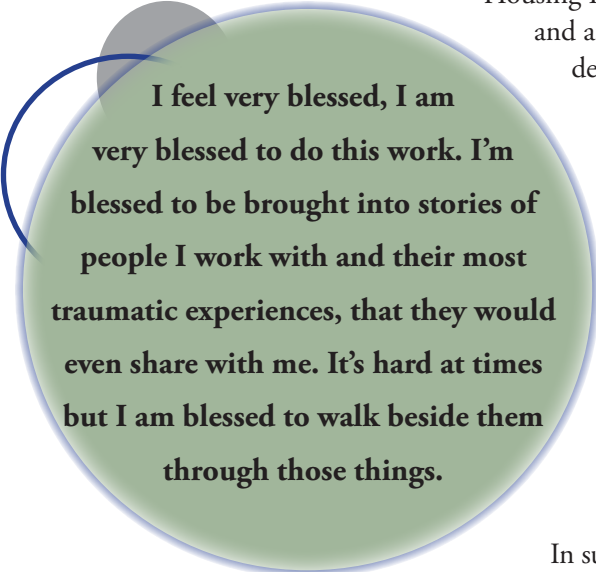
> "When I think of this client, I also think of these other three or four clients 'cause they all hang out together and just so happens that they're Aboriginal. And I try to house all those people at the same time because I was aware that it was probably not going to be very effective if just one of them was housed and the others were homeless. If we house them all at the same time, they had a greater collective chance of success toward independence because they would all be in the same boat — they would all have homes that they could get evicted from and they would all be learning together what they needed to do in order to keep their homes and to further that idea, I think maybe it's a good idea or it could work within the traditional Aboriginal cultural view of a collective."

Another spoke of offering Indigenous services to her clients: *"a lot of homes too ... when they first move in they like me to smudge their house, their place before they move in."*

Another spoke of the frustration of trying to fit an Indigenous person's values into the mainstream value system:

> *"You have to live by yourself and there's, "Yeah, yeah, yeah" and two weeks later, all their relatives are living there and they get evicted. So I mean to me, that's a big concern, that's a problem. I don't know how to deal with it 'cause I mean I have apartments to put people in and that's it ... (laughter) ... I mean if something could be done about that, that would really be helpful."*

Housing First staff commonly have a world view that is supportive of the Housing First paradigm, inclusive of an Indigenous world view and attentive to empowerment of Indigenous clients in a decolonization process. A non-Indigenous front-line staff spoke from an Indigenous perspective on knowledge:

> **I feel very blessed, I am very blessed to do this work. I'm blessed to be brought into stories of people I work with and their most traumatic experiences, that they would even share with me. It's hard at times but I am blessed to walk beside them through those things.**

> *"I just wanted to say I feel very blessed, I'm very blessed to do this work. I'm blessed to be brought into stories of people I work with and their most traumatic experiences, that they would even share with me. It's hard at times but I'm blessed to walk beside them through those things. I think they are the most oppressed, they've been the most oppressed culture in this society and I just ... like I say, I feel blessed to work alongside them and learn from them as well."*

In summary, Housing First staff are commonly willing, eager or existing facilitators of Indigenous identity development and empowerment. Ongoing cross-cultural support and training will help front-line staff to continue to empower Indigenous clients.

Awareness of the Impact of Colonization and the Potential of the Decolonization Process

Staff are commonly exposed to Indigenous clients along a spectrum of Indigenous identities and a spectrum of individual empowerment. Similar to Indigenous participants, non-Indigenous participants commonly lack knowledge and understanding of the historic and current context of colonization. A participant stated his awareness of a diversity of Indigenous identities without a corresponding understanding of that identity in a colonized context:

> *"I try not to differentiate between my white clients and my Aboriginal clients but it also depends on how they feel about themselves. I think some are more in tune with their Aboriginal culture and some are more homogenized for another term right. they're more used to integrating with the way we do things."*

Some participants express curiosity about potential reasons for the common Indigenous disconnect with his/her culture and identity. A participant shares this perspective in the following way:

> "I know some have tried or they're like ... they keep saying, "oh I connect with my culture." But yeah, I don't know if some of them find it hard or if they are maybe not all that interested necessarily."

Another participant expressed this curiosity and a sophisticated but tentative decolonization understanding about the Indigenous experience of disconnect from Indigenous culture in another way: *"It seems like there's a disconnect with their culture as well, like with the actual traditional aspect of their culture. So I've always wondered a little bit if they feel at times maybe like a man without a country sort of thing."*
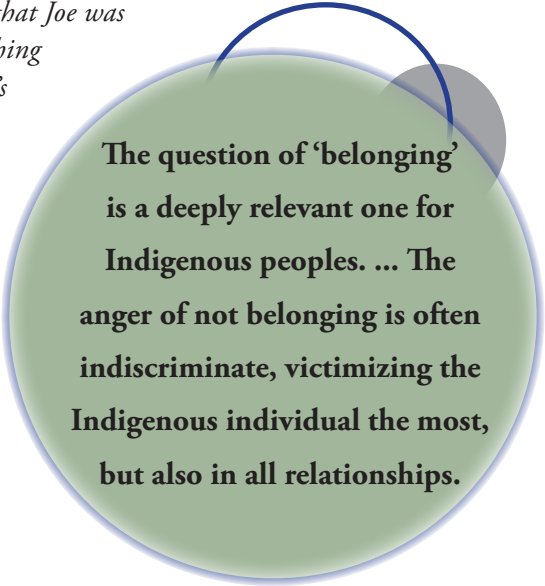
Another shared a tentative understanding of this in the following way:

> "Just with the fact that if they're not really relating or connecting with their culture, their community but they don't really feel like they fit with the regular Canadian culture whatever, white Canadian culture, the other multi-cultural Canadian culture that ... I wonder if they kind of feel like they're floating on their own a little bit and so they kind of bounce between whatever."

The impact of colonization in the creation of "cultural and spiritual poverty" and the pain of disconnection and lack of belonging is outlined by the following front-line staff participant:

> "They're paying the price for a lot of their cultural and spiritual poverty, having ... you know I had a good friend that I was sent to prison with and he said, "where do they fit in?" And it was either the reservation, rezes or jails or the inner city bars. That was society's view of the Indian or the wagon burner as they would say back then and I think a lot of people have grown up with that sort of mentality that Joe was just a drunken Indian down at the bar. There will never be nothing that will come about from his life or his children or his children's children because that's just what society's been stigmatized by as they see an Aboriginal person. I think that a lot of their mind-set and thinking comes through the way mainstream society views them."

The question of 'belonging' is a deeply relevant one for Indigenous peoples. Some participants recognize the disproportionate anger held by Indigenous clients related to this pursuit of belonging in a society that does not necessarily support Indigeneity, at the best of times, and is outright hostile to Indigeneity at the worst. The anger of not belonging is often indiscriminate, victimizing the Indigenous individual the most, but also in all relationships.

The question of 'belonging' is a deeply relevant one for Indigenous peoples. ... The anger of not belonging is often indiscriminate, victimizing the Indigenous individual the most, but also in all relationships.

A front-line staff participant commented on the anger of Indigenous clients falling on him in a manner that is confusing but invokes compassion:

> *"I find they get really upset really easily so I don't know if I'm being insensitive without even knowing it or if they're just very outspoken or what. But I was actually just thinking about that today because I've had an incident with a client who, just like no matter what I say, it's like she doesn't hear what I'm talking about. And so I'm just like, just even trying to understand how to better communicate or how to say things in a way that doesn't become offensive even if I don't feel like I'm being offensive, maybe I am. And just to be able to better understand where she is coming from or whoever, where they're coming from."*

Staff need fortitude to dig deep ... to see that they are dealing with human beings that have emotions and ... their anger is directed ... maybe at culture, maybe at our society and for the most part, fortitude will help them overcome those aspects and do the real ground work.

Participants commonly recognize that the anger is related to lack of belonging associated with the legacy and current reality of colonization. A participant explained this in the following way:

> *"They [staff who deal with homeless Indigenous individuals] need fortitude to dig deep, to dig deep and to throw all the cussing and the swearing aside and to overlook that, see through them. See that they're dealing with human beings that have emotions and it's not directed at the staff. Their anger is directed at ... maybe at the white race, maybe at culture, maybe at our society and for the most part, fortitude will help them overcome those aspects and do the real ground work."*

Attentiveness to historic and current colonization, including real and perceived racism, are additional demands placed on front-line workers with Indigenous clients. A non-Indigenous front-line staff participant stated the impact of real and perceived racism on his clients, on him and on the professional working relationship: *"Sometimes I have clients that are Aboriginal and they tell me that they've been trying to get places and they've been declined because of being Aboriginal."* Unlike Indigenous front-line staff, non-Indigenous front-line staff have a unique opportunity and responsibility to support their client in the face of real or perceived racism. How the non-Indigenous worker responds to allegations of racism could dramatically affect the working relationship.

Non-Indigenous persons are placed in the unique position of trying to understand discrimination, oppression and prejudice without a personal experience of it. Front-line staff participants commonly express a desire and willingness to try to bridge the divide created by differential experiences with and understandings of discrimination. A participant outlined this willingness in the following way:
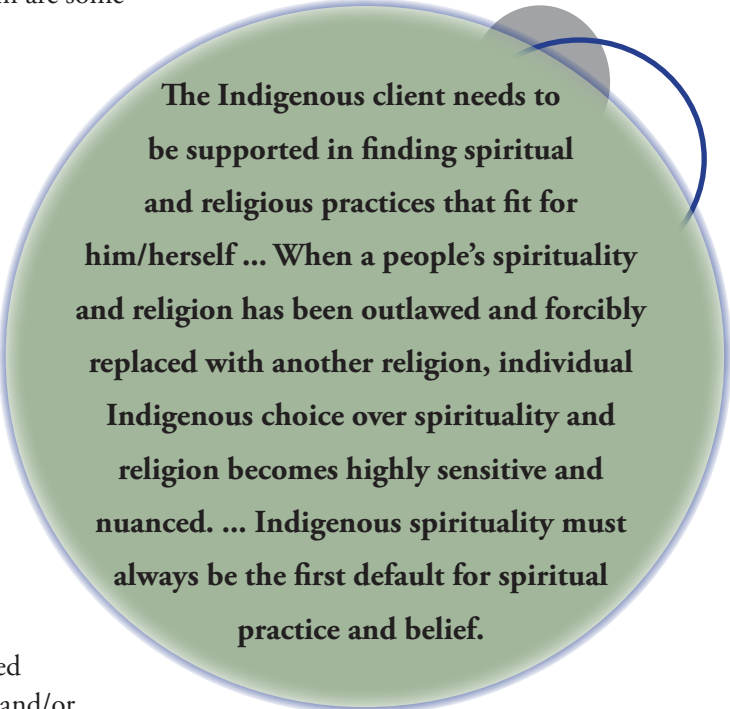
> *"I think there's a lot of hurt and a lot of, I think even feeling discriminated when they're not, they're being discriminated against and so I think they're, you know my great insight would be that I think there'd be a lot of benefit from a lot of discussion."*

Addressing racism can easily become an overwhelmingly demanding process and project. Front-line staff participants are commonly keen to partake in a consciousness-raising process relative to racism, but are attentive to making it manageable. A front-line staff spoke in the following way of a realistic approach to addressing racism:

> "The thing that I was thinking about is just how we can only really affect the people in our circle of influence I guess and it would be great if we could change all of society's view on Aboriginal people. I just don't really see that's necessarily going to change anytime soon but what we can do is work with our Aboriginal clients one on one and just try to work with them the best that we can and teach them, I guess, not to let people walk over them but also somehow, without insulting them, try not to give into the welfare or hand me mentality either. I don't know, I guess it's such a fine line but just showing them that they are valuable and even if they don't feel that from anybody else, we can be the one person that can speak value into their lives and hopefully, maybe that can make a difference."

Addressing and unlearning racism and internalized racism are some aspects of the decolonization process.

Another subtle but important area for attentiveness in the decolonization process is relative to spirituality, faith and religion. The Indigenous client needs to be supported in finding spiritual and religious practices and traditions that fit for him/herself in the broader context of decolonization. When a people's spirituality and religion has been outlawed and forcibly replaced with another religion, individual Indigenous choice over spirituality and religion becomes highly sensitive and nuanced. When intergenerational trauma and internalized oppression are present in the individual, is the Indigenous individual making choices from an empowered place? In a decolonizing framework, Indigenous spirituality must always be the first default for spiritual practice and belief. This becomes complicated when front-line staff may be non-Indigenous, Christian and/or associated with a Christian organization. The line of least resistance in terms of spirituality and religion may not be an appropriate option.

The Indigenous client needs to be supported in finding spiritual and religious practices that fit for him/herself ... When a people's spirituality and religion has been outlawed and forcibly replaced with another religion, individual Indigenous choice over spirituality and religion becomes highly sensitive and nuanced. ... Indigenous spirituality must always be the first default for spiritual practice and belief.

One participant spoke of seeking out the services of the Homeward Trust Elder, experiencing some challenges, subsequently asking for spiritual guidance from his worker:

> "So I asked [name of worker deleted] and then [name of worker deleted] actually gave me a bible, kind of so I could find some kind of spirituality and I find that's kind of helping. I'm starting to slowly read it but I'm starting to understand more of it 'cause it's starting to make sense 'cause ..."

The religion chosen by an Indigenous individual is intertwined with historic and current colonizing influences and therefore has implications for Indigenous identity. Some participants overtly reject traditional values, others subtly reject assimilation. Most Indigenous participants are ambivalent, neutral or curious about Indigenous identity. Some participants are strong advocates of traditional Indigenous values. Only one was a strong advocate of assimilation with overt hostility towards Indigenous identity. This was associated with adherence to Christianity where "my focus is on the Lord, nothing else matters." This participant had a very unique perspective compared to the other Indigenous participants and is thus discussed here in detail.

This participant spoke of surrendering his power, will and authority to God:

> *"We can't do anything ourselves. No matter how intelligent we think we are, I think it's more of a detriment to our salvation to think that instead of giving it all to the Lord and the Lord's showing us, the Lord paving the way for us and releasing it all to him instead of coming back to the idea that, "yes Lord, this is what I want to do, this is what I can do for you" instead of releasing it all to him."*

This participant is not unfamiliar with an Indigenous critique of his chosen religion and identity. He states that:

> *"I have about three … two or three friends that, I guess you could say they dislike my choice of beliefs. They accuse me of being a white man because of my Christian views, 'cause of my Christian beliefs."*

Critiques of individual choice of religion and Indigenous identity are not helpful. The bigger questions around religion and Indigenous identity relate to empowerment. Regardless of professed faith, whether it be Christianity or Indigenous spirituality, both or neither, does the Indigenous individual express his or her faith from an empowered position? Does the Indigenous individual express his or her identity from an empowered position? If so, support the empowered position. If not, attentiveness to supporting the individual to shift from an external sense of authority over one's life to an internal sense of authority is appropriate and necessary.
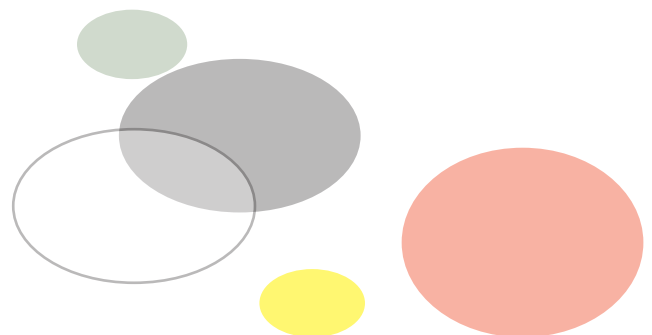
Homeward Trust Organization — Indigenous Serving Agency Identity

Indigenous Governance and Programming Issues

Homeward Trust has some formative practices and structures in place to support the disproportionately represented Indigenous peoples in their funded client base. Homeward Trust has appointed and allotted funding for an organizational Elder, an Aboriginal Advisory Committee (AAC) and has established formal and informal relationships with a variety of Indigenous organizations in Edmonton. Homeward Trust does not appear to offer training relative to culturally appropriate services.

The connections between the Homeward Trust Elder and Indigenous clients are formative. Most Indigenous participants had no awareness that Homeward Trust offered and provided the services of an Elder. There are a variety of personal, logistical, professional and systemic reasons for the unsuccessful brokering of relationship between the Elder and Indigenous clients. While Team Leads are repeatedly advised of the Homeward Trust Elder, confusion regarding protocols and lack of in-person relational familiarity with the Elder are two identified obstacles to effective connection.

There is a weak to non-existent connection between the Homeward Trust Elder and Housing First program staff:

> *"I think he [Homeward Trust Elder] came in with you. I don't really know … I think if you want to meet with him, I do know if clients want to meet with him to like go out for coffee and just talk with him, they can but I don't know if that would be offered to staff or not, I'm not sure."*

Again, Housing First program staff lack an in-person, informal relational familiarity with the Elder and may lack knowledge regarding appropriate protocols. It is unclear whether Housing First staff are permitted to approach the Homeward Trust Elder on behalf of themselves, their families and their communities in a manner that is distinct and separate from the needs of their Indigenous clients. Homeward Trust provides a regular fax out of Indigenous community and organization cultural events in Edmonton. A participant commented on the importance of relational connections to make services accessible to Indigenous clients and staff:

> *"Yeah, we have some that definitely aren't interested at all and the ones that are interested in it are already connected to Aboriginal events and communities already and so the ones that Homeward Trust offers, it's nice to have and it's like, "oh that's a nice list" but I don't know that they would necessarily go to that, they would default to a place they already know and feel comfortable with and already connected with. If they are interested, they've probably already made those connections."*

Again, lacking the in-person informal relational familiarity with these organizations and people affiliated with these organizations, accessibility of these events and services is not common by Indigenous clients or staff. Indigenous clients rely heavily on the emotional connection with their worker — this has historical context in oppression and in cultural identity. Additionally, Indigenous culture is highly relationally driven, necessitating ongoing in-person informal relational contact with individuals and organizations.

Homeward Trust is placed along political fault lines in working with a disproportionately represented population of Indigenous peoples within the framework of a Western organization. Homeward Trust has invoked a number of structures including an organizational Elder, the AAC, attempted brokering to Indigenous organizations and services and this Circle Process research project. Homeward Trust is exploring it's organizational identity relative to being an Indigenous serving agency.

The diversity of the homeless population, the diversity of political players and pressures and the availability of Indigenous personnel combine to complicate the feasibility and appropriateness of defining itself as and Indigenous serving agency. Potential and actual Indigenous staff, clients and partnering organizations exist along a spectrum of Indigenous identities. Navigating these complexities is a worthwhile endeavor, albeit a challenging one.

Some saw the feasibility and potential of a leadership role for Homeward Trust in establishing a collaborative working group aimed at the decolonization process within Homeward Trust's scope of practice:

> *"I don't know, maybe collaboration of different Aboriginal people that are working within Housing First 'cause they see firsthand what happens and what will be helpful and then also definitely like some Elders and then people who actually are educated in Aboriginal Studies. Like I have a friend who took Aboriginal Studies and so somebody like that who obviously knows history and knows extensively about it would be super beneficial. So I think a collaboration of people from different aspects so the front line workers, the Elders, the people who've researched the history."*

Similarly, a participant saw the potential, and the complexity, of creating an Indigenous framework for an Indigenous Housing First program model:

> *"To what extent do they identify with that culture and what aspect of that culture and there's so many different Aboriginal cultures too. So it gets kind of messy ... (laughter) ... it gets complicated. I guess what it ultimately boils down to is that every individual is unique and we can't assume anything about them and it's a process of learning and trying to understand but then how do you do that within a system where you've kind of got to make assumptions and draw lines in order to be cost effective in the way you're helping people.*
>
> *Like for example, does Housing First create an Aboriginal only team to work with Aboriginal clients? That's one of the questions I'm sure that Homeward Trust has mulling over and perhaps initiated some of this research so if we see everybody as unique individuals, it makes it kind of hard to program plan and to decide questions like are we going to have an exclusive Aboriginal team. It's just ... there's no easy answers."*

A housing program for formerly homeless Indigenous peoples faces many challenges to align itself with an Indigenous epistemology and ontology. Holistic interventions, ways of working and ways of seeing the world need to be embedded in every layer of the organization. Addressing physical, emotional, mental and spiritual wellness is key.

A participant shared the perspective of the importance of holistic interventions in the following way:

> *"A couple of my clients have mentioned that they've got the physical needs met, they're starting to work on the mental needs but they want the spiritual aspect to be a whole person again. And there's been some that have sought out Elders to help them with that but they still haven't been able to fully grasp it in a lot of ways they still are suffering from their addiction and I guess some mental disorder."*

Homeward Trust clients, funded agencies, funded staff and Homeward Trust itself exist within a larger sociopolitical context. It is that context to which we now turn our attention.
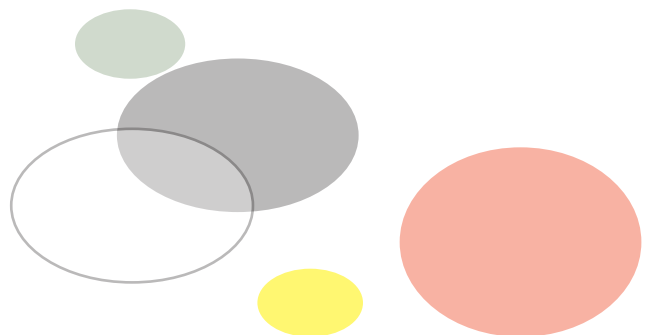
Larger Policy and Environmental Context

Some participants believe that current and historic Indigenous traumas can't likely be solved from a Western world view and with Western methodologies. A participant shares this perspective in the following way:

> "I was raised with a sister or an aunt or a relative and now mom's back in my life. She wants to start changing things for the better but yet, they still haven't been empowered to deal with the past abuses and I don't know if that can come from mainstream society or if that comes from an Aboriginal point of view of maybe their needs to be special Aboriginal psychological counselling in some ways. I don't know if they have that but if it's different from mainstream society, maybe that would help them to cope with a lot of the stuff that's happened in their past."

A historical aspect associated with the Western world view relating to homelessness and poverty is the British Poor Laws on which the Canadian social welfare system is predicated. The British Poor Laws were established in 1834 to address escalating poverty, destitution and homelessness associated with the industrial revolution. The British Poor Laws were invoked to establish public funding to address poverty. Prior to the British Poor Laws, the poor and destitute were the domain of private and church philanthropy and charity.

Canadian social work's history and foundation is based on British history, the Protestant work ethic and the British model of social work (Turner, 2009). Based on the British Poor Laws, the philosophy of the first social services was based on the assumption that someone in a dire situation could and should be able to sustain themselves, but due to some fault of their own, they would not. In this philosophy, no consideration is given to social, political and economic factors to the individual's predicament.

The British Poor Laws established philosophical and pragmatic criteria to differential between those who are "deserving" of public funding and those are "undeserving." The values of the British Poor Laws are still in effect with our social welfare programs and in the general consciousness relating to those experiencing poverty. Individual responsibility without consideration of broader social and environmental factors is often associated with the current political social welfare model based on the historic values of the British Poor Laws.

A participant spoke of his experiential understanding of the difference in treatment from the Housing First model and the current political social welfare model based on overt and covert assumptions of the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor in the following way:

> "If you were to go to social services and say, "yeah, I'm addicted to crack or whatever", they're not likely to help a person. They expect you to be … I don't know, it seems harder to get anything through them."
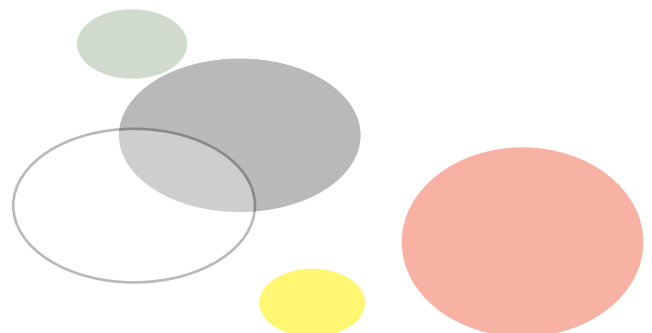
Another participant commented on his need for self-advocacy skills in order to align himself more with the "deserving" poor. He brings this conditioning to his initial interactions with the Housing First program:

> "I found at social services, they don't really help you unless you have the answers already. You go there and ask a specific question, then they'll give you an answer. I found if I wanted anything, I needed to do things for myself and I always did before. Everything that I wanted or whatever, that I thought that I deserved or whatever, I got myself in my own way and that's the same way that I am ... approached that place or whatever. I knew that I wanted a place and I knew that they had the resources to help me get a place with no kind of strings attached or no government sort of saying …"
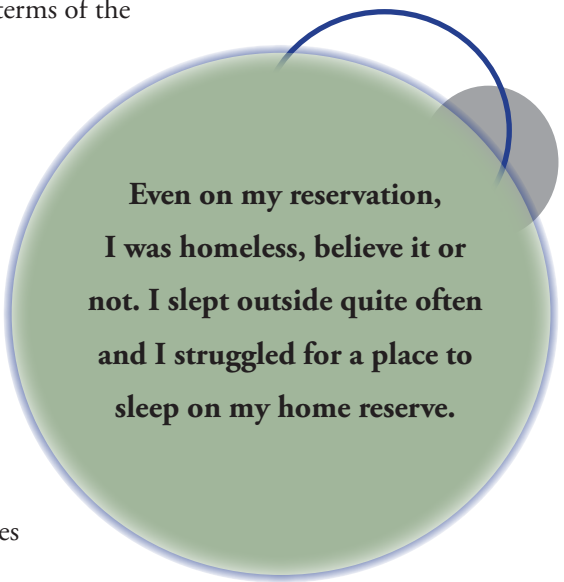
Another spoke of his experiential understanding of the difference between the expectation of individual resilience associated with the "deserving" poor and the undifferentiated offering of support experienced in the Housing First program:

> "Housing First is a lifesaver. It is so hard to … without any help, lots of people can't do it, pick yourself back up from when you're down like that."

Homeward Trust and the Housing First program are a philosophical and pragmatic departure from an entrenched philosophy that differentiates between "deserving" and "undeserving" poor. Homeward Trust and the Housing First program are also in thin company in the non-governmental sector in Alberta and Western Canada. This philosophical and pragmatic departure from historic norms and current governmental policy has implications for program understanding, design and scope of impact.

Players within the Homeward Trust structure commonly "get it" in terms of the departure from "deserving" and "undeserving" poor:

> "They've been through so much trauma in their lives. If I had gone what they've gone through, I wouldn't be able to get out of bed, no less live a semi normal life which is what a lot of them are striving to do right, just the hurts. Our friends say, "Get a job" right and I'm thinking, "If you went through what they went through". If you just think it's just get a job and stop drinking, it's not. They have these things in their life for a reason and these reasons started often when they were very, very young. You know they're just so hurt and so damaged and so abused that..."

Even on my reservation, I was homeless, believe it or not. I slept outside quite often and I struggled for a place to sleep on my home reserve.

By seeing and embracing all individuals as worthy, the program places itself at odds with the broader sociopolitical environment.

A unique sociopolitical context that affects Indigenous housing is the housing situation on the reserve as it relates to the Treaties and the Indian Act. Reserve housing issues affect Edmonton's homeless population. Some participants struggled with episodic urban homelessness and inadequate housing on a home reserve.

A participant shared that, *"Even on my reservation, I was homeless believe it or not. I had to find ... I slept outside quite often and I struggled for a place to sleep on my home reserve."*

Another participant spoke of coming to Edmonton to look for stable, safe housing after failure to secure stable and safe housing on the reserve:

> *"We came to Edmonton from the reserve and the reason we came to Edmonton is because there was inadequate housing on the reserve [name of reserve deleted]. Housing, it just ... just seems to be no funding on the reserve to do what needs to be done."*

This participant shared in detail her experiences with insecure and unsafe housing on the reserve:

> *"Our house at the reserve burnt down on February 2, 2009 and since that time we have actually really, really been homeless because the reserve didn't care at all about our house burning down. They got the insurance money for the fire, that's the second house that burnt down at the reserve on us. The first house that burnt down, Chief and Council and they got insurance money for it and yet when we asked for them to give us housing, to help us with housing, they reply that we always received — there's no funding."*

After a brief stint in northern Saskatchewan,

> *"... we moved back to the reserve. We get back to the reserve and they had given the house to some other band member to salvage whatever lumber or whatever parts he needed out of the house. So basically they started demolishing the house and then when they seen that we were back, they put us into a chicken coop that still had pigeons living in the attic and you could just smell like a chicken coop. There was no plumbing, no water, the electricity was barely working and we lived there for five months and that's when they burnt down the other house instead of fixing it up and putting stuff back to that house, they torched it.*
>
> *Then they put us into a trailer; we're living in this trailer and it is the same thing as living in a tent in the winter time 'cause there was absolutely no heat whatsoever, even though the furnace was working. There was one inch gaps underneath the doors, the snow and the wind was coming right straight through, underneath the doors, all around the doors was great big gaps and we told them to fix it. "Oh we can't, there's no funding, we can't fix it". So we had to throw plastic and blankets over the door in order to try and maintain some warmth in the place.*
>
> *From there we moved to the house that burnt ... the second house that burnt down. We were okay at that house for awhile but the house was really, really old, it was one of the oldest houses on [name of reserve deleted] but we were doing good there. Then they sent the house inspector to come and inspect the house and he condemned it 'cause there was black mould in the attic and asbestos and so the house got condemned and we were told we could not live there anymore. We were not allowed to take any of our belongings out of that house other than our clothes and we had to make sure we washed them.*

So once again we asked the Chief and Council, "What should we do, we no longer have a place to live, the place that we were living in, it got condemned and we can't live there". No reply, then a Councilor came to our house and he told us, "well you guys are going to have to find your own housing, there's only a limited number of housing on the reserve and there's nothing available on reserve that we can give you, you're going to have to go for your own housing elsewhere.

So at that point I tried with my band which is [name of Band deleted] and I got told because I married off my band and married onto [name of Band deleted], I was [their] responsibility; my band can't do nothing to help us. So once again, we went back to Chief and Council and were … then told them that [my band] said that you guys have to help us, they can't help us and again, we're told "No funding". There's no funding for us to get a house, yet there was funding for them to go buy an old house and replace the house that burnt down but they … instead of giving us that house, they sold it to somebody else for money, for political favours and we just got sick and tired of all the politics and bullshit on the reserve.

We decided to come back to Edmonton and at least here in the city, if you need something and you try for it, there isn't all the god darn roadblocks and stuff. If you really, really want to do something and you prove that you really, really need something, here you can get housing and we're maintaining our housing as best as we can right now. I don't know how it's going to be in the future."

This participant also spoke of the unsafe housing in a different way:

"The wiring in that place is not safe. It's got … there's switches that don't work, there's plug-ins that don't work. I don't know how many electrical contractors they've had working on that building and every time there's a new contractor, he puts his own stuff in and so there's all these wires in the walls that are leading here and there and nobody knows where they go. So that place was not safe to live in but we stayed there for six months."

Unfortunately, "third world" living conditions are not the exception on Canadian reserves, a situation that relates to issues associated with the Indian Act and historic and current issues of colonization.
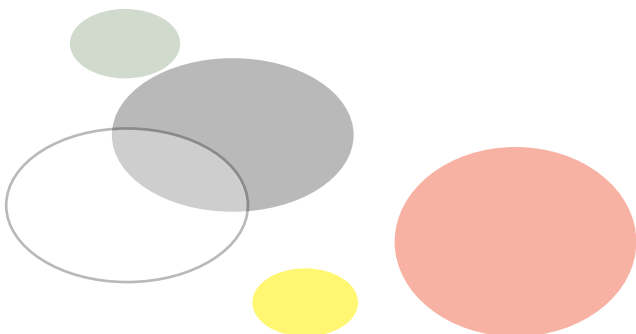
It's a bigger issue than just putting a roof over a person's head. It's a starting point ... but there is more work to be done than just that, that's in counselling services, employment and training services so people can learn how to take care of themselves so they won't have to depend on social assistance or band funding.

The above mentioned participant who shared at length about her challenges with housing on the reserve offered the following recommendation:

> *"If they want to do something, help with the housing on the reserves or in the cities. It's a bigger issue than just putting a roof over a person's head. It's a starting point, it's a good starting point but there's more work to be done than just that, that's in counselling services ... (long pause) ... employment and training services so people can learn how to take care of themselves so they won't have to depend on social assistance or band funding."*

Interventions framed from an Indigenous world view may be necessary and appropriate relative to the Indigenous homeless population in Edmonton. From a decolonizing Indigenous perspective, housing stability is foundational for miyo pimâtisiwin. The 'good life' may exist along a spectrum from traditional to assimilated Indigenous identities and may require more or less need and desire for "success" aligned with Western standards and a Western world view. From an Indigenous world view, miyo pimâtisiwin is a lifelong journey towards centeredness between physical, emotional, mental and spiritual aspects and wholeness of Indigeneity.

A participant shares an understanding of the 'good life' she is trying to facilitate with her Indigenous clients in the following way: *"I want them to experience a good life, whatever that is for them."*

An Indigenous process to end homelessness is envisioned to be more holistic than current approaches. A participant made this point in the following way:

> *"I found like government wise, it just seems like the easy answer always is well let's just throw money at it and then maybe it'll work itself out. I don't really ... I haven't seen, personally, I haven't seen a lot of success with that. That's just like the easy answer but there just seems to be the perpetual same thing over and over again with nothing really changes. So my question and I've heard the same word from somebody else was just how can a people group be empowered to have that internal change or that society change within their own people group or is there ... what could they initiate and partner with anybody else that's willing to get on board with that to see actual change happen in their culture or in their society working together with, overall with the culture and society that we all live in Canada that is actually going to see some of the negative things that are going on whether it's homelessness, whether it's substance abuse, whether it's family dysfunction, whether it's discrimination, whatever the situation. I guess it's what would actually work."*

Another participant shares a recommendation for Indigenous healing to occur in a family-centred way that is aligned with the Indigenous world view:

> "They should try and get programs in place, the people that have children ... (inaudible) ... programs so the family can heal together. 'Cause once a family's been broken up, they all have problems; anger, drugs, alcohol, blame, there's a lot of confusion, especially for younger children. I know some people have very, very poor parenting skills, especially if you grow up in foster care like I did."

Another issue related to epistemology and ontology is the way of learning, understanding and sharing knowledge. The following Indigenous participant shares an under-valuing of experiential knowledge and learning — a traditionally Indigenous way of knowing — compared to a Western way of learning from books:

> "I have a social work friend who's really good at explaining it and I'm like I just wish she was here every time ... (laughter) ... I just more know experientially from seeing my family."

In the broader context of Indigenous and Western epistemologies and ontologies, the goals and definitions of success of the Housing First program may look different. This is interesting to consider in the context of the broader map and funder of the Homeward Trust project, *A Place to Call Home: Edmonton's 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness.* Currently, some Homeward Trust funded agencies derive a lot of motivational strength from the current goal and purpose:

> "We're ending homelessness in Edmonton and Alberta in the next ten years and so paying them well, keeping their eyes on the focus, teaching self care and allowing flex days when they need it."

From a social, cultural, economic, environmental and political context, it is important to envision where and how the Housing First program and the Homeward Trust organization fits within various epistemologies and ontologies.

A participant made this observation:

> "There's a dominant culture that's not Aboriginal and the expected rules and norms of our society follow that dominant culture. And so it's really interesting because we're introducing people who have not been able to follow the rules of the dominant culture and reap the rewards of doing so. We're introducing them to those rules but at the same time, there's an awareness within me that those rules are not necessarily ... well they're imperialist and there are certain ways of life that may have just as much validity and maybe just as healthy but are different and they're not part of the dominant culture and its rules.
>
> So in this program, we've been housing people independently and that is one of the rules of this society that people have to take individual responsibility for their actions and sign on the dotted line of the lease to say that whatever happens here, I'm ultimately responsible for and maybe that's right, maybe that's wrong, maybe there is no right and no wrong but it doesn't necessarily jive with Aboriginal traditions which are more, as somebody else mentioned, family oriented and collectivist in nature.

In Housing First we've been housing people independently and one of the rules of this society is that people have to take individual responsibility for their actions. … Maybe that's right, maybe that's wrong … but it does not necessarily jive with Aboriginal traditions which are more family oriented and collectivist in nature.

Another is … in terms of time, we as workers, manage our time according to the European traditions which are part of the dominant culture. And so we make appointments to be at X place at a certain time and not … there's no great fluctuation permissible with that. Whereas we are all familiar with the term, "Native time" or "Indian time" or whatever, which is a lot looser. And maybe again, that's right, maybe that's wrong, it's just different but we are imposing that upon our clients and maybe that's a good thing in some ways because are we doing our Aboriginal clients a favour by being so flexible with them that we try to accommodate Aboriginal life ways to such an extent that we create false expectations on their part, that the rest of society is going to follow suit. Clearly they're not, that's not going to happen.

So maybe it's good that we impose the rules of the dominant culture on our clients, it's certainly worthy of consideration anyway.

I also wanted to mention the way that Aboriginal culture sees communication may differ from the way that the white European culture view communication. There's certainly a more, what I've seen anyway, there's a lot more directness in the dominant culture than the Aboriginal culture and that sometimes makes for difficulties between white workers and Aboriginal clients and it gets really tricky because we're dealing with people that have addictions and may have and probably do have mental health disorders a lot of the time as well and may not have … may not be familiar with certain protocols of communication that make for effective communication for any cultural group or maybe they're just very used to their own way of communicating and it's very … perfectly healthy but it's just not what the white workers are used to.

Anyway, it makes for a bit of a disconnection and sometimes it's hard for me to recognize what's a dysfunctional way of communicating and behaving, that has it's ideology in addiction and mental health disorders and what actually is a difference in communicating and behaving that has it's ideology in cultural differences, in Aboriginal culture as opposed to street culture. Of course there's a lot of overlap between Aboriginal culture and street culture. Anyway, those are more thoughts that came to my head."
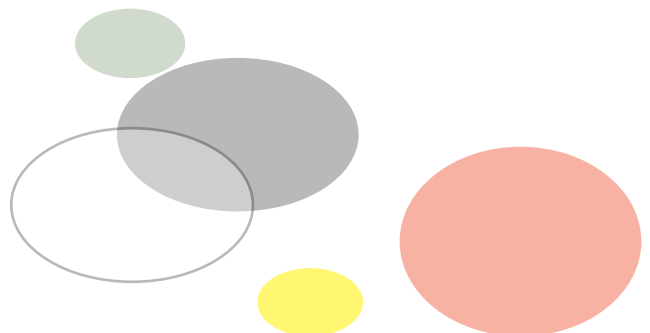
Learnings

Indigenous Housing First Program Learnings

Consider formalizing structures, staffing and processes to assist Indigenous Housing First participants — including staff and clients — with Indigenous identity development.

Formalized consideration in the following areas may be helpful:

- **Life-skills traning for clients:** Explore the feasibility of offering Indigenous and non-Indigenous life skills training for clients. This training could include training on skills that will help with integration into non-Indigenous and Indigenous societies in a balanced way. Skills aimed at integration into non-Indigenous society could entail, as a participant stated:

  > *"Well that's what they need, they need a program, a volunteer one at that … at least. A program where people learn how to conduct themselves, how to conduct themselves on the street, how to talk to people, how to present themselves, what expectations are from people, behavioural science program perhaps 'cause most of my street friends, they don't know how to conduct themselves in an appropriate fashion."*

This participant mentioned that this non-Indigenous training could also include computer training, training on how to file taxes, basic custodial training and nutritional courses. Indigenous life-skills training could include teachings relative to the Natural Laws, the Medicine Wheel, Indigenous language, culture and ceremony and Indigenous history including information about colonization and oppression. Current initiatives provided include Diversity Training, Circle Process Workshops and education regarding the 60s Scoop.

- **Mentorship:** Consider the feasibility of a mentorship program for clients and staff. As a research participant put it:

  > *"I strongly believe that we need to believe that we need to have a mentorship program in place. Mentors for Aboriginal people would be particularly helpful because if you grow up in a culture where you have few heroes, few of your own ethnicity and culture and few people that you can look up to and believe that one day I can be like that person and be successful. If you grow up in that kind of situation then mentors become all the more important. So if we can get together, Aboriginal people that have risen from a situation that our clients can relate to, to one that they can respect and see as being worthy of aspiring to, man, that would make a huge difference."*

A current example of mentorship includes the *Welcome Home* program where *"volunteers are partnered with a recently housed person or family to help connect them with existing services agencies, offer companionship, and make them feel part of a community that cares".* (http://www.edmonton.ca/ city_government/news/edmonton-faith-communities-provide-a-welcome-home.aspx)

It may be additionally helpful if the volunteers from the *Welcome Home* program were of Indigenous ancestry. Another existing resource for mentorship is the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women dedicated to *"develop and deliver support services to build the individual capacity of Aboriginal women, their families, and communities".* (http://iaawcanada.com)

- **Indigenous program design and model:** Exploration of the feasibility and appropriateness of having more than one worker working with each client. In addition to Front-line Worker, Follow-up Worker and Team Lead staffing, opportunities exist for roles that support Indigenous identity development or navigation of various systems. Additionally, having a 'team' working with each individual may be more aligned with an Indigenous world view. A participant shared this recommendation in the following way:

> *"The ease with which a lot of Aboriginals will raise their children in a community, you know, maybe we need to raise chronically homeless Aboriginal people from that status to the status of being independent of that poverty. Maybe we need to raise them in a collectivist kind of environment with more than one worker and more than one client."*

This may suggest the creation or implementation of a model of service-delivery based within the context of an Indigenous world view. The inclusion of ceremony, protocols, circle process, team approach and relational accountability could all be components of this model. Creating the time, space and resources to encourage the development of this model would be helpful.

- **Indigenous Elders:** Homeward Trust may want to consider providing a tobacco and cloth offering to the Elder on behalf of each client's request for contact with the Elder. Similarly, Homeward Trust may consider formal and informal teachings to Indigenous Housing First clients and staff on the protocols associated with the Homeward Trust Elder. A participant framed this recommendation in the following way:

> *"See the one thing they don't know the right protocol to go to an Elder ... to come and speak to our clients and protocol is you give tobacco ... a pack of cigarettes, along with a blanket and in most places now they give 'em an honorarium for traveling."*

Clients currently wishing to access Elders can access the appropriate protocol resources (tobacco, blankets, broadcloth – dependent on Elders teachings) through Homeward Trust and their worker. Staff and clients can be notified that these resources are available.

Homeward Trust may additionally consider expanding the roster of Homeward Trust Elders so that there is at least one female and one male Elder and possibly representing a variety of tribes and teachings.

- **Indigenous organizations:** Consider increasing ongoing, informal, relational contacts and networks between Housing First staff at all levels of the Housing First program with Indigenous organizations, with particular emphasis placed on Edmonton and area organizations. Increasing informal relational contacts with Indigenous organizations would increase the accessibility of Edmonton-based Indigenous peoples, culture and organizations.

Increase relational and therapeutic supports

- **Daily informal in-home visitation:** Indigenous Housing First participants appear to be strongly driven towards a sense of connection. There is opportunity to provide in-home visitation from volunteers. The newly launched *Welcome Home* project in Edmonton may be an ideal partner in this regard. A participant shared this recommendation in the following way:

  > *"We really need programs in the community that the person has moved to where there are volunteers that will spend time with each person and maybe that's part of the mentorship thing but people that can spend time with the client and get him or her used to his or her community and what's going on there and the positive, constructive things that that person could do to spend their time rather than reverting back to old habits. That would be very helpful I think, especially for the Aboriginal clients."*

- **Mentorship program:** Related to but distinct from the mentorship program mentioned above. Participants expressed interest in engaging in peer support mentoring relationships with each other, proposing that recent graduates of the Housing First program mentor those in the program.

Many research participants at the post-program stage in the housing first adjustment process express a profound sense of gratitude towards Homeward Trust and a deeply rooted desire to give back to the program in some way. One participant spoke of his interest in being a mentor to a future Housing First program participant. Others spoke of wanting to volunteer or work with homeless people, those struggling with addictions, those caught in the gang life and those in need. Others spoke of their willingness to share their stories with wider audiences to help promote awareness of and support for the services of Homeward Trust. Some saw their participation in this Circle Process as a way to give back and to express their gratitude to Homeward Trust for providing them with Housing First programming.
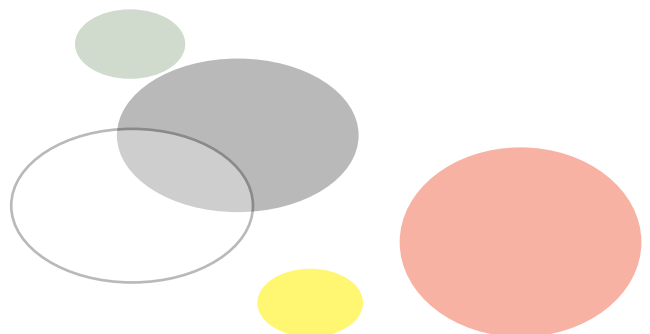
Relationships

- The lifestyle associated with housing stability is foreign to a formerly homeless individual, and participants commonly spoke of a **period of disorientation towards what to do, who to be**. Adjustment to the quietness of the housing also commonly lead to time to 'sit still and do nothing,' a circumstance that is conducive to negative thoughts to arise:

  > "If I'm sitting still not doing nothin' I think bad thoughts so I got to keep myself occupied. For example I could play powwow music, just reading, doing things with my son, that keeps me from the bad thinking, eh? 'Cause it's easy to fall into the depression/discouragement when you're not working and things are going bad, eh?"

- Related to the adjustment to the quietness of stable housing is a **sense of loneliness that commonly arises**:

  > "Well, like when you're on the streets, at Spady's or even the Bissell, there's always somebody around to talk to, somebody to play cards with, just companionship. I mean I had ... I still do, a handful of guys that I trusted, they trust me and we just kind of watch each other's back you know and if one of us is a little short on cigarettes or maybe a few bucks, we'll go around you know. So I mean the companionship is always there. Here, well like I say, it gets a little lonely sometimes but it's alright, it's not going to last forever."

  Coping with and healing from this loneliness is an ongoing process throughout the program for many Housing First participants.

Increased trauma resources

- Indigenous peoples in general, and formerly homeless Indigenous peoples in particular, are in need of **therapeutic services aimed at healing from the legacy of intergenerational trauma**. Trauma services framed from an Indigenous world view may prove to be particularly useful in this regard.

  Resources are available through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Healing Foundation. In addition, various agencies that provide services and programs for healing and resolution can be accessed by Homeward Trust. Staff and team training in recognizing trauma and stress symptoms would also be beneficial.
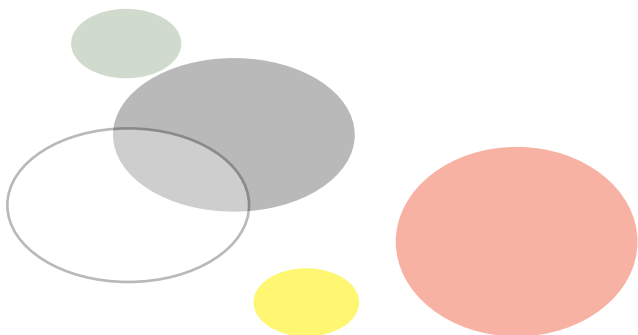
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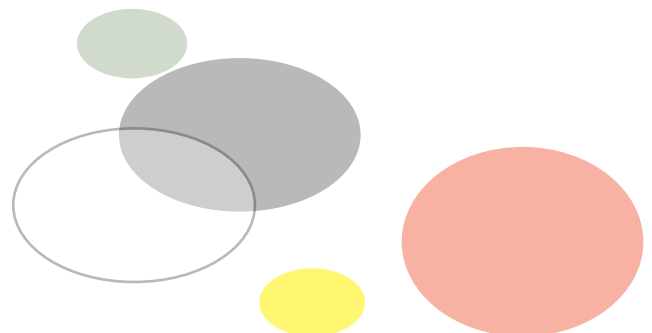
Indigenous staffing issues

- While it may be neither feasible nor desirable to have a completely Indigenous team and Housing First program, attention to **Indigenous staffing is still appropriate**. There may be unique roles for Indigenous staff persons, dependent on individualized skill-sets and interests. A participant spoke of this recommendation in the following way:

    "I would have [five] Aboriginal worker[s] that's available to meet Aboriginal clients for any reason whether it be smudging or whether it be just to come and talk to cause a lot of 'em want an Aboriginal worker to talk to about things that's happened to them and once they've been apprehended what's happened to them all in care. So yeah they need an Aboriginal worker to be there to I guess basically sit, listen to them, counsel them."

- Existing and potential Indigenous staff can be supported in various formal and informal ways relative to Indigenous identity. **Consideration of mentorship of Indigenous individuals into specific roles with the Housing First program may be effective.** Consideration of protocols that support access to and participation in Indigenous culture and services may be considered appropriate. Attention to protocols that address perceived and actual racism may also support Indigenous staff and clients.

Staff training

- Given the recent introduction of the Housing First model in Edmonton and the lack of clarity on the decolonization framework and process, additional **training for staff on the shift in value system from a treatment first to a Housing First model may be helpful**. Training on Indigenous culture and colonization and decolonization may also be helpful. Indigenous training could include accessing existing Aboriginal Awareness workshops that are provided by a number of agencies in the community or be working with Institutions such as Blue Quills First Nations College or the Nechi Institute to create specific focus workshops exploring the process of colonization and the use of ceremony, protocols and relational accountability in practice with Indigenous clients.

Staff mandate

- **Consideration of the scope of practice for Housing First staff may be appropriate**. Alternatively, specialized staffing positions could be developed for interdisciplinary and intersectoral networking, Indigenous identity assessment and ongoing evaluation and assisting clients with navigation and advocacy with various systems.

Homeward Trust Organizational Learnings

Clarify organizational Indigenous identity

- Homeward Trust may wish to **explore the feasibility and appropriateness of an Indigenous organizational identity**. Considerations in this regard would include the framework, values, protocols and process that would guide such an exploration. It is important to consider that Indigenous identity development process is isomorphic with each process and effort mirroring processes and efforts at various different levels within an organization. As such, attention to Indigenous identity development of clients without simultaneously addressing Indigenous identity development of staff, organizations, and Homeward Trust as a whole may be frustrated efforts. In this context, a participant shared the following perspective on an envisioned collaborative process relative to Indigenous identity:

  "I do think we need to look at the whole community aspect, it's a huge part of the Aboriginal community ... or Aboriginal culture, a sense of community and that's a huge issue with a lot of our clients." Maybe Homeward Trust as a whole maybe, as an agency, I think that the agencies need to collaborate for sure, it can't be just on Homeward Trust but how do we, like maybe we need a group that sits down and says, "How can we address this?"

# Broader Policy and Research Learnings

Consider roles for advocacy

- Consider **advocating for and funding alternative housing structures and models** that may be more structurally aligned with an Indigenous world view.

- Consider **Homeward Trust's role relative to advocacy, funding, prevention and intervention** relative to Métis settlement and reserve housing.

- Consider **Homeward Trust's role relative to advocacy on social policies affecting homeless and Indigenous peoples** including the Indian Act, child welfare legislation, social assistance issues and municipal/ provincial/ federal jurisdictional silos (Turner et al., 2010). These all fall under the larger community planning process currently involving Homeward Trust.

- Consider the **feasibility and appropriateness of supporting the creation of an urban reserve in Edmonton**

Consider funding and conducting research in areas pertaining to homelessness and Indigenous peoples

- Consider **research pertaining to intergenerational trauma, Indigenous identity and colonization issues**, differential age-based profiles of Indigenous homeless peoples, research that explores the possibility of a 'Housing First adjustment process', research exploring the relational impact of the Housing First model, research that explores the shift in values of Housing First program participants, and quantitative measures of housing stability in the Housing First model.

- Consider **community-based research comparing public opinion regarding the treatment first and Housing First models.**

- Consider **pilot project evaluative research projects exploring the feasibility and appropriateness of volunteer programming, community development programming, life skills training, role and mandate expansion** including systemic navigation and systemic advocacy and Indigenous organizational identity development associated with the Housing First program.

- Consider **engaging in research partnerships exploring environmental predictive factors to homelessness including childhood poverty, child welfare involvement, externalized racism, marginalization and social isolation** (Turner et al., 2010). Particular attention to Indigenous children, youth, women and Métis peoples is called for (Turner et al., 2010). Comparative studies for people coming from reserves versus urban Indigenous peoples is also suggested (Turner et al., 2010). Evaluation of current programming and project models with Indigenous homeless peoples and "research that looks at the trends, impacts and outcomes of public social policy and funding intended to address Aboriginal homelessness" (Turner et al., 2010, p. 11) are also needed areas of attention in research.
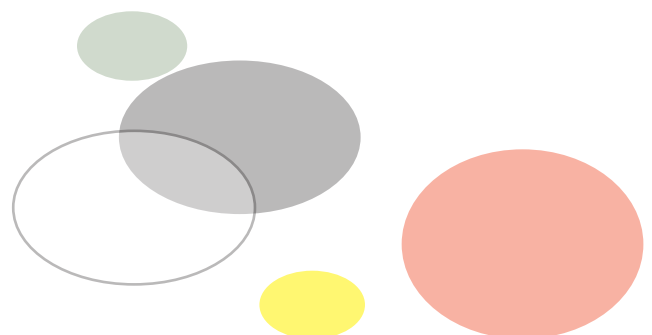
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