

# Increasing Safety for Aboriginal Women

Community Action Document

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# ACTION DOCUMENT

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## Introduction and Overview

The Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women (IAAW) is a provincial Aboriginal Women's organization with outreach to several Chapter communities in Alberta. Our objectives include achieving social justice for Aboriginal women and building collaborative relationships with like-minded organizations to advance Aboriginal women's issues.

As part of this mandate, the IAAW received funding support from Alberta Aboriginal Relations to develop a provincial plan to address the high number of missing and/or murdered Aboriginal women in Alberta. To build this strategy, the IAAW:

- Engaged a group of stakeholders, who have been meeting monthly, to understand and identify gaps in services
- Facilitated focus groups with Aboriginal women over the age of 18 who are, or have been, living in 'high risk' situations
- Facilitated a 2-day gathering on January 21-22, 2014 around the theme of "Increasing Safety of Aboriginal Women." The gathering involved speakers, panels, presentations and action planning.

This document outlines the recommendations of both the women we interviewed in the focus groups and outcomes from the 2-day gathering in January 2014. Our intention in developing this document is to capture the conversations in a way to that will create tangible, solution-based and action-oriented ideas. Over the two days, a number of common issues emerged throughout the panels, speakers and workshops. Topics have been grouped together and organized into themes, each of which outline ways to increase safety for Aboriginal women. Within each theme is listed:

- Issue: a brief statement capturing discussions on the problem or obstacle to creating safety for women
- Solutions: Ideas that participants suggested for addressing the issue
- Best Practices: Current initiatives that participants have identified as a working solution

Through addressing these themes, we believe we can build a strategy to increase safety for Aboriginal women. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but rather, a starting point for some discussions, or to contribute to existing conversations and initiatives. Some solutions are easy to implement, others would take considerable time and resources.

We have organized the action items in a way that represents a continuum of support (recognizing that many of the issues overlap). **The action items are not organized by priority.** The initial number of actions outlines more proactive measures we could take, to prevent violence from occurring the first place (such as to create safe and affordable housing and engage leadership). As the action

items move along, we are looking at ways to increase women's safety and to exit high risk lifestyles (coordinate services, support families of missing and murdered women).

As next steps, this document will be validated by the participants in the gathering and by the women who participated in facilitated focus groups. From there, we will bring this information to the larger community help build a strategy for increasing the safety of Aboriginal women.

What has become clear is that none of us can address this issue alone. By working in collaboration, we believe that we can embrace a culture of understanding that acknowledges what has held us back in the past, but moves forward with common sense, cost-effective solutions to help women and young girls who need immediate change.

We would like to thank everybody involved in this gathering for their openness, trust and energy. We had very candid conversations and participants were forthright with their knowledge, experience and ideas. It is this willingness and commitment that will help us all succeed in increasing safety for Aboriginal women.

Rachelle Venne, CEO  
Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women

# Actions to Increase Safety for Aboriginal Women

## 1. Create Safe and Affordable Housing

### Issue:

Without safe and affordable housing, it is impossible to create real safety for women and their families. We cannot make real and lasting change without adequate housing. The issue starts in Aboriginal communities, where people may leave in part due to inadequate housing. They move to urban centres, only to confront unaffordable and unsafe housing options.

In 2007, the Government of Alberta launched, *A Plan For Alberta – Ending Homelessness in Alberta*. At that time, it was estimated there were 8,400 homeless people in Alberta – a number which would only rise without intervention. Edmonton and Calgary have corresponding 10 year plans for the cities.

### Solutions:

- Alberta housing agencies operate on the premise that housing is a right
- Funding is crucial for a solution, but so is a collaborative and community effort
- Focus on the positive in the individual
- It takes a community to help and draw on connections
- Sharing ceremonies helps Aboriginal people heal and find a safer and stable path
- Subsidies follow the person, not the residence, which works well for clients

### Best Practices:

Three organizations provide a variety of services aimed at providing housing for everyone, with a focus on the most vulnerable. Because the list of supports is so large, we have provided website links to the organizations:

- Homeward Trust:  
<http://homewardtrust.ca/programs/housing-development.php>
- Bent Arrow:  
<http://bentarrow.ca/programs-and-services/housing/nikihk-housing-first/>
- E4C Crossroads:  
<http://e4calberta.org/programs-services/homeless-supports/>

## 2. Engage Leadership

### Issue:

Our Aboriginal leaders have the ability to advocate for women, and to increase their safety. Women often leave their communities to escape unsafe situations for themselves and their children (violence, gangs, drugs), only to move to urban centres with little supports. We have a number of outspoken leaders who champion the issue throughout Alberta, and whose actions have already made positive impacts.

### Solutions:

- Support leaders who are outspoken advocates of women's issues
- Create awareness through social media, by attending/supporting local events, writing letters to encourage leader participation
- Find ways to activate the community that includes leaders

### Best Practices:

- The AFN is partnering with Amnesty International and the United Nations on the missing and murdered Aboriginal women issue.
- Chiefs made a resolution to work with RCMP to assign a full time Aboriginal person to the ASIRT team to ensure our files are being dealt with to our satisfaction.

## 3. Reach Women and Youth Before They Leave Home

### Issue:

Many women and youth living in their communities don't know the risks of leaving or running away without a plan. Drug abuse and violence is an issue in communities and those problems continue on into urban centres. If our youth and women are better educated about the realities of moving to the city without supports, this could reduce the likelihood of their becoming victims in the first place.

### Solutions:

- Teach our children to respect one another and keep them involved in school
- Employ a traveling road show to visit communities (set up similar to this gathering)
- High school orientation – at the beginning of the school year
- Youth workers to speak at schools, informing them of programs/resources

- Bring info to children/youth through teachers
- Have family members of victims meet with youth
- High school debates/school orientation
- Get kids involved in sports to give them a sense of belonging
- Literacy training to include financial literacy and the realities of moving to the city
- Life skills training for youth
- Help people understand that the treaty card benefits don't always follow them off reserve.
- Start with school age children – personal safety awareness
- Reach out to ASETS program staff in communities
- Teleconference / Skype – create an ongoing dialogue
- Develop a Women's resource centre in every First Nation and Métis community

#### Best Practices:

- The Tipi of Courage, a community-based project that educates and empowers Aboriginal people. The tipi travels to communities and reaches out to youth to encourage them to make healthier and safer choices.  
<http://www.redcross.ca/where-we-work/in-canada/alberta/events/tipi-transfer-a-tipi-of-courage-event>
- In the Alexis First Nation, restorative justice has worked well (for example, people caught up in prescription drugs).
- The Alexis First Nation also provides youth with a 25 week life skills program. This is especially important given how young people are who are having children.
- Parents in some communities have developed a PTA group made up of parents, who have become very involved in the school.

#### 4. Welcome Those Who Come to the City

##### Issue:

Women arrive to the city without information or a plan once they arrive. They may be escaping an abusive situation and have been isolated with no knowledge of supports. Others may be leaving corrections and are trying to start again. It is important to realize that many do not realize there are supports available, and don't know where to start. Sometimes, the first point of contact is within women shelters. The levels of support and knowledge greatly varies from shelter to shelter. Some women experienced no support and a sense of isolation within shelters, while others receive a range of services.

In all these cases, if they were connected with resources as soon as they arrive, their level of safety could be dramatically increased. We need to focus on ways to find the women, and not wait for them to seek out agencies. These are some ways to welcome and support women who arrive to urban centres.

### Solutions:

#### Person-to-Person Welcoming

- Hold welcoming ceremony
- Develop a settlement program and resource centre in urban areas
- Identify welcome ambassadors
- Encompass and welcome youth
- Hold round dances
- Provide face to face (1 on 1) support: Assist the women to connect with the resource/ agency such as taking them to the resource

#### Develop Resources

- Resources for women/families that are new to the city such as “New in Town”
- A safety kit/plan
- A phone app
- List of hostels, compendium of services
- Take-away cards (wallet sized) of info. Others examples: matches, pen pullouts, street guides
- Check the language! Our messaging to women and children needs to be respectful and welcoming – move to kind, respectful, positive language in our documents developed

#### Offer Extended Services

- Many women who would like counseling cannot access it. We need to find ways to provide more free counseling
- Women often need more time than is allotted to them within shelters. There should be more time allotted to stay in shelter, especially when lives are at risk

#### Distribute Resources

- Before leaving their communities: Social media, radio ads across the province sponsored by industry, ads in community newsletters
- Social media
- Link with shelters so they can provide supports to women
- Develop smart phone apps
- Advocacy with media to get the story out

- 24/7 hotline
- Websites
- Inner city billboards (back of bathroom doors)
- AA meetings
- Within shelters
- In correction facilities
- Send information to communities
- Bingos
- Walk in clinics
- Emergency rooms
- Greyhound bus station
- Drop-in centers
- Food banks
- Build on the capacity of libraries
- Salvation Army

Best Practices:

- U of A through Aboriginal Student Services provides backpacks filled with information and resources for new students.
- Treaty 7 Elders sent a teepee to the Calgary police force for young people to use when they come to the city
- Support for women/families that are new to the city such as “New in Town”
- Homeboy Industries serves high-risk, formerly gang-involved men and women with free services and programs, and operates seven social enterprises that serve as job-training sites.  
<http://www.homeboyindustries.org>

## 5. Support Parents (Engage Child and Family Services)

Issue:

By supporting parents who need assistance in caring for their children, we can prevent many problems from occurring and break negative cycles. In speaking about women who are in high risk situations and lifestyles, a crucial component of this support is building relationships with the Child and Family Services Authorities (CFSAs) and Delegated First Nation Agencies (DFNAs) across Alberta. Many parents are afraid to ask for help, as they fear their children will be apprehended. Women have babies without prenatal care because of a (justified) fear that their babies will be apprehended in the hospital.

Solutions:

- Services must be non-judgmental
- CFSAs need to work more with women before moving to apprehending children
- Find a way to deal with the turnover at Child and Family Services or to alleviate the impacts of the high turnover
- Support parents to enroll their children in sports. Helping families get their kids into sports and hockey, for example, will give kids a sense of belonging. They have to know that someone loves them
- Engage midwives and/or doulas to work with women in their prenatal care – without women fearing apprehension of their children
- Provide access to psychiatric support without having to wait 6-12 months for an appointment and for getting medication to remain stable
- Support and support workers available 24-7, not just during business hours. Also those with training and a solid understanding of the women
- Support to build self-esteem, to learn self-forgiveness and self-love, and how to have healthy relationships
- Programs on why the lifestyle of streets, gangs and danger are addictive. This would help both as prevention (for those before they enter in) as well as women who are trying to escape the lifestyle, to help them understand why they keep returning
- Teach life skills – for example, accompany women to appointments
- Programs to help couples (not all partners are abusers)
- Cooking classes
- Provide parenting classes
- Create greater understanding from judges, lawyers and others so they do not judge or “write-off” the women

#### Best Practices:

- Crabtree Corner Family Resource Centre provides programs and services for families who need them the most. Located in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, one of Canada's most impoverished neighborhoods, Crabtree Corner helps women and their families improve the quality of their lives. [http://www.ywcavan.org/content/Crabtree\\_Corner/258](http://www.ywcavan.org/content/Crabtree_Corner/258)
- The Royal Alexandra Hospital is currently looking for ways to support pregnant women with their pre-natal care
- One participant used to be an Aboriginal Cultural Worker at the Royal Alexandra hospital, who worked at the hospital to help create positive outcomes for the women and babies. She introduced a baby welcoming ceremony for women. Even though they knew their babies would be in care, they were given a chance to hold the ceremony and meet their baby. It was a long road, and it took 8 years to allow these ceremonies.

## 6. Support Youth When Exiting the Child Welfare System

### Issue:

As parents we prepare our children for their journey, but in the system this doesn't happen often enough. Children who have been raised in the child welfare system lack role models, supports and preparation. When they turn 18 they suddenly leave the system. These children often lack basic life skills and are looking for family connections.

### Solutions:

- Work with school councilors to help them get into programs
- Foster parents need to attend cultural ceremonies not call support workers to take them or just drop them off
- Elders group for children in foster care possibly an elder attached to each child in feasible communities
- Find ways to teach children about their culture and rites of passage, ceremonies
- "Welcome Home" should happen when children return to community so for sense of belonging happens
- Women need stronger political or leadership ties
- Develop (immediate and extended) family re-unification program to help with the transition, consistent rules

### Best Practices:

- "Supports to Independent Living" is a program for children transitioning into adulthood

## 7. Support and Involve Men

### Issue:

Men must be fully engaged in order to increase safety for Aboriginal women. We need to define a role can men play in addressing issue of violence against women (especially Aboriginal) and get men more involved. Men don't always know what their role is, and need to be empowered in healthy ways. Men are also victims and they do not always receive the level of support they need to heal.

### Solutions:

- Develop a strategy to engage high profile men who can serve as good role models
- “John” school – educate and engage offenders
- Start local, build partnerships to address the wider issue
- Awareness sessions on how pornography shapes men/boys attitudes
- Community builds picnic tables to bring together men and children
- Find ways to build trust/relationships to get men to open up
- Create temporary housing when released to keep them housed outside the family home, breach mitigation
- Need men’s shelters
- Focus group to continue discussion on this issue

### Best Practices:

- Calgary Friendship Centre is about to start a men’s group
- CEASE “Men of Honor” – could be adopted for the Aboriginal community <http://www.ceasenow.org/index.php/families-a-communities/men-of-honour>. These are nominations and awards that recognize men to promote healthy relationships and create positive opportunities for people.
- TED Talk – Jackson Katz: Violence against Women is a Men’s issue. Jackson Katz points out that these are intrinsically men’s issues -- and shows how these violent behaviors are tied to definitions of manhood. A clarion call for us all -- women and men -- to call out unacceptable behavior and be leaders of change. [http://www.ted.com/talks/jackson\\_katz\\_violence\\_against\\_women\\_it\\_s\\_a\\_men\\_s\\_issue.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/jackson_katz_violence_against_women_it_s_a_men_s_issue.html)
- Creating Hope has discussions/DVD on family violence
- Walter DeKeseredy is an Ontario researcher who studies pornography and its effects in young people as well as other family violence issues. <http://wvu.academia.edu/WalterDeKeseredy>
- Moosehide Campaign [www.moosehidecampaign.ca](http://www.moosehidecampaign.ca)  
On Feb. 13th, men across Canada are invited to fast (no food or water) from the time they wake up to the time they go to sleep as a way of honoring the women, and as a way of demonstrating a deep commitment to end violence towards women and children.

## 8. Build Relationships and Trust With Police

### Issue:

Police have come a long way in moving from law enforcement to building relationships and helping; however, a lot more work needs to be done to build mutual trust and respect. Many Aboriginal people have learned to fear law enforcement, and this prevents them from coming to police for help and from reporting crimes. We need to find ways to reach out to people who are afraid to go to the police because they have previous negative experiences or a warrant. We need to message that police are there to help, not just enforce laws – and move from the negative perception of police to people who are police officers.

### Solutions:

- Create celebrations – police have food, song and dance, hold round dances
- Support people on their healing journey - sometimes jail isn't the answer
- Hold workshops to cover treaties, history and ceremonies
- Teach key words (in Cree, for example) so police will be aware
- Invite police to participate in the ceremonies and feasts – make them part of the communities. RCMP should attend (if you hear about an event, that is your invitation)
- Authorities need to understand and use protocol such as tobacco and sweet grass
- Increased engagement of social services when going out on calls: having a central repository so people could access available resources
- Develop a comprehensive communication fan out with social services agencies when someone is reported missing.

### Best Practices:

- RCMP KARE Pro Active team is spearheading the Safe Communities Initiative in conjunction with First Nation Communities, local social support and other partners. Through consulting with the community, several key topics of education and awareness will be outlined and addressed. Each community event will be unique to that community, as their concerns may vary. The first community to participate was Fort Chipewyan. Topics identified to be addressed were gang violence, domestic violence, addictions, human trafficking and vulnerable persons.
- A national best practices document was developed by experienced officers, intended for police agencies across the country. The document will be revised and improved over this year.
- Aboriginal justice camp in southern Alberta. It involves four days of experiential learning with seats, ceremony. By the fourth day, participants experience real breakthroughs in understanding.

- Alberta Justice / Solicitor General created a role to ensure services are culturally relevant. It involves capacity building (provide support in more rural communities, trying to get people talking to each other), sharing promising practices (share that information with victim services) and adding a mandatory Aboriginal module for all victim services staff.
- RCMP now have weeklong training sessions when they come out of training to help switch from reactive to more collaborative policing, changing the approach. This includes cultural education.

## 9. Centralize and Coordinate Services

### Issue:

An ongoing issue for community agencies is to better coordinate services. From the clients' perspective, services are hard to navigate, and they encounter both gaps and overlaps. Especially when in a state of crisis, clients need clear road maps for accessing services. We must remember that many clients are in trauma, and often aren't in the position to seek the services out. A focus needs to be on finding the women who need help, and making it easy to access the services.

### Solutions

- Provide transportation to and from agencies
- Hold programs at night, women only, provide food
- Identify champions to provide one-on-one support for filling out applications etc.
- Give client a copy of 'their story' so they don't have to repeat information again and again
- A one-stop shop would be ideal
- Hold ongoing coordination session with agency staff, for example: workshops, conferences, coming together in one location, arrange site visits to different agencies.
- Create networks to connect different moving parts (examples; addressing jurisdictional issues with federal and provincial gov't).
- Luncheons - bring agencies to places (such as Bissell Centre) so clients can access agencies in one place
- Create 'super teams' from various agencies
- Address jurisdictional issues – Federal/Provincial/Municipal/Aboriginal – is there is an existing memorandum of coordination to piggyback?
- Every vulnerable person should receive free cell phones that can dial 911
- Place emergency phones in high risk/crime areas
- Utilize events like "Homeless Connect" to promote info and resources

## 10. Identify, Support and Promote Champions

### Issue:

We already have many advocates in home communities and in cities – as well as many people who could step into becoming champions for women and girls. These people could be connected and provided with information on existing services and resources. By engaging this group of people, we can create a safety net to further protect and support women and girls.

### Solutions:

- Work with existing ‘movers and shakers’ in the community. Target influential members of various communities who have credibility and are approachable and safe to advocate for/support other women
- Identify people in practicums
- Target in the right areas – for example – a bus driver who talks to passengers
- Provide court workers with more resources
- Staff of outreach services: Street works, Bissell, Boyle Street, Hope Mission, WAVE (Women Advocacy Voice of Edmonton)
- Educate library staff
- Build relationships with hospital emergency departments to provide info/supportive referrals
- Implement a corrections transition team – providing them with information before they are released
- Workshops and conferences for staff to share information
- Engage this champions to provide one-on-one support such as going to meetings, filling out forms and applications etc.

## 11. Support Families of Missing and Murdered Women

### Issue:

Support to family members of missing and murdered Aboriginal women has been hugely problematic for many. Resources are thin and inconsistent, and many have encountered racism. More resources and attention have been dedicated more recently, but we still have a long way to go.

### Solutions:

- Provide more sessions for victims. Currently victim services offers limited sessions and only for specific family members

- Increase the eligibility of the recent federal grant for parents to take time away from work to cope with the death or disappearance of their child or children, as a result of a probable *Criminal Code* offence. Currently, the crime must have occurred on or after January 1, 2013 and is not retroactive. This date should be retroactive as families are still grieving years after the crime occurs.
- Social services need to work with families, not just apprehend. Otherwise, people will be too afraid to ask for assistance
- More information needs to be available for people on how to find and fund counseling services. It can be difficult to find out what kind of programs and supports were available.
- Provide access to funding for travel. Family members were living in a different city/province than where the crime took place – it can be unaffordable to travel.
- Homicide support groups helpful however there needs to be a centralized group for easier access for transportation.

#### Best Practices:

##### Regina Police Service Victim Services Unit

- Created a family toolkit to capture information. They don't just hand it over, but go through the kit with family.
- Family decides how much they meet and what the contact will look like.
- Hold group meetings throughout the year to meet with an entire family so the family gets a group update, which takes pressure off of the primary contact
- In the works: developing specialized counseling with an organization that specializes in death loss. Looking at grief counseling for those who have missing family members.

##### Leslie Block Counseling

- Works with “ambiguous loss” – someone in a coma, family members in addictions, missing persons
- Goes into communities utilizing ceremonies and sharing circles, with the intention of moving towards healing through a sacred journey
- Works on disputes that arise among family members
- Deals with the guilt that occurs especially among the youth
- The work doesn't end even if a person is found deceased.

## 12. Increase Media Exposure and Understanding

### Issue:

For a variety of reasons, it is very difficult to get and maintain the media's attention. The news cycle is very short, and stories are quickly forgotten. Racism is a factor as well – stories of missing and murdered Aboriginal women have been slow to make headlines.

### Solutions:

- Create an event and engage media at strategic times:
  - Anniversaries of disappearances
  - Birthdays of those women
  - Vigils
- Develop Indigenous TED Talks
- Hold awareness walks

### Best Practices:

Bret McCann shared his family's strategies for reaching out to the media and for engaging the public in a search ever since his parents went missing in Alberta in 2010. Many of these strategies could be adapted and applied for missing Aboriginal women and girls:

- Created a Facebook page, "Help find our parents" – which attracted 35,000 members in a short time
- Held a candlelight vigil in front of city hall
- Poster blitz – 100 people showed up to put up posters along highways and in stores
- Held a press conference to kick off a fundraiser for a reward – mayor and Crime Stoppers participated. Turned out to have a \$60,000 reward, which received extensive news coverage
- Talked to hunting stores and licensing businesses and provided a poster to be given out with every hunting license in the area
- Family members conducted searches on quads
- Held meetings with Alberta Sustainable Development (ASRD), tracked areas to search using maps provided by ASRD
- Sent a bulk mail out to all residences in the area with a poster asking people to check their property
- Held a media presentation with RCMP in front of one of the billboards
- Presentation at a senior citizens Christmas lunch with RCMP, Crime Stoppers and media
- Made a contact list for media – invited media by email to attend events
- Recorded audio messages aired as a spot on local radio stations

- July 2011 – anniversary of parents wedding held a memorial open to public

Results and observations:

- Was able, through the media, to keep the search in the public eye
- Someone was charged, trial is starting April 2014
- Were able to personalize our plight
- Emailed media to come to events
- Enlisted Crimestoppers, Mayor of St. Albert, prominent citizens
- Involved the community as much as possible
- Never publically expressed frustration with the RCMP
- Always available for the media, never said no

### 13. Other Issues

The issue of increasing safety is complex. There are an additional number of issues that were raised, which need more attention and discussion. They have been captured here:

- Missing men and boys
- Human Trafficking
- Drug trafficking and prescription drugs
- Gangs
- Anti-prostitution laws
- Affordable child care
- Adequate transportation
- Employment opportunities for people with criminal records
- Increase education for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people
- Extend sensitivity training from police to other front line staff (lawyers, judges, nurses, doctors)

Thank you to our funding partners for this gathering.

