Assembly of First Nations

6th Annual National Forum on Income Assistance:

Leveraging Regional Variations: Innovating Income Assistance for Future Generations

SUMMARY REPORT

February 3-5, 2026
Richmond, British Columbia
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Executive Summary

The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) 6th Annual National Forum on Income Assistance (IA) was hosted in Musqueam Territory in Richmond, British Columbia from February 3-5, 2026. The Forum gathered 190 IA case managers, administrators, and others from First Nations across Turtle Island to connect with one another, learn about innovative approaches and regional variations in IA administration and service delivery, and engage in discussion. Participants were encouraged to share their experiences and perspectives during a facilitated breakout session on Day Two, and throughout the Forum in Q&A sessions following each presentation.

Day One featured updates from the AFN, the Institute of Fiscal Studies and Democracy (IFSD), and Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) on advocacy, research, and the status of IA Program reform. This was followed by a workshop on the theme of lateral violence and kindness. On Day Two, participants heard from presenters on the impacts of regional differences, funding agreements, and self-governance of IA administration, among other topics. Participants then divided into three facilitated breakout groups to discuss gaps they encounter in the IA Program and share innovative solutions they use to support their clients. The Forum concluded on Day Three with presentations on the Southern Chiefs' Organization Disability Program, First Nations perspectives on Guaranteed Liveable Basic Income, and next steps for the AFN in its work advocating for an IA Program that meets the needs and realities of IA clients and staff.

DAY ONE – TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2026

Opening

The Forum began with an opening from Elder Larry Grant / sʔəyəɬəq, Musqueam Nation, followed by a group of Musqueam drummers, who shared a Welcome Song and an Honour Song. Assembly of First Nations (AFN) National Chief Cindy Woodhouse Nepinak (by video) and AFN Social Development Portfolio Holder and Manitoba Regional Chief Willie Moore then welcomed participants to the Forum and provided opening remarks. Facilitator Heather Swan then went over the agenda and housekeeping items before introducing the first speaker.

Overview of the AFN's Advocacy on Income Assistance (IA) Program Reform

Torri Weapenicappo, Assembly of First Nations

Torri Weapenicappo, Senior Policy Analyst at the AFN, provided an overview and timeline of the AFN's mandates and advocacy work on Income Assistance (IA) Program reform to date, which has focused on building capacity, ensuring programs meet community needs, and strengthening socioeconomic outcomes. The AFN, in collaboration with the Technical Working Group on Social Development (TWGSD), submitted First Nations-developed policy recommendations for program reform, including needs-based funding structures, expanded case management and administrative capacity, resources to promote self-determination and data sovereignty, and a First Nations social safety net model to provide holistic, wrap-around supports for clients.

In May 2023, Cabinet expressed verbal support for these recommendations but provided no corresponding funding in Budget 2023. First Nations-in-Assembly directed the AFN and the TWGSD to conduct costing of the full implementation of the policy recommendations, and in 2024, the AFN contracted the Institute of Fiscal Studies and Democracy (IFSD) to undertake this research. Since then, the AFN and the TWGSD have taken further steps to advance their mandates, including focusing the IA Program reform conversations and outlining additional investments required. Participants were encouraged to contribute to IFSD's research by participating in a survey or joining as a case collaborator. Accurate, community-driven data is essential to advocating for equitable funding and government accountability, as well as self-determined planning and decision-making.

Updates on IA Program Reform

Stephan Aucoin, Indigenous Services Canada

Stephan Aucoin, Manager of the IA Program at Indigenous Services Canada (ISC), shared updates on the status of IA Program reform, federal budget commitments, and next steps on implementation. He highlighted that Budget 2024 committed over $927 million to the Program over five years, and $169 million per year ongoing – one of the largest increases in ongoing funding for the Program since its creation. This commitment includes funds to address pressures on existing programs, renew case management and pre-employment funding at current levels until 2027, and introduce disability income supports on reserve where gaps exist as compared to provincial and territorial programming.

ISC has been advancing incremental changes to the IA Program where possible. Some actions to date include increasing Special Needs and Service Delivery rates in some provinces, updating Terms and Conditions to prevent claw backs resulting from the new Canada Disability Benefit and settlement payments, implementing a new IA information management system, consolidating health and social programs to promote efficiency, and coordinating with internal and federal partners to better support service delivery, communication, and self-determination.

IA Costing Presentation from the Institute of Fiscal Studies and Democracy

Dr. Helaina Gaspard, IFSD Advisors Ltd. (IFSD)

Dr. Helaina Gaspard, co-founder and Managing Director of IFSD Advisors Ltd., provided an update on IFSD's IA costing work, including research and analysis into regional social assistance programs. Their research indicates that across regions, the adequacy of social assistance benefits is unclear and not systematically linked to the actual cost of living, while methods used to calculate rates are often arbitrary and lack public transparency. Performance measurement frameworks and reporting practices are often non-existent, inconsistent, or not aligned with stated program objectives.

The presentation outlined IFSD's mandate – to develop a First Nations-specific funding model for the IA Program based on First Nations policy recommendations – as well as the goals of the project and data collection efforts. IFSD emphasized that this work relies on voluntary collaboration from First Nations and other organizations delivering IA, whose data and front-line perspectives are vital to building a representative data set and defining an improved approach to IA. IFSD is seeking contributors to participate through an online questionnaire as well as in-depth collaborative workshops with 20 First Nations. Dr. Gaspard explained why participation is needed, what information is being gathered, and how the data will be managed and used according to OCAP® Principles.

Using Data and Innovative Artificial Intelligence (AI) Approaches in the Income Assistance Program

Nordeen El Bakkouri, 360 Nation Administration Solutions

Nordeen El Bakkouri, Co-Founder and Managing Partner at 360 Nation Administration Solutions, introduced a customizable software platform developed in collaboration with First Nations to support program administration and service delivery. Drawing on experience working with 40 First Nations, Nordeen El Bakkouri highlighted how case workers on reserve often perform the work of an entire administrative team. The company's approach focuses on simplifying data management so that case managers can spend less time on administrative tasks and more time supporting clients.

360 Nation Administration Solutions developed a fully digital case-management platform that automates much of the administrative workload, collecting and organizing information in a searchable database from which reports, forms, and other required outputs can be generated automatically. Working with Ermineskin and Samson Cree Nations, 360 Nation Administration Solutions also developed a client assessment framework that incorporates an AI component to generate recommendations based on client responses. A demonstration of the software explained how it is used, and how the host Nation's database can support multiple community programs, including IA, Post-Secondary, Housing, and Child and Family Services. The system also includes tools such as SMS notifications to remind clients about case notes and required actions. Importantly, the software conforms to OCAP® principles of data sovereignty.

Workshop: Lateral Kindness

Shannon Beauchamp, Eagle Feather (Migizi Miigwan) Facilitation & Coaching Inc.

The workshop began with a 'Kindness Pause' and proceeded with a presentation defining lateral violence and exploring its forms, causes, and consequences. Participants were led in individual reflection and writing exercises, table discussions, and group exercises, including a 'Gallery of Collective Experience,' in which they documented forms of lateral violence on hundreds of sticky notes and placed these on the wall.

The second portion of the workshop focused on lateral kindness as a decolonized approach to addressing lateral violence. The lateral kindness movement was created in 2011 by over 200 First Nations and the First Nations Health Authority (FNHA). Lateral kindness is about healthy relationships and coming together to support and uplift one another. It is both an individual choice and an organizational practice that can transform relationships. Kindness is also an active behaviour that requires effort. A core message of the workshop is that kindness is medicine: when we choose to act with kindness, we become the medicine.

Key Takeaways from Day One

- Data is a powerful and necessary tool to advocate for equitable funding, government accountability, and program reform as well as for planning and designing First Nations-led service delivery. However, it can also be misinterpreted, misused, and biased.
- IA Program funding based on provincial/territorial comparability does not work for First Nations. First Nations must be able to develop and implement their own funding policies based on actual need.
- Programs should be adapted to meet the needs of communities, rather than communities having to adapt to meet the limits of programs.
- The true cost of IA must include administration costs: wage parity for staff, adequate infrastructure and space, professional development training, and supports for front-line workers dealing with complex cases and daily trauma.
- Lateral kindness is the antidote to lateral violence. Kindness is medicine: when we choose kindness, we become the medicine.

DAY TWO – WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 4, 2026

Panel Presentation: Regional IA Administration Variances

Amanda Kubrakovitch, West Region Tribal Council, Manitoba; Gene Bercier, West Region Tribal Council, Manitoba; Fran Okasikewiyin, Saskatoon Tribal Council, Saskatchewan; Nina Dickson, Little Salmon/Carmacks First Nation, Yukon

The panel focused on the regional variances in IA administration across Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Yukon. The discussion highlighted how governance structures, funding models, and community realities shape program delivery. Panelists discussed the balance between federal comparability requirements and First Nations-led administration, and ongoing challenges related to cost-of-living disparities, remoteness, housing shortages, limited employment opportunities, and capacity constraints. High caseloads, staffing shortages, and wage gaps between on-reserve IA administration and their provincial and territorial counterparts were identified as persistent pressures affecting service delivery and case management. Additionally, the discussion explored the impacts of minimal benefit levels and policy rigidity on housing stability and long-term outcomes for recipients.

Despite these challenges, the panel showcased innovative, First Nations-led responses aimed at strengthening flexibility, cultural relevance, and pathways to self-sufficiency. Examples included flexible funding approaches, capacity-building initiatives for administrators, standardized tools and knowledge-sharing forums, and holistic, person-centred supports that integrate employment planning and temporary financial assistance. Panelists reinforced the importance of local control, adaptable policy design, and IA systems that reflect the distinct social, economic, and cultural contexts of First Nations communities.

Panel Presentation: The Impact of Funding Agreements on IA Policy Administration

Florence Kanhai, Thunderchild First Nation, Saskatchewan; Ruth Levi, Elsipogtog First Nation, New Brunswick; Millie Thunder, Little Pine First Nation, Saskatchewan

The panel examined how different funding agreements – fixed, block, and flexible models – directly shape the administration, flexibility, and effectiveness of IA programs. Panelists highlighted how outdated rate structures, composite formulas based on partial rental averages, and funding tied to pre-pandemic data have created persistent deficits at the community level. Shelter allowances and basic needs rates have not kept pace with rising costs of housing, food, and utilities, forcing First Nations to supplement programs through own-source revenue or absorb financial shortfalls. Administrative burdens, delayed reimbursements, and ineligible expenses, such as transportation and equipment, further restrict communities' ability to deliver responsive services.

The discussion highlighted the operational realities IA administrators face. In many First Nations, limited staffing means one or two coordinators manage the case files for hundreds of individuals, while navigating complex reporting requirements and shifting provincial comparability standards. Funding silos and varying terms in funding agreements across regions create inconsistencies in service delivery, even within the same province. Panelists described how rigid policies can inadvertently reinforce dependency, discourage employment uptake, and fail to reflect the higher costs and geographic realities of on reserve and rural communities.

Collectively, the panel called for structural reform rooted in self-determination. Speakers emphasized the need to separate IA from broader funding envelopes, modernize rates to reflect actual living costs, and design First Nations-led models that prioritize economic development, employment pathways, and long-term sustainability. Rather than continuing to adapt to externally imposed systems, meaningful reform requires First Nations to collaboratively redesign IA frameworks that align with their values, realities, and aspirations.

Plenary Presentation: First Nations Child and Family Services and Jordan's Principle Compensation Claims Process and Supports

Seneca Stacey-Allen, Assembly of First Nations

Seneca Stacey-Allen, Information Desk Team Lead with the AFN, provided an overview of the compensation claims process for First Nations children and families affected by underfunding of the First Nations Child and Family Services Program and the narrow interpretation of Jordan's Principle. The presentation covered the historical context, including the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal decisions and the final settlement agreement approved by First Nations-in-Assembly in April 2023, totaling over $23.3 billion to compensate more than 300,000 children and caregiving parents or grandparents. Seneca Stacey-Allen outlined the process for submitting claims, including required documentation, accommodations for minors, houseless and incarcerated individuals, and the availability of claims helpers offering trauma-informed support. The session also highlighted mental health and financial education supports, the allocation of decommissioned laptops to improve access to the claims process, and the ongoing development of dedicated support lines. Following the plenary session, participants were encouraged to connect with the AFN Information Desk or claims helpers for guidance on navigating the claims process.

Panel Presentation: Self-Governance and IA

Chief Leroy Denny, Eskasoni Mi'kmaw Nation, Nova Scotia; Alisha Carter, Assembly of First Nations

The presentation highlighted the progress and strategies behind First Nations self-governance in IA. Panelists discussed the creation of community-led governance structures that reclaim control over social programs from federal and provincial systems to ensure that policies reflect the cultural needs and lived experiences of First Nations communities. One example is the Ta'n Etli-tpi'tmk initiative, which represents 12 of the 13 Mi'kmaw First Nations managing social assistance policies locally and serves as a model to exercise inherent rights to self-determination.

The discussion emphasized the importance of long-term planning, collaborative policy development, and sustainable funding models to reduce intergenerational poverty and support client well-being. Panelists shared that case management programs now help clients with barriers, such as lack of childcare, transportation, or previous criminal records. The presentation also addressed the role of flexible and predictable funding through initiatives like the New Fiscal Relationship (NFR) Grant, which enables communities to plan programs over ten-year cycles, adjust for population changes, and maintain funding levels without claw backs. Overall, panelists underscored the broader goal of decolonizing IA systems through self-governance and empowering communities to implement programs that promote employment, personal growth, and wellness.

Plenary Presentation: Reducing First Nations Poverty Through IA Program Reform

Jolene Andrew, Lil'wat Nation, British Columbia

Jolene Andrew, Director of Community Development at Lil'wat Nation, shared insights on addressing intergenerational poverty in First Nations communities through IA program reform. Framing poverty as a structural and legislated issue rooted in colonialism and systemic oppression, the presentation emphasized that individual failure is not the cause of poverty. It also explored how data has historically been weaponized against First Nations, shaping narratives around dependency rather than structural causes of poverty. Data and data analysis have failed to capture the lived outcomes and real harms experienced by individuals and families, and the impacts of ongoing policy changes. These limitations further highlighted the importance of First Nations data sovereignty to ensure data is used transparently and interpreted in ways that reflect community realities rather than perpetuating biased narratives.

The presentation outlined innovative approaches to IA reform, including assigning a Poverty Reduction Coordinator to connect families with food security, housing, and wellness resources, integrating services across departments, and using evidence-based research to guide leadership decisions. Advisory structures like the Community Service Committee play a key role in informing Chief and Council on policy directions. Culturally grounded supports including land-based programs, Elder involvement, and inclusive community spaces are essential to ensure wrap-around services meet the holistic needs of clients.

Breakout Session: Identifying First Nations innovative responses to supporting IA clients to address the gaps within the Income Assistance Program

Torri Weapenicappo introduced the breakout activity and participants were divided into three facilitated breakout groups. They were invited to share their experiences and perspectives on assisting clients and bridging gaps in the IA Program, and informed that their feedback would be utilized to support ongoing AFN IA Program reform advocacy. The discussion focused on three questions:

1. What are the gaps in the services you are encountering within the IA Program?
2. What supports do your clients access or do you help your clients access?
3. What innovative or creative approaches has your First Nation used or does your First Nation want to use to support IA clients beyond the IA Program itself?

Key Takeaways from Day Two

- Flexible, First Nations-led policy design and funding approaches enable communities to better respond to local realities, including remoteness and cost-of-living pressures.
- Building administrative capacity, supporting frontline IA workers, and strengthening employment and training opportunities are critical to sustaining effective and responsive IA systems.
- Existing funding agreements for IA often leave First Nations under-resourced with fixed or delayed contributions that do not reflect actual costs for housing, utilities, food, and transportation.
- Meaningful reform requires First Nations to collaboratively redesign IA frameworks that align with their values, community realities, and long-term aspirations.
- First Nations-led governance structures, like Ta'n Etli-Tpi'tmk, are critical for reclaiming control over social assistance programs and ensuring policies reflect the cultural and community needs of First Nations peoples.
- Decolonizing IA systems through self-governance empowers communities to implement culturally relevant, locally managed programs that reduce intergenerational poverty and promote employment, personal growth, and wellness.
- Poverty in First Nations communities is a structural and legislated issue rooted in colonialism and systemic oppression, not individual failure.
- Data has historically been weaponized against First Nations shaping narratives around dependency rather than structural causes and failing to reflect lived outcomes or the impacts of ongoing policy changes.

DAY THREE – THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 2026

Guest Presentation: Southern Chiefs' Organization First Nation Disability Program

Grand Chief Jerry Daniels, Southern Chiefs' Organization Inc.

Grand Chief Jerry Daniels presented on the work of the Southern Chiefs' Organization (SCO) and its First Nation Disability Program, launched in February 2025. The SCO was not intended to provide service delivery, but as services were failing to adequately meet the needs of their members, the SCO chose to step in and fill the gaps using administrative fees to fund new programming in healthcare and Identification clinics.

The First Nation Disability Program supports individuals living with disabilities and their caregivers across Manitoba but often works beyond jurisdictional boundaries due to unmet needs. Many individuals encounter not only physical barriers but also social, cultural, and systemic obstacles within a complex and fragmented system that is confusing to navigate. Forms, application processes, and eligibility rules are often confusing, rigid, and invasive. The SCO works alongside citizens to help them navigate the red tape and understand their rights, empowering individuals to better advocate for themselves and access available supports. Partnerships with community programs, service providers, and other organizations have been essential to the work. Grand Chief Daniels noted that while similar programs may exist elsewhere, collaboration between organizations, rather than competition, enables teams providing overlapping services to support one another during times of crisis. The First Nation Disability Program emphasizes dignity, culturally responsive support, and First Nations-led solutions that prioritize lived experience and access over bureaucracy.

Panel Presentation: Guaranteed Liveable Income and First Nations Perspectives

Victoria Caravaggio, Chiefs of Ontario; Staci Williams, Ontario Native Welfare Administrators' Association

The panel focused on the concept of Guaranteed Liveable Basic Income (GLBI): an unconditional cash transfer from the government aimed at helping people move out of poverty. Victoria Caravaggio, Policy Analyst at Chiefs of Ontario (COO), presented on Bill S-206, the *National Framework for a Guaranteed Livable Basic Income Act*, currently before the Standing Senate Committee on National Finance. She noted some strengths and areas for improvement within the Bill, and outlined the COO's submissions, which focus on the importance of a gender-based analysis and approach, retaining and strengthening existing First Nations supports, First Nations autonomy, sovereignty, and self-determination, and considerations for regional uniqueness. Participants were encouraged to reach out to COO to continue the dialogue or for support in creating regionally specific submissions on the Senate Bill. Regardless of individual perspectives on GLBI, the crucial thing is for First Nations voices to be part of the conversation.

Staci Williams, Project Coordinator at the Ontario Native Welfare Administrators' Association (ONWAA), presented on the work of ONWAA in relation to GLBI. Bill S-206 reached second reading with little to no consultation with First Nations, leaving many unaware that conversations around GLBI were even underway. In response, ONWAA organized five two-day workshops over two years to explore First Nations-led alternatives to a national framework for GLBI and support research on community needs. The initiative emphasizes that any income assistance program must be designed for and by First Nations, reflect diverse realities, and respect First Nations sovereignty and nation-to-nation relationships with Canada.

ONWAA's Designing Culturally Appropriate Income Assistance Program Workshops were organized around five units: Indigenous Knowledge, Data Collection, World Models, Planning Processes, and Program Review. Research and discussion in each area produced a number of insights and recommendations. The panel presentation concluded with the conviction that "reconciliation should not have a price tag on it" and called for a collective statement on this. In the context of colonization and imposed trauma, resources and supports are not luxuries, but basic needs that are owed to First Nations.

Key Takeaways from Day Three

- First Nations organizations are identifying areas where service delivery fails to meet clients' needs and are stepping in to fill those gaps.
- Where different programs provide overlapping services, teams can collaborate to support one another. Indeed, partnerships are essential to effective program delivery.
- The national conversation around Guaranteed Liveable Basic Income is an opportunity for First Nations to be proactive in exploring, designing, and advocating for IA programming that responds to community realities and needs.

Looking Ahead

Torri Weapenicappo, Assembly of First Nations

Torri Weapenicappo thanked the speakers, staff, and participants for their contributions to the Forum and spoke about next steps. A high-level summary report of the presentations will be shared with participants followed by a more in-depth report highlighting the conversations that emerged in breakout groups on day two. While IA Program reform has been a challenging process, the AFN is unwavering in its commitment to advocating for the needs of IA workers, clients, and communities. Participants were encouraged to continue building on the connections they made, sharing resources and knowledge, and exploring opportunities for collaboration. They were invited once again to assist the AFN and IFSD in the research by participating in the online data collection survey or joining as a workshop collaborator.

Closing

AFN National Chief Cindy Woodhouse Nepinak addressed participants by video, followed by Victoria Bird, AFN Director of Social Development, on behalf of AFN Manitoba Regional Chief and Social Development Portfolio Holder Willie Moore. Elder Larry Grant / sʔəyəɬəq, Musqueam Nation, gave a closing and expressed final words of thanks. Drummers from Musqueam Nation then shared a Warrior Song to honour participants for their work, and a Paddle Song to send them home safely to their loved ones.



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