

American Indian Elders Housing and Homelessness Summit

*Held on November 16, 2018 at the
Minneapolis American Indian Center*

About the gathering

An encampment of mostly American Indian people along the Hiawatha Avenue corridor in 2018 raised the visibility of American Indian¹ homelessness in Minneapolis. Particularly troubling is that in addition to young adults and families with children, several dozen American Indian elders also live at the encampment. As the weather turned colder in November and health and housing challenges persisted, American Indian elders sought a chance to think and talk about what was happening and raise issues and concerns more broadly affecting their Native elder community.

Prior to the existence of the highly publicized encampment, concerns were voiced about American Indian homelessness in Minneapolis by both community stakeholders as well as members of the Urban Indian Elders Provider Network. It was at a Network meeting in 2018 that the elders decided that they needed to do something. This summary highlights a discussion held in mid-November at the Minneapolis American Indian Center. The 30 participants included American Indian elders living in Minneapolis with roots in Mille Lacs, Bois Forte, Red Lake, Leech Lake, Prairie Island, and other tribal lands outside of Minnesota. The discussion also included representatives from the Minnesota Board on Aging, Catholic Charities of the Archdioceses of St. Paul and Minneapolis, Metropolitan Transit, the Metropolitan Area Agency on Aging, the Wilder Foundation, the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS), and Minnesota Housing (MH). Funding for the gathering comes from a Live Well at Home[®] Grant to Catholic Charities of the Archdioceses of St. Paul and Minneapolis made by DHS.

¹ During the discussion, participants used the terms American Indian, Native American, Native and Indian at various times. These terms are used interchangeably in this document, as they were during the Summit.

Opening presentations

Elder Jerry Dearly opened the session with comments and a prayer honoring the four directions, the earth and the sky. He also offered words of encouragement and hope.

Claire Wilson, an assistant commissioner from DHS, described the importance of this gathering and the state's interest in supporting the needs of aging American Indians in Minneapolis and throughout Minnesota.

Sgt. Brooke Blakey of the Metro Transit homeless action team described their work related to transit services in the Twin Cities. They operate from 9 PM to 7 AM and focus on several sites including helping people who are sleeping on trains.

The Metro Transit homeless action team collaborates with service providers to provide case navigation that includes:

- Distributing and helping people access housing vouchers
- Working with health care for the homeless to provide culturally specific services
- Offering the support of 25 dedicated beds in Saint Paul

They seek to provide compassionate law enforcement: “We don’t want to criminalize being homeless. It’s not against the law to sleep on the train.”

Metro Transit officers receive training in outreach and crisis intervention. Metro Transit is working on placing portable toilets for people sleeping on trains to use when the train is not in service. They also want Metro transit officers to attend community events to get to know people.

Melea Blanchard and Patricia McArdle from Catholic Charities talked about their case management work in Hennepin and Ramsey counties related to homeless American Indian elders (the work is supported by a Live Well at Home[®] grant).

Catholic Charities works with American Indian elders age 55+ at three shelters. Many of these elders have chronic illnesses, experience substance abuse, and have a lack of recent contact with family. The case management program helps connect individuals with family and service benefits (including waived services) to maintain housing with supportive services, but services are becoming more difficult to access because systems are complex, leading to increased vulnerability for elders. This vulnerability can lead to:

- Elder abuse related to housing, medications, and finances
- Significant challenges with managing chronic health conditions while homeless, including following treatment plans, maintaining good nutrition, and getting adequate rest
- Transportation barriers
- Difficulty finding subsidized housing

Follow-up to agency presentations

Following the presentations by agency representatives, participants were invited to question the presenters or offer comments regarding what they had heard. Questions, comments, and responses are shown below.

Question

- How long does someone have to be in a shelter before becoming eligible for case management?
Answer: There is no waiting period for eligibility but caseloads are so full that there is typically a wait for services.
- Do you have service? Are those who are precariously housed as likely to get services as those who are literally homeless? Answer: Catholic Charities prioritizes those who are in shelters or living outside.
- What is Catholic Charities doing to reach out to American Indians? How many homeless American Indian elders are there? Answer: The 2018 Wilder study data will not be available until spring 2019, but Wilder's 2015 Statewide Homeless Study identified 483 homeless American Indians across the state and 192 in the metro area. Elders (age 55+) made up between 10 and 15 percent of the population at that time.
- What do we need to know to reach and better serve American Indian elders? (Question from Catholic Charities staff)

Comment

- A strategy used to track veteran homelessness (a statewide registry) might be useful for ensuring that services are provided to Native elders who are homeless.

Responses from elders

- The spend-down for elderly waiver services causes some people to stay outside rather than spending down their resources. Can anything be done about this?
- Our children are missing opportunities to learn from our elders because some of these elders are dying on the street. The strength of our elders is critical to our culture.
- I am one paycheck away from being homeless myself at age 56.

Discussion format

Following introductions by everyone in attendance, Wilder staff opened the discussion by describing recent interviews at the Hiawatha encampment and the fact that several dozen of those interviewed were American Indian elders. The information gathered in those interviews will be part of a forthcoming report on homelessness, publicly available in spring 2019.

After some additional opening comments by an American Indian elder concerning the seriousness of the issues now faced by the community, Wilder staff framed the purpose of the day:

To hear what area service providers have to offer American Indian elders and to hear directly from elders regarding their needs, concerns, and hopes for the future. Topics may include any topic of interest including health, social services, housing, substance use, or next steps at the Hiawatha Encampment.

The discussion that followed continued for approximately two hours and included 16 American Indian people (mostly elders) and 14 agency representatives. A Wilder Foundation staff member facilitated the conversation, asked elders who arrived during the discussion to introduce themselves and say a bit about who they were and why they came to the discussion, and helped identify topics and encourage comments by the elders. Another Wilder staff member took detailed notes to serve as the basis for this summary. At the conclusion of the morning, before lunch, the facilitator asked participants to identify the most pressing issues facing the Native elder community and discuss what might be done to address them.

Themes

During the discussion, as expected, several key themes emerged. The themes, identified below, include specific observations related to each issue or concern.²

Do not forget us

- One of the best things that could happen is that people would learn **not** to see American Indians as an insignificant percentage of the population.
- Minnesota rushes to address the needs of new immigrants, but forgets about the American Indians and African-Americans who have been treated badly in this country.
- We need to break through “Minnesota Nice.” Putting one person of color on a board is not the same as representing American Indians on a board. American Indians get grouped with people of color and then you don’t hear about American Indians. This needs to end.

² Note that comments do not appear in quotes. The summary is based on handwritten notes and the pace of the conversation allowed Wilder to collect key observation and messages, but made it difficult for comments to be recorded as exact quotes.

- I think our biggest problem is a beating down of the spirit.
- Recent immigrants are getting much of the housing that is available. Somehow, Native people have never gotten the same support as immigrants.
- Native American people are prideful. They don't want to ask for help, so when they do ask, if they get told "no" once, they won't go back. Everyone shares the same fear of rejection. We should move on from looking at these problems so we can offer help to people. We need help from the state representatives who are here.
- American Indians have the highest percentage of any U.S. population group serving in the military. Yet with all that is spent on the military, there is not enough for our Native veterans.

Housing is essential to our well-being

- We should be in panic mode, but we're not! We need to look in every direction. Housing is the number one issue because it is foundational to all living. It is also the most difficult and expensive service to provide.
- Affordable housing needs to be accessible and provide support to people and offer opportunities for community engagement
- We need more housing. Everyone deserves a warm bed.
- I am hopeful that the American Indian Community Development Corporation housing waiting list will open soon.
- I think we should be examining different models of housing for Indian elders. They should include intergenerational and communal housing. I think the biggest killer of elders is isolation. We should have housing that adapts to us not us having to adapt to the housing that is available.
- Is it possible that housing is a treaty right?
- We need affordable housing options. [What used to be called] Group Residential Housing is not seen as affordable because you have to sacrifice so much of your income.
- There are concerns about gentrification due to many of the new housing developments in Minneapolis. Higher home values and property taxes means that it is harder for elders to stay in their homes.
- People in the American Indian community respond to homelessness by taking their relatives in and doubling up.
- Sometimes it is hard to get all of the adults in a housing unit on the lease, particularly if they have a felony/criminal background. It would be helpful to have some type of a waiver to get into public housing in these cases.
- Elders sometimes lose their housing if they bring in unauthorized people into their unit.

- There are code issues and zoning issues about having too many people in family housing. But we know that the banks changed their loan procedures for obtaining mortgages for Hmong families. Perhaps this could happen for American Indian families, too.
- We need more affordable housing. Leech Lake wants to collaborate to build more housing for our members.
- We need opportunities for elders to keep their adult children and grandchildren with them. Extended families can help reduce the chance for drinking and other negative behaviors.
- It's impossible to find affordable housing when you are in recovery or have a criminal record with felonies
- It is a struggle now to find housing for elders. I never seem to have real answers when people come to me for help. Everyone is telling them "No."
- Tribes want to help with housing but it's hard to create Indian-specific housing because funders will not allow you to discriminate, which I understand.
- Many elders don't want to go back to their reservations, and there are waiting lists for housing there, too.
- It is important for elders to take what they can get in this current environment (affordable rental housing market). They can't be picky to wait for their "ideal" option to open.

Many American Indian elders live on the margin

- Rents are high. How can people afford to live and pay for their housing? I work two full-time jobs and it's hard to afford anything else.
- Need advocacy so that people do not have to spend down a small amount of assets in order to get services. We should also advocate for not taxing Social Security income
- I pay 90% of my income for rent. I am wondering what baby boomers will do, especially those who have no savings.
- The poorest people always get hurt the most from economic changes
- What happens when someone falls through all the safety nets? It seems like many of our elders have poverty-level incomes.
- Per capita payments from reservations are beneficial but not usually enough to live on all month.
- Some are homeless and working, sometimes sleeping in their cars at rest stops.

The encampment on Hiawatha has increased awareness, but problems are difficult to solve

- At the Hiawatha encampment, they're going back to survival mode. It's in their DNA. Encampments are what they know.
- The encampment has increased awareness and helped people focus on potential solutions.
- People often need aftercare after they are placed in housing.
- The Community Mental Health Act brought many people with mental illness out of facilities and into the community. But, there is not enough support in our community for housing for these people now.
- I am aware of an elder who couldn't get housing because of a long waiting list. I feel the encampment needs have come before his needs.
- People are getting help now. There are meals and health care available at the encampment. They need propane for heaters now that it is getting cold and people are freezing.

Aging brings new problems

- People are losing the stories of their lives because of memory loss.
- In Indian culture, we do not deny our children, even if they have baggage. This perhaps makes it easier for abuse to happen.
- Homelessness has been in the forefront over the last few months. An elder I know became homeless due to abuse by family.
- We are going to face a lot more difficulty as time goes on, when the senior populations doubles in size, and the need for services increases dramatically.
- We need people to navigate or provide more case management support to help people jump through the hoops.
- Heartbreak turns to outrage and returns to heartbreak when people can't age with dignity.
- The adult protection system seems to be overwhelmed. It can't take new cases.
- We need to protect elders against abuse. We do know that some children of elders take advantage of their elders in terms of their home, their money, their food or medicine.
- We have concerns about elders' safety when they have dementia, particularly getting on the bus and living alone.
- Many elders cannot go back to their reservation. They often feel disconnected and/or have no access to services

What can be done?

Near the end of the discussion, each participant was asked to make any final observations regarding the future for American Indian elders, the best path forward, or any other comment or reflection that represented an issue of importance or concern. These comments are shown below.

- I would like to see a community center for Indian elders.
- We need greater access to affordable medication so that people don't go without their meds.
- We need to address this from a policy perspective where we address definitions of family income and family structure in the Native community.
- Tribes need to collaborate together including the Minnesota Chippewa tribe and all Natives and get rid of tribal service areas.
- Because the American Indian population is small, we need to collaborate and share information and work together.
- It may be possible to avoid financial abuse by having a payee receive monies rather than direct payment to an elder.
- We need to think about these issues in an intergenerational way. We need to invite youth to be part of these conversations.
- I would like to see the casinos do more to fund Native housing.
- We need to build greater awareness of the need for affordable housing and support for our Indian elders.
- We need to identify and define elder abuse so that our community learns and realizes what it is when it is happening.
- It would be beneficial to have a culturally focused day center where American Indians could bring loved ones who have dementia to stay during the day.
- We would like Prairie Island to be represented on the board of Wisdom Steps.
- Advice from the VOA's experience in serving immigrants and minorities could be useful for Native communities.
- We should develop and submit a project proposal for serving Native elders and submit it to the Minnesota Board on Aging.
- We need additional services for elders who have memory loss at our Native-specific elder housing and other locations where Indians are served.
- A partnership with the Bois Forte reservation, St. Louis County, and the Minnesota Housing Finance Agency helped create new housing on the Lake Vermillion section of the reservation. We would like to know how we can replicate these types of partnerships.

- Catholic Charities' Live Well at Home® grant can help pay for transportation for elders to get home to their reservations.
- Tribal enrollment benefits are only available for people with a specific blood quantum. It would be good to eliminate blood quantum as a criteria for tribal enrollment.
- We need to know what services are available from tribes. There are service navigators at the Area Agencies on Aging (through Senior Linkage Line). However, [there are] few culturally specific resources.
- We need advocacy so that people do not have to spend down a small amount of assets in order to get services. We should also advocate for not taxing Social Security income.
- The cost of staying in your home with waived services (\$20,000 per year) is less than any type of facility-based care for elders who need help. We need greater access to these services.
- We have some Indian elder housing, Bii Di Gain Dash Anwebi ("Come in. Rest." in Ojibwe) in Minneapolis, and Elders Lodge in Saint Paul. Both are Native-specific elder housing. We need more of this. It is hard for Indian elders to feel comfortable in housing when there is disrespect.
- We need more participation by other tribal urban offices the next time we meet like this.
- Are there Native people on the Minnesota Board on Aging? We need to ensure representation. (Note: MBA has two tribally enrolled members: Chief Executive Melanie Benjamin, Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe and Stephanie Klinzing, Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians.)

After everyone gave their final comments, Leonard Geshick, Indian Elders Coordinator, the session organizer and staff of the Minnesota Board on Aging (MBA), concluded the session, thanked everyone for showing up, and reiterated the fact that both the Department of Human Services and MBA want to hear the concerns of the American Indian community and intends to help this group, where appropriate, find its next steps.



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