

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Journey Together

District of Sault Ste. Marie
Community Proposal

September 2017

District of Sault Ste. Marie *Journey Together*: Early Years Services for Indigenous Children and Families

Executive Summary

The Journey Together — Ontario's Early Years Initiative for Indigenous Children and Families is intended to enhance access to culturally relevant, Indigenous-led off-reserve early years programs and services, including child care and child and family programs. In January 2017 the Ministry of Education released Capacity Funding agreements to partners to support meaningful, collaborative discussions and local planning in the implementation of this initiative.

The District of Sault Ste. Marie Social Services Administration Board (DSSMSSAB) contracted NORDIK to provide assistance with the community review, planning, implementation and reporting for *The Journey Together* Initiative. Social Services staff, NORDIK and local Indigenous organizations including Waabinong Head Start & Family Resource Centre, and the Sault Ste. Marie Indigenous Friendship Centre worked together to develop proposals for submission to expand access to culturally relevant child care and child and family programs. Gleaning information from the consultations with both Indigenous families and service providers, the collaborative developed a community strategic plan for building on strengths and addressing gaps within the current Early Years Service system as it relates to Indigenous children and families in the District of Sault Ste. Marie.

Partners in the initiative include:

- District of Sault Ste. Marie Social Services Administration Board (Social Services);
- Waabinong Head Start & Family Resource Centre;
- The Indigenous Friendship Centre in Sault Ste. Marie;
- Nog-Da-Win-Da-Min Child and Community Services;
- Métis Nation of Ontario (Historic Sault Ste. Marie Council);
- Ontario Aboriginal Housing;
- Parents of children eligible for Indigenous services;
- Algoma Public Health;

- Algoma Family Services;
- Thrive Child Development Centre;
- Child Care Supervisors Committee;
- Sault College of Applied Arts & Technology;
- Algoma University;
- NORDIK Institute;
- The Sault Ste. Marie Innovation Centre;
- Algoma District School Board;
- Huron-Superior Catholic District School Board; and
- Conseil Scolaire Publique du Grand-Nord de l'Ontario

Methods

A variety of community-based research methods were employed in the process to generate a broad picture of the needs of Indigenous families within the DSSMSSAB's service area.

Focus groups were conducted with Indigenous families and service providers respectively. In response to initially low rates of participation, additional consultations continued either in concert with established events or drawing on the network of service providers to maximize engagement.

As part of the process, on May 11, 2017 researchers participated in a World Café held as part of the Ontario Early Years Child and Family Centre consultation and planning process. The group responded to a number of questions related to Early Year's service delivery, including a question dedicated to discussion of the current level of Indigenous programming and services. Over 40 people, including parents and service providers participated in the event.

Additionally, on June 14, 2017 researchers took part in an "Early Years Fair" at the Sault Ste. Marie Indigenous Friendship Centre. Over 100 people attended the event, provided ideas on an informal "Vision Map" of services and 30 participants answered questionnaires that profiled respondents' desires for relevant service.

On July 26, 2017, researchers attended Waabinong's *Best Start 20th Anniversary* celebration. Approximately 100 people attended the event with over 60 of those attendees signing the available guestbook and providing input into a "vision map" for Early Years services. They were also asked for examples of how

Waabinong had supported Indigenous children and families in the past. Surveys completed by Indigenous child caregivers were also received and incorporated into the findings.

The data collected identified the gaps and needs affecting Indigenous children & families and fell into seven distinct categories: Culture and Language; Land and Physical Activities; Programming; Social Interaction; Family Supports; Service Provision and Collaboration; and Transportation and Location.

The Journey Together Plan was developed concurrently with the Early Years System Plan, with some of the input for each plan being gathered from shared community consultations with Indigenous families and coordinated with the consultants hired to conduct the Early Years system plan. There was a strong desire for additional partnerships, resources and knowledge about Indigenous communities, cultures and language for all Early Years service providers and clients. These collaborations also demonstrated a meaningful commitment from all participants to dialogue and engage with one another to support improving programming and services for Indigenous children and families.

The Community Strategic Plan

NORDIK compiled results of the consultations and developed a draft vision statement and strategic plan, which were presented back to the community partners on August 22nd, 2017. Following input from the partners over subsequent weeks, the strategic plan was finalized in early September.

The vision for Indigenous Early Years services in the District of Sault Ste. Marie is that:

All Indigenous children and their families have access to Indigenous-led Early Years centres/services that strengthen their relationship to Indigenous culture and language and contributes to healthy child development.

Four objectives were developed to provide the direction required to achieve the vision. These objectives are:

- 1. Implement Indigenous culture and language based programming in Early Years Services;**
- 2. Increase Indigenous organizations' capacity to lead and deliver Early Years services;**
- 3. Provide wrap around, supportive services for families; and**

4. Clear communication through networking and advocacy.

Each objective was prepared using 'Action Analysis Charts' that assist to identify paths for developing objectives into achievable supporting actions. The supporting actions in turn informed the development of a number of proposals to the Ministry of Education from Social Services, Waabinong Head Start and Family Resource Centre, the Indigenous Friendship Centre in Sault Ste. Marie, and a number of service providers who are partnering on the *Homeward Bound* initiative to support single-mothers and their children to escape the cycle of poverty.

Proposals

NORDIK assisted partners in developing a series of proposals to support the actions outlined in the Community Strategic Plan. Each proposal provides unique services or programming that will assist the District of Sault Ste. Marie Early Years system to come closer to meeting the demand for Early Years services among Indigenous children and families and to provide services and programming that integrate Indigenous culture and language in meaningful, responsive ways.

Cultural Resource Coordinator & System-Wide Training

A Cultural Resource Coordinator was proposed to be housed within Social Services. The Coordinator will develop cultural and language programming to be delivered throughout the Early Years system in the District of Sault Ste. Marie, build relationships with local Indigenous elders and knowledge keepers and coordinate their participation in Early Years programming. The proposal includes funds to support increased promotion of services and professional development for service providers to acquire greater cultural competency and skills that address needs that are particularly relevant to Indigenous children and families.

This program will assist in increasing the proportion of Early Years and Social Service staff who acquire greater familiarity with Indigenous culture, language, and approaches to care and develop the confidence to share and apply their newly acquired knowledge in other care centres. The program strives to overcome the discomfort and anxiety that many non-Indigenous and

Indigenous care providers who doubt their cultural competence have in acting on or applying their knowledge of Indigenous culture and language. It ensures the care provider feels they have acquired knowledge from an authoritative source, and have been guided through the process of applying that knowledge in respectful and non-appropriative ways. This is based on the premise that building cultural competency is not about attending workshops but about ensuring a deeper understanding of the meaning behind specific activities.

Indigenous Ontario Early Years Child and Family Centre

The Indigenous Friendship Centre in Sault Ste. Marie will operate an Indigenous Ontario Early Years Child and Family Centre to provide culturally relevant programming for children and families. Services will be provided by a team including Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs), a qualified Supervisor, an Indigenous Language teacher and an Outreach Coordinator. The Outreach Coordinator will work with the proposed Cultural Resource Coordinator, Sault College and other Indigenous community stakeholders to integrate Indigenous cultural awareness into the ECE training curriculum, and will facilitate dialogue with local school boards to address issues of transitions to school for children attending Indigenous Early Years services. Part of that process will include providing mentorship and support for Indigenous families to make informed decisions regarding their child (ren)'s school integration. In partnership with the Cultural Resource Coordinator, the Outreach Coordinator will also coordinate a peer support network for Indigenous Early Year's service providers and support the development of a staff exchange program to foster mentoring, greater collaboration and increased cross-cultural awareness among Early Years service providers throughout the District of Sault Ste. Marie.

Waabinong Child Care Centre

This proposed child care program will leverage resources and build on the expertise of Waabinong Head Start to provide Indigenous infants, toddlers and pre-school-aged children with licensed, high quality, fully subsidized, all-day child care rooted in Anishinaabe culture and language.

Waabinong Head Start and Family Resource Centre proposes to develop a new fully-funded full-day program for Indigenous children to complement its existing Head Start program. The proposed Waabinong Child Care Centre will provide children with access to Indigenous culture and language through the presence

of an Anishinaabemowin language teacher and a cultural worker and will build on the expertise of Waabinong Head Start's Indigenous Early Years management and staff to provide culturally responsive programming. Through the presence of a Family Resource Consultant and access to additional professional development opportunities for all staff, the program will provide access to specialized services on-location for children with a variety of special needs. A School Liaison Worker will facilitate dialogue with local schools and school boards to address issues of school transitions for Indigenous children attending Waabinong programs, will support each child's caregivers in advocating for the best interests of their child with the schools, and will monitor the child's transition up to a year after their last attendance at Waabinong programs.

The program will increase the number of ongoing, fully-funded spaces for Indigenous children by 37 spaces (6 infants, 15 toddlers and 16 pre-school) with services later expanded to include before and after-school care. Transportation will also be provided to children to and from the Centre.

Homeward Bound Child Care Centre

The proposed Homeward Bound Child Care Centre will be part of the larger Homeward Bound initiative that supports single-mothers and their children to escape the cycle of poverty by providing key supports such as housing, child care, and access to education. Child care is a critical component of the program and this proposal will ensure the provision of high quality, fully-subsidized full day child care rooted in Anishinaabe culture and language through the presence of an Anishinaabemowin language teacher and a cultural worker. The program will increase the number of fully-funded spaces for Indigenous children by 32 spaces (6 infants, 10 toddlers and 16 pre-school).

Partners in the initiative include the DSSMSSAB, the Indigenous Friendship Centre in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario Aboriginal Housing, Sault College, Algoma University, Métis Nation of Ontario and other Indigenous community organizations.

Next Steps

The community plan outlined in the research provides a roadmap for ongoing dialogue, engagement and the development of the proposed programs and services to support improving the social, educational and cognitive outcomes

for Indigenous children and answering the call for greater integration of Indigenous culture and language into Early Years services. Opportunities to share cross-cultural dialogue will benefit both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, both at the level of service providers and administrators as well as among children and their caregivers.