

Urban Aboriginal Economic Development National Network



Background Brief:

Aboriginal Business and Community Development Centre: All Nations Elders

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Title: Aboriginal Business and Community Development Centre – All Nations Elders

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About the Urban Aboriginal Economic Development Network: The Urban Aboriginal Economic Development National Network is an open and inclusive multi-stakeholder network of researchers and practitioners working in urban Aboriginal and Métis communities. This includes organizations, universities, federal/provincial/municipal and Aboriginal governments, private industry, community groups, and NGO's. The network's focus is on mobilizing economic development knowledge and strengthening organizational capacity.

This paper can be found on the network website: <http://abdc.bc.ca/uaed>

The Aboriginal Business and Community Development Centre (ABDC) in Prince George, BC is a results oriented team of professionals, working together in unity to provide a full spectrum of culturally, client sensitive, business and economic development services to assist Aboriginal individuals, organizations and communities to achieve ‘their’ full potential.

The Role of Elders in Urban Aboriginal Communities

Elders traditionally play an important role in Aboriginal communities. “Aboriginal communities highly esteemed their ageing members, turning to grandmothers and grandfathers for advice, teaching, and guidance in raising children and maintaining traditional cultural practices” (Government of Canada referenced in ABDC *Elders Rock*, 2). The role of senior members of traditional communities was that of passing on knowledge, skills, and history, providing advice and wisdom to younger generations. Teaching traditional hunting practices and medicinal knowledge, to name two examples, required physical and mental fitness and were crucial to community survival.

Colonization and modern lifestyle changes have impacted Elders, their role in society, and the traditional social structure of Aboriginal communities. Physical and mental health deterioration among Elders due to these changes has made it difficult for many to fulfill their traditional roles or have eliminated some of the roles altogether. The urban Aboriginal community of Prince George, like many other Aboriginal communities, has not been able to fully benefit from their Elders for the above mentioned reasons. A majority of Prince George Elders struggle with health issues and are unable to fulfill their traditional roles. As a result, the Elders called for help and assistance to aid them back into a position to help their community, to fulfill their role, to contribute to and be present in schools and educational institutions, and to get involved in all aspects of community life.

Organized Revival of Elder Roles

Various Elder groups were formed to provide support and networking opportunities. The common issue of multiple national heritages and origins in urban Aboriginal communities manifested itself in the operation of these groups. The co-existing groups were unable to instigate cooperation among each other and, over time, became protective of their own. Therefore, in 2008, at the request of the Elders, ABDC convened open space meetings for all Elders and community members regardless of nationality or ethnic affiliations. The purpose was to initiate open conversations about improvements for the Elders and the community.

The establishment of the *Elders Rock* Newsletter in December 2008 marks the beginning of a united group of Elders for the urban Aboriginal community of Prince George. Regular meetings and an Elders Camp further consolidated the group. Eventually, the All Nations Elders (ANE) was formed in 2009. The ANE was purposely named to express its function as a counseling body as opposed to a governing body. The group is open to any Elder or younger member of the community, Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, from any ethnicity or nationality. After thorough deliberation of various formats for a structure, representation, and voting system, the Elders

decided not to adopt any structural formats and simply hold monthly meetings that are open to anyone who is interested. They feared the possible downfalls of electing a Board or spokesperson and determining a voting system, such as hurt feelings and an overload of formalities.

Activities

ANE meetings are broken into three segments:

- The first segment of every meeting is dedicated to the Elders talking among themselves and networking. Communication is an important part of traditional, oral cultures and provides knowledge exchange, experience sharing, and a social network and safety net.
- The second segment consists of time made available to community members who wish to get advice and counseling from the Elders. People, organizations, schools, and anyone interested or in need of Elder counsel can contact ABDC in advance and ask for time allocation in an ANE meeting. One example of what is being discussed with the Elders is the Aboriginal Choice School, which is to open in Prince George in September 2010.
- The last segment of each meeting is dedicated to learning and training for the Elders themselves. Workshops are provided to further the Elders' health, skills, and quality of life as well as their ability to advise their community. For example, workshops on health issues such as diabetes and Elder mental health, or workshops on financial literacy have been held.

ANE has grown and evolved over the past year. The monthly newsletter indicates a variety of activities and events for Elders and community members. The events, some of which are ongoing, range from health care and sports to cooking, eating, and celebrations. Elders are meeting more frequently for get-togethers, arts and crafts, and networking. Elders Camps provide further networking, a closer relationship between the Elders, knowledge sharing, and learning experiences from guest speakers and performers.

As an organization, ANE provides support for the Elders in finding out their personal strengths and areas of interest in which individuals wish to get involved. For example, a sub-group has been formed for those who would like to be involved in the school system. The Elders of that sub-group receive training and advice on how to fulfill their roles and, for example, give presentations in schools and educational institutions. They are also supported with bureaucratic aspects such as criminal background checks.

ANE has also established its role in the community as the body to address when in need of Elder counsel, input, or involvement, whereas, previously, there was a problem with the lack of contact persons and the risk of offending one person by contacting another. As an established community organization with community contacts, the Counsel encourages community members and other community organizations to approach Elders and reintegrate the Elder role into community life.

ANE from a UAED Perspective

The recognition of the need for Elders in healthy urban Aboriginal communities is an important step that is demonstrated and implemented in the establishment of ANE. Especially in fragmented urban communities, which struggle with individualization and a lack of coherence and communal experiences, reintroducing Elders in their traditional roles and reclaiming the practice of community activities and knowledge sharing are very important to community health and stability. Offering Elders a platform, showing them the respect they deserve, and leading them back into the role of advisors, counselors, and teachers enables a community to benefit from Elder knowledge and input.

The advantages of having an organized, approachable group of Elders in an urban Aboriginal community are many: other urban Aboriginal organizations are enriched by Elder input and membership; traditional ways are passed on and kept alive or revitalized; a functioning community support system with involved, respected Elders can solve problems like daycare and senior care, which is a vital contribution to economic advancement of a community as it allows parents to work, reduces senior care costs, and enhances quality of life for all parties involved.

From a governance perspective, ANE shows that an urban Aboriginal organization does not need to be a structured governing body. A counseling body can achieve a lot in terms of community health. However, the Elders of ANE have not taken on any functions that require interaction with and integration into the dominant government system. This is the characteristic that allows them to refuse to become a governing structure and still be an effective and influential part of the community. ANE can be seen as an advisory tool for urban Aboriginal governance bodies. As such it is important to UAED and urban Aboriginal governance in its own way.

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