



# **I'taamohkanoohsin (everyone comes together): (Re)connecting Indigenous people experiencing homelessness and substance misuse to Blackfoot ways of knowing**

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# **I'taamohkanoohsin (everyone comes together): (Re)connecting Indigenous people experiencing homelessness and substance misuse to Blackfoot ways of knowing**

## **Abstract**

Substance misuse and homelessness are closely related outcomes for many Indigenous Canadians who live with extensive intergenerational trauma caused by residential school and the 60s Scoop. In recent years, the rise of opioid addiction along with related overdoses and mortalities in many parts of Canada has led to what is being called an opioid crisis. (Re)connection to Indigenous ways of knowing and practices are frequently seen as a path to healing. To address substance misuse and homelessness within a Canadian city, a grassroots program was developed for a largely Blackfoot population. The program increased access to traditional cultural resources and activities in a visible, downtown location. Two-Eyed Seeing informed the development and evaluation of the program. Results indicated that attendance connected people with their spirits, inspiring strength and hope for the future, and ameliorated spiritual homelessness. The program formed a safe space where relationships were strengthened, people felt respected, and meaningful activity away from substances was available.

## **Keywords**

Homelessness, substance misuse, Indigenous peoples, healing, cultural connection, spirit

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Introduction

The experience of homelessness and substance misuse among Indigenous people in Canada is the result of a legacy of colonialism that has separated peoples from their lands, ceremonies, and spirits. Racist and genocidal policies, the Indian Residential School system, and the institutionalized practice of removing Indigenous children from their families wrought historical and ongoing intergenerational traumas (Daschuk, 2014). The government's prohibitions against practicing ceremonies, speaking original languages, and confining peoples to tiny reserves effectively removed the very things that kept Indigenous people strong and healthy (Linklater, 2014).

Access to cultural resources facilitates healing within Indigenous communities (Dell et al., 2011; Gone, 2011). Traditional approaches to wellness ease distress because they address aspects that Western methods typically do not: spirituality, cultural reclamation, cultural continuity, and communal bonds (i.e. Goudreau, Weber-Pillwax, Cote-Meek, Madill, & Wilson, 2008; Lincoln, 2010; Linklater, 2014). These approaches include participation in ceremony, drumming, singing, dancing, storytelling, traditional arts, and traditional food gathering. Therapeutic activity that is based partly or wholly on traditional Indigenous knowledge, values, and activities can help with the reduction or cessation of substance misuse (Dell & Hopkins, 2011; McCormick, 2000; Rowan et al., 2014).

Alcohol was the most common substance of addiction in southern Alberta but prescription medication and crystal meth use are present (Belanger & Lindstrom, 2016) and likely growing. Canada has seen a dramatic rise in fentanyl-related deaths (Fischer, Vojtila, & Rehm, 2018; Tyndall, 2018). Mortality incidents rose in Alberta from 116 in 2014 to 673 in 2018 (Government of Alberta, 2019), an increase that became part of an "opioid crisis" (Fischer et al., 2018; Government of Alberta, 2017). Rates of fatal fentanyl overdose are three times higher in First Nations populations than in non-First Nations groups (Government of Alberta, 2017a). Prevention and harm reduction approaches are effective at reducing mortality rates but need more extensive implementation to make a difference (Fischer et al., 2018). Publicly funded treatment programs are difficult to access with waiting lists up to eight weeks long.

Homelessness and substance misuse are interrelated; each reduces access to health care (Belanger & Lindstrom, 2016; Christensen, 2013; Fazel, Geddes, & Kushel, 2014; Grinman et al., 2010; Palepu et al., 2013; Thurston, Milaney, Turner, & Coupal, 2013). Indigenous people are eight times more likely to be homeless than non-Indigenous people (Belanger, Awosaga, & Weasel Head, 2013). They experience additional barriers to seeking help and accessing treatment services that include racism, inadequate childcare or transportation, and a lack of culturally appropriate models and social supports (Thurston et al., 2013; Venner, Greenfield, Vicuna, Munoz, Bhatt, & O'Keefe, 2012). Indigenous youth who are homeless or victimized also experience difficulties accessing addictions treatment (Phillips et al., 2014). Indigenous people who are homeless and misusing substances are routinely confronted with

social exclusion and the risk of violence. Their social position in an urban centre makes it more difficult to access Elders, ceremony, and traditional activities (Wilson & Peters, 2005).

Non-Indigenous definitions of homelessness limit the experience to inadequate physical housing whereas Indigenous homelessness is conceptualized more broadly to include historical dispossession from lands and isolation from relations (Thistle, 2017). Indigenous “home” identifies a sense of belonging, safety, and proximity to family (Belanger & Weasel Head, 2013). The Aboriginal Standing Committee on Housing and Homelessness stated,

*“Indigenous homelessness... is more fully described and understood through a composite lens of Indigenous worldviews. These include: individuals, families and communities isolated from their relationships to land, water, place, family, kin, each other, animals, cultures, languages and identities. Importantly, Indigenous people experiencing these kinds of homelessness cannot culturally, spiritually, emotionally or physically reconnect with their Indigeneity or lost relationships” (as cited by Thistle, 2017, p. 6).*

Existing housing services are less effective, primarily because the issue is not viewed from an Indigenous perspective (Thistle, 2017). Homelessness can be directly linked to colonial policies of the Indian Act, intergenerational trauma of residential school, and the removal of children from traditional family systems by child welfare agencies (Menziés, 2009).

Spiritual homelessness is a form of Indigenous homelessness resulting from displacement from traditional lands and kinship networks (Memmott & Chambers, 2007; Memmott, Long, Chambers, & Spring, 2004). It contributes to an acute, pervasive sense of loneliness and loss of identity, family, community, and trust (Belanger & Lindstrom, 2016; Christensen, 2013). Spiritual homelessness diminishes one’s ability to thrive within their environment.

This paper describes the development, implementation, and evaluation of a program that provides a more holistic and culturally-based approach to healing. The program and research represents a journey of co-learning between each of us and the program attendees. Sharing leadership (Goulet & Goulet, 2014), we combined our knowledges of Niitsitapi’ cultural beliefs and practices, addictions recovery, research, and life on the street to implement an innovative approach to support those who are homeless and misusing substances.

### **I’taamohkanoohsin<sup>1</sup>**

Situated on traditional Blackfoot territory in southwestern Alberta, Canada, Lethbridge is a growing city of over 90,000, 5.8% of which are Aboriginal (Statistics Canada, 2018). The two closest First Nations are the Kainai (Blood) Nation adjacent to Lethbridge and the Piikani (Peigan) Nation west

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<sup>1</sup> Pronounced ee-TAH-moe-ga-NOGH-sin

of the city. Their respective populations are over 12,800 (Blood Tribe, n.d.) and 3600 members (Piikani Nation, n.d.). Reserve-urban migration in the region translates into a regularly shifting population (Belanger & Weasel Head, 2013). Blackfoot people use the word, *Niitsitapi*<sup>2</sup> to refer to themselves, which translates into “the real people.” The region is also home to a smaller but diverse group of people representing other First Nation, Métis, and Inuit communities.

I'taamohkanoohsin targets an extremely marginalized and vulnerable population, primarily Indigenous people who are homeless, and nearly all of whom engage in substance misuse. In addition to intergenerational trauma, this group experiences high rates of concurrent physical, mental, and developmental conditions. “Tipi in the Park” or the “Tipi Program,” as it was known in the beginning was developed to increase access to Blackfoot cultural activities in an open, welcoming environment. Every second Friday, we set up a tipi in a downtown park that is a main hub for people living on the street. For three to four hours, we shared hot drinks, snacks, and served a simple lunch to anyone walking by. Blackfoot activities – typically drumming, singing, storytelling, hand games<sup>3</sup> or face painting<sup>4</sup> – were offered. The program was later renamed, I'taamohkanoohsin, which means “everyone comes together.” This name signified the spirit of the program along with the power of collaboration and resource sharing to create a social space where everyone, even the most marginalized, is welcome, valued, and respected.

### **The Story of How We Came Together**

The authors come from different organizations and backgrounds, but each of us desired to improve the lives of the homeless population. Chelsey works for the Aids Outreach Community Harm Reduction Education Support Society (ARCHES), an organization that provides support and harm reduction services for people who engage in substance misuse. Les is the Community Diversity Liaison Officer for the Lethbridge Police Service (LPS) and conducts community outreach activities. Mark was a former client of ARCHES' Housing-First Team and volunteers with numerous community organizations. Roger is a local Elder and a Blackfoot societal grandfather. Melissa is an undergraduate student in Public Health who will soon begin graduate studies. Janice is a faculty member at the University of Lethbridge. Melissa, Mark, and Roger are Niitsitapi. Les is Cree but was raised in a Euro-Canadian settler family. Chelsey and Janice are Euro-Canadian settlers. The diversity of those involved led organically to a Two-Eyed Seeing practice in the program's development and implementation.

Each of us along with other community organizations contributed something different to I'taamohkanoohsin. Chelsey identified a distinct lack of accessible and culturally relevant services for Indigenous people. She consulted with clientele, Elders, and Blackfoot mental health workers, and then surveyed youth and adults to assess their interests in cultural activities. Chelsey presented her data to the

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<sup>2</sup> Pronounced nit-SI-tah-pee

<sup>3</sup> Hand games are a traditional Blackfoot game played in teams.

<sup>4</sup> Face painting is a Blackfoot blessing using bison fat and ochre.

Lethbridge Indigenous Sharing Network interagency meeting. There she met Les, who sought to improve relations between the police and the homeless population, and proactively address the root causes of substance misuse and other community issues. As the two brainstormed ideas, Les offered the use of the LPS tipi to create a place for programming. This innovation circumvented the need for an indoor space and increased visibility and accessibility by positioning the program in a central park. Les coordinated the setup, obtained necessary permits, arranged coffee and snack donations from McDonald's, and provided supplies to build a fire inside the tipi.

Roger joined the collaboration when Les asked him to become the Elder for the program. Chelsey invited Mark who had strong relationships with the target population and could organize cultural activities. Melissa volunteered to reconnect with, and support, family and friends who were experiencing homelessness. Janice joined to build community relationships and was later asked to document the program. Other non-profit and health-related organizations saw the benefit of the program for their own clientele, and contributed by providing meal preparation, transportation, and active participation. Activities were based upon ongoing feedback from the program attendees.

I'taamohkanoohsin was initiated by the desire to support people to begin their healing process and it grew into a multi-organizational collaboration. The first event was held on January 21, 2017, two weeks after Chelsey and Les first met, demonstrating how the joint effort of community organizations and volunteers can enable the rapid mobilization of resources. Supporting I'taamohkaanoohsin furthered the organizational mandates of contributing agencies. During the first year, ARCHES expanded I'taamohkanoohsin to offer several activities at other locations: beading, talking circles, a mini pow wow, and traditional teachings. Out-of-city excursions occurred to visit sacred sites, harvest tipi poles and pegs, and to go fishing. The most visible and well attended activity remained the tipi program.

## **Methodology**

A general inductive approach to impact and process evaluation was used to assess the program after its first year (Thomas, 2006). The assessment goals were to: a) determine impact on participants, b) gather program feedback to expand future activities, and c) to investigate successes and challenges to implementation. This evaluation focuses only on one part of I'taamohkanoohsin, that is, the "tipi program." Ideally, research with Indigenous people is decolonizing and participatory (Bartlett, Iwasaki, Gottlieb, Hall, & Mannell, 2007; Smith, 1999), but the extreme disempowerment of the target population limited expectations for a participatory process. Instead, we prioritized relational accountability with the participants (Wilson, 2008). Our team met in August 2017 to finalize the methodology and construct two brief semi-structured interview guides, one for program participants and one for key informants. Key informants included program facilitators and people within the community who interacted regularly with program participants. The University of Lethbridge Office of Research Ethics granted ethical approval.

## Data Generation and Analysis

Data generation occurred over two events in September 2017. We co-facilitated interviews with two or three participants at a time within the tipi. Interviews lasted four to 15 minutes. Of the twenty-four adult participants interviewed, twenty were Indigenous, four were Caucasian, and eight were women. Five participants were currently housed but may have misused substances frequently. Participants received a five-dollar McDonald's gift card for each interview. Six key informants were individually interviewed in winter 2018 regarding their observations of the program. Their data is used to supplement results from participant interviews. Key informants did not receive any compensation.

Analysis was guided by a Two-Eyed Seeing framework that views knowledge production as a journey of co-learning through the interweaving of two worldviews (Bartlett, Marshall, & Marshall, 2012). Janice first analyzed the data using thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) undergirded by narrative inquiry's "ontology of experience" (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 39). Melissa then followed with a deeper interpretation that contextualized and interwove responses within Blackfoot knowledge, relationships, and histories.

## Results

The results identified a web of connections between what drew people to the program and why they returned. Essentially, I'taahmohkanoohsin gave people *Something to Look Forward To*. Starting with seemingly simple things like *Food and Drinks*, people had the opportunity to *Build and Renew Relationships* and connect with *Niitsitapi' Ways of Knowing*. Activities under all three themes triggered *Memories of Better Times*. These experiences would *Bring Spirit Home*, enhancing participants' strength and hope, however brief, until the next event. Figure 1 illustrates the connections between these themes.

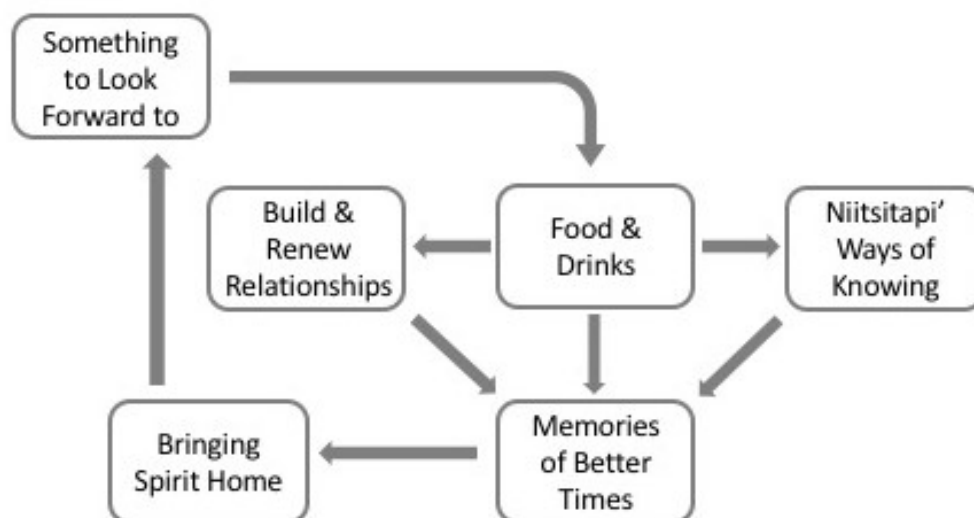


Figure 1. *Process of coming together.*

## Something to Look Forward to

People living on the street experience extreme social marginalization and risk of violence. I'taahmohkanoohsin counters marginalization, even if only for a short period. It offers a non-judgemental and inclusive environment that counters the dehumanizing tropes of “drunk” or “junkie.” Paul<sup>5</sup> (40s) had dropped in to investigate the activities for the first time and explained how important seemingly small things are for people on the street: “Our people need something... to make their day, because their day is empty. Something that... will help them, you know? Something to look forward to.” The program provides that something to anticipate: “I find it fun... [and] interesting. I like coming here” (Laura, 50s).

## Food and Drinks

Several things drew people into the activities. Participants mentioned drumming or seeing the tipi, but they most consistently identified *Food and Drinks* as a benefit of or draw to the program. “Food” was the most common response to what participants liked and what kept them returning; but it was entwined with relationships: “I like their mint tea, and they always have good food, and I like the people” (Evelynn, 50s). Sharing food and drinks are a small way to show care and respect for people. More than just physical nourishment, food demonstrates to participants that they have value: “You can actually come here and get a cuppa coffee and you don’t have to beg for it.... You can... get a cookie. I don’t have to pick it up out of the garbage” (Alex, 30s). Food brought people to the tipi to talk and laugh. Brian said, “This is good. Coffee, and donuts and that, that’s a beginning.” As with any relationship, whether it is for research or friendship, it most often begins with sharing and talking with one another over coffee or tea. This simple offering opened the door to more meaningful interactions.

Food is an important part of Blackfoot culture that connects people to one another and strengthens relationships. Sharing food is a form of respect and reinforces the value of looking after one another. Hosts always offer food and drinks to visitors and food is often the most important part of community gatherings. Sharing food is one of many daily rituals or protocols that ensures good relations with allies or kin. Providing food also gives energy to our visitors, assists in the continuation of life, and it helps maintain balance on their daily journey.

## Connecting and Building Relationships

Sharing food was an entry to *Connecting and Building Relationships*. Participants attributed repeat attendance to the welcoming space and meeting with friends and new people. They enjoyed the relational elements embodied through laughter, sharing, kindness, and conversation. The few hours that the program ran each time provided a reprieve from the struggle and isolation of street life. It was Alex’s first time attending the program and this was his impression:

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<sup>5</sup> All names are pseudonyms

*This (program)... is one place where you can come and you can find peace.... where you come and... just talk, share your heart, share your spirit, and share your soul. And you don't have to be afraid, [like when] we walk around the streets.... I'm not afraid that somebody's going to come up behind me and stab me in the back. [...] Right now, I get to talk. When I'm out there on the street I can't. (Alex).*

Compared to existence on the streets, the space created by the program was a safe one that provided a sense of belonging.

The program aspired to be supportive and respectful. Everyone was welcome, even if they were intoxicated or high. Disruptions were rare. Some stayed away when using: "I didn't bother stopping because I was under the influence. So... I showed more respect than just stopping in... smelling like alcohol and stuff." Cultural protocols requiring people to avoid ceremony when intoxicated are still respected by many.

Relationships between community service workers and people on the street are more easily forged when meeting outside of the formal and intimidating office setting. Some participants became connected to housing services this way. One worker who attended the program was able to de-escalate a situation at the social services office because she recognized that individual from the tipi program. There are indications that the relationship between police services and people living on the street can be improved through program interactions. Les was always present out of uniform, but other officers would visit in uniform. Trixie<sup>6</sup>, a woman who took on a leadership role as participant-volunteer, "Did not like police," according to Mark. But after becoming involved in the program, "She had a real, 'Well *not all* police are bad,' ...attitude instead of, 'All police are bad, we don't like the police.'"

### **Niitsitapi' Ways of Knowing**

Coming together to share food and stories enables the transmission of cultural knowledge. Traditionally, Niitsitapi' knowledge and values were passed down to younger generations through storytelling and other oral practices as well as land-based teachings. Given that cultural transmission was disrupted by forced assimilation, the program's goal was to improve access to cultural resources and facilitate cultural (re)connection.

Participants affirmed that I'taamohkanoohsin achieved this goal and described the necessity of restoring *Niitsitapi' Ways of Knowing*: "It is very important, because... we'd like to keep it active for the younger generation, so it can carry on" (Mary, 50s). Older and younger participants expressed similar views even though their experiences diverged. Older participants referred to childhood memories where they were learning Blackfoot ways from their grandparents. Younger participants who grew up within the foster care system indicated little knowledge of their cultural ways,

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<sup>6</sup> Trixie passed on in the fall of 2017. It is for people like her that we do this work.

*I was raised in a Christian home... and then in the foster care system.... I never got the opportunity to learn about my culture. I was sort of against it for awhile because of how I was raised. But now... I'm very proud of my culture and who I am... so I would like to learn about my culture a lot more now and take part in ceremonies.... My daughters dance pow-wow... and I'm happy that they dance. It was something that I never did.... Now I'm more open to it because that's who we are and that's who we have been.... It is important... to learn that and to pass it down, and I think it is another way for us to step towards healing. (Jared, 30s)*

Attending community events provides opportunities for members to obtain Indigenous knowledge from community leaders and members. Participating in pow-wows helps people feel better about themselves, strengthens or reaffirms Blackfoot identity, and creates a pow-wow “family.” This new family offers resources to learn Niitsitapi' ways of knowing through connections to Elders, ceremonies, and land-based teachings which may have not been previously accessible.

(Re)connection to Blackfoot ways of knowing supports people to feel that their lives have value and meaning. It can lift spirits, instill pride, and provide a sense of belonging. Mary explained how, without traditional knowledge, people are denied the life guidance that it provides.

*“A lot of the younger ones, they're lost because not a lot of the tradition has gone to them. And they're seeking something. Like a foundation together. And walking this way brings back a lot (of) blessings within themselves.... They want to find it but they don't know how.” (Mary)*

Without cultural guidance, it can be difficult to decipher the lessons within stories and teachings. Mary was explaining how, by following a traditional path, people will learn to understand the oral teachings they have been unknowingly gifted or blessed upon them from their kin.

Non-Indigenous participants felt it was valuable to learn about other cultures. This sentiment was expressed most strongly by two participants who had Niitsitapi' and Métis grandchildren. For Gail (50s), it was important to learn Blackfoot culture to share it with grandchildren who were not receiving this knowledge from their custodial parent.

## **Memories of Better Times**

*Connecting and Building Relationships and Niitsitapi' Ways of Knowing* elicited pleasant reminders of participants' childhoods. The atmosphere around sharing food and visiting with others at I'taamohkanoohsin invited memories of the grandmothers. Their homes were always open to their kin. A pot of *siksikimi* (tea) was always waiting on the stove, instantly inviting conversations from aunts, uncles, and cousins. Stories were transferred in Blackfoot between the *kaáhs/kaasiiks* (grandparents) and the children. Sitting around the tipi, especially, brought memories to resurface among participants. Mary explained that “[the tipi] brings back lots of history... it's a reminder of who we are.” Evelyn shared, “It brings me back to the days [when] we would go to pow-wows and sleep in the tipi.”

Opportunities to participate in ceremony and other activities are limited when one is unhoused. Traditional knowledge can be a source of strength and resilience: “I learned a lot from [my grandparents], how to speak my language, how to survive” (Evelyn). Participants suggested the program had a restorative effect that mediated, temporarily, a very difficult reality brought on by colonialism, residential schools, and foster care. The tipi program was a reminder of the imperative to learn Blackfoot knowledge gifted from grandparents and transfer it on to others.

### **Bringing the Spirit Home**

*Connecting and Building Relationships, Passing on Traditional Culture and Knowledge* and *Memories of Better Times* all feed into *Bringing the Spirit Home*. Spiritual identity is strongly valued by Niitsitapi' and creating a relationship with it tends to our spiritual needs. The sharing, laughter, relationships, memories, cultural activities, and storytelling of I'taamohkanoohsin are all medicines that nurture the spirit (Portman & Garrett, 2006). Through these activities, the program brought people's spirits back to them by facilitating reconnection between people's mental-self and the spirit-self. Arnold explained, “Sometimes my spirit gets lost and it (my tradition) helps bring it up.” Mary said I'taamohkanoohsin “brought (a connection to) spirituality and... belief.... You get your strength here.” Niitsitapi' believe that when you use substances it disconnects your spirit-self from your body resulting in a lost feeling. *Bringing the Spirit Home* to one's body offers strength to support healing and recovery from substance misuse. Smudging and prayer is needed “to give them strength for the day because most of them are lost out there “(Donna, 40s). Given the precariousness of many participants' lives, surviving each day is an ever-present challenge. Connection to spirit gives people hope for a better future and hope gives them something to look forward to when coming back to the program.

More than a symbol or reminder of traditional ways, the tipi transformed the park space and served as a gathering point to draw people in. It was a place to warm up on cold days. The interior had a feeling of sacred space where people's stories were shared and respected. It had a powerful influence upon spirit: “I like the tipi... it makes me feel safe [and] brings out my light. This makes me feel at home” (Arnold). Arnold's experience contrasts profoundly with the dislocation and violence of homelessness. The tipi formed a safe space in the park and embodied the spirit of “everyone comes together.”

### **Discussion**

Blackfoot knowledge understands spirit as a separate entity from the body that is connected to all of creation (Little Bear, 2000). Spirit is the foundation for wellness and resilience. Living by daily Blackfoot values empowers the spirit to connect to the land and all that it contains (Bastien, 2004) and maintaining a relationship with one's spirit is vital to feeling at home in the world. Niitsitapi' participants are not so much homeless as they are displaced from their family homes and community because of their problems with substance misuse. They have homes they might return to if they could

resolve the pull of alcohol or drugs. Their displacement from community, kin, and land precipitates the experience of spiritual homelessness.

I'taamohkanoohsin offered individuals a path out of spiritual homelessness with an opportunity to develop pride and confidence in who they are as Niitsitapi'. Attending the tipi program would counteract spiritual homelessness by offering a sense of kinship, belonging, and spiritual connection. The experiences around the tipi were reminders that life can still have bright moments and inspire a sense of hope. Identity, spirituality, and a return to traditional values are all implicated in recovery from addiction (Prussing, 2007; Tempier, A., Dell, Papequash, Duncan, & Tempier, R., 2011). This program can be a catalyst to seeking alternative ways of living by guiding people back to this path, particularly with the support of community members working together to address the negative effects from residential school. It provided the safety and care missing with spiritual homelessness. Welcoming interactions instilled feelings of belonging and demonstrated that participants are worthy of respect from society. Sharing traditional knowledge reaffirmed Niitsitapi' identity and provided guidance. Overall, the tipi program fortified people with hope and brought their spirits home.

The immediate benefits were evident, although successes must be viewed on a smaller scale. Actions like showing up to meet workers or staying temporarily sober are all successes for this population. Furthermore, at least two participants transitioned into recovery and one obtained housing. I'taamohkanoohsin provides a short reprieve from the challenges of daily survival. Coming together around the tipi improved moments and hours within a participant's day and kept them from engaging in substance use for a time. It provided meaningful activity instead of walking the streets to pass time.

### **Program Challenges**

Implementation had its challenges due to participant and organizational factors. Participation depended largely on how people prioritized attendance with their addictions. Acknowledging he would like to learn more about his culture, Sam (40s) indicated he did not have the capacity to explore it: "So much [is] going on in my life, I can't think straight. I keep thinking about my family, my uncles that passed away.... That's too much for the brain to think about it." The trauma and grief many experience can be complex and people must be stable enough to even attend events like I'taamohkanoohsin that might trigger memories or trauma related to their loss. Feeding one's addiction will also take priority over attendance. Jared revealed, "Honestly if there was somebody (who)... got like \$30 and (said), 'Let's go get a two-six,' you know, my addiction with alcohol is pretty strong. I'd most likely go and drink."

I'taamohkanoohsin had limited capacity in the first year. Employers were supportive but unable to delegate additional resources. The help needed to set up and take down the tipi was sometimes absent. The low cost of the program was good initially but then began to limit the range of activities possible. Small sources of funding were located for day trips, but other challenges like insured transportation and risk mitigation arose. ARCHES received funding the following year to expand other I'taamohkanoohsin

activities substantially. Workplace changes and community dynamics also decreased the ability for some co-authors to continue collaborating on tipi activities.

## **Limitations**

This research is unable to track the program's long-term benefits and results may only be applicable to the southern Alberta region. However, the lessons learned here may be useful for harnessing the power of community and cultural reclamation to develop similar grassroots activities in other locales. There are small but discernible benefits to participants, yet significantly more action is necessary to lower rates of substance misuse and mortality due to overdoses and violence. Single programs are insufficient without changes to policies, budgets, and institutional structures, the absence of which allow the cycle of poverty, addiction, violence, and marginalization to continue (Oelke, Thurston, & Turner, 2016; Marshall, 2015; Tait, Henry, & Walker, 2013). Future research and development must press for a systemic integrated approach to increase access to long-term, culturally appropriate treatment and post-treatment supports. Creative grassroots solutions may be necessary to work around the failure of governments to implement known solutions (i.e. Blackstock, Brown, & Bennett, 2007), such as poverty reduction and changes to child welfare and health policies, until the time when systemic change occurs.

## **Conclusion**

The people with whom we work are vulnerable, frequently in crisis, and yet are some of the strongest and most accepting people with whom we have had the honour to work. The patterns of their lives are formed around the cycle of their substance misuse and by being unhoused and displaced on their home territory. Blackfoot values and practices can be the starting point to good relations and life balance. Embodying those values connects people to their spirit, which is a source of strength and resilience. The program increased opportunities for cultural connection and supported people in nurturing their spirit-self. Participants (re)connect with kin, community, and self. People from all walks of life were attracted to the tipi, providing opportunities to learn about one another and alleviate fears or stereotypes among people who would otherwise have little interaction. I'taamohkanoohsin created a very visible presence of Niitsitapi' regional identity in the heart of Blackfoot homeland. It made the statement that Blackfoot culture is strong and vibrant.

Overcoming substance misuse is a personal journey that begins when a person decides s/he is ready. Our desire is that the moments of hope gleaned in the program will accumulate into stronger identities and self-worth, greater agency, and the beginning of that journey. The ongoing and increasing numbers of overdoses and mortalities in the Blackfoot community punctuates the urgency of this work. The Tipi Program is currently on hold but ARCHES has expanded other I'taamohkanoohsin activities at its new supervised consumption site. There, daily cultural supports are provided in a ceremonial room including counseling, smudging, beading, and music jam sessions. Some clients have recorded music

mixes in a hip-hop club; and another is developing a Blackfoot language class. These are all individuals who still use substances regularly but are now showing the other gifts they possess.

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