



Assembly of First Nations

# **5<sup>th</sup> Annual National Forum on Income Assistance:** *From Surviving to Thriving*

## **SUMMARY REPORT**

September 10-12, 2024  
Calgary, Alberta



# Assembly of First Nations 5<sup>th</sup> Annual National Forum on Income Assistance: *From Surviving to Thriving*

SEPTEMBER 10-12, 2024 • CALGARY, ALBERTA

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## Executive Summary

The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) 5<sup>th</sup> Annual National Forum on Income Assistance (IA) was hosted in Treaty 7 Territory of Calgary, Alberta from September 10-12, 2024. The forum gathered 150 First Nations case managers and administrators from across turtle island to hear about the status of IA Program reform, network, and provide input on best practices and priorities for core program elements for the reformed IA Program.

Throughout the forum, participants received updates from Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) on reforming the IA Program, learned about mental wellness in the context of IA Program reform, and the connections between housing, homelessness, and IA. Throughout the forum, participants were engaged in discussions on the importance of supporting IA case managers and administrators, identifying priorities for training, resources and supports for IA workers, best practices for case management and pre-employment supports, hidden costs experienced by IA clients, culturally appropriate wrap-around supports for IA clients, defining culturally appropriate disability supports for IA clients and priorities for implementing disability funding within the IA Program. Additionally, participants received a presentation on the First Nations indicators of poverty and wellness, and explored strengths-based indicators for determining IA client success.

## DAY 1 – TUESDAY SEPTEMBER 10, 2024

### Opening

Following the opening from Sorrel Rider Drum Group from Siksika, Alberta, Knowledge Keeper Ivy Raine, Louis Bull First Nation, provided a traditional opening to participants. The Facilitator Luc Laine introduced Renee St. Germain, AFN, and Yeyatakenhas Doxtator, AFN, to welcome participants.

### Overview of the AFN's Advocacy on IA Program Reform

*Torri Weapenicappo, Assembly of First Nations*

Torri Weapenicappo, file lead and Senior Policy Analyst at the AFN, provided an overview of the AFN's advocacy and mandates for IA Program reform followed by a timeline of the work completed by the AFN and the Technical Working Group on Social Development (TWGSD) on the development of First Nations policy recommendations to reform the program. The policy recommendations include higher IA rates that are needs based, strengthening wrap around supports for client wellness with a particular emphasis on First Nations with special and additional needs. Enhanced resources and resourcing to support program administration and IA workers, First Nations-led data collection strategies, and supporting First Nation determination and governance with traditional knowledge embedded in the IA Program. The presentation outlined the next steps for IA Program reform, which include conducting the two-year cost analysis for the implementation of the First Nations-developed policy recommendations and continued budget advocacy for additional investments until the recommendations for IA Program reform are fully implemented.



## Updates from ISC on IA Program Reform

*Natalie Thiffault and Micheal Ferguson, Indigenous Services Canada*

Natalie Thiffault, Director of the IA Program at ISC and Micheal Ferguson, Acting IA Program Manager at ISC, co-presented an overview of IA Program reform and the 2024 budget investments in the IA Program. Budget 2024 invested \$596.2 million over five years for IA Program integrity funding; \$117.6 million over three years for case management and pre-employment supports integrity funding; and new funding of \$213.5 million over five years, plus \$49.8 million per year ongoing, to implement income supports for eligible persons with disabilities, that are aligned with those provided in all provinces and the Yukon.

As part of the program integrity investments, ISC used a funding formula for service delivery to increase access to services for some First Nations by providing funding for base services. The use of this method provided 220 First Nations with new funding for service delivery. The case management funding maintains the current services offered and is set to sunset after three years.

Lastly, the new disability income funding will allow the IA Program to better align with regions stand-alone disability funding. The IA Program has previously offered disability supplements; however, the new funding will allow ISC to better align with regions on the financial assistance part of the disability supports. The budget investment covers few of the priorities for IA Program reform. Additional collaboration to identify capacity needs, and additional funding to address the need for wrap-around services are needed.

## Plenary Presentation: Identifying Hidden Costs for IA Clients

*Torri Weapenicappo, Assembly of First Nations*

Torri Weapenicappo provided a brief overview of the existing gaps in the financial supports provided to clients accessing the IA Program. The gaps within the financial supports for clients differ across the regions as the IA Program mirrors the supports provided within the province/territory in which a First Nation individual resides. The Program does not currently account for First Nations needing to leave their communities to access services, nor does it adjust for the higher cost of living on-reserve, resulting in additional expenses for IA clients that are not covered through the current program. One of the outcomes for the long-term financial analysis of IA Program reform focusses on the development of a funding formula able to account for the additional costs experienced by First Nations IA recipients. Following the plenary session, participants shared insights, lessons learned, and the innovative solutions they leveraged to support their clients in breakout groups.

## Panel Discussion: Best Practices for Case Management and Pre-employment Supports

*Harvey Bitternose, Touchwood Agency Tribal Council; Glenda Louis, Randi Robins & Julianne Brewer, Okanagan Indian Band; and Calla Moore, Meadow Lake Tribal Council*

The panel discussion provided valuable insights into best practices for case management and pre-employment supports centered around leveraging a client-first approach to case management. A client centered approach understands the needs of their client, evolves with the client, and is constantly reflecting on ways to provide meaningful support and follow up. Panelists noted the need to incorporate client wellness and connection as the foundation for effective growth and development. The discussion





highlighted various challenges within case management including lack of access to transportation and childcare, as well as financial and personal struggles, which may make it difficult for individuals to transition into employment or education. Additional barriers included the lack of support networks provided during relocation, safe and inclusive transportation for employees, mental health and substance misuse, and a lack of staffing capacity provided within the IA Program to meet clients' needs.

Panelists identified key program funding enhancements required to ensure successful case management, such as expanding training in various trades to build skilled workforces within communities, establishing community-based facilities to provide training and case-management services, establishing reliable community transportation initiatives, and hosting workshops to enhance personal wellness, alongside case management and pre-employment supports. Lastly, the panel acknowledged the lasting impacts of COVID-19 on client engagement, employment opportunities, and caseworker availability within the IA Program. Rebuilding trust and encouraging participation is now a key focus. A holistic approach, grounded in values that promote overall wellness was highlighted as essential. Encouraging self-care through activities that strengthen connections to the self, family, community, and land remains a priority.

### **Plenary Presentation: Identifying Culturally Appropriate Wrap-around Supports for IA Clients**

*Kerri Commanda, Niigaaniin*

Kerri Commanda, Strategic Administrator, shared best practices from Niigaaniin, emphasizing a client-centered, strengths-based approach to case management. Their model uses a holistic, wrap-around approach that operates on the principle of "no one is left behind, and no door is the wrong door." Niigaaniin leverages a phased method of supports that builds on identity and connection to determine a path forward through culture, knowledge, skill building, and land-based learning opportunities. The importance of engaging community members, adapting services to meet individual needs, and investing in staff is key to ensuring high-quality supports. Following the plenary session, participants shared best practices and key priorities for providing culturally appropriate wrap-around supports for IA clients in breakout groups.

### **Key Takeaways from Day One:**

- Case management must leverage a client-centered approach that meets clients where they are at, enhances wellness, and evolves alongside them.
- Holistic, culturally relevant approaches are important for improving client engagement and enhancing wellness.
- Collaboration across programs is essential for attaining better outcomes.
- Ensuring access to inclusive spaces and transportation methods is key to providing meaningful community-based services.
- First Nations approaches to case management and pre-employment supports empower growth and wellbeing, achieves results and requires additional resources and investments to expand programming and build sustainable IA Programs.



## DAY 2 – WEDNESDAY SEPTEMBER 11, 2024

### **Workshop: First Nations Mental Wellness: IA Program Reform from Surviving to Thriving**

*Dr. Carol Hopkins, Thunderbird Partnership Foundation*

Dr. Carol Hopkins, Chief Executive Officer of the Thunderbird Partnership Foundation, led a professional development workshop on enhancing First Nations wellness, leveraging data to measure and strengthen interventions, and increasing access to training and self-care for case managers to better support IA clients transitioning to employment, education, and independence. Dr. Hopkins discussed the prevalence of substance use and mental health amongst First Nations and the challenges in supporting clients through these barriers to access employment and education. Most IA workers are not trained to provide the type of support these individuals need, which can only come from community-wide support. Additionally, factors like trauma, housing insecurity, and food insecurity contribute to substance use. These issues can only be effectively supported through wholistic, culturally grounded interventions. Interventions need to use data-driven decision making to understand clientele and measure success.

The Thunderbird Partnership Foundation developed an Addiction Management Information System that offers assessments and tools to track and measure progress while incorporating cultural approaches to client wellness. The incorporation of an Indigenous Wellness Framework to build a sense of purpose and belonging is important for enhancing health and wellness. Additional funding is needed for First Nations to transition from traditional case management to digital systems that will improve data and program efficiency, and community supports. Lastly, the development of the First Nations workforce is critical. Focusing on training, education, and mental wellness support to prevent worker burnout is a key element for improving service delivery. A compassionate, well-trained workforce is essential for helping clients move from survival to stability.

### **Plenary Presentation: First Nations Indicators of Poverty and Well-being**

*Dr. Helaina Gaspard, Institute of Fiscal Studies and Democracy*

Dr. Helaina Gaspard, Managing Director and co-founder of the Institute of Fiscal Studies and Democracy (IFSD), presented on the findings from the IFSD's work with the AFN on the study of First Nations indicators of poverty and wellbeing. A First Nations working group on poverty collaborated to share their communities' contexts and experiences with deprivation to define poverty relationally and identify indicators to shape a new measurement strategy. Poverty was defined as deprivation, which is cyclical and affects communities differently based on location. While IA Programs address immediate needs, they function as temporary solutions rather than addressing systemic poverty. The IFSD leveraged existing literature and measures of poverty to compile a series of indicators in a table with possible measures for each. During the discussion with the First Nations working group on poverty, members narrowed the list of indicators to 39 key indicators within eight dimensions to capture deprivation and measure its impact. Dr. Gaspard noted that 47% of the selected indicators do not have accessible data. Data is important for shifting into outcomes-based adaptive strategies and measuring outcomes. Dr. Gaspard noted that measuring success within the IA Program must be rooted in community values, and that First Nations



are best equipped for determining indicators aligned with their data collection priorities. Following the plenary presentation, participants discussed key considerations for determining the success of IA clients and enhancing data collection and reporting within the IA Program in breakout groups.

### **Plenary Presentation: Supporting IA Case Managers and Administrators**

*Tischa Stefanowski, Saskatchewan First Nations Families and Community Institute (SFNFCI)*

Tischa Stefanowski, Executive Director from SFNFCI, provided an overview of the work completed by the institute alongside an IA advisory committee on supporting case managers and IA administrators, including identifying the structural challenges faced by IA Program staff and developing innovative ways to support staff through the challenges. Key themes included identifying areas for enhancement within the program by clearly defining roles to ensure staff are not working outside the scope of their position, standardizing intakes, providing training to support staff within their positions, and training on various self-care practices to support staff wellbeing. Tischa highlighted the importance of leveraging best practices, focusing on what is controllable and making changes to program services and administration, such as improving organizational structures, ensuring workforce development through competency-based training, improving case management systems, enhancing worker knowledge of social programs, and developing staff retention policies. Further, identifying the need for a flexible approach to adapt to community needs while advocating for funding and policy changes is imperative. Following the plenary session, participants shared best practices for accessing training and identified priority training areas for case managers and administrators, including the resources and supports required to support case IA workers within their positions in breakout groups.

### **Plenary Presentation: Defining First Nations Disability**

*Marie Frawley-Henry, Assembly of First Nations*

Marie Frawley-Henry, Senior Policy Analyst at the AFN, provided an update on the AFN Health Sector's work towards accessibility and disability inclusion, highlighting ongoing advocacy efforts for a distinct First Nations disability legislation. Marie provided an overview of recent federal and First Nations laws and policies to support persons with different abilities such as the Accessible Canada Act and Canada Disability Benefit and their limitations, particularly their failure to address First Nations-specific needs. Furthermore, Marie provided an overview of the findings from AFN's 2023 survey on advancing accessibility in First Nations, including significant barriers to disability support, such as misdiagnosis, stigma, financial insecurity, and systemic discrimination in healthcare. Recommendations included ensuring culturally relevant assessments, expanding eligibility criteria, and improving access to disability-related financial and social supports. Following the plenary session, participants discussed key elements to defining First Nations understandings of disabilities and priorities for culturally appropriate disability programs and supports for the reformed IA Program.



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### Key Takeaways from Day Two:

- Enhancing program data is key for supporting a shift into evidence-based budget advocacy.
- Measuring success within the IA Program should be community-based as First Nations are best equipped for determining indicators aligned with First Nations data collection priorities.
- IA case managers and administrators need to be supported holistically with adequate training and resources within their positions as well as through networks.
- Boundary setting and self-care practices are integral for enhancing worker wellness and reducing staff turnover.
- First Nations must receive flexible funding and resources to ensure the administration of the IA Program can adapt to community-specific needs and approaches.
- Additional work is needed to ensure First Nations persons with different abilities have access to the proper services and supports required to participate within community.
- First Nations approaches to case management and pre-employment supports must empower growth and wellness, achieve results and requires additional resources and investments to expand programming and build sustainable IA Programs.

## DAY 3 – THURSDAY SEPTEMBER 12, 2024

### Plenary Presentation: Housing, Infrastructure, and Income Assistance

*Jordan Fischer & Dan Gaspe, Assembly of First Nations*

Jordan Fischer, Senior Policy Analyst at the AFN, presented an overview of the AFN housing and homelessness sector's mandates including the most recent mandate for the development of a National First Nations Homelessness Action Plan which aimed to empower First Nations communities through self-determined control and the provision of holistic and culturally safe housing solutions. Key considerations from the action plan included increasing First Nations jurisdiction to deliver holistic and culturally safe supports and services, enhancing service navigation and prevention efforts, developing partnerships to support with community specific needs, and enhancing First Nations data sovereignty.

Dan Gaspe, Senior Policy Advisor at the AFN, provided an overview of the various initiatives being completed by the AFN housing sector including adjusting the urban, rural and northern housing funding and strategy development, collaborative efforts with the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) on the transfer of the First Nations market housing fund to First Nations control, joint advocacy efforts to ensure Canada's housing plan doesn't sideline First Nations housing investment needs, the co-implementation of the eight recommendations from the Auditor General's 2024 on-reserve housing report and, the ongoing collaboration with the AFN's infrastructure sector on the National First Nations Housing and Related Infrastructure Strategy in an effort to close the housing gap. Furthermore, Dan highlighted the AFN's recent budget advocacy for \$135.1 billion to close the housing gap and the 2024





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Budget investment of \$488 million over five years to support housing and infrastructure. The AFN continues to push for policy change, investment, and regional advocacy to ensure adequate housing for First Nations both on- and off-reserve.

### **Panel Discussion: Building Sustainable Income Assistance Programs**

*Victoria Marchand & Deborah Oladele, National Association of Friendship Centers; Ruth Levi, Mi'gmaq Wolastoqiyik Social Development Support Lodge; and Mike Randall, Lennox Island Development Corporation*

The panel focused on the development of sustainable, community-driven IA models that reflect the diverse needs of First Nations, regardless of residency. The discussion highlighted the importance of economic reinvestment, self-governance, and culturally grounded service delivery in creating long-term stability and support for recipients of IA. Panelists shared examples of how own-source revenue can enable First Nations to invest in their communities. One example showcased a Four-Pillar Framework developed to guide revenue allocation toward debt reduction, direct support for members, equalization between on- and off-reserve members, and investments. The own-source revenue obtained through this Framework is invested into the community through band-owned businesses, enhances community supports and social programs by providing food security initiatives, second-hand goods access, and a community greenhouse, all aimed at improving community well-being while building toward financial sustainability.

Additionally, the discussion explored urban realities, where organizations like the National Association of Friendship Centers (NAFC), play a critical role in supporting urban Indigenous peoples. These centres provide wraparound services, conduct policy analyses to inform advocacy, and collect data to inform decision-making. Friendship centers are important for ensuring First Nations have access to the cultural programs and services required to successfully transition to urban areas.

Lastly, the panel also touched on the impact policy has on the design of IA Programs. New Brunswick shared an approach on policy reform and IA Program redesign through a self-governance lens. A four-year gap analysis led to the creation of a new, regionally tailored IA policy that replaced out of date federal standards. Program delivery was adapted to include direct payment of shelter and hydro costs on behalf of clients and a wholistic service approach rooted in empowerment, pre-employment preparation, and personal development. Rather than adopting a conventional case management model, New Brunswick opted for a more flexible, culturally relevant method of supporting clients. The case management system they developed is focused on supporting clients to self-sufficiency, empowerment, personal development, and pre-employment supports. Panelists collectively reinforced the need for local control, flexible funding models, and IA systems that reinvest in social and economic outcomes while aligning with the distinct realities and aspirations of their First Nations.



### Key Takeaways from Day Three:

- First Nations leadership and jurisdiction are essential to closing the infrastructure gap through the delivery of culturally safe, community-driven housing solutions.
- Flexible and sustained funding, including own-source revenue, is critical to building sustainable IA Programs that reinvest in social outcomes, support economic development, and improve overall community wellness.
- Urban Indigenous organizations, like Friendship Centres, play a vital role in supporting Indigenous peoples off-reserve and must receive ongoing funding to continue delivering wraparound services and community-based advocacy.
- Regionally tailored IA policies rooted in self-governance and wholistic service delivery, offer culturally relevant alternatives to federal standards and support client empowerment and independence.
- Sustainable IA reform must prioritize First Nations control, flexibility, and culturally grounded approaches that address housing, economic participation, and service navigation in an integrated manner.

### Looking Ahead

*Torri Weapenicappo, Assembly of First Nations*

Torri Weapenicappo thanked participants for their input and participation for the duration of the forum. The next step for the feedback provided by participants is to summarize the discussions into a What We Heard document to inform the development of a policy document outlining considerations for an IA reform implementation framework. IA Program reform is a long-term process to be guided by First Nations. The conversations do not end with the forum. Participants were encouraged to go back to their communities and talk with their clients, coworkers, and leadership to pick up the conversations the next time we gather. Everyone was once again thanked and wished safe travels.

### Closing

In closing, the AFN's National Chief Cindy Woodhouse Nepinak provided closing remarks to participants of the forum before Knowledge Keeper Ivy Raine, Louis Bull First Nation, provided a traditional closing. Participants were sent off in a good way with songs from the Sorrel Rider Drum Group from Siksika, Alberta.