National Association of Friendship Centres

Association nationale des centres d'amitié

# Addressing Housing and Homelessness

November 2024

275 MacLaren Street
Ottawa, Ontario K2P 0L9
(613) 563-4844
NAFC.ca

Unclassified-Non classifié

This study/research was led by

National Association of Friendship Centres

and received funding from Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) under Part IX of the *National Housing Act*. The views, analysis, interpretations and recommendations expressed in this study are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of CMHC. CMHC's financial contribution to this report does not constitute an endorsement of its contents.

La présente étude/recherche a été menée par

Association nationale des centres d'amitié

et a reçu du financement de la Société canadienne d'hypothèques et de logement (SCHL) en vertu de la partie IX de la *Loi nationale sur l'habitation*. Les opinions, analyses, interprétations et recommandations présentées dans cette étude sont celles des auteur(es) et ne reflètent pas nécessairement le point de vue de la SCHL. La contribution financière de la SCHL à la publication de ce rapport ne constitue nullement une approbation de son contenu.

**OPIMS**

*For internal use only/Section réservée à l'usage interne*

Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) provides accessible forms and publications in alternate formats for persons with disabilities. If you wish to obtain this publication in alternative formats, call 1-800-668-2642

La Société canadienne d'hypothèques et de logement (SCHL) offre des formulaires et des publications en format adapté pour les personnes handicapées. Si vous désirez obtenir cette publication en format adapté, composez le 1-800-668-2642.

20230927-006 **15**

**CMHC.ca | SCHL.ca**

Canada

CMHC SCHL

# Table of Contents


Executive Summary....2
Introduction....3
Background....4
Methodology....6
Key Themes and Findings....8
Service Delivery and Housing....8
The Importance of Location....9
Mental Health and Substance Use....9
Stages of Life....11
Engaging with Gender....13
Climate and Environmental Factors....14
Housing & Homelessness....15
Impact of Racism....15
Public Perception and Stigmatization....17
Burnout of Frontline Workers....18
Encampments....20
NAFC Impact and Guiding Principles....22
Relevance: How will this approach or activity bear upon or connect to the FCM at the local and regional level?....22
Succession: How will this approach or activity transmit our successes and learning into the future and consider impacts seven generations ahead?....23
Influence: How will this approach or activity build NAFC to be a compelling force that produces effects on the actions, behaviors, or options of others?....23
Sustainability: How will this approach or activity support the vitality of the FCM?....24
Recommendations....25
Human Approach: Need for Compassionate and Empathetic Support Services....25
Human Rights Approach: Need for Compassionate and Empathetic Support Services....25
Urban Indigenous Rights Approaches: Need for Compassionate and Empathetic Support Services....26
Conclusion....27
Acknowledgements....28
Bibliography....28

# Executive Summary

The National Association of Friendship Centres (NAFC) was established in 1972 to represent, nationally, the growing number of Friendship Centres emerging across Canada. The National Association of Friendship Centres represents over 100 Friendship Centres and Provincial/Territorial Associations (PTAs) from coast-to-coast-to-coast which make up the Friendship Centre Movement (FCM). This executive summary provides an overview of key findings and insights regarding housing and homelessness, with a focus on encampments, from the perspective of the Friendship Centre Movement.

Through ongoing conversations with Friendship Centres across the country, housing is identified as a fundamental aspect of wrap-around services for urban Indigenous peoples, underlining the need for mental health and addiction support systems, especially for individuals facing precarious housing and homelessness. Additionally, there is a growing recognition of the importance of youth-focused programs in addressing these issues effectively for urban Indigenous communities.

Building on pre-existing relationships, the NAFC's Research Department partnered with Friendship Centres to conduct a series of group discussions exploring the experiences of frontline staff working in the housing and homelessness sector, including support for encampment communities. These discussions offered rich narratives and insights, deepening our understanding of what Friendship Centres need to continue their vital work. The findings also provided enriched stories, actionable recommendations, and robust qualitative data to support this research project. One of the most pressing concerns identified was the significant challenges faced by frontline workers, including burnout, lack of pay equity, and barriers surrounding capacity building. Prioritizing the mental health of Friendship Centre staff emerged as a critical aspect to ensure sustained support for increasingly vulnerable urban Indigenous populations.

Moreover, the engagement sessions highlight the discouraging trend of governments offloading jurisdictional responsibilities to non-profit organizations such as the Friendship Centre Movement, which has raised concerns about the consistent violation of human rights, particularly regarding the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

Equitable and consistent funding remains a critical barrier in meaningfully advancing housing initiatives, with COVID-19 funding sunsetting by the end of 2023 further fuelling the crisis. A crucial step towards ensuring equitable access to affordable housing and funding is the acknowledgement and addressing of systemic barriers brought on by the colonial history and racism embedded in housing policies.

Collaboration and partnerships are emphasized as essential strategies in addressing housing and homelessness effectively, with the key takeaway being the adoption of a more humane approach recognizing the cultural ties between Friendship Centres and encampments, which foster a sense of inclusivity and understanding.

The engagement sessions highlight the important role of Friendship Centres in advocating for a human-centered approach, rooted in relationship building and local Indigenous protocols when addressing the housing crisis. These approaches aim to dismantle colonial attitudes and racism towards urban Indigenous encampment communities, promoting safe spaces and upholding their rights on traditional lands.

This research stresses the urgent need for human rights-based approaches to housing, homelessness, and encampments. The experiences and stories shared by the Friendship Centre Movement offers valuable leadership and wise practices in the development of effective and equitable solutions to address the growing housing crisis across the country.

# Introduction

A house is simply not a home without the right tools and supports to ensure stability and empowerment to its tenant. As housing challenges continue to persist, a diverse and tailored response is essential to support individuals seeking stable affordable housing. Urban Indigenous communities face unique and complex challenges that require culturally grounded and holistic approaches when addressing the housing crisis.

Historical injustices exacerbated by systemic racism and colonial attitudes continues to impact access to housing and intensify homelessness. Encampments tend to serve as alternative spaces for individuals seeking autonomy and community, while navigating a system that has failed to adequately address their needs. To understand the complexities of the urban Indigenous context, it is crucial to recognize the structural inequalities embedded within Canada's historical and ongoing colonization. Encampments face jurisdictional challenges, further complicating efforts to address homelessness effectively. Indigenous organizations, such as the Friendship Centre Movement, have a long legacy of understanding the history, culture, and context that impact Indigenous people. Friendship Centres and Provincial/Territorial Associations continue to support the ongoing need of improving access to safe affordable housing while advocating for the removal of barriers for Indigenous people experiencing homelessness regardless of where they live. At a national level, the NAFC focuses on providing policies, research, and recommendations that are informed by a culturally grounded and gender-based lens to support Indigenous people in attaining safe housing.

To help address precarious housing and homelessness, the National Association Friendship Centres is working on the development of comprehensive Friendship Centre Specific Housing and Homelessness National Action Plan and Framework. With funding support from the Office of Federal Housing and Advocate and Canada Mortgage and

Housing Corporation (CMHC), the NAFC conducted research through an engagement process, laying the foundation for developing the national action plan and framework. Through this important research, we engaged directly with frontline staff to showcase their experiences working in the housing and homelessness sector and supporting communities, while emphasizing the significance of urban Indigenous perspectives.

This report highlights the gaps and barriers in program and service delivery, the impact of systemic racism in the housing and homelessness sector, and the importance of empowering and amplifying the voices of frontline staff and those with lived experiences. Addressing the specific needs or urban Indigenous communities is essential for promoting equity and social justice. This report is particularly relevant for policymakers, service providers, and community leaders who are responsible for creating and implementing effective programs and policies.

# Background

The COVID-19 pandemic exasperated the disparities in social supports and programs; however, the housing crisis existed long before the world locked down. Urban Indigenous communities face disproportionately high rates of homelessness, a critical issue heightened by systemic barriers to securing affordable housing and accessing services. Belanger et al. (2019) highlight this disparity, noting that urban Indigenous housing concerns remain inadequately addressed by governmental policies at provincial and federal levels.[1] The authors argue that these challenges persist despite increasing recognition at local government levels.[2] Rodrigues et al. (2020) underscore the multifaceted nature of defining homelessness experienced by Indigenous communities, attributing its persistence to historical and ongoing systemic discrimination against Indigenous peoples in Canada.[3] Factors such as economic marginalization, inadequate social safety nets, and racial discrimination intersect to create and perpetuate homelessness among Indigenous populations.[4]

The disproportionate representation of Indigenous people among the population experiencing homelessness is a direct consequence of colonial systems. Olson and Pauly argue that "homelessness needs to be further understood in the context of colonialism and displacement of Indigenous people."[5] They highlight that "colonial foundations underpin contemporary laws of displacement that continue to exist for people

[1] Belanger et al., "The Urban Indigenous Housing Experience of NIMBY-Ism in Calgary, Alberta," 1.
[2] Belanger et al., "The Urban Indigenous Housing Experience of NIMBY-Ism in Calgary, Alberta," 1.
[3] Rodrigues et al., "Developing Gendered and Culturally Safe Interventions for Urban Indigenous Families Experiencing Homelessness", 23
[4] Rodrigues et al., "Developing Gendered and Culturally Safe Interventions for Urban Indigenous Families Experiencing Homelessness", 23
[5] Olson and Pauly, "Forced to Become a Community' Encampment Residents' Perspectives on Systemic Failures, Precarity, and Constrained Choice", 133.

experiencing homelessness across the continent." [6] This ongoing displacement, combined with the destabilization of culture, has led to high rates of homelessness among Indigenous peoples.

To further reinforce the importance of having housing supports that are tied to Indigenous cultures and ways of knowing, taking a step back and re-examining the definitions that guide our understanding on housing and homelessness is necessary. Based on Western definitions of homelessness, it "occurs when an individual or family is without safe, permanent, and/or appropriate housing and are without prospects for achieving such housing."[7] Thistle (2017) provides a comprehensive definition of Indigenous homelessness that diverges from conventional Western perspectives.[8] For Indigenous communities, homelessness encompasses not only the absence of physical shelter but also the disconnect from cultural and spiritual ties to land, family, and community.[9] This holistic view contrasts from the Western definition, which primarily focuses on the lack of safe and permanent housing.[10]

Addressing the housing crisis does not simply begin and end at providing a physical space and a roof over one's head. Valuing the concept of a 'home' and the characteristics that turn a house into a home, however, requires understanding homelessness through an Indigenous lens which results in redefining what "home" means. Indigenous concepts of the home expand beyond the physical structures to encompass a web of relationships and responsibilities. Home is "understood as circles of interconnectedness that together form the heart of healthy Indigenous social and spiritual emplacement."[11] To address the housing crisis effectively, integrating Indigenous concepts of home into policy and practice is crucial. Thistle advocates for the establishment of Indigenous concepts of home to direct funding towards culturally sensitive supports for Indigenous peoples, especially those in crisis situations.[12] This approach recognizes the importance of cultural connections and the need for services that respect and incorporate Indigenous worldviews.

Indigenous initiatives, such as the Friendship Centre Movement, have long demonstrated their capacity to support the growing urban Indigenous populations across Canada by offering safe and affordable wraparound housing supports within a network of cultural and relational practices. These organizations embed their services within Indigenous perspectives and practices, aiming not only to house individuals but to restore and strengthen community ties that are essential for holistic living.

---

[6] Olson and Pauly, "Forced to Become a Community' Encampment Residents' Perspectives on Systemic Failures, Precarity, and Constrained Choice", 133.
[7] Rodrigues et al., 3
[8] Thistle, "Definition of Indigenous Homelessness in Canada,".
[9] Thistle, "Definition of Indigenous Homelessness in Canada,"6.
[10] Rodrigues et al., 6
[11] Thistle, "Definition of Indigenous Homelessness in Canada," 14-15.
[12] Thistle, "Definition of Indigenous Homelessness in Canada," 14.

However, despite these efforts, frontline services dedicated to addressing homelessness often operate under significant strain. Racism is etched in Canada's infrastructure and will continue to make itself present and affect every aspect of life. Systemic racism creates a landscape where Indigenous people face additional hurdles in securing housing, which is inherently linked to their overall health and well-being. Racism not only creates significant barriers when accessing services, but also exacerbates delays when disseminating resources and supports. The Office of Federal Housing Advocates (OFHA) reports widespread challenges such as inadequate funding, overcapacity, and high staff turnover, which undermines the effectiveness of these critical services.[13]

To effectively address the worsening housing crisis, meaningful and consistent engagement with those with lived experiences must be at the forefront of this work, ensuring that every action taken is a direct response to their needs and concerns. Engaging with frontline workers is paramount, as they provide a unique perspective from their experience of working directly with both different level of governments and those seeking supports. We engaged with Friendship Centre staff to learn more about their experiences, providing a basis on how to develop the necessary tools to support and empower the work that they continue to do.

# Methodology

This research focuses primarily on qualitative data collection methods. The experiences and stories shared during the engagement sessions provided an understanding of the multifaceted challenges surrounding housing and homelessness, through first-hand accounts. To substantiate this research, a literature review and online-based environmental scan was conducted to provide a snapshot of existing knowledge and literature that focuses on the FCM, urban Indigenous communities, and supports available for communities' experiencing homelessness and/or living in encampments. This work also assisted in developing the survey and engagement guide. As anticipated, there were information gaps when documenting the efforts of Indigenous-led grassroots organizations when addressing the housing crisis.

For the engagement sessions, the NAFC partnered with five (5) Friendship Centres, to conduct engagement sessions filled with various staff members and partners. These partnerships originated during the proposal phase of the research project, leveraging pre-existing knowledge and relationships with those who had expressed their interest in being a part of this project. Invitations were then extended to participate in the engagement sessions. Although Friendship Centres continue to experience similar challenges, they operate autonomously, meaning the challenges they face may vary. As such, this participant group is not fully reflective of the experiences of all Friendship Centres but

[13] The Office of the Federal Housing Advocate (OFHA), "Upholding dignity and human rights: the Federal Housing Advocate's review of homeless encampments – Final report", 17.

rather help start the conversation on the experiences and needs of urban Indigenous communities and frontline staff.

These engagement sessions were conducted in two (2) phases. Phase (1) included a virtual engagement session with the wider FCM and in-person engagement sessions. In-person engagement sessions in the first phase include:

- Prince George Native Friendship Centre (Prince George, BC)
- Manitoba Association of Friendship Centres (Winnipeg, MB)
- Winnipeg Indigenous Friendship Centre Inc. (Winnipeg, MB)

And the second phase, virtual and in-person, included the following Friendship Centres:

- Dze L' Kant Friendship Centre Society (Smithers, BC)
- Labrador Friendship Centre (Happy Valley-Goose Bay, NL)

These sessions, involving participants ranging from three (3) to twenty (20) individuals present, facilitated dialogue and the exploration of diverse perspectives with the Friendship Centre Movement (FCM). Participants represented a wide spectrum of roles within the FCM, including frontline workers from various programs such as Youth Shelter Officers, Executive Directors, Housing Managers, and staff, as well as their various external partners.

Steps taken to organize the engagement sessions with the Friendship Centres included check-ins and conversations prior and during the engagement sessions for guidance, wellness breaks, and provision of beverages, meals for the in-person engagement sessions – all done with the intention of creating a respectful, inclusive, and accountable space for sharing perspectives and experiences.

An online survey was distributed, gathering approximately 40 responses, during the 2023 Urban Indigenous Summit, which took place in November 2023 and welcomed over 300 guests to Ottawa, Ontario. The survey questions aligned with the questions asked during engagement sessions, effectively capturing the diverse voices of the Friendship Centre Movement through different forms of participation. The virtual engagement session received over 30 registrants. This session provided a platform to share an overview of the research initiative with members of the wider FCM and created opportunities to engage in in-depth discussions and insights into the key challenges and opportunities relating to housing and homelessness among urban Indigenous communities.

Given the sensitive nature of the topic, particular attention was given to ensure the comfort and safety of participants throughout the engagement sessions. These sessions delved into a variety of crucial topics, such as existing programs, systemic barriers faced by encampment communities, past initiatives/programs/services, relationships with encampment communities, and supports for achieving safe and affordable housing. Although there was no direct engagement with encampment communities, the

experiences shared by frontline staff members provided valuable insights, creating a basis for understanding of the current landscape on services geared towards these communities.

# Key Themes and Findings

The engagement sessions with our partnered Friendship Centres brought forward powerful narratives that highlight the importance of an intersectional lens, the human approach to support, and the profound impacts of systemic issues like racism and funding constraints. By understanding the unique experiences of Indigenous peoples, we see not only the hurdles they face but also the unwavering commitment to creating safe and inclusive spaces for their communities. From the barriers faced by those transitioning from reserves to urban centres, to the mental health struggles exacerbated by colonial systems, every story shared underscores the critical need for tailored, compassionate solutions. These findings are a testament to the unyielding strength of these communities and the collaborative efforts required to build a future where every individual has a culturally and spiritually relevant place to call home.

## Service Delivery and Housing

The intersectional approach in service delivery for Indigenous communities is critical to addressing the myriads of challenges due to historical and ongoing displacement. The NAFC underscores the importance of an intersectional approach in addressing the housing needs of urban Indigenous peoples, highlighting that there are many jurisdictional gaps for Indigenous people when accessing adequate housing in rural and urban centres. This approach emphasizes the importance of focusing on the whole person when identifying strategies to eradicate homelessness. Critical gaps include the lack of transitional supports for those moving from reserves to urban centres, shortage of culturally appropriate housing, and an insufficient number of urban Indigenous housing providers.[14]

Long-standing historical processes like racism, colonialism, and culturally unsafe practices continue to hinder access to affordable and sustainable housing. The community connections amongst Indigenous peoples play a crucial role in their well-being, to the extent that some may choose to sleep outside to maintain these bonds.[15]

Thistle (2017) proceeds further by introducing the *12 Dimensions of Indigenous Homelessness in Canda*, these dimensions work to identify the contributing factors to

[14] The Office of the Federal Housing Advocate, "Upholding dignity and human rights: the Federal Housing Advocate's review of homeless encampments – Final report", 17.
[15] Olson and Pauly, "Forced to Become a Community' Encampment Residents' Perspectives on Systemic Failures, Precarity, and Constrained Choice", 128.

homelessness.[16] These dimensions include *Historical Displacement*, *Contemporary Geographic Separation Homelessness*, *Mental Disruption,* and *Imbalance Homelessness*, and so forth. These dimensions provide a breakdown on the types of supports and service required to support someone in their journey of securing safe and sustainable housing. The barriers to accessing housing are extensive, including lack of kin support, inadequate release planning from institutions, and racial discrimination in housing markets.[17] Diversifying the types of programs and services made available allows for programs to be tailored to all 'walks of life'; "[the] supportive housing programs and how I [just see] it works on all different levels from places like the Inn; where you're truly meeting people, where they're at, and you're not judging them."[18]

The following below were identified as the key themes that were present during the engagement sessions:

# The Importance of Location

Indigenous peoples' mobility and relocation are essential for accessing a wide range of services and opportunities, from health care and education to cultural and spiritual events.[19] This mobility reflects the dynamic and adaptive nature of Indigenous communities, who navigate considerable geographic distances to maintain their well-being. Efforts to improve information dissemination and transportation services can further enhance access and support these resilient communities in their daily lives.[20] As expressed during our visit at the Labrador Friendship Centre, the location of one's home or even supports system can be a barrier when attempting to access and sustain affordable housing, "*[somebody's] thinking about if they do become housed and like access to transportation to get a job.*"[21] This can also demonstrate the shortcoming when solely utilizing a Western definition to homelessness, without encompassing outside factors such as location, we are not able to provide a full assessment on the quality of housing.

# Mental Health and Substance Use

Intergenerational trauma and the impacts of colonization are significant factors influencing mental health and substance use among urban Indigenous peoples. However, Indigenous communities are actively working towards healing and reclaiming their health through culturally relevant practices and supports.[22] Housing systems that incorporate trauma-informed and culturally safe approaches can foster dignity and empower

[16] Thistle, 10-12.
[17] Thistle, 37.
[18] Participant from Prince George Native Friendship Centre, 2023
[19] Thistle, 11
[20] Thistle, 24
[21] Participant from Labrador Friendship Centre, 2024
[22] Thistle, 7, 34

individuals to rebuild their lives.[23] Providing cultural relevant mental health support is a step forward in addressing the unique needs of Indigenous communities, as well as moving away from Western notions when receiving care:

> "*[It] was involving the mental health supports, even with the mental health supports that we do have in place, there's no culturally relevant mental health support to support Indigenous people, and our community and from like our municipality to provincial and onward federal, it really pushes the Western models onto individuals and don't recognize that, okay, returning to the land is culturally appropriate."*[24]

The discussions surrounding mental health and substance use encompassed the experiences of those seeking supports, as well as the behind the scenes when providing these supports. As frontline workers, Friendship Centres have seen the impacts of racism and discrimination when seeking supports:

> "*And then people internalize that and that just snowballs their own, their own mental health and addictions and self-blame. So it's really this huge systemic thing which I think all of us know on this call. And then to be continually treated in that way, by many, whether it's service providers or municipalities or police, it really just is self-perpetuating, I guess."*[25]

This calls for more training geared towards external non-Indigenous partners, ensuring that they have the proper anti-Indigenous racism and trauma-informed to provide quality care to urban Indigenous communities. This can also assist with the capacity issues that are being faced by Friendship Centres when providing mental health and substance use supports. As mentioned during the Prince George session,

> "*[We're] getting a lot of people, elderly men and stuff from the hospital. [They have] serve mental health issues, they have physical issues [to deal] with, but as a shelter, we're not capable of looking after the workers. They need more extensive care and as a shelter, we're not capable of doing that. We can't function on those levels. So, I think there should be some more elder housing. I think there has to be long-term housing capable of dealing with your physical and mental…"*[26]

Recognizing that these types of supports require around-the-clock care while also ensuring that people can access these services on a moment's need is crucial to creating an effective and confident response. When including the topic of mental health and crisis supports, there is an element of unpredictability that especially needs to be reflected in

[23] Rodrigues et al., 17
[24] Participant from Labrador Friendship Centre, 2024.
[25] Participant from Dze L' Kant Friendship Centre, 2024
[26] Participant from Prince George Native Friendship Centre, 2023

service delivery; "*It is Monday to Friday, 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. so if you're going to have a mental break, it's advisable to stay within that that time.*"[27]

## Stages of Life

Wrap around supports should be able to address any point throughout one's lifetime. Friendship Centres have tailored their supports, from prenatal care to end-of-life service, "*{We] also offer wraparound support services including mental health support, addiction treatment, job training, and life skills development to individuals experiencing homelessness.*"[28] As emphasized throughout all the engagement sessions, it is important to ensure that no one is left behind when addressing homelessness or precarious housing.

Despite facing disproportionate rates of homelessness, Indigenous youth continuously show incredible resilience and adaptability. They often gravitate towards urban centres in search of acceptance and opportunities and navigating the complexities of urban living with resourcefulness and determination.[29] Ensuring robust support systems during the transitional phase from youth to adulthood can empower their growth and contribute to their bright futures, "*{There's] a need for support for youth who are out growing the youth system to enable [their] transition into adults. [You] know, of youth care, they become easy prey on the streets.*"[30]

Indigenous youth are met with systemic barriers when attempting to secure affordable housing. This is evident in the processes put in place by realtors and renting agencies. Requirements for background checks, the first and last month's rent, and damage deposits are barriers which limits opportunities to feeling accepted and results in affordable housing becoming inaccessible:

> "*[There's] the practice of, [needing] to have, a reference. So when you are a youth, especially a youth in care where you've grown up in a group home or foster care, you don't have references, you don't have anyone that can vouch for you. And so that's right there, there's like a roadblock. And then, a lot of that landlords wanted you, um your credit, credit checks. And so you don't have any credit, and you don't have stable employment.*"[31]

A response to these barriers would be wraparound services and programs that allow youth members to practice autonomy, while also having access to readily available resources to support them as they create a safe and sustainable home for themselves. As mentioned during the Prince George Native Friendship Centre engagement session, "*I think that will be such a huge stepping stone towards their future where, you know, they*

[27] Participant from Labrador Friendship Centre, 2023
[28] Participant from Dze L' Kant Friendship Centre, 2024
[29] Thistle, 21
[30] Participant from Prince George Native Friendship Centre, 2023
[31] Participant from Prince George Native Friendship Centre, 2023

*can focus on finishing their school and, getting like, employment and [not] have to worry that they're not going to be able to find housing.*"[32] There was also mentioning of the need for more preventative supports for youth, this includes supports for when a youth member doesn't feel comfortable or safe in their assigned group home.

Community and belonging should be at the heart of service delivery development and rollout. Creating spaces that invite intergenerational living and learning was an ongoing theme.

> "*[My] kind of dream thing [is] to have a place like our lodge, like our Elders place that is for families, or it's for single moms or single dads or the young people trying to make it together. And where you have all that wraparound care, you've got daycares, you've got counselors, […] let's teach people how to grow a garden again. You know, just all of the basic life skills that our youth aren't [being] taught anymore. I mean, we used to do it in school remember? We used to learn how to make a pot of soup in school or sew a button on whatever, and that stuff's just gone.*"[33]

During our visit in Winnipeg, a participant from the Winnipeg Indigenous Friendship Centre shared the Tiny Home Village project. A communal space that consists of 22 units of single person housing with access to wrap around supports, as well as Elders and healers. This village also allows people to be a part of a community that allows them to share meals together, connect, and socialize with one another. Aligning with what was shared by a dedicated staff member during the Prince George Friendship Centre engagement session, "*[We're] looking for interdependence, not independence. No one is designed to be independent from anyone. And so those community supports are important.*"[34] It is incredibly essential that individuals feel empowered when using supports, as highlighted during the Winnipeg engagement session; "*[if] you can't meet the basic needs for shelter, how can you expect folks to have an appropriate apartment*."[35]

Despite facing barriers such as limited fixed incomes and health challenges, Elders and seniors, vital pillars in Indigenous communities, continue to demonstrate remarkable strength and commitment to their families and communities. Addressing the specific Elders' and seniors' housing needs, such as increases in available subsidized housing and rent control, flexibility in household composition, supports for overcrowding, can enhance their well-being and enable them to contribute to their crucial role as cultural and familiar anchors.[36] Highlighting these existing barriers and gaps in services are essential in addressing these needs. Economic barriers are not only experienced by those that are seeking safe and affordable housing for themselves but also impacts their families. This

[32] Participant from Prince George Native Friendship Centre, 2023
[33] Participant from Prince George Native Friendship Centre, 2023
[34] Participant from Prince George Native Friendship Centre, 2023
[35] Participant from Winnipeg Engagement Session, 2023
[36]Participant from Prince George Native Friendship Centre, 2023

may also result in the risk of losing supports due to rules and restrictions in shelters and housing programs. To ensure the safety of Elders and seniors, housing and shelters need to support the whole person; this includes access to health care that is accessible and inclusive to all needs, a space that fosters communities, and that embraces all the different makeups of the family. It is vitally important that this sect of population is provided care and shelter in the event they experience displacement.

## Engaging with Gender

Indigenous women face unique challenges when seeking reliable and sustainable housing and often face challenges that arise at the intersections of race and gender. Navigating complex issues such as violence, child welfare, and poverty, while also combatting sexism and racism when advocating for oneself is a common reality.

Access to justice was strongly emphasized when incorporating an intersectional and gender-based analysis on precarious housing and homelessness. This approach includes implementing proper supports and resources available for youth that may be experiencing homophobia at school, assisting women who are victims of gender-based violence, to transitional housing made available for men that were previously incarcerated. Fostering partnerships to provide preventative and restoration care for those that were once incarcerated, "*[if] they're in custody, basically [their] pathways, [right] to the shelter, right? So, if there was any way to support that continuum to, to not even make it back to the shelter to, to provide them with that, that housing and that support, and planning.*"[37]

This further showcases that programs and services can not work in silos, as Friendship Centres continue to tailor supports based on the immediate needs of their community members. Not all Friendship Centres experience the same demands or obstacles. During the engagement sessions, some Friendship Centres mentioned the need for more supports geared towards women while others share that men tend to be a demographic that is overlooked.[38] Building strong community connections produce the best results when responding to gaps in services. It was also mentioned the importance of everyone's participation when addressing gender-based violence and disparities. When discussing ending violence against of women, a participant expressed the importance of engaging with men when breaking the cycle of violence: "*[if] we don't provide men with the wraparound supports, then we're not going to break the cycle.*"[39]

Racism and discrimination continue to persist, not only in accessing services but also in advocacy. Practices such as town hall meetings, while they may ignite powerful conversations and foster change, can still serve as echo chamber for racist and outdated rhetoric. As mentioned during the engagement session with the Dze L' Kant Friendship

[37] Participant from Prince George Native Friendship Centre, 2023
[38] Participant from Labrador Friendship Centre, 2024
[39] Participant from Labrador Friendship Centre, 2024

Centre, "*The louder speakers [win]. And [what's] happening is, two-spirit LGBTQ, women, men, families, they are not participating in any of these municipal town halls.*"[40] Creating gender-conscious and inclusive housing policies can empower these communities and enhance their well-being.[41]

## Climate and Environmental Factors

Friendship Centres are at the forefront of addressing environmental changes and crisis. Friendship Centres are continuously being met with the question, "*[what] does, looking after our unhoused people [look] like, what does that look like when there's wildfires and there's people coming in from other communities?*"[42] Instances of natural disasters, such as repeated floods and wildfires, showcase the resilience and resourcefulness of these communities in the face of adversity.[43] Navigating the influx of people seeking supports during the wildfire, Friendship Centres were still responding to the needs of their community members. Innovative responses to environmental challenges, including community-led emergency response and climate adaptation strategies, highlight the strength and ingenuity of Indigenous peoples; "*[We] got creative during that time when it was really hot days. [They] froze water bottles, and you wouldn't believe how like that and washcloths and just [for] like people get that ten second tidy and they got a water that was iced.*"[44]

When discussing access to services, the topic of location comes up. As mentioned, at times, Friendship Centres are the only source of supports, especially for those living in remote or rural areas. And so, Friendship Centres are continuously met with the question on how to support community members during these unpredictable environmental crises, while continuing to show up despite limited funding and capacity. While also preparing for an anticipated influx of people coming from different regions seeking shelter. As mentioned by a staff member from the Prince George Native Friendship Centre, "*[What] happens when there's wildfires and communities are evacuated to Prince George. They bring their homeless population as well to Prince George*."[45]

This can also be seen as a direct response to the failure of government allocating appropriate supports and funding for these environmental factors. Leaving many feeling like a "*[sort] of a relief valve, a pressure cooker for these other communities*."[46]

[40] Participant from Dze L' Kant Friendship Centre, 2024
[41] Thistle, 21
[42] Participant from Prince George Native Friendship Centre, 2023
[43] Thistle, 38
[44] Participant from Prince George Native Friendship Centre, 2023
[45] Participant from Prince George Native Friendship Centre, 2023
[46] Participant from Prince George Native Friendship Centre, 2023

# Housing & Homelessness

Housing and homelessness are critical issues that disproportionately affect Indigenous communities that reflects broader systemic inequities rooted in historical and ongoing colonial practices. This section delves into the multifaceted nature of these challenges, highlighting how systemic racism, public perception, and burnout experienced by frontline staff further contribute to barriers when accessing supports. By examining these themes through a strength-based lens, we aim to demonstrate these barriers and share proactive solutions emerging from the Friendship Centre Movement. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing policies and practices that support the well-being and self-determination of Indigenous peoples in their achieving stable, safe, and culturally appropriate housing.

## Impact of Racism

Systemic racism profoundly impacts access to housing and essential services for Indigenous people. The long-lasting effects of historical trauma from colonization continue to disrupt traditional governance systems and social structures. Thistle (2017) echoes these sentiments, highlighting the impacts of inter-generational trauma experienced within Indigenous communities.[47]

During the Prince George Native Friendship Centre engagement session, a participant had shared, "*There's like this ongoing, issue of racism that permeates everything that, you know, that we face in health and education and social work. And so these colonial systems have, really don't allow for sometimes our cultural ways [to] govern or [to] mind our people.*"[48] This disruption has led to individual and communal traumas, contributing to the disproportionately high levels of mental, cognitive, behavioral, social, and physical challenges among Indigenous populations.[49]

The psychological and social consequences of the residential school system have left many Indigenous people and communities grappling with the trauma of being violently pulled apart from one's culture and communities with the intention of assimilation. Thistle describes, "[the] consequence is that generations of Indigenous Peoples feel caught in a type of purgatory between cultures, not feeling a sense of belonging to either."[50] This cultural destabilization underpins many of the housing challenges faced by Indigenous communities today.

As racism continues to make its presence known when attempting to access services, appropriate measures to protect Indigenous communities have yet to be put in place.

[47] Thistle, 7
[48] Participant from Prince George Native Friendship Centre, 2023
[49] Thistle, 7
[50] Thistle, 36

Stated during the Dze L' Kant Friendship Centre engagement session, "*I think that there [are] so many barriers that we face, including racism on so many levels. I think that policies, outlined in the municipalities aren't conducive to solving these racial problems. And I think that they have to look deep in their own selves*."[51] Ultimately, these policies and lack of recognition of the impact of racism have resulted in barriers when addressing basic, yet necessary, needs. A participant from the Labrador Friendship Centre noted, "*[Accessing] health care, Indigenous community members might just face blatant racism going towards them and it can be reported on, but there's not necessarily going to be action taken.*"[52]

Individuals and families seeking care are met with "[the failures] of social systems of care and support such as discharges from hospitals, corrections and child welfare, which in turn require a reliance on the homelessness sector."[53] A frontline staff member notes that community members "*[do] not feel comfortable in the shelter. They feel that they have been banned or treated poorly or they feel that they can't be successful with the rules. And the rules are very, very strict and restrictive. And there's a huge concern around cultural safety*."[54] This speaks to the inaccessibility and lack of inclusivity protocols that exists within housing supports. Farha and Schwan's (2020) observe that "existing shelters may also not be low-barrier, wheelchair accessible, trans-inclusive, or safe for people experiencing complex trauma or other challenges."[55]

Barriers in access can also be seen as a direct result in challenges in service dissemination. A staff member from the Dze L' Kant Friendship Centre emphasizes the challenges that frontline staff experience: "*[we're] faced with horrible, horrific treatments, and barriers to get the work done. And, you know, that needs to be really acknowledged here. You know, our biggest stressors do not come from our people. It comes from the challenges, just to get the minimum resources that we have out there*."[56]

The experience of burnout and compassion fatigue is not a singular experience for those working within the non-profit sector. There is an ongoing call out for supports, tools, and resources that to alleviate this pressure while empowering frontline staff. Another participant highlighted,

> "*[We] need this anti-racism brush to go through every part of legislation that touches our lives, right? People say, oh, the system is broken, it's not broken, it's doing exactly what it's supposed to do. But there's no room for Indigenous people in that system, right? So, your Indigenous ways are often put off to the side*."[57]

---

[51] Participant from Dze L' Kant Friendship Centre, 2024
[52] Participant from Labrador Friendship Centre, 2024
[53] Olson and Pauly, 126.
[54] Participant from Labrador Friendship Centre, 2024
[55] Farha, L., and Schwan, K., "*A National Protocol for Homelessness Encampments in Canada*". 2
[56] Participant from Dze L' Kant Friendship Centre, 2024
[57] Participant from Prince George Native Friendship Centre, 2023

This systemic exclusion has resulted in a lack of culturally appropriate services, which is significant when attempting to access safe and stable housing.

A participant from Winnipeg shared, "*[systemic] racism or systemic barriers, they're still there, many of them. We are knocking them down slowly. But, you know, we have to be aware that there are people out there who still hate us*."[58] Despite these challenges, Friendship Centres continue to do the work to provide supports to their unhoused communities. As remarked by a participant at the Prince George Native Friendship Centre, "*We make our funders look good with the work that we're doing because we're going over and above time and time and time again*."[59]

## Public Perception and Stigmatization

Public perception plays a significant role in shaping housing policies and attitudes towards the homelessness sector, especially toward Indigenous populations. Homelessness is often misunderstood and stigmatized mostly attributed to Indigenous people being unfairly blamed for their circumstances. Thistle points out that Indigenous homelessness is frequently debated through the lens of perceived personal failings, rather than systemic issues.[60] As described during the Labrador Friendship Centre engagement session, "*[People] need more education around housing and homelessness. And there's [this] public outcry person [that] needs to resign because they said that there isn't a good understanding of how people come to be homeless, which clearly there's not. But it's like very volatile [when] even learning that information*."[61] Blame-based narrative is perpetuated by a lack of accurate historical education and an unwillingness to address the root causes of homelessness.[62]

The prejudices attached to visible homelessness contribute to negative attitudes and violence towards individuals experiencing precarious housing while blurring the lines between the structural and systemic causes of homelessness. Olson and Pauly note that public controversies surrounding visible encampments often focus on public health and safety concerns, rather than addressing the underlying issues that resulted in these encampments.[63] This stigmatization limits public health responses and perpetuates further discrimination. This is evident from an incident shared by the Labrador Friendship Centre, stating that there is a big yellow sign that says "'"Make a shelter located here. Honk if you disagree. What about our seniors? What about our youth? What about treatment? What about detox? Yeah, instead of infrastructure for people facing homelessness."[64]

---

[58] Participant from Winnipeg Engagement Session, 2023
[59] Participant from Prince George Native Friendship Centre, 2023
[60] Thistle, 17
[61] Participant from Labrador Friendship Centre, 2024
[62] Thistle, 17-18
[63] Olson and Pauly, 125.
[64] Participant from Labrador Friendship Centre, 2024

The phenomenon of NIMBIY (Not In My Backyard) adds a deeper insight of how this stigmatization materializes. Coined in the 80s, NIMBY can be understood as "[the] protectionist attitudes and exclusionary/oppositional tactics adopted by community groups facing an unwelcome development in their neighborhood."[65] Belanger, Y., et, al. (2019) highlights that existing work are exploring the complexities with NIMBY conflicts, articulating that conflicts arise when deciding who is considered as worthy, whose opinions matter the most, and whose interests should be protected from perceived threats.[66] The practice of NIMBY-ism continues to cut into the efforts and solutions that are being provided by frontline workers, such as Friendship Centres. A participant from the Dze L' Kant Friendship Centre shared their experiences with NIMBY and racism, "*That's a huge challenge. And the NIMBY-ism we've faced, whether that's the neighbors right next door or whether that's in the broader community, continues to be something that can't be dismissed. It's a massive barrier*."[67]

Securing a unified public investment towards eradicating homelessness requires the acknowledgement of the historical efforts of Friendship Centres and the barriers experienced when navigating the housing and homelessness sector. Through public buy-in, there is an opportunity to lean on broader communities to support capacity and advocacy gaps. This works as a catalyst in creating active supports for various communities and garnering a sense of allyship. This can also help bolster meaningful and equitable relationships between Friendship Centres and other housing and homelessness stakeholders.

## Burnout of Frontline Workers

Frontline workers within the housing and service delivery sector face significant challenges, including high stress and emotional turmoil. The lack of adequate funding for services exacerbates these challenges, leading to burnout and compassion fatigue among staff. A participant from the Dze L' Kant Friendship Centre reinforces the need for equitable wages and professional development to support frontline workers, noting that "*equitable wages are something that we advocate for all, [and] every day*."[68]

The high turnover and burnout rates among frontline workers are driven by the overwhelming demand for services and insufficient staffing. As one participant from the Prince George Native Friendship Centre described, "*[we've] got programs funded for 35 people, but you're serving 105. We've got shelters where there should be 50 people, but we're serving 70 or whatever it is per night*."[69] This overburdening leads to burnout,

[65] Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC). Gaining Community Acceptance of Affordable Housing Projects and Homeless Shelters.
[66] Belanger et al., 9
[67] Participant from Dze L' Kant Friendship Centre, 2024
[68] Participant from Dze L' Kant Friendship Centre, 2024
[69] Participant from Prince George Native Friendship Centre, 2023

making it difficult to maintain high-quality support. Limited funding opportunities adds further pressures organization to ensure adequate program rollout, creating an "'unproductive competitions between organizations as they fight for the same funding opportunities."[70] A participant from the Dze L' Kant Friendship Centre expressed concerns about organizations receiving resource that "*[utilize] lateral violence and racism as a form, or a form of bullying to support our community members when they're accessing or trying to access safe and supportable housing*."[71]

Moreover, the downloading of responsibility from all levels of government onto Friendship Centres, overwhelming them with support requests. A participant from the Prince George Native Friendship Centre further elaborated on this point, "*[government] download that responsibility to people […], they download the responsibility and they're downloading the people that they're downloading, the people that they have a hard time that they can't manage from up there*." Neglect stems not only from the lack of direct housing and homelessness supports, but also failure to address external barriers like transportation access, as highlighted by a participant; "*transportation is a significant barrier. You know, our we don't have a daily, functioning transportation system. And we recently were reopened for taxi services*."[72]

Investing in frontline staffs' well-being is essential, this includes ensuring fair compensation, prioritizing mental health, and providing professional growth opportunities. As a frontline staff member had shared, "*When it comes down to it, we have to invest in people if we're going to be investing in people. So we need to invest in the staff to really support people so that people can get support*."[73] Service delivery organization require unique and specialized experience when disseminating programs and this should be reflected in their wages. Concerns surrounding wage inequity was a common theme among all sessions. As a staff member of the Dze L' Kand Friendship Centre reflected on their position, "*[We're] talking about an area of pretty high expertise and very high needs individuals that often have very complex mental health, concerns and traumas. And the fact that we're paying people, not equitable wages, it's very concerning. And I feel like it's just, kind of accepted*."[74]

These narratives highlight the resilience and commitment that Indigenous communities hold, in the face of these systemic challenges. Without the proper investments in the people that show up every day to do this work, there is no way that a wholistic approach can be implemented in the housing and homelessness sector.

[70] The Office of the Federal Housing Advocate, "Upholding dignity and human rights: the Federal Housing Advocate's review of homeless encampments – Final report", 17.
[71] Participant from Dze L' Kant Friendship Centre, 2024
[72] Participant from Dze L' Kant Friendship Centre, 2024
[73] Participant from Dze L' Kant Friendship Centre, 2024
[74] Participant from Dze L' Kant Friendship Centre, 2024

# Encampments

Encampments are defined as, "any area wherein an individual or a group of people live in homelessness together, often in tents or other temporary structures (also referred to as homeless camps, tent cities, homeless settlements or informal settlements)."[75] As Farha and Schwan (2020) continue to note, 'People living in encampment typically face a range of human rights violations and profound challenges with respect to their health, security, and wellbeing."[76] The Office of Federal Housing Advocate (OFHA) asserts that encampments are a direct consequence of Canada's failure to fulfill its human rights obligation, which stipulated that all individuals should have access to housing that is secure, habitable, accessible, culturally appropriate, and located in a sustainable area with access to necessary services.[77]

Encampments have emerged as a visible consequence of the government's inability to address the housing crisis and uphold the fundamental rights of vulnerable population, particularly Indigenous communities[78]. As Olson and Pauly (2023) asserts, these settlements reflect "[a] failure to successfully implement the right to adequate housing', failure to design responses to homelessness and encampments that meaningfully center the voices of people experiencing homelessness, and failure to provide other imperative public health provisions like food, water, social supports, and self-determination."[79] Farha and Schwan (2020) further emphasize that while encampments are not a solution to homelessness, it is critical for governments to "[uphold] the basic human rights and dignity of encampment residents while they wait for adequate, affordable housing solutions that meet their needs."[80]

A growing number of Indigenous people residing in urban areas find themselves navigating precarious housing, leading many to the establishment of encampments. These encampments can vary in their development and internal organization, with some developing informally, while others operate with structures and policies. The decision to reside in an encampment rather than a shelter is often driven by a desire for autonomy, a sense of community, the ability to maintain family units or accommodate pets, as shelters may not always cater to such specific needs. As a participant from the Prince George Native Friendship Centre stated, "*We can't just think of the encampment as a separate entity […] The encampment itself, the people that live there, take care of each other and become a family as well.*"[81]

[75] Farha, L., and Schwan, K., "A National Protocol for Homelessness Encampments in Canada". 5
[76] Farha, L., and Schwan, K., 7
[77] The Office of the Federal Housing Advocate, "Upholding dignity and human rights: the Federal Housing Advocate's review of homeless encampments – Final report", 6.
[78] The Office of the Federal Housing Advocate, "Upholding dignity and human rights: the Federal Housing Advocate's review of homeless encampments – Final report", 2.
[79] Olson and Pauly, 125.
[80] Farha, L., and Schwan, K., 2
[81] Participant from Prince George Native Friendship Centre, 2023

Responses to encampments vary from community sweeps and displacement, with or without supports, to unspoken acceptance and, in a few cases, sanctioning.[82] However, government responses to homeless encampments often fail to employ a rights-based approach. Residents of encampments are frequently victims of abuse, harassment, violence, and forced evictions or "sweeps."[83] Forced evictions of encampments have been widely criticized for their harmful consequences on residents' well-being and safety."[84] Olson and Pauly note that "the constant presence and threat of policing and displacement in homelessness people's lives contributes to difficulties with sleeping and poor mental health as well as trauma and emotional distress."[85]

This is evident in government responses, as they have been described as inherently violent and traumatizing. Shared by a participant from the Prince George Native Friendship Centre, "*They look like that if you see them on the street, they're quite intimidating. They have the bulletproof vests, you know, the vest, that kind of stuff. They don't carry, they just have a different energy about them*."[86]

In contrast, Friendship Centres have aimed to support neighboring encampment residents and prioritize relationship building. As shared by a participant from the Labrador Friendship Centre, "*[You] work with Friendship Centre or [LFC], like their guard goes down for a lot of people, which is nice*." During the engagement session, the participant went further on by sharing "*[if] you make yourself known to be one of the people who will buy a coffee, give a ride, do whatever, then you'll, you'll make your buddies and see a little bit. They'll be nice to you*."[87]

This is showcased in the diverse forms of care that are available for encampment residents through the Friendship Centre Movement. A question on the types of supports that are being offered was asked during every engagement session. Answers varied from physical supports for their neighboring encampments to ensuring access to basic services such as showers, to advocacy work ensuring that their human rights are being upheld. A participant from the Dze L' Kant Friendship Centre further elaborates the programs and services offered at their centre,

> "*[We] also have our peer support program, which we have significant collaboration between our housing support program and harm reduction program. And we have, the portable showers. [We] also provide, laundry cards, for those in need of basic human rights services. [So] the programs and initiatives aim to address the immediate needs*."[88]

---

[82] Olson and Pauly, 133.
[83] Farha, L., and Schwan, K., 2
[84] Farha, L., and Schwan, K., 2
[85] Olson and Pauly, 133.
[86] Participant from Prince George Native Friendship Centre, 2023
[87] Participant from Labrador Friendship Centre, 2024
[88] Participant from Dze L' Kant Friendship Centre, 2024

# NAFC Impact and Guiding Principles

To support future planning for the development of an NAFC Friendship Centre Specific Housing and Homelessness action plan and framework, it is imperative to ensure its alignment with the missions and values outlined in NAFC's Strategic Plan (2020-2030). This section will engage with the following impacts outlined in the Strategic Plan, Relevance, Succession, Influence, and Sustainability. By transforming the experiences and recommendations that were shared during the series of engagement sessions into actionable and responsive next steps, these tools will reflect NAFC's commitment to supporting the wider movement.

## Relevance: How will this approach or activity bear upon or connect to the FCM at the local and regional level?

The proposed approach of developing an inclusive, comprehensive, and urban-Indigenous-centered strategy by the NAFC can directly support and strengthen the efforts of the Friendship Centre Movement (FCM) at the local and regional levels. By taking a more active role in addressing the lack of political will, resources, and coordination, the NAFC can help create an environment that enables the FCM to deliver services more effectively to those experience homelessness or precarious housing within urban Indigenous communities.

At the local level, the NAFC's strategy can facilitate better collaboration between municipalities and the FCM. This can help mitigate the lack of cooperation within municipalities, which often leads to inhumane treatment of urban Indigenous organization and community members. By fostering a more inclusive and coordinated approach, the FCM's efforts to provide services tailored to emerging needs can be better supported and amplified.

Regionally, the NAFC's comprehensive strategy can address the gaps in resource allocation and political will, which currently hinder the FCM's ability to deliver services effectively across different regions. By advocating for increased resources and fostering multi-level governmental engagement, the NAFC can create a more conducive environment for the FCM to operate and expand its reach, ensuring that the housing crisis is addressed comprehensively across various urban Indigenous communities.

## Succession: How will this approach or activity transmit our successes and learning into the future and consider impacts seven generations ahead?

This research approach aims to amplify the voices within the Friendship Centre Movement, capturing their experiences and aspirations for safe, comprehensive, and effective housing solutions. This research also works to address literature and data gaps when seeking more information on the experiences of urban Indigenous communities within the housing sector. By documenting these narratives, the findings can serve as a catalyst for positive change that resonates across generations.

The inhumane approaches by cities and urban residents fail to address the needs and wants of encampment residents adequately. In the post-COVID era, the cracks in Canada's social systems are amplified, highlighting the need for more dedicated funding, from programming to data collections, to support local organizations and their communities. This research captures a 'snapshot' of the experiences of urban Indigenous frontline staff and Friendship Centre providing care and housing services to their local communities. Amplifying the voices of front-line staff members within the Friendship Centre Movement, while addressing the barriers they face with the influx of services needed for encampment community members.

Indigenous peoples seek housing in urban settings require a coordinated effort to provide more housing-specific opportunities for low-income tenants. The FCM works with vulnerable populations, especially those that are on the verge of experiencing homelessness, ensuring they stay safe and housed through systems navigation assistance. To increase the likelihood of successful interventions, organizations like the FCM should be consulted by local and regional governments and provide them with sound and community-oriented advice on effective approaches. When developing encampment-specific response measures, engagement with urban-Indigenous representative organizations like the NAFC must be integrated into the decision-making processes. Solving the housing crisis requires rarely seen holistic interventions that meet vulnerable clients facing systemic barriers at their current life stage.

## Influence: How will this approach or activity build NAFC to be a compelling force that produces effects on the actions, behaviors, or options of others?

This approach of 'snapshot research' and Indigenous engagement methodology is one that positions NAFC as a compelling force by being deeply rooted in the unique needs and cultures of the communities it serves. By collaborating closely with local Friendship Centres, staff, and volunteers, NAFC aims to understand and amplify the voices of urban

Indigenous frontline supports, tailoring its actions to their specific goals and achievements.

The FCM are doing all they can to assist those with housing needs by providing shelter space, subsidized housing programs, and by helping clients to negotiate complex legalities and rights, yet resources are limited. Many FCM staff, furthermore, are asking for professional development, especially related to mental health, first aid, and triage. Many staff are ready and willing to occupy—and, in some cases, already playing the role of—a first-response buffer before law enforcement is called in. This role as a helper could be expanded and sustained if staff were properly compensated and had the opportunities to develop more skills to effectively assist those in precarious housing or experiencing homelessness. This requires adequate and long-term funding to provide urgent care for mental health, addictions, and substance use, including grief counselling and trauma support for those who use drugs, their families, and those who work with them. For urban Indigenous women and 2SLGBTQIA community members, a lack of safe and affordable housing options compounds the risk of sexual and other forms of violence. The fact that low-income and affordable housing neighbourhoods are also often overpoliced and surveilled, highlights the importance of acknowledging colonialism's influence on geographically isolated systemic violence.

## Sustainability: How will this approach or activity support the vitality of the FCM?

The FCM has a long history of supporting the homeless, unhoused, and under-housed communities for over 50 years in Canada. The approach for this research is to create lasting partnerships within the national, provincial, and local urban Indigenous housing and homelessness partners. The goal is to create safe and active communities for urban Indigenous people, focusing on community driven approaches to housing and homelessness across Canada.

There is an urgent need for consistent and flexible funding to maintain responsive operations and combat homelessness effectively. Currently, much of the FCM's funding is acquired through short-term contracts with restrictive conditions, which limits their ability to provide comprehensive and sustainable support. By securing consistent funding directed at combatting homelessness, the FCM can alleviate the stress and strain on its staff, who often go above and beyond their duties to assist clients. This financial security will enable the FCM to allocate resources more efficiently, creating a safer environment for their clients, and reduce the administrative burden of constantly seeking resources.

Furthermore, the recognition of NAFC's jurisdiction and qualification to determine, develop, and administer programs and services related to housing and homelessness is a crucial step towards self-determination. Supporting the NAFC in providing culturally appropriate housing and related services will compliment the FCM's efforts and ensure that the unique needs and perspectives of urban Indigenous communities are adequately

addressed. This collaborative approach not only strengthens the FCM's vitality but also promotes reconciliation and empowers Indigenous communities to take ownership of their housing and homelessness initiatives.

Overall, by fostering partnerships, securing sustainable funding, and embracing self-determination, this approach will enhance the FCM's capacity to deliver effective and responsive services, create safe and active communities for Urban Indigenous peoples, and continue offsetting the lack of humanity shown to the homeless, unhoused, and underhoused with a jolt of positivity and action.

# Recommendations

## Human Approach: Need for Compassionate and Empathetic Support Services

Real progress begins when a human approach to engaging with encampment communities is implemented as it will be crucial toward addressing the complex challenges. This approach was emphasized during engagement sessions which highlighted the importance of compassionate and empathetic support services. The FCM has been successful in addressing precarious housing and homelessness by reminding us that no one is immune from this crisis. By ensuring that a human voice is present in these conversations, the sense of "Otherness" is removed. Relationality emerged as a core value that can advance the human approach, which is often lacking when working towards bettering the lives of encampment community members and their neighbors. At the heart of this work is a continuous commitment to cultivating a culture of interdependency. This human approach should be guided by practices such as local Indigenous protocols of working with community families and members. These practices can be modeled from the Friendship Centre's relational-driven processes, where protocol is at the core of their work with civic, local First Nations, and regional partners and stakeholders. During the engagement sessions, the importance of protocol was highlighted, particularly how the Prince George Friendship Centre uses it to advance their relationship with local First Nations. Utilizing this practice creates a human approach to working with one another that is rooted in relational guidance led with culture and dignity.

## Human Rights Approach: Need for Compassionate and Empathetic Support Services

A human rights approach is essential for guiding the engagement and treatment of encampment communities and their members. This approach is influenced by an international legal lens on how governments and other stakeholders treat a certain segment of their citizenry, specifically Indigenous populations. Encampment residents

face many forms of violence at any given moment, highlighting the urgent need for safe spaces for Indigenous peoples as a core governmental goal.

Attitudes toward encampments can be linked to the colonial oppressions that Indigenous peoples face within Canadian society, reinforcing the urgency to create safe spaces and measurement tools for the most vulnerable. Instead of exclusion and expulsion, people should be treated with a human rights approach guided by values of relationality. Engagement sessions revealed an important emotional component often left out of processes, as an Elder from Alberta stated, "This is heart work, and hard work." This highlights the need to revive our humanity and work from the heart in our approaches to encampment communities.

The military-style response to evictions reinforces mistrust and exposes the lack of relational values when a human approach should be at the core. The "Fist and Gun" approach of the Canadian government under the guise of justice is central to the tensions among Indigenous community members living in encampments. Community organizations like the Friendship Centre Movement lead in providing care, culture, spiritual, and ancestral guidance to sustain the essentials of life for encampment residents. However, the clash between judicial processes and the policing system's military-style approach creates significant harm, burdening organizations like Friendship Centres.

When encampment residents are evicted, they are not provided care or solace from police and the judicial system, which perpetuates colonial attitudes. Friendship Centres demand that police departments and other decision-making agencies work with community organizations to develop plans that include relational values and local Indigenous protocols.

## Urban Indigenous Rights Approaches: Need for Compassionate and Empathetic Support Services

In recent Canadian history, various national, territorial, and civic frameworks have been nourished by recommendations from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Calls to Action. This commission report, published in 2015, aimed to bring forward the truths of residential school survivors and create actions to ensure such treatment is never repeated within Canada. The Friendship Centre Movement endorses these Calls to Action and promotes their use toward Urban Indigenous Frameworks and future recommendations, particularly when working with Indigenous Peoples who call encampments home.

The MMIWG2S+ movement and its Calls for Justice stem from the work of survivors and family members, addressing the Canadian society's oppression toward gender, sexuality, and anti-Indigenous racism. The resurgence and recognition of Indigenous Matriarchal Relational values and leadership have brought forward Calls to Justice based on

Traditional Knowledges and ways of doing that are integral to these Calls to Action. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) provides an international framework for the legal treatment of Indigenous people globally. This document guides better treatment of Indigenous Peoples who call encampments home and distinguishes them as displaced peoples on traditional lands. Canada's adoption of UNDRIP through its UNDA Action Plan includes Friendship Centres to help address and find local solutions for urban Indigenous community members.

At the core of this work, relationship building continues to breathe life into this work. Relationship building is not simply a concept, but rather it is an action that should continuously be practiced. Even with the framing of the research, it is vital that enough time is allocated solely to relationship building. Respected time for relationship building also aligns with the complexities of addressing urban Indigenous housing and homelessness; it is not merely a conversation about securing funding to buy more buildings. Identifying the root causes of urban Indigenous homelessness, the existing barriers when accessing and receiving funding to support existing initiatives, relationship between municipalities and community members, the well-being of frontline workers – a myriad of topics were covered and that is why it is important to take the time to visit FCs, learn about their services, experiences, and histories.

# Conclusion

The experiences of urban Indigenous people accessing housing are deeply rooted in historical and systemic barriers. Longstanding barriers such as racism, colonialism, and culturally unsafe practices continue to impact access to secure, safe, and stable housing. Urban Indigenous communities and institutions have often been marginalized in policy discussions and support systems, further emphasizing the necessity for tailored approaches to meet their needs.

Indigenous-led initiatives, such as organizations like Friendship Centres, play a key role in providing culturally safe and effective housing and wrap-around supports to Indigenous communities, particularly those residing in encampments. These initiatives prioritize the recognition of Indigenous perspectives, cultures, and histories, while addressing challenges such as precarious housing and lack of affordable housing. By centering Indigenous perspectives and approaches, these initiatives contribute to the empowerment and resilience of Indigenous peoples across the country.

While this report provides an overview as well as an in-depth analysis of the discussions surrounding urban Indigenous housing and Friendship Centres, with a focus on encampments. Through collective action and a commitment to reconciliation, we can strive towards building a more inclusive society where Indigenous communities have equitable access to safe and affordable housing.

# Acknowledgements

This work would not be possible without the generous support and partnerships with the following Friendship Centres:

- Prince George Native Friendship Centre (Prince George, BC)
- Manitoba Association of Friendship Centres (Winnipeg, MB)
- Winnipeg Indigenous Friendship Centre Inc. (Winnipeg, MB)
- Dze L' Kant Friendship Centre Society (Smithers, BC)
- Labrador Friendship Centre (Happy Valley-Goose Bay, NL)

We also extend our sincerest gratitude to the wider Friendship Centre movement for providing input and direction! From the important stories shared during the engagement sessions to the collaborative efforts that helped shape this work, we thank you for all the incredible work you that continue to do for your communities!

We would also like to thank the Office of Federal Housing Advocate (OFHA) and Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) for their support. This study/research was led by the National Association of Friendship Centres and received funding from Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) under Part IX of the National Housing Act. The views, analysis, interpretations and recommendations expressed in this study are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of CMHC. CMHC's financial contribution to this report does not constitute an endorsement of its contents.

# Bibliography

Belanger, Yale D., et al. "The Urban Indigenous Housing Experience of NIMBY-Ism in Calgary, Alberta." Final Report Prepared for the Aboriginal Standing Committee on Housing and Homelessness, 30 Sept. 2019.

CMHC. "Gaining Community Acceptance of Affordable Housing Projects and Homeless Shelters." 2006.

Farha, L., & Schwan, K. "A National Protocol for Homelessness Encampments in Canada." 2020.
Olson, Nicholas, and Bernadette (Bernie) Pauly. "'Forced to Become a Community': Encampment Residents' Perspectives on Systemic Failures, Precarity, and Constrained Choice."
Rodrigues, C., et al. "Developing Gendered and Culturally Safe Interventions for Urban Indigenous Families Experiencing Homelessness." Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press, 2020.
The Office of the Federal Housing Advocate. "Upholding Dignity and Human Rights: The Federal Housing Advocate's Review of Homeless Encampments – Final Report." The Office of the Federal Housing Advocate, 2024
Thistle, J. "Indigenous Definition of Homelessness in Canada." Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press, 2017.

# Appendix

## Engagement Questions

1. What are the main goals with housing/homelessness in your community?
    a. Does your FC have a housing program/s?
    b. Does your FC have a homelessness program/s?
2. What are the systemic barriers that encampment communities face when accessing safe and affordable housing?
    a. Are there economic barriers?
    b. Are there infrastructure barriers?
    c. Are there any policy barriers?
3. What programs or initiatives, past or present, has your FC been involved in when supporting Encampment communities?
    a. Where did the funding for these initiatives originate from?
4. How would you describe your relationship with Encampment communities?
    a. How were they created?
    b. How are they maintained?
5. What are some systemic barriers, if any, that FCs face when supporting communities in accessing safe and affordable housing?
    a. Are there economic barriers?
    b. Are there infrastructure barriers?
    c. Are there any policy barriers?
6. What type of support would be needed to have all your community members in safe and affordable housing?
    a. Are there any municipalities/regional directives dedicated to working with Indigenous organizations regarding homelessness?
7. What does a fully supported housing/homelessness program, from start to finish, look like to you and your community?
    - Please share successes and challenges that you may have experienced.
        - Please share recommendations based on wise practices/experiences.
8. Have you, in the past or currently, worked with external partners when developing housing programs/initiatives?
    a. Are there any partnerships with your FC movement dedicated to solving the housing/homelessness issues in your area?
        i. If so, how were these partnerships acquired?
        ii. How did these partnerships look like?
9. What would you consider as the main goals for a Friendship Centre-specific National Housing and Homelessness Action Plan and Framework?
    This could include identifying major themes within the framework such as:
    - Affordable housing
    - Emergency Shelters
    - Youth
    - 2SLGBTQQIA+

- Women
- Mental Health