

SECTION 7:

THE ABORIGINAL FRIENDSHIP
CENTRES OF SASKATCHEWAN

REPORT TO COMMISSION ON FIRST NATIONS
AND MÉTIS PEOPLES AND JUSTICE REFORM
DECEMBER 2003

BACKGROUND

The Friendship Centre movement in Saskatchewan dates back to 1958 when one of the first Centres opened its doors to respond to the needs Aboriginal people faced as they moved into larger centres. These kinds of centres were developing across the country as needs of Aboriginal people evolved and grew in the larger (urban) centres.

The centres were started and run by community, often based on small donations, volunteers and some grants from governments. This is a key feature to the development and the current structure of Friendship Centres – each Centre is created around the issues specific to each community it serves. Because Saskatchewan is not a homogeneous community and the history and growth of the First Nation and Métis people vary across the province, the issues faced from North to South, East to West, were not identical, even though there was overlap. This in fact holds true today.

In many respects Centres were the vehicle by which urban issues faced by Aboriginal people were dealt with because these issues were often left to fall between the cracks and did not deal directly with the lifestyles of Aboriginal people. As these needs were identified each Centre grew and the direction was identified.

The objectives of the Centres in Saskatchewan include:

- Primary Program and service delivery agent,
- social and community development,
- referrals,
- network to promote positive relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples and communities,
- identify community issues/needs and priorities

As mentioned previously, the range of services and programs is vast and varies greatly from place to place according to the demographics and geographics (which may limit what is available) of each community. The list also changes over time with the creation of new programs and services and demands of the various agencies.

Programs and services provided include or have included:

- sports/culture recreation,
- Aboriginal literacy,
- music,
- dance,
- teen parenting skills,
- family violence,
- housing,
- drugs/alcohol abuse,
- substance abuse
- literacy,
- job skills,
- food bank,
- diabetes education and care,
- cultural education
- court workers,
- alternative measures,
- Elders,
- soup lines,
- fine options,
- Santa's Anonymous and Christmas gift giving
- food at Christmas, Thanksgiving Easter and so on,
- traditional feasts and ceremonies,
- meeting and gathering places
- Safety shelters

The Centres range from intimate meeting places where everyone knows each other to larger urban spaces where the clients are more transient and facing urbanization issues. This clientele also shifts from region to region and over time as the issues they face evolve and change. There are 13 Centres currently operating at various capacities in Saskatchewan and in fact over 100 nation-wide.

Another key component of the Friendship Centre development is the fact that they are not political, partisan, or for profit. This feature of the Centres keeps their mandate focused on actual programming and service delivery to Aboriginal people as opposed to the politicization of issues and daily partisan struggles among governments. That is not to say that political meetings are not held in the various Centres, however, all governments have utilized the Centres as a meeting place.

The Centres are also “status- blind” a strength which allows service delivery to Treaty Indians, Non-status, Métis and some of the Non-Aboriginal poor who are in need of programs and services in the urban centres. This is an advantage for the client in a centre where there may not be services available to them based on their Aboriginal Status.

The Friendship Centres in Saskatchewan and indeed across the country have grown and shrunk in size over the years. The programs and services they offer have changed and the clientele has an ever changing face yet the key feature of all is that for Aboriginal people they are a KNOWN and ESTABLISHED PRESENCE in all of the urban and rural areas in which they have a home.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND FRIENDSHIP CENTRES

Identification of what programs and services are available within each Centre turns on a multitude of factors. This includes first and foremost the needs of the community. As the patrons of the Centres arrive and/or become involved with the Centres, their particular needs and suggestions for what the Centre can do for them or within the community can be identified. Also, the staff and volunteers may see a gap in programming or in services offered within the centre or from other agencies where Aboriginal client’s needs are not identified or met. Yet another example is when the Centre is approached by an outside organization or government department seeking an Aboriginal agency to deliver a service. Again it is important to note that the services vary for each Centre depending on where the Centre is and who the patrons are.

The priority of what is offered is also an issue which must be managed on a number of variants. Primarily, once there is a recognized need for a formalized structured service, a determination of the resources required must be completed. Because the Centres are always trying to meet the needs of their patrons in the face of skeletal infrastructure and resources it is a misnomer to think that if there is a need, nothing is done if there are no resources. Problems arise where resources are so low that the existing staff and volunteers are trying to play the role of many—social workers, babysitter, paralegal, addictions counsellor, parent and so on. Sufficient staff, who are properly trained and supported eliminates this issue.

If there are insufficient resources to create a program, or no funding agents will resource the needed program, the Centre falls to its volunteers and staff and does the best it can with what it has. Of course this may be of little assistance to the patrons and it certainly does not allow for any progress on the root cause of the social symptoms of the identified problems but that is the reality of the Centre’s ability without proper resources.

If there is a funding agent available that option is always utilized. This process soon turns into the funding proposal game which offers up money on a short-term basis, reviewable by the funding agent and which may or may not result in the renewal of programs – even when they are very successful. In some cases a relationship is created where the program is renewable and it runs on a semi long-term basis with funding renewed yearly, dependant of proposal agreements.

It is clear that when the issues a community faces are identified within the community, there is commitment to finding solutions. Further, when the Centre has core funding and a strong reputation for effective program and service delivery and the proposal game does not eat up valuable time and administration, then the actual impact of the delivery on the community is positive and moves forward.

Please see the attached documents for a list of Centres and their current status for additional information and available services.

THE ROLE OF THE ASSOCIATION OF FRIENDSHIP CENTRES

The Commission on First Nation and Métis People Justice Reform is looking at the issues that we as Aboriginal people face in Saskatchewan daily as we work towards creating a positive relationship within the province between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal citizens. These are the same issues the Friendship Centres have been looking at and dealing with since our creation. Although the problems faced are multi-dimensional and a number of processes will be required to create a healthier environment, we see that the Friendship Centres throughout the province have a continuing valuable role to play.

As the political field changes and as Aboriginal governments evolve and provincial and federal governments revamp and reevaluate their relationship with the Aboriginal community, the daily needs of Aboriginal people must continue to be filled in a consistent, professional way. As the traditional agency to work within community and with individuals, The Friendship Centres, when properly resourced, are the agencies to ensure there are always solutions for the social issues faced by Aboriginal people. We have a history of working with a diverse group of people not based on political relationships or status.

In developing a policy framework agreement with Saskatchewan, we are examining the need for core funding, stable programs funded on long term basis, enhancing our current menu of services and recapturing programs we have lost. This kind of a relationship with a funding agent will ensure the professionalism, proper training and stability which is required, not only for the organization but for the clients who require that kind of structure and consistency. The intention is to address issues of underfunding and understaffing concerns we face. It also eliminates the proposal cycle in an attempt to scramble for available dollars on a very short term basis just to keep a skeletal program agency alive.

The Friendship Centres must stay non-partisan in order to fulfill our mandate. Although we need a working relationship with the many Aboriginal organizations, being non-political should ensure that our funding is based on community need and not politics or status.

The Friendship Centres have approached all issues faced by Aboriginal people and low income people, as part of their entire life experience. To us this approach means that the people who are in need of assistance in one area of their life will also benefit by examining all of the issues in their life, from personal, educational, health, familial and communal. We know that not only the individual is impacted by a crisis but the family and the community is touched as well and therefore the range of services and programs available must reflect this. The term that captures this concept today is of course holism however, the reality of how this is achieved can be another factor compounding the already numerous problems faced by service providers. The benefit of being able to provide a number of services and a range of options will fall not only to the individual, but to the family, the community and to the institutional workers as well – who are often left with few or no options.

The range of who provides what services to the Aboriginal people of this province under the current provincial and federal schemes takes justice, education, health, sports culture recreation, employment, social, food and economic development. Each of these areas can be broken down again and those areas in turn have their own specialties. This is an expansive list which may or may not be specialized for Aboriginal people, and which is not community sensitive unless it is designed by the community.

Equal to the range of services to be provided are the people with whom they work. This range goes from unborn babies, children, teens, adults to Elders. It takes in individuals, community, community organizations and all the people who work within this sphere. A holistic approach takes all of this into account.

In addition to our philosophical approach to working with Aboriginal people we feel it is crucial that the use of traditional knowledge, spirituality be incorporated within contemporary resolution measures to deal with a wide variety of issues. This keeps the culture, language and traditions alive and it is an aspect that only Aboriginal program and service workers can provide. Further, although we work primarily with Aboriginal people, our status blind policy allows us to work with many people and to build an education component on Aboriginal traditions with our non-Aboriginal clients and contacts.

Through the networking developed by the various Friendship Centres with other organizations in the province there is an understanding of the climate in which service must be offered to meet the needs of the client, the system workers, the funding agent and the community at large. This is the expertise of the Friendship Centres.

PROBLEMS/CONCERNS

As an association which has worked with Friendship Centres for over 30 years, we have experience with the many growing pains which have impacted our development and our growth. Many or all of these problems are ones which Aboriginal organizations and individuals have experienced to some greater or lesser degree. The following is a list of the essential concerns identified. This list is not exhaustive, but will provide examples of what the problems are:

- Marginalization: although goals and objectives of each Friendship Centre are laudable we require more involvement or connection with non-Aboriginal community to actually create a multicultural society and to identify and deal with problems we face as a community. For example, one presence which is at the centre of your work is the police. The work done by the police within a family, and therefore a community must be done with an eye to the future and the development of the person's and the community's life. This can only be done if there is an education and an understanding of that person or that community, their history and all of the positive and negative factors involved. The police are but one of hundreds and even thousands of examples we could cite here.
- Due to the fact that we rely on minimal funding to function day-to-day and the fact that we are the family/community of the people we serve, we too are in constant reactive mode. As a result of this we are only able to scratch the surface of the problems faced by various quadrants of the province's Aboriginal population. This impact is significant and it undermines our ability to truly keep an eye on all aspects of a person's life and to deal with the entire person. We are also reliant on volunteers in many of the Centres, which has positive and negative aspects; we have dedicated people who truly know the issues and care about the outcomes, on the other hand, these people are expected to take on more and more as the needs increase and the result can be a crisis in their own lives. Volunteers are the backbone to Aboriginal communities and many are doing the work that other, government employees are paid to do.
- When we are left to react to crises the cycle of reaction starts in many areas of our program and service delivery. As we stated earlier, once we lose sight of the entire person and their needs because only enough time, people and money to deal with the identified crises then there is no opportunity to go beyond basic human needs to more participatory relationship within a community. The overwhelming issues that we as Aboriginal people face from history and from current reality of crises, racism, and violence prevent a move forward unless we are respected to look after ourselves.
- Minimal short-term funding, lack of human resources and makeshift infrastructure from space to office supplies all impacts on any institution's ability to deliver, effectively, its services. The Friendship Centres are no exception.

- In addition to minimal funding it is also granted on a short term basis and we suffer the “pilot project” problems that many others face. Long term core funding provided to the Centres based on sound accounting principles must occur. This funding needs to be tied to evaluation schemes which everyone knows in advance. Again, we apply for funding on a project by project basis and even when we know the project works, we wait with bated breath to see whether or not the program will continue. The problems with this are obvious – our staffing and administration fails, but worse our patrons come to rely on a service we cannot continue because the funding is simply not there. This situation also causes Centres to hire staff over an 8-10 month period rather than the full 12, dependent on when the funding is received. (Some Centres do not run the risk of retaining staff if they are not sure if the program will be extended as it does cause a loss of funding if they bridge finance a program and it is not extended).
- Evaluation of programs and services must be fair, include the funding agencies and the service providers. It must have a mechanism for review which honestly assesses what the impact of a program or service is, what the problems were and most importantly how it was successful and how it can be improved. We need an opportunity to participate in this kind of discussion and not to be constantly worried about what will happen year to year.
- The political atmosphere in which we operate can also impact on our daily operations. This includes federal, provincial and Aboriginal governments. The impact of federal and provincial governments is a concern for financing and the livelihood of the Centres. A new government can mean a change in direction, loss of interest and new personalities to deal with on the yearly or program based funding arrangements. Issues with the Aboriginal governments are more complicated. Since we are all facing the same financial issues, and further because we may all be slated into the same “Aboriginal funding” pigeon hole, we often end up proposing for the same dollars and since our funds are tied to whatever program the government decides to fund, our proposals will have very much the same profile and the same flavor. This pits Aboriginal governments against each other, even within First Nation or Métis community. There simply is not enough to go around, yet the problems are not decreasing and provincial programs are not impacting in any significant way on our levels of employment, incarceration or how long we are on the social services payroll.

SUCCESSES/BEST PRACTICES

Moving past the problems and concerns that the Friendship Centres of Saskatchewan face, we would like to emphasize our success and what we feel are the best practices which should be highlighted and built upon.

- We are Aboriginal people serving Aboriginal people. We are the community and should be the ones to identify specific needs for our community and how to set up a process to deal with those needs, in conjunction with what is available, creating what is not. This allows for the diversity which is essential for services delivery over an entire province;
- Culture, tradition and spirituality are at the centre of our organization and are key components to keeping the heritage alive. This is a service which should be provided by Aboriginal people. This is what allows us to include the entire person in any process to connect various people and services in a society and to create the relationship which is essential for community building;
- The Friendship Centres are non-political, non-partisan, status blind program and service provider, keeping the political issues to the political players and leaving service delivery to the community;
- The role of the Centres in education for both Aboriginal people and non- Aboriginal people aids also in community development;
- We see our role as one that extends from the individual, to the family and throughout the community. Any boundaries are artificial since the success and the problems of one sector spills into the next;

- Improvement of the lives of Aboriginal people in urban centres is our goal and its long term rewards are measurable in both economics – costs of incarceration and employment – as well as human worth – education, and participation in community building;
- We see youth as the key to the future and in addition to working with their families we build their confidence and aid them in making decisions for healthy life choices so that they can participate in their communities;
- We are located throughout the province and understand issues from North to South, East to West and urban and rural. We know that we are not dealing with the same culture, language or history for each of the Aboriginal groups. At the same time we understand that there is overlap and consistency with many issues which are found throughout the province;
- We are the primary program and service delivery agent for a very diverse Aboriginal population in Saskatchewan;
- We create a safe space for meetings for both Aboriginal people and mixed audiences which also adds to the creation of a larger community.

Two examples of where we have been successful with minimal dollars and an abundance of commitment are listed below. There are others but this provides some insight:

- An example of a Northern success, which shows what Centres can do in spite of the identified problems, would include the Ile-a-la-Crosse Friendship Centre Inc. This Centre runs 10 programs in the community, hosts an annual wellness and youth conferences, and employs 19 full time staff, 1 part-time and 4 casual and a host of volunteers. The revenue flowing through this Centre is approximately \$1.2 million.
- As an urban Centre, the Saskatoon Centre shows a presence in the Community through its participation in local cultural activities, programs for youth, families, and touches on many areas of life including health, employment and social services. The programs and services are provided to over 4,000 people each year. Again, there are core staff and a number of people hired on contractual a basis, as well as volunteers.

IMPROVEMENTS/RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to take on the role that the Friendship Centre sees it can fill the following needs are highlighted from the above discussion:

- Long-term core funding to establish our body as the centre referral agency in addition to being a delivery agency;
- The ability to rely on a stable infrastructure, which is physical space, human resources and daily operating supplies;
- The recognition of Friendship Centres as the primary service provider for Aboriginal people in Saskatchewan and the advantage of their non-political, non-partisan approach to meeting the needs of individuals and communities;
- Establish a fair, inclusive, evaluation process for services provided which includes discussion of what works and why, what does not work and why- then ultimately how to proceed with that information.
- Long-term fee for service agreements, i.e. a 5-year court worker program.

CONCLUSION

When Aboriginal people can work with government in an effort to recognize that Aboriginal people want and need to take responsibility for their own people there will be real, visible, sustainable change for Aboriginal people in Saskatchewan. When the people whose lives are affected by government policy, are the ones consulted and involved in the process to restore health and wellness then there will be a move away from crisis management and towards Aboriginal participation at every level of society.

When frontline workers, like Friendship Centres, are part of the decision making process and our expertise is a recognizable commodity, then there will be an impact in the current statistical evidence faced by the citizens of this province. When we stop studying Aboriginal people as a societal problem, respect that we are responsible for our future, at the same time acknowledging the past, then there will be progress.

When we celebrate our contribution, our culture, our ability to participate and we are the example people look to for creating positive relationships and holding a process to deal with our growing pains, good and bad, then we will know that the Aboriginal people who live in Saskatchewan were not only listened to but were heard and are now part of the fabric of society without having to compromise our culture.

As the Association of Friendship Centres in Saskatchewan, we want to be part of this as we see it as a solutions oriented process. We see this as an ongoing long term process. We have the community presence and knowledge and the cultural expertise to be a key player in the creation of a new relationship between Aboriginal people and the rest of Saskatchewan.