



Addressing Trauma in the Search and Recovery of Missing Children

Summary Report
November 2022



**Office of the Independent
Special Interlocutor**
for Missing Children and Unmarked
Graves and Burial Sites associated
with Indian Residential Schools

**Bureau de l'interlocutrice
spéciale indépendante**
pour les enfants disparus et les tombes
et les sépultures anonymes en lien avec
les pensionnats indiens



**National Centre for
Truth and Reconciliation**
UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

**Centre national pour la
vérité et la réconciliation**
UNIVERSITÉ DU MANITOBA



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Dedication

Elder Charlie Nelson, also known as Mizhakwanigiishik or Nibidekwaneb, from Bagwaa'onishkoziibing (Roseau River First Nation) within Treaty 1 Territory, was scheduled to raise his Pipe during the Gathering; unfortunately, he passed to the Spirit World just days before the Gathering began.

Elder Charlie Nelson had a positive impact on many people's lives. He was known as respectful, calm, non-judgmental and compassionate. He was an educator and helped establish the Minweweywigaan (often called Charlie's Lodge), a gathering space for community events, workshops and sweat lodges. In 1988, he was raised up by the Grandmothers of the Three Fires Midewiwin Lodge to be Ogimaw of the Western Doorway and entered his 6th Degree in 2016.

Elder Nelson was born to Stan and Marjorie Nelson and was a proud father of six children, one adopted daughter and proud grandfather of 13 grandchildren. He was a Survivor of the Assiniboia Indian Residential School and an advocate for preserving and revitalizing Indigenous languages that were purposefully attacked through the Indian Residential School System.

Among many other contributions over the course of his lifetime, Elder Nelson held governance positions within his community and was a member of the Elders and Knowledge Keepers Circle for the Southern Chiefs' Organization and the Elders Council for the Southern Network of Care.

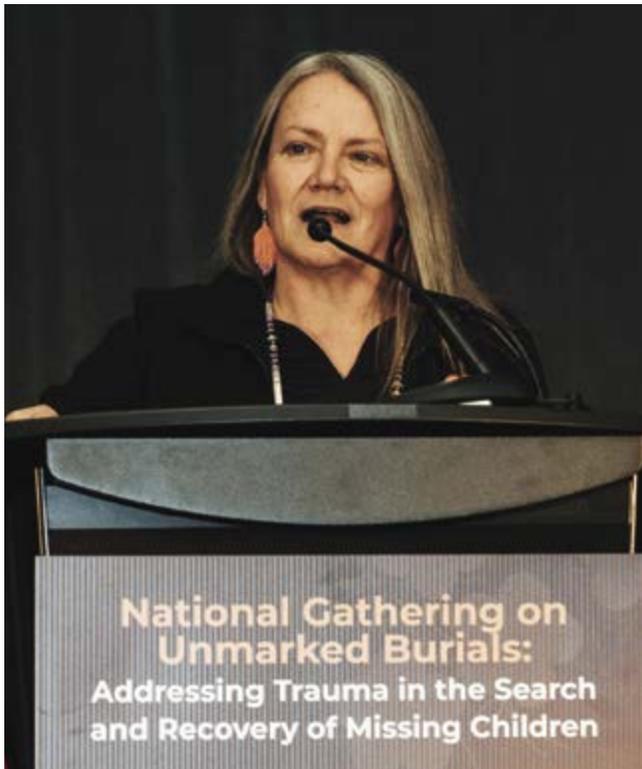
In his youth, Elder Nelson was a member of the FrontRunners, a group of 10 Indigenous track and field athletes (nine of whom attended Indian Residential Schools) who carried the torch for the 1967 Pan Am Games from St. Paul, Minnesota to Winnipeg Stadium. After carrying the torch for the more than 800-kilometre journey over seven full days, the FrontRunners were sent to a nearby restaurant to watch a White athlete carry the torch into the stadium on television. In 1999, the Manitoba government issued a long overdue official apology and a special ceremony was held at the 1999 Pan Am Games for the seven surviving athletes.

The FrontRunners' story is recounted in a docudrama released by the National Film Board in 2007 called Niigaanibatowaad: FrontRunners. This film has been shown across Canada and at various events to educate the public. In 2014, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada held a Blanketing Ceremony to honour the FrontRunners. Several months later, at the 2015 Pan Am Games in Toronto, four members of the FrontRunners: Charlie Nelson, Bill Chippeway, Charlie Bittern and William Merasty, were honoured and participated in the Opening Ceremonies, which included the Three Fires Ceremony.

Elder Charlie Nelson dedicated his life to the well-being of Anishinaabe people; his approach in all aspects of his life was grounded in traditional Anishinaabe ways of being and seeing the world. He embodied the Seven Grandfather Teachings of Love, Kindness, Respect, Humility, Courage, Wisdom, and Truth and left important tracks for the next Seven Generations.

At the lighting of the Sacred Fire on the first morning of the Gathering, and throughout, special prayers for Elder Charlie Nelson were offered.

Message from Kimberly Murray, the Independent Special Interlocutor for Missing Children and Unmarked Graves and Burials Sites Associated with Indian Residential Schools



Kimberly Murray providing opening remarks at the Gathering

I begin, as always, by acknowledging Survivors, Indigenous families and communities across Turtle Island who are leading this Sacred work of recovering the unmarked burials and missing children. I want to acknowledge that those leading search and recovery efforts often relive their trauma as they work to bring honour and dignity to the Spirits and bodies of the children. The fact that there are unmarked burials of children on Indian Residential School sites and other associated sites across this country is due to the actions and decisions of the Canadian government and the churches who administered these institutions. However, it is Survivors, Indigenous families and communities that are carrying the burden of leading the search and recovery efforts – a burden that should never have been theirs to carry.

I also want to acknowledge the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR)

for co-hosting this Gathering with the Office of the Independent Special Interlocutor. In particular, I acknowledge the contributions of the Circle of Survivors and the National Advisory Committee on Residential Schools Missing Children and Unmarked Burials. The National Advisory Committee organized several workshops during the Gathering for further exchange of knowledge and discussions about how to address trauma in search and recovery work.

Volume 4 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's (TRC) Final Report focused on missing children and unmarked burials. The Commissioners heard about and worked to locate many unmarked burials, and they believed that there are likely similar burials associated with the former sites of every Indian Residential School across Canada. Children were often sent to other places, like the federal Indian hospitals, sanatoria, mental health and provincial hospitals, provincial reformatories, and industrial schools. The TRC identified that further work needed to be done to locate all the unmarked burials and find the missing children.

Specifically, TRC Calls to Action 71 through 76 identify some of the steps needed to support communities with finding, identifying and recovering the children. These include ensuring access to records and sites, and that decisions about commemoration and protection are Indigenous-led. Calls to Action 71-76, should be read in relation to the other Calls to Action, including Calls to Action 18-24 that are about improving health outcomes for Indigenous people and communities. In Call to Action 21, the TRC identified the need for community healing and wellness programs to address the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual harms caused by Indian Residential Schools. The need for long-term, sustainable funding for health and wellness supports was also identified as a common concern by Survivors, Indigenous families and communities and highlighted in the [Progress Report](#) that was delivered to the Minister of Justice in November 2022.

This National Gathering focused on the importance of addressing trauma related to the search and recovery of missing children and unmarked burials. During the Gathering's Welcome Dinner, the NCTR's Memorial Cloth – nearly as long as a hockey rink, bearing the names of 4,120 children known to have died while in the care of an Indian Residential School – was carried into the Gathering to the heartbeat of an Honour Song. The Memorial Cloth is evidence of the mistreatment, neglect and violence that children experienced at Indian Residential Schools that led to their deaths. The Memorial Cloth also reminds us of those children whose names are not yet included; the many children who died and are yet to be identified. This Sacred work can be overwhelming. The challenges of addressing its impacts can feel immense. But they can and must be met.

At the National Gathering, we were guided by Elders, Knowledge Holders, Ceremony, Songs and Drums. Participants and presenters highlighted the wisdom of Indigenous healing and wellness approaches that have been developed and practiced since time immemorial. These powerful discussions provided an important way forward to care for ourselves and others as we continue the Sacred work of bringing the children home.



Message from Stephanie Scott, Executive Director of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation

Boozhoo Miskwa aankwaadkwe ndizinakaaz wabeshishii dodem. Winnipeg doonji.

I want to acknowledge the Elders, Elder Florence Paynter and Elder Harry Bone, Ernie Daniels, Peter Skula, the Fire Keeper, and Mary Nirlungayuk for lighting the Qulliq. I would like to particularly thank our two Co-Chairs who have guided us through these two days with humour and kindness: Albert Beck and Lisa Meeches. I also want to thank all the performers who helped lift our Spirits through these very important – and sometimes very difficult — conversations.

There are so many people who deserve acknowledgement and thanks for their hard work and contributions to this event and to the work on a daily basis. This includes not only our wonderful presenters and facilitators, but also all of you who shared your own stories and insights. In preparation for this event, we have benefitted from the advice of the National Advisory Committee on Missing Children and Unmarked Burials, many of whom were with us throughout the week.

Many of you brought forward important recommendations to the Independent Special Interlocutor for how the laws and policies of Canada need to change to support the Sacred work of finding our missing children. I can think of no better advocate than Kim Murray and I know that she will be a champion for those changes you have identified.

This Gathering was an opportunity for the communities carrying out this work to connect with each other and share their knowledge and the lessons learned from their experiences. I know that the National Advisory Committee will be creating more of these types of opportunities in the near future. The Committee is also compiling a guide to some of the key resources that are already available to communities. These resources are now available on the [National Advisory Committee's website](#).



Stephanie Scott providing opening remarks at the Gathering

I want to briefly touch on three themes that I heard during this Gathering. These are things on which we can all act on going forward.

First, we know with absolute certainty that we must listen to Survivors. This is where our work begins. And this is how the work must proceed.

More than that, we must take care of Survivors. Because we know that these important conversations we are having, and the important work being planned or already underway in our communities, brings up terrible memories and opens old wounds.

The search for our missing children is a long and complex process. We need to care for Survivors at every stage along the way. And we need to take the time to do this work in a good way. As I heard several of our speakers say during this Gathering, the reason we are doing this is to heal. We must never lose sight of that purpose.

Second, I want to say that the need for care and healing doesn't end when the work day ends. And it won't be over when the search concludes. The need for care and healing is ongoing. This is true of Survivors. It is also true of our communities. And it is true for the frontline workers involved in all the steps of the search process. One message I heard loud and clear throughout this Gathering is that, collectively, we need to do a better job in recognizing and meeting these ongoing needs.

Finally, we have heard so strongly and so clearly that the search for our missing children must be grounded in our ceremonies and protocols. Our communities have the tools we need to do this work in a good way. We have heard how communities are using ceremony at every stage of the search process, from the first conversations with Survivors to the ways that they are memorializing the young ones. During this Gathering, we experienced the healing power of our Elders' words and of our songs and our dances.

Let's learn from this. Let's build on this. This is a long journey ahead of us. I want to assure you that the [National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation](#) is here to support the Survivors, the families and communities every step of the way.

Miigwetch.





Photo Credit: Mackenzie Garlow, Honey Bee Beading

During assimilation, we were so interconnected and intertwined, they saw that and they used that against us... They scattered us almost like beads. And now we're picking ourselves up one by one. We are colour-sorting ourselves, we're restringing them along, we are creating our own design... [In] the re-creation of our own design, [we are] rebuilding our Nations... We get this beautiful piece in the end and we're so proud of that... We need to interconnect again, we need to find and redesign ourselves so we can remake ourselves and fit into a beautiful piece again.

Diandre Thomas-Hart, Southern Chiefs' Organization Youth Council (Manitoba)

A. Overview and Purpose of the Second National Gathering

*Intergenerational healing takes time,
it takes a lot of effort, and it can be done.*

Dr James Makokis, MD

The National Gathering took place in Treaty 1 Territory, within the territories of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota and Dene Peoples, and the homeland of the Red River Métis and the urban home for many Inuit and other Indigenous people.

At the Gathering, it was clear that the trauma associated with the search and recovery of missing children and unmarked burials is experienced physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. Trauma is personal and trauma is collective.

More than 35 speakers and over 400 participants from across Turtle Island engaged in important conversations about how to address trauma related to missing children and unmarked burials. Hundreds more joined the livestream. Survivors, Elders, youth, Indigenous doctors and healthcare practitioners, Indigenous Healers and community leaders shared their knowledge and experiences regarding trauma and effective ways to address it.

To see the [full Program](#) for the November National Gathering, visit the OSI website at www.osi-bis.ca and click on Past Events.



Participants at the National Gathering

B. Introduction to the Summary Report

Throughout the Gathering, the discussions highlighted the strength, resistance and resilience of Indigenous people and communities in addressing trauma in the search and recovery of unmarked burials and missing children. Discussions highlighted Indigenous strength in surviving attempts at colonial genocide, Indigenous resistance in revitalizing Indigenous languages, cultures and ceremonies, and Indigenous resilience in supporting Survivors, families and community members in addressing the various forms of trauma associated with search and recovery efforts.

This Summary Report reflects the discussions that took place at the Gathering. While sections can be read in any order, they are organized like steps on a healing journey. First, the report describes the commitments and protocols that supported attendees to share their knowledge in a culturally safe environment. Next, it summarizes what was shared about the trauma associated with the search



An 'Every Child Matters' Tipi standing near the site of the Sacred Fire

and recovery of unmarked burials and missing children.

The report then highlights Indigenous-led principles and practices that have been put in place to address this trauma, including examples of how this is being done in specific search and recovery processes. Finally, it provides an overview of the challenges and barriers that Survivors and Indigenous people face in accessing culturally relevant mental health and wellness supports and services to address trauma.

Each person who attended the Gathering brought unique insights. The full richness of what was shared cannot be conveyed by a written summary. For those who were unable to attend, video recordings are available [here](#).

*You do carry intergenerational trauma
but you [also carry] the strengths of your ancestors.
How do you awaken that?*

Elder Eleanor Skead

C. Commitments and Protocols

Learning, following and respecting Indigenous protocols and ceremonies is central to the Sacred work of recovering the missing children and unmarked burials. Indigenous ceremony and knowledge is at the heart of addressing mental health and wellness for Indian Residential School Survivors, families and communities during search and recovery efforts. Consistent with these teachings, the Gathering included the following core commitments and protocols.

Residential schools took our children away. They took them away from our families, our songs, our languages, our ceremonies and told them that they were evil and worthless. They separated us from ceremony. And so now we see our path forward as being through ceremony and language and family.

Dr Sherri Chisan

Leading with Indigenous Ceremony

Elders and Knowledge Holders from many Indigenous Nations were present at the National Gathering and guided participants through ceremony and prayer in accordance with Indigenous protocols. Pipe and Water Ceremonies were conducted each morning by Elders Phillip and Florence Paynter. Many speakers and participants emphasized the importance of ceremony in addressing trauma. They shared that ceremony *is* healing, ceremony *is* law. The ceremonies and protocols that supported the Gathering drew on the diverse and unique traditions and knowledge systems of First Nation, Inuit and Métis Peoples, with an emphasis on those from the host Nations.



Participants at the National Gathering

Upholding Indigenous Healers and Healing

The Gathering prioritized hearing from Indigenous Healers, doctors and health practitioners. This provided an opportunity for participants and speakers to discuss Indigenous approaches to wellness and how to increase access for those experiencing trauma relating to the search and recovery of missing children. The knowledge shared included: research about the genetic and intergenerational impacts of trauma; the importance of Indigenous-led and community-centred programs; strategies for working with non-Indigenous health professionals and systems; and evidence about the healing power of Indigenous Medicines, principles, and practices.

Incorporating Indigenous Processes for Sharing Knowledge

Throughout the Gathering, Indigenous processes for knowledge sharing were incorporated. Based on participant feedback from the Edmonton National Gathering, dedicated time was provided for participants to share their own truths about trauma, resilience and healing, and to ask questions of presenters. Some of the most powerful messages, insights and songs emerged from the discussions that followed each presentation.

Smaller sessions on specific topics and Sharing Circles provided more opportunities for participants to engage in participatory discussions. The National Advisory Committee on Residential Schools Missing Children and Unmarked Burials led six two-hour Sharing Circles. These Sharing Circles provided culturally relevant processes for participants to discuss the trauma and grief associated with the search and recovery of missing children and unmarked burials.

Finally, Elders, Knowledge Holders and Survivors were able to rest, relax and informally meet in dedicated spaces at the Conference Centre.

Illuminating our Work: The Sacred Fire and Qulliq

At sunrise, on the first morning of the National Gathering, a Sacred Fire was lit and cared for by Fire Keeper Ernie Daniels Jr and other local Fire Keepers throughout the duration of the National Gathering. The Sacred Fire connects us to the Spirit World, and participants were given the opportunity to make offerings for their families, loved ones and the Spirits of the missing children. Ashes from the Sacred Fire in Edmonton were gathered and added to the Sacred Fire in Winnipeg.

During the Gathering, a Qulliq was also lit each morning. The Qulliq is the traditional oil lamp used by the people of the Arctic. It is made of



A Qulliq being lit

stone and uses the oil from blubber of seals or whales for fuel. Arctic cotton is used as the wick. It provides light, warmth and heat. It gives life. Inuit women carry the responsibility to tend the flame. In Inuit culture, it is a custom to light the Qulliq before ceremonial events.



The Empty Chair

Honouring the Missing Children: The Empty Chair

At each National Gathering, a blanket and Medicines are placed on an Empty Chair. The Empty Chair represents and honours the missing children who were never returned home from Indian Residential Schools. Ceremonies were held to invite the Spirits of the missing children into the Gathering to witness all the work that is being done to find them and bring their Spirits home in the most respectful and honourable way. Offerings of Medicine and gifts were made to the Empty Chair by participants throughout the Gathering.

The Bentwood Box

The Bentwood Box is a lasting tribute to all Indian Residential School Survivors. Coast Salish artist Luke Marston steamed, bent and carved the Box in the traditional style from a single piece of Sacred, old-growth red cedar. Its carved panels represent the distinct cultures of First Nations, Inuit and Métis Survivors.



The Memorial Banner placed over the Bentwood Box

Commissioned by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) in 2009, the Bentwood Box travelled with the TRC to its eight National Events throughout Canada, where people placed personal items into the Box to symbolize their journey toward healing and expressions of reconciliation. Thousands of items from across the country — including photographs, reports, books, drums, knitted baby blankets, beaded moccasins, a prayer shawl, a suitcase and a Tutchone Warrior's bow with Eagle Feathers and four arrows — were donated to this collection.

The Bentwood Box, and the gifts placed into it, are now under the care of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation.

Taking Care of Our Whole Selves: Sacred Medicines

The four Sacred Medicines – Tobacco, Sage, Cedar and Sweetgrass – were made available to all participants and speakers for offerings and prayers. Indigenous health and cultural support workers were present at all sessions to smudge participants as needed. Gifts of Tobacco and Tea were given to speakers and presenters. Tobacco ties were also made available to participants for offerings and prayers at the Sacred Fire.



Sacred Medicines at the National Gathering

Singing with Our Hearts: The Drum

The Sons of the Drum, from Roseau River Anishinaabe First Nation, opened each day with a Welcome Song and closed with an Honour Song. At the conclusion of the Gathering, they sang a Travelling Song to help participants journey home safely. The drum and songs demonstrated the power and beauty of Anishinaabe teachings and prayers. Throughout the Gathering, other Indigenous singers also shared their territorial teachings and songs.



The Sons of the Drum opening the National Gathering

D. Sharing Truths about Trauma

Survivors, families and communities identified the importance of having safe spaces to discuss the different forms and impacts of trauma that this Sacred work carries. The Gathering enabled participants to share many difficult truths. These truths include the links between trauma and colonial genocide, the fact that trauma is intergenerational and emerges in complex ways, and the reality that non-Indigenous approaches to health and wellness are often ineffective and can even cause harm.

To the Survivors who have carried that message in your heart until you were ready to share it... we will meet you halfway. Then you don't have to carry it [alone] anymore.

Lisa Meeches



From left to right: Survivors' Panel: Elder William Osborne, Dr Levinia Brown, and Manitoba Métis Federation Vice-President Andrew Carrier



Trauma is a Product of Colonial Genocide

Many participants at the Gathering spoke of how the Canadian government's genocidal policies and actions, including the Indian Residential School System, have contributed to the trauma experienced today. The Honourable Murray Sinclair reminded us of some terrible truths about the Indian Residential School System:

- it lasted and did its evil work for so long, because it benefitted Canadians;
- it broke family structures, eroded cultural and community bonds, and denied and displaced Indigenous laws, to allow the land to be taken; and
- it, together with other colonial laws and policies, allowed Canada to pretend that there were no treaties, no friendships, and no promises worth keeping.

He emphasized that only the full acceptance of these truths, and those of other attempts at colonial genocide, will make reconciliation possible.

The Honourable Murray Sinclair also shared his personal experience of losing his brother in tragic circumstances that did not allow for closure. He talked about hoping to hear his brother's voice when he answers the phone or hoping to catch a glimpse of him on a busy street corner. He reflected on the "displaced trauma" that comes from not knowing where loved ones are. He acknowledged that while each person's experiences with trauma differs, when families lose a child without knowing what happened or where they are buried, this can lead to unresolved grief.

Participants throughout the Gathering reflected on the on-going impacts of the colonial trauma that Indian Residential Schools inflicted. As one participant said:

There were four things that were broken by the residential school system: we got disconnected from the land, disconnected from ourselves, disconnected from our communities and relationships, and disconnected from our Spirit.

Elder William Osborne, a member of Pimicikamak Cree Nation, explained that these disconnections are not the fault of Indigenous people: "we never lost the path... someone else took us from it."



[The] trauma we all feel... that children are still in the ground and were so badly treated, is a trauma that runs throughout our Nations in all of us.

The Honourable Murray Sinclair, former Senator and Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada

Participants emphasized that the work of searching for and recovering the missing children and unmarked burials weighs heavily on Survivors, Indigenous families and communities' minds, bodies, and Spirits. The importance of coming together to address this form of colonial trauma was one of the Honourable Murray Sinclair's key messages, and was echoed throughout the Gathering by speakers and participants.

Coming together involves Indigenous Survivors, families, communities and Healers; however, governments and churches that caused this harm must also work towards addressing the trauma.

The system of isolation and disconnection led to great harms, including the death of a significant number of children in our community [and] great trauma that transcended the time and place where it occurred. Today the legacy of the schools impacts our families through unresolved trauma which lives in the genetic memory of our people.

Niibin Makwa (Derek J. Nepinak), Chief of the Minegoziibe Anishinabe (Pine Creek First Nation)

Trauma is Intergenerational and Interconnected

The trauma related to missing children and unmarked burials is layered on top of other forms of colonial trauma. As elected Tribal Chief Beverly Kiohawiton Cook of the Saint Regis Mohawk Tribal Council explained:

The experiences in Indian Residential Schools inflicted trauma of many different kinds on the students, which is carried down through the generations both through biology, and through learned actions and teachings.

In addition to traumatic childhood experiences, prejudice, violence in the community, being put in foster care, and many more things that Indigenous people experience can cause trauma. Even the experiences that babies have while inside their mothers' womb affects the way the baby's brain develops. If the mother is going through stress or pain, the baby's brain will reflect that.

Tribal Chief Cook emphasized that experiences can have epigenetic effects, meaning that trauma can affect the way a person's genes work. She made clear, however, that Indigenous spirituality, ceremonies, and relational connections can help people cope with and move forward from the traumas they have experienced.

Failing to address trauma can make it worse. Sharing a teaching from a late Elder, Chief Derek Nepinak said:

Anger grows from an original hurt or sadness. If you don't address that original hurt, that anger can grow into hatred. And sometimes that hatred turns into acts of wickedness to self or outward acts of violence to your family, your neighbour and community.

Indigenous youth shared personal stories of trauma's intergenerational impacts. Métis Youth representative Tracy Léost reflected that she did not know that her grandmother spoke Cree before being sent to Indian Residential School, and that she was 18 years old when she first learned that her father spoke Michif: "I had to grieve that the Residential School System robbed [my siblings and I] of the opportunity to grow up knowing our language."

She also talked about how, as a teacher in an inner-city school, she sees the impact on Indigenous youth of negative messaging and harmful stereotypes about Indigenous people:

A large number of Indigenous students... have been labeled as bad, deviant, troubled. All have been touched by the child welfare system and they continue to grapple every day [with these realities] as intergenerational Survivors of the Residential School System.

Studies confirm the intergenerational effects of trauma – how adverse childhood events have impacts that extend to generations not even born when the original trauma took place.

Dr James A Makokis, Nehiyô (Plains Cree), a family physician from the Saddle Lake Cree Nation, explained how adverse childhood events are expressed in chemical and physical changes:

Adverse childhood events increase the risk for mental health illnesses, physical illnesses, [and] early death. The more adverse childhood events, the more likely someone will have depression, anxiety, suicidality, chronic high blood pressure, cholesterol, diabetes because their stress level goes up and their cortisol is always high.

Childhood trauma also impacts people's ability to express their feelings and emotions throughout their lives. As the TRC's work has shown, difficulty connecting emotionally with loved ones is a common symptom of trauma for Survivors of Indian Residential Schools.

Participants and speakers, however, strongly maintained that adverse childhood events, and the traumas associated with the Indian Residential School System, can be healed. As one participant asserted:

Adverse childhood events are not a roadmap to who you are... You can take teachings into your home to heal yourself and heal your family. We don't have to be who they [the government and churches] want us to be. We were never going to stop being Indians. We may have lost our language, but our bloodlines are true.



Diandre Thomas-Hart and Tracie Léost

Many participants shared experiences of having overcome adverse childhood events by recognizing the harmful cycles of learned behaviours, reconnecting with Elders and Indigenous spirituality, and learning healthy ways to relate to their children and other loved ones. Elder William Osborne encouraged us to find healing paths in this Sacred work: “Our identity, our language, our spirituality was never lost – the road is still there and always will be. We can always come back to the main road.”



Grief relating to unmarked graves is a public health emergency.

Dr Cornelia (Nel) Wieman, MD, Deputy Chief Medical Officer, First Nations Health Authority delivering a Keynote Address

Trauma Emerges and Re-emerges in Complex Ways

The trauma associated with Indian Residential Schools impacts people’s physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health. And, as Dr Beverly Jacobs, member of the Mohawk Nation, Professor at the Windsor Faculty of Law, and Indigenous Human Rights Monitor at the Six Nations Survivors’ Secretariat, noted, “we’re all impacted differently [by trauma]; we all respond differently.”

Dr Marcia Anderson, a Cree-Anishinaabe physician, looked at the intersecting traumas that have impacted Indigenous people in recent years. These include the COVID-19 pandemic, the toxic drug crisis, the climate crisis, the loss or degradation of lands, and the ongoing confirmation of unmarked burials. These traumas, Dr Anderson explained, can result in complex forms of post-traumatic stress disorder and “disenfranchised grief.”

Disenfranchised grief occurs when our losses are not acknowledged or accepted as legitimate by the society around us. The violence of Indian Residential School denialism, including denialism regarding missing children and unmarked burials, may deepen disenfranchised grief. For many Survivors, Indigenous families and communities, disenfranchised grief compounds the pain of not knowing where the children are. At the individual level, disenfranchised grief and complex post-traumatic stress disorder can emerge as depression, anxiety, personality disorders and unhealthy coping strategies such as using substances to try to change or escape negative feelings.



Another type of trauma relating to missing children and unmarked burials is ambiguous loss, which is defined as an unclear loss that occurs when a loved one is missing either physically or psychologically. It is experienced when people do not know if their loved one is dead or alive, absent or present, permanently lost or coming back. In speaking about ambiguous loss, Saulteaux counselling psychologist and educator Brenda Reynolds explained that:

Loss stays with us. When we do nothing to [deal with] it, it can be really harmful. It's really important to know how to address the loss, and to keep the relationship with the thing [or person] we lost. The feelings of loss can feel unmanageable. The best way to manage the loss is to [open yourself up to] feel those feelings... [and stay] grounded while [doing so].

Dr Anderson, discussed how vicarious trauma can affect Healers, helpers and others involved in search and recovery processes. Vicarious trauma can emerge and re-emerge in different ways. Dr Sherri Chisan, President of University nuhelot'jine thaiyots'j nistameyimâkanak Blue Quills, shared how seeing the Memorial Cloth at the Gathering brought her back to the terrible reality of what happened to the children who died while in the care of the state and churches at Indian Residential Schools:

Even though I have been involved in this work for some time, I was still overcome and I wept. My mind was screaming 'how could this ever have happened?' It became real in a new way... for all of us engaged in this work, every day it will become real in a new way and we will have to find our way...through that.

Reactions to Vicarious Trauma



- Everyone reacts to trauma/vicarious trauma in different ways; communities and members may be experiencing increased:
 - Substance use as a coping mechanism
 - Need for mental health support
 - Grief and loss
 - Stress
 - Physical illness and weakened immune systems
 - Disruption to normal health and wellness patterns including sleeping, eating and exercising
 - Support workers turnover
- Frequent and unanticipated changes lead to uncertainty & trauma related to actual & perceived loss of control
- Individuals, families & communities become crisis-focused; unable to move things forward, including individual & collective healing

Slide from Dr Nel Wieman's presentation, Acting Chief Medical Officer at the First Nations Health Authority, British Columbia

Dr Anderson explained that search processes are likely to retrigger traumas for Survivors, affected communities and others: “we’re going to see more trauma and more [negative] responses as these triggers happen, as communities undertake these processes.” She emphasized that “people are going to make the best choices they can in any given moment when it comes to dealing with this grief or trauma... based on what’s available to them.” This makes it particularly important for communities to be appropriately supported and funded to address the traumatic impacts of search and recovery work.

Non-Indigenous Systems and Interventions Continue to Have Harmful Effects

Speakers and participants spoke of how traumas resulting from the Indian Residential School System continue to be ineffectively addressed by non-Indigenous healthcare systems. Sometimes, whether intentionally or not, these systems can retrigger or worsen existing trauma. Dr Makokis explained, for example, that when Survivors are brought into non-Indigenous institutions like hospitals or long-term care homes, they can be retriggered due to traumatic experiences that they endured at Indian Residential Schools.



The fact that funding gets poured into the Western health system led mainly by non-Indigenous people who don't have the same respect for our knowledge of Indigenous health systems is a barrier to having Indigenous-led, culture-led, Knowledge Keeper-led health systems.

Dr Marcia Anderson, MD, Vice-Dean of Indigenous Health, Social Justice and Anti-Racism, Rady Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Manitoba

Non-Indigenous medical systems and interventions have contributed to ongoing traumas for Indigenous people, families and communities. Several speakers and participants indicated that over reliance on non-Indigenous approaches to health, such as Western accredited healthcare professionals, ten-minute appointments, pharmaceuticals, and other non-Indigenous methods, do not truly support Indigenous people to heal from trauma. As one participant noted: “A lot of youth are being heavily medicated to deal with their symptoms, not knowing that they can turn to Indigenous healing and supports.”

Personal testimonies, health indicators and leading research all demonstrate that the traumas associated with search and recovery work are poorly addressed by non-Indigenous approaches.

E. Indigenous-led Approaches to Addressing Trauma

Throughout the Gathering, participants stressed the importance of establishing and ensuring sufficient funding for Indigenous-led supports and services to address the trauma associated with unmarked burials and missing children. One participant commented that more is required than the buzzword of being “trauma-informed.” Instead, the participant stated that we need to ask: “what is trauma-informed for us?”

*We are inherently resilient.
When we talk about our
challenges, we cannot
forget about our resilience.*

Dr Nel Wieman

The knowledge shared at the Gathering underscored the need for hope and unity in meeting the challenge of addressing trauma in the search and recovery of missing children. Participants demonstrated their resolve to meet these challenges as they continue this Sacred work. The healing pathways are not easy, but many have learned how to walk them. One participant, responding to a presentation about trauma’s genetic effects, stressed that strength and resilience are also intergenerational: “[it’s important to remember that] it’s not just trauma that is passed down through our bloodlines.”

Participants and speakers also discussed how the trauma related to missing children and unmarked burials needs to be addressed in ways that are tailored to each person being supported. Different laws, languages and needs across Indigenous Nations means that the challenges of addressing the trauma must be met in different ways. A number of shared principles and practices emerged at the Gathering. The ones summarized here do not necessarily reflect all the values that are central to effective Indigenous practices and processes for addressing trauma. Collectively, however, they offer insights into what ‘trauma-informed’ means when it is Indigenous-led.



A Participant at the National Gathering



Courage

Addressing individual and collective traumas requires courage. In the words of Dene National Chief and Assembly of First Nations Regional Chief Gerald Antoine:

We need to get back to our Spirit. This is who we are. The path forward is that we need to understand the doubt, the fear and the trauma and we need to help each other to recover. It's just like the unmarked burials – what is happening is that we are uncovering ourselves.

Lisa Meeches reminded us of the challenges involved: “When you are doing this work, when you’re burying our loved ones, when it’s your responsibility to keep the songs alive, that’s hard to do.”

It takes courage to take steps towards healing trauma. While presenters shared many accounts of ceremonial and other Indigenous approaches that can help, there was a recognition that each person has to have the courage to make a decision to actively participate in their own healing. The testimonies and wisdom shared at the Gathering were expressions of the courage that this healing requires.



Conference Co-Chair Lisa Meeches, Order of Canada and Order of Manitoba recipient



Elder William Osborne, Pimicikamak Cree Nation

Kindness

Addressing trauma in the search and recovery of missing children also requires kindness. Elder William Osborne highlighted what we can learn from nature to demonstrate kindness in our lives: “A blade of grass, every spring, summer, we step on it, we cut it... every time we step on it, that blade of grass always stands up again, it never says anything to us... It teaches us the spirit of kindness.”

Anglican Deacon Rebecca Blake, an Inuvialuit from Inuvik, said:

It is only going to be through kindness that we can get through these days... One thing I have seen of Indigenous people, no matter how many times they have been put down, no matter how many times they have been tried to be annihilated, they come back every time with kindness.

Choice

Trauma is held, felt and triggered at deeply personal levels. Addressing trauma requires choice for people to determine how to respond to their experiences of trauma and whether to participate in search and recovery efforts.

Choice is also important for trauma-informed medical care. This includes what, how, when and to whom personal disclosures are shared. As noted by Dr Nel Wieman, “most of all it’s important for people to be able to choose...to tell their stories and learn more about themselves.”

Many Indigenous community-led search processes are building in – and building from – the principle of choice. Dr Marcella Fontaine, a member of the Sagkeeng First Nation and Coordinator for the Fort Alexander Residential School Ground Search, described how Sagkeeng First Nation’s process incorporates choice and consent to participate in search and recovery processes. She shared that after making a list of all Survivors who attended Fort Alexander Residential School, each Survivor was contacted and given a choice whether to participate in the process or not. She said that most Survivors agreed to share their experiences to support search and recovery efforts.

Choice, as an empowering principle, extends from individuals to families, and from families to communities. Deacon Blake spoke about how choices are provided to Inuit families to determine how memorial and funeral services should be conducted and officiated. She acknowledged that, especially in more remote areas, ensuring a family’s officiant of choice may be difficult, but that respecting families’ wishes should take priority whenever possible.

Practically speaking, honouring choice requires time, information, and resources. At the community level, it involves making difficult decisions about how to gather Survivor truths and testimonies and how to conduct search and recovery efforts. Choice therefore is a key principle that provides a way forward in addressing the trauma related to searching for and recovering the missing children and unmarked burials.



Participants at the National Gathering

Balance

Several presenters and participants identified the importance of balancing different needs and approaches in doing this Sacred work. Balance complements choice. It also reflects how essential holistic well-being is – of taking care of mind, body and Spirit.

There is also a balance required between Western medical approaches and Indigenous healing methods. Dr Nel Wieman's said:

[by] establishing balance between Traditional Healers, Knowledge Keepers and mental health clinicians... you can achieve better outcomes for individuals, families and communities. We need to work with both systems if that's what people want.

Dr Wieman highlighted some of the general principles of trauma-informed care developed by the Center for Preparedness and Response and the National Centre for Trauma-Informed Care. Many accord with the Indigenous approaches that participants described.

A Framework for a Trauma-Informed Approach

6 GUIDING PRINCIPLES TO A TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH

The CDC's Center for Preparedness and Response (CPR), in collaboration with SAMHSA's National Center for Trauma-Informed Care (NCTIC), developed and led a new training for CPR employees about the role of trauma-informed care during public health emergencies. The training aimed to increase responder awareness of the impact that trauma can have in the communities where they work. Participants learned SAMHSA'S six principles that guide a trauma-informed approach, including:

1. SAFETY
2. TRUSTWORTHINESS & TRANSPARENCY
3. PEER SUPPORT
4. COLLABORATION & MUTUALITY
5. EMPOWERMENT VOICE & CHOICE
6. CULTURAL, HISTORICAL & GENDER ISSUES

Adopting a trauma-informed approach is not accomplished through any single particular technique or checklist. It requires constant attention, caring awareness, sensitivity, and possibly a cultural change at an organizational level. On-going internal organizational assessment and quality improvement, as well as engagement with community stakeholders, will help to imbue this approach which can be augmented with organizational development and practice improvement. The training provided by CPR and NCTIC was the first step for CDC to view emergency preparedness and response through a trauma-informed lens.

<https://www.traumainformedcare.cdc.org/resources/samhsas-national-center-for-trauma-informed-care/>

https://www.cdc.gov/orr/infographics/6_principles_trauma_info.htm

Slide from Dr Nel Wieman's presentation, Acting Chief Medical Officer at the First Nations Health Authority, British Columbia

Several participants spoke of incorporating 'the best of both worlds' from Indigenous and Western approaches. Some shared how they have been helped by Western methods like talk therapy, and others spoke of reaching the limits of what Western medicine had to offer. One participant recalled being told "you're doing too much of the White-man way. You have to connect to who you are." She told us how she has taken these learnings into her community work:

Our communities are doing their own work with our own people [through] on-the-land healing programming... what I came to realize with my own clients is that they do better with their own people who've been through that healing work.

Dr Marcella Fontaine spoke of the importance of acknowledging diverse beliefs and approaches to healing in the Sagkeeng First Nation's search and recovery work: "we have to balance our church beliefs and our traditional beliefs... we don't force anybody [to share or participate]."

Balance helps address trauma both at an individual level and collectively in community-led search, investigation, and recovery processes.

Belonging

Belonging is another principle central to effectively addressing trauma. As one participant emphasized, it is important to truly feel like you belong. This Sacred work focuses on the children who were never returned home – to bring them honour and dignity and reinforce their belonging within their families and communities. At the same time, it engages Survivors, families and communities to find their own ways home, and their own belonging.



Participants at the National Gathering

Kinship relations are our first and often closest forms of belonging. Many participants advocated for community-led, family-centred approaches to healing. Dr Marcella Fontaine explained that engaging with Survivors in a respectful way is best done through familiar community networks and facilitators:

As in any community, you always have a visit first, then you lean in... [Survivors] know us, we know them. Traditional Knowledge Keepers, those that hold ceremonies, are always there to help us... [Survivors] also support one another. They grew up together in residential school, they grew up together in the community.

Indigenous families, and family-based healing, are much broader than parent-child units. As one participant emphasized: “We are a collective people. We have families. Aunties, uncles, little nieces, nephews... We need to go back to the Tipi in our relationships, in our families... [we need to] rediscover who we are.”

As Dene National Chief Gerald Antoine said, focusing on the community and family accords with the laws of many Indigenous people: “We already have our governance. It’s in our home, it’s in our family – family leadership.” Participants echoed the importance of family leadership: “Our grandparents and great-grandparents, those were our deans. Those were our health professionals... we don’t need a degree.”

Several speakers shared how their strength and wisdom comes from ancestors, grandparents and others who have passed on. Speakers also emphasized the important role that young people play in kinship-centered healing processes.

Our youth are ready and able to learn from our Elders and Knowledge Holders... Our Elders tell us that in order to know where we are going, we have to know where we are coming from. That is why it is important to have our youth here with all of us. They need to learn about our history from you so they will continue to carry the torch for our people and our communities.

Conference Co-Chair Albert Beck, Director with the Manitoba Métis Federation





Survivor Lillian Elias and her sister Susen Peffer dance at the Gathering

The Gathering also focused on the importance of Indigenous practices and (re)connections to land, language and one's physical body. The Elders, as Six Nations (Cayuga) Healer Wendy Hill said, know that trauma changes people – it can make people disconnect from their bodies, cloud people's minds, and make people feel like giving up. That is why, she explained, many Haudenosaunee ceremonies help to reconnect people to their bodies:

Our ceremonies of dancing and songs...make you sweat and your heart beat hard... It brings you back to life...These songs pull our mind back to our body so we are completely present... That's our Medicine, that's our therapy.

Dr Makokis also spoke about addressing trauma through Indigenous cultural practices. Moose-hide tanning is one example of a traditional practice that helps move people from their minds to their hearts to their hands:

Working with hides, we are doing a repetitive motion over and over again with that moose who is a teacher to us and one of our first clans. And we are having this chance to work side-by-side with people and...dialogue and work on something physical together... When we do that, we have those smells [of the moose hides] that create positive experiences that bring us to those good memories.

Singing and drumming are also powerful healing practices that bring us back to our bodies and help to address trauma. As Dr Makokis explained:

The heartbeat of Mother Earth, it reminds us of being in utero, safe in our mother's womb, and when we do this together with songs that connect us to our creation stories... it connects us with our mental and physical parts of our bodies.

Search processes are trauma-informed when they nurture belonging at each stage and for each person. Survivors, Indigenous families and communities leading search and recovery efforts shared the various ways that they are incorporating Indigenous healing processes into this work, including:

- Feasting;
- Conducting ceremonies before, during and after searches;
- Lighting, tending and visiting the Sacred Fire;
- Singing, fiddling and drumming;
- Participating in land-based activities;
- Visiting Sacred sites;
- Connecting with loved ones and relations; and
- Learning and speaking Indigenous languages.



From left to right: Michael, Cienna and Jacob Harris of the Ivan Flett Memorial Dancers



Métis Youth Morgan Grace plays the fiddle, accompanied by her father

Safety

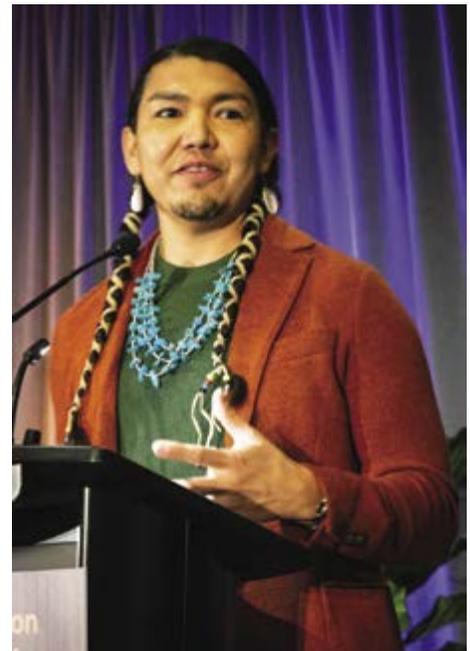
Safety, as Dr Beverly Jacobs indicated, must include emotional, spiritual, physical and mental well-being. Safe spaces, processes and interventions pay attention to all these domains. Many speakers and participants shared that the burden of trauma highlights important practical needs as well as a range of negative and sometimes harmful emotions and behaviours. These can make it hard to ensure safety for those who need the most help.

Prioritizing safety helps address even the most complex forms of trauma. Dr Marcia Anderson addressed the role of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous approaches in helping to reduce harm and (re)creating individual and collective safety: “our primary resources for healing have to be those... safe spaces.” She used a powerful analogy to show how we can all contribute to safe places and practices:

Buffalo circle those who are weaker...when there is any kind of threat. As our communities and our relatives go through these times of searching for unmarked graves or repatriating [their loved ones], there are going to be times when people are okay to be on the outside of that circle. But there are also going to be times when everyone will need to step from the outside and go on the inside and be the ones getting supported and loved and receiving that healing, nurturing care. That is a sign of strength too: to know when it's time to step into the middle and be the one who is receiving care.

Dr Makokis specifically considered the therapeutic importance of spaces that are safe – mentally, physically, culturally and spiritually:

When we're triggered, we can go on a downward or an upward spiral... When we go into those healing spaces, we can access traumatic memories in that loving supportive space without having to be flooded, or dissociate or have negative coping mechanisms to deal with that, and to start to reprogram our brain. This is one of the benefits of having access to our ceremonies and to our Medicines and to our Healers as part of our own health systems. [These] have been systemically dismantled by the Canadian state and they need to be systematically repaired.



Dr James A. Makokis, Nehiyô (Plains Cree), a Family Physician from the Saddle Lake Cree Nation

Joy

Throughout the Gathering, participants and presenters talked about the importance of joy and laughter to heal from trauma and grief. As Métis educator Sandra Delaronde, who led laughter yoga at the Gathering, said, “as difficult as this work is, we remember our joy. And the way to get to our joy is to sing, to dance, to play and to laugh.”

Dr Sherri Chisan highlighted the importance of joy for Survivors even as they visit places where they have experienced trauma. She said: "One of my favourite memories [is of] three Survivors sitting around the Fire, sharing their memories, and even though there are traumatic memories, there are also some humorous memories - they were talking about all the trouble they used to get into as little boys and the way they would tease each other." She emphasized that "laughter is part of the healing journey."



Sandra Delaronde leads the audience in laughter yoga

Love

Love threads through and binds together all of what we heard about Indigenous approaches to addressing trauma in this Sacred work. Love provides Indigenous people, families and communities with the strength to face all the harms that Indian Residential Schools and other colonial systems have caused. Love is essential to healing broken relations. Deacon Rebecca Blake raised this in how she cares for others in their most painful moments:

In our tradition, when someone dies, we go to them immediately... I do so with love in my heart... Giving back is so rewarding. I draw my strength from my love for my people and my land... We are one people, and when we come together and become one people, we become stronger.

This sense of unity is an expression of love. For Métis Elder Jimmy Durocher, this lies at the heart of Indigenous resilience: “They will never destroy our culture, they will never destroy us as a people. They tried for hundreds of years but we are still strong, as long as we do it together.”

Love helps people address trauma in their darkest moments. Tracie Léost shared how her love supports inner-city Indigenous youth:

To meet them where they are at and to love them and lift them up while they are navigating the systems that they find themselves in... Showing up is the first win. I work with young people who use substances and come into our spaces holding onto a lot of shame... I remind them that I love them anyway. I have stood on the side of bridges far too many times waiting for the police to come. I tell my students that I will sit with them in the dark until the light comes back on.

Participants told us that love must be part of healing at the broadest societal level. As one person shared, “[Indigenous and Canadian people] have to live as one and love one another.”



Love, like healing, cannot be forced. While love may be essential to resolving problems like intergenerational trauma and reconciliation, it needs time and the right conditions to flourish. Turning to the wisdom of the ancestors and learning to love ourselves and each other is a key part of healing.

Deacon Rebecca Blake (left) shakes hands with Elder Jimmy Durocher. Elder Wilbert Papik seated in the center.

Indigenous Youth-Led Resistance, Resurgence and Revitalization

Many participants emphasized that youth are ready to address the trauma caused by government attempts at colonial genocide. As one participant stated:

It's my generation that has to break the chains of colonialism, Indian Residential Schools, the Sixties Scoop. Those chains are more brittle than we think they are... [But for this to happen] we need to change the perceptions of our young people so that they don't live the self-fulfilling prophecy of drugs and alcohol... We need to help youth recognize and develop their strengths.

Cree-Ojibway Youth Diandre Thomas-Hart said: "We must uplift and support our young people... we have to let them know that we are so proud of them. We have to tell them, otherwise they won't know."

Another participant spoke directly to the young people at the Gathering:

The best way we can help our Elders heal, our Survivors heal, is to live with the intent to live instead of with the intent to die. We have to live a good life. And when our Elders see that they'll see that their strength and experience of holding on was well worth it. Our best way to heal our entire communities is to live a good life.

This participant shared information about a [youth-focused life promotion toolkit](#) that he helped develop.

Indigenous youth are working to heal and revitalize languages, customs and legal orders. Tracie Léost, Métis Youth, said:

Young ones are Drum Carriers and language speakers and beaders... our young ones are the ones who plan our [school] gatherings and feasts... we are the generation our Old Ones have been waiting for.



Carmello Swan, Inuk Youth and artist, speaks at the National Gathering





Addressing Trauma and Grief Under Haudenosaunee Law

To grieve well is to live well.

Wendy Hill

Wendy Hill presented about the powerful processes and laws of the Haudenosaunee in supporting people to address grief and trauma. She described the Condolence Ceremony and its methods of helping people process grief and death by feeling and moving through them. She shared the importance of the first ten days after losing a loved one and how the Spirit of that loved one will hear people talk about them during this time. We can honour those who have died by reflecting on the things that we admired about them and how the world was a better place because of them. The living have a responsibility to help the Spirit of their loved ones journey forward by reassuring the Spirit that those still living will be okay; she said: “our ancestors knew the importance of the relationship with Spirits so they could leave in a good way.”

Wendy Hill then explained that the Spirit may visit their family members for a whole year after their death. She emphasized that people need to pay attention to their dreams because that is when the Spirit will come to visit. At the one-year mark, people are invited to gather once again to grieve and to help the Spirit of their loved one continue their journey.

In contrast to colonial ways that have made talking about death taboo, Wendy Hill emphasized that Haudenosaunee processes help people accept death so that they can have a good life. Under Haudenosaunee law, there are specific ceremonies to help people move through trauma; there are different ceremonies for those who are experiencing grief, including ceremonies for those who have lost loved ones in tragic or unexpected ways. She emphasized that to move on from loss and grief, we need to connect with our Spirit and remain connected to one another.



F. Addressing Trauma in Search and Recovery Processes

Speakers and participants shared examples of how communities are putting Indigenous principles into practice to address trauma in the work of searching and recovering the missing children.

The Kaatagoging Initiative

Elder Eleanor Skead, from Wauzhushk Onigum Nation, presented on the Kaatagoging Initiative, which is the Survivor-led search for unmarked burials at the former St. Mary's Indian Residential School site. Kaatagoging means "growing together" in Anishnaabemowin.

The main goals of the Kaatagoging Initiative are to:

1. Bring together customary Anishnaabe protocols and Western protocols in seeking and uncovering the truth;
2. Continue the journey of individual, family and community healing;
3. Seek and gain closure for families of missing children; and
4. Protect future generations and make recommendations for action so this does not happen again.

Between 1897 and 1972, over 6,114 children were taken to the St. Mary's Indian Residential School. Archival records show that at least 36 children died during the operation of the school. Survivor testimonies, however, indicate that the number of children who died is significantly higher.

The Kaatagoging Initiative is guided by four principles:

<p>Weweni (Take our time) "Any decisions we make today can affect future generations for many generations."</p>	<p>Bebekaa (Doing it right) "There are consequences to the decisions being made. This is a Sacred, spiritual process. It needs to be done right."</p>	<p>Biiziindun (Listen) "Listen carefully. Everyone will be heard and hear others."</p>	<p>Gego Gotachiken (Don't be afraid) "Survivors felt the oppression of those institutions that took away their voice, their identity. We encourage Survivors to speak up."</p>
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There is always hope, and the hope to overcome trauma is resilience. An Indigenous approach to resilience is rooted in spirituality, ceremony, and connections. It's possible for each generation to heal as we learn lessons from each other, from Elders, and from children.

Tribal Chief Beverly Kiohawiton Cook



We not only have inherent jurisdiction, we have inherent responsibility.

Elder Eleanor Skead, Survivor of St. Mary's Indian Residential School

The Kaatagoging Initiative has also developed protocols to guide the search and recovery process based on collective memory and customary laws. These protocols illustrate how Wauzhushk Onigum Nation is exercising its jurisdiction and sovereignty, including with respect to supporting Survivors, families and community members who are impacted by search and recovery efforts. Healing from trauma, both now and into the future, is central to the decisions that the Kaatagoging Initiative is making.

Indigenous ceremonies care for the missing children, their families and Survivors. As Elder Skead shared: "We always burn a plate, a Spirit dish...the children are hungry, the ones that are left on our site that didn't have an opportunity to have proper ceremonies to make it home...but they're still part of our community."

Looking to the Future

Healing looks like...

- Access to customary lands and reclaiming our sacred relationships and sacred sites
- Deeper integration of language and more speakers
- Understanding displaced anger to heal - smoothing existing tensions between individuals and families
- Increased data sovereignty
- Continued decolonizing in governments, institutions, and everywhere
- More accessible process for applying, receiving, reporting on funding



Slide from Elder Eleanor Skead's presentation, Kaatagoging: Residential School Survivors' Initiative

The Kaatagoging Initiative's approach reflects much of the wisdom exchanged at the Gathering about how Indigenous-led processes are best suited to address the intergenerational, multi-dimensional impacts of the trauma associated with missing children and unmarked burials. Elder Skead noted:

[We] emphasize connection to land and language as primary healing needs. Our land holds our healing, our healing systems. There are Sacred sites...in every single reserve. By building that sense of community we're reclaiming those Sacred sites.

Blue Quills Indian Residential School Search: University nuhelot'jne thaiyots'j nistameyimâkanak Site

Dr Sherri Chisan presented on the search processes taking place on the grounds of the third site of the former Blue Quills Indian Residential School – where the University nuhelot'jne thaiyots'j nistameyimâkanak Blue Quills is now located.

Dr Chisan said that the search team carefully considered what supports were needed to address the trauma that Survivors, families and community members would experience. She explained how ceremonies have been included at every step of the search and recovery work:

Every day the search team began with a Pipe Ceremony in the morning and at the end of every day, the team came into the Tipi. The team also brought their equipment in for a special blessing ceremony to help them let go of whatever they had encountered on those grounds.

The search and recovery process also included Sacred Fires, Circles, smudging, dance, songs and prayers. Dr Chisan stated:

Perhaps one of the most beautiful things that happened that week [when the ground searches began taking place] was that there was a steady presence all day long around the Fire – people gathering, Survivors, their families – sharing memories. And we had grief and loss educators there who also are ceremonial people so all of the grief and loss support happened in ceremony and it was like being in ceremony all day long. And there was a real sense of peace and comfort even though we were doing very difficult work that was triggering trauma for everybody.



During the initial search, Survivors and their families were invited to gather and visit at the site: “People came to make offerings, to share songs and memories, to just be with one another and share that healing... that [Sacred] Fire helped us get grounded and remember who we are and what we do and why we do it.” Dr Chisan added, however, that not everyone was willing or able to come back to the site of the former Blue Quills Indian Residential School:

We will also take this work into our communities. There are Survivors who are not comfortable coming to Blue Quills. The memories they carry are just too painful. And so, we will go to them, and make [these healing activities] available to them.

The search and recovery work has included opportunities for Survivors and families to heal through a range of therapeutic activities, including beading, quilting, art workshops, wellness supports, visiting the Healing Garden that has been planted on the grounds, and participating in a Full Moon Walk/Run. As Dr Chisan noted: “Movement is healing... getting our physical bodies moving is part of our healing process.”



While this work has the potential to hurt us again – enough to tear us apart – it can also be the opportunity to bring ourselves together. To heal together, through ceremony, dialogue, kindness, patience and respect.

Dr Sherri Chisan speaks on the Blue Quills Indian Residential School search and recovery process at the University nuhelot'jne thaiyots'j nistameyimâkanak site



Niibin Makwa, Chief of the Minegoziibe Anishinabe

*As a community, we undertook
to walk this difficult path together,
so that the grandchildren of our grandchildren
would know that their ancestors
were strong and resilient people
who survived the very worst times
of the genocidal policies
of colonization.*



Minegoziibe Anishinabe's Search and Recovery for Missing Children and Unmarked Burials

The Minegoziibe Anishinabe are leading search and recovery efforts in relation to the former site of the Pine Creek Indian Residential School, which operated from 1890 to 1969. Chief Derek Nepinak talked about the care that was brought to establishing the search and recovery processes in Minegoziibe Anishinabe. He stressed that the whole community – including Survivors, spiritual leaders, Fire Keepers, grandmothers and grandfathers, and elected leadership – were involved in establishing the process and protocols:

Determining the parameters of our project was not a political process, it was a community process... We have only proceeded this far because we stand together and we commit to holding each other up.

He explained the name of the Gego Mawiken Project, which means “Don’t Cry” in Anishinaabemowin. It is meant to evoke and record what the church attempted to take away from the children:

Students were always told they couldn't express emotions, couldn't cry. So we decided to entrench this message so that future generations wouldn't forget what we have survived... We wanted to refer to the project in our own language because this project is about repatriation. It's about reclaiming our language, our culture and our unique connection to our ancestral lands. In this way we hope to promote the healing of self, our families and our community.

Chief Nepinak described how the community is taking care not to judge or push people away from engaging, regardless of their spiritual beliefs. They have included the local catholic priest in engagement sessions, and they encourage everyone who attends to pray in the way they know how.

He also indicated that they have traditional Medicines and mental health supports on-site for every meeting, engagement, and ground search update. These supports include Traditional Helpers as well as trained mental health and crisis intervention professionals.

While endorsing an approach that balances diverse needs, Chief Nepinak confirmed the central importance of Anishinaabe protocols and ceremonies:

Difficult discussions need to happen within the safety of our ceremony...each engagement, ground search and community update always involves these [Pipe, Water and Drum] Ceremonies... We committed that a four-day Sacred Fire would be lit at the start of each phase of ground searches. This Sacred Fire is out of respect for the lost children who did not return home to their families... [It] has created opportunities for community members to come to the Fire and share their thoughts and their feelings. The ceremonies set the stage for respectful discussion and ensures the safety of everyone involved. Not everyone participates, but all are respected... As dark and difficult as these stories are, there's also a beauty to it. The beautiful way of the Anishnaabeg is once again revealing itself. And it's making strong people once again.

Monitoring Human Rights in the Investigations into Missing Children and Unmarked Burials at the Mohawk Institute

In 2021, Survivors at Six Nations of the Grand River established the [Survivors' Secretariat](#) to lead the search and recovery efforts relating to the over 600 acres of land associated with the former Mohawk Institute, which is the longest running Indian Residential School in Canada. The Survivors' Secretariat has been working with a Multi-Jurisdictional Police Task Force, where the Six Nations Police Service works alongside the Brantford Police Service and the Ontario Provincial Police in the search and investigation of unmarked burials and missing children.

Due to the long and documented failures of the justice system, in particular with death investigations of Indigenous people, the Survivors' Secretariat appointed Dr Beverly Jacobs, member of Six Nations of the Grand River, as an Indigenous Human Rights Monitor. In this role, Dr Jacobs is responsible for monitoring, verifying, and reporting back to Survivors about the work of the Multi-Jurisdictional Police Task Force.

Being culturally safe means that you're safe in being Onkwehonwe, you're safe in being an Indigenous person, no matter where you go...no matter where you're situating yourself...that you don't have to feel any attack on who you are whatsoever.

Dr Beverly Jacobs

Dr Jacobs described the policies that have been put in place to create a culturally safe process for Survivors who provide testimonies to support the search and investigation efforts. She outlined that the process is based on Haudenosaunee legal principles and that Elders and Knowledge Holders worked to train police investigators on how to be trauma-informed and culturally safe before they began to gather statements from Survivors:

Part of my job is being there [at statement gathering interviews] at the request of the Survivor. Whatever the Survivor wants, whether they want me in the room, or others, or no one. Sometimes they just want to share their story and not have anyone else hear it... it's at their consent.



As well as training, Dr Jacobs emphasized that establishing trust between Survivors and representatives of institutions who may have been involved in causing the harm (like police services), and respecting Survivors' views on whether the necessary levels of trust and safety are met, are central to her work. This means “making it very human” through individual-to-individual processes that consider both verbal and non-verbal indicators of how safe a space or process is:

We have to be very careful and conscious even of the words we use, and who we're speaking to... [Survivors] are the ones who are leading this. How do we know you feel safe in these questions that we're asking? Is the space itself safe? It's always [about] how they feel. Sometimes because of what the Indian Residential Schools did to us we don't even know how we feel... we're just learning to feel. That's why it's important for those of us asking those questions to know what our own well-being is.

APPLYING TRAUMA INFORMED PROCESSES?

- More than a “buzz word” – the actual practice of applying trauma informed processes
- Processes that will ensure safety (emotional, spiritual, physical and mental wellbeing)
- Awareness of all types of trauma, the impacts, responses, behaviours
- Being very careful and conscious with the words being spoken
- Respecting the wishes of Survivors
 - Do they feel safe?
 - Are surroundings safe?
 - Do they need supports of any kind?
 - Timing

Slide from Dr Beverly Jacobs' presentation

“Let’s Find Them”: the Nanilavut Initiative

In August 2022, Rebecca Blake, who is Inuvialuit and an ordained Anglican Deacon, travelled to Edmonton with a group of Inuvialuit who had been searching for their family members' burials. Each of the missing loved ones were taken by the government to southern tuberculosis sanatoria. They then died while in the care of the state and were never returned home. When a child died, parents were often not notified of their child’s death nor about the location of their child’s burial.

The Nanilavut Initiative is led by the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation and is aimed at helping Inuit families find information on loved one sent away during the tuberculosis epidemic of the 1940s to 1960s. Nanilavut means “Let’s find them” in Inuktitut. People of all ages were taken to sanatoria by government and never returned, including Inuit children at Indian Residential Schools and Federal Hostels.

At the Gathering, Deacon Blake talked about the trip to Edmonton to support families in visiting the burial sites of their loved ones. Remembrance and Celebration of Life Ceremonies were held at the gravesites.

After sharing that she has conducted hundreds of funeral services, Deacon Blake said: “I have to tell you...there was nothing I could have ever done that could have prepared me for those days.” As they travelled to visit the burial sites, they found that some of the burials were unmarked; some were in segregated sections of cemeteries only for Indigenous people, which were often too small for the number of people buried there; at the direction of government, some were buried in graves with other people to save costs; and one grave was in a ditch next to a busy highway.

As she reflected on the importance to the families of finding the burials of their loved ones, she shared:

*"At every gravesite, [families] were saying
‘finally we have found you.
And we have so missed you
and we have always, always loved you.’
[Finding the graves] lifted the burden
of not knowing – that now
we can allow our loved ones to rest;
that these were just their carrying cases
that were left behind in a foreign land,
but their Spirits can now soar free."*



Deacon Rebecca Blake

Addressing Trauma through Education, Commemoration and Memorialization

Just as trauma is intergenerational, so too is healing. Presenters shared examples of ways that those leading search and recovery work are addressing trauma's ongoing effects through interventions that educate, commemorate, and memorialize the missing children.

Education

Education takes many forms, as knowledge and best practices are passed on, both within and between communities. Elder Eleanor Skead said:

[Recording and sharing Survivor truths and testimonies is] life energy... Those life experiences are passed on to the next generation so that they will know what genocide looks like. They'll know what oppression looks like. And they'll know how to be different.

David Aglukark, who manages search efforts on behalf of Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated (NTI), which launched its Missing Inuit Children of Residential Schools process in summer 2022, underscored the urgency of listening to these truths and testimonies: "I've been hearing it said over the last two days and it's true: our Elders and Survivors are aging, and some have already passed. It's important for us to start going to them and gathering information."

He also spoke of the need for communities with established search processes to help those that are just getting started: "You've been doing this for a lot longer than we have. We'll be reaching out for guidance in the work we might be doing in the future."



Historical photos are displayed on a tablet in the Archive Room, a space dedicated to the sharing of history and archives at the National Gathering



A participant speaks with staff at an information booth

Commemoration

Commemoration can also enhance public education while at the same time support healing. There are many commemoration efforts occurring across Canada with respect to the missing children and unmarked burials. One example is by Secwépemc/Coast Salish artist D’Arcy Basil, who talked about a Jade Owl he is sculpting for the children found in Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc. As he explained, this is not just his own work – it is meant to include all those who need healing:

When it is almost completed, it will be brought to Tk’emlúps so that Survivors, families, and the community can come and help work on it so anyone can feel attached to it and feel represented by it. The people need to have the community involved not just the artist – the children, the Elders, the whole community.

Other participants shared their own artistic processes for addressing trauma and commemorating the children. As one participant noted, “art is a powerful healer.”

Participants noted that more support is needed for artistic and other creative ways to heal from trauma and commemorate the children who were never returned home: “We need dedicated funding for commemoration and memorialization activities as well as art as healing programs.” Participants suggested that this could be facilitated through a central resource for communities to access public and private funding. Funding applications and decisions themselves should be Survivor and community-driven, “not dictated by what the government deems acceptable.”

There is also a need to commemorate the parents and relatives of the missing children. Survivor Belinda Vanderbroek, from Opaskwayak Cree Nation, called for more recognition of the traumas suffered by parents of the children who were taken: “there should be a National Day of Recognition and Honouring the parents of us children who went to Indian Residential Schools. We don’t talk much about them.”



Sacred Medicines being lit at the National Gathering

Memorialization

Caring for the children who died after being taken away by the Indian Residential School System is among the most important, and most difficult, matters that community-led search and recovery processes must address. Questions related to repatriation – how to bring children home whose burial sites have been found – are particularly sensitive, and may cause additional trauma to Survivors, Indigenous families and communities. Determining the way forward may require difficult decisions about how to meet the needs of the children, Survivors and families, and future generations. There may also be a need to act in accordance with the laws and protocols of multiple Indigenous Nations.

One participant, who is the son of Survivors of the Shingwauk Indian Residential School and former president of the [Children of Shingwauk Alumni Association](#), advocated for the need to take a very cautious, harm-reducing approach to questions relating to repatriation. These decisions, he reflected, have both logistical and spiritual dimensions:

We have decided to do a memorialization. This is a spiritual connection, Indigenous and Christian. So far we have decided not to exhume, just to memorialize. If you exhume, there is a whole set of challenges, it is not an easy challenge and it is not guaranteed... Really investigate that route [of exhumation] because it can be difficult, not only in a nuts and bolts kind of way but also in a spiritual way, in a triggering way for the Survivors. I can't imagine going to 84 communities asking for their DNA to find out if the remains that we found belong to one of those family members. If we get that DNA all collected and we get the hopes up of those families [what if] the remains don't match up?

This participant further noted that, “there are other ways you can memorialize and bring your children home... [for example] bring a piece of the earth, dig up a piece of earth, have a ceremony and bring that piece of earth back to your community.”

Some families have made this choice. The Osborne family, from Pimicikamak (Cross Lake) Cree Nation, shared their powerful story of searching for their three Aunties who had been taken away in the 1940s and buried far from home and from each other. The family was finally able to locate the burials of their three loved ones after 70 years. Finding and performing ceremonies at their burial sites allowed the family to begin to heal. They held a service to rebury earth from the sites, in small caskets, next to the graves of the three girls' parents.



A participant at the National Gathering

G. Continuing Challenges and Needs

Indigenous communities and organizations have the skills and knowledge to meet the healing needs of Indigenous people. Participants emphasized that Indigenous people have the right and the ability to provide the appropriate supports for those impacted by trauma relating to the search and recovery of missing children. What is needed is respect, recognition, and sufficient resources to do this healing work. The following areas were identified for meaningful, sustainable action.

Eliminating Barriers

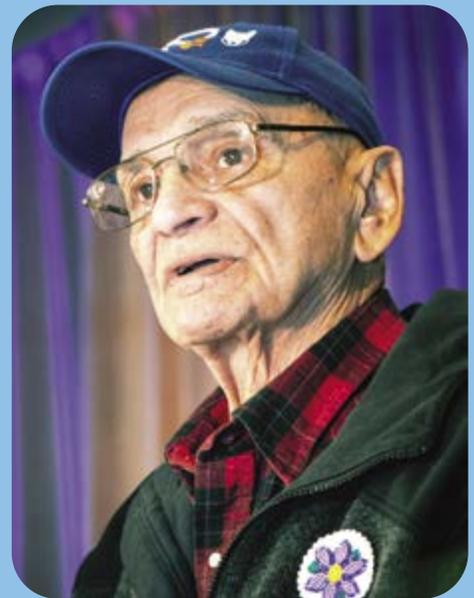
Lack of recognition of the sites, barriers to accessing records and an inability to access sites on private lands all contribute to increased trauma for those leading search and recovery efforts and the families of missing children. Eliminating these barriers is one important way to address this trauma.

Currently, government funding supports search and recovery efforts at the former sites of Indian Residential Schools recognized under the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA). However, there are several other Institutions that Indigenous children were forced to attend and are not recognized under the IRSSA. As the TRC found, and many Survivors have clearly stated, the traumas associated with the work of searching for and recovering the missing children are not confined to the Institutions or Survivors who have been officially 'recognized' by the federal government through the IRSSA.

Ongoing struggles to have the state and churches acknowledge their wrong-doing and treat Survivors fairly stand in the way of healing. The need to eliminate the barriers was powerfully described by Elder Jimmy Durocher regarding the Métis children who were forced to attend Île-à-la-Crosse Residential Boarding School:

Don't allow governments to put limits to what we can do to find each and every one of those children who are missing.

Elder Jim "Jimmy D" Durocher,
Survivor of Île-à-la-Crosse
Residential Boarding School



We deal with trauma every day... I don't have a problem with forgiveness. But I do have a problem with being fair. We need to be fair, they need to be fair to us. Some of them are withholding information... it took us a helluva long time for the church to give us information. The federal government is finally at the table. The province is still out there, not responding to our request for their help, for their records. They tell us to take them to court. But 75% of our people are dead already. If we have to go to court, we are all going to die by that time.

Tracie Léost, Métis Youth, shared her own family's struggles in regard to other institutions that have not yet been formally recognized:

[There was a] large mission in St. Laurent...they were phasing it out into the provincial school system... The records are difficult to find. The provincial government still deems them specialty schools and not genocidal institutions... My community along with many others haven't yet experienced the same recognition, healing or closure that others have as a result of their school not being recognized the same way others are.

Ongoing barriers to accessing information and records also increase trauma and impede search and recovery work. Similarly, barriers in accessing sites that need to be searched also exacerbate trauma. Another participant shared her community's challenges in accessing private lands to continue their search and investigation work. One area where children are buried is still privately held. A lack of information and control over the site is standing in the way of what the community needs to do to heal:

There is another burial site there that the school had used to bury students. It was privatized... and they will not let us onto the grounds to mark the spots, find the burial sites, so that's been an ongoing conflict... – to find the spots, dig them up, DNA test them and return them to their original communities or to transfer them up to the cemetery or to leave them there and mark them so that people don't walk on them. We go there annually to honour the bodies [of the children] who are buried there. We don't know the names [of those missing children].

Fighting Denialism

Denialism is yet another source of trauma for Survivors, Indigenous families and communities leading search and recovery efforts. This includes, and extends beyond, explicitly racist commentary. As noted by Gwichyà Gwich'in professor Dr Crystal Fraser, a member of the National Advisory Committee:

Residential School denialism is more prevalent than we think. The hate mail that comes about Indian Residential Schools – that we are making these stories up, that we are bribing the ground penetrating radar companies to make up these results...

Demands for Indigenous people to provide physical proof of unmarked burials and missing children is yet another manifestation of the long and deeply rooted history of Indian Residential School denialism. As one participant reflected:

The vast majority of non-Indigenous Canadians want the proof. That's a difficult thing – we've talked about that we don't need more than ground penetrating radar. I'm wondering whether the federal government is going to carry on funding these efforts if there is no further physical "evidence" provided.



Leah Ballantyne, lawyer from the Mathias Colombe First Nation, supporting efforts to recover the missing children and unmarked burials at the former sites of the Guy Hill and Sturgeon Landing Indian Residential Schools

Leah Ballantyne included the Office of the Independent Special Interlocutor among institutions who can take up this responsibility of fighting denialism:

When there is some type of denial regarding unmarked graves, the Special Interlocutor should have a team of lawyers or writers to counter that propaganda type of dialogue in the media.

Countering denialism is everyone's responsibility, but participants made it clear that this responsibility should not be shouldered by those who are focusing on their own healing or the healing of Indigenous families and communities. Others, in particular non-Indigenous people, need to take on this responsibility.

Supporting Wrap-Around Care

A common theme at the Gathering was the need for wrap-around care for trauma associated with the search and recovery of unmarked burials and missing children. For many people, these traumas are layered. Participants spoke about searching for older relations, siblings and cousins, children and grandchildren. Some shared that they are searching for multiple missing loved ones across different generations at the same time.

A particular need for wrap-around care was stressed for Survivors of Indian Residential Schools in addressing this trauma. Dr Marcia Anderson noted:

We are talking about Survivors of a genocide. We can't think about [Survivors] in the same way we think about older non-Indigenous people. We need to support them with that experience in mind.

Elder Jimmy Durocher emphasized the trauma associated with missing children and unmarked burials is difficult for many to even comprehend:

I'm dealing with Elders who don't understand why this happened... we could never have imagined [finding thousands of kids in unmarked graves] so it is very difficult to find the protocol to deal with this.

The impacts of the trauma associated with the search and recovery of missing children and unmarked burials requires holistic supports and services. The trauma cannot be adequately addressed with discrete programs and limited funding. Dr Nel Wieman said that “tools for resilience” must include comprehensive, safe, accessible and, ideally, community-based supports. She stressed that progress can – and must be – measured through indicators that go deeper than simply providing health care. Instead, the following questions need to be considered:

Are people's health and wellness actually improving? Are we seeing changes?... [It's] not just that there's a healthcare provider in a community, it's do people choose to come forward and seek those services? A lot of times people don't come forward out of a fear [about] how they're going to be treated.

Dr Wieman and Dr James Makokis both called on governments to implement and enforce cultural safety and humility standards, as matters of accreditation and competence, for healthcare professionals who work with Indigenous patients. This is particularly important for non-Indigenous professionals who are attempting to support Indigenous people in addressing trauma. Elder Eleanor Skead emphasized: “We need to develop relationships [with healthcare professionals] before people can really open up from the hurt that's being carried.”

Participants stressed the need for Indigenous-led supports and services to address trauma before, during and after search and recovery processes. They consistently highlighted the need for wrap-around care that supports all the Survivors, Indigenous families and communities leading this work.



Participants at the National Gathering

Supporting Indigenous Healers and Healing

Many at the Gathering identified the need for, and ability of, Indigenous Healers to lead the work of addressing trauma. Dr Wieman observed, “some of the people who are our Traditional Healers and Elders may have gone through these experiences themselves.” This deepens their ability to practice healing that is informed by lived experience and Indigenous values.

At the same time, it means that Indigenous Healers must have access to supports to meet their own wellness needs. Supports must be sufficient, sustainable, and controlled by Indigenous people. Dr Makokis noted:

When people are brought back into these institutions, they can be retriggered.... We do the best in our own communities. We need to have long-term care facilities in our community, so we are not shipping out our sources of knowledge to a non-Indigenous community.

One participant noted that there are Indigenous Healing Centres, which provide effective models in supporting Indigenous people who are experiencing trauma:

There are places across this country that have healing centres – we need more of that... – health centres run by us. We have doctors, we have nurses, we have health professionals all across this country – we could run those health centres – it’s no problem, but it takes money... We don’t need people telling us what to do. We already know what to do and we have been doing it for over 100 years... [W]e can build these health centres, we can build these facilities to tackle all these issues. Diabetes, cancer, trauma, alcohol, drugs, violence we can do it and we have been doing it... Take that back to Ottawa – give us money to have these health centres – we will have sweats, smudges, we can work with doctors, all types of health professionals. Give us the money, we will build these places... but we want ownership.

The lack of funding for Indigenous Healers makes it difficult for those with the skills and knowledge to support Indigenous people experiencing trauma. One participant noted: “Boy it’s expensive to be a ceremonial person... that’s one of the roadblocks we have to healing.”

We’re being ad hoc funded to resolve this mess... we’re unravelling the work of 150-200 years [of colonialism]. It can’t be [done] through small contribution agreements. We need something more robust.

Leah Ballantyne



Participants at the National Gathering

Another concern that several participants raised was the lack of recognition and respect that Indigenous Healers receive. This must be remedied with education, resources and by removing unnecessary barriers. A participant from Nunavut said:

The government says you need a paper, a degree, so our Elders were turned away. Why do they need that piece of paper? Elders are Elders...A lot of our Survivors...are being flown out... [they have] nowhere to go except to Yellowknife, to a non-Indigenous doctor because we're not allowed to be with our Elders. The government has all the money. Elders have no money. Give us that money and give it to the Elders who are trying to do the healing, while they're still alive.

Another participant recounted similar barriers within her Arctic community for people to access health and wellness services. She emphasized that additional trauma is inflicted on people who must be flown out of the community to access treatment: "We don't even have addictions treatment. We send everybody down south. And that, in itself, is another trigger for our Survivors and their families."

Many participants stressed that there is a need to reclaim Indigenous control of Indigenous health. One participant asked:

How is it that we are ever going to be able to come home and really heal if the health system is still run by non-Indigenous people?... Who will understand better than us what we are going through?... Until the time comes when we administer our own [systems], we will never be healed.

Dr Makokis affirmed that Indigenous Healers and approaches to healing should not be treated as "add-ons", but as essential:

Every single one of our Nations, should have Indigenous health professionals working in our own way... Every single Nation should have barrier-free access to immersion programs, healing programs, cultural centres, all these things that are essential to revitalize our nationhood and our health systems. Until we see that happening, I don't see the effort that is required by the federal government, which has caused this harm, to actually change.



Manitoba Métis Federation Vice-President Andrew Carrier speaks with a participant at the National Gathering

Nurturing Indigenous Languages

Language is so much more than a way to communicate; it holds memory and wisdom, speaks to our relations with each other, with territories, and with past and future generations. As David Aglukark said, Indigenous languages have survived because of the strength of many Survivors:

My parents are traditional Inuit. They taught us hunting and gathering, making sure you know your language and practice it. Both my parents survived residential school as well. My mother attended residential school for about 48 hours. She got up in the middle of the night and walked back to her grandmother's camp and [the government officials] didn't come back for her at all. So that just tells you how strong my mother is.

Many participants spoke of the healing power of Indigenous languages. But they also shared how challenging it is to learn or relearn the languages that Indian Residential Schools and other colonial policies attacked. This is but one intergenerational consequence that exacerbates trauma. The loss of language impacts people deeply and has been experienced across all Indigenous communities.

Reclaiming and relearning Indigenous languages is a powerful part of addressing trauma.

Dr Makokis said:

Every single community should have the opportunity for people to 100% of the time learn their languages, learn their Medicines, learn who they are. Because we know that all of these are protective factors for keeping our people healthy, breaking that cycle of intergenerational trauma, and causing intergenerational healing to happen.

Unacceptable barriers continue to exist for those trying to learn Indigenous languages. Dr Makokis said that, although Nehiyakwak (Plains Cree) is one of the most widely spoken Indigenous languages, there is only one land-based immersion camp teaching the language: “we can't maintain a language if children aren't speaking... [governments] need to fund people to attend language camps and immersion.”

H. Closing Words: Indigenous Strength, Resistance and Resilience in Action

Trauma impacts our bodies, Spirits and relations. Its effects extend across all Indigenous communities. Its consequences pass down through generations. But alongside the undeniable weight of trauma, what emerged at the Gathering as a key theme throughout was Indigenous resilience. Resilience is also genetic, also intergenerational. It is nurtured through relationships with lands and families and upheld in cultures and ceremonies. Indigenous resilience is sustained and strengthened by Indigenous Healers and healing processes. In addressing trauma and drawing on Indigenous resilience, Indigenous people will collectively find the strength needed to continue this Sacred work.

An Indigenous approach to resilience is rooted in spirituality, ceremony, and connections. It's possible for each generation to heal as we learn lessons from each other, from Elders, and from children.

Tribal Chief Beverly
Kiohawiton Cook

In recognizing the strength and resilience of Survivors, Indigenous families, communities, and Leadership who are leading this Sacred work, it is important to emphasize that it is not appropriate to depend solely on the resilience of Indigenous people to address this trauma. Depending solely on Indigenous resilience places an unfair burden on those who are experiencing trauma relating to missing children and unmarked burials. It also leaves the role of government and the churches that actively created this harm and the systemic racism underlying the Indian Residential School System unchallenged.

This Gathering, and the ongoing work of Survivors, Indigenous families and communities, made it very clear that addressing trauma must be led by Indigenous people and accord with Indigenous principles, approaches and practices. Indigenous people will continue to support each other, to walk these healing journeys with courage, kindness, choice, balance, belonging, safety, joy and love. Indigenous healing approaches that support holistic wellness – mental, emotional, physical and spiritual – must wrap around those who are impacted by the searches and recoveries of unmarked burials and missing children. This is what ‘trauma-informed’ means in this context.

Another clear theme throughout the Gathering was that governments and churches need to fund the Indigenous-led supports and services necessary to help Survivors, Indigenous families and communities to heal from the various forms of trauma that they are experiencing.

The Independent Special Interlocutor will continue to advocate for sufficient, long-term health and wellness funding to support Survivors, Indigenous families and communities address the trauma associated with the search and recovery of unmarked burials and missing children.

Building on the important discussions that took place at this Gathering, further opportunities for knowledge sharing between Survivors, Indigenous families and communities will occur at future National Gatherings, including discussions on Affirming Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Upholding Indigenous Laws.



The Bentwood Box and the Empty Chair

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Lisa Meeches and Albert Beck for kindly agreeing to Co-chair the Gathering.

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Resources

British Columbia Cultural Safety and Humility Standard

https://healthstandards.org/files/HSO_CSHClientandFamilyInformationSheet_EN.pdf

The British Columbia Cultural Safety and Humility Standard is a toolkit developed by the BC First Nations Health Authority and the Health Standards Organization for designing, implementing and evaluating culturally safe healthcare systems and services.

Children of Shingwauk Alumni Association

<https://childrenofshingwauk.ca/>

The Children of Shingwauk Alumni Association (CSAA) provides resources for Survivors of the Shingwauk and Wawanosh Indian Residential Schools, their families and their communities. CSAA is partnering with the Shingwauk Education Trust and Garden River First Nation in the search and recovery of unmarked burials and missing children in relation to the former Shingwauk Indian Residential School site.

Indian Residential Schools Resolution Health Support Program

<https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1581971225188/1581971250953>

The Indian Residential Schools Resolution Health Support Program was established as part of the 2006 Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement. It provides cultural and emotional support, and mental health counselling services to Survivors of Indian Residential Schools and the families of former students.

Kaatagoging: Residential School Survivors Initiative

<https://narrativesinc.com/narratives-projects/kaatagoging-residential-school-survivors-initiative/>

Kaatagoging: Residential School Survivors Initiative is led by Survivors from St. Mary's Indian Residential School to search and recovery unmarked burials and missing children on the site of the former St. Mary's Indian Residential School in Wauzhushk Onigum Nation.

Life Promotion Toolkit by Indigenous Youth

<https://wisepractices.ca/life-promotion-toolkit/>

The Life Promotion Toolkit by Indigenous Youth is designed by and for Indigenous Youth. This toolkit provides knowledge, activities and resources for Indigenous Youth to strengthen their connections to Land, Self, Community and Spirituality.

Nanilavut Initiative

<https://www.irc.inuvialuit.com/service/nanilavut-initiative>

Tuberculosis reached epidemic proportions in Canada in the early twentieth century and peaked among Inuit communities during the 1940s to the 1960s. Thousands of Inuit were sent south for treatment under the management of the Government of Canada. Many people were not returned home and some families still do not know what became of loved ones who were sent south. Nanilavut, Inuktitut for “Let’s find them”, is an initiative dedicated to helping Inuit families find information on loved ones sent away during the tuberculosis epidemic of the 1940s to the 1960s who were never returned home.

Na-mi-quai-ni-mak Community Support Fund, National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation

<https://nctr.ca/memorial/na-mi-quai-ni-mak/na-mi-quai-ni-mak-community-support-fund/>

Na-mi-quai-ni-mak (I remember them) Community Support Fund is a number of small grants made available through the NCTR to Indigenous communities and organizations to support community-based healing and remembrance. The name Na-mi-quai-ni-mak is Anishinaabemowin (Ojibway) meaning ‘I remember them’ and was given to the program by an Indian Residential School Survivor and Elder. Funding may be used to support activities such as

- Community-led healing gatherings.
- Ceremonial activities (memorial feasts, give-aways, etc.).
- Memorial or commemorative markers (healing gardens, murals, carvings, plaques, etc.).
- Maintenance of burial sites (fencing, cutting back overgrowth, etc.).

Nēhiyawak Language Experience

<https://nehiyawak.org/>

The nēhiyaw (Cree) language immersion camp takes place in July in Saskatchewan on the land for one week. The camp provides the opportunity for authentic language engagement in the context to enhance and share nēhiyaw identity, including ways of knowing and being. Learning resources, workshops and classes are also available at nehiyawak.org.

Survivors’ Secretariat

<https://www.survivorssecretariat.ca/>

The Survivors’ Secretariat was established in 2021 to organize and support efforts to uncover, document and share the truth about what happened at the Mohawk Institute during its 136 years of operation. The mandate of the Survivors’ Secretariat includes supporting searching for and investigating unmarked burials and missing children; gathering Survivor statements about the truths of their experiences at the Mohawk Institute; research, collecting and archiving records and commemoration; and reporting back to Survivors, leaders, community members and liaising with other First Nations whose children were taken to the Mohawk Institute.

Thunderbird Partnership Foundation

<https://thunderbirdpf.org/>

Thunderbird Partnership Foundation is a leading culturally-centered voice on First Nations' mental wellness, substance use and addictions in Canada. It supports an integrated and holistic approach to healing and wellness serving First Nations Peoples and various levels of government through research, training and education, policy and partnerships, and communications. Thunderbird provides training, programs and resources that honour First Nations people's strengths and cultures.

Trauma-Informed Legal Practice Toolkit

<https://www.goldeneaglerising.org/photos/trauma-informed-legal-practice-toolkit>

The Golden Eagle Rising Society produced a toolkit for legal professionals, including lawyers and judges, about why and how to take a trauma-informed approach to working with Indigenous people in the Canadian justice system. The toolkit also provides information for law schools and law firms relating to trauma-informed legal practice and managing vicarious trauma.

Tunngasugit

<https://tunngasugit.ca/>

Tunngasugit is a non-profit organization that helps Inuit living in Winnipeg to find safe and affordable housing, accessing health & social services, finding employment and/or applying for social assistance and providing cultural activities and workshops. It offers front-line services to assist Inuit in transitioning to life in the city.

Williams Lake First Nation: Emergency Emotional & Spiritual Health Resources

<https://www.wlfn.ca/community-release/sjm-wellness-supports/>

The Williams Lake First Nation released an Emergency Emotional and Spiritual Health Resources in January 2022 to support Survivors and others impacted by the search of the grounds of the former St. Joseph's Mission Indian Residential School.





Representing strength, family and healing, bears are the primary element in the Office of the Independent Special Interlocutor's logo. The larger bear represents the parent, family, and community, while the smaller bear symbolizes the children who were stolen and never returned.

The Northern Lights in the night sky are the Spirits of our ancestors dancing. The dancing guides the children to reunite with their ancestors.

The stars depict the connection between the children taken from their communities and the parents left behind, who would stare at the same stars longing to be reunited.

The flowers in the larger bear signify life and the resilience of Indigenous people.

The changing colours in the dotted path illustrate the on-going search for truth, justice and healing.

The three pairs of moccasins honour and acknowledge all First Nations, Inuit and Métis children.

At the first National Gathering on Unmarked Burials in Treaty 6 territory, Regional Chief Gerald Antoine observed that on the back of the larger bear, there is a clear outline of a child's face looking up at the sky. Although this was not intentionally part of the design, it has shown us yet another way that the children's Spirits are speaking to us all.



*“For the child taken,
For the parent left behind.”*

TRC Interim Report, 2012



Office of the Independent
Special Interlocutor

for Missing Children and Unmarked
Graves and Burial Sites associated
with Indian Residential Schools

Bureau de l'interlocutrice
spéciale indépendante

pour les enfants disparus et les tombes
et les sépultures anonymes en lien avec
les pensionnats indiens



National Centre for
Truth and Reconciliation

UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

Centre national pour la
vérité et la réconciliation

UNIVERSITÉ DU MANITOBA

osi-bis.ca