

Engagement Approach and Findings

Overview of Engagement Approach

Administration has developed a three phase approach. The first phase, undertaken in January and February 2022, constituted a jurisdictional scan to gain an understanding of Indigenous-led shelter, housing and programming initiatives present elsewhere in Canada, the United States, and other similar jurisdictions such as Australia and New Zealand. A brief summary of the findings from the initial jurisdictional scan are available in Attachment 1.

The second phase constituted engaging with stakeholders. The overarching question guiding Administration's engagement approach was:

- What resources would Indigenous-led organizations need to develop and operate Indigenous-led shelters and programming? What actions by the City of Edmonton would best support them in this work?

Administration developed an initial list of stakeholders to be invited to participate in the engagement and finalized it in consultation with the Indigenous Relations Office. Five different groups were identified, which included: 1) Nations and Treaty holders that the City has collaborated with through various Memorandums Of Understanding; 2) Indigenous-led social service organizations; 3) Mutual Aid Groups; 4) Non-Indigenous homeless-serving organizations (including shelter operators); and 5) Other stakeholders that play key roles in Edmonton's homelessness and housing systems (such as Homeward Trust and relevant units within Edmonton Police Service). Administration used a staged approach to engage with stakeholders, beginning with Indigenous organizations.

The third phase has been initiated, with substantive activities scheduled for summer and fall of 2022 to engage First Nations and Treaty Representatives, Indigenous Elders and knowledge keepers, Indigenous communities, and provincial and federal government representatives to ensure that key perspectives are integrated into the planning and design phase of Indigenous-led shelter development and programming.

Engagement activities

From March to April 2022, Administration invited stakeholders to participate in one-on-one conversations. Administration developed a distinct set of questions for each group of stakeholders to identify the information needed to respond to the Council and Committee motions. The list of questions used to guide engagement conversations are included below.

While not all stakeholders were able to participate in conversations during this phase, for various reasons, Administration was successful in engaging the following organizations, groups and community representatives:

Indigenous organizations, groups and individuals

- A member of Edmonton's Inuit Community
- A member of Edmonton's Metis/Black Community
- Metis Urban Housing and Metis Capital Housing
- Niginan Housing Ventures
- Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society
- Bear Clan Patrol
- Water Warriors/Treaty 6 Outreach
- Nekem Mutual Aid

Non-Indigenous organizations and groups

- Bissell Centre
- REACH 24/7 Crisis Diversion
- Edmonton Police Service
 - Human-Centered Engagement and Liaison Partnership (HELP) Unit
 - Police and Crisis Team
 - High Risk Encampment Team
- Hope Mission
- The Mustard Seed
- Homeward Trust

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, engagement was primarily conducted through virtual methods, unless stakeholders specifically requested in-person conversations.

Engagement Findings

The following report provides a summary of common themes that were cited during these initial discussions, as well as notable areas of divergence between participants. Differences of perspectives between Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants are also outlined, where applicable.

Lack of Indigenous-led shelters in Edmonton

The distinct absence of Indigenous-led shelters in Edmonton was linked to lack of funding to Indigenous communities and lack of capacity and expertise to operate shelters. For some participants, Indigenous-led shelters would signify greater autonomy for Indigenous communities and power sharing.

Emergency shelter systems were believed to be a product of charitable social service models, some of which had been in existence for many decades. Even though the model had evolved to receive provincial funding for shelter beds,

fundraising remained the primary source of funding for programming. Historically, Indigenous communities had not been considered for government funding and might not have had the capacity and resources to organize fundraising events to operate shelters.

Participants believed that creation of Indigenous-led shelters might improve emergency shelter usage among many Indigenous individuals currently experiencing homelessness, but sleeping rough or living in encampments.

Let Indigenous communities lead and co-create solutions to Indigenous homelessness

Some participants underscored the significance of receiving input from the Indigenous communities on the matter of Indigenous-led shelters, specifically learning what they think, what they need, and how they want to be supported. They viewed engagement with Indigenous organizations and agencies as insufficient as this work should be situated in the broader context of Reconciliation (“We need to go higher than the Indigenous agencies”). They observed the need for engaging Indigenous leadership (such as Treaty 6 Chief) and Elders and ensuring Indigenous People led this to overcome “the philosophical challenge that decision makers behind the City Council directive do not represent the communities they are making decisions for.”

Some participants noted there were no quick solutions to the challenge of Indigenous homelessness and it would be important to take the right steps to avoid compounding the problem. Creating successful outcomes for Indigenous people experiencing homelessness should be the ultimate goal. The desire behind creating Indigenous-led shelters should not be to address/reduce public disorder issues that sometimes arise from homelessness (“Council has a driving need around public disorder, but that is a different line into the conversation”).

Conceptualizing and operationalizing Indigenous-led

At a high level, Indigenous-led was understood to be guided by Indigenous world view and rooted in cultural traditions and teachings. But participants were unclear on who could access such shelters (and what forms of identification may be needed to prove Indigeneity), who would lead and operate them, what types of organizations would (or not) be eligible for funding to support indigenous clients, how would this affect collaborations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations with different expertise and capacity, and whether the decision makers at the funder’s end would have representation from Indigenous communities to guide granting decisions.

Participants observed that non-Indigenous organizations having to create a separate entity to acquire Indigenous-specific funding to primarily serve Indigenous clients

would be the best approach. Collaboration between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous organizations should be encouraged to build capacity and offer cultural programs.

One Indigenous participant observed that “Indigenous influenced practice” may be better conceptualized than Indigenous-led as Indigenous practices can apply universally. Some participants from non-Indigenous/settler organizations declined to share their perspective on Indigenous-led as they felt it was inappropriate for them to do so.

Incompatibility of the emergency shelter system and Indigenous world view, and preference for more housing over expansion of the emergency shelter system

Some Indigenous participants believed that the emergency shelter system reflected values of the colonial and settler system, was racially discriminatory and extended the trauma caused by colonization. They were rooted in the charitable model practiced by Western/settler and sometimes faith-based (Christian) organizations. As such, they perceived the emergency shelter system to be out-of-sync with the Indigenous world view.

Some Indigenous participants observed that the emergency shelter system ultimately reflected a “gap-fill” option due to lack of affordable housing. They emphasized the need to build more housing (transitional, bridge, supportive) options over expanding the emergency shelter system. They were “not interested” in Indigenous-led shelters and one participant noted: “stop investing in shelters, reduce the number of shelters. Maybe have just one shelter. People need to be stabilized, which is better through transitional and bridge housing.” In contrast, other Indigenous participants suggested developing “off-shoot partnerships with separate buildings [from current emergency shelters] and programs based in Indigenous traditions.”

Recognize and integrate diverse Indigenous cultures

All Indigenous participants raised concerns over adopting a pan-Indigenous approach to creating Indigenous-led shelters and programming and advised against treating Indigenous Peoples as a monolith. They raised the issue of whether the City envisioned separate shelters for different cultures since they are diverse - First Nations, Metis and Inuit - all Indigenous cultures with distinct traditions, teachings, and languages. Further, Edmonton is located on Treaty 6 territory which is home to many First Nations communities, Cree, Dene, Sauleaux, Blackfoot, and Nakota Sioux, each with distinct cultures and practices.

Close attention should be paid to distinct cultural practices in developing Indigenous-led shelters and programming that meet the needs of diverse Indigenous Peoples. For example, there should be provision for inviting Elders from different Indigenous cultures. Staff, regardless of whether Indigenous or otherwise, should be aware and respectful of different Indigenous cultures. Indigenous shelter clients should be free to follow cultural and spiritual practices of their respective communities, including being free to choose not to participate in any such practices at all.

Mitigate potential harms of incorporating Indigenous-led services in the current emergency shelter system

Some Indigenous participants believed that Indigenous-led culturally appropriate services could not be incorporated in the current emergency shelter system, especially those operated by faith-based organizations. They expressed concern over the idea of involving Indigenous Elders and knowledge keepers, many of whom were survivors of the residential school system - run by Christian organizations - in the provision of cultural services at Christian-led shelter facilities. Such actions may lead to re-traumatizing such individuals.

However, shelter operators were unanimous in their interest in incorporating Indigenous cultural programs and values in their services. They were interested in partnering with Indigenous organizations to offer cultural programming to their shelter clients.

Sacred Heart Church of the First Peoples, a Catholic church, was mentioned occasionally as an exceptional example of an institution widely accepted by some Indigenous people due to its welcoming attitude toward Indigenous Peoples.

Community concerns over commodifying and deprecating Indigenous cultural services

Select participants, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, raised concerns over the “contracting” of Indigenous cultural services by non-Indigenous homeless serving organizations. Indigenous participants were concerned that Indigenous staff who are providing cultural services at current emergency shelter facilities may be benefitting (“profiting off of”) from the suffering of fellow community members experiencing homelessness. Non-Indigenous participants underscored the importance of gaining the perspective of Indigenous communities on this matter since some community members have raised concerns over the “purchase” of Indigenous cultural services as commodifying them, and therefore by extension deprecating them.

Potential unintended consequences to avoid in creating Indigenous-led shelters

There might be potential unintended consequences if the City of Edmonton directly funded the creation of Indigenous-led shelters. Operators of such facilities may become isolated from well-established communities of practice (supported by other funders) who have extensive experience with responding to housing and homelessness needs. Attention should be paid to how Indigenous-led shelter operators can be best supported in developing capacity to respond to service delivery needs.

Creating distinct Indigenous-led shelters could perpetuate segregation and amplify existing disparities unless funded adequately. Lack of sustained and sufficient funding could lead to sub-standard and poor quality services, and worsen the existing challenge.

Do not assume Indigenous organizations are interested and/or have the capacity to operate emergency shelters

Indigenous organizations may not currently have the expertise and capacity to operate shelters. Their capacity to operate shelters may need to be built over time, but there were diverse perspectives among participants on how to address this issue, as noted in the following:

- Some participants, including Indigenous participants, cautioned against assuming that Indigenous organizations would be spontaneously interested in operating shelters simply because they are organizations led and staffed by Indigenous people. Indigenous organizations may not be best suited to undertake this work.
- Some Indigenous participants, interested in Indigenous-led shelters, expressed a desire to collaborate with current shelter providers who have expertise in shelter management.
- Shelter providers expressed interest in partnering with Indigenous organizations to develop capacity to offer culturally appropriate services at their current facilities.

Current approach, needs/gaps in integrating Indigenous lens in the work of non-Indigenous homeless serving organizations

Majority of non-Indigenous homeless serving organizations (including some shelter operators) have incorporated some Indigenous cultural services in their programming, primarily in collaboration with an Indigenous organization. This was seen as essential to attracting shelter clients and better supporting them. This included design and delivery of cultural awareness training for staff and referring clients to Indigenous organizations for additional supports. Some participants observed creating leadership and outreach positions and recruiting Indigenous people in those roles to support greater integration of Indigenous perspectives in organizational activities. Others mentioned working through Indigenous advisory

bodies and Indigenous lived experience groups to guide organizational decision making.

Participants highlighted various gaps surrounding physical and human resources as well as expertise/capacity needs. These were ultimately linked to lack of adequate financial resources that included:

- **Staffing:**
 - Lack of dedicated staff at emergency shelters due to lack of funding to provide Indigenous cultural services;
 - Insufficient housing support workers to support clients to exit homelessness;
- **Housing and Shelter spaces:**
 - Inadequate affordable housing to exit emergency shelter system;
 - Inadequate space/beds in emergency shelters;
- **Expertise:**
 - Lack of staff with Indigenous cultural awareness; and
 - Lack of know-how and capacity to connect shelter clients to Indigenous communities to build healthy relationships and improved sense of belonging.

Desired features of Indigenous-led shelter and programming

Participants shared their vision of Indigenous-led shelter and programming with staff which included the following:

- **Location:** There was a strong preference for not building Indigenous-led shelters in the downtown core and considering alternative locations such as neighborhoods outside the downtown core of the city.
- **Size and site of shelter facilities:**
 - **Size:** Indigenous-led shelters should be smaller (30-50 people) and less crowded than current emergency shelter facilities to allow for more holistic service provision.
 - **Type of site:** The space should be able to host ceremonies on site, sweat lodge sessions, smudging, drumming and singing activities. Indigenous participants emphasized the need for building codes which do not require special permission or scheduling to host gatherings and fire alarm protocols that allow for smudging. They also emphasized a site that could accommodate Indigenous food preferences (such as wild meat) which may be sometimes restricted from existing spaces.
- **Governance:** Members of board of directors should include Indigenous individuals with lived experience. There should be oversight from Elders from different Indigenous cultures. Individuals in executive leadership

- positions should be Indigenous and policies and procedures should be informed by Indigenous world views.
- **Staffing:** All staff do not need to be Indigenous, although the majority of staff may be Indigenous. They should have lived experience of homelessness and be culturally competent in Indigenous world view. Special attention should be paid to recruitment and training of staff. The hiring process should reduce/eliminate barriers for Indigenous applicants (such as formal education and experience, especially those interested in frontline roles). There should be ongoing, rather than one-time, cultural competency training for non-Indigenous staff who should be encouraged to be involved and immersed in Indigenous cultures outside professional context.
 - **Service approach:** Service approach should be holistic and draw on a medicine wheel perspective. Holistic service is understood to include all services necessary to support a shelter client's entire journey from exiting homelessness to entering stable housing where they can live independently among the community. One-size-fits-all approach may not work. Shelter clients should be treated with dignity and respect and staff attitude and behavior should be rooted in compassion and understanding. Clients should not be forced to participate in any cultural and spiritual activities that they do not voluntarily want to engage in. They should also not be banned from shelter facilities, unless involved in serious criminal activity. Recruitment of staff with lived experience of homelessness would be most useful in ensuring such service. Shelters should be equipped with readily available services to provide necessary on-demand services to clients. Programming should be unlimited and available 24/7.
 - **Programming:** All programming should be rooted in Indigenous world view and clients should have access to the following programs:
 - Detox and aftercare programs to heal from addictions (beyond harm reduction);
 - Resident Indigenous Elders, knowledge keepers, and language holders from diverse cultures to provide cultural and spiritual guidance (and option to request to meet with an Elder from a specific culture);
 - life skill coaching and opportunity to gather work experience (paid or volunteer) to eventually become self-sufficient and live independently;
 - Indigenous participants also emphasized the importance of holding sharing circles and supporting clients to build connections back to their communities to develop a sense of belonging.
 - Mental health services in collaboration with Alberta Health Services;

- Psychologists/therapists
- **Safety needs:** As highlighted through the engagement process on the City's role in responding to the recommendations of National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, Indigenous-led shelters should be safe, welcoming and affirming spaces for Indigenous women fleeing violence, two-spirited, and queer Indigenous individuals.
- **Transportation needs:** Indigenous participants underscored the importance of having access to vehicles to transport clients for ceremony, sweat lodge, and round dancing when held beyond City limits. They emphasized the need for vehicles (and necessary funding) to transport people to community gatherings on reserves or on land beyond city limits to encourage building connections to the community.
- **Funding:** Funding for both capital and operations should be considered at the very onset in establishing Indigenous-led shelters. Cultural programming should be funded as a "core function" rather than on an ad-hoc basis. Funding formulas should be sensitive to the scope and needs of cultural programming. For example, gatherings that are community events attended by collectives and funding formulas that prioritize "per-head" fund allocation are insensitive to Indigenous cultural realities. Reporting requirements for funders can be a burden on grantees/recipients and "allowable expenditures" should not obstruct spending on cultural supports.

Desired role for City of Edmonton in Indigenous pathways out of homelessness

The engagement revealed a desire on participants' end for the City to play multiple roles in supporting Indigenous pathways out of homelessness. The City should

- Build and sustain long-term relations with Indigenous communities, listen and critically reflect on the community's needs and aspirations with regards to Indigenous pathways out of homelessness;
- Create more gathering facilities, such as Kihciy-askiy, for Indigenous communities for ceremonies and other cultural events;
- Invest in building a range of affordable housing options to accommodate different needs of individuals experiencing homelessness to minimize the need to expand the emergency shelter system;
 - Simplify and improve planning and processes to reduce the length of time necessary to receive permits to develop affordable and supportive housing solutions;
 - Educate Edmontonians on the need to build affordable and supportive housing solutions across the city;
- Broker, create, and support partnerships to build community capacity to develop Indigenous pathways out of homelessness
- Provide funding to

- Expand the Community Outreach Transit Team, a collaboration between the City of Edmonton and Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society through provision of additional resources (human and financial);
- Integrate Indigenous-led programming in City's encampment outreach;
- Emergency shelters to implement *Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards* (especially, those relevant to Indigenous-led programming) approved by the City Council in 2021;
- Non-profit Indigenous housing providers to operate temporary housing solutions to support Indigenous pathways out of homelessness;
- Advocate for more funding from other orders of government to support the emergency shelter system (until more Indigenous led pathways out of homelessness are created); and
- Explore and support employment and training pathways to help individuals to permanently exit homelessness.

List of Questions for Engagement Sessions

Nations and Treaty Organizations

1. What constitutes Indigenous-led?
2. Why aren't there any indigenous-led shelters in Edmonton?
3. What issues, opportunities, and ideas come to mind in regards to increasing Indigenous-led shelters, housing and programming in Edmonton?
4. What role (if any) do you see your nation or organization playing in this work?
5. Do you currently offer any services that are culturally appropriate for Indigenous people accessing shelters?
6. What role can the City of Edmonton play in increasing Indigenous-led pathways out of homelessness?
7. Are you interested in supporting or partnering to deliver Indigenous focused shelter?
8. Is there anything else you would like to share with us?

Indigenous housing and social service organizations

1. What constitutes Indigenous-led?
2. Why aren't there any indigenous-led shelters in Edmonton?
3. What issues, opportunities, and ideas come to mind in regards to increasing Indigenous-led shelters, housing and programming in Edmonton?
4. What Indigenous-led programs, supports and services does your organization currently provide?

5. What challenges does your organization experience in the provision of these programs, services, and support? What is needed to increase the provision of these?
6. Are there gaps that need to be addressed? What resources and supports are needed to address these gaps?
7. What elements would need to be considered if the City were to fund Indigenous-led shelter?
8. Would you be interested in operating an Indigenous led shelter? If no, would you be interested in supporting or partnering to provide Indigenous-focused shelter?
9. For Indigenous-led shelters, what set-up would your organization prefer (e.g. communal sleeping areas, hotel, trailers, tents etc.)?
10. Do you have any feedback about the principle regarding cultural and spiritual identities and how this can best be incorporated into Indigenous-led shelter?
11. What role can the City of Edmonton play in increasing Indigenous-led pathways out of homelessness?
12. Is there anything else you would like to share with us?

Current Shelter Operators

1. What constitutes Indigenous-led?
2. Why aren't there any indigenous-led shelters in Edmonton?
3. What issues, opportunities, and ideas come to mind in regards to increasing Indigenous-led shelters, housing and programming in Edmonton?
4. Do you receive specific funding dedicated to incorporating culturally appropriate services for clients accessing emergency shelter?
5. Do you currently offer any services that are culturally appropriate for Indigenous people?
6. What resources would you require to enhance culturally appropriate services for Indigenous people?
7. What role can the City of Edmonton play in increasing Indigenous-led shelters, housing and programming in Edmonton?
8. Are you interested in supporting or partnering in order to deliver Indigenous focused shelter?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share with us?

Mutual Aid Groups

1. What constitutes Indigenous-led?
2. Why aren't there any indigenous-led shelters in Edmonton?
3. When you think about outreach to an encampment, what elements would an Indigenous-led encampment team include?

4. What resources would your organization require to enhance encampment outreach?
5. Is there other related programming you would be interested in being involved with?

Social Service Operators

1. What constitutes Indigenous-led?
2. Why aren't there any indigenous-led shelters in Edmonton?
3. What steps do you currently take to ensure services are culturally appropriate for Indigenous people?
4. What resources would you require to enhance culturally appropriate services for Indigenous people?

Other Stakeholders

1. What constitutes Indigenous-led?
2. Why aren't there any indigenous-led shelters in Edmonton?
3. How do you integrate an Indigenous lens into your work?
4. What steps do you currently take to ensure services are culturally appropriate for Indigenous people?
5. What resources would you require to enhance culturally appropriate services for Indigenous people?
6. How do you support your grantees (if applicable) to provide culturally appropriate services for Indigenous people?