

Housing our Community: A Strategic Approach to Addressing Indigenous Homelessness in North Bay

A Position Paper

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Indigenous people are the major casualties in North Bay's current homelessness crisis, but city and provincial agencies are not involving Indigenous organisations in a meaningful way to address the issue. An effective strategy is needed to face this problem; and Indigenous organisations in North Bay have five proposals that we are certain would address this crisis. These proposals are rooted in evidence-based analysis and an Indigenous cultural-based framework of understanding.

First, funding from sources such as Community Homelessness Prevention initiative (CHPI) funding, funding for supportive housing, and other sources devoted to addressing homelessness are distributed proportionally to Indigenous organisations in North Bay as an evidence-based approach to addressing homelessness.

Second, revise the CHPI performance indicators requiring SMs to collect data on the 16.5 percent of provincial Indigenous identity population funding (including Inuit and Metis).

Third, new models of collaboration are established that reflect collaborative partnerships premised on the understanding that Indigenous service delivery agencies are deserving of increased agency, autonomy, and respect.

Fourth, the province of Ontario supports our organisations to address the housing crisis in a visionary way which centres culture-based housing supports and services that can only be designed and delivered by Indigenous organisations.

And Fifth, the province institute integrity standards for homelessness data collection that requires meaningful engagement and participation from Indigenous organisations in the collection, dissemination, and access to local homelessness data.

Indigenous organisations in North Bay, including the North Bay Indigenous Friendship Centre, the North Bay Indigenous Hub, and Native People of Nipissing Housing Corporation, are well suited to help address these challenges. In the spirit of reconciliation, we would like to collaborate with our city and provincial partners to address this crisis and end homelessness in the City of North Bay.

INTRODUCTION

There is a local housing crisis in North Bay that disproportionately affects Indigenous people. In our community 42 percent of homeless individuals self-identify as Indigenous.¹ The COVID-19 pandemic and upcoming winter months will exasperate these rates as individuals who are unhoused, living in crowded housing, and couch surfing will be in immediate need of housing options that are safe and supportive.

The status quo approach to housing in North Bay has not made a measurable impact on Indigenous homelessness. In a time of uncertainty with individuals lives at imminent risk, outcomes-oriented strategies are required. Our coalition of urban Indigenous service providers in North Bay² has a five-point solution. This position paper outlines the steps necessary to address Indigenous homelessness in North Bay in a manner that is responsive to community need and driven by evidence. We invite the province of Ontario to work in partnership with our coalition to realize change in North Bay.

ADDRESSING THE HOUSING CRISIS IN NORTH BAY

The City of North Bay, situated on Lake Nipissing, represents an important gathering place for Anishinaabe people who took care of the land and waterways and practiced traditional ways of living on these territories for centuries. Today North Bay is home to a diversity of Indigenous people. According to 2016 Census data, approximately 5,415 Indigenous people live in North Bay, representing 11 percent of the total population.³ While we know that this figure likely underrepresents the size of the urban Indigenous community in North Bay, we are also cognisant of the fact that population figures from 2016 will have increased over the past four years and it is estimated that Indigenous people make up 14 percent of North Bay's population today.⁴

The large and growing urban Indigenous community is well served by the coalition of local Indigenous service delivery agencies in North Bay. Our organisations provide culture-based services in housing, health, mental health, and addictions, access to justice, children and youth, seniors, education, language and culture, and much more.

¹ Smith, Kelly Anne. (October 2020). 'Proportional funding essential for homeless Indigenous people in North Bay.' Anishinabek News. Retrieved from: <https://anishinabeknews.ca/2020/10/23/proportional-funding-essential-for-homeless-indigenous-people-in-north-bay/>

² See *Appendix I*

³ Statistics Canada. (2016). 'Aboriginal Population Profile, 2016, Census: North Bay, City.' Retrieved from: https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/abpopprof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=CSD&Code1=3548044&Data=Count&SearchText=North%20Bay&Se archType=Begin&B1=All&GeoLevel=PR&GeoCode=3548044&SEX_ID=1&AGE_ID=1&RESGEO_ID=1

⁴ Smith, Kelly Anne. (October 2020). 'Proportional funding essential for homeless Indigenous people in North Bay.'

Our service delivery and programming methods are informed by Indigenous ways of caring for the community and our positive results improve the quality of life of urban Indigenous people living in North Bay.

According to the most recent point-in-time count, there are 293 homeless individuals in North Bay and 42 percent or 123 people self-identify as Indigenous.⁵ As recently reported by Anishinabek News, “[s]ervices for people who are homeless are needed more than ever.”⁶ As it stands, Indigenous people experiencing homelessness and housing precarity are left with few culturally relevant options for housing and supportive services in the city. We know that what works best for Indigenous community members is culture-based programs and services that are designed and delivered by Indigenous organisations. It is therefore *imperative* that changes are made to the provincial approach to housing and homelessness.

REAL SHARE OF FUNDING

We have worked hard to address homelessness affecting Indigenous people in North Bay with a disproportionately share of funding devoted to Indigenous homelessness. Indigenous service delivery agencies are not only perennially underfunded, but funding sources are often unsustainable, allocated as one-offs, or time sensitive. Our organisations are consistently left to deliver services with only a fraction of the funding that is allocated to mainstream services.

At the core of the systemic underfunding of Indigenous homelessness initiatives is a lack of mainstream strategy or vision for ending Indigenous homelessness in our community. The results of which are being felt in North Bay today under the backdrop of a global pandemic. Indigenous people experiencing homelessness represent almost half of all those who are homeless in North Bay. As ‘tent cities’ are established across our community, job losses increase, and individuals and families struggle to make ends meet, the homelessness crisis is at risk of further ravaging the community.

We believe that an evidence-based approach to the issue is required. Given that 42 percent of homeless individuals in North Bay are Indigenous, funding allocations to address homelessness in North Bay should be re-disbursed to Indigenous organisations addressing homelessness in a manner that is proportional to the situation.

The patchwork of funding sources aimed at addressing homelessness are not sufficiently overseen to ensure that Indigenous community priorities are supported or being met. The Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative (CHPI), for example, currently allocated to District Social Services Administration Boards (DSSABs),

⁵ Smith, Kelly Anne. (October 2020). ‘Proportional funding essential for homeless Indigenous people in North Bay.’ Anishinabek News. Retrieved from: <https://anishinabeknews.ca/2020/10/23/proportional-funding-essential-for-homeless-indigenous-people-in-north-bay/>

⁶ Smith, Kelly Anne. (October 2020). ‘Proportional funding essential for homeless Indigenous people in North Bay.’ Anishinabek News. Retrieved from: <https://anishinabeknews.ca/2020/10/23/proportional-funding-essential-for-homeless-indigenous-people-in-north-bay/>

represents a critical funding source with program guidelines to address Indigenous homelessness as a priority. Without a mechanism in place to distribute funding proportionally, all CHPI funding flows directly to the DSSAB and any funding dedicated to Indigenous homelessness prevention is not reported on or transparently shared with community partners. As such, the direct outcomes from these investments are also obscured as the rate of Indigenous homelessness continues to rise. It is therefore recommended that CHPI funding, funding for supportive housing, and other sources devoted to addressing homelessness are distributed proportionally to Indigenous organisations in North Bay as an evidence-based approach to addressing homelessness.

HONEST COLLABORATION

Indigenous organisations in North Bay want to collaborate in a fair and productive manner with mainstream partners and the province of Ontario. Formal processes through which to effectively communicate community priorities, share information, and work toward achieving our vision are required.

Relationship building is key to collaboration with urban Indigenous communities. As set out in the Urban Indigenous Action Plan (UIAP), the framework “envision[s] respectful relationships with Indigenous people as the foundation of all policy, programming and interactions.”⁷ Without the foundation of a respectful relationship it is very difficult to do the collaborative work necessary to achieve the outcome of common interest. A respectful relationship is a pre-condition to achieving longer-term goals and objectives which are inevitably difficult to attain.

As it stands in North Bay, the urban Indigenous community has been insufficiently engaged on community priorities, planning, and evaluating outcomes. Furthermore, Indigenous service delivery organisations are often tokenized, dismissed, and left out of decision-making. A clear example of this disconnect has been the District of Nipissing Social Services Administration Board’s lack of support for the North Bay Indigenous Friendship Centre’s Suswin Housing project – a visionary initiative that would see 30 units of transitional housing built and operated by the NBIFC for Indigenous homeless individuals.⁸

We recommend that new models of collaboration and accountability are established that reflect collaborative partnerships premised on the understanding that Indigenous service delivery agencies are deserving of increased agency, autonomy, and respect.

⁷ OFIFC, ONWA, MNO. (2018). ‘The Urban Indigenous Action Plan.’ Retrieved from: <https://4aplj539nvh042etqt14p3kr-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Tab-7-The-Urban-Indigenous-Action-Plan-2018.pdf>

⁸ Taschner, Eric. (September 2019). ‘New Indigenous housing and services in North Bay.’ CTV News Online. Retrieved from: <https://northernontario.ctvnews.ca/new-indigenous-housing-and-services-in-north-bay-1.4595236>

CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE CLIENT SERVICES

Urban Indigenous community members have expressed their preference for Indigenous-led services and describe the importance of Indigenous agencies in fostering cultural pride, cohesiveness, and safety. In North Bay, the coalition of Indigenous organisations that serve the urban Indigenous community function as first-points-of-contact for the majority of Indigenous people in North Bay seeking social services, cultural programming, and cultural connections.

It is inherent in the fact that our organisations are Indigenous-led and community-driven that our approaches are culture-based and aimed at meeting the needs of the urban Indigenous community. It is often argued that since mainstream organisations serve a high number of Indigenous people, funding that is ear-marked for Indigenous initiatives can and should be allocated to mainstream service delivery agencies. However, mainstream organisations like service managers cannot deliver culture-based services because Indigenous cultural approaches are not and cannot be embedded in the fabric of mainstream services. Mainstream-lead Indigenous programming will therefore inevitably be ineffective and likely detrimental in addressing the unique needs of urban Indigenous community members. In contrast, Indigenous-led housing services will serve to reconnect individuals with the cultural values and world views that contribute to a positive sense of self and one's place in the community.

Mainstream services are unable to replicate the culture-based work of Indigenous organisations. While key departments or staff may be hired within mainstream organisations to take on duties specific to Indigenous initiatives, this approach results in, at best, the role of a community liaison or navigator that can work collaboratively with Indigenous partners. Ultimately, the consistent funding of mainstream organisations on homelessness and other priorities, rather than Indigenous organisations, contributes to a lack of access to culture and can result in a lack of meaningful impact and negative outcomes.

Recognizing the vital force that urban Indigenous service delivery agencies play within the housing landscape, it is recommended that the province of Ontario supports our organisations to address the housing crisis in a visionary way which centres culture-based supports and services.

INTEGRITY OF DATA

Access to data related to homelessness is critical to addressing the housing crisis in North Bay from an evidence-based standpoint. Baseline data disaggregated by race and gender is important for measuring our collective progress in addressing homelessness. Additionally, the process by which data is collected, analysed, and shared should be open, transparent, and co-developed alongside partners including Indigenous organisations.

Point-in-time (PiT) homelessness counts are critical for establishing local homelessness data and working to end the housing crisis in North Bay. While Indigenous partners have been involved in the PiT count process, decisions regarding the date and time of PiT counts and the methods of conducting homelessness surveys (including considerations for trauma-informed and culturally competent approaches) should involve the local community.

Access to data related to homelessness funding for North Bay and the Nipissing District is also critical for addressing homelessness in a strategic manner. Funding sources allocated for homelessness initiatives can be varied and, in some instances, there are directives or requirements for funding to be devoted to Indigenous-specific initiatives. Without adequate information about funding or proper oversight regarding the use of funding (i.e. how it is allocated and spent), Indigenous partners are insufficiently informed about funding opportunities and left scrambling for funding sources to cover the culture-based housing and homelessness programming that is needed within the urban Indigenous community.

It is therefore recommended that the province institute integrity standards for homelessness data collection that requires meaningful engagement and participation from Indigenous organisations in the collection, dissemination, and access to local homelessness data. Additionally, access to data related to homelessness funding allocations and how they are spent by municipalities should be transparently shared with the urban Indigenous community.

Therefore, it is critical that SMs are required to collect the performance indicator *other 16.5 percent Indigenous identity (including Inuit and Metis) population* funding data.

CONCLUSION

The right to housing, health, and culture is fundamental and enshrined in the United Nation's Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous social service organisations in North Bay actively uphold these rights and support the conditions for urban Indigenous community members to experience an improved quality of life. An understanding of the important role that Indigenous partners play in the housing services landscape provides the necessary foundation for an honest and collaborative relationship with Indigenous partners. By working in alignment and recognizing the need for both co-developed approaches and Indigenous-led housing services, real progress can be made to end homelessness in our community.

The issue of homelessness in urban Indigenous communities' stems from a history of cultural assimilation and the resulting systemic racism, cultural isolation, and socioeconomic hardship that are reality for many urban Indigenous people in Ontario. The adoption of our four key recommendations will provide a way to address urban Indigenous homelessness in North Bay during a time when the safety and well-being of individuals and families is of utmost concern.

Appendix I: About the Coalition

About the North Bay Indigenous Friendship Centre

The mission of the North Bay Indigenous Friendship Centre is to improve the quality of life for First Nation, Metis, and Inuit people in the urban environment of North Bay by supporting self-determined activities which encourage equal access and participation in society and which respects Aboriginal culture distinctiveness. The North Bay Indigenous Friendship Centre provides a wide array of programs and services to support Aboriginal people of all ages. An important part of our mandate is to serve as a gathering place for Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal people. The Centre is a place where Aboriginal culture is celebrated, friendships are made, knowledge and skills are shared and good times are enjoyed.

About the Native People of Nipissing Housing Corporation

Native People of Nipissing Non-Profit Residential Development Corporation, established in 1985, provides rent geared-to-income housing for families, individuals, Elders of Indigenous ancestry under the unique federal Urban Native Housing (UNH) program. Native People of Nipissing owns and operates 66 housing units scattered throughout the city of North Bay and are comprised of a diverse variety of duplex, semi-detached and detached dwellings, as well as a small senior citizen apartment building and townhouse developments.

About the North Bay Indigenous Hub

The North Bay Indigenous Hub is a new service provider that offers Primary Health Care and Early Childhood Development and Learning Services to First Nations, Inuit, Metis People, without distinction of status, non-status or residence. The intent is to improve service coordination and collaboration across municipal, Indigenous, provincial and/or federally funded health and early child development or learning services for the Indigenous population. The new services are meant to complement not duplicate existing services and to fill existing gaps in the service continuum for the Indigenous population