

POSITION PAPER

From disruption to continuity: Rethinking responses to homelessness, mental health and addiction in urban Indigenous communities

Public position paper submitted as part of the national consultations on future directions in mental health, homelessness and addiction

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REGROUPEMENT
DES CENTRES D'AMITIÉ
AUTOCHTONES DU QUÉBEC

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Summary of recommendations

The recommendations presented in this position paper aim to transform responses to homelessness, mental health and addiction issues in urban Indigenous communities. They are grounded in a central premise: The most promising solutions already exist within the practices, living environments and expertise developed by Native Friendship Centres. The task now is to fully recognize them, support them sustainably and place them at the heart of collective responses.

- **Recognize and consolidate practices that already work**, specifically a safe and culturally relevant welcome, psychosocial support, navigation of public systems, outreach and harm-reduction approaches as well as spaces that foster social, cultural and community ties.
- **Recognize Native Friendship Centres as frontline infrastructure** by securing recurring funding for them, formally acknowledging their roles and ensuring their active participation in defining strategic directions and coordination mechanisms.
- **Implement a truly integrated continuum** across health, social services, housing and justice to ensure genuine continuity throughout individuals' pathways, especially during periods of transition, disruption or mobility.
- **Develop responses capable of reaching invisible realities**, particularly those of women experiencing hidden homelessness, youth in transition or mobility and men who are largely unreached by current intervention models.
- **Conceive of housing as a living environment** by focusing on supported housing models that foster belonging, the rebuilding of ties and the meaningful integration of cultural and collective dimensions.
- **Strengthen knowledge and recognize Indigenous ways of knowing** by supporting research and structured observation led by Indigenous organizations, integrating experiential and community knowledge, and promoting the concrete application of these approaches in public policy.
- **Establish the conditions for lasting transformation** by moving away from temporary project-based approaches toward stable, flexible frameworks co-constructed with Indigenous organizations, designed to align with non-linear life pathways and the lived experiences in urban settings.

In short, this brief calls for a paradigm shift: moving from managing issues in a fragmented way to fostering continuity, recognition and joint construction, grounded in the Indigenous expertise already at work across Quebec's towns and cities.

The Native Friendship Centre Movement

The Quebec Native Friendship Centre Movement constitutes the largest urban service network for Indigenous people. Its core mission is to drive wide-reaching social change, led by and for Indigenous people in urban areas, to support their social, community, economic and cultural development. The Movement is made up of affiliated Native Friendship Centres, the Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec (RCAAQ), the RCAAQ's real estate company and the RCAAQ's Early Childcare Centre (CPE).

The Native Friendship Centres

In Quebec, 11 Native Friendship Centres and 3 community service points, brought together under the RCAAQ banner, are present in 14 cities where nearly one third of the urban Indigenous population in the province lives. Rooted in the communities they serve, the Centres focus on social, community and civic issues as they welcome Indigenous people of all genders and all ages. Offering a range of integrated and interconnected services, the Centres provide a culturally safe and relevant environment, making them crucial hubs for frontline services. They play a pivotal role in enhancing the quality of life for urban Indigenous residents, promoting Indigenous cultures and bridging gaps between different communities.

The Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec

Since 1976, the Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec (RCAAQ) has served as the provincial association of Native Friendship Centres, representing and advocating for the rights and interests of urban First Nations members and Inuit. The RCAAQ is a key partner for public authorities on urban Indigenous issues and a central player for ensuring equity in service delivery to Indigenous people in cities. Supporting and contributing to the development of concrete solutions and public policies, the RCAAQ strives to better document the presence, needs and realities of urban Indigenous people through consultation, research and evaluation. The RCAAQ supports each Centre and service point in their daily operations and interactions with local partners. Native Friendship Centres nonetheless maintain full autonomy in their actions, reflecting their distinct local realities.

RCAAQ's real estate company

As an extension of its commitment to the wellness of urban Indigenous populations, the RCAAQ created, in 2019, its real estate company. This distinct non-profit entity is dedicated to the design, development and management of Indigenous real estate projects. Its primary objective is to ensure that the skills and expertise developed in urban Indigenous contexts are applied to meet the specific needs of Indigenous populations, particularly in the area of housing.

RCAAQ's community living environments

Through its real estate company's housing developments, the RCAAQ fosters community environments that serve as genuine, safe and culturally relevant community spaces designed to promote academic success, family wellness and cultural grounding. Each living environment takes a respectful, long-term approach to addressing the social and cultural realities of First Nations members and Inuit in urban areas. These living environments also encourage community engagement and mobilization where residents are central to service development and activity programming, actively contributing to shaping environments that fulfill their needs and aspirations. This innovative model allows Indigenous people pursuing postsecondary studies to live and learn alongside their families. For many individuals coming from remote communities, such opportunities are difficult to find in urban areas and play a critical role in academic success.

The following living environments are operational or under development in several Quebec cities:

- Nutshimit in Sept-Îles (2023): 32 housing units
- Waska Witcihitowin in Trois-Rivières (2023): 42 housing units
- Yahndawa' in Québec City (2026): 94 housing units
- Living environment in Chibougamau (planned opening in 2026): 16 housing units
- Living environment in Loretteville for Elders and families (planned opening in 2026 or 2027): 30 housing units

RCAAQ's Early Childcare Centre (CPE)

In 2024, the RCAAQ established an early childcare centre, an initiative designed to support Indigenous families in urban settings. The RCAAQ's Early Childcare Centre (CPE) carries out an educational, social, community and cultural mission that places the child and their family within a caring environment rooted in Indigenous cultures. This new institution also plays a strategic role in the development of future facilities to sustainably meet the needs of Indigenous families and help them thrive in Quebec's cities.

Approach of the position paper

This position paper builds on the realities experienced, observed and documented daily in Quebec's towns and cities within Native Friendship Centres and the RCAAQ's community living environments. Native Friendship Centres and RCAAQ living environments represent far more than simple service delivery sites: They constitute spaces of cultural grounding, trust and continuity for First Nations members and Inuit in urban settings. Together, they provide essential reference points along life pathways often marked by disruption, by supporting individual wellness, the rebuilding of social ties and community roots.

This position paper stems from a collective, ground-level process that incorporates the experiential knowledge of the individuals served, the expertise of interveners and the knowledge developed by the RCAAQ's Observatory of Urban Indigenous Realities and its partners. This reflection is also rooted in the practical experience of a network actively engaged in various collaborative spaces, particularly with government bodies, regarding homelessness and wellness.

Mental health, homelessness and addiction issues are addressed here as inseparable realities that unfold along life pathways marked by disruptions and discontinuities. These dimensions interact and reinforce one another, calling for solutions that account for their interconnectedness and complexity.

From the outset, a strong conviction guides this position paper: Lasting transformation requires recognizing and supporting the expertise already at work. Through their practices and ongoing presence alongside individuals, Native Friendship Centres and RCAAQ community living environments play a foundational role in people's journeys. Their contribution highlights approaches rooted in lived realities that foster wellness, continuity and the renewal of social ties—approaches that must be fully recognized when organizing collective responses.

1. Key findings

1.1. An intensifying and increasingly complex crisis

Across all regions of Quebec, the same observations converge with growing intensity: Homelessness is increasing, transforming and becoming more complex. The most recent data confirms this trend: The 2025 provincial point-in-time count estimates the number of visibly homeless individuals at over 12,000, an increase of approximately 20% since 2022 (Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux, 2026).

However, this increase is not limited to what is visible. The number remains largely underestimated, particularly among Indigenous populations, for whom homelessness more frequently takes hidden forms, with people relying on informal networks and survival strategies. In several towns and cities, the situation is hardly noticeable in public spaces, despite being deeply rooted in individuals' life pathways.

What may have once appeared to be a contained issue is now revealing itself to be a deeply systemic crisis. It is part of an interplay of mutually reinforcing realities: mental health distress, shifts in substance use habits and types of substances used (contributing in particular to a rise in overdose deaths), and persistent housing insecurity. These dimensions do not simply coexist; they interact, overlap and severely impact life pathways.

This transformation is also perceptible in urban settings through more fragile cohabitation, heightened tensions and a shared sense of urgency. However, this partial visibility tends to mask a deeper reality of fragmented journeys marked by repeated disruptions (social, institutional and land-based) that traditional analytical frameworks regularly overlook.

1.2. Intervening in increasingly complex contexts

From an intervention standpoint, a distinct sense of unease emerges. In many settings, practices still rely heavily on individual interveners' ability to absorb increasingly complex situations, in particular with co-occurring challenges in mental health, substance use and housing insecurity. Interventions are thus carried out in high-pressure environments with limited leeway to structure actions. This observation in no way calls into question the commitment of interveners, whose dedication is essential on a daily basis; rather, it highlights the limitations of a system that struggles to provide the conditions necessary to implement organized and sustained approaches.

High staff turnover, particularly in the community sector, accentuates this fragility. Further, a lack of specialized training and insufficient support compound the issue, keeping interventions locked in a mode of continuous emergency response rather than building a collective capacity to act proactively in an organized manner.

One idea has become undeniably clear: Indigenous people should never have been expected to adapt to services. The experience of recent decades demonstrates that this approach quickly reaches its limits. The needs of First Nations and Inuit in urban settings cannot be fully addressed through simple adjustments to models designed without them. Instead, it is necessary to recognize, support and develop approaches created with communities and rooted in their realities, knowledge and priorities.

This also requires recognizing that life pathways are non-linear and do not follow timelines defined by service providers. Journeys evolve, transform and may include periods of recovery, transition or setbacks, without these being interpreted strictly as negative. Support must therefore demonstrate flexibility and continuity, adapting to each person's pace and to the complex lived realities they face, particularly at the intersection of substance use, mental health and relationships with public institutions.

1.3. A fragmented system creating disruptions in life pathways

Service fragmentation stands out as one of the most concerning findings. For a single individual, it is common to have to navigate multiple processes across various resources, and sometimes across several interveners within the same organization, each operating under its own rules, schedules and eligibility criteria.

Yet, individuals experiencing homelessness, social disruption, active substance use or mental health challenges have needs that can be continuous, often manifesting around the clock. In this context, services intervene at isolated moments, without true continuity or an integrated pathway between organizations. This lack of continuity weakens

individual efforts and complicates access to tailored support. A single change in circumstance, such as active substance use, can be enough to interrupt care. An administrative hurdle can delay access to a service. Moving from one region to another can result in a loss of entitlements or a complete loss of reference points. For these individuals, such disruptions accumulate over time, creating discouragement, fatigue and, ultimately, disengagement from the steps they have undertaken. Giving up is not an isolated choice; it is often the end result of fractured journeys marked by repetitive administrative hurdles, constant transitions and a lack of continuity between services.

The lack of alignment between sectors largely contributes to this situation. Health, social services, justice and housing too often operate in silos, lacking robust coordination mechanisms. The responsibility of building bridges between these sectors then falls implicitly onto the individuals themselves. In such situations, the outreach and relational approach of Native Friendship Centres becomes essential. While it can be part of specific roles, this cross-cutting approach is primarily shared across all teams. It makes it possible to support individuals as they navigate the system, facilitating access to services and restoring a form of continuity in otherwise fragmented life pathways.

1.4. Key players still insufficiently recognized

Native Friendship Centres occupy a unique place in these life pathways. They are often the first point of contact for Indigenous people living in or moving through urban areas, and sometimes the only spaces considered safe. In these spaces, individuals are not defined primarily by their challenges; they are welcomed as whole people, in an environment that fosters the creation of trusting relationships, an essential prerequisite for any meaningful steps forward. Native Friendship Centres thus play a pivotal role in people's journeys. Through their ongoing presence, outreach approach and integrated services, the Centres serve as anchors, navigation hubs within a complex system and bridges between individuals and institutions. Their work maintains connections in the midst of pathways studded with disruption while supporting longer-term efforts.

Yet, despite this contribution, their unique expertise remains insufficiently recognized within the formal organization of services. This gap between the scope of their work and their institutional recognition constitutes a structural issue: it limits the capacity to consolidate and deploy approaches that have already proven relevant in supporting individuals. Fully recognizing this unique expertise means viewing Native Friendship Centres not as peripheral or complementary actors but as central components of the service continuum, whose contribution must be supported, structured and integrated in a manner that reflects their important role in people's life pathways.

2. Specific issues, challenges and realities

2.1. Differentiated vulnerabilities at the intersection of life pathways

Homelessness, mental health distress and addiction do not manifest uniformly. They take different shapes depending on individuals' life journeys, identities and life stages. Behind administrative categories lie deeply unequal realities that are often rendered invisible within current solutions.

Among urban Indigenous populations, these vulnerabilities cannot be understood without considering the cumulative effects of family, land-based, social and institutional disruptions scattered throughout life pathways. This upheaval also occurs within contexts marked by racism and discrimination—particularly in accessing housing, employment and public services—which further exacerbates precarious situations. In addition to these dynamics is the fundamental situation of a dual pressure on housing, felt both in communities of origin and in urban settings. This situation restricts options for returning home, complicates mobility pathways and heightens the risks of housing insecurity. It also fuels less visible forms of homelessness that rely on relational and community networks. While these networks can serve as crucial sources of support, they can also lead to instability and the exhaustion of informal safety nets.

These vulnerabilities are thus embedded in life pathways marked by an interplay of individual, relational and structural factors that cannot be fully grasped through sector-specific analysis. They call for perspectives capable of capturing both the complexity of these journeys and the broader contexts in which they unfold.

2.2. Women experiencing invisibility and increased danger

For many Indigenous women, homelessness does not take the visible form that systems are set up to recognize. It is largely experienced as hidden homelessness via temporary housing arrangements, reliance on informal networks or exchanging services to secure shelter or protection. This elusive reality remains widely underestimated and insufficiently addressed in public policy (Schwan et al., 2021). Furthermore, multiple analyses highlight that the homelessness experienced by women and girls remains largely invisible within dominant analytical and intervention frameworks (Women's National Housing & Homelessness Network, n.d.).

This invisibility is far from protective; it comes with increased risks of violence, control and exploitation. The life pathways of many women bear the marks of gender-based violence, which is both a trigger for entering homelessness and an ongoing reality in their lives (Schwan et al., 2020). For Indigenous women, these dynamics manifest through cumulative experiences of racism, discrimination and institutional disruptions that amplify their vulnerability. Canadian data shows that they are disproportionately exposed to violence, which is closely tied to housing instability and homelessness (Heidinger, 2022). In this context, hidden homelessness can serve as a strategy to navigate insecurity and limit certain immediate risks, even as it keeps women at arm's length from formal services and recognition mechanisms. Many Indigenous women, particularly younger women, do not use support services, which are often perceived as inaccessible, inadequate or unsafe from a cultural and relational standpoint.

Specific circumstances further compound these contradictions. Mixed-gender shelters can expose women to the same individuals they encounter in public spaces, perpetuating dynamics of insecurity. Outside of urban centres, the scarcity or total absence of resources specifically dedicated to women severely limits their options for accessing truly safe environments. Thus, far from indicating an absence of need, the invisibility of Indigenous women's trajectories highlights the limits of current frameworks, which struggle to recognize and address situations that fall outside the most visible forms of homelessness.

2.3. Highly mobile youth exposed to disruptions and predatory dynamics

The life pathways of Indigenous youth frequently involve significant mobility, with several moves between towns and cities, and sometimes between regions or provinces, that fragment social ties, complicate ongoing support and hinder continuous care. This high mobility occurs in journeys where movement between territories, communities and urban environments is an integral part of lived experience. This context contributes to exposing certain young people to predatory and exploitative dynamics, where relocation is imposed or encouraged by networks that remove them from their anchors and support systems (Public Safety Canada, 2019).

A major point of disruption in the life pathways of many Indigenous youth is aging out of youth protection services. Available data indicates that 25% to 50% of youth leaving the child welfare system experience episodes of homelessness or housing instability within the year following their departure (Kurzawski, 2021). Indigenous youth, who are heavily overrepresented in the youth protection system, are particularly vulnerable to these disruptions. This often abrupt transition occurs in a context where mental health, social support and housing stability needs remain high, even as safety nets shrink. For many Indigenous youth, aging out occurs after prolonged placements, sometimes in non-Indigenous foster families, involving constant navigation between different cultures and a cumulative history of displacement. These journeys are frequently marked by complex trauma, loss of identity anchors, disproportionate exposure to violence and repeated interruption of meaningful connections. The continuity of care and support is often severed precisely when needs escalate, heightening the risks of homelessness, problematic substance use and psychological distress.

Native Friendship Centres often serve as safe spaces to which young people turn during these periods of transition and disruption. However, supporting youth experiencing these situations cannot fall solely on Indigenous organizations. It requires genuine, equal collaboration with public health and social service networks, where the roles and responsibilities of each partner are clearly defined to ensure seamless continuity of support beyond institutional thresholds.

2.4. Men overrepresented yet under-served in their specific realities

Adults make up the majority of individuals experiencing visible homelessness. Canadian data shows that adults, particularly those aged 25 to 49, constitute the largest group in shelters, while the proportion of individuals aged 50

and older is steadily growing (Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada, 2024; Alston et al., 2024). Men are also overrepresented among visibly homeless individuals, a trend well-documented in point-in-time counts and shelter data, though cross-sectional analyses by age, gender and Indigenous identity remain limited.

Among Indigenous men, this overrepresentation is tied to life pathways often including prolonged disruptions, deep isolation and difficulty accessing spaces where they can rebuild a sense of purpose, belonging and social recognition. For the most part, current intervention models do not address issues related to masculinity, fatherhood, social roles and help-seeking behaviours; this contributes to keeping many men from seeking services.

While men are more visible in public spaces, this visibility does not necessarily translate into better access to solutions that align with their realities. Many interventions remain focused on emergency or crisis management without addressing the relational, identity and cultural dimensions that shape these journeys. This mismatch leads to life pathways characterized by frequent cycles between the street, emergency resources and institutions, lacking true continuity.

Certain initiatives rooted in local and cultural realities, including projects led by Native Friendship Centres, show the power of culturally centred spaces. By focusing on culture, community and wellness, these programs offer meaningful guidance and help individuals forge life paths aligned with their own aspirations. However, these initiatives are often marginal and insufficiently recognized within the formal organization of services.

2.5. Life pathways marked by systemic breaking points

Beyond demographic categories and specific profiles, certain moments in life repeatedly arise as tipping points into homelessness or a worsening of existing conditions. Release from a correctional facility, discharge from a hospital, aging out of the youth protection system or moving from a home community to an urban centre are all critical moments where individuals find themselves without an adequate safety net.

These transitions often occur when needs are high, even as support mechanisms dwindle or stop abruptly. Access to safe housing, psychosocial support, continuity of care, recognition of rights and genuine alignment between services is frequently missing, undermining the continuity of care and support. When these conditions are not met, transitions become breaking points.

These moments are all the more destabilizing because they take place within poorly coordinated systems. Moving across jurisdictions (between regions, provinces or service networks) can result in a loss of entitlements, disrupted care management and the need to restart already complex administrative processes. This institutional discontinuity implicitly relies on individuals' ability to navigate complex systems on their own.

For Indigenous people, these disruptions are often part of life pathways that already include multiple displacements, experiences of racism and fragile relationships with public institutions. The compounding of these disruptions leads to disjointed journeys where progress doesn't translate to lasting stability, despite individual and community efforts.

2.6. An inherently systemic understanding of vulnerabilities

The realities described in the previous sections cannot be reduced to individual situations or so-called "at-risk" profiles. They are the result of structures, policies and systems that fail at multiple key moments to provide continuous support along life pathways. In the case of Indigenous people, this gap is also explained by an often partial understanding of lived experiences. Institutional solutions rely on reference frameworks that do not always align with Indigenous ways of being, self-defining and belonging. They consequently tend to target visible manifestations of homelessness without fully accounting for the relational, cultural, land-based and historical dimensions that shape these journeys.

Considerable research demonstrates that Indigenous homelessness cannot be understood simply as a lack of housing, rather it is a disruption of social, relational and cultural roots. "Home" is not limited to a physical space; it encompasses a web of connections, belongings and reference points that give meaning to existence and allow individuals to locate themselves in the world (Lévesque & Comat, 2018). From this perspective, responses focused exclusively on housing access tend to be insufficient if they are not grounded in a broader understanding of what home and habitation represent for Indigenous people.

This discrepancy is also evident in how situations are analyzed, measured and framed. Current indicators and intervention frameworks rely on concepts that fail to capture the full complexity of Indigenous life pathways. This disconnect leads to fragmented, and often inadequate, responses as well as heightened criminalization when visibility in public spaces triggers an intervention. This dynamic is especially pronounced in an Indigenous context, where heightened visibility in public spaces exposes individuals to repeated police stops, fines and legal issues. These interventions, which are often tied to survival strategies rather than criminal behaviour, fuel a vicious cycle: they destabilize life pathways, complicate access to housing and services and drive people further away from support networks, ultimately worsening the very situations they claim to manage.

Reframing vulnerabilities therefore requires shifting our perspective. It is not the individuals who are inherently vulnerable but rather their living conditions that create and intensify these vulnerabilities. Recognizing this distinction is essential to move beyond responses focused strictly on symptoms and to pave the way for approaches capable of supporting life journeys in all their complexity.

3. Rethinking responses: Grounding responses in lived experiences

The evidence is clear: current solutions will remain inadequate as long as they are fragmented, conditional and disconnected from the lived experiences of urban Indigenous people. It is no longer enough to simply add more services; we must fundamentally transform how they are designed, coordinated and delivered.

This shortfall also stems from dominant analytical and service delivery frameworks, which often fail to fully capture Indigenous realities, resulting in approaches that have difficulty reaching individuals and ensuring seamless support pathways. Rethinking approaches demands a fundamental paradigm shift that places Indigenous journeys, communities and expertise at the centre of public action.

3.1. Consolidating and recognizing effective existing practices

In many environments, relevant practices already exist and have proven their value. These practices are structured, sustainable and embedded within organizations, while remaining deeply connected to individuals' lived experiences. They do not rely on isolated individual initiatives but on a coherent set of approaches deployed by Native Friendship Centres at various stages of individual pathways.

These practices notably encompass functions such as a safe and culturally relevant welcome, psychosocial support, system navigation, transition support, harm reduction, as well as rebuilding social, cultural and community ties. They make it possible to build lasting relationships with individuals who often fall under the institutional radar, to support seamless pathways and to maintain anchoring points in lives marked by disruption.

Community-outreach and harm-reduction approaches are central components of this overall model, acknowledging the non-linear nature of these pathways and relying on a respectful, culturally safe welcome. However, these practices cannot be reduced to a few specific interventions; they are part of a holistic approach of support, delivered collectively by teams and integrated into the operating models of Native Friendship Centres.

Transforming solutions therefore requires recognizing this suite of practices as foundational components of the system, ensuring their stable funding, professionalization and integration into practice frameworks.

- To this end, it is essential to recognize and consolidate:
 - roles to provide a safe and culturally relevant welcome, which often serve as the initial entry point for support pathways and foster the establishment of long-term relationships of trust;
 - psychosocial support and system navigation practices, which maintain continuity of pathways beyond simple referrals;
 - community-outreach and harm-reduction approaches, rooted in a non-linear understanding of individual pathways and the cultural safety of interventions;
 - spaces for socialization, rebuilding connections and belonging, encompassing cultural, community and collective dimensions;
 - the capacity of Friendship Centres to intervene at key stages of individual trajectories, including periods of transition and disruption.

3.2. Recognizing Friendship Centres as frontline infrastructure

In light of these findings, Native Friendship Centres stand out as key foundational players within the continuum of services in cities. The Centres do not play a merely complementary or ad hoc role: they provide core frontline services that are essential to ensuring seamless pathways.

Friendship Centres offer safe and culturally relevant spaces for reception, support and navigation through a complex system while serving as anchor points to turn back to when pathways break down. Their work relies on an ongoing presence, a deep understanding of local realities and an ability to recreate relational environments that foster trust, socialization and belonging—fundamental conditions for supporting wellness and long-term engagement.

In a context marked by disconnected services, Friendship Centres act as a vital bridge between individuals and institutions by facilitating access to services, ensuring continuity of support and driving informal cross-sector coordination. Although this function is widely carried out on the ground, it remains unrecognized within the formal organization of services.

- Recognizing Friendship Centres as frontline infrastructure therefore requires:
 - stable, recurrent funding that matches their key foundational role;
 - formal recognition of their core functions within service delivery models;
 - active participation in shaping policy direction and coordination mechanisms alongside other system partners.

3.3. Establishing a truly integrated continuum

One of the major challenges highlighted in this position paper is the lack of continuity between sectors. As long as mental health, homelessness and addiction are treated separately, individual journeys will continue to face disruptions, service gaps and an implicit burden on individuals to navigate poorly aligned systems on their own. Establishing a truly integrated continuum means moving beyond simple referrals between resources. It requires building sustainable coordination mechanisms among system partners, with the explicit integration of Native Friendship Centres as core partners, to ensure seamless pathways, particularly during times of transition and disruption.

- Such a continuum notably requires:
 - formal alignment mechanisms between the health, social services, housing and justice sectors;
 - sustained coordination between Native Friendship Centres and public institutions, grounded in a clear recognition of each partner's roles and responsibilities;
 - continuous, long-term pathway support that acknowledges the non-linear nature of these journeys and allows individuals to move back and forth between services without interruption or loss of entitlements.

3.4. Reaching realities overlooked in service delivery

Current service delivery models still fail to fully address several circumstances, particularly those of women experiencing hidden homelessness, highly mobile youth and men who are rarely reached by dominant intervention approaches. Often less visible in public spaces or within institutional frameworks, these experiences continue to fall through the cracks of existing intervention models.

Grounded solutions must recognize that these pathways are not isolated issues. Instead, they are rooted in complex relational, family, land-based and cultural dynamics, often characterized by frequent disruptions and highly unpredictable journeys. Rather than creating parallel or specialized programs tailored to specific profiles, the goal is to strengthen approaches capable of meeting people where they are, in ways that align with their realities and aspirations.

- This notably requires developing:
 - safe, culturally grounded environments for women to mitigate the risks associated with hidden homelessness and violence;
 - sustained support pathways for youth navigating transitions and disruptions, particularly when aging out of or exiting institutional systems;

- spaces and intervention approaches tailored to the lived experiences of men, addressing issues related to isolation, identity, fatherhood and perceptions around seeking help.

3.5. Reimagining home as a catalyst for wellness

Housing issues eloquently illustrate the limitations of current solutions. Gaining access to housing, while essential, is not enough to ensure lasting wellness when individual journeys face repeated disruptions, increased involvement with the justice system, frequent mobility and eroded social ties. Responses focused solely on providing shelter risk falling short if they fail to account for the realities surrounding these life paths.

For Indigenous people, the upheaval associated with homelessness is not merely the absence of a physical space but a broader loss of anchoring across social, relational, cultural and land-based dimensions. “Home” is far more than a dwelling; it encompasses a web of connections, reference points and a sense of belonging that enable individuals to find their place in the world, remain part of a community and sustain their overall wellness.

From this perspective, housing solutions must be designed as living environments capable of supporting the rebuilding of connections, socialization, belonging and continuity throughout pathways. This requires moving beyond a purely functional approach to housing, to incorporate relational and cultural dimensions alongside a clear recognition of the non-linear nature of individual pathways.

- Transforming responses requires moving beyond an approach focused solely on housing access, which involves:
 - developing supportive housing models tailored to non-linear pathways and mobile populations;
 - creating environments that foster socialization, belonging and the rebuilding of ties;
 - integrating cultural and collective reference points into living environments;
 - increasing the flexibility of approaches to account for substance use, justice system involvement and repeated transitions.

3.6. Strengthening knowledge and recognizing Indigenous expertise

Sustainable improvement in service delivery also relies on better access to knowledge and, above all, on the full recognition of existing expertise. Urban Indigenous pathways, hidden homelessness and the dynamics leading to service disruptions are only partially documented. This is partly due to the fact that they fall outside dominant analytical frameworks and the standard indicators used by current systems. In this context, knowledge development and mobilization must directly support action, rather than gather a stockpile of data disconnected from lived realities. Experiential knowledge, frontline expertise and data generated by Indigenous organizations are essential drivers for understanding the complexity of individual journeys and designing more equitable, effective responses.

The role of the RCAAQ’s Observatory of Urban Indigenous Realities aligns directly with this vision. By documenting lived experiences, supporting applied research and fostering collaboration across community, institutional and academic sectors, the Observatory helps illuminate dynamics that are often missing from public analyses while strengthening our collective capacity to take action.

- Strengthening knowledge therefore requires:
 - supporting research and observation initiatives led by and with Indigenous organizations, directly aligned with needs on the ground;
 - fully recognizing and integrating experiential and community-based knowledge into policy and program design;
 - sustaining spaces for dialogue and knowledge transfer to ensure this expertise is practically applied in shaping service delivery.

3.7. Creating the conditions for sustainable transformation

The transformations proposed in this position paper cannot happen without clear structural groundwork; without it, the outcomes of even the strongest, most relevant solutions will remain fragile and limited. The findings demonstrate that current obstacles stem less from a lack of practical solutions than from the rigid frameworks in which they operate.

First, we must shift away from fragmented, short-term project funding, which destabilizes organizations, drives high staff turnover and disrupts continuity. Coherent, grounded solutions require stable, predictable funding that matches the key structural role played by Native Friendship Centres and urban Indigenous organizations.

Achieving lasting transformation also demands genuine co-construction with urban Indigenous organizations, moving beyond occasional consultations. This means recognizing these organizations as full partners in shaping policy directions, programs and coordination mechanisms.

Finally, long-term sustainability hinges on valuing the human dimension of frontline work. Supporting individuals through systemic disruption, complex trauma and non-linear journeys takes time, continuity and properly supported teams.

- Sustaining long-term transformation requires a structured framework that includes:
 - ensuring recurrent, stable, long-term funding that enables Native Friendship Centres to plan, consolidate and scale their work beyond short-term project cycles;
 - recognizing and supporting true co-construction with Native Friendship Centres in policy development, programming and coordination mechanisms, including representation on decision-making bodies;
 - investing in the human dimensions of frontline work, particularly training, staff retention and burnout prevention to safeguard service quality and support continuity;
 - building flexible, enduring practice frameworks designed for non-linear pathways, high mobility, justice system involvement and frequent transitions.

Toward a paradigm shift

The findings and recommendations put forward in this position paper call for a fundamental change in how we design and organize responses to homelessness, mental health and addiction challenges among urban Indigenous populations. They invite us to move beyond fragmented, conditional services and recognize the central role that relationships, continuity and cultural grounding play in pathways to wellness. These issues cannot be understood or addressed in isolation; they are interconnected manifestations of life paths marked by systemic disruption, stemming from institutional frameworks that still struggle to accommodate the complexity, mobility and non-linear nature of urban Indigenous journeys. Transforming our response therefore requires rethinking not only frontline practices but also the structural frameworks through which policies are conceived, funded and governed.

Native Friendship Centres already embody this paradigm shift. Through their ongoing presence, culturally safe and relevant approaches and capacity to intervene across all stages of individual trajectories, they provide vital anchoring points within journeys often disrupted by repeated systemic breaks. The priority is not to invent new solutions but to recognize, sustain and structure what is already working on the ground by drawing on the expertise of Native Friendship Centres and building living environments that foster belonging, continuity and overall wellness. Ultimately, transforming urban Indigenous service delivery requires a true paradigm shift: moving away from managing isolated problems and toward a model rooted in relationships, recognition and meaningful joint development.

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