



FEELING HOME: CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE
APPROACHES TO ABORIGINAL HOMELESSNESS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

JULY 2011

FEELING HOME:
CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE APPROACHES TO ABORIGINAL HOMELESSNESS

AUTHORS AND RESEARCHERS: KATIE MCCALLUM & DAVID ISAAC

COVER PHOTOGRAPHY: DAVID ISAAC

PREPARED BY THE SOCIAL PLANNING AND RESEARCH COUNCIL OF BRITISH COLUMBIA (SPARC BC) AND THE CENTRE FOR NATIVE POLICY AND RESEARCH (CNPR)

© JULY 2011

CENTRE FOR NATIVE
POLICY AND RESEARCH
VANCOUVER, BC
WWW.CNPR.CA

SOCIAL PLANNING AND
RESEARCH COUNCIL OF BC
4445 NORFOLK STREET
BURNABY, BC V5G 0A7

WWW.SPARC.BC.CA
INFO@SPARC.BC.CA
TEL: 604-718-7733

CNPR AND SPARC BC OFFICES ARE LOCATED
WITHIN THE TRADITIONAL TERRITORY
OF THE COAST SALISH PEOPLE.



Centre for Native Policy
and Research

 sparc bc
people. planning. positive change.

FEELING HOME: CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE
APPROACHES TO ABORIGINAL HOMELESSNESS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

JULY 2011

Acknowledgements

The success of the research and related resource guide could not have been possible without the invaluable support of the Feeling Home Advisory Committee members:

- Albert Jimmy (Onion Lake Cree Nation, Onion Lake, Saskatchewan)
- Dan Welsh (North Central Family Centre, Regina, Saskatchewan)
- Mona Woodward (Aboriginal Front Door Society, Vancouver, B.C.)
- Patrick Coon (Carrier Sekani Family Services, Prince George, B.C.)

We also wish to thank the outstanding work of the case study facilitators who helped share the stories of their programs. Specifically, we wish to thank:

- Anita Ducharme (Aboriginal Health and Wellness, Winnipeg, Manitoba)
- Marianne Godlonton (USRA Kootenay Lodge, Calgary, Alberta)
- Marcel Swain (Lu'ma Native Housing Society, Vancouver, B.C.)
- Louise Burns-Murray (YWCA, Regina, Saskatchewan)

Finally, we express our sincere thanks to all of the interview participants. The identities of interview participants remain anonymous in order to protect their privacy; however, it is our hope that their vision for service provision are clearly communicated in this report.

This project received funding from the Homelessness Partnering Secretariat, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC).

The research and recommendations are the responsibility of SPARC BC and CNPR and do not necessarily reflect the views of the reviewers, advisors, collaborators or the Homelessness Partnering Secretariat, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC).

Executive Summary

Objectives and Research Question

Previous research has shown that despite over-representation in the homeless population in general, Aboriginal peoples are less likely to utilize homeless shelter supports than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. This project turns critical attention to how conventional services have failed Aboriginal peoples and what can be done by service providers to make certain their supports are not a further barrier to healing.

The guiding question for this project was: *What active practices demonstrate good cultural responsiveness to shelter and support services for Aboriginal peoples?*

The goal of the project was to develop knowledge concerning good practices in providing culturally responsive approaches to Aboriginal homelessness in Western Canada. The objectives set to meet this goal were to:

1. Develop knowledge concerning good practices in providing culturally responsive approaches to Aboriginal homelessness in Western Canada;
2. Analyze that knowledge in ways that will make it easily adaptable to new contexts, so it can be incorporated into practice to improve services to homeless individuals and families who are Aboriginal;
3. Translate the knowledge for shelters and support service agencies to use to make meaningful improvements in the cultural responsiveness of services;
4. Identify policy and development issues as generated by the findings.

Methodology

This project utilized three (3) methodological approaches to respond to the above questions and objectives. The approaches included:

1. Literature review on homelessness in Canada, Aboriginal homelessness and culturally responsive approaches to service provision;
2. Interviews with twenty-two (22) representatives of service delivery organizations and community leaders; and
3. Case studies of programs that currently provide culturally responsive services to Aboriginal persons who are homeless or precariously housed.

Case study sites included:

- Kootenay Lodge based out of the Universal Rehabilitation Service Agency in Calgary, Alberta;
- Lu'Ma Native Housing Society in Vancouver, British Columbia;
- My Aunt's Place based out of the YWCA in Regina, Saskatchewan; and
- The Ni-Apin Program based out of the Aboriginal Health and Wellness Centre of Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Each stage of the research was used to inform the next, with the literature review shaping the interview questions, and interview results shaping the case studies. The project team was also guided by the ongoing review of an Advisory Committee made up of representatives from four (4) Aboriginal service providers from across Western Canada.

Key Findings

Findings from Literature Review

Economic, cultural and social interference brought on by forced acculturation and assimilation have resulted in disparities that have placed Aboriginal peoples at greater risk of becoming homeless. The literature review identified growing calls for service providers working with Aboriginal peoples to account for the impact of over 140 years of assimilation and the resulting personal, familial and community trauma.

Culturally responsive approaches use cultural knowledge about a population in order to better serve that population's needs. Culturally responsive programs and services accommodate people's cultural context, values and needs and can help make service provision more effective and respectful for Aboriginal peoples who are homeless.

Culturally responsive service provision is founded on providing a matched level of services for all, where everyone is capable of being served in a way that accounts for their culture. In practice, this is a demanding task requiring the reconciliation of "potentially conflicting goals of respecting difference, protecting rights, facilitating equality, and nurturing our shared citizenship" (Armstrong, 2009 on Shacher, 2001).

Established scholarship on culturally responsive approaches to serving Aboriginal and Indigenous persons emphasize the need to:

- Use a grassroots approach to developing culturally responsive approaches;
- Ensure consistent financial support to establish trust in long-standing culturally responsive services;
- Record successes and setbacks in using culturally responsive approaches;
- Develop partnerships with service providers with a similar local mandate;
- Utilize holistic health care models; and
- Increase Aboriginal health workforce and competency.

Findings from Interviews and Case Studies

Interview participants affirmed that their clients' experience many of the issues addressed in the literature, including trauma, cultural disconnection and racism as a result of the historical experiences with residential schools or the child welfare system. Participants observed that many of the people who slip through the cracks and into homelessness have little earning potential or financial stability. Participants also noted that those who have a history of trauma are often reluctant to reach out for help, not even from other Aboriginal communities.

Several participants viewed the term "cultural responsiveness" critically - particularly Aboriginal participants working in Aboriginal-operated organizations - and pointed to flaws in *responding* to culture as opposed to *embodying* culture. According to some, Aboriginal culture and its plural expressions and modes or responsiveness is an embodied phenomenon that exists within Aboriginal organizations.

Aboriginal-led organizations that employ Aboriginal staff are the only services capable of sharing and animating Aboriginal culture. Based on the impressions of many interview participants (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal), lived experience as an Aboriginal person is irreplaceable in service provision for Aboriginal peoples who have suffered specific forms of discrimination, trauma and unsafe living conditions.

Although the best support for Aboriginal peoples at risk of homelessness comes from Aboriginal organizations, there is still an important role for non-Aboriginal organizations to play in supporting culturally responsive approaches to Aboriginal homelessness. The largest single step a non-Aboriginal organization can make to being culturally responsive is to be an ally in the common fight against the persistent but not inevitable injustice of homelessness.

Based on the results of case studies and interviews, culture does seem to play a critical role in making services more accessible to Aboriginal peoples. We suggest, however, that culture's integration into service design and delivery falls on a continuum from "culturally responsive homeless services" to "cultural integrity in the design and delivery of homeless services". Each organization must situate themselves on this continuum in critically assessing how their agency and services include and/or embody Aboriginal culture.

Approaches to Cultural Responsiveness that can be Applied Across Contexts

Findings highlight three (3) main characteristics of effective culturally responsive approaches to and cultural integrity in the common fight against Aboriginal homelessness:

- 1) Strong leadership by Aboriginal-led organizations in providing services for Aboriginal peoples;
- 2) Learning, dialogue and partnership between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organizations;
- 3) Qualified Aboriginal staff should be employed and nurtured within all homelessness service and support agencies.

The following techniques were used across different service provision contexts to establish the relationships that dignify Aboriginal people who are homeless.

- Open, respectful and non-judgemental service;
- Flexibility in service provision (allowing people to find their own path);
- Accepting people's autonomy to make their own relationship with culture;
- Asking people "where you from?" as a basic first greeting;
- Creating a community within a community ("a home away from home");
- Culture as therapy (engaging in traditional cultural activities);
- Developing clients' sense of identity, pride and self-esteem;
- Understanding names, histories and politics of local First Nations history and current work and focus;
- Laughter and other comforts to make organizations more welcoming;
- A living room-like setting for clients to socialize and make friends;

-
- Working with other community resources to provide full spectrum of care;
 - Cross-cultural training for all employees (and new employees);
 - Employing a participatory approach to develop and provide services geared towards Aboriginal peoples (community and client consultation); &
 - Blending traditional and contemporary approaches to healing.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Recommendations reflect three areas that are key to the development and application of culturally responsive services for Aboriginal peoples that are homeless or at risk of homelessness: good research to inform good service provision, proven program and service delivery approaches as well as policy that is supportive of excellent service.

Research Areas and Approaches

Recommended research area: Several participants identified the deliberate inhalation of solvents as an issue in the Aboriginal homeless population, and one that is not well researched or resourced. Further research is needed to understand how widespread solvent use has become in Canadian communities, who is most at risk of using solvents and what resources are most needed to help solvent users.

Recommended research approaches: Participatory research approaches are strongly recommended for all research relating to Aboriginal homelessness. Consultation is the first priority in designing and implementing programs that have cultural integrity and are responsive to the needs of the local Aboriginal community. There is also a call for the application of Indigenous research methodologies that empower the researched, not just the researcher.

Case study design can provide powerful comparative information. The unit of analysis for this exploratory project was broad and restricted close, quantitative comparison. Further studies could be undertaken that examine culturally responsive practices in particular services or models.

Program and Service Delivery Recommendations

Governance and Program Design Recommendations: The most effective models identified in this report support people in many areas, ranging from life skills training to intensive case management. Servicing people experiencing homelessness requires a longer continuum of care and flexibility to let people find their own way to heal. It is suggested that funders grant models that show results multi-year funding with straight forward renewal processes, to ensure that culturally responsive services have the time needed to develop and make an impact.

Funding bodies might also support the development of strategic plans that fit with tenets of the Aboriginal non-profit organization, or make strategic planning a requirement of multi-year core funding models to promote the long-term sustainability of good culturally responsive programs.

For organizations, several recommendations are advanced. The first of which is to make Aboriginal culture explicit; use Aboriginal names, recognize traditional territory in prominent places (signs, business cards, e-mail signatures, etc.). Consultation with Aboriginal communities, Elders, leaders in decision making for program design and implementation is also key. Set up an advisory board, review panels, committees or conversation circle to guide and align program design to priorities in the community and cultural ways of knowing.

Human Resources Recommendations: Train front line workers to take a team based or “allied approach.” Training needs include contextual information, cultural teachings and an explanation of on and off-reserve supports available in nearby areas. Utilizing trainers and Elders from the community will extend the reach of people staff know and trust. Involve in a central way the Elders and ceremony into program structure and make Aboriginal culture a part of organizational culture. Bring cultural activities into the workplace for staff as well as for clients.

The emotional demands of work in this sector are huge. Organizations consistently prioritized their staff as their strength. A good living wage and benefits are critical to keeping staff strong and supported. To further support staff, consider providing human resources support so staff can focus on helping clients.

Recommendations for Evaluating Services: For all homeless support agencies, there is a need to assess whether existing services are culturally responsive or have integrity. A review process is necessary to determine what (if any) changes should be made. Once culturally responsive programs are in place, it is just as important to utilize evaluation tools that can assess the degree to which culturally responsive services helped an Aboriginal person experiencing homelessness. Culturally responsive evaluation techniques are needed to assess programs but are not well understood in the service literature. It is recommended that culturally responsive evaluation approaches be developed.

Policy Matters in Working with Indigenous Communities

Policy makers need to directly involve Indigenous peoples in policy development. As summarized by one participant, Aboriginal peoples who are homeless or precariously housed and the people who serve them are those best equipped to review and guide policy on housing and homelessness for Aboriginal peoples.

Research has proven that long term approaches to resolving complex social issues are the most effective. Governments on many levels have taken on long-term plans to address homelessness. Service providers, however, are still mostly caught up in short-term funding arrangements. Public policy on homelessness should be predicated on the belief that long term strategies with clear goals, time lines and appropriate funding are essential to the solution to end homelessness.

The most important funding that participants identified was core funding to stabilize the strongest component of human service work for Aboriginal peoples experiencing homelessness. Regardless of whether homelessness is a continuous social problem, the community capacity developed by sustaining long-term, well-established organizations is tangible. Long-term funding for core services goes beyond supporting community services for a handful of years – it invests in community strength for the long term.

THIS EXECUTIVE SUMMARY REVIEWS THE FINDINGS OF A RESEARCH PROJECT STUDYING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE APPROACHES TO SERVICE PROVISION FOR ABORIGINAL PEOPLES WHO ARE HOMELESS OR AT RISK OF BECOMING HOMELESS. THE RESEARCH WAS COMPLETED BY THE SOCIAL PLANNING AND RESEARCH COUNCIL OF BRITISH COLUMBIA (SPARC BC) AND THE CENTRE FOR NATIVE POLICY AND RESEARCH (CNPR). IT WAS MADE POSSIBLE WITH FUNDING FROM THE HOMELESSNESS PARTNERING SECRETARIAT, HUMAN RESOURCES AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT CANADA (HRSDC).



Centre for Native Policy
and Research

 **sparc bc**

people. planning. positive change.