

Meeting in the Middle

Engagement Strategy & Action Plan

Co-developed by the City of Toronto Shelter, Support and
Housing Administration (SSHA) Division and the Toronto
Aboriginal Support Services Council (TASSC)

June 2018



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Statement of Purpose

Meeting in the Middle – Engagement Strategy and Action Plan was co-created to foster better relationships between the City of Toronto Shelter Support and Housing Administration (SSHA) Division and Indigenous organizations. Our vision is to meaningfully address Indigenous homelessness in Toronto by addressing the City of Toronto’s Statement of Commitments to Aboriginal Communities.



To further our work, we look to the ‘ethical space’ framework for relationship-building. Willie Ermine describes ‘ethical space’ as a space, “formed when two societies, with disparate worldviews, are poised to engage each other. It is the thought about diverse societies and the space in between them that contributes to the development of a framework for dialogue between human communities”.¹ We acknowledge that engaging in this ‘ethical space’ can be awkward and sometimes uncomfortable. Through the process of relationship-building, we strive to ensure that this space is never so uncomfortable that one group fails to see the benefit of moving forward together. In so doing, we are ‘meeting in the middle’ and exploring new ways to understand and appreciate our differences.

¹ Ermine, W. (2017). The ethical space of engagement. *Indigenous Law Journal*, 6(1), 193-203.

***“We’ve listened
to each other...
it was a meeting
of the minds”***

*– Indigenous partner,
Engagement Strategy and
Action Planning Session, 2017*





Background Information

Over the years, SSHA and local Indigenous support service organizations have been recognizing the necessity of working together to meaningfully address Indigenous homelessness in Toronto. A need to further explore a mutual understanding of self-determination, respectful consultation and collaboration was put forward. *Meeting in the Middle – Engagement Strategy and Action Plan* is the product of a three-day facilitated consultation where SSHA and Indigenous leadership came together; during this consultation, they established personal and organizational commitments, and came up with ways to hold each other accountable.

Why This Work Is Important

Indigenous people are overrepresented in the Toronto homeless population, as consistently shown in all three Street Needs Assessments (SNA) led by the SSHA. The 2013 SNA revealed that Indigenous people make up at least 16% of the homeless population, and about one-third of the outdoor homeless population.²

Indigenous homelessness and its risk factors can be directly traced to colonization; structural and institutional racism; government policies and practices; and intergenerational trauma. Since the housing and homelessness sector continues to face complex internal structures that often function to maintain the status quo, there is great need for effective engagement among all parties mandated to serve Indigenous people facing homelessness. Furthermore, eliminating Indigenous homelessness requires Indigenous-led solutions.

The City of Toronto wants to honour Indigenous Peoples' inherent right to self-determination and autonomy. In 2010, it adopted the *Statement of Commitment to the Aboriginal Communities of Toronto – Towards a Framework for Urban Aboriginal Relations in Toronto*; this document recognizes the City's need to work with, learn from, and support local Indigenous partners. Commitment 3 states:

² City of Toronto. (2013). *2013 Street Needs Assessment*. Toronto, ON: Author.

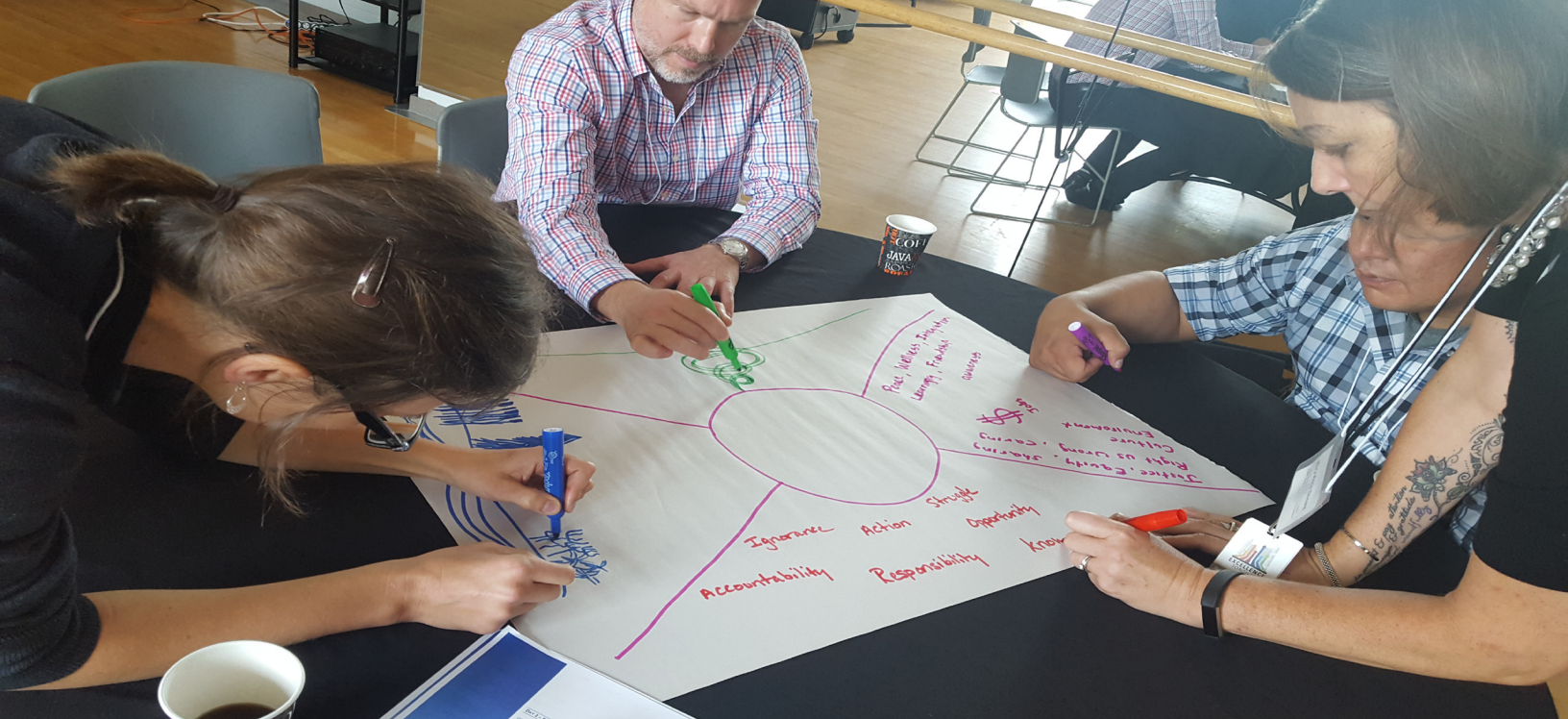
The City of Toronto commits to working with Aboriginal partners to explore ways to strengthen the capacity of Aboriginal organizations and associations to plan, lead and deliver initiatives for local Aboriginal communities. The City also commits to engaging Aboriginal communities in the City's decision-making process, to removing barriers to civic participation and to increasing the representation and role of Aboriginal people on municipal boards and committees.

“this will not be a straight path... but the opportunity is huge if we can get there...”

— SSHA Director,
Engagement
Strategy and Action
Planning Session,
2017

This commitment is aligned with the principle of Indigenous self-determination. In 2013, the City's *Proclamation of the Year of Truth and Reconciliation* recognized and affirmed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Article 3 of UNDRIP also calls for Indigenous Peoples' right to self-determination.





How to Use the Engagement Strategy and Action Plan

Part A: Honouring the Relationship

The first part of this document highlights the importance of relationship-building in improving socio-economic outcomes for Indigenous people. The *Collective Commitments to the Relationship-Building Process* section outlines how SSHA and TASSC will review their working relationship and individual organizational commitments. The accompanying *Accountability Statements* outline what successful implementation of the commitments would look like.

Part B: Upholding the City's Statements of Commitment to the Aboriginal Communities of Toronto

The second part of this document lays out the itemized action statements that SSHA and Indigenous partners have agreed to uphold the City's Statement of Commitment to Aboriginal Communities of Toronto.

SSHA staff and Indigenous organizations will review these commitments and accountability statements on a quarterly basis. This should be done at an individual, team, and organizational level. Annually, we will gather to evaluate our independent and collective progress on achieving our accountability statements.

Part A: Honouring the Relationship

Collective Commitments to the Relationship-Building Process

As individuals committed to fostering better relationships between SSHA and Indigenous organizations, we understand that we all have a role to play in supporting, enhancing, and stewarding our relationships. We have expectations of ourselves, our colleagues, and our partners.

We carefully listen to each other

We are patient with each other's concerns

We accept that mistakes will be made along the way

We address mistakes with respect and in a way that is solution-focused

We actively create space for relationship-building

We remain open to new ways of working together

We communicate challenges and successes

We will not avoid encounters that may be uncomfortable or difficult to navigate

We are goal-oriented and solution-focused

We are authentic with each other

“There has to be a distinct overlap of understanding on both sides”

– Indigenous partner, Engagement Strategy and Action Planning Session, 2017

“If we want to serve the community in the best way, we need to ensure we work together in a good way.”

– Indigenous partner, Engagement Strategy and Action Planning Session, 2017



Statements of Accountability

In the following two sub-sections – for both SSHA and Indigenous organizations – collective statements of accountability will be followed by individual statements of accountability.

SSHA Statements of Accountability

To honour the relationship-building process, we will:

- Provide a land acknowledgement at the beginning of each public presentation and general meeting. This acknowledgement will be tailored to SSHA's work, specifically that being done to address Indigenous homelessness and housing
- Acknowledge and reflect on power differentials and privileges that affect relationship-building. This may include – and is not limited to – institutional power and privilege derived from settler status, whiteness, patriarchy, colonization, ableism, and/or heteronormative and/or cisgender ways of being
- Work creatively to challenge power and privilege; this may include exploring what equitable, nation-to-nation and autonomous working relationships look like
- Educate ourselves on the histories and diversities of First Nations, Inuit and Métis people, and examine how this relates to everyday life for Indigenous communities and individuals
- Participate in ongoing cultural competency training, be it formally (e.g. going for professional training) or informally (e.g. attending community events)
- Challenge current systems that need to be more responsive to the needs of Indigenous organizations and communities
- Be open to cultural protocols that honour SSHA and Indigenous organizations' commitment to build relationships together

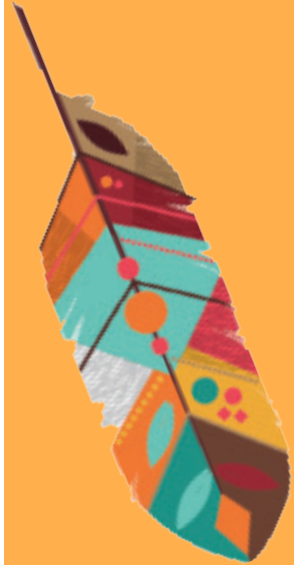
As SSHA staff, I will:

- Provide – at the beginning of meetings/events, and when appropriate – a land acknowledgement linking SSHA's work to the needs of local Indigenous people
- Be willing to acknowledge my privileges when working with the Indigenous communities and clients
- Seek out Indigenous perspectives to grow my understanding of Canada's true history with First Nations, Inuit and Métis people; so that I might better see colonization's impacts on urban Indigenous communities in Toronto
- Seek out formal and informal opportunities to gain a fuller understanding of the day to day lives of Indigenous people in Toronto



Tips for Informal Opportunities to Learn from Indigenous communities:

Attend a Pow Wow in the city, check out an Indigenous organization's Annual General Meeting, or observe an Aboriginal Affairs Committee meeting held at City Hall.



Example of a City of Toronto Land Acknowledgement from the 2018 Toronto for All Indigenous Campaign

I ACKNOWLEDGE

the land I am standing on today is the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. I also acknowledge that Toronto is covered by Treaty 13 signed with the Mississaugas of the Credit, and the Williams Treaty signed with multiple Mississaugas and Chippewa bands.



Tkaronto is built on sacred land that is part of an agreement between Indigenous peoples and then extended to allied nations to peacefully and respectfully care for it. By personally making a land acknowledgement you are taking part in an act of reconciliation, honouring the land and Indigenous heritage, which dates back over 10,000 years.



TorontoForAll.ca





Indigenous Organizations' Statements of Accountability

To honour the relationship-building process, we will:

- Move away from historical grievances against SSHA and embrace a new and positive way we could work together
- Be open to change and the need to adapt
- Actively invite SSHA to our agencies, events and advisory meetings
- Be transparent about our organizations' capacity needs and challenges
- Be honest about how funding impacts our ability to effectively address the issue of homelessness within the communities we serve
- Work as a collective to organize annual ceremonial events, to honour our commitment to ongoing relationship-building

As an Indigenous partner, I will:

- Not let any historical grievances against SSHA hinder my ability to embrace new and positive ways to work with their current staff
- Be open to change and embrace new ways of working in relationship
- Contact SSHA staff to encourage their involvement in Indigenous community events and meetings
- Contact SSHA staff when I have concerns regarding a program or contract
- Support my organization's effort to hold annual events to honour our collective commitment to relationship-building with SSHA



Guiding Elements for Indigenous Engagement

- Aspirational achievements were examined.
- Both groups synthesized.
- These, when refined, become your preamble.

Solidify through Ceremony.
What do we aspire to achieve?

Statements of Purpose
City SSHA

Statements of purpose
Indigenous

Expectations & Roles

Resource Planning

Accountability
Provide time to support/advise City to be heard (eg. structural change)
Keep doors open/continue to work through change

Roles
Support
Advocate
Collaborate (evaluation)

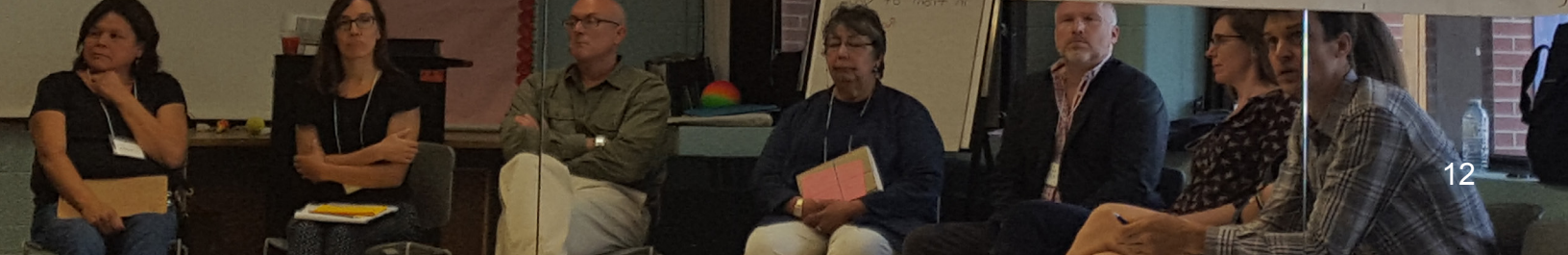
Aspirational relationship and Indigenous homelessness
Providing a culturally informed approach to ending Indigenous homelessness in Toronto

Ensure current & ongoing collective accountability to the engagement process

Deepen the relationship with understanding of Indigenous service providers

Create a strategy/policy to future generations due to lack of?

What financial considerations should we make as we move forward?





Part B: Upholding the City's Statement of Commitment to the Aboriginal Communities of Toronto

Commitment 1

The City commits to creating training opportunities for the Toronto Public Service to learn about the history and its current day impacts from Aboriginal Elders and other Aboriginal partners. The City also commits to working with Aboriginal communities to improve public awareness of Aboriginal life in Toronto.

- SSHA commits to on-going cultural learning and development for all levels of staff, with particular focus on local realities of Indigenous homelessness from an Indigenous perspective.
- SSHA will encourage staff to attend other formal and informal events that further knowledge development around local Indigenous ways of life.
- Indigenous partners will help make SSHA aware of opportunities that are open to the wider public, so that they might participate and learn more about Indigenous communities in Toronto.
- Indigenous organizations will share resources, documents and research with SSHA to highlight Indigenous issues relevant to homelessness and housing.
- SSHA will share information and resources with the wider SSHA community so as to create learning opportunities with regards to Indigenous issues related to homelessness.

Commitment 2

The City commits, when working with the Aboriginal communities in Toronto, to learning about the elements of an Aboriginal holistic approach from its Aboriginal partners. The City further commits to supporting this approach in the belief that this will provide the greatest benefit to the community being served.

- With guidance and support from Indigenous partners, SSHA will integrate holistic approaches to understanding and representing Indigenous homelessness and housing within policy and programs.
- Indigenous partners will be available to provide guidance and support to SSHA staff in integrating more holistic approaches to addressing Indigenous homelessness and housing in the development of strategies, policies, programs and services.

Commitment 3

The City commits to working with Aboriginal partners to explore ways to strengthen the capacity of Aboriginal organizations and associations to plan, lead, and deliver initiatives for local Aboriginal communities.

- SSHA will address capacity building supports for Indigenous organizations in any revision of SSHA's Service Plan and Investment Plan, as well as in other program and policy development initiatives. This may include dedicating a percentage of funds to Indigenous communities, and exploring ways of providing funding to Indigenous organizations to administer directly.
- SSHA will seek creative opportunities to build capacity of Indigenous organizations. This may include hiring Indigenous organizations to conduct Indigenous-related research and engagement, pro bono support from SSHA staff, one-time funding for community planning, providing customized data analysis pertaining to Indigenous issues, making appropriate referrals and connections and providing access to complementary training.
- SSHA will develop a data strategy to ensure data collected from Indigenous people are owned and protected by a local Indigenous authority.
- Indigenous partners will ensure SSHA is aware of capacity-building needs of Indigenous organizations and how these needs impact on the ability to address Indigenous homelessness.





Commitment 4

The City also commits to engaging Aboriginal communities in the City's decision-making process, to removing barriers to civic participation, and to increasing the representation and role of Aboriginal people on municipal boards and committees.

- SSHA will extend opportunities to Indigenous partners to provide early and meaningful input into SSHA's Service Plan and Investment Plan and other policy and strategic program development opportunities.
- SSHA will work with Indigenous partners to hold separate consultations, in addition to being invited to general consultations, on homelessness and housing issues.
- Indigenous partners, where appropriate, will reach out to Indigenous organizations, groups and individuals with lived experience to ensure wide diversity and inclusion in SSHA consultations. The Indigenous CAB will be made aware of the consultation efforts and outcomes, and will provide feedback on whether the consultation was sufficient and how future efforts can be improved.
- SSHA will advocate to other City Divisions and Agencies for increased accessibility and inclusion of Indigenous people on municipal boards and committees.



Commitment 5

The City of Toronto commits to implementing employment practices that ensure that opportunities for employment are accessible to Aboriginal people and increases the number of Aboriginal employees at all occupational levels.

- SSHA will work with Indigenous partners to promote all SSHA job opportunities to Indigenous communities in Toronto.
- SSHA will look into providing opportunities for Indigenous people to train on-the-job to address potential inequity in the hiring process (formal education or years of experience).
- Experience and knowledge working with Indigenous communities in Toronto will be a desired qualification in all SSHA employment opportunities.
- Where appropriate, SSHA will provide funding for Indigenous knowledge keepers to support public consultations.



Commitment 6

The City of Toronto commits to working formally and informally with all orders of government and other municipalities, institutions, and community organizations to continue exploring promising practices and opportunities for collaboration on Aboriginal initiatives and to promote the interests of Aboriginal people in Toronto, as defined by the Aboriginal communities.

- SSHA, through the endorsement of the Indigenous CAB, will seek out opportunities at all levels of government and other municipalities, institutions and community organizations to create engagement and collaborative opportunities with Indigenous organizations.
- SSHA and Indigenous partners will also seek opportunities to co-present and share promising practices to promote our mutual work and reflect upon our processes and impact.

Commitment 7

The City of Toronto commits to the development of an action plan in partnership with Aboriginal communities in Toronto. The City of Toronto also commits to ensuring an accountability process is established in order to measure the success of the Statement of Commitment.

The *Meeting in the Middle – Engagement Strategy and Action Plan* is SSHA's response within this commitment. Together, SSHA and Indigenous partners will take ownership of collectively reviewing and assessing our accountability statements and action items.

Accountability work will include the following:

- Annual gathering of SSHA directors and Indigenous partners to review and assess progress made on accountability statements and action items. The Meeting in the Middle Review Guide will support the evaluation process.
- Annual gathering will be inclusive of Indigenous ceremonial and cultural procedures to honour and demonstrate the importance of this work.
- The review and assessment on progress made will reflect our commitments to the relationship.
- SSHA and Indigenous partners are open to altering any aspect of this document and the accompanying Review Guide, as our relationships evolve and collective priorities change.
- SSHA and Indigenous partners will explore and document the connection between the improvements in our relationships and their direct and indirect impacts on addressing homelessness and housing needs of the Indigenous communities.

The co-creation of *Meeting in the Middle – Engagement Strategy and Action Plan* has been enriching, productive, and rewarding for those involved; relationships were strengthened and concrete plans of action were made. Beyond its creation, we must continue to act on and renew our commitments to each other.

We hope this document also serves as a model for healthy engagement between organizations and other city departments. As we learn to embrace our unique characteristics and acknowledge the constraints we face, we must stand united in addressing the needs of the people we serve, always remembering that relationship-building is an ongoing process.



Appendix

SSHA and Indigenous Partners Three-Day Engagement Strategy and Action Planning Session

Day One

Setting the Stage

To start off the engagement sessions in a good way, Elder Andrew Wesley was invited to open with prayer and land acknowledgements. The facilitator then led the leaders through an introductory exercise where they were given opportunities to get to know about each person in the other group. Later each person was asked to share with the group what they learned about at least one other person. This activity was used to illustrate the importance and value of listening and getting to know each other on a personal level in order to build trust. It helped set the tone and expectations for the next three days.

Introducing the Issue

The leaders were then asked to self-evaluate their familiarity with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action and physically place themselves along a continuum to let others know where they stand. In three groups of four, they were given time to reflect and share what reconciliation means to them personally. After recording – in words or pictures – their reflections on four quadrants of poster paper, they were given a chance to present their discussion with the larger group. The facilitator then shared the model of 'Ethical Space' as a values-based planning tool, re-emphasizing relationship-building as crucial in working together.

Agreeing on How to Decide

The chapter "Striving for Unanimity: Working with Gradients of Agreement"³ was distributed to the leaders as an example of a model of consensus decision-making they might want to consider. After being given a chance to read through it, the leaders were asked to evaluate its strengths and weaknesses in their small groups. As concerns were raised and alternatives were considered, discussion of the tool allowed leaders to collaboratively identify how existing decision-making practices were lacking and what needed to be improved in the context of existing time, resource and structural constraints.

Closing the First Session

Leaders reconvened in a sharing circle where everyone took turns to speak about their experiences or reflections on the first day. After a recap of what was discussed for the day, the facilitator touched on what will be covered for the following session.

Day Two

Re-affirming Commitments

The facilitator opened the second day with a creative introduction exercise. Leaders were asked to share a story behind their names, whether it be family history, experiences or grievances. This allowed them an opportunity to exercise and re-affirm their commitment to open up to each other, listen and build relationships. After a recap of what took place on the first day, leaders were given large index cards on which to record their expectations of themselves, their colleagues and their partners with regards to Indigenous engagement.

³ Kaner, S., Lind, L., Toldi, C., Fisk, S., and Berger, D. (2014). *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making (3rd ed.)*. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass.



Building a Plan Part 1: Mixed Groups

The facilitator shared Sinek's "Golden Circle" of Leadership to remind leaders of the need to discuss first and foremost why the Engagement Strategy is important before figuring out how they are to go about it and what needs to be done. In small groups made up of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous leaders, they were asked to come up with clear statements of purpose to articulate what they hope to achieve with the Engagement Strategy. In the process, they discussed current challenges that need to be addressed as well as issues regarding roles, commitments, and continuity. Groups then reconvened to share with the larger group what was discussed.

Building a Plan Part 2: Indigenous Leaders and SSHA Leaders

After informal conversations over lunch, the larger group reconvened to continue discussing an Indigenous Engagement Strategy. They were split between Indigenous and SSHA leaders and instructed to discuss their expectations on an executive-to-executive level. This included protocols and behaviors, how often and why they should meet. The two groups met back together to share their commitments.

Day Three

Strengthening Relationships

The third day began with another introductory exercise. This time, leaders were given two and a half minutes to pick a topic to speak about. There was a range of topics to choose from and they required various degrees of personal disclosure. The leaders' choices indicated a willingness to share on a more personal level. It was evident that they had acquired a sense of camaraderie over the first two days which translated into a spirit of openness.

Unifying Pieces of the Puzzle

Having had ten days to reflect on the discussions and commitments voiced out during the first two sessions, highlights were presented to remind leaders and anchor the day's discussions on what had already been laid out. The goal of the third day was to collectively draft out pieces of a puzzle that will be used to create a relevant and workable tool for engagement.

Engaging in Meaningful Dialogue

Leaders were paired up and asked to reflect on expectations, protocols, frequency and purpose with regards to executive-to-executive engagement. As in the first session introductory exercise, they were then asked to share with the larger group what they heard from their partner. Aside from re-emphasizing the need to listen to each other, this exercise helped leaders embody one of the key goals of the engagement strategy - to engage in meaningful dialogue.

Clarifying the Plan

Using the dialogue and presentations made in the earlier exercise, the facilitator noted down key outcomes on poster paper. Four sheets of these key points were then pasted on the wall and used to focus further discussion. Leaders were given time to read through these and then were asked to put a star next to points that needed further elaboration. Time was spent discussing concerns regarding these points and building consensus on solutions that can be taken.

Solidifying and “Owning” the Plan

Leaders were then split back into two groups, Indigenous leaders and SSHA leaders, to discuss next steps. After discussions, each group chose a representative to present their commitments to the Engagement Strategy and the other group was given an opportunity to ask questions and give feedback. This process allowed leaders to publicly affirm their commitments.

Key Elements in the Engagement Sessions

Spiritual Grounding

- Opening prayer by Elder Andrew Wesley, turning to the four directions
- Smudging

Doing Things in a Good Way

- Explanations of teachings i.e. sharing of the four directions
- Opening and closing circles

Unity in a Common Vision

- Information sharing and presentation
- Visuals – Poster paper, cue cards
- Background work – Pooling and synthesizing information

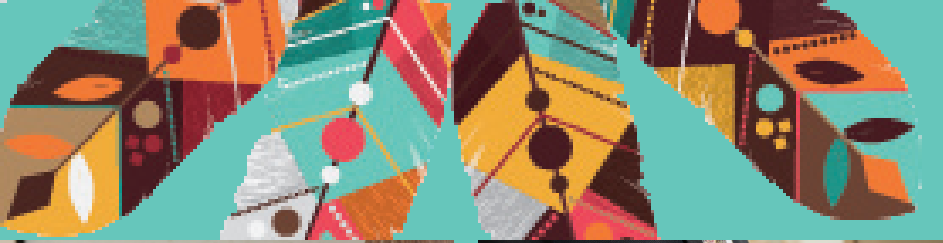
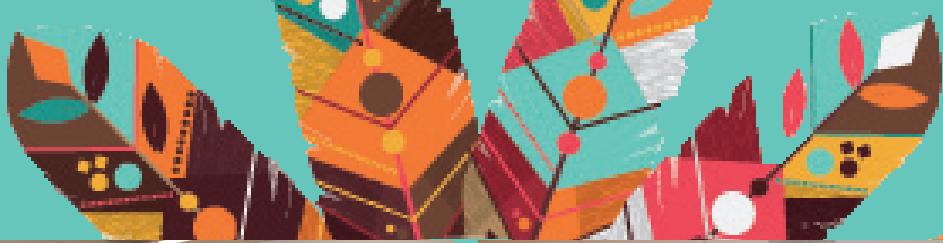
Centrality of Food

- Brings people together with informal discussions and relationship-building
- Equal playing field, no one's hungry
- Cultural significance – Presentation of cultural food

Significance of Space

- Change in venues creates different atmospheres
- Options to sit outside
- Ample room for privacy and easy discussion





Report Design: Swooping Hawk
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