THE INCLUSION OF ABORIGINAL VOICE IN CO-CONSTRUCTING "HOME": ABORIGINAL HOMELESSNESS IN A NORTHERN SEMI-URBAN COMMUNITY IN MANITOBA

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Abstract:

Dominant approaches to homelessness often exclude the voices of those without a home, when solutions are designed. We argue that attempts to develop meaningful and long-term initiatives without including the voices of homeless people run the risk of failing. Traditional interventions tend to be designed and implemented by experts and authorities, ignoring the accumulated knowledge of homeless people. Acknowledging the structural causes of homelessness and the specific historical, cultural and economic uniqueness of northern Manitoba, this chapter reflects on the knowledge of homeless people living in Thompson, Manitoba, and looks at how this can be incorporated into the co-construction of the concept of home. We will document their process using Freire's 'Praxis' approach of learning, action and reflection through a community-based research experience that uses photovoice when possible. We will also use group and individual interviews, using an appreciative approach. By highlighting the stories, concerns and concepts co-constructed using photographs and discussion, a number of key themes have emerged. In discussing the meaning of home, themes such as the importance of family, of safety and the connection to "the bush" emerged. In discussing both the pathways to homelessness and possible solutions, themes such as overcrowded housing on and off reserve, a positive sense of belonging and the development of trust were identified.

Keywords: Aboriginal, Canada, structural, community-based research, homelessness, allies, services, semi-urban

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Introduction

The dominant strategy to address issues connected to homelessness often excludes the voices of the homeless people themselves when strategists are designing solutions. The writers argue that attempts to design and develop meaningful and long-term initiatives without including the voices of homeless people run the risk of failing. In addition, without discussions of the structural causes of homelessness (Baskin 2007, Ruttan, LaBoucane-Benson, and Munro 2010, Kauppi et al. 2013, Gaetz et al. 2013) and the specific historical, cultural and economic circumstances of northern Manitoba, any solutions will likely be transitional; they will increase recurrence and might not be sustainable. Those interventions tend to be designed and implemented by experts and authorities, ignoring the accumulated knowledge of homeless people, their definitions of home and space, and their sources of identity and belonging.

Homelessness issues affect a significant group of Aboriginal people in northern Manitoba communities and the City of Thompson. The City of Thompson continues to develop strategies to address the problem of homelessness such as the creation of the Thompson Homeless Shelter, the constitution of the Thompson Community Advisory Board for Homelessness, the Downtown Strategy and the newest long-term proposal led by the City of Thompson in collaboration with different levels of government, service providers and community organizations: the Project Northern Doorway. For the most part, these strategies have been expert and authority driven.

This chapter directly quotes the stories and the knowledge of those who are homeless living in Thompson, Manitoba, as well as their allies, to co-construct the concept of home. Borg and co-authors define home as

> a stage for everyday life. Having a home affords a sense of order, identity, connectedness, warmth, haven, and physical protection, which, in turn, provide the means to pattern existence in meaningful ways through, for example, cherished routines or interactions with people one cares about. (2005, 243)

Such a definition helps us to understand better what is missing from the lives of the homeless. Oliver adds that the "[c]onceptions of homelessness cannot exist without conceptions of home." (2013, 113) Low degrees of control over one's environment, then, pose a risk to one's overall health and well-being. Home is not simply a place of shelter, but also a place of belonging, inclusion, and social support. Mallet (2004) states, "House and home, therefore, are two separate concepts: the architectural structure of a building is but one component of the overall machinery of home, one that varies between societies, cultures, times, and places" (cited in Oliver 2013, 113). We document this co-constructive process using Freire's 'Praxis' approach of learning, action and reflection through a community-based research experience that uses photovoice when possible. (Freire 1995) Participants are also given the choice of individual and group interviews. Using a participatory approach to research homelessness in Thompson, Manitoba, we find a number of themes emerge from the interviews undertaken that help us understand (1) the meaning of "home" in a northern context, (2) the reasons for absolute and relative homelessness, and (3) provide some recommendations to the Thompson Downtown Strategy as well as any other initiative involving the homeless Aboriginal population. This chapter represents our initial research, as this project is still in progress. We will continue engaging others in this process of inquiry and reflection (Ackerly and True 2010, Paradis and Mosher 2012).

This article will begin by defining homelessness. This will be followed by an overview that situates the issue of homelessness in the City of Thompson and the region. Our research methodology will be described, and in the following section, the voices of those who are homeless will be quoted to describe their pathways to homelessness as well as the themes that describe their current situations. Their voices ground the discussion on northern homelessness and the emerging themes such as housing conditions on and off reserve, domestic violence, mobility and the importance of security and a sense of belonging. The final section of this article will wrap up with a discussion and conclusions.

Definition of Homelessness

Studies on homelessness carried out in northern environments such as northern Ontario (Stewart and Ramage 2011) and Nunavut (Qulliit Nunavut Status of Women 2007) describe the variance in types of homelessness. Reflecting on the definitions used in the Nunavut study, in this article we will generally refer to three categories: (1) *visible or absolute homelessness* which includes those staying in emergency shelters and those living on the street or in tents at the edge of town. (2) *Relative homelessness*, which includes those living in spaces that do not meet basic health and safety standards or those who are a step away from being without shelter, (3) *Hidden homelessness* which includes those temporarily staying with friends (couch surfing) or family, or in short term housing such as the YWCA.

Those who tend to be in these various states of homelessness are often single-parent women, youth, single men, those with mental health problems, those with addiction issues, and those who come from over-crowded housing conditions on reserve and come into a centre like Thompson for work, independence, safety and social reasons (Qulliit Nunavut Status of Women 2007, Kidd et al. 2013, George and O'Neill 2011, Stewart and Ramage 2011).

Situating Homelessness in Northern Manitoba

The city of Thompson is the largest semi-urban center in northern Manitoba and is situated 750 kilometers north of Winnipeg. Thompson acts as an economic and service 'hub' for northern Manitoban communities, including commercial, educational, recreational and medical services. Employment opportunities such as the Vale nickel mine or Manitoba Hydro also contribute to inward migration from outlying communities. The City of Thompson services an area that covers 396,000 square kilometers, which includes 32 communities and totals approximately 72,000 people. (See figure 1) The average age of a Thompson resident is 30.6, well below the provincial median age of 38. Regionally, the area surrounding Thompson has a median age of only 24, and this trend is growing within the region's Aboriginal communities. In communities such as Garden Hill and Split Lake, the average age is under 20. Thompson's current population is estimated as 50% Aboriginal. The city is located on the territory of the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation (Thompson Economic Diversification Working Group 2012).
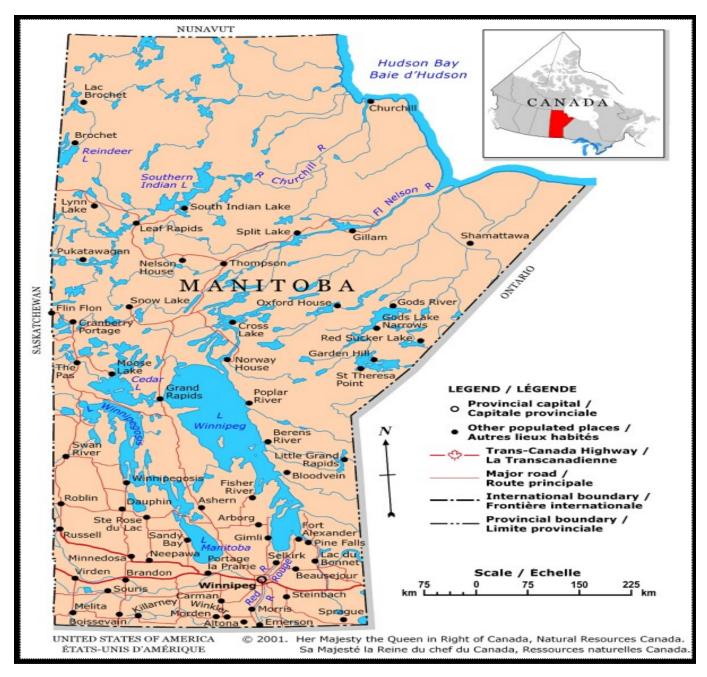
Figure 1 - Map of Manitoba

Starting in 1956, the city of Thompson was built by Inco in order to have a stable workforce to work in the nearby nickel mine. The city has experienced wide population fluctuations over the decades, with an all-time population high of over 20,000 in the 1970s (FemNorthNet Project 2012, 5). At present, Thompson's population is estimated at closer to 12, 829. The economy, the unique demographic make-up of Thompson as well as its isolated northern location presents particular challenges in terms of access to housing and other core social goods for the vulnerable segments of the city's population.

Being homeless in Thompson is often depicted as a phenomenon of circular mobility generated by the movement of residents back and forth from outlying communities and reserves into Thompson in need of medical/rehabilitation treatment, education or other services and supports. Sometimes it is simply a matter of survival that brings people to the city—for example, fleeing a violent family member or being kicked out of an overcrowded house on reserve. Lack of resources in the First Nations and northern communities reinforces such needs to move to Thompson. Mental health, domestic violence and social issues are intersected with housing needs in northern communities; and in the case of Aboriginal people, these issues are associated with colonization and relocation (Christensen 2012, MacKinnon 2010, Hart 2010, Fernandez, MacKinnon, and Silver 2010).

In northern Manitoba, experiences of social disruption can be seen in the residential school experience, where young children were taken away, often for years, and came back not knowing their language as well as not being connected with traditional activities and cultural ways of knowing and understanding (Milloy 1999). Similarly, much social disruption can also be attributed to relocations, flooding and construction due to hydro development from the 1950s onward in northern Manitoba. For example, there is the case of hydro development in the community of Grand Rapids:

> When we were kids we didn't know any different we just accepted what was here, we didn't know all the problems that this stuff was causing like all the influx of people looking for work. There was a lot of crime and after when I guess almost right away when the road come the alcohol. And all the violence, you know like I bet you we've seen more violence in those four years than most people will see in a life time. Violence in the community and violence between the workers… they were just harassing the local people [sic]. (McKay cited in Kulchyski and Neckoway 2006, 11)

Not only did roads and construction crews contribute to alcohol abuse and violence, but also the flooding and relocation of communities displaced hunters and trappers from their traditional territories, changing economic patterns and family roles and impacting communities for several generations (Tough 1996, Martin and Hoffman 2008).

Due to the systemic nature of the social and economic barriers, Aboriginal peoples experiencing poverty and homelessness within Thompson are often dismissed as 'derelicts' by the general public and are treated with particular hostility by a segment of Thompson's population (Barker 2013). While there is an increase in efforts to support Aboriginal homeless people, the daily interaction with society is highly affected by racism and judgments on culture that perpetuate stereotypes and colonial dynamics (Graham 2013). In a 2003 study of 100 Aboriginal people in Thompson, 44% felt that racial discrimination had limited their housing options at some point over the previous 5 years (Corrado Research and Evaluation Associates 2003, 44). This perspective is reflected by some of the people we interviewed.

City of Thompson's Homelessness Strategy:

For many, the move from reserve communities into Thompson is one faced with many challenges and barriers upon arrival. For example, there is a lack of affordable housing,

affordable child care, and accessible job training. Newcomers often arrive with a lack of life skills and education, lack credit and housing references, face mental health issues, and within a short period of time become involved with alcohol and drug addiction. Recently, positive strategies have been initiated to help with an easier transition into the city.

In 2009, the City of Thompson in collaboration with the Thompson Urban Aboriginal Strategy created the Aboriginal Accord. The Aboriginal Accord is a document that recognizes the role of Aboriginal People in the region's history and affirms the city's commitment to strengthen relationships with Aboriginal governments and peoples. The Thompson Aboriginal Accord is one of only two of its kind in Canada today. It is a living document with an ongoing responsibility adopted by signatories and partners to report on the success of the commitment in concrete ways such as in the observing of new programs and initiatives (City of Thompson 2013b).

In 2012 the City of Thompson, alongside and in collaboration with 25 community stake holders, announced a Downtown Strategy (DS) promoting a safe, clean, active city for all members in the community. The DS covers primary components such as emergency, transitional and supported housing, addictions and mental health. The DS also includes ancillary components such as addressing poverty, domestic violence, unemployment, limited life skills and gaps in education. The DS encompasses guidelines that include 1) a proactive rather than punitive approach; 2) using holistic ways to address social issues; 3) enhancing positive relationships; 4) promoting collaborative partnerships with community organizations; and 5) addressing root causes of homelessness and promoting advocacy (Siddle 2013). Contrary to historical strategies, the DS is a long term commitment, which goes beyond 'band aid solutions' and isolated initiatives to encourage collaboration and mobilize different sectors, institutions and communities to contribute to the wellbeing of Thompson and northern communities.

That said, there continue to be struggles for those moving to the city. Thompson's vacancy rate hovers at 0% (MacKinnon and Lafreniere 2009), and its young population, combined with an aging/static housing stock and rising prices, together produce a major housing crisis (FemNorthNet Project 2012). There are only 144 affordable housing units in Thompson and 90 emergency shelter beds. The emergency shelter beds are split between a homeless shelter, a women's crisis centre, and an addiction treatment centre and transition hostel. The Ma-Maw-We-Tak Friendship Centre and the Additions Foundation of Manitoba (AFM) also provide transitional and emergency housing (Thompson Economic Diversification Working Group 2012, 15). As a last resort for those who cannot get into the homeless shelter, there are high numbers of person/days in the RCMP Intoxicated Person Detention cells (Thompson Economic Diversification Working Group 2012, 15). The City of Thompson also has an "Extreme Cold Weather Policy". When the temperatures reach -35 and below, the city opens up alternative 'warm spaces' for those who cannot get into the homeless shelter. (City of Thompson 2013a) What is not captured in the statistics are those bed nights provided by friends and families, those living in bush camps around the city and those sleeping rough on the street.

In the last year, new housing strategies have been developed in Thompson to respond to the needs of different groups. For instance MAPS (Men Are Part of the Solution) created a sober housing living facility for men. This home provides a healing environment for men who have been involved in domestic violence, to use holistic approaches to become empowered and

practice healthy relationships. Another new initiative is the 'Project Northern Doorway' which addresses the needs of the chronically homeless people. This is a 16-bed supportive (damp housing[4]) personal care home. It follows the 'Housing First Model', to reduce harm and risk to individuals and the community through the provision of programs, services and supports (Project Northern Doorway 2012). The City of Thompson has also developed a long term plan to open a Main Street North Project. This project is also based on the 'housing first' model and follows a harm reduction and holistic approach by providing a place of respect and non-judgmental care. The Main Street North Project will provide a home for homeless women, men and youth affected by mental health and addictions issues. They will have not only a roof and a bed but also the resources and supports for treatment and healing as well as the educational opportunities that will help them to re-establish their lives. The long term goal is to centralize a number of current components into one facility. This will give them the capacity to provide wrap around services in a multi-agency approach under one roof. The intent is to be at the fore-front of social inclusion, where conditions are created that will allow people to participate fully in society as valued, respected and contributing members. This facility will have physical and human resources to provide individual assistance as well as to develop different kinds of intervention programs for people who are living on the street (Siddle 2013).

As part of a community planning process, the Thompson Community Advisory Board for Homelessness has recommended that homeless people themselves should advise the board as it makes recommendations for future programs for the homeless population (Thompson Community Advisory Board for Homelessness 2011). Once open, the Main Street North Project plans to build in a community based research component with the residents, who will be encouraged to become involved in dialogue and other participatory activities to work together with staff and 'allies' from different community agencies to make this facility their home and a place that suits their needs. Thus, together, residents, people at risk of homelessness, staff, allies and researchers will use photovoice, learning circles and interviews to reflect on their experiences and discuss new developments and initiatives. The information and outcomes of this participatory process will contribute to the inclusion of those without homes and be helpful for the myriad of service providers from both Thompson and northern communities.

Methodology:

The major purpose of this research project is to use community-based participatory research methods (CBPR) to listen to and document the knowledge gained by Aboriginal peoples who are currently without a home. CBPR emphasizes the collaborative aspects of research (Shdaimah, Stahl, and Schram 2011) and collaboration between the researcher and the community. CBPR seeks some type of change for those living with problems (Anderson 2006, Paradis & Mosher 2012) and promotes 'praxis', the combination of action and reflection in which researched people have voice through a participatory and dialogical process of knowledge-action. The long term goal is to use photovoice (Wang and Burris 1997) as an approach to promote dialogue between those who are homeless and service providers, to work together in addressing issues of homelessness. This follows Dahl's (1970) principle of affected interest, "namely that those who

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[4] "damp housing " means that people who have been consuming alcohol or who are intoxicated can be accommodated (Project Northern Doorway, 2012).

are affected by a policy have a right to participate in its formation and in determining its eventual outcome" (cited in McKenzie and Wharf 2010, x).

The importance given to the voices of the homeless here reflects a concern over the long history of exclusion of the marginalized, in particular the Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Colonization has been, and continues to be, a contest over what knowledge is counted and who counts as experts in determining this. The approach taken here follows recent trends towards challenging these traditional approaches. It supports marginalized voices using a participatory method. For example, Aboriginal academics and communities have challenged traditional methods of knowledge generation by using decolonizing research methodologies (Absolon 2011). Dei, Hall and Rosenberg (2000) explain that Indigenous knowledges are unique to given cultures, localities, and societies, and are "acquired by local people through daily experiences" (p.19). Knowledge is built on experience. Wilson (2008) asserts that the "foundation of Indigenous research lies within the reality of the lived Indigenous experience. Indigenous researchers ground their research in the lives of real persons as individuals and social beings, not on the world of ideas" (p.60).

Photovoice is an approach that encourages dialogue, story-telling and the sharing of ideas and has been used in a variety of projects (Palibroda et al. 2009, Wang and Burris 1997, Walsh, Rutherford, and Kuzmak 2010, Bonnycastle 2013) in which participants engage in data collection and analysis. At the beginning of this project, we had intended to recruit participants using posters distributed throughout the community. Unfortunately, we were not successful in using this traditional recruitment strategy. We quickly moved to a new strategy. We had a series of meetings with key community members who had already been working on homeless issues. We hoped that they could provide us with insights into how to recruit participants. During these conversations, we realized that building relationships and trust were key factors/values when we were recruiting those who are homeless. We defined these contacts as "allies" (Mullaly 2009, Bishop 1994). Nine people were invited to participate in the project as allies. Currently there are seven allies taking an active role. The seven active allies are:

- The resident Elder at the Ma-Mow-We-Tak Friendship Centre. He has been a strong voice in the community on the issue of homelessness. He has also experienced homelessness at a particular time in his life, which gives him increased credibility amongst the homeless population.
- A Cree woman who is the Aboriginal Liaison with the Northern Health Centre Community Clinic. Through her work she has fostered strong relationships with the homeless, service providers and northern communities.
- The Executive Director of the Thompson Crisis Centre. She not only manages a women's shelter, but is also well known for her commitment and compassion. She has experience working at a number of agencies across northern Manitoba that work with marginalized populations.
- The Coordinator of the Youth Build Program at the Boys and Girls Club. He is deeply committed to supporting youth at risk through training, counseling and job placements.
- The Coordinator of the Thompson Homeless Shelter has shown support for this project by allowing us to conduct interviews at the shelter.
- The Director of the YWCA has been open to the possibilities of including women in transitional housing at the Y in future interviews. She has also allowed us to use the

Women's Centre at the Y when a group of women from the homeless shelter didn't want to be interviewed at the shelter.

- The Mental Health Worker from the Canadian Mental Health Association has acted as a liaison between some of the people using the homeless shelter and our project. She was also homeless at one time in her life and so she has gained the trust of people at the shelter.

They are primarily participating in two different ways: 1) In individual interviews and 2) By inviting potential participants and sharing information about the project. As stated above, there are other allies that we hope will become involved in the project in the near future.

Participants

The new recruitment strategies consisted of again placing flyers at different public spaces and agencies serving the homeless population and using snowball sampling techniques. In addition, we held meetings with potential participants who were contacted by the allies so we could explain the project and invite them to participate. Participants were eligible for the study if they were women or men at or above the age of 18 and were Aboriginal homeless people or at risk of becoming homeless. Four groups of participants have taken part in this project. They were recruited in the Friendship Centre, the Thompson Homeless Shelter, the Northern Regional Health Clinic, the Boys and Girls Club, and the Thompson Crisis Centre. The first group we met with was four women and four men who were currently on the street and who sometimes sleep at the Thompson Homeless Shelter. The second group was five youth, all male older than 18, who were attending the 'Youth Build' program at the Thompson Boys and Girls Club. The third group who were interviewed individually were eight women who were living in a transitional home, the Thompson Crisis Centre. The fourth group interviewed was five women who are currently using the Thompson Homeless Shelter. That group interview took place at the Women's Centre at the YWCA, as the women didn't want to be interviewed at the shelter. The majority of the participants were homeless at the time of the interviews. We have also interviewed allies. Group and individual interviews as well as research using photovoice will continue over the coming months.

Data collection

Approval for this research study was obtained from the University of Manitoba, Psychology/ Sociology Research Ethics Board. All participants were volunteers and were free to withdraw from the study at any time. Participation, whenever possible, was confidential and participants were able to withdraw from the study without affecting any services they received. All participants completed informed consent forms.

A variety of qualitative and participatory methods were used in this study. Eight men and women participated in one focus group and five women participated in another focus group. Eight participants were engaged in 45-60 minute private interviews using a semi-structured interview guide. Five participants were involved in a photovoice workshop. Broad similar questions were used in the three groups to encourage participants to share their homeless experiences and their understood meanings of home. Each participant was given an honorarium of $10 after the informed consent was obtained. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and stored in password-protected electronic files.

Data analysis

   Content-analysis techniques (Smith and Sparkes 2005) were used to identify themes across interviews and focus groups. Using NVIVO qualitative software, transcriptions were analyzed by identifying themes that responded to their meaning of "home" and by determining how the knowledge of those who are homeless living in Thompson, Manitoba, can be incorporated into the co-construction of the concept of home.

   Data will not be included for the photovoice project with the five youth from the Youth Build program. We felt that their needs and experiences were quite different from those living at the Thompson Homeless Shelter and the Thompson Crisis Centre, so we decided to exclude this data until we have done more youth interviews in the future.

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Findings

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  The following themes were identified from data collected from 21 participants at the Thompson Homeless Shelter (THS) and the Thompson Crisis Centre (TCC); most of them were women. Their stories and experiences are captured under two main categories: The Meaning of Home and Pathways to Homelessness. Each is then subdivided into a number of subthemes. The first theme is categorized loosely in chronological sequence: Prior to homelessness; and Life without a home. We begin with stories regarding the meaning of home.

The Meaning of Home

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"I sleep in the blue boxes, the bush, stairways, laundry rooms…" (Gloria)

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       When participants were asked about the meaning of home, it was difficult for them to imagine home without talking about their struggles and their experience of homelessness. Consequently, this section begins by describing the meanings of home prior to homelessness and the altered meanings during life without home.

   Prior to homelessness
   For the women interviewed at the TCC, building a sense of home was often restricted by negative memories of violence, instability, living in precarious conditions, being abused, and enduring poverty. For example, Betty described her situation before coming to the TCC as involving frequent temporary housing in multiple homes.

> I was in a domestic relationship and I was tired of moving around every four or five months. Last year I moved four or five times. First I went to my uncle's house, then my cousins' house, then back to mom's, then my sisters…. I thought I would find a place here, but that's not going to happen. I have to go back again to [home community[5]] next week to my parents' house. I've been here about a month. I have been trying to get a

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[5] The actual names of home communities have been left out to ensure confidentiality. Similarly pseudonyms have been used in place of the real names of participants.

house in [home community] and here in Thompson. I have been on a waiting list at Manitoba housing for past year. In [home community] there are three or four families living in one house. It's really overcrowded. I have to stay with my kids in one room… five kids and me (Betty).

For Betty, increased mobility and homelessness were the outcomes of ending an abusive relationship. Unfortunately, she was unsuccessful in finding a place to live in Thompson and consequently she believed she had no other choice but to return to her home community.

Glenda talked about being raised by her grandparents, whose house was her home until her grandfather passed away. Up to that point, home had meant a sense of security and control. With her grandfather passing, she and her grandmother lost authority over the house and other family members began making decisions about her housing situation. She explained, "I was getting harassed by my aunties to get out of my granny's house. My granny told me not to leave… but there are already many people living there (four adults and ten children). I have four children and they are here with me. When my grandpa passed away, my aunties start to harass me to leave" (Glenda).

Glenda lost her familiar physical and social environment. She had not only lost her grandpa, but also the security and support of living with grandma in her home. She now sees herself and her four children as homeless people. She now struggles to find a place to live and at the same time is dealing with emotions as a consequence of her forced separation from her grandmother.

From the above, we find that loss of family, of a permanent place to stay, along with weakened connection with one's home town and a loss of security and control, all contribute to a restricted meaning of home. This theme is further commented on by Florence.

I have nowhere to stay in my home town. I got kicked out because my brother and I did not get along well. We have different lifestyles, we just didn't see eye to eye. He chose his way I chose mine and we just couldn't work it out. He was the one taking care of us after my mom passed away. Dad isn't in the picture. I was back and forth living at different family members, friends' places, so I just couldn't do it anymore (Florence).

Such preconditions often reflected not having options to make choices. Doris had to leave an abusive relationship and the only alternative home in the community was her mom's place, which was already overcrowded. Consequently, the women's shelter in Thompson became her reality.

I was abused and I didn't have any place to go, only my mom's place but I had to leave. There are 23 people already living there, and then me with my six kids. This is the only place I had to go. I chose the TCC because I'm protected here. This is my second time here. Growing up I lived with my granny, and sometimes my parents and sometimes foster homes (Doris).

Betty spoke about never truly feeling that she belongs. Her life so far has been a tangle of living arrangements, in many different places and institutional settings, and never truly having her own place. A continuous cycle of struggles and never experiencing what home might mean was a common theme. Betty, who is living at the TCC, reflected on the condition:

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I don't feel like I have ever had a home. I have been this way for the past 10 years since I started having kids. I think a home should be relaxed and comfortable… a place I would be happy with my kids and not having to move around. My kids could have their friends over. It should be a place where I can make my own decisions (Betty).

To the women coming to the TCC, a sense of home is shown to be complex, one that combines different visible and invisible factors related to space, time, security, relationships, mobility, loss, and belonging. Home is clearly not a simple binary, between either being housed or not. Rather, house and home need to be seen as separate concepts, with home seen as a contentious and continuous process of definition and redefinition. We continue this discussion in the next section.

Life without a home:
This idea that house and home are separate concepts is very much in keeping with our discussions with Elders, Aboriginal service supporters, and the participants themselves. We listened to narrative descriptions and experiences of "being at home" that included diverse social, cultural, spiritual and physical factors. Elder Robinson related that he had once been homeless due to addiction issues. He describes that for him, being in the bush and being on the land was "being at home". For him and for many others who have experienced a transient life, the bush is a quiet, private place where one is in control of their activities. For example, Elder Robinson spoke about the camps on the edge of town, and that some of those who are homeless prefer to stay there rather than in the shelters. These camps enabled people to be independent, gain a sense of autonomy, and spend time with their friends and family. This is something they couldn't do in the shelter (Robinson 2013). Elder Robinson takes on the personal responsibility of checking in on people in those camps particularly when the temperatures get below -30. Some will come into town to try to get into the shelter when the temperatures are extreme, others still prefer to stay in these camps despite the extreme winter temperatures.

When participants using the THS were asked what the meaning of 'home' was to them, their responses were often more focused on the immediacy of the current situation, the need to find some form of shelter in order to sleep. For example, getting a bed in the THS each day is a continuous challenge, due to THS policies and the limited capacity to host all the people who need to find a place to sleep. Many of them spoke about having to regularly find alternative places to sleep.

Fred stated that: "We use the camp even in winter when they don't let us into the shelter. I used to walk 10 km to a camp when I couldn't get into shelter. The shelter is always crowded. Some people can't get in and have to sleep in the doorway or sleep in a tent on the edge of town" (Fred).

The THS is the city's main resource during the winter season but the blue boxes (dumpsters) and the bush camps are used when other options are exhausted for those who are homeless, as Martha explained,

I have been staying at the shelter off and on for about a year. In the summer time I don't' bother with the shelter. I stay in a blue box or in the bush. I just go there [shelter] for meals. Sometimes I sleep outside in the wintertime too. I have been staying here for

about 10 months now but didn't stay here all summer. I usually sleep outside… in the bush. I have to drink and I can't be with my old man in here so I prefer to stay outside with my old man. You can't drink here. I am a heavy drinker. It's a daily thing for me. I love to drink because it eases my pain… takes all my hurt away. In the summer there is a lot of people living in the bush [on the edge of town]. Nobody hardly stays at the homeless shelter in the summer, only eat there, except when it's raining. When it's cold everyone wants to be inside (Martha).

Other options are stairways, laundry rooms, and AFM (Addiction Foundation of Manitoba). Gloria commented,

I first went to the shelter in 2003. I was in and out. After my ex died of cancer, I lost my kids, and stayed at the homeless shelter. They took my home, my kids...I was homeless in Winnipeg too. I didn't know where to go and friends showed me the shelter… or sleeping outside or in shacks… just to be safe there were a bunch of us… we would walk around all night… stay up all night. Here… the blue boxes, the bush, stairways, laundry rooms, but then I went to the AFM. They put me down [on a list]….when I came back they told me I was evicted. So I went to the homeless shelter again just recently. I plan to go back to the AFM again.

The THC is often not included in the participants' meaning of home as being a safe place in which you can rest and sleep. As described by Evelyn, "You have to straighten out first before you get a home. You go to the treatment centre first and get your life straightened out, then get a place, then go job hunting, or to school. You need somewhere safe. If you were there [in the shelter] right now, you couldn't sleep. People yelling and pounding at the door, snoring. A home is where you have your own key."

In this case, home is not associated with the need for temporary or transitional housing such as shelters, but rather with the need for a secure and more permanent condition of being housed. For Gloria, this need was directly associated with living with her children, "For me it's having my kids with me under the same roof. And having food in the fridge, being able to provide for my kids. That's home for me." Similar definitions were provided by other women staying in the TCC.

"My dream of a home would be to feel safe, and a good environment for me and my baby with a nice backyard where they won't hurt themselves… a nice clean healthy environment" (Ruby).

"Home is a place where you are not being abused, a place where you are encouraged to go forward, not backward. A home is where you can be independent with your children… violence free is what I consider home" (Florence).

"Home is where you can feel comfortable and be able to breathe and feel free. It's like having a nest with my kids. Home is being content and not threatened. It is to feel love and being wanted… a feeling of confidence in self and growing with possibility. You have to be careful who you bring into the house. Don't bring in trouble" (Roberta).

Having a stable place to go home to, and being able to keep that place, are important identifiers, as Henrietta, who has successfully transitioned into permanent housing, explains: "It feels wonderful when I'm done work and I'm able to go home to a place. But it's a struggle for me too, because I'm a single mom and rent is high. I pay $1200 a month for my townhouse. I'm barely hanging in but for my kids I'm willing to do anything for them. Now that I have a home, the challenge is keeping it…very high rent."

That said, shelters and transitional homes can offer comprehensive services and programs and have the staff and programming to provide more than a place to crash for the night. This is the case with the Thompson Crisis Centre (TCC) which provides not only a place to stay in flight from domestic violence but also the supports and resources to help women move forward and find the resources needed to regain their stability. For some of those interviewed, the TCC provided a place to build a sense of safety, belonging and relationships. They described life at the TCC in very appreciative terms. Staying at the TCC gave them a sense of community and of belonging, as well as a sense of safety. For example, the TCC provides counseling and resources to empower women to create plans to move from abused relationships and recover while also providing a safe and secure environment. "I like it here. I like the women and I get counseling. Women here are really nice people and I didn't have this support before" (Glenda).

Although it is a transitional space, the TCC offers protection for extended periods of time. Women appreciate having this option when leaving abusive relationships: "This is the only place I had to go. I chose the TCC because I'm protected here. This is my second time here. I have been here for five months. I have six6 children here with me" (Doris).

Women receive the support to become empowered, have needs satisfied, make their own choices and take control of their lives; Roberta's comments confirm this fact: "I have these women here to help me, to give me a push… to focus on what I want. They showed me how to be more consistent with my needs. They made me see a difference. They helped me to be good to myself and to be more assertive. I used to think that nobody believed me. I like it here" (Roberta).

For people who find themselves homeless and on the street in Thompson, the bush camps have offered some a sense of being at home. Others have had to focus on the immediacy of finding temporary shelter on a daily basis in order to survive the night. For the eight women interviewed at the TCC, home is described as a place where you can live independently and have a sense of control and also safety.

Pathway to homelessness

The stories of those living at the THS were similar. Many transitioned into Thompson from their home communities because of overcrowding or behavioural issues. Some came for medical reasons and couldn't get back home. Others fell into addictions due to depression or mental illness. Some went directly from jail to the streets of Thompson. All the women interviewed in the TCC described domestic violence as a cause of leaving home. They were targets of violence committed by husbands or partners and/or other family members, and their only option was to leave.

Housing shortage

The lack of opportunities in the reserve communities often pushes Aboriginal people to move to Thompson with good intentions, looking for employment or going to school.   People need to leave the reserve as a consequence of the housing shortage and poor economic and social conditions. Once they are in Thompson, the lack of affordable housing, both in terms of overall numbers of units and cost is a major cause of homelessness. Elder Robinson remarked on this, "There is a lot of overcrowding on reserves, so people come to Thompson to get away. People come to Thompson and don't want to go back to the reserve, but there is a housing shortage here. People can't afford the rent and there are also rent increases."

Henrietta expands on this by adding her experience of homelessness after coming to Thompson for post-secondary education:

> My experience of being homeless began when I came out to go to school. I was a single mom with one daughter. I came out to school when she was 6 months old. My sister was living here but we didn't get along so well. It was hard to stay in her place… meanwhile I was searching for a place in town. It was hard for me. It took me about a year to get a one bedroom. That's when I went back to school. I started from the bottom and I'm glad I went back to school. It was hard being a single mom especially when there was no housing in Thompson (Henrietta).

Other obstacles also increase the risk of homelessness. For example, a rule relates to having a co-signer on a lease, as was also the case with Henrietta:

> They [renters] require co-signers and no one wants to co-sign so it gets harder for everyone. I'm glad I went back to school. That's how I removed myself from poverty. Finding a home gave me stability. I never did find someone to co-sign. At the time I didn't know what a co-signer meant. Finally, someone gave me a place. It worked out. I was lucky at that time. Before that I stayed with my sister but it was crowded. It was a one bedroom and she had her kids too. But she supported me (Henrietta).

Reserve Dynamics

Participants reported different social and individual factors on reserve and in other northern communities that contributed to the pathway to homelessness such as behavioral issues, limited resources, overcrowding, and accessibility. Some Aboriginal people involuntarily moved from their reserve to Thompson after they were forced to leave their reserves through a Band Council Resolution (BCR). Once in Thompson they have had to deal with many issues such as health and addictions. This was the case with Fred:

> I came to Thompson because I was kicked out of the home for drinking. There was a lot of people living there. I originally got sick so I couldn't work, then I started drinking. I need a letter from the doctor to go back to work…in the meantime I stay at the shelter" (Fred).

Addictions sometimes force people to leave the reserve and once here, they find that an addiction can often exclude them from getting a bed in the THS. There are no resources for treatment in

the reserve communities. Addiction can also be a result of street life once reserve-leavers are here. The Aboriginal Liaison for the Northern Health Region talks about such experiences:

> People come to Thompson and gradually get addictions. They are often not let into the shelter because of addictions. Communities often BCR a person. The band gives them three chances [drugs or behavioral problems], then eventually they are asked to leave. There are no resources in FN communities and no confidentiality (Lathlin 2013)

Poor housing conditions and accidents on reserve are another pathway to homelessness, as it was the case of David and his family:

> My home burned down on reserve. My family is at camp in the bush. I'm waiting for them to come and get me. I need to sober up. I want to go back to the bush. Once in trouble, it's hard to get out" (David).

Alcohol consumption, along with mental health issues and/or leaving jail without housing in place can lead to further risks of becoming homelessness. As in the case of Cheryl, homelessness was also interconnected with her children being taken by the child welfare system. Cheryl talked about her experience, "I don't get to see my kids… they are all in care. I have alcohol problems. I'm always in and out of jail. I can't stop drinking. I have too much grief. I have tried rehab many times, but go back to drinking. I suffer from depression" (Cheryl).

Impact of the child welfare system

Some single parents, who lose their children to Child Welfare, find themselves homeless. This was commented on by the Aboriginal Liaison for the Northern Health Region, who works daily with similar issues. She stated, "Often children are apprehended by social services. There is no support for parents such as addictions counseling, literacy training, or counseling to deal with depression after children are apprehended. For a single person with no children they only get about $200.00 a month [social assistance]. They can't live on that. This in turn causes drinking due to stress, despair, and the influence of others who are also in despair" (Lathlin 2013).

Domestic Violence

For the eight women interviewed from the TCC there were some commonalities between their stories about what circumstances brought them to a women's crisis shelter in Thompson. They all identified as Aboriginal women, they all had children, some of their children had been apprehended by Child Welfare, the majority moved from overcrowded housing in their home communities and all of them had fled violent domestic situations. This last point was the main reason why the women at the TCC left the reserve.

Being a resident of the TCC was not new for Edna. Twenty years earlier she had come to this place as a child, when her mom found herself in a similar violent situation. Now she too is the direct victim of spousal abuse. She talked about a life of living in an insecure home and in an abusive relationship,

> My spouse always locked me out of my house. This is one of the main reasons I am here. I was sick and tired of being locked out of my own home. I would stay home isolated

from friends and family and would want to go out and when I did he wouldn't let me back in. I would usually go to my mother's when this happened. I warned him I would leave if he kept on doing this, so finally I left. I have been here for 5 months now…this is my first time of being here [as an adult] (Edna).

Pregnancy was mentioned as another reason for becoming homeless, as in the case of Ruby. She was in a relationship with her partner who became physically abusive when she got pregnant. Ruby commented, "I am here because of my relationship with my ex. He threw me out because I was pregnant and he does not want a child."

As mentioned above, domestic violence can cause long term housing instability and insecurity. Such was the case of one participant who has been living on the street, in a tent, at the YWCA and the TCC. Ruby explained,

I had been living on the street for 3 months the previous year…in a tent near the hospital for a few weeks. I was a single mother, bouncing from place to place with my baby when I went to the YWCA. Things got physical and he knocked me down. After this I lost my child who went into care and my room at the YWCA. Whenever I had a stable place he was there to take me away. I've been here for 9 months and this is the longest apartment I have ever had of my own. I am always hiding from him, but eventually he finds me out and comes there (Ruby).

Economic violence was also a cause of homelessness for some of the women at the THS. They reported different experiences in which their partners controlled their money, which caused them distress and loss of control, home, children and health. For instance Martha commented,

Well, what happened was I went for my conference in Edmonton and I found that my husband cashed all my cheques and I was waiting for him to send me money. So I started drinking… went back home for a while. Then we started having problems. I came back out for a medical and I never went back. I left my husband and my kids. My kids got taken away. I didn't feel like going back [to the reserve]…I have 5 kids…all of them were taken away. I was given chances but I keep messing it up. So I start drinking heavily. My husband was with another woman so I start drinking. He came and got me but he started abusing me. I was scared to go back home with him so I thought I would stick around here. We had opportunities to get our kids back but we didn't get along, we couldn't live under the same roof (Martha).

All the above stories of domestic violence show multiple complex interconnected stressors that increase the likelihood of homelessness in women and children; they include physical, emotional and economic abuse.

Racism and exclusion

Racism is evident in the daily lives of Aboriginal homeless people. Participants told different stories, for instance Evelyn described this circumstance:

> [Racism is when you] lost your home… lost your apartment…when you can't get along with another person…there is racism…people complaining and complaining about you. The person right next door… when I have friends over, just laughing not partying or anything, and she is constantly knocking at my door. So one day I went to drop off my resumes and all of a sudden they changed the lock on me. They threw all my clothes away… everything. The owner is there and the care-taker. That's how I ended up at the shelter. I was sleeping in the bush. That's where I ended up last year. I couldn't stay with my family. I don't get along with my family (Evelyn).

While there are clear challenges to finding a place to sleep at night, there are additional struggles regarding how to spend the day, especially when it is very cold. When the shelter is closed, there is not an indoor place for the homeless people to congregate and relax during the day. For example, the city malls and businesses have hired security staff specifically to monitor and control the homeless who try to enter such places. When Fred was asked what he does during the day, he commented, "Go out and walk around… talk to friends… no place to go. I can't even go to McDonalds. They ask you to leave. We stay together… safety in numbers. We always walk together especially at night. You get jumped or beat up otherwise. The security guards at the mall poke you or hit you and yell abuse" (Fred).

Discussion:

This study explores the knowledge of homeless people living in Thompson, Manitoba, and looks at how this can be incorporated into the co-construction of the concept of home. This research extends knowledge of homelessness which often echoes existing research on northern and rural homelessness (Peters and Robillard 2009, Christensen 2012, George and O'Neill 2011, Kauppi et al. 2013, Fidler and Bonnycastle 2003). Poverty, instability, relationship breakdown, domestic violence and lack of choices precede homelessness for the participants in this study and additional hardship has caused anxieties and suffering once they fail to find a place or have to stay in transitional shelters.

Similar to other studies such as Hart (2010) that have discussed the poor living conditions on some reserves most of the participants in this study came to Thompson in search of better options or to escape the trauma they experienced in their own communities such as overcrowded housing, behavioural and addictions issues, or fleeing from domestic violence. Once they arrived, they faced many challenges finding a place to live, due to the shortage in housing, and the lack of facilities to support them. In addition they have often experienced racism along with exclusion that impacts their life in Thompson. Many of these issues are not new. What is emphasised here is the attention to the importance of the inclusion of Aboriginal homeless people's voices in defining what is home and the exploration of options to recover their experiences to identify their needs and to reflect on how to satisfy those needs. Study findings as well as the literature (Norman and Pauly 2013) underscore the importance of including the voices of those who are homeless to assess their needs and of listening to their knowledge and experiences.

Participants expressed different levels of needs when they were asked about their meaning of "home". Their responses can be categorized into two groups, immediate needs verbalized by those living in absolute homelessness and the more relative needs (Dean 2010) articulated by those who are more hidden/ less visible. Their needs were complex and thus responses require a collaborative approach. Such a response cannot be met by only one agency or government department and less by only one individual or family. The following expands on this argument.

The eight people interviewed at the Thompson Homeless Shelter talked about wanting more security, comfort and privacy. When asked what their idea of "home" was, they listed the following basic security needs: "feel safe", "lockers, "Even hard to keep clothes here… have to sleep on your shoes." They also talked about comfort needs such as "a warm place in winter", "place to relax", "my own bed", "access to shower and laundry", and "nutritional food." In addition, participants highlighted the need to have privacy. For example, they mentioned, "I need a real home before I can go to school or do training." or "nowhere to do homework." They also discussed a higher level of need which is related to ownership and belonging: "a place to eat whenever we want", "whatever we want and traditional food". Some of them expressed their occupational and leisure needs such "access to services, advice and training (training such as computer skills and high school upgrading)", "a place to do crafts, beading, sewing", "to entertain", "a place to 'live'." These are all reflected in the definition of home Borg and associates provided in the introduction of this chapter.

A home is a place to embrace changes needed to enhance one's life. That was one of the goals expressed by some women. For example, Edna's goal was having a home, "to get my own place, that way family can come over and help me out, and continue to go to school…having my children with me. They are the most important part of my life." This goal was reinforced by Betty, "a place to be yourself." Florence added, "I plan on getting my own home one of these days, no abuse, no drugs, it will be mine." All of them include their children in their goals as it was expressed by Doris, "to find a place to live for me and my kids… a nice clean place… I want a better future... to live healthier. I would like a beautiful house with a roof over our heads… nice background we can call our own. .. a school close by."   Clearly, the stability given to the women at the TCC provides them a greater opportunity to think about embracing change and more long term goals. Sadly, that was rarely heard in the voices of those staying at the THS, whose images of home were often framed around issues of immediacy and survival. Even those using the bush camps offered more hopeful expressions of hope and future changes.

Relationships and community were a big part of women's needs as Edna explained, "Getting women together, being able to talk together and build relationships". Mary added, "having somebody here to talk to who knows what you're going through, and having a shelter and food". This was also inclusive for other homeless northern people: Roberta expanded, "We need more people to go out there on the street and talk to people. I am familiar with how they got there. For us northern people, you have to talk to people who are homeless and not in a detrimental way. You need to use the right voice and body skills and to really listen to them. Know where people are from and know their dialect. Give them the time… maybe three or four visits."

Women wanted to make sustainable moves from violence and they did not want their children to continue the same patterns as their fathers. For example, Edna asserted, "I left my spouse in the first place so my children would know it's not right that he was treating me that way." They also commented that women need more support to flee from violence as Ruby said, "I don't feel

like there is help for women after violence." They need programs for women to feel safe such as a place to live that is for single mothers. Some commented on the need to have better support while living on reserve to be able to have sustainable changes. As Doris explained, "Bands should help their people first. They sent us away. After I left this building last time… I went back to an abusive relationship. They apprehended my kids. I have been working on myself. One day, I just left the relationship and now I'm here." Ruby also highlighted the need to work on herself to achieve goals; she said, "Getting support to help myself… healing myself… I looked for programs to help myself. I'm not leaving this place until I have proper housing for myself and my children. We need our own beds, our own kitchen where we could cook. I want a safe place where there is no drama, no abuse, and no guy coming in to hurt us."

Education was a dream to most of the women in the TCC in order to build the bases for a new life. Edna commented, "I am trying my best to get my GED and would like to one day join the social work program." Mary was determined to go further in her life, "I'm trying to finish school. I have finished up to grade 10. I applied at UCN, either here or The Pas will work as long as my school gets done. Get a good job, a home." Some of them were clear about their future career such as Betty who commented, "I want to go back to school when I have a place to stay. I want to finish high school then maybe social work or RCMP. I almost finished grade 12" Glenda also wanted to finish her high school, "I want to finish school. I'm 28 so I want to get a house. I want a home. I want to go into nursing." Roberta wants to help other women: "I want to go back to my health career. I want to help women out there."

In terms of the role of service providers, the needs of the homeless population need to be considered from the perspective of the homeless. Kennedy (2013) asserts, "a need implies, that unless it is met, a person will be harmed in some way…theories have tried to define need as a concept…while they also discussed who is best placed to define need: service users or professionals" (p.103). We have tried to expand on this question by sharing examples of the knowledge homeless people can provide to the analysis.

We have briefly described the basic programs and initiatives being offered or proposed for the City of Thompson. While these initiatives are meeting needs, they have been primarily developed by experts and authorities. We propose that, under the principle of affected interest, this approach needs to be expanded to include the voices of the homeless. In particular, this should occur during any analysis of needs and in determining how needs will be satisfied (Dean 2010). These are always value laden decisions. Manfred Max-Neef (1991, 24-25) conceives needs as "deprivation and potential…they reflect a dialectical process in as much as they are in constant movement… better to speak of realizing, experiencing or actualizing needs through time and space...". He defines a 'satisfier' as "the way in which a need is expressed, goods are in strict sense the means by which individuals will empower the satisfiers to meet their needs" (p. 24-25). In other words, Max-Neef helps us to understand why we argue for the inclusion of Aboriginal homelessness in continuous dialogues. It is in order to be more inclusive in our reflections on forms of organization, political structures, social practices, subjective conditions, values and norms, spaces, contexts, behaviours and attitudes that are a tension between stabilization and change. It is an invitation to allies, Aboriginal homeless people, service providers, business and community at large to co-create space to continue dialogue on the needs and their satisfiers and on what actions are needed that promote change and well-being for those

northerners who have been excluded from society and have been viewed only as targets of charity or negative stereotyping.

Conclusion

This research project has shown us that the 'allies-homeless people-researcher' approach can be successful in building on current relationships that service providers already have when working with marginalized groups, to eventually achieve bigger objectives. The allies who participated in this research project were instrumental in recruiting more than 21 participants who have been interviewed to date. The waiting list for future participants is very promising and we will continue working together with those who are homeless, with the service providers and with fellow academics in response to our main questions. To conclude this chapter, we offer the following three recommendations, ideally to continue to feed the dialogue on this issue:

1. As stated in the *Community Plan 2011-2014,* we recommend that the Thompson Community Advisory Board for Homelessness create the space and opportunity for homeless people themselves to advise and make recommendations for future homelessness strategies (Thompson Community Advisory Board for Homelessness 2011, 22).
2. That the Main Street North Project incorporate a bush/land component into their strategy in order to create the space for Aboriginal people to "be at home".
3. That policy-makers incorporate the popular slogan, borrowed from the disability movement, "nothing about us without us" (Charlton 2000) into any decision making process in the future.

We strongly believe that the complexity of homelessness in Thompson and northern Manitoban communities cannot be addressed by isolated solutions without including the voices of Aboriginal homeless people, without a coordinated effort on the part of allies and service providers. There is a need to create the space and the opportunity to develop programs and solutions that show compassion and justice for those who have been excluded and marginalized.

Acknowledgements

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