



Voices from the Field

Welcome to [*Voices from the Field*](#), a podcast series produced by the National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health. The NCCIH focuses on innovative research and community-based initiatives promoting the health and well-being of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples in Canada.

Episode 15

Homelessness and mental health among Indigenous Peoples

This episode provides an overview of a multi-year, community-based research study examining homelessness among Indigenous Peoples, conducted in Winnipeg, MB, funded by the Mental Health Commission of Canada. The study was co-led by Dr. Jino Distasio (University of Winnipeg) and community partners Betty Edel and Lucille Bruce (End Homelessness Winnipeg). In this podcast, Betty, Lucille and Jino discuss the *At Home/Chez Soi* study and how they engaged and worked alongside the urban Indigenous population experiencing homelessness in Winnipeg. You will hear how the project began and context for this work, how an Indigenous perspective informed understandings of the root causes of homelessness among Indigenous Peoples, and how those understandings shaped and continue to shape work ongoing beyond the project. Insights in relation to preventing homelessness among Indigenous Peoples are highlighted.

Bios



[Jino Distasio](#), Vice President of Research and Innovation/Professor, Department of Geography, joined the University of Winnipeg in 1999 as a member of the Department of Geography. For over two decades, Jino guided the University of Winnipeg's Institute of Urban Studies where he worked extensively in Winnipeg's inner city, as well as explored broader Canadian and urban global issues. During this period, he actively engaged in over 200 projects, publications and community initiatives. Areas of interest include urban revitalization, housing market analysis, urban economic development, mental health, homelessness and local and national urban policy.

He has also served on numerous local and national committees and boards within the housing and community sectors. Additionally, he has extensive experience in the housing industry, supporting the building of affordable ownership, rental and student housing, along with property management experience.

At the national level, Jino has led several large, multi-city projects that have examined housing markets, tenancy supports, and homelessness, and developed a national index of neighbourhood distress in Canadian cities as well as a toolkit for eviction prevention. Of note, he served as senior member of the Mental Health Commission of Canada's *At Home Chez Soi* project, which was a \$110 million dollar study of mental health and homelessness in five cities. He recently completed an Indigenous Housing First Toolkit for the Federal Government.

As a faculty member in the Department of Geography, Jino focuses on urban issues. He has held Adjunct Professor status in the departments of Psychiatry, Geography and City Planning at the University of Manitoba where he supports graduate students. He enjoys writing commentary and provides local and national media comment on issues relating to urban policy, poverty, transportation, inner city renewal and other civic and urban concerns.



[Lucille Bruce](#) is the Chief Operating Officer of [End Homelessness Winnipeg](#). She has been serving in this current position for the past two years. Lucille is a Métis woman who has worked in various leadership roles in Winnipeg, addressing the needs of urban Indigenous women and children for over 3 decades. More specifically, she served as Executive Director of the Native Women’s Transition Centre for over 17 years. Most of Lucille’s work experience, including her current position, has been focused on establishing and building a continuum of culturally-relevant services and supports for Indigenous women, children and peoples in Winnipeg, including, to name a few, founding organizations and services like Memengwaa Place, Kihiw Iskewock Lodge, Oyate Tipi Furniture Warehouse, and Wabhung Abinoonjiiag. Lucille is also recognized for her work as the Indigenous Co-Site Coordinator for the Winnipeg site during the Mental Health Commission of Canada’s implementation of the “Housing First Approach” as part of the Commission’s national demonstration research across five Canadian cities. More importantly, Lucille is recognized by the Indigenous urban community as an advocate, innovative and action-oriented leader. She thrives in working in transformative change environments and has brought this experience and knowledge to her current position; during her tenure, End Homelessness Winnipeg has transitioned into becoming an Indigenous organization. Lucille has sat on numerous national and regional boards and committees throughout her 30 years, including the Women’s Provincial Jail Review Panel, Manitoba Council on Post-secondary Education (COPSE), Kekinan Centre, and Wabhung Abinoonjiiag.



[Betty Edel](#) is an Indigenous woman from the City of Winnipeg who grew up in the Child Welfare system where she spent her teenage years experiencing being homeless. Betty has over 30 years of experience working and volunteering in the inner city of Winnipeg on social justice issues ranging from health care, adult and child education, and affordable housing. For the last twelve years, she has been working on issues related to youth and adults experiencing being homeless. Betty has a degree in Social Work from the University of Manitoba. Currently, Betty is the Manager of Prevention at [End Homelessness Winnipeg](#).

Transcript

Rick Harp: Welcome to Voices from the Field, a podcast series produced by the National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health. NCCIH focuses on innovative research and community-based initiatives promoting the health and well-being of First Nation, Inuit and Métis peoples in Canada.

Interviewer: How does your team conceptualize homelessness?

Betty Edel: I guess from the broadest perspective, homelessness is not just about having a physical structure. Homelessness contributes to disconnection and exclusion of people. It contributes to trauma of people, physical trauma, emotional, spiritual and mental trauma of people. It’s an isolating factor. It’s always being in crisis, always being stressed out, so it’s just impacting the person all the time. You can give someone a physical structure but if they are not connected to family, to friends, to informal or formal supports that help them be everything they were created to be. So that’s how we look at homelessness – as the whole person, in mental, emotional, physical and spiritual.

Lucille Bruce: I guess for End Homelessness Winnipeg too, because we have become an Indigenous organization we are also now looking at homelessness particularly from an Indigenous lens and perspective. That's really important for us because we know there is an historical context factor that come[s] into play for Indigenous homelessness and it goes back to relationship between land, language, culture, ways of being and value-based. So we are beginning now in Winnipeg to use that definition more in terms of how we approach homelessness because as you know, the population in Winnipeg who are homeless is predominately Indigenous people.

Interviewer: What are some of the root causes of homelessness for Indigenous Peoples in Winnipeg?

Lucille Bruce: Well again, I think when we talk about root causes, we need to go back historically and look at the whole impact of Residential School, the whole impact of colonization and how that has affected and impacted Indigenous people. When we look at Indigenous people today, we know they are the poorest of the poor. Poverty is a huge, huge issue that has not been addressed. There is a lack of adequate safe affordable housing, [a] huge issue that has not been addressed. If we even begin to look further on reserve communities, we know in this day and age that First Nations people living on reserve don't have access to clean water and they don't have access to flushable toilets. We have to ask ourselves, in a country as rich as Canada, why is that? It should not be happening. There is the whole issue of structural and systematic racism as well that comes into play when we think about homelessness and Indigenous people.

Betty Edel: I think part of it, for me too, is what contributes now besides the historical is the displacement of people off land. So if there's a fire, then you have to move out. If there's a flood, and it never seems to be a quick resolution to that.... Like we have people in this city who may be in a house but they ... still feel homeless because they are not with their family and friends from where they come from. So, they are in this city isolated because they are in limbo because that is where they come from, so how can they be included? I have talked to people who feel like they can't vote because [they] are not really from here and [they] are just here waiting for the land claim to be settled or build housing, so you're keeping people in limbo for years and that really impacts people not being connected. I have heard of ... and I guess it's not just disconnect from people, [it] is the sadness that comes with it, and then you start meeting up with people who do things that normally didn't happen in your own community and so now that is contributing to that because now if you do go home, maybe you're going back with an addiction and then maybe in the community, okay we don't want that, so how are we going to solve that? So people need access to substances who never had before, so now they're coming back here to get those substances and now they are ending up homeless on the street. So people are sometimes coming here for a better life also, like "I want to go to school" or "I have to come for medical reasons," and they are getting caught up homeless because the doctor's appointment is on this day but you have to take the plane back or you're not going to get back, so "what do I do now"? Do I stay and get my medical care or do I follow these rules and go home and then I don't get my medical care? So there's many policies and procedures that are impacting peoples' lives to this day and age.

Jino Distasio: That's where I was going to pick that up. When we look at homelessness within the context of Manitoba, [there has been a] tremendous movement of people from rural, northern, remote [and] reserve communities into places like Winnipeg, and then back to places like Thompson and Brandon. So there's a tremendous amount of movement, but I would say too that one of the biggest challenges is the failure of our federal and provincial governments to provide adequate resources and supports, in terms of self-governance and the ability to build better housing, to provide economic opportunities and to lead solutions and ways out of where we are today, because in 2019, it is not all that different than it was 20 or 40 years ago and we are not going to get our way out of this until all levels of government realize they have a responsibility to invest and support and provide those tools that are needed to move forward. I think that has been a tremendous gap, both policy, political will and ability to actually do something to help community support positive change.

Lucille Bruce: And even the gender based services, like where do you go in rural and northern communities if there is violence in your home? Like how or where [are] the resources in the communities or even surrounding communities? There [are] not that many resources. So again, people have to come in, “So now what do I do? I have to uproot my whole family and leave my supports behind to try to figure out how I can have a better life here.” So it’s every facet of people’s lives that are contributing to this.

Interviewer: How does this understanding of root causes shape your work with Indigenous Peoples experiencing homelessness and mental illness?

Lucille Bruce: End Homelessness Winnipeg is working from the principles of Truth and Reconciliation and the UNDRIP (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People), including the rights to housing and including the social inclusion of people who are directly impacted in the work that we do, so we involve people with lived experience in everything that we do. Any initiatives that we move forward in Winnipeg to address homelessness, we ensure that the voices of the people who are directly impacted are included because we feel they are the ones [who] know what is needed, what is necessary to address homelessness and that we need to listen to them. We also include the Indigenous leadership in our community to assist us in finding ways to address homelessness because as Jino stated, nothing much has changed, particularly when we look at homelessness in the last 10 years. If we look at the last street census, we know that the numbers are pretty well the same, that 70% of the population who are homeless in Winnipeg are Indigenous. Those numbers have not changed in the last 10 years so we realize[d] that we had to do things differently now moving forward. By saying that, I mean we had to ensure that we work ... [using] an Indigenous lens in everything that we do. We apply that Indigenous lens but also we integrate the cultural ways of doing things in terms of how we respond and how we set forward on the work that we do here in Winnipeg as End Homelessness Winnipeg. So we have now done a number of initiatives. We have set forward a number of key initiatives, we have created a community sector leadership council that’s reflective of the population that we are serving - 70% Indigenous - who will guide forth our work in addressing those gaps and the needs of the Indigenous people in a meaningful way. We have also changed our entire organization so that our Board of Directors also is reflective of that population now that we are serving, and we did that with the intention that we would work from that cultural lens and cultural framework. Our staff is also reflective now of Indigenous people. The work that the staff is currently doing works from that cultural lens as well. So we’ve got a number of initiatives and maybe I will let Betty now step in and talk a bit about some key initiatives that we are moving forward on, working and addressing Indigenous homelessness in a significant way.

Betty Edel: So before I get to what we are doing now, I think at the core of how we engage with people is we engage with people from a strength-based [perspective] because we recognize that a lot of people look at us from a deficit, from “we need”.. from “they have to give us”. They don’t look at our relationship as reciprocal; you have a good life because I have pain; you can afford your house, your car, whatever, because I have pain, and many of us have pain right. And when you understand when you’re engaging with people, especially on intake forms or whatever, that if it’s constantly coming from a deficit base it impacts people. It impacts how they walk and how they talk because they are always looked at as, “Okay, how can I make my story most needy, most deserving of help so that someone will help me now”. So when you’re doing intake forms, well do I qualify because people would always think, “You are trying to exclude me. Is that why you’re asking me these questions, because you don’t want to help me?” So, if you’re in relationship with people and you understand that trauma, and you understand the desperation and just “Why do I have to blow up all my boundaries just to get simple help from you, like why do I have to tell you all my pain so you will help me get a house?” When we go rent a house, you just fill out your financial information, your references and off you go, right? So we treat people as our relatives. We’re up front, what we are doing with people, who is going to have access to information. We give people permission to be who they are in our conversations when we’re

talking. I have talked to people about [for example], do you ever see or hear things not in a mental health perspective, but if you do let me know, but from your teachings of your knowledge keepers, your Elders and it's just like the freedom to [say], "Well you know I was sitting there peacefully and I heard this...". Just the brightness in their eyes, it's like someone is going to listen to me that understands what I'm talking about, right? So that whole way of engaging with someone and bringing them back to, "You are a person of gifts and knowledge and that is how I look at you. You don't need to tell me all your misery and your pain because we want people to remember you were more than this. You are more than a homeless person. Homelessness is an experience. It is not you as a human being. You are an aunt or an uncle, a brother or a sister, and that helps with emotional, mental and spiritual ways of engaging with people and so that's the importance of how we engage with people. So it's understanding that we are in a reciprocal relationship. Because on people's pain, if we are wise, that's how we learned the teachings. Everyone who tells their story is teaching you something so we all need to listen to all the teachings that are given to us. That's the way out of this and that is how we engage with each other, and that is the importance of talking to the Elders, to the youth. So instead of planning things for people, acknowledging that experience and the wisdom they've got from that experience of what would be helpful and to really listen, not just hear but to really, really listen to what is being said and to know that we are all in this together. There is not one person or one organization that can solve homelessness. The way to end homelessness is you need to look at everything and everyone needs to be involved. We cannot point fingers and blame because if we are not all in this together, we're never going to get out of it. So that's like working with youth and trying to help them stay in school, and you know, just like all the things that we are doing, like working in the community with youth who are ageing out of care. How is that connected to housing and how is it connected to justice? How is that connected to mental health? How is that connected to financial support? How is this all connected, and to ensure we're not doing things for people but making sure we're having the voice of everyone at the table and looking at the whole picture and stopping the silos, that we don't operate in silos. We all need to be together to do this, we all have a stake in this.

Jino Distasio: You remind me of something which is very important. I think what's happened in Winnipeg, I think it's actually unlike any other city because if you go back to 1999 when the federal government got back into funding homelessness through SCPI [Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative], communities had to put up plans. I think if you go back to '99 in Winnipeg, the table was different then it is now where [then] it was a lot of the existing stakeholders. Some Indigenous persons might have been invited to the table and may have contributed, but what we see now 20 years later is perhaps one of the most fundamental shifts that we have seen ever before in the establishment of End Homelessness Winnipeg. As an Indigenous organization, that is the table now and it's taken 20 years to have this almost complete reversal of roles where Indigenous voices, Indigenous leadership, [are] driving the narrative of how Winnipeg, and in some ways Manitoba, [is] going to move forward to supporting more individuals on their own paths to recovery or ending homelessness or whatever they are trying to do in that journey. But again, it's been 20 years, 40 years, 50-60 years, 100 years for one organization in Winnipeg to come to the top to say, "Hmmm, it's now our turn", waiting patiently, but now I think we're going to see much more change that's really driven by those [who] understand the role of peers, the role of engagement of community. Not that we hadn't seen this before, but it's from a different vantage point and it's taken awhile to get there, but I think Winnipeg will be a real leader in showing that it does, and it will happen more and more where Indigenous leadership is driving change in a good way.

Lucille Bruce: In the last year, End Homelessness Winnipeg has become the community entity to oversee the Reaching Home strategy funding, which is the federal funding directed towards homelessness in Winnipeg. We now administrate that funding [of] ten million dollars in the city, of funding that goes towards providing services, supports for agencies and organizations to serve people who are homeless, and so it really now positions us really well to influence how we're going to continue doing that important system

transformation work in the next four years. We want to move forward. As I mentioned, things have not changed in the last 10 years, so we are going to move forward now at ensuring that we work collectively with our community partners and stakeholders, including the Indigenous leadership, Elders, people with lived experience, to now set forward priorities, to create some system change. We have got to change those policies, as Betty mentioned, that are preventing people from accessing income security, housing services, that they need and we're going to look at how do we ensure that we remove barriers for people so that they can quickly access housing. But in response to that as well, we need to build housing – housing for people who struggling with addiction and mental health services – so we need to look at different housing model types that will meet the needs of people who may be struggling both with addiction and mental health. Low barrier housing, for example, would be one solution to that, and as Betty mentioned, it takes now the will of all levels of government to work with us, including the private sector, investment, to move forward building housing for people who are homeless. We need them on board and so it's going to be a tremendous amount of work for us. We recognize that, but we are moving forward on some key strategic initiatives that will hopefully address that.

Interviewer: Could you tell us the impetus for... your team's work on *At Home Chez Soi* in Winnipeg and describe the Housing First approach?

Jino Distasio: The At Home Chez Soi project began a decade ago in 2009 when five Canadian cities – Moncton, Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg and Vancouver – came together with a range of partners, including the Mental Health Commission of Canada, to launch an assessment of Housing First. Housing First, in the early phases, was built on the Pathways to Housing model from New York City. In a nutshell, it was really about working with folks on the street, providing rapid housing and access to supports and services to end homelessness quickly, using an assertive community treatment model (ACT) or intensive case management model (ICM). Those two models provided supports to persons with moderate and severe mental health issues, and then the housing was to be the wrap-around support to bring people together. It was largely an American intervention. The five Canadian cities that pulled it in, each city tried to pull some unique aspects of the local within that. I will let Betty talk about kind of the local model. But in the end, what we tried to do over the first 4-5 years with At Home Chez Soi was, say we can work with individuals in the Canadian context using this American model, but “Canadianized” in some ways to rapidly house and support individuals who are otherwise struggling. In the case of Winnipeg, we really wanted to focus in on addressing the local concerns which were again, as noted, primarily Indigenous individuals on our streets, 70-75%, whatever number we want to use, but we also knew that dropping an American model into Winnipeg wasn't necessarily going to work and I'm going to get Betty to talk about that component.

Betty Edel: Lucille and I were both part of that. The issue I would say for the leadership that was involved with starting from an Indigenous perspective, At Home Chez Soi, I think, is mainly women that got that going and to us, it had to be important. I understand in the States how they did stuff, but I kept on saying but we're from here, we are still connected to this land, we have a history here. So that may not be the same people that they're working with in the States. And it was very important to us to really think about balance and what we were doing because if you only concentrate on housing, you'll put people out of balance, like you have to look at the four directions and not just okay, I'll house you and I'll wait for you to calm down enough and then we can start engaging on something, right. So it was the importance of engaging with people from the beginning, well let's all go out to the country and have a picnic. Let's talk about who knows how to bead, who was taught to bead when they were younger, do you want to share? And we can relearn those things. It was about importance of laughter because we didn't want to put people out of balance, we didn't want to have people [think] “Oh when I see them I can only talk about misery”. No, let's talk about laughter, and just going for a picnic in St. John's Park and someone just looking at you who was struggling to walk and just say, “Hey Betty, you know when I was a kid, two of us swam across here,” and just the happiness of

that...and [thinking of] how strong [they were] and the energy ... and joy. It's remembering to go fishing, it's remembering to be friends, it's remembering that when we were young we had different ideas of where we would end up in life and we had different goals. So if all through life the only way you engaged with people is you tell sad stories so they will help you, we are trying to know the whole person, we have sharing circles and healing circles. Just like another way and instead of saying to people, "You're intoxicated and you can't come in here", the conversation would be, "I know you're struggling right now but your friends have just quit and they are trying not to drink and you might upset them with being..." That is a different way to have a conversation versus [saying], "You're bad and you can't be here"; versus you care about these people and [saying] "I know you're struggling a bit now and you can come back tomorrow, but we don't want these people to..." It's that empathy and reconnection, and it isn't only about me. It's about the community starting to build that again, and wishing the best for each other, and it's about laughter and telling jokes. It's about looking at housing and respecting that people have friends, they have family, so not saying to people, "Well you can't do this because if you do that you're going to be evicted", but it's, okay, your friends and family [are] coming in for some reason...so how can they stay here, how can we talk about this...to do things in a good way and just include to people. Because if for years people have fed you, and made a bed for you, and washed it all and then now you have to do that, so how do we do that as a relative, how do we stand there and wash the dishes together and wash laundry versus doing it as a worker. How do we do it in a different way so we're not making people feel less than, but doing it as we do with a friend and a relative. It was just like looking at the whole person and people working together and having guidance from knowledge keepers and Elders. And there were lots of hard conversations, but you can have hard conversations without being spirit-taking to someone else because when you start spirit taking, no one wants to talk to you. So how do you have those hard conversations with other providers to help them see people in a different way and help them look at people in a different way and not just, "Well what's your plan? What do you want to do for a good life?" But if you've been in foster care your whole life and then you aged out and someone's asking you "What's your vision of a good life?" What would you be able to say? So it's just doing things in a different way and helping people discover their gifts in a safe way. It's being in a good relationship with people so you can hear hard things because then you're in an authentic relationship and being able to say hard things to people. I know people call people "clients," but we never looked at people as "clients." We looked at them as people, all our relations. How do we love and care for each other and not look at someone that we have to analyze, dissect and figure out what we're going to do with them? So it's just a different way of engaging with people.

Lucille Bruce: I think in terms of bring[ing] Housing First, part of that national research demonstration project in Winnipeg, I think what was successful here being part of that project was the fact that we looked at the community and we strategically selected which Indigenous organization would become part of that national research project. Because the Indigenous community had said, no you can't do this without us, we need to be part of this research project if this is going to be rolled out in Winnipeg. We need to have a significant role to play in that, and we've recognized also very early on that the Indigenous organizations in this city have been providing services from a culturally relevant perspective for years now, so they brought all of that expertise into adapt[ing] that Housing First model and integrat[ing] that whole cultural aspect that Betty just spoke about in her examples. How do we do that adapted within how we approach Housing First? This made us really unique because that cultural lens and perspective w[ere] pervasive and integrated into all of the Housing First approach within those three teams that were established, but also in the research piece that was part of the demonstration project. By doing that here in Winnipeg, we developed also the expertise of the Housing First that had not been here in Winnipeg that carried on after the project left. So these three organizations who were involved are still operating today as we speak... [Betty: That is the only place in Canada]... and with that cultural perspective fully integrated still into their approach. It was a huge success

for Winnipeg because of the Indigenous leadership standing up and saying, “No, we need to be fully engaged in this national research project and involved in it.”

Betty Edel: We didn’t dismiss other people. Housing First is a very medical model of mental health, so you can have a psychiatrist [and] you can have a knowledge keeper working together. So it wasn’t just about, “okay, analyze this person and give them pills”... but you would have a different perspective from an Indigenous lens or maybe they don’t need any medication, maybe we need to talk about a healing journey. We need to do some different things so we can go on a healing journey because part of what we hear a lot about is people being diagnosed with PTSD and getting medication. Medication isn’t healing; medication is numbing. There is a role for medication, but medication in and of itself will not move people onto a healing journey and in turn, looking at that pain and owning it, taking the lessons and letting it go. That’s what we cared about, don’t keep walking with that pain and holding it. “What’s the teaching in it?”, and “How do we let it go?”

Jino Distasio: I think that really defined Winnipeg among the five cities, and in other jurisdictions, not in a bad way, but most of the partnerships were with hospitals, psychiatric units, and more pure university based approaches. Here it was completely different, and I would say it was much more centered within the community, that then connected to other layers. So you have to remember that you have the Mental Health Commission of Canada sort of dropping in a medical based model and Winnipeg community leadership saying, “No it will be the community based organizations working with, not for,” and I really think the governance approach was very collaborative and very welcoming, but with a lot of questions and a lot of back and forth. It took a long time to build all those different relationships that I would say that existed within most of the groups that were in Winnipeg at that time. But to build that trust up into the Commission took time and a lot of energy. But I do think that the outcome of that is ten years later, I got a hug from one of the project workers... [who] saw me on the street and we had a short conversation. We still see individuals from a research side, we still have participants from the project coming into the University of Winnipeg, just to say “hello.” Now I don’t know if it [is] the same in other communities. We have different kinds of relationships that we have all learned.

Lucille Bruce: We have a lived experience circle that keeps going.

Jino Distasio: I think [the] greatest gift I got from this project was learning other ways of thinking and doing and being inspired and transformed by that and how important all these relationships and all these things that were going on and why it was so important to take time, why it was important to listen, why it is important to keep those relationships going even a decade later... When we came together in Winnipeg, it wasn’t just for a small project and then we all walked away. I think we knew that that was impossible and for good or bad, we are all still connected in different ways.

Lucille Bruce: We are still connected and still very much focused on addressing homelessness.

Interviewer: Just turning now to lessons learned, you talked about research, I’m wondering if you could comment about the research process during the *At Home Chez Soi* program, particularly with regards to Indigenous engagement that you spoke a little bit about it, maybe expand on that so we can hear about Indigenous engagement.

Jino Distasio: I think the research piece was secondary to the goal to try to support communities using Housing First more effectively to help folks transition from the street. The research in other jurisdictions became the defining component of the *At Home Chez Soi* project. We put it second. We did have to collect information and we collected a lot. There’s been a lot of publications and a lot of research that’s been used to help support ongoing funding for Housing First and that’s good. I like to say that in Winnipeg, we helped try to tell important stories to people [who] needed to listen, to understand that we had to keep investing in the

organizations that were providing the support and services, and if there's a legacy that I would think came from that research, it's that the original money from the original At Home Chez Soi project, which was about 110 million dollars, went on to leverage 600 more million in the first wave of the Housing Partnership Strategy money and it has continued to make that investment through Housing First and other strategies to end homelessness important. I think we were able to use that evidence to keep moving the agenda forward, which I think still moves back to the importance of End Homelessness Winnipeg becoming an Indigenous organization that is leading Winnipeg solutions as we move forward, and it goes back and undoes some of the mishaps that we had 20-25 years ago where different organizations were being invited to a table that wasn't being set by the community, and now the community setting the table and inviting the partners in an open manner but doing it from a different perspective. And again, the At Home relationships helped us rethink some ways we could do things differently. I expect they will keep evolving. 125-130 peer review papers were one tiny piece of the real root of what happened in Winnipeg, which was much more rich.

Lucille Bruce: What was really interesting was I sat at the research committee tables with Jino and the other researchers in the four other sites across the country. What was really interesting too is we were actually bringing that knowledge to all the other researchers.... From my perspective, there was very little understanding of working from an Indigenous lens and in an Indigenous perspective and how we address homelessness with Indigenous people. And we know across the country and in every city, Indigenous people are disproportionately represented, and I think we brought that to that table in terms of how we talked about what was being done in Winnipeg, but was different with the whole cultural integration of the whole cultural piece in Housing First and they were very interested, I believe, in learning but also apprehensive because there was a disconnection of... "What are you saying, you know this needs to be looked at differently, that we need to approach the research differently". But some were very open hearing about how things... so we helped to educate as well... I think that's what we did in terms of Winnipeg, we helped to educate people that you need to work from a different approach and lens when you work with Indigenous people. You can't work from that Western model thinking. [That] is what we brought to the table.

Betty Edel: Jino, you alluded to this. One of my concerns I often express about research is it comes in and it takes and doesn't give back. It takes people's knowledge, their pain, then people write reports, and the reports go wherever they go. So I think the importance of the research done under At Home Chez Soi is it contributed to a legacy being left, which is End Homelessness Winnipeg. So it contributed something instead of just taking something to the movement forward of Indigenous leadership and the voices of those with living experiences, and it was meaningful it didn't take peoples pain and log it. It was meaningful stories that we can learn from to create something so we can continue moving forward.

Interviewer: So going forward, which is something we talked about, how can Indigenous communities, public health researchers, policy decision-makers, funders, and knowledge users best work towards preventing homelessness among Indigenous Peoples in terms of research, in terms of community-based initiatives, policy and programming?

Betty Edel: Well for me, my conversations have been for a long time about the difference between intentions and impact. If you have intentions but you're not evaluating what the policies and procedures [are] and the impact [they are] having on people, we need to start looking at that, right? We need to start having those hard discussions, we need to start seeing the whole picture of when youth are aging out of care, how does EIA get impacted? If our youth are going from the Manitoba Youth Center into Headingley, why is this happening? The role of poverty in what we're doing, the role of education, if we're suspending youth from school and if education is a way out of poverty and leaving poverty behind and being able to get a home, we need to look at what we are doing and if my view of systems.... I've been really thinking a lot lately about problem bias, if we are creating systems that make the jobs easier for people who are working in them, then it's hard for the same people to look at them differently because it is meeting their needs. We need to all sit

down at the table at the same time and have those hard discussions, [saying] yes, I hear what you're saying. But when you have those rules... like when you're incarcerated and you're going to be released, but you can't get EIA the day you're getting out, then you are releasing someone into homelessness. We just need to logically think, what [are] the rules. We are not asking anyone to give anyone any money while they are in a correctional facility, but what are the rules preventing us from ensuring that people are walking out of a correctional facility with a damage deposit and with a rent form, so that all the supports out here who help them can actually help them. We need to all sit down together and have those hard conversations... and we need to talk about what is working well, what isn't working well and how do we figure this out.

Lucille Bruce: I totally agree with that. We have to shift our perspective of how we work from managing homelessness to ending [it], and finding long term solutions to homelessness and that's where we're shifting our work, to lead to that system transformation work that Betty is talking about. A part of that shift is also shifting from doing downstream work, which is what emergency response services are doing, to doing upstream work, which is stopping the flow, preventing it, like Betty just talked about, the flow from kids aging out of care into homelessness, people being released from the justice system into homelessness. We need to start focusing on that whole prevention aspect and as a community, again, I am repeating what Betty said, that we need to work together in a coordinated fashion and stop working from the silo model. We need to work together [with] all of the services, including all levels of government and private sector, to come up with solutions, and part of that work will require ongoing engagement with Indigenous people to provide direction to us in terms of what needs to change, how we go about making those changes. We need to involve Indigenous leadership, Elders, to provide us with that guidance and support as we move forward on this.

Jino Distasio: I go back to 1999 where the view of homelessness, its solutions were really about building our way out of this, by "heads on beds"; we thought we could build our way, build shelters. Then we thought it was about labour challenges so we need[ed] to retrain people and support people in the mid 2000's. I think Winnipeg becomes an interesting spot where I have had this really cool position of helping on some of those community plans for the last 20 years, watching this evolution of again, "heads on beds", to some kind of labour mismatch, to recognizing things like mental health, to now where we are in 2019 and 2020, which is coming full circle and saying to the community, the solutions are yours. Here's the resources, here's the supports. They are not enough, so we need to keep advocating for more funding and more supports by all three levels of government and the private sector and allow organizations like End Homelessness Winnipeg to move towards both long term prevention and ending who's on the streets now by providing this community-based, strengths-based approach that has really just completely turned the table at Winnipeg. I think that's where we are at.

Lucille Bruce: And moving away from a personal deficit and blaming a person to looking at systems and policies and procedures that are perpetuating this and creating it.

Jino Distasio: Let those policies, solutions and ideas come from the new table that has been set here and it's with the right community-based leadership model that is again routing us from the ground up as opposed to these drop down kind of approaches that are a coverall. So in Canada we don't have one solution because we don't have one set of issues that represent all the individuals, all the stories and the dynamics at play. So communities have to be the drivers of their own plans, their own solutions, and I think people should look to Winnipeg and this new model emerging from End Homelessness Winnipeg as being one of these amazing examples that took well over 20 years to come, but it's here. I think it will show that communities have the right capacities, the right leaders, the right expertise to get all this stuff done. We just need to believe.

Rick Harp: To hear more podcasts in this series, head to the Voices from the Field on the National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health, nccih.ca. Music on this podcast is by Blue Dot Sessions. It appears under a creative commons license. Learn more at www.sessions.blue.

National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health
(NCCIH)
3333 University Way
Prince George, British Columbia
V2N 4Z9 Canada

Tel: (250) 960-5250
Email: nccih@unbc.ca
Web: nccih.ca

Centre de collaboration nationale de la santé autochtone
(CCNSA)
3333 University Way
Prince George, Colombie-Britannique
V2N 4Z9 Canada

Tél : 250 960-5250
Courriel : ccnsa@unbc.ca
Site web : ccnsa.ca

© 2020 The National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health (NCCIH). This publication was funded by the NCCIH and made possible through a financial contribution from the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC). The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of PHAC.