

Micmac Native Friendship Society

Urban Aboriginal Homelessness Community Action Plan

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SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

Homelessness does not discriminate and although this homelessness community action plan is focused on addressing homelessness for the urban Aboriginal people, it is important to recognize that homelessness affects all people and has many faces no matter what your gender, age or cultural background. It lives on our streets and under our bridges and affects us socially, morally and even has an economic impact associated with it that is far reaching.

Homelessness reduces the quality of life for individuals, can put a strain on our programs and services (including health care). There is also a stigma associated with homelessness that can even have a negative impact on tourism and local businesses. The faces of homelessness are everywhere and are seen by everyone whether people choose to acknowledge it or not.

Homelessness can happen to anyone and is usually direct result of circumstances which can be out of the control of the individual. The more complicated the circumstances and the needs of the person the longer they will remain homeless and the longer they remain homeless the higher the costs will be to that individual and to society as a whole.

There are currently many great programs and services, community groups and organizations (Aboriginal and non-aboriginal, profit and non-profit) in addition to all facets of government who have been working for years to address the issue of homelessness and yet unfortunately homelessness continues to exist.

The priorities and actions outlined in this homelessness community action plan are meant to provide a blueprint to assist with chipping away at the issues impacting homelessness for the urban Aboriginal people with a larger goal of reducing and preventing homelessness for all.

Putting an end to homelessness cannot be achieved solely by one organization. It will take a strong commitment from all stakeholders and partners (Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal, profit, non-profit), businesses, correctional facilities, landlords and all levels of government, including the community at large to collectively work together.

1.1 Purpose of Action Plan

The purpose of the homelessness community action plan is to combine the feedback collected from the homelessness needs assessment and community action plan sessions held to develop a comprehensive plan of action.

This action plan also takes into account the proposed solutions and support mechanisms required to stabilize the lives of Aboriginal people who are homeless or at risk of being homeless in an effort to move them towards self-sufficiency.

1.2 About Micmac Native Friendship Society

The main goal of the Micmac Native Friendship Society (MNFS) is to provide structured, social-based programming for urban Aboriginal people, while serving as a focal point for the urban Aboriginal community to gather for a variety of community functions and events. The MNFS practices an open door policy with all of their programs and events, making services available to all people regardless of their background or cultural affiliation. As well, the MNFS sees itself as an instrument for the reduction of poverty and crime, and the promotion of personal and community health and well-being. This is an active philosophy embedded in all of their programming, based on the firm belief that by providing people with skills, a venue for spiritual and fellowship activities, offering support and guidance in areas such as social, health and education they will be meaningfully contributing to a safer, healthier and more vibrant community.

The programs of the MNFS focus on serving the cultural distinctiveness of the urban Aboriginal population; therefore, all of the programs do have components of Aboriginal culture incorporated within their delivery models. One of the newest programs offered at the MNFS is the housing program which offers assistance to help clients with their housing needs. This is a relatively new service offering of the MNFS and has proved to be quite successful to this point. The MNFS hopes to build on the housing services offered by taking a collective approach working with other stakeholders both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal

The MNFS opened its doors on September 17, 1973, and was incorporated June 02, 1975. It is one of one hundred and nineteen Friendship Centers across Canada. The MNFS is a non-profit, board governed organization that currently operates sixteen core projects. Each program is mandated to deliver its core service, but is also supported in developing proposals for new initiatives.

Programs are also encouraged to find ways to expand services in innovative ways, as the needs of the urban Aboriginal people/clients evolve.

1.3 Methodology

A homelessness needs assessment was conducted by the MNFS between May and October of 2012 in order to gain a better understanding of both the needs and barriers urban Aboriginal people currently face related to accessing affordable safe and suitable housing in the HRM.

The needs assessment provided MNFS with the “What” (What challenges are facing the urban Aboriginal people in addition to some recommendations on how to address these challenges). It makes sense that the next step is to solidify the “How”. How will we begin to address the challenges identified in the needs assessment?

To help identify the “How”, more recently several community action plan sessions were held with community members and stakeholders to review the findings of the needs assessment to identify action items required from their perspective to begin to address urban Aboriginal homelessness in HRM.

The stakeholder session was held in January of this year was very well attended by a diverse group of key stakeholders and consisted of 31 participants in total.

All expressed their keen desire to work together for the common goal of addressing the barriers related to homelessness. Many of those who participated in the session swapped business cards and have already begun to work more closely together.

One of the stakeholders who participated in the session gained a better understanding of the programs and services offered at the MNFS and was able to refer an Aboriginal family from Manitoba to the MNFS within one week of participating in the session. The MNFS was able to help the family find housing and in addition was able to refer them to other programs and services to help them with their transition to Halifax.

A community session was held in February and although every effort was made to invite as many community members as possible the turnout for this session was lower than anticipated. The facilitators were still able to collect pertinent information that strengthened the findings of the needs assessment and the stakeholder session held in January. The stories shared by participants provided stories of “hope” and confirmed that if some of the participants were able to overcome homelessness on their own just think how many people can be helped if a collective approach is taken to address the issue of homelessness.

Both community action plan sessions held helped to solidify the findings of the needs assessment and also helped clearly identify priority areas and action items required to develop this community action plan.

The results of the needs assessment and the feedback received from the community action plan sessions cannot be generalized or considered to be statistically representative of the housing situations and experiences of all urban Aboriginal people living in the HRM.

The information obtained in the needs assessment and the community action plan sessions has however increased our understanding of the issues and needs relating to homelessness facing urban aboriginal people in the HRM and some of the action items required help to address homelessness both short and long term.

SECTION 2: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Very few people choose to be homeless. Homelessness is usually a result of system or social related barriers and the lack of access to safe affordable housing. The issue of homelessness is both broad and complex and requires a systematic approach to take action to find viable solutions to tackle this mountain of a problem.

This homelessness community action plan is ambitious and achieving the goal to reduce and prevent homelessness for the urban Aboriginal population in the HRM will be a daunting task. We must begin to address the barriers such as unemployment, addictions, mental illness to name a few that are negatively impacting the urban Aboriginal people and contributing to their current housing situation.

Implementing this action plan will require a lot of commitment and work and not everything can be done at one time nor can everything be done by one entity.

The priorities and action items outlined in the action plan are based on the feedback obtained from both the needs assessment and the recent community action sessions held in January and February of this year.

The information collected identified many barriers facing urban Aboriginal people related to meeting their housing needs and also provided many suggestions on how to improve and address the challenges faced by the Urban Aboriginal people in HRM.

This homelessness community action plan is the foundation that can be used to begin to break down the barriers/challenges facing the urban Aboriginal that are contributing to homelessness in the HRM.

Implementation of the homelessness community action plan will not be an easy task and there will be no quick fixes. Support and guidance from all Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal stakeholders will be crucial. As previously mentioned there is no one organization or person that can achieve the goal of addressing homelessness but together we can begin to chip away at some of the issues facing the urban Aboriginal people such as employment, addictions, mental health to name a few.

It's no surprise that challenges related to lack of funding and limited resources already exists and so even before the ink is dry on this community action plan it is obvious the hill that will need to be climbed will be steep but still very much achievable.

To implement this community plan there are few key areas of focus that will be required.

1. Community Participation-A collective approach involving commitment from programs and services in the HRM, including Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal, Profit and Non-Profit, businesses and all levels of government will be required. This will also require the involvement from Aboriginal communities and organizations in the region.
2. Resources Required-Resources required to assist with the implementation of the community action will be crucial. Without the people to take action the deliverables of this action plan will not be realized.

3. Prevention – More focus on preventing homelessness before it happens is required. This will include connecting people with the help they need and putting follow up systems in place to ensure they get the help they need.
4. Accountability- There must be resources and mechanisms in place to ensure the progress of the community action plan is monitored and reported on a regular basis.
5. Funding- Access to funding will have a direct impact on the priorities and deliverables of this action plan.

SECTION 3: BACKGROUND

3.1 Homelessness Needs Assessment

A homelessness needs assessment was conducted between May and October of 2012. In-person interviews were conducted with urban Aboriginal people to gather more qualitative information. Some stakeholder needs assessment were conducted via telephone and fax but were also conducted in-person when possible.

Recruitment efforts for this needs assessment was done by word of mouth and advertising through the Halifax Aboriginal People Network and also by accessing those individuals that MNFS's Housing Coordinator worked with six months prior to the needs assessment process.

Key stakeholders were easily identified by both the Housing Coordinator and the urban Aboriginal people who participated in the needs assessment.

3.2 Community Action Plan (Stakeholder) Session

The first session that was held was with key stakeholders both Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal in January was very well attended. A total of 31 people participated in the session.

Participants included (but is not limited to) representatives from Tawaak Housing, Union of Nova Scotia Indians, Native Council, MLSN, Department of Community Services, HRM Regional Planning, HRM Mayor's Office, Phoenix Youth Programs, Addictions Services, Addiction & Mental Health Services, Salvation Army, Transition House of NS, Adsum House, Department of Health and Wellness.

- *See Appendix A For list of Participants.*

The Stakeholder session consisted of starting with a roundtable format to give participants the opportunity to introduce themselves to each other. Following the round table session participants broke into focus groups and was asked to answer the following questions:

1. What do you see is the most important homelessness issue facing urban Aboriginal people and why?
2. What action items should we do to address these issues?

The facilitators reviewed the findings of each focus group with all participants. Participants were then asked to vote on the 3 areas they felt were a priority.

Not surprising the feedback received during this session mirrored the findings of the needs assessment and helped identify the priority areas and additional action items for this homelessness community action plan.

3.3 Community Action Plan (Aboriginal Community) Session

The second session was held with urban Aboriginal community members in February of this year. This session was conducted in the format of a Talking Circle and was done so in a culturally appropriate and respectful way. The Talking Circle is an Aboriginal way to remove barriers and have people express themselves and share their points of view without fear of criticism or judgment.

Mr. Doug Knockwood, who is a well-respected elder in the community also participated in the circle and provided opening and closing prayers in addition to sharing his own experiences related to homelessness over the years.

Community members were asked to share their experience "story" related to homelessness. In addition they were asked to share their views on how the experience of homelessness differs for Aboriginal people and if they experienced homelessness in the past what did it take for them to overcome homelessness.

Although the questions were not answered in a systematic way, the facilitators were able to obtain pertinent information based on the key areas from the stories they shared related to homelessness in which they were able to overcome. All echoed the sentiment that making a “cultural” connection was a turning point for them.

This session was very emotional and provided what we believe to be the “heart” and “hope” that will help keep the focus on the arduous task of implementing this community action plan and someday putting an end to homelessness.

The following are some of the stories that were shared during the community session worth mentioning.

Story #1

Participant #1 was 18 years old when she dropped off in the city by her father and basically left to fend for herself. She did manage to find a job and was able to find an apartment in a low income/high crime area. Shortly after arriving in the city she found herself turning to drugs to deal with her emotional issues. She lost her job and found herself on the streets. She was desperate and at times found herself having no choice but to resort to prostitution to help feed her addiction and help her survive living on the streets.

For years she couch surfed and lived in the streets. For a short period of time she was able to access a shelter at the Friendship Centre that was able to provide her with the cultural connection and the 24 hour support she required to deal with her addictions and get her life back on track.

She has come a long way since that time and was able to go back to school and eventually university and is now working as a cultural family support worker. She now has a family in which one of her children is currently attending university and she has even done her part to give back by adopting a child.

She contributes her success to having access to the support services she required 24-7, strong counsellors and being able to stay connect to her culture through the Friendship Centre.

Story #2

Participant #2 was a child of the welfare system and at a young age found himself living on the streets struggling with drug and alcohol addictions. He was transient for many years living all over Canada and was in and out of the justice system for most of his life and was married several times.

He was fortunate to have found a 12 step program that helped him with his addictions and was able to make connection with the MNFS who assisted him in obtaining a trade and also provided him with making that spiritual connection he needed to believe in himself

He has been married for 18 years and has been working in the trades industry for many years now and is an active participant in a local trade union. He's very grateful for the support and guidance he has received in the past that helped him turn his life around is now leading by example and giving back to the Aboriginal community by volunteering and hopes his story will inspire others not to give up.

Story #3

Participant #3 parents' passed away when he was a young boy and was passed around through his family in which he experienced abuse at the hands of family and friends many times. He has been homeless for 9 years now and struggles with mental illness. For years he did not have access to the medications he needed but now has been able to access the medications he needs to help him function.

He is currently staying at a local shelter and is trying to access Narcotics Anonymous to help him deal with his drug and alcohol problems which he has been struggling with since he was a teenager.

He has found the cultural support and guidance he needs from an elder he met at the MNFS and one of the shelters in Halifax has been providing him with the additional support and encouragement he says is helping him to get his life together. Although he realizes he still has a long way to go he feels he is getting the support and guidance he needs that is helping him turn his life around. He feels like someone cares. He has aspirations to follow in his father's footsteps and someday be appointed to the Mi'kmaq Grand Council.

Let's keep tucked away in the back of our minds some of these stories that were shared and remember that there are many more stories that are living on our streets today that haven't been told and are still hoping for a happy ending to their story.

If some of these people were able to overcome homelessness with limited support just think of the people that can be helped if all programs and services take a collective approach and work together towards the common goal of ending homelessness.

SECTION 5: KEY CHALLENGES

Finding solutions to homelessness is difficult to do because there is no one or two reasons in which one or two solutions can be found to end homelessness. The findings of the needs assessment and the community action plan sessions does however provide us with a better understanding of some of the key challenges faced by the Urban Aboriginal population that has contributed to their situation and gives us a good place to start.

The key challenges identified by participants are as follows:

1. Unemployment
2. Dealing with addictions
3. Lack of insufficient/affordable housing with support services
4. Lack of knowledge & understanding of all available programs and services (Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal)
5. Health related issues (e.g. mental health, depression, anxiety, obesity, diabetes)
6. Low level of education
7. Recent release from incarceration
8. Family existing on edge of homelessness
9. Personal/family problems
10. Criminal convictions
11. Victim of domestic abuse
12. Disabilities
13. Discrimination/racism
14. Lack of childcare
15. Lack of Life/survival Skills
16. Disconnect between Band social and DCS

17. Not enough access to traditional/cultural teachings
18. Lack of funding on reserve to assist community members moving to the city
19. Nothing in place to help Aboriginal people establish credit or deal with bad credit
20. Lack of cultural awareness in some programs and services dealing with Aboriginal people
21. High level of evictions or about to be evicted from current housing situation

It is important to note that the challenges listed above that were identified in the needs assessment were also echoed in the community action plan sessions.

Additional challenges identified by participants in the community action plan sessions are as follows:

1. Culture – different set of skills required to live off reserve (more hands on support offered on reserve)
2. Spiritual- Lack of places to go to practice their beliefs and culture
3. Current housing policies/legislation is not applicable to urban Aboriginal people. No long term thought to consequences by government decisions.
4. No release plans in place to help those being released from the justice system
5. Lack of culturally appropriate affordable, supportive housing
6. Very little in place for after hour access to programs and services
7. Lack of support for young mothers
8. Some Aboriginals are transient
9. Families are difficult to help, no real place for family emergencies
10. Length of time for people to wait for help too long (e.g. mental health, addictions)
11. Lack of funding = “fighting” for funding which causes division
12. Lack of “startup costs” for housing individuals
13. Getting in the system is difficult
14. Gaps exist between programs and services. People falling through the cracks

“I’m losing everything because of my addictions”

“Unemployed. Difficult to find work with two little ones”.

“Need affordable housing living arrangements and something pet friendly”.

SECTION 6: PRIORITIES & ACTION ITEMS

Addressing homelessness for the urban Aboriginal people will require support from many areas in order to make a difference (e.g. Aboriginal, Non-Aboriginal, public and political support to make a difference).

Based on the feedback from all who participated in the needs assessment and community action plan sessions there are five (5) priority areas that will need to be addressed. They are as follows:

1. Priority 1- Access to Additional Safe & Affordable Housing
2. Priority 2- Prevent People From Falling Through Cracks
3. Priority 3- Find Ways to Move Towards Self-sufficiency
4. Priority 4- Provide More Cultural & Spiritual Connection/Support
5. Priority 5- Identify and Access Available Funding

Priority 1- Access to Additional Safe & Affordable Housing

There is a diverse population of urban Aboriginal people in HRM that require access to affordable safe suitable and supportive housing that is Aboriginal friendly. Based on the feedback received the types of housing that is required are as follows:

1. Families/Pet friendly
2. Men & Women being released from justice system
3. Single men and women
4. Safe supportive housing for young mothers
5. Students
6. Emergency housing for women and children
7. Men and women with health related issues/disabilities
8. Aboriginal emergency shelters run by Aboriginals
9. Friendship Centre needs to be able to offer short-term transition housing
10. Needs shelters/homes that provide continuous support

For housing to be suitable it must “fit” the need of the individual(s) and therefore what is suitable for one person may not be suitable for another. For example it wouldn't be suitable to place a family of six in a one bedroom apartment in a high crime area.

Based on the feedback received 'suitable' housing as it relates to the urban Aboriginal population also needs to be culturally appropriate.

It could be argued that in order to address other challenges contributing to an individual's homelessness a safe warm place to stay would be a good place to start.

Suitable safe housing could be defined by individuals as follows:

1. Emergency Housing
2. Transition Housing
3. Social Housing
4. Subsidized Housing
5. Supportive Housing

"More supportive housing for Indians in the city needed. No access to transportation where there is affordable housing".

➤ **Action Required-** Increase access to adequate safe affordable housing

- 1.1 Work with government and community at large to increase housing supply and types of housing required.
- 1.2 Work with city to understand and optimize resources available in HRM.
- 1.3 Research and identify innovative ways to create and improve housing options based on diverse needs and available resources in the right locations.
- 1.4 Research and pursue new housing models to provide types of all-inclusive (supportive) housing.
- 1.5 Find ways to enhance affordable housing delivery.

- 1.6 Develop Housing inventory list to assist clients looking for housing more quickly.
- 1.7 Partner/build relations with landlords in the HRM to identify available housing stock and increase availability of affordable housing.
- 1.8 Provide support to tenants and landlords to find the right housing “fit” for both.
- 1.9 Provide support to better understand lease agreements/resolve issues between landlords and aboriginal tenants.
- 1.10 Pursue changes to policies and regulations to level playing field for Aboriginal housing authorities vs. non-Aboriginal. Current housing policies/regulations not applicable to Aboriginal people. Work with government to so that policies/regulations are more applicable.
- 1.11 Establish provincial Aboriginal housing policy/program which includes separate Aboriginal funding.
- 1.12 Review and understand Housing Strategy to be released in the spring of 2013 for Aboriginal inclusion.
- 1.13 Provide support to urban Aboriginal people to access advice and support they need to help related to their rental property.
- 1.14 Establish Aboriginal trustee program (e.g. assist clients with budgeting).
- 1.15 Develop housing agreements for landlords and tenants to sign that could help address areas of concern for both and provide some assurances to landlords who otherwise would not consider renting to tenant.
- 1.16 Access student friendly housing by building relationship with universities and colleges.

Priority 2-Prevent People From Falling Through the Cracks

Many of the urban Aboriginal people who are homeless or at risk of being homeless require ongoing support in order to deal with their current living situation. Support required by individuals will vary.

Ongoing support to women and men after they are released from the justice system, or people who are recovering addicts and have recently finished a program are expected to be “Better or OK” and move forward with their life but unfortunately this is normally not the case. Most require more long-term hands-on support to help them overcome their challenges.

Someone being released from the justice system needs a plan in place prior to their release to help them transition back into society. Being released from the justice system without a place to stay, no source of income, no food are some of the factors that contribute to many ending up back in the system.

A recovering addict may need more than a 12 week program to help them once they have completed the program. They will need to help to fight the urges/temptations or deal with emotional issues that more than likely they will face and eventually succumb to their addictions.

In addition we know that programs and services that are available in the HRM deal with funding cuts, increased demand and rising costs. Reductions in programs and services are one of the main reasons people who need assistance fall through the cracks.

There is a need to prevent the urban Aboriginal population from falling through the cracks or reverting back to barriers they have struggled with for many years.

“I was so desperate when I was struggling to find my way once I got out. I wish I had known that there were people that could help me. I was scared and cold. May as well commit another crime to get into jail cause at least there I know what to do that I have shelter and food”.

“Didn’t qualify cause my baby’s not born yet-can’t get into certain programs until my baby’s born and if my baby is born while I’m homeless they’ll take my baby”.

Outreach –Aboriginal Communities & Urban Aboriginal People

One of the key factors identified by the urban Aboriginal people that they felt contributed to their current housing situation was the lack of knowledge and understanding of the programs and services available to them and how to access them.

In addition, the Aboriginal communities who participated in the needs assessment process indicated that they were not aware of all the programs and services available to community members relocating to the city.

The Aboriginal communities must have a good understanding of the programs and services available to their community members before they move to the city. Community members need to have a good understanding about what is available to them and types of assistance they qualify for and have a “plan specific to their needs in place” to ensure their move to the city is successful.

“It would have helped if I knew about what programs there were before I came. Someone should connect with local reserves so people coming to the city know someone here”.

Outreach- All Programs and Services

All programs and services (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) need to work together to gain a good understanding of the different services available ensuring there is a well-rounded understanding of each other’s mandate so that if they are not able to help an individual they at least know where to refer that person to.

In addition the non-Aboriginal programs and services would benefit greatly from some cultural awareness training to assist with being able to understand or relate to their Aboriginal clients.

“Don’t know what’s available. Don’t want to ask for help”

“The helped me but don’t understand me or where I come from”.

Intake Process for Urban Aboriginal People

There is a need to provide a comprehensive intake of urban Aboriginal people seeking assistance in the HRM that also includes providing more hands on support and a follow up component. Someone who can help them develop and follow a course of action to address their barriers.

As part of that comprehensive intake process, a system to report data related to Aboriginal homelessness would be beneficial. This data would provide evidence of the problem of homelessness for urban Aboriginal people and could be used in future to assist with securing funding for future projects.

There would be no reason for the MNFS to re-invent the wheel as one of the current programs and services has a database that could be enhanced to track pertinent data related to housing. In addition the MNFS has a Housing Coordinator in place that is currently providing a more hands-on approach to clients and could possibly provide a more comprehensive intake process.

➤ **Action Required**-Strengthen support for programs and services Programs and Services

- 2.1 Link programs and services to gain a better understanding what services are available and how they fit together in order to effectively help those in need by being able to refer them to the appropriate service provider (helping to fill gaps).
- 2.2 Regular communication between the programs and services required to ensure changes or updates to services is communicated and understood.
- 2.3 Communication plan to communicate available programs and services to the urban aboriginal people and First Nation communities and organizations in the region is required.
- 2.4 Develop, maintain and distribute a master resource list of all programs and services and contact information including an overview of the programs and services to all stakeholders and the community (Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal).

- 2.5 Look for ways to increase access to programs and services 24/7.
- 2.6 Develop/improve relations with Aboriginal communities in the region.
- 2.7 Hold focus groups with programs and services to identify and fill gaps.
- 2.8 Establish a 24 hr. service information system/helpline/drop in.

Addictions/Health Issues/Mental Health/Abuse

- 2.9 Determine feasibility of how additional support person(s) in areas related to addictions and mental health could be made available to urban Aboriginal people.
- 2.10 Look for ways to provide more one on one support/counseling.
- 2.11 Assist individuals to access counseling (e.g. provide transportation to participate in counseling sessions.
- 2.12 Additional training for programs and services is required to help them identify/deal with clients suffering from mental illness.
- 2.13 Seek volunteers to offer their time to drive people to sessions and/or provide emotional support/mentoring.
- 2.14 Periodic follow ups with people seeking counseling required to ensure they stay on track.
- 2.15 Make required counseling accessible in a setting that is culturally appropriate where they feel more comfortable and safe.
- 2.16 Review discharge plans with hospitals for people suffering from addictions/mental illness to identify possible opportunities for improvement.

Men and women in justice system

- 2.17 Improve communications with correction facilities and men and women in the justice system.
- 2.18 Develop and distribute information packages to corrections facilities and people in system to help prepare them for their release.
- 2.19 Offer regular information sessions to inform people in the system of programs and services available to them before they are released.
- 2.20 Work with inmates to help them develop a release plan to help people with transition back into society.
- 2.21 Offer more support/access to female elders and counselors.
- 2.22 Provide assistance for those who qualify to obtain pardons to help with better job opportunities.

Comprehensive intake process for urban Aboriginal people

- 2.23 Expand MNFS's housing program to include a comprehensive intake process.
- 2.24 Offer services at MNFS to help Aboriginal people to develop a course of action to help address their barriers and provide more hands on assistance if required.
- 2.25 Establish database related to tracking Aboriginal clients, barriers, action taken, referrals, follow up and successes.
- 2.26 Review current intake process and database already in place at the MNFS to prevent re-inventing the wheel.

Priority 3 - Find Ways to Move Towards Self-sufficiency

In order to reduce and end homelessness it will be imperative that we focus our efforts on helping the urban Aboriginal people to become more self-sufficient, keeping in mind that the steps may be small and many.

Becoming self-sufficient may require simply helping them to access income assistance such as social assistance or employment insurance. For others providing basic life skills workshops might be a starting point. Addressing low level of education or lack of training will be required for some and even in some instances for those who do have an education or training assistance, to find and maintain a job might be the step required.

"I wish they would help more with trying to better myself and get me off welfare".

Income Assistance

There are many urban Aboriginal people who for one reason or another are not able to work and so for them being financially self-sufficient is but a dream and so in order to survive may need to rely on social assistance.

Some do not understand how to access such assistance and sadly in some instances are not receiving any income assistance that is available to them.

There are many people that do not qualify for social assistance because they don't have housing in place and yet in order for them to obtain housing they need social assistance.

Many of those who participated in the needs assessment echoed the sentiment that more hands on support is required to help them navigate and access income assistance programs such as social assistance. Many described accessing income assistance programs as a difficult process.

In addition some of the urban Aboriginal people are able to access some assistance from their Band but unfortunately there is very limited funding available from their community to assist them with their relocation to the city. There is a need to better understand what areas their community can help them and work together to find solutions.

“Wasn’t sure how to get started in the city. City services hard to navigate. Much easier at home to figure out what’s needed. My band is helpful”.

Education and Training

Having a low level of education and training was identified as being a challenge that participants felt was contributing to their current housing situation.

The MNFS currently offers several adult literacy programs such as ALP and GAP programs that are available to help urban Aboriginal people get the basic training they need. These programs are geared towards helping them prepare for additional training and education that they will need in order to find a job and move them towards self-sufficiency. There is a need to increase participation in these types of programs.

“Don’t feel educated enough. Feel like I can’t explain what I need”.

Employment

Unemployment was ranked by participants of the needs assessment as the number one challenge contributing to their current housing situation.

We understand that linked to unemployment can be many other barriers such as addictions, mental health problems, disabilities to name a few.

Some people are successful in finding employment but if they have other barriers such as addictions or mental health problems that are not being addressed sadly it will be only a matter of time before they will not be able to maintain their employment.

In addition, those who have been part of the justice system at one time or another are not able to get a job because they have a criminal record. More assistance obtaining pardons where applicable or working with employers to create employment opportunities would be helpful.

We know that in order to obtain and keep housing a person needs employment and yet in order to have a job a person needs a roof over their head.

Before a person can find meaningful employment the other barriers they face need to be identified and addressed. It will be important that follow up mechanisms are in place to ensure barriers are addressed so that they can get to a point in their lives where they can find meaningful employment.

*“Difficult to find fulltime work with 2 little ones”
“If I could only find fulltime work. I need a career”.*

Life/Survival Skills

During the needs assessment process (including the stakeholder session held in January) stakeholders identified the lack of life/survival skills as a challenge for their Aboriginal clients.

The types of life/survival skills required that were identified by both community members and stakeholders were as follows (but not limited to):

1. Dealing with addictions
2. Confidence/esteem building
3. Resume writing/interviewing skills
4. Family planning

5. Budgeting/How to set up a bank account/Dealing with bad credit/Establishing credit (partner with financial institution to offer workshops)
6. Cooking skills
7. Personal hygiene
8. Cleaning
9. Mentors/Life Coaches
10. Cultural support* See Priority 4

It is important to note that individual life skills training will vary and therefore an “individualized plan of action” may be required. For example there would be no value in providing a resume writing workshop for someone who is dealing with addictions and is not ready for employment. Addictions counseling would be more suitable.

In addition, it is important to keep in mind that when possible life skills training offered to the urban Aboriginal people should be done so in a culturally appropriate way which may require developing workshops specific for Aboriginal people. The more comfortable they are with the setting and course content the more likely they will successfully complete the training/workshop.

- **Action Required**-Assist urban Aboriginal people become more self-sufficient

Income Assistance

- 3.1 Build relationship with income assistance programs such as Department of Community Services and Employment Insurance to gain better understanding of how the systems works.
- 3.2 Provide more assistance for Aboriginal people who require more hands on help (e.g. filling out paperwork, setting up/attending appointments with them) accessing social assistance, employment insurance and Band assistance.

Life Skills & Support

- 3.3 Work with Aboriginal clients to develop life plans specific to their needs to help them address barriers.

- 3.4 Provide more hands on assistance and follow up to ensure barriers are addressed and goals are realized.
- 3.5 Partner with training facilities/key stakeholders to develop culturally appropriate workshops (e.g. partner with financial institution to develop finance related workshops applicable to Aboriginal people).
- 3.6 Offer life/survival skills training in the areas listed above.
- 3.7 Provide ongoing life skills coaching/mentoring.

Education & Training

- 3.8 Promote and look for ways to increase participation in literacy programs available to the urban Aboriginal people in HRM.
- 3.9 Develop plan and assist Aboriginal clients in realizing their education and training goals.
- 3.10 Provide information and guidance accessing educational/training funding available.
- 3.11 Provide hands on assistance applying to educational/training institutions.
- 3.12 Partner with training institutions to develop/offer training that is culturally appropriate.

Employment

- 3.13 Seek funding to keep MNFS's Connections Career Centre going beyond 2014. This program provides assistance to Aboriginal people to find employment and access training programs. This program has been very successful in assisting Aboriginal people obtain additional training and find employment in the region. Unfortunately funding for this program will end in 2014.
- 3.14 Look for ways to continue to offer target wage subsidies to increase opportunities for employment/work experience (Note: This is currently offered through Connections Career Centre).
- 3.15 Work with employers/partners developed by MNFS's Connections Career Centre and Active Partnership Strategy to provide employment opportunities.

- 3.16 Work with Connections Career Centre to identify and gain an understanding of the clients they were not able to help and why. Possibly identify gaps that need to be filled.
- 3.17 If funding for Connections Career Centre cannot be secured, consider partnering with a local employment agency to develop and offer employment services for Aboriginal people.

Priority 4 –More Cultural & Spiritual Connection/Support

There is a real need and desire for the urban Aboriginal people to have a sense of belonging and feel connected to their culture. This sentiment was echoed throughout the needs assessment process and the community action plan session.

Having access to more cultural and traditional teachings (e.g., healing circles) and support (e.g. elders, cultural support groups) within the city would provide them with the emotional support, connection to their culture and give them the inner-strength they will need to face their barriers.

A sense of belonging and not being judged can go a long way.

“They treated me fairly and I have a connection to Aboriginal people”. “I trust the people that run these (Aboriginal) programs. They don’t judge me”.

Cultural Awareness Training for Non-Aboriginal Programs and Services

There is another important aspect to providing cultural and spiritual support to the urban Aboriginal people and that is educating the non-Aboriginal programs and services to better understand and relate to the urban Aboriginal people. This can be done by offering cultural awareness training.

Some of the stakeholders suggested that talking circles be held between the programs and services and community members on a regular basis to begin to build that bridge.

“They don’t understand me or respect my story”.

- **Action Required** - Provide more cultural/spiritual connection and support.

The urban Aboriginal people that took part in the needs assessment and community session echoed sentiments that they felt comfortable and not judge by the staff at the MNFS. It will be important that any steps taken to provide assistance should be done so in a culturally appropriate setting when possible.

Providing Cultural Connection and Support

- 4.1 Advertisements of cultural events in the HRM need to be communicated throughout the HRM and Aboriginal communities.
- 4.2 Increase access to Aboriginal mentors/support (i.e. elders, women) for urban Aboriginal people.
- 4.3 Provide more cultural/spiritual teachings for the urban Aboriginal community.
- 4.4 Develop and provide cultural awareness workshops for non-Aboriginal program and services.
- 4.5 Develop and offer orientation workshops for Aboriginal people to help with transition to living in city.

- 4.6 Offer information sessions for non-Aboriginal programs and services and the urban Aboriginal community to come together in a culturally appropriate setting (e.g. MNFS-Talking Circles)
- 4.7 Establish an Aboriginal Welcome Centre, offering orientation for newcomers to the city.

Priority 5- Identify and access available funding.

As previously mentioned we know that programs and services in the HRM are already dealing with funding cuts while at the same time are experiencing an increased demand on their services and rising costs. Funding cuts have caused programs and services to compete for funding to survive instead of working together to find innovative ways to access funding.

When it comes to funding that is available each funder has their own funding formula and criteria and many times for programs and services understanding the rationale for available funding can be confusing. Having a good understanding of the rationales for funding available can make the difference in whether or not the program or service will be successful in obtaining funding.

We must be cognizant of the fact that funding (or lack thereof) will have a direct impact on the priorities and deliverables of the action items identified in this action plan. Ensuring that we have a good understanding of the funding that is available will be imperative if we are to obtain funding to support this community action plan.

➤ Action Required

- 5.1 Identify funding availability and gain better understanding of funding rationales.
- 5.2 Access available funding.
- 5.3 Increase access to funding by partnering with other programs and services.

SECTION 7: IT'S TIME TO TAKE ACTION

Now that we have a clear understanding of the challenges, priorities and actions required it's time to roll up our sleeves and get to work.

The priorities and specific action items will be achieved through a series of action plans to assist with the implementation process.

- See Appendix B for Action Plans

The following steps outline the sequence of events to be considered to help move this community action plan forward.

Consider the following:

1. Identify and solidify resources needed. This will include identifying and recruiting potential partners and stakeholders based on the area of expertise or interests to assist with implementation of priority areas.

✓ Establish an Advisory Team

The Advisory Team would consist of members from MNFS, Tawaak Housing, other Aboriginal & non-Aboriginal programs and services, government & non-profit organizations.

The Advisory Team would be the “catalyst” to promote change and provide leadership to task force and other team leaders as required. The Advisory Team could work with all levels of government to bring about change.

WHAT

→Priorities

→Action Items

→Deliverables

WHO

→Coordinator(s)

→ Advisory Board

→Task Force

→Committees

→Working Groups

WHEN

→Target Dates

→Frequency

HOW

→Meetings

→Progress Reports

→Work Plans

→Annual Report

✓ Appoint Teams/Working Groups and Team Leaders

Teams will be responsible to work together to address priority areas and action items assigned to them. Team leaders will be responsible to monitor and report on progress or lack of progress to the Advisory Team on a regular basis.

✓ Develop Terms of Reference

Develop clear roles and responsibilities for teams, working groups associated with the community action plan.

✓ Appoint Overall Coordinator(s)

MNFS should appoint a coordinator(s) to oversee all aspects of the implementation of the homelessness community action plan.

The coordinator(s) could be responsible for the following;

- Monitor the progress of priority action plans and report to key stakeholders
- Promote the plan to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community and organizations.
- Work with levels of government.
- Provide assistance to Advisory Team/Teams/Committees as required.
- Collect and distribute information between the Advisory Team /Committees/working groups.

✓ Establish a “Triage” Task Force

Task Force could help identify and fill gaps and should consist of front line workers from both Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal programs and services. Task force would be responsible for meeting/connecting at least once a month to review any client cases and seek support and guidance on how to best help them.

2. Gather Information

Once resources are in place, review action items and develop course of action. This should include taking the time early in the implementation stages to identify what resources currently exist and how they could impact or be helpful to address action items (e.g. Master list of programs and services may already be in place but needs to be updated. No need to start from scratch).

- ✓ Keeping in mind the intent of the action items and based on information gathered re-prioritize action items or redefine action items required to address priority area(s).
- ✓ Changes to action items should be communicated back to Advisory Team /Coordinator/Working Groups (as applicable) to ensure the overall intent of the community action plan is not compromised and is updated accordingly.
- ✓ Once action items have been solidified target dates and person(s) responsible should be assigned.

Note: Some of the action items may need to be broken down into individualized work plans to ensure smaller steps required to address action items/priorities occur.

3. Accountability: It will be important to ensure that monitoring and reporting mechanisms for the community action plan are in place.

- ✓ Frequency of meetings, updating of action plans, progress reports should be determined.

- ✓ Consider annual report that would provide stakeholders with an update as to progress made, any challenges, successes or changes to the direction of the community action plan and why.
4. Identify Best Practices and Build on. Don't re-invent the wheel. Look at some of the current programs and services of the MNFS, and other programs and services in the HRM to identify best practices. MNFS already has a comprehensive intake process and database for one of its current programs that is already tracking number of clients and barriers.
 5. Inform Key Aboriginal & Non-Aboriginal Stakeholders: Promoting the homelessness community action plan to key Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal stakeholders in the region would be beneficial. Addressing homelessness will require the input, support and guidance from all key stakeholders (Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal) and would help MNFS garner the support they will need to move some of the more challenging action items in this plan forward.
 - ✓ Consider having Chief Debbie Robinson (who is a board member for the MNFS) present the action plan to the Assembly of NS Mi'kmaq Chiefs on behalf of the MNFS to seek their mandate to advocate and support the action plan.
 - ✓ In addition, consider having Chief Debbie Robinson present the action plan to the Mi'kmaq-Nova Scotia-Tripartite Forum to seek approval to have the action plan added to their social work plan.

The Social Development Working Committee's mandate is to work with the Province of Nova Scotia and the Government of Canada to discuss and find solutions with respect to social development.

The Committee consists of representatives from Aboriginal organizations in the region and other non-Aboriginal stakeholders (e.g. Health Canada, Aboriginal Affairs, Department of Community Services). This committee could possibly add some weight to addressing some of the priority areas outlined in this action plan.

- ✓ Consider presenting the action plan to Mayor Savage and his team to gain their support and suggestions on how to move forward with some of these action items.
- ✓ Consider presenting the action plan to the United Way as they may be able to provide MNFS with some suggestions on how to move forward with the plan and might even be an avenue to obtain some funding to support some aspects of the plan.

SECTION 8: WAY FORWARD

Accountability mechanisms will be required for the long-term success of this community action plan. This homelessness community action plan should be monitored and priority areas and action items reviewed, updated and evaluated on a regular basis.

As we move forward with the implementation of the homelessness community action plan it is important that we do not lose sight of the many faces that define homelessness in our city and remember the people who live on our streets and under our bridges.

It is hoped that this homelessness community action plan becomes a cog in a very big wheel of momentum that needs to begin to turn. To turn in the direction of ending homelessness in the HRM.

If we take a cohesive approach, identify the resources required and ensure accountability mechanisms are in place the ultimate goal to reduce and prevent homelessness by improving the lives of the urban Aboriginal people is very much obtainable.