

Executive Summary

CONNECTING OUR SPIRITS

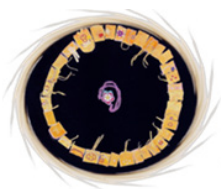
2015 FAMILY GATHERING OF MISSING AND
MURDERED INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND GIRLS





Prepared by

Amanda Buffalo
867-333-9960
amanda.buffalo@live.ca
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Prepared for

For Whitehorse Aboriginal Women's Circle
867-668-7532
wawc@northwestel.net
www.wawc.ca



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INTRODUCTION

On December 12, 2015, the Whitehorse Aboriginal Women's Circle hosted a one-day gathering in Whitehorse for families of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls in Yukon. Twenty five family members were able to attend the gathering, though over 50 had initially registered.

The 2015 Yukon family gathering was held with the intent of families providing recommendations to political representatives of Yukon Government and First Nations, as well as the RCMP, and non-governmental Aboriginal and women's organizations at the Yukon Regional Roundtable, to be held on February 12th, 2016.

Following the opening prayer, participants formed a circle, and welcoming remarks, introductions, and a brief history of initiatives related to missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Yukon were shared. The introductions were an important part of the process, and gave families present the opportunity to share who they were, who they were there for, and their experiences coping with the loss in a supported and open space. This sharing was an immensely powerful part of the process.

Following the sharing circle, Mary Jane Jim gave a presentation to families on grief and loss as a community development tool. Mary Jane's presentation discussed the cycles of grief and the journey of healing from loss, and how working through both in a healthy way can support community growth and development long term. Her presentation stressed the importance of dealing with internal individual grief one step at a time, before trying to help others – an approach similar to putting on your own oxygen mask first. The faster individuals work towards healing, the faster the family and community heal in turn. By creating "sober leadership" with a clearly articulated vision, Aboriginal women and communities have "taught us, built us, gave us tools, created partnerships to get us to where we wanted to go – including partnerships with the Creator."

Family members brought photos of their loved ones, which were shared on a memorial table with traditional medicines. Throughout the day, family members participated in creating an optional video documentary about their loved one. This video will be used as part of the family presentations at the upcoming Yukon Regional Roundtable.



RECOMMENDATIONS AND KEY MESSAGES

Key Messages

1. Rushing is not the way to do things — we should not be doing things just because the government is starting to think that this is important. It has always been important and we should treat it with the respect that it is due.
2. Not all families have been identified or want to be identified at this time, and we do not speak for them. Every family has their own perspective. We need to know who the families are in order to invite them and provide support. We also need to be patient and acknowledge that this is incredibly difficult, and not all families are ready and willing to participate.
3. Support and resources are paramount to prevention. Valuing Aboriginal women is an act of prevention. Many of these women needed support and resources to increase safety, and the community failed them in many respects. Resources are needed to provide our women with the support needed to begin with so that they do not experience increased vulnerability.
4. The issue and focus is missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, which has been a great loss to families and communities. It is important to remember that there is a ripple effect and ripples move in all directions.

Would you
look for me?

Support for Families

1. Create access to immediate and continuous support and follow up for families. Families need a range of options to choose from, including culturally safe counselors and access to Elders. These supports must be available at all times, in all communities, not just between 8:30 and 4:30, and not offered in isolation (e.g. one grief workshop) — consistent follow up is needed for healing.
2. The first step is to identify all of the families. Not all families have been identified at this time. However, when they do come forward and are ready to share, they will need wrap around support, and opportunities to have their voices heard.
3. Supports for families can't just fall to community members and families. Professional support that goes to the different communities is of paramount importance. Face to face counseling supports are needed; a 1-800 number is not adequate.
4. Counseling programs need to provide options for whole family counseling, as well as grieving camps - preferably on the land. Healing the whole family is a traditional value. The whole family is affected, and it is imperative to have access to support in our own community.
5. Families need to be able to choose their supports, and have access to them in their own community, so that they are comfortable with their helper.
6. Create resources for families to support each other in different ways. We need to build our capacity to be supportive; we need access to resources to allow us to be physically present for other families as they are going through trials or investigations.
7. Resources need to be allocated to and expended at the family and community level into critical areas, such as: crisis response and aftercare, travel costs to attend court proceedings, annual family gatherings, and family-to-family support.
8. There needs to be someone to check on families. This person needs to come around in a traditional way — not just over the phone. Even if people are drinking, it's ok to talk to them. When families are drinking, that's when they need the most support.
9. Families need someone who can help them through the whole process to heal, recover and be empowered.



Family Gatherings

10. The bulk of the resources are going to development of some big report — resources need to come down to our level. Resources should be used for family gatherings and community gatherings, not on a report that is collecting dust somewhere. We need more family gatherings to allow us to support each other, we need resources to heal the whole community.
11. More family gatherings are needed, so that families can talk with each other and provide support. Families need to know that they're not alone, and have a network of supports.
12. It is hard to stay connected and keep in touch when it is long distance. Family gatherings should be held at least once or twice a year.
13. Families need support before, during and after the family gatherings, and any other kind of meeting.
14. Family gatherings need to have some fun and creative activities, like the angel dolls, or a patchwork quilt like the national quilt. These should be displayed and travel to the communities.
15. Family gatherings also need some humour. Laughter is an important part of our cultural being. It is good medicine, and it teaches us to heal.
16. Family gatherings should include someone to make families laugh.
17. Supports need to be in place for family members who do not attend family gatherings as well. Family members often remain behind in the community, and they have no access to support.
18. Family gatherings shouldn't be limited to just the Yukon. There are a lot of family members outside the Yukon – Alaska, NWT, BC, Alberta, Saskatchewan. Our families are connected all over, and these connections need to be honoured.
19. At family gatherings, a healer from elsewhere should be brought in to help us through the journey of letting go. We need to be able to be vulnerable, and we need a person who can guide us through it and put closure to the end of the session.

“When communities begin creating vision, we know we are on the healing path and accepting responsibility and growing.”

Support for Communities

20. Families are not the only ones affected. The whole community is impacted by the loss and therefore the whole community needs support and opportunities to participate in healing. The whole community is grieving. How we experience loss depends on how closely we are related to it.
21. Funding resources need to be allocated for grid searches, crisis support teams, food, and gas. This is currently done on a volunteer basis.
22. Resources are needed for capacity development and training for ongoing grief awareness, so that there are people in the community teaching each other how to help themselves.
23. Develop a train the trainers on how to support families and communities through various stages of the grieving cycle. The Elders can't do it all, and shouldn't be expected to.
24. It is the young people who need the most help in the community; they have lots of things they haven't dealt with. A lot of times, too, children and youth will get into drugs because a party is a safer place to go when there is violence at home. There needs to be after hours support and safe places for youth in all communities.
25. More counseling supports are needed for youth. These need to be available more than once every three weeks. The young people need professional and culturally appropriate care, which should be offered through the school and the college to start. Support needs to be provided by someone they feel comfortable talking to, someone they trust and feel safe with.
26. More programs for youth are needed in the community. We need leadership and training programs for youth that they want to be part of.
27. It would be ideal if programs like Jackson Lake, for example, had mobile units and were able to go out to communities to provide support.
28. Better safety mechanisms and resources are needed for women fleeing violence. Not being able to leave the community until the next day is too dangerous. Women should not be turned away from safe houses or other places because they are drunk or high, or because it's after a certain time — there needs to be a safe place for them to go at all times.
29. Search and rescue training is needed in all communities, even if it's a volunteer team in each community; they need to be professionally trained (like the program in Saskatchewan).

“If we don’t have human help, we have help from our relation with the earth, with the air, with the water, with our relations on the other side...”

Justice

30. It is imperative that our loved ones are respected throughout the process. When the RCMP and justice system see them as a person and not a stereotype, it makes a huge difference. Cultural competency, gender competency, and trauma informed care training is needed for RCMP and court and justice workers.
31. Communication between the RCMP and families is needed from the outset, and should be regular and ongoing throughout the investigation. Information should flow back and forth regularly. The RCMP should follow up with families, especially when families provide information. The relationship needs to be reciprocal.
32. Families need resources and support for travel to support search efforts, be part of the investigation process, and attend hearings and court proceedings.
33. The RCMP needs to improve their response times for calls related to missing persons and women experiencing violence, and an audit of response times should be done every few months to monitor and provide feedback for improvement.
34. We need regional crisis teams, funded by government that have resources and supports available for mobilizing searches and investigations, including resources for food, gas, crisis response teams, etc.
35. The waiting is really painful for families. There needs to be ongoing communication and information flow to families about the court system and legal processes. It is too much to deal with in isolation and without support.
36. The Gladue report process has significant impacts on the families who have lost a loved one, and should be examined, and the punishment of offenders needs to be addressed.
37. The justice system has failed many of our women, and isn’t supporting closure for the families. We need to address this as a community, in a traditional way. In all cultures, when you take someone’s life, there are consequences to those actions, and we need to feel that cultural justice is done too.



Photo: © 2016 Government of Yukon, "Moosehide Gathering"

Culture and Ceremony

38. More ceremony is needed for healing and supporting families. We learn to heal through ceremony. Resources need to be made available for ceremonies to move throughout the territory, because not everyone can afford to attend — move ceremony around the territory.
39. Elders and counselors are needed to support families and other community members to have talking circles in their homes.
40. Traditional belief systems and ceremony are important tools. We get affirmations from ceremony and from dreams. We need to make individual and community offerings (with red, white and navy blue cloth and tobacco) across country in ceremony. These offerings are for those who need to be called to ceremony for purification, and to ask for help and guidance and ceremony for ourselves.
41. The names of each of these women should be brought out and shared in a cultural, ceremonial and traditional way, through a potlatch that honours them and allows their stories to be shared. Acknowledging these women publicly will bring closure. The whole potlatch is a sacred ceremony, but lots of additional ceremony (e.g. sweats) is needed before and after the potlatch.
42. A remembrance potlatch should be held annually to honour the women, and to bring families together in ceremony, and funding needs to be available to support families.
43. Ceremonies are happening all the time, and create a safe forum to come to and make a connection. Many are open to everyone who comes and makes an offering. We need resources to continue these ceremonies; this work is important and needs to be valued too. We need to have ceremonies for our people, and also send them out for ceremony; especially the young people.



Photo: Yukon News

Sharing the Names of Loved Ones

44. The list of names should be expanded to include additional cases that have come to light since it was originally created.
45. The list of names should be shared. The names of these women should be made public in a cultural way, at a potlatch. All of the families need to be contacted directly, to let them know before the list is shared.
46. Once all of the families have been contacted, and it has been potlatched, the names should also be shared with the public.
47. The names need to be shared in a way that honours the women and their stories, Yukon-style. A memory book with photos and biographies and stories that reflects the women, their families, cultures and communities would be ideal.
48. A traditional memorial site is needed for these women, such as a memorial pole, a vigil site, or other monument.

“It’s been 25 years. It’s still very hard on my family. I still have lots of anger. I pray lots. Forgiveness is important. And hard.”

Yukon Regional Roundtable

49. There must be room for families at the roundtable. Not just to attend, but to have a voice. Financial supports need to be made available to families. The gathering cannot help families if it isn’t open to them and inclusive. Strong relationships need to be built in order to do the work.
50. All families who are available and willing to come need to be represented at the roundtable.
51. Families need ceremonial, cultural and counseling support before, during and after the roundtable. Family support workers need to be present at the roundtable, to help families carry forward the work.
52. Resources need to be made available to support families to meet the day before the roundtable, to prepare, and the day after, to debrief.
53. The roundtable should be opened and closed with a ceremony.
54. Families have expressed concern that there will be another meeting, and about what happens to this report and recommendations. We do not need another report — we need an action plan that maps out how we are going to address these issues.
55. Government needs to be more constructive with resources. Less money should be allocated for government meetings, and more for supports in the community.
56. The RCMP need to be present at the roundtable and part of the conversation.

