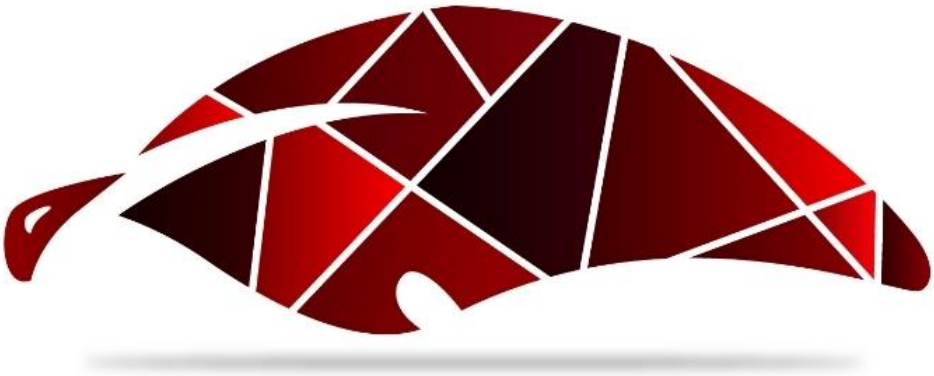

OFIFC

Ontario Federation of
Indigenous Friendship Centres

House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance 2024 Pre-Budget Consultation Submission

August 2023

Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres

House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance
2024 Pre-Budget Submission

Recommendations:

The Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (OFIFC) recommends the following Budget 2024 investments:

1. The annualization of dedicated federal funding to support the core operations and capacity development of Indigenous Friendship Centres. Investments will stabilize essential service delivery and propel the Friendship Centre Movement forward.

2. Confirmation that urban Indigenous-led child care spaces are embedded within the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care System to meet urban Indigenous families' proportionate need in our growing communities.

3. The Indigenous-led implementation of the Urban, Rural, and Northern Indigenous Housing Strategy announced in Budget 2022 through the National Indigenous Collaborative Housing Inc. (NICHI).

4. Long-term, stabilized funding supports for the OFIFC's Urban Indigenous Homeward Bound program in response to MMIWG2S+ National Action Plan.

5. The establishment of an annualized, flexible federal funding source for Indigenous Youth Initiatives in Friendship Centres to support young people to thrive in their communities.

Introduction:

The OFIFC represents the interests of 31 Indigenous Friendship Centres across Ontario. Census 2021 statistics indicate that most Indigenous people across Canada reside in urban and rural communities. In Ontario, 88% of Indigenous people live off-reserve in towns, cities, and rural areas.[1] Our communities' demographics are younger than the mainstream Canadian population and our communities are growing.

Friendship Centres play a critical role in creating opportunity for urban Indigenous people to exercise their rights to access culturally relevant programs and services that meet their needs where they live. Indigenous Friendship Centres were formed as a grassroots response to decolonization and remain direct catalysts of Indigenous people's self-determination in the areas of education, culture, justice, housing, health, and healing. Friendship Centres have a proven and extensive track record in managing physical and social infrastructure and in contributing to the modern reconciliation era as decolonial spaces where relationships between Indigenous communities and settlers are made real in cities and towns.

In an uncertain economic climate, Budget 2024 presents an opportunity for Canada to leverage the expertise of Friendship Centres to make immediate impacts on reconciliation priorities.

1. Annualized Core and Capacity Funding for Indigenous Friendship Centres:

The issue:

> Federal cuts to evergreen core funding and chronic underfunding have stretched Friendship Centres thin while facing unparalleled service demands amidst a cost-of-living and human resource crisis.
>
> Friendship Centres in Ontario operate with insufficient federal funding for core operations that must cover the salary of core staff, utilities, technology, database development, and building maintenance, among other core costs. In 2021-22, the true core operating costs of Friendship Centres exceeded the federal Urban Partnerships for Indigenous Programming (UPIP) funding by over $30 million.
>
> These rates are stifling Friendship Centres' impact across our communities and systematically underfunding meaningful Indigenous employment. It is time to recognize the work of Friendship Centres as on par with professionals in adjacent sectors. This has been a significant setback to reconciliation and is disruptive to Friendship Centre capacity at a time when demand for Friendship Centre services is growing.

[1] Statistics Canada. (2021). 'Census of Population: Focus on Geography Series, Ontario.'

Our recommended solution:

It is recommended that Budget 2024 introduce annualized, dedicated federal funding to support the core operations and capacity development of Friendship Centres through the establishment of an Indigenous Friendship Centre Program federally. Investments will serve to stabilize essential service delivery and propel the Friendship Centre Movement forward.

An Indigenous Friendship Centre Program that is distinct from UPIP will acknowledge the pivotal role that Friendship Centres play in urban Indigenous communities.

Key elements of our proposed Indigenous Friendship Centre Program include:

- Core staffing enhancements to improve Friendship Centres' capacity to manage rapid program and service growth;
- Equitable salary enhancements that enable the recruitment and retention of highly qualified staff;
- Increased operating funding that reflects the true cost of conducting business;
- The expansion of programs and services in ten new or existing Friendship Centres where communities are currently underserved; and
- Capital infrastructure investments to build, expand, and maintain existing infrastructure.

2. Ensure urban Indigenous-led child care spaces are embedded in the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) System

The issue:

Indigenous families living in urban areas will not have access to Indigenous-led culture-based child care as part of the CWELCC system because the federal government's distinctions-based funding model fails to reach the 82% of Indigenous people across Canada who reside off-reserve.[2]

This discriminatory approach will leave wide gaps in programming in urban areas and is counteractive to the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework (IELCCF).

According to ESDC, most of Budget 2021's $2.5 billion Indigenous ELCC commitments are being allocated to the three distinctions-based envelops for First Nations, Inuit and the Métis Nation.[3]

[2] Statistics Canada. 2021 Census of Population. Table 98-10-0264-01 Indigenous identity by Registered or Treaty Indian status and residence by Indigenous geography: Canada, provinces and territories

[3] Employment and Social Development Canada. Policy Brief to the Standing Senate Committee on National Finance. 2021. Pg.2. Retrieved from: 2021-06-08-NFFN_SA-22_ISC_e.pdf (sencanada.ca)

Canada committed to "working with provinces, territories, and Indigenous partners to create a Canada-wide system of high-quality, affordable, flexible and inclusive early learning and child care that all families can access no matter where they live."[4] However, the federal government has not created a mechanism to engage with urban Indigenous partners on CWELCC.

At the same time, the federal government's distinctions-based approach is trickling down at the provincial and local levels, creating significant barriers for urban Indigenous organizations to partner in creating child care in urban Indigenous communities.

In Ontario, access to Indigenous-led child care is objectively abysmal. There are only 24 off-reserve Indigenous child care centres out of the 5,545 licensed child care centres in Ontario. Accordingly, it would require 117 new off-reserve Indigenous child care centres to achieve parity in Ontario.

The lack of action is leaving urban Indigenous families behind. The federal government must take immediate steps to ensure that urban Indigenous communities including Friendship Centres can participate equitably.

Our recommended solution:

For Friendship Centre communities, recovering child care responsibility is the centerpiece of our overall community development strategy to build healthy prosperous, and vibrant urban Indigenous communities. The OFIFC has developed a comprehensive child care proposal which details a roadmap for Indigenous-led child care administered by the OFIFC and delivered by Friendship Centres that would ensure Indigenous families have access to quality, affordable and culturally relevant child care where they reside.

As Canada embarks on the implementation of the CWELCC system, the federal government, must:

- establish an ongoing engagement mechanism with urban Indigenous partners to advance our child care and early learning priorities.
- co-develop an urban Indigenous ELCC framework.
- establish firmer expectations of provinces and territories to support urban Indigenous-led child care and early learning centres.
- co-develop a direct funding relationship, guided by Bill C-35 with ESDC Secretariat and Directorate, that is in alignment with IELCC.

[4] Federal Secretariat on Early Learning and Child Care at Employment and Social Development Canada. Discussion Guide: Federal Legislation on Early Learning and Child Care. 2022.

2. The Indigenous-led implementation of the Urban, Rural, and Northern Indigenous Housing Strategy announced in Budget 2022 through NICHI

The issue:

In 2017 the federal government released the National Housing Strategy (NHS), which failed to leverage the substantial expertise of urban, rural and northern Indigenous housing providers across Canada. Instead, Indigenous-specific NHS investments were allocated to National Indigenous Organizations at the exclusion of urban Indigenous housing providers and organizations.

In Budget 2022, a commitment was made to implement an Urban, Rural and Northern Indigenous Housing Strategy federally – the missing pillar of investment needed to address Indigenous housing issues nationally. In Budget 2023, an allocation of $4 billion over seven years was committed. Over the past year, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) has utilized funding for the strategy to staff up internally and to facilitate engagements that have politicized and delayed the development of the strategy.

These serious concerns, combined with the lackluster results[5] of NHS programs speak to the need for a radically new approach.

Our recommended solution:

It is recommended that the trajectory of the promised Urban, Rural, and Northern Indigenous Housing Strategy is led by National Indigenous Collaborative Housing Inc. (NICHI). Since its founding, NICHI has assembled a strong coalition of Indigenous housing providers and sector experts who are serious about driving solutions to the housing crisis.

In April 2023, NICHI received a strong mandate from its members to administer the Urban, Rural, and Northern Indigenous Housing Strategy in a manner that respects the distinct needs of every region of the country and builds the capacity of Indigenous housing providers in under-served areas.

NICHI is expertly positioned to design and administer the strategy in partnership with CMHC. It is recommended that the federal government depoliticize its approach and instead work directly with NICHI to achieve immediate results on the ground in communities.

[5] National Housing Council. 2022. 'Analysis of Affordable Housing Supply Created by Unilateral National Housing Strategy Programs – Research Report.' Retrieved from: https://assets.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/sites/place-to-call-home/pdfs/analysis-affordable-housing-supply-created-unilateral-nhs-programs-en.pdf

3. Long-term, stabilized funding supports for the OFIFC's Urban Indigenous Homeward Bound program as a MMIWG2S+ National Action Plan direct response

The issue:

The Final Report of the National Inquiry on MMIWG2S+ demonstrated how poverty and colonization are the root causes of social issues that disproportionately affect Indigenous people. The National Inquiry found that economic marginalization and exclusion, including the lack of adequate housing, featured prominently as a root cause of violence.[6]

Our recommended solution:

It is recommended that Budget 2024 introduce long-term, stabilized federal funding for the OFIFC's Urban Indigenous Homeward Bound Program (UIHB) as a MMIWG2S+ National Action Plan direct response.

The program is changing Indigenous women's lives and will have a marked impact on Indigenous young people's futures, lifting families out of poverty including government assistance.[7] The program supports a high number of Indigenous women and children who have experienced or are fleeing violence. Program participants include youth-aged mothers, families with institutional involvement with child welfare agencies or correctional services, families who have experienced homelessness, families who have experienced long-term reliance on social assistance programs, and families leaving institutional settings such as shelters.

UIHB tackles these issues systemically through a culture-based wraparound approach to lifting families out of poverty and connecting them with culture, stabilized housing, education, and the job market. We can act immediately to support upstream investments in ending violence by strengthening the OFIFC's UIHB Program.

4. The establishment of an annualized, flexible federal funding source for Indigenous Youth Initiatives in Friendship Centres to support young people to thrive in their communities

[6] The Final Report for the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. (2019). Volume 1a. (439-445) Accessed: https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Final_Report_Vol_1a.pdf

[7] Raynard, Kelsey. (2022). 'Urban Indigenous Homeward Bound program celebrates first graduates.' Kenora Miner News. Retrieved from: https://www.kenoraminerandnews.com/news/local-news/urban-indigenous-homeward-bound-program-celebrates-first-graduates

The issue:

Indigenous young people within the Friendship Centre Movement have been without access to dedicated youth programming since the former Cultural Connections for Aboriginal Youth (CCAY) program was canceled federally. Indigenous young people continue to recover from pandemic-related issues that contributed to higher rates of mental health issues, addictions, violence, and trauma. This is in addition to interruptions to access to culture, education, and safe community spaces.

As young people, especially those aged 16-29, look to strengthen connections with their language, culture and community, the need for strengths-based programming for youth is a documented need across Friendship Centres.

Our recommended solution:

The federal government introduce an annualized, flexible federal funding source for Indigenous Youth Initiatives in Friendship Centres to support young people to thrive in their communities. To be responsive to the needs of Indigenous youth in the age range of 16-29, the fund should be flexible and focused very broadly on offering cultural connections, community involvement, and uplifting supports. To meet the needs of youth, major capital for the creation of safe spaces and land acquisition for land-based programming should be a component of the funding.