



The Soulful City

Stories of collective well-being



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WHY RECOVER

We want to address the complex challenge of urban wellness.

We believe that we are all on a wellbeing journey and that those living under the toughest conditions have a lot of knowledge about what really matters.

We strive to give them opportunities to use their knowledge to create better ways to experience wellbeing.

We believe that wellness is achieved through small scale interactions by engaged citizens, neighbours and community, as much as through larger scale service systems and create enabling conditions for these interactions to occur.

From 2017-2019, the City of Edmonton's Recover Initiative, alongside not-for-profits, businesses and community members, set out to improve urban wellness – to show, through small-scale actions, how the community might come together to enable wellness in the downtown core and Strathcona neighbourhoods.

When this work started in 2017, our definition of urban wellness had five broad categories that were very closely linked to the social determinants of health: social capacity, economic vitality, safety and security, physical and mental health, and built and natural environments.

In three years of researching and testing, we have learned much about how to improve urban wellness, and that our initial definition of wellness was lacking.

Soulful City broadens our understanding of urban wellness and provides strong direction in how to move forward.

WHAT IS SOULFUL CITY

As Recover approached its third year of work, it was time to step back to review all of our research, examine some of our most basic assumptions, resituate ourselves in people, place, and what is meant by “urban wellness,” and talk about what is called for, now.

“The Soulful City” is the result of this examination. It is an exploration of wellness rooted both in the experience of those living on the streets of Edmonton today, and a long history of philosophical thought. It looks to Indigenous, Eastern, Western, and interdisciplinary perspectives on what it means to be well.

We might not think twice about words like wellness and well-being, but behind the words are ideas that shape how we organize our lives, distribute resources and define problems. Our study of urban wellness has led us to a narrative, full of moments and characters, ideas and themes that can ground us in new and different ways of thinking and talking about living and being well: connected to self, body, land, culture, community, human development and spirit.

In our new, emerging context within the COVID-19 global pandemic, this work becomes even more relevant.

THIS IS FOR YOU

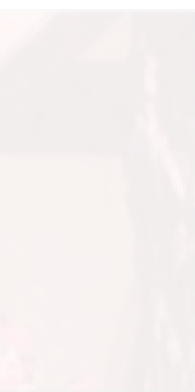
We've brought together stories and data, literature and historical events, photos and audio to make visible people and concepts too often hidden from view.

For **civil servants** and **decision-makers**, we hope you'll wrestle with the big ideas and every day realities, and hold space for fresh conversations and approaches to change.

For **frontline workers** and **social sector leaders**, we hope you'll see the people you support, the purpose of your work, and the possibilities for action from fresh perspectives.

For **community members**, we hope you'll see your city and the people who live on its streets through fresh lenses, and come to recognize wellness as a collective pursuit.

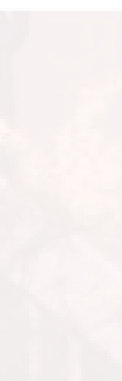
STARTING WITH PEOPLE



Following our principle of being people-centered and inclusive, having people at the centre of all that we do, we wanted to learn what wellness means to the people that are the most marginalized.

In Soulful City, you will learn about people like Mitch, Wayne, Clara, and Earl. They all have different stories, and these cannot be reduced to a single narrative. While no two lives are the same, several intertwining plot lines emerged: **hopefulness, humiliation, grief, self-sufficiency, ambivalence, aloofness** and **earnestness**.

One plot line gives way to another, and unless we stop to understand the inherent emergence of human story, we risk reducing people to a series of one-dimensional situations (ex. homelessness, drug addiction, mental illness).



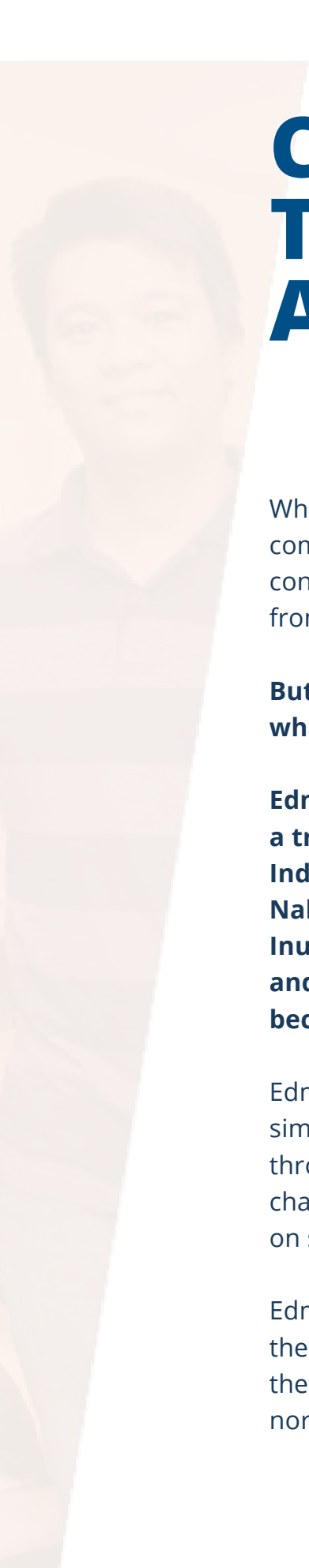
Since January 2018, social design shop InWithForward has done four two-week stints of ethnographic research in Edmonton. They have been spending time with street-involved folks wherever they are, doing whatever they are doing. They have learned about stressors and pain points. They have also learned about people's talents and aspirations.

InWithForward has gained deep insights into the way that people who have very little in terms of material goods think about the good life.

When you ask someone with very little in terms of “stuff” what they think is important to living well, it is amazing how they hone in very quickly. It is also very striking that they do not list any “stuff” as being the priority.

What floats to the top are things like **respect, sense of purpose, and connections to family, friends, and community.** This is not to say that a safe place to sleep is not important; it is just that the lack of such a space is more of a stressor. Having material things like a roof over your head and food to eat doesn’t mean that someone is living well. It just means that they are able to survive.

But what are they living for?



CITIES ARE MORE THAN CONCRETE AND STEEL


When we think of the ‘urban’ part of urban wellness, what comes to mind? We tend to envision its materiality: steel, concrete, asphalt, glass. Vertical structures jutting out from the land. Skylines paying homage to man.

But, beyond its physicality, what makes a city, and what defines urbanism?

Edmonton is a growing city situated on Treaty 6 lands, a traditional and contemporary gathering place for Indigenous peoples including the Cree, Blackfoot, Nakota Sioux, Haudenosaunee, Saulteaux, Métis, Inuit, and many others whose histories, languages, and cultures shape who our community is and can become.

Edmonton is bold in its outward looking curiosity, with a simmering ambition that floats on a reserve of hope through booms and busts. The city has an appetite for challenge, a neighbourly-ness, and that blue collar-hands on sensibility.

Edmonton has been a pragmatic destination, as a hub for the oil industry, seat of provincial government, as well as the first big city on the way south from Canada’s vast north.



Now a metropolitan city in its own right, Edmonton has also become a popular choice for international immigrants.

Edmonton is a city of ambition and stubborn hope. As our mayor, Don Iveson points out, the city's identity has been much less clear than its sheer will to be different and great.

From early boosterism, to bold monuments and facilities, and an evolving relationship to its Indigenous roots and peoples, as well as its natural setting, Edmonton remains stubbornly hopeful.

WELLNESS AT ITS CORE

Combined, the stories of the individuals' we talked to tell a surprisingly cogent narrative about the good life, and one that picks up on the core themes across Indigenous, Western, Eastern and interdisciplinary traditions:

Wellness isn't the presence or absence of just one thing: it's the relationship between self, family, society, nature and cosmos. Despite living without some pretty basic material things, people's non-material desires are just as high and, in many cases, higher. Most important to the folks we met: **respect, family/connection, and purpose.**

While materiality isn't the core of how Edmontonians on the margins conceptualize a good life, it is the biggest perceived (not to mention, structural) barrier.

Housing, services, money, storage and getting around consume people's days; taking away opportunities for acceptance, calmness, peace of mind, etc. Relational stressors are a close second, upsetting harmony and balance.

In our cities, on our streets, there is no avoiding body talk, often for banal reasons, like the need for shelter, food, clothes and bathrooms, needs that occupy so much time. Not having a safe place to sleep or a bathroom to use is a huge stressor.

No doubt, Edmonton cannot ignore our physicality, our bodily self-awareness and care, and Edmonton is taking some steps to reclaim our physical experience in urban settings.

While existing policies and services put much of their attention on addressing material needs, how they do so can shape overall outcomes.

Focusing exclusively on material barriers can negatively impact nonmaterial outcomes.

For example, when systems house people away from their chosen communities, or place restrictions on living arrangements, people describe a palpable loss of agency, control, respect and connection.

THE TALE OF TWO SHELTERS

A few years ago, in a city that wasn't Edmonton, InWithForward stumbled across two services.

One served homeless adults.

The other served homeless young people.

Both offered free dinner.

To access the meal, adults lined up, often snaking the perimeter of the building, even in the coldest of winter days. Upon entry, they grabbed a standard issue tray, and stood in the buffet line, waiting their turn for a church volunteer with a hairnet to plop the main and side on their plate, before scouring the cafeteria to find an open seat.

The place expanded and contracted, with the frenetic energy of constant comings and goings. Just a few blocks away, young people entered a gallery space, checked-in with the maitre-d, and headed to the shared kitchen for a glass of fancy water in a hand-painted mug while their peers, dressed in aprons, put finishing touches on the evening's home-cooked meal.

After choosing and plating their own food, young people took seats at a long, shared table and broke bread together – under sparkle lights, accompanied by live, jazzy (youth-made) music.

TWO MEALS, DIFFERENTIATED NOT ONLY BY AGE, BUT BY IDEAS

Beneath the lines, the cafeteria, the standard-issue trays, and the nice church ladies with hairnets was one dominant idea: hierarchy of needs. Safely satiating hunger had to come before all else

Beneath the gallery, the maitre-d, hand-painted mugs, aprons, shared table, sparkle lights and music was a different dominant idea: to be 'nourished' is to have a sense of community, identity, ritual, contribution, and appreciative living.

In this one, seemingly every day task of providing a hot meal, these distinct ideas took shape, influencing most everything about the spaces: their physicality and the human interactions within.

AN INDIGENOUS VIEW

Ensuring that Indigenous worldviews are present in our understanding of wellbeing and in our design of practices is critical.

Not only because over half of the homeless population in Edmonton is Indigenous, but also because the values, beliefs and stories of Indigenous peoples are typically left out of broader discussions about wellness and wellbeing.

"Part of the challenge is recognizing that the conceptualizations used to produce [wellness] frameworks and measurement tools are rooted in Western knowledge systems that do not adequately reflect Indigenous ways of knowing and seeing the world in a more holistic sense."

Jacqueline Quinless

As a project team that consists primarily of settlers, we are making a conscious effort to continually bring Indigenous voices to the forefront through ethnographic stories, academic research, and community engagement.

Doing this allows us to engage with the very real and ongoing negative effects of historical and present-day colonization and settler practices.

In addition, this provides us with the opportunity to recognize Indigenous ways of knowing and seeing the world as not just significant to Indigenous peoples, but also enriching for all who wish to pursue a good life.

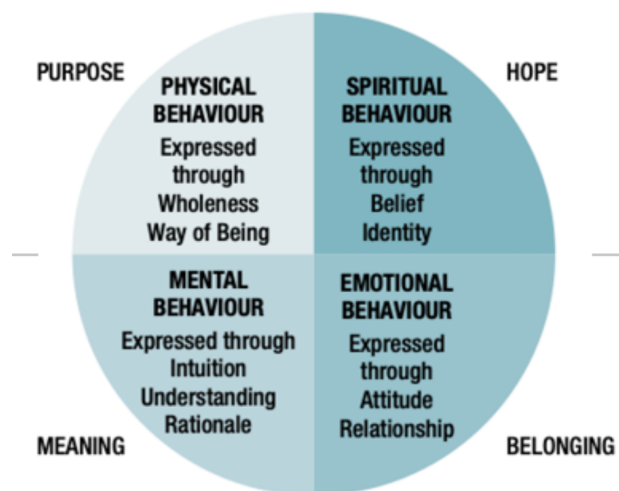
For the nehyiawak or Cree people, a life well lived recognizes everyone and everything is alive, restored and renewed through practices, teachings and ceremonies grounded in values of compassion, generosity, honesty, self-determination, respect, unity, humility, and a desire to live in harmony.

This understanding is familiar to other Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island. As far away as the southwestern United States, teachings shared among the Navajo people share that a good life is not composed of discrete events, but regularly nurtured practices for being in balance with oneself, one's loved ones, one's community, the natural world, and the universe across time.

We are all a part of creation and we carry the responsibility to continue that creation.

As we pursue our urban wellness goals, it is clear that Indigenous ways of knowing and being can meaningfully lead the way.

Wellbeing is made up of



Indigenous Wellbeing Framework

Purpose as expressed through physical behaviour including cultural ways of doing and being, caregiving, learning, working.

Meaning as expressed through mental behaviour including intuition and understanding of place within creation and history.

Hope as expressed through spiritual behaviour including belief in spirit, Indigenous values and identity.

Belonging as expressed through emotional behaviour including feelings of connectedness within family, community and culture.



Jenn, by giving up the house and car, has rejected wealth and security as the basis of her good life.



Patrick, by losing his house and car, has come to recognize that relationships are the heart of the matter.



Ko sees his eviction, hospital stay, and months of shelter living as a kind-of 40-years in the desert. For Ko, returning home is less about finding a house and more about practicing his values: self-sufficiency, achievement, adventure.

A FRAMEWORK FOR WELLBEING

Wellness isn't a linear pursuit, so much as a circuitous journey.

Rather than reduce wellness to a hierarchical list of factors, we can identify lots of interwoven elements. At its centre, a deep sense of connection and balance.

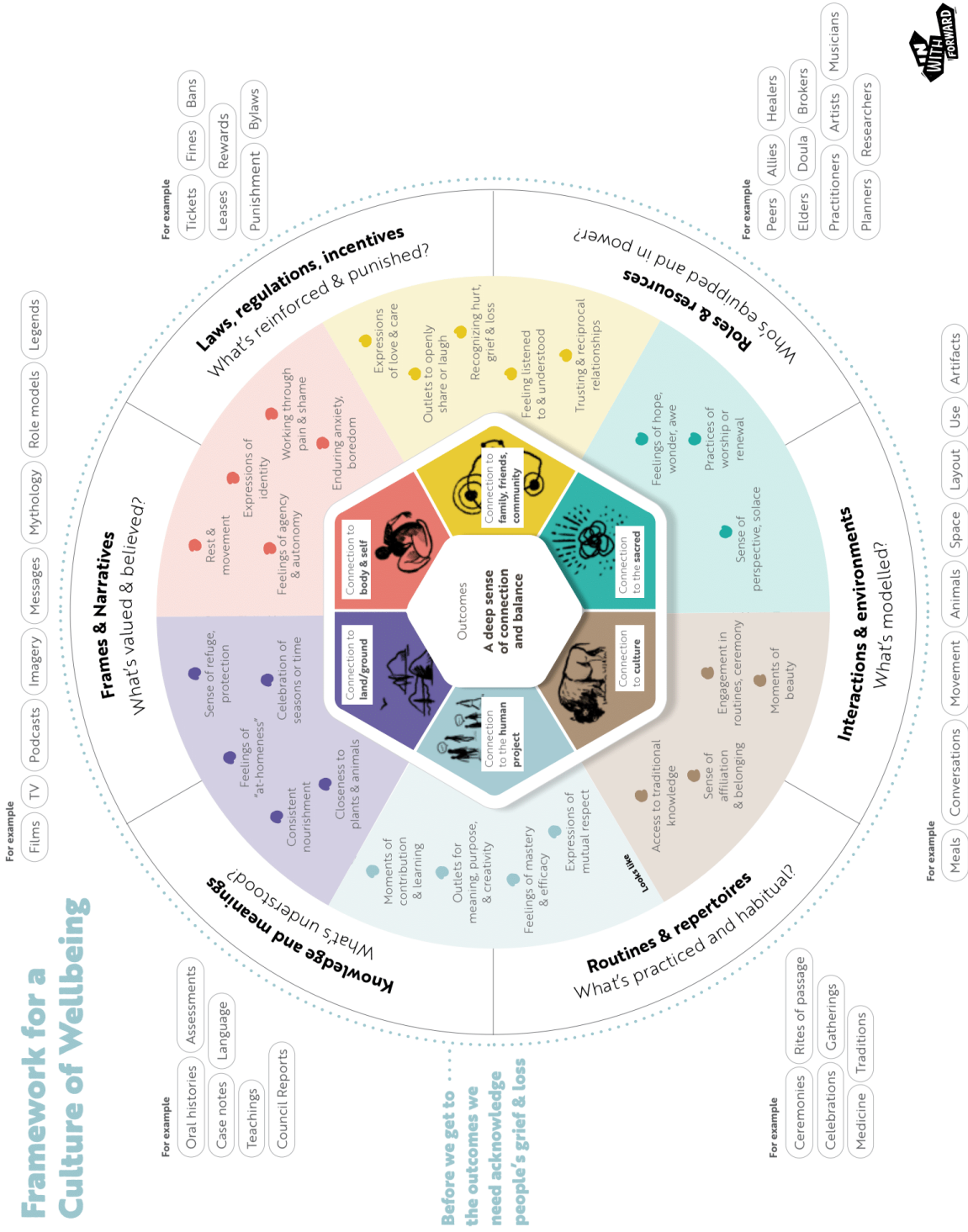
Surrounded by the elements that contribute to a holistic picture of wellbeing - connections to: body & self; family, friends & community; the sacred; culture; self-actualization/the human project; and land/ground.

Providing structure to these are: frames & narratives; laws, regulations, & incentives, roles & resources; interactions & environments; routines & repertoires; and knowledge & meanings.

This outer ring is where our influence lies.

How might we understand these structures as a series of leverage points for cultural change, creating shifts over time that elevate the importance of the inner rings?

Framework for a Culture of Wellbeing



Before we get to the outcomes we need acknowledge people's grief & loss

THE DIFFERENCE IS IN THE DETAILS

Story from February 2019

The difference is in the details

What really happened:



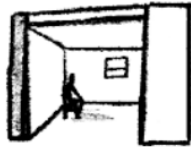
Deborah's last eviction didn't surprise her. She'd let people stay with her, despite a lease which barred overnight guests.

Back on the streets, at 58, Deborah felt protected by her crew. She wasn't lonely – but her health wasn't so good, and she was racking up tickets for public sleeping.



In and out of the hospital and shelters, Deborah was referred to a case manager. She liked her. The case manager navigated the system, helping her get a new ID, qualify for housing again, and acquire furniture for a new place.

Deborah was excited and unsure about her new place. She couldn't have overnight visitors for more than a few days at a time. And she wasn't sure how she'd deal with her insomnia, all alone.



A speculative story of what could happen with the new Framework for a Culture of Wellbeing:

For Deborah, a life full of camaraderie and friendship is a life well lived. She says hello to every passerby, even when they don't smile back.



Instead of tickets for public sleeping, Deborah earns a ride on the sleep bus, where she's treated to a comfy chair (rules/norms). Dropped off at The Nook, one of twenty cafes in the breakfast network, she banters with the staff and customers (environment).

Afterwards, she wanders over to the liquor store, where she picks up her Blackstone vodka. The guy behind the counter tells her about a natural medicine event going on at the city's equine park – would she like to take the purpose bus there? Her friend Jimmy wanders in; there will be tobacco and ceremony (routines).



They go; Deborah's feeling pretty relaxed after, but worried about a night at home, alone. She and Jimmy head back to hers – she calls her Night Owl (a role) to let her know that Jimmy's coming over. The Night Owl checks-in, brings by some tea to help Deborah sleep, and assists Jimmy to the shelter around 3am (interactions) Deborah's slowly finding a balance between self and friends.

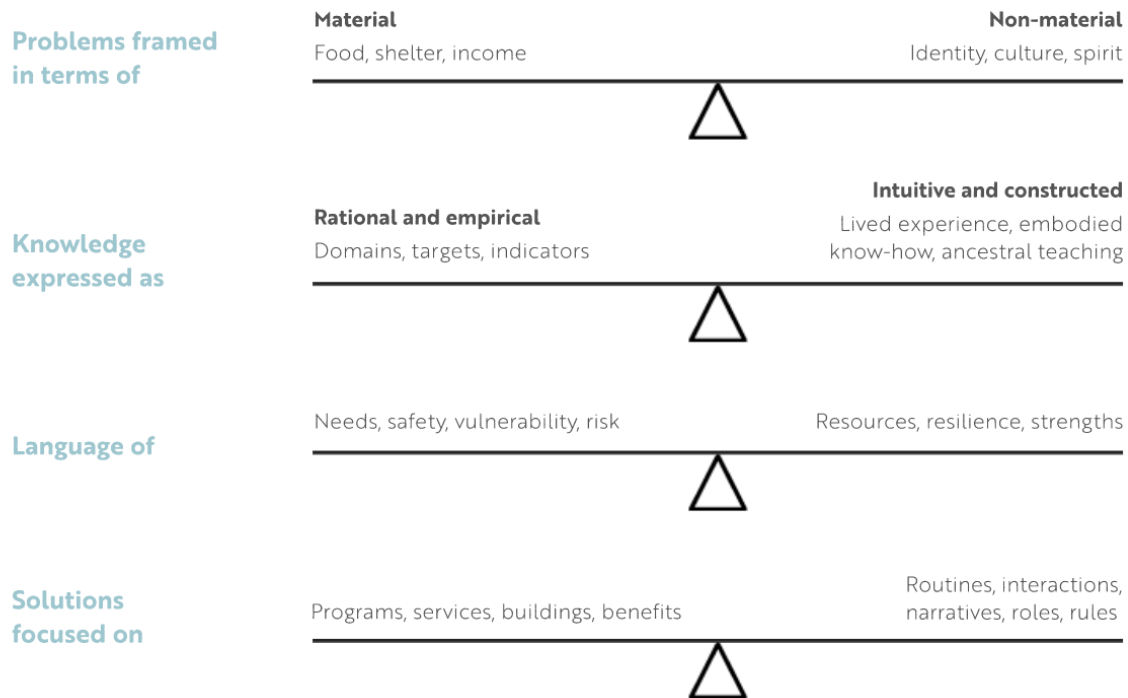
WHAT THIS MEANS

Focusing exclusively on material barriers can negatively impact nonmaterial outcomes.

This all means that we have to pay careful attention to non-material aspects of wellbeing at the same time as trying to meet a person’s material needs.

Existing policies and services put much of their attention on addressing material needs, but these need to be balanced with non-material needs - how they do so can shape overall outcomes.

Striking a balance between...



THERE ARE THREE WAYS FORWARD

1. Hosting conversations

Carving out more time and space to broach the awkward and uncomfortable; be honest and vulnerable; confront assumptions; and collectively dig to the heart of the matter. More conversation need not mean more meetings, communication plans and brands – but discussions where we stop taking ideas as givens, unearth their origins, and entertain alternatives.

The Talking Points section provides a short summary of the ideas contained in these pages, plus plenty of prompts to get conversation going.

2. Honing intentions

Talking doesn't have to preclude acting. Often, the best way to work our way through ideas is to deliberately act. Over the past two years, the RECOVER Initiative has experimented with many small-scale interventions – from neighbour dinners to alleyway gardens. We can begin to map these actions against a common theory of change, looking at how they shape the intersecting elements of urban wellness.

The Change Points section offers a Framework for a Culture of Wellbeing, highlighting the overlapping currents of cultural change. The aim isn't to rationalize or streamline action so much as to deepen and strengthen action.

3. Highlighting decisions

Alongside open experimentation must come open decision-making. What to say 'yes' and 'no' to? Ultimately, rebalancing the elements of urban wellness requires a reallocation of time, money, and emphasis. An explicit set of questions and considerations can help.

The Focus Points section includes a draft decision-making rubric, designed to assist RECOVER stakeholders with discerning which pieces of work embody the spirit of urban wellness.

Defining wellness in terms of living standards and health domains feels so knowable, comfortable, and manageable. Adding the soul and spirit into the mix feels so much the opposite. And yet, they don't have to be.

Rather than avoid that which we don't quite know or understand, we invite you into a conversation about what it really means to live and be well in Edmonton. What are wellness programs and services, clinics and centres, health and social care professionals, targets and indicators ultimately in pursuit of?

How does a city, and its many intersecting communities, thoughtfully acknowledge grief, respect healing, and recalibrate balance? This is really the central question for the Recover Initiative as it grows into its third year.