

National Report on the 2018 to 2020 First Nations-Led Engagement on Income Assistance

National Summary Report

Income Assistance Program
Indigenous Services Canada



Indigenous Services
Canada

Services aux
Autochtones Canada

Canada

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Engagement Partners

Québec

- Commission de la santé et des services sociaux des Premières Nations du Québec et du Labrador

Ontario

- Association of Iroquois and Allied Indians
- Grand Council Treaty 3
- Nishnawbe Aski Nation
- North Shore Tribal Council
- Ontario Native Welfare Administrators' Association

Manitoba

- Social Development Advisors Technical Group, including:
 - Dakota Ojibway Tribal Council
 - Interlake Reserves Tribal Council
 - Island Lake Tribal Council
 - Keewatin Tribal Council
 - Manitoba Independent First Nations
 - Sioux Valley Dakota Nation
 - Southeast Resource Development Council
 - Swampy Cree Tribal Council
 - West Region Tribal Council

Saskatchewan

- Saskatchewan First Nations Family and Community Institute

Alberta

- ISC Regional Office worked with First Nations, including Treaty Area Chiefs and Band Social Directors, to organize and host engagement sessions.

British Columbia

- The First Nations, Indigenous Representative Organizations and Tribal Councils (including Naut'sa mawt Tribal Council) that partnered with the ISC Regional Office to organize and host engagement events.

Atlantic

- First Nations in the Atlantic region are continuing to research self-determination and are developing distinct approaches to on-reserve Income Assistance programs.

Yukon

- The Council of Yukon First Nations declined to participate due to other priorities.

Merci / Thank you / Ekosani / Miigwech / Meegwetch / Mahseecho / Mutna /
Wopida / Hei Hei / Marci Cho / ᑭᑭᑭᑭᑭᑭᑭᑭ / Quanaqqutit / Nakurmik /
Kukwstsétsemc / Woliwun

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Executive Summary

The Income Assistance Program was first introduced in 1964 as a policy to ensure income assistance was available to on-reserve residents in all of the provinces and territories.

Currently, the Program ensures income assistance is available to eligible on-reserve residents in the provinces as well as all Status First Nations living in Yukon at standards reasonably comparable to the relevant province of residence or Yukon.

The governments of Northwest Territories and Nunavut have independently administered their own income assistance programs since devolution.

In line with Indigenous Service Canada's broader social reform agenda, Budget 2018 committed \$8.5 million over two years to better understand how to make the Program more responsive to the needs of individuals and families and to identify the supports required to help individuals better transition from income assistance to employment and education.

The Department of Indigenous Services Canada provided funding to enable a First Nations-led, regionally specific, engagement process that sought input from three key groups: First Nation Income Assistance clients, First Nation Income Assistance administrators, and First Nation leadership. Prior to this engagement process, First Nations had not been meaningfully engaged since the Program's inception, which has changed little since 1964.

Between fall 2018 and spring 2019, First Nation organizations hosted in-person engagement sessions and undertook secondary engagement activities such as online surveys, testimonials from former clients and workers, youth outreach, etc.

In analyzing the engagement reports submitted by First Nations and First Nation organizations, Indigenous Services Canada identified five recurring themes:

- a) provisions;
- b) capacity building;
- c) case management and pre-employment supports;
- d) community-based wraparound, ancillary and holistic services; and,
- e) self-determination/governance and traditional knowledge and culture.

A number of participants highlighted how colonialism (e.g., the *Indian Act*, the legacy of residential schools, etc.) continues to contribute to the dependency cycle faced by some First Nation communities and individuals.

Engagement participants emphasized the importance of framing income supports within the context of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action and the principles of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.

Participants stressed the importance of comprehensive approaches to community development and ancillary programs to address income and employment needs and the broader needs that impede self-sufficiency.

Case management and pre-employment supports were highlighted as being of particular importance.

- Indigenous Services Canada should work with First Nations to ensure equitable services for on-reserve Indigenous people;
- Income Assistance rates should be determined by the needs of clients and their actual cost of living to ensure that basic needs are met;
- there should be increased access to case management and pre-employment supports;

Engagement participants made numerous recommendations, including:

- funding and resources should be increased to build capacity within communities for efficient and effective program delivery; and,
- there should be greater flexibility and local control over the design and delivery of the Program, in part to enable culturally appropriate approaches to Income Assistance.



Figure 1: Challenges, Opportunities, Gaps, and Strengths identified by Little Red River Cree Nation at an April 2019 Engagement Workshop (High Level, Alberta)

1. Introduction

The Income Assistance program (the Program) was first introduced in 1964 as a policy to ensure income assistance was available to on-reserve residents in all of the provinces and territories.

Currently, the Program ensures income assistance is available to eligible on-reserve residents in the provinces as well as all Status First Nations living in Yukon, at standards reasonably comparable to the relevant province of residence or Yukon.

With expenditures of \$973 million (2017-2018), the Income Assistance program is one of Indigenous Services Canada's largest social development programs. In 2017-2018, the program helped support 150,073 beneficiaries (81,104 clients and 68,978 dependents).
Indigenous Services Canada

The governments of Northwest Territories and Nunavut have independently administered their own income assistance programs since devolution.

The Program provides funding to eligible individuals and families to help cover basic needs, such as food, clothing, and shelter (i.e., rent and utilities), and special needs such as doctor recommended diets.

Targeted funding is also provided for case management and pre-employment supports to help income assistance clients become more self-sufficient.

First Nations had not been meaningfully engaged since the Program's inception,

which has largely remained unchanged since 1964.

Budget 2018 committed \$8.5 million over two years "to work with First Nations to understand how to make the Program more responsive to the needs of individuals and families on reserve and to identify supports required to help individuals better transition from income assistance to employment and education."

In line with the Department's broader reform agenda, engagement processes are being conducted across different social and health care programming areas (e.g., education, child and family services, assisted living and a continuum of care) to identify approaches to enhance service provision.

Engagement activities were held in all of the regions other than the Atlantic and Yukon regions. In 2016-17, First Nations in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island began research on self-determination and are currently developing distinct approaches to on-reserve Income Assistance programs in their respective provinces – for this reason they declined to participate.

The Council of Yukon First Nations also declined to participate given its other priorities.

2. Engagement Process

In the spring and summer of 2018, Indigenous Services Canada identified First Nation partners interested in leading, designing, and implementing regionally-specific engagement processes.

Interested First Nation organizations submitted proposals to Indigenous Services Canada which reviewed them, transferred funding to organizations and provided supporting materials as needed.

First Nation communities and organizations then planned and hosted their own engagement activities, which ran from October 2018 to June 2019.

Principles for Engagement

- ✓ *First-Nations Led*
 - ✓ *Regionally Specific*
 - ✓ *Reconciliation*
 - ✓ *Respect*
 - ✓ *Shared Commitment*
 - ✓ *Accessibility/ Inclusivity*
-

Program administrators, caseworkers, clients and beneficiaries, communities, youth and families, First Nation leadership and organizations provided insights and recommendations for program improvement.

In some cases, engagement participants were also able to submit additional information after the in-person sessions. Regional surveys were also used to supplement the in-person sessions.

Representatives from Indigenous Services Canada were able to attend a number of engagement sessions and thus hear first-hand about key challenges and opportunities.

Following the engagement activities, funded First Nation communities and organizations submitted regional engagement reports to Indigenous Services Canada which then undertook a qualitative analysis of these reports to identify the five major themes discussed below.

These themes, as well as this national summary report, have been validated by First Nation communities and organizations that received funding as well as by other First Nation partners.

3. Overarching Themes

This report summarizes the comments, opinions, and recommendations made by participants in the engagement process on income assistance that was led by Indigenous Services Canada's First Nation partners. To ensure the voices of engagement participants are heard and well documented, this report aims to provide an objective summary of the main feedback received.

Recommendations and input shared are those of engagement participants as documented in the engagement reports provided to Indigenous Services Canada.

Engagement participants expressed support for more holistic and culturally sensitive approaches to programs and services that would better correspond to the needs of individuals and communities.

Based on its analysis of the individual reports, Indigenous Services Canada identified five overarching themes:

- a) *Provisions*: Participants discussed the adequacy of provisions under the current Income Assistance Program and made recommendations on how the Program might be improved to better meet the needs of individuals and their families.

- b) *Capacity Building*: Participants discussed the tools and services that are required in First Nation communities for the efficient delivery of income supports.

Challenges related to program administration included staff retention; inadequate salaries; the need for appropriate training and tools; and high caseloads.

Program policies were characterized as outdated, complex, influenced by provincial regulations, and having been developed without First Nations' engagement.

- c) *Case Management And Pre-Employment Supports*:

Participants stated that case management and pre-employment supports have contributed to client success in communities where these have been implemented by helping to address some of the complex barriers to employment faced by Income Assistance clients.

Participants suggested increasing access to eligible services under case management and pre-employment supports through:

- long-term funding of case management and pre-employment supports in all communities;
- increasing the number of eligible services offered within communities; providing more navigation services and supports; and
- better coordination of government services.

Participants explained that the limited opportunities for employment in their communities was an obstacle to self-sufficiency.

Five Overarching Themes

- *Provisions*
- *Capacity Building*
- *Case Management and Pre-employment Supports*
- *Community-based Wraparound, Ancillary and Holistic Services*
- *Self-determination/Governance and Traditional Knowledge*

- d) *Community-Based Wraparound, Ancillary And Holistic Services*:

Participants expressed having difficulty accessing supports for their well-being (e.g., mental health and addiction services), and for employment and self-sufficiency (e.g., transportation and reliable child care). The lack of these supports in and around communities, as well as current Income Assistance rates, act as barriers to accessing these services.

Participants recommended a broad approach to reform that focuses on a holistic continuum of care and services.

- e) *Self-Determination/Governance And Traditional Knowledge And Culture*: Participants discussed how the *Indian Act*, the legacy of the Indian Residential Schools, and other factors adversely impact First Nation individuals and communities.

Participants expressed a desire for local control over the design and delivery of programs such as Income Assistance as well as more flexibility and discretion with respect to adhering to the current Program guidelines and Terms and Conditions, in part to enable culturally appropriate approaches to Income Assistance.

The preservation and revitalization of traditional knowledge and culture were viewed as critical to the achievement of better outcomes.

While this report focuses on these five themes, many of the challenges faced by First Nations are interconnected and cannot be addressed by a single program or service.

Discussion at engagement sessions often moved away from income support to interconnected issues, such as:

- health care, including prenatal care, healthy childhood development, the caring for of elders/sick family members, and chronic disease (e.g., heart disease, cancer, diabetes, osteoporosis) prevention and treatment;
- gaps in coverage as individuals age out of Jordan's Principle;
- social support programs for trauma resulting from colonization as well as prevention programming (e.g., mental health and addictions services and supports, suicide prevention,

trauma-informed culturally safe care, and community-based counselling);

- education programs and services tailored to First Nation needs, including adult literacy programs (e.g., basic life-skills and personal development services, opportunities for educational upgrading, and fitness programming);
- community/economic/job skill development and access to labour markets (e.g., maximizing employment on-reserve/making space for First Nations on the job market);
- long-term impacts of poverty, and the need for a poverty reduction strategy;
- impact of eligibility requirements for child tax benefits (i.e., Canada Child Benefit; provincial child benefit);
- raising public awareness of First Nation realities and cultural specificities to combat racism and discrimination;
- on-reserve food banks;
- on-reserve housing (e.g., insufficient housing, overcrowding, homelessness, need for shelters) and related infrastructure (e.g., drinking water); and
- upgrading communications infrastructure (e.g., internet connectivity).

The feedback on these items that fall outside the scope of income support has since been shared with the departments and programs with the relevant mandates to address them.

“Jordan's Principle makes sure all First Nations children living in Canada can access the products, services and supports they need, when they need them. Funding can help with a wide range of health, social and educational needs. Jordan's Principle is named in memory of Jordan River Anderson, a young boy from Norway House Cree Nation in Manitoba.”

Government of Canada

3.1. Provisions

Cost of Living

Engagement participants in all regions indicated that the basic Income Assistance rates are insufficient to cover expenses such as food, shelter (e.g., rent and utilities), clothing, personal items, and transportation.

Participants said that Income Assistance rates should be determined by the needs of clients and their actual cost of living rather than being set by provincial or Yukon governments based on the needs and cost of living of individuals residing in more urbanized centres.

First Nation Income Assistance clients, administrators, and leadership observed that the Program excludes expenses for many culturally and locally-relevant items, such as supplies for hunting or traditional harvesting activities, that

could help clients become more self-sufficient.

Engagement participants explained that the cost of living on reserve is impacted by factors such as the local economic context, remoteness (e.g., lack of road access to some First Nation communities), limited available resources, the cost of essentials (e.g., food, fuel, clothing, personal items etc.), and that the transportation costs of accessing resources are distinct from those in off-reserve and urban communities.

Consumer Price Index – the Basket

- Food
- Shelter
- Household operations, furnishings and equipment
- Clothing and footwear
- Transportation
- Health and personal care
- Recreation, education and reading
- Alcoholic beverages, tobacco products and recreational cannabis

Statistics Canada

Some participants mentioned their perception that Income Assistance rates had not kept pace with increases in the cost of living. Some Income Assistance clients explained that to make ends meet they take on debt, cancel services or leave bills unpaid.

While not a direct measure of cost of living per se, the eight major components in the basket of goods and

services used by Statistics Canada in calculating the Consumer Price Index can be a useful measure when thinking about the cost of living.

Some administrators mentioned that capped budgets and expenditures for special needs results in an inability to cover the essential needs (essential needs includes both basic and special needs) of clients and their families. Families may go without support in some cases.

Another issue is that the amount that can be authorized for purchasing items such as furniture is insufficient; this is particularly challenging for individuals living in isolated and remote communities who have to pay high delivery fees.

Some participants said that they had insufficient funds to cover the cost of clothing for themselves and their children. They specifically mentioned the seasonal burdens of buying new school clothes in September and winter clothes for their children.

Moreover, Income Assistance rates do not cover the full cost of funerals or the transportation cost for Income Assistance clients to attend family funerals. Families may therefore be unable to afford proper burials or communities may have to assume the cost.

Food Security

Participants indicated that Income Assistance rates are insufficient to cover the true cost of food, especially in remote or isolated communities where there are fewer options for purchasing food. Communities such as these are reliant on a small number of retailers, sometimes a single store, that may

operate as near monopolies, and which sell groceries at very high prices.

Consequently, many residents of First Nation communities travel to distant urban centres to shop or access medical services; however, given the limited transportation options, those who do not have access to vehicles must often hire a driver at additional, sometimes significant cost, thereby further reducing their living allowance.

Food Security is defined as the “assurance that all people at all times have both the physical and economic access to the food they need for an active, healthy life. The food itself is safe, nutritionally adequate, culturally appropriate and is obtained in a way that upholds basic human dignity.

Paying for Nutrition: A Report on Food Costing in the North
Food Secure Canada (2016)

Some participants also explained that services such as food banks that help ease the burden of food insecurity in other municipalities are not available in First Nation communities. Food banks and similar services are not federally funded and there are no non-governmental organizations offering these types of services in the communities. This is discussed further in the section on ancillary services.

Shelter Allowance and Housing

Participants in every region considered housing-related issues to be significant barriers to well-being and self-sufficiency. They explained that overcrowding in homes often leads to the need for more frequent repairs and maintenance. However, Income

Assistance shelter rates were said to be inadequate to cover those costs.

Some participants described overcrowding and other housing-related issues as negatively impacting health and well-being.

Many clients indicated that Income Assistance allowances do not cover the full costs of utilities, including firewood.

Participants explained that local context can lead to additional expenses (e.g., chainsaws and fuel) to meet shelter needs.

Traditional Activities

Some participants said that they cannot afford to participate in traditional or cultural activities such as hunting, fishing, and trapping that might help increase their self-sufficiency.

They explained that their ability to participate in such type of activities is limited because of program restrictions on allowable assets such as snowmobiles.



Dependents

Some participants said that they could not afford the full cost of caring for their children, even when receiving additional benefits through other federal and provincial programs (e.g., Canada Child Benefit).

They explained that assistance rates for children and newborns are inadequate to cover the costs of items for infants

and children. For example, participants noted that the newborn assistance rate decreases after the first child is born; however, many items (e.g., child car seats) must be repurchased whenever additional children are born into the family.

“if you look at the comparison, and you’re in foster care allowance and what they are allowed for Temporary Care, oh, [...] it’s not just a little, it’s a really huge gap. And to say that they are providing for children that’s not their relatives so they get more money for them, it’s not right. [...] They still need the same things as this child that’s going into foster care. They still need the same food, clothing, transportation, all that stuff.”

Engagement Participant (2019)

The discrepancy between the allowable rate for children under Income Assistance as compared to the higher allowance provided to foster parents or guardians through child foster systems (e.g., Child and Family Services) was characterized as being unfair and being counter to the needs of families and communities given that poverty leads to more children being removed from their homes and placed with foster parents.

Participants mentioned that the cost of caring for children with disabilities is particularly challenging for parents or guardians receiving Income Assistance.

Participants highlighted how the Program’s eligibility guidelines define adult children living with their parents as dependents; however, these children often live independently of their parents but cannot move out of the family home

due to the housing shortages found in many First Nation communities.

Accessing Income Assistance Funding

Participants described challenges in receiving or accessing Income Assistance funds. Local businesses (e.g., stores, banks) that offer cheque cashing services generally charge service fees, which can be considerable, especially in remote or isolated communities or for clients without bank accounts.

Clients receiving Income Assistance on debit-type cards are often charged a per transaction fee. Some clients requested that they be allowed to pay bills themselves rather than having the band or administrators do this on their behalf – being able to do so would help clients build independence and life skills and better prepare them to move off of Income Assistance.

Some administrators noted an increase in the incidence of fraud. They explained that some clients may deposit their cheques electronically and then cash them at a local store. In other cases, cohabiting couples may circumvent eligibility guidelines by applying separately to receive higher rates than they would receive as a couple.

Provincial/Yukon Alignment

Generally, participants claimed that the policy of federal alignment with provincial/Yukon rates and eligibility criteria creates challenges for First Nation communities because of the fundamentally different contexts on and off reserve. Some administrators opined that alignment is insufficient to meet the full needs of their clients and that even this base level of provision is not always met.

Administrators explained that some services eligible under provincial programs are not available on reserve and, in some cases, on-reserve Income Assistance rates are lower than the corresponding provincial rate.

Income Assistance is residency-based and all residents on reserve are therefore eligible to apply regardless of their status. However, some administrators observed that there are cases in which non-Status residents apply for provincial Income Assistance while living on reserve.

Some engagement participants also said that non-Status residents on reserve receiving Income Assistance may not be eligible to receive any health care benefits.

For clarity, Status First Nation people living on reserve are eligible for Non-Insured Health Benefits while clients of provincial income assistance programs living off reserve are eligible for health benefits (e.g., prescriptions and dental coverage) through provincial programs. Income Assistance, under Special Needs, is sometimes used to provide health services to non-status residents on reserve who would otherwise not have access to provincially or federally funded health benefits.

Participants asked to have more discretion with respect to eligibility criteria.

3.2. Capacity Building

Service Delivery

Participants identified a number of service delivery issues of which funding appears to be the most critical. Participants indicated a lack of funding to purchase office equipment (e.g.,

printers, scanners, photocopiers, computers, software, including compatible financial software).

Participants explained the need for improved data collection in order to be able to better deliver the Program and debated the relevancy of certain forms required by the Program.

Offices were described as often unavailable or too small to be able to provide some social support service programs. Participants noted the limited office space availability for external professionals who come to the community to serve Income Assistance clients.

Some program administrators said that many of their offices are not equipped with features such as security glass and cameras that enhance employee safety and security when working with more difficult clients. Poor Internet connectivity was also noted.

Participants commented on the limited travel budget for administrators to attend meetings, workshops and training events/opportunities. Administrators also reported some uncertainty on how to best approach filing charges against clients they suspect of committing fraud.

Participants recommended that extra funding be provided to administrators to acquire the tools (e.g., computers, printers, central/universal database, travel) necessary for effective program administration.

To enhance the safety and security of program staff, safety plans may need to be developed for on-reserve offices that mandate the use of security cameras, panic buttons, security guards, etc.

Improved infrastructure such as better designed workspaces and premises to

ensure confidentiality and protect personal client information as well as additional office space to accommodate visiting professionals were also seen as important.

Income Assistance Workers - Salary/Responsibilities

Participants in all regions agreed that program administrators have such heavy workloads that they may be unable to meet the program's administrative requirements.

Administrators are often requested to provide supports above and beyond those provided by peers (e.g., crisis worker) employed by the provinces.

Administrators are considered underpaid compared to provincial staff providing similar services. This is said to result in high staff turnover with administrators leaving for better paid positions. Without funding for assistants to help manage the workload, administrators spend considerable time filing, reporting, and dealing with clients, and less time providing case management and support services.

Participants recommended increased funding to retain and train staff and reduce burnout. This could include funding for workplace wellness programs, revising administrator job descriptions, clarifying roles and responsibilities, and developing diploma courses for new and current administrators.

It was also recommended that caseloads (i.e., the ratio of Income Assistance workers to clients) be reduced, salaries increased, and that more staff, including case managers, employment counsellors, and administrative support, be hired.

A comparative study on the salary differences between administrators of provincial income assistance programs and those of the Income Assistance Program was recommended as well.

Income Assistance Workers - Training

Participants across all regions agreed that there is insufficient training, resources and professional development programs (e.g., financial reporting, budgeting, and software, motivational speaking skills, facilitation skills, etc.) for new and current administrators.

It was noted that there is no requirement or funding for formal accreditation to administer the Program and that the Program offers no guidance or official training (e.g., training on how to deal with intoxicated clients) to administrators.

Participants also described how administrators often provide mental health support, addictions support, life coaching, and support to seniors for which they are neither paid for nor technically qualified to do. All of this work is done without administrators having the necessary resources to maintain their own physical and mental well-being.

Participants highlighted the importance of ongoing professional development to promote consistent, non-judgmental service by administrators. This would help counter political interference from Council, bullying by community members, and accusations of unprofessionalism and unfairness.

Participants explained that administrators need supports and resources to provide case-management services to clients.

It was recommended that more funding for training be provided to enable administrators to upgrade their client services skills (e.g., addictions, case management, intergenerational trauma and trauma mitigation, healing and self-esteem building, and self-care) as well as their office and research skills (e.g., business administration/human resources, policy research and analysis, community engagement and program planning, governance, local enterprise and community economic development, software and technologies).

It was also recommended that more opportunities be provided for program administrators, Indigenous Services Canada, and First Nation leadership to meet and develop networks to strengthen capacity, discuss best practices, successes and challenges, and support better communication between First Nations leadership and program staff.

Income Assistance Workers – Reporting Requirements

Participants noted an increase in the Program's reporting requirements due to the introduction of the 2019-20 Data Collection Instrument (DCI) which requires collection of client-level data as opposed to community-level data in previous years.

Participants explained that the lack of a formal network to bring together all program administrators within First Nations results in a lack of clarity on reporting requirements.

Participants recommended that the DCI Income Assistance Report be reviewed and assessed.

It was also suggested that federal departments (e.g., Education and Social

Development Canada and Indigenous Services Canada) could reduce reporting redundancies by collaborating to avoid multiple requests for the same information.

Policy

Participants were critical of the Policy and Procedures Guide – its length and restrictions can result in confusion and the need for clarification from Indigenous Services Canada.

Participants also discussed how policies in the Policy and Procedures Guide are outdated, and were created without input from First Nation leadership and administrators and therefore do not reflect First Nation cultures and issues.

Concerns were raised about government inconsistencies in applying the Program's Terms and Conditions and the frequent provincial changes that must be implemented on reserve, all of which have significant impacts on communities.

Some participants stressed that the Program has to address lived realities and be designed by communities themselves.

Participants recommended more frequent reviews and revisions of the Program's policies with more involvement and input from leadership and administrators.

Participants stated that additional community engagement on program reform is necessary and that the

provincial and federal governments should uphold the articles of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People* and engage in joint discussions and policy tables with First Nation leadership and administrators.

It was recommended that a user-friendly website be developed onto which the policy and program forms translated into Indigenous languages could be posted. Engagement participants in one region recommended the creation of a policy support telephone line.

Participants also recommended that additional training be provided to enable program staff to better understand policies to build capacity and increase program flexibility for both administrators and clients.

3.3. Case Management and Pre-Employment Supports

Income Assistance clients and administrators stated that case management and pre-employment supports have contributed to client success in communities where these have been implemented.

Participants said that clients would further benefit from access to a greater number of pre-employment services and supports in communities where these types of services are already available or by introducing pre-employment supports in communities that do not currently have these available.

Case Management provides Income Assistance clients with individualized supports to help them get ready for work or return to school/training.

Pre-employment supports can include everything from daycare services to help obtaining driver's licences.

Some participants observed that the lack of employment opportunities in or near their communities present significant challenges for clients to exit Income Assistance or to find secure employment following participation in pre-employment supports.

Barriers to Employment or Education

Engagement participants identified a number and variety of barriers to employment or education that Income Assistance clients face, including:

- addictions/mental health challenges;
- physical disabilities and age-related conditions;
- learning disabilities;
- lack of education, skills training, or work experience;
- lack of transportation to employment (e.g., no driver's license or vehicle ownership);
- criminal records;
- caregiving responsibilities for children and/or for sick or disabled family members;
- low self-esteem; and
- lack of Internet access to communicate with potential employers.

Case Management and Pre-employment Support Services

Some engagement participants with access to case management and pre-employment supports in their communities indicated that Income Assistance clients would benefit from increased access to these types of services. However, some of the training programs offered through these services frequently do not fully meet the needs of Income Assistance clients and there are often not enough spaces to meet client demand.

It was noted that client needs for services such as transportation and childcare may not be met even if they are eligible for funding under pre-employment support. For example, some participants explained that while daycare is eligible under pre-employment supports, there are sometimes not enough daycare spaces in their community to make use of this service.

Participants in some regions indicated that eligibility requirements for Income Assistance applications such as identification documents and bank statements can be burdensome for clients who do not have these documents. Participants in one region observed that the cost of birth certificates is covered, but a driver's license is not.

Participants said that they would like greater access to programs such as:

Life Skills Supports

- Money management, budgeting, and tax clinics.
- Motivational workshops/self-esteem building.
- Land-based activities and traditional knowledge from Elders.
- Healthy lifestyle initiatives.

- Gym or fitness services to improve physical health.
- Transition supports for cultural shock experiences with urban centres.

Employment Supports

- Work experience and apprenticeships.
- Wage subsidies, transportation to employment, and access to daycare.
- Employment transition funding.



Pre-Employment Supports

- Job/career counselling.
- Literacy and numeracy skills.
- Drivers licenses.
- Supports for high school students.
- Employment skills training and job readiness programs.
- Incentives for clients who are looking for work, in school, or participating in training activities.
- Transportation to training programs, and access to daycare.

Mental Health Supports

- Addictions supports.
- Grief and trauma counselling.

Education Supports

- Education upgrading.

Transition to Employment or Education

Participants discussed the limited supports for Income Assistance clients who are transitioning to employment or education.

For example, once clients gain employment only limited earnings are permitted without benefits being clawed back. This results in clients feeling that they are penalized for working, while also incurring additional costs for things such as childcare and transportation.

Participants explained that because of these additional costs some clients are financially better off to stay on Income Assistance rather than taking low-paid and/or sporadic jobs. While funding for supports such as childcare/daycare or work clothes and tools are eligible under the Program, engagement participants indicated these were inadequate and that additional incentives would improve client success and ability to exit Income Assistance.

Many participants noted the insufficient number of childcare spaces in most communities while others indicated the prohibitive cost of work clothes (e.g., safety boots, mitts, and goggles) given the inadequate allowance for this.

Participants explained that while work and training incentive allowances can help motivate clients to exit Income Assistance, the current rates are inadequate as clients still cannot cover their essential needs.

Proposal-Based Funding

Some administrators discussed the challenges inherent in the proposal-based nature of pre-employment

supports programming. They noted that communities delivering case management and pre-employment supports face uncertainty each year as to whether funding will be renewed for the following year.

Some participants expressed concern that the Program could be terminated, resulting in high staff turnover as case workers seek other employment.

Some engagement participants also observed that the proposal-based process requires communities to align the needs of their clients with criteria determined by Indigenous Services Canada, rather than by the community.

It was mentioned that communities that do not have the resources to design and develop projects that meet these criteria cannot access funding, and that communities that do devote time and energy to develop proposals have no guarantee of receiving funding.

Client-Centred Supports

Some participants discussed how institutional obstacles and a lack of coordination between government services and supports reduced client success. They explained that case management and pre-employment supports would be more successful if programs were not siloed and more focused on addressing complex client needs that create barriers to employment.

The lack of coordination between the pre-employment supports offered through the Income Assistance Program and the Indigenous Skills and Employment Training Program at Employment and Social Development Canada were specifically mentioned in some regions.

It was suggested that the Program take a holistic approach that responds to the social as well as the economic barriers that clients experience, and encourages greater collaboration with other departments.

Engagement participants discussed the challenges that both Income Assistance clients and administrators experience when navigating the services and supports that clients may be eligible for, particularly when language barriers exist.

It was suggested that navigation supports would minimize the sense of intimidation, confusion and frustration that many clients may experience when accessing income supports.

Administrators in some regions explained that collaboration with other organizations and government departments can be challenging due to client confidentiality - they cannot share client information such as who is looking for work or their skillsets with other parties.

It was suggested that cross-sector collaboration agreements, including information sharing protocols should be developed.

Labour Market Access

Some engagement participants indicated that the lack of local employment opportunities often requires individuals to move to urban areas to find work, where they may face racism and discrimination.

Some participants also noted that the seasonal nature of work in some areas makes it difficult to obtain and maintain year-round employment.

Participants stated that some Income Assistance clients prefer not to take on

casual or part-time employment rather than risk losing the “stability” they currently have with Income Assistance.

Clients may be further demotivated from seeking casual or part-time employment as they expect the income they earn to be “clawed back” leaving them with insufficient funds to meet living expenses.

Some participants explained that undiversified nature of on-reserve economies result in a lack of quantity and variety of jobs on reserve.

Administrators also reported that clients sometimes attend training programs that are not appropriate for them, and consequently do not want the jobs associated with the training they have received.

Further, some participants noted that some clients do not maintain long-term employment when they take the first available job, rather than finding a job that is the right-fit.

Participants also mentioned that training certificates obtained through the pre-employment supports are not always recognized by organizations off reserve.

Some participants observed that many clients aspire to self-employment and entrepreneurship despite the significant financial risks of self-employment. Many clients wished to access assistance to prepare them for the possibility of establishing their own enterprise.

3.4. Community-Based Wraparound, Ancillary and Holistic Services

Wraparound Services

Participants discussed the variety of programs operating in a community

“Residential schools are a tragic part of Canada’s history. But they cannot simply be consigned to history. The legacy from the schools and the political and legal policies and mechanisms surrounding their history continue to this day. This is reflected in the significant educational, income, health, and social disparities between Aboriginal people and other Canadians.”

Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015)

including: employment and training programs such as Employment and Social Development Canada’s Indigenous Skills and Employment Training (ISET) Program; social services programs such as the Family Well-being Program; and other support available through Head Start, Early Learning, Healthy Babies, other First Nations and Inuit Health programs, Jordan’s Principle and others.

Some participants explained that despite the many links between the issues these programs address and how the functions, successes, and deficits of each program impact each other, the contact and coordination between programs is infrequent or ineffective.

“The wraparound process is a holistic approach to client care. It involves a team planning process to design a set of services and supports that focuses on client needs. The wraparound approach includes these key elements: based in the community; individualized to meet the needs of clients; culturally competent and strengths based; includes the client in every level of developing the process; and, involves interagency coordination and collaboration in service delivery.”

VanDenBerg & Grealish, 1996

Participants recommended a holistic and flexible system designed around the needs of clients and communities and focused around a continuum of care that brings together all sectors responsible for delivering services within communities. Such an approach would address key barriers to employment and education that prevent clients from meeting their basic needs.

Other participants recommended breaking down community-level silos by appointing a person to create program linkages. In one community, a point

person was appointed to work on a “silo busting” strategy and bring staff from different programs and departments in that community together to harmonize their policies and functions.

Health Section

Health issues emerge from a diversity of sources, including the legacy of residential schools and other dimensions of colonization, environmental contamination, as well as the long-term impacts of poverty. They act as barriers to employment and education.

Mental Health and Addiction

Mental health and addiction related issues were described as pervasive by both clients and income assistance workers.

Depression may exacerbate difficulties clients have in navigating the system to access the benefits to which they are entitled and create cascading effects in their ability to draw from the resources of the Program.

Depression and anxiety were discussed as interfering with employment and were identified as being among the key reasons why clients initially require and continue to need Income Assistance.

Other psychosocial challenges, such as low self-confidence and self-esteem, were also discussed as barriers to employment.

Land-based programming includes a wide variety of formally organized activities that take place on the land. These activities may be taught and practiced within the context of trapping, fishing, and hunting, including connected activities such as maintaining the camp, or they can be selectively organized such as a medicine walk or arts and crafts workshops. They may include ceremonial activities such as sweats, blanket ceremony, pipe ceremony, or smudging, but this is not always the case. Generally, land-based programs have storytelling, legends, and teachings components, and thus can be viewed as a culturally-specific therapeutic and educational experience.

Land for Healing: Developing a First Nations Land-based Service Delivery Mode
Thunderbird Partnership Foundation (2018)

Addictions were identified as being tied to prolonged poverty and dependency on Income Assistance; for example, some clients use their benefits to buy illicit drugs and have little left to cover their basic needs.

Clients discussed experiencing discrimination when their addictions become known in their communities – this often leaves them feeling ashamed, outcast, hesitant to participate in community events, and is an additional barrier to moving out of Income Assistance dependency.

Clients seeking help with addictions have limited access to mental health services and treatment programs. Long wait times for limited services and the lack of support systems can contribute to client relapses.

Some participants stressed the importance of cultural programs that can support people struggling with addictions.

Programs involving land-based activities and indigenous or other forms of spirituality were identified as playing a role in fostering or strengthening identity and self-esteem and promoting positive mental health outcomes.

Participants recommended increased funding for mental health services, such as substance abuse prevention initiatives, support for people with substance abuse issues, and more accessible treatment centers.

Culturally appropriate programs and services were recommended, as getting out on the land is perceived as an important aspect of mental health and cultural continuity.

Participants recommended revising sections of the policy that address mental health issues and disability for greater clarity. Flexibility and support for clients with mental health issues and/or addictions was also recommended.

Physical Health

A number of engagement participants indicated that they had initially accessed the Program due to personal health issues and/or to take care of a sick family member.

Issues such as these prevent clients from being prepared to even begin to engage in employment planning or training and present significant hurdles both for individual clients as well as their families and communities.

Participants in several regions highlighted the inadequacy of rates for special and/or therapeutic diets.

Participants discussed receiving insufficient funds to purchase medically prescribed foods, and how clients are only allowed one therapeutic diet even if they have been prescribed more than one.

Some participants recommended increasing the rate for therapeutic diets by factoring in the actual cost of food in different regions along with the costs associated with different health issues.

It was also recommended that clients be allowed to have more than one therapeutic diet and that they no longer be required to renew diet forms each year.

Participants also discussed the limited access to medical professionals in many communities - clients often have to travel to the nearest urban centre to see health-care specialists. Accommodation and food allowances for medical travel were considered to be insufficient.

Travel for medical services was found to be a major disruption that had the potential of impacting client employment.

Participants recommended that the Program partner with health programs to help offset costs associated with medical travel.

Further, participants recommended providing extra support and resources to those who must relocate to an urban setting for medical reasons.

Some participants indicated that the current disability income rate is insufficient and should be increased.

It was also suggested that the current application form for disability benefits be revised to include more detailed questions and separate sections for permanent and short-term disabilities.

Participants recommended that clients with permanent disabilities not be required to reapply annually for benefits.

Some participants recommended pain management programs for clients dealing with chronic pain that interferes with employment, and that better health benefits should be provided for clients and dependents.

On-Reserve Housing

On-reserve housing was considered to be inadequate in communities across all regions, with one region describing it as a serious crisis.

Participants indicated that not only are there not enough dwellings to keep up with the high demographic growth of many communities, but that many existing homes require renovation and remediation for issues such as mold, asbestos, and lead-based paint).

Housing shortages were said to result in long waiting lists for housing as well as overcrowded homes that deteriorate at a much faster rate which result in higher utility costs, and lead to a greater potential for instability and social issues.

Participants explained that overcrowded or unsafe low-quality housing leads to more frequent apprehension of children, which interrupts the child's education and the parents' employment, especially

"The problem is that if you've got nine benefit units in a house, the chances of that house deteriorating are way faster than in a regular house with regular amount of people in it. You bump into the drywall more, you open and shut your door more, so your housing stock ends up deteriorating faster because Ontario Works can't assist with rent. Some of those shelter costs that a parent would probably fix if they were being paid rent."

Program Administrator/
Engagement Participant (2019)

if a child is moved to an off-reserve home or if the case goes to court.

Some participants expressed concern on how the management of housing by local bands and councils can contribute to poor housing conditions. Lack of housing was said to be associated with homelessness in some communities, forcing some clients to live off reserve.

Community members who leave for educational purposes were said to have a hard time returning home because there is no place for them to live - this results in a brain drain and loss of mentors in the community, a lack of diversity of skills and education in the workforce, and a loss of income earners and spenders.

It was explained that given that housing conditions are a social determinant of health, this crisis has major ramifications for health and constitutes a hindrance to

the development of individuals and communities.

Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada define determinants of health as the broad range of personal, social, economic and environmental factors that determine individual and population health.

Participants recommended providing adequate and sustainable funding to communities so that they can meet their housing needs, including more accessible affordable housing.

Determinants of Health

- Income and social status
- Employment and working conditions
- Education and literacy
- Childhood experiences
- Physical environments
- Social supports and coping skills
- Healthy behaviours
- Access to health services
- Biology and genetic endowment
- Gender
- Culture
- Race / Racism

Health Canada / Public Health
Agency of Canada

Some participants recommended increased funding to be able to do their own repairs on band-owned homes, and to implement a damage deposit provision into the policy. Some participants also suggested implementing a rent to own program.

Some participants provided examples of innovative approaches to address housing issues that have worked in the past. For example, one community implemented a housing/skills training project that simultaneously addresses housing shortages and teaches carpentry skills to project participants.

Transportation

Transportation issues were cited as a barrier to employment by clients in every region. Whether accessing Income Support services, getting to work in rural communities, or leaving a community to find work, transportation was identified as a barrier at nearly every scale given that public transportation is rarely available in First Nation communities.

In one region, the Income Assistance Program addresses some transportation issues for those seeking employment by, for example, providing fuel purchase orders if clients can document that they have an interview or have accepted a job offer.

The challenge is that it relies on the client to find reliable and available transportation.

Some participants recommended a subsidy program to make transportation more accessible for clients going to work and school. This was identified as an opportunity to both save money on transportation costs, and to create employment in the community.

Income Assistance clients also face transportation challenges for everyday activities such as medical appointments, training, grocery shopping, community events and emergencies. Some communities offer shuttle services but this is often reserved for medical transportation or program delivery. Both

clients and Elders recommended offering shuttle services for clients to use for appointments, training, grocery shopping, and other activities requiring transportation.

Some participants recommended increasing the basic needs rate generally so that less of the benefits would be required for transportation costs and an even higher rate increase for isolated communities.

Driver's licenses are a requirement for many employment opportunities, yet are difficult to obtain for anyone without easy access to a vehicle or sufficient income to pay for testing fees. This is particularly true in remote and isolated communities.

Participants explained that the cumulative cost of travel, accommodation, vehicle rentals and the driving tests themselves place residents of remote communities in an uphill financial battle just to acquire the means for employability (i.e., a driver's license).

Moreover, vehicle ownership costs can be prohibitive, even for those with driver's licences.

Funding for immediate family members to travel to funerals was also recommended in one region.

Childcare

Inadequate access to childcare was considered to be a barrier to finding and maintaining employment in all regions.

Participants mentioned the limited number of daycares and after school programs available in communities as well as their affordability when available.

In some instances, the lack of available space at daycares continues to act as a barrier even when employers offered to

pay part of daycare costs. Without childcare, parents of children too young for full-day school cannot be employed unless they find a daily babysitter, and even then, they are subject to that babysitter's schedule, competing obligations, sick days, etc.

Participants recommended more funding for daycare and childcare services. Better access to quality childcare for their children would enable clients to more easily access training, skill development, and employment.

Participants recommended investments in childcare infrastructure to complement the Early Years programming dollars that are being made available to First Nations. A First Nations community asked whether prevention funding available through Child and Family Services could be used to partially fund infrastructure for daycare.

Income Assistance Dependency and Self-Esteem

Some participants referred to "a culture of dependency" that makes people unwilling or unable to help themselves, regardless of the supports available to them.

Some participants discussed the importance of engaging with high school students and young clients in preventative actions such as presenting the Income Assistance Program as a last resort program and explaining the difficulties and challenges associated with being on it.

These same participants stressed the importance of showing youth that Income Assistance is not "a way of life" or a means of dependency and

encouraging youth to complete high school and go on to further education.

Participants recommended providing workshops for younger clients and youth not yet eligible for Income Assistance to discuss success planning before and after leaving high school as well as the challenges of living on Income Assistance.

It was also recommended that case management and pre-employment supports be extended to youth younger than 18 to steer them away from dependency on Income Assistance.

Community Development

Participants across all regions described community development as a priority.

Some participants described how individuals are embedded in communities, and how opportunities for these individuals are tied to the vitality of those communities.

Some participants went so far as to favour changes at the community level that would help foster cultural ties and involve cooperative community interaction, as opposed to changes that solely focus on an individual's basic income.

Participants also highlighted the cultural strengths and resilience of Indigenous people and communities and stressed the importance of fostering this through community development projects, especially those that have minimal negative environmental impacts.

Participants identified the following as ways to enhance community development:

- more community infrastructure (e.g., healing lodges, grocery stores, health facilities, playgrounds);

- more services focused on cultural revitalization and Indigenous education (e.g., access to language, history and traditional knowledge training);
- help improve the social condition of the community and promoting health by funding recreation and exercise programs, community gyms, and supporting programs to help collect sports equipment;
- strengthen existing mutual supports that the community provides, especially around food security;
- support for community-based food security programs (e.g., community-based enterprises, and community gardens, hunts, and smoke houses);
- support for bulk shipments of goods to the community (facilitate barter and informal work); and
- cooperative transportation initiatives (e.g., cooperative Uber-type ride sharing program).

3.5. Self-Determination / Governance and Traditional Knowledge and Culture

Self-Determination / Governance

Colonialism and intergenerational trauma were identified as roadblocks to change.

Participants indicated that the *Indian Act* hinders self-government and that the federal and provincial/territorial governments create funding and legislative challenges.

Participants conveyed concern that government interference and imposition of legislation hurts their communities.

Tactics for continual forced assimilation contribute and reinforce the systemic barriers experienced by the community in terms of lack of funding, judgmental society and prejudice experienced off-reserve.

Participants recommended that federal and provincial/territorial governments and First Nations work together to uphold the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, including the right to self-determination.

Article 3 - Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.

United Nations Declaration on Rights of Indigenous People

It was recommended that an integrated approach to social services that works within a framework of Inherent Rights be developed. It was recommended that First Nations have more input and be consulted when making any changes to the Income Assistance Program.

Participants in some regions discussed the perception of nepotism, including political interference, and favoritism in decision making in some communities. For example, some clients may take any problems they may have with the program to leaders with the expectation that the leaders will overrule policies, such as eligibility criteria.

Participants recommended developing a policy outlining the roles/responsibilities of Income Assistance clients and the mandate of band leadership, including chiefs and councils, so as to prevent

political interference in the Income Assistance Program.

It was recommended that newly elected chiefs and council members should be provided with an orientation to Income Assistance.

Participants also recommended having an ombudsman or creating an appeals process to help resolve cases in which clients feel they were unfairly deemed ineligible for the Income Assistance Program.

Participants indicated that the existing chief and council structure could be more accountable to the community and that consideration could be given to the development of an Indigenous Services Canada committee to address this.

Some participants recommended reclaiming and empowering a traditional, clan-based, self-governance system.

Other participants noted that some chiefs and councils do not advocate politically for Income Assistance thereby missing opportunities for improved outcomes.

The traumatic impacts of residential schools “have been felt not only by those with direct experience with residential schools – they have also been transmitted to subsequent generations through various psychological, physiological and social processes.”

Aboriginal Peoples and Historic Trauma:
The process of intergenerational transmission

W. Aguiar and R. Halseth
National Collaborating Centre for
Aboriginal Health (2015)

Some participants recommended that the role of tribal councils be limited to advocating for change to the Income Assistance Program while other participants recommended that administration of the Income Assistance Program be transferred from individual First Nations to tribal councils or to centralized regional Income Assistance offices to provide services for both on and off reserve membership.

Leaders and administrators expressed a desire for control over the design, delivery and management of Income Assistance programs, in part to enable culture-based approaches to service delivery.

They explained that governance of the Income Assistance Program is based on Indigenous Services Canada terms and conditions that require alignment with provincial and Yukon rates and eligibility criteria, that more programs and services are offered off reserve than can be accessed by on reserve Income Assistance clients, and that even fewer Income Assistance services, supports and programs are offered in remote First Nation communities. Consequently, Income Assistance policies were said to be misaligned with First Nations needs and concerns.

It was recommended that local autonomy and decision making in community-developed policy and procedures be implemented through mechanisms such as devolution to local agreements.

Some participants recommended that legislation should be enacted to give First Nations the power to design their own Income Assistance programs (e.g., to develop and apply their own regulations, determine eligibility criteria, and set income assistance rates).

Some participants recommended that Canada's Income Assistance policy be transformed so it becomes a funding mechanism that addresses gaps in the standard of living on a given First Nation. It would fund the value of the gap and leave it to First Nations to decide how to spend that money.

Normlessness denotes the situation in which the social norms regulating individual conduct have broken down or are no longer effective as rules for behaviour"

Emile Durkheim (1893)

Some participants recommended that funding be provided that is self-sustaining and controlled by the community. 10-year grant funding and supporting agreements were specifically recommended.

Traditional Knowledge and Culture

Participants discussed how the Indian Residential Schools disrupted traditional teaching methods and the generational transmission of knowledge, survival skills, and community values, practices and relations.

Participants said that the Income Assistance Program does not reflect First Nations culture and traditional teachings and ways nor does it meet their expectations.

Participants recommended decolonization of the Income Assistance Program (e.g., translate policy into Indigenous languages) to reflect traditional culture and teachings.

While recognizing the need for basic life-skills training, such as meal preparation, budgeting, and job search skills, participants also called for revitalization of traditional knowledge and culture. Educational programs that intertwine life skills, career attainment credentials, and cultural revitalization were said to be necessary.

Some Indigenous communities have reformed their delivery models by rooting them within local cultural values that balance the inter-connectedness of individuals, family, community, and nation.

Traditional Knowledge – the collective knowledge of traditions used by Indigenous groups to sustain and adapt themselves to their environment over time. This information is passed on from one generation to the next within the Indigenous group. Such Traditional Knowledge is unique to Indigenous communities and is rooted in the rich culture of its peoples.

Assembly of First Nations (undated)

Participants noted that cultural variations between First Nation communities and emphasized the need for local control and decision making around program design and delivery.

Participants expressed concern about threats to language retention and culture. The lack of language and cultural opportunities, especially for young people, is said to contribute to the normlessness associated with psychiatric and addiction issues.

“When you have [...] a client that’s negative, I can’t do a damn thing. I can’t do anything. You put that client in a program making moccasin or you put them in a program, their mindset starts to change. It evolves and snowballs. These programs are small, [or] seem like small [...] but] all of a sudden they are thrust into a traditional cultural environment where they go ‘damn I never knew this was all here for me,’ ‘damn I never knew I could do this.’ That’s what we focus on with our clientele, that concept of self-stabilization [...] and their minds start to change.”

Program Administrator/ Engagement Participant (2019)

Participants indicated that although there are now more formal cultural and social opportunities, the informal gatherings of the past served as cultural supports in that traditional teachings and ways of life were omnipresent, thus, language and culture were stronger.

It was suggested that meaningful Income Assistance and Social Service Program reform requires engagement with community development and well-being efforts, and that these efforts must include social and cultural goals as well as economic development goals.

The revitalization of Indigenous culture and language was said to be essential in community motivation and that establishing a strong, positive personal sense of cultural identity may provide a foundation on which youth can build.

Participants mentioned that as participation rates in hunting, trapping, and gardening have declined, there have been corresponding losses of traditional knowledge and practices (e.g., the sharing of food with the community).

Participants emphasized that cultural revitalization and Indigenous education are both strongly connected to food security.

It was recommended the development of a holistic, culturally-based approach that helps First Nations deal with their daily scenarios (e.g., life skills training such as traditional parenting and kinship, community-based initiatives such as hunting, fishing, and agriculture).

It was also recommended that the teaching of Elders be incorporated into such an approach to provide spiritual and physical support and to enhance cultural programming (e.g., beading, ribbon skirt making, food preservation).

Other participants recommended that a knowledge keeper be employed to ensure local culture is not lost when individuals seek employment and development.

Participants explained that teaching cultural literacy creates cultural pride, respect, and a desire to return to the community later in life.

Participants noted that outcome measures, such as employment and earnings, do not reflect First Nation cultures and realities nor affirm or value traditional values and skills and their transmission. For example, traditional roles (e.g., knowledge keepers) have been marginalized because they are not recognized wage jobs despite helping to

address barriers to client success, health and self-sufficiency.

Participants recommended implementing a compensation program for people engaged in traditional work (e.g., hunting, trapping, harvesting, fishing, language keepers) to help restore traditional roles, safeguard traditional knowledge and practices, endorse language retention, enhance food security, and help people maintain their mental health.

4. Conclusion

Engagement across all regions demonstrated that further work is required to make the Income Assistance Program more responsive and better support the local and essential needs of individuals and families as well as to ensure individuals and families have greater access to services to help them transition to employment and education.

Engagement participants provided feedback and recommendations on the following key aspects of the current Income Assistance Program:

- the rates and eligibility criteria, the gaps in services that lead to a greater reliance on income assistance;
- the capacity of communities and administrators to deliver the Program effectively;
- the appropriateness of the Program's policies to communities' local contexts, and
- the potential of case management approaches and pre-employment supports to improve the ability of clients to transition to employment.

Participants specifically highlighted the importance of case management and pre-employment supports, and called not only for increasing the number of communities it is offered in but the breadth of services offered as well.

While engagement discussions provided the opportunity to collect input on the Income Assistance Program as it is currently structured and delivered, they also provided insights on how income support services could be developed in the future.

The following key themes best summarize these general insights:

- re-thinking the current principle of aligning eligibility and rates to the reference province or Yukon, and ensuring that further reforms mitigate the additional challenges faced on reserve (e.g., high cost of living; transportation issues; lack of access to services such as daycares; etc.);
- addressing gaps in wrap-around services to provide individuals and families on reserve greater access to health services, mental health and addictions services, and supports such as childcare are also not readily accessible on reserve;
- providing more flexibility and local control to First Nations in the design and delivery of income support services, given local, culturally-appropriate knowledge, capacity and experience, and supporting communities wanting to move towards self-determination or governance; and
- increasing resources to build capacity within communities to ensure the efficient and effective

delivery of income supports that is culturally appropriate and responsive to the needs of individuals and families.

These insights are expected to help inform the next phase of the Income Assistance reform process as Indigenous Services Canada works with First Nation partners on a process to develop options to ensure effective income support services on reserve.

