

# **TOWARDS A VALUED LIFE-STYLE FOR NATIVE PEOPLE**

**A NEEDS ASSESSMENT AND PLANNING  
PAPER FOR NATIVE PEOPLE IN  
SIMCOE COUNTY AND YORK REGION**

## **SUMMARY**

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## BACKGROUND

### Introduction

The Barrie Area Native Advisory Committee (BANAC) was established to improve the quality of life for Native people in Simcoe County and York Region. BANAC includes representatives of Native organizations and government agencies. This project emerged from BANAC's recognition that service to Native people in the area had a number of gaps and inadequacies. What was needed was a systematic needs assessment in which community members, service providers, administrators and others helped identify the main issues, existing resources, service gaps and inadequacies.

### Project Objectives and Methods

. To determine the positive quality of life values desired by Native people within Simcoe County and York Region

. To determine the issues and circumstances faced by Native people which prevent the achievement of the positive values.

. To identify the types of resources and other solutions which would improve the quality of life.

. To describe the current resources

. To assess existing resources.

. To recommend changes

A community action research approach was utilized, one in which information was collected for problem solving, social and organizational change. The project required close collaboration between researchers and community members, and used data for educational purposes. Community members were directly involved in the research process. Information was gathered from Native communities in Barrie, Christian Island, Georgina Island, Midland, Orillia and Rama.

Three sub-projects formed the core of the research:

The Community Needs Study aimed to understand the quality of life ideals held by people, and the types of issues and circumstances that impeded achievement of these ideals. Ninety-two people were interviewed for their knowledge and experience in the areas of family life, health, education, employment, alcohol abuse, recreation and culture. Information was reviewed in six community meetings.

A Resource Assessment Study of sixty-eight Native and non-Native service providers, on and off-reserve, focused on describing existing programs and services, and assessing the quality of service delivery.

A Public Education Conference aimed (i) to share the research findings with the communities and service agencies, and stimulate discussion of common solutions (ii) to create an atmosphere for positive changes in government policy, programs and services, and (iii) to provide a forum for community input.

A BANAC working group was involved closely with the research team, and a BANAC staff organized and assisted the project. Information was gathered by a team of Native surveyors. Two technical consultants designed and completed the research and writing.

## FINDINGS

### A Vision of Ideals and Valued Life-Styles

When Native people were asked to identify their hopes, dreams and future aspirations, the following themes emerged:

- . A strong family life of healthy relationships, quality child-rearing, extended family ties, community participation, and access to child care.
- . Strong individual and community identities based on Native background and revitalization of culture and language.
- . A sense of practical competence involving work and life skills, parenting abilities, capacity to set and achieve life goals, and problem-solving.
- . Community strength, reflected in such qualities as a strong sense of community, mutual involvement and participation

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- . Economic security, to meet basic and recreational needs, and to establish a foundation for family and community strength.
- . The value of learning, reflected in the achievement of a good education for their children, adult learning, life skills and literacy.
- . Physical health and well-being, through the absence of disease, freedom from alcohol/substance abuse, happiness, self-respect, social skills and confidence.
- . The acquisition of housing as a source of shelter, safety and health, family and personal well-being.

#### **Current Challenges**

Native people in Simcoe County and York Region are rising to the challenges of realizing their values and aspirations. Many are committed to the goal of self-determination, and are actively involved in community building and cultural revitalization. However, a number of issues and problems still need to be confronted.

#### **Family Life**

What is missing for many people are solid economic foundations for healthy families and strong ties with the community at large. As well, cultural strength and parenting skills are limited. These missing ingredients weaken families and parenting. Family violence exists in some families. Alcohol is a major factor in most violent situations in aboriginal communities.

Native women have long been central to family life, and to cultural leadership. Today many women are the victims of single parent situations, assault, alcoholism, inadequate community resources, and emotional pain.

### **Rekindling of Aboriginal Culture and Native Language**

Aboriginal society has a long, honourable history. The languages are precise and descriptive. Aboriginal culture and life ways are sensible, practical, sensitive and useful.

Many interviews addressed the loss of culture and language, and how this loss has impacted negatively on people's lives. The most frequent and note-worthy themes are...

- .cultural loss as the root of many problems
- . the need for improving community comfort and attitudes toward living Native culture and language
- . the lack of culture and language activities for children
- . the communities' limited capacity to develop and support cultural events and ongoing programs.

### **Overcoming Alcohol and Substance Abuse**

Alcohol consumption was introduced to aboriginal people with the coming of settlers, and is a non-traditional part of Native life. Since entering their lives, it has caused havoc and destruction of the integral elements of Native culture and values.

From this study, the essential points about alcohol and other substance abuses are that:

- . Alcohol and other substance abuses are viewed as problems in all communities.
- . Compared to normal social drinking, alcohol abuse is defined as drinking on a regular, daily basis. Substance abuse involves the use of marijuana, cocaine and hashish.
- . Alcohol abuse is generally viewed as prevalent among men, women and children, but is particularly true of the unemployed, young people thirty and under, and single people.
- . Substance abuses other than alcohol are more evident among young people, and are more likely to promote crime.

Native people described the immediate cause of alcohol abuse as: unemployment, peer pressure, depression, childhood learning, family problems, personal crisis, boredom, society's promotion of alcohol, and a possible low level of tolerance.

Native people in Simcoe County and York Region believe that alcohol abuse contributes to...

- . environments where children learn alcohol abuse habits.
- . family isolation from the community.
- . breakdown in family relationships, resulting in physical abuse, arguing, and violence.
- . poor child-rearing and adult relationships with children, including neglect, adolescent rebellion, mental, physical and sexual abuse.
- . unemployment, and an inadequate financial base for strong families.

### **Employment and Income: Changing Attitudes**

Historically, Native people were self-employed and self-sustaining.

With World War II came the transition between the cultural and modern day society. From all interviews, unemployment and limited incomes loom large in affecting almost all areas of life.

The average estimated unemployment rate for all Simcoe County and York Region Native communities is 41%.

- . On average, the household incomes in these communities is \$25,000 or under; many household incomes are estimated at under \$15,000. The following groups are described as particularly hard hit by low incomes: single, teenage or sole support parents; those on fixed incomes; youth who left school early.
- . Most people reported a community concern about the quality of life of those with low incomes. Two-thirds of our interviewees believe that community members do not have enough income to meet their needs.

For Native people, unemployment is one of the many products of oppression, creating an experience described as "ethnostress". Ethnostress is the disruption of the joyful sensations of being Native. Mutual respect and trust are lost, and the capacity to reach out and help is weakened.

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The study asked people to compare successful and unsuccessful employment-seekers, and what factors seemed to make a difference.

The following were highlighted:

- . Life skills and training for accessing, holding, and doing well in jobs.
- . Educational background.
- . Access to transportation.
- . Personal qualities such as motivation, assertiveness, confidence and self-esteem, having clear life goals and priorities, and a positive attitude.
- . Family support and positive experiences.
- . Employment opportunities.
- . Relevance, quality and use of existing employment programs.
- . Criteria for employment on reserve.

As well, a deep-rooted feeling exists that some peoples' attitudes toward employment and income is not one of a 9-5 lifestyle. Accumulating personal wealth at the expense of others is not traditionally Native.

## **Health and Well-Being**

Native people believe that good health is a gift from the Creator, and that each person has a responsibility to stay healthy. Good health balances the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual.

Native people in Simcoe County/York Region spoke at length of their health. When describing positive physical health, many spoke of physical fitness, healthy and happy appearances. Others emphasized sound and balanced minds. Still others spoke of active life styles, sports and general participation in community life.

Person after person observed that few people in the community display the healthy signs and behavior described above. The most serious health problems are diabetes, stress and tension, obesity, alcoholism, heart problems, and high blood pressure,

Alcohol abuse was viewed as a main contributor to physical health problems. Other factors contributing to poor physical health are: stress, depression, worry; poor eating habits; life-style (smoking, insufficient rest, inadequate exercise); socio-economic factors (unemployment, poor paying jobs, urban culture shock).

Asked to identify life experiences contributing to mental health problem and stress, people cited alcohol or drug abuse, economic difficulties, and family problems. Oppression experienced over the years has interfered with full self-realization. Restricted opportunities and cultural loss, for many Native people, creates misery and confusion.

## **Housing**

Chronic housing problems face Native people whether they live in urban, remote or rural communities. In the community needs study, many housing issues or concerns were identified, but the most common was a concern for the limited numbers of housing units due to limited funds. Suitability of housing was also troublesome.

More housing units and suitable types of housing would have enormous healthy consequences for family life, including: less overcrowding, opportunities for quality relationships across the generations, teaching by older persons, space for study and "private time".



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Several people were critical of housing which is not appropriate or supportive of Native culture. For example, people want housing which accommodates and integrates the elderly into the life of the community.

The impact of poor housing is far-reaching: depression, poorly looked after housing, lower standard of life-style, overcrowding, poor sanitary conditions, and isolation.

### **Education: Regaining Control**

Historically, parents and Elders were the principle educators in Native society. Culture and language were taught and a way of living was retained. Education was everyday living, not confined to a classroom setting. With residential schools, Native people were forced to hand over the teaching responsibility to others.

The importance of education for Native people in Simcoe County and York Region was emphasized repeatedly. As well, many concerns were voiced, including a high drop-out rate, lack of parental and community support for children's schooling, the lack of Native cultural teaching in the school system, and insufficient support for adult learners. Part of the problem is that Natives are insufficiently involved in the school system, through parental participation or Board membership.

Interviews also uncovered the strong ties between family life and schooling, and how improving the quality and strengths of families would have important pay-offs.

### **Recreation: For the Betterment of Body, Mind and Spirit**

Recreation is vital to well-being. It is a source of learning and is good for mind, body and spirit. Historically, Native recreation was a family activity that strengthened the bond between individuals, families and communities.

Many respondents see improvements in the quality of recreation as essential to strengthening communities and establishing a better quality of life. Although efforts are already well underway, several concerns were expressed: lack of volunteers and community participation, poor organization of programs, access problems, too few activities for involving entire families or special groups, and the competition from alcohol.

Again, the absence of sufficient and suitable recreational alternatives is believed to weaken family life. Recreation was described as a way of strengthening whole communities and revitalizing culture.

## **Existing Programs and Services**

The aims of this section are first to identify resource gaps, next to assess how well existing resources are working for Native people, and finally to summarize ideas for change suggested during interviews and community meetings.

A broad network of Native and non-Native programs are available to Native clients. However, the research uncovered a number of resource gaps, and struggles to provide adequate services.

The following resource gaps are common to most communities.

### **Alcohol**

.Native alcohol treatment centre

### **Cultural**

.capacity to provide cultural experiences

.resources to create positive community attitudes and involvement in culture

.opportunities/facilities for language learning

### **Education**

.Native resource people in the educational system: guidance counsellors, teachers/teachers aids

.resource programs to promote the support of children's schooling by families and the community at large

.support for adult education: training information in relation to careers; day-care; information to link adult education and potential employment on reserves; study skills programs

### **Employment and Income**

.resources to help change employer attitudes towards Natives

.resources to change attitudes towards work and welfare

### **Family and Children's Services**

.family life and parenting skills education

.resources for building the cultural foundations of family life

### **Recreation**

.facilities for expanded recreational programs

.organizational support for recreation: staff, committees, volunteers, planning and publicity

.programming for special interests: all-family events, variety, sports activities, women's interests, non-competitive events

### **Housing**

.limited amount of available housing; slow rate of development

.support for potential and existing home-owners: advice on financing and building; up-to-date information; development of fair and consistent policies

.wider range of options: renting or owning; single parent housing; single youth; large families; extended family housing

.gaps in appropriate housing program resources, including: organization, administration, full-time staff, housing specialists, committees

### **Health and Well-Being**

.programs and facilities specializing in the stress and mental illnesses related to "ethnostress", i.e. the psychological problems associated with being a Native person in Canadian society.

### **The Effectiveness of Services**

#### **Native Services**

Research suggests that many Native people do not use services that could possibly meet their needs. Across all services, Native service-providers find that certain community groups are difficult to reach, particularly people aged 15-50, and young parents.

Native service providers find it difficult to meet community needs, attributing this to insufficient resources and programs, lack of community participation and support, and in some cases poor co-operation and co-ordination with other programs. For the most part, networking with non-Native organizations is positive.

In some service areas, such as alcohol abuse, needy people do not acknowledge their problems. In other instances, they may be unaware of available programs. Strong efforts are needed to change certain community life-style patterns, such as excessive drinking.

Native service-providers were positive about their ability to meet the immediate needs of troubled people, but were less optimistic about making long-lasting improvements. The main unmet needs were identified as mental health and spiritual healing, family life education and parent skills development, family support and counselling, treatment and after-care for alcoholics and adult children of alcoholics, cultural awareness, education and training, court advocacy and support, career counselling, housing and housing information.

### **Generic Services**

Native service providers claim that most Native people in need are willingly to use non-Native services, and most claim that client needs are being met. However, many non-Native service providers interviewed claim that many needy Native people do not seek their services. As well, one-third expressed some difficulties in serving Native clients; many lacked sufficient resources. **Family and children services agencies seem to have the most difficulties.** Most were unable to say how many Natives use their services.

The main reasons why Native people may find it difficult to use generic services are: cultural and language differences, lack of Native staff, accessibility, cost, complex Band procedures, a lack of program awareness, staff unawareness of Native needs, and a general discomfort in non-Native settings.

Information is an important resource in service agency functioning. Non-Native service providers overwhelmingly need more and better information to serve Native people. In particular, information is needed on needs, descriptions of other programs and Band operations, and awareness training on Native life, culture and mobility trends.

Non-Native staff were evenly divided on the level of co-operation and co-ordination with other agencies in providing service to Native clients. **Family service liaisons seem most in need of improvement.** Most informants in housing, education, culture and recreation said that coordination was good; a few said that it needed improvements.

## **Suggestions for Change**

What changes might help Native people in Simcoe County and York Region achieve ideals and valued life-styles? As an action research project, this research took special pains to stimulate ideas from community members, Native and generic service providers.

Service leaders take the position that a better quality of life for Native people will result from self-determination. In the social service field, this means that Native communities should plan, operate, and generally control their own services. People representing different service areas and communities expressed slightly different priorities. These are presented in the main report. However, several broad suggestions tend to cut across many areas of life. Native quality of life would be enhanced by:

.Economic development

.Housing

.Community changes: increased voluntarism, support and participation in existing programs, general life-style changes, community cohesiveness, and attitude changes towards traditional culture.

.A more preventative approach in existing programs, particularly in the service areas of family life, alcohol abuse, and health.

.Organizational changes: appropriate staffing, training, program advertisement, links with other programs and organizations.

.Better access to resources from island communities, particularly recreation, employment, training and health.

.Cultural revitalization and language use, including culturally appropriate helping approaches, cultural teachings in schools.

.Greater responsiveness to Native people by schools and service agencies.

.Program changes to involve whole families, provide opportunities for emotional healing, reflect actual community needs, and connect with the community at large.

.New program facilities, particularly for family programs, recreation and mental health.

.Community and parental support of schooling

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Towards a Valued Life-Style: Community Action**

This section contains several recommendations from the project consultants. The recommendations respond to the serious quality of life problems identified, and to the difficulties experienced in current service delivery.

#### **Family Life**

- 1.It is recommended that all communities make special efforts to strengthen the family as a support system for the educational aspirations of both children and adults.**
  
- 2.It is recommended that, using current information on community needs and possible future directions, all Native family programs collaborate in a planning process for identifying future priorities.**
  
- 3.It is recommended that all communities collaborate in developing a comprehensive list of resource people and resource materials for both professional and volunteer work in family life, giving special emphasis to women and women's groups as resources.**
  
- 4.It is recommended that existing family and children's services should be consolidated into a new Native child and family service agency.**

**Native Women**

5. It is recommended that all communities give special priority to improving the lives of Native women in their family and community leadership roles, through such activities as (i) supporting women's groups (ii) building relationships between such groups (iii) a research conference on the needs of Native women (iv) a family violence initiative for September 1991 funding (v) a Native women's resource centre in the Quality of Life Learning Lodge (see later recommendation)

**Employment**

6. It is recommended that isolated communities consider the appropriateness of volunteer-based transportation models for rural areas and senior citizens.

7. It is recommended that all six communities make sure that social service training and employment needs are communicated to the Local Management Board (Employment and Immigration Canada) attending to Simcoe County and York Region.

**Cultural Awareness and Language Use**

8. It is recommended that all communities should collaborate in developing and realizing their goals for the promotion of culture and language, through such activities as cultural contacts between communities, involving Elders, promoting cultural awareness and language use in schools, and developing a cultural resource centre.

**Community Development**

9. It is recommended that communities seek community development assistance to strengthen their particular program development needs. Priority should be given to helping the recruitment and support of volunteers for family programs, and encouraging greater community participation in existing programs.
10. It is recommended that each community take steps to discover the potential alternative use of existing facilities for family programs, women's activities, and other initiatives. Facilities other than those presently identified and developed as service facilities should be sought out.

**Education**

11. It is recommended that all six communities collaborate on the planning and development of a Native Quality of Life Learning Lodge.

**Health and Well-Being**

12. It is recommended that all Native communities in Simcoe County and York Region collaborate in the establishment of a comprehensive Native healing lodge.

**Recreation**

13. It is recommended that communities design and provide recreational programs which promote family togetherness and involvement in the life of the community by all people.
14. It is recommended that communities identify and share the various cultural aspects of recreation, such as Native sports figures, traditional games, and forms of leisure, recreation and fitness practised in early Native communities.
15. It is recommended that all communities collaborate in seeking government and private funding for recreational development, giving special emphasis to how recreation helps to develop communities and improve the over-all quality of life.



**Housing**

16. It is recommended that all communities collaborate in establishing a housing working group for the purpose of promoting mutual education among Native communities and the appropriate housing organizations. Special attention should be given to (i) assuring that CMHC has appropriate information concerning housing needs (ii) culturally appropriate housing preferences (iii) lobbying methods for impacting policy, and (iv) alternative approaches and criteria for allocating houses to community members.
17. It is recommended that communities maintain up-to-date information on housing programming, particularly for the use and continuing education of housing specialists and committees within each community.

**Friendship Centres**

18. It is recommended that both Friendship Centres should foster (i) community development (ii) access to community resources, and (iii) community mental health. Depending on priorities, these could be fulfilled by the addition of a Community Development Officer, a Community Resources Officer (also responsible for cultural awareness), and a Community Mental Health Worker, specializing in prevention work.

**How BANAC Can Support The Above Recommendations**

19. It is recommended that BANAC, to fulfil its supportive roles, should immediately develop a clear mission statement. This vision-building process can start with the ideal quality of life images discussed earlier.
20. It is strongly recommended that BANAC continue as a central supportive and advisory body.
21. It is recommended that BANAC assume the following on-going and new functions: planning support, enhancing the flow of information, supporting change, and policy liaison.
22. It is recommended that an office be established for a transitional period, and that funding be obtained to hire three full-time staff.
23. One of BANAC's top priorities should be the task of facilitating the improvement in delivery of existing Native and generic services to Native people.

**24. It is recommended that BANAC take immediate action in circulating important information to communities and service providers.**

**25. It is recommended that BANAC renew its efforts to attract additional members.**

