

## Ottawa Aboriginal Coalition and City of Ottawa Safety and Wellness Fund Impact Story

One of the meaningful impacts resulting from the City of Ottawa Wellness Fund is a less ethno-centric program inclination and the move toward the recognition, acknowledgement, and acceptance of Indigenous world views that offer different and more “fitting” or appropriate success measures that transcend deeply engrained systemic issues.

First Nation, Metis, and the Inuit people have different notions, concepts and perceptions of “equity”, “culturally-safety,” or “cultural affirmation” than definitions that are often, commonly held. An appreciation is beginning to emerge among some funders that building Indigenous organizations’ capacity necessitates a self-directed approach for creating the space for reconciling past practice, and decolonized thinking, including decolonized performance measurement.

The importance of re-defining the Indigenous experience and Indigenous worldviews is integral to more representative and practical responses in creating a pathway that recognizes the need for Indigenous people to re-engage in their own culture where they are able to embrace again, the values that govern their self-determination. The CSWB funding is impacting in some measure, how this change can be accomplished.

### 1. Space and time for a knowledge-seeking agenda

Evaluation creates frameworks to assess processes that lead to planned outcomes; logic models denote a linear cause and effect process, or input and output effect. The outcomes for the City of Ottawa Wellness Fund, hints at some success in its capacity to enable the indigenous recipients to reject or step away from mainstream recognized frameworks and explore alternatives that reflect the common situational needs of wellness of Indigenous people and offer more holistic and realistic responses designs. Indigenous-led and Indigenous-design models have been a long-time desire which is increasingly proffered. According to Rowe, true reconciliation means answering some crucial questions:

*Who will set a knowledge-seeking agenda, whose voice will lead the process, whose knowledge will be sought and valued, what methods will be used to gather the knowledge, and what will be the ultimate use and distribution of the results of the knowledge-gathering are all important elements that have been raised by Indigenous researchers for decades. The answers to the questions above are fundamentally about power and representation. It is important to consider these factors in the roles and responsibilities evaluators must adopt for decolonizing and reconciling. Hart & Rowe (2014), in their examination of the field of social work, have asserted the necessity of working from an anti-colonial and decolonized space (Rowe & Kirkpatrick 2018).*

The Ottawa Aboriginal Coalition through the CSWB funding has made some progress in empowering and supporting these conditions.

## 2. Align Models of Development – Road Maps and Opportunity for Creation

Initially, the Ottawa Aboriginal Coalition began its work with a discussion and exploration of the values, roles, and responsibilities within the context of a decolonized space, offering an articulation of the Indigenous voices to create an understanding within the OAC service agencies, of the necessity of working from an anti-colonial and decolonized space.

This front-end investment of time and knowledge helped to identify road maps, and opportunity for creation of appropriate responses to reduce risk of harm through social development. In creating their Indigenous road map within the context of the Indigenous World view, they also were able to contemplate outcomes that could result from various services agency interventions, which could occur in the middle, at the beginning or way down the road, after an individual or a family has embarked on their life journey

Such approaches and models enable agencies to begin to build the supports that are not pre-supposed with intended outcomes, and which move away from linear approaches to regenerate a view of “us” within the circumstances and place, of where people are at with respect to their mental health, identity growth and their respective cultural revival. This approach rejects an understanding of Indigenous people from a mainstream systemic perspective that focus on ideas that pathologize Indigenous people, including the devaluing of Indigenous women. For example the OAC shuns the notion of people as “simply clients” replacing it instead, with a context for providing for a view of the individual or family “journey” or “path” and well-being in the grander scheme of life with many different roads with different outcomes to experience.

*The ability to start at a place where with the City of Ottawa supports, we can do things in a sphere that is bigger than just a program has been crucial to being effective. There is a need to tell a story that is much bigger than we have been able to tell in the past and to define meaningful measures of success.*

*Ottawa Aboriginal Coalition*

## 3. Relevant Engagement Partners, Mental Health, Well-being, Safety Supports

The overall goal of systemic change with a foundational base of Indigenous values and practices, as well as the time and space to build capacity, has allowed instrumental relationships to be built across the Indigenous services agencies and with many different partners, including the City of Ottawa, with the Ottawa Aboriginal Coalition playing a lead role.

Partners such as the OAC Indigenous services agencies in the city, the Royal Ottawa Hospital and the City of Ottawa came together to listen, to hear, and to come up with far-reaching potential solutions that are expected to be impactful for the target population. The partners came to understand that enhancing social development, reducing risks of harm, culturally-safe mental health supports and supporting youth and women and girls starts with some very basic needs.

By taking the time to set their own agenda, and to explore and discover a road map that could have the greatest impact, the partners landed upon housing and supports beyond tenant relations as a fundamental factor to consider. Discussions led them to identify housing and the needs of tenants that go beyond tenant relations as a likely inflection point where a significant change in direction or behavior could be had, and where they could direct resources to have maximum impact.

Their preliminary investigation found housing and the increasing complex issues of tenants was a point where there is significant need and interactivity with respect to most of the supports that service agencies offer, where intervention could be coordinated and, where there is likely to be the “best” point of impact. More importantly, to reduce the risk of harm, the members of the OAC began to see that if people have safe-secure housing, they can have stability and can better deal with the rest of the “other stuff” (insecurity, mental challenges, trauma, etc.). One of the significant findings in their process is that for some people providing housing is not itself, the solution and that in fact, some people are unable or unprepared to manage a home – or that some people may require assisted living arrangements, or that others just do not have the skill at this point in their lives to take on this responsibility. Without this additional support, it is not only difficult for housing to be sustained for these families and individuals, the quality of life and safety issues of other tenants is affected.

The OAC members also saw that a focus on housing over-and-above tenant relations, through the hiring of Wellbeing Workers to serve the tenants of Gignul Non-Profit Housing and Housing and Inuit Not-for-Profit Housing, provides an opportunity to proactively engage with families to identify supports and to make the proper referrals to the appropriate service providers in a timely way to circumvent any potential issues and to ensure the wellbeing and safety of all tenants.

Having taken the time to assess situations in a cultural context and capture the story of Indigenous community, the allocation of the CSWB funding is being used to hire two Wellbeing Workers, and to adapt services as they move forward with solutions that will enhance mental health, and provide culturally safe programs.

Although an effective indigenous model is still being tested and developed, CSWB funding has enabled individuals, and organizations to actively explore activity including various experiences and learnings which are expected to ultimately contribute to more accommodating impactful outcomes.

## Lesson Learned

1. Authentic relationships are key to making substantive changes in the relationship between funders, (in this case the City of Ottawa) and Indigenous people (in this case the OAC). Relationship building takes time and investment and requires the willingness to consider that systemic change is necessary if the needs of Indigenous people are to be meaningfully addressed; and that without this systemic change historical and ongoing colonial processes and policies will continue to perpetuate harm to Indigenous people and continue to negatively impact their health and wellbeing;
2. Indigenous world views and self-determinations are valid considerations and have legitimacy in policy making and program design. This provides for the possibility that decolonizing systems allows for only a limited response and that starting from an Indigenous world view creates the potential for substantive change and impact given the appropriate space and time to manifest;
3. Indigenous-designed and led policy and program design are not incompatible with system funding and logic models, which can be adapted when there is the will and recognition and validity given to lessons 1 and 2.

## References:

Rowe, G. & Kirkpatrick, C. (2018). Na-gah mo Waabishkizi Ojjaak Bimise Keetwaatino: Singing White Crane Flying North: Gathering a Bundle for Indigenous Evaluation. Winnipeg, MB: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. ISBN 978-1-77125-392-5

<https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/jr/eiaer-eaame/appendixc-annexec.html>