

5.1 YOUTH WISDOM, HARM REDUCTION & HOUSING FIRST: RAINCITY HOUSING'S QUEER & TRANS YOUTH HOUSING PROJECT

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The way a lot of services I was in—foster care, group homes, detoxes, treatment centres and shelters—everyone looked at me like I was a problem. I was an issue and there was something wrong with me. It was different when I entered this program. I am not a problem. There's nothing wrong with me. I just needed love and some opportunities, rather than being seen as an issue.

S. T.

Introduction

This case study describes some of the ethical framework and liberatory practices of RainCity Housing workers, clinicians and queer and trans youth to create a housing project that aims to deliver housing without the professional imperative to either 'fix' young sexually- and gender-diverse people or tell them how to live. RainCity is not a queer organization: it is a housing organization, and this case study is presented to assist and encourage other housing organizations to take up the work of housing sexually- and gender-diverse youth who are at great risk because structural oppressions they face make their lives precarious.

This project embraces the tenets of Housing First (Tsemberis, 2010) and a radical approach to harm reduction with an ethic of doing justice (Reynolds & polanco, 2012), to create a living community for two-spirit, trans and queer youth who are chronically and episodically homeless. The definition we use encompasses youth who have lived on the street for six months or languished in shelters, not those who are couch-surfing. We will describe the ethics that are at the heart of our work, which provide our framework. This includes Housing First, radical harm reduction, culture and belonging as imperative to wellness, creating reciprocal relationships of respect, dignity and autonomy, and centring our work in our collective ethics, which are decolonizing and committed to not replicating the very oppressions that caused youth to be homeless.

I think the RainCity staff has a lot of lived experience. They know a lot of what's going on with you because they've experienced something similar. They aren't ignorant about homelessness, homophobia or bigotry, you know? They understand all the stuff that we are going through, and that makes them much stronger allies, so much more relatable role models.

A. B.

I'd take that, and add that they understand they haven't been through everything I've been through. Everyone's different. Everyone's experiences are different. It's not the severity of the situation, it's the emotions we take away from it that allows us to empathize with one another. It's really not our journey, but it's how we felt through our journey, that allows us to really unite and grow. It's how we felt, who we are, who we become and how we make sense of it all.

S. T.

It's not something you can learn in a textbook.

K. R.

Prioritizing culture as a tenet of wellness and belonging is a foundational piece of our work. Our project has a dedicated Cultural Worker whose time is devoted to making cultural connections. This is important structurally, as cultural work is often an add-on to a full workload, usually shouldered up by minoritized and marginalized workers as if it is their personal interest or hobby, and not a foundational piece of community-building, spirituality and health. We have been taught by youth (and by social justice movements) that the solutions are in reconnecting to people. We promote mentorship from the two-spirit, trans and queer communities to share our communities' capacities and care. This is a reciprocal process, where both mentors and youth are trans-formed and in-formed relationally. Our intention in this project is to move beyond 'serving' (Kivel, 2007) individual queer, trans and two-spirit youth and actually transform societal responses and the contexts of injustice that promote the suffering of all youth experiencing homelessness. We aim to resist charity while embracing justice-doing and a just approach to sharing resources and power.

Where We Begin: The Need

RainCity Housing is a non-profit organization that has been operating for over 30 years and is rooted in the ethics of harm reduction and Housing First. RainCity has a history of listening to needs and proposed solutions from people who access its services, and then building programs that respond to those needs. This is a radical orientation to the work, and in its best moments is in line with social change, and not social control (Kivel, 2007). We acknowledge the supportive leadership at RainCity that has allowed space for radical workers to take this work on at multiple sites with the organization's backing.

In 2008, RainCity opened a cold wet weather shelter in an area where there had not previously been a shelter. The shelter was located next to Vancouver's West End, traditionally known as the 'gay' neighbourhood. That year, we hired a lot of queer and trans staff to work at the shelter; this occurred in part because the shelter manager was out as trans, which provided some sense of safety and trust for users of this agency. We were surprised that about 40% of shelter participants spoke openly about being queer. For example, a young trans woman wore women's clothing for the first time, using clothes from the donation bin in the shelter. We believe this occurred largely because of the staff who worked at the shelter and the shelter's location. This made us curious about how many people experiencing homelessness are not out because of safety concerns when accessing the shelter system.

It seemed to us that enough research had been completed to demonstrate that youth had identified wanting a project created specifically for them. We began the work of fundraising and developing a model that we believed would address this need. We opened the housing program in January 2015, and this case study will share the story of the first 20 months of the project, both from our perspective and the perspectives of the young people being housed.

Funding requirements limited us to working with young people who are chronically or episodically homeless, which means they have been on the street or in shelters for at least six months. 59% of the young people we were working with were Indigenous, which is disturbing, but not surprising, given the oppressions of colonialism, poverty and other violence that young people face. The risks of violence and what is referred to as 'suicide' in the lives of Indigenous youth challenge our ethics to be accountable, and to structure whatever safety we can with this community (White, 2007). Indigenous Peoples make up only 5% of the population of British Columbia (BC).

Of our participants, 69% self-identified as trans. Since approximately 1% of the general population is trans, the fact that 69% of the youth experiencing homelessness we connected with identified as trans—most identifying as trans women—says much about who is left out of the LGBTQ2S movement, who is showing up on our streets, and who is staying outside.

Where We Stand: Unceded Indigenous Territory

This work and writing takes place on unceded territories of the Səlilwətaʔ (pronounced Tsleil-Waututh), Xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (pronounced Musqueam), and Sk̓w̓x̓w̓ú7mesh (pronounced Squamish) Nations. Our aim is to engage in decolonizing practice and ethics in our work. For those of us who are not Indigenous, that requires unsettling ourselves as settlers (Regan, 2010; Manuel, 2015) and working toward accountable partnerships with Indigenous Peoples, and being led in the work of decolonization by Indigenous Peoples and knowledges. In this project with queer, trans and two-spirit youth, we have an Indigenous cultural worker whose role is dedicated to centring Indigenous cultures as a site of resistance and healing. This is important structurally because Indigenous workers are often required to do the cultural and spiritual work of social programs with no pay attached and no recognition of the professionalism and knowledge this work requires. We also hold an ethical stance for doing justice, which means we aim to avoid replicating oppression and abuses of power in all domains of identity and social interaction. This requires that we educate ourselves about colonization, meaning invasion, occupation, genocide and assimilation (Hill, 2010), and about the persistence of Indigenous resistance every day since occupation (Richardson & Wade, 2008). Informed by Tuck & Yang (2012), we understand that naming decolonization is not a symbolic gesture, but requires a commitment to working toward Indigenous governance and land reclamation.

Structural Homelessness and the Medicalization and Psycholonization of Suffering

I think the problem with a program that expects everyone to be in the same place is that everyone is going to be in different places in their journey, which is perfectly okay. At one point, I wouldn't have been able to comply with abstinence; that was not an option for me. But there are different places suited for people depending where they're at.

A. M.

They utilize that, they take you where you're at, and put you where you need to be, and they work with you there. I wouldn't be in this house if I wasn't where I am right now. No one's unworkable.

S.

The structural causes of homelessness are often obscured by individualism and the usual suspects: addiction, mental illness and trauma. Questions about how people end up homeless occur within a constructed dialogue around personal choice and individual failings. This obscures the reality of both structural poverty and structural homelessness. Because of the systemic oppressive nature of poverty and homelessness, we understand this as structural legislative violence. Canada is the only G8 country without a National Housing Strategy. Our province, BC, has the highest rates of child poverty in Canada, and our last provincial budget provided no measures to address this. In Canada, the federal government abandoned the project of social housing in 1993. Poverty activists assured all levels of government that we were building a homeless nation, and we have done so. By the 1980s, homelessness became a normalized part of life in Canada, and we need to educate our children and students that homelessness has not always been a significant problem in Canadian society. We built this, but we can do better.

Given the dire nature of the social context in which queer, trans and two-spirit youth are made homeless, using the languages of trauma, addiction and mental illness to describe the experiences of youth struggling with homelessness and the structural problems that underlie homelessness does some powerful things to allow society to abdicate its responsibility to provide human rights and the necessities of living to all citizens. Instead,

the powerful languages of psycholonization, criminalization and medicalization construct social problems as if they are the individual's failures, which serves to blame two-spirit, trans and queer youth for their own suffering. Psycholonization (Todd & Wade, 2004) is a neologism for the interface between the practices of colonization and psychology, which create the 'client' as deficient and give the power to describe what is normal, sane, and acceptable from a Eurocentric and power-holding perspective. Medicalization, psycholonization and criminalization make sense of the experiences of two-spirit, trans and queer youth as if they are personally responsible for them, more specifically, locating the problems as if they exist inside the youth, occurring only in the landscape of their brain. The medicalization of terms like 'trauma' obscures violence and oppression, and constructs the youth's identity as flawed and stigmatized. The responses to their lives and the acts of resistance against these injustices by queer, trans and two-spirit youth are thus easily framed as the youth exhibiting symptoms of mental illness, trauma and addiction. This hides the youths' intentional, intelligent and resourceful resistance to oppression (Richardson & Wade, 2008; Reynolds, 2010a). Much of what two-spirit, trans and queer youth experience can be better understood as responses to violence and oppression, which happen in the social world where power is wielded by others and youth are oppressed.

Imperfect Allies

Most people would understand this is a safe space, and bringing any type of racism, homophobia or transphobia into this place is an unspoken...

A. B.

If it does pop up the staff, with help, take care of it.

H. L.

There have definitely been people that have come into this program who were ignorant to a few things, me being one of those people. I think my politics have gotten a thousand times better moving from a [small town] to here, you know? In the language that I use, the way I see myself as a queer person. A lot of things have changed.

A.B.

We feel it is important to note that this project would not have been possible without the help of many allies. These allies included straight and cisgender people who recognized how important it was for two-spirit, trans and queer young people to be safe in a world that still has so much hatred toward them. In activist cultures, an ally is a person who belongs to a group that has particular privileges, and who works alongside people from groups that are oppressed in relation to that privilege. The hope is to create change and increase social justice in relation to this oppression (Bishop, 2002; Reynolds, 2013). Acting as an ally is something we do, actions we take, not an identity. It is more useful to talk about ‘acting as an ally’ than ‘being an ally.’

When we experience oppression, we accept allies because we need them, not because it is safe or we have good reasons to trust each other. We invite good-enough allies, despite past acts that were not trustworthy, as imperfect allies are required when the stakes are high and risk is near. This fluidity, which is informed by queer theory, makes more room for imperfect allies, momentary allies, and moment-to-moment alliances, which are flawed and not safe, yet required and useful (Reynolds, 2010b). Challenging the binary of ally–oppressor, these imperfect alliances bring some trust for a degree of solidarity, and allow more accountable ally relationships to grow.

Our allies in this project include one person who, when asked to assist with funds, replied: “If there is one thing I can do in this bureaucratic job it’s going to be to house queer and trans kids.” We also needed a landlord to rent a house to us. In Vancouver, there is a zero-vacancy rate for rentals, so this was a major obstacle. We negotiated with a landlord who is not a member of two-spirit, trans or queer communities. He asked: “Where are their parents?” He could not understand that parents might not help their kids just because they were two-spirit, trans or queer. He was not connected to queer issues: he was just a decent person and a good father who wanted to help out. He comes to community dinners, and the youth are fond of him and respect him.

This project also required members of two-spirit, trans and queer communities to volunteer their time. Doctors, nurses and social workers volunteered their time as in-kind donations, so we could have both culturally safe care for the youth and meet the matching funds to release the grant money we had raised. The goal of this project was to have many two-spirit, queer, trans and gender-diverse people involved and so we asked them, and they agreed. But they did this work for free, and there are politics attached to that. The doctors, nurses and social workers showed up because they have experienced the impacts

themselves of not having health care that is sensitive and culturally competent. Many of the people who have volunteered or worked at this project have backgrounds of growing up disenfranchised as young people, or where home was not a safe place. Bringing that lived experience to this project was invaluable. But once again this work is on the backs of our communities of choice, who participate because we know people want to see themselves reflected in the services that are provided to them.

Gender Diversity as Identity—Not Diagnosis

Ethical, accountable and competent care is essential for two-spirit, gender-diverse and trans youth, as it is for all youth. But these communities have experienced specific abuse, neglect and oppressions from medical systems and practitioners that are life-threatening and limiting of life choices and experiences (Spade, 2011) based on their gendered identities. Historically, physicians and psychologists have been required to label trans people with the diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder or Gender Dysphoria in order for them to access services, and also as part of the history of medicalizing and pathologizing the profession's interactions with these communities (Strong & Busch, 2013). An ethic of this project is to move away from these labels and view gender diversity as identity and not diagnosis. This is necessary so that we are not pathologizing in our work with gender-diverse youth.

We recognize the 'policy of respect' (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute, 2003), which means that people self-identify in all their domains of identity, including gender. We are led by youth in this, and use and respect the specific words that fit for them. If we do not understand what they mean, we simply ask them. For instance, several youth use the term gender-nonconforming to describe themselves, but it means something very different to each of them. We are specific here about description and not definition, as we do not ask youth to explain or categorize themselves, but rather invite us into the language they are using (Hammoud-Beckett, 2007a, 2007b) and often co-creating within their communities to expand the realm of what is possible in identity for all of us. This policy of respect in action is an acknowledgement of potential power abuses that can cause us to objectify and invisibilize young people's identities and autonomy if we do not respect their language and identities.

Collective Ethics for Justice-Doing

The work of this project is radically collaborative, and our ethical intention is to be directed and informed by two-spirit, trans and queer youth in all aspects of the work. This requires that we construct collective ethics as a staff team, and work in solidarity to hold one another accountable to the ethics we value and claim (Reynolds, 2009; Reynolds & polanco, 2012). Collective ethics are those important points of connection that weave us together as community workers. Often collective ethics go unnamed, but they are the basis for the solidarity that brought us together and can hold us together. We have worked to name our collective ethics to invite a collective commitment to these ethics and create shared meanings and clearer agreements.

Just back on that cold detachment thing, when you have that 'us versus them' mentality, I think that's really damaging, especially growing up in foster care. When I was a kid of 10, 11, 12, not being able to be hugged as a kid because it's against the rules, I think that's really damaging, and I still kind of have intimacy issues. Sometimes it's hard to let people in and know it's okay to have real relationships.

A. N.

To kind of build off of that, one important thing is everyone here genuinely loves us, and it doesn't go unsaid either. There are times I've been hurting and Aaron at the end of a phone conversation says, "I love you buddy, you know that, right?" I feel that's a genuine statement. That's important. Other people won't be able to say that to people they care about and are working with because of institutionalism and professionalism.

A. B.

We wanted to develop a project that would be safer compared with the homophobia and transphobia youth were experiencing in general population shelters. It is very difficult to provide medical care or health care if young people are not housed. For trans and two-spirit youth, transitioning can be extremely problematic and risky, if not impossible, within a shelter setting. Experiencing homelessness often results in youth not being able to access health care. This should be viewed within the Canadian context as a human rights violation

because health care is supposed to be universally available to all Canadians. Youth have told us many stories of homophobia and transphobia they have experienced within the health care, housing and shelter systems. We wanted to create a project where youth could not only have a safe place to sleep at night, but also create community amongst themselves and two-spirit, queer and trans staff who might be able to demonstrate that maybe life can turn out okay, if you have the right supports in place. We wanted to wrap around them, give them those supports and use our personal experiences to assist in normalizing differences that are still ostracized and stigmatized in our culture. As one young person put it when visiting the project for the first time: “Wow, I’ve never been in a space where there were so many people like me.” The experience of being witnessed and seeing your identity reflected in the people who provide care can itself be healing.

The project was intentionally designed to be highly relational, meaning that the ethical stance of the work is centring our respectful and dignifying relationships with youth. Homelessness is often considered primarily an economic issue—a poverty issue—and is often simplified to frame poverty as a mental health or addictions issue, but young people have also taught us that homelessness is a social issue. Poverty plays a key role in homelessness, and it is important to note that housing these young people does not solve the poverty issue for them.

We are not all one paycheque away from being homeless: most of us have friends, family or social connections that, regardless of employment or income, protect us in material ways from homelessness. It is ingenuous to claim that because we might not be homeowners, “we are all one paycheque away from homelessness,” since preventing homelessness is not just a matter of simple economics. This myth obscures the privilege of hetero- and cisnormative social relations that provide a massive protection against homelessness. Black Lives Matter (2014) faces a backlash for not saying “all lives matter.” But the movement has taken its position to centre Black lives because anti-Black racism has a specific history, upheld by systemic patterns of slavery, lynching and impunity for murders, all of which requires a space of its own in which to speak to the complex history of oppression and violence. Likewise, there is a specificity about homophobia and transphobia that needs to be understood differently from other systems of oppression, and this requires unsettling hetero- and cisnormativity and making the violence of these normative forces visible. This complex analysis is directly related to the need for a two-spirit, queer and trans youth housing project because of the precarious lives this hatred constructs for these youth (White & Morris, 2010; Butler, 2004). Part of this precariousness is the context

of criminalization of two-spirit, trans and queer youth, which leads to their being “over-policed and under-protected” (Kushnick, 1999). We believe that changing the context of the lives of two-spirit, trans and queer youth experiencing homelessness will create more just options for everyone, as resistance in the margins always delivers more justice for everyone (Sin & Yan, 2003). Collective accountability for specific oppression of two-spirit, trans and queer youth is what we are inviting cisgender and heterosexual people to respond to as allies.

To protect two-spirit, trans and queer youth from homelessness we need to focus on building social connections and networked communities (Lacey, 2005), which are spaces of justice, and intentional communities with an ethic of belonging (Reynolds, 2002; Richardson & Reynolds, 2012). A key practice that enacts this commitment to the construction of a rich social fabric is community dinners. We have a community dinner each week at the communal house, and all youth in the program are invited, whether they live in the house or in an apartment across the Greater Vancouver Region. The youth are building relationships with one another, and creating street family and family of choice. We have had young people evicted, or whose housing did not work out for some reason, who did not have to go to a shelter while we found them new housing, because one of the other youth shared their apartment in the interim. This is proof that natural connections are necessary to protect youth in the long term from homelessness.

As workers, we need to have real relationships with youth, acknowledging that they are not just clients, but members of our community. As the Indigenous Cultural worker, Cori Kelly, said: “That old social work model, with boundaries that said you have to be way back here; we had to be really careful to not get too close and being too connected. Now we know that the danger isn’t being too connected. The danger is being too disconnected” (RainCity, 2014).

Housing First

For RainCity, Housing First (Tsemberis, 2010) is about removing barriers to housing and recognizing that it is very difficult for anyone to begin to change their life circumstances and respond to suffering, oppression and violence until they have safe housing. We do not view youth as broken or mentally ill and addicted—we understand them as unhoused and oppressed. Traditional housing approaches often require that people abstain from substance use or receive mental health care before having access to housing. Housing

First was a radical departure from that idea, but it was also a commonsense approach to responding to homelessness. It recognized that if we offered housing to people, they would then no longer have to spend all their energy struggling to live outside, and might begin to feel respected enough to want different outcomes in their lives. Housing First is increasingly being adopted and accepted as a valid and successful response to ending homelessness for adult populations, but it is still controversial for youth populations.

Most youth shelter and housing programs continue to require that youth abstain from substance use and adhere to regimented goal planning. This project does not create barriers to being housed. When we meet youth, we do not ask them to participate in psychiatric treatment or addiction care. We just ask them where they want to live, and where they would feel safe. Maybe they want to live with somebody else? Maybe they have a pet? And then they direct the outcomes. There are minimal choices in the housing market in Vancouver, but we offer as much choice as possible. Then we move them into housing and they do better. It works. Housing First allows people to make mistakes. This is an essential part of the program's usefulness. If a young person loses their housing, we have a conversation about what happened and then we house them again. We recognize that the loss of housing is their experience of loss and not ours (RainCity, 2014).

We humbly believe that we fundamentally do not understand how youth learn. Our society puts people in institutions where they cannot make mistakes. Youth have taught us that in their experiences of prison, and other institutional spaces, they do not learn life skills and autonomy, because their entire life is regimented. We do not see making mistakes as a bad thing, but rather as an opportunity to learn. For example, we have housed one youth five separate times. We just keep housing them, and every time they learn something new. Connected to our ethical position to trust youth with their own lives, we find that we are learning to be more useful alongside the youth, and this learning is exciting.

Our program utilizes a mixed model of housing that includes a communal house in a formerly working-class neighbourhood and independent rental arrangements. Youth can choose to live in the communal house or to live alone. We are being educated by witnessing the process of how youth have made the decisions about whether they want to live more collectively or individually. Some youth thought they would do well in one setting, but they have not, and some youth have had to move, but there has been learning in all of it for all of us. This aligns with a teaching from Housing First that there are no predictors of who will be successful in particular housing situations (RainCity, 2014).

Radical Harm Reduction: Resisting Barriers

The only reason I am clean now is because I was allowed to live my life and shoot up in the bathroom and everybody else was relatively uncomfortable about it. But it was understood. It's a huge fucking deal to be allowed to ask for what you need and go shoot up in the bathroom for 2 hours and then go nod off somewhere in a huge group of people. It's a huge gift. To have the space to do that.

K. R.

Being able to take the time, to take the step for yourself, not being forced to do something before you're ready.

A. B.

Yeah, like not being asked, When are you going to be clean? Have you thought about it yet? I thought that was going to be a prerequisite to being here, you know? The first time I was going to ask if I could go to the bathroom, I was so fucking scared, I thought I was going to lose my, like, eighth house in the past two years, you know?

K. R.

Can I just say that I think RainCity helps build a foundation for you to grow, mentally, spiritually and physically, in your own skin. Those three categories, I think they take them all into consideration.

S. T.

The barriers two-spirit, trans and queer youth face to access housing can be staggering, and can make housing difficult to keep. Requiring youth to be emotionally stable, substance-free, and involved in education or employment in order to get housing seems to us to be in the wrong order. First, you house youth, and then they can begin to make the changes they desire in their lives. What is often required of young people is that they have some treatment plans, some outcome goals, and are registered in education. There

are rigorous barriers in requiring youth to achieve all this while they are unhoused in order to get housed. Then youth have to behave in regimented, modulated measurable ways to keep their housing.

When two-spirit, trans and queer youth experience homelessness it is an issue of economic and social injustice. There is a lack of understanding of what two-spirit, trans and queer youth are dealing with that leads to expectations that youth be substance-free when they return to a shelter. If they are under the influence of substances, they are not allowed shelter, and have to sleep on the street. These are young people who have experienced extreme violence, oppression and loss. Of course some youth will respond to this suffering with substance use. We believe it is punitive to refuse housing because youth are responding to suffering in these ways. In order to access stable housing youth are often required, if they have been told they have a mental health diagnosis, to be in treatment or taking psychiatric medications or both. Every single youth in our project has at least one mental-health diagnosis, but not all of them choose to take or benefit from medication.

A large part of RainCity Housing's work has been with young people who were not able to access youth services because they were not able to meet the requirements for shelter. By the time they are old enough to show up at the shelters that we operate, the layers of suffering, trauma and loss are deep. It is irrational that society is so afraid of liability that we structure public shelters in ways that leave young people outside and sleeping on the streets until they are adults. Who is that safer for? How long does it take to get over being left outside, having people walking by you and often not seeing you suffer (RainCity Housing, 2014)?

This project centres work with youth from particular locations, but another solid outcome from the project is that it shows that Housing First ethics and practices work with youth. This expands the usefulness of the approach itself, which is generally used only with adults. This project was always exciting to us because it was about two-spirit, trans and queer folks, but that label partly hides what is actually happening here, which is that we are using Housing First and harm reduction strategies and philosophy with young people—and we are proving they work.

A Queer Orientation to the Work

It is both exciting and encouraging that, despite not being an LGBTQ2S organization, RainCity has created this project. RainCity is primarily a Housing First and harm reduction agency. This is a queer project, meaning we were intentional about centring queer culture and ethical ways of being as the frame for all our work. Everyone on our staff is Indigenous, two-spirit, trans and queer, which makes it very personal work. We are informed by intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1995), and so we know that despite the similarity of locations for both staff and youth being two-spirit, trans and queer, there are still important differences in access to resources and privilege, based on colonialism, racism, ableism, gender, economic class, migration status and family connection, to name a few. Within this intersectional analysis we create relationships through our points of connection, but we also work hard not to annihilate our differences, or smooth over the very real differences in privilege and disadvantage that still separate us.

Almost 50% of trans people will attempt what is referred to as ‘suicide’ at some point in their lives (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2010), and we are working with young people within that population who are further marginalized and oppressed. For us the language of suicide is problematic because we believe hate kills these youth. They do not take their own lives; their lives are stolen from them. Like much psychology language, the language of suicide blames two-spirit, trans and queer youth for killing themselves, when their deaths are better explained by the violence of transphobia and homophobia (Reynolds, 2016; Coates & Wade, 2004; 2007). This is risky work on many levels, especially personally, as our staff come from the same isolated and oppressed communities as the young people, and our workers are often personally connected to the same struggles as the youth. Therefore, it is essential to acknowledge that our workers are pretty amazing.

Immeasurable Outcomes

Nobody sitting here at the table wants to see anybody else here at the table going through any hard times or anything. They want to see everybody here succeed, right?

A. B.

I've had multiple people stay at my house in this program, because they were homeless, they were going to be homeless, or have been homeless.

H. L.

We work to track and name the immeasurable outcomes of our work, those outcomes not of interest to funders, but which speak to the heart of our work. The ineffable, intangible and untraceable influences of our collective work cannot be measured. Much of the work we do alongside two-spirit, trans and queer youth goes unmeasured for lack of an instrument of measurement, or because what we do achieve is not prioritized, or recognized as having value. This particularly includes our efforts to dignify youth, and foster safety and ‘unhappenings’—situations that do not get measurably worse because our work prevents them from getting worse (Vikki Reynolds, Keynote Address at Dignity Conference, Centre for Response Based Practice, Duncan, BC, May 2016).

In our relationships with two-spirit, trans and queer youth, we dignify them as people worthy of our respect. We repair dignity and co-create dignity. Dignity is something that we provide amongst ourselves as people. It is not something you have on your own (Allan Wade, personal communication, 2008), but occurs in social interactions, such as the community-building and relational centring so intrinsic to this project. It is difficult to measure a sense of connection, but we can point to 20 youth who are not alone: they are loved, and everyone involved in this project has contributed small acts to create a sense of belonging for these two-spirit, trans and queer youth.

We can measure risks, but safety is not a commodity that can easily be quantified. However, we can work towards ‘safe-r’ and ‘safe-enough’ (Bird, 2000, 2006). ways of being. In our work with youth, much changes in terms of their understanding of what they can do to be safe-r or safe-enough in the world. ‘Unhappenings’ are all those things that we cannot measure because they don’t happen, such as a trans youth who is no longer participating in survival sex work because he has six months free of substances, or a queer youth who does not consider suicide this time because they are belonged and connected within our community of care. How can we recognize these unhappenings that defy measurement? Our influence as community workers may be, not just immeasurable because it cannot be measured, but at times untraceable, and perhaps that is how it ought to be if our work is to remain truly youth-centred (Elaine Connolly, personal communication, 2008).

Interventions in line with the principles of Housing First, such as housing youth based on need of housing with no other barriers, cost less than police intervention. Without community responses such as this housing project, two-spirit, trans and queer homeless youth will be incarcerated and institutionalized, whether in psychiatric wards, prisons or visits to emergency departments. But having funding tied to desirable economic outcomes is frankly unethical, however effective it is as a strategy. We believe we should be housing all our children and young people because it is ethically required, not because it is cost-effective.

One of the youth in our program published a book. Another has a job working with kids. Social connections made it possible for these things to happen, and this is true for all of us. We cannot exist in isolation: that is what is killing our youth. And we cannot really make a chart that captures the profound meaning of these connections: loving two-spirit, trans and queer youth; putting a roof over their heads; offering health care that allows them to be who they are; offering culturally relevant engagement; and having communal dinners. They should have those things anyway, but they do not because of transphobia, because of homophobia, and because society did not value them because of who they are.

Hate Kills

*We are building a community here. We are actually building a community.
That's big.*

H.

“Homophobia and transphobia are so prevalent and powerful that they can actually convince parents to hate their own children.” (Aaron Munro, Keynote Address at Dignity Conference, Centre for Response Based Practice, Duncan, BC, May 2016). The power of hate is staggering, heart-wrenching and oppressive. The inspiration of Housing First principles and practices, a radical approach to harm reduction and the engagement with radical informed consent, which trusts two-spirit, trans and queer youth with their own lives, are foundational to our work. Our hope is that the imperfect responses we have had to two-spirit, trans and queer youth without homes are of use to others struggling to increase choices and access to the necessities of life for youth facing precarious lives in our society, young lives that were not provided with the promises of a just society.

Dedication

To the people we have worked with and been informed and transformed by, especially two-spirit, trans and queer people who did not have access to housing and respectful health care. To our Elders, whose often public and political suffering and resistance made it possible for us to take this action now. And, of course, to the young people who informed this project and survived this shit and who will make it softer for those who come after them.

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This work occurred on Indigenous territories of the Səlilwətaʔ, X^wməθkwəyəm and Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh Nations, which were never surrendered.

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Aaron is a Trans and Queer identified person who has worked on the unceded ancestral homelands of the Səlilwətaʔ, Xʷməθkʷə əwú7mesh peoples with people without homes or housing security for over a decade. He has struggled with what gets called “addiction” and “mental health issues” and uses this knowledge to know what he doesn’t know and this informs his approaches to responding to individuals and communities.

Vikki Reynolds, PhD, RCC

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Vikki Reynolds is a community activist, adjunct professor, and therapeutic trainer & supervisor who identifies as a white Irish Catholic Settler to these unceded Indigenous territories. Vikki is heterosexual and has cis privilege. She works to connect activist ethics for justice-doing with community work, and is honoured and humbled to be included in this project. Vikki has benefited immeasurably from teachings from the queer & gender non conforming partnerships and community connections, at their cost, and has an intention to work towards accountability for all of it. Her writing and talks are available for free at www.vikkireynolds.ca.

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Marria is a queer cis gender family physician who is passionate about improving health services to trans and gender diverse people. She is grateful to have been doing this work for the past decade on the unceded land of the Səlilwətaʔ, Xʷməθkʷə əwú7mesh peoples. In addition to providing gender affirming care in her clinical practice, she enjoys teaching and mentoring students, residents and other health care providers to better enable them to serve trans and gender diverse communities.