

Key stakeholders come together to address suicide rates with youth in James Bay area

The Mushkegowuk Youth Collective is made up of five members; Dr. David Danto, Program Head, Psychology, University of Guelph-Humber, Trustee, Psychology Foundation of Canada; Rick Wabano, Program Coordinator, Mushkegowuk Youth Collective; Greg Spence, Elder; Sally Fazal, Founder of Social Impact Advisors; Mallory Hilkwech from Right To Play Canada and Mandi Hickman, Manager of Programs and Community Partnerships with PFC.

The Mushkegowuk Youth Collective members came together for the first time during a workshop hosted by the Laidlaw Foundation in October 2018. In our synthesis of that workshop day we came up with a population-level intended impact statement:

“Significantly decrease suicide rates in children 0-12 years and youth 13- 19 years in the Mushkegowuk Territory within 3 years.”

Estimates¹ put the rate of suicide among indigenous children and youth at five times the national average. Our goal is to eliminate that disparity by 2023 and continue to support children, youth and their families in mental health and wellbeing into the future.

Since our first meeting in 2018, we have had a series of teleconferences and two days in July 2019 of in-person meetings with youth and mental health care workers from Attawapiskat, Kasheshewan, Moosonee, Fort Albany and Peawanuk. Through these meetings and consultations, the Collective developed a theory of change for our impact statement and began to outline the activities and timeline for the implementation of our theory.

To honour an underlying principle of the Collective, our project is named the Mawachi Hitowin Project for Children and Youth. Mawachi Hitowin means “coming together” in Cree. An essential value of our plan is an inclusive community approach and the embrace of both traditional and western teachings referred to as ‘two-eyed seeing’.²

We emerged from our meetings in July 2019 with a plan for developing an integrated system of mental health care in the region that incorporates the two-eyed seeing approach, integrates

¹ Retrieved September 8, 2019: <https://www.suicideinfo.ca/resource/indigenous-suicide-prevention/>

² [Psychology's Response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Report](#)
[A report of the Canadian Psychological Association and the Psychology Foundation of Canada](#)
[Prepared by the Task Force on Responding to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Report, May 2018](#)

Two-eyed seeing: Two-eyed seeing refers to learning to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, and from the other eye with the strengths of Western knowledges and ways of knowing together, for the benefit of all. P.10

traditional healing and western approaches, supports youth and caregivers, and offers connection, healing, development and education opportunities to youth and caregivers.

In February 2020, the Mushkegowuk Youth Collective returned to the north to continue our consultations. We spent three days meeting with representatives from the coastal communities to discuss the integrated system of mental health care and youth suicide. It was an honour to listen and learn from elders, youth, Chief in council and community members as to what they need to heal and move forward in a healthy way.

We have only just begun this work and there is much to do. We are grateful to the people we met in Fort Albany who were open to sharing very difficult personal experiences. Over the next month, the Mushkegowuk Youth Collective will synthesize what we learned and will circulate our findings with each of the communities so we can take the next step together in building a more coordinated approach to mental health services and programs.

Thank you to the University Guelph-Humber for your overall support of Mawachi Hitowin.

Thank you to Air Canada for providing the Collective with travel vouchers to ensure we could connect in person.

And a special thank you to the Laidlaw Foundation for supporting our idea and helping us realize our theory of change for the Mushkegowuk Region.

Mushkegowuk Youth Collective
Fort Albany
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Photo Gallery



