

MEETING
IN THE
MIDDLE
FOURTH
ANNUAL
GATHERING
SUMMARY REPORT

2022



Land Acknowledgement for Toronto



We acknowledge that our work takes place on the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. We also acknowledge that Toronto is covered by Treaty 13 signed with the Mississaugas of the Credit, and the Williams Treaty signed with multiple Mississaugas and Chippewa bands.



“...the idea of the ethical space, produced by contrasting perspectives of the world, entertains the notion of a meeting place, or initial thinking about a neutral zone between entities or cultures. The space offers a venue to step out of our allegiances, to detach from the cages of our mental worlds and assume a position where human-to-human dialogue can occur.”

- **Elder Willie Ermine, Ethical Space¹**



¹ Ermine, Willie. 2007. The Ethical Space of Engagement, *Indigenous Law Journal*, 193-203.

Introduction

This document is a summary of the 4th *Meeting in the Middle* Annual Gathering that took place on Monday, November 28, 2022 at Evergreen Brickworks. The gathering is a commitment between the Toronto Indigenous Community Advisory Board (TICAB) and the City of Toronto Shelter, Support and Housing Administration (SSHA) Division to come together and openly discuss relationship building, and progress toward collective goals. It is also an opportunity to identify new goals toward stronger relationships and actions toward eliminating Indigenous homelessness in Toronto. The work is rooted in and reflects the seven commitments in the 2018 [*Meeting in the Middle Engagement Strategy Action Plan \(Meeting in the Middle\)*](#).



Culture and Ceremony

Each year TICAB and SSHA agree to hold a gathering that is inclusive of Indigenous ceremonial and cultural protocols to honour and demonstrate the importance of building strong relationships and taking action to end Indigenous homelessness in Toronto. This year's gathering was opened with a blessing by Knowledge Keeper, Larry Frost. Aaron Bowerman, an Indigenous Youth Research Associate with SSHA walked the group through a smudging ceremony. Gord Tanner, General Manager of SSHA, offered a land

acknowledgment and reflection. The gathering was facilitated by Crystal Basi (settler with Haudenosaunee ancestry) who utilized a sharing circle format to facilitate the session. Cultural teachings such as the Seven Grandfather (Seven Sacred) Teachings were utilized to guide the process. The gathering ended with a Bundle Exchange between SSHA and TICAB, and a closing by Suzanne Brunelle, Senator of the Toronto & York Métis Council.

Impact of *Meeting in the Middle*

Participants were asked to share stories that spoke to the impact of the relationships, commitments, and actions formed through *Meeting in the Middle*. Some stories dated back to the initial action planning in 2017, while other were more recent. Below is a summary of the reflective thinking of the participants:

Participants confirmed that relationships have come a long way since 2017 and that progress has been made. Much of the progress is due to the commitment to a strengthened relationship and being of “the same mind”. Participants reflected on the initial two day gathering at the Waterfront Neighbourhood Centre where TICAB members and SSHA got to know each other and ask the difficult questions of what needed to change in the relationship and how to move forward. One participant likened the initial meeting to speed dating! Today, we’re still “dating” and getting to know each other. The relationships are real – there will still be arguments but the relationships are strong enough that each group can “kiss and make up”.

Participants reflected on the necessity of sharing the commitments made during the initial meetings so that new staff will understand the importance of these relationships and continue the commitments. One SSHA participant reflected that the commitments have allowed them to see things from a different lens now and if affects how they interact with other partners.

A TICAB member suggested that *Meeting in the Middle* is a model that other City of Toronto divisions can look to. It has resulted in requests for presentations from other municipalities.

There was also sharing from Indigenous people working at SSHA. The strong communication and accountability that has come from the commitments and gatherings creates a safer space to work in: “... to have the same ability to be part of such great work that’s being done in the city for our people is something I’m very grateful for.”

One SSHA staff commented on the desire to return to in-person meetings once it is safe to do so. Building informal relationships and interactions before and after meetings were seen to be important in moving the collective work forward. Both SSHA and TICAB expressed similar feelings of wanting to plan a more significant Annual Gathering in 2023, to mark the 5th Anniversary of the *Meeting in the Middle*.

Meeting in the Middle was also seen as very useful in helping the City to meet hiring commitments. “We have something to go back to and say this is something we have been articulating in the work plan.”



Reflecting on the Previous Year

TICAB and SSHA reviewed what they stated they needed from each other in the third annual gathering in 2021 and reflected on the progress made to date based on the collective goals set out in the previous year. Below is a summary of the reflections, categorized under the seven commitments found in *Meeting in the Middle*.



Please view Appendix I for detailed description of the Seven Commitments found in Meeting in the Middle.

Commitment 1: Cultural Knowledge

[quote] "This has been a year of deep learning" – SSHA staff

SSHA meetings reflect not just the importance of acknowledging the land but internal reflections on the commitments as well.

As part of the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation initiatives, SSHA was gifted by Elder Gary Sault, in consultation with Elder Grandmother Dorothy Peters, the Anishinaabemowin name Baawaam mowinnaan gaa ozhisaygin "Dreams of Visions" for its main boardroom, a place to ground staff and have strategic planning. Having Elders open and close key internal and external meetings was an example of meaningful work.

SSHA highlighted that Indigenous Affairs Office has been tremendous in their support and helping SSHA specifically incorporate Indigenous cultural aspects, as part of daily thoughts and decision making.

TICAB members have noted that SSHA staff have come out to Indigenous events in the community and this is welcome and encouraged. Experiential and community knowledge counts for a lot.

Commitment 2: Holistic Practices

The need for on-going commitment to the process was observed:

“You can’t learn everything in four years and it has to be an on-going concerted effort to continue to absorb and continue to have opportunities ... there’s always going to be an influx of people who haven’t had the benefit of this cultural knowledge. You can’t expect the people working at SSHA to be the teachers...there has to be a way to work with the community and marry these things together.”

Commitment 3: Capacity Building

One TICAB member noted that since participating in the Reaching Home Directives related to Coordinated Access, the By-Name-List, and the common assessment tool, they have been able to access funding and opportunities which has benefited communities significantly. Collectively they have been able to house a significant number of Indigenous people in a short amount of time as a result of their participation and buy-in.

The co-development and implementation of the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit program with TICAB has been successful. The take up has been strong and had led to further housing opportunities and leveraging opportunities.

TICAB members expressed need for wrap around supports to keep people housed. This includes finance counselling, substance use and other supports. One person doing tenant support isn’t enough. There’s concern around burn out or, “recruitment” whereby the organization must start again to train a new person”. One TICAB member specifically expressed that there needs to be just as much funding and effort put into Indigenous recruitment at the community level to support job retention internally within Indigenous organizations, as there is at the City.

Commitment 4: Decision-Making

One TICAB member suggested, “When it comes to decision-making, I think we jumped really far ahead in a short amount of time”. It was noted that Indigenous decision-making is critical because these organizations have the connections to the people experiencing homelessness and Indigenous communities. SSHA's 20% allocation of homelessness grants funding for Indigenous providers, as well as an independent review committee involving participation from SSHA staff was highlighted. “The funds helped build capacity and practice self-determination”.

Coordinated Access was identified as an area where there has been a number of successes. SSHA mentioned the success of co-developing, with a subcommittee of TICAB, the Service Triage, Assessment, and Referral Support (STARS) common assessment tool. Supporting the hiring of an Indigenous artist to create a poster to

illustrate the assessment tool was also a success. The work SSHA and the TICAB Coordinated Access subcommittee are doing to move towards Indigenous data sovereignty with the By-Name List by having a shared Program Coordinator position, was identified as a positive first step forward in self-determination.

SSHA staff identified post-pandemic planning as a challenge that they would like to address in the upcoming year, specifically, connecting Indigenous people and providers and transitioning from the COVID-19 temporary sites. It was noted that one challenge is finding the time to strategize and be proactive about how to be Indigenous-focused in post-pandemic responses.

TICAB members agreed that there was a lack of engagement with Indigenous organizations when new COVID-19 response sites were opened. Staff from Indigenous organizations experienced some frustration in not being able to provide culturally appropriate supports to Indigenous people staying in these sites. Change in shelter staff and removal of flyers were given as examples that made providing services difficult.

SSHA staff noted that more strategic conversations should occur at TICAB meetings related to shared work, recognizing that the agenda is already quite full and look for other spaces to have conversations about programmatic or implementation conversations.

TICAB members encouraged the continued inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in SSHA reports.

Commitment 5: Employment Opportunities

SSHA staff recognized Indigenous employees have been very helpful in providing new or different perspectives. They reiterated the need for more hiring.

TICAB members noted the importance of understanding that, 'lived experience' for Indigenous people may not have the same connotation for non-Indigenous people. People with lived experience are staff who have a passion for working in the area of homelessness. Many Indigenous people have lived experiences and sit on Boards or are in management.

Commitment 6: Leverage Opportunities

There was an understanding that building more housing requires a collaboration with the City's Housing Secretariat with whom this mandate sits. This will help move beyond the theoretical to building housing, especially housing that meets the needs of different nations. An example was provided that the Haudenosaunee way is to live closer to the earth and not in apartment buildings.

There was an acknowledgement that all social support organizations need to be supported in their own capacity building to address the needs of people being housed.

Organizations need to understand and work in concert toward the goals of *Meeting in the Middle*. “Leading the band and having no one following behind doesn’t make for a very good parade”.

Commitment 7: Reviewing Relationships

Having SSHA meetings online has meant that it is easier to reach a wider group of staff to educate on commitments to *Meeting in the Middle*. “I should be able to pick up and run with this because of all the work that has been done...we’ve had the opportunity to gain that knowledge.”

Goal Setting for the Next Six Months to a Year

Using the seven commitments as general categories, participants were asked where action should be focused for the upcoming year.



Please view Appendix I for detailed description of the Seven Commitments found in Meeting in the Middle.

Commitment 1: Cultural Knowledge

- Focus on mandatory Indigenous Awareness Training for SSHA staff. Ensuring close to 100% of staff are trained in Introduction to Indigenous Learning in 2023 is an achievable target. At the same time ensuring learning is an ongoing commitment for SSHA.

Commitment 2: Holistic Practices

- Continue the work of learning from Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers, holistic perspectives and engaging in community.
- More co-development of programs and not just engagement.
- The upcoming City of Toronto reconciliation audit may lead to a better understanding of the City's policies and practices and where we can improve.

Commitment 3: Capacity Building

- Look at creating space to have strategic discussions and then also space for implementation and programmatic discussions. "Maybe 2023 is the year we look at how to organize those conversations".

Commitment 4: Decision-making

- Greater focus on early engagement and early development, starting with TICAB. "From the moment an idea is born, is the moment our Indigenous Partners should be engaged".
- Finding time to have strategic discussion around the COVID-19 Shelter Transition Plan. "TICAB and the work is so busy, how do we meaningfully get the time to have these conversations?"
- SSHA will keep TICAB updated about the reconciliation audit conducted by the City and any outcomes will be shared with TICAB. One TICAB member noted that they anticipate SSHA will set the bar for other City divisions.

Commitment 5: Employment Opportunities

- Further focus on removing barriers within the hiring focus by having positions that work in conjunction with both SSHA and TICAB. An example highlighted is Aboriginal Labour Force Development Circle (ALFDC) hiring an Indigenous person into a position that is shared with SSHA to fill in gaps in knowledge and to integrate Indigenous perspectives into the work.

Commitment 6: Leveraging Opportunities

- No additional objectives identified.

Commitment 7: Reviewing Relationships

- TICAB and SSHA to review the *Meeting in the Middle* Accountability Statements. Recommendations from the City's Reconciliation Action Plan audit will be valuable.

Appendix A: Participants and Contributors

Report prepared by:

Crystal Basi, Facilitator

Participant List:

Cultural Knowledge Support

Larry Frost, Knowledge Keeper

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Toronto Indigenous Community Advisory Board

Brenda Aviles, Assistant General Manager, Wigwamen Incorporated

Crystal Samms, Gabriel Dumont Non-Profit Homes Inc.

Frances Sanderson, Executive Director, Nishnawbe Homes Inc.

Lindsay Kretschmer, Executive Director, Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council

Lorna Lawrence, Executive Director, Miziwe Biik Development Corporation

Steve Teekens, Executive Director, Na-Me-Res

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Toronto Indigenous Community Entity

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