



OFIFC

Ontario Federation of
Indigenous Friendship Centres

***Response to Moving Ontario Forward –
Outside the GTHA***

September 2015

ABOUT THE ONTARIO FEDERATION OF INDIGENOUS FRIENDSHIP CENTRES

The OFIFC is a provincial Aboriginal organisation representing the collective interests of twenty-eight member Friendship Centres located in towns and cities throughout Ontario. The vision of the Aboriginal Friendship Centre Movement is to improve the quality of life for Aboriginal people living in an urban environment by supporting self-determined activities which encourage equal access to, and participation in, Canadian society and which respects Aboriginal cultural distinctiveness.

The OFIFC administers a number of wholistic, culture-based programs and initiatives which are delivered by local Friendship Centres in areas such as justice, children and youth, health, family support, long term care, healing and wellness, education, and employment and training. Friendship Centres respond to the needs of tens of thousands of community members requiring culture-based and culturally-appropriate services every day.

The Friendship Centres represent the most significant off-reserve Aboriginal service infrastructure across Ontario and are dedicated to achieving greater participation of all urban Aboriginal peoples in all facets of society, inclusive of First Nation – Status/Non-Status, Métis, Inuit and all other people who identify as Aboriginal. The OFIFC manages \$45 million in direct delivery funding across the province, not taking into account the direct resources procured by Friendship Centres at the community level.¹

KEY FACTS:

- **84.1 percent of Aboriginal people in Ontario live off-reserve.**
(Statistics Canada. (2011) National Household Survey.)
- **Between 2006 and 2011, Ontario's Aboriginal population grew five times faster than the non-Aboriginal population, increasing 24.3 percent compared to 4.8 percent.**
(Ministry of Finance. (2013). 2011 National Household Survey Highlights: Factsheet 3)
- **33.9 percent of the Aboriginal people in Ontario are under the age of 19, compared to 23.8 percent of the non-Aboriginal population.**
(Statistics Canada. (2011). National Household Survey)
- **Representing a network of 28 member Friendship Centres in Ontario, the OFIFC is Ontario's largest off-reserve Aboriginal service delivery structure.**
(Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres. (2015). OFIFC Leave Behind)
- **Every year, over 120,000 units of service are collectively provided to urban Aboriginal people through Ontario, from Atikokan to Windsor.**
(Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres. (2015). OFIFC Leave Behind)

¹ Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres., *Annual Report 2012/2013* (Toronto, ON: Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, 2013) 47.

THE CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL OF URBAN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES IN ONTARIO

There are 25 Friendship Centres and one satellite office located outside of the Greater Toronto Hamilton Area (GTHA) in all regions of Ontario spanning from Red Lake to Cochrane and Ottawa to Windsor and several communities in between. Friendship Centres are community hubs, providing multi-sectoral services to urban Aboriginal people and in many cases have been serving the community in their respective towns or cities for over 20 years and may be the only urban Aboriginal organisation in their location. The demand for Friendship Centre services from both local communities and government is increasing. However, Friendship Centres throughout Ontario continue to face significant challenges in meeting these demands as a result of the lack of infrastructure funding made available to urban Aboriginal not-for-profit organisations by the provincial government.

Ontario's Aboriginal population is growing at nearly five times the rate of the non-Aboriginal population.² Since 2006, the total number of people who identify as Aboriginal in Ontario has grown by an estimated 58,935, an increase of 24.3 percent in comparison to 4.8 percent of the non-Aboriginal population.³ The majority of Aboriginal people in Ontario live off-reserve, representing 84.1 percent of the total population.⁴ This population growth has placed additional service delivery and infrastructural pressures on Friendship Centres to meet the unique needs of urban Aboriginal people.

Subsequently, many Friendship Centres have outgrown their existing spaces and require larger facilities to meet the diverse needs of urban Aboriginal community members. Despite outgrowing infrastructure, Friendship Centres and other supportive urban Aboriginal agencies have made real differences in urban Aboriginal people's lives. Infrastructure investments made under *Moving Ontario Forward – Outside the GTHA* should prioritise projects that will enable urban Aboriginal people to better access needed services including: health care, education and training, social services, housing services and the labour market.

Aboriginal people in Ontario have a significantly lower median age than the non-Aboriginal population, 24.5 compared to 37.2.⁵ Further, more than 50 percent of Ontario's Aboriginal population is under the age of twenty-seven.⁶ Recognising the opportunities of the young and growing urban Aboriginal population, there is tremendous potential for their contribution to the diverse needs of Ontario's labour market and economy. Research on the labour market trends in Ontario indicates that

² Ministry of Finance, *2011 National Household Survey Highlights: Factsheet 3* (Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2013).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Statistics Canada, *National Household Survey*. (Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada, 2011).

⁵ Government of Ontario., *Breaking the Cycle: Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy* (Toronto, ON Government of Ontario, 2008).

⁶ Ibid.

Ontario will be facing a labour and skills shortage, in large part due to an aging population.⁷ Contrarily, the urban Aboriginal population is growing exponentially and represents a critical population that, with the adequate investments in culturally-appropriate education and training, and tangential supports such as housing and mental health, can help to address current and projected labour shortages. However, without the appropriate infrastructure in place, multi-barriered urban Aboriginal people will continue to face challenges in accessing these services and will remain disengaged from the labour market.

OUR POSITION

Prioritising Investments for Urban Aboriginal People and Communities

Conventional conceptions of critical infrastructure must expand beyond highways, bridges and commercial rail to include the need for investments in community based infrastructure such as housing, transportation and community organisations. When prioritising infrastructure investments, the Ministry of Economic Development, Employment and Infrastructure (MEDEI) should consider socioeconomic trends and issues that are compounded by poor infrastructure. These issues are well documented within local Friendship Centre communities, for example, transportation is often cited as one of the most significant barriers for participation in the local economy. Barriers include challenges in accessing pre-employment services, education and training, health care, childcare, basic necessities; and the ability to get to and from job opportunities. As regulated through the *Infrastructure for Jobs and Prosperity Act*, the Government of Ontario must create long-term infrastructure plans.⁸ It is imperative that these plans consider and address the infrastructure needs of urban Aboriginal not-for-profit organisations, specifically Friendship Centres, to support the unique needs of urban Aboriginal people.

Reducing the socio-economic gap between the urban Aboriginal population and the non-Aboriginal population through increasing economic opportunities for urban Aboriginal people will help to support the development of a strong Ontario economy. To support this, strategic and Aboriginal-specific infrastructure resources and programs must be available to meet the needs of the young and growing urban Aboriginal population. However to date, infrastructure projects and investments have not prioritised needs of multi-barriered individuals, including urban Aboriginal people. Instead, infrastructure priorities have been motivated by political opportunities and largely based on supporting the private sector and vehicle-based transportation rather than public transportation. The Government of Ontario should prioritise infrastructure investments that support people living in poverty, including urban Aboriginal people, to access needed services.

⁷ Rick Miner (2010). “*People Without Jobs – Jobs Without People: Ontario’s Labour Market Future*”.

⁸ *Infrastructure for Jobs and Prosperity Act*, S.O. 2015, c. 15.

The Government of Ontario should recognise the human capital potential of the young and growing urban Aboriginal population and prioritise infrastructure investments that support the unique needs of urban Aboriginal people in a culturally competent manner. Specifically, the Government of Ontario should set aside a proportional amount of infrastructure funding in communities to meet the unique needs of urban Aboriginal people and the Friendship Centres that serve them.

Infrastructure funding should prioritise the needs of urban Aboriginal people in multiple ways. Most importantly, the MEDEI should remove barriers in current eligibility requirements that limit Friendship Centre's ability to apply for infrastructure funding. Infrastructure funding must be allocated in a way that recognises the vast majority of urban Aboriginal people live off-reserve in Ontario and represent a significant population within many local communities. The MEDEI should establish criteria that requires mainstream organisations and municipalities to engage with local urban Aboriginal partners, and that they be able to demonstrate they have support from urban Aboriginal partners as part of the application process. Prioritising investments for urban Aboriginal people and communities means that infrastructure investments made in 'bricks and mortar' will include urban Aboriginal not-for-profit organisations. 'Bricks and mortar' infrastructure investments in Friendship Centres will support them to continue to offer, maintain and expand services and programs for urban Aboriginal people.

A Transportation Vision for Ontario

In many Friendship Centre communities, public transportation is not available locally or within the region. In communities where public transit is available, the high cost of ridership challenges, and often prevents multi-barriered community members from accessing services. To date, most investments made in transportation infrastructure have focused on private transportation and improvements to roadways. More investment is needed in public transportation infrastructure, moving away from a car-centric approach to one that also supports Ontarians that do not have access to a personal vehicle. Without increased investments in public transportation infrastructure, multi-barriered urban Aboriginal people will continue to be hard-pressed to access needed services and will often remain disengaged from the local economy. The OFIFC believes that with purposeful and targeted investments in communities and regions, Ontario can invest and built in an effective and cost-efficient public transportation infrastructure outside of the GTHA; and through this, support increased prosperity across Ontario and make meaningful strides towards addressing some of the challenges of poverty.

People who face disproportionate barriers to affordable transportation are the same groups who are most vulnerable to poverty, including urban Aboriginal people. There is a strong connection between poverty, poor access to transportation and poor health outcomes.⁹ Public transportation plays a crucial role in ensuring other poverty

⁹ Mowat Centre., *What Works? Proven Approaches to Alleviating Poverty* (Toronto, ON: Mowat Centre, 2014) 19.

reduction initiatives and services are effective and accessible. Without adequate transportation (i.e. affordable, appropriate routes, reasonable operating times) multi-barriered community members will continue to live in poverty with limited access to health care, food, labour market, and social services. The Government of Ontario may be stalled in fully realising its goal to end poverty, as articulated through the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS), without transportation options for multi-barriered community members. The Government of Ontario should develop a provincial transportation strategy which includes poverty reduction as a significant goal.

A provincial transportation strategy will require collaboration amongst several provincial ministries, including the MEDEI, the Ministry of Transportation (MTO), the Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS), the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (MMAH), the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care (MOHLTC) and the Treasury Board Secretariat. In developing a provincial transportation strategy the Province should seek buy-in from municipalities, the federal government, quasi-governmental and not-for-profit organisations. According to the Ontario Public Transit Association and the Canadian Urban Transit Association, “without progressive transit investment by all levels of government, the well-documented economic, environmental and mobility benefits linked to effective transit will not be reali[s]ed at the expense of communities.”¹⁰

The OFIFC recognises that the Government of Ontario has taken some initial steps to facilitate locally-driven solutions for public transportation through the Community Transportation Pilot Grant Project, providing municipalities with two-year grants to work with local organisations to develop and implement community transportation initiatives. Communities receiving this grant without any existing transportation infrastructure will face challenges in meeting a two-year implementation timeframe. With announcements of funding in March and April, 2015, a fulsome evaluation of the program is not practical, however with an expansion to other communities and an extension of timeframes, this program may be able to meet specific needs in communities throughout Ontario.

In the absence of public transportation, local organisations receiving government funding to provide transportation services, namely the Local Health Integration Networks (LHIN), Community Municipal Service Managers (CMSM), District Social Services Administration Boards (DSSAB), and Friendship Centres, have faced challenges in meeting demands of local communities and clientele. Within each community, Friendship Centres are building relationships and creating partnerships with various organisations to respond to their local transportation needs. However, in order to create a sustainable and lasting system, long-term investments are needed from the provincial government to create and maintain these projects.

¹⁰ Ontario Public Transit Association and the Canadian Urban Transit Association., *Investing in Public Transit: The Growing Need for Urban Mobility 2014 Pre-Budget Consultations* (Toronto, ON: Ontario Public Transit Association and the Canadian Urban Transit Association, 2014) 3.

In an effort to meet the transportation needs of urban Aboriginal community members, Friendship Centres have found innovative ways to provide needed transportation beyond the limited funding provided. Increasingly, Friendship Centre workers are transporting clients in personal vehicles, not claiming mileage used when providing services off-site and in some cases feel obliged to purchase increased vehicle insurance to purchase liability coverage. Individuals are stepping in to provide highly needed services because of the glaring absence of government action or support in an area that is clearly under the purview of government. For this reason and others, such as personal and financial costs, the approach is not sustainable. As part of a broader public transportation strategy, the provincial government, along with the federal government, should better align transportation funding to ensure that local organisations in receipt of funding are adequately staffed and resourced to provide integrated services to the community.

While the bolstering of transportation funding to urban Aboriginal not-for-profit organisations is undoubtedly required; these services cannot exist in isolation of public transportation. The OFIFC believes that a provincial transportation strategy should aim to reduce poverty through increasing transportation funding for local organisations and developing or expanding local and regional public transportation systems.

The MEDEI's Moving Ontario Forward should provide long-term investment in the development and enhancement of local transportation systems through funding for Friendship Centres and other local partners. This type of investment in collaboration with a provincial transportation strategy would be well-placed to address a critical barrier to economic participation and the reduction of socio-economic gaps between urban Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people.

Community Infrastructure Investments

There is a pressing need for increased infrastructure investments to be made in community organisations, such as Friendship Centres, that provide programs and services that can ultimately improve individuals' participation in the economy and improve socio-economic conditions. Friendship Centres and other supportive urban Aboriginal not-for-profit organisations have made real differences in urban Aboriginal people's lives with limited infrastructure and capacity investments. The Urban Aboriginal Task Force found that 25.4 percent of respondents earned over \$40,000 per year in 2007. Twenty years prior, the majority of these respondents were living in poverty and not engaged in the labour market.¹¹ Growing the urban Aboriginal middle class should be a strategic priority for government to support an engaged and skilled workforce. Without reliable community infrastructure, pre-employment programs, youth programs and other needed supports may be jeopardised, certainly will not be optimised, and at the very least will be challenged to meet the needs of the growing urban Aboriginal population.

¹¹ OFIFC, OMAA, ONWA, *Urban Aboriginal Task Force: Final Report* (Toronto, ON: Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, Ontario Métis Aboriginal Association, Ontario Native Women's Association, 2007).

Research shows that the majority of urban Aboriginal people prefer to obtain services from Aboriginal organisations over mainstream agencies based on culturally-relevant program models and a perceived higher accountability to Aboriginal communities. While the number of urban Aboriginal organisations and services has grown significantly over the past 30 years, a lack of needed infrastructure and core funding has created challenges in the maintenance of Aboriginal organisations.¹²

Currently, the provincial government does not provide any infrastructure funding, core funding or capacity support to Friendship Centres. Infrastructure funding was last provided to Friendship Centres in 2011 when \$8 million was allocated over three years under the Friendship Centre Infrastructure Program to support renovations and new building projects. Nevertheless, Friendship Centres continue to deliver multiple provincial programs with limited support for administration and compounding issues of poor and inadequate infrastructure. As a result of rising demand, many Friendship Centres have outgrown existing spaces and have had to purchase or rent additional space to provide services. In fact, a number of Friendship Centres have turned down opportunities to expand and/or co-locate programming due to a lack of appropriate infrastructure, thereby reducing opportunities to amplify the impact of service provision. The lack of government investment in Friendship Centre infrastructure continues to impede program integration, undermine their function as a community hubs, limit their ability to address community needs and in extreme cases, compromises the health and safety of Friendship Centre staff and clients. Ongoing infrastructure needs cover a wide range, including: preventative and ongoing maintenance as a result of aging buildings; accessibility requirements; lack of space to meet increasing demands for services from community members and government; safety issues; and poor geographical location.

When infrastructure funding is available to urban Aboriginal not-for-profit organisations, Friendship Centres can be limited in their ability to apply as a result of eligibility criteria and other barriers. In particular, northern Friendship Centres can face exacerbated barriers to accessing funding, where there may be few licensed contractors to provide estimates and the prohibitive costs of building materials challenge northern Friendship Centres from meeting application requirements for funding. The OFIFC believes that all provincial infrastructure-based programs should be designed in such a way to ensure that urban Aboriginal not-for-profit organisations are eligible to receive funding and that a proportional amount of funding is reserved for such organisations. Further, infrastructure programs must also recognise the unique challenges often experienced in northern Ontario when establishing eligibility criteria.

¹² OFIFC, OMAA, ONWA, *Urban Aboriginal Task Force: Final Report* (Toronto, ON: Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, Ontario Métis Aboriginal Association, Ontario Native Women's Association, 2007).

Friendship Centres have also experienced issues accessing funding for building expansion. In many cases, Friendship Centres do not qualify to access infrastructure dollars made available through the Infrastructure Ontario and other sources such as the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation (NOHFC). The NOHFC provides funding for capital grants through the Strategic Economic Infrastructure Program, but Friendship Centres do not qualify because the funding criteria stipulates that investments must have an “economic impact”. While Friendship Centres in Northern communities are large employers of Aboriginal people and play an important role in supporting urban Aboriginal people secure sustainable employment the NOHFC does not consider this to be an eligible economic impact. The almost complete lack of alignment between the NOHFC and Friendship Centres in northern Ontario is unacceptable; particularly considering that northern Ontario, while only having a small share of the province’s total population (6 percent), is home to almost one-third of the total Aboriginal population in Ontario, many of whom live off reserve in more urbanised communities.¹³

Further, Friendship Centres have experienced difficulties accessing monies made available for Capital Grants through the Ontario Trillium Foundation because proposals often fall outside the scope of the program which limits investment at \$150,000.00. The lack of sustained and consistent infrastructure support from all levels of government has not met increased service demand. To support expansion some Friendship Centres are now taking on additional mortgages and borrowing funds from private lending institutions, a financial risk that has been exacerbated by the lack of consistent and predictable core and capacity support.

Currently Friendship Centres are not eligible for either the Ontario Community Infrastructure Fund or the Federal Government’s Small Communities Fund, administered in part by the MEDEI, unless they partner with the local municipality. Recognising the critical role Friendship Centres play in improving the socio-economic outcomes of urban Aboriginal people, a dedicated and proportional set-aside should be made directly available for urban Aboriginal not-for-profit organisations in all provincial infrastructure funding. Infrastructure funding made available to mainstream organisations and municipalities should require applicants to engage with and seek endorsement of the local urban Aboriginal community through urban Aboriginal not-for-profit organisations. The infrastructure funding made available through the MEDEI can support partnerships and ensure that the needs of urban Aboriginal people are prioritised locally and regionally.

¹³ Service Canada., *Client Segment Profile: Aboriginal Peoples, Ontario* (Ottawa, ON: Service Canada, 2014).

Adequate Social and Affordable Housing Infrastructure

It is well documented that the conclusion of the Social Housing Operating Agreement will undoubtedly impact the supply and maintenance of affordable housing in Ontario. In 2014, the federal government spent approximately \$1.7 billion, representing a reduction in spending of almost one-third from the 1990s, with operating agreements set to fully expire over the next 20 years.¹⁴

It has been estimated that once all operating agreements expire, around 2040, the federal, provincial and territorial governments will “save” about \$3.5 billion annually.¹⁵ These savings do not factor in the social cost the end of these operating agreements will have on communities. Without continued investment, as the operating agreements expire, social housing providers will either cease to exist or will be forced to find other mechanisms for funding subsidised units, including converting them to market rent. This will exacerbate the already pressing need for increased social and affordable housing, and municipalities will be further burdened with finding other ways to meet this need and continue support for precariously housed individuals and families who currently make up the majority of people using subsidised units funded through these agreements. As a result, the federal and provincial government should reinvest the saved revenue from the cancelling of the operating agreements back into increasing Aboriginal housing and homelessness support. This can be accomplished through existing organisations like Ontario Aboriginal Housing Services, which already has a proven track record when it comes to managing large infrastructure investments for the development and administration of a variety of housing services for Aboriginal people.

The recently enacted *Infrastructure for Jobs and Prosperity Act* clearly indicates that social housing is considered a provincial infrastructure asset.¹⁶ As such it is imperative that infrastructure investments made in communities include social and affordable housing. Specifically, long-term funding commitments are required by all levels of government to create a sustainable supply of affordable housing. The federal and provincial governments must cooperatively and collaboratively support and improve social housing infrastructure throughout Ontario communities for urban Aboriginal people by investing in the maintenance of existing housing stock and the building of new stock.

¹⁴ Stephen Gaetz, Tanya Gulliver, and Tim Richter, “The State of Homelessness in Canada 2014,” The Homeless Hub Press (2014). 4.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ *Infrastructure for Jobs and Prosperity Act*, S.O. 2015, c. 15.

Urban Aboriginal housing is threatened by aging housing stock, poor construction methods, culturally unsafe policies and the devolution of housing programs to 47 municipal service managers across Ontario.¹⁷ While some municipal service managers are developing innovative housing supports for community members, the majority of municipal service managers are unable to meet local demand for housing support due to a lack of resources. In most Friendship Centre communities, housing supports are available for at least one targeted demographic, often women and children. However, this is achieved at the expense of other groups – namely youth and men, and even in communities with services for women and children, the system is plagued by overcrowding and long waitlists. In some cases, a lack of available housing stock results in the relocation of housing insecure individuals. Friendship Centres have reported to the OFIFC that youth, men and sometimes seniors are more likely to leave the community in order to obtain housing. Increased support for urban Aboriginal specific housing is needed from the provincial and federal governments, including through the MEDEI's *Moving Ontario Forward*.

The development of new housing stock, specifically transitional and supportive housing, must be considered in addition to maintaining existing social and affordable housing stock. Excess land held by the Government of Ontario should be made available at reduced cost for the development of new affordable housing stock, including school buildings and lands that are no longer in operation. Further, infrastructure investments made by MEDEI in social and affordable housing should align with the Government of Ontario's Renewal of the Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy and the Poverty Reduction Strategy.

¹⁷Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, Métis Nation of Ontario, Ontario Native Women's Association., *Ontario Urban and Rural First Nations, Métis and Inuit Housing Policy Framework* (Toronto, ON: Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, Ontario Native Women's Association, Métis Nation of Ontario , 2013) 15.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The OFIFC recommends that:

- The Government of Ontario recognise the human capital potential of the young and growing urban Aboriginal population and prioritise infrastructure investments that support the unique needs of urban Aboriginal people in a culturally competent manner.
- The Government of Ontario create a long-term infrastructure plan, as set out by the *Infrastructure for Jobs and Prosperity Act*, that recognises the need for investment in urban Aboriginal not-for-profit organisations, specifically Friendship Centres.
- The Government of Ontario set aside a proportional amount of infrastructure funding in communities to meet the unique needs of urban Aboriginal people.
- The Government of Ontario require all mainstream organisations and municipalities applying for infrastructure funding, partner with local urban Aboriginal not-for-profit organisations, such as Friendship Centres. Applications should be evaluated against this requirement.
- The Government of Ontario commit to developing a provincial transportation strategy that identifies poverty reduction as a foundational principle.
- The Government of Ontario review all existing provincial infrastructure-based programs take place to ensure that urban Aboriginal not-for-profit organisations are eligible to receive funding and further, a proportional amount of funding is reserved for these organisations, with specific recognition of the unique challenges often experienced in northern Ontario when applying for this funding.
- The Government of Ontario ensure infrastructure investments include social housing, and that investments made align with the Province's Renewal of the Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy.

CONCLUSION

Infrastructure investments should be made with the goal of enhancing the long term well-being and prosperity of Ontario residents, including Aboriginal people. With this in mind, infrastructure investments made under *Moving Ontario Forward – Outside the GTHA* should include support for affordable public transportation systems, community-based organisations and affordable housing. Strong community-based infrastructure can serve to reduce the socio-economic gap between the urban Aboriginal population and the non-Aboriginal population. To support this, strategic and urban-Aboriginal specific infrastructure resources and programs must be available to meet the needs of the young and growing urban Aboriginal population. The Government of Ontario should prioritise infrastructure investments that support people living in poverty, including urban Aboriginal people. We look forward to the Government of Ontario taking action in this direction.