

Denendeh Indian Residential School Survivors Conference  
Ndilo Gymn

*March 13-14, 2007*

*Yellowknife, NWT*

Speaking Notes Prepared for President Georges Erasmus,  
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Thank-you for this opportunity to provide an update on the Aboriginal Healing Foundation's work.

The Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement contains two distinct but complementary initiatives, healing and compensation.

These address separate issues.

As you know, healing is not compensation, and compensation is not healing.

Healing programs do not fulfill legal responsibilities, and financial compensation doesn't provide healing.

That's why we at the Foundation feel there must be a proper balance between the two.

We furthermore believe that, while the Settlement Agreement represents a commitment to healing, it does not represent finality.

The Settlement Agreement is an important and even historic step on the journey.

Since its inception on March 31, 1998, the AHF has been the only national funding agency mandated to support community-based healing initiatives which address the intergenerational legacy of physical and sexual abuse in Canada's Indian Residential School System.

Today, 145 community projects funded by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation constitute a unique national healing network designed specifically to address the historic trauma of abuse.

In only days from now, on March 31, all funding from the Foundation to these community services will cease as a result of the exhaustion of available resources.

The Settlement Agreement commits \$125 million to healing.

However, these funds are not expected to flow to the Aboriginal Healing Foundation before the end of 2007.

Projects funded by the AHF will be unable to continue delivering their services from March 31 until such time as the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement funds begin to flow, whenever that may be.

For about a year now we have been meeting regularly with senior government officials and with various partners and supporters, including the Assembly of First Nations.

We have made many speeches and presentations across Canada.

We have seized every possible opportunity to alert the government and the public about this funding gap faced by our funded projects.

Although the response has been positive, and although we have received verbal commitments to solving this funding issue from government officials – including a public commitment from the Minister of Indian Affairs at the December AFN Assembly in Ottawa – the problem remains unresolved.

And so we face the following:

In the absence of bridge funding, investments in community services will be lost and needless start-up costs will be incurred at a later date if projects are dismantled, staff are laid off, and healing professionals seek employment elsewhere — a scenario which grows more likely each day.

Furthermore, former attendees of Indian residential schools have a critical need for healing and for trauma support which may in fact rise with the issuance of Common Experience Payments in the coming months.

The Aboriginal Healing Foundation carries the message that healing is central to the successful resolution of numerous challenges which today face Aboriginal people.

These challenges include education, economic development, and self-sufficiency.

The critical work of healing represents the best hope in many communities.

This matter is too important and too timely to be left to the blind machinery of government bureaucracy.

We therefore have strongly encouraged the Government of Canada to bridge the funding gap by advancing \$40 million from the \$125 million committed in the Settlement Agreement to enable the Aboriginal Healing Foundation to sustain this community healing network.

In these efforts we have received a good deal of support from the communities and from organisations, for which we are grateful.

It appears at present however that the Government is content to leave the fate of these community projects to the workings of institutional processes.

The Aboriginal Healing Foundation at present has 1,345 signed contribution agreements.

We have done our best to ensure fair and equitable distribution of funds among First Nations, Métis and Inuit, both urban and rural, on-reserve and off-reserve.

Nearly 60 percent of the overall allotments were for direct healing services including counseling and therapy.

What is clear from exhaustive research is that the healing process requires ten years on average in a community to be effective.

The healing process includes reaching out to individuals, dismantling fear and denial, creating safety, and engaging participants in direct therapeutic healing.

Other considerations are the availability of organizational and community infrastructure and access to skilled personnel and counselors.

The healing process in Aboriginal communities in all parts of the country is just beginning.

Our research has concluded that a commitment to build on the work already completed must be made and carried out for another generation.

The healing, in short, has just begun.

And yet we know it is working.

There are approximately 70,000 survivors of the Indian residential schools alive in Canada today.

Over the past seven years, 50,000 people have received training and over 200,000 Aboriginal people have participated in healing projects.

Two-thirds of these participants in healing have never before had an opportunity to do so.

A prominent journalist, Marie Wadden, recently traveled across Canada visiting Aboriginal communities as part of a fellowship provided by a major Canadian newspaper, which then published a series of articles drawn from her experiences.

She has since commented that in many communities she visited, the community's efforts to heal represented the best, and sometimes the only, hope to be found.

Communities and individuals remain at different levels of preparedness and capacity for addressing the Residential School legacy.

However, in all regions of the country, people are more prepared now than they were a decade ago.

They are responding because the time and environment are more favorable.

This raises another challenge.

As part of the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement, the AHF has received a commitment of an additional \$125 million.

This will allow us to extend a limited number of already-existing funded projects for three years, but we will be unable to consider new proposals from those who are ready to heal and would like to begin a program.

The Settlement Agreement funds will be greatly appreciated by the communities receiving them, and the money will certainly provide us more time and more opportunity for dialogue concerning a broader role or longer-term arrangements.

Such efforts will be required, given the promising healing practices we have seen.

In closing, I thank the Assembly of First Nations for your support and I acknowledge and thank the many, many people who are bearing the work of healing in our communities.

Thank-you for you attention.