Submission to the UN Special Rapporteur report on the Right to adequate Housing for Indigenous Peoples

About End Homelessness Winnipeg
End Homelessness Winnipeg was established in 2015 in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada through a community mandate to be the backbone organization implementing Winnipeg’s 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness. The 10-Year Plan identifies goals under four pillars:

- Homelessness Prevention
- Housing Supply and Access
- Person-Centred Systems of Care
- Measurement and Evaluation

End Homelessness Winnipeg’s mission is to create lasting solutions with our community that prevent and end homelessness, in order to achieve our vision for a community where everyone has a home and the supports they need to belong. In this work, we are guided by the following core values:

- The UN’s declaration that housing is a human right
- The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
- Truth and reconciliation as a path to ending Indigenous homelessness
- Social inclusion and working to end all forms of discrimination and racism
- The voice of people with lived and living experience of homelessness
- People, organizations, and sectors working together around a common vision and shared goals
- Integrity, accountability and transparency in all that we do

Housing conditions of Indigenous Peoples in rural and urban contexts in Manitoba
Manitoba has existed since 1870 on the lands of Anishinaabe, Oji-Cree, Cree, Dakota, Dene and Inuit peoples and the homeland of the Métis Nation. As of 2016, there are 223,310 Indigenous people in Manitoba, comprising 18% of the total population. More than half of Indigenous people in Manitoba (130,505) are First Nations (e.g. Anishinaabe, Oji-Cree, Cree, Dakota, Dene); 40% (89,360) are Métis; and 0.3% (610) are Inuit. More than 90% (121,180) of the First Nations people in Manitoba have “Indian Status” as defined under Canada’s Indian Act.1

More than half of Manitoba’s Indigenous population is urban, with more than one third living in the provincial capital, Winnipeg. Winnipeg has the largest per capita Indigenous population of any major city in Canada, with more than 12% of residents identifying as Indigenouss.2 One in four Indigenous adults and more than one in three Indigenous children in Winnipeg live in poverty.3 A recent point-in-time count indicates that more than two-thirds of those experiencing homelessness in Winnipeg are Indigenous and of these, more than three-quarters are First Nations.4 Indigenous people in Winnipeg experience rates of poverty twice that of the general population and rates of homelessness between five and six times that of the general population.5

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5 City of Winnipeg. (2019). Poverty in Winnipeg By the Numbers
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Approximately 60% of First Nations people in Manitoba live on reserves: tracts of land set aside for First Nations under the Indian Act and treaties. There are 63 reserves across the province. More than 3 in 4 children on Manitoba reserves live below the poverty line. Out of 17,289 homes on Manitoba reserves, 4,176 need major renovations and 1,213 need to be entirely replaced. Overcrowding, mould, and inadequate plumbing or water service are frequently cited concerns.

There is a direct link between these statistics and Canada’s 150-year history of colonization and genocide, which suppressed Indigenous peoples’ traditional governance, social, cultural and economic institutions; occupied Indigenous lands for resource extraction; and separated children from their families with the goal of assimilation. Colonization and genocide continue today. The Indian Act (“the Act”), introduced in 1876 to eradicate First Nations cultures, remains in force. The Act defined criteria for recognition as a “Status Indian” according to patriarchal rules designed to assimilate First Nations peoples into settler society. The Act outlawed First Nations’ traditional political and cultural practices, granting the government of Canada sweeping powers over First Nations governance, “language, health, housing, education, child welfare, justice, land, resources, rights, ownership, marriage, voting rights, food access, employment, religion and ceremony.” These powers manifested in a regime of “fiscal brutality and permanent austerity.”

Many areas of jurisdiction in the Act were passed onto provinces by the federal government, leaving displaced and non-Status Indigenous peoples in a jurisdictional vacuum, as federal services were only available on reserves, while provincial governments viewed service provision for Indigenous peoples as a federal concern. Federal and provincial funding disputes continue today, denying or inhibiting Indigenous peoples’ access to public services. For example, social assistance in Manitoba is administered federally for Status and provincially for non-Status, Métis and Inuit individuals. The systems are not connected or integrated to support transitions of Status people from reserves to urban centres or the reverse. The Act also required First Nations children to attend Residential Schools, which forcibly separated Indigenous children from their families in order to assimilate the children into settler society by cutting their family and cultural ties. While the last residential school closed in 1996, Indigenous children continue to face substandard funding for education services and/or displacement from their home communities in order to attend school.

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The Métis Nation in Manitoba experienced a distinct history of dispossession, displacement and cultural suppression. After resisting settlement of the Red River Valley through the Uprising of 1869, French-speaking Métis were guaranteed certain language, religious and land rights through the 1870 Manitoba Act. The Scrip System, designed to extinguish Métis title, imposed an onerously bureaucratic process for asserting claims to lands promised under the Manitoba Act, opening up Métis Scrip to speculators intent on profiting from the colonization of the West. Métis, unable to assert claims to their traditional lands, were pushed to the margins of society, living on marshlands at the fringes of reserves, in small fishing villages, or on road and rail allowances. Until 1961, when its homes were bulldozed and burned to make way for City of Winnipeg development, the Métis community of Rooster Town was one example of this pattern of habitation.

The government of Canada signed no treaties with the Inuit, nor did it make provisions for individual land title through a scrip or grants system. Only after the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami was established in 1971 to assert Inuit rights to sovereignty and governance over their traditional lands, did the government of Canada begin negotiation of Inuit land claims.

Starting in the 1950s and for more than three decades, the Sixties Scoop saw the mass removal of Indigenous infants – First Nations, Métis and Inuit - from their mothers’ arms. These children were placed for adoption with non-Indigenous families across Canada, the U.S. and Europe: yet another example of the genocidal and assimilationist policies enacted by Canada against Indigenous peoples.

Generations of Indigenous peoples, surviving occupation and genocide, have suffered disproportionate levels of displacement, trauma and poverty, exacerbating their risk and experiences of homelessness. The impact of colonization on Indigenous peoples’ relationship to place, both in terms of the dispossession of territory and of culture, has rendered many Indigenous peoples “homeless in their own lands.” First Nations, Métis and Inuit homelessness in Canada has been defined as:

“Individuals, families or communities lacking stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means or ability to acquire such housing. Unlike the common colonialist definition of homelessness, Indigenous homelessness is not defined as lacking a structure of habitation; rather, it is more fully described and understood through a composite lens of Indigenous worldviews. These include individuals, families and communities isolated from their relationships to land, water, place, family, kin, each other, animals, cultures, languages and identities. Importantly, Indigenous people experiencing these kinds of homelessness cannot culturally, spiritually or physically reconnect with their Indigeneity or lost relationships.”

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21 Aboriginal Standing Committee on Housing and Homelessness. (2012).
In Manitoba, social and material inequities have driven a high rate of migration from reserves or rural and remote Métis and Inuit communities to urban centres. This migration can itself become a pathway to homelessness, given rising costs of housing in cities and jurisdictional gaps between federal and provincial service systems. Indigenous people travel from reserves and rural or remote communities to the city for access to housing, employment, education, health care and disability services, only to discover barriers to access in each of these systems. Alienated from community supports in the urban environment, yet unable to return home, Indigenous people, particularly Indigenous persons with disabilities and Indigenous youth, can become vulnerable to experiences of family separation, homelessness and exploitation, as demonstrated by the tragic death of Tina Fontaine.22

Tina Fontaine’s story also demonstrates how the legacies of residential schools and the Sixties Scoop live on in Manitoba’s child welfare policy today. With more than 10,000 children in Child and Family Services care, Manitoba has the highest per-capita rate of children in care across Canada. Almost 90% of these children are Indigenous.23 Youth in care who “age out” of or migrate while in this system are particularly vulnerable to experiencing homelessness. In a 2018 survey, nearly half of the participants experiencing homelessness in Winnipeg reported that they had spent time in care.24

Colonization and its legacies of dispossession and trauma are also linked to the overrepresentation of Indigenous men, women and youth in prisons, which is in turn linked to homelessness and poverty. Individuals who are experiencing homelessness or living in poverty are both more likely to engage in illicit activities for economic survival and to come into contact with the police. At the other end of the prison gate, criminal records severely limit individuals’ economic and housing opportunities when reintegrating to the community. Winnipeg’s most recent point-in-time count identified that 11 of 81 adult inmates released from Manitoba Correctional Centres on the day of the survey were released to no fixed address, to a shelter or to provisional housing arrangements. Throughout the week that the count was made, “many [inmates] were released far from their home communities, often without resources to return.”25

**Housing needs identified by Indigenous Peoples in Manitoba, Canada**

Clearly there is a great need for improved supply of adequate housing for Indigenous peoples in Manitoba. It is equally evident that within Manitoba’s Indigenous community, First Nations (Status and Non-Status), Métis and Inuit peoples possess distinct cultures, histories, experiences and housing needs; and that changes are needed to other government and social systems to address the complex dimensions of Indigenous homelessness.

In 2019, End Homelessness Winnipeg partnered with the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs for a series of engagements and focus groups with First Nations individuals in Manitoba, toward development of a strategy for ending First Nations homelessness in the province. Through these consultations, some themes emerged to inform the development of initiatives designed to address First Nations homelessness:

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25 Brandon et al. (2018). p.23
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- First Nations experiences of homelessness are tied to experiences of colonization, dispossession and trauma. To address First Nations homelessness and housing precarity, initiatives must address the legacies of colonization, dispossession and trauma by centring traditional knowledge, restoring decision-making power to First Nations peoples, and integrating a holistic, healing, trauma-informed approach.

- The criteria for “adequate” housing as being accessible, affordable and safe must be more clearly defined, as colonization has enforced disparate and sometimes contradictory definitions of these terms for Indigenous peoples compared to settlers.

- To be “adequate,” housing requires access to amenities and services, including food, health care, education, training, recreation and ceremony.

- Due to the complex root causes of First Nations experiences of homelessness, a “home” must be more than a house, offering connection and healing for relationships to self, community, kin, culture and land.

- A holistic approach that looks at the whole person – physical, mental, emotional, spiritual – to provide a person-centred system of care is required.

- A spectrum of types of housing and models of operation are needed across Manitoba. Cookie-cutter single family homes built to federal specifications on reserve, “care homes” operated in small communities to house anyone with a disability requiring supports, or urban rooming houses and shelters are not “adequate.” Integrated developments, built on principles of accessibility such as universal design to be inclusive communities and hubs for community or on-site supports, including cultural programming and mentorship, offer a promising alternative.

- Programs should strive to establish a path to housing choice that can include home ownership.

The Métis Nation in Manitoba, through the Manitoba Metis Federation, has been actively involved in housing development as a pillar of its strategy toward self-government since the early 1970s. Before 2012, when the Manitoba government assumed control of rural social housing in the province, the Manitoba Metis Federation was the largest provider of affordable housing for small communities across the province. In 2018, federal government announced $500 million over 10 years for Métis Nation housing, including nearly $10 million for the Manitoba Metis Federation in 2018-19. To prepare for this influx of federal Housing Funding, the Manitoba Metis Federation has consulted with stakeholders to identify priorities. Themes emerging from these consultations included:

- Manitoba-wide research on Métis housing needs and experiences
- Increasing affordable housing though new builds
- Seniors housing
- Repairs and maintenance for existing housing stock, to prevent loss of housing supply
- Using local resources to support local economies, for example by tendering out small contracts for housing that can be bid on by small and rural Métis builders
- Investing in Social Housing: as the province of Manitoba currently divests itself of its property management role in social housing, there is a possibility for the Manitoba Metis Federation to bid on this role, leveraging its decades of experience in administering rural social housing.

While less than 1,000 Inuit identify as residents of Manitoba, thousands more spend time in the province each year to access education, health care or employment opportunities. The Manitoba Inuit Association was formed in 2008 to enhance the lives of Inuit in Manitoba by promoting Inuit values, community and culture while connecting to services that meet our evolving needs. Its goals include:

- Improving access to affordable housing choices for Inuit in Manitoba
- Connecting Inuit in Manitoba through initiatives that sustain and build Inuit culture, values and language

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As the smallest Indigenous population in Manitoba, Inuit struggle to maintain connection to culture and supports while far from their traditional lands. “Because Inuit have land-based benefits and self-governments, when they move, they may fall through the cracks.”

For First Nations, Métis and Inuit alike, it is important that adequate housing be approached by governments as a human right, rather than a privilege or a commodity to be granted, purchased or sold. Similarly, there is a shared need identified for improved and accurate data, gathered under the guidance and leadership of Indigenous communities themselves, on Indigenous peoples’ migration within and to the province, and on those experiencing homelessness or living in precarious or inadequate housing.

Promising Practices for Housing from an Indigenous Perspective in Manitoba

Kinew Housing
Kinew Housing was incorporated in Winnipeg in 1970 by a small group concerned about the availability of decent affordable housing for Indigenous people in the city. The first homes were purchased with private sources of funding by Kinew and were rented at cost. It became apparent that this would not be sustainable. Funding was eventually made available through programs from CMHC. In its early years, Kinew purchased older homes to repair and renovate. Kinew developed training programs to do the work required themselves, helping to keep costs down. Kinew continued to buy older homes until the mid-1980s when newer homes requiring less repairs and renovations started to be bought. Kinew has built 20 new homes that use Rent Supplements from the Province of Manitoba to provide rent for 25% of a tenant’s income. Kinew also advocates for social housing.

The Neeginan Centre
The Neeginan Centre was incorporated in October 1990 to realize the goal of providing a centre that promotes the social, educational and entrepreneurial growth of the Indigenous community in Winnipeg. In 1993, the Centre moved to its current location in the former Canadian Pacific Railway Station at Higgins and Main in Winnipeg’s North End. Today, the Centre houses the Aboriginal Health and Wellness Centre, Doorways (a Housing First access program), the Centre for Aboriginal Human Resources Development (which operates a nearby transitional housing complex for students, Neeginan Village), the Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg and other services and organizations. The Neeginan Centre has provided an enduring and accessible community hub that helps to connect Indigenous people in Winnipeg to a range of supports, including housing, that individuals require to exit homelessness and maintain housing.

Ndinawemaaganag Endaawaad/Tina’s Safe Haven
Established as a 24/7 safe space in response to the tragic death of Tina Fontaine, Tina’s Safe Haven is a drop-in centre for youth that welcomes approximately 50 participants each day. During the day, youth can access employment and housing resources, mental health support, counselling and other programming. The drop-in centre is open 24 hours and offers laundry, TV, phone, games and computers. Tina’s Safe Haven also offers outings that include recreational activities and camping trips. Tina’s Safe Haven connects to other sites and services of Ndinawemaaganag Endaawaad, such as Ndinawe’s Safe House emergency shelter and transitional housing for youth aging out of CFS care. As the door is always open, Tina’s Safe Haven offers a vital refuge for Indigenous youth in Winnipeg who find themselves with unsafe or no adequate housing.

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Housing First from an Indigenous perspective
Winnipeg’s At Home/Chez Soi project examined Housing First as a means of ending homelessness for people who are and living with mental illness in urban settings. The project reflected the diversity of Winnipeg’s First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities and an openness to learn about and respect different Indigenous world views and life experiences. An Elders Council was established to provide guidance throughout the process. This initiative brought new energy into non-Indigenous organizations seeking to understand and develop services from an Indigenous perspective, and to Indigenous organizations building infrastructure and capacity to support the communities they serve.

National Housing Strategy/Reaching Home
The federal government of Canada has taken steps in recent years to increase funding for Indigenous housing and homelessness initiatives. The federal government has also, for the first time, negotiated a housing agreement with the Métis National Council for initiatives shaped by and for Métis. Clearly there is more work to do, particularly for housing and maintenance on First Nations reserves. The federal government’s new Reaching Home homelessness strategy mandates that entities administering funding for Indigenous organizations and initiatives will be Indigenous organizations themselves. This may help to ensure that new initiatives developed to reduce and end Indigenous homelessness are identified and led by Indigenous peoples. The National Housing Strategy marks the first time in decades the federal government is playing an active role in ensuring all Canadians have a place to call home.

End Homelessness Winnipeg
As of April 2019, End Homelessness Winnipeg is the interim Community Entity administering Reaching Home funds in Winnipeg. In the coming year, End Homelessness Winnipeg is transitioning to become an Indigenous organization, to embody its value of Truth and Reconciliation as a path to ending Indigenous homelessness and to reflect the reality that Indigenous peoples are disproportionately impacted by homelessness in Winnipeg. These developments support the organization’s mission is to create lasting solutions with our community that prevent and end homelessness, in order to achieve its vision for a community where everyone has a home and the supports they need to belong.

Relevant reports and studies
At Home/Chez Soi Project: Winnipeg Site Final Report (2014)
Jino Distasio, Jitender Sareen, & Corinne Isaak. Calgary, AB: Mental Health Commission of Canada

This report documents the final results of the At Home/Chez Soi Winnipeg site’s research demonstration project, which followed 513 participants for two years and compared Housing First to available local services.
Link: https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/sites/default/files/At%252520Home%252520Report%252520Winnipeg%252520ENG_0.pdf

Indigenous Definition of Homelessness in Canada (2017)
Jesse Thistle. Toronto, ON: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness

Indigenous homelessness is not about not having a structure to live in; it runs much deeper than that—it’s about not having healthy social, physical, spiritual, and emotional relationships. It’s about not having one’s indigeneity.
Link: https://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/COHIndigenousHomelessnessDefinition.pdf
Finding Her Home: A Gender-Based Analysis of the Homelessness Crisis in Winnipeg (2017)
Jenna Drabble, Sadie McInnes. Winnipeg, MB: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

In order to end the crisis of homelessness among women in Winnipeg more social housing is needed along with targeted supports and coordination amongst governments and community. This report renews calls to action to end women’s homelessness in Winnipeg and Manitoba.


On the night of April 17-18, 2018, over 300 volunteers and staff of agencies working with people experiencing homelessness interviewed people about where they stayed and heard their stories. This second Winnipeg Street Census gives us a snapshot of the population experiencing homelessness in Winnipeg.

2018 Winnipeg Street Health Survey Final Report (2019)
Corinne Isaak, Aynslie Hinds, Thomas Steur, Gus Nelson, Pamela Campos-Ordonez. Winnipeg, MB: End Homelessness Winnipeg

Between July and October 2018, 406 individuals were interviewed for the survey. The report shares findings on the self-reported health status, housing, and social service needs of individuals experiencing homelessness in Winnipeg, along with recommendations to guide policy and planning.

A Place Where It Feels Like Home: The Story of Tina Fontaine (2019)
Daphne Penrose. Winnipeg, MB: Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth

This report explores the life of Tina Fontaine and makes recommendations for reforms to education, mental health, victim services, and child and family services systems in Manitoba.

Carol Muree Martin, Harsha Walia. Vancouver, BC: Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre

This comprehensive report is the culmination of a participatory process with 113 Indigenous women and 15 non-Indigenous women regarding the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.