Phase 5 Thought Companion

Building for Recovery CMHC Solutions Lab

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Table of Contents

Introduction....3

How to Use This Guide....4

Part 1: Reimagining Recovery....5

Part 2: Why Churches and Faith Communities Matter....6

Part 3: What Makes a Recovery Village Different?....7

Part 4: Questions Before Building....8

Part 5: Designing for Human Beings....9

Part 6: Governance + Sustainability....10

Part 7: Community Integration....11

Part 8: Holding Hope....11

Carrying the Work Forward....12

Introduction

This companion guide is designed for churches, faith communities, community organizations, recovery partners, planners, funders, boards, and local leaders exploring the possibility of creating recovery village models rooted in dignity, healing, belonging, and long-term stability.

This is not a technical construction manual or a prescriptive operational blueprint. It is a reflective planning framework: a companion to conversation, design, decision-making, and community imagination.

Recovery villages are more than housing developments. They are living communities: ecosystems of care, accountability, healing, and belonging. Thoughtful design matters in all aspects including the physical environment, governance, relationships, culture, accessibility, and the systems that shape daily life.

This companion invites communities to think deeply before building, because good intentions alone are not enough. Communities can unintentionally recreate institutional harm, exclusion, dependency, or inequity if difficult questions are not asked early and often.

This document is grounded in a human-centred, systems-thinking approach and explicitly informed by Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, Accessibility, and Belonging (EDIAB). EDIAB is not an optional lens or a final-stage consideration. It is foundational infrastructure.

Recovery experiences are shaped by identity, lived experience, access, trauma, social conditions, discrimination, community belonging, and systemic barriers. Recovery village design must therefore account for how race, Indigeneity, disability, neurodivergence, faith, gender identity, sexuality, poverty, immigration status, age, health, and lived experience shape access to healing and belonging.

At its core, this companion is grounded in the belief that **communities can co-create spaces of recovery, dignity, belonging, and stability.**

How to Use This Guide

This companion is built around reflection, not completion. There is no score, no pass mark, and no single correct set of answers. Its purpose is to slow a community down at the points where slowing down matters most, and to make sure the right people are in the room when key decisions are made.

Read it together. This companion is most useful when worked through by a group rather than a single leader and the group should intentionally include people with lived and living experience of recovery.

Use the questions as conversation starters. Each set of reflection questions is designed to be discussed aloud in order to encourage deeper conversation and a range of perspectives.

Return to the questions more than once. Questions that feel abstract early on often become concrete later. Revisit the relevant sections at each major decision point such as before allocating land, before drafting plans, before forming partnerships, and before construction.

Pay attention to when it is hard to answer. The questions a community avoids, rushes past, or are unable to answer are often the most important ones. Mark them and come back to them.

Adapt it to your needs. This is a companion, not a standard. Communities should add questions that reflect their own context, identities, history, and relationships, and remove those that do not apply.

Use it to also decide whether the project is feasible. Working through this companion may also help lead a community to decide that this is not the right project, the right time, or the right partnership.

PART 1

Reimagining Recovery

Recovery is More Than Abstinence

Recovery is often framed narrowly through the lenses of abstinence, treatment completion, sobriety milestones, or crisis stabilization. While these may be meaningful elements of some recovery journeys, they do not represent the full picture. Recovery is often about much more than stopping substance use. For many people, substance use is not the beginning of the story but a part of their journey. The use of substances can be a form of coping and connected to experiences of trauma, grief, housing instability, poverty, family disruption, chronic stress, social isolation, racism, colonial harm, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, exclusion, mental health challenges, or disconnection from identity, meaning, and community. Recovery, therefore, can involve rebuilding many things at once: physical safety, emotional regulation, identity, trust, purpose, belonging, routine, relationships, confidence, autonomy, and hope.

Recovery village planning must therefore move beyond the question of *"How do we help people stop using substances?"* to *"What conditions support healing, belonging, accountability, and long-term stability?"*.

Recovery Through an EDIAB Lens

Recovery is also not experienced equally. Systemic inequities shape who receives support, who is believed, who is criminalized, who is excluded, whose healing practices are recognized, who feels safe seeking help, and who remains visible within systems. Recovery design must recognize that dominant recovery narratives may not reflect all lived realities and intersectional identities.. An Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, Accessibility and Belonging (EDIAB)-informed approach requires communities to consider culturally grounded healing approaches, Indigenous perspectives on healing and land, trauma-informed care, gender safety, disability access, sensory and cognitive accessibility, the inclusion of 2SLGBTQIA+ communities, anti-racist practice,neurodivergence-informed environments, and the socioeconomic realities people are living within.

Questions for Reflection

- What is recovery beyond abstinence?
- What conditions help people heal?
- What role does belonging play?
- Why do many people cycle through systems?
- What happens when housing, connection, and purpose are missing?
- Whose definition of recovery is shaping this model?
- Are dominant recovery approaches culturally relevant for everyone?

- How might healing look different across cultures, communities, genders, neurotypes, faiths, and lived experiences?
- What assumptions are being made about readiness, motivation, compliance, or success?
- How might systemic barriers be misinterpreted as personal failure?
- Are we designing for human wellbeing — or for program management?

PART 2

Why Churches and Faith Communities Matter

Faith communities currently occupy a unique position in local Canadian ecosystems as many hold underused resources such as land, community infrastructure, gathering spaces, long-standing neighbourhood relationships, volunteer networks, philanthropic capacity, social trust, and deep commitments to service and stewardship. These assets create real opportunities as access to land is one of the most significant barriers to community-based housing innovation and uniquely positions faith communities as a leader in communities to drive change and healing through collaboration.

A Shift in Mindset

Recovery village development through faith communities requires a shift in mindset from charity narratives towards partnership, dignity, and co-creation. This requires critical self-reflection and discussions which examine power, ownership, control, governance, inclusion, decision-making, religious assumptions, access, and dependency dynamics.

The central question becomes: *How do communities participate in healing without recreating hierarchy or exclusion?*

EDIAB Considerations

During this process, it is essential that faith communities consider people's experiences of religious trauma, the historical and ongoing exclusion of 2SLGBTQIA+ communities, accessibility barriers, cultural representation, racial inequities, newcomer inclusion, disability access, gender inclusion, faith pluralism, and the inclusion of people who are secular or hold no faith.

Healing cannot require conformity. Belonging cannot be conditional.

Questions for Reflection

- Why is this community drawn to this work?
- What values are shaping this initiative?

- How do we avoid saviourism?
- Are we offering partnership — or dependency?
- How might histories of religious harm affect trust?
- How do we create belonging for people of all faiths or no faith?
- How are Indigenous perspectives on land and stewardship being considered?
- How do race, class, disability, sexuality, immigration status, or faith identity shape belonging here?
- Who may feel excluded before even entering the space?
- How will autonomy be protected?

PART 3

What Makes a Recovery Village Different?

Recovery villages are not simply another housing intervention. They represent a fundamentally different way of thinking about recovery, community, and stability.

What Recovery Villages Are Not

Recovery villages are not emergency shelters, institutional housing, short-term treatment centres, crisis containment models, compliance-based environments, behaviour management systems, or isolated service compounds.

What Recovery Villages Can Be

Long-Term Stability. Healing takes time, and it is rarely linear or fast. Short-term placements can interrupt the very stability they aim to create. Recovery villages can offer time horizons measured in years rather than weeks, allowing people to rebuild without the pressure of an arbitrary discharge date.

Community Integration. Recovery is relational. People heal in connection, not isolation. A recovery village is woven into the wider neighbourhood — its services, transit, social life, and shared spaces — rather than walled off from it.

Healing Environments. Built spaces affect nervous system regulation and well-being. Light, noise, space, nature, and privacy all shape whether a body feels safe enough to settle. Recovery villages can be designed deliberately to support regulation rather than trigger stress.

Peer Support. Shared lived experience builds trust. People with lived and living experience of recovery offer recognition and a shared experience. Peer relationships can model that change is possible and reduce the isolation that frequently accompanies recovery.

Autonomy. People require agency in their own healing journey as tecovery cannot be imposed onto a person. Residents need real choices about their daily lives, their goals, and their pace, which means resisting the urge to be prescriptive or have a “one size fits all model”.

Rhythm and Routine. Predictability can create safety. Gentle, predictable routines and rhythms of life through shared meals, regular gatherings, and seasonal markers can help a dysregulated nervous system find its footing. Routine here is an invitation, not a mandate.

Contribution. Purpose supports recovery as people are not only recipients of care; they are contributors. Opportunities to work, mentor, garden, cook, create, and lead help restore a sense of value and identity.

Restorative Community. Repair, accountability, and belonging matter. When harm or conflict happens, restorative approaches focus on repair and reintegration rather than punishment and exclusion. Accountability and belonging are held together, not traded against each other.

EDIAB Questions

- Who is excluded by current recovery models?
- Are abstinence-only approaches appropriate for all contexts?
- How are people with disabilities included?
- How are older people included?
- How are neurodivergent needs considered?
- How are 2SLGBTQIA+ residents supported safely?
- How is cultural healing respected?
- How are women’s and gender safety needs addressed?
- Who might still be excluded?

PART 4

Questions Before Building

Designing a recovery village requires deep reflection before land is allocated, plans are drafted, or commitments are made. ,

Purpose and Community

- Who is this village truly for?
- What problem are we trying to solve?
- Who benefits most?
- Who may not benefit?

Inclusion and Representation

- Who is missing from the planning table?
- Who has lived experience but no decision-making power?
- Are lived experience voices symbolic — or genuinely influential?
- Are racialized communities represented?
- Are Indigenous communities represented?
- Are disability perspectives included?
- Are 2SLGBTQIA+ perspectives included?
- Are community members with recovery experience meaningfully engaged?

Equity and Access

- Who may struggle to access this model?
- What barriers exist for Indigenous residents, newcomers, refugees, women, trans residents, disabled residents, neurodivergent residents, people with criminal justice involvement, parents, people with pets, and older adults?
- Are any of these barriers built into our assumptions rather than our written policies?

Harm Prevention

- What institutional harms might we unintentionally recreate?
- Are policies designed for safety — or for control?
- Are consequences restorative or punitive?
- Who is most likely to be excluded by the rules we set?

Sustainability

- What happens after the ribbon cutting?
- What happens when funding changes?
- What happens if leadership changes?

PART 5

Designing for Human Beings

Human-centered design is essential as environmental factors shape people's experience of safety, regulation, dignity, connection, conflict, independence, and hope.

Design Considerations

Thoughtful design attends to the balance of privacy and connection, sensory safety, access to nature, gathering spaces, accessibility, cultural inclusion, options for spirituality, quiet

spaces, kitchens, gardens, room for movement, pets, transportation, pathways, lighting, and environmental sustainability.

EDIAB Design Questions

- How is the space physically accessible? How?
- How is the space cognitively accessible?
- How is the space sensory accessible?
- How is the space design trauma-informed?
- How is it neurodivergence-friendly?
- How are gender-inclusive spaces included?
- How will residents see themselves reflected in the space?
- How will food be culturally inclusive?
- How will spirituality be optional and welcoming?
- How will transportation be accessible and equitable?

PART 6

Governance + Sustainability

Communities require stewardship as a vision without governance creates instability.

Questions for Reflection

- Who holds decision-making power?
- Are residents included in governance?
- Is lived experience represented?
- How are complaints handled?
- What crisis processes exist?
- What staffing model is sustainable?
- How is staff and volunteer burnout prevented?
- What happens if church leadership changes?

EDIAB Governance Questions

- Who is absent from leadership?
- Is governance culturally representative?
- How is accessibility embedded in how decisions are made?
- What anti-discrimination protections exist?
- Is trauma-informed training mandatory?
- Is 2SLGBTQIA+ competency required of staff and volunteers?
- Is disability inclusion embedded and not an add-on?

PART 7

Community Integration

Recovery villages should be part of community life and not isolated from it.

Topics to Consider

Integration depends on attending to neighbour relationships, stigma, public education, partnerships, volunteer boundaries, economic participation, shared spaces, and genuine mutual benefit.

Questions for Reflection

- How will neighbours be engaged?
- Whose fears are being prioritized?
- How do we prevent NIMBY (not in my back yard) responses without dismissing legitimate questions?
- How are racialized residents protected from criminalization narratives?
- Are residents contributors or recipients only?

PART 8

Holding Hope

Recovery work requires realism, hope and imagination. Recovery villages offer the possibility of designing environments where dignity is protected, belonging is cultivated, accountability is collective, healing is possible, contribution is welcomed, and hope is tangible.

Final Reflection Questions

- What kind of community are we creating?
- What values are non-negotiable?
- How will dignity be visible in daily life?
- Are we building housing or belonging?
- Are we building services or healing conditions?

Carrying the Work Forward

Building an inclusive recovery village is an act of community imagination and long-term commitment. The questions in this companion are meant to assist communities willing to reflect honestly on power, inclusion, sustainability, and belonging to create something that heals rather than simply houses.

There is no single blueprint, nor should there be. Every community brings its own history, relationships, and possibilities. What this companion offers is not a fixed destination, but a way of moving forward. With humility, reflection, and care.

At its core is a simple belief: that people are more than their hardest chapters, and that communities can intentionally build spaces where dignity, healing, and belonging are possible.