



# LESSONS LEARNED FROM LIVED EXPERIENCE

Engaging people experiencing homelessness in the development of affordable housing solutions

**Michelle Grover** | **Lissie Rappaport**

*University of Manitoba*  
MCP Candidate

*End Homelessness Winnipeg*  
MCP

## ABSTRACT

Homelessness is a crisis impacting a disproportionate number of Indigenous peoples in Winnipeg. Permanent housing is needed to address their right to adequate housing. However, people experiencing homelessness can be hard-to-reach through traditional engagement processes. To gather the insight of the individuals that these developments are intended for, End Homelessness Winnipeg has partnered with other Indigenous-led organizations in the city to coordinate community consultation sessions. This case in point examines the engagement processes of two projects led by End Homelessness Winnipeg: Housing for women and families experiencing gender-based violence and homelessness, and the Village Project. From these, four best practices are identified, including the use of culturally relevant practices, providing compensation, building trust and relationships, and ongoing engagement. These processes have culminated in the design of housing solutions that are safe, affordable, and suited to the unique needs of Indigenous people experiencing homelessness in Winnipeg.

# 1.0 / INTRODUCTION

The United Nations (UN) has recognized the right to adequate housing as a universal human right (End Homelessness Winnipeg, June 2020). Adequate housing is housing that is secure, affordable, accessible, habitable, culturally adequate, and is suitably located with access to appropriate services (UN Habitat, n.d.). People experiencing homelessness do not have access to housing that meets these criteria, and their perspectives are needed to develop housing solutions that are adequate. However, people experiencing homelessness can be difficult to reach through traditional engagement processes. Communicating with people experiencing homelessness can be challenging, as they are often transient and lack a permanent address, phone and email access. These barriers can be compounded by stereotypes associated with race, sex, class, and ability, among other aspects of their identity. However, “inclusion is especially vital in the context of homelessness [...] because being excluded and silenced is a huge part of the experience of homelessness and poverty” (Lived Experience Advisory Council, 2016: 1).

Indigenous peoples are overrepresented among people experiencing homelessness in Winnipeg, with their rate of homelessness as high as six times the city-wide average (Bruce, 2020). This is a direct outcome of colonialization which has, and continues to, oppress Indigenous people through displacement and the suppression of their traditional way of life. As a result, Indigenous people in Winnipeg may face additional barriers to participation in public processes associated with a history of systemic racism and exclusion, as well as distrust of political or public systems.

Though community consultations for housing projects typically seek the perspectives of future tenants, neighbours and landlords or housing operators, engagement methods to reach these populations often rely on public open houses, online surveys, and door-to-door mail drops.

**“Being excluded and silenced is a huge part of the experience of homelessness and poverty”**

**- Lived Experience Advisory Council**



**FIGURE 1** | Image from the Ceremony as part of the Village Project engagement

When building housing for people experiencing homelessness, other engagement methods are required due to the barriers outlined above. While this may include engaging agencies that serve people experiencing homelessness, direct engagement of people with lived or living experience of homelessness is often limited. This can result in housing solutions that neglect the needs of the people they intended to serve. For example, in Winnipeg there has been investment in new affordable housing, but these developments often have zero tolerance policies related to drug and alcohol use. Through community consultations, End Homelessness Winnipeg has learned that low barrier housing is needed to meet people where they're at.

This case in point seeks to identify lessons learned through End Homelessness Winnipeg's consultation processes with people with lived or living experience of homelessness. It emphasizes the importance of direct engagement with these populations and offers best practices for service providers looking to identify needs, and develop housing solutions that support their right to adequate housing.

# 2.0 / BACKGROUND

End Homelessness Winnipeg is an Indigenous-led organization that aims to address the root causes of homelessness through four pillars: prevention, person-centred supports, housing supply, and measurement (End Homelessness Winnipeg, n.d.). Lissie Rappaport, as Manager of Housing Supply, works to develop new affordable housing for people experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness.



Through this work, she has engaged people with lived experience of homelessness to ensure that new housing is accessible and appropriate for people with diverse needs and abilities (End Homelessness Winnipeg, n.d.). This case in point examines the engagement strategies used in two housing projects she has been involved in: Housing for women and families experiencing gender-based violence and homelessness, and the Village Project.

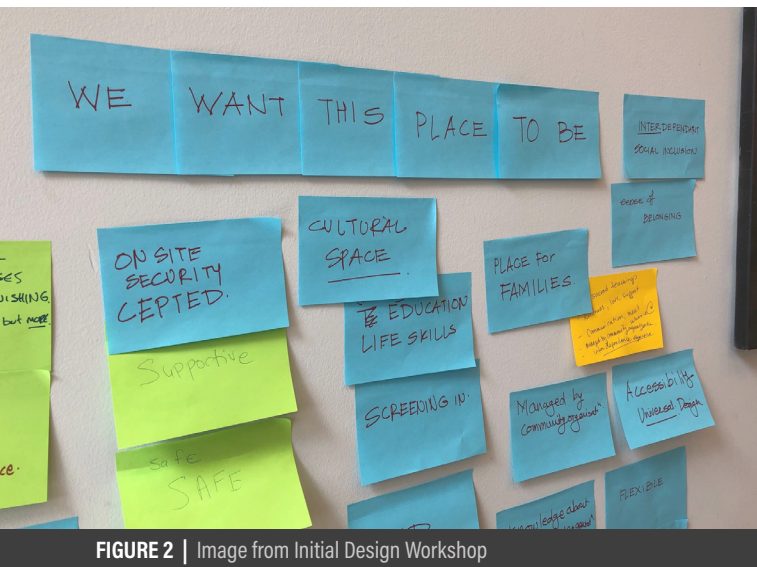


FIGURE 2 | Image from Initial Design Workshop

### 3.0 / PROCESS

#### Housing for women and families experiencing gender-based violence and homelessness

Beginning in 2019, End Homelessness Winnipeg supported the development of a vision for new housing for women-identifying individuals and their families who are experiencing gender-based violence and homelessness. Women-identifying individuals often experience ‘hidden homelessness,’ which may include staying with friends or family members, in hotels or motels, or staying in an abusive situation because their only other option is the street. It is estimated that the number of women experiencing hidden homelessness is three times that of women using shelters, which makes them particularly hard to reach (Hayashi et al., 2016). This also means women’s housing needs have been ignored by other homelessness responses. To address this gap in Winnipeg, End Homelessness convened community and Indigenous partners who chose Wahbung Abinoonjiiag Inc. to be the lead owner and operator of a new housing project (End Homelessness Winnipeg, 2020).

End Homelessness Winnipeg is now supporting Wahbung Abinoonjiiag Inc. to design and develop this housing. This has included coordinating an Advisory Council with agency partners and engagement sessions for its design:

#### Initial Design Workshop

End Homelessness Winnipeg convened agency partners and asked each partner to bring one of their participants with lived experience of homelessness and/or gender-based violence. This group informed values that should guide the design of the housing.

#### Concept Design Consultation

Using the insight from the design workshop, architects prepared two preliminary designs – a circular concept and a linear concept. In this stage, the advisory committee, people with living experience, and other partners offered input related to the designs. This process illuminated a number of considerations that shaped the direction of the project. In particular, the engagement session was valuable in learning that the majority of participants supported the linear model. Though the concept of the circle is important in Indigenous cultures, the courtyard at the center of the circular model made participants feel as though they might “be watched.” This concern was particularly problematic given Indigenous peoples ongoing interaction with the child welfare system. In Manitoba, Indigenous children are overrepresented within Child and Family Services, making up almost 90% of the children in care (CBC News, 2020).

As Wahbung Abinoonjiiag Inc. and End Homelessness Winnipeg develop further plans for this transitional housing complex, they continue to engage partner organizations and incorporate their feedback through an iterative process.



IDEA 1  
CIRCULAR LAYOUT

FIGURE 3 | Circular model presented in the Concept Design Consultation

## The Village Project

The Village Project is a communal housing project, led by Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre, in partnership with six other Indigenous-led organizations including End Homelessness Winnipeg. The concept of an Indigenous model for communal housing had long been envisioned for the area surrounding the Winnipeg's Circle of Life Thunderbird House, and was articulated through the development of Nii'kaanaagaa (Our Hopes and Dreams), a strategic plan to address homelessness among First Nations. This housing project focused on the needs of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness, or people sleeping outdoors in tents, bus shelters, cars, doorways, or in empty buildings (End Homelessness Winnipeg, June 2020). People living unsheltered often have fewer connections with service providers, which can make them even more difficult to reach. Rather than relying on organization partners to bring participants to the engagement session, End Homelessness Winnipeg, along with the project partners, connected with outreach workers to communicate the details of the sessions to potential participants. They went directly to the encampments where people experiencing unsheltered homelessness were living and gathering. Engagement sessions were held in the summer of 2020 to gather insight from the community on the initiative, and included partner engagement, Elders' Circle, community ceremony, and feast.



FIGURE 4 | The Village Project rendering of community space

### Partner Engagement

Indigenous partners were invited to discuss the vision and guiding values of the project. The project had unanimous support and partners were eager to move forward, so an architecture firm was contacted to create preliminary concept designs. Partners continued to meet through the project's design and development.



FIGURE 5 | Diane Redsky, Executive Director of Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre

### Elders' Circle

An Elders' Circle allowed further discussion of key themes for the project. It also afforded an opportunity to seek guidance on how to hold a ceremony with people living in encampments.

### Community Ceremony and Feast

At the site of the former Disraeli encampment, approximately 75 people, a majority of whom were living in that encampment or others nearby, participated in a community ceremony and feast. Participants were offered a tobacco bundle, a to-go meal, harm reduction and hygiene supplies. They took part in a pipe ceremony, a sacred fire, song, and discussions about what they would like to see in housing. Feedback gathered here directly informed the design of the Village Project. Lissie explained that the ceremony was well-received because it offered an opportunity for healing following a particularly hard summer following the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Several themes were identified through these engagement sessions that helped to identify a vision and values to guide the project. These included: partnerships and relationships; a strengths-based approach; a non-judgmental and low barrier environment; and the promotion of healing and traditions. Importantly, the feedback from people with living experience of homelessness informed where the Village Project would be built and what it would look like. Elders and partners informed the design as well, as they provided guidance on how traditional villages were structured. The renderings in this document show the current design concept, which include 22 re-used shipping containers that provide residents with their own private and secure space, as well as communal space to foster relationships created within the encampment community. The project also provides access to supports from service providers, and cultural elements on-site including a Tipi and sacred fire at the centre.



# 4.0

## ANALYSIS

From the community consultations for these housing projects, four best practices have been identified. In engaging hard-to-reach populations, it is important that consultations are culturally relevant, participants are compensated, relationships and trust are central, and that engagement is sustained throughout the project.

### Culturally Relevant

Both the Women's Housing Project and the Village Project were Indigenous-led and included culturally relevant practices. They opened with prayers from participating Elders, made land acknowledgments, and conducted the engagement in a circle before splitting off for one-on-one conversations. The Village Project also used ceremony and feast for the engagement itself, and has an Elders' Circle which continues to inform design and development. These values extend beyond the engagement process, as the Village Project's entire development "[draws] inspiration from traditional culture and the clan system" (End Homelessness Winnipeg, 2020: 12).

### Compensation

Lissie reported that End Homelessness Winnipeg makes a point of offering meals or honorariums to those that participate in engagement processes. Not only do these forms of compensation provide an incentive to participate, but they also act as a means of recognizing participants time and contributions. Just as staff hosting engagement sessions are paid for their time, people with lived experience should be compensated for their role in the visioning, design, and delivery of these projects.

### Relationships and Trust

End Homelessness Winnipeg, along with project partners, targeted their outreach based on sub-populations that the housing projects were intended for. Generally, when engaging hard-to-reach populations, End Homelessness Winnipeg relies on agency partners who have experience working with people who have lived experience of homelessness. These frontline service workers have existing relationships with people experiencing homelessness and can facilitate the organization of engagement sessions. In the past, End Homelessness Winnipeg has asked people within their networks to identify

people with lived experience of homelessness and invite them to join a committee in which they can collectively make policy decisions. These existing relationships help build a foundation of trust that allows them to openly share their opinions.

**“We might think people want a door they can lock and be safe in, but for some people that is a big change from how they have been living. So, what that door looks like and how they lock it is really important for someone’s success”**

**- Lissie Rappaport**

### Ongoing Engagement

A key element in the success of End Homelessness Winnipeg's engagement is that it has been sustained throughout the entirety of the projects. End Homelessness Winnipeg engages people experiencing homelessness in preliminary stages to determine what the general housing needs in the city are. Through various consultations, the organization seeks to understand what types of housing the community would like to see, where they would like to live, and what they would want the housing to look like. Once a project is initiated, End Homelessness Winnipeg will return to previous participants or seek new participants to involve them in decision-making surrounding the design of the development. This often includes seemingly minute details, like the size of windows or how doors lock, because these can have a big impact. These insights demonstrate that people with lived or living experiences of homelessness need to be at the table to ensure their perspectives are incorporated into affordable housing solutions.



**FIGURE 6** | Unit Interiors

End Homelessness Winnipeg also intends to have tenants involved in these projects on an ongoing basis. Once the project is completed, they will have the opportunity to participate in decision-making, evaluation, and reporting on the outcomes of the project.

### Challenges

The process of engaging 'hard-to-reach' populations lives up to its name. There are several barriers that make it challenging to reach people experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has made it more difficult to engage people with lived experience. Public health restrictions have limited the ability of people to gather, and alternate online meetings do not work for this population. At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the need for rapid housing solutions. Economic impacts of the pandemic have put Manitobans at risk of eviction, and congregate shelters pose a significant health risk. The government has asked everyone to shelter in place to limit the spread of the virus, but people experiencing unsheltered homelessness do not have this option. The government has asked everyone to shelter in place to limit the spread of the virus, but people experiencing unsheltered homelessness do not have this option.

## 5.0 / CONCLUSION

In the development of housing projects, it is common to conduct engagement with potential tenants. What is different in these two cases is that End Homelessness Winnipeg is putting people with lived experience of homelessness at the center, and not compromising that at all. Notably, the Village Project involved direct consultation with encampment residents, which hasn't happened before in Winnipeg. Moreover, the feedback received through these engagement processes has been translated directly into the design. In doing so, End Homelessness Winnipeg has been able to build trust with participants of the engagement sessions by demonstrating the value of their insight and delivering on their promises through the rapid implementation of these developments. It is evident that engaging people with lived experience is critical in developing adequate housing solutions for people experiencing homelessness.

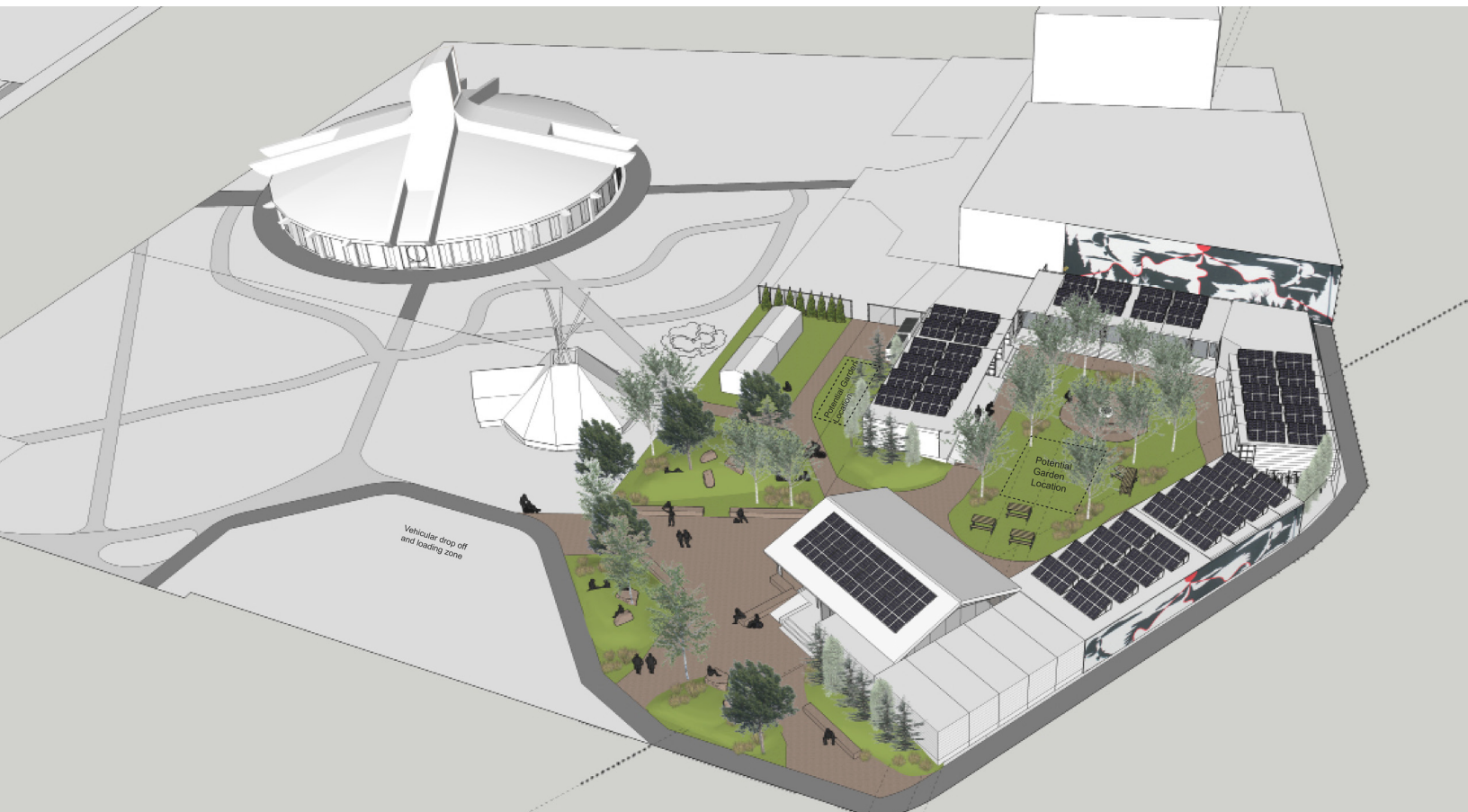


FIGURE 7 | The Village Project rendering with Tipi at the centre

# REFERENCES

- Bruce, L.. (2020, December 21). Indigenous-led housing key to pandemic Recovery. *Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives*. Retrieved from <https://policyfix.ca/2020/12/21/indigenous-led-housing-key-to-pandemic-recovery/>
- CBC News. (2020, October 1). Number of Manitoba kids in CFS care down 4 per cent from last year. *CBC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/cfs-child-welfare-system-manitoba-families-kids-in-care-drops-annual-report-1.5746315>
- End Homelessness Winnipeg. (N.d.). Consultation Summary - 191 Watt Street Development. *End Homelessness Winnipeg*. Unpublished document provided by Lissie Rappaport.
- End Homelessness Winnipeg. (N.d.). What We Do. *End Homelessness Winnipeg*. Retrieved from <https://endhomelessnesswinnipeg.ca/what-we-do/>
- End Homelessness Winnipeg. (2020). 2019-2020 Annual Report: HousingThroughCollaboration. *EndHomelessnessWinnipeg*. Retrieved from <https://endhomelessnesswinnipeg.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Housing-Through-Collaboration-End-Homelessness-Winnipeg-2019-2020-Annual-Report-to-Our-Community.pdf>
- End Homelessness Winnipeg. (2020, June). Kikinaw Oma: This is Our Home Here - A Strategy to Support Unsheltered Winnipeggers. *End Homelessness Winnipeg*. Retrieved from <https://endhomelessnesswinnipeg.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/20200630-K%C3%ADkininaw-%C3%93ma-Strategy-to-Support-Unsheltered-Winnipeggers.pdf>
- End Homelessness Winnipeg. (2020, October). The Village Project Engagement Summary. *End Homelessness Winnipeg*. Unpublished document provided by Lissie Rappaport.
- Hayashi, K., Daly-Grafstein, B., Dong, H., Wood, E., Kerr, T., & DeBeck, K. (2016). The relationship between violence and engagement in drug dealing and sex work among street-involved youth. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, 107(1), p88–93. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.17269/CJPH.107.5219>.
- Lived Experience Advisory Council.. (2016). Nothing about us without us: Seven Principles for leadership and inclusion of people with lived experience of homelessness. *The Homeless Hub Press*. Retrieved from [www.homelesshub.ca/NothingAboutUsWithoutUs](http://www.homelesshub.ca/NothingAboutUsWithoutUs)
- UN Habitat. (N.d.). The Right to Adequate Housing. *Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*. Retrieved from <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/>

## Image Resources

**Cover image:** Village Project Rendering. (From Cibinel Architecture)

1. Image from the Ceremony as part of the Village Project engagement. (From End Homelessness Winnipeg)
2. Image from Initial Design Workshop. (From End Homelessness Winnipeg)
3. Circular model presented in the Concept Design Consultation. (From Architecture 49)
4. The Village Project rendering of community space. (From Cibinel Architecture)
5. Diane Redsky, Executive Director of Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre. Retrieved from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/tiny-houses-winnipeg-homeless-housing-1.5922442>
6. Unit Interiors. (From Cibinel Architecture)
7. The Village Project Rendering with Tipi at the centre. (From Cibinel Architecture)