



Recommendations for Weaving the MMIWG2S+ Calls for Justice for Service Provision in Baawaating

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WHAT'S AT STAKE?

This policy brief is the result of an Indigenous-led, mixed-methods, and participatory research project undertaken by the Indigenous Women's Anti-Violence Task Force (IWAVTF) in Baawaating. This project provides a glimpse into the knowledge and application of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit individuals (MMIWG2S+) [Calls for Justice](#) (CFJ) within service planning, programming and delivery for violence prevention in Baawaating. The CFJs addressed in this brief include aspects pertaining to equitable funding (3.6), accessible, trauma-informed, culture-based and continual services (3.7), training (18.18), and public education among social service providers (18.19).

The catchment area of Baawaating — Anishinaabemowin for 'The Place of the Rapids' — is located on Robinson-Huron Treaty Territory. It includes the traditional territory of Batchewana First Nation and Garden River First Nation and a sizeable urban Indigenous population in the city of Sault Ste. Marie. Missanabie Cree First Nation has a presence in the city as many of its governance and business enterprises are located here. The Métis Nation has had a historic presence here as well. Anishinaabe Peoples know this area as a gathering place, where Indigenous Peoples continue to share knowledge and exercise their jurisdiction over their lands. However, local community leaders have stressed the need to draw attention to the effects of gendered and colonial violence given the area's unique location along Trans-Highway 17 and the U.S.-Canada border, as well as the North Shore.

The IWAVTF network was established in 2018 as a result of collective concerns about the consequences of colonization including the effects of Canadian policies, and the absence of action to address the need to provide culturally-based solutions to these issues. Under the direction of a group of Indigenous women, the IWAVTF network established collective spaces for the exchange of anti-violence best practices based on Indigenous perspectives.

RESEARCH APPROACH

This study's methodology was developed with the IWAVTF members in Baawaating to address their communities' identified concerns and goals. Consequently, the study design included three stages. First, surveys collected data about participants' organizations regarding their demographics, policies, organizational mandates and operations that align with the CFJ. Secondly, the thematic areas in the survey results provided the questions for the trauma-informed interviews/conversations. These findings provided evidence of the existing gaps in service provision for Indigenous communities in Baawaating. Finally, the sharing circles provided a forum for attendees to engage in open dialogues on long-term strategies to close the identified gaps in service provision — the policy recommendations as presented in this policy brief. Overall, the study collected 32 survey responses, conducted 28 interviews, and held four sharing circles with 18 attendees.

KEY FINDINGS

Our survey data of 21 Indigenous and non-Indigenous service organizations found that at least 25% of their clients identify as Indigenous, despite the fact that, according to the [2021 Statistics Canada Report](#), they only make up 11.9% of Sault Ste. Marie's population. For this reason, it is critical to address the needs unique to the Indigenous community. This section demonstrates that reforms in the following sectors are needed to prevent violence in Baawaating: education, hiring and staffing, partnerships, 24/7 wrap-around services, training, housing, and the criminal justice system.

Education

Consistent with the [Assembly of First Nations](#) (AFN) report and Report Cards by both the [NWAC](#) and [ONWA](#), low retention rates in post-secondary education are linked to socioeconomic factors such as limited funding, geographic barriers, and inadequate curricula to support Indigenous students. These factors also explain the low number of Indigenous professionals or students wishing to pursue post-graduate education (e.g., [medical school](#)). Therefore, having low numbers of Indigenous professionals in the school system impacts the ability to provide safe and adequate academic student supports, particularly for Two-Spirit and gender-diverse students.

We call on the Federal and Provincial governments to coordinate their funding to create **equitable** access and **increase** support for all Indigenous learners and eliminate education gaps in post-secondary institutions, which aligns with CFJ 4.4.

Consistent with [previous evidence](#), our findings pointed to the need to educate students on gender/sexual diversity within Indigenous cultures, so they are better prepared for working from trauma-informed lenses within Indigenous contexts. For example, recent graduates working as frontline staff reported experiences of shock and apprehension on topics like sexuality, Indigenous practices, safe spaces, and the use of pronouns. Some first responders also shared that both the frontline, executive, and supervisory levels are improperly trained on Indigenous topics. Curricula on gender/sexual diversity within Indigenous cultures need to be mandated and [standardized](#) in all post-secondary programs.

We call on the Ministry of Colleges and Universities' Quality Council to incorporate guidelines requiring institutional quality standards that address **gender and sexual diversity** from Indigenous perspectives.

Participants remarked that Indigenous students often relocate to Baawaating or Thunder Bay to pursue post-secondary education, which are major hubs of violence and trafficking. Resolving jurisdictional debates over funding responsibility is required to develop or strengthen Indigenous-led educational partnerships and retain students in their home communities. This will also support the communities' active participation in creating Indigenous-led programs or courses.

We call on the Federal and Provincial governments to ensure Indigenous-controlled post-secondary institutions and Indigenous-led programs in non-Indigenous institutions are **equitably funded and Indigenous-led**.

Hiring and Staffing

All participants expressed that severe funding inequity persists across agencies and is more pronounced among Indigenous service providers as they tend to serve clients with more pressing needs. Their caseloads are alarmingly high, which is complicated by the lack of permanent positions in social service organizations, leading to [high turnover rate](#) among staff while disrupting client trust and increasing the workload for the remaining staff. We also heard that some organizations have not fully materialized mechanisms to assist frontline staff in practicing self-care.

We call on all levels of government to address funding inequity in hiring and staffing and provide **equitable funding for permanent positions** in service organizations to alleviate the workload and burnout.

Our findings indicate organizations lack human resource policies on increasing diversity hiring that align with CFJ 12.12. Responding to this gap, Indigenous staff voiced that there are too few Indigenous colleagues who are recognized members of the community they claim to belong to and serve.

We call on all levels of government to ensure social service organizations increase the number of Indigenous executive-level professionals and frontline staff hired to address **gaps in cultural representation** and non-Indigenous peoples falsely claiming Indigenous identity.

In addition, there is a high turnover among Indigenous staff who experience racism and harassment in the workplace and/or experience burnout due to high caseloads. To address this issue, indigenization and equity, diversity and inclusion (I-EDI) principles must be clearly outlined and updated within organizational policies in partnership with Indigenous communities.

We call on all social service organizations to create **Indigenous advisory groups** within their Boards to ensure agencies are meeting I-EDI standards within their agencies.

Partnerships

Participants emphasized that Indigenous agencies, Elders, and frontline workers are experts in their community, so their knowledge and lived experiences must be centred. We found that Indigenous-led organizations are often reluctant about partnerships due to concerns for cultural appropriation and, loss of self-determination, as well as decreased funding.

We call on all levels of government to equitably fund **Indigenous-led partnerships** based on respectful and horizontal working relationships without sacrificing their funding allotment.

Our findings indicate that ongoing Indigenous-led partnerships in violence prevention are needed to identify best practices in wrap-around service provision and violence screening given that individuals rarely come forward to report violence and abuse. Currently, a strategy for developing and operationalizing wrap-around services is not available in Baawaating due to a lack of program coordination based on a common definition of wrap-around services. Finally, we found that many organizations lack standardized violence screening protocols due to service time restraints, training needs, lack of referral resources, and fear of re-traumatization.

We call on all levels of government to support **ongoing** Indigenous-led partnerships to develop and improve best practices in **wrap-around services** for violence prevention with all service organizations.

Accessible Wrap-around Services

Participants identified the need for culture-based accessible and round-the-clock (24/7) wraparound services to prevent individuals from falling through the cracks during non-operational hours. Respondents repeatedly emphasized the high service needs before organizations close, meaning that social service operation hours do not align well with clients' schedules and needs. Some staff remarked that organizations need specialized staff positions for culture-based, 24/7 wraparound support so that they can focus on their own roles. Although some organizations and programs have extended their work hours, their funding still does not keep up with the service demands and the time required for inter-agency service coordination.

We call on the Municipal government to prioritize and equitably distribute funding for frontline services that provide **accessible, 24/7 wrap-around support**, and ensure these supports include specialized services and trauma-informed and culturally appropriate care for Indigenous clients.

Participants shared the complexity in navigating issues such as inter-agency communication, familiarity with other agencies' service eligibility and mandates, and client confidentiality. Our findings point to the need to regulate and streamline referral processes and jurisdictional issues related to First Nations Peoples.

We call on all levels of government to allocate equitable and adequate resources to mandate the development of effective communication and **collaboration** protocols that ensure prevention, crisis, and emergency services are **streamlined**.

Participants have identified the need for organizations to provide programs focused on basic life skills that were not taught in their clients' early years: self-care, literacy, parenting, financial skills, budgeting, and cooking. Frontline staff attributed the lack of these skills to the impact of ongoing colonial impacts such as intergenerational trauma, cycles of violence, and systemic racism. They underscored the need for wrap-around service programming that moves away from a deficit social construction of social service recipients.

We call on all levels of government to coordinate core, sustainable and equitable funding for organizations to prioritize **wrap-around programming** based on trauma-informed, community- and culture-based approaches, aligned with CFJ 1.8.

Training

The majority of participants raised concerns about the lack of ongoing, program-specific, and Indigenous-led and engaged cultural safety/humility training, anti-racism and gender/sexual diversity training. They call on the need to make it [mandatory and accessible](#) to all staff. Some barriers include: 1) Lack of dedicated funding; 2) Training is not mandated or incorporated into the job description, preventing staff from attending; 3) Unwillingness to attend due to perceptions about usefulness; 4) Lack of qualified Indigenous-led training either internally or externally.

We call on all levels of government to mandate all organizations receiving public funding to conduct **accessible, mandatory and ongoing** Indigenous-led, trauma-informed cultural safety/humility training, which should include topics such as trauma-informed care, restorative justice, 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion, and anti-racism, in alignment with CFJ 9.2 and 12.12.

Our findings show that organizations lack mandates, awareness, preparedness, and acceptance for the needs of gender-diverse individuals. This is evident when making referrals, due to a lack of knowledge about safe community resources, events, partnerships, and/or training to engage respectfully and safely with 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals. Service providers continuously cited concerns about the limited number of staff with lived experiences and expertise.

We call on all levels of government to provide equitable funding to educate all staff in social service organizations in **gender and sexual diversity** — led by and partnered with 2SLGBTQIA+ communities — and demonstrate how the training **impacts** the programming and service delivery.

Housing

Indigenous women, girls and gender-diverse individuals face unique factors that exclude them from accessing affordable, supportive, and subsidized housing in Baawaating. Statistics gathered by Municipal bodies such as the [2023-2025 Housing Needs Assessment](#) have failed to disaggregate the data to address the specific needs stemming from the gender discrimination and racism maintained by the Indian Act.

We call on all levels of government to collect **disaggregated, race-based** data to understand and address the unique factors Indigenous women, girls and gender-diverse peoples face.

Aligned with CFJ 4.6, participants strongly emphasized the need for more affordable housing that can be attained through retrofitting vacant buildings and increasing building permits for housing stock. Data from the [Sault Ste Marie Poverty Round Table 2020](#) shows a critical shortage of vacant and [adequate housing](#) for individuals fleeing violence in general, but fails to specify on the unique risk factors that Indigenous women, girls or gender-diverse individuals face.

We call on the provincial government to make the proper legislative amendments to mandate all municipalities to create **Community Safety and Well-Being Plans** that specifically address the **unique risk factors** impacting Indigenous off-reserve and non-status women, girls and gender-diverse individuals.

Indigenous participants reported the need to access and control federal funds for housing initiatives created by Indigenous Peoples, for Indigenous Peoples. This in turn can help address the significant gap in the [federal budget](#) to support on-reserve housing as identified by the [AFN](#).

We call on all levels of government to provide **equitable access to funding** for coordinating Indigenous-led, culturally safe, wrap-around **on-reserve** housing services regardless of jurisdiction.

Respondents shared their frustration with the limited definitions of success in transitional housing and reporting formats, resulting in cancelling or discontinuing long-term program investment.

We call on all levels of government to refine the **reporting format** to better **align** existing funding structures for transitional and 24/7 wrap-around housing support.

Many participants shared that there are insufficient emergency and accessible shelter spaces in Baawaating. For example, despite the city's commitment to add more [low-barrier](#) (immediate and easily accessible) shelter spaces in Baawaating, these are still inaccessible or overcrowded. Meanwhile, staff from almost all service providers have consistently raised concerns about the [binary gendered nature](#) of shelters, which are not safe for gender-diverse and Two-Spirit individuals fleeing violence. This means that CFJ 18.25 has not been properly addressed in Baawaating.

We call on the city to develop more **gender-inclusive and low-barrier** housing and shelter options to ensure accessibility for all individuals and families.

According to participants, non-market and violence prevention housing initiatives require access to government-controlled surplus land with adequate infrastructure (sewage, water, etc.).

We call on all levels of government to coordinate the housing development process to address **land base issues**, specifically access to Crown land, land distribution lists, and zoning requirements.

In addition, funding to Indigenous national organizations is short-term and unsustainable, requiring mainstream government intervention. We also heard that all housing initiatives need to have guaranteed funds for Indigenous Peoples regardless of the size of the organization.

We call on the Federal government to provide guaranteed, ongoing funding to the National Indigenous Collaborative Housing Inc. (NICHI) to support **Indigenous-led housing initiatives**.

Criminal Justice System

Indigenous Peoples have unique social service needs that, if not met, often lead to involvement in the criminal justice system (CJS). We heard from participants that Baawaating is particularly impacted by severe rates of drug poisoning, chronic insufficient and unsafe housing, lack of/limited accessible youth programming, and violence prevention programmes — all areas serviced by first responders. As reported by NORDIK Institute and the IWAVTF (2022), the aforementioned have impacted Indigenous youth disproportionately, resulting in increased rates of petty crime, incarceration and individuals in custody with limited or no access to social and restorative justice programs.

Consistent with scholarship on the tumultuous nature of policing with Indigenous individuals and communities, such as the National Inquiry into MMIWG2S+ (2019) and the Viens Commission (2019), participants noted that funding for servicing the Indigenous communities falls short of meeting even the most basic functions in responding to emergencies (e.g. law enforcement, healthcare professionals, and victim services). In terms of staffing and training, improving the provision of emergency responses to address a number of challenges mentioned in the study: 1) insufficient staff leading to uncovered shifts and unanswered calls; 2) gender and race wage gaps and difficulties attracting and retaining staff. Participants voiced the need for all levels of government to recognize: 1) the unique role and self-determination of Indigenous first responder services in the community; and 2) the need for culturally safe emergency responses.

We call on all levels of government to ensure Indigenous first responder services receive equitable and ongoing funding and mandates for Indigenous-led and culturally safe emergency responses.

Our findings reveal many service silos in the system leading to overpolicing and underserving of Indigenous Peoples. For example, first responders are mandated to either engage in law enforcement, emergency responses, or both. It is equally important to invest in improving trust between Indigenous Peoples, law enforcement and emergency services. Participants reported some key issues that prevent survivors from reporting crimes: 1) mandatory charging when there is physical evidence of intimate partner violence and prior reports; 2) fear of criminalization during a wellness check; 3) inability of first responders to coordinate/provide wrap-around services; 4) implicit bias and racist/sexist stereotypes guiding service provision and interactions.

We call on the Provincial and Municipal governments to shift the focus of law enforcement and emergency services to **trauma-informed wrap-around** services focused on violence prevention, and victim support services for Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit, and gender-diverse survivors.

Participants highlighted a gap between policymaking and community needs, where legal frameworks and policies are developed without training and meaningful community involvement. For instance, restorative justice, as a framework influenced by [Indigenous legal traditions](#), has recently been reignited by [Garden River First Nation](#). Within the court system, staff expressed difficulties in clients' accessing Gladue writers. This gap impacts clients' access to Indigenous restorative justice programs and results in high workloads for Indigenous court workers and Gladue writers.

We call on all levels of government to meaningfully work with Indigenous communities to create **sustainable and streamlined** Indigenous-led restorative justice processes, and appropriate trauma-informed, culture-based supports that guarantee **Gladue** recommendations are fulfilled.

Finally, law enforcement reported challenges in recognizing and managing implicit bias while on duty, due to insufficient training. Specifically, participants agreed that law enforcement training is not enough to prepare them to be culturally prepared and trauma-informed. Some first responders also reported not getting the cultural humility training provided by their organizations.

We call on the Provincial government (Ministry of the Solicitor General) to mandate changes to the **police college training** curricula to include trauma-informed, cultural humility/safety, in addition to ongoing engagement with Indigenous communities.

We also call on police organizations to ensure all officers and new recruits get **additional cultural humility training** beyond the basic training required by the Community Safety and Policing Act.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The release of the MMIWG2S+ Final Report and the CFJ outlined the legal imperatives and recommendations to properly address the systemic violence against all Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit, and gender-diverse individuals across Canada. However, despite [much violence](#) against Indigenous communities occurring in smaller urban and rural regions, research studies have largely overlooked the Baawaating catchment area. We infer that this oversight is due to limits in accessing communities outside of larger urban centers. This study shows that a robust research project requires more resources (time, training, funding) to fill this gap. Advocating for systemic changes requires the Canadian government to fulfill its treaty and fiduciary responsibilities and obligations as outlined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), the Royal Commission on Indigenous Peoples (RCAP), and the Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) Calls to Action.

Finally, we would also like to call attention to the issue of misgendering statistics, which reveals a gap in the accuracy of [femicide](#) and general homicide statistics and the identification of gender-diverse individuals. The above recommendations need to be implemented in impacted communities, led with their knowledge bases to support ongoing efforts to address the needs of MMIWG2S+ Peoples.

This brief highlights recommendations from an ongoing community-based research project led by IWAVTF, partnered with NORDIK Institute, Algoma University.

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Indigenous Women's Anti-Violence Task Force (IWAVTF) is a grassroots and community-based network of Indigenous women from different organizations that are mandated to provide culturally safe services to Indigenous peoples. IWAVTF aims to restore and protect the honour and value of Indigenous women and is ultimately committed to ending all forms of violence.

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