



National Association
of Friendship Centres
Association nationale
des centres d'amitié

Submission to the Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Rights:

Canada's Response to COVID-19 and Urban Indigenous Communities -
Perspectives from the Friendship Centre Movement

275 MaLaren Street

Ottawa, Ontario K2P 0L9

(613) 563-4844, toll free: (877) 563-4844

nafc.ca

In Friendship.

About NAFC

The National Association of Friendship Centres (NAFC) is a network of over 100-member local Friendship Centres (FCs) and Provincial/Territorial Associations (PTAs) across Canada. For more than 50 years, Friendship Centres have aided First Nations (status and non-status), Inuit, and Métis people living in rural, remote, northern, and large urban environments. Friendship Centres are Canada's most significant off-reserve Indigenous service delivery infrastructure and are providers of culturally enhanced programs and services to urban Indigenous residents.

Friendship Centres are grassroots organizations that provide services to all members of their respective communities, regardless of their legal status as an Indigenous person, and have done so since their inception. Last year, 93 Friendship Centres served approximately 1.4 million First Nations, Inuit, Métis, and non-Indigenous people across over 1200 programs in 238 buildings across Canada and employing over 2,700 staff.

These programs and services span a range of areas, including health, housing, education, recreation, language, justice, employment, economic development, culture, and community wellness. Friendship Centres are a lifeline for many Indigenous people living in urban environments. Today, approximately 75% of the Indigenous population in Canada lives in urban, rural, remote, and northern communities (with over 1000 population). Friendship centres are known within urban Indigenous communities for creating much-needed support structures that are not available anywhere else. This has held true as the COVID-19 pandemic has unfolded in Canada.

NAFC respectfully submits this report to lend its perspective and expertise to the Special Rapporteur's study of the impact of COVID-19 on Indigenous peoples, in the hopes of summarizing existing initiatives undertaken by the Friendship Centre Movement to ensure urban Indigenous peoples' needs are met during the pandemic, and to identify protection gaps which require the attention of the Government of Canada.

Canada's COVID-19 Response to Indigenous Communities

How are indigenous peoples given the possibility to shape the national COVID-19 response to ensure it does not have discriminatory effect on their communities? Is their input sought and respected in the programs that could affect them?

The Government of Canada has adopted a "distinctions-based approach" to its federal policy and decision making. Distinctions-based means the three federally recognized Indigenous groupings in Canada: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. Distinctions based approach was intended to remedy the previous "pan-Aboriginal" or "one size fits all" approach to Indigenous policy and decision making. The NAFC has been critical of this approach because federal funding is also divided along these distinctions and in a service delivery and urban environment, services must be provided on an inclusive basis to ensure that the diverse needs of community members are met. Further, the federal government of Canada has engaged only three national Indigenous organizations in their

consultation and decision making. The NAFC has continually provided context from the urban perspective and realities, with varying impact. The result is that, although some Indigenous people are engaged in government decision making, there is a large gap in urban Indigenous voices and perspectives being heard.

Initially, NAFC and its membership had additional issues securing funds to serve urban Indigenous communities due federal and provincial/territorial jurisdictional wrangling: the federal government initially directed Friendship Centres to provincial/territorial governments for accessing funds, who in turn directed them back to the federal government. Jurisdictional wrangling should never come between an Indigenous person and accessing important, and potentially life-saving services. The NAFC, along with other urban Indigenous organizations were successful in advocating for urban-specific funding. However, the resources allocated to urban Indigenous communities and organizations were not based on need or population.

NAFC has heard there is major concern for Indigenous people in urban settings who are homeless, unsheltered, or street involved. This is a vulnerable population with little federal strategy, funding or attention to these community members.

On March 18, 2020, the Government of Canada announced a \$305 million Indigenous Community Support Fund, to address “immediate needs in First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities”¹. The money was broken down in the distinctions-based approach² with just \$15 million set aside for “regional, urban, and off-reserve Indigenous organizations” through a call for proposals.³ In seeking these initial support funds from the Government of Canada, NAFC submitted a proposal based on urban Indigenous community identified needs and highlighted 4 top concerns including: food security; protective equipment for keeping employees and community members safer; maintaining clean and sanitized spaces; and available cashflow from loss of fundraising, extra expenditures, and fiscal year end. NAFC received \$3.75 million in immediate response funds to distribute amongst 99 FCs and PTAs, which was a fraction of what was needed to ensure that Friendship Centres can operate safely during this crisis. On June 8, 2020, NAFC submitted a second proposal to the federal government for a second round of funds, wherein we reiterated these concerns while expanding them to include infrastructure needs (such as spaces for isolated safe spaces) and mental health services.

NAFC had the opportunity to testify at the House of Commons three times in the last two months regarding the government’s response to COVID-19.⁴ In our testimonies, we have raised that the

¹ Indigenous Services Canada (Updated 21 May 2020). “Indigenous Community Support Fund”. Retrieved online [<https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1585189335380/1585189357198>]

² The Government of Canada’s current approach to Indigenous rights and policy development is to take a “distinctions-based approach” in which “the unique rights, interests and circumstances of the First Nations, the Metis Nation and Inuit are acknowledged, affirmed, and implemented” (Retrieved online at <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/csj-sjc/principles-principes.html>)

³ Indigenous Services Canada (Updated 21 May 2020). “Indigenous Community Support Fund”.

⁴ Canada, Standing Committee on Health, *Hansard*, 43rd Parliament, 1st Session, No. 014 (21 April 2020) [[online](#)]; Canada, Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs, *Hansard*, 43rd Parliament, 1st Session, No. 008

distribution of funds along a “distinctions based approach” did not appropriately consider the unique situation of Indigenous people in Canada living in urban communities. While federal government funds provided to on-reserve First Nations, Métis and Inuit governments were provided based on population, urban Indigenous organizations serving urban-based Indigenous people, a majority of the Indigenous population, were required to go through an application process for the support funds. NAFC provided feedback that this requirement for only urban Indigenous people was unjust at the outset, particularly in the context of a pandemic. The reality of needing to compete for an insufficient pot of funds in a proposal-based process while communities are in a state of emergency due to a global pandemic is simply flawed and disrespectful.

Friendship Centres on the Front Line of COVID-19

How are indigenous peoples supported in their own initiatives to fight the pandemic, protect health and provide assistance in their own communities? What lessons can be learnt from indigenous traditional practices and community-based programs in lock down and emergency?

Please provide information and specific examples showing the increased risks and/or disproportionate health impact of the pandemic on indigenous peoples. What measures have been taken to provide health care and other forms or urgent assistance for remote communities?

Friendship Centres moved quickly to respond when the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak as a global pandemic on March 11, 2020. Friendship Centres have been highly responsive and agile in supporting their communities throughout this global pandemic, including by acting as information hubs for their communities; distributing food and essential supplies; forming or joining task forces to address the needs of the most vulnerable; and becoming COVID-19 testing sites. Where possible, Friendship Centres have adjusted program and service delivery to take place virtually to ensure safety of staff, volunteers, and community members.

As Centres continue to serve the most vulnerable members of their communities in-person, such as through shelter services, concerns remain about how to safely provide services when resources are dwindling. In liaising with our membership, our member Friendship Centres have indicated that they are well overcapacity in terms of the services they have been called on to provide. Among the systemic barriers impeding Friendship Centres’ ability to access resources for this important work is Canada’s distinctions-based approach to relief funding, which leaves many urban Indigenous community members feeling “unseen”.

(13 May 2020) [\[online\]](#); Canada, Standing Committee on Finance, *Hansard*, 43rd Parliament, 1st Session, No. 029 (19 May 2020) [\[online\]](#).

Canada's Distinctions Based Approach

In addition to experiencing racism and discrimination, urban Indigenous people generally experience higher rates of poverty, unemployment, precarious housing or no housing, violence, and overrepresentation in the criminal justice system. These issues are further heightened for Indigenous children, youth, people with disabilities and Two-Spirit and LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Upholding rights and addressing the challenges of urban Indigenous people requires equally diverse supports and responses from multiple stakeholders. As service delivery community hubs, Friendship Centres observe that the federal government's distinctions-based approach has allowed urban Indigenous people to become "unseen" by current government policy approaches that results in inadequate resourcing for urban Indigenous services. Further, the federal government has not engaged an effective mechanism to be able to "see" urban Indigenous people or the organizations that serve them across Canada. This gap has persisted throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

In keeping with the findings of Canada's Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Inquiry, NAFC holds that distinctions ought to be defined with an intersectional lens, not just including First Nations, Métis and Inuit, but also considering the residence of Indigenous people, the province or territory that they're in, whether they're remote or northern residents, their physical and mental abilities, and their sex, gender identity and sexual orientation. Including an intersectional lens to distinctions will better position the Government of Canada to provide urban indigenous community members with the supports they need throughout and beyond this pandemic.

Data Collection and Urban Indigenous Communities

How does the State collect and analyze information on the impact of COVID-19 on indigenous peoples and individuals? Is disaggregated data on indigenous peoples, including health impacts, available?

Two months into the COVID-19 pandemic, Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) announced additional funding towards improved data collection about the impact of COVID-19 on First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. Activists and policy-makers have criticized not only the delayed response, but the overall data inequality that has been highlighted by the pandemic.⁵ While daily updates are available on the number of new cases, deaths, and detailed projections, public data on how the pandemic has impacted Indigenous communities is scarce. As of the writing of this

⁵ Skye, Courtney (May 2020). "Colonialism of the Curve: Indigenous Communities and Bad COVID Data," *Yellowhead Institute*, issue 63. Retrieved online [<https://yellowheadinstitute.org/2020/05/12/colonialism-of-the-curve-indigenous-communities-and-bad-covid-data/>]; CBC News (12 June 2020) "As COVID-19 restrictions are loosened, Canada must do more to protect vulnerable groups, doctors say" online [<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/whitecoat/as-covid-19-restrictions-are-loosened-canada-must-do-more-to-protect-vulnerable-groups-doctors-say-1.5606545>]

report, the only information available through ISC relates to cases on-reserve for First Nations and community-collected data from May 2020 suggests the figures are nearly double what ISC is reporting.⁶

Lack of data on health outcomes for and impacts on Indigenous communities in urban contexts has been a persistent issue for as long as Indigenous peoples have been living in them. If we are to develop policy and programs that meaningfully address how COVID-19 is impacting urban Indigenous communities, Federal, Provincial, and territorial governments need to work with urban Indigenous community members and experts on better, community-owned data collection relevant to urban Indigenous specific-needs and barriers, both throughout and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

There have been recent announcements by the federal government for more data collection, with some focus on urban Indigenous communities. The structure and roll out is still being developed. NAFC is engaged with these conversations.

Support for Indigenous women, youth, people with disabilities, Two-Spirit, and LGBTQ+ people

Please provide information on how indigenous women, older persons, children, persons with disabilities and LGBTI persons are or may be facing additional human rights challenges during the pandemic. Please provide information on targeted measures taken to prevent intersecting forms of discrimination, and ensure indigenous women, children, older persons, persons with disabilities and LGBTI persons' access, protection and services with due regards to their specific needs within indigenous communities.

The Government of Canada has announced few supports directed by and for Indigenous women, youth, Two-Spirit and LGBTQ+ individuals, and individuals with disabilities. In terms of supports for Indigenous women during COVID-19, additional shelter funding was announced on April 4, 2020 specifically through Indigenous Services Canada's (ISC) existing network of 46 emergency shelters on reserve to support Indigenous women and children fleeing violence. This will flow directly to shelters and will provide them with additional operational funding to manage or prevent an outbreak in their facilities. Following calls for more funding, the Government then announced \$44.8 million over five years to build 12 new shelters, 10 in First Nations communities and two in the territories.⁷ However, spreading these funds over five years will not allow

⁶ Skye, Courtney (May 2020). "Colonialism of the Curve: Indigenous Communities and Bad COVID Data," *Yellowhead Institute*, issue 63. Retrieved online [<https://yellowheadinstitute.org/2020/05/12/colonialism-of-the-curve-indigenous-communities-and-bad-covid-data/>]

⁷ Office of the Prime Minister (29 May 2020), "Prime Minister announces additional funding for health, economic, and social support for Indigenous peoples and communities" [Press release] Online <https://pm.gc.ca/en/news/news-releases/2020/05/29/prime-minister-announces-additional-funding-health-economic-and#:~:text=The%20Prime%20Minister%2C%20Justin%20Trudeau,COVID%2D19%20in%20Indigenous%20communities.>

communities to respond now to imminent needs arising as a result of COVID-19. Further, all shelter funds that have been announced for Indigenous women have been targeted to on-reserve, First Nations women. While there is no debate that those funds are sorely needed, many Indigenous women and their children face violence and need shelter in off-reserve contexts, and irrespective of whether they are First Nations, Métis, or Inuit.

While the Government of Canada has funded Kids Help Phone for an additional \$7.5 million and put a moratorium on student loan payments,⁸ it has not announced any financial supports specific to Indigenous children or youth. A cursory survey of urban Indigenous youth conducted by NAFC in May 2020 indicated that youth's top two concerns were 1) keeping their families and communities safe, and 2) money and not being able to access a summer job. Though Canada has extended work terms within the First Nations and Inuit Youth Employment Strategy⁹, no relief funds have been allocated to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis youth. This has increasingly dire consequences for a population group more likely to face systemic barriers to accessing safe housing, employment, and education.

As of June 5, 2020, the federal government is providing Canadians with disabilities with a one-time \$600 payment, with an additional \$300 available for some individuals over 65.¹⁰ Again, the fund has been criticized by disability advocates for excluding over half of disabled individuals in Canada and no funds have thus far been allotted specifically towards Indigenous peoples with disabilities. Similarly, no supports have yet been announced for Two-Spirit and LGBTQ+ individuals, who are at higher risk for infection due to rates of poverty, social isolation, and systemic discrimination within the health care system.

In each case listed above, the Government of Canada has failed to consider other intersections of identity outside of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. By prioritizing only these distinctions, the Government of Canada will never be able to appropriately respond to the full spectrum of Indigenous people and will continue to compromise the quality of services and quality of life of Indigenous people with intersecting identities.

Recommendations

Indigenous populations are diverse and varied, and need supports that reflect that diversity if they are to create safety for those populations throughout this pandemic. Much work remains to be done to ensure that Indigenous service providers, such as Friendship Centres, have what they

⁸ Office of the Prime Minister (29 March 2020), "Prime Minister announces support for vulnerable Canadians affected by COVID-19" [Press Release], retrieved online <https://pm.gc.ca/en/news/news-releases/2020/03/29/prime-minister-announces-support-vulnerable-canadians-affected-covid>

⁹ Indigenous Services Canada (Updated May 2020), "First Nations and Inuit Youth Employment Strategy: Summer Work Experience Program: National Program Guidelines 2020-2021", online <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1578659283637/1578659306449#chp6>

¹⁰ Office of the Prime Minister (5 June 2020), "Prime Minister announces supports for Canadians with disabilities to address challenges from COVID-19" retrieved online <https://pm.gc.ca/en/news/news-releases/2020/06/05/prime-minister-announces-supports-canadians-disabilities-address>

need to serve the diverse urban Indigenous communities to which they belong both now and into any second wave that may be coming, as well as into the post COVID-19 future. Given the information submitted above, NAFC recommends the following:

1. That the Government of Canada provide an adequate level of support to urban Indigenous people, utilizing the urban Indigenous organizations such as the Friendship Centre network, so they can continue to serve as effective community hubs for urban Indigenous communities throughout and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic;
2. That the Government of Canada immediately allocate funds for women's shelters that serve Indigenous women living in urban contexts;
3. That the Government of Canada immediately broaden its COVID-19 disability benefit and create a specific funding pot for Indigenous people with disabilities to receive relief funding;
4. That the Government of Canada immediately allocate COVID-19 relief funds to support Indigenous Two-Spirit and LGBTQ+ service providers, advocacy groups, and individual community members to ensure that everyone has access to care;
5. That the Government of Canada immediately allocate COVID-19 relief funds and create mental health supports specifically for Indigenous children and youth;
6. That the Government of Canada immediately expand its "Distinctions Based Approach" to be truly intersectional (including sex, orientation, gender, residency, geography, ability and age); and
7. That federal, provincial, and territorial governments build partnerships with urban Indigenous communities and governments to collect comprehensive data on how COVID-19 is impacting urban Indigenous communities.