

A glowing feather, possibly a quill, is the central focus. It is illuminated from below, creating a bright, ethereal glow that fades into the surrounding darkness. Wisps of white smoke or mist rise from the base of the feather, adding a sense of movement and atmosphere. The feather's structure is clearly visible, showing the fine barbs and the central rachis.

Together We Are...

FEATHERS

OF HOPE

A First Nations
Youth Action Plan



THE PROVINCIAL ADVOCATE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH WOULD LIKE TO ACKNOWLEDGE RIGHT TO PLAY FOR MAKING PLAY AN ESSENTIAL PART OF THE FEATHERS OF HOPE FORUM.

Together We Are...

FEATHERS OF HOPE

A First Nations
Youth Action Plan

Provincial Advocate
for Children & Youth

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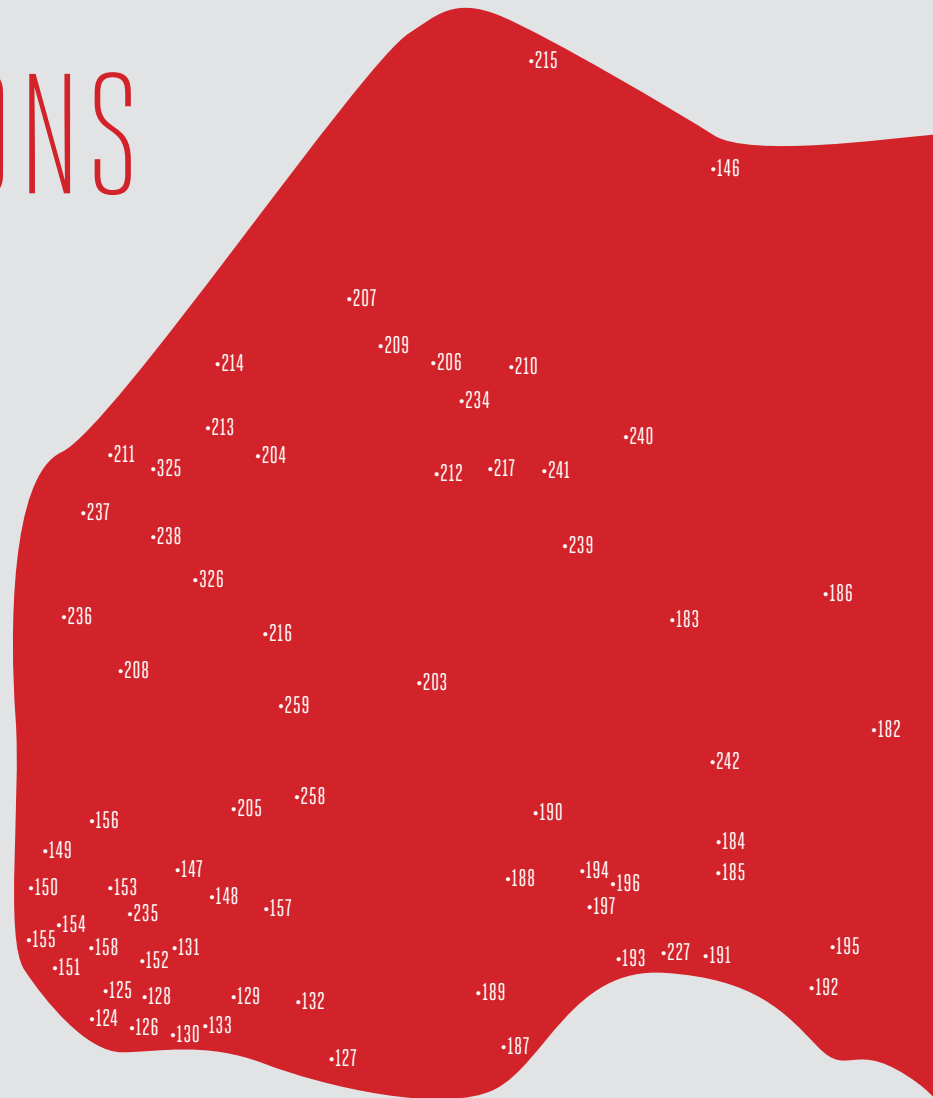
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TO PRESENT TO DECISION-
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MESSAGE FROM IRWIN ELMAN

THE PROVINCIAL ADVOCATE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH



IRWIN ELMAN AT THE FEATHERS OF HOPE
YOUTH FORUM IN THUNDER BAY

In March 2013, I had the pleasure of attending the Feathers of Hope Youth Forum hosted by my office and organized by my Community Development team and hard-working, dedicated and passionate First Nations young people. The event was also developed in partnership with Health Canada, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, the Ministry of Community and Social Services, the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, the Thunder Bay Suicide Task Force, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and Nishnawbe Aski Nation in northern Ontario.

Over the course of five days, we brought together more than 100 youth from 62 northern First Nations communities to share their lived experiences and talk about issues affecting their lives. On the final day, the young people presented their action plan for change to government and community leaders and decision-makers. They assembled an impressive group of influential people including: provincial ministers and deputy ministers from Children and Youth Services, Education, Aboriginal Affairs and senior representatives from eight other provincial ministries. There was federal representation from Aboriginal Affairs, the Ministry of Health and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Also in attendance were one of the co-chairs of the Assembly of First Nations Youth Council, a Deputy Grand Chief from Nishnawbe Aski Nation and Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health, along with others who travelled from near and far to listen to what the young people had to say.

One floor above the meeting room, more than 100 First Nations youth watched the home group presentations on closed circuit televisions while they waited for their turn to present. In a show of solidarity and

support young people would begin stomping their feet on the floor every time they saw a group struggle and every time a group said something that rang true for them. There was an overwhelming emotional energy in the room and a sense of hope. These young people had bonded and together they had become ‘feathers of hope.’ They were ready to use the power of their voices and the sound of their feet to demonstrate to everyone in the room that they were committed to change.

In my first few days as the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth two children in my mandate died. One was a school age child in downtown Toronto, which made headlines across the province. The other was a First Nations teen who had left his group home despondent and, according to his friends, leapt in front of a train. We received a call from a Kenora reporter about the young man’s death and were asked this question, “I know he is a First Nations child and he lives up here in Kenora, but do you care about him, too?” I got on a plane and flew to Kenora.

First Nations children and youth face starker life realities and greater inequities in terms of the rights afforded them than any other group of children in my mandate. While the legislation that governs my office prevented me from investigating the death of this young man, I wanted to learn more.

I spent time meeting with First Nations leaders and advocates to learn more about the challenges faced by First Nations children and youth. I am indebted to people like Betty Kennedy, northern First Nations leadership and Sylvia Maracle during these early days for sharing their knowledge and experience. I visited dozens of communities and met with leadership, children, youth and elders. My office supported initiatives like Shannen’s Dream and supported a delegation of First Nations youth to travel to Geneva to speak to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

The First Nations children and youth I met were remarkable as was the resolve of their communities for things to be different. I heard people speak about their feelings of hopelessness and could even see it in their faces and how they carried themselves. But under the surface, I could also see hope.

First Nations children and youth carry a wisdom that comes with lived experience. As with other children in the mandate of

my office, First Nations children and youth want an opportunity to make things better, not just for themselves, but for the generations of children and youth who will come after them.

The Feathers of Hope forum is a demonstration that change can happen and that in making change history and the legacies of oppression and injustice faced by First Nations peoples must be addressed.

Feathers of Hope: A First Nations Youth Action Plan reflects the voices of young people involved in the forum. It is based on the presentations the young people made on the final day of the forum as the walls shook under their stomping feet. The young writers do not assume they speak for all First Nations youth. They authored it humbly, working as much as possible to ensure those who attended the forum would be able to recognize their own voices. They hope that the action plan resonates with other First Nations youth.

It takes courage to name one’s own world and we owe the young people involved a debt of gratitude for sharing their experiences so that the process of change can begin. With open hearts, they have allowed themselves to connect with their history, each other and with a vision for the future. Now, they present their action plan to Ontario and Canada with both hope and trepidation.

The action plan prepared by these young people offers a way forward. It extends a hand and an offer of partnership to the adults around them. They don’t ask decision-makers to take the action plan away and make change. They ask decision-makers to walk beside them and work together to improve the circumstances of their lives. The action plan offers “steps to make hope real” and begins with actions that decision-makers can implement immediately to start making a difference. These steps alone will not solve all the challenges First Nations communities face, but it’s a start.



IRWIN ELMAN

PROVINCIAL ADVOCATE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

LETTER FROM THE YOUTH AMPLIFIERS



UKO ABARA,
OKOKO ITEM, ABIA STATE,
NIGERIA



NICOLE BEARDY-MEEKIS,
SANDY LAKE FIRST NATION



SAMANTHA CROWE,
LAKE HELEN RESERVE



KATHRYN MORRIS,
KITCHENUHMAYKOOSIB
INNUNIWUG



JULAINE TRUDEAU,
MUSKRAT DAM
FIRST NATION

We are pleased to present *Feathers of Hope: A First Nations Youth Action Plan*. It reflects nineteen months of planning and work including a five day youth forum in Thunder Bay, a three day youth gathering in Kashechewan/Ft. Albany, visits with youth in northern First Nations communities in Ontario, speaking engagements across the country, media interviews and more sleepless nights than we can count. Most importantly, these months of travel, discussion and listening sessions confirmed we are not alone in wanting to change the conditions of hopelessness and poverty faced by First Nations people in northern Ontario.

When we applied to be Youth Amplifiers with the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth in Thunder Bay, we didn't know what we were getting into. For some of us, it was a summer job. For others it was an opportunity to work with young people in our communities. However, it became clear that what we were involved in was more than that. *Feathers of Hope* demonstrates the power and potential of youth leadership and a youth-centred focus in advocacy to confront the issues that directly affect young people's lives. Its success is tied to young people working together to make change.

Feathers of Hope helped young people realize they could add their voices and energies to work with their communities, leadership and government to create real change.

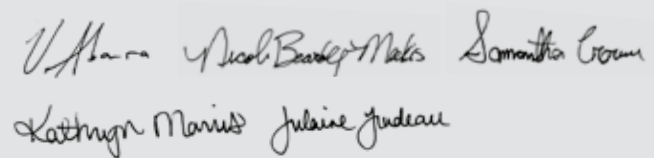
The Feathers of Hope forum process showed that partnerships that support safe space and respect, allow young people to speak powerfully and passionately about their determination to achieve change. This is, in essence, why this project is so important to us. First Nations youth deserve better than the lives of neglect and marginalization we have been forced to live due to the failure of government, First Nations leadership and consequently our communities to meet our most basic needs. Before attending the Feathers of Hope Youth Forum or participating in other community meetings we held, many youth did not understand why they felt the way they did or that they were entitled to speak about their feelings of pain, frustration or anger about their life situations. Feathers of Hope helped young people realize they could share their feelings and experiences, talk about their wants and needs, dreams and hopes for the future, and add their voices and energies to work with their communities, leadership and government to create real change.

We also went through personal transformations as we worked together. We are from different communities and are not all First Nations people. We have different backgrounds, have learned in different ways, have different levels of education and life experiences, our hobbies are different — our *lives* are different. However, what brought us together is the fact we all agree there is a need for change. Feathers of Hope provided us with an opportunity to learn

about each other and how to bring our skills and life experiences together to accomplish our goal-building hope within our communities.

Feathers of Hope is gathering strength and we thank our partners and allies who have worked with us. We would also like to give a special “thank you” to the young people who are Feathers of Hope. Our main goal was to create an action plan where their voices and experiences were at the centre. We hope we have achieved this.

Sincerely,



YOUTH AMPLIFIERS

OFFICE OF THE PROVINCIAL ADVOCATE
FOR CHILDREN & YOUTH

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In January 2012, the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, with the support of First Nations leadership and federal and provincial members of the Intergovernmental Network (IGN), began planning to bring First Nations young people from Ontario's ninety-two remote and fly-in communities together with policy-makers and decision-makers to discuss the realities and issues of concern for youth living in the north. A small working group of IGN members was formed to support the creation of a forum in Thunder Bay for this important discussion.

In July 2013, the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth hired five northern Youth Amplifiers to work with the northern office to lead the planning and delivery of the forum. Over the next eight months, we looked back to see what work had already been done to address the needs of First Nations young people living on-reserve in Northern Ontario. We began with a review of, *Horizons of Hope*, a report on First Nations youth suicide written 18 years ago. That is where we found the term "Feathers of Hope."¹ The term has become a focus for First Nations youth, inspiring in us a sense of hope and a belief that we

can be part of driving the positive change so needed in northern Ontario's First Nations communities.

Over 5 days, between March 24–28, 2013, youth from 62 First Nations communities met and shared their stories, life experiences and hopes for the future. This action plan summarizes the perspectives of more than 175 youth — 150 who attended that event plus another 37 youth from the communities of Fort Albany and Kashechewan who attended a three-3 day "mini-forum" in Kashechewan from July 15–17, 2013.

The Youth Amplifiers have written this action plan as a conversation on paper. The action plan focuses on key issues brought forward at the forums. For example:

- Residential Schools
- Identity and Culture
- Quality of Education
- Schools
- Suicide
- Sport and Recreation
- Youth Opportunity and Leadership
- Role Models and Mentors
- Physical and Mental Health
- Drugs and Alcohol
- Sustainable Funding

1 "Despite the many testimonies of grief, loneliness, disappointment, frustration and broken lives, *feathers of hope* and a better future stand among the ruins," from, *Horizons of Hope: An Empowering Journal*. Final Report Nishnawbe Aski Nation Youth Forum on suicide. (1995). pp. 32.

The presentation of each issue in the action plan begins with a Youth Amplifier reflecting on what she/he heard at the forum, in the live stream video from the group presentations and read in notes taken at the workshops and home group meetings. The Youth Amplifiers then reviewed reports and other literature that had been written in Ontario or other parts of Canada and touched on some of the issues specific to First Nations young people living on-reserve.

After introducing the issue, each Amplifier then reconnected with the other three Youth Amplifiers to work together to write about how to move forward and what was needed to make positive change. You will see this in the way the young people shift from using the first person “I” to the “we” of the Amplifiers. In the concluding sections of issues discussed in the action plan, the writing shifts to a collaborative “We” that includes an advisory committee of youth from the treaty areas and Independent Nations who attended the Feathers of Hope forum. We used a continual process of writing and review to ensure that what is contained in this action plan is reflective of the experiences, perspectives and voices of the young people we met throughout the Feathers of Hope forum process. This was not an easy task given that we had lived experiences that were similar to those of the youth participants, but also different in that the realities of our lives, families, communities, traditions and cultural backgrounds were not identical.

Through writing the action plan, we want to drive home the point that as young people we want to be respected for our ideas and abilities, to contribute and to work with our leadership, government, communities and allies to create solutions that improve the lives of young people and communities. We gathered together through the forum process and we intend to stay connected. We will continue to communicate with one another and seek opportunities to further the work started through the Feathers of Hope forum.

We feel like we have a foot in two worlds — the modern and the traditional — and yet we are disconnected from

both. The residential schools have disconnected many of us from our histories and our treaties. We want to speak our languages. We want to have a deeper connection to the land, our traditions, communities and elders and live in communities where we can give back and help one another. These things are important because they strengthen our sense of identity as First Nations young people. But we are more than this; we are also modern, wanting the education and post secondary experiences of non-First Nations people. We are young people wanting access to opportunity and success.

We heard from young people at the forum that all levels of leadership and government must ensure our communities have basic things such as schools, safe housing, clean water, and secure access to affordable nutritious food. More must be done to address the legacy of generations still struggling with the impact of colonization and the residential schools. Government must ensure that funding is in place to provide culturally-informed social and clinical services to community members, elders and young people who are locked in intergenerational trauma. We need adults in our communities to be healthy and free of addictions so they can be good parents, community leaders and mentors for us.

Forum participants discussed the need to have schools in their communities, not just for purposes of obtaining their education, but as gathering places and as community space. They saw schools as being an important part of connecting community members to one another. They saw schools as safe spaces that can offer access to sports, arts or other recreation activities. They felt schools provided an important point of contact between youth and elders and a location to teach and learn the traditional cultural practices of the community. They believed that having schools in communities helped keep families together and eliminated the harm that can happen when children are separated from their families to go to high school in cities and live among strangers who do not understand their culture or share their traditional values. Many felt that this isolation from family

and community increased their exposure to the potential for substance abuse, depression and suicide.

Young people at the forum said they want greater accountability or transparency from the leadership of their communities. They want to see how chiefs and band councils consider their needs and those of children when it comes to determining how to spend their communities' resources.

As young people we share concerns about issues playing out in the present, but we also want to place our focus on a path forward and towards the future. We all want elders to be part of our lives and to have hope in us as youth. We all want elders, community members and leadership to know that the customs and language of our communities will continue. We all want our communities to show pride in and celebrate the accomplishments, gifts and talents of young people like us. We want opportunities to learn how to be positive healthy role models and mentors for the younger children coming up behind us; but to do this we need positive healthy role models in front of and beside us.

Feathers of Hope is about the importance and power of hope. Based on the discussions and ideas for change raised at the forum(s) we realized that there were no quick fixes to the challenges facing First Nations children and youth, their families and communities, but there is so much that can be done to meet their needs without always requiring more funding. We have included in this action plan the feedback and ideas of forum participants who want to see real and lasting change. The plan provides steps that can be followed to start a change process focused on improving our lives and healing our communities. These "steps to hope" are critical, but more is needed to change the conditions many First Nations youth live in.

We believe strongly that the active participation of First Nations youth at every step of the process is necessary for its success. For this reason we developed the action plan as a five year road map that we believe will move forward the vision of young people and provide a real opportunity for youth to be part of shaping work tied to the healing processes in their individual communities.

KEY ACTION PLAN ITEMS

1. All decision-makers in Ministries at the provincial and federal level, First Nations leadership and other interested organizations must join together and take immediate action to meet the needs and challenges faced by First Nations youth. All actions and strategies based on the action plan must be created with First Nations young people as equal partners.
2. A five year strategy must be created to focus on the following themes raised by youth in forum discussions:
 - Residential Schools and their Effects:
Dispelling Myths
 - Identity and Culture
 - First Nations Culture and Teachings
 - Quality of Education
 - Education and Schools
 - The Tragedy of Youth Suicide
 - Mental and Physical Health
 - Drugs and Alcohol
 - Sports and Recreation
 - Youth Opportunity and Leadership
 - Role Models and Mentors
 - Sustainable Funding
 - Child Welfare
 - Accountability (Corruption)
- a) Within 60 days of the release of the action plan, the Province of Ontario, the federal government, and representatives of First Nations leadership from each treaty area in Ontario's North, (Nishnawbe Aski Nation, Treaty #3, Robinson Superior) will publicly state their support for and commitment to working together with First Nations youth to ensure the five year strategy remains focused on creating real change tied to the themes listed above.

- b) Within 60 days of the release of this action plan a formal body will be created to bring together all the parties (provincial and federal Ministries, First Nations leadership, other organizations and youth) needed to create meaningful change in the lives of First Nations children and youth.
- c) The principles and funding mechanisms set out in Jordan's Principle will be key in the terms of reference used by the formal body so that the focus of the work is on the needs of young people and communities, not on "who pays for what."
- d) The formal body (including senior representation from the Province of Ontario, the federal government, youth and First Nation Nations leadership) shall address two of the themes listed above each year over the five year period of the strategy and do so in a real and observable way through the development of an action plan. Each action plan must include a commitment to provide the sustainable human and financial resources needed to make change in northern and remote fly-in communities. The action plan must be goal specific, practical and measurable in its activities and outcomes.
- e) Within 90 days of the release of the action plan, steps must be taken to work with the current youth Amplifiers to hire five First Nations young people to work with them and ensure that the work begun through the action plan is acted on and moved from paper to implementation to achieve real change. Funding for the five youth who will do this work over the next five years will be provided by the Federal government and First Nations bodies.
- f) The Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, which we have found to be a neutral and supportive partner, shall remain central in the recruitment and support of the five First Nations youth.

- 3. We see the support, funding and development of this five year strategy as an opportunity for government and First Nations leadership to prove to First Nations youth that we matter and that they want us to believe in ourselves and our ability to be the real change that needs to happen in our communities.
- a) That a yearly forum for First Nations youth shall be held in each of the next four years. Each annual forum will be tied to two key priority areas identified by First Nations youth. Also, a 5th youth forum will be held to specifically address First Nations child welfare, as we need to extend the work of Feathers of Hope to include children and youth from our communities who are in the care of child welfare and Child and Family Services.
- b) The leadership for organizing these yearly forums should remain with the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth as they have shown that they have the skill and capacity to allow us as young people to come together in a way that ensures safety and a youth-centered focus to the discussions.

KEY TERMS

FIRST NATIONS A term used to refer to the first peoples of Canada (excluding Inuit and Métis) recognized under the federal *Indian Act of 1876*. It is considered to be a more respectful alternative to the terms ‘Indian’ or ‘Native.’ Use of the term First Nations came into common usage as a result of political advocacy for the rights of Aboriginal peoples in Canada.

COLONIZATION For many First Nations people ‘colonization’ is a term that is used to describe the gradual loss of power by First Nations people and the increasing influence and role Europeans played in the community, social, political and family life of First Nations peoples. Colonization refers to the way First Nations people were gradually forced from their traditional lands, practices and traditions by Europeans who imposed their laws and rules.

TRADITIONAL LIFE Tradition can mean a lot of things to different people. In simple terms, it refers to life before Europeans came into contact with the Nations of peoples who lived on Turtle Island/North America. The traditions of the people we now call First Nations and Inuit people, were impacted by all the things that came with contact — trade, disease, exposure to ways of life and community organization different from our own. Our traditions changed when contact happened and as a result new traditions were formed to reflect what was happening to our people. When we talk about traditional life in this action plan we talk about the tradition of the role of elders in our communities, the importance of community, our clan systems, our language, our relationship with mother earth and the spirit, animal, plant and mineral worlds. We see a traditional life as being one where we have strong ties to the land, family, community and Nation. We want to be

able to live on or off the land and still be able to preserve our culture and identity in ways that work for us and our communities.

ELDERS For young people, elders are often viewed as the knowledge holders of the community. They are the keepers of our stories, ceremonies, history, culture and language. There is a special quality to elders. Just being someone who is older is not enough. Elders understand the responsibility that comes with teaching and sharing knowledge from one generation to the next. They hold within them a lifetime of learning and a lifetime of commitment to the people of the community with a special place for children and youth.

CULTURE When considered from a First Nations perspective, culture is a reflection of many things — our history, oral stories, songs, language, spiritual practices and traditions. Our culture(s) define our place on Turtle Island/North America as original peoples.

IDENTITY When we talk about identity, we mean how we identify as First Nations young people. A lot of people want to use one word to define the many Nations or original people that existed across Canada before contact with Europeans. We talk about identity from the perspective of how it gives us a sense of belonging, connection and awareness of our place in our families, our clans, our communities and among our people. We believe First Nations young people develop a positive sense of self and identity when they have a strong connection to their community and culture.

RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS Even before the residential school system was created in Canada, there are records of boarding schools in existence for Indians that go back as far as the 1620’s that were run by the Recollets, a French religious order in New France, and the Jesuits and Ursulines. But when most people think about residential schools they think of the residential schools that began operating in Canada in 1828. The first school on record was actually the Mohawk Institute, also known as the “Mush Hole,” in Ontario.¹ Eventually, other residential schools were opened across Canada and by the 1930’s there were

1 United Church of Canada Archives. (Undated). *The Children Remembered*. Retrieved from: <http://thechildrenremembered.ca/schools-history/mount-elgin/>

more than 80 residential schools; 44 Catholic, 21 Church of England, 13 United Church, and 2 Presbyterian, providing education to more than 17,000 Indian children. The last federally run residential school, The Gordon Residential School, closed in 1996 and the last band-run school closed in 1998. The legacy of the residential school system is that children were taken from their families, communities and culture and moved sometimes hundreds of miles away, so that they could be ‘civilized’ and educated.² The impact of the schools has been devastating. Children were emotionally, physically, sexually and culturally abused. The very core meaning of family and community was lost as generation after generation of children were torn from their families and taught that everything about their people and culture was bad or wrong. In 2008, as part of a class action lawsuit tied to the residential schools, Canada was required to undertake the formation and funding of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The Commission was formed to look into the history of these schools and their impact on First Nations peoples.

ADDICTIONS This word usually refers to the misuse of illegal drugs, medications not prescribed for you by a doctor, or substances like alcohol, glue, gasoline or solvents. Being addicted generally means that your body has become used to the drug or substance and you find you cannot easily stop using it. After a period of time you will likely have to use more and more of the substance to obtain the same effect. If you stop using suddenly, you can become very sick and suffer unpleasant ‘withdrawal’ symptoms. People misuse drugs and become addicted for different reasons. The most common are boredom, feeling alone or “down,” a lack of supports in your life, a way to cope with loss or other kinds of negative personal experiences or an absence of services that can provide support when struggling to deal with life’s ups and downs.

SUICIDE A word used to describe when a person makes a choice to end his/her own life. Most people who attempt or complete suicide don’t actually want to harm themselves. They are usually struggling with serious and painful personal problems but just don’t know how to reach out and let others know how they are feeling. They may have been feeling depressed or “down” for a long time but have no

one they feel they can talk to — including friends, family or counselors. Sometimes a person will give a warning sign to let others know they are struggling to cope with their life problems, but sometimes they don’t. It’s important to take any person’s talk about suicide seriously and help them find someone who is trained to provide the needed support and assistance. If you think someone is struggling or is feeling overwhelmed by challenges in their life, reach out and be a friend. It just might make all the difference.

MENTAL HEALTH These words refer to the way we think, feel and act. When we have good mental health we are able to feel for and get along well with others, love and care for ourselves and our friends, family and community and cope with the changes that happen in our lives. Good mental health means that we are able to manage our thoughts, feelings and actions and generally enjoy positive relationships with others. Of course everybody has “good days” when we feel “up” or happy and “bad days” when we feel sad, nervous, “jumpy” or worry too much about things in our lives. That’s just a part of being human. But when those feelings last a long time or overwhelm us to the point where we lose control of our behaviour and harm ourselves or others through words or actions, then we need to talk it out with a friend, family member, elder, counselor or another person we trust.

Mental health is like physical health; you have to take care of your mental health the same way you do your physical health. Having good mental health is like having the ability to do a “balancing act,” to deal positively and in a non-harmful way with all good and bad things that happen in our lives. When we experience a loss or other sources of stress, it is okay to feel sad, down or “lost” or confused. Most of these feelings pass with time or with support and we regain a sense of “balance.” The time it takes will be different for every person. When we can’t get back to a sense of balance by ourselves and get “stuck” in negative thoughts or feelings or start using self-harming behaviours (like drug and alcohol abuse or solvent sniffing) to help us cope, then it is time to reach out for help. A good counselor or, if really serious, a mental health professional can help a person heal or “get their balance back” and restore their good mental health. Traditional healing practices may also be used to restore balance if used by a knowledgeable community member or trusted elder who knows how to select and use the correct medicines.

² Nishnabe-Aski Nation. (2013). Retrieved from: <http://www.anishinabek.ca/irscp/irscp-about-residential.asp>

Our mental health can also be affected by the environments we live in. We may have positive feelings about ourselves and be able to keep our “balance” in our thoughts. However, if we are surrounded by people who behave toward us in a harmful manner through racism, oppression, neglect, violence or abuse, it can throw us off balance and make us feel like there is something “wrong with us” when nothing could be further from the truth. Feeling sad, down or outright angry is a perfectly “okay” reaction to these negative behaviours of others. Knowing this can encourage us to reach out to others for support — people who understand our experience and help us regain our balance. In fact, having supportive family and friends, a positive community environment and opportunities to give back to others can be one of the best ways to restore and maintain good mental health.

PHYSICAL HEALTH Physical health is a lot like mental health in that we achieve it through finding balance in our bodies. Physical health is achieved when we eat nutritious food, drink clean water, get enough sleep and rest, exercise regularly and avoid harmful habits like substance abuse or eating high calorie junk food. Our physical health is also affected by our mental health and vice versa. Finding balance between the two is important. Our physical health is also affected by our environment. When we live in environments where we are surrounded by cigarette smoke, toxic molds, or pollution, our bodies can become weakened and our ability to fight off infection or illness significantly reduced.

SPORTS AND RECREATION These are forms of activity that can have an important and positive impact on our own life and our community. They are great for maintaining physical and mental health and for building leadership and strong connections among our friends, peers and community volunteers who help organize the activities. Sports can include organized team games like hockey, soccer, martial arts, walking and basketball or individual activities like running or track and field. It can also include traditional games. Recreation can include indoor or outdoor games, modern or traditional activities such as art, music and dance programs, or living off the land, hunting, fishing and building sweat lodges. Regardless of our ability or level of skill, the most important thing about participating in sports and recreation activities is to have fun and enjoy positive healthy ways to occupy our time being able to be kids who play and work together instead of being isolated and alone.

RESILIENCE This is a word that has a number of meanings. It is commonly used to talk about the ability a person has to “bounce back,” adapt or cope with stress when they experience problems or major challenges in their lives. It is something we sometimes begin to understand better as we get older and as we look back and reflect on our life experiences. We can develop more resilience every time we go through a rough time, avoid using harmful coping strategies like drinking or drug abuse, and are able to deal with the strong feelings or emotions that come with things like loss, grief or injury. It helps to have close relationships with friends, family, elders or other members of the community. It requires us to reach out and be able to share our struggles with others. It also helps to see our selves as being strong and capable of helping both our selves and others. Resilience is about being able to cope and develop healthy ways to deal with survive the difficult things that happen in our lives.

TREATIES First Nations people believed treaties represented sacred agreements between nations that defined the terms by which First Nations and non-First Nations peoples would co-exist on Turtle Island. Treaties were agreed to based on First Nations understanding of ceremonies and sacred law. Treaties represent formal agreements between different First Nations and the Crown and were agreements to co-exist with non-First Nations people in peace and friendship. These were agreements tied to non-interference. These treaties are reflected in our Wampum belts

RESERVATION An area of land set aside by the government for the exclusive use of a First Nations community. Reservations were established through treaties and the *Indian Act*. Under the *Indian Act*, Canada was given increased control over what happens on reserves.

REZ A slang term for ‘reservation.’

INTRODUCTION

(THIS SECTION WAS PREPARED BY ADVOCATE'S OFFICE STAFF)

"Participating makes me feel like I'm giving back."

Over the past several months, Youth Amplifiers — Kathryn, Uko, Samantha and Julaine — worked to create the action plan you have in your hands. The action plan is anchored in the perspectives of its authors and the lived experiences of youth participants at the Feathers of Hope forum held in Thunder Bay and the second smaller event — or mini-forum — hosted in Kashechewan. Its tone is deeply personal and reflective, the issues it addresses highly charged and its call for partnership and action more impatient than tentative. Because the document is a record of the forums as experienced and observed by these young people, an introduction is necessary.

THE STORY OF THE NORTHERN AMPLIFIERS

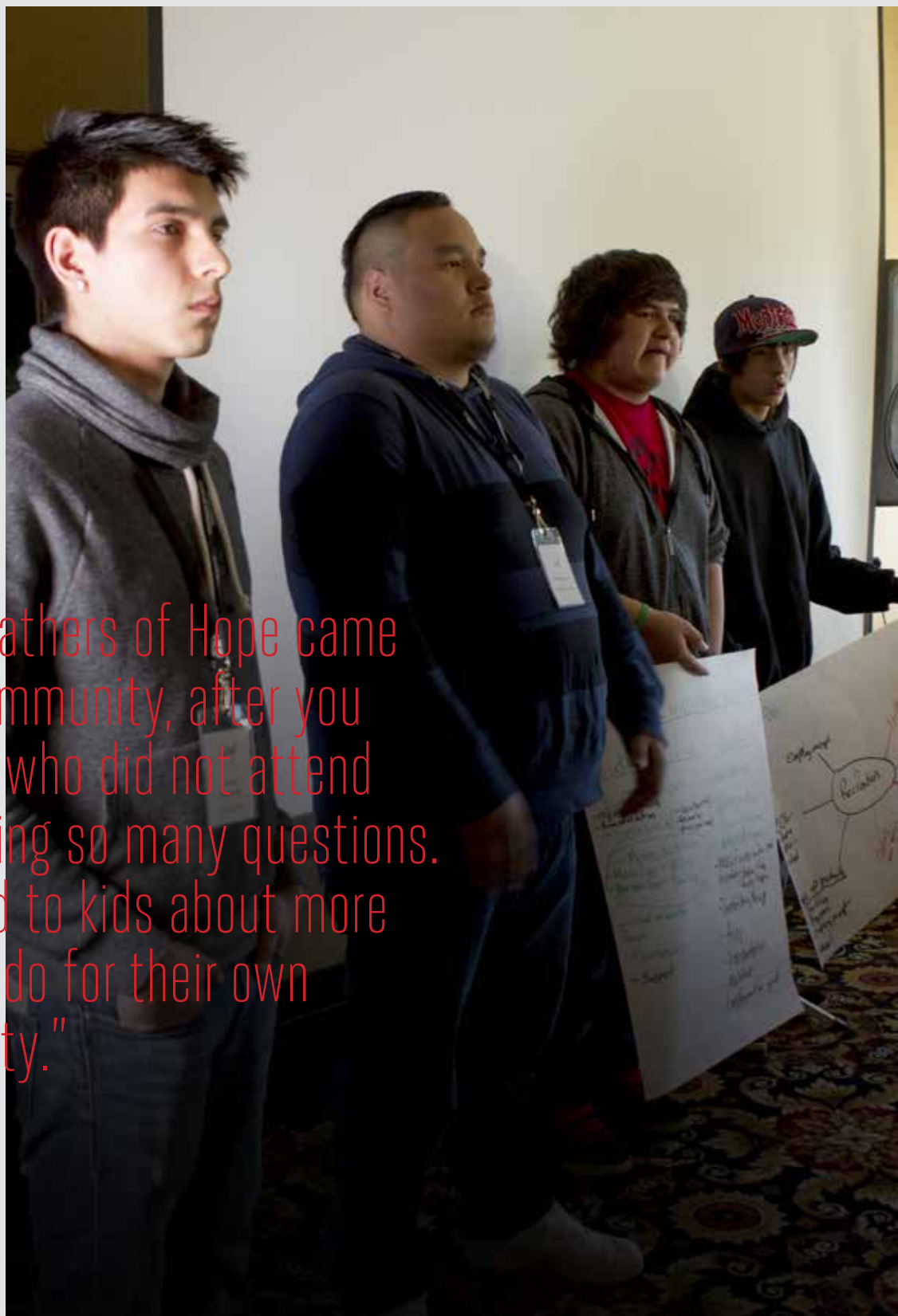
Early in the summer of 2012, the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth (Advocate's Office) hired five young people to work with our northern Office. Their task was to plan and organize a forum to bring together First Nations youth from across Ontario's north, an area stretching

from the Ontario/Manitoba border to the Ontario/Quebec border and from the shores of James Bay to the northern coast of Lake Superior. The purpose of the forum was to provide young people with a space to talk about issues of importance in their lives and then share their thoughts and reflections, including potential solutions to the issues in their communities, with representatives from First Nations leadership and provincial and federal levels of government.

The magnitude of the work involved was not lost on the Amplifiers. They understood that to make the forum meaningful, they needed to reach out to 92 First Nations communities, where Cree, Oji-Cree and Ojibway — not English or French — was, for some, the language spoken by community members. They gained the support of leadership from the Grand Chiefs of the various treaty areas representing the 92 communities; Treaty #3, Treaty #5, Treaty #9 and the Independent communities. They reached out to the Assembly of First Nations and provincial and federal levels of government. They understood that if their vision for the forum was to be realized they needed to have a nation-to-nation discussion with key decision-makers. With this knowledge in hand, the work of Feathers of Hope began.

Julaine, Uko, Kathryn, Samantha and Nicole brought a wealth of lived experience to the Feathers of Hope team. As a member of the team, Nicole stepped into the work of

"When Feathers of Hope came to our community, after you left, kids who did not attend were asking so many questions. We talked to kids about more they can do for their own community."



YOUTH PRESENTING
TO DECISION-MAKERS
ON THE FINAL DAY OF
THE FORUM.

"Growing up as a First Nations youth at this time is really hard. There are so many statistics working against you, like we're three times more likely to fail in school. I want to bring these statistics down."

planning the forum with a grounded sense of the importance of what needed to be done. During her time with the team, she visited remote and fly-in communities across the province to talk about the work of the Advocate's Office and promote the importance of young people adding their voice and presence to the Feathers of Hope Youth Forum.

Nicole balanced her roles as parent and university student with her commitment to community development activities at the Advocate's Office. Nicole has moved on to new things, but as a part of the original team we want to acknowledge and thank her for her contributions to the early work of developing the Feathers of Hope forum.

Kathryn has been a force to reckon with over the last year. In addition to completing her studies at Lakehead University she contacted every remote and fly-in community in Northern Ontario encouraging and reminding young people to get their registration packages in for the Feathers of Hope forum. Kathryn pushed herself and encouraged her peers to make the forum an event about which they could all feel proud. She was clear that the report had to move beyond another set of recommendations that would be talked about and then dismissed. She has grappled with the pain and anger of hearing about the deaths of friends and family members and shared with pride how Feathers of Hope is having an impact on young people who attended the forum. She

is committed to doing her best to ensure that leadership at all levels make changes that matter to First Nations youth. She, and the other Amplifiers, travelled extensively over the year leading up to the Feathers of Hope forum to meet with young people in communities across northern Ontario.

Like his peers, **Uko** is an active member of the Thunder Bay community. He just completed his Master of Public Health degree at Lakehead University, is a member of the Thunder Bay Diversity Committee, was a community broadcaster with Lakehead University's radio station and is a community volunteer — in addition to his role as a member of the Feathers of Hope team and being a First Nations ally. Uko aspires to be a human rights lawyer. His ability to continually jump into everything from writing letters to federal and provincial leaders to setting up and running our Facebook and Twitter pages allowed us to reach out to young people across the province. He played a central role in every element of the forum. Over the last year Uko, his peers and the Advocate's Office were put in the position of having to work through the way people sometimes struggled to engage with his lived experiences as a non-First Nations person within the forum process. The struggle to have his views and voice reflected along with his First Nations peers, as people reached out to better understand the issues and ideas for change in northern communities, became a barrier we had not anticipated.

"I feel like I'm accomplishing something, feel like I am having my voice heard."

This struggle has brought into focus the importance of, as well as the challenges faced by, allies in movements and mobilizing activities. Uko's experience made it clear that we cannot support the struggles of one group of people at the expense of another. That is not what advocacy means to the Advocate's Office.

The fourth member of the Youth Amplifier team, **Samantha**, is a member of Lake Helen First Nation and is attending Confederation College this fall. Over the next few years she will be working toward achieving her Master of Social Work degree. If there was a word that could be used to describe Samantha it would be "energy." Samantha jumps in with both feet and plugs away at things until they are accomplished. There was a time when after travelling in the north to meet with young people, she arrived back in Thunder Bay to immediately catch a flight to attend a meeting in Toronto before rushing out at the end to join up with her hockey team at a tournament in Niagara Falls. At the forum she sat up all night with young people and worked closely with Uko to finalize letters to political leaders and registration materials for participants at the forum. At her core, Samantha understands the importance of sport, recreation and community mentorship in the lives of young people. She role modeled it in her own engagement with young people at every forum event of which she was a part. Samantha's commitment to First Nations young people, and the personal attention she pays to every young person she meets, make her an invaluable support to her peers.

Like the rest of the team, **Julaine** believes passionately in Feathers of Hope. She is from Muskrat Dam First Nation and it is easy to say that she is perhaps the most intuitive member of the team. She is able to draw from the emotion, power and struggles underpinning Feathers of Hope and bring it to life through her words. She acknowledges that the



YOUTH PARTICIPATING IN TEAM BUILDING ACTIVITIES WITH RIGHT TO PLAY.



"Our communities are struggling. It's important to me to change that."

commitment to bring her voice to issues faced by First Nations youth is a challenge, and a source of power and inspiration for her. Julaine is clear that the work of raising young peoples' voices is only just beginning. She wants to take the release of this action plan to Muskrat Dam, Bearskin Lake, Sachigo Lake and other remote communities. She made a commitment to the young people in these communities that we will come to them and ensure Feathers of Hope works towards creating change for them and their communities

Their work has not stopped. While writing this action plan, they spent the summer months organizing a smaller community-based Feathers of Hope forum in Kashechewan, attended meetings with government and met with young people in the Yukon in August to talk about Feathers of Hope. With the release of this action plan the Youth Amplifiers are planning to begin a new round of discussions with communities to ensure that the excitement and promise of Feathers of Hope continues to grow and gain momentum.

As it was being prepared, sections of the action plan hit close to home and the lived experiences of the Amplifiers, making it, at times, difficult for them to write. In these instances, two members of the Advocate's Office team who provided editorial and research assistance to the Amplifiers, offered support and worked closely with them to share the weight of writing about difficult or controversial issues raised by First Nations young people at the forum.

tone and voice of the action plan

The reader will notice that the writing in this action plan has both a personal and group feel to it. It is the result of having young people, each a uniquely informed and caring story-teller, tell their story from a different place of connection to the issues brought forward at the forum and visits to communities. The Youth Amplifiers reviewed and discussed the live stream video from the forum, the group presentations and the notes taken in workshop and home group meetings. From their review of these materials, they identified key issues of concern to forum participants. They also reviewed published reports and resource documents that had been written on these topics and included highlights to emphasize the seriousness of the issues.



OPENING PRAYER BEFORE PRESENTATIONS BEGIN ON FINAL DAY OF FORUM. REPRESENTATIVES FROM FIRST NATIONS, FEDERAL, PROVINCIAL, MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENTS AND POLICING.

The Amplifiers took responsibility for summarizing the issues and worked together to prepare their action plan. After preparing their respective sections of the action plan, each young person reconnected in writing with the other three and worked out a way to write out their conversation on the topic and determine how to move forward and make positive change. The reader can see this process at work as they shift from “I” to “we” when discussing the topic. At the end of most sections, the writing shifts to include a collaborative “WE” that contains the feedback and reflections on the topic from a youth advisory group. The continual process of writing, reflection and review was used to ensure that the action plan reflected the experiences, thoughts and ideas of the young people the Amplifiers met through the Feathers of Hope forum process. Preparing the action plan was challenging for the Amplifiers given the similarities they shared in terms of lived experiences with forum participants, but also the differences in terms of the realities of their lives, families, communities, traditions and cultural backgrounds.

In writing the action plan the Amplifiers want to emphasize that young people need to be respected by adults and

leadership for what they can contribute to improving the quality of life in their communities. They want adults to acknowledge that they have their own ideas and abilities and are willing to work hard and alongside their leadership and government to find solutions and create change. They want to create an action plan that shows their peers they were listening and earns the trust placed in them by participants at the forum. They want to achieve this by writing the action plan like it was a community conversation. Their goal in preparing the action plan is to create a tool for change, one that will ensure that First Nations young people coming up behind them see positive change in their lives.

Through their focus on partnership, leadership and hope the Youth Amplifiers want to demonstrate that the dreams of First Nations children and youth matter too and, more importantly, that together young people — with the ongoing support and investment of governments and leadership — can make the changes that are needed for all of First Nations youth in Ontario. These young people have accepted that challenge, the question is; are the rest of us ready to do the same?



"I don't want younger kids to grow up like I did,
with nothing to do, that's it, not grow up like I did."

THE FEATHERS OF HOPE YOUTH ADVISORY GROUP

A draft of the action plan, including key recommendations, was reviewed by an advisory group consisting of youth selected by the Amplifiers from the respective treaty bodies and Independent nations who attended the Feathers of Hope Youth Forum in Thunder Bay or the smaller gathering in Kashechewan. Comments and feedback offered by advisory group members were added at the end of topic sections to document the ongoing conversation between the authors and the youth at the forum and to ensure they were creating an action plan that included everything that forum participants wanted to see happen moving forward.

Two feedback sessions on the draft action plan were held with the advisory group, both in Thunder Bay. The first was held on September 13–14, the second on October 4–5, 2013.

LOOK AND FEEL

Even the time and planning put into the design and layout of the action plan has been done from the perspective of positioning difficult issues within a healing space. We have used the four sacred medicines to guide the subject matter in the action plan and you will notice that the page colours of each section reflect the colour of the medicine it is part of. This has been done so that the words on each page have the healing influence of the medicines with them.

You will also find a DVD of the forum at the end of the action plan that will provide you with a glimpse into what were five very powerful days. We hope you enjoy your glimpse into Feathers of Hope. Like those who attended the forum we hope you are inspired to be part of this movement towards change.

"I grew up on a reserve and feel the effects of it. So many youth have gone down the wrong path because of the way the system is built. It's really frightening not being treated fairly. You only see the conditions on reserve and don't see beyond that. When you see beyond it you can dream beyond it. We learn so much when we talk together, share ideas and see what the solutions can be. We need to change the cycle so it does not become worse. I have learned how to use my voice and I want other kids to as well."



YOUTH PRESENTING THE CHANGE THEY WANT TO SEE IN THEIR COMMUNITIES.



ADDRESSING THE LEGACY

Sweet grass, one of the four sacred medicines.
Many say sweet grass is the hair of mother earth.
It is often burned as a smudge. Sweet grass
is often braided and each of the three strands
represents for some nations mind, body and spirit
and for others love, kindness and honesty.

RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

AND THEIR EFFECTS: DISPELLING MYTHS

"Canadian public:
Just get over it."

Being a First Nations person in this country has negative implications for the lives and outlook of our young people. We watch as First Nations issues are hotly debated in public forums and are the topics of discussion in news programs and other media outlets. We witness our lives as a peoples repeatedly investigated, dissected and critiqued. It is certainly evident that the "Indian Problem,"¹ a term first coined by Duncan Campbell Scott, Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs in the early 1900's, still lives in the mindsets, behaviours and attitudes towards us by mainstream Canada.

These public "debates" and discussions typically involve the use of dangerous terms such as "assimilation" and "integration into Canadian society." **What is surprising to me is that these issues are discussed with such intensity and heat by people who, more often than not, have no prior**

education about or direct experience with, First Nations peoples. Unfortunately, the very strong and misguided opinions that get expressed in these discussions underpin and entrench deeply problematic attitudes towards us by non-First Nations Canada. For example:

- We should simply leave our reserves if we want to gain equal footing with the rest of mainstream Canadians.
- We need to stop complaining about our situations and start taking care of ourselves, instead of "relying on the government."
- We use residential schools as an excuse for remaining in our present state of poverty (victim blaming).
- As "non-contributing" members of society, we use up Canadian tax dollars to live freely on "handouts" such as housing, welfare, post-secondary education, community infrastructure.
- We receive "special race-based treatment."

As First Nations young people we are left living the very real and painful legacy of residential schools in our day-to-day lives. Our parents and elders who experienced emotional trauma in these settings later developed addictions problems, depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among other things. These dismal outcomes are common in First Nations communities across the country. When our parents and grandparents were young, they experienced

1 John Leslie, *The Historical Development of the Indian Act, second edition* (Ottawa: Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Treaties and Historical Research Branch, 1978; pp. 114)

"The image I see in the Canadian public of myself isn't who I know I am. We need to be a part [of] shaping what that looks like."



abuse on physical, emotional, developmental, sexual, and spiritual levels. They were denied nutritious food, access to caring adults and proper health care. These deprivations resulted in the development of dysfunctional behaviours that continue to be passed down through the generations. Coming home after spending time in a residential school usually left these children feeling disconnected from their parents and communities. Some also felt shame for their parents' traditional ways because of what they were taught about their cultural backgrounds and heritage while in school. Most ended up

not being able to fit into either the world of the community they were born into or the world they were educated in.

Growing up, we were impacted by what our parents faced in residential schools. The result is our inability to trust adults, our inability to show or receive affection from our parents and siblings, our draw to alcohol, solvents, and prescription drugs to distract us from our situations, sky-high rates of suicide and damage to our relationships with our elders. This ever-present reality can all be tied back to the impacts of our dispossession

GROUP PRESENTS
ABOUT THE NEED TO
EDUCATE BOARDING
HOME FAMILIES
ABOUT THE NEEDS
OF YOUTH WHO
ATTEND NORTHERN
OFF-RESERVE
SCHOOLS AND THE
NEED FOR CULTURAL
TEACHINGS TO
ADDRESS THE GAPS
IN LEARNING THAT
EXIST.



"A lot of people don't want to talk [about the] residential schools...all the crazy shit they've seen."

YOUTH POWERFULLY PRESENTING ON THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE, COMMUNITY AND CULTURE IN SHAPING WHO THEY WANT TO BE.

and disconnection from our culture, language, spiritual practices and families.

Most young people (some as early as 5–6 years old) have the responsibility of caring for or feeding their families while struggling to attend school and dealing with depression, anxiety, feelings of abandonment, isolation and loss to death or suicide. Many of us have never even had the chance to just be children. Facing these challenges is so overwhelming to many youth and they are left struggling with no way to cope. This is due to a lack of resources in our communities and the absence of healthy adults who can teach or pass along life skills.

The impacts are highly complex and interwoven into the lives and families of those who attended residential schools. Helping them regain some quality of life will require the development of accessible rehabilitation programs in sufficient number to reach people in communities all across the province. Unfortunately, at present these types of programs are not available to most families and communities in the far north.

When non-First Nations people tell us to “just get over it” or simply “leave the past in the past,” they do not understand how this one-off phrase works to silence us from ever speaking about our history and present, stifles conversations

about attaining a better future and is harmful on so many levels. First Nations people know that we cannot move forward if we do not acknowledge and honour our pasts. Pushing all the responsibility and weight (or in some cases, blame) on to the survivors plays into the common belief that First Nations people are “blowing out of proportion” the indecent acts that were forced upon our mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters and ourselves. I cannot comprehend how simply forgetting and ignoring the past will help anyone out, especially since the harms of the past continue to be repeated. How do you tell someone to “just get over” abuse; to “just” know how to trust, to love, to be strong, to be soft, to be vulnerable?

The residential school system has not gone away, it has only changed its face. Its roots are deep and can be seen in the current secondary school system in place for many First Nations youth who attend schools off-reserve in town or urban such as:

- Dennis Franklin Cromarty (DFC) High School in Thunder Bay
- Northern Eagle High School in Ear Falls
- Pelican Falls High School in Sioux Lookout
- Queen Elizabeth In Sioux Lookout
- St. Patrick’s High School in Thunder Bay

These schools are situated so that young people *must* be taken out of their communities and separated from their families in order to get a “proper” secondary school education. This current system of educating us resonates too much with our recent past. The unfortunate loss of youth, such as Jethro Anderson, Curran Strang, Paul Panacheese, Robyn Harper, Reggie Bushie, Kyle Morriseau and Jordan Wabasse — all of whom died, sadly, while attending DFC (either by accident or suicide) — and the hundreds of youth who dropped out of school to return home with addictions and no credits, provide examples of what the present system does to First Nations youth.

It is with indignation that I write about how we were moved from being thriving independent self-determining nations to peoples who are forced to receive the “help” of successive federal governments, who have, through formal policy and legislation, put us into a reserve system that created little more than the first slums of Canada. It is unjust that we are expected to now look to this same government and outsiders to tell us what we need to do to restore and heal ourselves and our communities. It is with this sense of injustice that Feathers of Hope was born: that we as young people are at a point where we want to decide for ourselves what are the best solutions to our issues, despite the oppressive environments we were born into.

Feathers of Hope represents what was also in the *Horizons of Hope Report* (1995),² youth rising like a phoenix from the flames. We are taking a stand against the inequality we face in our Canada, our “home on Native land.” We want the oppressive and ill-informed attitudes that people have of us dispelled. At the Feathers of Hope forum, many youth participants spoke about feeling misunderstood and frustrated with their living situations and said, **“Come to the reserve and see what it’s really like. You try surviving here.”**

Hearing these repeated public discussions about First Nations peoples, “getting a free ride” or “free handouts” and “special race-based treatment,” promotes hostile attitudes towards us on the part of the Canadian public. **The reality is, people don’t know how much young First Nations people struggle every day.** This “convenient blindness” in everyday Canadian society is disheartening and disempowering.

Young First Nations people understand that this is a misguided perspective subtly reinforced by the media and other misinformed public sources of information. We come across these disturbing attitudes every time we try to do well for ourselves, whether it be though furthering our educations, trying to get access to proper health care or creating a political movement.

We are continually stonewalled by attitudes and beliefs that suggest we are asking for “special undeserved treatment.” Beliefs like this make it easy to slip into conversations that lead to the use of words such as “lazy,” “irresponsible” and “drunken.” This oppressive and all too common attitude prevents us from achieving our full rights and hinders the advancement of young First Nations people. It sets us up against even more obstacles as the integrity of our aspirations and actions is constantly put into question.

We know we live in Canada not through “race-based” law, but rather through nation to nation treaty agreements, agreements between equals. We hold on to these treaty agreements with pride because they are a record that our relationship with Canada is an agreement between equals. The fact that we do not surrender these treaties and refuse to simply forget them because it is convenient shows we are still able to fight for the future while holding onto our past. We openly question what is being taught about us and our histories in mainstream educational settings. These attitudes we encounter everyday of our young lives demonstrate clearly how colonization is in full force and still working to this day.

We want to de-colonize our minds. That being said, our first request is that instead of denying our true past, we choose to acknowledge and to honour it, and we want Canada to join us.

2 Nishnawbe-Aski Nation (1995). *Horizons of Hope: An Empowering Journey. Final Report of the Youth Forum on Suicide.*

TAKING STEPS TO MAKE HOPE REAL

WE MAKE THE FOLLOWING RECOMMENDATIONS TO HEAL THE ONGOING IMPACT OF RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS ON FIRST NATIONS YOUTH:

1. Establish a nationally recognized day that commemorates the lives stolen by residential schools and the impacts the schools continue to have in the lives of First Nations young people, adults and elders.
2. Establish a First Nations History Month (like Black History Month).
3. Design and implement, with the input of First Nations youth, curriculum that teaches the truth about what happened in residential schools, day schools and the 60's Scoop to counteract the harmful stereotypes and false and misleading "debates" that play out in the media.
4. Establish partnerships and scholarships for First Nations young people to promote access to broadcasting and media resources and help create real First Nations content.
5. Fund the establishment of more networks like the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network, and cover the issues of importance to Aboriginal peoples in all our diversity.
6. Make the publication of blatantly racist articles in the media subject to "hate laws."
7. Begin with families. We need families to have the support necessary to begin healing.

CONTINUING TO LISTEN AND LEARN

YOUTH ADVISORY FEEDBACK

After reviewing this section, the youth advisory group, in conversation with the action plan's writers, added the following thoughts, stories or recommendations:

"Telling us to just get over [what happened in residential schools] is going to be an issue that is unavoidable [people just don't understand], even First Nations youth. People who went through these places were seriously impacted. In my family it was all around. When you are the eldest child in the family you end up raising your siblings because your parents [who were residential school survivors] are too busy drinking and stuff. As the eldest, that is the hardest part, having to live through all of this."

"I was the youngest. I just had to listen and see the impact. We never had a chance to have fun, grow up. If you were in my house you would understand. It really chokes you up."

"My sister is older than me and she left as soon as she became of age. Our parents don't realize how much trauma they caused me and my sisters. Me, being the youngest, with 2 older sisters, my grandparents died from alcoholism. My other grandparents went to residential school, day school, bullshit church. My dad grew up on alcohol. My mom worked and travelled all the time so she wasn't there. I ended up in child welfare and

thought that was a normal thing — no one being around, adults drunk all the time. I didn't see my dad after I turned 12. I think I turned out pretty good given the circumstances. I learned to shake it off and crack jokes about it."

"The effects of [residential schools] are alive today. But how can you just get over it if you don't really understand what happened and what has to be done?"

"We need a platform in education to teach First Nations youth. Teachers don't say anything about those who died, who never came home, how many. Teachers avoid the subject. We don't hear anything about the subject in our history class. We get 3 days on Native Spirituality in a world religion class."

"Schools don't help us. I'm in grade 8 and not learning math. I'm not really learning anything."

"It's not seen as important. There are only 30 First Nations youth in my school of 1,500 students, so hardly anybody looks like me. Also, near my school there is a homeless shelter so you sometimes see First Nations adults who are drunk. That is what people are seeing and think that is the situation for all of us. I feel embarrassed in front of white students, like I feel the need to explain that this is not what being First Nations is all about."

“The truth is we need to feel sympathy for those people and take the time to explain to others why some First Nations people end up becoming alcoholics, having addictions or other problems. That’s why everyone needs to learn about the residential schools.”

“That’s the problem with stereotypes. When I lived in a big city we saw a white girl living on the street. It was November and real cold. We invited her home for a hot dinner. We helped her out just like we would help any other person we saw in that situation. She is happy now and her life is better. She still stays in contact with us. She said, “In all my life I never thought an Aboriginal would help me and you people did.”

“People call us moochers all the time, but they don’t understand. They don’t understand how much we’ve given up. “Getting over it” works both ways. It’s unbelievable to see how angry people get when we ask for something when all we want is equality. I want to pay taxes.”

“But is equality even possible? We fight for land and our hunting grounds. Many of us believe we are going to lose the land anyway.”

“What bothers me is seeing 30 year old First Nations guys trying to act all thug, trying to act younger. Get over it and grow up. Other people look at them and think that is who “Indians” are. It just reinforces negative stereotypes about who we are.”

ADVISORY GROUP’S ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

1. We believe that the first step toward healing from the impact of colonization, racism and the residential schools is to learn about the past. We, and non-First Nations people, must understand the history about these places and how the impact continues to affect our communities, families and youth.
2. We and non-First Nations people must understand how colonization, racism and the residential schools continues to have such a negative impact on the quality of life in our communities, our cultures, our mental and physical health, and crime and high suicide rates.
3. We and non-First Nations people must learn about the promises and obligations made to us through the treaties made between our nations and the Crown and the fact that they are ignored, not respected or are broken all the time.
4. We and non-First Nations people must become more aware that the negative things that happen in our communities is a result of these broken promises of the residential schools. This is unacceptable for anyone living in a wealthy country like Canada and can’t continue.

MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

PHYSICAL HEALTH

Many of the young people at the forum felt that the physical health of First Nations youth is an issue in need of attention from their families, community leadership and all levels of government. As a non-First Nations youth, I have learned first-hand that, as a group, First Nations children are among the most disadvantaged of all children in Canada.¹

Many of the health problems First Nations children face are tied to the living conditions in their communities. The quality of housing is worse than poor. In fact, First Nations people are four times more likely to live in a home in need of major repair (28% vs. 7%) than non-First Nations people living in Canada.² This forces young people to live in unhealthy and crowded living conditions without the basic resources that many Ontarians and other Canadians take for granted such as clean drinking water, working toilets or functioning sewage systems. Living in unhealthy and overcrowded con-

ditions exposes children and youth, families and extended families to infectious molds, bacteria, accidental physical injury, emotional stress and health problems like asthma, bronchitis and tuberculosis (TB).

Some of the living conditions in First Nations communities are beyond the control of local leadership because access to funding and other resources necessary to make improvements is made complicated due to government jurisdiction. For example, the federal government is responsible for housing and infrastructure, including health care, but the provincial government is responsible for social assistance and social services. Without a coordinated working relationship, based on shared policy objectives between levels of government, projects to improve quality of life in communities can be implemented only in a piecemeal fashion.

The diets of First Nations communities have changed over the years, in many ways for the worse. People are no longer able to live off the land like their ancestors because the land does not provide the amount of food needed to survive. Some communities hunt, fish and trap but it is no longer possible to feed families on seasonal hunting. Restrictions to hunting, fishing and gathering of foods by government have reduced access to safe and secure food supplies. For example, when the Williams Treaty was signed in 1923, the seven affected First Nations surrendered their traditional

1 Assembly of First Nations. (2008). *The Health of First Nations Children and the Environment: Discussion Paper*. Retrieved from: http://www.afn.ca/uploads/files/rp-discussion_paper_re_childrens_health_and_the_environment.pdf.

2 Statistics Canada (2006). *Aboriginal Peoples in Canada in 2006: Fact Sheet*. Retrieved from: <http://www12.statcan.ca/census-recensement/2006/as-sa/9^9-^958/p18-eng.cfm>.

"Parents pass
on problems
until one
generation
stops it."

THIS GROUP OF YOUTH SPOKE ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE AND EDUCATION. THEY SPOKE ABOUT EACH BEING LIKE THE WINGS ON AN EAGLE. FOR THE EAGLE TO SOAR IT NEEDS BOTH WINGS.



right to hunt and fish for food as needed. In a challenge to this treaty provision in 1994, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that community members had to abide by Ontario federal hunting and fishing regulations (unless on-reserve). Even if they ran out of food, community members could not fish or hunt out of season off-reserve to feed themselves.³

Traditional forms of hunting and fishing have been replaced by increasing dependency on food supplied from the south. However, the cost of shipping to northern communities means paying high prices, even for the most basic food items. For example, bananas can cost as much as \$5.39 per kg., oranges \$11.19 per kg., apples \$9.39 per kg., and a 4 litre bag of milk \$14.00. As a result, diets have become more and

more unhealthy. This has led to a major rise in diabetes, obesity, dental caries and other health problems in First Nations communities.

Perhaps one of the most powerful indicators of poor physical health among youth in the communities we visited and among participants who attended the forum, was the constant focus on a lack of healthy, safe community gathering spaces where young people can access recreation and leisure activities. Young people are saying that the lack of positive recreation options in their communities, the unhealthy living conditions, overcrowding in their homes and the amount of addiction and violence in many homes is isolating. Many spend much of their time gaming and online. This is not so different from what kids do in the south, but it becomes a problem when these isolating activities replace visiting friends or being on the land with family

³ Supreme Court of Canada, in the case of R. v. Howard, 18 O.R. (3d) 384, May 12, 1994.

"[I want to learn] to be healthy and a role model [for other youth]."

and elders. First Nations youth need opportunities to be physically active in the community. This increased isolation from community has a negative impact on the physical and mental health of young people and is something that was mentioned constantly, no matter what community youth were representing at the forum or what community we visited leading up to the forum.

At the level of health services, northern remote and fly-in communities lack permanent medical staff, i.e., local doctors, dentists, nurses or counseling resources. There are fly-in services where at different times of the month, or less, some communities receive visits from medical doctors and dentists. Nursing and counseling staff are hard to come by in many communities and young people note that there is a lot of turnover in staff in these areas.

Most of the time people need to be flown out of communities to get counseling services and treatment or medical needs met. If a young person has to travel out of the community to see a doctor, they sometimes have to travel with more than one family member. Though travel costs may be provided by Health Canada through First Nations and Inuit Health Branch (FNIHB) for one family member, costs for additional members may not be covered. Sometimes parents need to pay for childcare for their other children when they are away traveling with their sick child to keep an appointment or visit a hospital.

It is really hard on families going to the south to see doctors. Many of the doctors that First Nations people come into contact with don't understand the way life on-reserve. They pass judgment on people. Their physical and mental health issues get labeled as "social issues" due to life on-reserve and so get dismissed rather than properly treated. More needs to be done to ensure that health care workers stop blaming communities and begin treating the needs of people. It is a social injustice that the needs of First Nations people are so easily dismissed by the health care system or that funding

for needed health care and mental health needs continue to get cut by the federal government.⁴ The rest of Canada needs to understand the impact of history and isolation on the health and well-being of First Nations peoples. This is not First Nations peoples' problem; this is Ontario's problem and Canada's problem.

MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health issues affect First Nations young people of all ages. This point was raised everywhere we travelled and by participants at the forum. There are a number of issues at the source of the poor mental health and well-being many First Nations children and youth experience. Far too many youth on-reserve live their lives at unacceptable levels of poverty for one of the world's richest countries. Parents and leadership have limited to no control over even the most basic factors impacting their lives and the lives of their families and communities. Overcrowded living conditions place increased strain on relationships and families, and there are more and more single parents, usually mothers, struggling to support their families. Communities are dealing with violence, addictions, food insecurity, poor education and a lack of health care services.

What I took away from our sessions with young people at the forum and in our visits to remote fly-in communities is that young people feel that the needs of their communities are often forgotten about or ignored by people in the rest of Canada. I heard that as economic development moves closer to their reserves, what they see is their communities benefiting very little while being put at risk of possibly having harmful chemicals ending up in the soil or water on their Treaty lands.

4 Bourassa, C. (2012). Funding Cuts in the 2012 Federal Budget. Retrieved from: <http://www.urfa.uregina.ca/swc/BudgetCuts2012.pdf>.

"If you're going to teach something to someone, you don't need to tell people about it (to get fame), just do it with humility."

They expressed concern that over time their mental and physical health will be weakened by poor diet, the increased rates of diabetes, obesity and heart disease. Concerns were also expressed about the impact of addictions and the number of children being born with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome/ Fetal Addictions and Global Developmental Disorders.

The young people at the forum felt strongly that substance abuse has a big impact on mental health and is a problem in so many ways for First Nations youth. Their concern is that drug use puts many youth at increased risk for being a victim of violence, involvement in crime and suicide.

When First Nations children and youth leave their communities to attend school in the city, many live in fear and anxiety every day. They face constant judgment and open racism and discrimination. They struggle against negative stereotypes about First Nations people and do this on their own without the support of families and friends close by. Wider Canadian society needs to understand that so much of what causes 'mental illness' in First Nations young people is tied to the constant struggle they have with the often hostile and rejecting environments they live in both on- and off-reserve. Dealing with this hostility every day and being without the strength and support of your community or your family is something no young person should have to go through. People have to remember these are children who are being sent out of their communities to get their education. They are placed with people they don't know and they have very limited contact with home. In many ways this is not unlike the residential school system. Children are left to navigate and meet their own needs and their own mental and physical health without the guidance and support of their families and communities.

Even as a non-First Nations person, I have seen and heard from young people attending the forum the strain these realities have on families and communities, and that they

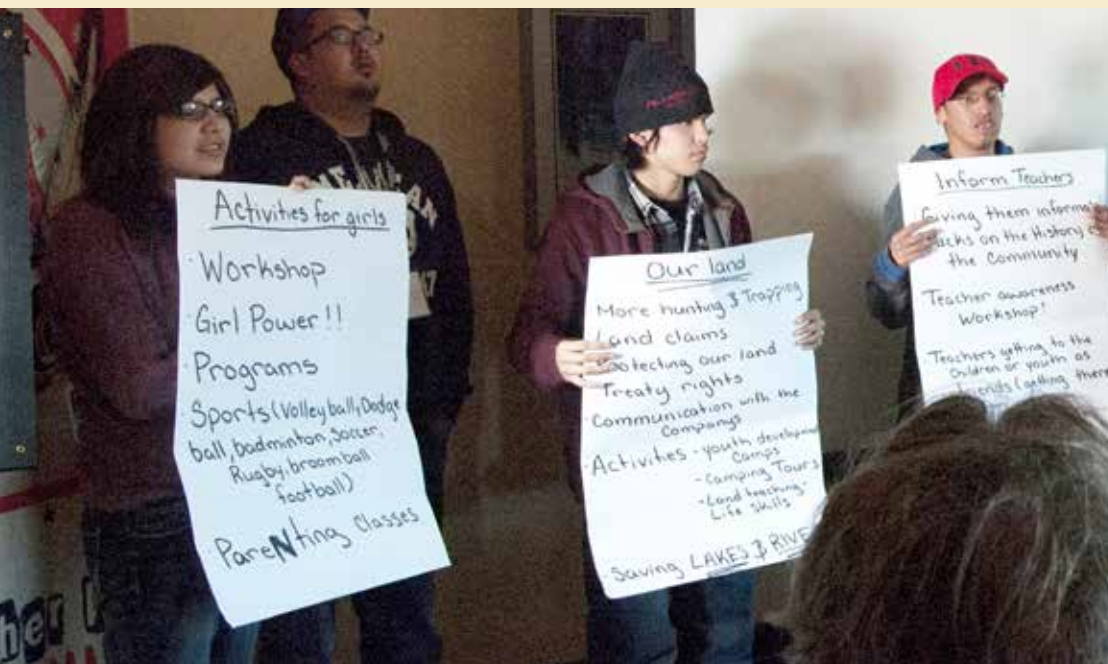
continue to be largely ignored by government. I have heard from young people that the rates of violence and abuse grow within communities that are already without the resources they need to heal from the legacy issues of the residential schools and the cultural attacks on generation after generation of First Nations children, parents and grandparents. I have also heard young people say that this kind of trauma and health crisis would not go unrecognized anywhere else in this province or in Canada and then ask why then is it acceptable in Ontario and Canada's First Nations communities.

WHAT DO WE NEED TO DO?

Youth at the forum understood that dealing with the complex problems related to physical and mental health will take time, commitment and a long-term investment of resources, both financial and human. They also recognized that it is going to take an approach that brings together support systems, resources and the whole community in a focused way. Everyone involved in fixing these problems will have to keep an open mind because what works in one community may not work in another. However, the one thing that is absolutely necessary is that young people must be at the table as equal partners working alongside elders, leadership, communities and government.

PHYSICAL HEALTH SOLUTIONS

Listening to the young people speak at the forum, it is clear that First Nations communities need recreational facilities, gym and sports equipment and programs to promote healthier lifestyles for children and youth of all ages. Youth also need more and better access to health services of all kinds. Health funding from government must cover the travel and other related expenses incurred by families when members need to accompany young people who have to travel south to keep medical or dental appointments. Com-



"The school gym [has] no equipment [so] it's hard to exercise."

YOUTH TALK ABOUT THE INFLUENCE OF MINING AND FORESTRY ON THEIR COMMUNITIES.

munities must not be forced to draw down on their limited resources to cover these kinds of costs. They should be given support by government to assist with these medically necessary expenses.

Government and communities must work together to make sure culturally-relevant parenting classes are available to new moms and dads. The information must be based in local traditions and could even be offered in school before young people become sexually active. Supports for single parents and access to daycare for families who need to travel for medical appointments for their other children must also be available to all communities.

The federal government needs to ensure communities have safe, adequate housing and functioning water treatment and sewage systems. First Nations youth are asking for opportunities to get healthy and become role models and leaders to create change in attitudes toward health among their peers and younger children.

Governments must respect traditional and evolving hunting, fishing and food-gathering practices of communities to ensure there is greater food security. Elders need to reach out to youth and teach them traditional hunting and food

gathering practices. Government must allocate funding to subsidize the transportation cost of shipping nutritious food to remote and isolated communities.

Finally, all levels of government must hold companies legally and financially responsible for cleaning up any pollution to the water or soil caused by development on treaty lands.

MENTAL HEALTH SOLUTIONS

In the short-term, youth who are struggling with mental health needs must have access to culturally-informed supports, services and workers who are trained to work with First Nations peoples. Youth need access to counseling supports in their home communities and at the schools they attend when away from home. Access to medical services and mental health services must be improved and services must be provided at a level equal to or greater than what non-First Nations youth have access to in the rest of the province. First Nations peoples' history and the facts show the number and severity of their mental health needs cannot continue to go unaddressed and that targeted and cross-government approaches are needed where the province and federal government work cooperatively and together to increase and improve the services provided.

"We all want to feel happiness and hope for the future [and] a chance to make things right. Most of us want to help our elders... to let them see there is hope for the community in the future."



DURING THEIR PRESENTATION THIS GROUP SPOKE OF THE NEED TO DEVELOP DAYCARES SO OUR CHILDREN HAVE A SOLID FOUNDATION FOR LEARNING. THEY ALSO NOTED THE NEED TO ENSURE COMMUNITIES HAVE SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITY SPACE WHERE KIDS AND YOUTH CAN HAVE ACCESS TO LEARNING AND RECREATION ACTIVITIES.

When beginning to think about the longer term, the physical and mental health needs First Nations youth face can't be addressed completely until a strategy is in place that helps the whole community get and stay healthy. Government must meet its treaty obligations to First Nations people and ensure that communities have the same level of supports and services available to non-First Nations youth in Canada. It also means educating all Canadians about the treaties and the fact that when treaty rights are ignored there are real and devastating impacts on First Nations people at the reserve level and on the lives of First Nations young people.

It is important for government to work with First Nations youth to end racism and the stereotypes that cause so much harm in their lives and impacts on their physical and mental health. Also, First Nations youth need to be recognized for their strengths, gifts and talents too. First Nations youth have much to give their communities and the rest of Canadian society. Adults, in both First Nations communities and mainstream society, must start taking these youth seriously and acknowledge their rights and demands to be heard. They need access to positive, supportive peers, adults and community members who care about their physical and mental wellbeing. They need to know what it means to be healthy.

TAKING STEPS TO MAKE HOPE REAL

1. The issues impacting the physical and mental health of young people in remote and fly-in communities are, as one of my fellow Amplifiers has noted, full of knots that need to be unknotted one step at a time. We need to find a way forward one step at a time otherwise it gets too overwhelming. We want to focus on taking on a few manageable issues that are actionable by us in partnership with communities and some key partners.
2. We need to form partnerships with non-governmental organizations (NGO's) or others who have experience working with First Nations and non-First Nations populations that are struggling with similar issues.
3. Issues of physical and mental health are going to require a separate forum with a specific focus on these issues so that we have an opportunity to discuss and question the experts and young people about what can be done to create positive, manageable change in their communities.
4. The many issues impacting the physical and mental health of First Nations young people need to be broken into manageable pieces so actions can begin and take root at an individual and cross-community level.
5. Any discussion about improving health must include methods of improving nutrition and creating secure food sources through the development of community gardens, soil management, greenhouses and keeping food-producing animals on-reserve.
6. We need to understand the components of traditional diets and how they can be supplemented with affordable accessible foods. We need to take a refocused look at food distribution/shipping processes at the community level, and expand on pilot projects done with 'Food Share' and Fort Albany and/or community-based farming and greenhouse options.

CONTINUING TO LISTEN AND LEARN

YOUTH ADVISORY FEEDBACK

After reviewing this section, the youth advisory group, in conversation with the action plan's writers, added the following thoughts, stories or recommendations:

"We try to talk about the struggles we have as youth and they blow us off. They don't care. Don't bother asking us what we think, if you really don't care."

"Your health is affected by your environment [and] who you surround yourself with."

"Everything affects you and your health. All the mold in communities, in our homes. You can't afford to fix this because financially you just can't do it and when you leave it people get sick."

"We have to go back to get connected. That is how our ancestors were raised. You see it in the medicine wheel. Everything has to exist in balance. No one refers to it anymore. It's something that belongs to the past. No one teaches it anymore."

"We need access to dieticians to help tell us what to eat, help develop meal plans and how to budget."

"We should have a counselor or crisis worker on-reserve. Focus on working with kids in the community as long as possible so that they learn to get along. Instead of writing kids off, talk with families, don't tell families what to do, help them make positive choices."

"To protect confidentiality, communities should have access to professionals or support workers from out of town."

"Healing circles can work. They can't be used everywhere. But where you have cultural support it can be used to do counseling and it works well."

"We have community youth circles. Once a month we get together."

"We need more specialized First Nations informed health services. I don't just want to be asked a ton of questions that make me feel bad. That's not natural to me. We need to learn how to do things like smudge, use sage, help others and be educated on how these traditions work again."

DRUGS AND ALCOHOL

"There's just nothing to do [on-reserve].
There's sand, grass, bush, drugs and alcohol."

Drug and alcohol misuse is a sad part of what happens in many First Nations communities. Many of the young people I met at the forum had someone dear to them who suffered from substance abuse — a best friend, family member or peer. Some youth even admitted to being on their own journey to recovery. These experiences were so common that it presented as a normal part of community life by many of the youth who spoke about it. Even though they know they really don't want to drink alcohol, use drugs, or other substances, sometimes it is the only way to forget and escape from feelings of hopelessness. Sometimes it's the only way to feel alive.

I heard other young people at the forum talk about substance misuse and realized that it's not just about mainstream drugs — it's about the extremes people will go to just to get high in order to forget about life on the reserve or in boarding homes while attending school in northern urban centres, or their own personal and family problems. I have heard that children and young people are getting high

by using household substances, alcohol, weed (marijuana), gasoline, solvents, prescription drugs, or store-bought alcohol and "home brew" to escape the boredom, the sense of hopelessness and the painful reality of their lives.

I have heard and seen the reality of how isolated northern remote fly-in communities are first-hand. I have travelled for a day to get to communities that have no road access other than when the winter comes and the lakes freeze over and ice roads are used. For the most part, these are communities where you have to get back on the plane to visit the next community. Many First Nation young people experience geographic isolation. This isolation leaves many young people and their families unable to travel as the cost of flying is beyond their ability to afford. As a result, they become isolated from the rest of the province and the supports needed to move towards a healing path, until a crisis arises. This same physical isolation plays out in every other element of a reserve community's day-to-day reality. Everything becomes a question of cost. The basic cost of resources

"Drugs and alcohol come into play as there is nothing else to do."



PRESENTER SPEAKING ABOUT THE REALITIES OF LIFE ON RESERVE ON THIRD DAY OF FEATHERS OF HOPE FORUM.

and equipment explode when you add in the cost of transportation. This remoteness factor does not get accounted for and as a result this adds to why communities have limited — if any — recreational facilities, housing or resources that we take for granted in the south. The outcome of these kinds of barriers is kids do without and become bored, angry and develop feelings of hopelessness, while governments and companies make profit or cost save. This puts them at risk for substance abuse, violence and addictions.

Time and time again, young people spoke about social isolation — both from other First Nations communities and their peers in the rest of the country. Because of the impact of the residential schools on communities, many young people feel lost and disconnected from their history, cultural identities and elders. They spoke about feeling separated from members of their own community by language barriers because the elders only know how to speak their traditional

language, a language they are being told holds the key to better understanding their identity. Instead of practicing their traditional spiritual or healing practices, many youth turn to destructive survival and coping mechanisms. Their social supports are few. Substance, solvent, and prescription drug abuse at all levels of the community, destroys families and decreases their confidence in their leadership and adds significantly to the sense of hopelessness that exists.

We heard at the forum that institutions that are supposed to be helping youth are not. Schools in many communities are not up to the same standards as off-reserve mainstream schools. Youth complained about being unchallenged academically and sometimes mistreated by school staff. Teachers underestimated the abilities of young people and their desire to learn, so young people often left school altogether and turned to drugs out of boredom.

"People think we're stupid, drunks and it is true in some cases. We need to change that story."

Young people noted that education and advice about sexual health is not provided and, as a result, some young people get pregnant while misusing drugs and alcohol and their babies enter the world sick or unhealthy. There are few safe spaces for young parents to receive information they need to cope. There is fear that the personal information they share or their privacy will not be respected when they do access support services and identify the problems they are facing. Instead of getting help, they worry their children and families will get pulled into the child welfare system.

There has been a lot of attention brought to the role of prescription drugs and prescription drug addiction in northern First Nations communities.¹ Young people at the forum noted that this is a growing issue in their communities.

There are not enough culturally-based treatment centres, healthcare professionals, and counsellors at the community level or in-residence programs off reserve to address the needs that exist. Those young people who are able to access these resources find that when they return to their communities after getting treatment there are no support systems to ensure they continue to successfully manage their

recovery. Because the living conditions in their community remain the same and they lack access to the supports they need to stay clean, many eventually get pulled back into using drugs, substances and alcohol again.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As with many of the issues raised by young people at the forum, everyone agreed that the misuse of substances, alcohol and drugs in communities has to stop. Young people need access to information and education on substance, drug and alcohol abuse, the risks associated with their use and how they can destroy lives. They want programs and counsellors that understand their cultures and traditions at the community level. Overwhelmingly, young people stated that they needed to have the safety to be able to share their experiences in overcoming or living with substance abuse without feeling judged or afraid. There are so many different stories they want to share and it helps to have access to healthy adults with a similar cultural background who can show confidence and speak about how they found their way to healing.

The youth spoke about needing access to detox services and treatment centres and other supports within the community. They also wanted to see more use of restorative practices and sharing circles.

Prevention is just as important as treatment programs. First Nations youth want to learn positive and constructive ways to have fun. They want to build on what Right to Play offered them through the forum: positive childhood experiences that allow them to just be kids. Young people were clear they needed places to go so that they can safely occupy their time and have access to sports or recreation opportunities that non-First Nation youth take for granted. After-school activities and safe spaces with positive adult and youth role models were considered essential. All they want to do is have fun and to do so in a positive way!

1 Dell CA, Roberts G, Kilty J, Taylor K, Daschuk M, Hopkins C, Dell, D. (2012). Researching Prescription Drug Misuse among First Nations in Canada: Starting from a Health Promotion Framework. *Substance Abuse: Research and Treatment*, 24. Retrieved from: https://www.google.ca/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&ved=0CC8QFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.la-press.com%2Fredirect_file.php%3Ffiled%3D4211%26filename%3D3114-SART-Researching-Prescription-Drug-Misuse-among-First-Nation-in-Canada%3A-St.pdf%26fileType%3Dpdf&ei=RY8fUtzrJJKTqwGuyICQAw&usq=AFQjCNGcnq48GuLmOsehKW1WmDTIUwQw&sig2=qsXVLpgzUfHYJWfhaLHPWA&bvm=bv.51495398,d.aWM.

TAKING STEPS TO MAKE HOPE REAL

1. We need plain-speaking information that helps First Nations youth understand that drug and alcohol misuse is an unhealthy way of managing the pain of the many problems and issues in our lives, families and communities.
2. These issues surfaced so much in forum discussions that we saw them as being in the top two priorities, requiring a forum of their own.
3. While treatment centres to treat addiction for youth and community is important, aftercare and post-discharge supports will make or break the treatment, recovery and healing process.
4. To maximize scarce resources, centralizing hubs should be established so ^9-^9 communities can share supports and services and keep them within close proximity to reduce travel time and costs, and increase or promote more contact with family and friend support systems.
5. More must be done to ensure that communities have access to affordable, healthy and nutritious food including support to ensure that traditional northern foods and hunting are accessible. For this to happen, governments need to revisit and address regulating affordable prices for food and support efforts to address and revitalize the decreasing number of moose and game that are key elements of First Nations traditional food systems.
6. Education resources need to be prepared with young peoples' assistance and made widely-available to counteract the racist stereotypes that First Nations issues are only "social issues" and not medical.
7. We need to learn the skills required to start, maintain and grow healthy, healing relationships that serve the purpose of addressing addictions and mental health problems before they start or become worse.
8. We need to help communities invest in the prevention strategies that decrease the need for more costly interventions down the road.

9. Our communities need to invest in us to create circles of support that link healthy elders to struggling adults in the community, healthy adults to struggling youth, and healthy youth to struggling children all down the line. This builds webs of support and strengthens the interconnections among community members.
10. We need to work within our communities to find or establish shelters/hostels in high schools or arenas or other spaces that can offer a place of safety each evening and keep young people from wandering the community and placing themselves at risk for abuse, violence and addictions.
11. We need to work with training institutes, colleges and universities to create curriculum to teach new or graduating professionals about life on-reserve and how to work within the communities' traditions and culture so they can more easily connect with young people and families, improve retention and help them be better prepared to provide the service or do the job the community needs them to do.

CONTINUING TO LISTEN AND LEARN

YOUTH ADVISORY FEEDBACK

After reviewing this section, the youth advisory group, in conversation with the action plan's writers, added the following thoughts, stories or recommendations:

"Teachers or workers coming to work with children and youth on-reserve need to have criminal [records] background checks."

"Sex education and sexual health education needs to be offered in schools starting in grade nine."

"Young mothers need access to mid-wives, nurses, mentors or someone else with skills to help them learn how to provide care to their newborn."

"Communities require needle exchange programs and instruction in harm reduction techniques. Condoms and clean needles should also be available to young people even if band councils don't want these programs because they think it will increase addiction or encourage drug use and sex."

"Policing needs to be improved with respect to handling people who are intoxicated. Protocols for better policing need to be explored with youth."

THE TRAGEDY OF YOUTH SUICIDE

Who we are as people is more than the just color of our skin, the language we speak or how we live our lives. Who we are is connected to the stories of our lives, our communities, our families, our ancestors and our history. Sadly, our stories of struggle in the present are stained with the legacy of colonialism, the *Indian Act*, the residential schools (past and present) and the long history of harm toward our people, first by others and now also by our own hands.

One painful part of our present story is the tragedy of suicide and the number of young people on- and off-reserve who are taking their own lives. The impact on family, friends and communities is impossible to describe. It makes us sad but it also makes us angry. The loss of our young people poses a threat to the survival of our Cree and Ojibway cultures. We cannot let the tragedy of high youth suicide rates be something that now defines us or becomes the history we pass on to the next generation of young people.

In many ways everyone who attended the Feathers of Hope Youth Forum were like travelers from the old days, travelers who came together from their communities to tell their stories. When we shared our experiences as young people, we reflected on the stories shared by the youth who attended the Horizons of Hope forum. They let us know that there was a lot of pain, anger and suffering in our recent history. When those youth, who are now adults, listened to our dis-

cussions they came to see that another generation of young people has been born, passed through childhood and this year will turn 18 years old. After all these years, First Nations young people still see the same issues that were brought forward in the *Horizons of Hope Report* in 1996, and again in the *Royal Commission's Special Report on Suicide* in 1996, in the inquest into the suicide death of Salena Sakenee in 1999, in the Assembly of First Nations and Ministry of Health report on suicide prevention in 2001 and in the Office of Ontario's Coroner's 2011 Report into the 6 suicide deaths in Pikangikum between 2006–2008. Is this the written and oral history we want to continue passing along from one generation to the next? Do we want to tell the next generation of young people that more than 100 recommendations have been made to stop this tragedy, but have remained untouched and on paper while report after report keeps getting written? This is not why we worked so hard to bring young people from our communities to Thunder Bay.

We need to move beyond these stories of pain, anger and suffering. We need to find or regain an individual and community sense of who we are as a peoples, whether it be Cree or Ojibway. We need to reconnect with the stories about the pride and strength of our peoples. We need, once and for all, to address the causes and contributing factors that put us at risk of suicide so we can change this story.

RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES AND THE LACK OF FUNDING FOR MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS FOR YOUTH WERE THE CENTRAL THEMES OF THIS GROUP'S PRESENTATION TO DECISION-MAKERS.



In every community we visited leading up to the Feathers of Hope Youth Forum we found young people, adults and elders who spoke first-hand about the impact of suicide on their families and communities. As I think about the pain carried by young people who spoke about the loss of their friends, mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts and uncles it becomes too easy to get tied up in the anger and pain of why nothing has changed. How many reports does it take where our communities plead for governments to address the unfair conditions that contribute to the loss of hope and meaning in our lives, and the need for stronger ties to culture, community and identity that will increase the likelihood we will thrive, and decrease our risk for suicide.

I want you to look deep into yourself and imagine what you would do if the next young person who walks into your life says they don't want to go on living. What would you

"[Some] communities do not grieve the suicide death of a young person, [there's] no real talking through."

"Someone told me one time [about their intention to harm themselves, then] killed themselves a week later. I didn't know what to do."



IDENTIFYING KEY ISSUES OF CONCERN DURING GROUP PRESENTATIONS ON FINAL DAY.

"[There was] no real sign the young person was thinking about killing themselves, they were acting like everything was just fine."

say? What would you do? Would you ignore them? Would you tell them to stop looking for attention? Or, would you stop, turn to them and say, “Let me help.” At the core of the hopelessness felt by so many of us is pain tangled up in anger, frustration, poverty, boredom, struggles for shelter and healthy food, someone to talk to, pressure to use drugs and alcohol, physical, emotional and sexual abuse and a lack of real connections to people who inspire us to believe things will get better. That life sucks so much is the everyday reality for far too many of us. When you add to this the fact that very little has changed over the last 30 years, you begin to see the tragedy that has been in the making for so long. All of these things have been addressed in our report. We are your children and we are telling you what we need. You need to stop talking. You need to listen and hear. Most importantly, you need to take action.

We have been told that for every suicide that is completed, six to eight are attempted. Using data from the Sioux Lookout First Nations Health Authority (SLFNHA), it is possible to see how enormous the problem of youth suicide is in northern communities. According to the SLFNHA, there were 341 completed suicides involving children and young people aged 10–30 between 1986 and 2011 in their jurisdiction. If there were eight individual attempts for every one of these completed suicides, it would mean that approximately 2,728 young people would have attempted suicide over this same time period. If all those attempts had been successful communities in the SLFNHA’s jurisdiction could have lost almost 7% of their youth population.

At the forum and our meetings and discussions, we heard young people say they want to help their friends, who are struggling and that they don’t understand why family members kill themselves. Yet, in the same conversations, we heard them talk about alcohol, drugs, poverty, people’s sense of hopelessness and a lack of control many feel they have over their lives. So, if these are the conditions that increase the risk of suicide, then the solutions, even partial ones, must be tied to meeting the needs young people spoke about; the need for better health care, education, commitment to cultural and traditional learning, better policing and better leadership within their communities.

We are willing to work with our leadership, government and adult allies to create change, but we need you to start the work that needs to happen. We saw at the forum, and

in our discussions in communities, that when the subject moved to hope and solutions, there was less talk of suicide and a spark of excitement and energy entered the conversations. The very things young people are asking for have the potential to have the greatest impact on the rates of suicide in the community.

Christopher Lalonde, at the University of Victoria, who has written on cultural continuation and suicide reduction in British Columbia, says that when a community takes steps towards becoming more self-determining, suicide rates are significantly lower or non-existent compared to other communities.¹ If this is true, we need to see this as a powerful way to begin to heal our communities. We can’t sit by and continue to watch our family members, friends and community members die from suicide.

We know that 18 years ago James Morris believed that if we invested in the development of peer counseling we could take the first step to addressing suicide in our communities. He understood that a young person generally goes to another young person when they are upset or hurting. He believed governments and leadership should invest in giving young people the basic skills to talk with and support their peers or seek help from caring adults who might know the best first step to take to make change. In his idea, we see a bit of what Lalonde notes above, namely, that given an opportunity and some training, young people will begin to feel they can have a positive impact on their communities. His idea was not limited to one community, but to have peer counseling available in all communities.

This idea of wanting to help others was mentioned over and over again in the forum workshop sessions when young people talked about their desire to “be there” for friends and family. They simply wanted to be “friends and helpers” and a link to safe people and resources within or outside of the community. Their role is not to replace the need for professionally trained counselors and youth workers, they see their role more like that of an add-on resource for the community.

1 Chandler, M.J. & Lalonde, C.E. (2008). Cultural Continuity as a Protective Factor Against Suicide in First Nations Youth. *Horizons: A Special Issue on Aboriginal Youth. Hope or Heartbreak: Aboriginal Youth and Canada’s Future*. 10(1), pp. 68–72.

"Kids have nothing to believe in, there are no jobs, no opportunities, so why bother going to school; it's a waste of time. Adults drink and do drugs and there is no one here for us. You give up after a while."

Moving forward, there is a need to build on the things that give young people hope. The *Horizons of Hope* report and our sessions with youth at the Feathers of Hope forum made it clear that change needs to start in our own homes. We need to see and feel the adults in our lives care about us. Parents need help and counseling to deal with the source of their addiction issues, the effects of the residential schools, their anger about the poor quality of life we live in and the fact that government would rather give us welfare cheques than real opportunities. Young people need the elders in our communities, but like with our parents, we all need to learn how to show respect and affection that brings us back to the people we know we are. Our elders need to understand that a lot of our anger comes out in our questions and we need to learn how to talk with and be with each other as a first step.

Our chiefs and band council members need to be accountable to our communities because we know some corruption exists. We know there are mostly good chiefs and councils out there, but everything must be done to address any form of corruption, because if there isn't, healing cannot take hold and the sense of hopelessness that contributes to youth suicide will continue.

It is clear that in many of our communities no one is listening to us. How can we not be furious when we hear of 9 and 10 year old children choosing to end their lives? How can

we not be reduced to tears when we hear of a young person losing their parent or another sibling to suicide? How is it that suicide has become normal in so many communities? This has happened because adults in leadership, government and our communities have allowed it to happen and to continue happening.

We have to challenge the idea that simply returning to traditional ways and value systems will automatically stop suicide and solve all the problems in our communities. It's a start, and can play a role in helping young people — and all community members — find and strengthen their identities. But our young people have been dying from suicide for over 40 years. People have been writing reports about it and making recommendations, yet nothing changes. We have to meet the needs of the young people, their families and communities that are linked directly to youth committing suicide. If there is no action to meet these needs, how can we expect change to occur?

As we have mentioned before in this action plan, change is not always about spending more money. We need to be able to turn to our communities and begin to ask, "Why do we have to keep secrets that make suicide the only option we think we have to be free?" What does it cost for our families to give us the love, affection, safety and security that we need when we are overwhelmed or lost and feeling hope-

"[We need] more cultural programs with elders and youth involved."

MAKING VOICES MATTER. YOUTH
TAKING CONTROL OF THEIR
FUTURE ON FINAL DAY OF FORUM.



"We need people to encourage and help us."

less. This is not about money, it's about creating safety, love, support and starting where it counts the most, in our own homes and with our own families.

The adults in our lives need to value us as children. The teachings of the elders say children are sacred gifts. When will you begin treating us that way? Whether you want us to be traditional or connected to God, the Creator, or even a combination of the two, we need you to model the path that leads us there. Right now the path you are leading us along is one of self-destruction and death. We need to see you fighting for us and for our communities so we can begin to

believe we can do the same. When you give up and surrender you model this for us and that fuels our anger and frustration.

We challenge First Nations young people to come together with elders and the women of our communities and with all levels of leadership. We will review all the recommendations that have been made and we will tell you the ones that we want to see you act on. We will sit with you and build the path forward together and we will hold you and ourselves accountable to create the change that is needed.

TAKING STEPS TO MAKE HOPE REAL

1. We want more transparency from our band councils and leadership.
2. We want councils to consult regularly with youth in the community so that the chief and council members are aware of our needs and issues of concern.
3. We want band councils to have a permanent seat for a community youth representative. Youth in the community could nominate peers to run in an election for this position. The position could be referred to as “youth chief.”
4. We want band councils to hold “town meetings” so youth and community members can make leadership aware of issues of concern, receive community feedback and hear updates on council activities.
5. We want to see the creation of “youth councils” to work alongside band councils. The leader of the youth council could sit on the band council. We want to see youth councils in all communities and have them linked together in a “forum of youth councils” so they could work together on issues of common concern.
6. We want the council of youth forums to be linked to an all government body so discussion concerning young peoples’ needs and concerns could be brought forward in a transparent manner.
7. We want positive mentors and supporters to help us connect to other communities that have experienced success starting and running this form of youth run organization.
8. We want skills to support friends and peers who may be experiencing life difficulties. We want training in ‘SafeTALK,’ or a similar program that will give us the skills to recognize when someone is depressed, in distress and at risk of suicide. We want to obtain a “train the trainer” certification so we can pass that knowledge to other youth in the community.
9. We want to understand and connect with our elders and we want our elders to be able to understand us. We want to find a healthy, supportive elder in our community who will join with us and help form a youth-elder circle so we may teach and learn from one another.
10. Mental health professionals, hospitals and doctors have to stop calling our issues “social issues” and be educated on the real needs that underpin the reality of life on-reserve (How often does an off-reserve, non-First Nations person get told their struggles and suicidal behaviour is a social issue and then get sent home without a proper assessment)?

CONTINUING TO LISTEN AND LEARN

YOUTH ADVISORY FEEDBACK

After reviewing this section, the youth advisory group, in conversation with the action plan's writers, added the following thoughts, stories or recommendations:

"Cutting' and going into care, kids posting pictures and ending up in hospital getting stitched up, why are they doing this? There has to be a better way."

"Young people need anger management skills and ways to deal with sad thoughts instead of taking it to extremes. It seems like it's getting to be a trend."

"It seems so normalized. It's the attitude that is so troubling, that being depressed is cool, screw the world, that attitude is rampant."

"People do a lot for attention because they have so much bottled up. It feels like there is no one to talk to. That is how it is in most communities."

"What helps is reaching out to those you trust the most. Just being able to talk about it, not bottling up my anger at the people in my life."

"There are not a lot of people in the community to talk to."

"You can't keep anything a secret in the community. If you tell one person then next thing the whole reserve knows."

"We need to use natural helpers, peers who have received training. This is really important."

"Kids need help early like around 8 or 9 years of age. For a young person to have self-esteem they need to have something to work for. No handouts, but something to work for. Have a finished product, something you can be proud of."

"Kids going to school out of the community need weekend passes to go home and be with their families so they have something to work towards."



HEALING AND GROWING

As a sacred medicine cedar has medicinal properties and is used in sweat lodges and in ceremonies to protect us.

FIRST NATIONS CULTURE AND TEACHINGS

"You need a good support system to get good self-esteem. You need to be guided to those opportunities, but so much is missing."

VANISHING CULTURES AND TRADITIONS

In the three northern treaty areas of Ontario, we are witnessing our traditional culture, languages, and the teachings of our communities slowly vanish. This departure from our ways has its historic roots in the 1800's when schools operated by the Protestant, Catholic, Anglican and Methodist churches began operating in Ontario. In 1905, up to 80–100 residential schools were in full operation in Canada and over 150,000 Aboriginal children were placed in the care of these schools.¹

The establishment of the residential school system was a partnership between schools or churches and government and was enforced by legislation and law. The schools have had a devastating impact on the lives of First Nations people in northern communities. The conflict between church teachings and the traditional views and values of First Nations peoples in northern Ontario continues to disrupt the lives of individuals and whole communities. The legacy issues, the conflict between living a traditional life or religious life, and surviving the experience of parents raised in these schools affects today's youth on many levels. In our commu-

1 Government of Canada. (2011). Addressing the Legacy of Residential Schools. Retrieved from <http://www.parl.gc.ca/Content/LOP/ResearchPublications/201^9-^96-e.htm>.



"It is important to expose our children to their culture and language before they are 6 years of age. Let them stay with their grandmothers for a year."

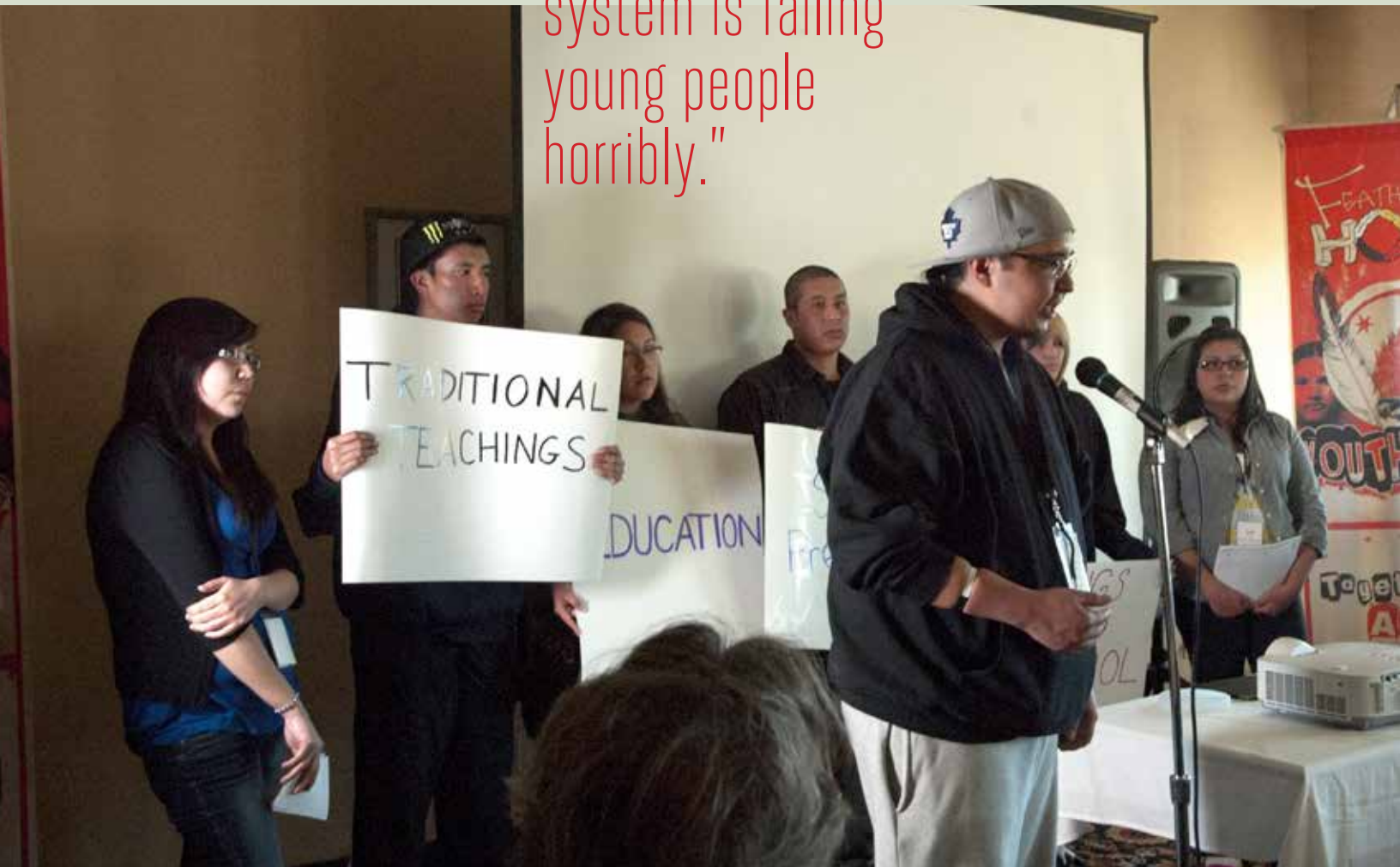
ELDER 'ALO' PETER WHITE PROVIDING GUIDANCE, SUPPORT AND WISDOM THROUGHOUT THE FIVE DAYS OF THE FORUM.

nities, young people are now feeling the pressure to choose between traditional versus religious beliefs.

THE LINGERING IMPACT OF RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS ON TODAY'S YOUTH

At the Feathers of Hope Youth Forum, through the workshops, home group sessions and general conversation, this struggle was seen as an issue affecting almost every area of First Nations young peoples' lives. While some youth said they had found ways to merge the culture and traditions of their ancestors with the non-traditional beliefs in their lives, others felt that both systems could co-exist separately or be interconnected peacefully. They also felt that they should be able to choose freely to practice traditional ways of life in their communities and not be denied this right even if their people are mainly religious.

"I feel like
the education
system is failing
young people
horribly."



YOUTH SPEAK ABOUT FINDING ACCEPTANCE
WITH CULTURAL AND MAINSTREAM EDUCATION
IN COMMUNITIES.

Some of the youth participants felt there was a link between elders who attended residential schools and a lack of willingness to pass cultural teachings on to young people. Some elders adopted the religious beliefs taught by the residential schools and so no longer chose to practice their traditions. Other elders are thought to be uncomfortable practicing their traditional ways if they had been punished, and were traumatized in the past for doing so back in the schools. Either way, the special traditional bond held between young people and elders — so important in the passing down of teachings, customs and practices — has been damaged and, for so many, lost.

It is all of the community who feels the effect of this relationship breakdown. Youth feel that, collectively, survivors' pasts have not been properly addressed or that steps have not been taken to help them heal. Because of this failure, the current generation of elders is struggling to understand how to reach out to young people in pain. Many elders are trapped in their own crises of identity, culture and faith. In the end, youth are no longer connected to the people who can provide them with cultural understanding, life skills, or the assistance to help youth in their struggles (which in many ways are very similar to those of the elders.)

When young people are left alone to struggle with conflicting views of the world, they lose pieces of their identity and they cling to whatever they see around them. This has a major effect on how young people live out their lives in First Nations communities, as well as in wider Canadian society. Young First Nations people who grow up without the influence of healthy adults and in environments that are chaotic and toxic are prone to develop feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, disengagement, of not belonging and shame leading to diseases such as alcoholism and drug abuse, depression, anxiety and other forms of mental illness — the very illnesses and diseases far too many of our elders are struggling with too. We desperately need to restore the bond held between elders and youth, because if this cycle continues, the sense of hopelessness that deprives us of our identity and causes us so much confusion in our lives will only get worse.

We believe that re-building relationships with our elders is part of the process of healing as individuals, as families and as communities. We want our elders to teach us our languages, to have sweat lodges in our communities, to

practice our ceremonies and to help young people become knowledgeable about hunting, trapping, fishing, tracking, drumming, dancing, singing, building shelter and cooking, just as our ancestors did before us. Young people believe this knowledge will help us to not only survive and thrive in our own communities, but it will also strengthen our identity and help us feel pride when living outside of our communities. Learning these skills will help strengthen our ability to walk in two worlds by anchoring us in the traditions and practices of our peoples, and positively affecting our day to day lives, while still encouraging us to find a path that allows us access to the opportunities provided in mainstream Canada.

First Nations youth are often faced with having to answer to the biased belief that we should simply leave our communities to achieve success, since “outside” is where “opportunities and education” exist. But we wonder why should we be expected to “simply” relocate and be forced to participate in the supposedly advanced education system provided in urban areas? Modern systems of education are not based on the values and belief systems that would provide First Nations youth with the knowledge, skills and awareness we need to become valued and fully contributing members of our *own* communities.

The mainstream education system places First Nations youth at a disadvantage and forces us to surrender/lose our identity in the process of achieving credits in subject matter that is of no value to us back in our home communities. We want to know why we cannot live, grow up, thrive and give back in our own communities in ways that are meaningful and relevant to our local customs and traditions? Why is the education system set up so that we have to leave our families to attend elementary and high schools when youth who happen to be born in urban centres do not?

CULTURE CAN HEAL

We want to see more work done around cultural knowledge sharing that brings youth and elders together in their communities in meaningful ways, where elders are respected teachers and young people are learners. We want elders to teach us about our traditional ways of life and living. In the Feathers of Hope workshop sessions, youth shared how going back to their roots has helped them find or restore their identities and filled them with a sense of pride about who they are.

At the forum it was said that the process of learning who they are not only gave youth the strength to live better lives, but also to overcome problems like alcohol and drug abuse. Young people want their band councils to take the lead in arranging these activities with participation from the whole community.

INCLUDE CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE IN EDUCATION

We want our education and school systems to include traditional teachings in our education and to have this material taught by culturally aware educators. We feel traditional teachings need to start being taught at a young age and be incorporated into schools on reserves in ways that meet credit requirements for additional languages and social and cultural studies courses. Language classes need to start in early childhood education and daycare settings. Cultural programs need to be a challenging and key part of the educational systems on-reserve.

“Cultural weeks” in schools may provide cultural awareness for youth, but this type of program needs to be expanded and integrated into First Nations young peoples’ education in an everyday manner. To limit the study of culture to a one week block is unfair. In mainstream schools the culture of English and French peoples are included in every part of the learning process. We think it is time to create the same focus in First Nations education. Our values, our history our traditions and cultural practices need to be integrated into the school curriculum, not just focused on for one week of the school year.

Youth also want to see that non-First Nations educators who come into their communities to teach receive training on cultural sensitivity and the history, background and traditions of the community. Young people expressed that they need to participate in the development of this training.

SUSTAINED SUPPORT AND FUNDING OF CULTURAL RENEWAL

The federal government must provide funding to expand and build on First Nations communities’ ability to provide ongoing activities and curriculum throughout the entire school year that celebrate, teach and support the passing on of the stories and traditions of communities to students. These events can be profiled nationally on a National Aboriginal Day or Treaty Day. Aboriginal education achievement awards should be given out on a regular basis and used to build new learning tools for teachers in classrooms all over Ontario.

For change to be lasting and for the recommendations of young people to be properly implemented, *sustainable* sources of funding must be allocated to communities. Cultural programs need to be operated on a continuing basis and run by healed and healthy adults who are trained to a level that makes them experts — or moving towards becoming experts — in running this kind of specialized cultural learning.

These programs also need the full support of others in the community along with allies and supportive stakeholders to ensure we have this vital opportunity to develop and flourish in this knowledge. The Government of Canada, First Nations band councils and organizations need to work together to develop a strategy, while fully engaged with youth, to create a plan to bring more culturally relevant programming into our schools and communities.

TAKING STEPS TO MAKE HOPE REAL

1. We must work with healthy willing elders and adult community partners to create teaching modules about “re-membrance” of the history of the residential schools and the ongoing impact on young people and all community members.
2. We need to work with elders and our communities to create a learning process to help us understand what “First Nations culture” means.
3. We need to speak with our peers about what they think is meant by the terms “culture” and “tradition.” This could mean holding a forum to focus on discussion of this important issue.
4. We need to determine how to go about reconnecting to our culture and to traditions and do it in a safe way, receiving correct knowledge from healthy and knowledgeable elders.
5. We need to have open discussions with our peers, elders and supportive adults in our communities about what “identity” means. We recognize that this is a complicated topic because our identity can be determined by so many things such as whether we are First Nations, a combination of First Nations and non-First Nations and everything in between.

CONTINUING TO LISTEN AND LEARN

YOUTH ADVISORY FEEDBACK

After reviewing this section, the youth advisory group, in conversation with the action plan’s writers, added the following thoughts, stories or recommendations:

“You need a good support system to get good self-esteem. You need to be guided to those opportunities, but so much is missing.”

“It is important to expose our children to their culture and language before they are 6 years of age. Let them stay with their grandmothers for a year.”

“I feel like the education system is failing young people horribly.”

IDENTITY AND CULTURE

"Some people don't know who they really are. I don't even know my spirit name, I don't know what clan I'm from."

Growing up, much of our identity is formed by our parents, grandparents and our whole communities. It is formed by the things we are taught in school, the attitudes and behaviours directed toward us by others on- and off-reserve and representations we see — or don't see — of ourselves in the media and mainstream Canadian society. How we see ourselves is strongly influenced by our families, in the cultural and traditional sense of the word, i.e., distant relatives, our band councils and First Nations leadership, health practitioners and educators among others. This brings me to question how these influences affect our lives and what impact they have on how we see ourselves as youth and individuals.

To start off, it is difficult to speak about how First Nations youth see themselves. I have met a range of young people from the proudest of the proud of First Nations youth, to those who are extremely self-conscious, withdrawn and voiceless. The most insecure youth are often the one's who

have been consistently beaten down, abused and mistreated by their community members, families and all levels of government. The services provided to them in their communities are so below the level of those provided to non-First Nations people that they know the same system that failed their families and communities is now failing them as well. I find that those who are the most confident are usually the ones who are firmly in touch with their First Nations culture and roots. Having a strong sense of one's identity provides a level of confidence that affects what we do and everything inside ourselves, right down to the decisions we make.

There can be no conversation about identity if we do not mention the pervasive stereotypes that impact the way others and we perceive ourselves. Here are some common terms and ideas that are used to describe First Nations people:

"If we have
nothing to look
forward to for
the future, how
are we going to
get there?"

SINGING IN A NEW DRUM DURING
THE PRESENTATIONS. DRUM
BUILDING WORKSHOPS WERE
RUN AS PART OF THE FORUM
WORKSHOP ACTIVITIES.



"I grew up in foster care. [I] couldn't identify with [moving] off-reserve and [living in a] non-Aboriginal foster home."

Positive Stereotypes: Spiritual masters, nature-loving, spirit-talking, wise, stoic, traditional, brave, long-haired, warrior.

Negative Stereotypes: Indians, natives, bogans, nates, wh-indians, neechie, alcoholics, lazy, red-skins, wild, rich, impoverished, druggie, thugs, gangsters, un-grateful, victims, angry, tax-free, brown (or "white"), violent.

Many of these stereotypes are contradictory and create confusion on the part of young people. We, as First Nations people, *need* to start questioning the beliefs we hold about each other and ourselves. **Youth need to be engaged in a self-learning process to start undoing the negative images we see and believe about ourselves.** We must explore where these beliefs come from and start questioning the validity of the sources and then work to rebuild our identities with positive and empowering self-images. Working with our Elders will be a vital part of this process.

Whether we identified ourselves as full-, half-blooded, or part First Nations, Anishinaabek, O-mushkegowuk, Métis, Cree, Oji-Cree, Ojibway, etc., there was great diversity among the youth who came to the Feathers of Hope Youth Forum. From beat-boxers, hip-hoppers, artists, young leaders, drummers, singers, jingle-dress dancers and athletes to traditional knowledge experts, traditional-medicine students and hunters, **we all shared the view that we were a cohesive group, united in our various identities.** We were "the 7 Shades of Brown," to borrow a forum team group name, who came up with this name so that everybody in the group would feel a sense of belonging.

When we have a strong, healthy and positive identity, we feel confident enough to pursue what anybody else would in terms of working towards our life goals, attaining our education and feeling empowered to change our worlds, despite

whatever negative messages we hear from others based on the colour of our skin.

It is unfortunate that some of the things our parents passed down to us to protect us from things they faced growing up were — although well intentioned — misguided. For instance, some parents chose to not pass their languages down for fear that their children would grow up and face difficulty living in the modern world because it would be hard to know how to speak both our language and English. Traditions were not passed down because of our parents' fear of stigma and concern that the practice of certain traditions, such as smudging (one of the ways traditional medicines are used), use of our medicines, and use of the sweat lodge and ceremonies would be thought of as "black magic." **This feeling of shame about our traditions and culture was taught to our parents as young children in the residential schools, and is still struggled with today in our homes. At this very moment, we are craving our languages and ceremonies.**

It is hard to identify as a First Nations person in mainstream Canadian society when you carry this sense of shame and live surrounded by people who look down on you. Some youth will outright deny their First Nations heritage if it makes it easier to live in urban centres or in towns. It is hard to try to live both on-reserve and in the urban world, as both discriminate and clash against the other. This makes trying to live a successful life in both or either worlds very difficult.

Sometimes, especially for young people who come directly from "toxic" or endangered reserves to urban places, we tend to identify with the dysfunction that we witness in our communities and become drawn to (or even seek out) similar environments — even though the setting has

"Seems like people don't know who they are."



FORMER HORIZONS OF HOPE
YOUTH COMMISSIONERS AND
FEATHERS OF HOPE AMPLIFIERS
JOIN TOGETHER TO LEAD THE
CHANGE NEEDED FOR THE SEVEN
GENERATIONS TO COME.

"Culture and identity are like the two wings of an eagle; both have to work together in balance to lift us up and carry us toward our destination."

"[I] was raised in mainstream society [with] no connection to [an] Aboriginal perspective."

changed. It's like we've been conditioned to only understand and live life in the ways we've seen on our reserves. To think and dream beyond this way of life can be extremely difficult. We tend to repeat what our parents and grandparents did before us, even if these actions are harmful or hinder our futures. We have no other frame of reference or the supports or services we need to help us see beyond these limitations that isolated communities create. If you only see, know and understand what "rez life" is, how can you plan for anything to be different in the future?

Unfortunately, the confidence and self-esteem that a positive identity provides, is often lacking in our young people. Experiencing a shaky or negative sense of identity, leads youth into thinking that issues like drug and alcohol abuse, pill addiction, racism, suicide and other dysfunctional behaviours are normal, unchangeable facets of life, especially when this reality is the only one we know. These negative beliefs are further reinforced by the media and public discussions that portray us in a negative way and contribute to the continuing cycle of self-destruction and hopelessness we experience. Sometimes, just to survive, some of us may even play out negative stereotypes, especially if the environments we live in become increasingly dangerous and unmanageable.

"Native gangs; people join because they don't have anything [else], to be a part of a family."

Youth are aware that being close to our traditions, feeling like we belong to a group, is vital to feeling confident in ourselves — a confidence that spills over into other areas of life. Vulnerable youth without families and who have experienced dysfunction, often turn to gangs to achieve a sense of belonging. This human need to belong is so powerful that it can drive us into something that is harmful not only to our communities, but our spirits as well.

Another factor that contributes to our weakened identity is the fact that we don't know our treaties very well, if it all. If we don't know our treaty rights as First Nations peoples, how do we know how we fit into Canadian society, and how do we make right the unjust treatment we've received? Being unfamiliar with our rights makes it difficult for us to feel confident that we can achieve equality in Canada. The original treaties made it clear we were and are nations in treaty with the Crown. Knowing our treaty rights should result in building our confidence as nations of people as we continue to build our relationships with the nation of Canada.

This is modern-day colonialism at its finest. With these deeply internalized negative beliefs we carry within ourselves, how can we be expected to feel confident enough to be able to achieve the dreams we had as small children, before the shabby reality of our life situations sunk in?

There is a certain feeling of empowerment we obtain when we know the traditions and good medicine of our people. When we see promotions, advertisements, artwork that reflect a positive view of our culture, we feel pride. And when we see successful First Nations people, leaders, lawyers, entertainers, entrepreneurs etc., in the media, we get excited because they reflect a positive representation of ourselves, inspiring us to do the same. Young people need to feel safe, happy and secure in order to flourish as individuals in our communities. To take these elements out of our lives, and replace them with negative self-beliefs, will only add to the continuing sense of hopelessness that plagues our communities.

TAKING STEPS TO MAKE HOPE REAL

TO CONNECT FIRST NATIONS YOUNG PEOPLE TO THEIR CULTURE AND IDENTITY AND DE-COLONIZE OUR MINDS WE NEED TO:

1. Strengthen our family bonds.
2. Practice the teachings given to us such as the Seven Grandfather teachings.
3. Hold more events that bring us together — like pow-wows, medicine walks, feasts, ceremonies and community events.
4. Learn the languages of our peoples.
5. Incorporate traditional knowledge into our health system, healing methods and education.
6. Incorporate the study of our treaties into our education on all levels.
7. We ask every person who reads this action plan to reflect on the effect they have had on First Nations youth and children in their own work and lives and ask them to take care in their interactions with us. Our sense of self is shaky enough as it is.

CONTINUING TO LISTEN AND LEARN

YOUTH ADVISORY FEEDBACK

After reviewing this section, the youth advisory group, in conversation with the action plan's writers, added the following thoughts, stories or recommendations:

"It would be a good idea to have something like a "National Aboriginal Month" so that there is a constant reminder to Canadians about the treaties. It is a time that could also be used to celebrate our achievements as peoples and as First Nations youth."

"Some people find focusing on one group or another a nuisance, even though the idea is not to push things in people's faces. It's just that a lot of people don't know their history. That's why it is important to teach this history to our own people within our own communities, so they can carry it around with them throughout the year and all their lives."

"Some First Nations young people complain about having to attend these events. But I don't know my clan, my spirit name, my history. I can see how it might help, to have pow-wows and learn traditional cultural customs."

"Kids don't know anything about themselves. I think these kinds of events [like the forum] are an important step toward finding a positive identity."

"Language is one of the major issues in our community. Some of the little kids speak the language better than us. I was impressed."

"I was jealous seeing a white man speaking to my sister in Ojibway better than she could. My father and grandparents spoke it fluently. I only learned English. I don't see learning our language as big a problem as the other things we are facing. I can navigate in the world in a more global language like English."

"I get mad at my father and grandfather for not teaching me Cree. They had good intentions by letting me learn only English, but I think it was still a bad decision. There are so many words and meanings you could not even understand the concepts"

"It might be too late for my generation to learn our language. I am past the point of learning this process at this time. I have never really lived on my reserve. I spent two months there once and got bored really quick."

"I would like to learn but there is no one to practice with. I didn't have the resources or connections to learn my language because my parents were alcoholics and my grandparents were dying."

"Learning our language is a significant thing."

“The elders could teach us but they are not in good shape. They ignore what happened to them or won’t talk about their past. Maybe in their own way they are saying, “Get over it.””

“Youth feel disconnected from the elders. There is no real interaction — in the community, at pow-wows. Elders come out in the morning, youth come out at night.”

“In my community, youth don’t find the elders are approachable. But I also don’t see a lot of elders going out of their way to reach out to young people either. We need to find a way to more mutual understanding.”

“Some elders abuse their power. Some are harsh or just mean. Are they really elders or just old?”

“It’s not the same in my community. Things are always falling apart.”

“In my community there are not a lot of cultural activities. In elementary school there is a week of activity and meeting the elders, but that’s it.”

“We had an ‘Aboriginal Week’ but it began dying down. People lost interest.”

“Youth ran for council in my community but no one got in. It’s the same old same old.”

ADVISORY GROUP’S ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

1. We need to help First Nations children learn about the treaties. We need to put them in simple language they can understand.
2. We need to develop a project to teach all people in Canada about the treaties so they can understand.
3. We need to offer First Nations students after-school programs to provide them with support to do homework, occupy their time and connect them to other learning activities or supports in the community.

QUALITY OF EDUCATION

In 1990, Canada became a signatory to the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)*¹ and ratified the document in 1991. According to *Article 29* of the *Convention*, “Education should develop each child’s personality and talents to the full. It should encourage children to respect their parents, and their own and other cultures.” In Canada, we know that education is a basic human right. However, when you examine the issues and realities surrounding the education of children and youth in First Nations communities, it is easy to see that Canada does not honour its obligations with respect to this article of the *Convention*.

Prior to colonization the education of First Nations children was held in high regard by our communities and instruction

1 The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is an international human rights treaty that grants all children and young people (aged 17 and under) a comprehensive set of rights. The UNCRC is presently the most widely ratified international human rights treaty. It is the only international human rights treaty to include civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. It sets out in detail what every child needs to have a safe, happy and fulfilled childhood regardless of their sex, religion, social origin, and where and to whom they were born. All United Nations member states, except for the United States and Somalia, have ratified the convention.

was rich with culture and traditions. Traditional education was respectful of heritage and promoted the passing down of knowledge from one generation to the next and strengthening the development of the community. Today, the education that we receive is a far cry from the past and is not designed to provide us with the right balance of cultural knowledge and real world skills. In fact, First Nations youth receive an inferior education and this denies us an equal opportunity to succeed with our non-First Nations peers.

Our education is under-funded by government. First Nations students attending on-reserve schools are funded at a rate of \$3,000 to \$7,000 less than students attending off-reserve schools in other parts of Canada. Since 1996, there has been a funding shortfall of over \$3 billion for First Nations education.² This funding gap makes us feel that government doesn’t care about the education of First Nations children and youth.

It also needs to be pointed out that this funding shortfall does not include the costs to provide First Nations students with the things that are considered part of a basic educa-

2 Assembly of First Nations. (2012). Chiefs Assembly on Education. *Federal Funding for First Nations Schools*. Fact Sheet. Retrieved from: http://www.afn.ca/uploads/files/events/fact_sheet-ccoe-8.pdf.



THIS GROUP FOCUSED ON THE NEED FOR WELLNESS WORKSHOPS, INCREASING THE ROLE OF RIGHT TO PLAY AND THE NEED FOR REHAB SERVICES AND TRADITIONAL HEALING CEREMONIES IN COMMUNITIES SO HELP CAN BE SOUGHT AND PROVIDED IN A PERSON'S HOME COMMUNITY WHERE THEY CAN BE NEAR SUPPORTS AND FAMILY.

tion in schools off-reserve. Incredibly, in a country as rich as Canada, First Nations children and youth attend schools that operate without proper heating, libraries, internet access, up to date technology, science labs, athletic facilities and equipment, counseling and support services or even properly trained and qualified teachers.

As a result of under-funding, the quality of education in First Nations communities is poor and continues to fail us, as did the residential school system, in providing the building blocks to create a positive and better future. Approximately 50% of Aboriginal youth drop out, or are pushed out, of high schools, a situation that results in low levels of literacy, high unemployment, and increased levels of living in poverty for future generations of youth.³ Report after report reflect that 40% of Aboriginal people in Canada aged 20–24 do not have a high school diploma compared to 13% among

non-Aboriginal Canadians. The rate is even higher for First Nations persons living on reserve (61%).⁴

Many people would be surprised to learn that the average school in a First Nations community only goes up to the eighth grade. This means that children as young as 12 years of age are forced to leave their homes, families and friends if they want to further their education. The boarding homes these young children end up living in face their own list of problems.

When it comes to post-secondary education, the limited number of First Nations youth seeking a post-secondary education generally chooses to attend either a college or trade school, rather than go to university. While this form of education is valuable and certainly important to obtain the skills necessary to find jobs and participate in the economy, without First Nations scholars in universities, the study of our cultures, stories and histories will be missing our voices

3 Assembly of First Nations. (2012). *A Portrait of First Nations and Education. Fact Sheet*. Retrieved from: http://www.afn.ca/uploads/files/events/fact_sheet-ccoe-3.pdf.

4 Ibid.

and continue to be directed and controlled by non-First Nations researchers and academics.

Historically, education has been used as a weapon to destroy our diverse cultures and assimilate First Nations people. This reality continues to affect the way First Nations young people view education. Education was used to destroy and dismantle our way of life, which is why we see it in a negative way. It was and continues to be part of an effort to diminish our languages and culture. A question worth asking is, “Are the days of assimilation really behind us?”

We heard youth at the forum voice their frustration over the current curriculum they feel is forced on them. They spoke of the absence of culturally-based learning styles, cultural and traditional teachings and a lack of effort to include or restore First Nations languages in the classroom. Several young people said that the role of elders in the classroom is crucial to the learning experience and they worry about the loss of knowledge only the elders can provide.

One young person shared a belief that the quality of education available to us in our communities is below provincial standards and so as a result, when we complete high school, we are unprepared to succeed in post-secondary settings like college or university. Another youth spoke about the lack of early childhood education for First Nations children and that an absence of resources in this area contributed to low academic success rates. A young mother shared, **“We need daycares that will allow our children to develop properly and allow us to attend school to develop our own skills.”** It was also stressed that culturally-based parenting classes needed to be offered in more communities to help assist with the challenges we as youth face as a result of losing our knowledge and understanding of the importance of learning about traditional ways of parenting, an intergenerational effect of the residential schools.

We feel it is necessary to retain qualified and culturally-based educators in order to help resolve the issue of inadequate education in on-reserve schools. Improving the current substandard education system will help stop us from seeing our futures as hopeless and bleak. The responsibility for creating these changes lies with all levels of government. The outright neglect of the education of First Nations children and youth on the part of government needs to end and inequities corrected. We have to stop making the education of First Nations youth a “political” issue where governments

continue to fight with each other and communities about who funds the building of schools and who provides supplies and learning tools. Every child in Canada has the right to the same level of education. It is just that simple. We need to start viewing this problem as an issue that affects Canada and Canadians as a whole. For us, education is not just about learning skills to get a job, it is about learning how to create or become positive members of our communities, better citizens and people who want to learn new ways to help our people.

Forum participants felt that solutions to problems concerning schools did not need to be complicated. For example, one facilitator asked, “How can we make your school a safe place?” and a young man answered, “We can build fencing around the school for security.” Another answered, “Having a playground and a guidance counselor for students to speak with.” These are all considered necessities at the average school in Ontario, although not if you are living in a First Nations community.

For too long we have accepted these poor learning conditions, thinking that we are unworthy of anything better and that waiting for change to happen is hopeless. Our generation is no longer willing to sit back and allow this situation to continue. We are worthy of the same opportunities and advantages every other Canadian child enjoys in this wealthy country. We deserve the same opportunities, equity in education funding and to learn in ways that are in line with our cultures. We have a right to succeed and to access the same resources as young people in the rest of Canada. As we begin to believe in ourselves and come together to realize the change we deserve, our voices will become louder and stronger.

The content of education should not be just about academic subjects. It should also provide information or course materials that reflect the world in which First Nations young people live. We want our education to include information about our local traditions, our territory, language, spiritual beliefs, history and customs. In the eyes of the young people, learning should be done in a way that helps us form bonds between each other, our teachers, our families, our elders and all members of our communities.

TAKING STEPS TO MAKE HOPE REAL

1. We want to see elders in the classroom teaching language classes and any subject matter that has cultural content. We want them to act as a support to the teacher and, where possible, add local knowledge about traditions and cultural practices to information contained in lessons taught in the classroom.
2. We want information about tradition healing and medicines taught in our schools.
3. We want to learn about traditional games and sports that do not require expensive equipment. We need healthy supportive adults who know these games to share their knowledge with us.
4. We want support to enable us to connect with Right to Play or other organizations that can provide training to youth in our communities so we can create recreation programs or other activities for our peers.
5. We want every band council to have a member responsible for coordinating recreation activities for youth. This should be a paid position, but if no funding is available, we want this recreation coordinator to mentor one or two youth at a time so the skills needed to provide quality play and learning activities remain in the community.
6. We need up to date and challenging educational materials to learn our languages. Too many of our materials are outdated or not advanced enough.
7. We want to be on hiring committees to ensure teachers coming to the community understand the local youth, our traditions and are a good “fit.”
8. We want teachers to be interested in more than their job and willing to be involved in extracurricular activities so they can add something to the life of the community.
9. We also want to be involved in developing training materials used by universities to prepare teachers for working in First Nations communities.
10. We want band councils to make sure teachers have the supports they need to remain in the community for the school year. We want to be on welcome committees for new teachers as ambassadors representing the community.
11. We want businesses and colleges and universities to do outreach to our communities and make young people aware of the wide variety of careers and education paths that they have open to them. We want these “job fairs” to stimulate us to think about the many ways we can learn and acquire skills that will allow us to work in our communities and help others.

EDUCATION AND SCHOOLS

THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IS FAILING US

We believe Ontario's education system is flawed and does not support the hopes and dreams of First Nations children and youth. This view applies to everything from the subjects taught, to teaching materials, the safety of school buildings and the health of the educational environment. Schools on-reserve are often in need of major repairs and lack supplies and sports or other types of equipment.¹ School buildings get condemned forcing some schools to close. Many do not even have clean drinking water for students. Schools typically lack access to the Internet, a learning tool that is taken for granted and considered a basic and essential learning tool in off-reserve schools throughout Ontario. Given these depressing conditions, it is no surprise that so many First Nations youth drop out of school.

When schools are closed or unavailable in a community, the loss or absence has a large impact. For example, schools are not just places for obtaining formal education. They can also be used as a physical space that acts as a community

hub, a place for education during the day, a community space when a gym is available, a place for elders to come together in the evenings or on the weekends, a place to hold feasts, celebrations or host cultural programs, or a safe refuge at night for mothers and children or other vulnerable community members.

Schools can also act as a space for early years learning. This is an important part of creating healthy communities because so many problems exist for very young First Nations children. It has been shown that involvement in early childhood education programs can play an important role in preparing children for school and establishing a solid foundation for their development. However, only 22% of First Nations children have access to early childhood programs. With a school building available, many of these issues could be addressed or preventable.²

The Shannen's Dream campaign is a great example of how a poor quality school can impact a community. In Attawapiskat First Nation, the soil under the local school became contaminated by a diesel fuel leak and ended up making students and teachers so sick that an environmental assess-

1 Senate of Canada. (2011). *Reforming First Nations Education: From Crisis to Hope. Report of the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples*. Retrieved from: <http://www.parl.gc.ca/content/sen/committee/411/appa/rep/rep03dec11-e.pdf>.

2 Assembly of First Nations. (2012). *A Portrait of First Nations and Education. Fact Sheet*. Retrieved from: http://www.afn.ca/uploads/files/events/fact_sheet-ccoe-3.pdf.



"We had one of the biggest classes in our community but only 10 out of 25 graduated."

THE FOCUS OF THIS FINAL DAY PRESENTATION IS "OUR HOPE TREE," BRINGING FOCUS TO THE ISSUES FACED ON-RESERVE AND LINKING CHANGE TO INCREASING HOPE FOR ALL FIRST NATIONS YOUTH.

ment was done and the school was closed. After the school was closed, it was replaced with portables that were of poor quality. The portables lacked running water, were not heated properly in winter, were infested with snakes and mice and contaminated with toxic mold. Only after a long ten-year campaign — and many broken promises — to lobby government to obtain a new school, did the community succeed in getting one under construction. The campaign was started by a young person named Shannen Koostachin and continued by her peers from the community and across Canada. It took a young person and her peers to do what government had an obligation to do but wouldn't.

JUST GOING TO SCHOOL PUTS US AT RISK OF HARM

When schools are not available in communities, First Nations youth are forced to make choices that put us at risk of harm. In southern communities, attending school is considered just a routine and normal part of growing up. However, if you live in a First Nations community, pursuing your education can be both challenging and a life altering experience — and not necessarily in a positive way. The problem is the lack of schools in many communities means we have to leave behind our support systems and attend



AS PART OF THE WELCOMING EVENING EVENTS YOUTH CAME TOGETHER IN HOME GROUPS TO GET TO KNOW EACH OTHER.

schools in southern towns or cities. This situation places us at risk of harm and is a contributing factor in pushing First Nations youth into negative behaviours that many of use to help cope with being on own in unfamiliar urban settings.

We find this situation intolerable! First Nations children and youth are forced to leave their families and communities to live with strangers, then die, never to return home. The question we ask is, “For what — an education?” It is clear that the education system isn’t designed to enrich or improve our lives. If anything, it bears a strong resemblance to the discredited residential schools system.

We will not sugar coat things in this action plan or the realities that First Nations deal with every day. We need to speak plainly and start holding accountable the people responsible for addressing the urgent needs, disadvantages and

inequities pertaining to education that cause us so much harm. We as young people feel it is our responsibility to ensure that our concerns and ideas for change are heard by decision-makers and that appropriate action is taken.

With respect to youth speaking up about our rights, movements such as Feathers of Hope and Shannen’s Dream are similar. Both are examples of young people raising awareness about the inequities we face and that our dreams matter too. Adults need to realize that we are ready and willing to work with all levels of leadership and government to implement solutions that will improve the condition of schools in our communities. The sad truth is, leadership of all types and at all levels, continually fail to meet us even half-way, break promises or refuse to implement changes that would meet our education needs — even when no new funding is needed.

Issues regarding the condition of schools and the quality of education were mentioned often by youth at the Feathers of Hope forum. In one discussion group, the team leader did an exercise activity where the group of 10–12 youth were asked, “Does your community have a school?” Only half the group stood up. One youth said that, “Our community had to shut down the school because there was no funding.” When you hear statements like this it becomes so discouraging. It makes you feel worthless, like you’re not as deserving as young people in other parts of the country. When you can’t have something as basic as a school in your community, it’s not hard to imagine why high numbers of First Nations youth just give up and lose any motivation to complete their education.

When asked, “What makes you feel hopeful?” three participants responded by saying: “Knowing I got a good start and maintaining my education and spirituality”; “Having my own choices”; and, “My education, providing for my kids, providing them with the things that I never had.” These responses provide a picture of the values common to many First Nations traditions: the importance of having solid personal foundations, the centrality of learning and spirituality, freedom to make one’s own choices in life, and the responsibility to look out for the well-being of future generations. The responses of these participants point toward the importance of having an established place to learn and the building blocks necessary to restore hope among youth, and to make communities safe, stable and healing places for young people and all members.

Communities without schools deny First Nations young people the “good start” other Canadian youth take for granted. Schools are places where you form friendships, learn about the world outside your immediate family, get to know more about your local history and traditions and begin to acquire the values that help build community and bind members together. Education is essential to learning the things you need to know in order to provide for one’s self, family and future. With the absence of proper well-equipped schools in many communities, and current inequities in the funding of First Nations young peoples’ education, the future is bleak for many of us. By stripping us of the choice to remain in our home communities, where we would have support from family, friends and the community, we continue to be exposed to risk of harm.

During another group session, a recommendation was made by one youth to create on-line high schools in First Nations communities. However, while this could serve as an interim option, it was agreed that this would deny First Nations youth the classroom experience which provides opportunities for rich interpersonal learning and relationship building as well as a supportive environment where the development of a sense of community and culture can be fostered and celebrated.

SCHOOLS AS COMMUNITY HUBS

It was obvious that young people at the forum felt that ‘education’ meant more than just having safe, clean and accessible schools in their communities. Schools are also public places that offer opportunities to increase contact between peers, families and generations.

In many communities schools act as an after-school recreation resource, a music center, community hall, pow-wow arena and whatever else it needs to be so that the community can gather. The physical nature of schools make them a central gathering spot. However, in many of our communities, we have only portables. In other communities the impact of violence and crime has resulted in our schools being boarded up and under lock and key outside of school hours and during summer and holiday periods. Schools can be the local gym, the cooking program, the seniors drop-in center, day care and early years learning centres we need. For this to happen, governments and leadership must come together and think in a more open-minded and strategic way about constructing schools with multi-purpose and multi-function capacities that meet the need of our communities.

When communities go without schools they also go without vitally necessary resources that support the ability of communities to come together. More needs to be done to build schools that meet the needs of communities who lack the infrastructure of cities. More needs to be done to build schools that are functionally flexible and useable by the entire community.

TAKING STEPS TO MAKE HOPE REAL

1. We need support to help us connect with First Nations communities who have had some success creating better schools and providing a quality education experience that ensures we can achieve a level of choice and options provided to non-First Nations youth off-reserve.
2. While we think it is more for temporary use, communities without a school should invest resources in establishing and providing internet-based high school courses for First Nations youth.
3. That sustainable federal funding be put in place to ensure the maintenance and repair of existing schools is a priority and that funding be put in place to ensure reserve communities without proper schools get them.
4. That the construction of new community schools focus on making school buildings multi-functional community hubs that are better able to meet the needs of the broader community.

CONTINUING TO LISTEN AND LEARN

YOUTH ADVISORY FEEDBACK

After reviewing this section, the youth advisory group, in conversation with the action plan's writers, added the following thoughts, stories or recommendations:

"It's more than just having an education, it includes being in charge of our curriculum and what it should look like. If you are doing your education in the community, it should align with what would be helpful to you in the community."

"Right off the start, if you are coming from an education standard that is lower than what everyone else is getting, you are always at a disadvantage. You have to give up so much to get an education, leave family, home and community to get it. Is it really free? We lose so much to get it."

"Schools don't give us what we need. We are so unprepared. They will not hold you back a year, but just keep bumping you up just because they don't want overcrowded classrooms."

"I do not see how what we're learning in school is relevant to youth living on-reserve."

"Communities will turn into ghost towns with so many youth leaving the community to go to school."

"Last time I went to school on the rez, the teacher was racist."

"I don't like what teachers are doing. Yelling at students — and I don't mean just raising your voice a tone or two."

"Some teachers can be really harsh or ignorant and the School Board automatically takes their side. I handed in a paper on a USB stick because I didn't have a printer. The teacher refused to accept my paper because it was not printed. When the principal printed it for me and handed it in, I was deducted 10% for handing it in late. That's totally unfair. Even other kids stood up for me."

"What we want is a teacher who is not prejudiced, wants to be in the community, is educated and willing to teach us, believes in us, is willing to talk and listen to us and knows their teaching area."

SPORTS AND RECREATION

Participating in recreation activities is not just an end in itself. Having access to public spaces and recreational activities provides the opportunity to get together with friends, take a break from the pressures of school, work or parental expectations, share life experiences, make connections with peers and learn what's going on in the community. It increases our connection to our communities and is critical to the development of a positive identity.¹ It can also advance cultural knowledge and values² and promote and increase the use of First Nations languages, especially among youth.³ Sport Canada and, more recently Right to Play have each recognized the power of sport to improve the lives of First Nations young people while combating some of the negative factors affecting our communities.⁴

1 Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development. (2009). Hope or heartbreak: Aboriginal youth and Canada's future. *Horizons*, March 2009, vol. 10, no. 1.

2 Blodgett, A.T., et. Al. (2008). From practice to praxis. Community-based strategies for Aboriginal youth sport. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 32(4), pp. 399.

3 Canadian Heritage. (May, 2005). *Sport Canada's Policy on Aboriginal Peoples' Participation in Sport*. Ottawa, ON: pp. 13, 15.

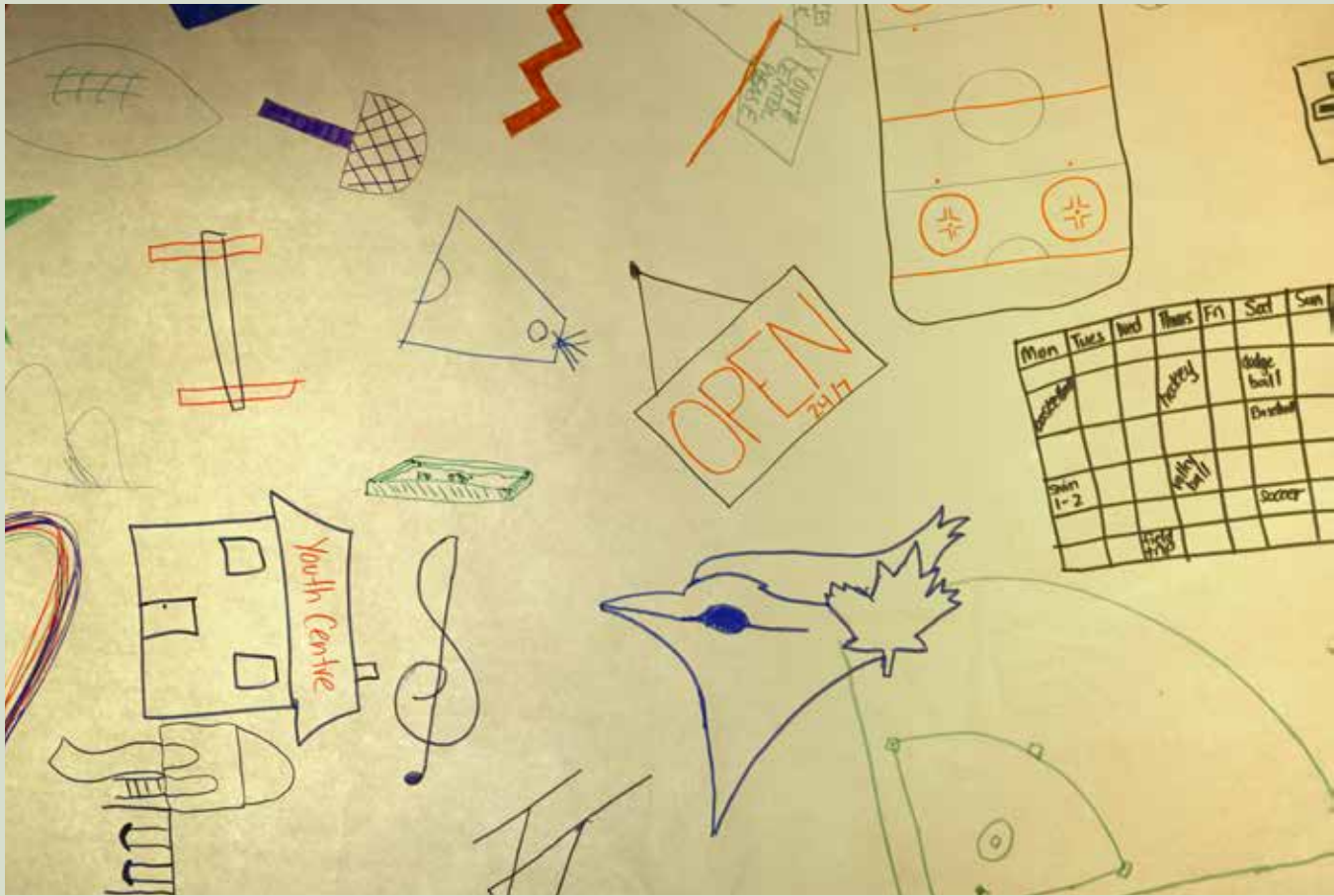
4 Winther, N., Nazer-Bloom, L. & Petch, V. (1995). A comprehensive overview of development, the North American indigenous games and provincial/territorial aboriginal sport bodies. p.2, as referenced in Canadian Heritage. (May, 2005). *Sport Canada's*

When it comes to recreation programming in Northern Ontario's First Nations communities, saying it is "limited" would be an understatement. Youth in our communities grow up longing to explore and express their passions and creativity. However, opportunities for First Nations children and youth to participate in pro-social activities through sports or safe activity centres or to develop their physical strength and skills are few in number. Communities lack proper sports equipment and coaches and trainers. Poverty and poorly equipped or non-existent facilities present even more barriers for First Nations children and youth to obtain key lessons in healthy living and self-care and to be on an equal footing with non-Aboriginal children and youth in Canada.⁵

The presence of Right to Play in communities is a powerful example of the failure of government to provide us with recreation facilities and resources and real opportunities to learn. Right to Play is an international non-governmental organization, known for advancing the importance of play in third-world countries. Over the last three years it has begun

Policy on Aboriginal Peoples' Participation in Sport. Ottawa, ON: pp. 2.

5 Canadian Council of Child and Youth Advocates. (June, 2010). *Position Paper: Aboriginal Children and Youth in Canada: Canada Must do Better*. Position Paper. pp. 8.



ART WORK CREATED AT THE FORUM TO HIGHLIGHT WHAT YOUTH WANT TO SEE IN THEIR COMMUNITIES.

offering programs and resources to northern and remote communities in Ontario. Right to Play’s mission is “to use sport and play to educate and empower children and youth to overcome the effects of poverty, conflict and disease in disadvantaged communities.” Why is it that First Nations children living in one of the world’s richest countries are eligible to receive a resource available only to the world’s poorest and most disadvantaged communities? Why is it acceptable to government that our communities are seen like the world’s poorest countries and have to compete with them for resources to enable our children to do something as simple as play?

The Ontario government knows Right to Play is providing recreation programming in some of our communities and that it is funded by the federal and provincial government.

We know that two provincial ministries — the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs and Ministry of Children and Youth Services — and two federal departments — Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada and Health Canada (First Nations, Inuit Health Branch) — are funders of Right to Play and their program ‘Promoting Life-skills in Aboriginal Youth (PLAY)’. Young people in our communities see Right to Play as a fantastic and desired program. So the thing is, if these two levels of government are able to work together to make programs like this available in a few communities, why can’t they make it happen in more? What is sad is that despite having an example of how a partnership like this can work, far too many of Ontario’s First Nations communities still do not have access to the benefits Right to Play’s programs and resources provide. What is sadder still is that no one questions why the eligibility of our communi-



THE YOUTH PARTICIPATE IN ICE BREAKER ACTIVITIES TO HELP THEM GET TO KNOW EACH OTHER AND CREATE THE CULTURE OF CONNECTION AND FRIENDSHIP THAT WAS EVERYWHERE IN THE FORUM.

ties to benefit from the resources provided by Right to Play is tied to the same requirements as countries dealing with some of the most horrific standards of living in the world. Why is something as simple as play not free from the language of disadvantage?

The importance of play at the physical, developmental and psychological level for children and young people has been well documented in Canada.⁶ As young people, we acknowledge the need to be physically active and, wherever possible, enrolled in different recreational activities. The importance of sport, physical activity and play throughout our childhood and youth has been underestimated in many of our remote and fly-in reserves by both government and our communities. It is time to think about the role government and communities need to play in investing in the early development of First Nations children and youth. As young people we need to be encouraged, supported and provided with the resources needed to promote physical activity in our communities. In many of our communities this is often seen only as a way to have fun or to be social with others. We don't have movie theatres, gyms, restaurants or many of

the social spaces available to youth in the south. As a result, sport and recreation become critical needs in our communities. Without them we lose the opportunity to be socially and physically and emotionally engaged with others in a way that is positive and healthy. We know there are benefits to play that go beyond simply being active. We know that a physically engaged First Nations child or youth is more likely to have a reduced risk of obesity, increased cardiovascular fitness, decreased risk of heart disease or diabetes, increased resilience to stress, improved social and interpersonal skills, and more likely to maintain a lifelong connection to sports and an active life style.⁷

Participation in organized sport provides more than just physical benefits. It helps build confidence and indirectly teaches us coping skills to deal with external pressures and stress. In addition to achieving camaraderie with teammates, participation in sports and recreation helps us develop interpersonal skills required to succeed in life. Without an outlet to occupy our spare time or release and channel our excess energy, we become vulnerable to the negative influences around us. Alcohol, drugs and gas sniffing are just some of the methods some of us use to combat bore-

6 Canadian Heritage. (May, 2005). *Sport Canada's Policy on Aboriginal Peoples' Participation in Sport*. Ottawa, ON: CH. pp.13–15.

7 Ibid.

"[We] should be more active with activities outside. As a kid, [me and my] siblings would do things outside and [have] fun. Now [my] siblings just do drugs. [We need] more youth forums and gatherings, [more] knowledge [about] these things."

dom, the emptiness in yet another area of our lives. Allowing us to be kids and providing us with the resources we need to play will give us a better chance to grow up mentally and physically healthy. It will provide us with healthy ways to be together and healthy outlets to express our anger, frustration and loneliness.

Reflecting on my own lived experience, I know that participating in sports has allowed me to focus on something other than the struggles and issues going on in my life. Without access to these external organizations and programs, I would not have had the opportunity to benefit from being part of organized recreational sport, i.e., access to positive peers and relationships and supportive adults, all of which have contributed to the person I am today. Through my involvement in sport and play I have had the chance to travel, and make lifelong friends who are also trying to live a healthy, positive life and gain skills that will help us work as part of a team while teaching us that sometimes you win and sometimes you lose. There is a need for all youth to have access to this type of opportunity where they can choose whether they want to participate in recreational activities that may be tied to sports teams, community activities or activities that just allow young people to come together and play. Right now many youth I heard speak at the forum or in communities I visited have no access. They have no gyms, no recreational space, no equipment, no coaches and no opportunity to do much of anything.

WHAT DID WE HEAR AT THE FORUM?

OUTDOOR/LAND-BASED ACTIVITIES

The issues and challenges facing First Nations youths' access to recreation are complex. However the solution does not need to be complicated. When we revisited what we heard at the forum we realized there were a lot of things that could be done to get started. Providing outdoor activities to engage youth, including traditional teachings, could be provided at little or no cost and be implemented almost immediately.

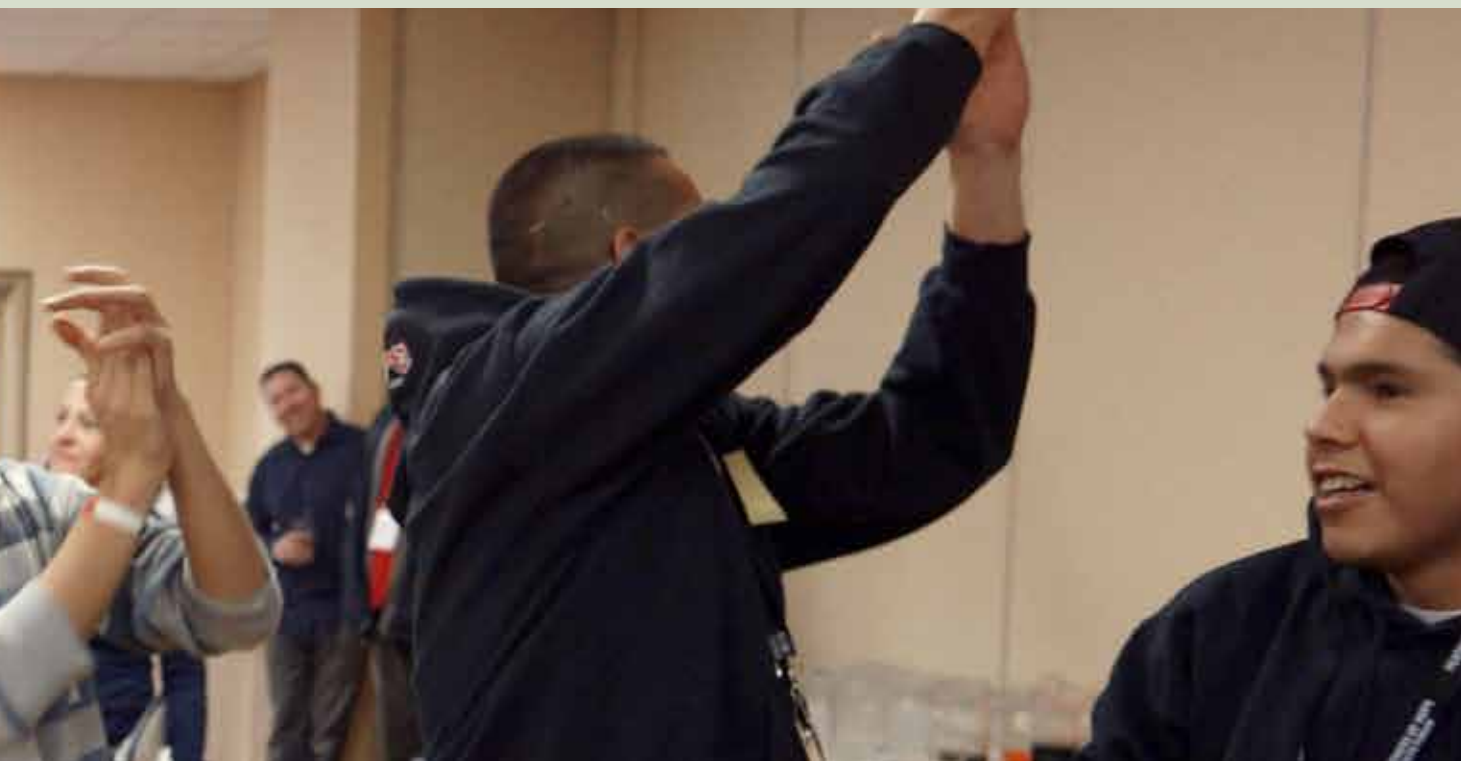
Youth at the forum asked repeatedly for opportunities to learn about living on the land and learning skills like hunting, fishing and trapping. In the past, the approaches of our peoples around these skills and teachings were passed down from one generation to the next through our parents, family members and elders. We need our elders to reclaim a strong relationship with us and offer young people the training we need so we can begin to feel we are supported and encouraged by the elders and adults in our communities.

In the process of learning these skills and traditions, a bond will be created between youth, elders and adults thereby fostering a positive community environment. Youth who develop skills in these activities could, in turn, teach younger children. This could be done through a mentorship model,

THE "BIG GAME." YOUNG PEOPLE GETTING READY TO ENGAGE IN AN EVENING OF ACTIVITIES AND GAMES THAT FOCUS ON TEAM-BUILDING THROUGH PLAY.



"[I] just moved back to [my] reserve nine months ago. I left because there was no help. The drum brought me back. So when I came back, I saw the change. We have sacred fires. I hang out with the [other] youth. [The Children's Aid Society] (CAS) and others have told me that their numbers have dropped because the youth centres help the kids. So being able to occupy the youth, it keeps them out of trouble. Having a youth centre does a great deal [for the] community."



"At the school, they have an after-school program. It helps [reduce] boredom. We actually hang out and play games. It has had a positive impact on myself and all of the youth."

high school credit course or through paid employment for older youth and elders. There needs to be more opportunity to tap into the skills of community members and showcase their abilities and desire to help youth. Local schools, community centres or other spaces, if available, could be the meeting place for this sharing. Learning opportunities could be made available during the school year or on summer breaks. Pilot programs could be developed in communities with the greatest need. Lessons learned could then be shared with other communities.

ARTS AND ACTIVE LIVING ACTIVITIES

For those of us not interested in sports, communities need to provide opportunities to participate in arts-based programs or activities such as sculpting, acting, dancing, music and drawing. Arts-based activities tied to local cultural traditions can deepen young peoples' knowledge about their communities and strengthen ties to their heritage. A place will need to be established in the community to provide these activities with a "home base."

Communities with schools could use this resource space. Other options could include a reclaimed house, outdoor lo-

DURING THE OPENING EVENING EVENTS EACH YOUNG PERSON INTRODUCED THEMSELVES THROUGH A CARD THAT NOTED THEIR NAME, FIRST NATION, AND INTERESTS.



cation, a seasonal temporary structure, a community centre or band council Office.

Whether it be sports or arts programs, creating opportunities to showcase the skills of young people will be just as important. We need fun and friendly tournaments, showcases or competitions where we can share our knowledge, support and encourage each other and celebrate the development of our gifts and learned skills. These events would also help strengthen ties between communities and promote the establishment of mutual support networks along areas of common interest.

Sport Canada recognizes the importance of sport to Aboriginal youth but has not provided funding sufficient to establish equity in terms of access to sports facilities and equipment for First Nations communities in northern Ontario. This must become a priority for government if we are to establish active living as a norm in our communities. Investing in sports programming, facilities and equipment would create the conditions to help us achieve better physical and mental health and, in the long term, likely save money that would otherwise be spent on the health consequences of sedentary lifestyles and boredom.

TAKING STEPS TO MAKE HOPE REAL

1. We need to work with our communities to create outdoor education activities. These activities will not need government funding. Volunteers with any kind of knowledge such as skills in sport, arts or living on the land can provide the training and skills we need.
2. More must be done to create real jobs and real opportunities for young people to obtain work experience and employment skills.
3. We recognize that sport and recreation programs are not just about being healthy. They link us to our peers, communities and, perhaps most importantly, act as a tool for us combat the internal, personal and family-based struggles that are playing out in other parts of our lives. They contribute to our well-being and increase the likelihood we will have stronger and more positive relationships with our peers and the adults and elders in our communities.
4. We are disappointed that Right to Play, a non-governmental service organization that delivers sport, life skills and recreation programming to third world countries, recognized our need for play when the governments of Ontario and Canada did not. Our needs around sport, play and recreation need to be addressed in a real way. Ontario and Canada have a responsibility to meet their obligations to our communities and take the steps needed to promote youth health and well-being through sport and recreational activities.
5. We need stable and positive adult support networks across our communities to provide resources and funding when developing showcases for young peoples' skills and talents. Possible events could include different sports, art classes, local talent shows or conferences or learning events.
6. We need events that bring communities together to participate and be more involved with each other. This could include something like a "Youth Olympics."

CONTINUING TO LISTEN AND LEARN

YOUTH ADVISORY FEEDBACK

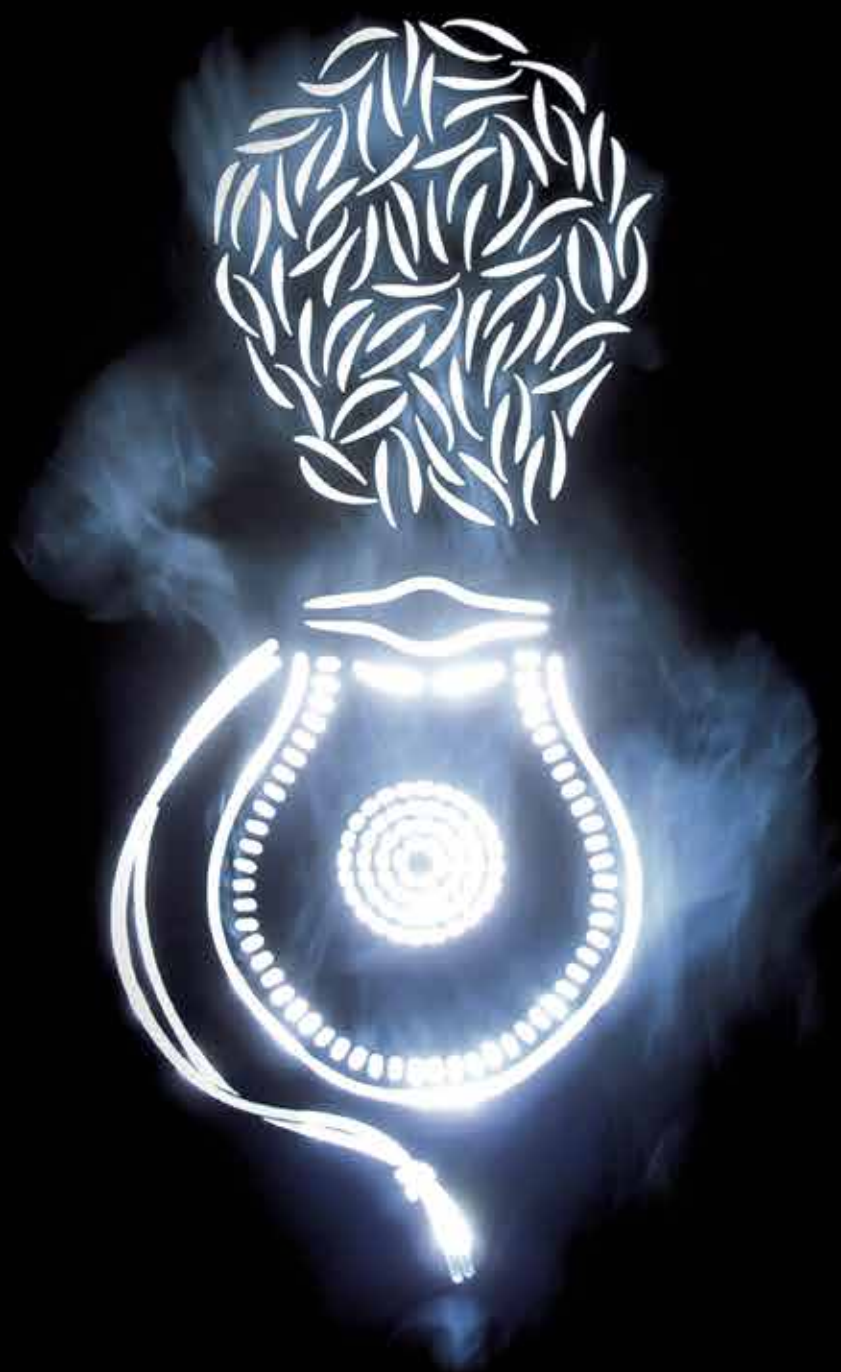
After reviewing this section, the youth advisory group, in conversation with the action plan's writers, added the following thoughts, stories or recommendations:

“Not all physical activity has to be sports oriented. Young people should be supported in the organization of community clean-up activities.”

“Being active in improving the community makes youth feel good about themselves. Taking an interest in the well-being of others helps build relationships and trust.”

“Youth can also be supported in activities that support and assist elders or the elderly in the community. Helping elders creates bonds of trust between the generations and encourages the kind of positive contact that restores traditional community values and creates feelings of hope for the future.”





BUILDING A MOVEMENT

"Always through tobacco," this medicine is used to strengthen and open communications between persons or people and the spirit world and is offered to elders when seeking advice. Tobacco is central in honouring our connection to the natural world.

YOUTH OPPORTUNITY AND LEADERSHIP

Opportunity can be defined as “a good position, chance, or prospect for advancement or success.” However, for many First Nations youth, this way of understanding opportunity doesn’t occur very often. We are tired of sitting around and doing nothing. We want to learn, to grow, to better ourselves and the communities we come from. We are tired of asking. We are ready to take on more responsibility. We want to create change and we want to earn the respect of young people in our home communities and across Ontario’s north. We want our leadership to listen to what is being said and seriously consider what responsibility they have in supporting us to make real change. Providing youth with leadership opportunities enables us to build resilience, self-understanding and empathy and encourages us to believe in who we are. It has a positive effect on our overall well-being.¹

Many of our First Nations communities lack learning and training opportunities for young people. I see more and more young people beginning to challenge their communities and asking for more opportunities to learn and the chance to take on leadership roles. The more skills we have, the more we want to learn and the more confident we feel. At the forum young people told us they wanted to be certi-

fied for First Aid and CPR and receive training in ‘safeTALK’ — a program designed to teach youth how to recognize the signs of suicide and connect peers to suicide intervention resources. They want leadership training and workshops on self-esteem. They know that for these programs to take hold in their communities they need stable, sustainable and targeted long-term funding.

At the forum, we were told that young people wanted access to apprenticeship programs so they could become certified trades people in their communities. This could be done through an expanded partnership with the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program. It would involve bringing certified trades people to our communities to train youth who are willing to learn and work hard. We know this will not be easy. Apprenticeship Programs will have to work with us in the north in a different way than they do in the south. It will mean adjusting the timelines to complete training and understanding the realities of being a trades-person in a northern community. These adjustments will make it possible for us to stay near our families and support systems while obtaining skills and giving us an opportunity to make a positive contribution to our communities. The more we feel educated and confident, the more we will be willing and able to work towards building a better future for ourselves and our communities.

¹ Retrieved from: <http://www.foroige.ie/media/new-irish-study-confirms-benefits-young-people-youth-leadership-programmes>.



"A lot of youth have talent but no spark or cities nearby [with resources to help develop their talent]."

Young people are constantly searching for constructive activities to participate in, no matter where they live. But this becomes a challenge when they live in small, isolated communities and see only the very visible and negative behaviours of others that are around them.

This issue was raised in every session of the Feathers of Hope forum. First Nations youth want to prevent these problems by establishing youth committees to plan and run community events. Giving responsibility to us to contribute to our communities in this way will help us develop a strong work ethic, demonstrate that we can be trusted with responsibility and give us a sense of accomplishment.

Creating youth councils and networks will help us come together to talk, swap ideas and skills and to grow and learn

"[Youth want to be] more involved with different activities in the community [and] feel like a part of something."

"[A band council] should get close to the youth. They ignore the youth."

to relate to one another. Also, being a part of youth committees, networks or councils that are volunteer-based will help us gain experience, and build in us a strong sense of community. The positive feelings and sense of accomplishment that comes from this kind of opportunity helps build confidence and spreads a message of hope that we have the power and capability to accomplish what we set our minds to. Feathers of Hope has been a clear example of this kind of coming together.

Youth need the support of leaders in their community to ensure they have opportunities to develop their leadership potential and skills. It is crucial for community leadership to be our allies and champions. The best way to demonstrate this is by meeting with us regularly on a weekly or monthly basis to truly listen to what we are saying, doing, and offer us advice and support while guiding our development as community leaders. We also need provincial and federal governments to come forward and support us on our journey. As Professor Mark Brennan from Penn State University said,

*"Youth organizations, schools, community groups and governments need to play their part in recognizing young people as valuable assets and leaders. Aspirational or token recognition and engagement means we are failing our young people."*²

Community leaders, various levels of government and policy-makers need to be on board with youth and the positive course they want to take. This can only happen if government and youth commit to a plan and work as partners for the successful completion of these initiatives.

2 Ibid.

TAKING STEPS TO MAKE HOPE REAL

1. We want to develop skills and have access to opportunities that will support our ability to become leaders in our communities. The skills we acquire will help us stay in our communities and create employment opportunities.
2. We want band councils and reserve-based businesses to provide us with internship opportunities so we can learn to become a valued part of our communities.
3. We want to establish a new tradition of volunteerism in our communities so that we are better connected to all members of our communities and build the resources we need to create sustainable healthy living environments and accountable governance.
4. We want to pool our knowledge and share it with other communities.

CONTINUING TO LISTEN AND LEARN

YOUTH ADVISORY FEEDBACK

After reviewing this section, the youth advisory group, in conversation with the action plan's writers, added the following thoughts, stories or recommendations:

"We want to establish Youth councils similar to 'reserve meetings' but for just for young people. These circles will help young people identify the things they want to see changed in the community and offer a respectful way to discuss issues and solutions "from the inside" instead of having them imposed from others."

"We need more 'natural helpers,' that is peer mentors who are the people we are most likely to reach out to when we are struggling. More young people on-reserve need to learn the skills to be an effective peer mentor for other youth."

"We would like our communities to establish a way to recognize the skills, talents or special contributions made by young people in the community. This could happen in the form of talent shows, showcases or acknowledgment at community gatherings."

ROLE MODELS AND MENTORS

The people around us, especially during our early development, influence our lives in positive and negative ways. It is far too common for First Nations children and youth to miss out on the opportunity of having around us people who have a beneficial impact on our lives. For many of us, life means growing up living in substandard housing and in communities with poor living conditions. Also, as a result of living in these poor environments, with unresponsive or absent caregivers and surrounded by the negative lifestyles of others, we are more likely than other youth in Canada to be taken into child welfare care.¹ These life circumstances have a great impact on our mental, physical and emotional development. However, despite living lives filled with neglect and early deprivation, we understand the impact just one positive role model can have when they reach out to guide us toward a healthy future. We believe that when adults act as positive role models and mentors they are not only investing in us as individuals but, more importantly, they are investing in and strengthening our communities by becoming community leaders in their own right.

1 National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health. (2009). *Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Children in Child Protection Services*. Retrieved from: http://www.nccah-ccnsa.ca/docs/fact%20sheets/child%20and%20youth/NCCAH_fs_childhealth_EN.pdf.

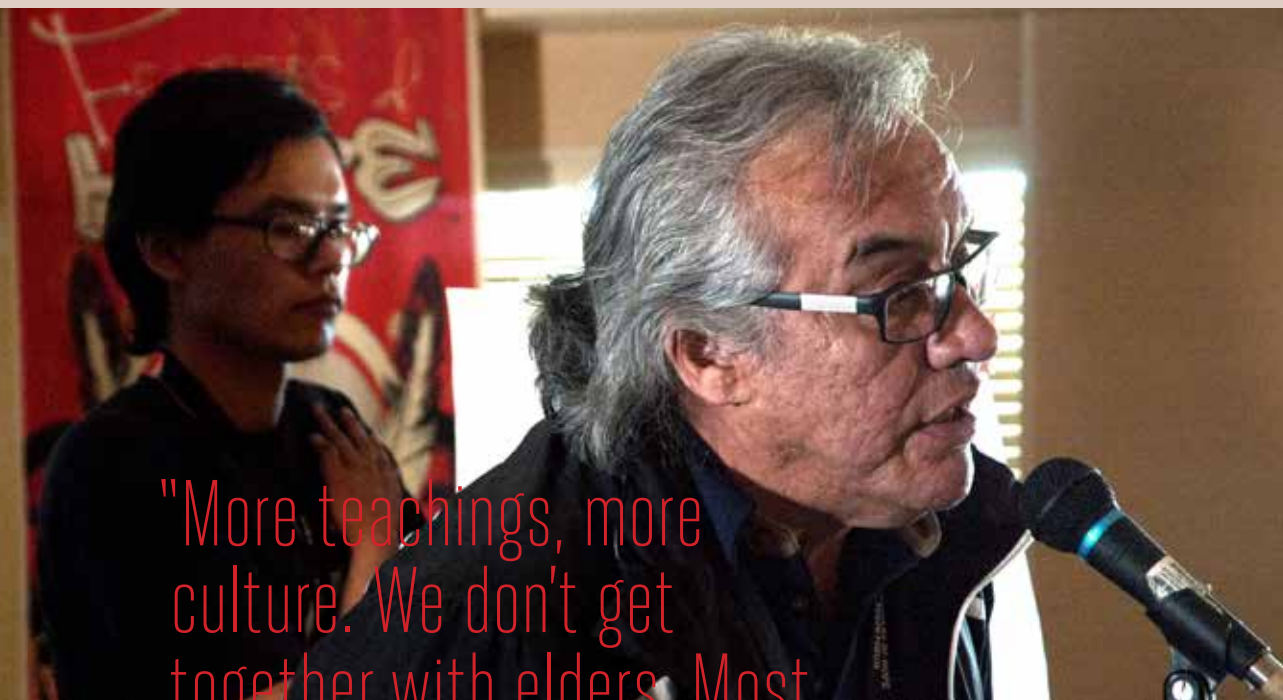
The power of a positive mentoring relationship knows no limits, especially when it comes to youth. Working and learning peer to peer or youth to adult is a great way to help us build connections and grow together in mutual understanding. And, not only is it a way to receive positive support and mutual guidance, it provides us with an opportunity to practice our own form of mentorship and leadership skills with each other. This way, peer mentorship takes on a healing quality and becomes a resource that can make a huge difference in our lives. This was something James Morris was committed to achieving when he pushed for the creation of the original *Horizons of Hope Report*. Like James, we believe peer-to-peer helping gives young people who have communication and leadership skills the chance to help others who need assistance. We believe we can create opportunities for peer-to-peer helping in many settings both on and off reserve or in and outside of school environments. More importantly, we believe peer-to-peer mentoring can provide a form of support that is often missing nowadays, a person, a friend, someone who will be with us and where needed, someone who will help us find the help we may need when life becomes overwhelming.

Too often young people in our communities live their anger, pain and sadness in silence. This can become too much to carry on our own and this is when peer mentors can help us

"[Youth respond better to the] power of example. I think it [youth councils] didn't work in my community because the person talking didn't really live what they were speaking."

THE ORIGINAL YOUTH COMMISSIONERS STAND WITH AND IN SUPPORT OF FEATHERS OF HOPE AND THE CONTINUATION OF THEIR EARLY WORK TO BEGIN THE PROCESS OF CHANGE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN ALL FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITIES.





ELDER WHITE PROVIDED TRANSLATION SUPPORT DURING YOUTH PRESENTATION SESSION.

"More teachings, more culture. We don't get together with elders. Most people our age don't know the language. Learning the language would be important. Chief and council could ask elders to meet with us, teach us language or just do something with us. Chief and council could help with that."

find the right person or resource to connect with to get the help we need.

The process of selecting and training community peer mentors can start by having the local school or community select young people who have a positive influence on their peers or local environment or who are just doing well in life in general. Having a person that we look up to, who is around the same age as us, shows us what is possible and provides the inspiration that we can achieve anything is so important in creating hope. As Alexandr Solzhenitsyn once said,

"He brought with him, too, that passionate sense of conviction which inspires beliefless by its veracity than by its origin in personal suffering. He spoke with the special insight of one who had witnessed..."

What this world famous human rights activist is saying is not too different from what young First Nations youth are saying now: **"If you don't have the same lived experiences as me, how can you begin to tell us how we should feel or what we need?"** Knowing someone who has the same lived experiences, but is doing well for themselves, demonstrates

the power of hope, courage and determination and that young people can overcome obstacles and challenges they may face in life.

As these same mentors become adults they carry with them a reputation as a person who mentors and supports young people attending school outside our communities. Whether touching base with us when we are away from home or advocating for funds for us to attend training and events outside our communities, this person becomes a valuable resource to our communities. When we have this kind of community champion it makes it easier to believe in the adults in our lives and in ourselves. But we need these mentors to be healthy and well. It is hard enough to be there for other young people in our communities. We cannot be expected to take on the responsibility for taking on a healing role in the lives of adult community mentors who are struggling themselves.

We heard that becoming an active member of the community at a young age gives youth the chance to interact positively with community members and feel more involved and connected to their surroundings. Time and time again participants at the forum stated that they wanted to be active contributors to their communities and form local youth councils. They wanted the opportunity to show the leadership and other community members that they can create positive change and instill hope, not only for themselves, but for future generations. Participating on a youth council is a great way to gain experience in advocacy, in creating events and developing programs. It also helps create and foster lasting bonds between council members and community members who support the efforts of the youth council.

Communities need to take the initiative to develop a youth council. The council will need a place to meet, an adult to mentor the youth and the leadership to be supportive. The leadership can be supportive by not only encouraging community members to accept the council, but to also meet regularly with the youth and discuss any issues or topics

young people feel need attention. Having an open dialogue between youth and supportive adults and allies will help us mature and give us an opportunity to share in the building of healthier communities.

Many of us feel disconnected from our elders, communities and our local culture and traditions. The need for mentoring programs and opportunities to connect with elders on an ongoing basis becomes more apparent to us every day. There is great power and potential in youth who are confident and strong in their identity. Having the opportunity to learn our culture through the study of local traditions and teachings will help us achieve just that. It provides a way to bond with the elders in the community and allows them to have a strong and positive influence on us. By bringing together youth and elders, we can help the community grow and restore and maintain its traditions.

This is a joint effort that must be supported by and through the community with funding from government. Funding will help communities establish a resource for gathering and enable elders and resource staff to provide instruction without having to worry about finances. Funding must be made available to ensure that steps are taken to address the barriers of distance and cost that often stop communities from supporting culturally-based experiences and other activities needed by communities to invest in mentoring their young people. At the community level there is a need to pair young people with elders who are knowledgeable, healthy, willing to work with youth and who want to make a positive impact on our lives. We believe the development of mentoring programs and programs involving both elders and youth will help restore optimism and have a dramatic impact on the health of First Nations communities everywhere.

TAKING STEPS TO MAKE HOPE REAL

1. We understand that, like the medicine wheel teaches us, it is important to have all parts of our communities working together in harmony and balance. This process begins by creating positive spaces for children and youth and families to thrive and be healthy.
2. We understand that positive or negative ripples created in a community affect all of the other parts. We choose to create positive ripples and ask for opportunities to give back to our communities through leadership and mentoring opportunities.
3. We want our communities to establish a pool of healthy adults who can mentor us and teach us cultural knowledge and our traditional ways while at the same time providing us with the skills we will need to step into leadership roles in our communities as adults (for example, finance, business and leadership skills).
4. We cannot do these things for or by ourselves. You, the adults in our communities, need to reach out and help us. If you genuinely believe we are leaders, the future and that things can change you need to support us to become what you want us to be. If not, your lack of guidance and attention becomes a form of role modelling that will trap us in the same reality that has been documented in the 30 years of reports we reviewed in creating this action plan. The choice is yours, and ours. We choose to move forward. All we ask is that you do the same.

CONTINUING TO LISTEN AND LEARN

YOUTH ADVISORY FEEDBACK

After reviewing this section, the youth advisory group, in conversation with the action plan's writers, added the following thoughts, stories or recommendations:

"We are the future and the leaders of today. We want to know you really see us that way too and recognize the contribution we can make to our communities."

"We want stronger connections to those who carry the knowledge of our people. We want to bring elders and youth together more at band council meetings so that we can share perspectives and learn from one another."

"We want elders and youth to respect each other, and a program or some other way to begin connecting youth with elders in our communities."

SUSTAINABLE FUNDING

"Our community had to shut down the school because there was no funding. [There is] no gym in the school."

The topic of sustainable funding for First Nations youth-related projects or services on- or off-reserve was raised often at the forum. Many youth wanted to know where the dollars go that are given to communities by government. Others were frustrated that funding for youth-related projects are tied to one-time or time-limited funding. Even if a program or service is well-developed, well-delivered and used or needed in the community, it just ends when the funding runs out. When programs that are helpful and of value to the community abruptly end or just disappear, it leaves young people feeling that their needs are not considered important by their chief and council and, more importantly, that they are not valued by their communities.

Participants talked about their feelings of hopelessness and frustration over the amount of time it takes to create even

the most basic supports and services youth need in their communities. I heard very clearly that they have had enough. They are tired of asking the same questions and not getting any answers from community leadership. They also do not intend to just sit around waiting for change to happen.

Listening to their stories, I could see that the experiences of First Nations youth are not all the same. However, overall, the living conditions in their communities in northern Ontario are far from what non-First Nations people would find acceptable in other parts of the country. Services that are important to help people maintain their physical and mental health, or offer protection and safety, are either not available or not funded at a level that provides the services communities need, even when it comes to "essential" services. A service is considered "essential" if stopping or reducing

OVER THE COURSE OF THE FORUM, EVENING ACTIVITIES FOCUSED ON PLAY, TEAMWORK AND YOUNG PEOPLE HAVING FUN TOGETHER. ACTIVITIES INCLUDED THE BIG GAME, SCAVENGER HUNTS, GIANT JENGA AND CULTURAL ARTS. KIDS WORKED WITH EACH OTHER TO BUILD A SENSE OF COMMUNITY FUN FOR THOSE IN ATTENDANCE AT THE FORUM.

"Adults have to let go of the programs."



"They don't know how to be kids, [they] smoke, [they] don't know how to play in the bush."

the service could cause harm or raise the chance of harm to community members.¹ If the service is non-existent, then the risk of harm is obviously very high. Yet this is exactly the situation young people and families face in many northern communities.

It was clear from listening to participants at the forum that many First Nations youth and their communities lack access to even the most basic essential services such as healthcare, schools, police and fire services. When added to a lack of access to sports- and recreation-related resources, it is obvious that there is a major problem with government funding and that it results in the poor quality of life forum participants described in the group discussions and presentations.

1 Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat. (April, 2005). *Guidelines for Essential Services Agreements*. Retrieved from: <http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pol/doc-eng.aspx?section=text&id=12597>.

"[We need love for each other] and [to] believe that [we] really are a community and need each other."

The lack of funding and support for these community services and social support programs — widely available to non-First Nations youth in the rest of Canada — is a major cause of the feelings of hopelessness First Nations youth talked about at the forum. Bored, frustrated and living in such poor environments causes some young people to turn to involvement in negative coping behaviours like substance abuse, violence, self harming, etc.

Limited opportunities to participate in positive recreation activities in northern communities have consequences. Some youth report feeling like they are forced to grow up too quickly. They talked about becoming sexually active before they were mature enough to understand the consequences, such as becoming pregnant or getting a sexually transmitted disease (STD). They misuse substances that harm their health. They become involved in unhealthy relationships or are physically or sexually victimized. They also have a lower quality of life.²

They recognize that they are not being treated equally compared to non-First Nations youth. Many say they just start to believe they deserve this unjust treatment by government and other Canadians, that they cannot amount to very much and that their dreams do not matter. Many First Nations youth spoke about living with overwhelming feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.

Many of the young people who attended the forum, and those we met at the mini-forum, know what they want — and it is not always about funding. And, while they believed that having youth centres, cultural supports and recreational programming available would reduce their chances of getting involved in negative coping behaviours, participants also spoke about simply wanting to build harmonious relationships in their communities and reclaiming

traditional values like the need to be responsible for taking care of one another.

Having a vision of restoring the health of their communities is an important first step for First Nations youth. They want to create hope for the future where members of their communities are able to earn a living, live strong positive lives and thrive in the lands of their ancestors. They believe that solutions start with the basics. They feel that hope grows in communities that honour and respect their culture and traditions. They feel that hope grows where youth are provided with opportunities to learn how to become contributing members of the community who are able to give back to others and be successful wherever they go.

They also spoke about wanting support from chiefs and councils and community leaders so they can take on responsibilities to help improve the quality of life in their communities. First Nations youth have constructive ideas. Participants spoke about wanting to lead fundraising and planning initiatives to support recreation centres or programs and activities for youth in their communities. Some are addressing the lack of social supports by starting youth groups and pushing for more resources to be allocated by leadership to establish educational programs for boys and girls in their communities. Some want to volunteer their time to represent their peers on advisory committees and get involved with the politics of their communities. Participants shared a belief that successful youth programs are youth-centred and youth-led and that sustainable programming is not solely money-based. It also requires a personal commitment from young people and a willingness to give their time and energy over the long-term to help start and keep these programs running. They recognized they needed the support of their communities, proper training, positive adult mentors, and safe spaces that can include all youth in their communities.

Participants also raised a concern about how decisions are made regarding youth-related programs and services. They expressed a wish for more accountability on the part of both

2 Best Start Resource Centre. (2013). *Why am I poor? First Nations Child Poverty in Ontario*. Retrieved from: http://www.beststart.org/resources/anti_poverty/pdf/WhyAmIPoor.pdf.

"I just want a job. I want opportunities to make money within my own community."

local leadership and government. They want increased transparency from their chiefs and band councils in regards to the funding the community receives. They expressed the belief that resources given to a community belong to the community and that funding must first be provided for essential services and programs that are beneficial to children, youth and families.

Many forum participants said they wanted to stay in their home communities as they got older. Unfortunately, many communities lack opportunities for employment or access to resources that can help young people achieve this goal.

First Nations youth are not looking for hand-outs. They want to work with elders, chiefs, band councils and government. But they also want to be able to do positive things for their peers and their communities on their own. This does not mean they don't need adults. They are asking for respect and a working partnership with adults and leadership where they have a voice in determining how their needs are met and in creating their future. Youth are hungry for change and are beginning to do their best to achieve it with what little they have. They are confident that with sustained and proper levels of resources, opportunities and mentorship, they will be able to achieve their goals and more.

TAKING STEPS TO MAKE HOPE REAL

1. We are looking for equity in the level of essential and social support services available to non-First Nations youth in the rest of Canada.
2. We want our communities to support youth-led and youth-driven activities.
3. We want to learn the skills required to write proposals and engage in the political processes that help us acquire the resources we need to establish these programs, projects or activities.
4. We want to pass these skills along to youth coming up behind us, leaving the knowledge in the community.
5. We need support to establish links and partnerships with other communities to share skills needed to build programs and projects, operate facilities, teach volunteers and watch over the younger youth who we are mentoring into the role of future leaders.
6. We need a member of the band council who will provide us with information that is easy to understand and explains the financing and decision-making regarding youth programming and services to ensure it is not used for any other purposes. We need to find and work with advisors who have been successful at establishing these accountability processes between youth and band councils.

CONTINUING TO LISTEN AND LEARN

YOUTH ADVISORY FEEDBACK

After reviewing this section, the youth advisory group, in conversation with the action plan's writers, added the following thoughts, stories or recommendations:

"Why is everything so political?" We should be treated like human beings."

"Why don't we get enough resources?"

"We don't even have basics like clean water. How many people in Ontario have to boil their drinking water?"

"We're so isolated. Sure there's technology, but it still doesn't feel like we're even connected to modern society. It's like we're living in a camp."

"It's like society doesn't want us to adapt to the urban way [of living] since they deny us the resources we need to do it."

"Fruit is out of reach. It costs fifteen dollars for eight strawberries. Who's going to buy that when you can buy a bag of chips for a dollar."

"Half is on us, half is on Canada. We can't stay stuck forever. We need to change and government needs to change to make things right."

"Most community members don't know where the funding for the community goes."

ADDITIONAL ISSUES

CHILD WELFARE, ACCOUNTABILITY, CORRUPTION

At the forum, and in meetings with the youth advisory group, young people raised issues they felt were too important for just brief mention and needed a separate forum to allow for a fuller discussion. The specific issues raised involved greater financial accountability from band councils and child welfare.

ACCOUNTABILITY/ TRANSPARENCY (CORRUPTION)

"Band leadership needs to tell the community how resources are being spent. We need paper trails and drug and alcohol testing for money managers."

The issue of accountability and the management of community funding was raised by young people who expressed concern about what they felt was "corruption" or dishonesty on the part of some community leaders. The need for greater transparency in decision-making and fund allocation for youth-related matters, health and community services was raised repeatedly. Youth felt that financial resources provided to bands were the property of the community and that those who spent the funding needed to be accountable for their expenditures to all band members, including young people. Concern was expressed that without a transparent process regarding decision-making, communities were vulnerable to leaders who might decide to act with selfish interest. Concern was also expressed that young people are given no input into their band's financial decision-making.

"[Band] council [members] worry about their own struggles and families and they ignore the community. I have talked about money our community has lost, that they could have used to make things better and they just didn't."

There was discussion among forum participants that financial decision-making and accountability takes skill and that not every reserve has people with this type of training. They felt that bands that did not have trained staff should consult with other bands who did. They felt leadership should also seek or require training from financial professionals for all paid staff and council members responsible for a community's financial resources to ensure their financial records are in order so government does not need to be involved in third party management; this way bands could negotiate the support they needed on their own terms.

In conversations about transparency and accountability, participants offered a hopeful message that First Nations communities don't have to stay stuck in one place. Change is possible and requires everyone working together. This theme of youth wanting to work with others, be they First Nations leadership, peers, adults in the community, government or allies, really stands out. It is an indication of the power and hope youth possess and want to bring to the table to create change in their communities.

"Administrators of the band's money need to be trained to manage funds. If government wants oversight, we should get better at doing it ourselves."

CONTINUING TO LISTEN AND LEARN

YOUTH ADVISORY FEEDBACK

After reviewing this section, the youth advisory group, in conversation with the action plan's writers, added the following thoughts, stories or recommendations:

"How many Aboriginals know how to manage funding. We have to ask for help."

"It's First Nations persons. We have the stats working against us."

"It's important to have partnerships on your own terms. If you're partnering with government then it has to be on mutually agreed upon terms. It doesn't even have to be government, just someone who can help."

"I know band members are taking money from the community, but I didn't know it was happening in other communities."

"If we had people who were better qualified, had partners to help us, there'd be fewer problems with [misuse of] funding. We need to find partners to help us, and successful bands who have experience to help us."

CHILD WELFARE

"Child welfare workers are poorly trained. I've seen workers who are drunk or intoxicated."

It is clear from discussions at the forum that the child welfare system has a major impact on many First Nations young peoples' lives. It was a topic that could have taken up much more time. Youth expressed strong feelings about their experiences with the system including the perception that child welfare workers are not properly trained. Given the responsibility workers have over the lives of young people and their families, youth want child welfare workers to demonstrate they have the skills and ability to be professional and competent at their jobs.

"I have seen child welfare workers' Facebook pages where they're partying, acting young portraying themselves as "gangsters" even when they're 40 years old."

CONTINUING TO LISTEN AND LEARN.

YOUTH ADVISORY FEEDBACK

After reviewing this section, the youth advisory group, in conversation with the action plan's writers, added the following thoughts, stories or recommendations:

"How can they say they care? They went on strike which negatively impacted on children."

"Youth have seen child welfare workers' Facebook pages where they're partying, acting young portraying themselves as "gangsters" even when they're 40 years old."

"Though it was raised briefly at the forum, we need a bigger discussion of this topic."



YOUTH PARTICIPATING IN THE
SCAVENGER HUNT.



TAKING ACTION

Another of the traditional medicines, sage, is often used to help people prepare for ceremonies and teachings. It can be used to help clear and calm the mind. Some First Nations people use female sage with women and male sage with men.

BUILDING AN ACTION PLAN

Since the forum and community visits were held, we have reviewed the recommendations and ideas shared by young people in attendance against a number of key reports that have been written over the last 30 years. For example:

1. Government of Canada. (1996). *Royal Commission Report on Aboriginal Peoples*. Ottawa, ON: Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.
2. Nishnawbe-Aski Nation. (1995). *Horizons of Hope: An Empowering Journey. Final Report of the Youth Forum on Youth Suicide*. NAN.
3. Ministry of the Solicitor General, Ontario. (1999). *Verdict of the Coroner's Jury into the death of Saleena Sakanee*. Toronto, ON: MSG.
4. Health Canada. (2002). *Preventing Suicide in First Nations: The Report of the Advisory Group on Suicide Prevention*. Ottawa, ON: Health Canada.
5. Office of the Chief Coroner, Ontario. (2011). *The Chief Coroner's Death Review of the Youth Suicides at the Pikangikum First Nation 2006–2008*. Toronto, ON: OCC.
6. Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth. (2011) *Our Dreams Matter Too: An alternate report from the Shannen's Dream Campaign to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child on the Occasion of Canada's 3rd and 4th periodic review*. Toronto, ON.
7. Government of Ontario. (2013). *First Nations Representation on Ontario Juries. Report of the Independent Review Conducted by the Honourable Frank Iacobucci*. (February, 2013).
8. Government of Ontario. (2008). *The Review of the Roots of Youth Violence*. Toronto, ON: Queen's Printer.
9. Government of Canada. (2012). *Federal Budget for 2012*. Ottawa, ON: Finance Canada.

In doing this review, we have come to the realization that the only real difference between these documents and *Feathers of Hope: A First Nations Youth Action Plan* is that conditions have, in many ways, only gotten worse for First Nations youth. So rather than simply cross-reference each of our recommendations against all of these well-written reports we have decided to adopt a different approach. We have, in dialogue with each other and our youth advisory group, decided to move forward with a call for action. We are calling on governments and leadership and our communities to seek out and ensure the financial and human

resources are in place to move forward with an action plan driven by young people and supported by leadership and government. The action plan requires that you start with a commitment to let young people lead the change process and that the federal and provincial governments adopt Jordan's Principle as a central tenant of ensuring that the needed financial and human resources associated with realizing the outcomes of the action plan are made available.

Through the action plan we are telling governments and our leadership that we will be part of the solution and that we will take the steps necessary to ensure that First Nations youth see we will continue to work with and for them to lead change in our communities.

The action plan will bring us back together with First Nations leadership and all levels of government. It will also require that the Office of the Provincial Advocate continue to play a key role as an Advocate for young people in our communities.

We are starting with a five year commitment by all levels of government and First Nations leadership to move forward on a framework developed by youth and supported by leadership who attended the Feathers of Hope forum. We will work with these youth to review the steps to making hope real that have been noted in this action plan and select 10 key actionable items that align with the needs we have brought forward.

As a first step in demonstrating a commitment to moving forward, we ask that provincial and federal governments secure the funding needed to cover the salaries for the original five Youth Amplifier positions for the five year duration of this strategy.

We ask that in its role as an independent body mandated to work with and for First Nations children and youth the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth to agree to continue housing and supporting the work associated with this strategy and work with the youth and a partnership table to ensure that as the work moves forward, the priority remains anchored in the rights and needs of First Nations youth.

We want to work with a group of senior officials from First Nations leadership, federal, provincial and municipal

governments who can make the decisions needed to ensure that human and financial resources are put in place to help us develop strategies to deliver on the recommendations in this action plan. We ask that senior officials at the Assistant Deputy Minister and Deputy Minister level in key provincial ministries and federal departments come together with deputy chiefs from each of our treaty areas to make this action plan a reality.

That in each of the years associated with this action plan, a Feathers of Hope forum be held to keep the energy, enthusiasm and commitment of young people alive. With this in mind, the first of these forums must centre on First Nations child welfare. We recognize that we need a separate dialogue with northern First Nations young people in the care of Children's Aid societies across this province including First Nations Child and Family Service agencies.

We ask that the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth continue to lead, with the financial and human resource support of First Nations leadership, federal and provincial governments, these forums as they have in their work with us demonstrated that they have the resources and capacity to support and invest in the development of young people leading this type of large scale event.

Each Feathers of Hope forum will do at least two things, focus on the issues raised in this action plan and focus on how to develop community-based responses to the recommendations that will be acted on in the upcoming year. In this way, young people will be able to hold us accountable for the commitments we are making in this action plan.

Where needed, we will invite persons with knowledge and expertise in the specific area to these forums. We recognize the issues our communities face are complex and as such we know there is a need for allies in this work. We must reach out to people who have the knowledge and expertise we need to develop strategies that will work in our communities. In doing this we want to be clear we want partnerships with these experts, not simply people telling us how things will go. We know what the tools for change must look like and for them to work in our communities and if we don't the young people we represent do. The partnership we want must be based in our ability to be self-determining. We need to know we have control moving forward, because we have promises to keep and work to do.

A FIRST NATIONS YOUTH ACTION PLAN

Feathers of Hope is about the importance and power of hope. Based on the discussions and ideas for change raised at the forum(s) we realized that there were no quick fixes to the challenges facing First Nations children and youth, their families and communities, but there is so much that can be done to meet their needs without always requiring more funding. We have included in this action plan the feedback and ideas of forum participants who want to see real and lasting change. The plan provides steps that can be followed to start a change process focused on improving our lives and healing our communities. These “steps to hope” are critical, but more is needed to change the conditions many First Nations youth live in.

We believe strongly that the active participation of First Nations youth at every step of the process is necessary for its success. For this reason we developed the action plan as a five year road map that we believe will move forward the vision of young people and provide a real opportunity for youth to be part of shaping the work tied to the healing processes in our individual communities.

1. All decision-makers in Ministries at the provincial and federal level, First Nations leadership and other interested organizations must join together and take immediate action to meet the needs and challenges faced by First Nations youth. All actions and strategies based on the action plan must be created with First Nations young people as equal partners.

2. A five year strategy must be created to focus on the following themes raised by youth in forum discussions:

- Residential Schools and their Effects: Dispelling Myths
- Identity and Culture
- First Nations Culture and Teachings
- Quality of Education
- Education and Schools
- The Tragedy of Youth Suicide
- Mental and Physical Health
- Drugs and Alcohol
- Sports and Recreation
- Youth Opportunity and Leadership
- Role Models and Mentors
- Sustainable Funding
- Child Welfare
- Accountability (Corruption)

- a) Within 60 days of the release of the action plan, the Province of Ontario, the federal government, and representatives of First Nations leadership from each treaty area in Ontario's North, (Nishnawbe Aski Nation, Treaty 3, Robinson Superior) will publically state their support for and commitment to working together with First Nations youth to ensure the five year strategy remains focused on creating real change tied to the themes listed above.
- b) Within 60 days of the release of this action plan a formal body will be created to bring together all the parties (provincial and federal Ministries, First Nations leadership, other organizations and youth) needed to create meaningful change in the lives of First Nations children and youth.
- c) The principles and funding mechanisms set out in Jordan's Principle will be key in the terms of reference used by the formal body so that the focus of the work is on the needs of young people and communities, not on "who pays for what."
- d) The formal body (including senior representation from the Province of Ontario, the federal government, youth and First Nations leadership) shall address two of the themes listed above each year over the five year period of the strategy and do so in a real and observable way through the development of an action plan. Each action plan must include a commitment to provide the sustainable human and financial resources needed to make change in northern and remote fly-in communities. The action plan must be goal specific, practical and measurable in its activities and outcomes.

e) Within 90 days of the release of the action plan, steps must be taken to work with the current youth Amplifiers to hire five First Nations young people to work with them and ensure that the work begun through the action plan is acted on and moved from paper to implementation to achieve real change. Funding for the five youth who will do this work over the next five years will be provided by, the federal government and First Nations bodies.

f) The Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, which we have found to be a neutral and supportive partner, shall remain central in the recruitment and support of the five First Nations youth.

3. We see the support, funding and development of this five year strategy as an opportunity for government and First Nations leadership to prove to First Nations youth that we matter and that they want us to believe in ourselves and our ability to be the real change that needs to happen in our communities.

a) That a yearly forum for First Nations youth shall be held in each of the next four years. Each annual forum will be tied to two key priority areas identified by First Nations youth. Also, a 5th youth forum will be held to specifically address First Nations child welfare, as we need to extend the work of Feathers of Hope to include children and youth from our communities who are in the care of child welfare and Child and Family Services.

b) The leadership for organizing these yearly forums should remain with the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth as they have shown that they have the skill and capacity to allow us as young people to come together in a way that ensures safety and a youth-centered focus to the discussions.



TOGETHER





WE ARE...





FEATHERS





OF HOPE





...A FIRST NATIONS





YOUTH MOVEMENT





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