

---

**National Wellness Gathering**  
*for Indian Residential School Survivors  
and Indian Residential Schools Resolution  
Health Support Program Workforce 2024*

---



**EVENT REPORT**

---

June 28, 2024



# National Wellness Gathering for Indian Residential School Survivors



February 13-15, 2024  
Sheraton Wall Centre, Vancouver BC

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1. Executive Summary ..... 3
  - 1.1. Purpose ..... 3
  - 1.2. Attendance ..... 3
  - 1.3. Planning ..... 4
  - 1.4. Principles & Values ..... 5
- 2. Event Summary ..... 6
  - 2.1. Pre-Event: Harmony at Work – An Evening of Caring for the Caregivers..... 6
  - 2.2. Day 1.....7
  - 2.3. Day 2 ..... 10
  - 2.4. Day 3..... 13
- 3. Participant Safety and Wellness ..... 14
  - 3.1. Accessibility ..... 14
  - 3.2. Elder Supports ..... 15
  - 3.3. Mental Health Supports ..... 15
  - 3.4. Wellness Supports ..... 16
  - 3.5. Live Viewing Rooms..... 16
- 4. Participant Feedback..... 16
  - 4.1. Survey Results ..... 17
- 5. Conclusion ..... 19
- Appendix A: Agenda..... 20*
- Appendix B: Graphic Recording..... 23*
- Appendix C: Survey Results..... 24*





# National Wellness Gathering for Indian Residential School Survivors



February 13-15, 2024  
Sheraton Wall Centre, Vancouver BC

## 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### 1.1. PURPOSE

The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) and First Peoples Wellness Circle (FPWC) hosted the National Wellness Gathering for Indian Residential School (IRS) Survivors and IRS Resolution Health Support (IRS RHSP) Workforce on February 13-15, 2024, at the Sheraton Vancouver Wall Centre on the unceded territory of xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sk̓w̓x̓wú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

The National Wellness Gathering for Indian Residential School Survivors was an informative and inspirational event to celebrate, acknowledge and uphold First Nations IRS survivors and their families, as well as members of the IRS RHSP workforce.

The event objectives were to:

- Provide a space for Indian Residential School (IRS) Survivors and their families to reconnect, share, learn, and heal.
- Support the IRS Resolution Health Support Program (RHSP) workforce through wellness activities, cultural connections, and self-care opportunities.
- Generate insights, support, and direction in determining a path to permanency for the IRS RHSP program past the current mandate ending in April of 2024. This includes imagining what the future looks like for the program from the perspectives of First Nations Leadership, mental wellness experts and service providers, Survivors, and Knowledge Carriers.



The event was facilitated by Khelsilem, a member of Sk̓w̓x̓wú7mesh (Squamish Nation), and Connor Lafortune, a youth from Dokis First Nation. Elena Sterritt, a Gitxsan graphic recorder, documented the event through graphic recording<sup>1</sup>. Further, a videographer was present to document stories and narratives from IRS survivors and the workforce.

### 1.2. ATTENDANCE

The gathering generated remarkable enthusiasm and attracted a large number of attendees. While the event was originally planned for 500 attendees, pre-registration numbers quickly exceeded this estimate. The planning team swiftly adapted efforts to accommodate a larger number of participants. Priority was given to First Nations IRS survivors, their families, and members of the IRS

<sup>1</sup> These graphics are integrated throughout the report, and found in Appendix B.



# National Wellness Gathering for Indian Residential School Survivors



February 13-15, 2024  
Sheraton Wall Centre, Vancouver BC

RHSP workforce. Additionally, Elders, Knowledge Carriers, youth, First Nations Chiefs, health and wellness organizations, industry representatives, academia, and government representatives were welcomed at the gathering, as this aligned with the event’s intention to cultivate relationships and promote dialogue. In total, 754 attendees were present, which highlights the demand for continuing these discussions at regional and national levels.

Participant Type	Registered	Checked In	%
* Total	999	754	75
Chief	15	8	53
First Nation Delegate	192	138	72
Government Representative	8	6	75
IRS Cultural Support Worker	99	74	75
Knowledge Carrier (Elder)	25	12	48
Non-Governmental Organization	18	12	67
Other Delegate	150	105	70
Presenters	12	12	100
Regional Chief	2	2	100
Residential School Survivor	399	325	81
Staff	23	23	100
Technician to a First Nation	13	8	62
Youth	43	29	67

Figure 1: Registration and Attendance

### 1.3. PLANNING

The coordination of this large-scale event was a collaborative endeavour between the Assembly of First Nations and First Peoples Wellness Circle. To support event planning, AFN and FPWC hired The Firelight Group – an Indigenous-owned consultancy that provides a range of planning, research, engagement, advisory, and training services to support the rights and interests of Indigenous communities and peoples across Turtle Island.

Together, the team worked collaboratively to oversee various aspects, such as securing speakers, organizing activities, managing logistics, and ensuring a seamless execution of the event.



# National Wellness Gathering for Indian Residential School Survivors



February 13-15, 2024  
Sheraton Wall Centre, Vancouver BC

## 1.4. PRINCIPLES & VALUES

Principles and values in event planning provides a guiding framework that aligns all aspects of the event with the overarching goals and objectives. This ensures coherence and consistency throughout the planning process and helps in making decisions that are in line with the event's purpose. Establishing principles and values also promotes transparency and accountability, both internally among the planning team and externally with stakeholders and attendees. It helps to set expectations and standards for communication and decision-making.

The following principles and values were at the core of the event planning:

- **Culture as the Foundation:** Ensuring that the event is rooted in First Nations beliefs, practices, and values, and honors and celebrates First Nations cultures and ways of doing, knowing and being.
- **Strengths Based:** Designing an event program and activities that highlight the strengths and resiliency of IRS survivors and the workforce, and emphasizing success stories, milestones, and opportunities to inspire enthusiasm and engagement at the event.
- **Accessibility:** Ensuring that the event is inclusive and welcoming to all individuals, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, and taking proactive steps to remove barriers and create an inclusive and equitable event experience for everyone.
- **Wellness:** Prioritizing the physical, mental, and emotional well-being and safety of attendees throughout all aspects of the event by creating an environment that has comprehensive health and safety protocols, resources and supports.
- **Relationships:** Enabling relationship building and connection in event planning means creating opportunities for meaningful interactions, fostering a sense of belonging and community, and building lasting connections that extend beyond the event itself.





# National Wellness Gathering for Indian Residential School Survivors



February 13-15, 2024  
Sheraton Wall Centre, Vancouver BC

## 2. EVENT SUMMARY

### 2.1. PRE-EVENT: HARMONY AT WORK – AN EVENING OF CARING FOR THE CAREGIVERS

#### 2.1.1. Summary

Caregivers are essential to supporting First Nations communities, making it crucial to recognize their invaluable contributions. The pre-event session “Harmony at Work: An Evening of Caring for the Caregivers” served as an opportunity to express gratitude and celebrate the IRS RHSP workforce for their efforts in upholding our community members. Attendees were invited to partake in a range of wellness activities, including massages, brushing, and relaxation activities, aimed at acknowledging and showing thanks for their dedication.

### 2.2. DAY 1

#### 2.2.1. Summary

Day 1 begun with a warm welcome from the emcees – Khelsilem, a member of S wx wú7mesh (Squamish Nation), and Connor Lafortune, a youth from Dokis First Nation. To start the gathering in a good way, Elder Stewart Gonzales from S wx wú7mesh shared an opening prayer, and representatives from the host Nations of x m k y’ m (Musqueam), S wx wú7mesh (Squamish), and s lilw ta (Tseil-Waututh) delivered a welcoming address. Additional opening remarks were delivered by:

- BC Regional Chief Terry Teegee;
- NWT Regional Chief Gerald Antoine;
- Nova Scotia Regional Chief Andrea Paul; and,
- FPWC Representative Dr. Ed Connors.

Throughout the day, the delegates were invited to listen to keynote speaker Elaine Alec and participate in a series of interactive breakout room activities. These sessions are further detailed below.

A select number of local organizations that work with and support First Nations and IRS Survivors were also invited to set up information booths at the venue. Booth representatives attended from the First Peoples Wellness Circle, Assembly of First Nations, IRS Survivors Society, and the Future Generations Foundation. The list of organizations was intentionally curated to maintain accessibility and safety due to venue capacity constraints.





# National Wellness Gathering for Indian Residential School Survivors



February 13-15, 2024  
Sheraton Wall Centre, Vancouver BC

## 2.2.2. PRESENTATIONS, PANELS, AND WORKSHOPS

Title:	Plenary – Keynote Address: Cultivating Safe Spaces
Speaker(s):	Elaine Alec
Summary:	Elaine shared her journey of creating the Cultivating Safe Spaces (CSS) framework, which encompasses key areas aimed at fostering safe environments: understanding the four necessary conditions, protocols, and perspectives for cultivating safe spaces. CSS serves as a transformative worldview framework, empowering individuals grappling with concepts of decolonization and reconciliation by supporting systemic change and policy shifts, while emphasizing well-being to enhance effectiveness and productivity. Through this training, participants transition from insecurity to empowerment, gaining focus and communication skills to contribute meaningfully to ongoing systemic transformations.

Title:	Breakout Session #1 – Networking Session / Gathering Our Knowledge Bundles
Speaker(s):	Mia Bourque-Commanda and Lulu Choy
Summary:	<p>During this session, participants were invited to network and engage in table discussions around the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Question 1: What were some of the challenges that your community or organization experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic? Are any of these challenges still present?</li> <li>• Question 2: What were some resources or supports that you found helpful in addressing any or some of those challenges?</li> <li>• Question 3: What are some wise practices, ideas, or solutions you would like to share?</li> </ul> <p>Facilitators led the networking activity, and responses were documented on flipchart paper. Additionally, participants were given an opportunity to exchange contact information, and received little copper cups as tokens of appreciation.</p>



# National Wellness Gathering for Indian Residential School Survivors



February 13-15, 2024  
Sheraton Wall Centre, Vancouver BC

<b>Title:</b>	<b>Breakout Session #2 – AFN IRS RHSP Advocacy Roadmap</b>
<b>Speaker(s):</b>	Nelson Alisappi and Katelyn Garrow
<b>Summary:</b>	This session highlighted the Indian Residential School Resurgence Program (IRS RHSP) and its potential for improvement. Emphasis was placed on cultural safety and the need for a framework centered on healing, wellness, and trauma-informed practices. Five critical areas, also described as stops on the roadmap for progress, were identified, including uncovering colonialism, establishing site-based programming, supporting the IRS RHSP workforce, and advocating for necessary funding. The need for adequate funding was a recurring theme, particularly for initiatives such as healing centres, traditional healers, and travel support for Elders and community members. Intersectionality between IRS and other programs like the Non-Insured Health Benefits (NIHB) program was also discussed. Overall, presenters highlighted advocacy efforts as essential to promote Indigenous-led initiatives, improve cultural safety, and secure long-term funding to address the complex and ongoing trauma experienced by Indigenous communities.

<b>Title:</b>	<b>Breakout Session #3 – Storied Learning and Healing for Future Generations</b>
<b>Speaker(s):</b>	David A. Robertson
<b>Summary:</b>	David Robertson delivered a session that provided an overview of his journey as an Indigenous storyteller and author. Through personal narrative, he aimed to illustrate the role of storytelling in healing and moving through intergenerational trauma and grief. The session reminded participants that storytelling is a powerful inward to outward pathway that, when shared, can empower others to share their truth, and promote learning, understanding, and healing.





# National Wellness Gathering for Indian Residential School Survivors



February 13-15, 2024  
Sheraton Wall Centre, Vancouver BC

<b>Title:</b>	<b>Breakout Session #4 – Resolution Health Support Program (IRS RHSP) Qualitative Assessment and Formative Analysis: Supporting the Workforce</b>
<b>Speaker(s):</b>	Brenda Restoule, Maxine Peltier, and Trisha Trudeau
<b>Summary:</b>	<p>The session provided an overview of the First Nation Mental Wellness Continuum Framework. The presenters introduced the IRS RHSP Qualitative Assessment, aimed at understanding the impact and effectiveness of RHSP services in assisting survivors and their families.</p> <p>The Qualitative Assessment involved a series of culturally grounded storytelling interviews with survivors, and the findings highlighted key aspects of healing inherent in the IRS RHSP. Key recommendations to enhance RHSP included expanding service scope to meet survivors’ needs, creating a life course approach, building a quality care system centered around wholistic healing services, prioritizing workforce self-care, and integrating cultural healing by Indigenous service providers.</p> <p>The IRS RHSP Formative Analysis emerged as an identified need from the work completed in the Qualitative Assessment. The Formative Analysis seeks to understand the needs of the IRS RHSP workforce and the increased workload of the RHSP. The data was collected through surveys and focus groups. Key recommendations included ensuring long term and comprehensive funding as well as adequate recognition and support of the RHSP workforce in fieldwork, training, and mentorship.</p> <p>The session concluded with a Q&amp;A.</p>

<b>Title:</b>	<b>Breakout Session #5 – Outdoor Exchange: Connecting in the Open Air</b>
<b>Speaker(s):</b>	The Firelight Group
<b>Summary:</b>	<p>This session was a space for participants to decompress and ground themselves. Attendees were invited to partake in smudging, setting the tone for a culturally safe and rooted atmosphere. Unlike traditional workshops with rigid agendas, this session embraced a fluid and organic approach, prioritizing the collective experience of coming together in a safe and comforting space. Following a “popcorn style” format, participants were encouraged to share at their own pace, free from any pressure or expectation. While it was not a formal sharing circle, both facilitators and attendees committed to upholding confidentiality, ensuring that whatever was shared within the circle remained within it. Through this nurturing environment, participants found solace in shared experiences and the mutual support of their peers, fostering a sense of community and belonging.</p>



# National Wellness Gathering for Indian Residential School Survivors



February 13-15, 2024  
Sheraton Wall Centre, Vancouver BC

## 2.3. DAY 2

### 2.3.1. Summary

The second day of the gathering kicked off with emcee Khelsilem offering a recap of the highlights from Day 1, setting the stage for another engaging day ahead. Delegates immersed themselves in a series of enriching panel discussions, delving into pertinent topics, and exchanging valuable insights. Interactive breakout sessions provided opportunities for deeper exploration and collaborative learning, fostering dynamic exchanges among attendees (details below). As the day ended, participants enjoyed a light dinner, accompanied by a performance from Juno award winner and Oji-Cree artist, Aysanabee.

### 2.3.2. PRESENTATIONS, PANELS, AND WORKSHOPS

<b>Title:</b>	<b>Plenary – Panel Discussion (IRS RHSP)</b>
<b>Speaker(s):</b>	Dr. Ed Connors, Dr. Carol Hopkins, Dr. Brenda Restoule, and Andrew Bisson (moderator)
<b>Summary:</b>	The panel discussion focused on the IRS RHSP. All three distinguished panelists have a close connection to the program through their respective organizations, and their advocacy work. Panelists reflected on the successes of the IRS RHSP, such as the creation of a generation of a Mental Wellness workforce, recognition of the importance of culture in healing, greater access to Mental Wellness supports for First Nations, to name a few. Despite these successes, the speakers also delved into ongoing challenges faced by the IRS RHSP workforce, including inadequate funding, challenges in delivering cultural programming, and difficulty in moving across program silos (i.e., family violence programming, substance use programming). Lastly, the panelists offered their visions of how the program would look like in the future, including how it might fit within the larger push for First Nations self-determination and Nation-building.

<b>Title:</b>	<b>Breakout Session #1 – Language Reclamation in Action: Building Oneida Sign Language</b>
<b>Speaker(s):</b>	Marsha Ireland
<b>Summary:</b>	Marsha Ireland, a residential school survivor, shared her journey towards discovering her mission of revitalizing sign language and bringing awareness to the discrimination faced by Indigenous deaf individuals like herself. Growing up, Marsha struggled with a lack of understanding and communication due to the absence of interpreters and the suppression of sign language in educational settings. Despite facing challenges, she became an advocate for herself and her deaf children. Oneida Sign Language became a way for her and her husband to reclaim their language.



# National Wellness Gathering for Indian Residential School Survivors



February 13-15, 2024  
Sheraton Wall Centre, Vancouver BC

<b>Title:</b>	<b>Breakout Session #1 – Language Reclamation in Action: Building Oneida Sign Language</b>
	During her journey, Marsha found support in cultural experiences such as sweat lodges and ceremonies, which helped alleviate her anger and frustration. She realized the importance of healing through language and identity. Marsha and her husband are now building a school for deaf Indigenous children on their property. It will be enriched with culture and a place to learn Oneida Sign Language.

<b>Title:</b>	<b>Breakout Session #2 – Writing as Medicine</b>
<b>Speaker(s):</b>	Jónína Kírtón and Zofia Rose Musiej
<b>Summary:</b>	<p>The co-facilitator of the session, Jonina Kirton, of Métis and Icelandic ancestry, shared insights on the significance of storytelling and self-care in writing. Her presentation drew parallels between planting sweetgrass and nurturing one's writing. Kirton began journaling over three decades ago as a form of self-expression, initially writing poems that she felt were not very good, but were deeply personal. As Kirton was navigating her struggles with her identity and discrimination as a Métis woman, poetry became a form of reconciliation and the healing.</p> <p>The second co-facilitator Zofia Rose Musiej shared how she uses writing to deal with her challenges. Drawing inspiration from their experiences and the works of other Indigenous writers, Kirton and Musiej encouraged participants to embrace their narratives and find healing through writing, music, and self-expression. They invited folks to use writing as a tool for personal growth and reconciliation with the past. At the end, the participants engaged a conversation on storytelling, writing, and impact of settler colonialism.</p>

<b>Title:</b>	<b>Breakout Session #3 – Connection is Our Foundation</b>
<b>Speaker(s):</b>	Rod Jeffries
<b>Summary:</b>	Rod Jeffries began by sharing his deep appreciation of Indigenous identity, recognizing the resilience, strength, connection to the land, ceremonies, ancestors, and future generations. Jeffries emphasized the importance of connection and relationships as the foundation of Indigenous life and a way to address the destructive impacts of Residential Schools and settler colonialism. Participants were asked to reflect on their roles in revitalizing these connections, modeling the wisdom of their ancestors. Jeffries urged participants to reclaim Indigenous ways of knowledge and living by prioritizing compassionate and functional relationships within individuals, communities, and the natural world. Jeffries emphasized the necessity of courage to take risks in the pursuit of community restoration to ultimately live a life of love.



# National Wellness Gathering for Indian Residential School Survivors



February 13-15, 2024  
 Sheraton Wall Centre, Vancouver BC

<b>Title:</b>	<b>Breakout Session #4 – Shaker / Rattle Making</b>
<b>Speaker(s):</b>	Connor Lafortune
<b>Summary:</b>	Connor Lafortune facilitated a workshop on crafting shakers or rattles, which are important traditional instruments which can be played by anyone, and help community members feel connected to culture and First Nations traditions and practices. This was a fun and interactive session, where participants could craft something with their own hands. By the end of session, all attendees left with their own handmade shaker or rattle to cherish and take home.

<b>Title:</b>	<b>Breakout Session #5 – Outdoor Exchange: Connecting in the Open Air</b>
<b>Speaker(s):</b>	The Firelight Group
<b>Summary:</b>	This workshop was repeated on both days of the gathering. See the summary on Day 1, above.

<b>Title:</b>	<b>Plenary – Panel Discussion: The Role of Leadership in Healing</b>
<b>Speaker(s):</b>	Kukpi7 Willie Sellars, Charlene Belleau, Kenneth B. Young, and Brenda Restoule (moderator)
<b>Summary:</b>	This panel explored the role of leadership in facilitating healing from intergenerational trauma resulting from Indian Residential Schools. All three panelists have dedicated their lives to supporting the healing and wellness of First Nations peoples through both formal and informal leadership roles in British Columbia, Manitoba, and across Canada. Panelists began with telling their stories of working towards truth, reconciliation, and healing, and the individuals who have been an inspiration for them during their journeys. The panelists shared their perspectives on the impact and role that leaders can take on when it comes to community healing and wellness. They also discussed a shift in the landscape and public discourse around Residential Schools. The panelists spoke about their contributions to investigations into missing children at former IRS sites. Lastly, the moderator invited the speakers to reflect on what they would like their legacy as leaders to be.



# National Wellness Gathering for Indian Residential School Survivors



February 13-15, 2024  
Sheraton Wall Centre, Vancouver BC

## 2.4. DAY 3

### 2.4.1. Summary

The final day of the gathering featured activities tailored to different groups. A specialized session was dedicated to the IRS workforce, titled “8-Point Star Teaching and Fun & Laughter”. Meanwhile, other attendees had the privilege of listening to a thought-provoking keynote address delivered by Dr. Michael Yellow Bird. The gathering culminated with a poignant closing ceremony, where representatives from the host Nations, Regional Chiefs, and FPWC representatives Brenda Restoule and Bill Mussell, delivered closing remarks, encapsulating the collective spirit and vision of the event.

### 2.4.2. PRESENTATIONS, PANELS, AND WORKSHOPS

Title:	<b>8-Point Star Teaching and Fun &amp; Laughter (Workforce Wellness Staff)</b>
Speaker(s):	Sylvia Recollet
Summary:	<p>This presentation on the 8 Point Star Teaching had a focus on self-care with laughter and play. The participants heard the Seven Grandfather Teachings and how it applies to Mino Bimaadziwin (their good life) and Anishinaabe Aadziwin (way of life). The teaching began with the center of the 8 Point Star, honoring your Sacred Fire (niin). Parts of the Medicine Wheel teaching was shared in terms of the purpose of medicines (e.g., tobacco, cedar, sage, sweetgrass) found in each direction, and information was shared on the aspects of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual of well-being.</p> <p>The Seven Grandfather Teachings of Love, Humility, Honesty, Truth, Respect, Bravery, and Wisdom was shared. The message for the 8th point part of the star was to be present. The participants received an 8 Point Star worksheet to write activities or information that will help with their self-care. The self-care activity had the participants laughing, playing, and having fun. The activities were encouraged to be shared and used within individual community’s programming or practice.</p>

Title:	<b>Plenary – Decolonizing the Mind: Traditional Healing Contemplative Practices</b>
Speaker(s):	Dr. Michael Yellow Bird (Virtual)



# National Wellness Gathering for Indian Residential School Survivors



February 13-15, 2024  
Sheraton Wall Centre, Vancouver BC

<b>Title:</b>	<b>Plenary – Decolonizing the Mind: Traditional Healing Contemplative Practices</b>
<b>Summary:</b>	Dr. Michael Yellow Bird commenced his presentation by with an exploration of the Medicine Wheel, which balances Western science with Indigenous traditional practices to heal and transform from diseases of colonialism. Dr. Yellow Bird then led participants through a 5-minute mindful meditation practice. He further examined mindfulness as a tool to combat molecular colonization — the deterioration occurring at the smallest units of the organism due to chronic stressors induced by colonization that can passed down generations. As part of his research, Dr. Yellow Bird described the positive structural changes in brain health were observed after hours of mindfulness practice. The research demonstrated the power of mindfulness in facilitating neurodecolonization. The presenter offered eleven traditional neurodecolonization practices as tools for healing and well-being restoration. This included movement, sleep, laughter, collectivism, fasting, contemplative practices, adaptive stress, circadian rhythms and being outdoors.

### 3. PARTICIPANT SAFETY AND WELLNESS

Ensuring participant safety and wellness remained the highest priority throughout the gathering, and the event planning team implemented several measures to create a supportive environment where everyone could fully engage in all activities. At the onset of the event, the emcee diligently introduced the array of supports accessible to participants – described further below – underlining the commitment to fostering a safe and inclusive space. Further, support staff wore white lanyards or vests of various colours to be identified by, and easily accessible to participants.

#### 3.1. ACCESSIBILITY

Several accessibility measures were implemented for this event. The event planning team selected meeting spaces with elevators in close proximity, prioritizing accessibility and convenience for Elders and individuals with mobility concerns. To further enhance accessibility, the emcees initiated the gathering by inviting participants to review the venue floor plan, displayed at the front desk. These floor plans not only highlighted the locations of elevators but also provided clear markings for stairwells, emergency exits, and other essential safety measures, ensuring everyone’s well-being throughout the event. Additionally, accessible materials such as agendas with enlarged font were readily available, accommodating diverse needs and promoting an inclusive environment.

The AFN Accessibility Team played a pivotal role in ensuring that individuals with diverse needs received the necessary support and accommodations throughout the event. Their presence



# National Wellness Gathering for Indian Residential School Survivors



February 13-15, 2024  
Sheraton Wall Centre, Vancouver BC

was instrumental in addressing various accommodation requests, including accessible seating arrangements, assistance with mobility within the venues, coordination of accessible transportation such as taxis, and provision of additional space for mobility aids such as scooters. To facilitate easy recognition, members of the Accessibility Team wore distinctive reflective armbands during the assembly, making them readily identifiable to participants seeking assistance.



The Sign Language Team, led by Marsha Ireland, a member of the Oneida Nation, was a prominent presence at the gathering. Marsha, alongside her husband Max Ireland, have been instrumental in developing the Oneida Sign Language and are actively involved in reviving other First Nations sign languages across the country. During the event, Marsha conducted a brief 2–3-minute sign language learning session for all participants, showcasing the richness of Indigenous sign languages. Additionally, a team of American Sign Language (ASL) and Langue des signes Québécoise (LSQ) interpreters, spearheaded by Debbie Parliament, was available to provide support to anyone in need, further promoting inclusivity and accessibility throughout the gathering.

### 3.2. ELDER SUPPORTS

Recognizing that large-scale events with numerous attendees can be overwhelming and exhausting, particularly for Elders, the event planning team took proactive steps to address this concern and ensure their comfort. In response, a dedicated Quiet Room specifically designed for Elders was assigned in the Gulf Islands BC room. This designated room served as a space where Elders could retreat to rest, reflect, or engage in quiet activities away from the hustle and bustle of the main gathering areas

### 3.3. MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS

A dedicated team of trained counselors was available to offer mental wellness support to delegates. To facilitate easy identification, the Mental Wellness team wore distinctive blue vests throughout the event, allowing them to move between rooms and provide support wherever needed. Additionally, the Mental Wellness team had a designated private space in the Gulf Islands A room, specifically reserved for offering confidential one-on-one support sessions. This proactive approach underscored



# National Wellness Gathering for Indian Residential School Survivors



February 13-15, 2024  
Sheraton Wall Centre, Vancouver BC

our commitment to prioritizing the mental well-being of all participants, providing a safe and supportive environment where individuals could seek assistance and receive the care they needed during the event.

## 3.4. WELLNESS SUPPORTS

During the pre-event activities, an Energy room was thoughtfully arranged to cater specifically to the needs of the IRS workforce, providing a sanctuary for engaging in holistic self-care practices, including smudging. Recognizing the importance of self-care and wellness for all participants, the Energy room was later opened up to all delegates, serving as a safe space where individuals could unwind, recharge, and practice self-care amidst the busy event schedule.

## 3.5. LIVE VIEWING ROOMS

To accommodate the additional participants, live viewing rooms were set up. These rooms were set up auditorium-style with microphones available, allowing attendees to watch the main plenary and engage by asking questions. The live viewing rooms were positioned near elevators for easy access, and close to refreshments and nutrition. They also offered a quieter space for those seeking it. Participants reflected that they appreciated the live viewing rooms due to their convenient and accessible location, as well as for their consideration of participant needs, such as the needs of those with hearing aids who felt overstimulated in the main plenary space.

## 4. PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

A post event survey was distributed to participants, in order to gather feedback from attendees about their experiences, satisfaction, and suggestions for improvement.

A post event survey can help event organizers understand what worked well and what can be enhanced for future events.

The survey was available in English and French. Physical copies of the survey were distributed after the event. An online version of the survey was administered via Survey Monkey, and shared with participants via email following the event.

The survey remained open one week after the event, closing on March 6, 2024. The participation in the survey was completely voluntary, and no identifying information was collected so that all responses could remain confidential. There were a total of 214 respondents.

The majority of survey respondents identified as IRS survivors (53%) and intergenerational survivors (35%), whereas 17% of the respondents identified as members of IRS workforce. Further, 3% were policy professionals, and 2% of the respondents selected "Other," many of which identified as the 60s scoop survivors and Indian Day school survivors.







# National Wellness Gathering for Indian Residential School Survivors

February 13-15, 2024  
Sheraton Wall Centre, Vancouver BC



## 4.1. SURVEY RESULTS

Participants were asked to rate the overall experience at the event. Based on the survey feedback, attendees expressed satisfaction with the gathering. Most participants were very satisfied (42%) or satisfied (41%) with their overall experience, whereas 13% felt neutral about their experience at the event. 1% were dissatisfied and 3% were very dissatisfied with the event.

The survey participants were also asked to rate various aspects of the conference. Overall, the survey respondents rated the conference positively.

- **Topics were interesting and informative:** Out of 199 respondents, the majority of the respondent found the topics to be interesting and informative with 49% indicating that they strongly agree and 38% indicating that they agree.
- **There were sufficient opportunities for networking and relationship-building:** Out of 195 respondents, almost three quarters of respondents strongly agreed (35%) or agreed (39%) that there were sufficient opportunities for networking and relationship-building. 19% of the respondents selected "Neutral." A small number disagreed or strongly disagreed (5% and 3%, respectively).
- **There was an appropriate inclusion of cultural content:** Similarly, over three quarters (76%) of the 197 total respondents agreed that cultural content was appropriately included, while the remaining felt neutral, or disagreed that there was an appropriate inclusion of cultural content.
- **The cultural supports offered to attendees were important and useful:** The majority out of the 191 respondents strongly agreed (54%) or agreed (30%) that the cultural supports offered at the conference were important and useful. 10% selected "Neutral" and 6% either disagreed or strongly disagreed.
- **The event was well organized:** Most survey respondents shared positive feedback regarding the event organization. Out of 197 total respondents, 78% felt that the that the event was well organized.
- **The venue was appropriate:** Out of 193 respondents, 49% strongly agreed and 31% agreed that the conference venue was appropriate. 13% selected "Neutral" and 7% either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

The participants were asked to "describe something you are taking away with you from this gathering to support you in your healing and wellness journey." The following themes were identified in their responses:

- **Healing:** Many described the gathering as a healing experience. Respondents expressed an appreciation for the focus on healing and wellness throughout the event and its activities. They described the speakers and facilitators as 'supportive', 'sociable', and 'informative'. For

# National Wellness Gathering for Indian Residential School Survivors

February 13-15, 2024

Sheraton Wall Centre, Vancouver BC



IRS survivors, teachings for self-care and healing from generational trauma were valuable takeaways from the event, and many left feeling a renewed energy to support their peers and communities. IRS workforce and other attendees felt that their takeaways included useful tools to support their important work. One participant noted that the IRS-RHS Program “morphed into a healing movement with a growing cadence for the relevance and application of Indigenous approaches to wellness” (Survey respondent).

- **Cultural Revitalization:** Through various cultural activities offered at the gathering, participants were able to reconnect with their culture. Many respondents expressed a strong desire to advance cultural revitalization among First Nations communities by passing their language, culture, and teachings to the upcoming generation.
- **Relationships:** Many expressed an appreciation for the opportunity to connect with other survivors and members of the workforce. During the gathering, the participants were able to speak to each other, listen, and share their stories. Some who participated noted that this experience cultivated a sense of belonging and validated that they are on the right path in their healing journeys.



The survey also asked participants for feedback to improve future events. Based on the feedback shared by participants, the following areas for improvement were identified:

- **Space and Time for Survivor Stories:** A common request from the participants was to allocate more time to survivors to share their stories and experiences. Participants emphasized the importance of providing a platform for survivors to be heard without time constraints.
- **Cultural Activities:** Many participants emphasized the need to incorporate more cultural activities into the event, such as ceremonies, drumming, and storytelling.
- **Improved Logistics and Accessibility:** Suggestions were made to improve logistical aspects, specifically around accessibility for elders and for individuals with mobility issues to reduce the need to walk to access various activities.
- **Diverse Food Options:** Participants expressed a desire for more diverse and culturally appropriate food options, including consideration for dietary restrictions such as diabetes and allergies. They also requested a more substantial meal options rather than just finger foods. The event team recognizes that food is a large part of any gathering. However, to accommodate the large increase in registration numbers, a decision was made to replace a full dinner with finger foods. This was noted by the emcee and in the agenda to allow participants grab dinner before or after the activity.



# National Wellness Gathering for Indian Residential School Survivors



February 13-15, 2024  
Sheraton Wall Centre, Vancouver BC

## 5. CONCLUSION

The National Wellness Gathering for Indian Residential School (IRS) Survivors and IRS Resolution Health Support (IRS RHSP) Workforce proved to be a powerful and impactful gathering, embodying the spirit of resilience, healing, and community.

By providing a safe and supportive space for Indian Residential School (IRS) Survivors and their families to reconnect, share their stories, and engage in cultural activities, this event honored their experiences and upheld their voices. Similarly, by offering wellness activities, cultural connections, and self-care opportunities for the IRS Resolution Health Support Program (RHSP) workforce, the event demonstrated our commitment to supporting those who dedicate themselves to facilitating healing and wellness within our communities. Furthermore, the event served as a catalyst for generating insights, support, and direction in determining a path to permanency for the IRS RHSP program beyond its current mandate.

As we reflect on the success of this event, we are reminded of the importance of coming together in solidarity, compassion, and shared purpose to honor the past, support the present, and shape the future. With gratitude and determination, we look forward to continuing this journey of healing, reconciliation, and empowerment together.





# National Wellness Gathering for Indian Residential School Survivors



February 13-15, 2024  
Sheraton Wall Centre, Vancouver BC

## APPENDIX A - AGENDA

### PARTICIPANT SCHEDULE

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 2024			
Time	Item	Speaker	Location
4:00PM – 7:00PM	Registration Open	N/A	North Tower Lower Lobby
4:00PM – 7:00PM	Pre-Event Workforce Wellness Gathering	Activities to support workforce wellness	Junior or Pavilion Ballrooms (TBC)

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 2024			
Time	Item	Speaker	Location
7:30AM – 8:00AM	Morning Yoga	TBC	Pavilion Ballroom C
8:00AM – 9:00AM	BREAKFAST		Grand Ballroom Foyer
9:00AM – 9:10AM	Opening Prayer	Elder (TBC)	Grand Ballroom
9:10AM – 10:15AM	Welcome from Nations Opening Remarks	Musqueam, Squamish, and Tseil-Waututh Nations (TBC) BC Regional Chief (TBC) NWT Regional Chief Ontario Regional Chief Denise McCuaig, Chair, FPWC Board of Directors	Grand Ballroom
10:00AM – 5:00PM	Photo / Video Booth		Gulf Islands BC
10:15AM – 10:45AM	HEALTH BREAK		Grand Ballroom Foyer
10:45AM – 12:00PM	Keynote Address: Cultivating Safe Spaces	Elaine Alec	Grand Ballroom
12:00PM – 1:10PM	LUNCH		Grand Ballroom Foyer
1:10PM – 2:25PM Breakout Groups	Session #1 – Networking Session	Mia Bourque-Commanda and Lulu Choy	Grand Ballroom
Charting our Paths: Self-determination in Healing Policy and Practice	Session #2 – AFN IRS RHSP Advocacy Roadmap	Nelson Alisappi and Katelyn Garrow	Junior ABC
	Session #3 – Storied Learning and Healing for Future Generations	David A. Robertson	Junior D
	Session #4 – Resolution Health Support Program (IRS RHSP) Quali- tative Assessment and Formative Analysis: Supporting the Workforce	Brenda Restoule, Maxine Peltier, and Trisha Trudeau	Pavilion Ballroom AB
2:25PM – 3:00PM	HEALTH BREAK		Grand Ballroom Foyer and Breakout Rooms



# National Wellness Gathering for Indian Residential School Survivors



February 13-15, 2024  
Sheraton Wall Centre, Vancouver BC

## PARTICIPANT SCHEDULE

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 2024			
Time	Item	Speaker	Location
3:00PM – 4:15PM <b>Breakout Groups</b> <i>Repeated breakouts, participants choose a second breakout to participate in. Charting our Paths: Self-determination in Healing Policy and Practice</i>	Session #1 – Networking Session	Mia Bourque-Commanda and Lulu Choy	Grand Ballroom
	Session #2 – AFN IRS RHSP Advocacy Roadmap	Nelson Alisappi and Katelyn Garrow	Junior ABC
	Session #3 – Storied Learning and Healing for Future Generations	David A. Robertson	Junior D
	Session #4 – Resolution Health Support Program (IRS RHSP) Qualitative Assessment and Formative Analysis: Supporting the Workforce	Brenda Restoule, Maxine Peltier, and Trisha Trudeau	Pavilion Ballroom AB

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2024			
Time	Item	Speaker	Location
7:30AM – 8:00AM	Morning Yoga	TBC	Pavilion Ballroom C
8:00AM – 9:00AM	BREAKFAST		Grand Ballroom Foyer
9:00AM – 9:10AM	Welcome & Recap of Day 1	TBC	Grand Ballroom
9:15AM – 10:30AM	Panel Discussion (IRS RHSP)	Dr. Ed Connors, Dr. Carol Hopkins, Dr. Brenda Restoule, and Andrew Bisson (moderator)	Grand Ballroom
10:00AM – 8:00PM	Photo / Video Booth		Gulf Islands BC
10:30AM – 11:00AM	HEALTH BREAK		Grand Ballroom Foyer and Breakout Rooms
11:00AM – 12:15PM <b>Breakout Groups</b> <i>Fortifying our Bundles: Strengthening Spirit through Culture and Connection</i>	Session #1 – Language Reclamation in Action: Building Oneida Sign Language	Marsha Ireland	Grand Ballroom
	Session #2 – Storytelling and Writing Workshop		Junior ABC
	Session #3 – Connection is Our Foundation	Rod Jeffries	Junior D
	Session #4 – Shaker / Rattle Making	Connor Lafortune	Pavilion Ballroom AB
12:15PM – 1:15PM	LUNCH		Grand Ballroom Foyer



# National Wellness Gathering for Indian Residential School Survivors



February 13-15, 2024  
 Sheraton Wall Centre, Vancouver BC

## PARTICIPANT SCHEDULE

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2024			
Time	Item	Speaker	Location
1:15PM – 2:30PM	Panel Discussion: The Role of Leadership in Healing	Kukpi7 Willie Sellars, Charlene Belleau, and Brenda Restoule (moderator)	Grand Ballroom
2:30PM – 3:00PM	HEALTH BREAK		Grand Ballroom Foyer
3:00PM – 4:15PM <b>Breakout Groups</b> <i>Repeated breakouts, participants choose a second breakout to participate in. Fortifying our Bundles: Strengthening Spirit through Culture and Connection</i>	Session #1 – Language Reclamation in Action: Building Oneida Sign Language	Marsha Ireland	Grand Ballroom
	Session #2 – Storytelling and Writing Workshop	Jónína Kirton	Junior ABC
	Session #3 – Connection is Our Foundation	Rod Jeffries	Junior D
	Session #4 – Shaker / Rattle Making	Connor Lafortune	Pavilion Ballroom AB
6:00PM – 8:00 PM	DINNER & SHOW (TBC)	Entertainment (TBC)	Grand Ballroom

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 2024			
Time	Item	Speaker	Location
8:00AM – 9:00AM	BREAKFAST		Grand Ballroom Foyer
9:00AM – 11:00AM	Post-Event Workforce Wellness Gathering	Sylvia Recollet	Junior Ballroom CD
9:00AM - 10:00AM	Decolonizing the Mind: Traditional Healing Contemplative Practices	Dr. Michael Yellowbird	Grand Ballroom
10:00AM - 11:00AM	Round Dance	Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations (TBC)	Grand Ballroom
11:00AM - 12:00PM	Closing Ceremony	Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations (TBC) BC Regional Chief (TBC) NWT Regional Chief Ontario Regional Chief Denise McCuaig, Chair, FPWC Board of Directors	Grand Ballroom
12:00PM	TRAVELERS FEAST (LUNCH TO GO)		Grand Ballroom Foyer





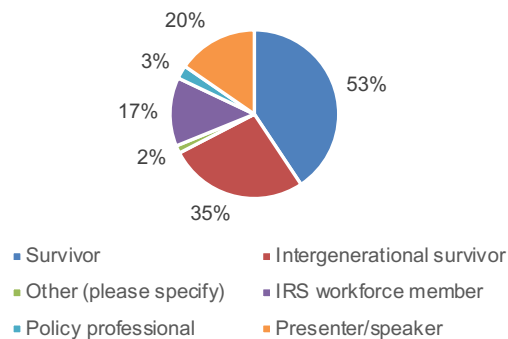
# National Wellness Gathering for Indian Residential School Survivors



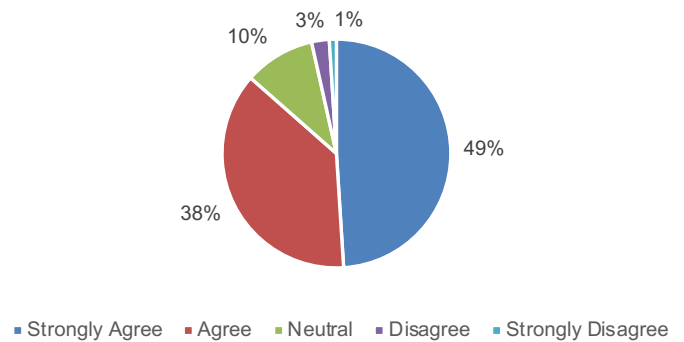
February 13-15, 2024  
Sheraton Wall Centre, Vancouver BC

## APPENDIX C - SURVEY RESULTS

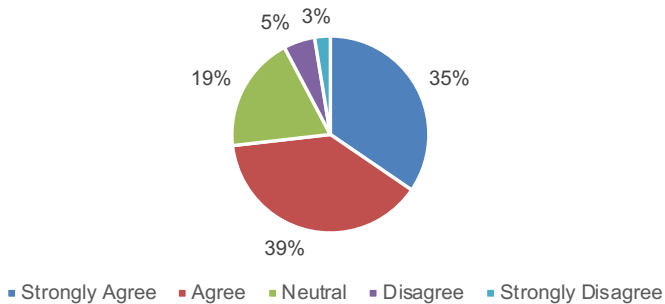
Which of the following categories do you fall within? (Total=208)



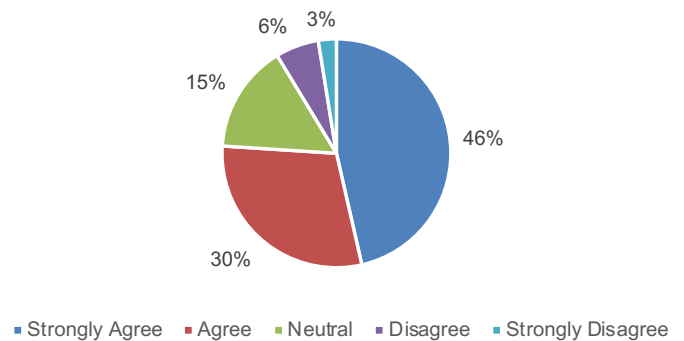
Topics were interesting and informative (Total=199)



There were sufficient opportunities for networking and relationship-building (Total=195)



There was an appropriate inclusion of cultural content (Total=197)





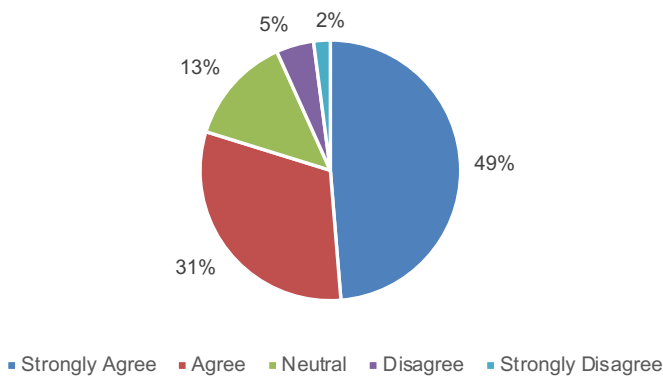


# National Wellness Gathering for Indian Residential School Survivors

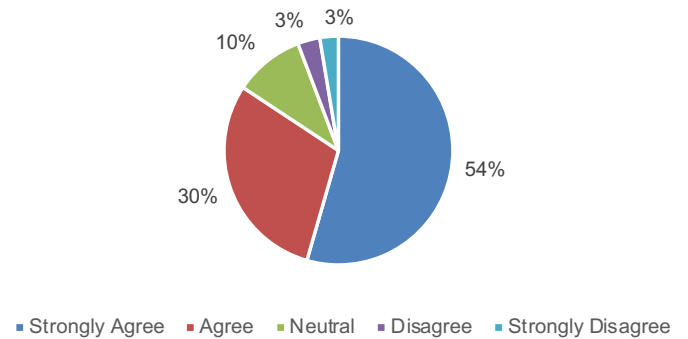


February 13-15, 2024  
Sheraton Wall Centre, Vancouver BC

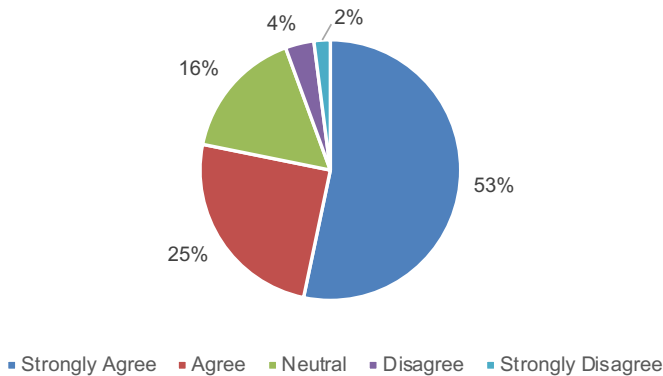
The venue was appropriate (Total=194)



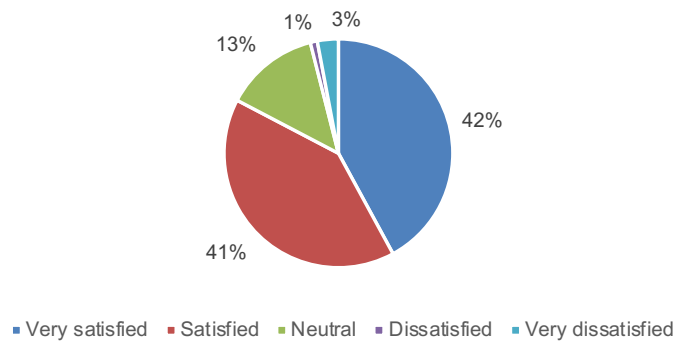
The cultural supports offered to attendees were important and useful (Total=192)



The event was well organized (Total=198)



How would you rate your overall experience at the event? (Total=202)





---

50 O'Connor Street, Suite 200

Ottawa, Ontario K1P 6L2

[www.afn.ca](http://www.afn.ca)