

Native Women's Transition Centre

(Winnipeg, Manitoba)

***Prepared by:
Cheyenne Chartrand,
Native Women's Transition Centre***

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Native Women's Transition Centre is first and foremost a safe home for Native women and children, which is staffed 24 hours a day. There is accommodation for 21 residents and the maximum length of stay is one year, but varies depending on individual needs. The Centre exists to support women who have been victimized, either in their interpersonal relationships or through systemic neglect, and who are left without the resources to make the lifestyle changes they feel are necessary. The doors are open to these women in transition—women in the process of changing their life situations. The Centre's goals are to replenish client resources and assist women in exploring their situations, to help them work toward healthy alternatives through the provision of shared decision making, common living experience, long-term accommodation, child care, supportive counselling and advocacy services as well as culturally appropriate role models and learning opportunities that promote self-esteem and improve life skills.

The program stands as an affirmation of the strongly held belief that Native women and children have the right to live in a nurturing environment that encourages Native self-awareness. Respect for traditional ways and the deepening of personal identity will always be at the heart of the Centre's philosophy. Since its inception in 1981, the Transition Centre has made every effort to provide tangible services that enable learning, change, growth and, ultimately, empowerment. To achieve these goals, the Centre has embraced the concept of the healing circle as a natural and meaningful evolution of its program and practice. The development of this healing circle will, over time, provide the opportunity for Native women both

in-house and in the community to heal from the effects of life experiences such as violence and victimization, sexual abuse and substance abuse, intervention for women who have lost children to the child welfare system due to unresolved personal issues, educational opportunities to enhance life skills within the community, networking and relationship building opportunities for Native women, and the development of leadership within the Native women's community.

Clients of the Transition Centre set their own goals and are supported in making those life changes. The programs are designed to help them meet these goals and develop their full potential as Aboriginal women. The input of the residents is evident in all levels of the Centre's functioning. There are ex-residents among the full and part-time staff, as well as on the Board of Directors. The Transition Centre also includes a second-stage housing facility, Memengwaa Place. This is designed to be an independent living facility that provides safety to women and their children who have experienced family violence. There, they are provided with on-site support staff and programs that offer empowerment and self-confidence.

Both the first- and second-stage housing facilities (Transition Centre and Memengwaa Place) are funded by the generosity of numerous organizations including Family Dispute Services, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, the Canadian Women's Foundation, City Social Services, Global Funds for Women, the Thomas Sill Foundation, Manitoba Government Employees All Charities Campaign, the Winnipeg Foundation, the United Way of Winnipeg and many other charitable and community organizations.

FACT SHEET

Native Women's Transition Centre

105 Aikins Street, Winnipeg, Manitoba
116 Robinson Street, Winnipeg, Manitoba
(Memengwaa Place)

Description of project

The Native Women's Transition Centre (NWTC) is a long-term residential facility (four rooms and three suites) that provides care for up to 21 Aboriginal women and children who are struggling to make life changes. Its second-stage housing facility, Memengwaa Place (Home of the Butterflies), is an independent living program for Aboriginal victims of family violence and residents of NWTC wanting to make the transition back to the community. It has seven full suites, an on-site support worker and security features. Memengwaa Place was created to provide a second phase of the Transition Centre's program. It accommodates residents in the process of leaving the Centre but who still require ongoing support and services while they move on to a more independent living arrangement.

Years in operation and impetus

The idea for the Centre started in 1977. The Aboriginal community of Winnipeg began to identify the needs and service gaps for its families, and a search had begun for real alternatives to the street for "women on the skids." The Native Family Life Counselling Program Inc. initiated a committee to consider the concept of a Native Women's Transition Centre. The Native Women's Transition Centre opened its doors July 2, 1981, while its second-stage housing facility accepted its first families December 2, 1994.

Major challenges in the next five years

The greatest challenge will be to meet the demand that currently exceeds the services and resources

of the Centre. While the waiting list of Aboriginal women needing the services of the Centre grows continuously, funds to expand are not available.

Sources of funding

Includes Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, the Canadian Women's Foundation, City Social Services (per diems), Family Dispute Services, Global Funds For Women, the United Way of Winnipeg, Winnipeg Child and Family Services (per diems) and the Winnipeg Foundation (special projects).

Clientele

Women 18 to 35 on average. (All women who need the services offered are welcome.) Most are single mothers who have children at risk of being in care, or who are in care already with Child and Family Services. Abuse, addictions and a lack of positive parenting skills are the central issues that bring them.

Innovative features

The staff is all Aboriginal women, a culturally appropriate program design, a healing room built to resemble a teepee and the organizational structure (butterfly shaped).

Contact

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PROJECT HISTORY

The Native Women's Transition Centre was started by a group of people who worked out of the Indian and Métis Friendship Centre of Winnipeg. When the project was first initiated, the goal was to provide long-term residential services for women who required support because of the issues they were facing, such as involvement with Child and Family Services, inadequate housing, family violence or abuse and addiction. A group was begun called the Native Family Counselling Services. Together with the Friendship Centre and community members, a committee was formed to help bring the concept of a transition centre into reality.

With little financial resources, the project was begun in Winnipeg's inner city. Agencies, such as the United Church of Canada and the Mennonite Central Committee, offered support (e.g., the use of a building and staff). Canada Employment, at that time, had grants to create employment opportunities. All these resources were put together to offer 24-hour-a-day peer support and residential services that were not crisis oriented, to Aboriginal women and their children.

When this project was first begun, there was recognition by the federal and provincial governments that social programs needed support and that communities had to take ownership of their families. Social programs were crucial to healing individuals and families. There were too many people being lost to street life, homelessness, poverty and prostitution. Aboriginal people were just beginning to come back to their roots and their heritage, as illustrated by organizations such as the Friendship Centre. Reclaiming what was lost was at the heart of a political and social awakening.

So, with little money, few employees, a lot of hope and a community behind them, the women who created the Native Women's Transition Centre

had begun the journey. The Centre's development helped lead other Aboriginal women to a place where they could receive the support, the caring and the understanding they needed in order to survive and grow. Along the way, the Centre overcame the doubts and the lack of funding. When it was obvious that they were meeting their goals and providing an invaluable service, the funding stabilized and the Transition Centre found a home.

One of the largest obstacles to overcome was the relationship with other social service agencies. Child welfare was a major stressor in the lives of Transition Centre families and with little or no advocacy, families were left to deal with their issues and problems on their own. So, the Centre became a strong advocate on behalf of the residents. Changes to the Transition Centre have resulted because of changes in the community and its needs. For example, families in the community needed more programs to increase self-esteem, eradicate family violence and develop parenting skills. These programs now are run as part of the Centre's services. Support for the Centre has grown over the years through the success of past residents and through its innovative programs and features such as the healing room.

Funding has been a major obstacle and remains one to this day. While the services of the Transition Centre must respond to an ever-increasing demand, and the waiting lists grow longer, funding has not only decreased but the requirements tied to this funding have grown.

The Transition Centre has evolved over the 18 years. To remain client-centred and client focussed, the Centre understood that those clients have to have representation at every level of the organization. The managerial structure reflects this concern with a model based on cooperation, equality and respect.

CLIENT PROFILE

The Centre houses 21 Aboriginal women and children in a communal family setting that resembles a traditional Aboriginal extended family and serves approximately 30 residents annually (excluding children in care). On average, the women at the Transition Centre are between 18 and 35 years, although all women in need of the services offered are welcome. The average age of a child is three and mothers have an average of three to four children. Most are the head of lone-parent households. The length of stay for residents is 12 months in the first-stage facility. Residents are then permitted, if they choose, to move on to second-stage housing at Memengwaa Place. They are welcome to stay until they feel confident with their independent living skills or until their first anniversary of moving into Memengwaa Place.

Many of the Transition Centre residents not only have a personal history of multiple forms of victimization, but also grief and loss, poverty, alcohol/substance abuse and negative coping behaviours. Many have or have had children in the care of child welfare agencies and many more were in those same systems as children. Those clients who have moved on from both programs at the Transition Centre go on to housing and raising their families. Others have found employment with the Transition Centre or other inner-city agencies that help families.

Client Stories

Client story 1

I am a resident at Memengwaa Place, which is the second-stage program at the Native Women's Transition Centre. I have been involved with the Transition Centre since August 1995, and have been at Memengwaa Place for approximately six months.

Before coming here, I was involved in a long-term abusive relationship in which I was abused physically, mentally, spiritually and sexually. The relationship came to an abrupt end when my ex-partner destroyed my home and my belongings, as

well as my children's. I came to the Transition Centre feeling I had no where else to turn, and that I would only stay until I could get set up elsewhere. I didn't acknowledge I was abused and I thought I didn't need help.

I started attending the programs at Native Women's Transition Centre, and the walls I had built around myself slowly started to come down. For the first time, I began to learn about the cycle of violence and how I was involved in it. It was then I made the decision to stop it from continuing on to my children.

After moving to Memengwaa Place, I attended a sexual abuse survivors group that was held twice a week. I found this group very helpful and supportive. Just knowing I wasn't alone made a lot of difference, and I finally understood why I was constantly in and out of abusive relationships. Now I know I can forgive myself and stop letting these men "punish" me.

Because of the ongoing support I have from Memengwaa Place, I am able to live a sober and drug-free lifestyle and provide a safe home for my children. My children know they are safe in their home and that I can finally provide stability for them. In closing, I'd like to say meegwetch for the supports I have received at the Native Women's Transition Centre and Memengwaa Place.

Client story 2

My name is Bernice. I would like to tell you about my experiences with the Native Women's Transition Centre and the second-stage program named Memengwaa Place. First of all, my children were picked up by Child and Family Services (CFS) in 1993. I was trying to fight for my children on my own. Two years later, I realized I was losing the battle and that CFS had plans to take my children as permanent wards. I felt like an empty shell walking around. I felt very troubled and very lost. Then I ran into a worker from the Native Women's Transition Centre and I began

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telling her about my situation and how helpless I felt. I told her I was ready to give up the fight for my children and therefore the fight for my life. This worker told me about the Transition Centre and that they could help in getting my children back. It was then with new hope that I checked into the Native Women's Transition Centre with a new desire to fight for my children and for my life.

I found that the NWTC had many programs. I became involved with all their programs and also received one-to-one counselling. In addition, I also began therapy with a psychologist. With all this much-needed support, I began to change into a stronger person.

As a result, I will be getting my children back this summer and now I do not feel so empty. I have learned to live a sober lifestyle and now I realize I no longer need alcohol and drugs. I now understand my past alcohol and drug addiction occurred because of things that happened throughout my life. This understanding process began at the NWTC where I lived for eight months and continued at Memengwaa Place where I have been living since January 1996.

Memengwaa Place also helped and supported me in many different ways. Since living there, I have learned to live independently and have learned new skills to deal with others. I have also learned how to handle conflict situations, which I would have handled negatively at one time. I can communicate more openly with my children and other women at Memengwaa Place. In communicating, I have learned a healthier way to express and manage my anger. In our group, which is held two times a week, we have had a variety of other topics, which I always learn and grow from. We have had an elder come and share traditional teachings like the butterfly and the wolf teaching. Also, we are finishing a 12-week sexual abuse program in our group meetings. We will be celebrating our group process with a potluck feast, honouring each other and a support person. This was the first time I was willing and strong enough to take an honest look at how my

past sexual abuse had hurt me, not only sexually, but also physically, emotionally and spiritually. This program has taught me much about myself.

As a result of these support services, I am very proud and pleased to say that my children will be coming home to live at Memengwaa Place with me and my youngest daughter Samantha. Right now, overnight visits are happening once a week. I will be practising new parenting skills before all my children will be returned home in July.

Another exciting thing happening in my life is the opportunity to get involved with community issues. Before this, I never knew much or even cared about what community meant. My thoughts were to make ends meet from day to day. I didn't bother anyone and I didn't want anyone to bother me. If I didn't like my neighbours, I moved. Now I see I can be a part of my community by getting involved. Right now, we are looking at making our community a safer place to live. We have gone to meet with city councillors and some police officials to ask for support. We hope to get a foot patrol officer by July of this year.

With the help of Native Women's Transition Centre and the continued support at Memengwaa Place, I believe I have truly found myself. I have learned to love and care about myself and my children. I have done so much inner healing through the help I have received from both of these services—I'd like to say meegwetch for the help.

In closing, I would also like to say to other women who are feeling helpless: help is available and there is hope. All you need to do is to be willing, determined and strong enough to ask for help like I did.

Client story 3

In 1996, I felt like a total failure because my children were apprehended by Child and Family Services (CFS) and I had just left a 12-year abusive relationship. During that time, I did not understand or recognize that I was in an abusive relationship. I just figured he was a jerk and that I

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deserved what was happening to me. We did not have a telephone, therefore, I was totally isolated from anyone. If I did happen to make or meet a new friend, he would find an excuse for why I shouldn't like them. He would often interrogate my children without my knowledge, about anything I did. My own family was not considered "good enough" either.

As time went by, things only worsened. I began to hate everything. I hated going to work. I hated the fact that he worked whenever he felt like it. I hated to go home. I just hated living in general.

I knew we had major problems, but I did not know what to do or where to go for help. I actually believed I was going crazy. As time went on, I became more depressed and had lost a lot of weight to the point where people who knew me actually thought I was sick or anorexic.

Then on March 31, 1996 the worse thing happened, my children were apprehended. I felt empty. I could not cope with this loss. I turned to alcohol and drugs to numb the pain and hurt. The only time I could be found sober during this period was while I was working or when I had no money. This continued for four months.

Finally, I received a letter from Child and Family Services letting me know my time was almost up. If I didn't do something soon I would lose my children permanently. I had not, to this point, had any contact with Child and Family Services nor had I visited with my children. They (CFS) had to mail court papers to my work. It was during this time that the CFS sent an Outreach/support worker to help me. Although at the time, I didn't think so, I now believe she was a godsend because I needed someone to help me receive services. I needed to begin my healing journey. My healing journey began at Native Alcoholism Council in September 1996, where I was enrolled in a Residential Treatment Program. I then attended a six-week Outreach Program. By Christmas however, I had a relapse.

I realized I needed more help and by January 1997, I went for an additional one-month program at

River House. This was "Women's Group" and it was very intense. This was exactly what I needed. At this point, I came to realize I could not stay sober until I began to do some healing. I needed to find out where all my anger came from. I could not do it on my own. Because I could not trust myself, I then entered River House's halfway house. I was there for one week when I received an unexpected phone call from Verna, a support worker from Native Women's Transition Centre first stage housing. She informed me that they had an opening. I left River House on February 10, 1997 and entered the NWTC on February 17, 1997.

I was full of all kinds of different emotions. I was excited, scared, nervous, anxious and just a bundle of nerves. I felt so alone as my children had now been in care for 11 months. I sure missed them and wanted them back with me.

One of the most difficult things for me to learn was to forgive myself. This sure did not happen overnight. I also needed to learn more about Native culture and to be proud of who I was as a Native woman.

It was through the Native Women's Transition Centre that I continued my journey. I learned more about where my anger came from, through sharing circles, which focussed on topics such as "family of origin," colonization, the cycle of violence and intergenerational issues. This helped me not only in a healing process but also in learning how to forgive myself. The thing that bothered me the most was that my children had witnessed my abusive relationship and were definitely affected by it. This was apparent because they would often, without reason, act out aggressively toward each other. They also would often direct their anger at me and they felt I deserved it. Thinking back to my own childhood experiences, I was able to understand how they were affected.

I don't know where I would be today if it wasn't for my first contact with Mary. She was there to provide me with support even though I was quite reluctant. When I was finally able to ask and accept the help I needed, everything became

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easier and things fell into place almost immediately. One thing that amazes me is that everything that happened in my life I now believe happened for a reason. I live with my children at NWTC's second-stage housing (Memengwaa Place) and eventually will be moving on. I can honestly say, now I love myself and I certainly love my children.

We are once again a family. I am not finished my journey, and I realize it will take time, patience and acceptance. I am not afraid. I'm happy and my children are with me. Without their father and my partner I feel free to make my own choices. Life right now isn't always a bowl of cherries, but it sure is sweet.

MANAGEMENT PROFILE

One of the most innovative features of the Transition Centre is its organizational model. It is depicted as a butterfly, with four layers to each wing. On one wing the top layer is the board of directors, then beneath it, the funders, then the Aboriginal community and partner agencies. The other wing illustrates the layers for the executive director, the elders, the staff and volunteers, then the extended family. It is a model of cooperation, equality and respect, rather than one of hierarchy and power.

Board of Directors

There are 11 board members including the chairperson, vice-chair, treasurer and secretary. The Board represents community members, external agency members, staff and ex-residents of the Centre. They are responsible for the governance and management of the Centre. Their five key functions are planning and program governance, policy management, financial management, personnel management and public relations.

Planning begins with an understanding of, and commitment to, the Centre's vision and mission. This involves setting goals for the Centre, and the Board determines which programs and services are appropriate to meet these goals. Policy management involves developing, establishing, implementing and evaluating written policies to provide both the Board and staff with clear authority and guidelines to perform their jobs. The Board is responsible for managing the financial affairs of the Centre. It establishes the budget, approves expenditures and commits to obtaining needed resources. It is also responsible for defining roles and responsibilities for board members, staff and volunteers. Public relations, which involves developing the Centre's image and identity, is another responsibility of the Board, and includes developing and maintaining a positive public image with the community, government, corporations and funding organizations.

Staff

The executive director provides leadership and makes the day-to-day management decisions. She ensures that all administrative duties related to daily operations are carried out and is required to monitor program needs and service delivery. The director is also expected to devise and implement strategies for fund raising, to develop and submit grant applications to alternative funding sources, and is responsible for human resource management, administrative and fiscal management, liaison work and public relations.

A practical skills instructor teaches practical skills such as cooking and budgeting. She also coordinates the Centre's catering services.

Two support workers are responsible for intake and assessment, planning and problem solving with clients to determine achievable, concrete goals. They also advocate on behalf of the residents with Child and Family Services, employment and income assistance agencies, parole or probation services, housing, court systems and other authorities. They facilitate program sessions and provide individual and group counselling.

The Outreach support worker's responsibilities include supporting individuals and families in Memengwaa Place, assessing the needs of community women applying for admission to Memengwaa Place, and developing and maintaining a process to monitor the progress of each resident toward independent living and eventual departure. She also facilitates the community healing circles the Centre runs out of Memengwaa Place.

The after hours support worker is responsible for monitoring resident activities and Centre operations during the evening hours and on weekends.

Office staff include the office manager who is responsible for the finances of the Centre, payroll, requisitions, all the banking and bookkeeping.

deposits and budgets. The receptionist operates the switchboard, provides callers or visitors with information pertaining to admission criteria and provides clerical support.

There are seven part-time staff at the Centre, mostly night staff who ensure the security of the building and the residents' safety during late night hours. They perform general maintenance duties, monitor and log after hour occurrences, and report to the receptionist the next morning.

Special Projects

The Transition Centre often has special projects run and staffed by community members. Past projects include Minoyawin (a program that used a medicine wheel framework to ensure the needs

of the whole person—mental, emotional, physical and spiritual—were addressed), smoking cessation, and children and elder programs. Currently, there are three special projects: the children and elders programs, the compulsive coping behaviours program and a literacy program.

Volunteers

The Centre has provided placements for work experience, high school students and interested community members. Reception has provided clerical experience, while other placements include helping in the playroom with children's activities, participating in fund-raising events or special community activities.

FINANCIAL PROFILE

Capital Costs

The capital cost for the Native Women's Transition Centre is \$2,052,796.

Annual Operating Costs

The annual operating costs for the Native Women's Transition Centre is \$824,803, and for Memengwaa Place it is \$136,121.

Sources of Funding and Innovative Features

Sources of funding for the Transition Centre include Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation,

the Canadian Women's Foundation, City Social Services, Family Dispute Services, Global Funds for Women, Manitoba Government Employees All Charities Campaign, the Thomas Sill Foundation, Winnipeg Child and Family Services, the Winnipeg Foundation and the United Way of Winnipeg.

The Centre's fund-raising activities include a letter campaign for special events and the Native Women's Transition Centre Enterprises Catering Business to support the programs and other operating costs. This business brings in much needed revenue and has become essential in keeping the Centre operating following governmental budget cuts, decreased funding and an ever-expanding clientele.

OVERALL PHILOSOPHY

The program at the Native Women's Transition Centre stands as an affirmation of the strongly held belief that Native women and children have the right to live in a nurturing environment that encourages Native self-awareness. Respect for traditional ways and the deepening of personal identity will always be at the heart of the Centre's philosophy. The Centre operates on the belief that women and children have the right to self-sufficiency, dignity, respect and caring. They also have the right to self-determination and to share in the decisions that affect their daily lives.

The Native Women's Transition Centre is first and foremost a home for Native women and their children. The Centre exists to support women who have been victimized either in their interpersonal relationships or through systemic neglect, and who are left without the resources to make the changes they feel are necessary. Memengwaa Place provides safe, affordable housing in an independent living setting to Aboriginal women and children who have experienced similar abuse. This setting promotes self-sufficiency, sustenance and healing by creating supportive networks in the community.

The goals of the Transition Centre revolve around the needs of the women who come to the Centre. They set the goals they want to achieve, and the

Centre provides the support needed to meet those goals. There are group programs on family violence, parenting and child development, self-esteem and assertiveness training, as well as abuse and addictions sessions. The Centre also has a traditional sharing circle and access to traditional Aboriginal teachers and healers. Individual counselling is provided along with parent education and opportunities to practise parenting skills with a group facilitator and Aboriginal elders. The women are given life skills training, support and advocacy when they need to deal with external agencies, such as courts or the child welfare system. Most recently, they are also provided with literacy training, if it is one of their goals.

There are still many other women who continue to struggle with issues of poverty, family violence, hopelessness and despair. The obstacles and barriers are numerous and need to be torn down if these Aboriginal women also are to be given the opportunity to reach their full potential and to live in a healthy society as mothers raising their children, students in job training or post-secondary education, or as members of the work force. As an agency, the Transition Centre continues to work hard and passionately to strengthen the continuum of services for Aboriginal people and to advocate strongly for social justice and change.