

MEETING
IN THE
MIDDLE
FIFTH
ANNUAL
GATHERING
SUMMARY REPORT

2023



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.



Introduction

This *Meeting in the Middle 5th Annual Gathering Summary Report* is an overview of the five-year celebration that took place on Friday, February 9, 2024, at the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto. This special event, jointly organized between the Toronto Indigenous Community Advisory Board (TICAB) and the City of Toronto Shelter and Support Services (TSSS) Division, celebrated and reviewed the last five years since the launch of the [Meeting in the Middle Engagement Strategy and Action Plan](#).

Meeting in the Middle was co-created in 2018 to foster a better relationship between TSSS and Indigenous partners in the housing and homelessness sector. Through the commitment to come together annually, this gathering was an opportunity to assess the past year, celebrate the past five years, renew the seven commitments outlined in *Meeting in the Middle*, and to identify actions to more meaningfully address Indigenous homelessness in Toronto.



Overview of the Five-Year Celebration

The *Meeting in the Middle 5th Annual Gathering* was presented as a hybrid meeting, with TSSS and TICAB leadership meeting in-person at the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto from 12 pm until 4 pm, and an invitation to TSSS and Indigenous partners' staff to view the five-year celebration online starting at 1 pm. Over 100 staff viewed the gathering virtually. A celebratory lunch was served at the beginning of the in-person

event allowing people to connect, casually share stories, and to enjoy the relationships that were created between TSSS and TICAB members.



Culture and Ceremony

While continuing the commitment to hold a gathering that is inclusive of Indigenous ceremonial and cultural protocols and to demonstrate the importance of building strong relationships and taking action to end Indigenous homelessness in Toronto, this gathering held a few additional ceremonies to honour the last five years.

The five-year gathering opened with a performance of songs and hand drums by the Red Bear Singers, followed by an opening and blessing by Grandfather, Larry Frost. Grandfather Frost and Aaron Bowerman, an Indigenous Youth Research Associate with TSSS, walked everyone through a smudging ceremony. Steve Teekens, Chair of TICAB, followed by Gord Tanner, General Manager of TSSS provided opening remarks.

To commemorate the five-year milestone, an Indigenous Youth Artist was hired to create [A Five Years At-A-Glance video](#), which was played during the gathering, highlighting the significant accomplishments over the past five years to improve outcomes for Indigenous people experiencing homelessness in Toronto.

The gathering was facilitated by Lindsay Kretschmer, who guided the group through prompted reflections of the past year. The gathering ended with a Bundle Exchange between TSSS and TICAB, and a closing by Grandfather, Larry Frost. Steve Teekens provided a drumming ceremony.



Celebrating Our Five-Year Relationship

To start off the afternoon activities, participants were first asked to share stories about their experience of being part of *Meeting in the Middle*. Below is a summary of the reflections from the participants:

In the past five years, “we have become a unified community” and together, have worked in a better way to manage and support Indigenous people experiencing homelessness. Through this “great partnership,” we have created more programs and services for Indigenous people and have engaged more Indigenous service providers.

Highlighting the reflections was the acknowledgement of matching 25% of all housing opportunities to Indigenous people experiencing homelessness through the Rapid Rehousing Initiative and PATHS program: “as it was only two years ago that we were at

11%”, and through the strong partnerships with the Housing Secretariat, “we also achieved 20% in grant funding with an \$8.67 million Indigenous funding stream.”

TICAB members reflected on the impact of the Rapid Rehousing Initiative and how the program affected many people they serve: “it is an amazing housing program that has housed so many people in such a short amount of time.” Along with this recognition, was the understanding that there is a strong need for more wrap around services and supports moving forward.

Participants also expressed excitement about the opening of the new Twin Turtles Indigenous Youth Shelter, operated by Native Child and Family Services of Toronto. The shelter program supports the *Meeting in the Middle* commitment related to capacity building through the creation of culturally based, Indigenous-specific services for Indigenous youth experiencing homelessness in Toronto. “It’s exciting to see NCFST grow their programming.”

TSSS staff were thankful for the support from TICAB helping to co-develop an Indigenous Homelessness Health Services Framework. The document highlights the work that took place by Indigenous service providers during the pandemic around health services. “It captures all of our hard work and what we want to do moving forward, but it also should be used as an advocacy tool with the different levels of government, to show what else needs to happen.”

In the end, participants were proud to be a part of *Meeting in the Middle*, acknowledging that it is “such a strong piece of work that was co-developed” and look forward to continuing the work. There were many “shout outs” for TSSS teams and Indigenous partners in the housing and homelessness sector for their work and their involvement in supporting *Meeting in the Middle*.

Facilitated Discussion

Participants were lead through discussions about the past year, and the progress that was made towards the *Meeting in the Middle* commitments and actions. These discussions were designed to intentionally reflect on the previous years’ collective goals, identify areas for improvement, and set new hopes and dreams for the future.

What Went Well?

The first part of the discussions focused on what went well. Using sticky notes, participants were asked to reflect and identify the *Meeting in the Middle* commitments they engaged in during the past year, and what actions or progress towards the commitments worked well.

A common theme throughout the discussions was the strengthened relationships between TSSS and the Indigenous community and partners. Participants commented

that through “collaboration, respectful listening, reflection” and a dedication to moving forward, we were able to provide much needed services and supports for Indigenous people experiencing homelessness. We have worked together to establish strong “lines of communication” with the promise to continue to “take care of our relationship.”

These relationships brought many opportunities and successes in the past year. The opening of the Twin Turtles Indigenous Youth Shelter, the partnership with the Coordinated Access team and the Rapid Rehousing Initiative “led to an increase in successful housing outcomes.” Participants also highlighted the allied work that successfully resulted in 20% Indigenous homelessness grants funding through a Memorandum of Understanding.

Strong partnerships helped to establish Indigenous-specific targets through programs like the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit (COHB), the Rapid Rehousing program, Priority Access to Housing and Supports (PATHS), Supportive Housing, and Rent Bank which “helped to reduce barriers to housing” for Indigenous people. Through Indigenous partners’ support, TSSS was able to hire more Indigenous staff and provide ongoing cultural learning and development opportunities for all TSSS staff.

Both TSSS and TICAB members reflected on the *Meeting in the Middle* model and how it is “recognized and requested by other municipalities and Indigenous organizations.” Over the past five years, it has been a model for collaboration and building strong relationships with Indigenous partners: “That’s such a good thing and that’s such a huge thing to be proud of.”

Participants highlighted the importance of engaging with TICAB early in all programming and policy development. Engaging with Indigenous partners and providing monthly updates to TICAB, has built the relationship that it is today: “the fact that we are here and doing this in the fifth year, is an indication that something is going well.”



What Could Have Improved?

For the second part of the discussions, participants were asked to identify the *Meeting in the Middle* actions or areas that need improvement, and to identify what could have been done differently to better meet commitments during the past year.

TICAB members acknowledged the increased demand for shelter beds as a result of asylum seekers arriving in Toronto, and that while all city shelters try to support this demand, it impacts their ability to provide shelter space to Indigenous people experiencing homelessness. Furthermore, Indigenous providers felt they were unable to support the refugee population appropriately: “I’m thankful that we’re able to help some of these guys in our shelters but they are not our shelter users.” In addition, TICAB members expressed frustration with the delayed opening of the new Indigenous men’s shelter: “I’m so excited that it’s getting closer... we desperately need more beds.”

TSSS staff discussed the challenge of recruiting Indigenous staff at the City: “We worked with our Indigenous partners around the recruitment process to hire... and we were really challenged to get someone who identified as First Nations, Inuit, or Métis in the role.” Both TSSS and TICAB members recognized the necessity to increase the workforce for Indigenous people in government roles.

Participants also highlighted the need to improve the cultural learning and development for all TSSS staff and noted that some staff are still not aware of Indigenous history and cultural issues. Discussions included a recommendation for new TSSS staff to participate in Indigenous cultural awareness training during the onboarding process, and TSSS to continue to provide cultural learning and development for all staff.



Both TSSS and TICAB participants felt that more relationship-building and collaborative work needs to be done to better understand the program and service needs for Indigenous people experiencing homelessness. Participants identified the need for more Indigenous-specific services and supports, especially people with mental health issues, women, and children. Areas for improvement also included Indigenous-specific

housing resources, Indigenous community outreach and cultural needs assessments at encampments.

Dreams for the Work Ahead?

For the final part of the discussions, participants were asked to reflect on their future dreams and goals for *Meeting in the Middle*, including which commitments and actions they would like to see change and develop, to further strengthen our partnerships and help support Indigenous people experiencing homelessness.

One of the key challenges identified by TSSS participants was the restrictiveness of government processes, hindering the ability to work with the community in the best possible way. It was noted that this was the reason *Meeting in the Middle* was developed, but that more work needs to be done. As one TSSS participant stated, “We need to be more useful... we need to challenge ourselves to say change can happen.” The participant noted that the goal must be focused on building better pathways, being persistent and “staying on course while raising the bar.”

Increasing collaboration efforts was the most important goal identified by both TSSS and TICAB members. Working together to find new ways to address service gaps in Indigenous housing and shelter options, including long-term supportive housing with wrap-around services, housing with mental health supports, and more services for Indigenous women and children.

TSSS staff discussed the need for collaboration on initiatives such as a policy framework for smudging in shelters, the Homelessness Services Capital Infrastructure Strategy (HSCIS) commitment to allocating 20% of infrastructure funding to Indigenous shelter spaces, and the Indigenous data sovereignty/governance framework. Additional collaboration efforts included working with TICAB around the hiring and retention of Indigenous staff, cultural training & development of TSSS staff, and supporting Indigenous people living in encampments.



***Meeting in the Middle* Commitments**

Below is a summary of the five-year annual gathering reflections, categorized under the seven *Meeting in the Middle* commitments. For every commitment, actions and goals for the next year are identified:

Commitment 1: Cultural Knowledge

Improve cultural learning and development for City staff:

- Ensure new hires participate in Indigenous cultural awareness training during the onboarding process, and all staff engage in continuous training and understanding of Indigenous culture and issues

Commitment 2: Holistic Practices

Continue the work of learning from Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers, Indigenous service providers and community partners:

- More collaboration and co-development of policy and programming initiatives
- Focus on building better pathways with Indigenous community
- Reduce restrictions, work with the community in the best possible way
- Take care of the relationship through respectful listening and reflection

Commitment 3: Capacity Building

Continue to strengthen the capacity of Indigenous partners and community:

- Address service gaps in Indigenous housing and shelter options
- Expand Indigenous shelter capacity through the opening of the new men's shelter at 67 Adelaide and explore options to open other shelters to meet the needs of women
- Support Indigenous-specific housing for people with mental health issues, women and children including cultural-specific wrap-around services
- Collaborate on the HSCIS 20% funding allocation for Indigenous shelter spaces, and the Indigenous data governance framework
- Co-develop Indigenous community outreach and cultural needs assessments at encampments

Commitment 4: Decision-Making

Continue early engagement with TICAB and Indigenous partners in the housing and homelessness sector on all initiatives and program development:

- Build on the established partnerships, continue to nurture the relationship to maintain a unified, allied community
- Early collaboration on policies such as smudging in shelters, and Indigenous data sovereignty, including input into the TSSS's next service plan

- Continue to provide TSSS monthly updates to TICAB including the City's reconciliation audit outcomes

Commitment 5: Employment Opportunities

Improve the City's hiring and retention of Indigenous staff:

- Continue to work with TICAB through challenges in hiring Indigenous people for City positions

Commitment 6: Leverage Opportunities

Continue to share *Meeting in the Middle*, as a model for collaboration and relationship building with Indigenous communities:

- Work with other divisions, municipalities, and communities to promote the commitments and actions, and to share best practices with government and other Indigenous organizations
- Promote co-created documents as an advocacy tool with the different levels of government, to show the outcome of collaborative partnerships with the Indigenous community



Commitment 7: Reviewing Relationships

Meet annually to review *Meeting in the Middle* commitments and actions:

- Build on the established partnerships, continue to nurture the relationship to maintain a unified, allied community



Appendix A: Participants and Contributors

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Red Bear Singers

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