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Homeward Trust – An Example of Urban Governance

“Homeward Trust is a community-based, comprehensive housing organization that provides leadership and resources towards ending homelessness in Edmonton. We fulfill our mandate by leading initiatives and programs, engaging community stakeholders and partners, conducting research, creating awareness, and funding housing and support projects” (Homeward Trust website).

This housing initiative began in 2001 as the *Edmonton Housing Trust Fund*. Since 2008, it has been operating as the not-for-profit organization *Homeward Trust*. Its overall goal is to end homelessness in the City of Edmonton, AB. In order to achieve this, Homeward Trust has chosen a community-based approach in coordinating local agencies as well as government organizations to align housing needs and responses in Edmonton. Homeward Trust roles include leadership for organizational tasks, resource direction, event planning, and research initiatives (Homeward Trust, 2008, p.9).

While Homeward Trust does not own or operate any housing units, its partnerships with landlords and community organizations provide opportunities for coordination of resources and available housing to meet community needs. Importantly, Homeward Trust recognizes that besides housing, an array of social supports is needed to sustainably fight homelessness.

Governance

The governance structure of Homeward Trust includes community organizations and stakeholders who are involved in housing-related activities and decision-making, thereby creating a strong position for the organization in the community and in the housing sector. The organization is led by a Board of Directors, currently headed by Executive Director Susan McGee. The nine remaining Board Members are representatives of various housing-relevant or community networking businesses and agencies as well as community stakeholder organizations. Partnerships include the Government of Canada’s National Homelessness Initiative, the Government of Alberta, the City of Edmonton, and a working relationship with the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC).

There are a number of Homeward Trust Committees which are chaired by Board Members and open to community members and organizations at large, who provide a minimum of three committee members. The *Advocacy, Awareness and Communication Committee* is one of those and is “mandated to provide advice and recommendations to the Homeward Trust Board on how to improve awareness of housing and homelessness issues and the successful efforts to address solving these concerns” (Homeward Trust website).

The *Community Plan Committee* is another example of standing Homeward Trust Committees and is “mandated by the Homeward Trust Board to prepare and update the Community Plan that will identify the housing-related needs and priorities of Edmontonians” (Homeward Trust website; see also Edmonton Joint Planning Committee on Housing and Edmonton Housing Trust Fund 2007). The Community Plan is a strategic tool to direct housing activities, funding, and priorities in Edmonton and is, in accordance with the community-based approach, built on community stakeholder input. This committee in particular has brought together and aligned numerous government, stakeholder, and community interest groups. Member organizations include:

- Aboriginal Advisory Council Member
- Alberta Health Services
- Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation
- Canadian Homebuilders Association
- Capital Region Board
- Capital Region Housing Corporation
- City of Edmonton
- Confederacy of Treaty 6 First Nations
- Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness
- Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues
- Edmonton Homeless Commission
- Faith Community
- Formerly homeless individual
- Government of Alberta
- Government of Canada
- Immigrant and refugee community
- Metis Nation of Alberta
- Representative of Inner City Executive Directors
- Treaty 8 First Nations of Alberta
- Wicahitowin

The *Performance Monitoring Committee* guarantees regular revision and adjustment of Homeward Trust activities to maintain strategic direction and effective action. “This committee has been established to develop and maintain an accountability framework for housing related initiatives, especially identified within the approved Community Plan” (Homeward Trust website). It ensures that resources are applied for maximum efficiency and effectiveness and

provides information and transparency to members and funding bodies.

Homeward Trust's *Research Committee* conducts surveys with the goal of compiling homelessness statistics and understanding reasons for and social impacts of homelessness. This allows Homeward Trust and its members to understand housing and homelessness issues, to share information in order to raise general awareness, and to strategically plan their actions to fight the problems.

Finally, there is the *Aboriginal Advisory Council*. It represents the Aboriginal community of Edmonton and area and ensures that the Aboriginal voice is heard and understood in housing initiatives. More details about this aspect of Homeward Trust governance are provided below in the section "Homeward Trust and the Urban Aboriginal Community".

Activities

In its operating period since 2001, the organization has "disbursed just under \$115 million to 275 different capital and support projects" (Homeward Trust website). Funds were leveraged with the goal of attracting additional investments, which added up to an overall value of Homeward Trust projects of \$233 million. Activities originate in a number of programs, one of which is the *Housing First Support Program*. "In this program, clients are provided assistance while living in their own homes. This program is delivered by teams at agencies across Edmonton" (Homeward Trust website). Since its beginning in April 2009, this program has placed over 1,000 homeless individuals in supported housing situations to provide them with an opportunity to develop an independent lifestyle once again. In addition, a *Furniture Bank* coordinates its supports with the Housing First Program to provide necessary furniture and appliances to those who are escaping homelessness and are transitioning to an independent life.

Another program provides *Short-Term and Transitional Housing*. This initiative answers needs for addictions and recovery situations and aims to provide "a safe alternative for those who have chosen to enter a recovery program, but are waiting for space to become available" (Homeward Trust website). Furthermore, *Youth Transition* offers temporary housing support for young individuals in a phase of becoming independent, and the *Family Shelter Network* assists families in finding appropriate housing according to their needs and financial means.

One of Homeward Trust's events is the *Homeless Connect Event*, which provides a venue to bring together the homeless and service providers in the community. This helps homeless individuals overcome the barriers of accessing and navigating an at times complicated service environment by providing one point of contact where assistance is provided. Services include, for example, medical and social offers, information exchange, and counselling.

The *Rooph Awards* are an incentive for agencies and organizations to stand out by making "a significant difference to the lives of Aboriginal people in Edmonton with housing needs"

(Homeward Trust website). The general focus of Homeward Trust activities is on creating an understanding of homelessness and related needs through research and on spreading the understanding and awareness through ads and campaigns. Mainly based on community collaboration, the organization aims to provide emergency response as well as sustainable solutions to homelessness.

Homeward Trust and the Urban Aboriginal Community

Homeward Trust distinguishes itself in an Urban Aboriginal Economic Development (UAED) context through its dedication to understanding and servicing Edmonton's Aboriginal community appropriately.

In all we do, our organization is committed to full engagement with Edmonton's Aboriginal community. This is reflected in Homeward Trust's new governance model, which engages the Aboriginal community at the board level and throughout the decision making process. (Homeward Trust, 2008, p.10)

This goal is demonstrated in specific projects, such as support for Wicahitowin: Circle of Shared Responsibility in becoming an independent organization with a leading role in responding to the needs of the Aboriginal community; but it is also reflected in Homeward Trust's governance structure and partnership-building. A number of Board Members have a personal or professional Aboriginal background, bring an understanding of Aboriginal housing needs, homelessness and its social impacts, and are positioned to suggest tailored solutions. Furthermore, the Community Plan Committee, as one example, features five Aboriginal representatives among its twenty member organizations. Since Aboriginal individuals and families are over-represented among the homeless, the strong urban Aboriginal focus is an important feature of Homeward Trust (Homeward Trust. Edmonton Joint Planning Committee on Housing, 2005, p.4).

The above-mentioned *Aboriginal Advisory Council* (AAC) is a manifestation of Homeward Trust's commitment to the urban Aboriginal community. As one of the standing committees of the organization, this consultative body consists of at least five community representatives and the Director of Aboriginal Relations and is chaired by Homeward Trust's Executive Director. AAC members bring expertise in housing and Aboriginal social and cultural matters to the committee. They also take on the role of ambassadors of Homeward Trust with the aim of forging new partnerships, maintaining existing community cooperation, and adding to the organization's sustainability in the community.

Building on its collective expertise, experience, and first-hand knowledge, the AAC advises Homeward Trust in Aboriginal matters by creating an awareness of Aboriginal issues and the Aboriginal perspective, directing relevant projects towards benefitting disadvantaged urban Aboriginal individuals and families, and by supporting capacity-building within urban Aboriginal organizations. AAC is asked to review and make recommendations in all activities and decisions

that are directed towards the urban Aboriginal community. This includes ongoing monitoring of change, regular evaluation of progress, and a role of introducing and maintaining the voice of the Aboriginal community in Homeward Trust activities and decision-making.

As a body of urban governance, Homeward Trust and its Community Plan act as an umbrella for several other urban Aboriginal initiatives and sources of funding, including the Urban Aboriginal Strategy and Urban Aboriginal Homelessness. Thereby, Homeward Trust becomes an example of urban governance with the potential to coordinate initiatives and find solutions for more effective and efficient resource allocation and operation. It also shows how one body in the, at times overwhelming, urban governance landscape can be the point of contact that facilitates service and resource access for the urban Aboriginal community by actively involving stakeholders, organizations, and the community at large.

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Research Committee

The research committee is actively looking to connect with other researchers working in the field.

Phone: 780.944.5697

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