Reconciliation is Local

Make Friends with Your Friendship Centre

Reconciliation does not happen only in Ottawa or Queen's Park. It happens where people live.

Today, 88 per cent of Indigenous people in Ontario live in cities and towns, and Friendship Centres serve this growing population.

Friendship Centres are reconciliation in action. Every day, they provide culturally grounded, Indigenous-led services, respond to local priorities, and create pathways to health, belonging, opportunity, leadership, and self-determination. Across Ontario, Friendship Centres are improving outcomes for Indigenous people and families and strengthening entire communities.

Municipal governments make decisions every day about housing, public health, transportation, emergency management, recreation, community safety, land use, and economic development. These decisions have a direct and often profound impact on Indigenous residents and communities.

Municipalities and Friendship Centres are navigating a period of economic uncertainty, housing pressures, workforce shortages, and growing demand for local services. Friendship Centres are helping communities respond to these challenges through housing supports, food security programs, youth services, employment and training, mental health supports, emergency preparedness, and cultural programming.

Although reconciliation is often viewed as a federal or provincial responsibility, municipalities have an important role to play, including in advancing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) Calls to Action, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and the Calls for Justice from the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and 2SLGBTQQIA+ People.

Reconciliation must be concrete and practical. It should be reflected in the everyday decisions municipalities make.

Reconciliation is Local invites municipalities, candidates, community leaders, and residents to move beyond symbolic gestures and build practical, lasting partnerships with Friendship Centres.

Municipal leaders do not need to start from scratch. Friendship Centres are already doing the work. Together, we can create communities where Indigenous people are visible, valued, and included in the decisions that shape local life.

Whether you are running for office, serving on council, or casting your ballot, every local decision is an opportunity to advance reconciliation.

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Reconciliation Begins with Understanding

Meaningful reconciliation begins with understanding. Too often, there is limited awareness of how the legacy of colonialism continues to shape urban Indigenous realities, and how municipal decisions can help remove barriers or reinforce them.

The lands where Ontario's cities and towns now stand have long been home to Indigenous peoples. As colonial settlement expanded, Indigenous peoples were displaced from their lands, and municipal institutions developed without Indigenous voices, priorities, and worldviews.

Many Indigenous people continue to experience the cumulative impacts of colonization, including intergenerational trauma, systemic racism, and barriers to housing, health care, education, employment, transportation, community safety, and cultural connection.

These challenges are often interconnected. A setback in one area can quickly affect another, creating cycles of instability that make it more difficult for individuals and families to achieve long-term wellbeing.

Friendship Centres understand these realities because they work alongside Indigenous people and communities every day. Their holistic, culturally grounded, Indigenous-led model disrupts cycles of instability. By providing culture, belonging, housing, food security, mental health, family support, education, employment, and community connection in one place, Friendship Centres help people stabilize, reconnect, heal, and create steadier futures.

Friendship Centres provide municipalities with practical insight into community priorities, emerging challenges, and community-driven solutions. They help local governments better understand how municipal decisions affect Indigenous people and how to contribute to more equitable and inclusive outcomes.

Understanding these realities is the foundation for meaningful partnership.

The following sections outline practical actions municipalities can take, alongside Friendship Centres, to advance reconciliation and build stronger communities for everyone.

Putting Reconciliation into Practice

Reconciliation requires more than good intentions or symbolic gestures.

Land acknowledgements, commemorative events, and Indigenous awareness initiatives are important expressions of respect, but lasting reconciliation is built through relationships, shared decision-making, and sustained investment in Indigenous-led solutions.

Reconciliation requires not only recognizing the First Nations on whose traditional territories municipalities are located, but also acknowledging the presence of contemporary urban Indigenous communities.

Indigenous people live, work, raise families, build businesses, and contribute to the social, cultural, and economic life of municipalities across Ontario.

Land acknowledgements should reflect both the history of the land and the Indigenous communities who continue to call these places home today.

Recognition must also be accompanied by action. Municipalities should ensure urban Indigenous people and organizations, including Friendship Centres, are meaningfully embedded in consultation, planning, policy development, and decision-making processes that affect their communities.

Reconciliation is also distinct from diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Indigenous inclusion requires a distinct, rights-based approach grounded in Indigenous histories, inherent rights, and ongoing relationships with the land.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action provide direction for municipalities seeking to put reconciliation into practice. Three Calls to Action are particularly relevant.

Call to Action 43: Implement UNDRIP

Adopt the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as the framework for reconciliation and ensure Indigenous rights, perspectives, and meaningful participation are reflected in municipal decision-making.

Call to Action 47: Repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery and Terra Nullius

Repudiate concepts used to justify the dispossession of Indigenous lands and the denial of Indigenous rights. Municipal reconciliation requires recognizing Indigenous rights, histories, and enduring relationships to the lands on which municipalities were built.

Call to Action 57: Build Cultural Competency

Indigenous cultural competency training for public servants is essential to addressing unconscious bias and systemic racism. Municipalities must understand the history, rights, and lived realities of the Indigenous people they serve, along with their own role in reconciliation.

Together, these Calls to Action provide a practical roadmap for municipalities. They call on local governments to transform systems, correct the historical record, uphold Indigenous rights, and equip elected officials and municipal staff to build relationships and serve Indigenous people with dignity and respect.

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What Municipalities Can Do

- Recognize Friendship Centres as essential Indigenous partners
- Develop reciprocal partnership agreements with Friendship Centres
- Include urban Indigenous voices, organizations, and Friendship Centres early in consultation, planning, policy development, and decision-making
- Ensure land acknowledgements recognize both the traditional stewards of the land and the presence of contemporary urban Indigenous communities
- Share land, space, funding, and in-kind resources to strengthen Indigenous-led initiatives and improve access to culturally grounded services
- Provide Indigenous cultural competency training for elected officials and municipal staff
- Embed reconciliation across all areas of municipal government, including housing, land use, transportation, public health, community safety, recreation, and emergency management
- Invest in Indigenous-led, community-driven solutions

Housing Stability is Critical

Indigenous people are disproportionately affected by housing insecurity and homelessness across Ontario.

In many communities, Indigenous people represent 20 to 50 per cent of those experiencing homelessness, and between 65 and 88 per cent in some communities, despite making up only three per cent of Ontario's total population.

Reducing Indigenous homelessness is a crucial part of reconciliation.

Municipal governments shape housing outcomes through decisions about land use, zoning, affordable housing, emergency shelters, homelessness responses, and community planning.

Indigenous people continue to face barriers across shelters, rental markets, and service systems, including discrimination, unsafe environments, and responses that can retraumatize survivors of residential schools and their families.

Friendship Centres understand the interconnected factors that contribute to housing instability and provide culturally grounded supports that help Indigenous people navigate housing systems, maintain stability, and reconnect with community.

Last year alone, Friendship Centres housed 1,867 people and provided 88,521 food supports. They also supported 3,624 people to begin school, employment, or life skills training.

What Municipalities Can Do

- Partner with Friendship Centres on Indigenous-led housing and homelessness strategies and initiatives
- Include Friendship Centres early in housing, homelessness, and encampment planning
- Prioritize Indigenous housing within municipal funding allocations and advocate for dedicated resources

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- Identify opportunities to use municipal land, facilities, and other resources to support Indigenous-led housing solutions
- Engage Friendship Centres and urban Indigenous communities in land-use planning, development proposals, and community consultation processes that may affect Indigenous residents
- Address anti-Indigenous racism across housing systems
- Support preventive and wraparound programming

Emergency Management

Municipalities play a critical role in emergency response.

In Ontario, most large-scale evacuations involve First Nations communities, with evacuees relocated to municipalities. When municipalities are unprepared, evacuees may face gaps in culturally safe support that can increase risks related to mental health crises, substance use, suicide, exploitation, and community safety.

Friendship Centres are often among the first organizations to respond, but the last to be informed. Municipal emergency plans rarely recognize them as formal partners, despite their trusted relationships with Indigenous communities and their ability to provide culturally safe, community-based supports.

Municipalities may not control every aspect of emergency response, but they can strengthen preparedness by ensuring Indigenous organizations are included in planning, coordination, and service delivery.

Friendship Centres are already contributing to Ontario's emergency preparedness infrastructure through the OFIFC's role as an Ontario Corps Partner and participation in provincial emergency readiness initiatives.

What Municipalities Can Do

- Include Friendship Centres in emergency plans and Emergency Operations Centre activation processes
- Establish clear communication and notification protocols
- Support Indigenous-led cultural, mental health, and community supports during emergencies
- Ensure emergency accommodations, food services, and gathering spaces are culturally safe
- Recognize Friendship Centres as essential emergency response partners

Indigenous Youth, Belonging, and Opportunity

Indigenous youth bring talent, creativity, and leadership to their communities.

Many also navigate racism, exclusion, and intergenerational trauma, which can affect confidence, belonging, and access to opportunity.

Municipal decisions about transit, recreation, youth programming, workforce development, and economic development shape whether Indigenous youth can access the spaces, services, and opportunities they need to thrive.

Friendship Centres support youth through culture-based programs, mentorship, recreation, land-based activities, and wraparound services that help build identity, confidence, resilience, and stability.

Demand for Indigenous youth programming continues to grow, with participation increasing between 13 and 53 per cent across key Friendship Centre programs.

Supporting Indigenous youth is an investment in the future of Ontario's communities and workforce.

What Municipalities Can Do

- Partner with Friendship Centres on youth, workforce, and economic development strategies
- Invest in culturally safe and accessible youth spaces and programming
- Improve transit access to schools, workplaces, and community programs
- Support Indigenous-led employment, training, and entrepreneurship initiatives
- Address systemic barriers in hiring and workplace culture
- Create opportunities for Indigenous youth participation in municipal planning and decision-making

Friendship Centres: Essential Partners in Stronger Communities

Friendship Centres are essential infrastructure in communities across Ontario and trusted partners in reconciliation, community wellbeing, and addressing local challenges.

Across 31 communities, Friendship Centres employ more than 930 frontline staff and anchor Indigenous-led service delivery across Ontario.

Friendship Centres help address critical community needs that directly affect municipal systems, including food security, housing, homelessness, crisis support, transportation, emergency response, community safety, youth programming, employment, and training.

Through these programs and services, Friendship Centres create pathways to stability, opportunity, and wellbeing.

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At a time when municipalities and Friendship Centres are both navigating economic uncertainty and increasing demands on local services, this contribution matters.

Friendship Centres create jobs, develop workforce skills, support entrepreneurship, and strengthen local economic resilience. They hire locally, spend locally, and respond to local priorities.

While Friendship Centres play an essential role in communities across Ontario, many continue to face funding challenges.

Many provincial and federal funding models are built around distinctions-based approaches that recognize First Nations, Métis, and Inuit rights and communities separately. While these approaches are important, they do not always reflect the realities of urban Indigenous communities, where Friendship Centres support Indigenous people from diverse nations, backgrounds, and experiences.

As a result, critical gaps remain in the resources available to sustain essential local services.

Reconciliation is Local

Some municipalities have developed strong relationships with Friendship Centres. Others have emerging partnerships, and some have yet to begin.

Supporting Friendship Centres is an opportunity to invest in reconciliation and stronger communities for everyone.

Reconciliation is built through relationships, understanding, shared decision-making, sustained action, and a commitment to Indigenous-led solutions. It is not an abstract concept.

Practical reconciliation happens at the community level through the decisions municipalities make every day and the partnerships they choose to build.

It's time to make practical reconciliation a priority in your community.

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