

“In honour of the village we have today”

Co-creating a Housing Solutions Lab for Indigenous youth aging out of care in Winnipeg

By Darrien Morton, Zoë Mager, Michael Redhead Champagne, Nigaanii Wabiski Mikanak Ogichidaa

Summary

Youth involved in the child welfare system in Manitoba are aging out of foster care and into situations of precarious housing and homelessness at astonishing rates. A cross-cultural and intergenerational collective of planners, researchers, and urban Indigenous youth in Winnipeg joined together to lead a social innovation lab to address this issue through a systems-thinking approach. This article shares some key learnings and takeaways from the lab. It examines how this process has centred the strengths, aspirations, and needs of the community while examining barriers to housing that Indigenous youth in Winnipeg face as they age out of care.

Sommaire

Les jeunes pris en charge par le système de protection de l'enfance au Manitoba quittent les foyers d'accueil et se retrouvent à un rythme effarant dans des situations de logement précaire et d'itinérance. Un collectif interculturel et intergénérationnel d'urbanistes, de chercheurs et de jeunes autochtones urbains de Winnipeg s'est réuni pour diriger un laboratoire d'innovation sociale afin de s'attaquer à ce problème par une approche systémique. Cet article présente certains des principaux enseignements et points à retenir du laboratoire. Il examine comment ce processus s'est centré sur les forces, les aspirations et les besoins de la communauté tout en examinant les obstacles au logement auxquels sont confrontés les jeunes autochtones de Winnipeg lorsqu'ils cessent d'être pris en charge.

I. Rebuilding the village for Indigenous youth aging out of care in Winnipeg

Winnipeg, Manitoba has one of the highest proportions of urban Indigenous residents living in a major Canadian city (12%) including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, and almost half that population is under 24 years old.¹ Although many individuals and families frequently travel between cities and rural 'home communities' or reserves, which are important when upholding kinship, ancestral, and cultural ties, neighborhoods such as Winnipeg's North End (and by extension Winnipeg's inner city) have become culturally recognized places of belonging with a historical and ongoing Indigenous presence.

Although Winnipeg is home to multi-generational Indigenous families, Indigenous youth (under the age of 18) are drastically overrepresented in the child welfare system in Manitoba, accounting for 90% of the approximately 11,000 children in care in the province.² Involvement in child welfare often leads to homelessness, unemployment, contact with the criminal justice system, and poor health and educational outcomes upon aging out of foster care.³⁻⁵ The *2018 Winnipeg Street Census* reported that 51.5% of people experiencing homelessness had been in the care of child welfare at some point, with the majority self-identifying as Indigenous. Among respondents, 62.4% reported experiencing homelessness within one year of leaving care, signaling inadequate transitional housing supports.⁴ These negative outcomes related to child welfare apprehension and homelessness are implicated in historical and ongoing legacies of colonization, racism, and land dispossession.⁶

In the mid-1980s, the leadership of North End grandmothers and women established culturally-safe community spaces that evolved into Indigenous-led organizations, or 'The Village.' In the heart of Winnipeg, this community is made up of several Indigenous-led organizations, collectives, and gathering spaces that are (re)constructing a sense of cultural and political identity, giving Indigenous communities a means to assume local control and revitalize Indigenous lifeways in cities.

Such stories of grief and resilience demonstrate how major policy gaps, and the failure to meaningfully engage Indigenous communities in policy processes, continue to fail Indigenous youth aging out of care when accessing transitional housing supports.

The Village provides a promising opportunity for urban Indigenous communities to enact collective notions of self-determination, empowerment, and racial equity, especially among those pursuing cross-cultural and intergenerational collaborations with Indigenous youth to address housing insecurity, homelessness, and community wellness.

The recent and popular rhetoric of "Reconciliation" in Canada has so far resulted in minimal efforts to simply include and hear the voices of Indigenous communities without fundamentally changing Indigenous-settler relationships, healing from historical injustices together, and redistributing resources equitably. In contrast, the practice of village-building instructs us to actively engage in these processes by shifting power in tangible ways.

II. Engaging in cross-cultural and intergenerational collaborations in the village

During the fall of 2018, a collaboration of community planners from HTFC Planning & Design and youth leaders from Aboriginal Youth Opportunities Movement (AYO!) were granted National Housing Strategy funding to host and convene an 18-month Housing Solutions Lab (HSL) by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC). Solutions Labs (also called social innovation labs) bring together diverse stakeholders using systems and design thinking to address complex problems through research, experimentation, and prototyping. This work was based on the foundation of strong community relationships and the village-building work that AYO! has been committed to over the past decade.

Upon inviting the Nigaanii Wabiski Mikanak Ogichidaa (NWMO) collective (a group of community-based Indigenous youth researchers), Fearless R2W (an Indigenous-led organization dedicated to education and advocacy for families involved in the child welfare system), and a social innovation coach through SHIFT Collaborative to become part of the Lab Leadership Team, the group agreed to focus on the urgent need to support housing solutions for Indigenous youth aging out of care in Winnipeg. These partnerships have evolved through years of ongoing relationship-building and collaborative work. The partnership brought together capacity to navigate the process



Figure 2. Housing Solutions Lab Guiding principles.

of accessing funding, following a social lab model, and providing administrative support that ensured that AYO! could bring the work to the community-level and create space for youth-leadership and direction.

Leveraging existing networks and gathering places within the Village, the Lab convened participants with lived experience (youth in care, aging out of care and those aged out of care), and those working 'within the system' (caregivers, case workers, administrators, policy makers) and 'around the system' (advocates, organizers, housing professionals, knowledge-keepers).

The Lab was guided by seven key principles developed by the Lab Leadership Team (see **Figure 2**) to ensure that the process was grounded in Indigenous worldviews and culturally-safe practices. The Housing Solutions Lab encompassed five distinct yet overlapping phases to ensure the applicability and uptake of solutions. These phases include: Definition, Discovery, Development, Prototyping/Testing, and Roadmapping.

Throughout every phase, multiple engagement methods were included, and learnings were tracked by the Lab Leadership Team through an iterative developmental evaluation process guided by the Social Innovation Coach. By remaining adaptive when responding to complex problems, the Solutions Lab methodology remained flexible and open to change. These methods and tools ranged from interviewing, meetings, systems-mapping, prototyping teams, talking circles, ceremonies, research training, and community engagement and consultation through existing gatherings in the Village.



Figure 1. Mural/Vigil in Winnipeg's North End for Tina Fontaine, who went missing and was murdered while in the care of the Child Welfare System.

III. ARROWS youth engagement strategy

“Committing to [absolute] integrity from the very beginning means we are showing the young people we work with respect. By starting the relationship with such an act of respect, we build the foundation of our relationship.” – Michael Champagne & Jenna Wirch, 2013.⁷

Stories that were heard and witnessed throughout the Lab point to an apparent absence of culture-based housing that prioritizes notions of “family” or “kinship.” Success in securing housing is predominantly based on a narrow interpretation of what it means to successfully transition to young adulthood, which youth may not achieve given

systemic factors and life circumstances. It is more than just finding housing but about finding (re)connection with self, kin, community, culture, and land.⁸

As allies and relatives, it is our responsibility not only to improve housing access and options for Indigenous youth, but to ensure they are also active collaborators that envision, co-create, and mobilize shared solutions. Such perspectives are indispensable to enliven different visions of a world upholding *mino-bimaadiziwin* (Anishinaabe)/*mino-pimatisiwin* (Ininew/Cree) – a concept applied through this collaborative work, meaning: ‘to live a good life’.

While the Solutions Lab employed many engagement frameworks and approaches, the Lab Leadership Team chose to amplify the *ARROWS Youth Engagement Strategy*, which was developed in 2010 by AYO! as a strategy promoting youth leadership and engagement during service-delivery decision-making, and can be adapted to various decision-making contexts. (See **Figure 4.**)

The Lab Leadership Team and broader Lab ecosystem were made up of participants – Indigenous and non-Indigenous – of many different ages, races, abilities, genders, sexual orientations, lived experiences and socio-economic backgrounds, including planners, researchers, community partners, storycatchers, helpers and the Village. By prioritizing rotational (shared) leadership through the cross-cultural and intergenerational Lab Leadership Team, ARROWS guided the team when navigating the complex, and sometimes uncertain, journeys that must be taken to address wicked problems requiring complex solutions.

IV. Outcomes

The Lab process cumulated in many key learnings including those shared above, as well as multiple prototypes of solutions that were tested throughout the second half of the process (and continue to be tested).

Prototypes chosen for testing include:

- An “Aging Out Party” rites of passage celebration.
- An empathy board game to help those working in the system to understand barriers faced by youth in care.
- An intergenerational kinship support initiative to provide community support and advocacy to youth aging out and dedicated transitional housing.
- A “one stop shop” website to provide all the information that youth may need before/after/during their process of aging out of the child welfare system.
- A social housing system-navigation guide.

At the time when this article is being written, many of the prototypes are still in the iterative process of testing and revision, with a roadmap to move forward on implementation being developed for suitable prototypes.

Other outcomes of the process include:

- Deeper analysis and increased awareness of youth homelessness and housing insecurity among Indigenous youth aging out of care.



Figure 3. Housing Solutions Lab launch at Meet Me at the Bell Tower in Winnipeg’s North End.

ARROWS Youth Engagement Strategy:	
ACCESS	Meets youth ‘where they are at’ in ways that are accessible (e.g., location, language, engagement style, etc.).
RESOURCES	Provide resources to serve the immediate health, safety, and wellness needs of youth (e.g., food, shelter, social support, training, etc.) before presenting opportunities.
RELATIONSHIPS	Build meaningful and trusting relationships with youth beyond what is expected by policies and programs, but based on responsibilities and shared commitments.
OPPORTUNITIES	Provide youth with existing or new opportunities to share their gifts and contribute to meaningful activities and goals. They may equally choose to redefine, reject, or terminate these opportunities and say “No.”
WELCOMING	Create a welcoming space that facilitates dialogue, compassion, and shared learning, and action.
SUPPORT	Offer continued support for youth to nurture their gifts and pursue their aspirations.

Figure 4. The ARROWS Youth Engagement Strategy

- Leveraged and extended previous housing solutions identified among relevant stakeholders and outlined in the *Here and Now: The Winnipeg Plan to End Youth Homelessness* report (2018).
- Enhanced relationships, networks, and collaborations through information gathering, sharing, and collaborative action.
- Enhanced community leadership through Fearless R2W by developing organizational capacity, centring and increasing supports and advocacy resources for youth aging out of care, and informing the development of a kinship-based 'Wâkôhtowin Policy'.
- Enhanced research capacity-building among Indigenous community-based organizations and youth researchers.
- Significant learning through prototypes addressing complex and multifaceted systems level challenges.

Engaging urban Indigenous communities within Canadian housing contexts leads to an undeniable conclusion: there is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all approach to engagement. Based on lessons learned, this work demonstrates the potential for urban Indigenous communities, and youth in particular, to collaborate on housing innovation initiatives. These lessons are also transferable across diverse planning and engagement processes, calling for more time, consideration, and attention to be devoted to determine what meaningful community engagement looks like for each individual community and process.

Learnings from this Lab process also show that, in spite of urgent needs to engage in cross-cultural and intergenerational partnerships, planners and researchers must maintain the awareness that even well-intentioned efforts have the potential to burden, disrupt, and tokenize community aspirations toward Indigenous self-determination and racial equity. Working toward professional standards of equitable cross-cultural collaboration requires this work to be rooted in a deeper understanding of a shared history and co-existence within Canada, and the fortification of good relationships and shared action. This requires a commitment to invest (both financially and emotionally) in working together for the long term to create better outcomes for all community members. It also requires this work to view people who are experiencing homelessness and housing



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insecurity as relatives and community members. However, as the Village reminds us, when engaging urban Indigenous communities in research, planning, and housing development: "There is nothing about us, without us."

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Nigaanii Wabiski Mikanak Ogichidaa

are a Winnipeg-based collective of community-based Indigenous youth researchers and organizers (storycatchers).

Endnotes

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