



# **Examining the Collective Impact Model**

## **in Winnipeg's Non-Profit Homeless-Serving Sector**

By Erica Charron

*The opinions and recommendations in this report, and any errors, are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the publishers or funders of this report.*

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## Initialisms

CA	Coordinated access
CAB	Community advisory board
CBO	Community-based organization
CE	Community entity
CI	Collective impact
EHW	End Homelessness Winnipeg
HIFIS	Homeless Individuals and Families Information System
HPS	Homelessness Partnering Strategy
MMIWG	Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls
NPIC	The non-profit industrial complex
RH	Reaching Home
SSIR	Stanford Social Innovation Review Journal
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
UW	United Way

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# Introduction

THE RESEARCH DESCRIBED in this report began as a straightforward critical inquiry, examining how the collective impact (CI) model was being used as a framework to coordinate Winnipeg's non-profit homeless-serving sector. The intent was to better understand CI, including its strengths and limitations, in the context that it is being applied to address homelessness in Winnipeg. The seeds of this study were sowed by a group of executive directors from community-based organizations (CBOs), both Indigenous and non-Indigenous agencies, in Winnipeg's inner city who raised concerns about the systemic barriers impeding their work to address homelessness. Further, they believed government policies and programs designed to address homelessness —like 10-year plans to end homelessness— require greater scrutiny. Deeply seeded issues surfaced as the research questions were unpacked. This research exposed longstanding tensions within the CBO homeless-serving sector, while the flaws of CI as a model to address complex social issues became apparent. This catalyzed deeper examination of a sector trying to implement a model that was imposed on it without the due diligence of examining evidence and scholarship for its efficacy.

Problems from the beginning of implementing CI in 2015 led to a lack of trust and buy-in by many CBO stakeholders — also known through this paper as “the collective.” They questioned how the CI model's ‘backbone organization’, in this case End Homelessness Winnipeg (EHW), could effectively confront homelessness as an entity that had been developed with minimal input from the CBO homeless-serving sector. They were skeptical that CI and its promise

to solve complex social issues through ‘multi-stakeholder’ solutions without increased government investment has compromised grassroots approaches to solving systemic problems. CI is arguably yet another example of how neoliberalism has become the “accepted logic of our times” (Shram, 2015). When EHW took on an additional role as the federal-government-appointed community entity (CE), skepticism grew. Some wondered if it was possible for the organization to objectively and effectively represent the homeless-serving sector in advocating for the system change required while also holding the purse strings that the sector relies on.

The process of interviewing CBO leaders (outlined in detail in Section 6) has unearthed raw nerves, tensions, and reluctant criticism of those fearful of reprisal. Moreover, the research has led to more imperative questions explored in this study:

- How does a significantly under-resourced and underestimated community sector with a vast wealth of expertise work collectively toward a complex social mandate under conditions of intense mistrust, inflamed politics, and colonial systems?
- How have neoliberal policies and ideology pushed community work into a futile tug-of-war between competition and collaboration?
- How can these learnings be more broadly applied to assess the limitations of community development approaches before they are applied to transformative policy change?

Ultimately, this study evolved into an examination of power, the changing role and accountability of governments, the ascendancy of private philanthropy to address social issues, the suppression of dissent, and the co-optation of the non-profit sector to advance colonial, neoliberal aims. It’s important to state here that this research encountered many barriers out of the control of the research team that delayed this paper from surfacing in a timely manner. The data collected for this research and subsequent writing of the paper took place in 2022 and 2023 and may not reflect any changes that have occurred within the CBOs interviewed in this project, the relationship between the CBOs and EHW, or any evolutions in the use of CI within the non-profit homeless-serving sector as a result of the research being conducted.

# Context: Housing and Poverty in Neoliberal Times

HOUSING IN WINNIPEG has had a tumultuous history since the beginning of the twentieth century (Smith, 2023). There continues to be an ideological tension between those who believe private market solutions can meet all housing needs and those who maintain that the private market cannot — or will not — address the housing needs of the most vulnerable. Yet since the 1990s, investment in social housing, including public housing, has been severely eroded (Suttor, 2016). Furthermore, “the government’s withdrawal of new operating agreements to support capital costs and operating expenses for social housing development resulted in a dramatic decrease in affordable housing options, leaving low-income households to try and make ends meet in the private market” (Suttor, 2016, as cited in Dej, 2020 p. 32).

Today, while available social housing stock continues to decline, the price of rental housing in the private market continues to increase (CMHC, 2024). As of October 2023, the median market rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Winnipeg is \$1,382 and the supply of housing for low-income renters is virtually non-existent (Bernas et al., 2023). In recent years, Winnipeg has seen an increase in homelessness and housing insecurity — the “the loss of, threat to, or uncertainty of a safe, stable, and affordable home environment” (DeLuca & Rosen, 2022, p. 344) — that is not fully reflected

in Street Census Report numbers, but by the increase in unique contacts experienced by CBO frontline workers through street outreach teams from agencies like Main Street Project, Resource Assistance for Youth, and West Central Women's Resource Centre. In April 2022, there were reportedly 1,256 people experiencing homelessness in Winnipeg, with 68.2% identifying as Indigenous, and 22.1% under the age of 30 (Street Census Report, 2022, p. 5). Still, this number is only a point-in-time snapshot and is considered a gross underestimation.

In 2014, United Way of Winnipeg (UW) rightly identified homelessness as a priority. Through its Poverty Reduction Council, UW established a community task force to develop a 10-year plan to end homelessness. Ten-year plans are a common homelessness management model in Canada, often government mandated in communities across the country in order to receive multi-year funding for housing and homelessness work (Adamo et al., 2016). After fifteen months of community consultation, UW needed a singular non-profit organization to carry out the plan. They created End Homelessness Winnipeg (EHW). It decided that homelessness would be best addressed through the CI model (explained in detail in Section 3), a public-private model that purportedly leverages the skills and resources of governments, private sector, and community. UW believed the CI model to be an approach that aligned with its vision and values. In 2015, EHW incorporated formally into a 'backbone organization', using CI as its guiding structure. Its primary function would be to coordinate cross-sectoral systems, including CBOs, governments, the private sector, and lived-experience experts, into a collective voice that would tackle the homelessness issue. It is governed by a volunteer board that includes CBO leaders, Indigenous leaders, government staff, and business professionals. EHW states that it works with over 130 stakeholders across many sectors in varying capacities to carry out its mission and mandate (EHW interview, 2022).

Critics argue that 'collaboration' models like CI can distract from neoliberal agendas that include cuts to government services by encouraging community-driven collaborations as a shroud for its disinvestment (Christens & Inzeo, 2015). Neoliberalism emphasizes "the efficiency of market competition, the role of individuals in determining economic outcomes, and distortions associated with government intervention and regulation of markets" (Palley, 2005, p. 1). It is a powerful ideology that influences far more than markets:

[neoliberalism] influences resource allocation across a number of social domains. [It] does not operate as a *deus ex machina* or free floating entity



independent of human agents; rather, its influence is pervasive because of the willingness of social actors to advocate this mode of intervention both within organizations and as a means of political and economic change ... It has been used to justify privatizations, to rationalize reductions in welfare provisions ... In the area of housing, it has served to validate a reduction of subsidies for social housing to create lucrative opportunities for profiteering ... we must also acknowledge how governments have recast the welfare state as a burden that undermines economic competitiveness and growth. (Jacobs, 2019, p.13–14)

This has pertinent implications when considering how resource allocation and the reduction of welfare provisions, specifically around social housing, have played a significant role in shaping the modern-day non-profit and the commercialization of service delivery (Bosscher, 2009; Evans, 2005; INCITE!, 2007; Madden & Marcus, 2016; Suttor, 2016).

With the ascendancy of neoliberalism in the late 1970s, post-war social gains have been intentionally eroded, replaced by an emphasis on charity. The charitable model is defined in this research as systematic giving aimed at alleviating social problems that are thought to be caused by a person's shortcomings rather than the root causes of marginalization (Smith-Carrier, 2020). Coinciding with the erosion of public services and investment in social goods, including social housing, has been a significant expansion of the non-profit sector, including organizations tasked with managing the homeless crisis (Dej, 2020). The charity model aligns well with neoliberalism. It contributes to the goal of reducing the role of the state, devolving responsibilities to inadequately resourced CBOs, and shifting power to the private sector. Reduced revenue from taxation and deregulation has resulted in deep social inequities and a reduced state capacity to address the fallout. CBOs are left to pick up the pieces in support of those pushed further to the margins, to the benefit of a relatively small percentage of the population. Those who benefit most effectively become the unelected decision makers, choosing where charitable dollars are allocated (INCITE!, 2007). This is the very makeup of how philanthropic foundations function. Consequently, this averts attention away from the growing disparity associated with neoliberalism, while also quelling resistance to a deeply unfair system (INCITE!, 2007). Neoliberal governments offload their responsibilities onto CBOs for a fraction of the cost, establishing a *Hunger Games*-like landscape of competition for limited and unsustainable funding. Some CBOs attempt to break down institutional structures to change the status quo. But they have little power.

Proponents of CI see the model as a way to tackle social challenges without meaningful changes in structures. In the case of Winnipeg, the erosion of government funding for housing has created a housing crisis not seen since the introduction of public housing post-WWII (Smith, 2023). The plan to establish EHW as a non-government entity tasked with ending homelessness in ten years using the CI model in the absence of government investment in supply was destined to fail. Since the early 2000s, scholarship has shown 10-year plans to be ineffective due to a persistent misalignment of policy and lack of government investment (Adamo, 2016). Broader critiques suggest 10-year plans are “fast policy” or a neoliberal proxy of thinking characterized by the instantaneous reproduction of “pre-packaged best-practices” transplanted across jurisdictions. “They are a mode of adaptive governance for responding to serial policy failure and systemic underperformance — [like the homelessness crisis] — one of the defining characteristics of neoliberal intervention” (Evans & Masuda, 2019, p. 505). The CI model and 10-year plans align well with the decades-long neoliberal notion that public problems can be solved through private sector solutions. Although recent iterations of CI as developed by the Tamarack Institute (a community development nonprofit and home to CI in Canada), are attempting to correct some of the early and substantial limitations, by design it shares similar characteristics with public–private solutions, also known as P3s, a “paradigmatic example of neoliberalization ... in their [explicit] financialization of welfare funding” (Shram, 2015, p.153). These models have consistently shown to be ineffectual, yet they continue to be touted by organizations desperately looking for solutions in the absence of robust government funding and investments in public policy solutions (Loxley, 2015; Hajer & Loxley, 2022). For example, in our interview with EHW they cited Social Impact Bonds — a popular example of a P3 model — as an “innovative finance tool” to explore.

# The Collective Impact Model

THE CI MODEL idea first emerged in 2011 in a five-page article by FSG consultants and social scientists John Kania and Mark Kramer, published in the Stanford Social Innovation Review (SSIR). The authors' goal was to address the problem of siloed interventions and initiatives for complex social problems like incarceration, food security, and high school graduation rates. They argued that complex social problems cannot be solved through independent objectives, but through structured coordination and buy-in across many sectors. On their website, FSG states that since 2011 CI has been “widely adopted as an effective form of cross-sector collaboration to address complex social and environmental challenges” (FSG, n.d.). Collective Impact has undergone two evolutions since its conception, however, the Winnipeg context discussed in this study continues to subscribe to the five original pillars, which include establishing: a common agenda; a shared measurement system; mutually reinforcing activities; continuous communication; and coordination through backbone support.

For the context of this study, the common agenda is ending homelessness in Winnipeg. The shared measurement system is a data tool used to hold the collective (all stakeholder organizations coordinated by the backbone organization) accountable to each other and the populations it serves by reporting outcomes of activities and efforts. The tool used in this case is the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS), a

**FIGURE 1** The Five Conditions of Collective Impact



**Note** Reprinted with permission of FSG and the Stanford Social Innovation Review

data-collection system used to track homelessness and shelter use, which is mandated across the CBO homeless-serving sector.

Mutually reinforcing activities are needed because “each stakeholder’s efforts must fit into an overarching plan if their combined efforts are to succeed,” with the caveat that “the multiple causes of social problems, and the components of their solutions, are interdependent. They cannot be addressed by uncoordinated actions among isolated organizations”

(Kania & Kramer, 2011, p. 40). These activities include but are not limited to homelessness-prevention strategies like market-aligned rent assist and rent top-up, increases to the supply and availability of housing, transitional housing for domestic violence survivors, programming for at-risk youth, advocating for livable incomes, robust supports and resources for mental health and addictions, low-barrier access to shelters, and embedding the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) calls to action within the foundations of each stakeholder's ways of working.

Continuous communication is needed to ensure a steadfast commitment to transparency and a celebration of each stakeholder's knowledge and experiences. Kania and Kramer describe the importance of creating a common vocabulary and leveraging this vocabulary to inspire and mobilize organizations together (Kania & Kramer, 2011). In the context of this study, continuous communication describes backbone-led activities including the CBO advisory working groups, annual reports, email communications, site visits, one-on-ones, and project partnerships. All of this requires coordination through a backbone organization, in this case, EHW. Kania and Kramer explain that the central role of the backbone organization is to “embody the principles of adaptive leadership: the ability to focus people's attention and create a sense of urgency, the skill to apply pressure to stakeholders without overwhelming them, the competence to frame issues in a way that presents opportunities as well as difficulties, and the strength to mediate conflict among stakeholders” (Kania & Kramer, 2011, p.40).

Since its debut in 2011, the CI model's popularity grew as an approach to address a multitude of societal challenges. Examples of successful CI initiatives have been profiled by FSG Consulting. Mark Kramer is the co-founder and a managing director of the U.S.-based non-profit. Early on, critics of CI raised questions about the model, noting it to be little more than a well-invested rebranding of collaborative models that have preceded it (Wolff, 2016). In 2011, Kania and Kramer themselves stated that evidence of the effectiveness of this approach is still limited and that collaboration is nothing new. Yet the privately funded clever branding and marketing strategies have successfully pitched CI as a novel approach that promises to solve complex social challenges with little attention to the systemic causes. Although CI is positioned as an approach to catalyze solutions to complex social problems, it has been criticized for emerging from a top-down business consulting framework ... mainly engaging the most powerful organizations and partners in a com-

munity and getting them to agree on a common agenda [while also] [de] emphasizing systems change [and] social justice (Wolff, 2016).

CI has also been labeled as a “philanthropy darling,” circulating the charity world with fervent enthusiasm (Stachowiak & Gase, 2018). This glorification of CI has illuminated another concern: the increasing use of private charitable institutions to solve systemically created problems. There is a robust critique of the ascendancy of charitable responses to social issues (INCITE!, 2007; Poppendieck, 1999). In Winnipeg, private and public charitable organizations, including The Winnipeg Foundation and UW, are increasingly relied on to fill funding gaps left by governments. CBOs serving Winnipeg’s most vulnerable rely heavily on these foundations. Unlike governments, which are democratically elected and accountable to the public, private foundations decide which organizations they deem worthy of financial support. This ‘worthiness’ is dictated by the ability of a CBO to meet expected outcomes and benchmarks, and an inherent willingness for CBOs to subscribe to the foundation’s mentalities. Moreover, foundation donors benefit financially (Rajotte, 2013). The increased reliance on philanthropic giving and non-profit service providers shifts power and control to the private sector. Foundations and other philanthropic organizations like UW become the deciders of where funding is allocated with no accountability to the public. For example, FSG, the home of the CI model, receives funding from wealthy philanthropic foundations including The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Walmart Foundation. These foundations wield a significant amount of power and political influence over public policies with little accountability. This is important when considering the origins of modern community development models and who benefits most from their practices—even at local levels—and through what kind of lens they evolve. It brings us to question how the CI model is serving its creators and disseminators rather than the community it’s supposedly intended for. These considerations mark a significant shift in the way CBOs function and the core values by which many operate, and explain the dubious logic of the CI model as it pertains to solving a problem like homelessness.

In the article “Ten Places where Collective Impact Gets It Wrong,” author Tom Wolff raises concerns about CI that are further explored in the local context of this study. Wolff points out that because of CI’s top-down structure, it is “not a true community-development model” (2016, p. 3). Wolff’s critique emphasizes that “systems change [work] is now recognized as a key priority and best practice in community change partnerships, [but] is inherently missing from the CI framework” by virtue of omitting policy



and systems change from the pillars and the CI discussion entirely (2016, p. 4). If we are not changing policies in order to change systems, we ignore the root causes of homelessness and will continue to do fragmented, isolated work with band-aid solutions. He states:

Collective impact does not include policy change and systems change as essential and intentional outcomes of the partnership's work ... For years, community coalitions addressed specific, focused issues without asking about the ecological and historical factors that impact the outcomes. (Wolff, 2016, p. 4).

He further notes that, "CI [was] not based on professional and practitioner literature or the experience of the thousands of coalitions that preceded [the] 2011 article" (Wolff, 2016, p. 4). This is incredibly important as it not only highlights the model's hollowness in scholarship, but the implications of implementing this model into initiatives like the homeless-serving sector in Winnipeg.

CI is now well into its second decade, and critiques of the approach can be found in various publications including *Non-Profit Quarterly*, *Community Development Journal*, and *Forbes Magazine*. The SSRI, which published the 2011 Kania and Kramer article, addressed critiques in its 2018 study by Stachowiak and Gase, "Does Collective Impact Really Make an Impact?" The article summarizes the first rigorous study of CI that examined 25 initiatives across the United States and Canada in 2017. Their study was the first to provide important insight into the efficacy and utility of CI in diverse sectors. They concluded that CI can undoubtedly contribute to population change, but with the caveat that it depends on the quality of implementation (Stachowiak & Case, 2018). They described ongoing challenges with the CI model, including the tendency for the backbone organization to tumble into hierarchical structures and gatekeeping mentalities. This is something echoed in our conversations with local CBO participants (see Section 6). It is very promising that the examination of the 25 initiatives conducted by Stachowiak and Case indicate some successful examples of CI contributing to measurable population change, however these results are reviewed with caution. Stachowiak and Case's study included site visits with only eight of the 25 initiatives, with three of the eight initiatives indicating "positive change." Moreover, all eight of these initiatives were based in the United States. While these examples are useful, significant differences in policy, legislature, resources, and infrastructure between the United States and Canada must be considered when measuring impact.

In a 2016 article published by Canada’s Tamarack Institute, “Collective Impact 3.0,” authors Mark Cabaj and Liz Weaver discuss the third reimagining of the five pillars in response to new insights from CI initiatives. The authors note concerns similar to those raised by Winnipeg CBOs (see Section 5). These include inattention to the role of community in the change effort, the understatement of policy and systems change, and the over-investment in the backbone organization. They conclude:

The next generation of community change efforts depend, in part, on the willingness of CI participants not to settle for marginal improvements to the original version of the CI framework. Instead, they must take on the challenge of continually upgrading the approach based on ongoing learnings of what it takes to transform communities. The CI approach is — and will always be — unfinished business. (Cabaj & Weaver, 2016, p. 12)

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## Choosing Collective Impact to Address Homelessness in Winnipeg

EHW was established by UW to be the backbone organization of a CI approach to ending homelessness in Winnipeg. Although part of a broader international network of UW organizations, each UW affiliate operates independently, relying heavily on corporate fundraising campaigns and relationships with wealthy donors. Each UW establishes its own funding criteria, and performance measures that align with its institutional goals and public image, and not necessarily with the needs articulated by the community (Paarlberg & Meinhold, 2012).

In an informal interview in 2022 with the former CI coordinator at UW (2015–2020), they described the formative years of EHW and the process and thinking behind adopting CI as the organization's guiding structure:

The horse was out of the barn [when I started], they were in the process of finalizing the board, they had done community consultations over several months [regarding the 10-year plan], conducted by a well-established community consultant. My role was to establish two working committees to help develop a plan for what EHW would do. The first group was the Housing Support Working Group, and the other was the Housing Supply Working Group, and these would be carried forward as two of the [central] pillars EHW would adopt into their mandate (CI Coordinator at UW 2015–2020, in-person informal interview, 2022).



They went on to further expand on the details of these two tasks: “The idea was that, within the Housing Support pillar they would fill in gaps to support what community organizations were already doing. For example, they would develop standards for good housing support, develop training programs for housing support workers to participate in, and develop networks for housing support workers to exchange knowledge” (CI Coordinator at UW 2015–2020, in-person informal interview, 2022). Moreover, the new backbone organization would “facilitate” the development of new low-income housing supply and work with governments to reduce bureaucratic red tape such as municipal zoning and bylaw conditions. The plan was that EHW, as a backbone organization, would have multi-stakeholder buy-in enabling it to play a revolutionary role for the sector with the power to maneuver through burdensome government administration and tap into private and public funding. As the designated backbone organization, EHW would take on all the ‘side-of-the-desk’ responsibilities that would be virtually impossible for other ground-level CBOs to take on effectively. The former UW CI coordinator said:

I felt pretty good about the process we went through ... we did a needs analysis of where are the supports as they exist now, and where are the gaps that EHW could help fill — that was the whole thinking, we know there is all this [work] already going on, so how can EHW support that and help fill in the gaps with a strong emphasis on Indigenous representation and consultation

However, problems with implementation of the CI approach began to germinate early on. While consultations through the 10-year plan did in fact emphasize the imminent need for a singular organization, UW creation of EHW was carried out with little forethought into the existing dynamics and values of Winnipeg’s non-profit homeless-serving sector that operates predominantly from an anti-oppression, social justice model, rather than a charity model. The former CI coordinator said:

I think one of the reasons why EHW did not work really well is because from the start there was not a good relationship with the broader community. I remember clearly, the community asking, “What the hell is this new expensive organization?” There was big money attached to it, and there was a lot of suspicion about that.

The former CI coordinator said that a series of decisions by UW inflamed the mistrust:

I remember when they were in the process of hiring a CEO. There was a priority to outfit this role with an Indigenous person. But nobody was applying to these jobs. So, they decided to start head-hunting potential candidates. There was a move to ask a high-profile person who worked in the entertainment industry, and I was flummoxed by this idea. There was a tendency to look for high-profile people whether there was a capacity and skill base for the role or not. It was the belief that these people could get us into a lot of doors, rather than, can they carry the role and hold effective relationships with community and corporations to achieve the common goal?

The role of a backbone organization is complex and requires unique skills and experience. In the case of a backbone organization with a mandate to end homelessness, it must have the trust and confidence of multiple sectors with a full understanding of the ‘common agenda’ and the complexities of housing and homelessness policies. Moreover, it needs to be able to strategize, rally, inspire, leverage, and research. The former CI coordinator reflected on what they believed to be a fundamental misstep:

The reality of the United Way is that they have connections in high places. There were assumptions made that if we can get these high-powered people around the table who can leverage resources and funds, that is how it was going to work; that was what was going to end homelessness. And I think a big piece that was missing was the intention of meaningful relationships with community groups — where there was a lot of expertise already — and finding ways to build trust that respects the expertise that was well established.

Constantly seeking new ways to attract donor attention, UW gravitated toward the CI model as one that emulated its multi-sector collaboration approach while furthering its ‘community impact’ branding (Paarlberg & Meinhold, 2012). Although EHW later evolved into an Indigenous organization (over 70 percent of their board and staff identify as Indigenous and lead by Indigenous principles), consideration of the racialized, colonial context of homelessness in Winnipeg was not centred when CI was chosen as the framework for EHW in its inception. Nor did UW facilitate a rigorous examination of CI’s origins and impact. It was selected because it was, as Australian non-governmental organization policy specialist Rodney Holmes (n.d.) describes, the “next big thing” in the philanthropic world.

These sentiments are supported in an informal interview with the independent community consultant who facilitated the 15-month-long consultations to develop the 10-year plan to end homelessness:

There were many, many focus groups, community meetings, and lots of gatherings of different sectors. Many people were at the table, community-based organizations, advocacy and research organizations, mainstream property owners, larger non-profit housing organizations, politicians, and corporations, all believing they had something to offer. (Community consultant, informal phone interview, 2022)

However, these consultations specifically focused on developing the 10-year plan to end homelessness, and not what the backbone organization would look like or how it would function. The consultant recalled a troubling dilemma:

The initiators of the project believed that for the plan to receive the attention it required it would be important to populate the planning team with high-profile leaders from the business, government, funding, and non-profit sectors. Many of the folks around the table had signed on to assist in the planning work, but they were not otherwise involved in housing or homelessness issues and were not expected to assist with the implementation of the plan. This included people like the regional president of the Royal Bank of Canada, individuals from the Business Council of Manitoba, Deputy Ministers, etcetera.

The consultant further described the intense skepticism they encountered from the community that corporations could have any useful insight into shaping a plan on ending homelessness. This is a prime illustration of one of the challenges inherent to the CI approach, a continuum of tensions in what the consultant described as a pull between turf and trust. Liz Weaver, CEO of The Tamarack Institute described it this way:

We cannot build real trust as a collaborative entity so long as we see our collaborators as competitors. Moreover, we cannot maintain trust should we hold tight to our turf building instincts ... collective impact sits at a part of the collaboration spectrum where we, individuals and organizations, begin to more intentionally work together in cooperative, collaborative or integrative ways. This intentional action requires us to build more trusting relationships. I would not cooperate with you, if I did not know you and trust you. (Weaver, 2015)

However, it is more complicated than this. For those working on the ground to address the fallout of neoliberal policies that have served the business sector well, and which generally continues to call for policies that deepen inequality, it is difficult to trust what corporate stakeholders will bring to

the table. UW might have looked to the Homeless Hub—a leading source of research on homelessness in Canada—for best practices of community engagement. It recommends:

It is important to get grounded in the evidence first; don't begin consultations if your planning group (backbone supports, project manager and steering committee) is not familiar with the evidence on ending [for example], youth homelessness, does not have a general sense of the issue in community, or is unsure about the potential solutions required to address the issue. This does not mean you've developed a plan and are simply 'shopping it' in community for a stamp of approval. It simply means you've done your homework and are taking on consultations from a solid foundation. A sound understanding of the issue does not mean your research is complete; rather, your data collection process should include reviews of existing literature, policy, data and consultations themselves. (Homeless Hub, n.d, p.101)

The independent community consultant described a process that began with a task force initiated by UW that was split up into groups to develop individual components of the plan. They noted:

With the benefit of hindsight, it was probably a mistake to develop a full-blown plan first, and then organize for implementation later. What might have worked better was to implement certain interventions — low hanging fruit — first, and then learning from that, and then implementing additional interventions and learning from that, and so on. If that approach had been taken, there may have been a better chance to turn this into a more effective collective impact initiative.

The consultant described another issue that emerged with the development of the plan and the establishment of EHW as the backbone organization. The inaugural board included several members who were not directly involved in homelessness work, including many leaders from within the business community. They noted:

Winnipeg is very polarized between the corporate world and the non-profit world. There is a huge suspicion of the corporate side that they always have the wrong kind of motives, and anything they offer to be a part is not going to be feasible. And this dynamic I saw play out in the consultation process.

They went on to say that the more politically motivated CBOs couldn't understand the legitimacy of corporation involvement in the plan. They

felt their toes were being stepped on and the community way of working was being dismissed:

The people who know best are clearly the people who work in the non-profit sector, but I do feel the sector got its back up; they had a choice, how much are they going to come to the table and how much are they going to resist? They chose to resist it, in my opinion.

The consultant described what they believed to be an “ideological rigidity” where you can be so committed to an ideology and struggle to see that other folks from different worlds can contribute to the solution in a good way: “In Winnipeg, I noticed, it is very hard to get sectors who are not ideologically aligned to work together. We have a strong protest culture here in Manitoba, and a very strong protest culture in the Prairies.” This culture can be linked back to a long history of class inequity, racism, and disenfranchised people in Manitoba. The consultant concluded that, “It ended up not being as ‘collective’ an impact as we had hoped for.” The consultant was posed with a final question about how it was decided that the CI model would be used to structure EHW:

It was the going thing at that time, it was trending and showing promise in other cities. And it made sense for the UW to adopt this model because they already had relationships with deep-pocket donors, they were leveraging the relationships they already had to fit within this new model.

To better understand the history and reasoning leading to UW's decision to use the CI model to address homelessness in Winnipeg, we spoke with two UW senior executives. They were asked:

1. Why was the CI model chosen?
2. What was the process for conceiving a backbone organization like EHW? What were the priorities and values you hoped this organization would embody?
3. How quickly did you have to get this new organization off the ground when the 10-year-plan to end homelessness was completed?
4. What resources and research were used to ensure the backbone organization would be successful in its mandate but also in carrying out CI?

5. How did the UW consider or deliberate on the long-term impacts of introducing a new model to a sector that had an already well-established core of knowledge and way of working?

The individuals interviewed focused their responses on the process of developing the 10-year plan and its strong Indigenous leadership throughout. One executive spoke with hope and support of Indigenous-led solutions and pointed to the need for the work to be facilitated through a lens of reconciliation and finding ways to help Indigenous leaders lead. After directing the conversation back to the questions about the CI approach, they said that the task force based their work on evidence-based research, but they did not say where this evidence came from. As noted previously, there was no evidence-based research at the time to support CI as an effective approach for managing a complex problem like homelessness. In fact, the first real scholarly analysis of CI in the community only emerged in 2015 after EHW had incorporated, in an article titled, “The Collective Impact Model and Its Potential for Health Promotion: Overview and Case Study of a Healthy Retail Initiative in San Francisco.”

While this conversation was a thoughtful dialogue centered on a strength-based perspective of the dismal realities of anti-homelessness work in Winnipeg, the informal interview did not lead to a better understanding of the logic and process in designing a backbone organization to end homelessness using a CI approach. The exchange reinforced two recurring themes that surfaced throughout this study: first, a reluctance for self-reflection and critique to improve the status quo; and second, a propensity to uncritically gravitate toward so-called social innovation trends, falling victim to what can be described in many sectors as “shiny object syndrome” (Pearson, 2015; Cullen, 2023).

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## **EHW Becomes the Federal Government’s Community Entity**

In 2019, EHW took on a new role. It was awarded funding through the Government of Canada’s Reaching Home (RH) program and was appointed as a third-party intermediary — called the community entity (CE) — that disseminates federal funding to the sector that EHW was established to coordinate and support. The idea was that a CE would offer greater flexibility to invest in proven approaches that reduce homelessness at the local level. This new role raised questions about whether EHW, which in effect became

a quasi-government agency with decision-making powers over the distribution of government funds to the sector it serves, would be able to objectively function as a neutral backbone organization. Although EHW established a community advisory board (CAB) to review funding applications and make recommendations, EHW would ultimately decide where funding would go.

Taking on the role of the CE led EHW down a new path that exacerbated existing tensions. It also raised questions about whether the organization intended to be a trusted voice and advocate for the sector, could maintain this role while also holding power as the federal government-appointed CE distributing federal homelessness funding. These concerns were raised by several people interviewed and are further discussed in the following sections.

# Methodology: Research Goals and Intentions

THIS STUDY WAS informed by a group of CBO executive directors of Indigenous and non-Indigenous agencies who raised concerns about the systemic barriers impeding their work to address homelessness. They spoke about the barriers to accessing funding, lack of transparency in funding decisions, unrealistic administrative responsibilities, poor data-collection tools, lack of support, and what some suggested to be an ineffective 10-year plan to end homelessness that was destined to fail. It is notable that as we have reached the 10-year mark since the plan's inception, homelessness and poverty in Winnipeg are far from being eliminated. They have grown. People working in the sector believe that the problem of homelessness will not be resolved without a fundamental shift in government policies and priorities as well as the funding methods of public and private foundations. Governments continue to ignore the most basic issue: there is a dire shortage of safe, suitable housing supply, with supports, accessible to the unhoused and those at risk of being unhoused.

This network of directors initiated a critical inquiry to examine the context and efficacy of CI as an approach to addressing homelessness in Winnipeg. Critical inquiry is a form of research that analyzes social structures, activities, public policies, or other social phenomena with an interest in advancing public knowledge. Aligned with this study's overarching research questions, the network wanted to know: are the target outcomes outlined in the 10-year



plan to end homelessness being met? Why are or why not? What has been the impact of CI on the sector and for the individuals it serves? What are the strengths and assets of this model we wish to maintain and harvest new actions from? And what are the issues that continue to burden the sector, and how can they be resolved?

The initial goals were to collect qualitative data from leaders within this sector to answer these questions, and to produce a solutions-focused path toward the common agenda — ending homelessness in Winnipeg. However, when research activities were implemented and preliminary data was analyzed, troubling systemic issues emerged, and this study adopted a much deeper purpose. Initial questions about “target outcomes” and “strengths and weaknesses” of the CI approach morphed into discussions about larger systemic barriers to achieving the common agenda. This included an examination of power, the changing role and accountability of governments, the ascendancy of private philanthropy to address complex social problems, the suppression of dissent, and the co-optation of the non-profit sector to advance colonial, neoliberal aims.

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## Ethics Review

Ethics review was conducted through the University of Winnipeg’s Human Ethics Board in the spring of 2022. Approval was granted to interview 20–25 CBOs within the homeless-serving sector and to facilitate a blind focus group as part of a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis of the CI approach. The Board approved the proposed framework of collaboratively developing a series of interview questions to be used to facilitate one-on-one interviews with participant organizations. Although the research is not specifically focused on Indigenous communities, given the high representation of Indigenous people experiencing homelessness, the ethics proposal included a commitment to engage Indigenous CBO leaders in the analysis phase of the project to ensure a cultural lens through the report.

In June 2022 EHW lodged a complaint with the University against the project. The research team learned that a senior EHW staff member contacted the University of Winnipeg Vice President of Research, requesting that he intervene. The complaint was referred to the Board. EHW submitted a list of concerns to the Board, which took appropriate action by suspending the project pending an investigation in response to the concerns raised. The research team met with Board to discuss EHW’s concerns and to raise its

own concerns about a potential conflict of interest and misuse of power to shut the research down. The research team was concerned that the senior EHW staff member chose to sidestep the protocols outlined in the Board-approved consent documents and instead contacted a senior University of Winnipeg official that they had a previous research relationship with and whose research had been funded by EHW. Given the power held by the senior official, researchers wanted to be assured that there would be no interference in the process. The Board assured the research team that it operates independently and confidentially.

The research team learned that EHW's primary concerns were that the project was violating First Nation ownership, control, access, and possession (OCAP). EHW argued that the project conflicted with fundamental principles of the TRC and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), stating that regardless of the project's overarching goals, as an Indigenous organization the principle "nothing about us without us" should be observed.

Researchers argued that the project aligned with the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Researchers Involving Humans Article 3.6 pertaining to Critical Inquiry. It states:

Critical Inquiry is a form of research that includes analysis of social structures, activities, public policies or other social phenomena with an interest in advancing public knowledge ... Where the goal of the research is to adopt a critical perspective with respect to an institution, organization or other group, the fact that the institution, organization or group under study may not endorse the research project should not be a bar to the research receiving ethics approval (Government of Canada, 2022).

Although EHW identifies as an Indigenous organization, it is a publicly funded organization serving the broader public, bound by non-Indigenous government protocols. The purpose of this research is to critically examine the appropriateness and effectiveness of the CI approach, a non-Indigenous framework that EHW uses to guide its work. Although the research would include interviews with Indigenous executives, the project aligns with Tri-Council Article 9.7, which states:

Research involving Indigenous peoples that critically examines the conduct of public institutions, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis governments, institutions or organizations or persons exercising authority over First Nations, Inuit or

Métis individuals may be conducted ethically, notwithstanding the usual requirement of engaging community leaders. (Government of Canada, 2022)

The Board agreed, and the second ethics review was approved with minor changes to research protocols including an increase in sample size to 30 organizations, and enhancement of Indigenous involvement by engaging an unbiased Indigenous consultant familiar with the sector in the analysis phase of the project. The research resumed in August 2022.

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## **Recruitment, Selection, and Participation**

The goal was to recruit 30 non-profit CBOs working in the homelessness-serving sector who have previously received, currently receive, or could receive funding from the CE/backbone organization. Stakeholders were identified through the backbone organization's publicly available lists of stakeholder working groups and advisory tables, and were considered to be members of the collective. Forty-five organizations were contacted, 16 organizations participated in the focus group, and 23 CBOs participated in one-on-one interviews. 6 of these organizations identified as Indigenous. Ten individuals of various expertise outside the target sample with historical knowledge related to the subject and themes of this project were consulted in informal conversations to help explain the early, undocumented history of EHW. Total engagement resulted in 33 individuals representing Indigenous and non-Indigenous CBOs and fields of practice in anti-homeless and poverty-reduction work.

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## **Data Collection**

Data collected through the focus group was used to establish baseline knowledge of CI, uncover early themes and trends, and curate the direction of the interview questionnaire. EHW was intentionally excluded from the focus group exercise to protect the identities of focus group participants. However, they were provided with project details and invited to participate in an interview.

After the focus group participants completed the questionnaire (Appendix A), the project entered the interview stage. All one-on-one interviews were conducted either in-person or via Zoom. All interviews were recorded, and then transcribed through Descript transcribing software and sent back to

participants for review. All data was processed and coded through NVivo qualitative data analyzing software, where major recurring themes, ideas, opinions, and beliefs were analyzed by the research team and triangulated back against established research.

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## Challenges and Limitations

One of the first challenges encountered in this study was maintaining the original protocol around focus group participation. In the original research proposal, the project outlined that individuals who participated in the focus group would engage in the SWOT analysis and develop the questionnaire. Some participants were concerned with anonymity despite having signed the required confidentiality agreement. They expressed concerns that their comments would get back to EHW and jeopardize future funding. This reinforced the potential conflict presented by EHW's now dual role as CI backbone organization and funder, and in particular its ability to fulfill the obligations outlined in the fourth pillar of CI, continuous communication. To address participants' concerns, accommodations were made allowing for the option to send responses to the focus group questions by email. Their data would then be collated with the data gathered in the in-person focus group. Others opted to only participate in the one-on-one interviews. Accommodations were also made around the interview questionnaire for those who said it would be easier if they could read the questions and write out their responses. These changes to the protocol were reflected in the amendments submitted in the second ethics review. 16 CBO leaders participated in this first phase of this project.

An unanticipated conflict of interest surfaced during recruitment. A few organizations that met the criteria for participation belonged to EHW's board of directors. Having these CBO leaders in the same room as other focus group participants could have potentially compromised confidentiality and anonymity. For this reason, this small group of CBOs was initially excluded from participating in the project. During the second ethics review process, a protocol amendment to include these organizations in the one-on-one interviews was submitted and approved.

As data collection resumed, new challenges began to surface. Recruitment and engagement suddenly became difficult. Some CBO executive directors who participated in the focus group and had previously indicated interest in participating in one-on-one interviews, did not respond to email requests or

phone calls after the second ethics review was completed. While we cannot know for certain why the sudden change of heart, one participant shared that they were directed by an EHW representative to not participate. Others said that they were sent emails from EHW advising them to contact EHW leadership if asked to participate. This information is provided here for two reasons. First, to reinforce the importance of ethics review to ensure that research is being carried out ethically and appropriately, and second, to provide context for recruitment challenges that emerged during and after the ethics review. Moreover, organizations that are susceptible to pressure from EHW or closely aligned with EHW were less likely to participate, potentially impacting the scope of data collected. The challenges to recruit participants after the events leading to the second review raise concerns that some individuals feared reprisal, and this ultimately interfered with the process, timeline, and goals of this study. This is another example of how the fourth pillar of CI is potentially compromised because of EHW's dual role as backbone agency and CE funding intermediary.

Tension remained between EHW and the lead researcher after the second ethics review. EHW was not keen to see the research proceed nor to participate, but if they did, they expressed wanting more involvement in shaping the research design and its implementation. EHW was reminded the research project was initiated by the homeless-serving sector and engaging EHW as it requested would compromise the process, data collected, analysis, and recommendations. EHW was encouraged to participate because their perspective was important, but they were also reminded that their participation was voluntary. In late September 2022, EHW notified the research team that their management team had agreed to participate in the study. They provided extensive written answers to the questionnaire, while 9 EHW staff members met with the lead researcher and project supervisor in an in-person interview in late October, 2022. Discussions were primarily centered around clarification of their written responses to the questionnaire and clarification around how their organization is structured as the CE, and how this aligned with its role as the backbone organization within the CI framework. The research team found the meeting collegial and productive, filling in gaps around EHWs governance model, decision-making processes, and advocacy activities at the systems level. Follow-up discussions between the lead researcher and EHW were more amiable. A final challenge was the extensive time it took to recruit and connect with CBO leaders and retrieve reviewed transcripts and consent forms. This further delayed the project by close to a year.

# Key Findings and Analysis

THE CENTRAL FINDINGS of this study are discussed within the context of the CI model's five pillars. They are organized by the major themes that surfaced in conversation with CBO participants. Interviews were coded through qualitative coding software NVivo by relative statements that frequented most often within these themes. The tables below document a sample of the most common responses and do not include all relative thematic comments made by CBO participants. The analysis of these findings within each CI pillar follows each table. The major themes that surfaced do not necessarily pertain to the CI approach but point to the larger systemic challenges that have created significant barriers to achieving the common agenda.

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## Pillar 1: A Common Agenda

**Question 1:** One of the core functions of the backbone organization is to influence systems in a coordinated approach toward a common agenda: ending homelessness. We asked research participants: Can you think of a few examples of where this is working well and where is this falling short?

**TABLE 1** Pillar 1: A Common Agenda

Major Themes	Sample Responses
<b>Selective inclusion in the common agenda</b>	<p>I've had to really elbow my way into some of those tables as opposed to being invited warmly into those tables. (CBO 19, virtual interview, 2022)</p> <p>The one thing that I find is that we're not often called to the table for some of those things ... you kind of get left behind. So, we're not that coordinated. (CBO, virtual interview, 2022)</p> <p>[This model] feels very much like community has been positioned to sit at the kids table, while the grown-ups go have the conversation. (CBO 7, virtual interview, 2022)</p>
<b>The agenda is not common</b>	<p>People are sitting in these [coordinated access] meetings, or sitting in these HIFIS meetings, whatever they may be, and they're not there to end homelessness, they're sitting there because it's their funder. And so, if you're not a part of this, is your funding at stake? (CBO 8, virtual interview, 2022)</p> <p>It's impossible to end homelessness in ten years. It doesn't mean that we don't try, it doesn't mean that we don't invest far more than we have to date. But the leading cause of people experiencing homelessness is poverty and we still haven't addressed that yet. (CBO 14, virtual interview, 2022)</p> <p>Whether you agree with [the common agenda] all the time or not, that fracturing [between us] in this direction and many other directions is how the government keeps control of us. (CBO 16, virtual interview, 2022)</p> <p>I think they have their own vision of how we get ourselves out of homelessness. I don't think that vision is shared by service providers, and when we push back against that vision, we're often told we're wrong; that's not the priority and they won't advocate for that. (CBO 2, in-person interview, 2022)</p>
<b>The non-profit Hunger Games</b>	<p>I don't feel like that within this sector, non-profit to non-profit, we want to be competing with each other. But EHW is setting us up to compete with each other. And now they are putting their own horses in the race. (CBO 22, virtual interview, 2022)</p> <p>You know, the way that funding is done in our community across all of our agencies is we're all scrapping for the same piece of pie. And when you're scrapping your funder, that becomes interesting. How are they making their decisions around funding themselves is the question. I also semi feel like I shouldn't have to dig for the information. (CBO 16, virtual interview, 2022)</p> <p>In order to really make a difference in community, relationships have to come first. Relationships and trust. When we do projects, one year funding never works, because you don't have enough time to build a relationship. And collectives will not work if there's no trust and relationships because we're competing against one another based on what the funders' expectations are. Instead, we need to sit down and actually having meaningful conversations that actually move the needle. (CBO 8, virtual interview, 2022)</p>

Those interviewed were generally disillusioned about the common agenda. The majority of CBO participants articulated sentiments that this CI pillar does not provide a strategy to ensure inclusion and create cohesion around the common agenda. Smaller organizations with smaller operating budgets described feeling left behind, and that their voices are not valuable enough to give them a seat at the larger stakeholder tables. Larger organizations with bigger budgets were viewed as having greater clout. The competitive context leads to empire building, with some organizations reaching beyond their scope to build more clout within their sector. CBO participants also spoke of the lack of input into the shared vision. Participants noted that the sector does not use a shared language nor agree on the role of EHW and the components of the 10-year plan. For example, sector participants often used the term “social housing” to broadly speak about non-profit, rent-geared-to-income housing and believes EHW should be focused on this as its primary goal. The backbone organization, however, sees its role

differently, and made clear in interviews that “it does not have the funds nor mandate to own and/or operate social housing” (EHW, written responses, 2022). CBO participants argued that while this may be true, EHW does have the capacity and resources to advocate for government investment in the expansion of social housing and the restoration of the derelict housing stock, and as the backbone organization, its role is to call for this systemic change.

These disconnections in shared vision and language have led some CBOs to feel excluded and ostracized. Rather than consensus around a shared agenda, a fracturing between the backbone organization and members of the collective has further entrenched silos and promoted a landscape of competition in what one CBO described as the “non-profit *Hunger Games*” (CBO 18 virtual interview, 2022).

As discussed in Section 3, competition in the non-profit world is not new.

Although the goal of this research was to measure the efficacy of CI in the context of addressing homelessness in Winnipeg, analysis of the data led to a critical assessment of what scholarship calls the non-profit industrial complex, which has been compounding for decades within the context of neoliberal policies (INCITE!, 2007). The non-profit industrial complex is defined as the way state governance intentionally and systemically traps organizations into a cycle of competition for limited resources to address systemically created social and economic devastation, limiting their ability to organize politically and transforming advocacy into a transactional model of social services (INCITE!, 2007). Organizations become financially dependent on the explosion of private foundations and government programs that demand a professionalization of ‘service delivery’ and a transaction of ‘outcomes’. This dependence keeps well-meaning non-profits from organizing themselves in a united front to rise against the system. Economic geographer and social theorist Ruth Wilson Gilmore explains that,

[W]hen it comes to building social movements, organizations are only as good as the united fronts they bring into being. Lately funders have been very excited at the possibility of groups aligning with unlikely allies. But to create a powerful front, a front with the capacity to change the landscape, it seems connecting with *likely* allies would be a better use of time and trouble. Remembering that likely allies have all become constricted by mission statements and [government requirements] to think in silos rather than expansively. (Gilmore, 2007, p. 51 )

As previously described, the Tamarack Institute, a leading proponent of CI in Canada, has made significant changes to the framework to address its



shortcomings. The common agenda is now called “shared aspiration” and emphasizes reform (or transforming) of systems where improvements alone do not go deep enough, but to build a united vision of the future and “em-bolden policy makers” and “system leaders” (Cabaj & Weaver, 2016, p.4). The authors argue that operating from a management paradigm emphasizes the focus on improving systems rather than tearing them down and rebuilding:

As a consequence, participants are suspicious of bold measures. In some cases, they resist or block transformative ideas because their instinct is to preserve the systems they manage... Managers would rather live with a problem they can't solve than with a solution they can't fully understand or control. (Cabaj & Weaver, 2016, p.4)

In this study, major concerns were raised about the inherent conflict of interest for EHW as both the backbone organization and the federally appointed CE, which distributes funding among fulfilling other federal requirements. This issue was addressed in a 2015 article, “When the Backbone Becomes the Funder: The Use of Fiscal Intermediaries in the Context of Collective Impact,” in which the authors examine the challenges of the intersection of fiscal intermediaries and backbone organizations. They describe “a relatively new phenomenon” and “a gap in the literature about the challenges organizations playing this dual role may face” (Lynn et al., 2015, p. 81). Pertinent to this analysis is their discussion around the disconnect between the common agenda and process around funding decisions. Tensions examined in two case studies yielded one question that had no answer:

Is it the backbone's job to ensure the funded partners stay on agenda? Or is it the collective's job to assess how funding is being deployed across all organizations and to have some form of collective accountability? Across examples explored here, there were no solutions to this issue, only a variety of strategies — each of which introduced tension in one way or another. (Lynn et al., 2015, p.90)

Although the authors say that the benefits of this intersection may outweigh the challenges, their research suggests another conclusion. The lack of evidence and scholarship on CI, concerns about transparency and accountability, and perceptions of inequity in funding distribution and resource allocation raise fundamental concerns that align with those raised in this study. This is another example of the conflicting dual roles of EHW as both backbone organization and funding intermediary, creating competition and mistrust both within the sector and between the backbone and the collective, making

it difficult to work together toward the common agenda. Most CBO leaders in our study felt that EHW as the backbone exists in a kind of uncharted territory of accountability and disclosure, straddling ambiguous spheres of community, government, and corporate. As the CE, EHW acts as an arm of the federal government, disseminating federal dollars to other partner organizations. CBO participants often stated that they believed EHW is not transparent about funding decisions, including those around CAB proposals, where they are funneling slippage dollars, and what process they are held to when applying for funding they oversee. CBO participants suggested that despite EHW's efforts to put forth an image of being community minded, they still chose to operate from an autocratic mindset. EHW's efforts to be a community-based organization with a corporate character that also distributes funding to the sector has harmed its relationships with the sector.

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## Pillar 2: Shared Measurement System

**Question 5:** One pillar of the CI model is to ensure stakeholders participate in a shared measurement system. The goal of collecting shared data is to not only ensure that all efforts remain aligned, but also to make data-driven decisions and hold each other accountable. We asked research participants: How does EHW measure its own efforts and the efforts of other participants around the implementation of the 10-year plan? How does/should EHW use the data it collects? How do you stay accountable to the sector, and to the community you serve?

**TABLE 2** Pillar 2: Shared Measurement System

Major Themes	Sample Responses
<b>Data collection and HIFIS</b>	<p>I've never logged on to HIFIS, I probably never will. I think there's some capacity to HIFIS that we don't even realize that's there, and I do not feel we are using it to its full benefit and this is very problematic. (CBO 15, virtual interview, 2022)</p> <p>We learned pretty quickly that it sucks. It's not a good data-collection tool, it's not a good case-management tool, so what the hell is it good for? And the answer for us is nothing, quite frankly. It's not their fault right, they're caught up in their mandate, and their genesis is a product of all of these discussions. (CBO 17, virtual interview, 2022)</p> <p>They are dictating what data fields are included and what they track and don't track to control how much funding they need to provide to particular agencies, which also limits applications to certain funding streams. (CBO 2, in-person interview, 2022)</p>
<b>Accountability</b>	<p>When you're collecting information about people in the community, it belongs to them. So, for me, two things: one, we should be feeding that back to the community ... we should be giving them collective information; and two, any organization should be able to use that data for whatever they may need it for — funding agreements, reporting to boards, reporting to whoever — that to me is the most transparent way to use data. (CBO 16, virtual interview, 2022)</p> <p>All [the data] needs to be available to each organization, they need to be able to get their data back easily and simply. (CBO 14, virtual interview, 2022)</p> <p>I think better visuals of the data would be very helpful just for the public to know, right, and then to actually be accountable for your work ... that kind of public accountability piece is really missing in the whole thing. (CBO 18, virtual interview, 2022)</p>

Most agreed that we cannot create realistic, timely, and evidenced-based plans toward a common agenda if we are not collecting robust and comprehensive data to support the stories we hear on the street. However, CBO participants expressed intense frustration with the shared measurement system component of the CI model, predominantly articulating that HIFIS and its accountability measures do not collect accurate data for numerous reasons. First, the system is not user friendly and requires extensive training. Information is often duplicated and/or mis-coded. Some argue that complicated administrative requirements create unnecessary barriers for individuals with lived experience working in the sector. Second, the data is believed to be virtually useless because not every CBO within the collective uses HIFIS. Some organizations have refused the platform completely because of its lack of utility, and other CBOs (some of which are Indigenous organizations) have been provided the option to opt out of it for reasons unclear to the wider collective. This has posed some significant concerns around the validity of the data because it simply cannot paint an accurate picture of homelessness in our city. Thus, questions have arisen as to how we can make informed, data-driven decisions and plans to end homelessness when the data we collect is filled with holes. To no avail, some CBO participants have called for changes to the system to better reflect the unique context of homelessness in Winnipeg. A former executive director

of the Social Planning Council described their experience when involved in the early development of HIFIS:

It was an awkward and unhealthy process; it was being controlled by Ottawa and the community was overwhelmed by the technology ... I felt that there was an overemphasis of the technical/logistical people wanting to be in control of the process and not so much interested in how [this system] would serve the community (Former executive director of The Social Planning Council (2011–2015), phone interview, 2022)

They went on to describe gaps in data: “HIFIS never reports how homelessness might be increasing, it doesn’t want to show how our approaches might be failing” (Former executive director of The Social Planning Council (2011–2015), phone interview, 2022).

This further highlights the failure of data collection at the federal level. It was reported by the Auditor General that the government has “failed to collect sufficient data...” and has no idea if they are ending homelessness as they have little to no data on the effectiveness of multi-billion-dollar programs like RH, despite mandating data-collection systems like HIFIS to all RH recipients (Tasker, 2022). Broader scholarship speaks to this government “control of process” with little interest in the applicability of data systems to individual communities as one of many tools of state surveillance downloaded into the non-profit sector to monitor and control the homeless population (Dej 2020; INCITE! 2007).

EHW is aware of the issues surrounding HIFIS and hosts a working group to address community concerns. They state that they are working with the federal government to allow for “custom reports” better aligning with the Winnipeg context, but the infrastructure takes many months to create, and often the platform amendments cannot keep up with the changing trends of the population. By the time amendments are made, new ones are required to reflect new trends. In addition, as one EHW participant explained, “it’s tedious work to create a custom report, especially when there’s different data sets for each community. So, it’s not like, one [size] will fit everything” (EHW, in-person interview, 2022).

Some participants feel that EHW has too much power in deciding which data fields can be included in the custom reports to better serve their needs rather than the sector as a whole. However, it is also the case that the HIFIS system is a federally mandated data-collection system that EHW is required to implement as a condition of receiving RH funding and functioning at the CE. This brings us to the question: Would data collection be more effective if

EHW was not the CE and simply a backbone organization with the flexibility to create a data system more aligned with and for the Winnipeg context? There is general agreement across the sector, and EHW agrees, that the HIFIS system is slow, laborious, bureaucratic, and missing integral data points. While participants understand that EHW must work with the system imposed on it, many feel that as the backbone, EHW should be doing more to advocate for changes at the federal level to better serve the sector and capture the information most needed to assess progress on addressing homelessness. The challenges presented by the contentious issue of HIFIS are an example of where EHW's role as both federally appointed CE and the CI backbone organization collide. One participant concluded, "They're happily a cog in the machine. They are not trying to change the machine" (CBO 22, virtual interview, 2022). Consequently, many in the sector have lost trust in the backbone:

They provide no data to the community on what they're doing. They collect data from us and take credit for our work. I think they could be doing more to track outcomes. I think agencies are doing more than EHW is even aware of to track outcomes, and the information is not being used. (CBO 2, in-person interview, 2022)

EHW stated in their interview that they are hoping to streamline access to their reports and data, and ensure their website is more accessible: "In response to a stakeholder engagement session ... we are creating an interactive dashboard that will display the progress on the seven measurable targets and other key homelessness indicators on our website" (EHW, written responses, 2022). EHW also reminded us that as the federally appointed CE in Winnipeg, it is subject to rigorous accountability mechanisms:

We have somebody that we work with from Service Canada who audits us all the time, and we go through activity monitors. We just participated in a three-hour, mid-year dialogue with our Service Canada representative. (EHW, in-person interview, 2022)

Discussions with EHW and sector representatives made clear that EHW finds itself in a difficult position. As the backbone organization, developing an effective shared measurement system is central to its role. However, as the CE, it is required to implement the federal government's standardized measurement system. This contributes significantly to the collection of flawed data whereby data-informed targets are virtually impossible to achieve, further perpetuating the cycle of homelessness management, rather than creating concrete, evidence-informed milestones toward ending it.

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### **Pillar 3: Mutually Reinforcing Activities**

**Question 2:** How do you think EHW has worked at aligning the various plans to end homelessness (The 10-year plan to end homelessness in Winnipeg, Here and now: the Winnipeg plan to end youth homelessness, Connecting the circle: a gender-based strategy to end homelessness in Winnipeg, and the upcoming provincial plan to end homelessness) to ensure the plans are working toward the same goal?

**Question 3:** Given the critical role that social housing plays in ending homelessness, what role does/should EHW play in the creation of new social housing supply in Manitoba and what role should it leave to others?

**Question 4:** One function of the backbone organization could be to advocate on behalf of the sector. Do you feel EHW has done this in Winnipeg? If so, what have been the outcomes?

**Question 8:** The 10-year plan calls on communities to make a shift from managing homelessness to ending it. As the backbone organization, how much of EHW's activities are based on managing homelessness versus ending it?

**TABLE 3** Pillar 3: Mutually Reinforcing Activities

Major Themes	Sample Responses
<b>Aligning sector research and plans to end homelessness</b>	<p>I just feel like there's been a huge disconnect. I don't know how they align because I don't hear about it. I literally don't know any more about how all those opportunities and how each plan really connects with one another. I don't see that, it's not there ... there [have been] no updates, there [is] no understanding about where we are now and no review of it. (CBO 8, virtual interview, 2022)</p> <p>I would say they've almost entirely rejected plans that they haven't themselves created. And it's really frustrating ... quite frankly, they aren't the experts in the sector. Service providers are. And we're not being listened to. They force their way in, they demand to be at the table. They had a great influence over shaping reports by force, at times attempting to co-opt the work of community organizations. And then they don't really use [them]. (CBO 2, in-person interview, 2022)</p> <p>I don't feel like they are aligning anything. I don't feel like they've examined any of the plans. I don't get the sense that they have knowledge of them or have any interest in them. (CBO 11, virtual interview, 2022)</p>
<b>Advocacy</b>	<p>It's not systems change that needs to happen. It's dismantling and rebuilding. If I repaint the colour of my office, the four walls still stand, right. But if I want to change my office, I need to knock down some walls and rebuild. And I don't think there's enough political will to alter those systems. Political will comes from the community voice, and again, I think there is an opportunity where a backbone organization could help to create political will through amplifying voices. But when the backbone functions as another arm of the federal government, that's not gonna happen. (CBO 7, virtual interview, 2022)</p> <p>I really do not see it. I haven't seen it since I've been in this position. I see the sector advocating, even for the recent bus shelter motion. The sector got together. We wrote that document. We arranged for people to speak. (CBO 10, virtual interview, 2022)</p> <p>They stayed away from advocacy for much too long. This has hampered not just their efforts but the rest of the sector's as well. Their board still has too many systems representatives on it for them to be as critical as they need to be. It is important to have good relationships with those that fund the sector but they shouldn't have authority in the organization that set itself up to be the backbone support for the sector. We will never end homelessness without overhauling the systems that lead people into it and that means policy work, not just short-term project funding. (CBO 14, virtual interview, 2022)</p>
<b>Excessive administrative burden</b>	<p>The administrative burden continues to grow. And each year our funding gets less, so we're constantly doing more and more with less and less. You will sit and have a conversation with them and, you know, the platitudes of "Yes, we understand," but then you don't actually see change to match that understanding. (CBO 7, virtual interview, 2022)</p> <p>We don't get funded for administration ... a lot of the work that needs to be done in these projects is administration, which really binds organizations to more responsibility, more reporting, more meetings, when really we want to be working on the ground. (CBO 8, virtual interview, 2022)</p> <p>We're still bound to reporting in a specific way ... even though it may not necessarily align [with our goals]. So, we're always trying to twist and contort to fit within what is already a preexisting box. (CBO 10, virtual interview, 2022)</p>

CBO participants spoke often on themes of advocacy and systems change work being integral to the third pillar, mutually reinforcing activities, but felt the sector was not doing enough in this arena. The 'activities' surrounding ending homelessness are not reinforced or aligned despite CI's clear direction that "each stakeholder's efforts must fit into an overarching plan if their combined efforts are to succeed" (Kania & Kramer, 2011, p.40). This is reflected in what the sector sees as a broad disengagement with multiple sector reports that were created to address unique facets of homelessness in Winnipeg and that are aimed to support the 10-year plan. These reports include *Here and now: the Winnipeg plan to end youth homelessness* and *Connecting the circle: a gender-based strategy to end homelessness in Winnipeg* (Maes-Nino & Gadoy, 2016; West Central Women's Resource Centre,

2019). Participants expressed concern that the backbone had not engaged with the collective to strategically determine what was needed and how best to respond to the reports.

Another example of misalignment raised was the 2021 sudden opening of the Indigenous-led shelter N'dinawemac. This initiative came as a surprise to the sector. Several participants perceived EHW's role in this initiative as a considerable overstep in their operational mandate. The decision was made without consultation or communication with the wider collective. It was also perceived as a conflict of interest, giving EHW the new role of what appeared to be direct service delivery, putting them in competition with the agencies they fund, and those they should be advocating for. EHW applied for and received funding through its own CAB to start a 24-hour shelter and has remained the face of its operations, despite an intricate partnership forged between a coalition of five Indigenous organizations to run the facility (EHW, in-person interview, 2022). The fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic had devastating effects on those experiencing poverty and homelessness, most visibly for Indigenous people who are significantly overrepresented in these populations. EHW defended its decision as an attempt to meet an immediate need that no other organization had the capacity to meet when they were overstretched and under-resourced during the pandemic. But they also acknowledged why the optics surrounding the decision raised concern:

[It] happened so fast ... the meetings began in October [2021] and N'dinawemac was announced a month later, and then within another month it was open, and then it was full ... It was a partnership that formed with EHW receiving the money from the Province to then distribute to the partners working [it], there's no ED of N'dinawemac, it was [our CEO] in the media. (EHW, in-person interview, 2022)

EHW explained that the long-term plan for N'dinawemac is to convert the shelter into transitional housing, while also securing an executive director and strategic plan for the initiative. EHW described the challenges of accessing long-term operational dollars (for maintenance, staffing) from the Province. The shelter receives capital funding in six-month increments, and this, they say, makes it impossible to plan long term or communicate such plans to the wider collective. EHW stated that their focus has been on keeping the shelter open and running (EHW, in-person interview, 2022).

This example reinforces the fundamental challenges for EHW and its ability to act as the backbone organization while juggling a growing number of roles that are perceived by the sector as out of scope and in conflict with



the collective. It is evident through this example that mutually reinforced activities are not clearly agreed upon by the collective, and the lack of communication between the backbone organization and the sector is exacerbating distrust. This is not surprising. Systemic limitations of the non-profit sector (like competitive project-based funding) do not facilitate an environment for activities to be mutually reinforced. Further, the backbone organization appears to be resistant to what the sector believes is a critical role: to advocate for meaningful change to systems that keep the sector entrenched in the cycle of competition, empire building, turf wars, and resource famine. Ultimately, the confluence of these issues only perpetuates the housing crisis, mental health and addictions crisis, and income insecurity within communities because the institutional structures that create these crises guilefully slide behind the smoke, while the non-profit sector is left fighting with the mirrors.

It is possible that EHW and the sector it represents have a different understanding of advocacy. Public administration scholar's Jennifer Alexander and Kandyce Fernandez differentiate between institutional advocacy and grassroots advocacy. Institutional advocacy is described as "inherently conservative in that the intention is to work with elites to influence policy from the inside ... [it is a] prototypical process" that looks to develop strategic relationships with systems, foundations, and/or high-profile donors. Institutional advocacy is safe and "depoliticized," prioritizing the perspectives and needs of the elites who fund them. Taking this approach to advocacy subtly shifts the focus away from the mandate of an organization, in this case ending homelessness, to the need to sustain the organization's survival through program expansion (Alexander & Fernandez, 2020, p. 4).

Conversely, grassroots advocacy "is an effort to actively engage broader publics, fostering their engagement with empowerment in an effort to organize and mobilize citizens so that they may speak on their own behalf ... it is employed by social movements intent on challenging norms and regulations" (Alexander & Fernandez, 2020, p.4). Institutional advocacy thus becomes an industrialized submission to the coercive powers of a government's strategic agenda. By virtue of remaining acquiescent to government and foundations like UW, CBOs remain subservient to the authority of colonial and capitalistic structures that continue to exploit communities.

## Pillar 4: Continuous and Open Communication

**Question 6:** One of the necessary conditions for CI systems to be successful is to have continuous communication across all partners and stakeholders to build trust and assure mutual objectives. How well do you think this condition has been fulfilled within the sector?

**Question 9:** Do you feel there is a conflict of interest in having the backbone organization hold the roles of the backbone, funder (community entity), and fundee/service provider? What do you think they are trying to achieve by taking on a service provider role?

**TABLE 4** Pillar 4: Continuous and Open Communication

Major Themes	Sample Responses
<b>Transparency and trust</b>	<p>It just needs the transparency of the community advisory board. The whole point of it is its accountable structure, but it doesn't seem to be accountable in terms of who can access it, who can make requests to it, what happens, etcetera. It's like a secret, like it goes to CAB and it comes back, it's like the government basically. (CBO 18, virtual interview, 2022)</p> <p>There is no communication or trust or relationship if you are constantly saying, 'Hold, this isn't working,' and the bulldozer is just coming at you. They tell us to come to a meeting to talk about it, well, there's no conversation. The decision's already been made. (CBO 7, virtual interview, 2022)</p> <p>Lack of transparency, lack of trust, we're not a collective, we're just not. I think in a real collective you can disagree in a healthy way and still come together as a collective, we're just not. (CBO 16, virtual interview, 2022)</p>
<b>Bureaucracy and red tape</b>	<p>Don't make me rely on fishing through the 47,000 emails I get a day that I'm not gonna read, that's not how you work with people. That's how the government works with people. Pick up the phone. (CBO 3, virtual interview, 2022)</p> <p>The focus is how many intakes I can do, and how many numbers I can push out. That doesn't translate into making [a] commitment to that individual and making [a] commitment to the 10, 15, 20 people, 100 people we see. (CBO 7, virtual interview, 2022)</p> <p>We have to count and justify every bus ticket we hand out. (CBO 22, virtual interview, interview)</p>

Discussions about this pillar centred around themes of trust, transparency, and bureaucracy. CBO participants expressed concerns about how CI allows the backbone organization's coordination of the collective to be hierarchical in practice, rather than collaborative as the model is presented in theory. As previously observed, the merging of a backbone organization and CE is questionable. CBO participants spoke about EHW's tendency to gatekeep funding knowledge and access, while also having too much power in determining the sector's next steps without clear communication and collaboration with the collective. The terms of reference for the CAB, which reviews proposals and makes recommendations for funding, are not available to the sector. There is no transparency on how and why funding

decisions are made. Moreover, year-end slippage funds are being used to top up organizations' funding and/or create new funding pots without sector consultation. Decisions on public funds appear to be made arbitrarily, without transparency and accountability:

So that's where it's not transparent, because it's not like an open call to say 'there's this slippage money, anyone applies', rather it's, 'we have this slippage, we know this group needs to get started, they've been trying to do it for years'. (CBO 13, virtual interview, 2022).

Issues related to communication and coordination have long been a problem in this context. A 2017 report by the Institute for Urban studies, AMR Consulting, Social Planning Council, and End Homelessness Winnipeg revealed similar issues regarding communication and transparency. It offered clear recommendations on how to improve transparency, including modifying the call-for-proposal process and CAB terms of reference to both reduce unnecessary competition and foster trust and collaboration. The recommendations in this report appear to have been largely ignored.

Assuming the dual role of the CI backbone organization and the CE severely hinders the continuous and open communication required to function effectively. By assuming the CE role, EHW is forced to play other roles not designated through CI, like imposing the federal government's shared measurement system (HIFIS) rather than advocating for a community-developed shared approach, and the creation of N'diniwemac without consulting with the wider collective. This has led to distrust in EHW as a backbone organization operating with the collective's interests at top of mind.

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## Pillar 5: Backbone Organization

**Question 4:** One function of the backbone organization could be to advocate on behalf of the sector. Do you feel EHW has done this in Winnipeg? If so, what have been the outcomes?

**Question 10:** Do you feel the distribution of funding that goes to the backbone versus what goes to the collective accurately reflects the volume and impact of work that is being done?

**Question 12:** What do you think EHW does well as the backbone organization? What are the gaps?

**TABLE 5** Pillar 5: Backbone Organization

Major Themes	Sample Responses
<b>Understanding the community perspective</b>	<p>It's great having a community agency where you don't have to explain the reasons you do what you do, and why you do it. (CBO 7, virtual interview, 2022)</p> <p>They understand the community perspective. (CBO 16, virtual interview, 2022)</p> <p>We don't have to come to the table and explain harm reduction and explain being a pro-choice organization and [working by] the social determinants of health, right? They get all of that. (CBO 19, virtual interview, 2022)</p>
<b>Serving as a network builder</b>	<p>[This model] creates a place at the table for everybody that has a stake and skin in the game, so to speak, has a stake in the decision making. (CBO 12, virtual interview, 2022)</p> <p>So as a network, a builder of people around an issue, that, I think can be pretty effective. (CBO 6, virtual interview, 2022)</p> <p>I believe we are better with them than without them. (CBO 15, virtual interview, 2022)</p>
<b>The importance of Indigenous leadership</b>	<p>This is why an Indigenous-led organization is critical. Because it will be responsive and within the value base that is consistent with how [we] operate and our worldview, our shared worldview. (CBO 12, virtual interview, 2022)</p> <p>I also think that another thing that they've done well is Indigenizing, because the majority of the new clients we see are our relatives. (CBO 9 interview, 2022)</p>
<b>Scope bleed</b>	<p>They've grown and I don't know why they've grown. They are duplicating work that is already taking place with other CBOs. But they wouldn't know that because they don't care to learn about what the rest of us do. (CBO 11, virtual interview, 2022)</p> <p>I know that they've [supported new housing] with projects [through two Indigenous organizations] where they've basically become those organizations and then done everything for them. To me, that's overstepping ... If you're really concentrating your resources on the two projects, then you have nothing left for your backbone work to the whole sector. (CBO 4, virtual interview, 2022)</p> <p>I also know that they had to have at least doubled in size in the last two years. I've gone to meetings where there was more EHW staff than there were service providers at the table. So, are they growing intentionally? Or because they have to? (CBO 15, virtual interview, 2022)</p>

Discussions around EHWs role as the backbone organization ranged from genuine optimism for its untapped potential to loathing for its current state. Participants agree that a backbone organization to coordinate the sector can have incredible utility and power. CBO participants supported the Indigenization of EHW, believing it to be an important step in leading reconciliation efforts that should be replicated more broadly. While participants described network building as a keenly positive outcome of having a backbone organization, most believed that EHW as the backbone organization had not fully realized its potential nor was it using its position of power to leverage tangible change. Participants spoke about how they saw the “truest” example in backbone coordination through the Covid-19 crisis when EHW demonstrated unconditional support, trust, and genuine collaboration with the wider collective to carry out sudden adaptations in their service delivery and funding structure to meet the needs of their populations under government-mandated lockdowns. CBOs also spoke about how the backbone organization could be harnessing their potential by magnifying

the visibility and voice of existing grassroots initiatives calling for public policy changes that would contribute to ending homelessness. For example, the Right to Housing Coalition and Make Poverty History Manitoba actively engage in political advocacy, challenging systems and policies identified by anti-poverty advocates, including those working in the homeless-serving sector. Participants noted very limited if any involvement in advocacy but a sizable growth in organizational size for reasons not clear to the collective. The majority of participants felt that EHW was reaching beyond its mandate, duplicating services and meddling in the operations of other CBOs. Some participants said they have been “bullied” or “ostracized” by the backbone organization when they questioned their role and activities. As noted previously, this was a factor inhibiting recruitment for the study.

Conversely, EHW feels differently about its function as the backbone organization, noting that they believe they “excel in collaboration with stakeholders,” pointing to partnerships with CBOs on the Street Census Report, developing Naatamooskakowin, Winnipeg’s coordinated access system (CA), the facilitation of “service expos,” and hosting of several working groups (EHW, written responses, 2022).

As described in the responses related to Pillar 1, there is a fundamental disconnect between how the collective and the backbone perceive the backbone’s role and impact. This disconnect can be traced back to EHW’s origins as a creation of UW and the lack of consultation with the wider community. EHW did not evolve as a priority of the sector. It was created through a top-down, hierarchical process involving UW and a select group of so-called stakeholders. This hierarchical nature has been further embedded in the structure of EHW, now reinforced through its role as a government-appointed CE responsible for the administration of federal funding to the homeless-serving sector.

# Conclusion

THE COMMUNITY CONSULTANT we spoke with maintained that despite challenges with the process, the 10-year plan was a comprehensive plan. They believed that many of the problems encountered later had more to do with the relationship between planning and implementation, and not necessarily with the plan itself (Community consultant, informal phone interview, 2022). However, we argue that the 10-year plan was destined to fail from the outset, at no fault of the backbone organization. EHW was handed a plan developed through a flawed and uncritical process that cultivated distrust. The plan's development was led by a small task force of government, private sector, and CBO representatives that did not adequately harvest the knowledge and experience held within Winnipeg's vast homeless-serving sector. Moreover, it was significantly underfunded and under-resourced — reaffirming critiques of 10-year plans of the last 15 years — while constructed as neoliberal 'fast policy', or pre-packaged best practices adopted across jurisdictions as the ultimate elixir to tackling homelessness. The top-down creation of the backbone organization designed to represent the sector and coordinate implementation of the plan without having sector involvement resulted in a lack of buy-in by the homeless-serving sector and raised insurmountable tensions. The expansion of the backbone organization into a government-appointed CE further inflamed relationships. All of this has pushed EHW into a difficult position.

Tensions are further reflected in the conflict experienced between the research team and EHW. Their response to this research can be seen as a

direct result of the competitive neoliberal pressures whereby non-profits must ‘sell’ their work as successful. Consequently, they are unable to pan outward to their location within a wider industrialized non-profit system that is constructed to mute self-reflection and breed hostile defense when the modalities of their work are questioned.

This brings us full circle to the fundamental flaw with the CI model as identified by its critics. CI’s multi-stakeholder, philanthropic-focused approach fails to challenge the increasingly inequitable environment that neoliberalism has created and that exacerbates homelessness. CI continues to rely heavily on the for-profit private sector and fails to acknowledge that the policies that have greatly benefited the private sector have led to growing disparity. Ending homelessness will not be solved by using CI. That will require a drastic change in public policy—including revenue generation through more equitable tax and fiscal policies that prioritize a strong social safety net. If a CI backbone organization can’t advocate for this change, then it isn’t doing what it needs to do.

# Suggested Recommendations

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## 1. Repairing Relationships and Building Trust

Given the substantial evidence of dissatisfaction with CI and the backbone organization's implementation of the model while also acting as the CE, it will be important for EHW to take time to reconnect with the sector to repair relationships, build trust, and lean into transparency. It would be worthwhile for EHW's senior leadership to prioritize engaging in face-to-face conversations with sector agencies, learning about their unique roles and the leadership they have to offer as members of the collective. The backbone will need to acknowledge and act according to their social location — they are not simply another CBO, but a novel hybrid of a government-mandated CE situated within the community and holding a considerable amount of power.

This paper was reviewed by a regarded Indigenous community-scholar to bring a critical-cultural lens to the research. They recommended that a community mediation take place between the backbone and the collective, facilitated by a skilled and unbiased mediator with intimate familiarity with the sector. Additionally, this mediation could include a collaborative process to develop a strategic path forward — a new plan to end homelessness that focuses on systems change and advocacy and clearly outlines the role of the backbone organization.



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## 2. Getting Comfortable with the A-Word

Advocacy has had a longstanding history in the community non-profit sector but it is often avoided in the modern-day non-profit landscape. Dependence on government and charitable donors for funding leads CBOs to abide by the unspoken rule, ‘don’t bite the hand that feeds you’. CBO participants in this study understand that political advocacy toward system change is critically important, and it should be a key function of a backbone organization. CBO participants emphasized that they would like to see EHW take more leadership in grassroots advocacy while also supporting existing grassroots initiatives by calling for more government investment in the expansion of social housing and support. They also spoke of advocacy around increased, sustained, and unrestricted funding for CBOs, including increases in administrative resources and reduced reporting requirements. The sector needs better data collection and shared measurement tools. They would like EHW to advocate for increases in core funding. The work is becoming more complicated while internal resources are being stretched further, yet many organizations have not seen an increase in core funding for several years. The backbone organization should also lead public campaigns against institutional racism and expose the causes of oppression that have led to soaring rates of homelessness. CBOs are keenly aware that the government will “not dole out dollars for groups to organize against it” (INCITE!, 2007). They recognize that the sector can no longer be complicit. It needs to challenge neoliberal policies that are exacerbating homelessness, and they believe EHW can champion their collective voice. It is recommended that EHW refocus its efforts on broader movement building by investing and participating in campaigns focused on tackling poverty and systemic racism. The collective needs to inspire participation from broader public sectors and governments and expand its aspirational goals beyond ending homelessness to a broader human rights agenda.

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## 3. Avoiding Shiny Object Syndrome

UW enthusiastic embrace of the untested CI model is an example of the tendency for institutions and governments to gravitate toward buzzwords, trends, and well-marketed ‘new’ models without thinking critically about their origins, conception, drivers, and how they apply in the unique local context. When scratching the surface of so-called innovative solutions like CI, P3s, and social impact bonds, we all too often find that they are

less innovative than they are an attempt to upcycle failed policy and solve politically created social and economic issues through private means. Before embracing the latest community development models, philanthropic trends, and news headlines, they need to be critically examined to understand the research behind them, the ideologies and locations of those who developed them, the policies and legislation that sustain them, and their applicability to the local context.

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#### **4. Separating the Backbone and Community Entity Roles**

A central challenge illuminated through this study is the conflicting roles of the federal government-appointed CE and the CI backbone organization. Mounting evidence suggests that EHW can't be both. Becoming the CE has eroded EHW's ability to carry out the common agenda and lead the collective in each of the CI pillars. Instead, it is suggested that the backbone organization and the CE role need to be separated in order to move toward EHW's mandate effectively.

# Looking Forward

IN A FINAL conversation, the CEO and a board member of EHW expressed tepid optimism:

In five years, I see a Street Census with far fewer numbers. I see us celebrating Indigenous housing solutions. I see new, dignified housing constructions that serve our community in the North End and North Point Douglas. I see organizations better equipped, better resourced, with healthy staff. I see less competition within our sector, and we're not on our hands and knees begging for resources. I see trust and confidence in EHW. I see transparency and unity. I see an increase in Indigenous involvement in the community, and the on-going recognition of lived experience. I want to see a thriving downtown, and safer streets for all Winnipeggers. (EHW, virtual interview, 2022)

If EHW is to continue as the CI backbone organization, it will need to reflect on and adapt its role with guidance from the homeless-serving sector. The majority of CBO participants in this study were clear that CI will not be effective so long as it acquiesces to the status quo. The primary and secondary research has illustrated that CI is not effective unless it commits to dutiful engagement in systems change. To do less reveals a model that is no more than smoke and mirrors, propping up neoliberal policies, benefiting corporate elites, and reinforcing systemic racism and inequality. The model's averseness to systems change and advocacy creates the perfect landscape for the non-profit industrial complex to sustain its course of instigating competition while managing dissent of the non-profit's voice (INCITE!,

2007). Social movement studies and community organizing scholarship have shown that redistribution of wealth, power, and resources is more likely to occur when poor and middle-income people have collectively resisted the interests of the wealthy, instead of creating partnerships with them (Scott & Fruchter, 2009). Our ducks are already in a row. Winnipeg's non-profit homeless-serving sector is a network of over 100 powerful organizations and EHW is well-placed to galvanize it to action. As stated by one optimistic research participant:

I really do believe, from what I've seen, that we've got to have a champion somewhere. I think End Homelessness Winnipeg is in that position where it could be that champion. (CBO 6, virtual interview, 2022)

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# Appendix

## Examining the Collective Impact Model in Winnipeg's Non-Profit Homeless-Serving Sector

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### Sector Questions (Developed by Focus Group Participants)

1. One of the core functions of the backbone organization is to influence systems in a coordinated approach toward a common agenda: ending homelessness. Can you think of a few examples of where this is working well? And where is this falling short?
2. How do you think EHW has worked at aligning the various plans to end homelessness (The 10-year plan to end homelessness in Winnipeg, Here and now: the Winnipeg plan to end youth homelessness, Connecting the circle: a gender-based strategy to end homelessness in Winnipeg, and the upcoming provincial plan to end homelessness) to ensure the plans are working toward the same goal?
3. Given the critical role that social housing plays in ending homelessness, what role does/should EHW play in the creation of new social housing supply in Manitoba and what role should it leave to others?
  - EHW-specific follow-up: How many units of social housing could be attributed to the work of EHW and how?

4. One function of the backbone organization could be to advocate on behalf of the sector. Do you feel EHW has done this in Winnipeg? If so, what have been the outcomes? (E.g. increases in funding (for whom?), direct social policy outcomes).
5. One of the pillars of the CI model is to ensure stakeholders participate in a shared measurement system. The goal of collecting shared data is to not only ensure that all efforts remain aligned, but also to make data-driven decisions and hold each other accountable.
  - How does EHW measure its own efforts and the efforts of other participants around the implementation of the 10-year plan?
  - How does/should EHW use the data it collects?
  - How do you stay accountable to the sector and to the community you serve?
6. One of the necessary conditions for CI model systems to be successful is to have continuous communication across all partners and stakeholders to build trust and assure mutual objectives. How well do you think this condition has been fulfilled within the sector?
7. Most plans to end homelessness created in Canada have not successfully ended homelessness. In fact, in most major cities, homelessness numbers have increased. Why do you think that is? Do you think Winnipeg's 10-year plan will actually end homelessness if fully implemented? Why/why not? Who exactly is accountable for its implementation?
8. The 10-year plan calls on the community to make the shift from managing homelessness to ending it. As the backbone organization, how much of EHW's activities are based on managing homelessness versus ending it?
9. Do you feel there is a conflict of interest in having the backbone organization hold the roles of the backbone, funder (community entity), and fundee/service provider?
  - Follow-up: What do you think EHW is trying to achieve by taking on a service provider role?

10. Do you feel the distribution of funding that goes to the backbone versus what goes to the collective accurately reflects the volume and impact of work that is being done?
11. In what ways do you think the sector (or the collective) can improve its relationship with EHW (the backbone) and vice versa?
12. What do you think EHW does well? What are the gaps?
13. EHW-specific: The five-year plan states that the CI model is the commitment of a group of cross-sector actors to a common agenda for solving a targeted social problem through alignment and differentiation of efforts. Why have Indigenous organizations been given the choice to opt out of things like HIFIS and coordinated access? What is the impact of this on accurate data collection and resulting approaches given the over-representation of Indigenous peoples among those experiencing homelessness?
14. EHW-Specific: The CI model has evolved twice over the last decade to address practical limitations and challenges discovered in numerous fields internationally. Creators of the model have emphasized that in order for CI to be successful, it will require a continuous commitment to learning what it takes to transform communities and upgrading approaches on the part of the backbone. Considering that EHW still informs its work from a CI model, how has the organization engaged or consulted with CI experts, other backbone organizations and/or CI forums to ensure they are evolving with the model and staying true to the principles of the system?

