Indigenous survivors, sexual assault services and bridging cultures
A case study

Report prepared for Muskoka Parry Sound Sexual Assault Services
June 2025

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Introduction

This report examines the Indigenous culturally-based supports offered by Muskoka Parry Sound Sexual Assault Services (MPSSAS), a mainstream community-based organization that supports survivors of sexual violence. MPSSAS has a history of being innovative in supporting Indigenous clients of all genders within their large and predominantly rural region. It is also one of the few provincial Sexual Assault Centers (SAC) to develop culturally congruent and culturally safe services, despite having no additional core funding to address these needs. This report tracks the development of Indigenous-specific supports within the organization. It identifies key principles and practice, gaps and challenges, and opportunities moving forward for the continued enhancement of Indigenous culturally-based supports. Little has been written in the academic literature about Indigenous supports for sexual assault and MPSSAS is a provincial leader in its Indigenous programming. Consequently, this report aims also to shed light on promising practices for others.

The research for this report includes holding a sharing circle with MPSSAS staff May 10, 2024, additional interviews with Indigenous staff and the executive director, and a review of the MPSSAS' Annual General Meeting reports from 2012 to 2022. All research was approved by the Nipissing University Research Ethics board. We acknowledge the support of Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada in funding this research. We thank MPSSAS staff for their participation and insight into this project.

The Impact of Colonization and Gender-Based Sexual Violence

According to Statistics Canada, 46% of Indigenous women in Canada have experienced sexual assault in their lifetime, in comparison to 33% of non-Indigenous women (Heidinger 2022). Indigenous women are also more likely to experience physical assault, childhood physical or sexual abuse, and homicide than non-Indigenous women (Heidinger 2022; National Inquiry 2019). While Indigenous men experience lower rates of sexual violence than Indigenous women at 5.8%, this is twice the rate of sexual assault experienced by

non-Indigenous men at 2.8% (Perrault 2022). Within the sector, the statistics are estimated at 1 in 6 men, although reporting of sexual assault by male survivors is quite low, according to Lauren. Further, the stigma is deeper for men. Suzanne, based on her years of experience in Indigenous wellbeing work, suggests that most Indigenous men have experienced sexual assault as children. Violence against Indigenous 2SLGBTQQIA persons is also very high, with one study showing 73% having experienced violence due to transphobia and 43% having experienced sexual or physical violence (National Inquiry 2019).

These alarming statistics are rooted in five hundred years of ongoing colonization. Settler colonialism is a deeply gendered set of structures founded on the intertwining of heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, and land dispossession. Prior to contact, women were seen as crucial to all facets of life and were revered for their roles as life-givers; many Indigenous cultures are matriarchal. Two-Spirit people were seen as gifted and were honoured because they carried two spirits, male and female, within them. Two-Spirit people often served as healers, medicine people and visionaries in their communities (Alaers 2010; Thurston n.d.). Sexual and intimate partner violence did occur periodically but were relatively rare due to the cultural values regarding women. In those rare times, the offenders were dealt with quickly through customary laws and socially accepted mechanisms (Collin-Vézina, Dion, & Trocmé, 2009; Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology Canada, 2013).

Indigenous Women

The imposition of European heteropatriarchal norms served to disempower Indigenous women. The *Indian Act*, read into law in 1876 by the MacDonald government, only obliquely addressed First Nations, or 'Indian,' women; their status as Indian was connected directly to their relationship to men family members with status. The "marrying out clause" in the *Indian Act* diminished the position of First Nations women within their own communities while reducing the number of claims to Indigenous land. Under this law, any First Nations

woman who married a man without 'Indian status' (including non-status 'Indian' men) would lose her Indian status, as would her children. This meant a loss of access to reserve land, i.e., housing and burial rights, and any treaty benefits that accrued from being a status Indian (Silman 1992). These losses remained in place even in the event of being widowed or divorced.

As European settlement increasingly encroached on Indigenous lands, conflicting views of gender and sexuality came to the fore. Colonists imposed their religious mores on Indigenous peoples. They perceived Indigenous women as sexual deviants due to their relative sexual autonomy. As the Native Women's Association of Canada writes, "The sacredness of women's bodies, honoured through ceremonies celebrating menstruation and the capacity to create life were replaced with the belief that the bodies of women and girls are inherently savage, dirty, impure and sinful; therefore violable" (2010, 10). In the first two decades of Canada's existence as a distinct nation-state, colonial laws and policies entrenched the belief that Indigenous women were inherently sexually available. For example, in the 1879 *Indian Act*, Indigenous women were "legislated as prostitute" (Boyer 2006, 14) through provisions which stated that any woman who was off-reserve ("vagrant") or intoxicated off-reserve was a prostitute. On the West Coast, the 1885 Indian Act amendments that banned the potlatch ceremony also reinforced the presumed sexual deviancy of Indigenous women, and by extension Indigenous communities. Potlatch ceremonies represented "an important act of [I]ndigenous sovereignty and self-determination" where nations built alliances, engaged in trade, and shared knowledge (Bourgeois 2018, 386). However, settler society equated the arrangement of marriages during the potlatch as a form of prostitution.

In that same decade, the *Indian Act* implemented residential schools as a way of further controlling Indigenous peoples by removing their children to enforce their attendance at these institutions. The federal government provided funding to Christian denominations (Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist, and later the United Church) to operate the

schools to force the assimilation of Indigenous peoples (Vowel 2016). The residential school system sought to produce good Christian wives, that is, to 'save' and 'civilize' Indigenous women through genocidal assimilation, and by making them the property of their husbands. But in the colonial imagination there were limits to such reform because, ultimately, moral purity required racial purity (Valverde 1991). Violence against Indigenous women is connected to the intergenerational trauma that results from the residential school experience. Due to the loss of language and culture, as well as extensive physical, sexual and psychological abuse that occurred in the schools, Indigenous communities suffer cycles violence, addictions, neglect, and suicide as well as decreased health and socioeconomic enjoyment (Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman 2014). This pattern of colonial violence is perpetuated as well, in violence against lands through resource extractive industries that have the political and economic leverage with the provincial government (e.g. the current enactment of Bill 5 that is largely focused on stripping protections for endangered species, and particularly accessing minerals in the so-called Ring of Fire are in Nishnawbe Aski territory) and the federal government (e.g. Bill C-5).

Two-Spirit People

The colonial European views of gender, and strict male-female heterosexual binary, also served to dehumanize Two-Spirit people. The derogatory term *berdache*, meaning "male prostitute" in French, was used to stigmatize males who did not fall within Western conventional heterosexual identity (Epple 1998). European Christians had a narrow view of gender and sexuality, reinforced by religious doctrine and church policies that had no tolerance for other ways of understanding and being in the world. This attitude provided justification for violence, including murder and theft of lands by the colonizers (Alaers 2010). This violence was expanded through the enforced conformity to which Indigenous children were subjected in residential and day schools (Alaers 2010). Using religious beliefs as their justification, European colonizers perpetuated violent actions and attitudes against Two-Spirit people that continue to be felt in the present.

Two-Spirit is a contemporary term, provided by Myra Laramee in 1990 at a gathering of Indigenous LGBTQI+ people (Pyle 2018; Wilson 2015). Pyre notes, “Two-Spirit people attending the 1990 conference were acutely aware of anthropological work being done to ‘dis-cover’ historical ‘berdaches,’ and they were intent on talking back to scholars doing such work without considering or involving modern Two-Spirit people” (577). While it is often used as though it is interchangeable with western concepts of gender and sexuality, Two-Spirit is more directly reflective of a person’s spirit (interests, inclinations, roles) and less on the either/or construct of the masculine-femine sexuality binary that dominates Western worldviews (Alaers 2010; Epple 1998). This is also reflective of the lack of emphasis on gender in many of the Indigenous languages of Turtle Island, and the desire to reclaim all aspects of identity by Indigenous peoples (Pyle 2018; Wilson 2015).

Holistic Healing

Our earlier study, “Visioning our Healing,” found that Indigenous survivors of sexual violence seek healing not only for specific assaults but also for the impacts of colonization, as a whole (Stevens & Nagy 2024). Nelson (2017) notes that supports to survivors must be grounded in cultural ways of healing that include anyone affected by the violence and must rely on Indigenous and gender-based analyses of the violence. Reeves and Stewart (2014) emphasize the relevance of culturally informed care that recognizes the importance of traditional approaches to life and healing, as well as the role that history has in shaping contemporary experiences. Trauma-informed care is essential and must go beyond the conventional Western individualized approach by recognizing the profound collective historical colonial impacts on the survivor (Reeves & Stewart, 2014). Smye, et al. (2021) identify how reclaiming traditional practices plays a vital part healing from trauma, asserting resistance to colonization, and revitalizing land and community relations. The following builds on these insights by examining in-depth the work of MPSSAS.

Brief Overview of MPSSAS

Muskoka Parry Sound Sexual Assault Services incorporated in 1993 and opened its doors in 1994. The main office is in Bracebridge, Ontario, one of the main towns in the Muskoka Region. The region is known for the stunning scenery and being at the southern end of the Canadian Shield. Tourism, particularly during summer months, is a critical economic driver for the largely rural area. MPSSAS had an office in Parry Sound until its closure due to the pandemic in 2020. The organization also has historically run programs in Huntsville and South River. Feminist principles of decision-making and a commitment to anti-racist, anti-oppression work in the region form the foundation of the supports offered. As well, "Two-Eyed Seeing" (Bartlett, Marshall and Marshall 2012), which brings together western and Indigenous perspectives on healing, is woven throughout MPSSAS' supports to offer what can be termed an Indigenist approach to service delivery.

The building that houses MPSSAS is quite old, on the main street of Bracebridge. Despite its location, it is somewhat camouflaged – not easy to discern from the street, which affords greater anonymity for clients. Bracebridge is a very mainstream Euro-Canadian tourist town that caters primarily to the affluent cottagers that come to the region each year. It typically runs to the conservative right in politics, having elected a succession of conservative MPPs and MPs over the years. There is not much that visibly reminds residents or visitors that they are on Anishinaabe lands. As well, most Indigenous people in the region tend to live closer to Georgian Bay (e.g. in one of the several First Nations along the shoreline or in the town of Parry Sound), or closer to Orillia and Rama First Nation.

The core funding for the organization comes from the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) and the Ministry of Health. It also relies on fundraising, community donations, and standalone grants from organizations such as the Ontario Trillium Foundation and Women and Gender Equity Canada. In Ontario, the demand for sexual assault services has increased dramatically, in some regions up to four times higher in the past eight years (Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres 2022). Lauren, the

executive director, links the increase in demand to a series of highly visible events over a period of several years: the Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) final report on residential schools in 2015, the #MeToo movement that began in 2017, the #TimesUp in 2018, and to the release of the final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG2S) in 2019. Due to these events, there is increased general awareness of the pervasiveness of sexual violence in Canada and of the complex intergenerational and gendered/sexualized harms of colonialism. Yet, provincial funding for sexual assault services has not kept pace. Lauren states that the organization is "incredibly stretched in terms of the numbers of survivors [now] accessing our programs" because of the comparatively insubstantial funding increases over its thirty years. The persistently poor funding impacts staff recruitment and retention, the ability to operate physical spaces, and more.

It is one of the unfortunate truisms for feminist non-profit organizations that there is never enough funding to do the work needed, and the work that is needed gets done only because the organizations have been forced to get very good at being creative and innovative. MPSSAS is no different and has demonstrated their capability in securing pockets of piece-meal funding, rolling the resources into services and supports stretching to meet a wide demographic of clients where they are at. For Indigenous clients, this responsiveness is even more crucial as they are typically trying to cope with multiple traumas and concerns.

A large portion of MPSSAS' attention is on supporting clients through crisis and counselling interventions; it is intensive work that is often not recognized beyond the sector for its specialized approach or the demand on staff and organizations. Crisis support is particularly important and exacting, as the organization responds to a wide range of scenarios, from providing support over the phone to funds needed for cab fare to the hospital, and more. Lauren notes that interventions for Indigenous clients, in particular, might be very broad because there is "almost always crisis in the sense of poverty, housing

security." In taking an Indigenist approach, MPSSAS is, as one staff member put it, seemingly "light years ahead" of other mainstream social services in the region. It is also a leader within Ontario community-based rape crisis centers in its provision of Indigenous supports.

Evolution of Indigenous Cultural Supports

As MPSSAS evolved from a grassroots collective, there were important areas of growth and understanding about the demographics that they were serving and the approaches needed to be effective and accountable. One such element was that the founders recognized that the agency operated near to several First Nations communities. Furthermore, well in advance of mainstream Canadian society, there was acknowledgement by the staff and board of directors of the impact of residential schools on First Nations peoples. The founding executive director, Helen Debassige, hails from Finland and had lived in M'Chigeeng with her husband, Malcolm, a member of that First Nation. Helen brought Scandinavian ideals of social justice to the organization and, along her experiences with Malcolm's Anishinaabe community, taught MPSSAS staff about Indigenous worldviews. Due to Helen's influence, MPSSAS has almost always had Indigenous people on its Board.

The early commitment to recognizing Indigenous women's experiences is featured in the original logo of the organization, which blended Greek and Anishinaabe symbolism. The logo featured a braid of sweetgrass in the shape of the symbol for woman, circled around Daphne's laurel tree. Daphne's tree signifies feminine power in healing and resistance to sexual assault, while the sweetgrass symbolizes "peace, healing and spirituality." As explained in one of the Annual General Meeting reports, "The three strands of the braid are for mind, body and spirit. A Traditional Sweet Grass Ceremony is a cleansing, purification and healing process."

In 2023, MPSSAS changed its logo to represent the inclusion of all genders, reflective of the initiation of a male survivors' therapy group in 2021 and reflective of the inclusion of transgender, gender diverse, non-binary, intersex and Two-Spirit people. This is a relatively rare turn for sexual assault centers, many of which serve cis-women only. The write-up for the new logo explains, "Sweetgrass is the sacred hair of Mother Earth and braided represents body, mind, and spirit. Burning it is to purify thoughts and the environment around. The braid is made up of 21 strands for community survival." Drawing on the Anishinaabe Seven Grandfather Teachings, the first strand of the braid is 7 for 7 previous generations, the second strand is for 7 for the 7 grandfather gifts (respect, love, truth, bravery, wisdom, generosity, humility) and the third strand is 7 for 7 generations to come.

The early commitment to supporting Indigenous women can be seen in outreach to First Nations communities and participation in activities such as First Nations wellness events or training workshops offered by First Nations organizations.[1] For the years 2012-2017, MPSSAS tracked the number of Indigenous clients served. In this period, the SAC served an average of 20 Indigenous clients per year, most of whom would have been attending mainstream programming. The percentage of Indigenous clients varied between 1.2% and 4.7% of all MPSSAS clients. (In Canada, Indigenous women comprise roughly 4% of all women.) Lauren shared that the organization stopped tracking, on paper, data that might be perceived as too personal by Indigenous clients. She stated Suzanne's concern was that Indigenous clients were reluctant to share data typically collected by agencies and would decline to engage in the service. This is not unusual for First Nations who have been "researched to death" (Goodman, et al. 2018), yet whose data has too often not benefited the people or communities. As Indigenous-specific programming has grown, however, at MPSSAS, so too has the number of Indigenous clients.

[1] We do not have a strong sense of Indigenous supports for the first fifteen years of operation, having only accessed AGM reports from 2011 onwards.

Figure One: The Evolution of Indigenous Support Programs

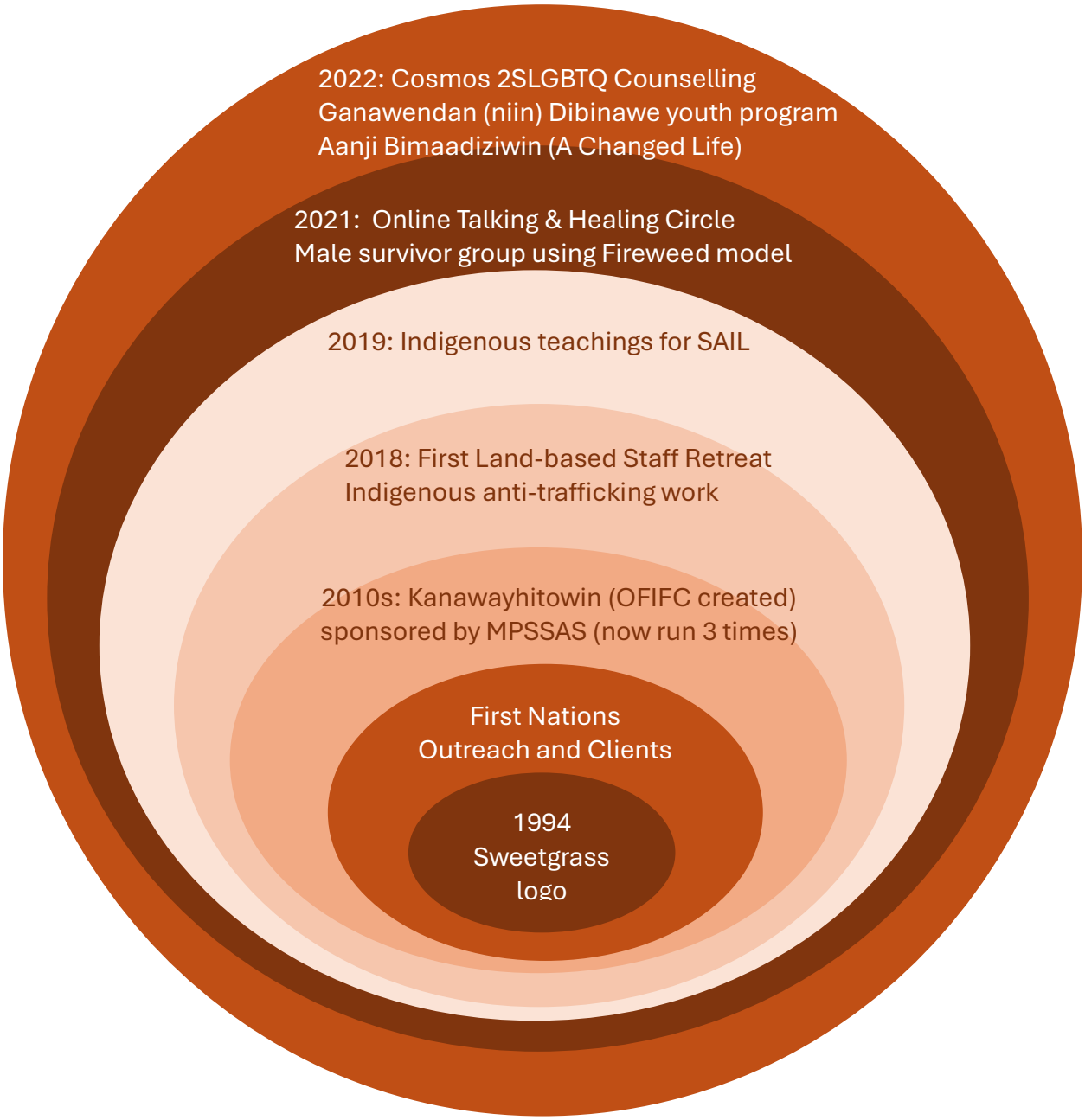

Figure One (above) depicts the development of Indigenous programming over the past ten years in a representation echoing the growth rings on a tree. The core commitment to Indigenous values, encapsulated in the original logo's sweetgrass braid, is at the center of all work. The development in Indigenous programming has been dependent upon, first, a

continual learning process for non-Indigenous staff about the impacts of colonization and Indigenous ways of knowing and being and, second, an expansion in the hiring of Indigenous staff members.

In the first regard, there have been definite growing pains for non-Indigenous staff who must "unlearn" colonial assumptions and figure out the "bigger picture" of the work they are doing as therapists or support persons. During the research sharing circle with MPSSAS staff, different members spoke of personal transformation and of being "broken open" during various training exercises and the 2018 land-based retreat at Limberlost Forest. There is still a long way to go, however, as decolonization is a process and not an endpoint. We heard during the research sharing circle that the sheer "what I don't know" is daunting for non-Indigenous staff, and that their learning is "never enough."

Notwithstanding the commitment to "always learning," MPSSAS is a white-dominated organization. This is an unsurprising reflection of the demographics of the Muskoka Parry Sound region. There have almost always been Indigenous persons on the board of MPSSAS, and there have also Indigenous staff members since around 2000. The staff presence has been more sporadic, but vital, along with the board representation to continue developing relationships with the First Nations in the region. In 2017, Suzanne began working with the organization. The number of Indigenous staff has increased rapidly in the last few years. There are now four Indigenous staff members, three working in person and one working remotely on a part-time contract. The addition of these staff members has resulted in the rapid expansion of Indigenous cultural supports in the last five years. Elders also are involved as supports to the staff on an ad hoc basis, such as during land-based retreats. However, since grant funding envelopes are not directed at core services, stabilizing the Indigenous program components from a human resource stance will continue to be a challenge.

The evolution of Indigenous cultural supports can be roughly divided into three phases or clusters (see Figure 2 below). The first is training and education of MPSSAS staff members, as well as other service providers in the district and clients. Although the organization had engaged in periodic training during the 2000s, the efforts were not focused until the 2010s. For example, the Kanawayhitowin train-the-trainer program, developed by the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (OFIFC), was sponsored by MPSSAS in 2013, and has been run 3 times over the past several years. Kanawayhitowin means 'Taking Care of Each Other's Spirit' in the Ojibway language. The 2016 workshop was titled "Understanding Colonization and Intergenerational Trauma" and the 2018 workshop was titled "Taking Care of Each other's Spirits" (offered in partnership with the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centers). Or, for example, the annual survivors' conference, "From Surviving to Thriving," in 2016 included traditional teachings with smudging, drumming and a session on the medicine wheel.

Figure 2: Phases in Evolution of Indigenous Supports

The next phase in the evolution of supports is the decolonization and Indigenization of existing programming. Starting in 2017, the agency has worked to incorporate Indigenous teachings into its mainstay program, Sexual Assault Intervention for Living (SAIL), which provides supportive group therapy in four different stages. In 2021, with funding from the Canadian Mental Health Association, MPSSAS was able to incorporate the Fireweed Model into its new support group for male survivors, which blends treatment modalities. Fireweed was developed through Amelia Rising by Jill Passmore and Rob Hawkins in consultation with Indigenous leadership. Amelia Rising is the sexual assault service in North Bay,

Ontario, a region with a sizable Indigenous population. In October 2023, MPSSAS secured funding from Women and Gender Equity Canada (WAGE), through the gender-based violence envelope, for a 29-month project called Anji-Bimaadisiwin (A Changed Life). This project builds on the organization's peer mentorship program and seeks to develop a decolonial and culturally relevant model of peer mentorship that recognizes the impacts of colonialism in rural areas when it comes to gender-based violence in Indigenous communities. There are also plans underway to rewrite all policies with a decolonial lens.

The third phase or cluster of development is the creation of programming specific for Indigenous folks. With provincial anti-trafficking funding, the agency started a Talking and Healing Circle in 2018 in the Parry Sound office. The Circle explores the issue of trafficking from an Indigenous lens with the support of an Elder. This evolved into an online format during the Covid-19 pandemic as an attempt to continue supporting clients, despite the need to be socially isolated. A particularly unique and salient feature of the Circle is the "commitment to prioritize Indigenous clients regardless of colonial boundaries" (2021-22 AGM report). This commitment is an attempt to address the gaps that are created if a client moves from one provincially-defined catchment area to another. In 2022, the Cosmos 2SLGBTQ Counselling program was initiated, providing "a space for Indigiqueer people to be both Indigenous and Queer" (interview). In 2023, MPSSAS submitted a successful proposal to the Ontario Trillium Foundation for a youth-focused systems innovation project to span five years. Originally the project was called *Ganawendan (niin) Dibinawe* (meaning "protecting ourselves"). The youth involved in the project changed the name to more closely reflect their collective sense of the project's purpose to *Akinoo'amaadiwaad ji nookaadiziyang*, or "The ones who teach one another with/on the land to live a tender life." The project's aim is to address systems-level changes "to create accessible and culturally informed sexual assault and mental health support services for Indigenous youth and to do this we need the engagement with our partnered agencies to help support this initiative."

A Two-Eyed Seeing Approach

Two-Eyed Seeing refers to "blending the powerful healing knowledge of Indigenous peoples with the trauma-informed work of western sexual assault centers" (2021-22 AGM report). By braiding together the best from both modalities of healing, a Two-Eyed Seeing approach enables a sophisticated understanding of the impacts of sexual assault and other traumas. As explained by an Indigenous staff member:

> We have a lot of neuroscientists like Michael Yellow Bird and other people who can prove when we sing ceremony, when we dance ceremony, when we make medicine or pick medicine, hunt, pick berries, it stimulates our vagus nerve, and that creates a connection. And so, one of the biggest things with sexual assault is the violation from self-determination, and that this connection to self, where you feel safe, where you feel grounded, and to get to the grounded spaces to do that ceremony. So that research is out there. It's just putting those pieces together. And so also explaining, like, the molecular structure of your brain actually changes when you smudge.

Indigenous healing approaches acknowledge the impact of trauma on mind, body, spirit and heart, and so necessitates a wide range of holistic/wholistic supports. In the SAIL program, this includes work on healthy relationships, boundaries and coping, self-soothing, mindfulness and compassion, as well as education on the neurobiology of the brain and what happens during trauma. Cultural activities such as land-based healing events, including ceremonies and creative activities such as ribbon-skirt workshops, are understood as healing for participants.

The reinforcement of land-based relationality and cultural knowledge is particularly important to Indigenous survivors of sexual violence; being on the land and participating in cultural practices actively opposes the colonial narrative that Indigenous cultures and peoples are somehow less than Euro-Canadian culture and people. Sexual violence has actively stripped away the power of Indigenous women and their place within their communities. Concurrently, settler violence against the land has and continues to strip

resources, leaving substantial damage behind. The parallel of these two actions is not lost on Indigenous peoples. The aim of colonial Canada has been to aggressively, forcefully assimilate Indigenous peoples through suppression of cultural practices and languages, thereby vacating the land for exploitation of resources by colonialists. For survivors, taking part in workshops, circles, and more, is a powerful testament to their resilience, survivance, resurgence and reclamation of culture, place, and relationships with all beings. Further, participating in these activities affirms the right of Indigenous women to their healing and wellbeing and to understanding that they are crucial to the wellbeing of their communities.

Strengths of the Organization

A crucial strength of MPSSAS is the solid team whose members genuinely care for one another. There is very little staff turnover with some people working there for twenty-five or thirty years. One team member, who laughingly referred to herself as a "lifer," indicated that the health of the agency was rooted in its feminist, anti-oppressive approach. In the staff sharing circle, people identified the deep respect everyone on the team has for one other. As one person put it,

> Everyone is respectful of each other, inclusive of [each other]. We're very open. We can share…vulnerabilities, be able to share our tears, and know that it's a safe space. That's one of our greatest strengths.

Another team member noted that having safety within the team provides a basis for providing safety to people in the community.

We also heard about the strong feminist leadership from both executive directors that the organization has had during its existence. Helen, the founding executive director was identified as a "driving force" in bringing cultural awareness to the agency. Lauren, the current executive director, has taken up that baton, working to expand MPSSAS' capacity in all its facets. Furthermore, her leadership extends into the provincial context, as well. During Lauren's time as Chair and Vice-Chair of the Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis

Centers (OCRCC), the OCRCC Executive recognized the need for support for Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) counsellors. For counsellors in sexual assault centres, it is not uncommon to hear about their experiences of microaggression or feeling isolated within their organization. With funding secured from Heritage Canada, a BIPOC Feminist Counsellors Coalition was established to address decolonization in the community sexual assault services sector (Euale Montilla 2023). The toolkit draws on a range of literature, from grassroots to academic, focusing on "anti-colonial and precolonial healing modalities that are liberation-centred and rooted in the collective power, spirituality, knowledges and cosmologies of Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour communities" (Euale Montilla 2023, 1). The toolkit examines the intersections of oppression and the many "isms" that are attached to non-heteronormative and non-white individuals in Canadian society. The goal of the toolkit is to support BIPOC sexual assault service counsellors in their work, and to educate their Euro-Canadian colleagues.

Another key strength of MPSSAS is the commitment to not simply tack on a single Indigenous program, but to decolonize and Indigenize the organization, as a whole. We see this in the revising of its mainstream programming; for example, previously the SAIL group therapy program "didn't really make space for work on the spirit." The plan to re-write all organizational policies with a decolonial lens is another important step. This effort is also reflected in the thoughtful composition of the Board of Directors. The board members have responsibility for approving organizational policies and currently have a balance of Indigenous and non-Indigenous members, some of whom are service providers with other regional organizations, such as B'saanbamaadsiwin, the Indigenous mental health program within the Muskoka-Parry Sound CMHA. With input from both the board members and staff, there is an evolving and deepening commitment to centring of Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing throughout the organization's programs.

Beyond the work of decolonizing itself, MPSSAS is taking steps to educate its funders by pushing back against colonial boundaries and mindsets. As explained by Lauren,

funders focus on risk management with “strict guidelines, strict rules about how to operate, penalties for deviations from that, and fear of liability.” One recent example of this has occurred with the *Akinoo’amaadiwaad ji nookaadiziyang* project which receives Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF) funding. The oversight for the project is a partnership between the Trillium Foundation and the Students Commission of Canada (SCC). While the OTF was interested in funding an Indigenous-led project, they had not worked at decolonizing any of their parameters or expectations. The Executive Director stated “they wanted to know what colonial counties we were going to do [the project] in, and we were able to push back on that…our contract reflects treaty regions and unceded territories” rather than conventional provincial catchment areas. In another instance, for a successful grant application, the funding document included a directive to not spend any of the funds on alcohol or drugs. Although the funder stated they include this in all documents, this was refuted by the MPSSAS staff based on prior experiences with the funder and speaks to the persistence of racist bias and stereotypes.

A further example of the need for funders to decolonize their processes is the time given to projects. Grants of this type are ‘pilot project’ funding, running typically one to three years, but no more than five years in length. This reflects the short span of government election cycles and is often a point of contention for communities and organizations awarded this type of funding. In contrast, Indigenous perspectives on time are quite different in that more time is generally needed to develop a project or to engage in decision-making on an issue. For example, the principle of planning for seven generations, which is found across many Indigenous cultures, prioritizes the need to think long-term in the context of relational responsibilities. This is particularly relevant considering the constituent factors in the healing process from sexual violence as well as in navigating ongoing colonialism. Colonialism has occurred over the past few centuries, impacting multiple generations. Working through healing from those impacts may take several years. Yet this understanding remains largely unsupported by funders.

These constraints also impede the relational approach to service delivery. Indigenous people are acutely familiar with services being imposed paternalistically, and project funding being brief and temporary. This effects the individual's ability to commit to participating in services, such as MPSSAS. As Lauren, explained:

> Attachment is really important, and if they have a relationship with a counselor who's from our agency, and yet they move home to their community north of Thunder Bay, why would we want to break that attachment to say that they've got to now work with this agency over here, because they don't reside in this colonial territory, and so we're really pushing on all of that.

Kara, a staff member working on Indigenous programming, began her time at MPSSAS as an Indigenous Master of Social Work student (Wilfred Laurier University). She has often stated how she had never worked in a mainstream organization prior to MPSSAS because of the significant cultural differences in expectations and approaches. Now, as the Project Coordinator for *Akinoo'amaadiwaad ji nookaadiziyang*, Kara has endeavoured to broaden the conventional ideas of project reporting and project structure with the two oversight bodies with some success.

> A big part of my role [during field placement] was to [explore] how we could capture the information, but in a decolonized way for our funders for future grant writing. So I had really pushed for this mind-mapping [see Photos below], because I wanted that visual artistic approach, and I wanted us to be able to share our story through, share their story through, like oral, oral articulation, if you will, and then to have that art to kind of like put everywhere and anywhere and draw attention to the topics.

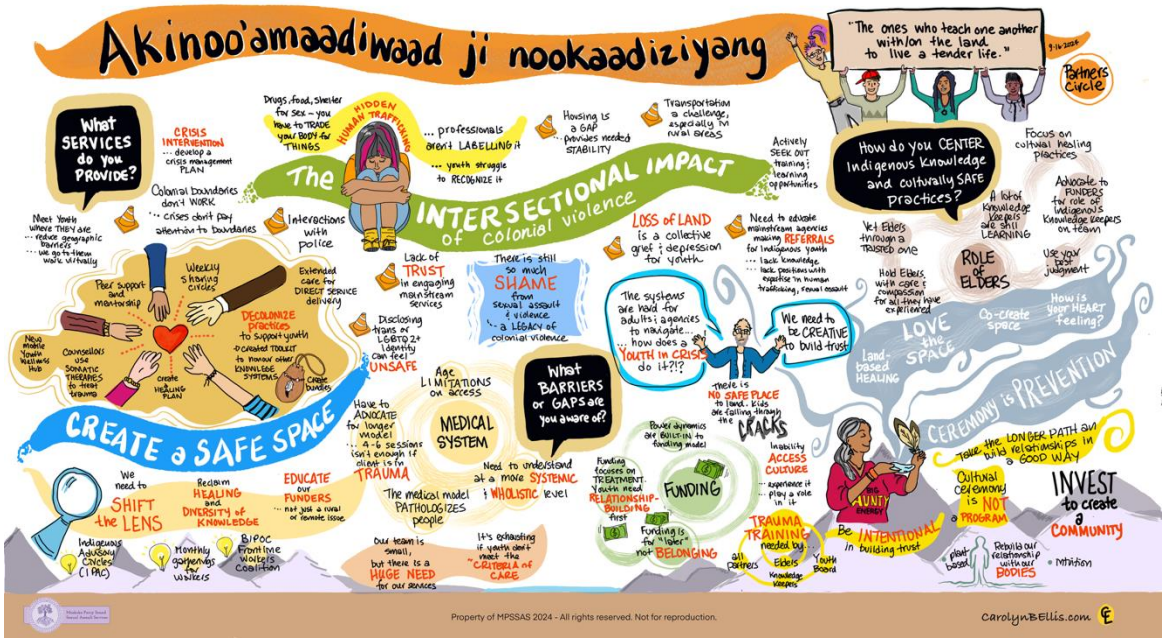

Photo 1: Youth Group Mind-Map

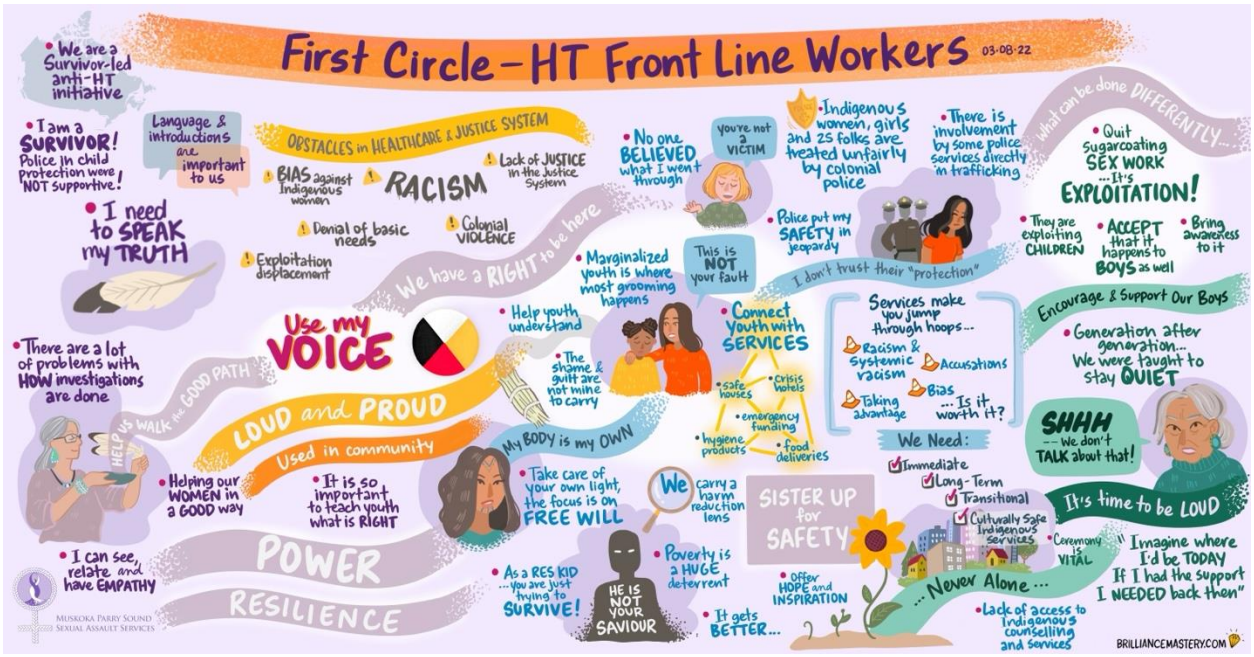

Photo 2: Sharing Circle Map

Photo 3:

Photo 4:

Photo 5:

Another point Kara addressed was the idea that the funders believed that the idea of holding land-based retreats was programming. Kara stated, “This is not programming when we meet on the land. That’s how we would meet, as people. It would be like going to a conference with all your fancy hotels.” The need for funders to begin decolonizing their own ideas of project versus program structures, reporting processes, and more, is critical as more and more funding envelopes are available to Indigenous-focused initiatives.

The ability to craft successful grants and other forms of funding is another forte of MPSSAS that continues to thread through the organization’s capacity to stitch services together over time. Securing new grants is often difficult; writing successful grants takes time, skill, and to some extent also luck. The amount of work that goes into writing a grant can detract from other, equally necessary work of the executive director and staff. Reporting back to funding sources may be particularly onerous and may not reflect the actual outcomes of the project or reflect the priorities of the client group or community being served. For example, the funder may be more interested in the number of clients served, rather than the quality of change occurring for a client. The amount of time allocated by the funder under the guise

of ‘best practice’ may be too short (e.g. 6 – 10 sessions versus 20 sessions or more) to begin to address complex traumas. The requirement to fit a round peg into the square hole of the funding sources may see the organization getting creative with how it balances the actual needs of clients with the expectations of funders. MPSSAS developed innovative service applications and approaches, despite funders’ constraints, that complement the organization’s philosophy and approach. Although the organization continues to advocate for a more robust funding envelope from the province to address the full scope of service, and to address Indigenous-specific needs, the long-term financial outlook is not promising in terms of funding increases. For the foreseeable future, Indigenous-specific supports in the agency will continue to be reliant on MPSSAS securing sporadic grant funding.

MPSSAS’ provision of Indigenous cultural healing supports to non-Indigenous folks, is especially unique, we believe. Another Indigenous staff member, Tala, explained:

> Indigenous methodologies are not just for Indigenous people. Indigenous methodologies are not about just being Indian, and Indigenous methodologies and research and health and ceremony and healing is about being a good person. It's about being a good relative. It's about feeling calm and grounded and balanced. That's what our ceremony does for us.

The Indigenous staff have made space with non-Indigenous women to sit in circle and to do ceremony with them, which generated a very positive response.

As well, during a recent land-based retreat with the men’s support group, some of the non-Indigenous men experienced a “profound release” by being “exposed to a form of healing completely outside of their lived experience.” A staff member said of the men’s service:

> [S]ome of the men who are not indigenous have been really transformed by being exposed to a form of healing that is completely outside of their lived experience, yet so needed for them as individuals that it really -- one man said, basically, this

> filled something that he had not been filled into as a child. And this is a man who's in his 70. So, we're talking about decades.

MPSSAS has adopted the Fireweed model for male survivors of sexual violence. It uses a Two-Eyed Seeing approach that blends Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of healing from trauma. This blending also reflects the organization's overall position on bridging cultures and sharing the strengths of both worldviews to offer the best supports to clients in respectful, responsive ways. As Kara noted, it is important to ensure that Indigenous knowledges are protected, even when they are shared, and so having a balance of an Indigenous male worker is crucial to ensuring that knowledge shared is not misused.

A final element of the strength and success of the organization is its board of directors. While we were not able to meet with the board to interview for this project, its members are made up of a diverse group of individuals, many of whom are social workers or counsellors in regional agencies, or who have had some type of strong community involvement over the years. Several of the board are members of First Nations in the region, whose perspectives further supports the work of MPSSAS, particularly as the Indigenous services evolve.

Challenges

The Violence Against Women (VAW) sector, as Lauren put it, is a "silenced sector." Lack of funding impacts not only programming but also the staff who may retire in poverty. Nonetheless, during the sharing circle, staff articulated a sense of "nevertheless, she persists" and "we're still here." Decolonizing the funding landscape, although identified as a strength above, is also an ongoing struggle. As noted earlier, the pushback from a funder on an application for land-based retreats because it looked like programming rather than a conventional systems' change project, is just one example of colonial paradigms that need deconstructing. Having space to build the relationships between the youth is reflective of Indigenous worldviews. Being able to do things "in a good way" is crucial to the success of

a project or program. What constitutes a good way in Indigenous cultures is a much slower, reflective, spirit-based process than what mainstream funders are familiar with. Indigenous-centred processes also embrace expansive understandings of service area by traditional territories, rather than forcing services to focus on a small geographic catchment area. These challenges, along with other forms of colonial thinking, persist despite the exhortation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada to all levels of government to begin dismantling the imbalances of power that continue to marginalize and oppress Indigenous peoples.

There is a challenge in educating funders about language and Indigenous healing practices. For example, Tala stated:

> We sometimes don't have those quantitative stats to prove why a sweat lodge is going to help someone who had [previously] maybe, been assaulted in a sweat lodge, and now needs to go back into the sweat lodge…We don't have an actual report that says, why that would work. But we know it works. We know how to bring people in back to their identity spaces where they feel safe.

Similarly, across the sector, there is a lack of awareness about Indigenous experiences, the relevance of culture and cultural practices in the healing process. Kara commented on attending various service provider tables and the impact of not seeing many Indigenous faces. Yet, she also noticed that there is a desire to start bringing some attention to supporting Indigenous clients.

When it comes to working with other social service agencies, including First Nations agencies, a key challenge is the tendency "to work in silos." One staff member, Suzanne, has been with MPSSAS for six years. She stated:

> I think that this agency here and our team is the safest I've ever been a part of… And that's a big obstacle for us as a team when we're dealing with so many intersectionalities of other people, we can be a safe space. But if there's an intersectionality around addiction or housing, or shelter, or any of that then there's a

> barrier, and there's an obstacle…and there has to be a willingness on the other agencies to recognize their own racism and their own biases and deal with that.

There was a sense within the sharing circle that "breaking down these divisions of silos and race" is occurring through the allyship that MPSSAS provides, as well as its Indigenist approach. Yet, there was also sense in the circle that MPSSAS has a "target on its back" when working with outside agencies, particularly those that are not sufficiently reflecting on racism and bias in their own practices. MPSSAS is an organization that is grounded in a deeply feminist, anti-oppressive and decolonial approach to it work and its relationships within and external to the organization. At times, the organization has found sitting at regional tables to be an exercise in frustration because of fundamentally different values and expectations at play[2]. The outcome is one where MPSSAS is chastised by other organizations for not following colonial processes. Lauren and the staff are acutely cognizant of the impacts of these processes on clients, and so continue to staunchly stand with their clients, doing their utmost to ensure their essential needs are met first, so that they can then tend to the more arduous work of healing from sexual violence.

Suzanne discussed how so few sexual assault services are able and willing to be fully inclusive of Indigenous peoples' needs. She also noted how Indigenous women are policed by violence-against-women organizations when they may be seeking support. For example, Indigenous women accessing services, such as shelters for domestic violence, experience their children being apprehended while in the shelters, or the threat of child apprehension is used to pressure women to leave an abusive partner (Tutty, Nixon & Thurston 2024). These coercive tactics are deeply troubling as Indigenous children are broadly over-represented in the child welfare system (Sinha, et al. 2021). Suzanne's point about having safe spaces and services for Indigenous survivors includes not just the woman, but her family as well. This pervasive threat often inhibits Indigenous families'

[2] Disagreements over the process to anti-human trafficking funds to support victims is one example of the sources of these types of paradigmatic conflicts.

access to supports, thus impeding their abilities to engage in healing from traumas, to centre culture and connection to land and community, and to go from surviving to thriving. This sentiment was echoed by Lorna who joined MPSSAS as a project coordinator. She related her experience as an Anishinaabe woman, as a previous youth mentor, and in providing kinship care for her cousin's children has emphasized how Indigenous people experience barriers rooted in racism in heath care settings of all sorts.

Furthermore, for First Nations people, there are barriers to disclosure of sexual assault within community. Suzanne stated:

> All of our community members, our young people are shunned. If they speak about it, then they don't get jobs in the community. If moms are speaking about it, their kids are denied education or daycare.

At the same time she states,

> There's a real fear in communities to disclose to non-Indigenous people, because there's persecution. There's public shaming. There's public judgment like every time that an indigenous person is charged in our communities, it's front page and news. and everybody jumps on it and says, Oh, yeah, we heard about that native community.

While MPSSAS' main objective is to create a safe space for Indigenous people to disclose and receive support, staff identified insufficient awareness within First Nations communities of the work MPSSAS is doing. Additionally, when it comes to First Nations outreach, Suzanne noted there are "gatekeepers" within Indigenous communities: "You have people that carry that baggage and that stuff from residential school, that fear of persecution, that fear of telling."

One response to the gatekeeping problem is to "work backwards through our children" because "there's just so much brokenness in older generations." *Akinoo'amaadiwaad ji*

nookaadiziyang, the newly created youth program, appears to be surpassing expectations, with over 40 youth from across the province responding to the opening call for participants. The current board is comprised of ten of the original youth responders. The youth board spent a year just getting to know each other, in part on the land, in ceremony. This has enabled them to build their relationship and to start envisioning what the systems' changes could be that they are tasked with tackling. Taking this time and care to build these relationships is necessary, but remains a poorly understood premise, and often not accepted by funders, despite their asserted desire to fund Indigenous projects.

Moving Forward

As MPSSAS continues to forge the trail in providing Indigenous-centered sexual assault supports, several recommendations arose from research conversations.

Recommendation #1

Core funding for the full range of services is a constant concern and needs to be addressed by the provincial government. The organization has been able to develop supports and projects that are specifically oriented to the Indigenous clients, but this has ramifications for the core funded programs that have been the organization's mainstays. The core funding needs to increase to provide equity within the organization, and across the human service sector. Women's services and Indigenous services have historically received less funding than similar services (e.g. mental health, substance use treatment) yet they deal with highly complex cases that need very skilled supports.

- This recommendation also notes that inadequate funding has impacts for those long-term staff who may not have a work-based pension, or if a pension is in place, may be inadequate to the ever-increasing costs of living. Extended health benefits (dental care, allied healthcare services, medication coverage) are also affected by a lack of adequate funding by the province.

Recommendation #2

Further research would support the organization's efforts to demonstrate the effectiveness of the Indigenous supports that they offer. As well, the research can work to assist in educating funders in how they can decolonize their processes and expectations. As other sexual assault centres begin to take on the work of building Indigenous-specific services, MPSSAS has an opportunity and (perhaps) a responsibility to share its knowledge as a sector mentor.

- We note that in a sector that is chronically underfunded, this work cannot be done without additional funding and human resources, therefore this recommendation includes the proposal that the province create an enhanced funding envelope specifically to support mentoring/training opportunities that enhance the growth of Indigenous services across the sector for the trainers and trainee organizations.

Recommendation #3

Growing the awareness of the Indigenous-specific programs within First Nations/Indigenous communities will need to continue as MPSSAS evolves. A critical element of the success is the relationships of Indigenous staff and the board with the regional First Nations and urban Indigenous community. Moving beyond the conventional catchment boundaries to those of treaties or traditional territories may make the organization more accessible, particularly where service is offered online. But it will come with additional costs (i.e. human resources, operational costs) and the additional challenges for staff with client loads.

Recommendation #4

As the men's/male-identifying survivors' program evolves, the program will benefit from having an Indigenous male Elder leadership to ensure that the Indigenous knowledge that is being shared is understood appropriately by the clients.

Recommendation #5

The organization should monitor and evaluate the provision of Indigenous healing supports to the non-Indigenous clients for two reasons: On the one hand, these methods clearly resonate with many clients, so tracking and evaluating their efficacy can lend support to applications for funding for blended healing and therapeutic practices. On the other hand, ongoing assessment of the use of Indigenous healing will help to identify any points of concern for misuse of knowledge or practices and may point to alternatives that allow Indigenous staff to meet the same goals, but without risking the misuse of Indigenous knowledge.

Indigenous knowledge and practices have historically been exploited and appropriated by colonial and corporate interests to the detriment of Indigenous peoples. As MPSSAS continues to evolve and deepen its organizational commitment to be an accountable and respectful ally to Indigenous peoples, it is vital to ensure that all individuals connected to the organization understand the difference between what is appropriate, and what is appropriation. A crucial aspect is the responsibility that non-Indigenous staff, volunteers and clients have to engage in learning, such as by accessing resources suggested by MPSSAS. The organization recognizes that Indigenous peoples are not responsible for the learning of others, although they may choose to facilitate some of this.

To support this, this recommendation urges MPSSAS, with input from its Indigenous community and organizational partners, develop a specific policy statement that expresses the foundation of relationships built on allyship, responsibility, accountability, and respectfulness, highlighting the importance of the principles of cultural humility and safety. Also, the education of funders and other sector members needs to include this emphasis to reinforce that programs need to be developed with conscious attention and intention paid to the process as the programs are delivered.

Recommendation #6

Work on creating a plan to acquire a land-base in order to maintain and enhance current land-based activities. This may mean creating a partnership with a regional partner(s), or to work on building a fundraising plan that allows the organization to purchase an acreage.

Recommendation #7

Continue to ensure that time is taken to do things in the right way, so that relationships are tended to and care is given and received. As well, the education of funders and other sector members needs to include this emphasis to reinforce that programs need to be developed with conscious attention and intention paid to the process.

- We recognize that this recommendation is very difficult to operationalize and that organizational dynamics, readiness of funders and sector-adjacent organizations is critical.

Recommendation #8

Adapt current policies to reflect the decolonial and Indigenist lens that is evolving in the organization.

- We recognize that this is underway and is an ongoing process for any organization.

Conclusion

MPSSAS has been and will continue to be a leader in a sector that has been marginalized; the issue of sexual violence engenders a great deal of discomfort in society, generally, even while social norms and attitudes implicitly condone it. Building on the work started with Helen, Lauren and the MPSSAS staff and board has expanded what the organization can offer Indigenous clients and communities in ways that are novel and yet fully rooted in Indigenous paradigms and practices. The strength and stability of the relationships within the agency, and allyship with regional communities is what has made this possible. The organization has learned a great deal, grappling with the issue of not knowing enough about Indigenous experiences, history, and more, as a direct consequence of colonialism.

Learning within the organization continues to add depth and competence to what the staff offer to support clients. Additionally, bringing people into the organization who add to MPSSAS' capacity in a variety of ways contributes significantly to the organization's strengths. However, it is the organization's fearless stance on how it supports clients that is the foundation from which it builds its success. There is a deep understanding that clients may have needs beyond engaging in counselling, such as not having money to replace glasses. The little things such as this can get in the way of being able to focus on the healing process. In supporting clients holistically/wholistically, from the small things up to making space for ceremony, and beyond, MPSSAS has created opportunities to enhance Indigenous clients' healing journeys. In this way, the organization has developed outside-the-envelope approaches that offer possibilities for other organizations and communities across the sector, as well as for social policy and funding bodies as they consider how to impact the wellbeing of survivors across Ontario.

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