



**Suicide Among Indigenous Peoples and
Communities: Presentation to the House of
Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous
and Northern Affairs**

Carol Hopkins, M.S.W., Executive Director

February 8, 2017

ABOUT THE THUNDERBIRD PARTNERSHIP FOUNDATION

The Thunderbird Partnership Foundation works with First Nations to further the capacity of communities to address substance use and mental health issues. We promote a holistic approach to healing and wellness that values culture, respect, community, and compassion. The direction for the scope of our work is drawn from the *Honouring Our Strengths: A Renewed Framework to Address Substance Use Issues Among First Nations in Canada* and the *First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework*.

Thunderbird is the national voice advocating for First Nations culturally-based addictions and mental health services.

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For more information, please contact us at:

22361 Austin Line
Bothwell, ON N0P1C0

Main Office Toll Free: [1-866-763-4714](tel:1-866-763-4714)
Main Office Phone: 519-692-9922 ext. 301
Fax: 519-692-9977

chopkins@thunderbirdpf.org

or visit the Web site: www.thunderbirdpf.org

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Introduction

Waywaynaboozhoo. Nozhem indizhinikawz, Myeengun indodiam, Lenape indow. My name is Carol Hopkins, Executive Director of the Thunderbird Partnership Foundation.

The Thunderbird Partnership Foundations' mandate is to advocate for a comprehensive continuum of services and the necessary infrastructure to effectively address substance use and mental health issues among First Nations in Canada. Our direction specific to addressing issues related to Suicide is drawn from the *Honouring Our Strengths: A Renewed Framework to Address Substance Use Issues Among First Nations in Canada* and the *First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework*.

Good Morning and thank you for the opportunity to inform your study on Indigenous Suicide. Much of my comments today are drawn from a paper, *Life Promotion to Address Indigenous Suicide*, recently commissioned by Thunderbird Partnership Foundation and authored by Dr. Chris Musquash and Dr. Jennifer White. I would also like to draw your attention to the Indigenous Wellness Framework to understand a strength based approach to "Life Promotion", a term commonly used by Indigenous youth to express their focus in the discourse on "suicide prevention". And finally, I would like to say a bit about the First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework.

I would like to provide 4 key themes for understanding suicide among First Nations people in Canada:

(a) Suicide is not an individual experience resulting from mental illness. Suicide is a direct result of colonization and social inequities. Suicide among Indigenous peoples in Canada must be situated within a broad sociopolitical and historical context that calls attention to the legacy of colonial attempts at assimilation and ongoing negative effects of social inequities;

(b) highlights from the current knowledge base of promising practices for preventing suicide and promoting life among Indigenous peoples must focus on creating the conditions for Indigenous children, youth, families, and communities to flourish;

For example, indigenous knowledge keepers say that life promotion / suicide prevention begins before birth with cultural practices that secure the spirit to this physical world. They also say that when we no longer hear the cry of new life at birth, the fabric of our communities become burdened by the cry of death and this creates imbalance in the life path for the community.

Contributions from the published scholarly literature that are specific to Indigenous people include the following:

- Cultural continuity factors (i.e. self-government, active efforts to restore land claims, control over education, health care, cultural facilities, and police and fire services)
- Indigenous language
- Creating a sense of belonging and connection to cultural identity and spirituality
- Cultural healing practices
- Connection to family and community
- First Nations governance & self-determination
- Strengthening social capital and support
- Building infrastructure (material, human, information)
- Reliance on Indigenous Knowledge to define wellness

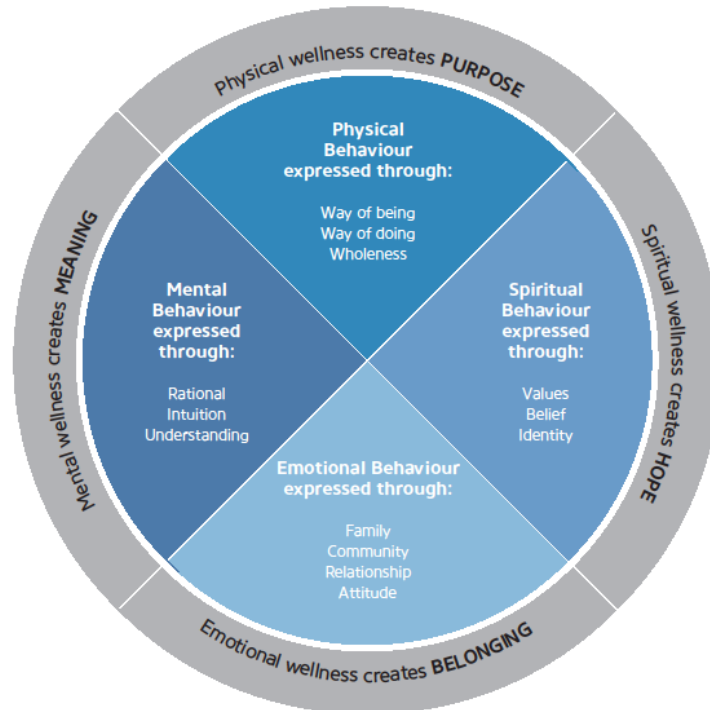
(c) recognize that Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, as well as provincial, federal, Territorial governments, and Indigenous organizations, must all be actively engaged as part of the solution;

And to do so requires a paradigm shift that makes space for indigenous knowledge as evidence, moves from a focus on creating solutions for individuals to focusing on outcomes for families and communities, that supports movement towards wellness rather than a focus on deficits.

“Strengths-based, life generating strategies which honour Indigenous ways of knowing and reflect relational, familial, social, and spiritual dimensions of selfhood are more likely to be effective than those which are predicated on de-contextualized, expert-driven, individualistic, biomedical understandings of distress”

(d) emphasize the importance of long-term, comprehensive, strengths-based and life promoting approaches that recognize the significance of land and ceremony, and honor Indigenous knowledge, values, spirituality, and cultures; and lineage;

- **Indigenous Wellness is defined by: Hope, Belonging, Meaning, and Purpose.** These are 4 outcomes when culture is used to promote life, to promote wellness. There are 13 indicators that facilitate the measurement of these four outcomes and are identified in the Indigenous Wellness Framework:



Indigenous Wellness Framework. Thunderbird Partnership Foundation. 22361 Austin Line, Bothwell, ON

Given What We Know, What Can Be Done?

- “Strengths-based, life generating strategies which honour Indigenous ways of knowing and reflect relational, familial, social, and spiritual dimensions of selfhood are more likely to be effective than those which are predicated on de-contextualized, expert-driven, individualistic, biomedical understandings of distress” p. 9
- **Use the Indigenous Wellness Framework to strategically guide policy, investments, program design, service delivery, and evaluation**
- **Use the First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework to support further understanding of a systems approach, relying on Indigenous Knowledge and culture**

Key Principles

Five guiding principles

1. Indigenous ways of knowing
2. Land, language, and lineage
 - The community is both a context and resource for healing and spirituality is intimately tied to the land.
3. Focus on Strengths
 - Strengths-based approaches emphasize the unique resources, capacities and wisdom of individuals, families, and communities

- One way to help people when they experience difficulties is through determining their intrinsic strengths as well as the strengths of their families, and communities and using these strengths and existing capacities to promote healing.
4. Decolonization and community self-determination
 5. Collective Responsibility and Reconciliation

Next Steps

1. Focus on the Social Conditions and Practices That Reduce Risks for Suicide and Promote Life in Indigenous Communities.
2. Rely on Indigenous Knowledge as evidence, i.e., Indigenous Culture to promote life and the important interconnectedness of all living things.
3. Rely on Culturally based Knowledge in Support of Practical Action and Positive Social Change.
4. Support the implementation of the First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework to guide a culture based approach to “life promotion”
5. Use the Indigenous Wellness Framework with its 4 measureable outcomes and corresponding wellness indicators to monitor the impact of culture to promote wellness
6. Support the development of standards of care using Indigenous knowledge specific to culturally defined developmental stages of life with specific attention to fetus/new born, infancy, childhood, adolescence and emerging adult