

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to present the Ma-Mow-We-Tak Friendship Centre's thoughts on the Provincial Budget.

Friendship Centres are Canada's most significant off-reserve Indigenous service delivery infrastructure and are the primary providers of culturally enhanced programs and services to urban Indigenous residents. For over half-a-century, Friendship Centres have been facilitating the transition of Indigenous people from rural, remote and reserve life to an urban environment. For many Indigenous people, Friendship Centres are the first point of contact to obtain referrals to cultural based socio-economic programs and services.

Since 1976, the Ma-Mow-We-Tak Friendship Centre Inc. has been offering such programs and services to Indigenous people who are making the transition from life on the reserve or community to urban life in the City of Thompson. These programs and services are designed and delivered specifically to meet their educational, cultural, social, recreational and employment needs, and to assist in improving their quality of life. The Ma-Mow-We-Tak Friendship Centre continues to have a significant impact on Indigenous people in the City of Thompson, with an annual average of 54,210 Points of Service being provided.

The social conditions that currently exist in the City of Thompson, such as the lack of affordable and accessible housing, lack of daycare spaces, increased criminal and drug activity is having a dire effect on the economic development progress within our city. With regards to the current labor market situation, many service sectors and trades operations in Thompson are struggling to attract maintain and retain employees. Businesses, organizations and private sectors are continually experiencing high turnover rates amongst their employees, as they attempt to compete with the higher wages associated with the construction, mining and hydro related activities. This has placed considerable hardship on them to keep their operations open and has forced many of them to reduce their hours of operation due to insufficient staff.

Although Thompson has a low unemployment rate, it does not take into account the under skilled or under educated labor force with which the workforce is drawn from. Therefore, the businesses, organizations and private sector are paying for their employees to be trained to carry out the responsibilities of their positions. The City of Thompson will continue to experience these types of job losses, if there is no intervention to address the current social conditions that exist.

Students or potential employees relocating to Thompson to attend school or secure work cannot find adequate housing or daycare space, therefore they return to or stay in their home communities. This is having a negative effect on the businesses, organizations and other sectors to have a sufficient workforce to draw from to continue their operations.

Much of the Aboriginal population in Manitoba are affected by many social, education, employment, health and poverty factors, many at the highest national rates. These factors are a detriment to the quality of life for urban Aboriginal people in our area and it is critical that programs and services continue to be delivered so we are able to effectively address the needs of urban Aboriginal people within the City of Thompson.

Recommendations:

Friendship Centre Funding

Although Friendship Centres provide a wide variety of evidence based programs and services that are proven to help meet the needs of Indigenous people, we are continually challenged with trying to secure funding for the ever-growing demand for the delivery of these programs and services. Manitoba Friendship Centres have received the same level of provincial core funding for well over a decade, and:

- We recommend that the Provincial Government look at investing additional dollars into the current level of funding in order to increase the capacity and sustain the vital role that Friendship Centres play in the lives of Indigenous people.
- Further, we recommend that the Provincial Government invest funding on a multi year basis to ensure the ongoing capacity required for efficient and effective delivery of programs and services. Friendship Centres are a wise investment for the province and the provision of increased multi year funding will go a long way in ensuring that Indigenous people receive the programs and services they require in urban centres.

The inclusion of Friendship Centre representatives in the design and delivery of provincial community based programs will ensure that the provincial government is investing money in the areas necessary for meeting the needs of Indigenous people living in urban centres.

Employment, Trades & Training

With a higher cost of living in northern Manitoba and a large percentage of Indigenous people living below the poverty level it is important that wage earners are able to be employed at a wage level where they are better able to sustain their families. There have been numerous instances where clients of the Ma-Mow-We-Tak Friendship Centre are left making the choice between becoming employed at a rate of well below what they currently take home from their Employment & Income Assistance and Child Tax Benefits. Along with the lower “take home pay” clients would also now have the additional responsibilities of finding childcare, transportation, appropriate clothing, etc. It is evident that these issues are leading to individuals choosing to remain on EIA and not seeking employment due to the fear of losing what they feel is a stable source of income.

- We would encourage the provincial government to expand on the investment of money into skills training programs and work experience programs for Indigenous people who are largely underrepresented in the workforce. These programs should be inclusive of personal supports such as childcare and transportation costs as this would provide better opportunities for Indigenous people who have experienced barriers to employment, to move beyond social assistance or minimum wage employment and secure good jobs.

Health

With the diabetes rates in Indigenous people being much higher than that of non-Indigenous people, we encourage the investment of funds for the design and delivery of culturally appropriate Indigenous diabetes programming that will focus on meeting the diabetes and related health care education, prevention and intervention needs of the Indigenous population.

- We would encourage the provincial government to invest funds into preventative programming will assist in decreasing health care costs associated with the disease itself as well as additional risks which could arise as a result of being diabetic.

Children & Youth

Many of our indigenous young adults are without the necessary resources to fend for themselves as they enter adulthood, putting them at serious risk for continued marginalization. Adding to this impoverished group is a growing number of transient youth and young adults who are struggling to find a place in society. Due to lack of available jobs and adequate housing, many of them have been forced to leave their rural northern communities for urban centers like Thompson to increase their skill development, and employment opportunities,

only to once again find that 'the good life', is nowhere to be found. Many of who fall through the cracks.

Without the basic need of food, shelter and security, and the willingness of organizations to spend the time and energy required to facilitate this segment of the population, there is little to no chance for their personal development and advancement. Instead the cycle of poverty, homelessness, and crime is likely to follow. A large segment of these youth also suffer from many forms of mental illness and substance abuse.

- We encourage the Provincial Government to invest funding into Indigenous youth programming to help address the social issues being faced by our youth and young adults to help them improve their quality of life.

Housing & Homelessness

Youth homelessness continues to be on the rise with many youth finding themselves in a position of "couch surfing". There may be many factors that lead to their situations. The Ma-Mow-We-Tak Friendship Centre has been providing youth programming in excess of 20 years and we continually hear, and have been witness to, youth who do not consider their homes safe environments. They will leave their homes when they feel threatened which is sometimes in the middle of the night. This puts them in a position of having no where to go. Some may be lucky enough to have friends but worst case scenario is they are truly without no alternative but to be on the streets.

- We encourage the provincial government to invest funds into youth safe houses in the northern urban centres which will provide youth with a safe alternative to homelessness and feeling of hopelessness.

We appreciate the opportunity to have made this presentation and trust that we have adequately outlined the concerns of our Members and provided priorities that are practical. We look forward to the opportunity for continued dialogue and consultation with the Government on these critical issues.

Thank you.