



OFIFC

Ontario Federation of
Indigenous Friendship Centres

Pre-Budget Submission | 2017

Introduction

For over four decades, Friendship Centres in Ontario have been gathering places for Indigenous people who live in urban areas, community-driven, and focused on the wellbeing of everyone who walks through their doors.

When there were very few other options in cities and towns, Friendship Centres provided a safe space for Indigenous culture to be shared and to thrive, for community members to be connected to supports and opportunities, and for Indigenous people to assume leadership roles and build meaningful careers.

Today Friendship Centres are dynamic community hubs. They are idea incubators for young Indigenous people attaining their education and employment goals, they are sites of cultural resurgence for Indigenous families who want to raise their children to be proud of who they are, and they are safe havens for Indigenous community members requiring supports. Our vision is to amplify this work.

In post Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Canada, Friendship Centres and the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (OFIFC) are playing a vital role in fostering relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities and creating opportunities for the TRC's Calls to Action to be fulfilled. It is in this spirit that we present the OFIFC's 2017 Pre-budgetary Submission.

About the OFIFC

The OFIFC is a provincial Indigenous organization representing the collective interests of twenty-eight (28) member Friendship Centres located in towns and cities throughout the province of Ontario. The vision of the Indigenous Friendship Centre Movement is to improve the quality of life for Indigenous people living in an urban environment by supporting self-determined activities which encourage equal access to, and participation in, Canadian society and which respects Indigenous cultural distinctiveness.

The OFIFC administers a number of programs and initiatives which are delivered by local Friendship Centres in areas such as justice, health, family support, long term care, healing and wellness, and employment and training. As not-for-profit corporations which are mandated to serve the needs of all Indigenous people regardless of legal definition, Friendship Centres respond to the needs of tens of thousands of community members requiring culture-based and culturally-appropriate services every day.

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1 | *What federal measures would help Canadians generally – and such specific groups as the unemployed, Indigenous peoples, those with a disability and seniors – maximize, in the manner of their choosing, their contributions to the country’s economic growth?*

As the youngest and fastest growing population in Ontario, it is critical to consider the unique challenges faced by urban Indigenous people. According to the 2011 National Household Survey, 84.1 percent of Indigenous people in Ontario now reside off-reserve in towns, cities, and rural communities. More than 50 percent of our population is under the age of twenty-sevenⁱ and is growing at nearly double the rate of the non-Indigenous population.ⁱⁱ It is estimated that more than 100,000 Indigenous youth will come of age to enter the labour market by 2026.ⁱⁱⁱ

With direction from Friendship Centres, the OFIFC recommends the following federal measures to best support urban Indigenous people:

Reinstate Core Investments in Friendship Centres

Absent from the federal government’s 2016 budget was the reversal of funding cuts to Friendship Centres. For the second consecutive year we urge the federal government to reinstate core funding to Friendship Centres and refocus the Urban Aboriginal Strategy on broader urban Indigenous community development objectives. The federal Community Capacity Support and Urban Partnership project funds have generated important local initiatives, but these short-term funding opportunities are not an adequate replacement for the evergreen core funding to Friendship Centres that was cut by the previous government. Short-term funding jeopardizes the ability of Friendship Centres to focus on supporting their communities and thereby affects the urban Indigenous community’s ability to contribute to their community and the larger economy.

Eliminate Indigenous Youth Poverty

It is estimated that more than 41 percent of Indigenous youth are currently experiencing poverty in Canada.^{iv} The incredible cost of generational cycles of poverty remains unaddressed by the federal government and requires immediate attention as part of any plan for economic growth, prosperity, and reconciliation. As a first measure, the OFIFC recommends the co-development of sustainable Indigenous youth programming that offers culture-based skills-building and responds to the TRC’s specific recommendation for youth-specific programs on reconciliation.

Across Canada, Friendship Centre youth have spoken out about the gaps created when the previous federal government cut the Cultural Connections for Aboriginal Youth (CCAY) program.^v In Ontario, this cut has negatively impacted the health and wellbeing of Indigenous youth and exacerbated poverty-related challenges youth face. Urban Indigenous youth need a willing federal partner that will share the responsibility for preparing youth to transition into successful adulthood.

Support Affordable Housing and End Homelessness

The federal government's commitment to work with provinces to develop a National Housing Strategy must respond to the needs of urban Indigenous communities in Ontario. Engagement and consultation with urban Indigenous communities and organisations to develop a National Housing Strategy should take place early in the policy development process and recognise regional differences and priorities. It is important that the federal government implements separate engagement processes for urban and on-reserve Indigenous communities in order to understand the distinct priorities and needs of urban Indigenous communities. It is not uncommon for urban Indigenous people to be on waiting lists for safe, affordable housing that outpace their children's childhoods. Waiting ten years for affordable housing is unacceptable.

Beyond the National Housing Strategy, investment into the Homelessness Partnering Strategy and the Affordable Housing Initiative must prioritise sustainable investments into all urban Indigenous communities in Ontario through adequate, sustainable, and coordinated funding that meets local demand. Active collaboration between the federal and provincial governments is critical for improving housing infrastructure throughout urban Indigenous communities by investing in the maintenance of existing housing stock and the building of new stock to meet current demands.

Expand Labour Market Training Opportunities

The OFIFC believes that Indigenous labour market programming, when coordinated with preventive and wrap-around support for Indigenous families is critical for increasing employment opportunities and outcomes for urban Indigenous people. The OFIFC calls on the federal government to negotiate for the allocation of Labour Market Development Agreements (LMDA) transfers specific to Indigenous programming that reflect the high number of urban Indigenous people in Ontario. Indigenous-specific programming should be delivered directly by, or in partnership with, urban Indigenous multi-service agencies, such as Friendship Centres.

As the federal government prepares for the next iteration of the LMDA, a retooled LMDA must consider impacts for multi-barriered urban Indigenous people requiring support to engage in the labour market. The OFIFC believes that the

LMDA and Canada Job Grant require significant altering to ensure that the most vulnerable populations are provided with equal opportunities to access training, pre-employment supports, and job opportunities. With the end of targeted supports to vulnerable Canadians who are not EI-eligible through the former Labour Market Agreements (LMA), the OFIFC is hopeful that the federal government will address this gap by changing existing LMDA eligibility requirements before transfer payment agreements are administered in 2017/2018.^{vi}

End Violence in Communities

Undertaking a national public inquiry on missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls in Canada must not merely shine a light on this issue, but instead develop a substantive approach to end all forms of racialized, sexualized, and gendered violence experienced by Indigenous women and girls. In order to bring healing to women, girls, and their families, a necessary societal shift must take place so that all Indigenous women and girls are safe in Canada and afforded the same opportunities as their non-Indigenous counterparts.

2 | *What federal actions would assist Canada's businesses – in all regions and sectors – meet their expansion, innovation and prosperity goals, and thereby contribute to economic growth in the country?*

Friendship Centres across Ontario represent some of the largest economic drivers in their communities, employing hundreds and serving thousands of Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members across the province. In many communities, Friendship Centres also foster social economy initiatives and facilitate education and training initiatives that support entrepreneurs, skilled workers, and youth.

Support Friendship Centre Capital Expansions

It is in large part through significant capital and core funding investments in Friendship Centres and other Indigenous organisations that a thriving Indigenous middle class emerged in urban centres in Ontario. In order to sustain this positive growth and support growing urban Indigenous communities across Ontario, capital investments in Friendship Centres should be prioritized. The lack of sustained and consistent infrastructure support from all levels of government has not met increased service demand and has limited the Friendship Centres' ability to grow its workforces and support all community members.

Foster Urban Indigenous Community Economic Development

Supporting an increased role for Friendship Centres in community economic development is a major strategy toward increasing economic growth in urban

Indigenous communities. Friendship Centres are community economic development drivers that employ local urban Indigenous community members, purchase local goods and services, and draw investments from government and other sources to build social service networks that meet local community needs. Through community economic development (CED) practices, the needs of local communities are placed at the forefront resulting in a more holistic and sustainable approach to economic and labour force development. There is a need to build on the success of this model to expand labour force opportunities that engage the aspirations of community members while considering the demands of the local labour market.

Expand ASETS

Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy (ASETS) has been in year-to-year contract extensions for the past several years, but it is vital to Indigenous labour market outcomes that the federal government commit to multi-year funding at sufficient and predictable levels. The OFIFC believes that ensuring equitable access for urban Indigenous people to federally-supported skills training programs and an expanded successor to ASETS will support the federal government in meeting the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, as it pertains to closing the education and employment gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. ASETS, and all Indigenous labour market programming, needs to be broadened to support Indigenous community economic development aspirations rather than fit Indigenous community members into labour market gaps.

3 | *What federal measures would ensure that urban, rural and remote communities throughout Canada enable residents to make their desired contribution to the country's economic growth and businesses to expand, prosper and serve domestic and international customers in order to contribute to growth?*

Prioritize Urban Indigenous Social Infrastructure

Budget 2016's commitment to spend \$3.6 billion on "social infrastructure to create inclusive growth" excludes urban Indigenous communities. Friendship Centres offer a range of community resources in a convenient and culture-based service delivery model, and should not be overlooked as sites of social infrastructure investment that would be key drivers of economic growth in Indigenous communities. Phase 1 and 2 of the federal government's new infrastructure plan must demonstrate recognition of the distinct needs of urban Indigenous communities in Ontario through targeted, sustained investments towards improving socio-economic outcomes.

Develop a National Child Care Strategy

A major service gap in urban Indigenous communities that limits community members' job market participation is the lack of affordable culturally-appropriate child care centres. Increasing access to culturally appropriate child care is key to poverty reduction and is a critical strategy to increase labour force participation of Indigenous women and end violence against Indigenous women. Culturally appropriate child care, which incorporates language and culture into curriculum and involves community members such as Elders, fosters positive cultural identity in early years and is a building block to future academic and labour force success.^{vii} Increasing access to culturally-appropriate child care, particularly by proliferating child care programming in Friendship Centres, will improve transitions throughout the education to employment continuum. The federal government must work with the province and the urban Indigenous community in the development of the national child care strategy.

Conclusion & Recommendations

With the goal of increasing equality of opportunity for Indigenous people in their communities, the OFIFC strongly encourages the federal government consider the strategic investments outlined within our submission. In so doing, we invite participatory and collaborative implementation processes that respect the Friendship Centres' voices.

In particular, the OFIFC recommends the following five specific priorities be included in the 2017 Federal Budget:

1. The reinstatement of evergreen core funding for Friendship Centres.
2. The inclusion of Friendship Centres within federal social infrastructure capital investments.
3. Consultations with urban Indigenous organisations including Friendship Centres on a National Housing Strategy.
4. The commitment to expand ASETS to meet the needs of urban Indigenous community members.
5. The reformation of Labour Market Development Agreements to:
 - Expand eligibility requirements to include non-EI eligible participants; and
 - Ensure urban Indigenous LMDA are delivered directly by, or in partnership with, urban Indigenous multi-service agencies, such as Friendship Centres.

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- ⁱ Government of Ontario. (2008). *Breaking the Cycle, Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy*. 15. Available at: http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/documents/breakingthecycle/Poverty_Report_EN.pdf
- ⁱⁱ Government of Canada. (2008). Hope or Heartbreak: Aboriginal youth and Canada's future. *Horizons: Policy Research Initiative*, 10(1), 14.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Government of Canada. (2008). Hope or Heartbreak: Aboriginal youth and Canada's future. *Horizons: Policy Research Initiative*, 10(1), 14.
- ^{iv} Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. (May 2016). "Shameful Neglect: Indigenous Child Poverty in Canada." Retrieved from: https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2016/05/Indigenous_Child%20Poverty.pdf
- ^v OFIFC. "Cultural Connections for Aboriginal Youth." OFIFC Website. Retrieved from: <http://www.ofifc.org/about-friendship-centres/programs-services/children-and-youth/cultural-connections-aboriginal-youth>
- ^{vi} Unless these changes are made to existing LMDA eligibility, by 2017/2018, when the full funding requirements of the Canada-Ontario Job Grant are reached, the majority of transfer-funded programs will be geared to EI-eligible, employment ready clients. This is particularly problematic considering that Ontario has a lower share of unemployed people receiving EI benefits in comparison with the rest of Canada. In 2013, only 27.8 percent of unemployed Ontarians were EI-eligible compared with the rest of Canada at 45.2 percent.
- ^{vii} Best Start. (2011). "Founded in Culture: Strategies to Promote Early Learning Among First Nations Children in Ontario." Best Start Resource Centre, Toronto. http://www.beststart.org/resources/hlthy_chld_dev/pdf/FC_K13A.pdf