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Final Report

Navigating Government Services: The “lived experience” of urban Aboriginal families in Fredericton, New Brunswick

UAKN Atlantic Regional Research Centre

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INTRODUCTION

In 2011, the Aboriginal population in Canada reached 1,400,685, about 4% of Canada's total population, with 56% of Aboriginal people living in urban areas.¹ According to the 2006 Census, Aboriginal people in Canada are increasingly choosing urban areas as places of residence. 54% of Aboriginal people in Canada lived in an urban centre in 2006, up 4% from 1996, and that number had risen another 2% by 2011.² New Brunswick's Aboriginal population totalled 22,620 in 2011,³ 1,455 of whom lived in Fredericton.⁴ According to Statistics Canada, the Aboriginal population in Fredericton has more than doubled from 2006 to 2011.⁵ As the numbers suggest that the urban Aboriginal population will only continue to grow, it is important that we better understand the needs and experiences of this group of people.

This research first emerged out of a desire from the urban Aboriginal community to better understand what is and is not working when it comes to access to government services for off-reserve Aboriginal people in Fredericton. Local community organizations were seeing first-hand the struggles that Aboriginal people were having accessing government services. This research hopes to bring some of these struggles to light so that both community organizations and local government can work together to better meet the needs of Fredericton's Aboriginal population.

This paper begins by explaining the terms used throughout the paper. From there follows a discussion of the methodology used in this research as well as a closer look at Fredericton's Aboriginal population and the community organizations that serve them. The findings and recommendations that emerged from this research are then discussed after which the paper ends with a short conclusion.

TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Throughout this paper, the term Aboriginal is used to describe anyone who identifies as an Aboriginal person regardless of status, including people who are First Nations, Innu, Inuit, and Métis. Urban is used to describe any place of residence that is off-reserve. The term urban Aboriginal community is used to describe the local community made up of off-reserve Aboriginal people as well as the Aboriginal-run organizations that service them. The term First Nations community is used instead of reserve wherever possible.

METHODOLOGY

To begin this research project, I submitted a proposal for this paper to the University of New Brunswick's Research Ethics Board where it received ethics approval. Once ethics approval was granted, I began conducting a literature search in order to learn what research had already been done on urban Aboriginal people in Fredericton and what statistics were available on this demographic. The questions that were used in the focus groups and individual interviews (Appendix) were developed by urban Aboriginal community members whom I consulted with continuously from the drafting of the proposal to the drafting of the final report.

Over the course of four months, 32 urban Aboriginal community members and frontline service providers, both in urban Aboriginal community organizations and in government, were spoken with either in focus groups or individual interviews. Participants were referred to myself and a community researcher through contacts at local urban Aboriginal organizations and government offices. Being a well-known member of the local urban Aboriginal community, the community researcher played a crucial role in facilitating the focus groups with urban Aboriginal community

members. Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted through: Under One Sky Head Start, New Brunswick Aboriginal People's Council (NBAPC), Skigin-Elnoog Housing Corporation, Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, New Brunswick Housing, and with front-line government employees working in areas such as education, social work, transportation, and employment. Urban Aboriginal participants were asked about positive experiences they have had accessing government services off-reserve, barriers to services they may have experienced, whether they noticed any differences in accessing services on and off-reserve, and what improvements they would like to see in access to services for urban Aboriginal people in Fredericton (see Appendix). Government participants were asked about their knowledge and perceptions of Aboriginal people and how these impact their dealings with their Aboriginal clients. They were also asked about how they handle situations that have occurred on-reserve and outside of their jurisdiction as opposed to how they handle situations that occur off-reserve and within their jurisdiction. And finally, they were asked about the role that on and off-reserve Aboriginal people play in the design and implementation of programs (see Appendix).

From these discussions themes such as health, education, parenting supports, mobility, and employment came up repeatedly. As the data were analyzed, three broad headings emerged which encapsulated the abovementioned themes: service gaps and barriers, funding gaps, and impermanence of programs and funding. The recommendations included in this paper emerged naturally from the themes and headings and from the words of the participants themselves.

The majority of quantitative data used in this paper comes from Statistics Canada's National Household Survey (NHS) Aboriginal Population Profile, Fredericton, CY, New Brunswick,

2011.⁶ As a result, the figures presented in this paper may not be fully representative due to the identity politics inherent in self-identification as an Aboriginal person as well as possible non-participation in the census.

URBAN ABORIGINAL PEOPLE LIVING IN FREDERICTON

There are 15 First Nations communities in New Brunswick. Nine of these are Mi'kmaq communities and six are Maliseet. Fredericton is home to the Maliseet community of St. Mary's, which has an on-reserve population of 847 and an off-reserve population of 783.⁷ Statistics Canada's findings in recent years indicate that the urban Aboriginal population in Fredericton is increasing rapidly. In 2006, Fredericton had a total population of 49,980. Of those people, 725 identified as Aboriginal.⁸ In 2011, Fredericton's population had grown to 55,145. Within that population, 1455 people identified as First Nations, according to the 2011 Census.⁹ These numbers indicate that the urban Aboriginal population in Fredericton had doubled in that 6 year span.

Table 1 Indicators comparing Fredericton's Urban Aboriginal Population, Fredericton City, New Brunswick Aboriginal Population, and the Province of New Brunswick

	Indicator	Fredericton Urban Aboriginal Population ¹⁰	Fredericton City ¹¹	New Brunswick Aboriginal Population ¹²	New Brunswick Population ¹³
1	Population	1,455	56,224	22,620	751,171 ¹⁴
2	Median Age	23.7	38.7	31.3	43.7
3	Mobility Status (moved in 2010-2011 to a different address, municipality, province or country)	530			
4	Total population female	865	29,530	11,580 ¹⁵	384,735 ¹⁶
5	Total population 15 years and older with no certificate, diploma, or degree	270	4,160 (10.9%)	3,180 ¹⁷	120,590 (22.6%)

6	Total population 15 years and older employment rates (%)	52.0	62.0		56.5
7	Median earnings 15 years and over for 2010 (\$)	16,667	63,134		57,867
8	% Whose mother tongue is an Aboriginal language	2.1		11.3	
9	% of population with knowledge of an Aboriginal language (ability to conduct a conversation)	6.2		13.7	

The data in the above chart indicates that the New Brunswick Aboriginal population is much younger than the provincial non-Aboriginal population. This is especially true of Fredericton where the Aboriginal median age is 23.7 compared to that of the non-Aboriginal population where the median age is 38.7. Additionally, more than half of the urban Aboriginal population in Fredericton is made up of women. What is particularly striking is that nearly half of Fredericton's Aboriginal population had moved in the year prior to the gathering of the census data. Mobility in this case includes changes of address as well as moves to different municipalities, provinces, or countries. To summarize from these findings, Fredericton's Aboriginal population is young, highly mobile, and largely female. Additionally, it is clear from these statistics that employed Aboriginal Frederictonians made substantially less money than their non-Native counterparts. While the median earnings for non-Aboriginal Frederictonians was \$63,134 for 2010, the median for Aboriginal workers in Fredericton was roughly 1/3 of the non-Aboriginal average at only \$16,667. Urban Aboriginal people are far less likely to know an Aboriginal language with only 2.1% of Fredericton's Aboriginal population claiming an Aboriginal mother tongue and only 6.2% claiming knowledge of an Aboriginal language.

EXTENT OF URBAN ABORIGINAL SUPPORTS

The predominant organizations that service urban Aboriginal people in Fredericton, New Brunswick are Under One Sky Head Start Program, New Brunswick Aboriginal People's Council (NBAPC), and Skigin-Elnoog Housing Corporation.

Under One Sky Head Start is a culturally relevant head start program that services off-reserve families. Parents participate in monthly parent sessions which help to foster a sense of community amongst the parents as well as a deeper engagement in their children's education.

The New Brunswick Aboriginal People's Council represents over 20,000 Status and Non-Status Aboriginal people living off-reserve across New Brunswick. The organization works to protect and defend the rights of off-reserve Aboriginal people in New Brunswick and also works to strengthen the cultural ties and leadership of its members.

Skigin-Elnoog Housing Corporation is an organization that provides affordable housing to off-reserve Aboriginal people residing in Fredericton and across New Brunswick. It offers numerous housing programs including rental and home ownership programs to help people of varying income levels.

These are the core organizations servicing the urban Aboriginal community in Fredericton; however, there are other organizations also doing important work for off-reserve Aboriginal people. These include Gignoo Transition House; Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy (ASETS); the Joint Economic Development Initiative (JEDI); New Brunswick

Aboriginal Workplace Essential Skills (NBAWES); and the Aboriginal Workforce Development Initiative (AWDI). Additionally, the University of New Brunswick's Mi'kmaq-Wolastoqey Centre and St. Thomas University's Aboriginal Education Initiative offer invaluable services to Aboriginal people pursuing a postsecondary degree in Fredericton.

FINDINGS

The findings that were gathered during the focus groups and individual interviews with urban Aboriginal community members and government employees are broken down under three main headings – service gaps and barriers, funding gaps, and impermanence of programs and funding.

SERVICE GAPS AND BARRIERS

Participants identified several areas where they have experienced gaps and barriers accessing services as urban Aboriginal people. What is most striking is that in most cases, had they lived on-reserve they would not have experienced such difficulties. Services that participants voiced concern with include health, non-insured health benefits, education, and parenting supports.

Health

Numerous interviewees were highly satisfied with Fredericton's Diabetes Clinic. *"The Diabetes clinic here is awesome. They don't judge you. They give you good information."* *"It was encouraging. They don't look down their nose. Very very helpful."* *"You can go there any time you want. You can call anytime you want. You don't need a doctor."* *"They let you be part of the decision making for your own health."* *"They would tell you what was available but they also included, 'well what do you think?' And 'how do you feel about this?' And 'are you happy with your readings?' and everything like that."*

Despite their satisfaction with the clinic, participants found the clinic difficult to access. *“Well, there’s only one place you can go and it’s across the river. They need to have one on this side of the river. You know, like satellite offices. And I think they might get more results for Aboriginal people if they had, like I know on the reserve there is something, right, but if you live off the reserve there isn’t anything. And there should be. There should be at the Council, or here, or wherever. Where you know there’s a dialogue about it, and it’s more open and available. Cause getting on a bus to go across the river and then getting the bus to come back, a lot of people just don’t.”* Due to limited bus service on Fredericton’s north side, travelling across the river to the south side where the majority of businesses and health services are can be very time consuming. Having a Diabetes Clinic only on the south side presents a major barrier to people living on Fredericton’s north side.

Interviewees also noticed a major gap in services in recent years with the introduction of H1N1 immunization. The government offers free immunization to people with a higher risk of suffering from complications due to the flu including children, the elderly, and people who have diabetes or asthma. Additionally, the government also offers free immunization to Aboriginal people; however, there seems to be a great deal of confusion surrounding this. Many urban Aboriginal people who went to local health offices for immunization were mistakenly turned away. *“They were announcing on the radio that if you fit into the high-risk group, like children and diabetics, they’d have a clinic at such and such a place and then if you’re Aboriginal, there’d be a clinic at Kingsclear. So, people who didn’t live on the reserve, if they went into the reserve the reserve was saying well, you can’t come here, you have to go over to the clinic off-reserve, but if you*

went to the clinic over there, the clinic was saying no, no, you don't come to this one. You're Aboriginal so you gotta go over there. I don't even have a vehicle to get to all these places. This was after they had already waited in line because the line ups were you know 2-3 hours long and then getting told that. It shouldn't matter. I just don't think it should matter." While Aboriginal people are supposed to be able to access health services wherever they live, many people were not able to do so in this case. These experiences underline an on-going problem that off-reserve people face – the persistence of the belief that Aboriginal people live on reserves. In this case, service providers assumed that Aboriginal people should be accessing services on the reserve. In actual fact, not all Aboriginal people belong to a reserve or live anywhere near their home reserve and therefore cannot access services that way.

While urban Aboriginal people who are Status Indians are technically eligible to access services on their home reserves, there are a lot of cases where this is not possible. *"Health care for Status Indians is supposedly a right, but for off-reserve Aboriginal peoples it's really difficult to exercise or access your rights when you're miles away from your reserve that your name is attached to. A lot of us, we've never even lived in those communities, but all of a sudden because of legislative changes our name is added to a band list and the band ends up having additional members added to its funding base."* *"So if there's a health clinic in Woodstock, but you're living in Fredericton or Saint John, it's difficult for them to go to Woodstock to access a health clinic. There has to be a way in which they can access their benefits."* There are many instances where people live very far from their home reserves, there may be transportation issues, or people may have never grown up on their reserve, so they do not feel comfortable going there to access services. Urban Aboriginal people need to be able to access services where they live.

“There has to be programs that are accessible to off-reserve people through some sort of mechanisms that are theirs. The bands aren’t theirs.”

Non-Insured Health Benefits

Interviewees also voiced concern with Non-Insured Health Benefits. Oftentimes the cheapest drugs are the ones covered; however, sometimes a different brand of drug might be more effective but it will not be covered. *“Sometimes there’s drugs out there that are better than what they’re giving you. So there’s a better drug for what you have, but you aren’t good enough to be able to get that. This here’s a better drug, but you won’t be covered for that, so we’re going to go with this here.”* Interviewees also noted that doctors do not always know what is covered. They may get to the pharmacy only to find that they cannot afford the medication they need. *“Our NIHB, it doesn’t necessarily cover a lot of stuff. And you don’t know right, until you get there and they’ll say no, it’s not covered under your NIHB and then if you don’t have any other insurance then you have to pay for it.”*

Additionally, if benefits holders want to challenge their rights to particular medications, there is no mechanism in place for them to do so. *“It’s not just about what’s covered, but the process to appeal or the turnaround time for them to give you an answer. And then you have to go back to your doctor and they have to fill out all these forms and fax it to them and you’re not allowed to communicate with NIHB only the pharmacist and the doctor can, and so you can’t even advocate and no one can advocate on your behalf.”* *“Sometimes the prescription that your doctor prescribes you and the reason for it is that it’s the best one you should have and then you’re not*

covered and you have no ... there's nothing in place for you to deal with that problem, or even advocate for why you should be entitled to that particular drug. There's just no appeals process." Not having coverage for the medications actually needed can have serious health consequences for off-reserve Aboriginal people. Having an appeals process in place would help people to make a claim for drugs they may need but may not be entitled to under the current benefits plan.

Interviewees also described the judgment they experience as benefits holders. Many have experienced racism and judgment from health service providers once they mention that they are covered under NIHB. *"Just because we're not paying for it why are we treated any different than someone who's paying for Blue Cross?" "We have community members too where doctors have refused them prescriptions because they could buy it and why should they get it for free."* Off-reserve Aboriginal people are often looked down upon for being recipients of medical and drug benefits. This can negatively impact Aboriginal peoples' relationships with health care providers which in turn can negatively impact their health.

Education

Participants were unanimously concerned with the lack of representation of Aboriginal culture, languages, and historical contributions in the curriculum. *"You have our children going to these schools, our children, not learning any of that [the history of Aboriginal people in Canada], not being validated in who they are. What's the message? Well you're not French, you're not English, you're not an immigrant. What the hell are you? Nothing of any value. In the absence of*

pride exists shame. That's what they're teaching by omission. They're teaching our own children to be ashamed and shameful." Both Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal people need to be better educated about Aboriginal culture and the contributions Aboriginal people have made to this country. Consequently, participants have voiced a desire in taking part in curriculum building. *"We need to have control of the curriculum, not the control to deliver somebody else's curriculum, but control of our own curriculum. We know our people."*

In addition to the lack of Aboriginal content in the curriculum, off-reserve students have other issues accessing culturally relevant educational materials. When Aboriginal language classes are offered to off-reserve students, there are barriers preventing students from accessing these classes. *"It's kind of like that in the school system when it comes to the Maliseet language. If you're off-reserve and you don't got that status because of whatever, you can't attend. Even though you're native you can't go to those."* *"My kids couldn't take Mi'kmaq language at school. Not Indian enough."* Students who do not have Indian Status are unable to take Aboriginal language classes offered in off-reserve schools in Fredericton. While urban Aboriginal community organizations are accepting of all Aboriginal people regardless of Indian Status, the federal and provincial governments still refuse to recognize Non-Status Aboriginal people as Aboriginal.

Lack of access to Aboriginal language classes is a significant problem for off-reserve Aboriginal people in Fredericton. According to the 2011 Census, only 6.2% of the 1,455 Aboriginal people residing in Fredericton claimed knowledge of an Aboriginal language. 0% of Fredericton's urban Aboriginal population claimed to speak an Aboriginal language most of the time at home, and

only 2.1% claimed an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue.¹⁸ If off-reserve Aboriginal people do not have access to educational classes and resources to help them learn their languages these numbers will only decrease. Loss of language is a component of loss of cultural knowledge and can negatively impact the well-being of off-reserve Aboriginal people, making it harder for them to feel a sense of connection to their cultures and communities. According to the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, the revitalization of Aboriginal languages is a fundamental part of creating healthy individuals and communities.¹⁹

Education came up in a different context in the discussions with government participants. Some had taken a course on Aboriginal Awareness offered to employees of Social Development and Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour. The participants who had taken the program found it to be informative and beneficial. According to one of the participants, *“It was a great course. We learned about the history of Aboriginal people and it went into some of the reasons or sources of the distrust of government that some Aboriginal people have, which was really helpful.”* While some of the participants had taken the course as part of their jobs, several had not even heard that such a course was offered by their employers. Those who had not heard of the course wished that they had, saying that such a program would be very beneficial to them and their jobs. Many of the participants thought that a course on Aboriginal Awareness should be mandatory for all government employees rather than optional. From these discussions it was clear that many government employees would like to be better educated about Aboriginal people, history, and issues so that they can be better equipped to aid their Aboriginal clients.

Parenting Supports/Mentoring

Government employees working in the field of social work noted that Aboriginal people often distrust the government. One participant noted *“Because of the 60s scoop, when the government came in and took all the children away, that mentality is part of people’s lives now. They know the government can take their children. It makes sense that they don’t trust us. And most of the social workers are non-native.”* Participants voiced frustration with the current trend in child welfare and social work of taking children away from families. One person felt that *“The government’s first response is to take the child out of the home, never mind about fixing the family. Thankfully this is starting to change.”* Many participants felt that there is not enough emphasis placed on helping families to improve and on preventing the need for child welfare interventions. One participant noted that each reserve has its own Child and Youth Welfare office, but that there is no Child and Youth Welfare office in Fredericton with an Aboriginal cultural element specifically for off-reserve Aboriginal people. Programs and services need to be developed to help off-reserve Aboriginal families who are struggling with parenting. Urban Aboriginal participants also felt that there is a lack of supports for parents and families.

The effects of colonization and the residential school system have had a negative intergenerational impact on Aboriginal families in Canada.²⁰ Additionally, some Aboriginal people are having children at young ages and may not know how to be a parent. As a result, Aboriginal parents may need assistance through parenting programs, supports, and mentorships in order to break intergenerational cycles of trauma and abuse. Urban Aboriginal participants voiced a lack of parenting supports and mentoring for off-reserve Aboriginal parents. While there are parenting programs offered in Fredericton through Family Enrichment and the Family

Resource Centre, not everyone is comfortable going there. *“If you’re one Aboriginal person in a room full of Non-Aboriginals, how uncomfortable is that?” “And if you’re forced to go there you’re labelled and if you choose to go there, then it’s like “Aha, you’re not a good parent.”*

Parents often fear judgment seeking out parenting help and advice. If off-reserve parents had somewhere to go that catered specifically to them, they would feel a lot more comfortable going there and the service would work a lot more effectively for them.

In some instances, parents may face barriers accessing parenting mentorship or supports due to past mistakes. *“We’re trying to help one of our moms here by getting her to come in and volunteer and she was more than willing to come in and volunteer, but anyone who works in Early Childhood Education has to have a criminal record check and have an SD check which is a Social Development check, so if your name comes up in Social Development for whatever reason, which wouldn’t come up in a criminal record check, if your kids were put in care for whatever reason, it’s called a contravention. And if they have a contravention they cannot even volunteer in that Early Childhood centre. So, because that woman’s child is in foster care they said no. They refused us. So, we said, let us get her in here. The girls could model the way for her on some of the parenting things she was struggling with.”* In cases like this, the parents who need it most are being cut off from getting hands on training that could help them improve as parents.

Both the lack of programming specific to off-reserve Aboriginal parents and the barriers that parents can face accessing mentorship and supports can hinder parents from getting the valuable parenting skills they need.

FUNDING GAPS

There are many gaps in funding that are unique to off-reserve Aboriginal people compared to those living on reserve.

Education

While Status Indians who live off-reserve are technically entitled to the same post-secondary funding as Aboriginal people who live on-reserve, in practice off-reserve people are often not actually able to access such monies. *“If you’re a Status and your reserve has certain monies for education and programs or whatever and you live on that reserve, you could get funded. If you don’t live on that reserve, depends who you’re related to you could get funded or not. So, education for people living off-reserve is iffy at best.”* In a lot of cases, the band will fund the students who live on-reserve first and if there is any money left over then they will decide if they want to fund off-reserve students as well. *“You have to go through the band and the band decides whether they have enough money to fund off-reserve. Even if you are a member, it’s whether they feel they have enough.”* The federal government accepts the fact that they give money to band councils and that they maintain their fiduciary responsibility to Aboriginal people that way, but oftentimes people living off-reserve are not able to access the funding and services that the government has provided money for.

Mobility and Gaining Self-Sufficiency

While statistics show that the Aboriginal population is becoming increasingly urban, participants felt that there were few services available to help them make the transition from the reserve to

the city. *“The government really doesn’t provide a heck of a lot for people moving from the reserves to the urban areas simply because their mindset is they’re only responsible for people on reserves.”*

The lack of services is particularly acute when it comes to housing. *“There’s all kinds of program assistance for Aboriginal peoples living on social assistance – affordable housing programs for them and the rural native housing program. But over the years, we’ve found that a lot of young Aboriginal peoples who got their education and had a career plan. They’d move into Moncton, Saint John, or Fredericton, and making that transition from the reserve to the urban area, the first thing they encounter is the cost of housing.”*

Many Aboriginal people who choose to leave the reserve do so in part because they want to access improved services and a broader job market; however, as they get jobs and begin to make money, many find that they are penalized for doing well. *“A lot of them have said over the years, well why did I go to school? Why did I try to work? I can go back to the reserve and get a free house or assistance in housing, but there’s nothing for me off-reserve.”* A lot of participants felt that the lack of services for middle-income Aboriginal people seems designed to keep Aboriginal people on assistance instead of helping them to become self-sufficient. Government participants felt the same way. One government employee noted that *“sometimes with transportation costs, people aren’t making enough with assistance to work so they quit their jobs.”* By quitting their jobs they become wholly dependent on assistance. While they were taking a step towards independence by working, because they receive less money from assistance each month they work and because of the added costs of transportation, oftentimes working is actually

unaffordable. These types of barriers are working to keep urban Aboriginal people dependent on assistance rather than helping them to become self-sufficient. Participants felt that better supports need to be in place to help urban Aboriginal people make the transition to financial independence.

IMPERMANENCE OF PROGRAMS AND FUNDING

The impermanence of available programs and services can have a profound impact on urban Aboriginal people. Because the majority of government programs are not self-sustained, a change in government or a decision to cut funding can completely eradicate programs regardless of how effective or beneficial they are. *“Most of the other programming that’s been available to Aboriginal people off-reserve has been hit and miss. It’s been programming that might exist for a year then it’s gone.” “I know that is a chronic problem, is that they fund these wonderful programs, projects, and that sometimes does more harm than good because it leads to high expectations and then people are left high and dry.” “And that’s what happens to people, it becomes just another failure in their life.” “Oftentimes these programs are directed at people who are at risk and struggling and the last thing you want to do is create another failure.”*

Health

As discussed above, interviewees had great experiences at the Diabetes Clinic in Fredericton despite the fact that they felt that it was not easily accessible to everyone and that satellite branches are needed. Participants mentioned that the off-reserve population in Fredericton previously had access to wonderful diabetes resources; however, these programs were cut. *“And we did have for off-reserve Aboriginal people a Diabetes Initiative through NBAPC, and the reserves, none of the First Nations communities lost theirs but all of the off-reserve lost theirs.”*

The Diabetes Initiative that the NBAPC ran was preventative and educational in nature. *“Giving people enough information so they could make healthy choices.” “She would go around the province to all of the locals. Like, New Brunswick Aboriginal People’s Council has zones and locals all over the province. And she would have a fun and interesting way of giving you facts about the good foods and bad foods that you didn’t feel like it was a lecture, right, because you got to ... she played games about it, Nutrition Bingo.” “She had props and things that people could relate to for people who are visual learners. She did a thing on the fat content in different foods.” “It’s unfortunate that we lost that program. It was funded by the federal government. I think we had it for almost five years. And it came to the end of its thing and then they stopped it for off-reserve.” “I just thought the program had so much potential and she was just, just getting in here and the parents couldn’t wait for her to come back and they were constantly saying what are we going to do next? And when are we going to do the Community Kitchen again? Because they loved that. They got to prepare a full course meal and they all left with enough food for a meal and it was all healthy. They all participated and it was fun.” “So that’s unfortunate that they stopped that program because it was reaching the people that it needed to reach.”* While this program was very successful and was reaching people and helping people to develop healthier eating habits, the program was cut because it was dependent on federal funding and was not self-sustainable. Significantly, the Aboriginal Diabetes Initiative (ADI), the diabetes program run on local reserves as well as on reserves across the country was not cut and is still an operating and successful program. Given that Aboriginal Canadians are three to four times more likely to get diabetes than non-Aboriginal Canadians, having a diabetes initiative program for off-reserve people in Fredericton is immensely important.²¹ In addition to the diabetes prevention program, participants mentioned several other fantastic programs that had also ceased due to

funding cuts including university funding assistance, participation programs, and youth summer camps. Government participants also felt that this is a major problem and that the termination of programs due to funding cuts has a negative impact on service recipients.

Post-Secondary Funding and Support

Often, the short term financial output of running a program could produce long term gains that would save the government money in the long run. For example, helping off-reserve people get a higher level of education could potentially decrease the number of people needing financial assistance further down the road. *“They had a program then, the province did. I can’t remember what it was. I went for upgrading [because she had never graduated from high school], and while I was in upgrading they did like a group session on where would you go from there. And they presented information. They said as a mature student you can go to university. So there is going to be a special session at St. Thomas/UNB, so if anyone wants to go we’ll pay your way and back.”* *“You can go to university. They’ll take you as a mature student. ... ‘Okay, but how’m I going to live?’ ‘You’ll get a student loan, we’ll help you. We’ll pay transportation to and from university, childcare,’ you know. So it was, whatever program that was a wonderful program because I know that there was about twenty of us that actually went ... Most of them graduated. I didn’t. Because the government changed. The provincial government changed and that was the end of that program, right, so you lost your support.”* Because of that program a lot of students who would otherwise not have gone to university were able to graduate with university degrees. As university graduates, it is less likely that these people will need to rely on social assistance in the future, but again, this program was dependent on government funding and was subsequently cut leaving people who had not yet finished their degrees without the assistance they needed to do so.

Employment

Participants also discussed employment assistance programs that were very beneficial to them and their community that were later cut. *“There are some things that they’ve done. There were provincially funded job finding clubs. It was a wonderful thing. It was working really well, so they stopped it. People came. They got skills to write resumes and how to present in an interview, and we had 100% success rate with getting jobs. It was sponsored by Income Assistance and the community college. Every one of the ones that we had, we’ve done like maybe twelve job finding clubs. I think its 8 weeks and every one of them got jobs.”* Again, the cost of running such a program can save money in the long run as employed people will be less likely to be dependent on social assistance.

OPPORTUNITIES: BUILDING ON SUCCESS

The urban Aboriginal community organizations that exist in Fredericton right now are doing fantastic work for the community. Building on the success of Skigin-Elnoog Housing Corporation, Under One Sky Head Start, and the New Brunswick Aboriginal People’s Council will allow an increase in programs and services by and for off-reserve Aboriginal people. As one interviewee noted *“most of the initiatives that have been successful, they’ve been basically driven by the desire of off-reserve Aboriginal people to do something for themselves. Those programs in most cases were programs that started through accessing you know Canada Works and all of the programs that have general applicability to regular Canadian citizens, you know to social, non-profit society. And we just basically took them and added an Aboriginal flavor to them and spun them off.”* The urban Aboriginal community knows its people and knows what services and programs are needed, often what is lacking is the money to run such programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations require the participation of both urban Aboriginal organizations and government in order to realize these goals.

1. Build strong partnerships between urban Aboriginal community organizations and government service providers to work together to improve access to services for off-reserve Aboriginal people. Strengthen communication between service providers and community organizations and commit to working together towards creating programs and services that cater to the unique needs of off-reserve people.
2. Foster a strong and functional Friendship Centre or Family Resource Centre in Fredericton to help centralize access to services, to increase the number of much-needed services for urban Aboriginal people, and to create programs and services that are more self-sufficient in their funding model.
3. Keep data on program participants in order to have a record of the success rate of programs that face being cut. Such data can be used as leverage in seeking funding renewal or in attempts to fund similar programs in the future.
4. Provide mandatory “Aboriginal Awareness” programming to all government employees.
5. Develop a counselling program for urban Aboriginal families to nurture strong parenting skills, to help treat addictions issues, and to foster health and well-being amongst the off-reserve population. This could be run through a Friendship Centre or Family Resource Centre.
6. Incorporate Aboriginal cultures, history, and languages into all school curricula, not as a side note or module but as a core component of school programming so that both Aboriginal and non-

Aboriginal students can become better educated about Aboriginal people and the history of this country.

7. Create an online database or a comprehensive website where urban Aboriginal people can go to learn about what programs and services are available to them and to find contact information for these services.

8. Build a mechanism of advocacy for off-reserve people in Fredericton. A collective of people who will advocate on behalf of off-reserve people, who have the knowledge and contacts to do so in order to ensure that the urban Aboriginal population is receiving access to the services they need, whether it be Non-Insured Health Benefits, Legal Aid, Housing, Social Development issues, or Employment Assistance. Such a mechanism could be provided by a functional Friendship Centre or Family Resource Centre.

CONCLUSION

There have been and continue to be some wonderful programs, services, and organizations working to meet the needs of Fredericton's urban Aboriginal community. By working together, government and community organizations can reach an even higher level of success.

Strengthening communication between government and community organizations and building strong partnerships are crucial to the improvement of programs and services for off-reserve Aboriginal people. Developing a fully functional Friendship Centre or Family Resource Centre in Fredericton will also be instrumental in offering culturally-relevant programs and services to urban Aboriginal people in a safe and comfortable setting.

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APPENDIX

Guide for Focus Groups

Focus group questions for urban Aboriginal families include:

1. Can you tell us about some positive experiences that you have had accessing government services (social services, education, health, and/or justice)?
2. Can you share with us some of the barriers you have encountered when accessing government services?
3. Have you had any difficulties accessing government services due to a move onto or off of a reserve?
4. Have you had any positive experiences accessing government services when moving on or off reserve?
5. Can you suggest some changes that would help government better meet the needs of off-reserve aboriginal families?

Focus group questions for front-line government employees include:

1. What do you know about the history and culture of Aboriginal people in Canada?
2. What is your perception of Aboriginal people?
3. How do your perceptions impact your dealings with Aboriginal people?
4. How do you handle situations that occur on reserve or outside of your jurisdiction?
5. How do you handle similar situations that occur within your jurisdiction?
6. What role do the differences between on- and off-reserve Aboriginal people (for example, in terms of needs, experiences, etc.) play in program design and implementation?