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UNITED WAY

PARTNER CONTENT

Listening to Indigenous voices to support Indigenous peoples

The Indigenous Partnership Council was created out of the need for greater partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations.

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The Na-Me-Res' Auduzhe Mino NeseWINong is home to an interdisciplinary primary care team that provides one-of-a-kind and culturally appropriate health care to the Indigenous community in the GTA.

Daria Perevezentsev

By Christine Miskonoodinkwe Smith, Special to the Star

It is a startling statistic. According to a recent study on the Na-Me-Res main website, 15 per cent of Indigenous people experience homelessness in Toronto, even though they only make up around 0.5 per cent of the population. It is this imbalance that Na-Me-Res is trying to address.

Located in Toronto, Na-Me-Res (Native Men's Residence) provides outreach services, along with temporary, transitional and permanent housing, to help homeless Indigenous men across the GTA to rediscover *mino bimaadiziwin* — living a good life in health.

Na-Me-Res has served as an anchor agency for the Indigenous community since 2016 and has done so in partnership with the United Way Greater Toronto (UWGT).

Michelle MacDonald, senior manager of Indigenous collaboration with the UWGT, sits on its Indigenous Partnership Council (IPC), which was created out of the need for greater partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations.



ENAGB Indigenous Youth Agency provides cultural, employment, life skills, holistic wellness and recreational opportunities to Indigenous youth.

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“The United Way recognizes the direct link between colonial history and trauma and the disproportionate impact of poverty on Indigenous communities, and we know that we must play an active role, but more importantly, we must work with and support First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples as they lead culturally responsive solutions within their communities,” MacDonald said.

“This can mean knowing when to learn, listen and support others to formulate and activate culturally responsive solutions. The creation of the Indigenous Partnership Council marks a change in approach for the United Way, and a step towards reconciliation.”

Simply put, the IPC is led by Indigenous voices for Indigenous peoples. It includes leaders from educational facilities, shelters, housing and social service organizations and is guided by Indigenous decision, so it remains accountable and transparent to the First Nations, Inuit and Metis peoples.

The IPA guides and informs the implementation of UWGT’s Reconciliation and Equity Action Plan, which helps to strengthen relationships between the United Way and Indigenous communities, and addresses social and economic inequities among Indigenous people across the GTA.

It is through partnerships that organizations like Na-Me-Res can feel like they are being listened to, heard and supported. It also assists them to expand their services because they have the backing of the United Way, and that support helps them strengthen their capacity to lead and deliver initiatives for their communities.

Steve Teekens is the director of Na-Me-Res. He said one of the ways Na-Me-Res was able to expand its services was with the opening of Auduzhe Mino NeseWINong — place of healthy breathing — which is home to an evolving Indigenous interdisciplinary primary care team.

Providing a space for youth

The ENAGB Indigenous Youth Agency is another Indigenous organization that receives support from the United Way Greater Toronto. The youth-led agency’s name comes from the phrases Eshkiniigjik Naandwechigegaming (a place for healing our youth) and Aabiish Gaa Binjiibaaying (where did we come from). This is the first ever indigenous youth led agency that supports mental health and addictions using a holistic & harm reduction approach. Its programs include cultural, employment, life skills, holistic wellness and recreational

opportunities to Indigenous youth ages 12 to 29.

Led by a nine member youth council, Toronto Director Briar Perrier, Executive Director Cynthia Bell and its staff of 55, ENAGB's daily programming is designed to allow youth an opportunity to actively participate in daily programming that addresses their mental, emotional, physical and spiritual well-being that leads up built self-esteem, confidence, skills and autonomy. It operates from two Toronto locations — one in the east, the other in the west — between noon and 8 p.m.

“Since we have opened in 2019 as an independent charity we currently have about 2,200 community members accessing ENAGB and 1,800 of those are youth who participate in our programs,” said Bell.

“ENAGB seriously walks its talk,” said Bell. “We are hoping that we can create other chapters across the province.”

He said it is a one-of-a-kind health organization for the Indigenous community that focuses on disease prevention, vaccinations, health promotion, holistic care and data sovereignty, through outreach partnerships, home visits and on-site healing.

Teekens said it first began as a partnership between the Native Men's Residence, Seven Generations Midwives Toronto and Well Living House in response to the disparities affecting the First Nations, Indigenous and Metis populations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Auduzhe Mino Nesewinong provides preventative, episodic and primary care to assist in meeting the needs of the Indigenous community. Over the past three years, it has also been developing and delivering culturally safe access to urgent health and social support, medical testing, contact tracing, case management and access to treatment.

Na-Me-Res has faced challenges due to inadequate health funding and the rise of non-Indigenous health centres offering Indigenous services without Indigenous representation, Teekens said.

He said ongoing gaps in access to culturally safe and effective holistic primary care leaves more than 24,000 First Nation, Indigenous and Metis people in the Toronto region without a provider, which means there are gaps in preventative care, and that there is a higher burden of disease and mortality.

And, Teekens said, there is a need for more affordable housing.



Nation Cheong, vice-president of community impact and mobilizations investment at the UWGT, said there have advancements in housing through cross-sectoral work with the City of Toronto, Indigenous organizations and other groups.

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Nation Cheong, vice-president of community impact and mobilizations investment at the United Way, said there have advancements when it comes to investing in housing solutions through cross-sectoral work with the City of Toronto, Indigenous organizations and groups like the Toronto Police Services.

Two weeks ago, the UWGT opened 51 modular apartment units at 90 Dunn Ave. in Parkdale to help address the need. He said it is important to advocate at both a community and government level when it comes to affordable housing.

“Often people who are for not-for-profit, only focus on not-for-profit and the private sector only thinks of the private sector. We need to advocate for the government to see not-for-profit as something to invest in,” Cheong said.

Teekens said he has received positive feedback from community members about the services provided by Na-Me-Res. But, he said, there is still a need for more

organizations to provide housing to end homeless, additional Indigenous nurses and doctors, and other supports to address all aspects of a person’s needs, including physical, mental, emotional and spiritual.

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