

# 2016

Assembly of First Nations National Youth Council

## CALLS TO ACTION

on Life Promotion in First Nations Communities



"My friends how desperately do we need to be loved and to love. Love is something you and I must have. We must have it because our spirit feeds upon it. We must have it because without it we become weak and faint. Without love our self-esteem weakens. Without it our courage fails. Without love we can no longer look out confidently at the world. We turn inward and begin to feed on our own personalities, and little by little we destroy ourselves. With it we are creative. With it we march tirelessly. With it, and with it alone, we are able to sacrifice for others."

- Chief Dan George



*"There are many kinds of love. Love that parents have for their children [...] love that can be seen in innocence and a love that gives us belonging. People who are part of a community know this love, it is from this love that we get purpose and belonging. It is through our experience of the different kinds of love that we find the courage to be who we are meant to be." - Josee Whiteduck, Algonquin Elder*

With these words, Elder Josee Whiteduck opened our gathering on June 8, 2016. On this day we, the members of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) National Youth Council (NYC), gathered in Ottawa for a Roundtable discussion with the Minister of Health, Jane Philpott. Our intention was twofold: (1) to reaffirm that our basic human rights as Indigenous peoples are to be recognized and upheld in keeping with the **United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples** and (2) to communicate our ideas for promoting life and reducing risks for suicide amongst First Nations children and youth. We have a sense of **cautious hope** that a distinct **window of opportunity** exists right now to promote positive change and transform existing relationships between Canadians and First Nations peoples, based on the following factors:

- a recognition amongst First Peoples that there is a spiritual revolution taking place within First Nations communities that has ushered in a time of healing for First Peoples – and potentially all Canadians
- a new **Liberal government and a Health Minister** that have publicly committed to strengthening the health, well-being, and self-determination of Indigenous peoples
- the recent release of the **Truth and Reconciliation Report** with its 94 calls to action
- the creation of the **First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum** which spells out a comprehensive and culturally informed approach to promoting individual, family and community well-being
- the increasing public awareness of the **links between suicide and the enduring negative legacy of colonization** and racism (i.e. loss of language, theft of land, forced removal of children from their families, multi-generational trauma, poverty, inequitable access to resources) affecting Indigenous communities all over the world
- clear evidence that **community control and self-determination**, cultural practices, and language revitalization are associated with lowered suicide rates in First Nations communities
- shared desire to tilt the conversation about suicide prevention towards affirmation of life, strength, culture, resilience, purpose, meaning, connection and hope as articulated within **Connecting with Culture: Growing our Wellness**
- a renewed commitment on the part of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) to value, support and promote youth leadership and advocacy

## **PROCESS**

The First Nations Youth Calls to Action on Life Promotion have emerged out of the following processes:

- Local and regional consultation with First Nations youth led by AFN Youth Council representatives (May-June, 2016)
- Summary of regional recommendations were presented by the youth to Minister Philpott at the Youth Roundtable (June 9, 2016)



- Roundtable discussion at the meeting with Minister Philpott
- Identification of initial themes and priorities for action
- Development of draft Calls to Action and solicitation of feedback from First Nations youth (June-July, 2016)
- Consolidation of feedback and refinement of Calls to Action
- Preparation of a 'living document' for presentation to the AFN Youth Summit (July, 2016)

## STARTING PLACES

As First Nations youth we are deeply saddened by the number of Indigenous communities that are experiencing major youth suicide crises and many of us feel frustrated by the lack of effective action, adequate resources, and timely response. We bring a **sense of urgency** as well as **some skepticism** to the process of developing yet another set of recommendations<sup>1</sup> calling for **dignity, respect, human rights, justice, and equitable access to resources** for all First Nations communities; conditions that are essential for **creating lives worth living**.

As youth, we recognize that the prevention of suicide does not rest with one sector or government department. It is a complex and multi-dimensional problem that requires the concerted efforts of individuals, families, communities, as well as federal, provincial, territorial and Indigenous governments to solve it. In other words, we recognize that **we are all implicated in the solution**, albeit in different ways.

A **spirit of love, hope and possibility** also pervades these Calls to Action. There is clear evidence that many of our communities are already making a positive difference in supporting young people to flourish through a creative range of **cultural, spiritual, inter-generational, recreational, land-based, wellness, and language revitalization projects**. We are calling for more **relational accountability** from various leaders to 'make good' on their promises to honour the **spirit and intentions of the Treaties**. With that in mind, these Calls to Action directly address those sectors and jurisdictions that we think have the most influence over improving the quality of life and living conditions for First Nations peoples.

The Calls to Action that follow are driven by our own **ideas, knowledge, stories, and experiences**. The insights and wisdom are drawn from our experiences of overcoming struggles, reconnecting with hope, and also from listening to the stories of our friends and relatives. We have articulated what we think some of the most pressing issues are for **promoting and preserving life** in First Nations communities today.

Similar documents have recently been developed by Indigenous youth, like the **Nishnawbe Aski Nation Youth Declaration**, which serve to amplify many of the key messages and recommendations that we are making here. We are grateful to our own Indigenous leaders, governments and organizations for their mentorship and look forward to receiving their ongoing support in the future. This is what helps us to be more effective advocates and strong leaders for our communities.

The Calls to Action that follow are **overlapping and inter-connected and action is required on multiple fronts**. In other words, "Everything is one" (Hjalmer, AFN Youth Council Representative, BC).

<sup>1</sup> As one example, the **Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP)** (1996) issued a number of sweeping and concrete recommendations for improving the lives of Indigenous peoples through a five-volume report. Most of the major recommendations for a renewed relationship between Indigenous peoples and other Canadians, which were to be predicated on recognition, respect, sharing and responsibility have **yet to be implemented**.



## **JUSTICE. Honour the spirit and intent of the treaties.**

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We recognize that without justice there can be no individual, family or community wellbeing. The spirit and intent of our Treaties based on our oral history needs to be understood and in fact must be the foundation of any terms of judicial reconciliation. The idea that justice is the foundation of healing and well-being was powerfully conveyed 20 years ago in the **RCAP Report** but sadly, many of the excellent recommendations from that report have gone unaddressed. Numerous threats to Indigenous health, safety, well-being and livelihoods persist in 2016. These include: poverty, racism, inter-generational trauma, overcrowded housing, poor infrastructure, unsafe drinking water, minimal employment opportunities, lack of equitable access to resources including child welfare services, isolation, social inequities, and a shortage of recreational opportunities for young people.

Local examples of promising strategies that directly engage with issues of **JUSTICE**:

- The Qwich'in Outdoor Classroom, engages 6-12-year-olds in land-based cultural education that supports the formation of healthy identities and meaningful connections to people and their land. This program assists these children to discover meaning and purpose for their lives so that they know that they are valued.
- The Chisasibi Land-Based Healing Program offers educational and healing opportunities to youth and young adults. The program is based on experiential learning and the teachings are all rooted in iyiyu pimaatisiwin (Cree way of life) and the healing power of nature.

To the **Minister of Health and Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs**, we urge that:

1. A priority be placed on taking immediate action to address growing inequities in education, employment, income, and healthy living environments. In keeping with a social determinants perspective, First Peoples must be allowed to control, design and define their systems of health, education and child welfare with funding that is at least equal to what all other Canadians receive.
2. Adequate and sustainable funding be provided to ensure that a comprehensive range of culturally-safe, prevention, health promotion, and mental health treatment services are made available to all First Nations communities.

*"Our community has been  
on a boil water advisory  
for 45 years."* - AFN NYC Ontario  
Representative



## **YOUTH LEADERSHIP & WISDOM.** *Create meaningful opportunities for youth to take action on issues of importance to them.*

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We believe that youth have a lot of valuable knowledge and experience to bring to the issue of promoting life in First Nations communities. We are collectively committed to speaking out against injustice in all its forms. We draw courage and strength from each other and know that our voices are stronger together. We want to explore new possibilities for taking action and are deeply committed to an ethic of relational accountability. We welcome the opportunity to learn more and want to be able to respond to and support each other when in crisis. We ask that our leaders, Elders, cultural advisors, and teachers help us to learn to become even stronger advocates for our friends, family members and relatives. We know that we need to learn to read the current context, anticipate what is coming next, and position ourselves as key influencers in our communities and in our organizations.

Local examples of promising strategies that directly engage with issues of **YOUTH LEADERSHIP & WISDOM:**

- Wapikoni Mobile, Quebec and the Photovoice Training, Nishnabe Aski Nation, Ontario are two examples of programs that enable First Nations Youth to develop their abilities and skills to produce knowledge, communicate their insights, and mobilize positive social action.
- CEPS Leadership Development Program, Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs and the Embrace Life Program, Prince Albert Grand Council, Saskatchewan are excellent examples of First Nations youth leadership development programs.

To the **Minister of Health and Minister of Youth**, we urge that:

3. Regular and accessible training opportunities are made available to youth who want to learn how to be supportive peer mentors to other young people in their communities (e.g. safeTALK or ASIST training through **Living Works Education** and other emerging culturally-safe life promotion programs such as Feather Carriers: Leadership for Life, Barrie Area Native Advisory Council, Ontario).
4. Adequate and sustainable funding be provided to enable young people to attend regional gatherings related to life promotion and suicide prevention. Young people need spaces to come together, be heard and develop their helping skills.

*"It is the simple things. Youth want to be told that they are loved."* - Deanna, AFN NYC Manitoba Representative



**CULTURAL IDENTITY. Support opportunities for young people to strengthen their cultural identities through learning and speaking their Indigenous languages, reclaiming traditional teachings, and participating in ceremonies.**

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We recognize that First Peoples cultures are most accurately transmitted and understood through Indigenous languages. Revitalization of our languages is vital for the development of a strong cultural identity. Support for traditional language and cultural restoration is a key component of reconciliation, as well as an important step to correct one of the major harms caused by the residential schools. Our languages enable us to fully maintain our unique Indigenous knowledge that is vital for the sustainability of our people and may very well be an important component of sustaining life on Mother Earth.

Local examples of promising strategies that directly engage with issues of **CULTURAL IDENTITY**:

- The Nena The Tr'inke-in, Yukon is a good example of a First Peoples early education program for 3 and 4-year-olds. This program offers culturally-based, land-based education that helps build strong foundations for the formation of healthy First Nations identities.
- The Ghost River Rediscovery Society, Alberta offers 'on the land' summer camps so that youth are provided with experience and teachings that enable them to build strong healthy First Nations identities.

To the **Minister of Health**, we urge that

5. Support be provided to First Nations communities so that Elders and cultural advisors can provide cultural teachings that will enable young people to know where they came from, who they are, what their purpose is and where they are going. This will help to reestablish the strengths of First Peoples' cultural identity that are vital for reconciliation.

To the **Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs**, we urge that:

6. Culturally-appropriate, land-based teachings and educational programs are available for all First Nations children, youth and young adults, including traditional language revitalization opportunities, since valuable ways of knowing come from speaking one's own language.
7. All government departments work closely with Indigenous leaders and local, provincial and territorial governments to implement recommendations 6-17, outlined in the TRC Report.

*"Do you know who you are?  
Do you know where you come  
from?"* – Kalila, AFN NYC British  
Columbia Representative



## **RESPECT & BELONGING.** *Create communities of respect, equity and belonging for all people.*

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As youth, we are especially concerned about the vulnerability of two-spirited (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, queer) youth who are repeatedly subjected to hate, bullying and harassment. In addition, cyber-bullying has become a serious concern for many youth in our communities. We are also concerned about the forms of overt and subtle forms of racism that we and/or our family members have experienced in the health and education systems. Too many service providers continue to practice in culturally unsafe ways when interacting with people who are from cultures other than their own.

Local examples of promising strategies that directly engage with issues of **RESPECT & BELONGING** include:

- BC Health Authorities Indigenous Cultural Competence Training is a good example of an effective effort to increase the cultural competence of health care providers in order to enhance culturally safe practice. A version of this program has been adapted for health care practitioners in Ontario.
- Journey 2 Wellness, Saskatchewan offers opportunities for First Nations youth to explore these important lessons of respect and belonging.

To the **Minister of Health**, we urge that:

8. Specific efforts be made to reestablish relationships of equity and respect between First Peoples and the Crown (Canada). These forms of relationship are crucial in order to sustain and advance healthy communities. This is the foundation of reconciliation and health upon this land (Mother Earth).

To the **Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs** we urge that:

9. Education for First Nations' students be inclusive of the values and beliefs of First Nations communities as determined by First Nations communities themselves. In this regard we envision a Canadian public education system that is inclusive and respectful of all Canadians' beliefs and values, as cultural safety dictates.

To **Provincial Ministries of Education**, we urge that:

10. All Canadian children learn about Canada's colonial roots and Indigenous pre-contact history to advance the restoration of respectful and equitable relationships between First Nations and the people of Canada.

*"We need to talk about respect."* – Hjalmer, AFN NYC British Columbia Representative



**HOPE. Pay attention to what is already working well and amplify stories of hope and success.**

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It is clear to many of us that several programs and strategies are already in place and making a positive difference in communities to promote life. We want to do more of what is working well. We recognize that much of what has been working well in our communities has been emerging from culturally-based programs that have been developed by our people, for our people. It is the healing and education programs that are based upon our Indigenous knowledge, beliefs and values that are offering real hope for the restoration of the health that our ancestors once enjoyed. We recognize that hope is based on the capacity to envision a healthier future that we believe will become reality for our people and our generations to come.

Local examples of actions or strategies that directly engage with issues of **HOPE** include:

- The Feather Carriers: Leadership For Life, Barrie and Area Native Advisory Council, Ontario, is a life promotion/suicide prevention program that is based on the Anishinaabeg teachings about life. Through these teachings participants are supported to develop their leadership skills for enhancing community members attachment to life. The values and beliefs that underpin the Anishnaabe ways of knowing and being form the basis of this training.

To the **Minister of Health**, we urge that:

11. Those programs that have already been identified by First Nations communities as making a positive difference in the lives of First Nations youth (see examples offered throughout) be given increased and enhanced flexible funding.
12. Another meeting with the Minister of Health be scheduled to address the progress made on these Calls to Action.

*"While we are here on this Earth, each and every one of us has a purpose." - Cheyanne, AFN NYC Saskatchewan Representative*







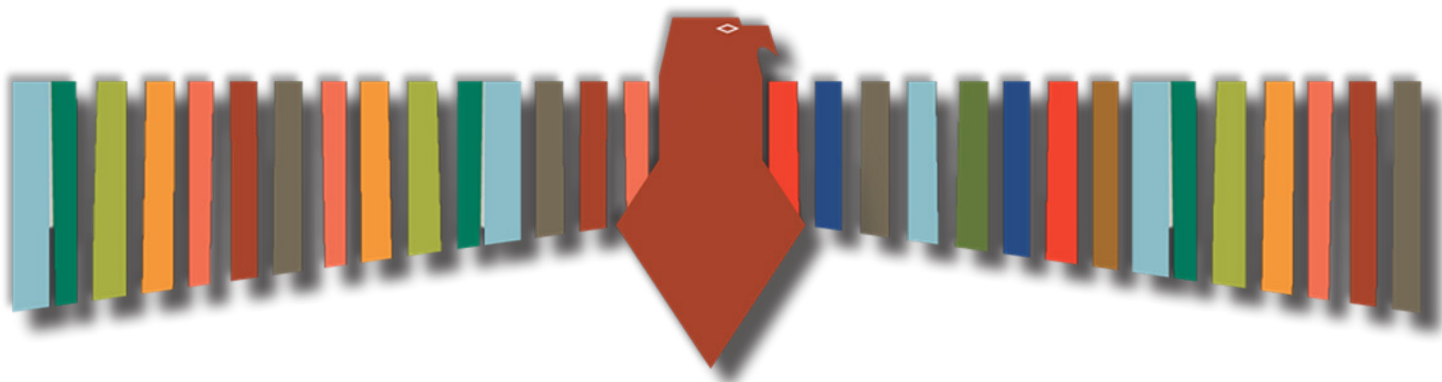
## **CLOSING REMARKS**

The AFN Youth Council humbly offer these recommendations in a spirit of reconciliation, and in the hope that our ideas will contribute to the healing of our relationship with the Crown and Canada and that this will lead to the healing of all First Nations people. We believe that these changes will lead to a reduction in suicides of our peers and relatives. It is our vision that one day all First Nations youth will choose to complete their life journeys as we have agreed to with Creator.

We close as we began, with the words of our Elder:

*"We need to find our traditional structures for doing this once again, for the truths that build a strong spirit may not be evident in the form of governance that has been imposed (upon us). So my encouragement for today is talk about how we can create this environment that reflects to every last person in the community, their worthiness." - Josee Whiteduck, Algonquin Elder*





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