

Board of Health Briefing Note

To: Chair and Members of the Board of Health
Date: October 6, 2021
Topic: **Relationship Building with First Nation and Métis Communities in Timiskaming: A Land Acknowledgement as a Next Step**
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Recommendations:

It is recommended that the Timiskaming Board of Health

1. Receive the briefing note *Relationship building with First Nation and Métis Communities in Timiskaming: A Land Acknowledgement as a Next Step* for information.

Ontario Public Health Standards (2018) and Timiskaming Health Unit Strategic Plan 2019-2023

- **Health Equity, Foundational Standard:** Public health practice results in decreased health inequities such that everyone has equal opportunities for optimal health and can attain their full health potential without disadvantage due to social positions or other socially determined circumstances.¹
Standard Requirement(s) Addressed: Requirement #3: The board of health shall engage in multi-sectoral collaboration, including engagement with communities and organizations, such as Indigenous communities.¹ The Relationship with Indigenous Communities Guideline, 2018 emphasizes the importance of engaging with Indigenous communities to foster and create meaningful relationship and collaborative partnerships to work towards decreasing health inequities.^{1,2}
- **Strategic Plan 2019-2023 Strategic Directions: #1** We infuse our work with learning and passion: *we apply a health equity lens in all of our work*; **#3** We collaborate with partners to make a difference in our communities: *we nurture positive and effective relationships with community partners to improve public health*; and **#4** We adapt to address the diverse and changing local needs: *we engage in meaningful relationships that respect and respond to our cultural and linguistic diversity*.³

Background:

The need for meaningful relationships between boards of health and local Indigenous communities and organizations is demonstrated in the Health Equity Standard of the Ontario Public Health Standards (OPHS). It states: “Engagement with Indigenous communities and organizations, as well as with First Nation communities striving to reconcile jurisdictional issues, shall include the fostering and creation of meaningful relationships, starting with engagement through to collaborative partnerships...”¹ (p.22)

Indigenous engagement is a sustained process where trust is built by ensuring Indigenous peoples have the opportunity to actively participate in decision-making from the earliest phase.⁴ Relationships are the foundation of successful collaboration between public health and Indigenous communities to achieve and maintain good health for all.⁴

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada defines reconciliation as “. . . an ongoing process of establishing and maintaining respectful relationships.”⁵, p.16

THU has been working to purposefully support pathways for trusting relationships and meaningful engagement to achieve the shared goal of Reconciliation and improved health and wellbeing for all.

THU staff have been supported with various cultural safety trainings and learning opportunities to reflect into public health practice and develop a deeper understanding of the history of Indigenous peoples.

In 2019, THU was involved in a research project titled *Talking Together to Improve Health*. The project explored and shared promising strategies, principles, and practices for engagement with First Nations communities and public health units in Northeastern Ontario. Four core principles of engagement were identified: Respect, Trust, Self-Determination and Commitment.⁶

A health equity situational assessment conducted by THU in 2019 included an assessment of health equity indicators for local public health agencies based on 5 roles for public health action on health equity: Role 1- Assess and report; Role 2- Modify and re-orient interventions; Role 3- Partner with other sectors; Role 4- Participate in policy development; and Role 5- Organizational development.^{7,8} From this an internal health equity committee was created to identify priorities for action and develop a multi-year work plan with monitoring indicators.

While the internal health equity committee has been on hold due to capacity impact of the local COVID-19 response, some work has continued related to relationship building with First Nation and Métis communities. This includes formal and informal engagement of Indigenous leaders and communities to inform local COVID-19 response, to plan, deliver and evaluate a local digital divide project and to plan and co-deliver COVID-19 vaccine clinics and supporting ongoing and/or self-directed learning opportunities. THU staff also drafted a Land Acknowledgement and some staff have used it during meetings with external partners and select internal meetings as deemed meaningful.

Considerations for the development of a Land Acknowledgement for Timiskaming Health Unit and Commitment towards Reconciliation.

Land Acknowledgements involve making a statement that recognizes the traditional territory of Indigenous peoples who called the land home before the arrival of settlers, and still call it home today.^{9,10} They help build awareness of Indigenous history and affirm the need to respect rights of Indigenous peoples set out in treaties, agreements and other constructive agreements.¹¹ Land Acknowledgements have been increasingly used across Canada by governments, non-government organizations and various institutions as a practice of reconciliation and to acknowledge the legacy of historical and intergenerational harm resulting from colonial practices and policies including the residential school system and the sixties scoop. They must take place within the broader context of authentic work towards Reconciliation.

Land acknowledgements are standard practice for local public health agencies and typically delivered verbally at the opening of each of the following:

- Board of Health meetings
- Formal meetings with external partners including virtual meetings taking place across the district, workshops and training sessions
- Public events or gatherings

They may also be placed on public health agency website and included in e-mail signatures.

THU has identified a need to finalize a comprehensive, district-wide Land Acknowledgement in consultation with local Indigenous partners as a small but important step in building meaningful relationships. To reflect THUs commitment to the shared path of Reconciliation, a statement of commitment shall be included in the Land Acknowledgement.

Next Steps

THU staff will engage with local First Nations and Métis partners to develop a comprehensive, accurate and meaningful district-wide Land Acknowledgement. The aim is to bring a final draft of a Land Acknowledgement with a resolution to approve to the BOH by the end of 2021 noting that as a practice a Land Acknowledgement is fluid and as need arises, THU staff will work to revise the Land Acknowledgement.

To support ongoing meaningful relationships that come from a place of trust, mutual respect, understanding and reciprocity, ongoing internal work will continue to support cultural safety development and learning and guidance on THUs Land Acknowledgement.

Staff will continue to follow-up and engage with First Nation and Métis partners to explore opportunities for action toward Reconciliation, reduce health inequities and achieve health and well-being for all.

References

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