UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL SAFETY: TRADITIONAL AND CLIENT PERSPECTIVES

FINAL REPORT FOR FUNDER

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DEDICATION

This is a dedication to one of the homeless urban Aboriginal clients who passed into the Spirit World during the course of this research and didn't get an opportunity to share his story about being homeless and his hope for improved services to homeless urban Aboriginal peoples. We wish to dedicate this report to his memory and the voices of those yet to be heard.

May the sharing of experiences of those who were able to give voice to homeless urban Aboriginal peoples help to grow our understanding as to how agencies providing services and programs to homeless urban Aboriginal peoples can best serve this very vulnerable population.

CLIENT STORY OF BEING HOMELESS

"When I was a kid I used to knock on the door (service provider). I'd get a bag lunch and I'll run under a bridge you know, and I used to sleep with the other kids and we'd eat, we'd, you know that was our hang out and keep ourselves safe. Then as I got older, I moved on to stairwells. Then one day, I was in a place where there was a lot of bad drugs going on there and this girl said 'I'm going to take you to detox' and then I met (staff), the First Nation one upstairs and she told me about treatment. I said 'what's treatment?' I think I was 27 and I'm 34 and I've been to 16 in between them trying to".

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

In 2012 Alpha House and the University of Calgary came together to create a research partnership to explore what Aboriginal clients who are homeless, Aboriginal Elders think and other staff say about creating cultural safety in a mainstream organization. Alpha House was identified as a mainstream agency providing a culturally safe service to an urban Aboriginal population. This research was supported by the Alberta Homelessness Research Consortium (AHRC) which is managed by the Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness (ASAH) and funded by the Government of Alberta (GOA).

The Research

Cultural safety is a concept that a Maori nurse from New Zealand began using to describe how staff provided health care services to individuals and families from another culture. She stressed the importance when providing care and service to others for service providers to take into consideration and respect their own cultural origins, values, beliefs and practices as well as those of the people seeking care. When the various cultural influences are taken into consideration, services can be culturally safe.

This project was part of a program of research to broaden understanding of how to enhance service and program delivery models when working with Aboriginal clients who are homeless so as to meet the goal of ending homelessness.

The Results

The term cultural safety was not familiar to clients, Elders, or other staff but they were all able to describe what they thought culturally safe services practiced. Their descriptions were similar to the published literature. Our model of developing cultural safety indicates that intentionality and partnership are essential to moving from cultural awareness to competence to safety. As more culturally safe services develop, the network of those doing cultural advocacy will grow. It will therefore be easier to develop and sustain culturally safe services. This project focused on provision of culturally safe services in the homelessness sector, but the results will be useful in other sectors.

Recommendation

Our one recommendation is that funding bodies provide motivation and practical financial support for projects that help organizations move along the cultural competencies continuum.

1.   INTRODUCTION

Homelessness is a major issue in urban centres across Canada. Aboriginal peoples (First Nation, Métis, Inuit peoples) are highly overrepresented in homeless populations. The high proportion of Aboriginal peoples who are homeless is evidence that there are extenuating circumstances impacting Aboriginal people experiencing pathways in and out of homelessness. The need for culturally safe services and programs to address the multiple needs of Aboriginal people who are homeless is great.

It is now widely accepted that cultural competencies are needed in staff so that services and programs meet the needs of Aboriginal people. Cultural competencies range from minimal to advanced skill sets; in this study we looked at the creation of a culturally safe program within a mainstream organization. The concept of cultural safety is one that is still evolving internationally, especially in the Canadian professional context, and in the context of Aboriginal experiences in Canada (Aboriginal Nurses Association of Canada, 2009; Indigenous Physicians Association of Canada, 2009; NAHO, 2009). Cultural safety, according to our understanding, is a more advanced stage in cultural competence.

The research project reported here investigated the concept of cultural safety as it applied to the delivery of homeless services for urban Aboriginal peoples from the perspective of Aboriginal Elders, clients and former clients, and staff in a non-Aboriginal organization. The partner organization in the research, Alpha House, provides a continuum of services for street involved people in four areas: outreach, shelter, detox, and housing. This project is part of a program of research to broaden understanding of how to enhance service and program delivery models when working with homeless Aboriginal clients so as to meet the goal of ending homelessness.

2.   DEFINITIONS OF CULTURAL SAFETY

The concept of cultural safety was initially described in the published literature by a Maori Nurse Practitioner (Ramsden, 1993) who examined cultural safety within the health care sector in New Zealand with the Maori peoples (Nursing Council of New Zealand, 2005; Ramsden, 1993).

In Canada, the majority of research on this topic has been with respect to health care for Aboriginal peoples (Aboriginal Nurses Association of Canada, 2009; Assembly of First Nations, 2008; Browne & Varcoe, 2006; Dion Stout & Downey, 2006; Indigenous Physicians Association of Canada & Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada, 2009; National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2008; Smye & Browne, 2002; Smye, Josewski, & Kendall, 2010) and family service experience with Aboriginal people (Ball,

2008). There is limited literature on the subject of cultural safety and homeless Aboriginal peoples in urban centres (Bodor et al, 2011; Thurston et al, 2010; Turner et al 2010).

As a result of these bodies of research, several characteristics of cultural safety are emerging from an Aboriginal perspective as described by the National Aboriginal Health Organization (2009). The Aboriginal Nurses Association of Canada (2009) notes that cultural safety is not the same as cultural sensitivity or cultural competence. Unfortunately, neither of these discussions provides much guidance to program leaders, but the Indigenous Physicians Association of Canada and the Association of Faculties of Medicine in Canada (2009) developed a definition that incorporates the views of the first two groups and provides expectations for service providers.

In addition, the Indigenous Physicians Association of Canada and the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada (2009) discuss the origins of culturally *unsafe* care and teaching for Aboriginal peoples which can be applied in all disciplines where providers have contact with Aboriginal peoples.

There is little to no literature on the subject of cultural safety with respect to culturally safe services being provided to homeless Aboriginal peoples (Belanger, Weasel Head, & Awosoga, 2012; Thurston 2010). There is even less literature on the subject of cultural safety from Aboriginal Elder and Aboriginal client perspectives other than an intention to investigate client perspectives on culturally safe services (ANAC, 2010; Anishnawbe Health Toronto, n.d.). The quotations in Box 1 represent some Elder perspectives on cultural safety.

> **Box 1**: *"My grandparents taught me that to fully understand the importance of something you must look back seven generations and you must look forward seven generations" (*Debbie Jette, Cree Elder in Ball, 2009).
>
> *"Tell them they are important. Let them know you care about them . . . Let them know they are safe and in a good place to let it out. Then really listen to them" (*Elder from Hopendale, Nunatslavut in NAHO, 2009).
>
> *"For me, cultural safety is a work environment where I am comfortable, where I am respected not judged for who I am, and the people I provide service to feel respected, valued, comfortable, and not discriminated for who they are. They feel the service they receive is safe and equitable ..." (*Elder Jessie Nyberg in Okanagan Urban Aboriginal Health Research Collective, 2009).

Although the majority of the available literature discusses the importance of client perspectives no examples were located where client perspectives in cultural safety were actually collected.

For the purposes of this research study the following definition of cultural safety was used (Box 2).

> **Box 2**: *Cultural safety is defined as effective practice determined by the individual and family. "Unsafe cultural practice comprises any action which diminishes, demeans or disempowers the cultural identity and well-being of an individual" (*Nursing Council of New Zealand, 2005).

3.   BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Homelessness is a major issue in urban centres across Canada and Aboriginal peoples are highly overrepresented in the population. In Calgary, at least 30% of the homeless population is Aboriginal (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2011) with a variety of needs related to their history, identity, and common experiences as Aboriginal peoples. Preliminary results from Alberta's Homelessness Assets and Risks Tool (HART), for instance, indicated that 25% of respondents were Aboriginal; 76% of those had direct experience with residential schools and 34% recently migrated from a reserve to Calgary (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2012). Aboriginal peoples in Calgary who found themselves homeless were younger, less educated, and more likely to be unemployed, to have experienced foster care, and to have been the victim of an attack than their non-Aboriginal counterparts (Thurston, Soo, Turner, undated). These statistics indicate that Aboriginal peoples' paths to homelessness run through structural inequities like historical trauma, multi-generational trauma, cultural genocide, and cultural loss compounded by circumstances leading to transitions from home communities to urban centres (Calgary Homeless Foundation, n.d.; Thurston et al., 2011; Hanselman, 2001). These traumas and losses have manifested themselves in a series of complex multi-dimensional circumstances for Aboriginal people who are homeless whose experiences usually include substance abuse, mental health issues, family breakdown, under employment, low income, and exposure to systemic racism and discrimination (Calgary Homeless Foundation, n.d.; Hanselman, 2001). This includes Aboriginal women choosing to flee their homes, at the risk of becoming homeless, as a result of domestic violence (Beavis et al, 1997; NWAC, 2004). Service delivery organizations, therefore, need the tools to address the complexities of needs among Aboriginal people who are homeless.

We have found that most homeless serving agencies have minimal integration of cultural supports, let alone integrating the concept of cultural safety in policies and practices. We

also found that programs developed especially for Aboriginal peoples most often occur in organizations that are governed by Aboriginal peoples (Thurston, Oelke, Turner, & Bird, 2011). However, given the extent of homelessness among Aboriginal peoples it is not realistic to expect Aboriginal organizations to provide the range of services needed; therefore, the homelessness serving sector requires guidance and support to developing cultural competencies when dealing with a range of complex needs among the diversity of Aboriginal people who have been experiencing varying degrees of homelessness and multiple transitions in and out of urban centres.

The challenge of providing culturally appropriate services was explored through a partnership between Alpha House Society, Calgary and the Aboriginal Friendship Centre of Calgary (AFCC). At that time, one team member worked in the AFCC Homelessness Outreach Program and another member subsequently conducted an evaluation of the AFCC program (Oelke, 2010). Alpha House Society is a non-Aboriginal organization serving homeless populations and almost fifty percent (50%) of their clients are Aboriginal. It was this need that led Alpha House to the partnership with the AFCC.

Although Alpha House Society does not specifically advertise culturally safe services for homeless Aboriginal clients, they relied on their mission (Box 3) and harm reduction approach (Box 4) to best serve the needs of all their clients, including Aboriginal peoples. In the partnership, Alpha House Society deliberately made an effort to improve the services and programming offered to their Aboriginal clients, for instance, by engaging an Elder on a regular basis. Client support includes providing client access to an Elder for one-to-one guidance, cultural reconnection support, home visits from time to time, street outreach, and specific access to Elder guided spiritual and cleansing ceremonies, sweat lodges, and sundances. This support grew to include a second Elder. The growing interest expressed by staff and other clients in Elder supports led Alpha House to extend these supports to all others within the organization.

> **Box 3**
> **Alpha House Society's Mission:**
>
> *To provide a safe and caring environment for individuals whose lives are affected by alcohol and other drug dependencies* (Alpha House, 2012).

> **Box 4**
> **Alpha House Society and Harm Reduction Approach:**
>
> *Is a set of strategies and approaches which aims to provide or enhance the skills, knowledge, resources and support that people who use drugs need to be safer and healthier* (Street Works, Calgary).
>
> *Harm Reduction can be defined as a set of practical strategies with the goal of meeting people where they are at, to help them to reduce harm associated with engaging in risk taking behavior* (Harm Reduction Coalition, United States, 2000; Canadian AIDS Society, 2000).

At the inception of the partnership, the term cultural safety was not employed, but the goal was to provide more culturally responsive and meaningful services to homeless urban Aboriginal peoples. While the partners believed that they were meeting success in the goal, there was little opportunity to evaluate and articulate what the important aspects of success were. Therefore, Alpha House Society agreed to partner with researchers from the University of Calgary in this research project on reaching cultural safety for Aboriginal peoples in a mainstream organization. An intended outcome of participation was for a better understanding of how cultural safety could shape their service delivery model across their programming (e.g., street outreach, detox, shelter and housing [Alpha House, 2012]). The research partnership provided an opportunity to illustrate how culturally safe services could be offered by mainstream agencies serving a culturally diverse homeless population.

4.   RESEARCH GOALS

The goal of the research project was to develop a theoretical framework for culturally safe services in the delivery of homelessness services for Aboriginal peoples.
The research focused on three key questions: (a) How is cultural safety conceptualized from an Aboriginal perspective? (b) What are the characteristics of culturally safe services as described by clients and former clients? and, (c) How can this information be translated into service delivery within a mainstream shelter in Calgary?

5.   RESEARCH METHODS

Constructivist grounded theory was used to guide the study and answer the research questions. In this approach we looked for "characteristics, conditions, causes, antecedents, and consequences of events or responses … [for] an integrated theory" (Morse & Richards, 2002, p. 56). Constructivist grounded theory gathers data from a variety of sources to answer the research questions and build a theory about a phenomenon. Original data is

collected and analysis includes turning to published data and experience to construct the theory, or in our case, the theoretical framework. We also used a participatory action research model in that participants in the organization were included on the research team so that research results could be used continuously, but more importantly for us, so that the results were credible and rich. The team brought together training from different disciplines and a variety of work experiences: directing a shelter for women leaving domestic violence; health research; nursing; employment in government and non-governmental organizations and academia; employment in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organizations; practicing as an Elder; directing a service for people experiencing homelessness in Calgary; serving on the boards of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organizations, to name a few.

Primary data collection included interviews with two Elders, 12 Aboriginal clients and 10 staff who were added to understand how cultural safety came to be part of the program and how it was lived out in practice. Interview transcripts were reviewed by one team member and coded for commonalities. The team then came together to conduct the analysis and reach consensus on the findings and the theoretical framework. A brief literature review helped to inform the analysis process. The final step was to develop the conclusions and a series of recommendations.

As is common in qualitative and participatory research methodologies, the writing of the final report included a deliberate decision to integrate the participant voices into the report as much as possible.

In the spirit of cultural safety the team integrated traditional Aboriginal ceremony which added a spiritual dimension to the research process. A ceremony was offered by Elder Lloyd Ewinen, Jr. at the onset of the project. Meetings were opened with prayers. A blessing ceremony was held for the closing of the project.

As with any study, this one has limitations related to the sample size being limited to one mainstream organization and limited research to draw from that investigates cultural safety from an Aboriginal client and Elder perspective. Given this, there was potential for the researchers' biases and value bases to have influenced the interpretation of the data; however, this was mitigated by the diversity of the research team's perspectives and experience in the full analysis of the results and interpretations.

6.   RESULTS

An awareness of the term cultural safety was limited among the Aboriginal clients who were homeless and the service provider staff who were interviewed in this study. The Elders, on the other hand, were familiar with this term (Figure 1). All participants, however, were more

or less committed to some aspects of the concept even if they didn't use the term cultural safety to describe it.
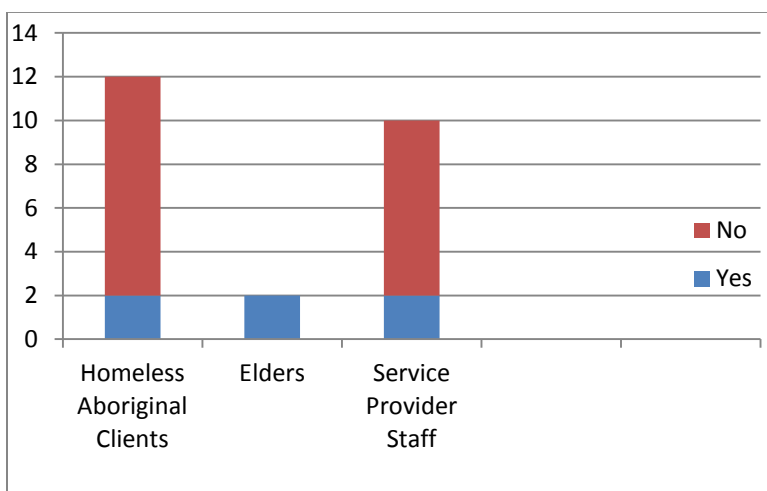

Figure 1: Awareness of term cultural safety among respondents

6.1 Conceptualizing Cultural Safety from an Aboriginal Perspective

The two Aboriginal perspectives are provided by the clients and the Elders. The staff perspective is included to add depth to the discussion and examination of culturally safe practice at Alpha House.

(a) Client Perspectives

The majority of the clients interviewed were not familiar with the term cultural safety. When provided with a definition, their understanding of the concept varied and was grounded in their personal life experience with homelessness and tied to being respected and accepted as an Aboriginal person.

> Client: *"To me that means, being accepted as an Aboriginal person in society. It doesn't matter like where you go like for help or just in general like whether it be like for a job, interviews, look for a place, working for the government like Child Welfare, being on assistance, and just being accepted as an Aboriginal person in society."*

(b) Elder Perspectives

Cultural safety is not a common term used among Elders. Elders who participated in the study were aware of the term cultural safety. However, only one of the Elders had

awareness of the Maori origins of the term cultural safety. Elders agreed that cultural safety meant "*being treated culturally appropriately*" and having "*the right to practice your belief*".

Elder perspectives on what is cultural safety were focused on an organization's commitment, sense of responsibility, and accountability for creating safe environments for clients, ensuring that services are culturally safe, and monitoring the cultural safety of the organization. They expressed concern for the cultural safety of clients and organizations.

(c) Staff Perspectives

The majority of the staff who participated in this study was not familiar with the term cultural safety. Two of the staff had heard of the term prior to their interview but could not provide a definition. When provided with a definition of cultural safety, staff was able to articulate a good understanding of the term based on their work experience at Alpha House with Aboriginal clients.

> "*My sense of cultural safety that is more of a concept than it is a checklist of attributes although I think that's part of it. It acknowledges the person when they come through the centre; having heightened sensitivity to the realities of what it is to be an Aboriginal person in an urban setting, who has a particular history.*"

The staff perspectives brought an added dimension to the study as a way of validating that the harm reduction approach works with Aboriginal clients and that respect is a key determinant of the quality of client provider relationship. Staff perspectives also indicate that there is a continuum of cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, and cultural understanding operating among staff; all of which could lead to cultural competency and cultural safety if an intentional focus is kept.

These combined perceptions from clients, Elders and staff describe how cultural safety can be fostered by a respectful approach to working with people, organizational commitment to providing services, and consideration for the role that Elders could have in that process of creating cultural safety when treated as a professional.

6.2 Characteristics of Culturally Safe Services: Clients, Elders, Staff Perspectives

Through the interview process, the three respondent groups indicated a series of common characteristics in their understanding of the concept of cultural safety which is illustrated in Figure 2.
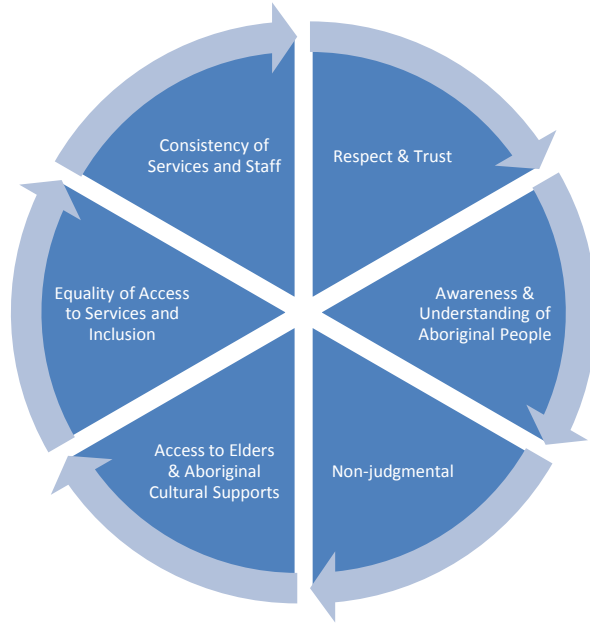
Figure 2: Common understandings of cultural safety among clients, former clients, Elders and staff

(a) Common Understanding #1: Respect and Trust

All three respondent groups identified respect and trust as fundamental attributes in the relationship among service providers, clients and Elders in a culturally safe service. Notably, these attributes are encouraged for all people in the seven traditional teachings that are important and common to many Aboriginal peoples' cultures.

> *Client: "Being accepted as an Aboriginal person in society. It doesn't matter like where you go for help or just in general like whether it be like job, interviews or look for a place."*

Elders expected the value of respect to be all inclusive in an organization and not limited to the staff directly engaged in providing service to clients.

> *Elder: "So everybody from even the person that works at the front to the people in the Detox, to the Housing Team to the Administration Staff, everybody has a high tolerance level to accepting people and being respectful toward people."*

Staff perspectives captured the importance of respect as a fundamental attribute of their relationship with clients, and observed that respect is valued by clients when interacting with Elders.

> *Staff: "I think it's important to all people, because again, it goes back to whether a person is going to feel respected or not for their own beliefs and culture."*

(b) Common Understanding #2: Awareness and Understanding of Aboriginal People

All three respondent groups agreed on the importance of service providers having an awareness of Aboriginal peoples' culture, history, impacts of such experiences as residential schools, and diversity that would help them understand the complex and multi-dimensional needs of homeless Aboriginal clients. This knowledge is seen as facilitating a deeper understanding of the vulnerabilities of this particular sub-population group within the context of their historical roots as a nation, and their journey through colonization.

> Client: *"I journeyed through sixteen different treatment centres looking for an answer in five years; here they understand."*

> Elder: *"If an organization is providing culturally safe services for Aboriginal people who are homeless, we would trust they would have good people providing that service, that have experience, have cultural knowledge, and know what it is they're doing and what invitation they're providing to people who could be vulnerable."*

> Staff: *"Meeting people where they are at and identifying their needs. Culture is definitely part of that."*

The Alpha House experience has led people in the organization to become aware of their practice and how they relate to their clients. In this context, they have journeyed to self-reflection and an intentional strategy to listen to their clients for deeper understanding of client needs.

(c) Common Understanding #3: Non-judgmental Approach

Clients, Elders and staff all agreed that being non-judgmental was a common characteristic of culturally safe services for Aboriginal people who are homeless. Respondents acknowledged that racism, prejudice and discrimination were all part of the experience of Aboriginal peoples, generally in society which was the reason non-judgment by service providers was important to them when accessing services.

> Client: *"Just being less judgmental; letting diversity be there and letting us Natives to be able to be cultural and have our spirituality."*

Respondents articulated that being non-judgmental means being open and approachable to clients, accepting them as they are, treating them equally with dignity, and not making assumptions about them but rather having some awareness and understanding about Aboriginal people.

> Staff: *"We need to look at how we treat somebody, because some of it can be subconscious; some racism could be there."*

This particular staff quote gets the closest to the concept of cultural safety and the consciousness that is required to ensure that when a person is providing service to a client that they don't apply their values or beliefs to the client on the initial encounter, nor to the assessment of services the client might require to address their needs.

Elders expressed that their experience with staff at Alpha House has led them to observe that they don't judge people; *"they're doing the Creators work".* This interpretation of providing service has a very spiritual dimension of compassion, empathy, respect, caring, humility, and forgiveness of the humanity in all people. Interviews with staff supported this finding in the language that they used to describe their work, practice, and relationships with clients.

(d) **Common Understanding #4: Access to Elders and Aboriginal Cultural Supports**

The majority of client respondents stated that access to Aboriginal cultural supports from homeless service agencies are important, with access to Elders being identified as their priority need, followed by access to Aboriginal spirituality practices and Aboriginal culture in the context of traditional teachings, practices, values and beliefs. The experience at Alpha House with Elders has been to offer access to Elders as an invitation, as an opportunity to experience a different way of healing. The invitation has been accepted by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal clients and staff alike who have come to witness the support as being more spiritual and relational.

> *Client: "I'm aware that they have sweats on Fridays and I go to some. I fasted last year so that was cool. It was incredible. It was just, everything was just coming together as it should have been. That's, I believe that all these things that I'm doing now I should have done with I was a kid."*

Alpha House has learned that offering these inclusive cultural supports to homeless people contributes to establishing a welcoming environment and developing a culturally safe reputation among Aboriginal people who are homeless. The Alpha House experience has also created an awareness and respect for the diversity among Aboriginal peoples which has helped staff to understand that not all Aboriginal peoples will embrace the opportunity to access cultural supports.

Elders also expressed a vulnerability of agencies and organizations who may not know the protocols for engaging a reputable Elder and stressed the need for organizations to protect their own cultural safety and those of their clients by checking references and reputation in the community and among their peers. This concern suggests that a cultural safety net has to be developed for clients and organizations to ensure their safety in the delivery and receipt of culturally safe services.

As a mainstream organization providing services to homeless people, including up to fifty percent Aboriginal people, Alpha House recognized that they needed to reach out to the Aboriginal community to build their capacity to better understand this sub-population they were serving. This connection began as a partnership with an Aboriginal organization, and grew into a working relationship with on-site support that resulted in broadening Alpha House's programming and services to include Aboriginal specific programming and services.

Sharing ceremony, prayers, sundance and sweatlodge practices is a key concept that is part of the Aboriginal worldview that contributes to relationship development (Sinclair, 2004). It is important to realize that not all service providers will want to do this, and in no way is it a requirement for staff at Alpha House. It is an invitation that the Elders at Alpha House have extended to staff to participate, which some staff have embraced in their own journey to acquire a deeper understanding of Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal peoples, thus growing their capacity to relate to their Aboriginal clients. It was evident in the interviews with clients and staff who did participate in these cultural activities together that a stronger more respectful relationship has been developing.

(e) Common Understanding #5: Equality of Access to Services and Inclusion

All three respondent groups agreed that equality of access to services was important. By supporting inclusion, Alpha House is acknowledging the diversity among Aboriginal peoples, including the diversity of their life experiences and multi-dimensional needs.

> Client: "We're all treated as one. We're not treated differently."

> Client: "To have equal opportunity; it doesn't matter where you are from."

It is significant that staff viewed the Elders' invitation for staff to also participate in the traditional teachings and ceremonies as inclusion and an opportunity for them to learn about Aboriginal culture, gain some knowledge and experiences to be able to better relate to their clients. Elders also hold the view that staff access to Elders and to their teachings is important for the staff working with Aboriginal clients. Alpha House Society has seen evidence of staff and client participation in these activities having positive impacts on client-staff relationships.

> Staff: "Looking at the very beginning of not offering anything and not even understanding it to being able to explain it to someone and trying to make that door open, like that little bit more of not just being able to say we can provide a mat and detox. Now it's more – on Friday's we have sweats; Thursday the Aboriginal Friendship Center is in to talk about reconnecting; an Elder is here Thursday; we have drumming on Fridays; and circle from someone. I love the fact that it is open to everyone."

Inclusion for clients refers to having Aboriginal peoples in the workplace as homeless service providers, and how they wish to relate to staff in accessing services. Given this result, combined with the 30% Aboriginal homeless population in Calgary (CHF, 2011) and only one specific Aboriginal agency serving Aboriginal people who are homeless, it is imperative for mainstream service providers to consider the value in investing in hiring staff who are Aboriginal with life experience and competencies to serve and enhance existing services provided to their homeless Aboriginal client population.

(f) Common Understanding #6: Consistency of Services, Supports and Client-Staff Relationships

Clients, Elders and staff shared perspectives and stressed the importance of consistency in scheduled services and supports, which included the consistency of staff delivering the services and programs. Structure and dependability were identified as critical to supporting client's recovery and healing processes.

From the clients' perspective, the consistency of knowing that sweats are offered every Friday at Alpha House Society provides some structure in their lives that they appreciate. Clients also expressed appreciation for the standing opportunity to access this type of cultural support if they wanted to. For Alpha House, it is all about being able to offer their Aboriginal clients a variety of healing methods, which includes access Elders and ceremony on a regular basis.

> Elder: "Homelessness is almost like an institutionalization; people learn to survive in a certain way and part of that is routine; you get to know a routine, and you make room for that routine in your life. Like a lot of folks will use like crazy but coming towards a sweat day, they'll take a few hours off, make sure they're here, get their lunch, they're on the van. That's one of the hugest portions I think of, [cultural] safety is the continuation of services."

Elders stressed the importance for an organization to be consistent in the services they provide by establishing a routine structure for clients as part of building the trust relationship with the organization and the person delivering the support. Staff also shared these perspectives.

It appeared from the interviews with all three respondent groups that their relationships are operating on a high level of mutual respect. The descriptors that clients used for the client-staff relationship are beyond the normal standards set by the traditional model of counselling and social work for client-staff relationships. They relate to an almost unconditional support that one would expect from family members, even when one doesn't always meet their expectations.

Client: "I know like (staff) are like my sisters and I love them so much, [be]cause you know they always help me and they always have been there."

The kinship terms used are consistent with Aboriginal worldview and the concept of "all my relations" and the "web of kinship" that extends to all human relations (Sinclair, 2004, p.54). In this context, the Aboriginal clients' ways of knowing are incorporated into their relationships with staff, a concept that has been explored in relation to social work pedagogy by scholars (Aboriginal Healing Foundation,2000; Bruyere, 1999; Duran, Duran & Yellow Horse Braveheart, 1998; Ermine, 1995; Henderson, 2000; Sinclair, 2004) when they developed ethics guidelines for Aboriginal communities doing healing work that involved Elders' methods of healing.

The client's use of kinship terms to describe their relationships with staff also provides a challenge to some extent for the current Calgary Homeless Foundation, Standards of Practice: Case Management for Ending Homelessness (2011) which is tied to the Canadian Accreditation Council of Human Services model. The model does refer to culturally appropriate case management and adheres to the principle of cultural competence of case managers, while recognizing that respect, trust and strong relationships are a requirement (p. 3) and cultural diversity inclusion is a general principle of case management (p. 5). However, this study has found that Aboriginal clients' expectations are that they will develop a stronger trusting respectful relationship with staff if provided with the opportunity through shared experiences such as ceremony, and access to services and supports that are consistently offered by an organization.

6.3 Importance of Offering Culturally Safe Services

All three respondent groups agreed that it is very important that homeless services be culturally safe.

It became apparent that the network among this homeless sub-population is a critical element in the street-level communication and referral system, a system that also acts as a culturally safe service evaluation tool. Clients indicated that they use this 'word-of-mouth' network to determine if they will access services from a particular agency or organization based on their peers' experiences. Sharing among themselves the experiences and encounters with service provider organizations helps them determine where and who an Aboriginal homeless person should go to for support.

(a) Organizational Changes Required for Offering Culturally Safe Services

When asked *"What things need to change in current services to be more respectful of Aboriginal people and their needs?",* respondents were able to articulate and describe what

they expected of organizations and agencies when providing cultural safe services to Aboriginal people who are homeless. Clients spoke about required changes from a place of authority as some of them have been experiencing homelessness for as many as 37 years.

Client expectations spoke directly to the organization's ability to provide services to meet their basic needs, diversity of cultural supports needed, and other supports needed. They expected to access staff with shared backgrounds and life experiences to help bridge understanding, with specific knowledge about Aboriginal peoples' historical and contemporary situations. They wanted staff with broad life experiences related to discrimination in society and housing challenges and good listening skills when their stories were being told.

Both staff and Elders identified the need to develop and provide a fully resourced continuum of culturally safe services for Aboriginal people who are homeless which both respondent groups linked to organizational commitment. Elders stressed that the effectiveness of this continuum would need to be based on an Aboriginal model, supported by an Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal team of workers, Elders, and Elder helpers to ensure that service was available 7 days a week.
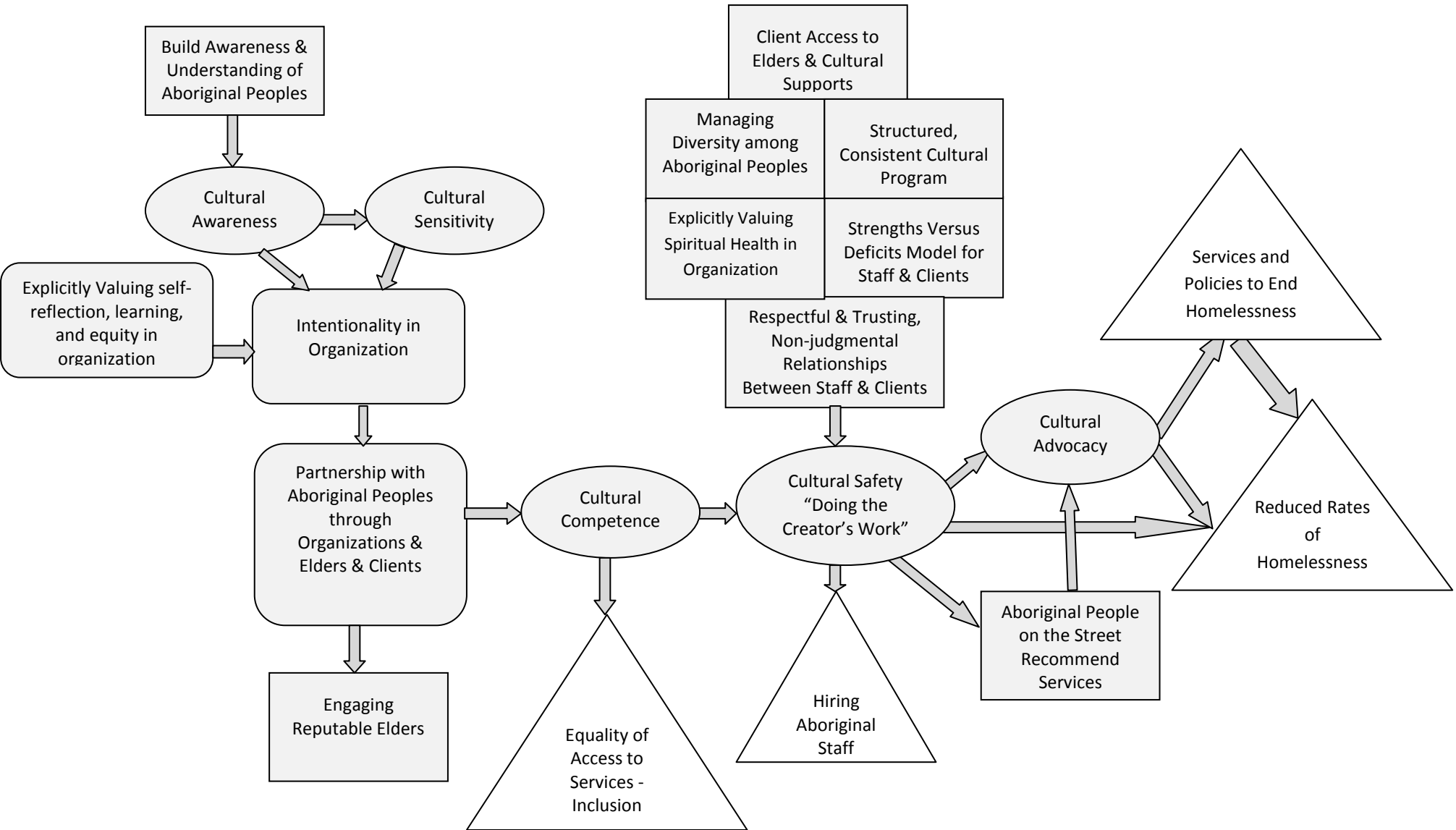
Staff stressed the need for more Aboriginal awareness training and education, combined with more Aboriginal representation within the workplace to build the organizational capacity to offer a variety of culturally safe services. They also identified organizational strategies as critical to developing an organizational intention to listen to clients. By growing in this knowledge, the organization could move to develop a stronger continuum of culturally safe services through a strategic planning process, mission building, language expansion of tag lines that may include the words *culturally safe services*, and hiring different people with different backgrounds, including more Aboriginal people.

7.   A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR BUILDING CULTURAL SAFETY IN MAINSTREAM ORGANIZATIONS FOR ABORIGINAL PEOPLE WHO ARE HOMELESS

The story of Alpha House's cultural safety project provided rich information concerning how mainstream organizations can move from ignoring differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples to providing culturally safe services.

A theoretically informed framework (Figure 3) developed from our research identifies the building blocks for cultural safety in mainstream organizations and moving the homelessness prevention sector towards the goal of culturally safe work that addresses the predominance of Aboriginal homelessness.

Figure 3: Theoretical Framework for Building Cultural Safety in Mainstream Organizations

Build Awareness & Understanding of Aboriginal Peoples

Cultural Awareness

Cultural Sensitivity

Explicitly Valuing self-reflection, learning, and equity in organization

Intentionality in Organization

Partnership with Aboriginal Peoples through Organizations & Elders & Clients

Engaging Reputable Elders

Cultural Competence

Equality of Access to Services - Inclusion

Client Access to Elders & Cultural Supports

Managing Diversity among Aboriginal Peoples

Structured, Consistent Cultural Program

Explicitly Valuing Spiritual Health in Organization

Strengths Versus Deficits Model for Staff & Clients

Respectful & Trusting, Non-judgmental Relationships Between Staff & Clients

Cultural Safety "Doing the Creator's Work"

Hiring Aboriginal Staff

Cultural Advocacy

Aboriginal People on the Street Recommend Services

Services and Policies to End Homelessness

Reduced Rates of Homelessness

The ovals (cultural awareness to cultural advocacy) in the figure represent the continuum of cultural competencies that can be achieved, all of which can be important in a sector response. Participants in the homelessness sector can contribute to ending Aboriginal homelessness by building competencies along the continuum, thus supporting each other. The round edged boxes indicate important processes identified in the data for getting started in becoming a culturally safe organization (explicitly valuing self-reflection, learning and equity; intentionality; and partnerships). The square edged boxes are the building blocks suggested in the data. The triangles contain changes that may occur throughout the process. It became clear during the project that everyone needed to keep the ultimate goal, reduced rates of homelessness, explicit in all decisions to create or modify programs in order to ensure deep reflection and to remind ourselves of why we would engage in the tough work associated with change. It is in meeting this ultimate goal that cultural safety finds traction and value.

While we believe that providing culturally safe services is a preferred goal, the story told here shows that organizations may not be able to move from intention to cultural safety quickly, and efforts along the continuum need to be respected and honoured while encouraging intention to move beyond cultural awareness or sensitivity. The model also suggests that as more mainstream organizations adopt cultural safety, some will move into cultural advocacy and the depth and breadth of the policy community advocating for changes will increase and ultimately result in innovations and increased efforts and supports to end homelessness. The experience of the Knaw Chi Ge Win team in northern Ontario in building networks in the mental health system supports this assumption. Building networks has served "to connect Aboriginal and mainstream agencies to advance coordination of care…[and] provide a forum for advocacy for Aboriginal mental health issues and the establishment of working relationships" among providers of care (Maar, 2009, p.5). That is not to say that there won't be many challenges along the continuum to cultural advocacy given the complex social and political context in which this takes place.

The research showed that the Aboriginal population is diverse and the urban context of homelessness prevention is complex. The model suggests that all participants can play a role in finding solutions. Building intentionality within the organization is an important first step as it allows for time to assess internal knowledge, build partnerships, and engage reputable elders. Changes need to be tailored to the clientele served and the programs offered in each organization. Partnerships with Aboriginal peoples through organizations may be challenging as there are fewer Aboriginal organizations and the staff could become overwhelmed by requests. The value of structures, such as the Calgary Aboriginal Standing Committee on Housing and Homelessness in coordinating and supporting change can therefore be great.

8. RECOMMENDATION

We are providing only one recommendation as we are leaving this report as an opportunity for people from different organizations to initiate self-study and to apply what is learned from reading to their context.

> *Our one recommendation is that funding bodies provide motivation and practical financial support for projects that help organizations move along the cultural competencies continuum.*

Although this research is grounded in culturally safe services for Aboriginal clients who are homeless, the findings and recommendation has far reaching application for service providers in all sectors that have contact and provide service to Aboriginal peoples.

The recommendation speaks to need to ensure that provisions for culturally safe services begin with respect of the client being served in a non-judgmental manner, by service provider staff that display some awareness and understanding of Aboriginal peoples history and how that history has impacted their current realities. Although organizations may view providing culturally safe services as a challenge, they must begin strategizing, developing and implementing culturally safe services now. The demographic of Aboriginal peoples is growing exponentially in the homeless sector. A broader base strategy across all sectors is warranted that makes provision for a continuum of services and programs that support a variety of prevention, intervention, and crisis response strategies.

This study has provided a place to begin to meet this challenge and embrace this opportunity – by listening and hearing the voices of Aboriginal clients who are experiencing homelessness.

9. MESSAGES OF HOPE

This report concludes with messages of hope from the clients and service providers. It is the hope of the research team that they will inspire service providers to want to make a difference in a homeless Aboriginal person's life whose hope for the future may be fragile:

Client: I don't want to be homeless all my life like I want to be here waking up 40 years old and still like living this way you know . . . Just have to get myself sober and work on my, my addiction, get it under control and that's why I'm going to treatment .. . That is the beginning of a plan though. I can, can see it moving along, you know from there to detox, maybe a house you know.

Client: I'm not making plans yet. I'm just saying, I'm just keeping on to what I gotta hold onto . . . one day at a time. It's scary sometimes but you gotta live with it, right

Client: Well, I think that I just put it straight out, Alpha House, if this place didn't exist, I'd be dead today. There is no doubt in, no shadow of a doubt in

Staff: We are here to serve. We are here to help someone else, to assist them in any which way, form or fashion that we can to do better for themselves, to get them out of the rut where they're at, to somehow say you know what, wake up today, today is the day, today is the day, we're getting it right today, I'm not giving up on you, you're not giving up . . ."

Staff: "We will never address homelessness unless we have culturally safe services."

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RESEARCH/INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Guide

Introductions; provide brief backgrounder; review consent form; sign

Questions	Probe
1. In your opinion, what is cultural safety? **Have you heard of the term 'cultural safety' before this research project?** *Provide definition from UofC and note that this term is evolving in Canada*. **Based on this definition, in your opinion, what do you think it means?**	• Allow participants to answer question • If they need further information base your explanation on the following definition and have them expand • Definition of cultural safety – Cultural safety is based on 'good' practice as determined by the individual and family. Cultural safety includes those practices that support cultural identity and well-being as an Aboriginal person (e.g., safe, comfortable environment, treated with respect, etc.) • Interviews are meant to be narrative, to collect the meaning and stories of cultural safety as told by participants – use probes as the interview enfolds
2. What would a culturally safe service for Aboriginal homeless people have that others would not? **How would someone decide if a service was culturally safe?** **3. How important is it that homeless services be culturally safe?**	
4. What things need to change in current services to be more respectful of Aboriginal people and their needs?	
5. Additional comments?	
Demographics	• Male □ Female □ • First Nations □; Métis □; Inuit □; Non-Status □; • Non-Aboriginal □ • Self Identification -----

Understanding Cultural Safety: Traditional and Client Perspectives

Aboriginal homelessness is a major issue in urban Alberta. Aboriginal peoples are overrepresented among the homeless population. These disproportionate numbers suggest pathways in and out of homelessness (causes and needs) are different for Aboriginal peoples. Structural inequities (e.g., multigenerational trauma, cultural genocide) increase the risk for homelessness. Culturally appropriate and safe services[1] are essential to address the multiple needs of Aboriginal homeless people and support their journey out of homelessness. Early attempts have been made in Calgary to deliver culturally safe services to Aboriginal homeless people (e.g., partnership between Alpha House and Aboriginal Friendship Centre of Calgary), but cultural safety is not fully understood, particularly from Aboriginal and client perspectives.

Alpha House, a homeless shelter, will provide the setting for this study. This research focuses on the following questions:

1) How is cultural safety conceptualized from an Aboriginal perspective?
2) What are the characteristics of culturally safe services as described by clients or former clients?
3) How can this information be translated into service delivery within a mainstream shelter in Calgary?

Interviews will be conducted with Elders delivering services at AH and Aboriginal clients or former clients of AH.

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[1] Cultural safety is defined as effective practice determined by the individual or family. "Unsafe cultural practice comprises any action which diminishes, demeans or disempowers the cultural identity and well-being of an individual".

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

FOR CLIENTS, ELDERS AND STAFF

I have been made aware of the purpose of the research that is being conducted by Alpha House Society and the University of Calgary regarding Aboriginal people who are homeless and the role that 'culture' may have in the way they access services and programs from service organizations.

I am aware that this research is part of the Alberta Homeless Research Consortium's Research Agenda. I am aware that my feedback will be part of the Final Report.

I have agreed to be part of the interview process, conducted by Cynthia Bird, Researcher, and understand that it will take approximately 45 minutes to one hour of my time. During this time she will be audio-recording the interview/taking notes to record my responses.

I have been asked to consent to this process, and hereby provide my signature as evidence of my consent to participate in the interview process.

_____   _____

Signature   Print Name

_____   _____

Date   Signature of Researcher