



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Revisioning Coordinated Access:

Fostering Indigenous Best Practices Towards a  
Wholistic Systems Approach to Homelessness

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**Prepared by:**

The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (Hub Solutions)

- John Ecker, PhD
- Anika Mifsud, PhD and

Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton - Indigenous Reaching Home Team

- Victoria Bomberry, Indigenous Systems Planner
- Yvonne Maracle, Indigenous Social Planner
- Sara Mayo, Social Planner (Geographic Information Services)
- Tristan MacLaurin, Indigenous Social Planner Assistant
- Cindy Sue Montana McCormack, Indigenous Senior Social Planner

**Layout by:**

Design team at the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (Hub Solutions)

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**Contact info**

The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness

thehub@edu.yorku.ca

[www.homelesshub.ca](http://www.homelesshub.ca)

Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton

smayo@sprc.hamilton.on.ca

[www.sprc.hamilton.on.ca](http://www.sprc.hamilton.on.ca)

## Land Acknowledgment

The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton recognize that the City of Hamilton is located on the traditional territories of the Erie, Neutral, Huron-Wendat, Haudenosaunee, and Mississaugas. The land is covered by the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, which was an agreement between the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabek to share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes. It is further acknowledged that this land is covered by the Between the Lakes Purchase, 1792, between the Crown and the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation (Urban Indigenous Strategy, City of Hamilton, 2019).

## Note

This report uses the W variant spelling of wholistic, to emphasize the inclusive meaning of the word, and reflecting the importance of the wholistic view, an Indigenous worldview that sees the whole person (physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual) as interconnected to land and in relationship to others (family, communities, nations). See also:

“'Wholistic': A Natural Evolution Of 'Holistic': The 'w' brings the meaning full circle” available at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/wholistic-word-origin-and-use> and Pidgeon, M. Indigenous Wholistic Framework in Cull, I., Hancock, R.L.A., McKeown, S., Pidgeon, M., and Vedan A. (2018). Pulling Together: A guide for Indigenization of post-secondary institutions. A professional learning series <https://opentextbc.ca/indigenizationfrontlineworkers/chapter/indigenous-ways-of-knowing-and-being/>

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# Executive Summary

This report explores the national shift in addressing homelessness through a “coordinated access” approach and its impact on Indigenous individuals and families experiencing homelessness. Launched April 1st, 2019, Reaching Home, Canada’s national homelessness strategy, has required that all Designated Communities (i.e., urban centres in Canada) have a coordinated access system in place by March 31, 2022.

The focus of the report is largely on the Hamilton context, but also provides insights from Indigenous service providers across Canada. The goal of this research was to provide an overview of coordinated access and its impact on Indigenous communities. It does not represent a comprehensive review of coordinated access procedures and does not provide the complete national picture. In reading this report, it will be important for Indigenous community leaders to contextualize the findings to their own cultures, traditions, and knowledges.

This report takes an advocacy-focused, grassroots level approach. It recognizes that local community consultations need to happen prior to the implementation of coordinated access systems. Input from local community members needs to shape how policies are created, rather than local communities having to adapt to policy directives. It provides an example of how Designated Communities should collaborate with Indigenous community members in a way that is Indigenous led.

## What is Coordinated Access?

Reaching Home defines coordinated access as a process by which individuals and families who are experiencing homelessness, or at-risk of homelessness, are directed to community-level access points where trained workers use a common assessment tool to evaluate the individual or family’s depth of need, prioritize them for housing support services and then help them to match to available housing focused interventions (Reaching Home, Employment and Social Development Canada, 2019). There are four pillars: 1) Access; 2) Assessment; 3) Prioritization; and 4) Matching and Referral. A fifth component of coordinated access is the collection, storage and use of the data collected through the assessment process.

## Who Manages the Data Collected Through Coordinated Access?

Missing from discussions on data and coordinated access is how Indigenous data is collected, stored, analysed and who has control or ownership of the data. These considerations are best understood through data sovereignty principles. Data sovereignty refers to the management of information in a manner that is legally consistent with the practices and policies in the nation and or state that it is located (Kukutai & Taylor, 2016). It addresses the legal and ethical aspects of the storage, use, ownership, consent, practicality and intellectual property of Indigenous data (Kukutai & Taylor, 2016).

One perspective on achieving data sovereignty in research and academic settings in Canada is through the integration of the Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP)<sup>®</sup> principles. The OCAP<sup>®</sup> principles outline how data from First Nations should be collected, protected, used, or shared. Below, each of the principles is defined using direct quotations from the First Nations Information Governance Centre.

- **Ownership**

Refers to the relationship of First Nations to their cultural knowledge, data, and information. A community or group owns information collectively in the same way that an individual owns his or her personal information.

- **Control**

First Nations, their communities, and representative bodies are within their rights in seeking to control over all aspects of research and information management processes that impact them. First Nations control of research can include all stages of a research project – from start to finish. The principle extends to the control of resources and review processes, the planning process, management of the information and so on.

- **Access**

First Nations must have access to information and data about themselves and their communities regardless of where it is held. The principle of access also refers to the right of First Nations communities and organizations to manage and make decisions regarding access to their collective information. This may be achieved, in practice, through standardized, formal protocols.

- **Possession**

This refers to the physical control of data. Possession is the mechanism by which ownership can be asserted and protected.

Although the OCAP® principles are one way to engage with Indigenous data, specifically for First Nations communities, other Indigenous Peoples have utilized similar guidelines to protect their data. However, it should be acknowledged that some Indigenous peoples may find the term data sovereignty to be problematic due to its colonial roots and as a result, may prefer to see themselves as stewards of Indigenous data.

## **Why is There a Need for this Research Project?**

In addition to requiring Designated Communities implement a coordinated access system, Designated Communities are also mandated to report on Indigenous homelessness. As recognized in the national definition of Indigenous homelessness, Indigenous experiences of homelessness are more than a loss of physical housing (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2019). For many Indigenous people, a sense of home is developed through a connection to spirituality, land, community, and culture. The experience of Indigenous homelessness also involves the lack of a stable connection to Indigenous culture and community (Thistle, 2017; Christensen, 2016; Alazazi et al., 2015). A coordinated access system therefore needs to work with Indigenous individuals and families in a wholistic approach. The current dominant colonial narratives and processes to address homelessness work to create a system in which Indigenous peoples are over-represented in homeless populations and experience a form of homelessness that is experientially different when compared to non-Indigenous peoples (Christensen, 2016). Although Reaching Home provides communities with the flexibility to tailor their coordinated access system to meet local needs, it is not known how coordinated access systems will address the unique strengths and needs of Indigenous individuals and families experiencing homelessness.

## **Where Was the Data for this Report Collected?**

Several sources of data were used: 1) A survey of Reaching Home – Indigenous Community Entities and Indigenous Community Advisory Boards; 2) Key informant interviews with three individuals in senior leadership positions at Indigenous agencies in Hamilton who work with Indigenous individuals and families experiencing homelessness; 3) One focus group with front-line service providers from Hamilton; 4) Five focus groups with community groups who had experienced homelessness and/or housing insecurity in Hamilton (Elders/Seniors; Youth; Men; Families; and 2SLGBTQ); 5) Two community consultations with members of Hamilton’s Indigenous community; and 6) Eight key informant interviews with Indigenous jurisdictions across Canada.

Indigenous team members led the data analysis. The data was analyzed using an iterative, thematic approach. Each team member reviewed the transcripts and community consultation notes and made comments and reflections based upon their interpretation of the data. These comments and reflections were then shared with the larger research team. The codes were refined during group discussions, and themes were created.

## What Did We Find?

Below we present a summary of the key findings from our interviews and focus groups. The main finding is **Indigenous service providers offer a holistic approach to service delivery and coordinated access that is based upon trust and relationship building**. A holistic approach addresses the mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual parts of an individual and family. A key informant respondent shared:

**But when you're talking holistic in an Indigenous point of view, it's like, it's making that person whole again so that they can move forward in life. Because if you're beat down spiritually, you don't know who you are, how can you accomplish success in life?**

In building a coordinated access system, it is essential that it is **designed** by Indigenous communities, **implemented** by Indigenous communities, and **owned** by Indigenous communities. A front-line staff member stated:

**Everything that we do has to be designed for the seven generations that follows us. All those young people. We're setting up a blueprint of systems for them that we may only design but, that they have to implement. How do we implement our ways of life into these systems? We have to do this work with our own people.**

The remaining sections are grouped upon the pillars of coordinated access.



## Access Points

**Indigenous agencies are the preferred access point for Indigenous individuals and families experiencing homelessness.** Indigenous agencies were points of access that Indigenous individuals and families trusted and provided a sense of community. A community focus group respondent shared:

I haven't been coming here lately, but before I was homeless, I sat in the parking lot because I felt safe here because it's like a Native ground type of thing here, people aren't going to screw with you. People know what this place is.

**In person access allows for trust building, but choice in access points is important.** Most community focus group respondents preferred to access services in person, as they felt that there was more trust building in this approach. Other respondents shared that they would be comfortable using other mediums, including telephone, texting, online chat, and video. Again, trust was an important part of these methods. Other factors to consider include accessibility by transit, appropriate services for women, and applying intersectional approaches.

**There is racism and a lack of safety in the current mainstream system.** Key informants and community focus group respondents noted that some Indigenous individuals in need of services will choose to be out on the street because of the racism and safety concerns encountered within the emergency shelter system.

**It is important to ensure that support is available to those unfamiliar with the local context.** A smaller number of community focus group respondents talked about being unfamiliar with the services available in Hamilton. These participants often came from other communities across Ontario. One respondent shared their experience:

When I first moved here, the first thing I did, I went to Notre Dame to stay for the night or for a while. On the first day, I asked about HRIC [Hamilton Regional Indian Centre]. I went over there and tried to ask if I could meet anyone to help me. ... If I'm thinking about a friend who is coming to Hamilton, the first place I would take them is HRIC.

**Cultural competency training is needed for mainstream agencies.** Community focus group respondents felt that mainstream agencies should all receive Indigenous cultural competency training. It was thought that some staff at mainstream agencies did not know how to work with Indigenous clients in a culturally respectful manner. A respondent shared:

You can't be sure if they have culturally training or not. Their social skills that involve us as a people are very minimal, so they actually are going by only what they have read and what they've written. It's not on real life.

## Assessment Procedures

### **Relationship building and trust are vital when determining an individual's or family's need.**

In determining the housing and service needs of Indigenous individuals and families, the approach should be conversational, culturally appropriate, trauma-informed, and not rushed. A key informant respondent shared:

What's necessary is it's building those relationships and trust. Walking into an organization and seeing a lot of brown faces. A culturally safe space where you're accepted for who you are and not judged when you walk in the door.

**Intakes and assessments should be conversational.** The key informant respondents stressed that rigid intakes and assessment tools are not appropriate for the Indigenous community. A key informant respondent said:

We don't bring somebody in take them through an assessment ask them all sorts of questions and give them a piece of paper and number and say here go call it...We don't assess people in the Western view of assessment.

**It is important to not have to repeat one's story.** Community focus group respondents shared that they did not want to repeat their story multiple times to multiple people. A respondent stated:

Or asking questions repetitively. I hate that. You go to the hospital and you have to answer every single nurse and doctor and you see it, 50 questions, all the same thing.

**Assessments need to be completed using a trauma-informed approach.** Jurisdictional scan respondents believed that the use of assessment tools that focused on deficits forces Indigenous people to relive their pain in order to 'deserve' services. In this way, deficit-based assessment scores shift the blame towards Indigenous people who then may go on to believe that they are only deserving of support after retelling their story. Assessments that are conducted within a trauma-informed lens should focus on the individual, not on the score.

## Prioritization

**Allocating resources based on Indigenous values and traditions and prioritizing.** In an underfunded system, key informant and community focus group respondents shared that children/youth, families, women, and Elders/Seniors should be given priority access to housing and supports. These groups were identified based upon Indigenous knowledge, values, and traditions. Respondents felt that it was important that households, particularly children/youth and young families, do not become entrenched into homelessness. The Seventh Generation Principle, a philosophy common to many Indigenous nations, was described as a guiding principle so that the decisions made today result in a sustainable world seven generations into the future. Focusing on the prospective impact of coordinated access, this means that children/youth should be prioritized since they are the future. A front-line staff respondent stated:

**We'd have to follow our traditional guidelines too. And our traditional guidelines tell us what? In every Indigenous community, what's the first sign you're going to see? 'Children are our future.' In every community.**

Some respondents felt that individuals who are working through mental health and addiction challenges, and those experiencing domestic violence should also be prioritized for services. This could also include children/youth, families, women, Elders/Seniors and men.

## Matching & Referrals

**Not enough affordable, quality housing is available.** Although an Indigenous-led coordinated access system is important, the process is only useful if there is affordable and quality housing available for individuals and families to move into. All respondents shared that there is not enough affordable housing available in Hamilton and that the few affordable options that exist are often of poor quality.

**Racism limits access to housing.** Respondents shared the racism and discrimination Indigenous people encounter from landlords. One key informant stated:

**Racism, discrimination happens to Indigenous people trying to secure housing. You hear stories of people opening the door and seeing an Indigenous person standing there and slamming the door on their face and not even consider them or renting their property – and that's a reality. I've talked to workers who have experienced that.**

**Housing for Indigenous people, by Indigenous people.** Because of the racism encountered within the housing market, respondents recommended that housing specific to the Indigenous community be created. A front-line staff respondent shared:

I would love to see something that's Indigenous specific. Just for Indigenous people. That way we don't have to put up with non-Indigenous people complaining about us when we're smudging or doing other kinds of ceremony. We're not constantly having to explain what we're doing.

## Indigenous Data Sovereignty

**Collecting the right data.** Key informant respondents felt that standardized data collection procedures, grounded in Western-based methods, do not accurately capture the work that happens with Indigenous communities. The importance of qualitative data was highlighted by one key informant respondent. The respondent said:

Yeah, I think qualitative is huge. It's huge for recognizing what a success is. In mainstream – in data, you have your target, you have your actuals. Did you have success? Did you meet your target? Right? Did you hit every point along the way? In the Indigenous community, again, it goes back to that individual. What might seem as huge success for us, is not seen that way in mainstream...But to us, it's a process...Every little step a person takes is their success.

**Legacy of data being used to harm Indigenous people.** The community focus group respondents recalled how governments have used data to control Indigenous peoples throughout history. As stated by one respondent:

History recalls that [the government] will keep doing that to us forever.

**Client confidentiality is key.** Client confidentiality and access to data was raised as a concern by respondents. Participants felt a sense of safety if they knew their data was managed by an Indigenous organization, rather than a government organization.

I don't know if that data gets put to the government for them to see. I don't know, but I guess I feel safer knowing that my data is being processed through them [an Indigenous agency] rather than looked at by western society, western organizations.

A key informant respondent thought client confidentiality was particularly important for women fleeing domestic violence. The respondent said:

**I wonder about the individuals and their autonomy. Do they really want to have everyone access their information? I struggle with that. I know they [women fleeing domestic violence] need the support and if they want to be on a list, but I don't know if they want a number of different persons having access to their personal information.**

**Indigenous agencies should host the data, when possible.** The respondents all agreed that Indigenous people have the right to determine who has access to their data, how their data is stored, and how their data is used. Some community members thought that this was already happening, as one respondent said, "Oh, isn't that already being done?" Without data sovereignty, it would reinforce the history of data being used as a weapon against Indigenous people. For example, a key informant said:

**The history of controlled data for Indigenous people has done nothing but reinforce colonization.**

**Indigenous communities need to be adequately resourced to develop their own data collection, analysis, and storage policies.** A key informant respondent and a jurisdictional scan respondent spoke about the lack of capacity some Indigenous communities had to analyze and report on their data. This lack of capacity was particularly harmful for Indigenous communities, as it did not allow them to draw conclusions on the issues of Indigenous homelessness in their community and turn the conclusions into meaningful policies across different levels of government. One respondent noted:

**You can look at all this data that you have but we need to go back to Indigenous ways.**

For Indigenous communities, having the capacity to own, control, and analyze Indigenous data would allow for opportunities to provide meaningful input into actionable policies related to Indigenous homelessness within mainstream federal, provincial, and municipal policies. As one respondent explained:

**I think that's important. If we really are looking forward to the future, how much of our way of life are we going to employ in the construction of these systems**

This process would be by Indigenous people for Indigenous people. Without being able to meaningfully analyze the data, Indigenous communities are unable to tell their own stories and interpret the data using an Indigenous worldview.

## Systems-Based Approach

**Trust needs to be developed with Designated Communities when developing data collection and storage policies.** When considering the protection of Indigenous data, there was a large need for trust and relationship building with Designated Community Entities to be established first. Some jurisdictions discussed how their relationship with Designated Communities was built by respecting Indigenous practices and traditions through the incorporation of local Indigenous ceremony and traditional protocols. Other jurisdictions stated that it was important for transparency on data policies when working with Designated Communities.

**Building ceremony into coordinated access systems.** By incorporating Indigenous ceremony into coordinated access processes, it can tie mandates and service agreements to spiritual commitments. One jurisdiction explained that ceremony allowed mainstream communities to understand the significance and complexity of the work that is being done. A jurisdictional scan respondent said:

How do you bring those two worldviews together? And I think that's where the pre-work needs to be done...Really starting off in ceremony. Starting off with the Indigenous people. And doing what they do in order to develop something in their community. And in doing it with the experts and doing it right...

**Working with other systems.** The key informant respondents discussed the importance of working with other systems outside of the housing and homelessness sector. Specific sectors identified included the child welfare system, the mental health system, the criminal justice system and the hospital system.

**Clear guidelines need to be developed for engagement between Indigenous Community Entities and Designated Community Entities.** A major challenge for Indigenous Community Entities was their relationship with Designated Community Entities and how program directives from Reaching Home could impact them. A lack of clarity from the federal government meant that it was not clear on what the differentiating roles between Indigenous Community Entities and Designated Community Entities were and that, as a result, collaboration between the two organizations could be negatively impacted.

## What do These Results Mean?

The results from the key informant interviews, community focus groups, and the jurisdictional scan interviews all showed that coordinated access processes are not fully aligned with Indigenous values, knowledge, and traditions. Rather than “Indigenizing” coordinated access, where Indigenous values, knowledges, and traditions are used to infuse culture into coordinated access procedures, current coordinated access procedures should be modified to align with Indigenous values, knowledges, and traditions. The only way for this to happen is through meaningful engagement, trust building, ceremony and partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous stakeholders.

We group the recommendation using three lenses. The first lens is focused on engagement with the federal government and designated communities. The second lens is focused on the implementation of coordinated access. The third lens is focused on data sovereignty.

### Engaging with the Federal Government and Designated Community Entities

#### Recommendation 1.

Reaching Home should create clear guidelines on cross-stream engagement between Community Entities and Indigenous Community Entities. With the overarching aim of enhancing Indigenous decision-making and leadership, these guidelines must be developed in a manner that allow local Indigenous leaders to align with local community traditions, cultures and needs at the grassroots level. These guidelines should also be completed in collaboration with national Indigenous homelessness experts, such as the new national gathering of members from Indigenous Community Entities and Indigenous Community Advisory Boards.

#### Recommendation 2.

Enact the Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada when developing coordinated access systems.

#### Recommendation 3.

As advised by local Indigenous community leaders, engage in ceremony when developing coordinated access systems.

#### Recommendation 4.

Engage with local Indigenous experts to contextualize local issues impacting the Indigenous community.

#### Recommendation 5.

Acknowledge and address the racism Indigenous people face in the community.

**Recommendation 6.**

Indigenous agencies need to be adequately and sustainably funded to provide wholistic services. Designated Communities should be responsible for finding creative funding solutions in order to ensure long-term sustainability of Indigenous agencies.

**Recommendation 7.**

Any service hub where multiple services can be accessed under one roof should facilitate an Indigenous wholistic system of care and should be created/sustained in communities.

**Recommendation 8.**

In order to ensure that no Indigenous person or family falls through cracks created by the lack of systems integration and system failures, representation from the child welfare sector, the correctional system, the mental health system, the hospital system, and other systems unique to each community should be convened with Indigenous housing and homelessness tables, particularly those related to coordinated access.

**Recommendation 9.**

Indigenous communities need to be equitably funded to rollout a coordinated access system, which includes increased funding for Indigenous housing stock.

**Recommendation 10.**

In order to support capacity for Indigenous communities to co-create and lead coordinated access, governance models and framework documents centered on enhancing Indigenous leadership within a coordinated access system must be co-developed by Indigenous homelessness experts and the federal government. These framework documents should cover areas such as policy and practice, technical standards, roles and responsibilities and accountability.

**Implementation of Coordinated Access****Recommendation 11.**

An effective communications strategy, including in-person outreach, posters in travel hubs, and electronic posts on social media, is necessary to ensure that coordinated access systems are accessible by all.

**Recommendation 12.**

In mainstream coordinated access systems, an Indigenous agency or agencies should be included as an access point for coordinated access.



**Recommendation 13.**

Indigenous representation among staff of mainstream agencies needs to be increased so that Indigenous individuals and families who access these agencies can speak with an Indigenous service provider.

**Recommendation 14.**

Indigenous outreach workers should be hired to collaborate with mainstream services to ensure that coordinated access systems are accessible by Indigenous individuals and families.

**Recommendation 15.**

Provide free transportation, such as monthly bus passes, so that Indigenous community members can enter access points in person.

**Recommendation 16.**

Coordinated access systems should include multiple modes of access, including telephone, video calls, and online platforms.

**Recommendation 17.**

Coordinated access systems need to take an intersectional, culturally safe, and trauma-informed lens in implementation.

**Recommendation 18.**

Strict time frames for the completion of intakes should not apply to Indigenous individuals and families experiencing homelessness.

**Recommendation 19.**

A strength-based assessment tool created specifically for Indigenous individuals and families should be developed.

**Recommendation 20.**

As part of an intake procedure, clear information on the confidentiality of the data that a client can take for their records should be made available.

**Recommendation 21.**

For communities that have a separate prioritization list for Indigenous people experiencing homelessness, the Indigenous Community Entity, in collaboration with the Indigenous Community Advisory Board, must be given authority to determine prioritization procedures. For communities that choose to maintain a single priority list, Indigenous individuals and families should be prioritized and the Indigenous community must be given authority to determine their own prioritization procedures.

**Recommendation 22.**

Housing options should meet the needs of each prioritized group.

**Recommendation 23.**

Housing for Indigenous people needs to be created and federal, provincial, and municipal funding needs to be provided. From the federal perspective, this includes the release of the National Urban, Rural, and Remote Indigenous Housing Strategy.

**Recommendation 24.**

Designated Community Entities must dedicate a proportion of their funding to receive cultural competency training from local agencies and experts, and work with local experts to determine how to meaningfully incorporate Indigenous representations within their spaces.

**Data Collection and Indigenous Data Sovereignty****Recommendation 25.**

Federally mandated benchmarks and data requirements should be co-created with national Indigenous homelessness experts (for example, the new national gathering of members from Indigenous Community Entities and Indigenous Community Advisory Boards).

**Recommendation 26.**

In collaboration with national Indigenous homelessness experts (for example, new national gathering of members from Indigenous Community Entities and Indigenous Community Advisory Boards), Reaching Home should co-create opportunities for the collection of qualitative data.

**Recommendation 27.**

Include accessible feedback mechanisms for clients, front-line service providers, and program managers on regular intervals.

**Recommendation 28.**

In collaboration with national Indigenous homelessness experts (for example, new national gathering of members from Indigenous Community Entities and Indigenous Community Advisory Boards), the federal government must co-develop informational materials related to Indigenous data sovereignty.

**Recommendation 29.**

The inclusion of Indigenous agencies in data governance committees in Designated Communities should be a requirement in Reaching Home directives.

**Recommendation 30.**

Indigenous Community Entities should be given the autonomy to choose the data management system that fits their needs and provided adequate, sustainable funding to develop and manage their coordinated access system and analyse their data.