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# How Much Longer? A Preliminary Assessment of Homelessness in Conklin

Peter Fortna



## **Acknowledgements and Limitations**

This report discusses Conklin Resource Development Advisory Committee members' understanding of the homelessness crisis in Conklin, and is based upon three focus groups, individual meetings, and a verification meeting. The information detailed in this report is the intellectual property of CRDAC and the community of Conklin. The information presented herein accurately represents the community's lived experience; however, due to the relatively small sample of members who participated in the project, the report by no means represents the full extent of the Conklin homelessness crisis.

This report is meant for decision makers responsible for housing and homelessness in the community of Conklin. It is hoped that this information will encourage them to ask further questions, gather more information, and ultimately take action to address Conklin's homelessness crisis. Any other use of the information contained in this report is strictly prohibited without written permission from CRDAC.

The author would like to thank the many Conklin community members who shared openly and truthfully at the focus groups and afterwards in order to tell the story of the Conklin homelessness crisis. In particular, the author would like to those community members who brought this issue to the public's eye in the fall of 2017 as well as those who have continuously advocated on the community's behalf, sometimes for generations.<sup>1</sup>

It is the author's hope that your story will now be told and understood. If it is not, it is wholly the fault of the author.

Thank you to Jeffrey O'Donnell, David Berrade, Kim Desjarlais and the rest of the CRDAC's staff and leadership for asking me to facilitate the initial focus groups, and for providing the resources necessary to produce this report. Your unyielding faith and hope for a solution to the homelessness crisis astound me and will help to find an ultimate solution.

Also, a special thank you to Grace Richards for her continued support for the project, reviewing an initial draft and touring the author through the community. The author, unless otherwise cited, took all pictures in April 2018 and May 2018 during those community tours.

Thank you to Gretchen Albers for acting as my long-suffering editor, and helping to articulate those things that are so very hard to translate in a written form.

Finally, thank you to you the reader. We all have a role to play in finding a solution to this homelessness crisis. I truly hope that after reading this report you take action, and do everything in your power to help end the homelessness in Conklin. If you have any questions or comments, the author can be reached at 780-381-9168 or [peter@willowspringsss.com](mailto:peter@willowspringsss.com).

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<sup>1</sup> Cullen Bird, "Rural Hamlets Struggle with Housing Crisis," *Fort McMurray Today*, October 19, 2017, <http://www.fortmcmurraytoday.com/2017/10/19/rural-hamlets-struggle-with-housing-crisis>.

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## Introduction

Experiencing several years of intense growth prior to the 2008 global economic crisis did not make the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB) immune to its effects. By 2009, Canada's second largest municipality was faced with increased poverty, housing shortages, and real-estate market inflation: a recipe for homelessness. In response—and in conjunction with the provincial government's "A Plan for Alberta: Ending Homelessness in 10 Years"—the RMWB released its own ten-year plan (2010–20) for tackling homelessness.<sup>2</sup> The RMWB was named the community-based organization responsible for distributing federal and provincial funds to grassroots community organizations, ideally ensuring that housing plans were tailored to meet local needs and circumstances. These coordinated efforts shared a "Housing First" philosophy, which is in line with provincial standards on housing case management, outcome-based contracting, rapid re-housing, and identification of local priorities.<sup>3</sup>

Although the local ten-year plan does not differentiate between rural and urban communities, until very recently the RMWB has taken little, if any, action to address homelessness in the rural hamlets.<sup>4</sup> In fact, all levels of government to date have been slow to respond to the developing housing crisis in the rural hamlet of Conklin, located 150 kilometres south of Fort McMurray. This is despite repeated efforts of community members and community-based organizations to secure funding to address the crisis.<sup>5</sup> Conklin is a primarily Métis community whose history spans nearly 150 years in the area. They are represented by the Conklin Resource Development Advisory Committee (CRDAC), which, in response to the lack of concrete action taken by various levels of government, has attempted to explain the severity of the homelessness crisis to those responsible for providing social housing in the community.

CRDAC is a community organization that represents Conklin Métis Local 193 (ML193) and the Conklin Community Association (CCA) while interfacing with government and industrial developers in the region. Although they are very aware of housing issues in the community, the CRDAC is not a government entity and does not have the capacity or the authority to raise taxes or administer housing programs in the community. However, due to the failure of all other levels of government to provide housing and shelter for the unsheltered, emergency sheltered, provisionally accommodated, and those at risk of homelessness in Conklin,<sup>6</sup> community members are increasingly looking to their local advocacy organizations to broadcast the urgency of this issue.

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<sup>2</sup> Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, "Heading Home: The Right Thing to Do. 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness, 2010–2020" (Fort McMurray: RMWB, 2009), [http://www.woodbuffalo.ab.ca/living\\_2227/Social-Support-Services/Asset1316.aspx](http://www.woodbuffalo.ab.ca/living_2227/Social-Support-Services/Asset1316.aspx).

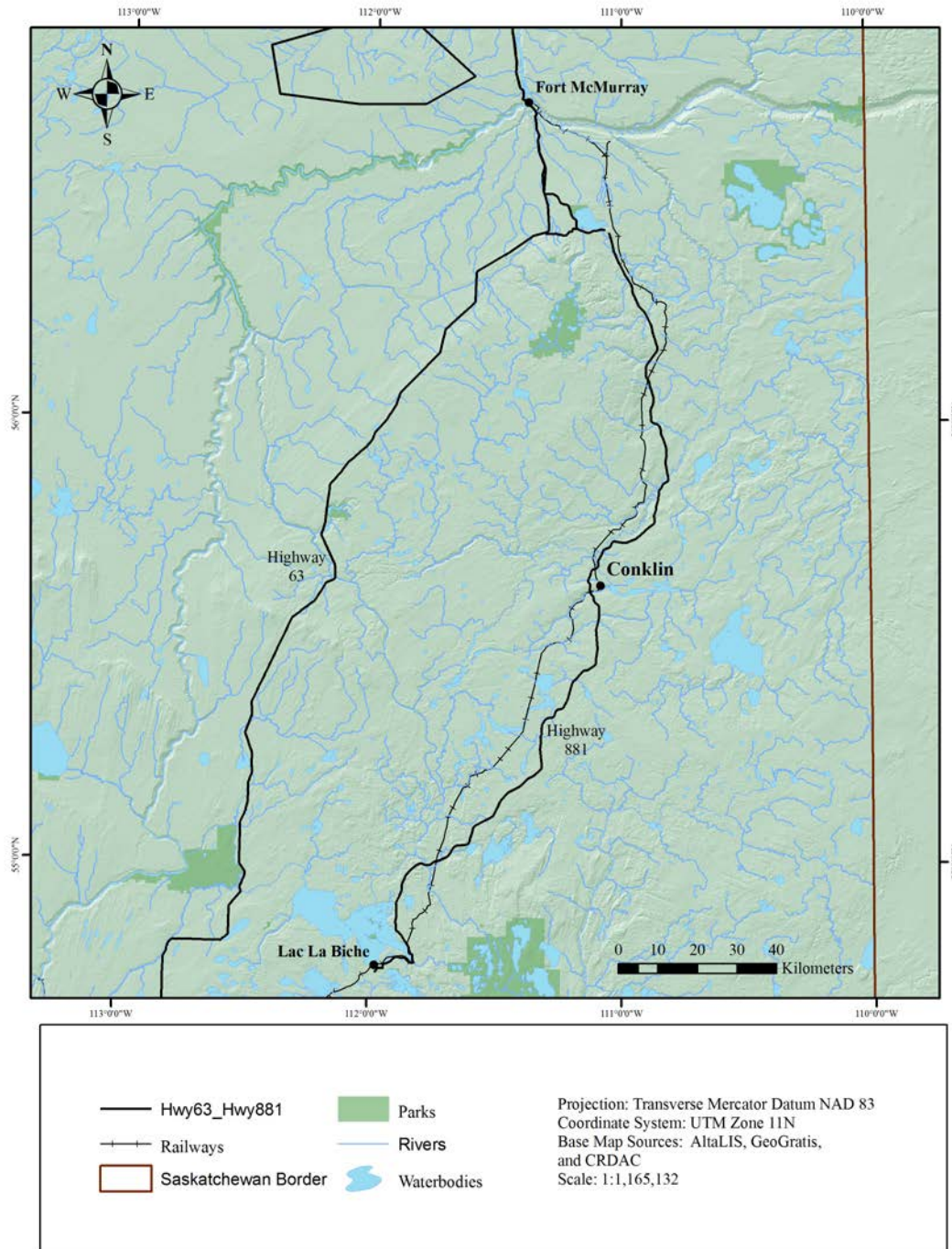
<sup>3</sup> Government of Alberta, Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness, "A Plan for Alberta: Ending Homelessness in 10 Years" (Edmonton, Government of Alberta, 2008), <http://www.humanservices.alberta.ca/homelessness/14601.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Personal communication, Linda Thompson-Brown, Manager, Neighbourhood and Community Development, Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB), March 5, 2018. On March 7, 2018, the RMWB Council announced that they would undertake a "rural" point-in-time count and develop a rural homelessness strategy. Laura Beamish, "Council Approves Funds for Non-Profits and Homelessness Plan," *Fort McMurray Today*, March 6, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> CRDAC to Hon. Minister Sabir, re: Government of Alberta Funding to Address Rural Homelessness, October 13, 2016; CRDAC to Hon. Minister Sigurdson, re: Government of Alberta Off-Settlement Housing in Conklin, Alberta, September 1, 2017. In response to a draft version of this report, Minister Sabir hosted a meeting with leadership from the CRDAC on April 3, 2018. At that meeting the leadership requested that the minister visit and tour the community to see the homelessness situation, but they are still awaiting his reply.

<sup>6</sup> S. Gaetz et al., *Canadian Definition of Homelessness* (Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press, 2012).

## Conklin, Alberta



It is unclear exactly why various levels of government have failed for generations now to address the housing crisis in Conklin. But it has not helped that the multiple jurisdictions responsible for delivering housing programs in rural Indigenous communities continuously foist the blame on one another.<sup>7</sup> Conklin's situation is not unique: many Indigenous people live in subpar housing

<sup>7</sup> Jesse Thistle describes this situation as follows: "The constant failure of siloed federal, provincial, territorial and municipal bureaucracies to communicate effectively and work together to deliver services to Indigenous individuals

and have limited input into local programs, while bureaucrats at various government levels debate who is responsible for providing housing in their communities. But it is important to understand that in Conklin this bureaucratic failure is happening while governments approve and benefit from multibillion-dollar industrial projects in the same area, deeming them to be in the “public interest” while the people most affected by those developments are further marginalized.

This report is primarily based upon focus groups held in the community on November 14, 2017, follow-up meetings held in December 2017, as well as a final validation meeting held in April 2018. A more comprehensive project—one that includes historical research, point-in-time counts, statistical analysis, and program reviews—is required to fully understand the extent of homelessness in Conklin. These limitations aside, approximately sixty people—representing the demographics of youth, adults, and Elders— participated in the November focus groups. An additional twenty people have participated in various verification meetings.<sup>8</sup> In these meetings, nearly every participant felt they were negatively affected by the housing crisis in the community, with a majority of participants likely meeting the Canadian definition of homeless by being either unsheltered, emergency sheltered, provisionally sheltered, or at risk of homelessness. The concerns were visually documented via photographs taken with community members.<sup>9</sup> Specific stories and photographs of Conklin homelessness are woven throughout this report, so that readers can understand the situation through community members’ own eyes and words.

The report uses Jesse Thistle’s definition of Indigenous homelessness, as outlined in his *Definition of Indigenous Homelessness in Canada* (2017), to organize key themes and perspectives. In his study, Thistle argues that Indigenous homelessness is distinct from the four different types of homelessness outlined in the Canadian definition. Indigenous homelessness is better understood as “the outcome of historically constructed and ongoing settler colonization and racism that have displaced and dispossessed First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples from their traditional governance systems and laws, territories, histories, worldviews, ancestors and stories.”<sup>10</sup> Thistle goes on to outline twelve dimensions of Indigenous homelessness—all of which, in one way or another, are experienced by people in Conklin.

The report is organized into three main sections. The first section explains the historic and contemporary contexts that have contributed to homelessness in the community. The second section examines the specifics of the current homelessness crisis in Conklin. The third section forwards a number of preliminary recommendations for various levels of government that were expressed during the community focus groups. By bringing this information together, it is hoped that the government agencies responsible for housing in the community will finally come together and work with local leaders to address this issue.

Again, the current study has a limited scope and budget and was financed exclusively by

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and communities has been colloquially described as ‘passing the buck,’ which also leads to easily preventable forms of Indigenous homelessness.” See Jesse Thistle, *Indigenous Definition of Homelessness in Canada* (Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press, 2017), 18.

<sup>8</sup> In this document, when focus group participants are referenced, it is by the focus group: Youth, Adult, Elder. The page number from each focus group is also included, but personal identifiers have been removed.

<sup>9</sup> Grace Richards took the author through the community in April 2018 to visit with community members and request permission to take photographs of their homes. All the photos were taken by the author and used with permission of the home owners.

<sup>10</sup> Thistle, *Indigenous Homelessness*, 6.

CRDAC.<sup>11</sup> It is CRDAC's hope that the various levels of government and their associated agencies will use this preliminary evidence to undertake a more detailed study in partnership with the Conklin community in order to understand the full extent of the crisis and provide the resources necessary to address the crisis. As the 2008 Alberta government's plan to end homelessness states: "Fellow Albertans don't belong on the streets or in emergency shelters. Instead, they should be moved into housing and given support to address their challenges, restore stability, and attain greater self-reliance. Each of them deserves the opportunity to succeed."<sup>12</sup> The residents of Conklin hope that after reading this report, the appropriate government departments will agree to work with them to give them an opportunity to succeed and have a safe place to rest their heads every night.

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Indigenous Homelessness is different than other types of homelessness experienced by Canadians, and has its roots in the historic realities that transformed what was almost exclusively Indigenous "space" into non-Indigenous space over a roughly 150-year period in western Canada.<sup>13</sup> In *Indigenous Definition of Homelessness in Canada*, Jesse Thistle explains how conditions prompted by Canadian colonialism have led to Indigenous people being moved into marginal geographic areas without the means necessary to build a successful community: conditions in which "poverty, poor housing, and economic disadvantage" are normalized.<sup>14</sup> For Thistle, the concept of Indigenous homelessness can only be understood once the Indigenous concept of "home" is also defined. He convincingly argues that for Indigenous people, "home" is a "web of relationships and responsibilities involving connections to human kinship networks; relationships with animals, plants, spirits, and elements; relationships with the Earth, lands, waters and territories; and connection to traditional stories, songs, teachings, names, and ancestors."<sup>15</sup> For Thistle, Indigenous people's "home" is about more than having a safe place to rest your head every night. It is also about having a meaningful relationship with fellow community members and the surrounding environment that has provided for the community through generations. Understanding Indigenous conceptions of "home" makes Indigenous "homelessness" all the more troubling. For Indigenous communities like Conklin, home is about a "rootedness" that flows from having a healthy environment, healthy community, and healthy place to end each night, things many in the community today do not have. This reality adds to existing social, cultural, and spiritual problems in the community. Addressing the lack of safe physical structures for people will be an excellent start to addressing Conklin homelessness, but steps also need to be taken to tackle related problems, such as "being without healthy social, cultural, spiritual, emotional and physical relationships."<sup>16</sup> As noted in the recommendations, a housing program needs to include wraparound services that will help Conklin rebuild an Indigenous home.

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<sup>11</sup> Grant applications submitted to the Alberta Rural Development Network were denied in early 2018, while the RMWB has stated that its ten-year plan to end homelessness only provides funding to deal with homelessness in the urban area.

<sup>12</sup> Government of Alberta, "A Plan for Alberta," 2.

<sup>13</sup> Thistle, *Indigenous Homelessness*, 15. Also see Ian McKay and R. Wright, "The Liberal Order Framework: A Prospectus for Reconnaissance of Canadian History," *Canadian Historical Review* 81, no. 4, 617–45; Irene Spry, "The Tragedy of the Loss of the Commons in Western Canada," in *As Long as the Sun Shines and Water Flows: A Reader in Canadian Native Studies*, ed. Ian A.L. Getty and Antoine S. Lussier (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> Thistle, *Indigenous Homelessness*, 8.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

It is within this context that Thistle goes on to describe twelve dimensions of Indigenous homelessness. While some of the dimensions are more well defined in the report than others, together they help to describe the homelessness situation that is disproportionately affecting Indigenous communities in Canada. Conklin community members found the twelve dimensions useful in understanding their own homelessness crisis that has been developing for generations. Community members have requested that this report use the twelve dimensions as the lens through which to view homelessness in their community and to contextualize community members' words as found later in the report.<sup>17</sup> As such, the report will describe how the twelve dimensions of homelessness identified by Thistle can be applied to the Conklin context, and use this as a form of introduction to the last section where community members' concerns are expressed in their own words.

The homelessness crisis is the primary issue facing Conklin today, and contributes to many other social, cultural, spiritual and psychological problems in the community. When focus group participants were asked whether they or their immediate family were either homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, over 50 percent raised their hands. The Conklin homelessness crisis was well articulated by one focus group participant:

Everybody's waiting for me to talk ... I was asked to come here because of my housing situation. Which is a little hut, tonight. I built it out of scraps, it's kind of emotional. All my other kids, they're older, they moved away, because I live in a one-bedroom camper. They considered it ghetto ... To build it, I had to use scraps, scrap wood, and it leaks. My camper's getting mouldy now, because I'm not a carpenter. I have an old stove, which was made in like, 1988. The door doesn't close, so I use this big bar against the wall. I got a door from the garbage, [near] where the old log houses [are], around there.

I live on my mom's lot, which is a lot, because my mother and I never got along. I have to pay her. I use wood now, because I couldn't afford propane. My dad said I could live there, as long as I wanted, but now that he's gone I'm kicked to the curb. But, I'm stubborn, and I don't care, and she can just ... whatever.

I get power from her garage. I can't even plug a heater, or a hotplate to cook ... it cuts out. It's cut off a lot. I have a nine-year-old son, who sleeps on a couch. I let him go sleep on my bed, and then when he's sleeping, I move him into the kitchen, on the couch. And I've been living like this for five years. No help. Yes, I got help this year, but that's just to kinda skirt my house,<sup>18</sup> which I don't even own.

My sewer's been backed up for over a year, I can't get it sucked out, because none of these companies around here do that. I have to pay \$80 bucks, from \$65 bucks to \$80 bucks, for a little camper, when all these houses get free sewer. By this year, my sewer's gonna explode, I'll be having my house on a pile of shit and me and my kid

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<sup>17</sup> Conklin Community Validation Session, December 7, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> “*Mobile Home Skirting* – (Noun) A term often used to describe a non-structural enclosure of a foundation crawl space. Typically, but not always, it is a lightweight material such as vinyl or metal, attached to the side of the structure, extending to the ground (generally, not installed below frost depth). Definition from *Mobile Home Investing* <https://www.mobilehomeinvesting.net/mobile-home-skirting-a-complete-guide-mobile-home-skirting-investor/>.



will be breathing that in.

People say it's hard. No one doesn't know how hard it is. How depressing it is. I can't work, I can't qualify for these houses that come in. 'Cause I don't have a job. I apply, apply, apply ... but I don't get hired. I have a fricking apprentice in auto mechanics, heavy duty mechanics, can I get a job? No, I'm a woman, at that time, when I first got here. Or, I'm not from here. How many times was I told that? I couldn't even vote, I don't have a Métis card, because I can't afford it. And then when I was working, my bills went to my kids. I have kids that are living in Fort McMurray. Who lived with an abusive dad, and I had to let them go, because I have no home. I have a son who is homeless in Edmonton. God knows how he is, I don't. My daughter, I'm proud to say she's doing well, she has met a very good family to live with, and her mother-in-law loves her. My son gets hit from his abusive dad. My baby goes to school with an empty stomach, and he's told to be a man. No one doesn't know how hard that is. I have a grandson, he got taken away from [me and sent to] the grandparents of my ex-husband, because they said my house ain't fit. I kept him for three years. He's four, he just turned four, and as soon as he turned four, he's gone. I haven't seen him. I haven't seen my baby since September. I know the talk around town that I'm a drunk, I ain't no damn drunk. Come look at my house. See how many times you see me sober, it's every day.

I live off the land and the food bank here, which isn't much sometimes. It doesn't apply to my housing. I leave the town, I come back, my cans are exploded. I throw that shit away. I'm not gonna feed that to my baby. That's every single time.

My floor is cold as hell. I wear my shoes in my house. No one doesn't know. The housing sucks out here. It does. They're afraid to look at how people live. I don't know what to say. Yes, I would love a house, because there's times when I have to send my son to my mom's. She wrote us a nasty letter. We're not allowed there. I got power cut off. She will not let us have water, I use two five-gallon jugs, every second day I'll go fill it up. I have to give her money. She acts like a saint. She's ain't no fucking saint. She's evil. People can't see that.

All my life I've been through this. No place, just making my ends meet. See how many people can live off and support their son on \$300 dollars a month, and plus clothe him. I don't get help, I don't qualify for anything, pretty much. This housing thing, doesn't apply for me. I know that. I wish I had a power saw, so I could go cut my own wood. I didn't have a big enough house, they said, to keep warm. I paid, or I would go get other people wood, so I could at least have two weeks of supply. That's how I live here. No one doesn't know.

I still keep a happy face, this is the first time anybody ever seen me cry, and it's depressing. I feel small. And that's all I gotta say. I want a house. I wanna be able to have me and my son where he can have his own room, he's got TV, he's got his game, it's at [community member]'s, in the basement. When she goes [to] town or leaves [for a] meeting here or whatever, she locks the door. My baby, if I'm not home, my baby's locked out. Or else she'll tell him, "I don't want you here. Go to your mom's." I can't take nothing, I can't take his clothes, 'cause we don't have room. Everything's piled in little bags. I feel like a bag lady. What's in this one? Oh, yeah.

No. My kids can't even come stay with me. And that evacuation, I don't wanna say nothing, my kids couldn't come stay with me, because of my mom. She don't want my damn kids there. Damn kids. Yes, we're damned, and I feel it. No one doesn't know how hard [it is] to raise a kid.

I told him not long, five years ago ... So he asks me, "How much longer, Mom?" [I] tell him, "Not long." I didn't know what else to say. Not long. Been here for years, moved away, came back, moved away. Lived at [community member's] get kicked out ... Belittled ... It's not right, and I don't have no one to turn to, because inside, I have too much pride. The only person I could talk to was my dad. He's gone. Like he said, once he's gone, I'm alone. And he's so right. And that's all I gotta say, about your housing---<sup>19</sup>



Above you can see the photograph of the quoted community member's home. For five years, she has shared this space with her children and grandchildren, some of whom circulate from being homeless to being marginally housed. In her story you can feel her pain, hopelessness, frustration, as well as strength; you can also come to understand the situation facing Conklin as a whole, a homelessness crisis of monumental standards. The failure of the system to provide support in the community has forced her to make her temporary housing permanent, placed extreme strain on her personal and family relationships, and likely contributed to her son becoming homeless in Edmonton. The trailer that she lives in is unsafe and unsanitary, putting

<sup>19</sup> Adult Focus Group, November 14, 2017, p. 15–17.

her and her children's health at risk and making it difficult if not impossible to access the social services she needs.

Perhaps the scariest thing about the above quote is that the community member's experience is not unique, and many people in Conklin can directly relate. As will be shown in the remainder of the report, the homelessness crisis being experienced in Conklin has significant ramifications, a long history, and has been ignored for far too long. It is hoped that this report will help lead to the change that Conklin deserves.

### **Conklin Homelessness Understood within Historic and Contemporary Context**

Jesse Thistle begins his analysis by explaining that homelessness in Indigenous communities needs to be situated within its historical and contemporary context: the processes that displaced Indigenous communities and nations from their precolonial Indigenous lands.<sup>20</sup> In Conklin, this process is described at length in the community history and traditional land-use study, *Kayas Achimona, Stories from a Long Time Ago: Preliminary Baseline of a Traditional Occupancy and Use Study*.<sup>21</sup> *Kayas Achimona* shows how the ancestors of the current community were first subject to the Métis scrip system in the late nineteenth century, which worked to alienate the Conklin community from its traditional land base.<sup>22</sup> Indigenous organizer Joe Dion wrote a letter dated September 15, 1932, to P.G. Davies, his local member of Parliament, describing the "Conklin situation": "No doubt it was with all good intentions that the government at that time had these scrips issued, but they were simply the cause of bad feeling and mistrust afterwards, and the Half-breed has not got over that yet."<sup>23</sup>

Conklin community members were not able to translate their scrip applications into a local land base, and instead community members continued to use the land in common, as they had for generations. The situation began to change in the 1920s when the local railway was completed, and community members found new economic opportunities. Community members would move near what was to become the "Conklin" rail-stop near Christina Lake to work in the summer months, while in the winter they would practice a traditional Métis lifestyle of gathering, hunting, trapping, and fishing.<sup>24</sup> This colonial process would transform Conklin from a community that lived a traditional lifestyle on common land into "squatters" living on "Crown land" without a legal title to areas they had lived on for generations. The importance of this transformation cannot be overemphasized, and continues to have serious ramifications for Conklin as community members try to address the present homelessness situation.

In the 1930s, Euro-Canadian trappers began to move into the region, putting increased pressure on the existing population. The situation was such that in 1933 non-Métis settlers were trapping "game animals for commercial purposes beyond permit limitations, intimidating, restraining and suppressing Métis trappers from exercising their right to a lawful livelihood and other activities detrimental to the Métis and the game commission"<sup>25</sup> Partly as a response to this incursion,

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<sup>20</sup> Thistle, *Indigenous Homelessness*, 10.

<sup>21</sup> Conklin Métis Local 193, *Kayas Achimona, Stories from a Long Time Ago: Preliminary Baseline of a Traditional Occupancy and Use Study* (Conklin: Conklin Métis Local 193, 2012).

<sup>22</sup> The history of scrip within the context of the Conklin community is well described in Neil Reddekopp, "Conklin as an Aboriginal Community: A Legal Perspective," in *Kayas Achimona*, Appendix A.

<sup>23</sup> Joe Dion to P.G. Davies, Glenbow M125, box 16 revised to Glenbow M-125-27, pp. 16–17. Originally cited in Dennis Wall, *The Alberta Métis Letters: 1930–1940, Policy Review and Annotations* (Edmonton: DWRG Press, 2008), 108–9.

<sup>24</sup> Conklin, *Kayas Achimona*, 19–25.

<sup>25</sup> Provincial Archives of Alberta, acc #75. box 4a, p. 131. Originally cited in Wall, *Métis Letters*, appendix, 71.

community members began to organize, looking to protect their interests and provide all the things growing communities require: schools, health care, land title, and so on. Conklin community members helped to found the L'Association des Métis d'Alberta et des Territoires du Nord West, the precursor of the Métis Nation of Alberta, and began the process of advocating for the creation of a Métis settlement in the area around Conklin.<sup>26</sup> The Alberta government did not recognize such a settlement, further institutionalizing Conklin as a “landless” community. As described by a community member at the adult focus group:

That would've been our land cause there was a native settlement before 166 acres land here we had our own. And we tried to fight that case and there's no such thing as native land here before. But I had those papers, there was 166 acres of native land here for free native Conklin people. And now we gotta pay you know, the industries and companies taking our land here and they're kicking us out. And we can't even... Should've been our land and [it] never came, we could've just stayed there, that would have been good.<sup>27</sup>

As Conklin advocated for the creation of a Métis settlement, the Alberta government was developing what would become the Registered Fur Management Area system, colloquially called the trapline system.<sup>28</sup> The Alberta government and the Métis people in Conklin were attempting to solve the same problem: namely, the encroachment of Euro-Canadian trappers and settlers onto Indigenous lands in the region. Interestingly, while the Métis were pushing for a system that would entrench their Indigenous governance by creating a collectively owned settlement, the Alberta government privileged a liberal governance model in which land use was individualized. Traditional common land management practices would eventually be usurped by the allotment of traplines or trapping areas to individuals.

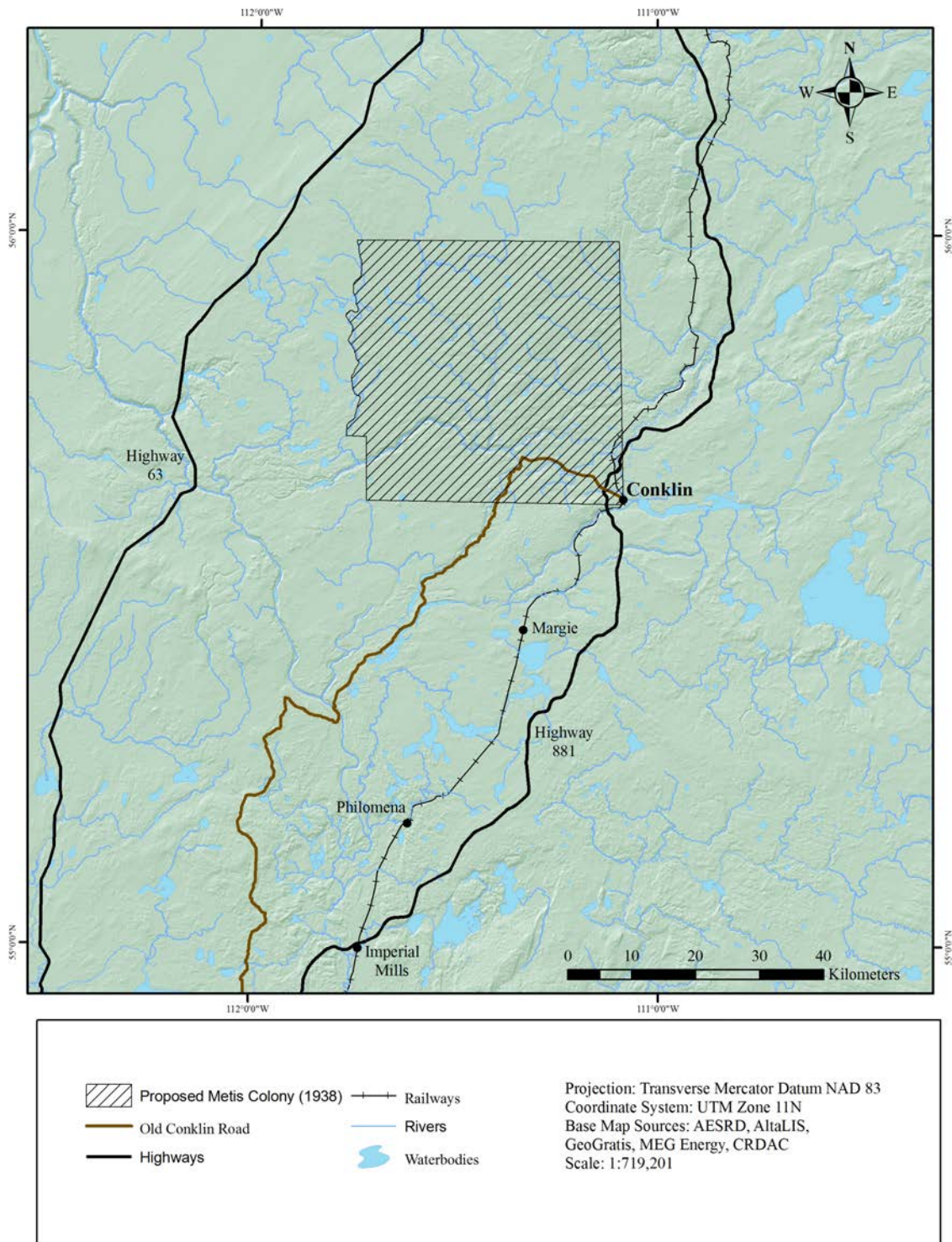
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<sup>26</sup> Conklin, *Kayas Achimona*, 58–64.

<sup>27</sup> Adult Focus Group, p. 24.

<sup>28</sup> For a full history of the RFMA system see Peter Fortna, “Do These Deskmen Think a Trapper with a Family Can Afford Beef?: Traplines, Métis Land-Use, and Aboriginal Rights, 1899–1980” (paper presented at the Metis Rights, Land Use, and Consultation Seminar, Fort McMurray Public Library, 2015), <http://www.willowspringsss.com/blog/-do-these-deskmen-think-a-trapper-with-a-family-can-afford-beef-traplines-metis-land-use-and-aboriginal-rights-1940-1980>; Dawn Balazs, *A Short Analysis of the Transfer of Natural Resources to Alberta in 1930 and a Preliminary Study of the Registered Trapline System* (Treaty and Aboriginal Rights Research [TARR] of the Indian Association of Alberta, March 1976). For an analysis of how the RFMA system potentially impacts Indigenous rights, see Monique Passelac-Ross, *The Trapping Rights of Aboriginal Peoples in Northern Alberta* (Calgary: Canadian Institute of Resource Law, 2005), <http://dspace.ucalgary.ca/bitstream/1880/47194/1/OP15Trapping.pdf>. For specific Conklin context, see Conklin, *Kayas Achimona*, esp. 45–57.

*Proposed Métis Settlement in Conklin 1938.<sup>29</sup>*



<sup>29</sup> This is the settlement proposed by Modeste Cardinal to James Brady, October 21, 1938. Glenbow, M-125-23. This information was passed onto the Government of Alberta by James Brady on April 6, 1939. Francis Buck, Chief Métis Administrator of the Métis Committee of the Bureau of Relief and Public Welfare, Social Credit Government, responded to Brady's request by stating that "at the present time, there are ten areas being set up" and that those had to be dealt with first. Glenbow M-125-25, p. 37 & 39. These documents are cited in Wall, *Métis Letters*, 176.

When the RFMA program was initiated in the late 1930s and 1940s, efforts were made to protect the interests of trappers who already lived and used the land in the region. Traplines remained in families, and communities like Conklin continued to trap commercially, but also used traplines as launching points to carry on their other traditional land-use pursuits. This early policy choice helped to mask the transformation of communal ownership to individual trapline ownership, but over time, and coupled with further policy changes,<sup>30</sup> traplines once owned by Métis community members were sold to non-community members. To provide context, it has been estimated that around 1960, approximately 90 percent of traplines in the Conklin's traditional territory were owned by Métis Conklin community members; in 2014 Conklin community members owned approximately 10 percent of traplines in the community's traditional territory.<sup>31</sup> This has had the effect of separating Conklin community members from their traditional territories and placing increased pressure on existing resources.



*R.K. Martin stands in front of a wall of furs, Conklin, Alberta, 1942. Glenbow Museum and Archives, PA-2218-210.*

As the trapline system was being instituted, the land and housing situation in northern Alberta was reaching a boiling point. In the late 1960s and early 1970s the Alberta government began to actively enforce game and land laws it had previously ignored. One of the changes that especially affected the community was the active enforcement of hunting laws that stated each family could only harvest one tagged moose every fall. Dumas Tremblay, president of the Conklin Métis Local, expressed his concern about this change in a letter to the Métis Nation of Alberta in 1972:

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<sup>30</sup> Balazs, "A Short Analysis," esp. 99–150.

<sup>31</sup> Fortna, "Do These Deskmen."

While on the subject of fish and game we notice that laws are becoming more stringent every year for the native people in the north eastern part of the province and at the same time more outsiders including Americans are coming further north to hunt. These laws are made in the south by the people that know very little and care less about conditions in our portion of Alberta. Our association should insist on a representative from every local be present when these games laws are under discussion, otherwise we will be forced right out of our own country by people who are foreigners to us. Thirty years ago a bushman was allowed to kill a moose for himself and family when needed, now a man with six or seven children is allowed one moose a year, providing he buys a license and kills it within a specific time. Do these desk men think a trapper with a family can afford beef? They could care less. It seems to us that the above state of affairs has already gone too far the moose that they are hoarding so carefully are hunted for sport, and left in the bush for the ravens. Conditions like these could lead to another Riel Rebellion. About all we need is a Riel to start it.<sup>32</sup>

This displaced Conklin community members from both their homes and traditional hunting grounds. For example, in the late 1960 and early 1970s, the Conklin Métis Local petitioned the Métis Association of Alberta to work to obtain land from the Alberta government<sup>33</sup> and to adjust the hunting and fishing laws to better reflect the common practices that had developed over generations.<sup>34</sup> The letters sent between 1969 to 1973 from Conklin to the Métis Association of Alberta detail the challenges faced by the Conklin community as they attempted to protect their community's rights. These challenges were not unique to the Métis of northern Alberta who did not obtain a Métis settlement. A 1971 briefing note from the Métis Association of Alberta to the Alberta government titled "The Métis People and the Land Question in Alberta" succinctly outlined the problems experienced by Métis people in northern Alberta:

Notwithstanding the settlements program, since the turn of the century the Metis people on the whole in Alberta have been a forgotten people. They have been, of all the racial and ethnic groupings in Alberta, the people who have reaped the least of the benefits of social, economic and political advancement in the province, and who have suffered historically the most incredible levels of privation on all fronts. As we have attempted to indicate briefly in this historical section of our brief, that privation has been closely linked at all times with the specific status of the Metis people with respect to the land question, and with the wishes of the Metis people to preserve a traditional way of life in face of the advance of white society into the northwest. Now that the game is up, now that there is no longer a possibility of retreat, now that we are accepting the need to come to terms with the predominance of white society and its norms and values in Alberta, our future is tied to the land question just as thoroughly as our past has been tied to the land question.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Dumas Tremblay to the Métis Nation of Alberta, September, 25, 1972. Glenbow Museum and Archives, Métis Association of Alberta Papers, 1892–1979, location M4755, file 465.

<sup>33</sup> Conklin Métis Local 116, "Petition Arising out of a Community Meeting at Conklin, Alberta: December 6, 1969," Glenbow Museum and Archives, Métis Association of Alberta Papers, 1892–1979, location M4755, file 465.

<sup>34</sup> Fortna, "Do these Deskmen." Also see Glenbow Museum and Archives, Métis Association of Alberta Papers, 1892–1979, location M4755, file 465, and Conklin, *Kayas Achimona*, esp. 45–57.

<sup>35</sup> Métis Association of Alberta, "The Métis People and the Land Question in Alberta," 1971, Provincial Archives of Alberta (PAA), GS 79.152, Métis-Societies, box 8.

Throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s community members continued to press the government for the creation of the Métis settlement that was first requested in the 1930s. The lack of an established Métis settlement did not dissuade Conklin community members from continuing to build their community, in some cases building houses “wherever they wanted because there were no taxes; there was nothing here.”<sup>36</sup> Some community members obtained 99-year “miscellaneous leases” from the government, but the histories of these leases is unclear, and it seems few if any community members hold them today.<sup>37</sup>

The election of the Progressive Conservative government in Alberta initiated a new era in Alberta politics, and this shift affected northern Métis communities the same as it affected all Albertans. One of the first initiatives undertaken by Premier Lougheed was the creation of the Alberta Bill of Rights in 1972. While it has been argued that the Bill of Rights established the foundations for a number of the exclusionary principles—institutionalizing censorship, eugenics, and racism—it also entrenched private property rights as fundamental to Albertan equality.<sup>38</sup> The problem in northern Alberta was that the majority of the citizens did not own the land upon which they lived, transforming them in the eyes of the government into “squatters” on their own land.<sup>39</sup> To help address this situation, the newly elected government established a “Métis housing program” in partnership with “the Métis association of Alberta and its community member groups.”<sup>40</sup> In 1973–74, the program was described as follows:

The overall objective of the Metis Housing Program is to provide adequate housing for those natives who do not have or are unable to provide their own housing at an acceptable standard. In sponsoring a Metis Housing Program, the Alberta Housing Corporation, in cooperation with the Office of Northern Development, will attempt to satisfy the following goals:

- (a) Establish a provincial responsibility for providing housing assistance to Metis people.
- (b) Assist in upgrading the housing standards of Native peoples.
- (c) To encourage a sense of personal responsibility and a pride in ownership through planned maintenance savings and an option to purchase.
- (d) To provide not only housing, but a counselling service which will attempt to encourage Native peoples to respond in a positive manner to a new environment.
- (e) To provide opportunities for local Native labour to be involved in construction of the units.<sup>41</sup>

By 1974–75, it seems that the representatives in the government recognized that providing housing was only part of the problem, and that securing land was just as pressing—if not more so. As recorded May 21, 1975, in Alberta Hansard:

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<sup>36</sup>Conklin, *Kayas Achimona*, 69.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 68–70.

<sup>38</sup> Northern Development Group, *What the People of Wabasca-Desmarais said about Land Tenure and Other Problems: Wabasca-Desmarais Land Tenure Research Project Report of Community Survey* (March 1974), i-iv found in PAA, GS 79.152, box 7, 59–78. For more on the Alberta Bill of Rights see Dominique Clément, “Alberta’s Rights Revolution,” *British Journal of Canadian Studies* 26, no. 1 (2013): 59–77.

<sup>39</sup> Conklin, *Kayas Achimona*, 68–69. For more on this topic see James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).

<sup>40</sup> Alberta Northern Alberta Development Council, *Annual Report, 1972-1973* (1973), 2-3.

<sup>41</sup> Alberta Northern Alberta Development Council, *Annual Report, 1973-1974* (1974), 20.



Reference in the throne speech to the government's increased recognition of the concerns and needs of native people is most heartening, and I am pleased that the Hon. Bob Bogle has already seen fit to visit my constituency. Isolated communities, such as Fort Chip, Chip Lakes, Janvier, and Conklin have special problems that are not easily solved in other portfolios. For example, the land tenure rights in Anzac and other communities need solutions. Government assistance to the new dawn housing operation should prove most effective in helping this industry get off the ground. Certainly, new dawn will have a role to play in alleviating the serious housing problems of the province and this constituency.<sup>42</sup>

A few days before this speech, Honourable Robert (Bob) Bogle, Minister without Portfolio Responsible for Native Affairs, requested a decision from Cabinet:

To set up a Land Tenure Secretariat under the Department of Municipal Affairs to resolve the long-standing grievances of natives and non-natives regarding land tenure. The Secretariat would be under the tri-partite supervision of the Ministers of Energy and Natural Resources, Municipal Affairs and Native Affairs. (Recent migrations, e.g. the Smallboy Indian band, are excluded from the project.) Where land titles are granted, titles would be non-transferable with a "sell-back" to the Crown, if land is relinquished. Eligible recipients for land would be required to pay a reasonable portion of closing costs. Future unauthorized land occupancy in Green Zone<sup>43</sup> would be prohibited.<sup>44</sup>

The challenges of land-tenure programs in Conklin are dealt with at length in *Kayas Achimona*, and these historic failures undoubtedly contribute to today's homelessness crisis. As described in the community history:

It is apparent in the interviews with Conklin Elders that a great deal of confusion about Conklin as a proposed Metis Colony and subsequent Metis land tenure and housing programs that followed. Many of the Elders still refer to Conklin as a Metis settlement or colony. Elders spoke of different land programs involving Conklin the 1950s, the 1970s and the 1980s, but the information is inconsistent and unclear as to the underpinning government policies and programs that were in place at the time.<sup>45</sup>

While some community members successfully obtained land through the land tenure program, many others did not, and, as the request outlines, this was a one-time program with no provisions to provide additional land for future generations.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, the program was not initiated in Conklin until the 1980s, and when it was, it was poorly understood and not fully utilized. As described by Elder Margaret Quintal:

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<sup>42</sup> Alberta Hansard, May 21, 1975, p. 77.

<sup>43</sup> In 1948 the Government of Alberta established area type for land management purposes, with White Areas "set aside as land primarily suited for agriculture and settlement," and Green Areas for "forest management planning and protection of important watershed areas." Government of Alberta Land Use Secretariat, *Understanding Land Use in Alberta* (Edmonton: Government of Alberta, 2007) 9.

<sup>44</sup> Honourable Robert Bogle, "Request for Cabinet Decision: Land Tenure Secretariat (This is a revision of RFD V34, October 1, 1974), May 8, 1975, PAA, GS 79.152, box 7 59-78.

<sup>45</sup> Conklin, *Kayas Achimona*, 68.

<sup>46</sup> Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, "Summary Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo Understanding the History and Rationale Establishment of the Hamlet of Janvier South as Facilitated by the Provincial Government" (Fort McKay Métis Community Archive, n.d.).

We had the land tenure program in the 1980s. I was told by someone from the municipal affairs that the lease that was supposed to have been here for the people was no longer valid, because people didn't keep up with the payments. With the land tenure program, they didn't come and say there's a program, but I first heard about it when I was visiting a friend. It was actually Edith Campbell, invited me to visit and we had a lunch together. And this person came by, on his way from north going south. He was telling us about this land tenure program where you can obtain a parcel of land to live on. And I thought it was unbelievable, and I was interested. And I thought it would be good for the community, they didn't own land, and so it would be good for them to live. So I got more information from him. It was the early part of July, 1980, I went to Edmonton to get more information at Municipal Affairs. I went to their office, and they told me how we could go about getting the program here.

I came back and talked to a few people. They said you need seventy-five per cent of the people in the community to show interest to get the program. So then we took names of all the people that were interested. A lot of them were interested in owning a parcel of land to live on, so we pursued it. And we had a planner come in to look at the area. They did a lot of testing, even soil testing, to see if the land was good to live on. I think that was probably more for water. They came in and did their thing. A lot of people were able to apply and get a parcel of land for a dollar. It was a lot of work to get that in, the land tenure program. The power came in at the same time. There was a stipulation with the land tenure program that you had to live in the community to get a parcel of land for a dollar. You also had to be eighteen years old.

But then they didn't have that program for too long. It kind of ended. I never heard of a reason why it was stopped. Because they had said at that time, it was a one-time thing, that's what I was told. In Janvier, they also had that program. I'm not sure about Anzac. I think so, but I can't say for sure. It's too bad. I think another thing was that we were learning. Now we're more up front with the government and if we don't understand something we ask questions. But back then, whenever somebody came along, we just believed. Out of respect, we believed what people said. Even now, these open houses, they come with their books, they pass out their information, if you're not outspoken or you're afraid to ask questions, you're shy, you're never going to understand. Just by reading that information, sometimes you're going to need a translator. Maybe they'll learn how to communicate better with us. And the younger generation is getting better educated. Maybe it will get better over time. I don't think we fully understand sometimes. We are too trusting. But the land tenure program, a lot of people today still live on the parcels they received from that program. We also understood that at that time there was going to be land set aside for the future generations. (Margaret Quintal).<sup>47</sup>

While it is true that the majority of land currently owned by Conklin community members came about as a result of the land-tenure program, to call it a success would be a stretch (though this is exactly what the Alberta government did in 1984 in a document titled "Alberta Government Initiatives of Significance to Metis People"),<sup>48</sup> and the failure of the program to provide adequate

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<sup>47</sup> Conklin, *Kayas Achimona*, 70.

<sup>48</sup> Native Affairs Secretariat, "Alberta Government Initiatives of Significance to Metis People" (Edmonton: Government of Alberta, August 1984), 5, [https://archive.org/details/albertagovernmen00albe\\_1](https://archive.org/details/albertagovernmen00albe_1).

land to the community of Conklin to establish houses further contributed to the current homelessness crisis.

Closely related to the historic processes is the contemporary context, which Thistle explains is the process where Indigenous people are separated from “their relationship to the land and its resources, caused by settler encroachment and state usurpation of the Indigenous lands, territories and waterways.”<sup>49</sup> In Conklin, this disconnection can be described in a number of different ways, but it is important to recognize the direct ties to the historic displacement outlined above. The homelessness problem in Conklin is the result of the government’s failure to provide land and housing to the community, coupled with the continuously growing extractive industrial developments in the region that disproportionately affect communities such as Conklin but provide surprisingly few benefits.

The challenges identified and described above were carried forward into the 1980s, with the community of Conklin identifying the continued housing shortage, requesting that “the MAA [Métis Nation of Alberta] housing department work with the community to lobby for 10 emergency trailers equipped with water and electricity.”<sup>50</sup> *Kayas Achimona* further describes how the community’s current land base is still largely held by the RMWB, with plans to build additional social and community housing being repeatedly cancelled and units necessary to address the housing crisis in the community never materializing.<sup>51</sup> In short, the community of Conklin has been requesting assistance with their housing for a long time, and at this point are left asking, “how much longer?”

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The need for more information about the exact nature of the homelessness problem in rural Indigenous communities, and the problems described by participants, has been raised in numerous reports and articles. In their comprehensive *Assessing Urban Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness in Canada*, Yale D. Belanger et al. state that “understanding rural Aboriginal homeless rates and its impact on urban lifestyles” is key to understanding Indigenous homelessness in Canada.<sup>52</sup> Jeannette Waegmakers et al. similarly suggest that there is a lack of knowledge about the interactions between rural and urban homelessness populations, and that a failure to provide services to at-risk community members is a likely contributor to homelessness both in rural and urban areas.<sup>53</sup> Waegmakers et al. goes on to summarize the lack of knowledge surrounding rural homeless people’s lived experience:

The issue of Aboriginal people who experience homelessness is often framed in terms of urban homelessness and little mention is made of those who remain in small

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<sup>49</sup> Thistle, *Indigenous Homelessness*, 34.

<sup>50</sup> Bill Haineault, “Report of the Métis Association of Alberta Workshop in Fort McMurray Held on November 3-4, 1984” (Edmonton: Manning Consultants Ltd.: 1984), 6.

<sup>51</sup> Conklin, *Kayas Achimona*, 71.

<sup>52</sup> Yale D. Belanger, Gabrielle Weasel Head, and Olu Awosoga, *Assessing Urban Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness in Canada* (Ottawa: final report prepared for the National Association of Friendship Centres (NAFC) and the Office of the Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians (OFI), March 30, 2012), iv.

<sup>53</sup> Jeannette Waegmakers Schiff, Rebecca Schiff, Alina Turner, and Karine Bernard, “Rural Homelessness in Canada: Directions for Planning and Research,” *Journal of Rural and Community Development* 10, no. 4 (2015): 94–95. Also see Alina Turner and Jeannette Wagemakers Schiff, “Rural Homelessness in Alberta: An Environmental Scan.” (Edmonton: Alberta Rural Development Network, 2014), [http://www.ardn.ca/projects/Homelessness%20in%20Rural%20Alberta\\_environmental%20scan%20and%20action%20plan%20FINAL.pdf](http://www.ardn.ca/projects/Homelessness%20in%20Rural%20Alberta_environmental%20scan%20and%20action%20plan%20FINAL.pdf).

town and rural areas. Reports that examine rural homelessness refer to issues of Aboriginal homelessness in smaller communities, and the impact displaced people have on local services and housing, but these reports omit the impact of these lived experiences, and the perceived needs, of Aboriginal people who remain close to, but not on, their home reserves and live in rural Canada.<sup>54</sup>

In northern Alberta specifically, a number of agencies have recognized that rural Indigenous homelessness is a problem that is not well understood. Reports cited in the earlier section reveal that since at least the 1930s, the lack of land and housing for Indigenous people has been identified as a problem in northern Alberta. As noted above, the Northern Alberta Development Council [NADC] documented this challenge as early as 1973, and it was still being studied into the mid-2000s. In their 2007 report *Housing Issues in Northern Alberta*, the NADC note that there are multiple challenges involved in providing adequate housing in northern Alberta. The section titled “Theme 2: Gaps in Government Housing Programs” is particularly relevant where it states:

Housing programs have been largely urban focused (*National Homelessness Initiative* and the *Affordable Housing Partnership Initiative*) or short-term (*Rural Affordable Supportive Living Program*). This situation may further erode the capacity of northern rural communities to provide a continuum of housing: as rural residents are forced to move to larger urban centres for housing and support services, the perceived demand for rural services is reduced at the same time the demand for services in larger urban centres is inflated. There is particularly a lack of rural subsidized rental housing for Aboriginals.<sup>55</sup>

The challenge identified by the NADC was not cited in either the provincial or RMWB’s ten-year plans to end homelessness,<sup>56</sup> even though the RMWB’s ten-year plan recognized that “persons in rural communities who have exhausted any local extended family or support system for housing drift to the city as homeless.”<sup>57</sup> It is perhaps not surprising that the problems identified in the 2007 NADC homelessness report remain in Conklin to this day. At present there are no statistics regarding homelessness in Conklin (as was admitted by the RMWB in 2008),<sup>58</sup> there are few (if any) programs to address homelessness in Conklin, and social housing available in Conklin is wholly inadequate, with much of it being poorly built in the 1970s. While there seems to be recognition of the connection between urban and rural homelessness, no one has systematically reviewed the interrelationship and identified gaps that need to be addressed for northeastern Alberta.<sup>59</sup> In short, the wilful failure by various levels of

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 98; C. Stewart and S. Ramage, *A Pan-Northern Ontario Inventory of Homelessness Problems and Practices: Northern Ontario Service Deliverer’s Association Ontario* (2011); YWCA of Yellowknife—The Yellowknife Women’s Society, *Being Homeless Is Getting to be Normal: A Study of Women’s Homelessness in the Northwest Territories* (2007), <http://ywcacanada.ca/data/publications/00000011.pdf>.

<sup>55</sup> Northern Alberta Development Council, “Housing Issues in Northern Alberta” (2007), 3, <http://www.nadc.ca/Docs/Housing-Issues.pdf>.

<sup>56</sup> Neither the Alberta government’s nor the RMWB’s ten-year plans cite the NADC report. Furthermore, neither report provides specific strategies for addressing the homelessness issue in rural and Indigenous communities, and instead almost exclusively focuses on urban homelessness.

<sup>57</sup> RMWB, *Heading Home*, 10.

<sup>58</sup> Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, “Towards 250k Envision Wood Buffalo: Conklin, Where We Are Today” (Fort McMurray, 2008), 3.

<sup>59</sup> Joshua Bénard and Jay Freeman, “The Interdependence of Rural and Urban Homelessness” (paper presented at 7 *Cities: Conference on Housing First and Homelessness 2017*, Edmonton, June 7, 2017),

government to fund studies regarding homelessness in rural Indigenous communities has meant that those communities do not have the information at hand to demonstrate the causes and pervasiveness of their homelessness problems. In turn, funding that could help address the rural homelessness problem has been reallocated to urban areas to house individuals who are often forced to leave their home communities to seek emergency housing, severing ties to their rural home, exacerbating existing problems, and placing additional pressures on urban providers. The lack of housing in the community coupled with increasing external pressure to develop the region's natural resources has placed a disproportionate burden on Indigenous communities like Conklin, and has contributed to significant substance abuse problems, gang-related violence, and negative learning outcomes.

In the focus groups, many believe that land-tenure program had the possibility of positively transforming the community, but the short time frame, lack of planning, and lack of community involvement made the program much less effective than it could have been. Furthermore, the failure to extend the program has left the current generation without access to land and often homeless, living on parents' property in "campers" and "lean-tos":

In 1980, they [took] land away and a lot of these older people ... I just turned 18, I signed my name and my one dollar, still never received nothing. To this day, my generation never got a darn thing from the community of Conklin. As to being represented, by who? We don't know. Our names are there, but, I'm sure they take that list of names to somebody.

I wonder why they exchanged house from land tenure to ID [Improvement District] 18, down to [Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo] municipality. Now we don't have no say whatsoever. There's people living in campers, at first they started living in lean-to's, some people I know, and then they upgraded to a camper. Still, the municipality now says, "You can't have a camper on that lot. This house is the only thing that's supposed to be on this lot, and two cars." I was told last year.

My nephew's living in campers on my mom's property, they got to all be removed, I'm told. And there's some clause on the lease agreement that can make us lose our property, because we can't develop up to specs. Now, there was a piece of school that was donated to me last fall, the farthest the guy can dump it is in my front yard, now I got nothing but heat from the municipality, the by-law officers say, "That thing has to be removed into the back, or demolished."

The other trailer that my two nephews are living in now has to be demolished. It's been considered, well, the health board was there, they considered it condemned, and there's mould all over the place, but they still stay in there. They got no place to go. They tried, but where are they gonna go? They go in the bush and set up, they're going to get chased right out of there.<sup>60</sup>

As the series of photos below demonstrate, the complaints of the community member above are

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[https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/ff2744\\_b054b1fe1e844d5abb1b7be22e111406.pdf](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/ff2744_b054b1fe1e844d5abb1b7be22e111406.pdf)

<sup>60</sup> Adult Focus Group, p. 1.

well founded. A number of houses in Conklin have been built with scrap lumber, garage kits, and repurposed ATCO trailers and RVs, many of which were originally manufactured in the 1970s. Few if any of these units have running water or sewer, and most depend upon a mix of wood-burning, propane and electrical heating. Air circulation is poor, living quarters are cramped, and many of the homes are affected by a greater or lesser degree by black mould. Perhaps most concerning, if these units are demolished, the inhabitants will suddenly be made homeless and without the local services necessary to deal with that shock.











It is within this context that community members in Conklin experience social, cultural, spiritual, emotional, and physical homelessness: all of which are compounded by the additional pressures placed on the community by industrial encroachment. It will be necessary to address these underlying factors before the homelessness situation in the community can be solved in a sustainable manner.

### **The Conklin Homelessness Crisis**

Jesse Thistle explains that “emergency crisis homelessness” can be caused by “natural disasters, large-scale environmental manipulation and acts of human mischief and destruction, along with bureaucratic red tape, combining to cause Indigenous people to lose their homes because the system is not ready or willing to cope with an immediate demand for housing.” This definition sums up the Conklin experience, where historic failures, large-scale environmental manipulation, and bureaucratic red tape collide, creating the current homelessness crisis in the community, one that is much bigger and has a much longer history than most outside of the community appreciate. The crisis is described by a community member at the adult focus group:

Housing and land is well-worn topic in this community and it has been from quite some time ago. And now with ID [Improvement District], when ID was present and land tenure there were lands available. And that's when the people should've jumped on them. Some people did jump on them and I don't know whatever happened that they didn't hold onto their lands. But be that as it may, that's water under the bridge. Today in 2017 we shouldn't be sitting here worrying about the same things that we worried about back in the '80s.

I think that the provincial government made sure that Conklin seemed to be left high

and dry here. Like, we had our own housing, they took that away and took it to Fort McMurray. So that was not a bonus for the people of Conklin. And then when the lands were available they left the lands open to everybody from wherever. So people came in from out of town, bought lands, never moved here, but in fact they put them up into ... they made huge profits from the lands they bought for next to nothing and that left a lot of people high and dry with nothing to make application to. So that was the first mistake that was made here, is that they removed the housing and then they gave all the lands away to people that didn't want them for anything but to make a profit. And to this day, a lot of these people are still sitting on some of those lands.

So that's when the problem started. So now, we have no land cause it's all leased out to industry pretty much. All around us. I'm not sure about, within the immediate. But there will be some lands hopefully, you know, speaking from my own personal observations, the Municipality hopefully will be releasing relinquishing some lands so that people that are in a priority situation for housing and for land will be considered, you know, to be of a top priority to them. But this can't go on. This is actually creating social problems in Conklin and it's creating hardships for the youth, the children. The parents and the grandparents are still looking after children when they should be retiring. So ... talking about retiring, we can't be healthy if we don't have land. We can't be healthy if we don't have infrastructure.

So for one thing, look around at all the seniors that are sitting around this table. A lot of them are pretty much homeless. Even if they have a house, they're considered homeless because they have to put up with their children and their grandchildren [in the same confined space] and so ... you know, it just keeps ongoing. And the saga continues and where do you stop it? How do we do this? What do we do to stop it? I think that this should've been addressed a long time ago and starting today I think it's a high priority and that should never be left alone anymore to anyone. But everybody in the community, they're not gonna get anywhere if they don't get together, bound together, in trying to solve their solutions.<sup>61</sup>

In short, there are not enough houses available to ensure each Conklin resident has a safe place to rest his or her head every night, and this reality exacerbates existing community problems. Conklin has variously tried to secure land and housing, and to date, the majority of these efforts have either been wholly ineffective, or have been met with half-measures. Many community members strongly feel that municipal, provincial, and even federal governments have worked to disenfranchise the community and take away their ability to address the current homelessness situation, forcing many to live in substandard situations. A community member described a situation where the RMWB expropriated his family's land due to late taxes, and then offered it back to the family at "market rate." This RMWB action has left this individual and his family desperate and multiple generations of his family homeless:

Just over 10 year ago, the municipality took my mom's lot, ended her lease for over \$2,600 of tax late fees or whatever, just money that was owed, for \$2.600 dollar only. They ended her lot, like her lease, and took the lot, and ever since I been back, for 10 years I've been trying and trying and trying to get it back, and the best they offer me

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<sup>61</sup> Elders Focus Group, Nov. 14, 2017, p. 14–15.

now is I can buy it back for fair market value. And they took it for only \$2,600 dollars. But they took payment, after they said the lease was expired, or ended, whatever.

And still the best offer they give me is to buy it back for fair market value. And they still didn't tell me what that is. And ever since our house burned down, where our kids own that house, like on our land, we've been living there, our house burned down, and ever since there, we've been homeless. We didn't get any help from anything. Community, nothing. We had to live in those houses that are over here for a little bit, like when we could afford it. But other than that, we've been homeless. And that's all on the municipality, as soon as they came in, or whatever, they just took our lot, and I don't want to swear on this thing, but I'm mad.

I still want to talk to these people and I still want to get that lot back, but that's still their best offer, is that, give them that fair thing for whatever. Buying it back for fair ... Like what do they want to charge over \$100,000? For only \$2,600 bucks that was owing [...]

I just wanted the opportunity so I could turn around from our situation, 'cause since they took our land away we've just been fucked. If I had a place to go put my own shit then I wouldn't have to worry about, if I got to work, I don't have to worry if someone's gonna fucking sell my shit off. To get themselves drinking money. That's why I don't fucking want to leave where I'm at now.

I have no power at home, my generator broke down in the middle of summer. I just got a wood stove in my house two days ago, been freezing until then, since then, or before then. I got that free from the dump. It is rough, like, when people have no opportunities. I've been trying to get that land back so maybe I can change my life. But being told, "Fuck you," it doesn't help. 'Cause all I'm being told, I'm not giving you land back ... Over \$2,600 bucks they took that land, and now we're fucked. For only \$2,600 bucks. Now land taxes are over that, one year it's over that.

We had nothing on that house. My mom was homeless, so apparently when they said that lease is over, they didn't send her any kind of notifications. 'Cause when she went and put the money in there, they accepted that money, then they sent her letters after saying, "No your lease is over."

Yeah, it's a little bit different from people there's not opportunity to get land at all, but we had a piece of land. It was taken, for only \$2,600 fucking dollars. And now we're nothing. Now, my mom is off somewhere herself because we can't be a family together. Since our house burned down, haven't had a family. I'm done.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>Adult Focus Group, p. 14, 21.





*Above and below are pictures of Emile Winterburn's home, a repurposed trailer on his uncle's land. He dreams of someday having a home of his own, where he can safely sleep every night and begin his life. At present, those plans are on hold.*

Sadly, this experience is not unique, and nearly every community member who participated in the focus groups experience the negative effects of homelessness on the community, in one form or another, as these excerpts demonstrate:

When it comes to Improvement Districts too it was better but then the minister just gave the community the land away to the Municipality. And the Municipality took over, they took everything. Even this recreation area we had set aside right up to that high lane. They took that away. We have nothing. Just this little area here.<sup>63</sup>

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Yes, definitely land, and land is the biggest thing. There's a lot of people that can build their own houses, they don't need [the Regional Municipality of] Wood Buffalo to build their own houses. But they need Wood Buffalo to give back the land, that they took from this community.<sup>64</sup>

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I don't want to say much. I don't know, all I know is years ago everybody got their own place and stuff around here, and our generation, we didn't get a house and land,

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<sup>63</sup>Adult Focus Group, p. 25.

<sup>64</sup>Adult Focus Group, p. 6.

whatever. So, now, we've come back here, we don't have a place to stay, we end up staying with our parents and stuff like that. It's not easy. To have to put up with all their stuff and whatever.<sup>65</sup>

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Yeah, and if you want to come back and get your own place, there's no place to rent. End up staying in a camper, or whatever. Or end up, like he said, in the streets, that's about it. Or else to the community. There's not much choices. Would be better if we actually get a chance to get our own places out here, our own land, and our own houses, 'cause we're all just end up living off other people, and that's not good.<sup>66</sup>

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And another thing too, that municipality's coming hard on us right now. And that's too much, that's too much. And then all of a sudden, what about the industry, all of a sudden shuts down all these industries? No money coming in for Conklin people no more, and then how are people gonna pay for their land taxes? Then municipality gonna come with a bulldozer and push us on the side into the muskegs or something? They took our land already. Now what more they gonna do to us, you know, what are they going to do to us anymore? They push us away. Pretty soon they're going to be telling us when to eat supper and when to, you know, and breakfast. Just about already. They just take our land away.<sup>67</sup>

It is not just the physical infrastructure, or lack thereof, that affects the community. As a primarily Indigenous community, residents of Conklin traditionally saw the land around them as 'home' that was able to provide sustenance and support even in the most difficult of times. Community members are feeling pushed out by the industrial development that is dramatically altering their traditional territories. For some, those territories are now virtually unrecognizable. The situation was described by one community member in reference to a proposed oil sands project west of Conklin:

Well, for us, this community has been isolated for such a long time. It's only the last twenty years that industry and government is coming out here, now. Before, you used to be able to supplement your ... You know, instead of buying groceries, you could go out and hunt moose. We used to eat everything. We used to eat moose, deer, [and] caribou. We'd eat beaver, muskrat, rabbits, grouse, [prairie] chickens. Even owls, we used to eat. Porcupines, we eat. Nowadays, you can't find the smaller animals, you can't eat or a lot of them are protected now, so you don't want to bother them.

You can't fill your freezer anymore and it's been hard if you can't work ... I know a lot of the guys in this area, they're not educated to the point where they can get a decent job. Now, you can't hunt and stuff like that. You can't go pick berries where you once used to go pick berries. You know, things like that. For me, as a teenager, I grew up going hunt[ing] from, like I said, just our back door here, and you go to the other side of the lake. We used to go all the way from there, like I said, Hay Lake,

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<sup>65</sup> Adult Focus Group, p. 3.

<sup>66</sup> Adult Focus Group, p. 3.

<sup>67</sup> Adult Focus Group, p. 12

you know, Sterner . . . You know, all the way up to Gris Lake, we'd go hunting. By the time you get to around Wassassi area, you could've gotten your moose already. Nowadays, you can't do that.

That itself just bugs me. That you're not able to go where I once was [and] I feel that we should be compensated somehow because of that, in this whole area. We've been getting screwed by government and industry for years. Things happen in our community, things happen around our community. You don't know it happens until you come up on it. If you're hunting in the bush, all of the sudden, there's a great big-ass open area they're putting their camp in there or a plant in there. The feeling that I get is more anger towards industry, because of the things that they're doing. I can go to McMurray and you see all the open [pit] min[ing] that they've got, and you can see the devastation that they're doing, and then you come over here and they're doing a different type of mining because of the overburden. They're saying it's not a big imprint on it, but it is. I know Christina Lake is being polluted because there's all kinds of stuff that's leaking into Sunday River. And it's going into our lake.

So now, I don't like to eat the fish in our lake anymore. And because of all of this industry and all the camps and everything, now Christina Lake is becoming a point where all these people come now, from the camps. All the camps out there. They're bringing their boats and coming in here now. So if their boats are not properly clean and stuff like that, now our lake, we didn't have that green algae and green-blue algae in the lake before, and now we've got it all over the place. Things like that. Now a lot of garbage, too. I see these guys go ice fishing. They'll leave their wooden camps there and they'll just leave it there to fall into the lake. There's lots of stuff like that. Our lakes are getting polluted by industry out here. It's not just Wassassi. MEG Energy's just right out at the end of our lake and it pisses me off that they have a dock and we don't.

The thing is, we were told: "you can't make your dock out of metal." You can't, you know, [do] this and that, yet, MEG Energy is allowed to go and put these steel posts in the ground in there so that the dock can rise and lower with the [water level] . . . You know, stuff like that. I know MEG Energy, they've been out here a long time. I've never heard MEG Energy in our community at all. I know there's nobody out there from Conklin working. I used to work out there. Probably, probably [community member] I think is the only one that goes to MEG Energy now. Yeah. And things like that. MEG Energy, they're taking a lot of our hunting and trapping areas. I feel like they should compensate us a little bit more. In terms of employment and stuff like that. Business opportunities and that.<sup>68</sup>

Focus group participants feel the lack of government support and increased industrial development are having a significant and negative impact on the economic and housing situation in Conklin:

As far as housing, I can't understand why there's no housing. When they come to these meetings, it for these people of the future, our children, grandchildren. I don't

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<sup>68</sup> Peter Fortna, "Conklin Traditional Land-Use Study: May River Project" (Fort McMurray: Willow Springs Strategic Solutions Inc., 2017), 16–18.

think none of them is gonna get anything from the [the Regional Municipality of] Wood Buffalo. There's too much oil and gas resources around here that they probably want us removed. They're already into the lake. Who knows how healthy that is to drink? But we still drink it, wash in it.

We're just put on the back shelf. As far as I'm concerned, the Wood Buffalo never really turned around and looked at us to see exactly how much we do suffer. Some people are making a good living here, but a lot of people aren't even one step ahead when they started years ago.<sup>69</sup>

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I don't like seeing people living in the trailers, living all crowded. It's just not us, you know? We see it all across this country, and yet we see immigrants come into this country and being treated royally, and look at the Native people. Being set back on the back burner. You know sure, we gotta do our part, but still, this is our land. This is our land, period. I'm not scared to mention that, the industry, or anybody, this is our land. It was taken from us.

They have all these oil plants here that try to chase us out. They control us, you can't do this, you can't go there, you can't hunt there, and all that, but that's nothing to do with the housing part, but still that's an issue for me. It bothers me, right? I wanna see Conklin rise up and get this place like, as I was told by some of our elders here, there was a settlement a long time ago for this. But they never moved on it, or something got lost, I don't know. Right? We should try something like that, you know?

RMWB just happened to come over here and say, "Well, hey, there's a lot of money, a lot of oil industry around this little community. Let's take up all of the land."<sup>70</sup>

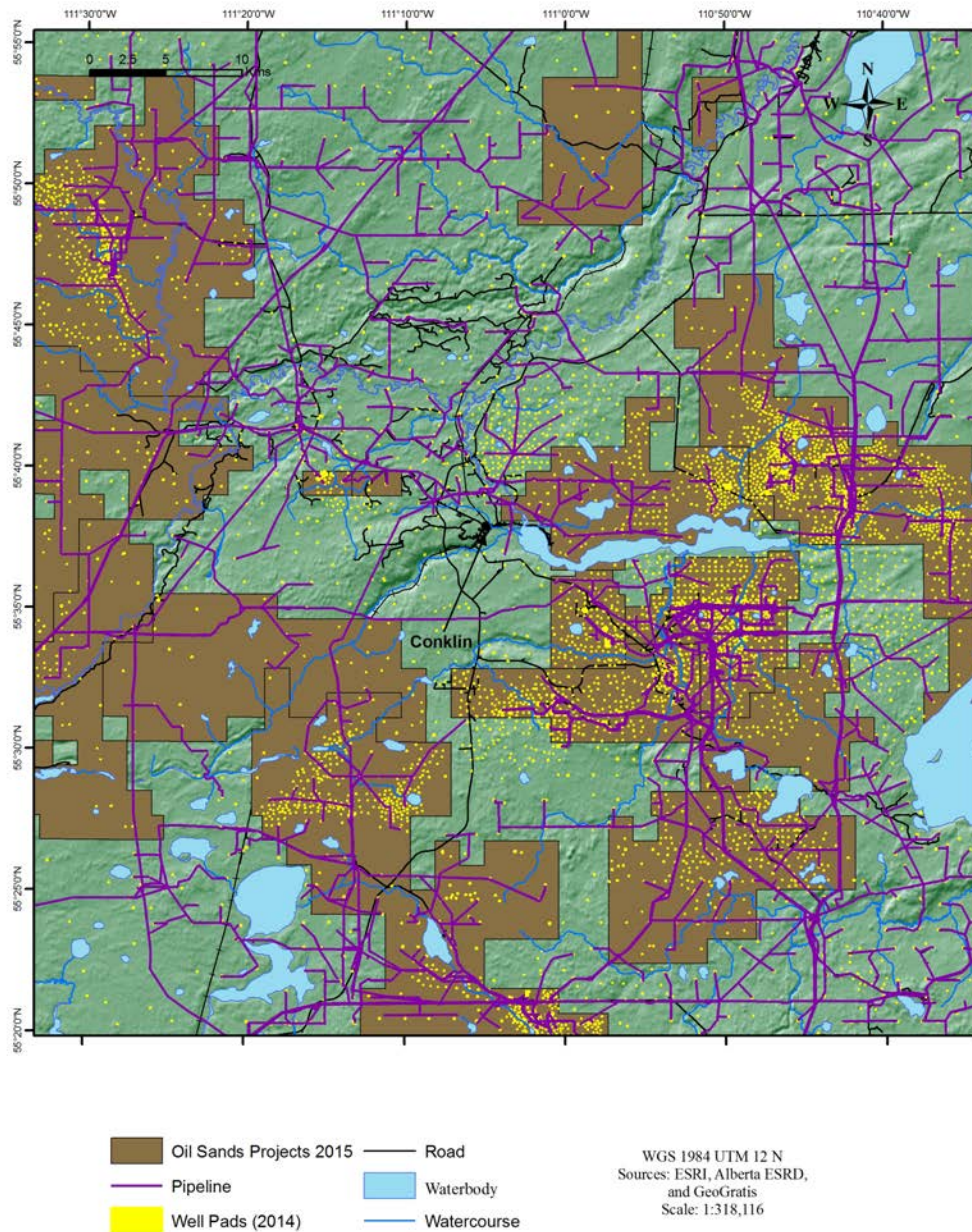
The map below helps to illustrate the situation, with very little, if any of the community's traditional territory still being available for harvesting:

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<sup>69</sup> Adult Focus Group, p. 2.

<sup>70</sup> Adult Focus Group, p. 10–11.





The following pictures provide a visual description of the situations described above. In the first picture you see Louis Tremblay, a Métis Elder and knowledge keeper, sitting inside of his trailer. Louis father, Dumas, was the author of various letters to the Métis Nation of Alberta concerning housing and land management. His home now is a converted ATCO trailer with no running water or sewer. Electricity is supplied through a generator and heat comes from either a wood-burning or propane stove. Cooking is done on a propane stove you can see in the right-hand corner of the second picture. In the third picture you can see where the siding on the trailer is starting to peel away. Louis is extremely concerned about the mould that is starting to form in that corner, and he believes this will spread if not remediated soon. These pictures show the reality of the homelessness crisis in Conklin, one that requires serious and immediate attention from all levels of government.





Thistle is clear within his definition of Indigenous homelessness that physical homelessness is only part of the equation, with homelessness also affecting Indigenous people’s spiritual, social, and cultural well-being. As many of the excerpts demonstrate, the homelessness crisis in Conklin has affected the community in many ways, but *especially* spiritually, socially, and culturally. The children of Conklin are particularly vulnerable. The Alberta government’s Early Childhood Mapping project, a five-year study that looked to understand child development in the province, showed that in the southern Wood Buffalo Region one-half of children are experiencing difficulty in multiple areas of development. That compares to one-third in Fort McMurray and one-quarter across Alberta. These are troubling and significant gaps that are exacerbated by the housing crisis in the community.<sup>71</sup> The situation was summed up when a community member exclaimed:

This is actually creating social problems in Conklin and it's creating hardships for the youth, the children. The parents and the grandparents are still looking after children when they should be retiring. So ... talking about retiring, we can't be healthy if we don't have land. We can't be healthy if we don't have infrastructure.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Alberta Early Child Development Mapping Project (ECMap), “Wood Buffalo South” (Edmonton, 2014), 3, [http://www.ecmap.ca/assetReports/2014/WBS\\_CommunityProfile\\_Spring2014\\_F.pdf](http://www.ecmap.ca/assetReports/2014/WBS_CommunityProfile_Spring2014_F.pdf)

<sup>72</sup> Elders Focus Group, p. 14.



*“Harvest Moon” a painting created by one of Conklin’s Homeless Youth*

These findings point to another feeling that was clearly articulated during the focus groups, a general feeling of hopelessness when dealing with the broader systemic legacies that have contributed to the current situation: “You know, give the citizens a chance to change their ways, you know, be responsible. As it goes now [we have] got no hope, no education, and even though I went to college, I went to school, I got careers, and I still can't get a place [to live] here.”<sup>73</sup> Grace Richards articulated the current situation well, describing how the lack of housing makes it difficult to find and keep a job:

Participant: There's a lot of people, it's kind of like a catch-22 situation, where people can't work because they don't have adequate housing, an adequate home. Like living in a camper with no running water, no heating, no proper heating, how do you feel comfortable about going to work on a daily basis? You still have to come home and shower after work. How do you do that with no home?

A lot of these people that live in the campers around the community, they don't have running water, or electricity. And it's a sin to be living this way, especially when we're right smack dab in the middle of oil industry. Everything surrounds us.

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<sup>73</sup> Adult Focus Group, p. 3.

Moderator: Mm-hmm (affirmative). That's been a point I've been making as ... If you think in the RMWB there's billions of dollars' worth of investment in various oil sands projects, and yet a community like Conklin doesn't have enough housing.

Participant: Exactly, there's nothing for our generation. Our generation, my generation, we got skipped out. Prior to that everybody got land, and then we were promised that there was property set aside for future generations. As it is right now, our community can't even grow. We are gonna be the original community people, from here, we're gonna be wiped out. All the young people from here that are having babies, have to go live elsewhere, because there's nothing here for them.

It is definitely a big issue, and there's a lot of people that are my generation, that don't feel like working. How can they work, when it's always in the back of their mind? Land and house, land and house, I need a home.<sup>74</sup>

Richards, has been living in her trailer for a number of years.<sup>75</sup> She allowed permission for her unit to be photographed and described below.

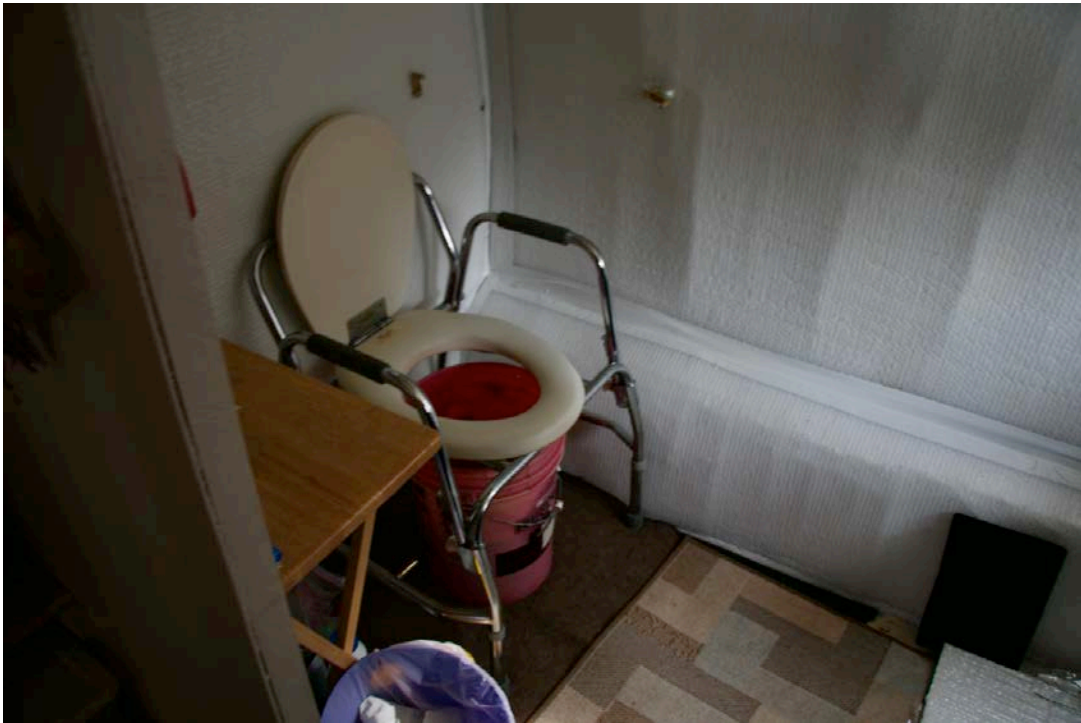


Like many units in Conklin, Grace's home is a trailer with an addition. She explained that because she is not a professional carpenter and did not have access to the proper tools or supplies, water is starting to come through the addition's roof and is causing the insulation to rot. She hopes to have this replaced in the coming summer, but again it is difficult to manage this

<sup>74</sup> Adult Focus Group, p. 6–7.

<sup>75</sup> Grace's story was also covered in Cullen Bird, "Rural Hamlets Struggle with Housing Crisis," *Fort McMurray Today*, October 19, 2017, <http://www.fortmcmurraytoday.com/2017/10/19/rural-hamlets-struggle-with-housing-crisis>.

unexpected cost on a limited income.



There is no plumbing and the “honey pot” in the picture above is used in the night. Electricity is supplied through a power cord plugged into the house, and heat comes from an electric heater and propane stove as seen in the picture below; cooking is done on the same propane stove. When temperatures drop below -20, both the stove and the heater need to be turned on and the trailer door needs to be closed to keep the home hospitable.



You can see in the picture below Grace's prized possession, a lampshade from the fabled Fort McMurray "Oil Can Tavern" where she used to bartend and visit with many from the region's Indigenous community. Shortly before it was demolished in 2012 (as part of the RMWB's so far unsuccessful plan to gentrify the area), each of the former staff was given the opportunity to purchase one thing from the tavern. Grace chose the lampshade and proudly displays it in her home. She hopes that someday she will be able to display the lampshade in a new home, but like many, she does not have faith in her elected officials at all levels of government.



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As noted earlier, the lack of housing infrastructure in the community is far from a new problem, and various agencies have attempted to address it. The Wood Buffalo Housing and Development Corporation (WBHDC) was “incorporated in 2001 by the RMWB to provide affordable housing alternatives to moderate and low income residents and seniors in the region.”<sup>76</sup> In the early 2000s, WBHDC did provide some initial houses on those lots (four “rent to own” and two gap housing units)<sup>77</sup> and had plans to provide an additional twenty housing units that likely would have gone a long way towards providing “needed affordable housing for the Conklin area.” The second plan was meant to address “a small immediate demand” known in the community, and it was hoped longer term that this project would “satisfy this immediate need and provide for future affordable housing.”<sup>78</sup> The RMWB transferred ten parcels of land to the WBHDC in 2003 for \$1.00, presumably in accordance with the RMWB’s 2002 Conklin Area Structure Plan.<sup>79</sup>

Focus group participants describe their version of events, beginning with decisions made by the local government, Improvement District 18, before Conklin was amalgamated with the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo in 1995. As one member noted:

When it was Improvement District [18], we had set aside land supposedly for younger people and since the Municipality took over, that’s gone. We don’t have that anymore. It used to be lots of ... We had planned lots of housing over there, lots of land for younger generations. But now it’s gone. And so where do we go? I guess we’ll start squatting wherever we can.<sup>80</sup>

Though further research is necessary to understand what exactly happened, it seems highly likely that Improvement District 18 (ID 18) had set aside land for future residential development and social housing. This land was then transferred to the RMWB after amalgamation, and then transferred again to WBHDC as the corporation responsible for providing social housing in the RMWB. WBHDC had plans to build houses on the land that was originally set aside by ID 18, but for reasons that remain unclear, that land has yet to be developed (though over this same time period the WBHDC built over 1,200 units in the urban area). This has left those who still live in the community with few choices and little power to make decisions that are in the best interest of their community.

Adding to the problem has been the failure of WBHDC to meet its mandate to provide safe and affordable housing in the Conklin area. While WBHDC is taking measures to respond to the current crisis in Conklin, including signing a memorandum of understanding with CRDAC and purchasing and placing an additional four trailers, there are still serious problems that need to be addressed. Most of the houses that are operated by WBHDC were inherited as part of the 1995 RMWB amalgamation. Focus group participants explained that many of those houses were built (poorly) in the 1970s and lack proper insulation, plumbing, heating, and emergency exits. Concerns with the existing available WBHDC housing stock were articulated by a number of

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<sup>76</sup> Wood Buffalo Housing and Development Corporation, “10 Years: Planting Roots in Our Community” (2011), [http://www.wbhdc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/10th\\_anniversary.pdf](http://www.wbhdc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/10th_anniversary.pdf).

<sup>77</sup> Conklin, *Kayas Achimona*, 67–70.

<sup>78</sup> Wood Buffalo Housing and Development Corporation, “Pine Lane Outline Plan: Conklin, Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, Alberta” (Fort McMurray: WBHDC, 2003).

<sup>79</sup> WBHDC, “Pine Lane,” 2; Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo. “Hamlet of Conklin Area Structure Plan – Bylaw No. 02/061” (March 2002).

<sup>80</sup> Elders Focus Group, p. 11.



focus group participants:

I rented the Wood Buffalo housing right now. And I've been asking since I moved in there to come fix up my stuff that's broken when I moved in. The doors, the screen windows, everything. The floors are rough, mould is gonna start. But I've been paying it, I've been after them asking for a favour. The one thing is, Wood Buffalo's mad. If you're behind one day from them, like if you pay too late for something. They'll be there. Come and do what they gotta do. But we ask them to come and check your place, they won't show up. It's another thing, it's another concern about these people that live around here. These houses that we live there's no exit door, not at all.<sup>81</sup>

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We had these houses that actually Wood Buffalo has been renting. I remember when I was a kid there, when my parents were together, I'm 33 going on 34 here, and they're still renting those houses out, and that's how many years ago? Those houses should have been given to the people of Conklin by now. I don't understand why they're still renting them out.<sup>82</sup>

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Those houses gotta be bought in over at least 10, 20 times, and the Wood Buffalo people are still renting them out. And another thing is, they got housing just up along the way here, where there's Elders staying there, and there's only one exit in there. There should be two exits in there, I don't know how they got the housing to be approved there. 'Cause by rights, when you do have a place, there's supposed to be two exits just in case there's a fire. My grandmother does live there, and if there was a fire at the door, like how would she even get out of there? She'd burn to death in that place.<sup>83</sup>

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Where I live, I told you the house is over like fifty something years old, and it's never been painted. When I moved in there, it was never cleaned or renovated, there's holes on the walls, the door was kicked in ... and it had rain ... was it last summer? ... Last summer it rained and it all went down the basement. You could smell the mould, right? And it's coming up, and I think that's what's getting me sick. I keep telling them that, and they're not doing nothing about it.<sup>84</sup>

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Let's get after Wood Buffalo for that house that's he's living in all that smell like, it's affecting her health. She gets sick, maybe she'll get who knows, like some kind of acute disease, right? And then, the ... it'll hit the bricks. It'll be too late. You know, something's gotta be done.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Elders Focus Group, p. 17–18.

<sup>82</sup> Adult Focus Group, p. 5.

<sup>83</sup> Adult Focus Group, p. 5.

<sup>84</sup> Adult Focus Group, p. 12.

<sup>85</sup> Adult Focus Group, p. 13.

So my grandma does have an issue. She lives in one of the Wood Buffalo housing. And it's only got the one exit, the one door. And then like, what if there was a fire? like how does she get out? The windows are super high and there's no other escape for my grandma other than the one door that's there. And there's no other doors, like all the one area of those Wood Buffalo housing only have the one door. And she's an Elder is her concern.

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My house is a bit old and too small. They are super old. They don't hold their air. The insulation on roof doesn't hold heat. My room is upstairs, it's really cold. And then some of the floors of some of the houses, they don't have insulation too. That's all falling down.<sup>86</sup>

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At my house the doors, in the winter, they don't lock. Like, we have to push in the door for it to lock. It gets really cold in my and my sister's room, upstairs and the windows get icy everywhere at the bottom, and then it gets mould.<sup>87</sup>

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The houses that they give are very poor and the First Alberta Housing they took that over and those ... we can't really call them decent houses. In that area it's so pitiful, it's unreal. If I was ... You know, if I owned those houses I would fix them or I would just demolish them. They're no good. There's a black mould growing in those houses. We don't even know exactly where, you know, the black mould is. But the houses are so old that they're, you know, they're getting that black mould and people are getting sick from that. And that's not very good, you know. Like children can die from that. It's very bad when you have black mould in your house. And also the other Alberta Housing, the new one that they had, put trailers in there. Or houses, cardboard boxes, whatever you want to call them, only one door. If fire breaks out by that door, where does the people get out from? The windows are so high if you jump out of that window, you break your leg. Then where do you go? How do you go to safety? Because it's ... you know, they're so poor. That's not good at all.

I don't know, like Wood Buffalo [Housing] should be ashamed of themselves to be renting places like that. The Wood Buffalo, the First Housing Alberta housing there, the way it is, like I said they should get rid of those houses. They don't fix them up anyway. Those houses pay themselves over and over again. And they should be building better and better homes for these people in the area. After all, they do collect money, you know, from the industry using the community. And also the yard, you should see the yard, the garbage bins are just, you know, breaking up and there's some garbage all over.<sup>88</sup>

These examples describe the inadequacies of available, affordable houses. But, as Conklin community members explained in the focus groups, and as was shown in earlier pictures, there is a much broader housing shortage in the community that is forcing community members to seek

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<sup>86</sup> Youth Focus Group, November 14, 2017, p. 10.

<sup>87</sup> Youth Focus Group, p. 10.

<sup>88</sup> Adult Focus Group, p. 9.

out housing alternatives that are often unsafe and/or unhealthy. These options include “couch surfing” with friends and relatives; campers, RVs, and portable trailers; log cabins (without services); “lean-tos”; and other temporary forms of housing. Some community members choose to leave the community searching for housing, with some then becoming homeless. Recently, one member who was forced to leave was found dead on the streets in Edmonton.<sup>89</sup> The inadequate housing was described variously by community members in the focus groups, and show the extent of the homelessness crisis in Conklin:

I have a concern about those houses they built on Pine Line<sup>90</sup> where [community member] is living. The houses got wood basement and they are, we mentioned a lot of black mould. But she has a daughter that got sick from there. And now my granddaughter's suffering for life from this. I don't know why they built those houses with a wood basement. You know, that's just pure unhealthy waste of a house. They don't ... Why they didn't put them in a foundation and any kind of housing they bring here, it's so pitiful. Don't even bring it here. Because it's not worth to live in them.<sup>91</sup>

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I [have] live[d] with my mother like all my life. I bought my own camper ... Well my brother gave me a camper and I stayed in there. And when my mom kicked me out, it was cold, and she never let me plug in a heater or plug in lights, or anything like that. But I sold my camper because I didn't wanna stay in there anymore, I don't like having no lights or no heat or nothing. So, I just moved back in with my mom because I have no choice. And I have no place else to go, so I might as well stay with my mom and be kicked out, I guess. For the rest of my life, and that's it. That's all I got to say.<sup>92</sup>

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And, I guess for housing out here, because I got a lot of relations that live here in Conklin, and it seems like most of my generation, they're all living in campers on their parents' properties. There's no property out here, nobody has property, like how Conklin used to be back in the day until Wood Buffalo was here, until Wood Buffalo actually came here.<sup>93</sup>

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If these people in these trailers are kicked out of their places and stuff, they're going to end up on the street, and there's no future there for them. So I think, everybody here that never got nothing, should deserve something.<sup>94</sup>

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Sure you can't take it [property/money] when you go, but at least you could say I had something while I was here. I inherited my mom's house and property with my sister,

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<sup>89</sup> Personnel Correspondence with Russell Cardinal, brother of the deceased. The obituary for Rodney Cardinal can be accessed here: <https://necrocanada.com/obituaries-2018/rodney-cardinal-january-25-2018/#.WuzYd9PwaMI>.

<sup>90</sup> The house described in this excerpt was originally owned by WBHDC and was transferred to the current owner through the “rent-to-own” program.

<sup>91</sup> Elders Focus Group, p. 2.

<sup>92</sup> Adult Focus Group, p. 17.

<sup>93</sup> Adult Focus Group, p. 5.

<sup>94</sup> Adult Focus Group, p. 2.

but I share that with the rest of my family when I can. I still wouldn't mind my own, by choice, if I wanted to pick a place I would be right by the lake, where we all grew up. Our livelihood's there. We hunt, fish, everything that came out of that lake was ... made me survive this long.

So, the housing, I think the housing should take a little look at how people are living. It's a struggle to burn wood. You're gonna get up 4:00 am in the morning and make fire again, and end up trying to go to work, keep your place warm ... It's a no-win battle here really, for me. I've been here ten years plus straight, I'm not leaving out of here. I had to go to school to get an education, I went to work for a young part of my life, but I came back, because there was no future in McMurray for anybody. You know that place is just overrun from people across Canada, who knows where.

But, for the housing part, that's what I can say for these people that live in campers. Give them a chance, you got these old housing units here, they're only like, \$60 grand in where they buy them. I mean we're spending million here, these people here, who's going to use that? It's definitely not there for the community.<sup>95</sup>

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I don't want to say much. I don't know, all I know is years ago everybody got their own place and stuff around here, and our generation, we didn't get a house and land, whatever. So, now, we've come back here, we don't have a place to stay, we end up staying with our parents and stuff like that. It's not easy. To have to put up with all their stuff and whatever.

Yeah, and if you want to come back and get your own place, there's no place to rent. End up staying in a camper, or whatever. Or end up, like he said, in the streets, that's about it. Or else to the city. There's not much choices. Would be better if we actually get a chance to get our own places out here, our own land, and our own houses, 'cause we're all just end up living off other people, and that's not good.<sup>96</sup>

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My son's homeless. He lives in my trailer outside and now he lives in his uncle's house. Got nowhere else to go. And that's just the way it is. Our grandkids are gonna see that too if we don't have any land or housing here. They're not gonna get anywhere on rental low income. We need land, we need housing that we could go buy so our generations to come can have homes to go to. Like, where do our family go when they come to Conklin? Nowhere. They can't even come back home. A lot of people left here cause of that reason and a lot of people can't come back here because of that reason. I remember when I was growing up, we had a log house. It stood there. When my dad had to go to work, he took his whole family and he came back here for winter. He'd go trapping and we had our house there. But you can't do that no more. Not allowed.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Adult Focus Group, p. 2.

<sup>96</sup> Adult Focus Group, p. 3.

<sup>97</sup> Elders Focus Group, p. 4.

We have a lot of displaced members that don't have any residences that are living in campers and so on. We have homes that are doubled up and tripled up and whatever else. There's ... Sure they built these units for the people who did get the houses. But you're always needing to renovate them because they were built so poorly. And it's really unfortunate that things are not moving the way they should be or fast enough for these people because one day we're gonna find people frozen in their own homes where they live. Because now they're living wherever they could find a place to live and I don't blame 'em for that because the RMWB is not moving as fast as they should be. Sure we get the blame for the community and so forth. However there's always democratic things that you have to jump through hoops over and so forth.

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I myself, I have campers in my yard. And that's gonna cost me more from my taxes and where do these people go? You know, they have to stay in their rundown little campers with mould in them and they look for it, try to kill it. But I don't think they find all of it. And so you know, we need land and housing very badly. I don't care what anybody says. To better this community we need land and housing and the young people can be proud of their homes and live better and raising their families. This way, when you're living with your relatives or you know ... you don't feel like you have a home. So what do you do? If you have extra money, you don't know how to save it. What do you do? Buy alcohol and drugs. What else is there to do to make you feel better?<sup>98</sup>

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No, I just wanted to say that like everybody said, land and housing is all we need. Cause a lot of us live in our own trailer or something. You know, it needs renovations or clean up like mould and everything. Just land and housing would be nice.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Elders Focus Group, p. 10.

<sup>99</sup> Adult Focus Group, p. 11.



*Darlene Richards is working to winterize her home. She would like to move into something nicer, but is worried about the cost of rent and having to leave her community in Conklin.*

As these quotes and pictures demonstrate, the government's failure to take action and provide land and housing in the Conklin is having a catastrophic effect on the community today, particularly people under forty who did not receive have the opportunity to obtain land through the land tenure program and are now forced to live with parents and grandparents in temporary housing. Furthermore, in recent years the RMWB has attempted to "clean up" the community by asking community members to remove "derelict" units that are privately owned. Unfortunately, many of these units are currently lived in, and removing them will most often force those displaced community members "onto the street" because there are not emergency housing options in the community.<sup>100</sup> As these quotes demonstrate, the situation is dire and requires immediate action.

The failure to take action in the past has affected the current infrastructure problem in Conklin, community members were clear in the focus groups when they stated that there is not enough affordable housing in the community to address the current housing shortage, with a significant proportion of people in the community either living in temporary or inadequate housing or having family members affected by the Conklin housing crisis.

Community members and leaders are growing increasingly frustrated. They recognize Conklin's growing housing crisis, but they too feel helpless since amalgamation when with the power to affect change taken from the local community:

Well, as for myself, as a Conklin community member and a Conklin Metis Local member, I wanna see Conklin rise up and try to get some Metis settlement happening here. Go after the government. I know it's gonna be tough, but this is where our leadership comes in, our Metis Local. They gotta push the buttons, our zone one president, and vice president to move on this. We should have demonstrations, frigging demonstrate for land for this place. And I'm serious about that.<sup>101</sup>

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Participant: I really sympathize with a lot of the community members, and [community member] spoke from the heart. And I don't know what it takes, like I work closely with leadership of this community, and month after month, year after year, housing and land has always, always been a main topic. I don't know, it's so frustrating, I don't know what has to happen. You know, Wood Buffalo supplies affordable housing, what are the requirements, you gotta be working? Or can people on AISH [Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped] and assistance, do they qualify for affordable housing?

Moderator: Wood Buffalo Housing has, from the government of Alberta, a certain set amount of social housing that they can provide. For AISH people, or whatever. They don't provide any of that to date, or they don't get paid to provide any of that, in the rural areas. The province does not provide any of that, they have been providing it anyways, because we know the people in Conklin can only afford what they can afford. Right now, there's a 170 person waiting list [for social housing], and primarily been provided in the urban area for social housing

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<sup>100</sup> Cullen Bird, "Rural Hamlets Struggle with Housing Crisis," *Fort McMurray Today*, October 19, 2017, <http://www.fortmcmurraytoday.com/2017/10/19/rural-hamlets-struggle-with-housing-crisis>.

<sup>101</sup> Adult Focus Group, p. 10.

Participant: I know, there's nothing in Conklin for social housing. There's affordable housing, right, but that doesn't even address the top of the problem here. And there's nothing at all for social housing. There's so many homeless people here in this community that, I don't know, I mean, land and housing, yes Conklin needs that, but maybe the minister need to come here and see first-hand how a lot of the people are living. It's costs no difference to live in this community than it does it Fort McMurray, or anywhere else. You go in the hole trying to make a living here in Conklin. To buy the land, to get a home, your mortgaged out for the rest of your life. And that's a grassroots people, in a community where we're told there's no more housing programs, or anything like that. We'll never ever see anything like that again. Nothing comes for free.

Yeah, we know that, we get that, but they're not releasing any more land. It's just so frustrating, I don't know what's it's gonna take. I hear the cries of the people. There's so many people begging, like what is it gonna take, what is the solution? And what's gonna come out of this, today? Like, this session here? Where is this information gonna go?<sup>102</sup>

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You know, give the citizens a chance to change their ways, you know, be responsible. As it goes now there's, got no hope, no education, and even though I went to college, I went to school, I got careers, and I still can't get a place here. It's who I know, or who I ...<sup>103</sup>

### **Community-Based Solutions**

As shown above, homelessness in Conklin has reached a crisis point. There is a great amount of frustration in the community, but there is still hope. Community members, however, recognize that there is a serious problem, and that it requires a serious solution. As put by one community member “Let’s get rid of the band-aid; let’s fix it.”<sup>104</sup>

**First**, borrowing from the Government of Alberta’s “A Plan for Alberta: Ending Homelessness in 10 Years” as well as the RMWB’s “Heading Home: The Right Thing to Do: 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness 2010-2020,” there needs to be a “Housing First” approach extended to Conklin where those who are homeless are given a safe place to rest their heads every night. Furthermore, it is imperative that Conklin’s understanding of “home” be incorporated into the Housing First program so that the community’s housing crisis is understood through the lens of Indigenous homelessness and that the “web of relationships and responsibilities”—as outlined by Jesse Thistle—are prioritized in the solution.<sup>105</sup>

**Second**, it is essential that Conklin’s local leadership be involved in developing and delivering the local homelessness and housing program. The community is in the process of establishing a Housing Committee, and that group should lead any efforts to address the homelessness crisis in the community. While outside agencies can offer support, it is the local community that is most heavily invested, and they will be the ones who find solutions. The point was emphasized at the

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<sup>102</sup> Adult Focus Group, p. 17–18.

<sup>103</sup> Adult Focus group, p. 3.

<sup>104</sup> Adult Focus Group, p. 20–21.

<sup>105</sup> Thistle, *Indigenous Homelessness*, 14.



focus groups:

I think we need to see the local people of Conklin having more of a say in how land is managed in Conklin and how it's allotted and how people get it and make it. We're tired of having outside agencies, whether it's Wood Buffalo, whether it's other groups controlling basically the fate of the community.<sup>106</sup>

**Third**, it is important that a variety of housing solutions be provided to meet Conklin's needs. As described earlier in the report, there is a broad range of needs in the community, and only when all those needs are addressed will the homelessness crisis in Conklin be solved. It is also vital that community members be involved in all aspects of the program, from planning, to building, to maintaining properties. Focus group participants spoke approvingly of the "Opportunity Core Program" where community members in the 1970s were involved in building houses for community members. The program had the additional benefit of providing employment opportunities and skills training for community members:

I think they should bring back that program they had years ago. I think it was done through the OCP [Opportunity Core Program], and then that would help everybody like they could build homes and land and, yeah, that would be a good idea. Opportunity Corp- They had the locals employed building houses for each other. That was a good project [and at the] same time you're learning a trade to be a carpenter ... Yeah, it's a good idea.

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One of the issues that I find, even if you were to buy the lot, which is really expensive. Before you even put a home on it, you have to pay \$13,000 for a building permit. Then on top of that, your water, your sewer, you know. Like it's really a ... an expensive way to go. But I'm just wondering if the government could be lobbied into bringing the OCP back or a group looking into that Housing for Humanity.<sup>107</sup>

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[We need] housing. Housing, land and employment, big time, we need it.<sup>108</sup>

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I just agree with needing land and housing, and yeah. Land and housing, as well employment. Yeah, but land and housing definitely.<sup>109</sup>

Additionally, the solution needs to involve developing a home ownership program, where community members are provided the opportunity and necessary support to own their own home. Recently WBHDC presented a "co-op" housing model where a group of community members in partnership with the WBHDC and potentially the CRDAC or other community organizations would build community homes. This approach seemed favourable to many in the room, as put by one community member:

I think everyone should have their own home and lands, so they can be proud of

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<sup>106</sup> Elders Focus Group, p. 22.

<sup>107</sup> Elders Focus Group, p. 11.

<sup>108</sup> Adult Focus Group, p. 6-7.

<sup>109</sup> Adult Focus Group, p. 9.

something they own, and look after it. Give them a sense of pride in their community. Pride for family events, bring people closer together as well.<sup>110</sup>

But such a program needs to ensure that houses remain in the community and used by community members:

I feel like that renting-to-own would be the proper way to go because if there's a next generation of the times, right now it's so hard that keep the housing going all the time. Just pass it on ...<sup>111</sup>

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But if they would give an opportunity to this community to bring land and housing back here for the people to own. Not to rent, like you could rent-to-own, yes it sounds good. But the rental ... You have to fit a criteria. You gotta be in this bottom before you get a house. And sometimes that's not good for some people. They don't qualify so they're homeless.<sup>112</sup>

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Hi, I like [community member's] solution of a rent-to-own program. That would solve a lot of our housing issues.<sup>113</sup>

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So like they said, I like rent-to-own houses. That's what we should do. They did it before. Many people used to buy houses here for one dollar. Some of those buildings are still standing, just to get land. But most of these people around here, they don't get that like even the kids that are growing up. Teenagers or kids, grandsons and everything, nephews. They got no place to stay. Like they said they should have little lodges here. For these single people for now. Like these trailers that are coming in. Who's gonna get those? Is it one person? Is it going to be alone? Or split it into three? There's three bedrooms. One building. I think that's what they should talk about to get people help each other.<sup>114</sup>

Additionally, if a co-op program is initiated, homes that are part of that program need to remain available to local people in Conklin. Previous versions of the “rent-to-own” programs have allowed for the sale of houses to people from outside the community, often for business purposes:

There's also people who have gotten rent-to-own houses through Wood Buffalo, and then years later they turn around and sell them. And then, once they're bought from somebody else, what's the chance of that ever going back to a community member? When they're selling them for like \$500 thousand? You know, like that doesn't address the problem. Rent-to-own is good, but I mean, once they're sold they're like gone...<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Adult Focus Group, p. 6.

<sup>111</sup> Elders Focus Group, p. 3.

<sup>112</sup> Elders Focus Group, p. 3.

<sup>113</sup> Elders Focus Group, p. 11.

<sup>114</sup> Elders Focus Group, p. 18–19.

<sup>115</sup> Adult Focus Group, p. 23.

It is also necessary that zoning requirements meet community needs. At present there are homes in the community that provide housing for temporary oil sands workers. This adds additional strain to the community and does not help with the current homelessness crisis. As described by one community member:

Adding to [the problem], when I said the RMWB has proper protocol that we have to follow, when there's one fella bought and built three homes with nineteen bedrooms in each one. Then when Wood Buffalo was told about it, they had to pay a fine cause that wasn't in their building permit. However, you do your math and you multiply nineteen bedroom homes at \$4,000 a room and there's three houses, [I would] pay a fine too if I could get away with it, because I profit that much more. It just doesn't make sense to me how we can't get away with somethings but the big businesses sure can as long as they pay their fine.<sup>116</sup>

Finally, while the co-op program will help some of the community members, there is still a need for emergency housing with wraparound services, as outlined in the “housing first” program.

In sum, in order to solve the homelessness crisis in the community, all those responsible for homelessness need to work together, in partnership with local Conklin community members, to quickly implement a housing-first strategy where all community members are provided a safe place to sleep every night.

### **Conclusion: *How Much Longer?***

*I told him not long, five years ago ... So he asks me, "How much longer, Mom?" [I] tell him, "Not long." I didn't know what else to say. Not long. Been here for years, moved away, came back, moved away. Lived at [community member's] get kicked out ... Belittled ... It's not right, and I don't have no one to turn to, because inside, I have too much pride. The only person I could talk to was my dad. He's gone. Like he said, once he's gone, I'm alone. And he's so right. And that's all I gotta say, about your housing---*

This quote from the focus group that opened the report sums up the Conklin homelessness crisis well, and should help to focus all those who knowingly or unknowingly have contributed to the crisis. In short, we all have to ask ourselves: “How much longer?”

*How much longer will we deny that the historical legacies have disproportionately affected the community of Conklin and contributed to the current homelessness crisis?*

*How much longer will we accept that it is okay for people in Conklin to live in “poverty, poor housing, and economic disadvantage” while the benefits derived from billions of dollars in oil sands development are spent elsewhere in the province and country?*

While it is clear that the homelessness crisis in Conklin did not materialize overnight, it is also clear that for the crisis to be remedied, immediate and sustained action from multiple levels of government and social agencies is required. It is also clear that the local community needs to be

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<sup>116</sup> Elders Focus Group, p. 23.

actively involved in developing remedies that will meet community needs. It is the author's hope that this report will spur action toward solving the homelessness crisis in Conklin, and that when I talk to Conklin community members in the future and say "not much longer," I'm not fooling myself, like the community member quoted above was forced to fool her nine-year-old son as she put him to sleep near the wood-burning stove in an aged camper sitting on a pile of shit.

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