

MEETING IN THE MIDDLE SIXTH ANNUAL GATHERING SUMMARY REPORT 2024



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

The following report is a summary of what we heard from the *Meeting in the Middle (MITM)* 6th Annual Gathering that took place on January 31st, 2025, at the Toronto Aboriginal Support Service Council office.

The annual gathering is an integral part of the ongoing commitment to being in relationship, between the Toronto Community Advisory Board (TICAB) and Toronto Shelter and Support Services (TSSS). It is an opportunity for TICAB and TSSS to reaffirm their partnership, review progress made on the 7 commitments outlined in the [Meeting in the Middle Engagement Strategy and Action Plan](#) and identify areas where further action is needed to address Indigenous homelessness in Toronto. The action plan is a living and breathing document, that will evolve to ensure the needs of Indigenous Peoples experiencing homelessness in Toronto are met.



Culture and Ceremony

Since the inaugural *MITM* in 2018, a central focus of the annual gathering has been to foster a safe space that is respectful and inclusive of Indigenous ceremonial and cultural protocols. The *MITM* annual gathering is a time to reflect on the importance of cultivating strong relationships between TICAB and TSSS, while collectively working towards the shared goal of ending Indigenous homelessness in Toronto.

This year's annual gathering began with an opening prayer by Elder and Knowledge Keeper Larry Frost, who also led the group through a smudging ceremony to ground the

room's collective thoughts in unity, peace, and understanding. This was followed by opening remarks from both TICAB chair Steve Teekens and TSSS General Manager Gord Tanner. The gathering was facilitated by Lindsay Kretschmer, who graciously welcomed the group to the new Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council (TASSC) meeting space and supported the group in reflective and goal setting discussions.

A Bundle Exchange ceremony between TICAB and TSSS occurred before the closing prayer was given by Elder Larry Frost. The gathering concluded with a powerful drumming song by Steve Teekens.



Impact of *Meeting in the Middle*

Through facilitated discussions, participants had the opportunity to share stories from the past year that celebrated the relationships and work done to uphold the *MITM* commitments. The group reflected on what worked well, did not work well, and identified gaps in supports and services to meet the needs of the Indigenous homelessness community. An “above/below” activity was also used to intentionally reflect on the achievements of the previous year, identify areas for improvement, and set goals for the year ahead.

Participants acknowledged the growth of the partnership over the last decade between TSSS and TICAB, while also recognizing opportunities for continued growth and collective achievement. With one TICAB member emphasizing the “respect given to Indigenous communities in being part of the problem-solving process,” to ensure Indigenous issues are being addressed with Indigenous-led solutions. Another TSSS member described the annual gathering as a stepping stone that is achieved each year and that this gathering symbolized TSSS and TICAB reaching and graduating “sixth grade.” This analogy highlighted how much has been learned and gained through listening, active engagement, and leveraging the expertise from both TICAB partners and TSSS over the years.

TICAB and TSSS members shared a collective sentiment of gratitude for the opportunity to come together as a group in one place to discuss the shared goals of ending Indigenous homelessness.



Reflecting on the Previous Year

Below is a summary of the reflections from the previous year summarized under the 7 *MITM* commitments.



Commitment 1: Cultural Knowledge

A TICAB member highlighted the importance of City staff understanding urban Indigenous history. In response, suggestions were made to incorporate training that covers the history of existing housing and service providers.

“The more informed TSSS staff are, the better we can support each other.”

A TICAB member raised concerns that TSSS still has a way to go to have all staff complete cultural competency training. Overall, TICAB members stressed that cultural competency has been a gap in the delivery of supports and services. TSSS and TICAB agreed on the need to continue collaborating to address cultural knowledge gaps.

Commitment 2: Holistic Practices

A TSSS member shared updates on the new Indigenous expression of interest (EOI) process, which will support the development of four new Indigenous shelters, through the Homelessness Services Capital Infrastructure Strategy (2024-2033). The EOI emerged from recommendations by Indigenous providers to ensure more autonomy for Indigenous providers. TICAB acknowledged the long-standing need for Indigenous owned and operated shelters in the City.

Both TICAB and TSSS shared their enthusiasm about moving forward with the new shelter development, in particular the first Indigenous women's shelter which had been identified as a critical need by Indigenous housing and service providers. TSSS members reaffirmed their ongoing commitment to working closely with Indigenous partners to shape processes and criteria within Indigenous shelters.

Commitment 3: Capacity Building

TSSS and TICAB members both emphasized the importance of respecting Indigenous sovereignty and governance. Particularly, focusing on "Land Back" efforts as a priority for the City to advance self-sovereignty for Indigenous communities. TSSS highlighted a staff report to City Council which involves transferring land to 2 Spirited People of the 1st Nations. This report is expected to set a precedent regarding Land Back policies within the City. Indigenous partners felt that collaboration and preliminary conversations surrounding Land Back were done in a good way, noting that they felt heard while working with the City.

Commitment 4: Meaningful Engagement

TSSS and TICAB discussed how they can collaboratively strengthen best practices to support Indigenous clients living in encampments. An Indigenous consultant was engaged to support conversations about how to best serve the Indigenous community and work with Indigenous support and service providers. TICAB members also highlighted the collaborative efforts involved in the co-creation and implementation of the *Interdivisional Protocol for Encampments* (IDP), which has acted as a guide for the City's approach to encampment response. However, TICAB members also pointed out the challenges in finding support pathways for Indigenous clients, particularly due to encampment concerns.

One TICAB member acknowledged the community working group, which was established to advise on approaches to supporting people living in the Allan Gardens encampment. Both TSSS and TICAB acknowledged the success of the approach with 98 individuals referred to housing. TICAB and TSSS noted a positive shift in how sacred fires are being addressed by the City as separate from encampment response.

TICAB members felt that Rapid Rehousing Initiative was working well, emphasizing that involving TICAB members who are not in the housing sector in this program was beneficial to supporting Indigenous women experiencing homelessness.

Additionally, TSSS also celebrated the launch of a system wide-support tool (STARS), which was developed with input from an Indigenous consultant, TICAB, and the Aboriginal Labour Force Development Circle (ALFDC). An Elder was also present

during the development process. These relationships played a key role in building trust and personal connections, easing the process and strengthening collaboration.

Both TICAB and TSSS members recognized the positive outcomes of strategic projects in 2024; one of which was the successful completion of the Street Needs Assessment (SNA) in collaboration with Indigenous partners. One TICAB member acknowledged that their input and involvement in the process was done in a good way.

Commitment 5: Employment Opportunities

A TSSS member noted the importance of having Indigenous staff as supports within the division, highlighting the value of their perspectives on varied projects. A TICAB member echoed the importance of engaging Indigenous staff at the City to better understand their experience working for the City, to support the creation of more opportunities for Indigenous employees.

Commitment 6: Opportunities for Collaboration

TICAB members emphasized the need to redefine what Indigenous shelters should look like, with Indigenous providers having the autonomy to make this determination. For example, a TICAB member celebrated the completion of Anduhyaun's new shelter, built intentionally for the Indigenous community.

To further ensure Indigenous communities are better supported, a TICAB member pointed out that Indigenous peoples face challenges not only in obtaining regular provincial and federally recognized identification, but also status cards. In response, additional funding was provided to the ALFDC for the development of a mobile Indigenous identification van. The ALFDC extended their appreciation to TSSS for their support throughout the project.

TSSS and Indigenous partners also acknowledged the ongoing commitment of 20% grant funding between TSSS, the Housing Secretariat, and ALFDC to continue addressing the needs of Indigenous communities experiencing homelessness.

However, both TSSS and TICAB agreed that improvements are needed in the administration process to ensure greater accessibility for Indigenous partners, recognizing this is critical to ensure effective collaboration and access to equal opportunities moving forward.

Commitment 7: Action and Accountability

TICAB and TSSS both acknowledged the strong foundation of their partnership and how the growing relationship is a testament to the accomplishments they have achieved

together. A TICAB member reflected on the progress made over the last decade, expressing how promising it is to see the progress made to address Indigenous homelessness and the respect shown to Indigenous communities, as active participants in the problem-solving process.

TICAB members expressed that the TICAB-Coordinated Access sub-committee has worked well, however noted that there is room to improve overall communication with TSSS. TICAB expressed the need to find avenues to streamline the process to ensure no information is missed or forgotten.

Goals Moving into the Year Ahead

Using a similar activity, participants were asked to identify collective goals and priorities they felt were necessary to address for 2025.



Cultural Knowledge

- Support frontline City staff to take part in Indigenous culture and safety training.

- Offer educational opportunities on urban Indigenous history and provide training that incorporates the history of existing Indigenous housing and service providers.

Holistic Practices

- Continuing to improve how TSSS collaborates with Indigenous partners to improve coordination of housing and support services to ensure Indigenous people experiencing homelessness are connected to housing.
- Use an intersectional lens to address the complex and overlapping factors that impact Indigenous community members needing a safe place to live.
- As new Indigenous shelters are built, ensure collaboration with Indigenous providers in the design of programs, services, and system management.
- Establish policies to ensure Indigenous peoples are prioritized for Indigenous services.

Capacity Building

- Continue to expand Indigenous shelter capacity by developing new shelters. Many TSSS and TICAB members emphasized that work to develop an Indigenous harm reduction shelter needs priority focus.
- Indigenous providers expressed their hopes for future restructuring of Indigenous shelters to be self-governing and autonomous. One TICAB member referenced the model used at “Kapapamahchakwew - Wandering Spirit School.”
- Take a Land Back approach to addressing Indigenous homelessness. This would involve giving Indigenous shelter and service providers the right to own property that is either rented or leased through the City.
- TSSS will continue to work alongside and partner with Indigenous providers to ensure Indigenous housing is a priority.

Employment Opportunities

- Improve experiences of Indigenous staff within the City of Toronto, including the development of a mentorship program and greater access to resources and opportunities that support professional growth and development.

Opportunities for Collaboration

- Collaborate on new or existing programs and services to better align with the needs of Indigenous clients, ensuring they receive proper support.
- Ensure investments focused on encampments are supporting Indigenous clients experiencing unsheltered homelessness.

- Support Indigenous partners on federal encampment funding implementation.
- Support Indigenous partners in their advocacy around the lack of funding from the Ministry of Health to support Indigenous people experiencing homelessness.
- Create more Indigenous housing opportunities that are deeply affordable for clients exiting homelessness.
- Increase participation of Indigenous providers in the new shelter development expression of interest (EOI) (e.g. 10 years of opportunity for 20% of funding through the Homelessness Services Capital Infrastructure Strategy).
- TSSS and TICAB agreed that collaborating to streamline administrative process for applications and reporting would be beneficial.

Appendix A: Participants and Contributors

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Participants:

Members from the Toronto Indigenous Community Advisory Board (TICAB), Toronto Indigenous Community Entity (ALFDC), and Toronto Shelter and Support Services (TSSS) were in attendance.