

FINDING HOME WITH SUSWIN

"There's more to finding home than securing a physical space ... They are homeless in spirit, because of residential school. We connect with them ... Our job is to bring them back to who they are."

Suswin Housing Worker



'Suswin' is the Ojibway word for 'nest,' a place where someone feels comfortable, loved, and safe, a place to call home. With generous support from the Ontario Trillium Foundation in 2017, the North Bay Indigenous Friendship Centre launched Suswin, a housing program designed to help Indigenous people living in and around North Bay find a place to call home, a place where they can feel they belong.

Suswin is an Indigenous housing first model with wrap around services and supports. Suswin collaborates with clients, services, and landlords to find and/or create housing supports and solutions and works in partnership with Friendship Centre programs, including healing and wellness, mental health, justice, healthy living, nurse practitioners, children's programming, cultural and spiritual wellness, language and land-based programs – to name just a few!

With widespread community support for the program, we are excited to share a little bit about our journey and our vision for the future, including Suswin Village, a 30-unit transitional housing complex that is currently being built to welcome and provide safe, warm, and supportive shelter for homeless and transient Indigenous community members.



**North Bay
Indigenous
Friendship Centre**

WHAT WE LEARNED

Suswin helps Indigenous community members find home.

Over the course of three years, Suswin worked with 297 people, many with families, requesting housing support. Suswin assisted 188 people (63%) to secure housing. The remainder were still being supported, moved away, and/or lost contact with the program. As well, Suswin supported 544 participants with housing-related needs through outreach and other initiatives such as providing Rent Smart training. Throughout, Suswin supported Indigenous participants to become more engaged with members of their community, Indigenous cultures and life ways, thereby reducing isolation and promoting connections, all essential to creating stronger community ties.

Indigenous Peoples are vastly over represented among North Bay's homeless population and support is urgently needed.

Regrettably, while Indigenous Peoples represent about 14% of the population in the District of Nipissing, they make up 44% of the people who are homeless in North Bay.¹ Isolated Indigenous community members and families urgently need the seamless range of culturally-safe care and concrete housing supports offered by Suswin and the North Bay Indigenous Friendship Centre.

1. According to the 2016 Census, Indigenous Peoples represented approximately 14% of the population in the district of Nipissing; the 2018 Point-in Time Count and Period Prevalence Count of homelessness found Indigenous Peoples made up 44% of the homeless people in the North Bay area, and based on the timing and features of the study, may still be an under-representation.

Suswin helps put a face to Indigenous homelessness in North Bay.

Of the 297 individuals who received housing support, just over half (52%) were male; just under half were female (45%); several identified as LGBTQ (under .02%) and 1 answered "unknown." Almost 40% were between the ages of 21 and 40 years old, followed by those between the ages of 51 and 60 years old (15%) and with the fewest (under .01%) being between 71 and 80 years old. The vast majority (77%) identified Ontario Works (48%) or ODSP (29%) as their main source of income; 6% identified employment; 3% identified employment insurance; and, 1.6% identified "CAS" as their main source of income. This latter group suggests the participants may have been young people in and/or transitioning out of the care of child welfare.

"I translate intake forms constantly, I sit with clients and I say, do you understand what that means? And they say no. I translate for them."

"Suswin has been working with CAS workers within the city or at times from out of town in transition. Suswin reports back to CAS with shared information that families are getting supports especially, when children are involved. With consents signed, Suswin always refers families with children to internal programs offered at the Friendship Centre to help families ... and get supports for their well-being."



There are many barriers to finding home.

Many people who are Indigenous and homeless endure racism and discrimination and live with the trauma of residential school, the sixties scoop, and the loss of culture, lands and language. Many are coping with illness, including addiction.

Research confirms that culturally competent service providers and culturally safe health settings are needed to address systemic and structural barriers to housing such as stigma, stereotyping, and discrimination (Allan & Smylie, 2015). Building on our own knowledge and experience, and echoing the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (e.g., #22, #23, and #24), the Friendship Centre set out to meet the urgent needs of North Bay's Indigenous homeless population.

Suswin is a trusted and valued "go to" resource, filling a gap in North Bay's social safety net and reducing pressure on community services.

From the start, Suswin staff immersed themselves in the North Bay housing landscape—they invited the service community in to their space where they offered cultural activities and training events, and they actively went out to support the work of others. Suswin built relationships, collaborated with other resources, and created practices and protocols to sustain the work. Suswin's approach bolstered its reach, alleviated service pressures and built

WHAT IS CULTURAL SAFETY?

"People who have experienced trauma are at risk of being re-traumatized in every social service and health care setting" (Klinic Community Health Care Centre, 2013, p. 6). Accordingly, cultural safety empowers Indigenous Peoples to be leaders in their own care, providing them with knowledge and skills to help navigate helping relationships and institutions, ultimately determining for themselves if they experienced respect and safety in the process.

This finding reinforces the research literature which documents "Indigenous homelessness in major urban areas ranges from 20-50% of the total homeless population." One study found that 1 in 15 Indigenous Peoples in urban centres experience homelessness compared to 1 in 128 for the general population; "Urban Indigenous Peoples are 8 times more likely to experience homelessness" (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2019).

capacity across the community. Suswin received the vast majority of its referrals (293 referrals) from a range of local community services, including the Friendship Centre.

"Suswin works closely with emergency shelters, social services agencies, and non-government organizations ... to bring a circle of care approach to meet individual needs. This highly communicative approach avoids duplication of effort on sister organizations and agencies by taking on part of their caseloads. Culturally sensitive counselling provides housing and related services in a comfortable and trusted manner thus significantly improving the chances of long term housing success."

"I have seen the effect for first responders to have an additional local resource to refer clients to."

"The Suswin program is one of the most referred to programs throughout the agency ... as they are able to find and help clients quicker than many other agencies."

Suswin filled gaps, providing a diversity of seamless supports for homeless Indigenous community members—from showers and traditional foods to crisis support and language assistance in completing forms, to empowering participants in their journeys to find and keep housing, and much more. Suswin also helped build community capacity to respond to the needs and preferences of homeless Indigenous community members by offering educational and training workshops to clients and community service providers.

Finding home involves so much more than securing a physical space.

Finding home for Indigenous people is fostered through culturally relevant spaces, programs, ceremonies, languages, foods, and supports that reflect the diversity of cultures, languages, spiritualities, histories and lived experiences of Indigenous Peoples. In short, finding home involves nourishing the spirit. Supports, practices and staff that holistically

build community—*reflecting the diversity of life ways, languages, and cultures of Indigenous Peoples*—are essential. In order to nourish the spirit, staff are needed who understand what this means and carry it out in their practice. Finding and creating opportunities to address food security as well as increasing access to diverse traditional foods is also important; the significance of gatherings and feasts was frequently mentioned.

"Language has always been a great barrier for Indigenous people coming from the James Bay coast, having workers that speak Cree has been an asset to this program, also having access to ceremony and indigenous practices, i.e. sharing circles, art classes, workshops."

"Part of who you are as an Indigenous person is about food. Food is a foundation. You feed the spirit, the spirit of that animal, with traditional foods."

Cultural knowledge keepers, such as language speakers, Elders, and knowledge keepers, who have expertise in the arts (such as beading, sewing and painting), Indigenous healing and wellness, land-based practices, traditional foods and storytelling, need to be engaged in all aspects of programming. Diversity is also key. Supports and approaches need to honour where each person is at on their own cultural continuum—while some Indigenous people eagerly embrace "cultural" programming, others follow Christian traditions and want different supports.

Suswin is grounded in cultural safety and uses a responsive, flexible, trauma-informed wraparound approach.

Suswin is recognized by community partners and Indigenous service participants for its culturally safe practices and wrap around support: Indigenous participants reported feeling safe and respected. Some said, "I don't wanna be around a lot of people" so they appreciated the outdoor spaces or the quiet space the Suswin office offered. Another participant shared, "I'm noticed here."

Suswin also fosters cultural safety and trauma-informed approaches across the community through modeling, collaboration, training and workshops. Suswin provided training to clients and service providers regarding cultural safety, history and impact of residential schools and the 60s scoop, key advocacy efforts such as Jordan's Principle, Rent Smart skills building and support for those going through the residential school settlement process.

"They have been homeless for so long, inside of themselves."

"I have attended a meeting with a client and the housing worker. They did a great job with communicating with the client and understanding their unique history and current situation."

"Suswin understands at times, some of the most vulnerable will need extra assistance through Emergency Response Team or mobile crisis team ... Suswin always thrives to help others with the utmost respect and dignity to the most vulnerable, even to just talk with them and making sure they are okay ... There are also safety protocols in place if our most vulnerable put others at risk but always using the best approach to help them."



BUILDING ON SUSWIN'S SUCCESS, THE NORTH BAY INDIGENOUS FRIENDSHIP CENTRE IS BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE WITH SUSWIN VILLAGE.

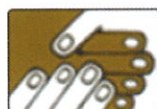
Suswin extended its reach well beyond individual clients by helping to lay the foundation for more culturally-responsive and safe housing in North Bay. By working with the larger service community, Suswin fostered culturally-safe and trauma-informed care across the community in order to strengthen the safety net, increasing the likelihood of housing participants accessing services, staying in services, and transitioning into other programs and supports.

Not only did Suswin establish and build new partnerships, new practices, and successfully house Indigenous homeless people, its work has been recognized at municipal, provincial and federal levels and contributed to the North Bay Indigenous Friendship Centre being awarded \$2.5 million dollars to establish a building for transitional housing. The 30-unit transitional housing structure is being built directly on the foundation and learnings of the Suswin program and will be named Suswin Village.



THERE IS STILL MORE WORK TO DO BECAUSE THE DEMAND CONTINUES TO BE HIGH.

To learn more, and to find out how you can help, please email suswin@nbifc.org or call 705-472-2811.



**North Bay
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