

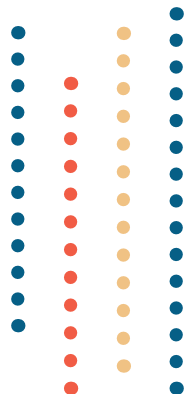
## Main Street Project Public Education Series

# A HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO SUPPORTING PEOPLE LIVING UNSHELTERED IN WINNIPEG



# Contents

INTRODUCTION .....	3
HISTORY OF MSP OUTREACH .....	4
WHY DOES HOMELESSNESS EXIST? .....	4
INDIGENOUS HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA .....	5
ENGAGING WITH PEOPLE IN ENCAMPMENTS .....	6
WHY DON'T PEOPLE ACCESS SHELTERS? .....	7
KÍKINANAW ÓMA STRATEGY .....	7
ARE PEOPLE LIVING IN ENCAMPMENTS DANGEROUS? .....	8
ARE PEOPLE LIVING IN ENCAMPMENTS VULNERABLE? .....	8
SUPPORTING PEOPLE LIVING IN ENCAMPMENTS .....	9
DOWNTOWN WINNIPEG: WHO IS WELCOME? .....	9
FEDERAL HOUSING ADVOCATE'S REVIEW .....	10
HOW MSP SUPPORTS ENCAMPMENT RESIDENTS .....	11
LIFE-SAFETY ISSUES IN ENCAMPMENTS .....	11
GARBAGE CLEAN-UP INITIATIVE .....	12
DIFFERENT TYPES OF HOMELESSNESS .....	13
A CONVERSATION ABOUT ENDING HOMELESSNESS .....	13
ARE ENCAMPMENTS SPREADING?.....	14
DESIGNATED SPACES FOR ENCAMPMENTS? .....	15
WHOM TO CALL? .....	15
CASE STUDY: NEW SKILLS, NEW ENVIRONMENTS .....	16
CASE STUDY: INEQUALITY IN HOUSING .....	16
SOCIAL CHANGE TAKES ALL OF US .....	17
LET'S CONNECT .....	17





# INTRODUCTION

Welcome to our public education series on a human rights-based approach to supporting people living unsheltered. We first launched this series through our social media channels to fight stigma surrounding homelessness in Winnipeg and to help the public understand how they can best support their unsheltered neighbours.

Many of us want to know how we can be a part of housing solutions. This work is difficult because more people live in encampments now than ever before. This causes feelings of concern from many different perspectives. When we talk about people living in encampments, we are first and foremost speaking about human beings. Keeping this in mind upholds everyone's dignity.

One's housing status does not dictate whether they are deserving of respect, compassion, or agency. We all have a role to play in ending discrimination and stigma against people experiencing homelessness.

**Our vision for Winnipeg upholds safety and dignity for everyone.**

Thank you for being here and for caring about the work we do.

We will reference a few documents throughout the series. They will be linked whenever they're mentioned. If you would like to do some pre-reading before diving into the series, the documents are listed and linked below.

## ..... REFERENCE DOCUMENTS

1. [Kikinanaw Óma Strategy to Support Unsheltered Winnipeggers](#)
2. [UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#)
3. [A National Protocol for Homeless Encampments, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing, 2020](#)
4. [Jesse Thistle's The Definition of Indigenous Homelessness in Canada](#)
5. [The Federal Housing Advocate's Review of Homeless Encampments](#)





## HISTORY OF MSP OUTREACH



In our 50+ year-long history, MSP has been a mainstay in the community, adjusting and growing our services based on community needs.

MSP found its roots in community outreach when founders John Rodgers and Clay Lewis used a transportation van to provide support and safe rides for people who experienced homelessness and/or needed safe overnight respite. Our roots were anchored in harm reduction and trauma-informed philosophies before the concepts were made popular.

In 2016, a 53-year-old woman was found dead in the 300 block of Portage Avenue after a night when temperatures dropped to a freezing -32°C. Hours earlier, firefighters responded to the same block after a call regarding “multiple people that were frozen” but could only locate one individual

that night. Without funding, MSP quickly mobilized vans and provided warm clothing, food, and safe transportation to folks who needed it.

Over the past 8 years, MSP’s mobile outreach program has continued to grow with the addition of Winnipeg’s only wheelchair-accessible outreach transport van. While other agencies do important outreach work in the city, they operate on limited hours and only cover certain areas of the city, such as downtown or St. Boniface. **Main Street Project’s mobile outreach program is a leader in Winnipeg and is the only city-wide outreach program working across Winnipeg, 24/7, 365 days a year.**



## WHY DOES HOMELESSNESS EXIST?



There are several reasons for homelessness in Canada, the number one being a lack of truly affordable housing. Housing is considered affordable when it costs 30% or less of a household’s income.

At base, the violent, forceable transfer of land from Indigenous people is the seed of homelessness on Treaty One. The cumulative results of this original displacement and inability to use land to anchor and facilitate ongoing opportunity and investments to pass down through family and community lines is clear in the over-representation of Indigenous Peoples who are homeless on their own lands. The closure of institutions for people with disabilities without enough community support in the late 20th century has led to the over-representation of people experiencing mental illness and mental and physical disabilities who are homeless.

Other contributing factors to homelessness include systemic failures such as:

- Youth aging out of the child welfare system into homelessness
- Discharges from hospitals, mental health care facilities, and prisons into homelessness
- Increase in the cost of living (food, fuel, shelter) without adequate income adjustments
- Ongoing low vacancy rates, especially for low-income housing
- Ongoing net decrease of low-income housing stock (we lose it faster than we build it)

Between 2011 and 2021, Winnipeg lost 25,000 units of housing valued at \$750 or less. If we want everyone to be housed, we need to build housing.



# INDIGENOUS HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA

We look to Jesse Thistle's Definition of Indigenous Homelessness in Canada to help shape our engagement with the community. Thistle is a Métis-Cree academic with lived experience of homelessness.

From the Aboriginal Standing Committee on Housing & Homelessness (2012) and [Thistle's](#) work:

*"Indigenous homelessness is a human condition that describes First Nations, Métis and Inuit 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, emotionally or physically reconnect with their Indigeneity or lost relationships"*

Thistle's work explains [the 12 Dimensions of Indigenous Homelessness](#) as:

## **Historic Displacement Homelessness**

Indigenous communities and nations made historically homeless after being displaced from pre-colonial Indigenous lands.

## **Contemporary Geographic Separation Homelessness**

An Indigenous individual or community's separation from Indigenous lands, after colonial control.

## **Spiritual Disconnection Homelessness**

An Indigenous individual's or community's separation from Indigenous worldviews or connection to the Creator or equivalent deity.

## **Mental Disruption and Imbalance Homelessness**

Mental homelessness, described as an imbalance of mental faculties, experienced by Indigenous individuals and communities caused by colonization's entrenched social and economic marginalization of Indigenous Peoples.

## **Cultural Disintegration and Loss Homelessness**

Homelessness that totally dislocates or alienates Indigenous individuals and communities from their culture and from the relationship web of Indigenous society known as "All My Relations."

## **Overcrowding Homelessness**

The number of people per dwelling in urban and rural Indigenous households that exceeds the national Canadian Household average, thus contributing to and creating unsafe, unhealthy and overcrowded living spaces, in turn causing homelessness.

## **Relocation and Mobility Homelessness**

Mobile Indigenous homeless people traveling over geographic distances between urban and rural spaces for access to work, health, education, recreation, legal and childcare services, to attend spiritual events and ceremonies, have access to affordable housing and to see family, friends and community members.

## **Going Home Homelessness**

An Indigenous individual or family who has grown up or lived outside their home community for a period of time, and on returning "home" are often seen as outsiders, making them unable to secure a physical structure in which to live, due to federal, provincial, territorial or municipal bureaucratic barriers, uncooperative band or community councils, hostile community and kin

members, lateral violence and cultural dislocation.

### Nowhere to Go Homelessness

A complete lack of access to stable shelter, housing, shelter services or relationships; literally having nowhere to go.

### Escaping or Evading Harm Homelessness

Indigenous persons fleeing, leaving or vacating unstable, unsafe, unhealthy or overcrowded homes to obtain a measure of safety to survive. Young people, women and LGBTQ2S+ people are particularly vulnerable.

### Emergency Crisis Homelessness

Natural disasters, large-scale environmental manipulation and acts of human mischief and destruction continuing to cause Indigenous Peoples to lose their homes because the system is not ready or willing to cope with an immediate demand for housing.

### Climatic Refugee Homelessness

Indigenous Peoples whose lifestyle, sustenance patterns and food sources, relationship to animals, land and water have been greatly altered by drastic weather shifts due to climate change. These shifts have made individuals and entire Indigenous communities homeless.

MSP's community outreach is often the only point of contact for individuals who may not feel comfortable accessing services that operate within colonial systems and that will often not best meet their needs. We thank Jesse Thistle for his work and for helping to shape what we do. Thistle also wrote a memoir about his experiences called *From the Ashes: My Story of Being Métis, Homeless, and Finding My Way* – it's an incredibly powerful read.

## ENGAGING WITH PEOPLE IN ENCAMPMENTS



In April 2020, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing released *A National Protocol for Homeless Encampments*. This document outlines 8 key principles based on international human rights law, and the recognition that people living in encampments are rights holders and experts in their own lives.

We are drawing attention here to Principle 8 of this [document](#): Respect, protect, and fulfill the distinct rights of Indigenous Peoples in all engagements with homeless encampments.

*“Governments’ engagement with Indigenous Peoples in homeless encampments must be guided by the obligation to respect, protect, and fulfill their distinct rights. This begins with recognition of the distinct relationship that Indigenous Peoples have to their lands and territories, and their right to construct shelter in ways that are culturally, historically, and spiritually significant.*”

*Governments must meaningfully consult with Indigenous encampment residents concerning any decisions that affects them, recognizing their right to self-determination and self-governance.*

*International human rights law strictly forbids the forced eviction, displacement, and relocation of Indigenous Peoples in the absence of free, prior, and informed consent.”*





## WHY DON'T PEOPLE ACCESS SHELTERS?



There are many reasons why a person may not access an emergency shelter and opt to sleep rough, including in an encampment.

From [A National Protocol on Homeless Encampments in Canada](#):

*“Shelters play a critical role in offering an emergency response for those without a home. However, people may experience barriers to accessing shelters or choose not to go. Barriers may include shelters being at capacity; having restrictions on pets, belongings or alcohol; separating couples; or requiring detailed intake criteria or processes. People may choose not to go to a shelter because they do not feel safe due to crowdedness, noise, past experiences of violence, previous negative experiences*

*at shelters, perceived health or safety risks, accessibility concerns, stigma or shame. Emergency shelters cannot serve everyone’s needs. For this reason, people may feel forced to choose between ‘sleeping rough’ on their own (putting themselves at risk of violence and criminalization), entering an emergency homeless shelter (which may be inaccessible or inappropriate for their needs, or in which their autonomy, dignity, self-reliance, and/or independence may be undermined), or residing in a homeless encampment (in which they may lack access to basic services and face threats to their health).”*



## KÍKINANAW ÓMA STRATEGY



One of MSP’s guiding documents when working with people living in encampments is the Kíkinanaw Óma Strategy. Developed in 2020, the strategy is the result of grassroots advocacy concerned with rights violations of people living unsheltered, including Indigenous land rights.

Direct service providers, City services and governments came together to address ongoing concerns with the health and well-being of people living unsheltered and to formalize a response.

- supports to people living unsheltered.
- Formalization of protocols to avoid displacement and to ensure best practices from a human-rights lens.

Key outcomes of [the strategy](#) include:

- An agreement to divert 311 calls concerning people living unsheltered from WPS to outreach organizations. This both ensured a best practice response and achieved a new efficiency of use of public resources.
- Formalization of Winnipeg Outreach Network collaboration with WFPS to improve fire prevention work.
- Formalization of Winnipeg Outreach Network collaboration with Public Works, and other City services, to triage appropriate response and

This strategy foregrounds a rights-based approach. It recognizes that residents of encampments are rights claimants, whose human right to housing has been violated. It recognizes that colonizing systems have been imposed on Indigenous Peoples’ relationships to land and housing, and that people living in encampments face widespread discrimination based on their housing status. It focuses on securing adequate housing while enabling communities to define, for themselves, what constitutes a home.



## ARE PEOPLE LIVING IN ENCAMPMENTS DANGEROUS?

We have observed a recent increase in the popularity of the idea that encampments and the people living in them are dangerous, and that they are a source of crime.

Just like people who are housed, members of any population could pose a threat to another person. As compassionate citizens, we must ask ourselves whether someone poses a genuine threat or if it's just discomfort that we're feeling in seeing poverty on display.

The idea that “encampments are dangerous” is often used as a reason to dispatch police and/or to force encampment evictions. This narrative can cause direct violence against those living unsheltered driven by people acting out of fear or people convinced that they have the right to ‘deal with a problem’, rather than relating to people living in encampments as human beings, many of whom have been failed by systems like the

healthcare and/or the child welfare system.

A lack of understanding about issues related to homelessness contributes to fear. Singling out one group of people based on an oversimplified version of reality is stereotyping, and it can lead to discrimination and harassment.

When coming across generalizations about people living in encampments, consider why these descriptions are widely promoted as truth. Often these kinds of messages are offered to strategically distract from an uncomfortable truth or responsibility, for example, truths related to colonialism or the responsibility to provide housing and mental health supports.

## ARE PEOPLE LIVING IN ENCAMPMENTS VULNERABLE?



People living unsheltered are denied the right to privacy and a secure place for themselves and their belongings. Within this context, they create strategies to stay safe.

They camp with people they trust. They position their camps in proximity to cover or lighting, they schedule their sleep time, they maintain check in times so that if they miss it, someone knows. When we hear people living unsheltered comment on what would make them more safe/less vulnerable, they call for housing, a decrease in unnecessary engagement/displacement and harassment, attention to issues like garbage pick-up, access to harm reduction, and supports.

The [Kíkinanaw Óma Strategy](#) was created in part to uphold safety for people living unsheltered. It also clarifies roles and protocols for the community agencies that support people in

encampments. In the strategy, outreach programs are tasked with initiating relationships, offering ongoing check-ins, harm reduction education (including fire safety) and supporting people towards housing.

When MSP mobile outreach encounters situations that require first responders, we call 911, non-emergency, or even our direct contacts at WPS as appropriate. We also work to increase access to healthcare by linking people living unsheltered with healthcare providers and getting them to their appointments. For over five decades MSP has worked to remove or lower barriers to care.





# SUPPORTING PEOPLE IN ENCAMPMENTS



The Winnipeg Outreach Network (WON) works together in several ways to support people living unsheltered.

It ensures:

- Daily collaboration and to-the-minute/24 hour triage of response according to need and availability
- Twice monthly WON meetings to assess and fine tune ongoing collaboration and address concerns or more complex challenges
- Planning for changes in season, creating program responses like the garbage plan, increasing work on fire prevention and more.
- Each member organization has their own

- specialty. Some work only in downtown or specific geographic areas. Some work only on certain days or between certain hours. Some are specialists in working with youth or women, for example.
- When emergency services/police are needed, outreach partners call 911.

MSP maintains proactive communication with WPS through our Board of Directors, where both WPS and WFPS hold liaison positions, as well as through formal meetings, and weekly ongoing check-ins. Together we work hard to ensure roles are clear, there is no duplication of service, and that the safety of those living unsheltered comes first.

Winnipeggers wanting assistance for someone living unsheltered can request the support of the WON by calling 211, calling MSP mobile outreach directly at 204-232-5217, or calling 311. Making this contact is the first step in ensuring appropriate assistance for someone needing care.

All outreach programs and partners are invited to this collaboration, including:

- Resource Assistance for Youth
- Downtown Community Safety Partnership
- West Central Women’s Resource Centre
- North End Women’s Centre
- 211
- Public Works (City of Winnipeg)
- Winnipeg Fire and Paramedic Service
- Community Services (City of Winnipeg)

## DOWNTOWN WINNIPEG: WHO IS WELCOME?



Many living unsheltered or precariously housed in the downtown area have been there for years, yet they are encouraged to move along to make space for people who are housed and often are traveling to downtown from another neighbourhood.

Many who are currently unsheltered lived in older hotels closed by circumstance (like a fire) or explicitly (demolished) as a part of the campaign of ‘renewal’. These residents remember having access, despite their meager means, to hotel common areas and other semi-public or public spaces including the Millennium Library that are now closed or only available on reduced hours.

The defunding of public housing and the oversight of downtown developments and development throughout the city have failed to ensure adequate supply of low-income housing. It has effectively been a policy of producing homelessness, and allowing privileged access to available resources to some groups while excluding other groups.

It can be a healthy reminder that all of downtown is a residential area. Regardless of where you live in the city, when you visit downtown, recognize that you are a guest in another person's neighbourhood and that many unsheltered people you meet are long-term residents, who, over time, have been made to feel unwelcome in an area where they live.

It is important to acknowledge that community revitalization can be inclusive and impacts everyone, not just visitors or people driving through. Great examples of this can be seen

with the Downtown Winnipeg BIZ's Downtown Recovery Strategy that included Amoowigamig, a permanent public washroom funded by the City of Winnipeg and operated by Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata that opened its doors in 2022. And we are excited to see the City of Winnipeg moving forward with Centre Plan 2050 which includes supporting a community focused plan to revitalize Thunderbird House and surrounding area including safety, site maintenance, single-room occupancy hotels, litter control with ongoing support and investment. These are concrete steps in the right direction.



## FEDERAL HOUSING ADVOCATE'S REVIEW

In early 2024, the Federal Housing Advocate released its review of homeless encampments. This document starts with a human rights framework – which is the basis of MSP's work with encampments.

*“The right to adequate housing and interconnected rights such as the right to life, are clearly established in international human rights law, including in treaties that Canada has signed and ratified as well as in human rights declarations and other international norms and standards.”*

[The document](#) defines adequate housing as ‘housing that is secure, affordable, habitable, accessible, culturally adequate, in a suitable location, and able to ensure access to basic services.’ It explains that governments have legal obligations to recognize and respect this right and protect against its violation, and these obligations are heightened for those who have experienced prior human rights violations – such as Indigenous Peoples.

Marie-Josée Houle, Canada's housing advocate stated, *“the expansion of homeless encampments across the country is a national human rights crisis that requires immediate action and co-ordination involving all levels of government.”*

While not a sustainable solution for housing, encampments represent an effort by people who are unhoused to claim their human right to

housing and to meet their basic need for shelter.

This review identifies encampments as a direct consequence of Canada's failure to protect and fulfill the right to adequate housing. It discusses the urgent need to protect human rights and reduce the instability of encampment residents' current living conditions until they can access adequate housing options.

This includes an obligation to protect against forced evictions from encampments, which greatly destabilize residents by removing them from their support systems and causing them to lose their personal items, including tools used for their survival.

In this report, the federal government is called on to establish a National Encampments Response plan by August 31, 2024, that will:

- Act immediately to save lives
- End forced evictions of encampments
- Work with all governments and provide support to municipalities
- Respect the rights of Indigenous Peoples
- Offer people permanent housing options as rapidly as possible
- Address the root causes of encampments

# HOW MSP SUPPORTS ENCAMPMENT RESIDENTS



MSP supports people towards success in housing.

For those who have experienced homelessness for a long time, trauma is often a part of their lived experience. Often, people living unsheltered build a significant skill set that will keep them alive while living unsheltered. Part of this skill set is determining whether people they encounter are trustworthy.

The foundation of success in permanent housing involves developing enough trust that someone will feel safe to share their needs and challenges. Acting on misinformation or incomplete information and rushing past the building of trust results in broken relationships and starting again from scratch. It extends the time people live unsheltered, making it more likely they will be unsuccessful in any housing placement we help to secure. The person will have racked up one more negative experience with the system, potentially diminishing their willingness to try again.

MSP's mobile outreach team is comprised of support workers, case managers, peers with lived experience, and Skaabes. Each team member

plays a role in improving immediate safety and well-being of those served, and in supporting a move into successful housing. This includes providing food, water, safe camp supplies and protection from the weather, harm reduction supplies, education and information, connection to ceremony and cultural supports, transportation to health care and other appointments, referrals to needed supports, and transportation to shelter, transitional housing, and permanent housing.

Each element is crucial in building meaningful relationships with people who have been repeatedly disappointed, and who have experienced so much systemic harm and oppression.

Something as simple as offering food and coffee to someone experiencing homelessness lays the groundwork for building critical trust. It's an important piece of the larger scope of work MSP and other outreach partners do to support people in accessing long-term housing.



## LIFE-SAFETY ISSUES IN ENCAMPMENTS

Fire safety, including concerns around carbon monoxide poisoning, is a frequently expressed concern related to housing and encampments.

For those who are housed, a solution to fire safety is to mitigate risk through education, awareness, training and tools.

For people living in encampments, fire safety concerns are often used as a reason to displace them. Fire safety is only one of the many ever-present life-safety issues that people living unsheltered are balancing day to day.

Other threats to life include:

- Limited or no access to medical supports including prescription medication and doctor appointments
- Lost connection to friends and family who provide protection
- Weather and exposure in the heat and cold
- Toxic drug supply and/or limited access to harm reduction supplies, including naloxone

A human rights-based approach to supporting people living unsheltered cautions against encampment displacement, not only because of people's right to be on ancestral homelands/ public lands, but also because when people are displaced, their ability to protect themselves against these life-safety threats is greatly diminished. Connections to people and resources are confused or severed, and people become

much more vulnerable to harm.

We encourage ongoing education and active provision of supports around fire safety with a balance of concern for all threats to life as we work to collaboratively solve challenges with and for people living unsheltered.

## GARBAGE CLEAN-UP INITIATIVE



Garbage removal is a big challenge for people living unsheltered.

Imagine if there was no garbage pick-up where you live and you didn't have access to an easy way to get your garbage to the landfill. What would you do? Garbage removal support is a necessity for all of us and is on a long list of essential supports absent for people living unsheltered that those of us who are housed take for granted.

A [National Protocol for Homeless Encampments in Canada](#) states that *“much of the stigma attached to residents of encampments is a result of governments failing to ensure access to basic services”* and *“the denial of access to water and sanitation by governments constitutes cruel and inhumane treatment and is prohibited under international human rights law.”*

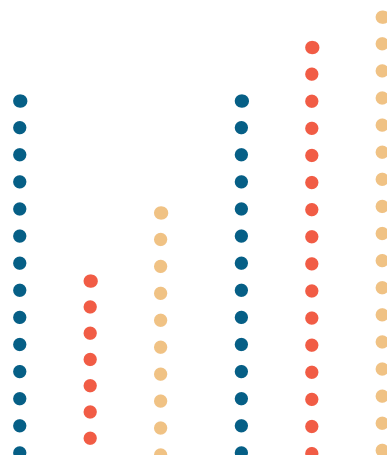
This year, the City of Winnipeg approved funding to support even more attention to garbage pick-up and clean-up associated with encampments. It includes three components:

- Weekly garbage pick-up at three downtown long-time encampment locations
- Increased attention and resources for mindful clean ups (supported cleanups around existing encampments)
- More resources for deep cleans at encampments

Each week, MSP, Public Works, DCSP and Siloam Mission meet to review requests for clean-ups or cleaning jobs that we have observed when doing outreach work. Tasks are assigned, and clean-ups happen throughout the week.

Support for garbage clean-up has always been a part of the Winnipeg Outreach Network's work with encampments. In partnership with the City of Winnipeg, we have organized mindful clean-ups that support clean-up around an active encampment while respecting the living area of the people there. We also arrange for full clean-ups when people have left an encampment and are unlikely to return.

If you've seen an area that could use some extra support with garbage clean-up, contact us at [admin@mainstreetproject.ca](mailto:admin@mainstreetproject.ca), and we'll look into it.





## DIFFERENT TYPES OF HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness isn't a one-size-fits-all issue. There are many different paths to experiencing homelessness, and it's essential to understand the nuances. Let's break it down and look at some definitions and categories of homelessness.

**Chronic homelessness:** Experiencing long-term (six months or more) homelessness often due to physical disabilities, mental health issues or substance use.

**Episodic homelessness:** Facing repeated periods of homelessness, currently living unsheltered and having experienced three or more periods of homelessness in the past year.

**Hidden homelessness:** Living in places not meant for habitation (like cars or abandoned buildings) or relying on temporary arrangements like couch-surfing.

**Imminent risk of homelessness:** Being on the brink of losing their housing due to financial hardship or other factors.

Many of us are closer to homelessness than we realize. With just a few missed pay cheques, we could be at imminent risk of homelessness.

It's a harsh reality that individuals experiencing violence or abuse are often forced into hidden homelessness where they have to choose between living with their abuser or living unsheltered.

Main Street Project focuses on supporting those chronically experiencing homelessness. By building trust and offering essential services like detox, referrals to medical and mental health supports, transitional and supportive housing, and case management, we work towards long-term solutions for people.

## A CONVERSATION ABOUT ENDING HOMELESSNESS



To end homelessness, first we need all levels of the government to invest in affordable public housing and to attend to gaps in healthcare and social services.

In Winnipeg, only [1.4%](#) of all available rental units are vacant. Most of these rental units are priced out of the reach of the people we support. We need affordable public housing. Privately run housing in Manitoba is often either expensive or in poor to deplorable condition, sometimes both, with government entities struggling to hold landlords accountable.

We are concerned with incentives for housing provision through the private sector that transfer

public dollars into private hands. Social housing needs to be owned and managed by the public sector or non-profits where rent is subsidized to ensure low-income households pay no more than 30% of their income on rent. Transferring this public obligation to private landlords has proven to be unsuccessful time and again, and wastes valuable public resources when it comes to the goal of ending homelessness.

Housing First is a recovery-oriented approach

to ending homelessness that centers on quickly moving people experiencing homelessness into housing and providing additional supports and services as needed.

Adapting Housing First approaches so they do not support an individual's right to have choice in their housing decreases their chances for success. Programs that displace people from encampments for very short stays in hotels, stays in uninhabitable places, or stays where they then learn they must apply again to be on a waiting list for housing, leaves participants feeling uncertain and without personal agency and with a feeling of distrust for anyone who says they want to help.

We point to success stories like The Bell that attend to the needs of people who have spent many years living unsheltered. The Bell is an

apartment block that offers 24/7 supports, allows people to tenant who have ongoing mental health concerns, as well as people who use substances, and works to uphold the right to housing regardless of history and circumstance.

Transitional and permanent supportive housing that offers a variety of models to meet different needs, such as mental health supports, harm reduction, sober housing, and communal living, need to be provided and sustained over the long term.

We have so many success stories and positive models active throughout Manitoba that can point the way forward as we continue to work to end homelessness together.



## ARE ENCAMPMENTS SPREADING?

Homelessness is increasing. We are losing housing faster than we are building it, and there are other pressures on available housing.

Climate catastrophe, natural disasters, fires and ongoing human rights breaches experienced by Indigenous people living on reserves and northern communities mean that more people are forced to move to the city without many resources.

We are also seeing displacements of people where they end up having to stay in the city for much longer than originally intended. We can expect more people from rural and northern communities to move to places like Winnipeg along with international refugees who are displaced through climate catastrophe, war and violence. This means that unless we are building temporary accommodations, transitional housing and other housing with supports, we will continue to see an increased gap in housing.

For a long time, many Winnipeggers understood that poverty was concentrated to certain areas

of the city. We are seeing that change as people spread out to find safe and secure locations to survive.

While we work to build more housing, people experiencing homelessness need safe places to stay. Everyone has different needs based on their situation. Some choose places that are more visible or close to human activity like sidewalks or in busier areas of the city for safety reasons, while others may want privacy, access to resources or closeness to friends and family. As homelessness continues to increase, people will keep trying to find places throughout the city that feel the safest to them.

In the short term, we need more supports to provide outreach and to ensure people's safety, while we work to make sure adequate housing is available, so the best option for them isn't an encampment.



# DESIGNATED SPACES FOR ENCAMPMENTS?



We should have housing. Homelessness has become the norm for many people, and instead of fixing this, we talk about managing it.

Some want to designate spaces for encampments with infrastructure for needs like bathroom and heating. Wouldn't it be better to use this investment towards actually housing people?

People living unsheltered should have their basic needs met and be provided more dignity while waiting for better solutions. We advocated for the Amoowigamig public washroom on Main Street, as well as the garbage plan for encampments that is now providing regular garbage pick-up at three encampment sites.

But confining encampments to a designated area ignores personal priorities like proximity to family, and employment for example, using distance between people to create safety, and preferences regarding enclosure/openness of a camp.

It creates more potential for criminalization of people living unsheltered if they are unable to live in designated areas while also complicating human rights law. Essentially, it introduces the argument that public space is for everyone except if you are homeless.

We're concerned about the increasing inequality in who can access public spaces based on their income and social status. For example, public washrooms used to be available for everyone throughout downtown. As they have closed and public places like libraries have reduced their hours, we have a situation where existing washrooms are only available to paying customers. Instead of fixing this, there's a growing conversation about building washrooms specifically for people living unsheltered. This seems like an inefficient application of collective resources.

We need a comprehensive housing plan that can add interim steps to manage the crisis while we work towards the solution of housing for all. This needs to include the voice of those who are staying in encampments, and with the understanding that creating any temporary space will cost more and not work for most of the people living in encampments. We strive to find that balance between investing in emergency services and permanent solutions.



## WHOM TO CALL?

It's always worth a conversation, and we are here to help find creative, consensual solutions!

If you have concerns or questions about people living unsheltered or need some support, please call either 211 or the MSP mobile outreach team directly: 204-232-5217

We are available to provide direct support, including facilitating good neighbour conversations and collaborative problem-solving

when challenges are occurring.

Please keep in mind that Main Street Project does not displace people or move people against their wishes. However, we sometimes facilitate solutions involving people living unsheltered moving from private property onto public property or modifying activities.

## CASE STUDY: NEW SKILLS, NEW ENVIRONMENTS

21

Some of the complications in getting housed are obvious. Income and affordability, references, safety. But some complications are unexpected. When you have built a skill set around surviving being unhoused, this can catch you by surprise.

MSP has the privilege of helping people move from many years of experiencing homelessness to transitional or permanent housing every week.

Recently, we helped a young woman who was so excited to have her own bathroom that she gasped out loud when she saw the clean tub in her new apartment.

When it came to her move in day, though, she became very frightened. She has learned that safety means sleeping in open spaces where she can see far around her, whether outdoors or in a big shelter space. Safety also means being around people she trusts, and this was a bachelor unit.

For a few days, she was unable to move in, wondering how she would stay safe in such an

unfamiliar setting.

MSP staff worked to problem solve with her. We invited her to bring a friend into the space with her. We introduced her to others living in her building. Slowly, she got used to the idea and a week later she decided to move in.

It isn't always this easy. For some, the learning curve is simply too steep, or we can't provide the adaptations that some need. Often a person needs a few tries over time to finally find what works.

MSP team members continue to work with the young woman, helping her get settled into her new home, ensuring she feels she's a part of the community.

22

## CASE STUDY: INEQUALITY IN HOUSING

There are other situations that can negatively impact a person's experience of accessing housing, including systemic oppression and racial discrimination. Here is a story from an MSP case manager about housing a participant she works with.

*"One community member with whom I had the privilege of working, was on a path of self-healing and residing in a transitional housing unit when we first met. He was motivated to reconnect with his culture, family, and identity and committed to having more stability in his life, including housing, by collaboratively working with the system and Main Street Project.*

*Initially, we secured the provincial top-up benefit for him, and our spirits were high as we pursued*

*viewings for properties he was interested in. The properties were in an area that he thought he would enjoy living in and were well within his budget.*

*However, he faced discriminatory remarks from landlords during these viewings. On one occasion, when we attended a viewing together, he made an effort to dress meticulously to avoid judgment, a concern unfortunately familiar to those who experience racial discrimination.*

*Despite the landlord's initial positive demeanor, it shifted once it became clear we were there on his behalf, with the landlord stating, "There are many applicants for this unit. I'm not sure if it's still available. You'll need to check with property management."*

*Around this time, the participant was regrettably evicted from his transitional housing unit for missing a single night of stay. Following this, he began couch surfing, and his motivation shifted dramatically from a high point to a place of deep struggle. During this period, he required increased mental health support from his workers. Simultaneously, his EIA benefits were discontinued for several months because the EIA*

*worker was never satisfied with the documentation provided, despite his repeated efforts to meet those requirements.*

*Amidst these systemic challenges, which seemed designed to thwart his progress, he is facing a profound uncertainty surrounding his basic need for housing."*

This is a deeply frustrating and challenging situation for the participant and case manager to work through. MSP remains committed to supporting the participant in accessing housing but this story demonstrates that a person can take the necessary steps and do things "right" and still be denied access to housing through no fault of their own.

## SOCIAL CHANGE TAKES ALL OF US



Thank you for following along with this series, and participating in meaningful and respectful dialogue.

We want this series to contribute to ongoing policy shift towards upholding the rights and dignity of all Winnipeggers. We hope you will share what you have learned here with your friends and family, and work to educate your political leaders on next steps.

Some suggestions on what you can do:

- Challenge inaccurate stereotypes about people experiencing homelessness, people

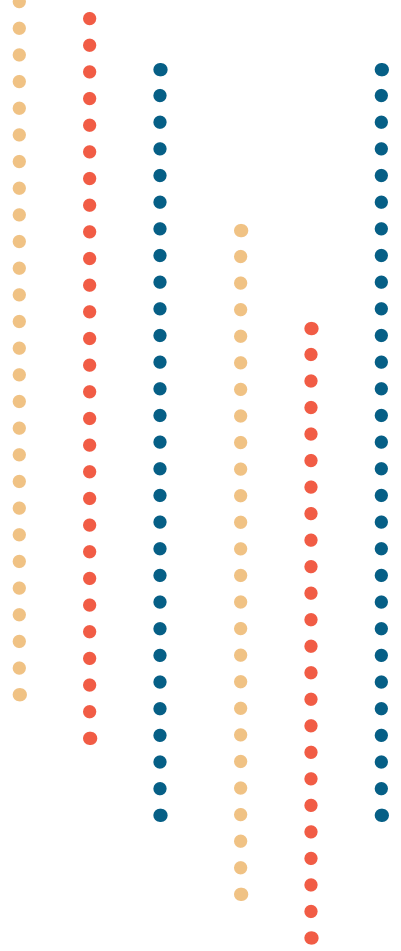
who use drugs, people living with mental health issues – speak up when you hear messages that are uninformed.

- Hold political leaders accountable for their words and actions, and encourage others to do the same
- Read, read, read! We have made many documents available at the beginning on this document.

## LET'S CONNECT

If you have found some meaning in this series and want to learn more about the work Main Street Project does to support people experiencing homelessness, check out our website and social media and please reach out to us to schedule a presentation.

Email us at [admin@mainstreetproject.ca](mailto:admin@mainstreetproject.ca) to coordinate this with our team.



**General Inquiries:**  
Main Street Project  
661 Main Street  
Winnipeg, MB R3B 1E3  
[admin@mainstreetproject.ca](mailto:admin@mainstreetproject.ca)  
[www.mainstreetproject.ca](http://www.mainstreetproject.ca)

