

OTF and Ontario's Aboriginal Communities: Learnings and Opportunities

45 Charles Street, East, 5th Floor
Toronto, Ontario M4Y 1S2

Telephone: 416.963.4927
Toll Free: 1.800.263.2887
Fax: 416.963.8781
TTY: 416.963.7905



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A word of thanks

The Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF) is profoundly grateful for the leadership of the late Clayton Shawana. Mr. Shawana was an OTF Grant Review Team Chair, assessing and recommending the allocation of community grants for the Algoma, Cochrane, Manitoulin and Sudbury region. He was a prominent businessman and a band councillor for many years. More recently he was the First Nations Estates Trustee and the Coordinator of the WCDG (Wikwemikong Community Development Group). He advocated strongly for this study and the Foundation’s continued engagement with First Nation people. Sadly he died before this work came to fruition.

Background

During summer and fall 2005, OTF engaged Margaret Wanlin of Wanlin & Co. to research the funding needs of Aboriginal communities and organizations in Ontario. The study included a literature scan, interviews with groups who did and did not receive OTF funding support, key informants, OTF staff and volunteers and federal and provincial government officials. An OTF Project Advisory Committee was also established, with leadership from Board members, Donna Gilhooly and Shirley Cheechoo.

Who are our Aboriginal People?

As set out in the Canadian Constitution, Aboriginal people include Indians, Métis people and Inuit people who originally inhabited North America. This fact sheet uses the term **Aboriginal** to describe all of First Nation, Aboriginal and Métis people in Ontario. It uses the term **First Nation** when referring to people, governments and organizations connected with the 134 reserves where Aboriginal people live in Ontario. It avoids the term “Indian”. The only exceptions are official titles such as **Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC)** and **status Indian**. The latter refers to people registered as Indians under the federal Indian Act and therefore entitled to live on a First Nation reserve.

The research was subsequently augmented by internal strategy development sessions, consultations with an Aboriginal reference group comprised of GRT members, as well as a special project that examined the aspects of relationship building to ensure access to Foundation grants by Aboriginal communities and organizations.

What we Learned about Aboriginal Communities in Ontario

Aboriginal communities in Ontario are very diverse, particularly in terms of the size and resources available to on- and off-reserve populations

- For instance, one of the largest First Nations in Canada, with a population of 22,000 members, receives proportionally more financial resources than 83 of the 134 First Nations in Ontario with a population under 500. In addition, large cities such as Toronto have more resources and organizations available for their Aboriginal populations than some smaller communities.

Aboriginal communities in Ontario have experienced demographic and educational trends very different from the rest of the province

- The Aboriginal population in Ontario soared by 33 per cent between 1996 and 2001, compared to six per cent growth in Ontario's total population.
- The overall age of Aboriginal people in this growing population, particularly in rural and remote Ontario, is younger than the age of people in the province as a whole.
- Despite there being proportionally more young people, fewer complete secondary or postsecondary education.

Aboriginal communities in Ontario are characterized by a lack of paid work

- Unemployment levels range from 20 per cent for Aboriginal people in urban centres to up to 80 per cent for those in remote communities.

There are deep fiscal and structural challenges in many Aboriginal communities

- Numerous Aboriginal people face poverty, disempowerment and isolation. Many cope with emergency situations such as unhealthy water, forest fire or flooding evacuations, suicides, sexual, alcohol and drug abuse and family violence.
- As a result, band funds are required to support community needs, leaving little money to set up other processes, organizations or projects.
- Furthermore, housing shortages on reserves require First Nation governments to prioritize accommodation rather than community building and youth work.
- In addition, the sustainability of projects that began with OTF support may depend on the arrival of subsequent grants or other government funds.

Aboriginal people are more mobile than the general population

- In many cases, they travel in pursuit of employment, housing, education, medical care, employment and quality of life. As a result, Aboriginal people and their children are likely to contact many, rather than a single set of service providers.

What we Learned About OTF Granting

Total Granting

- Between April 1, 1999 and March 31, 2005, OTF received 443 applications, valued at over \$62.5 million, for initiatives that benefited First Nation, Aboriginal and Métis communities and organizations in Ontario.
- The largest proportion of these applications came from Northern Ontario.
- The Foundation approved 225 of these applications, valued at over \$14.7 million, for Community and Province-Wide Grants.
- This represented 2.6 per cent of all OTF funding between April 1, 1999 and March 31, 2005.
- The 60 per cent overall OTF approval rate was higher than the 51 per cent approval rate for applications from Aboriginal organizations.

The need for more outreach, particularly to northern, remote First Nations

- ❑ Although more than 40 Aboriginal groups received OTF grants, most of the First Nation communities in Ontario have neither sought nor received OTF support.
- ❑ Aboriginal organizations in Northern catchment areas received fewer and smaller grants, less money and less money per capita through OTF's current allocation methods than Aboriginal people in urban centres such as Toronto. However, most First Nation communities are located in remote Northern Ontario communities. Their project costs for activities and enrichments are high because most resources must be flown in.

The OTF grant application process can be a barrier to access

- ❑ OTF funding is perceived as hard to get and the application process is considered challenging and time-consuming.
- ❑ Some First Nations do not want to release financial information about the entire band's operations when applying for a small amount of money for a particular portion of the organization.

OTF needs to develop closer relationships within Aboriginal communities to enable clearer communication in a culturally sensitive manner

- ❑ The initial study documented examples of miscommunication between Aboriginal groups and the Foundation that at times led to confusion about the application process as well as perceptions of disrespect.
- ❑ Miscommunication often contributed to a sense among Aboriginal applicants that they were "on the outside" of a system not built to help them.
- ❑ Further research found that miscommunication is often rooted in the different assumptions that prevail between people whose context is the not-for-profit funding economy and people whose context is the Aboriginal sector funding economy.

Opportunities for OTF

- ❑ There is an opportunity for OTF to serve as a bridge between the not-for-profit and Aboriginal sectors. As a responsive, relational grant maker that focuses on capacity building, OTF has the opportunity to develop relationships in Aboriginal communities over time, support ideas, people and organizations and to build healthy and vibrant communities.
- ❑ There is an opportunity for the Foundation to fund a range of initiatives in Aboriginal communities. Many areas of needs and opportunities identified in the study are closely aligned with OTF funding priorities:
 - **Enhanced success for students and learners.** This community would benefit from opportunities for literacy, numeracy and job training.
 - **Healthy and more physically active Ontarians.** This community would benefit from opportunities to improve health and well-being.
 - **Enhanced employment and economic potential for workers and their families.** Aboriginal people would benefit from more opportunities to develop workplace skills and knowledge.
 - **More effective volunteers and more people engaged in their communities.** OTF needs to understand that in First Nation communities the link between building healthy communities and volunteerism is not a shared concept. For example, Band staff are paid for community-building work, so other community members would reasonably also expect compensation. The concept of 'giving back' to the community might resonate more strongly among First Nation groups.

What OTF is Doing

From Learning to Action

A more proactive approach to granting to Aboriginal communities and organizations

- Staff have been actively looking for opportunities to increase granting in remote areas, supported by a more proactive outreach strategy aimed at developing more effective relationships with Aboriginal communities and organizations throughout Ontario.

Aboriginal Reference Group

- OTF has also established an Aboriginal Reference Group to provide advice on outreach, recruitment, strategic partnership development and best practices. The Reference Group is made up of OTF volunteers with deep roots and experience in Aboriginal communities from different parts of the province.

Outreach strategies targeting both on-reserve and off-reserve Aboriginal communities and organizations

- Staff have developed outreach strategies with specific plans for each catchment area and the Province-Wide team. These plans include specific links with Aboriginal organizations that can support improved access.

For example:

- Two program managers traveled 2,200 kilometres over six days in May 2007 visiting eight First Nations such as Lac Seul and Wabaseemoong. They provided three information sessions for Aboriginal, Métis and First Nation organizations in Sioux Lookout, Kenora and Fort Frances and had discussions on options for projects and funding barriers.
 - OTF presented at the Ontario Native Welfare Administrators Association's spring assembly in May 2007 and set up an OTF information booth at the Manitoulin Trade Fair. The weekend long event attracted about 9,000 people.
 - Outreach sessions were held for small museums in the district of Nipissing, in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture. A meeting was also held in the Durham-Haliburton-Kawartha-Pine Ridge catchment area to facilitate better coordination of current OTF funded projects and potential future applications in the environment sector.
- As a result of outreach, granting to First Nation, Métis, and other Aboriginal communities has increased sharply since 2004. In fact, the dollar value of grants to these communities nearly doubled by 2007.

Grant Review Team Recruitment

- Staff and volunteers are also actively reaching out to Aboriginal people to identify qualified candidates and invite them to apply to join the Foundation's Grant Review Teams.

Staff and volunteer training

- The findings of this research have been shared with staff and volunteers, and special sessions have been organized at All Staff meetings to engage staff and volunteers with experts from Aboriginal communities and organizations.

Special Project to increase familiarity with Aboriginal communities and organizations

- Marilyn Struthers, a Program Manager on the Province-Wide team, has examined what helps the Foundation serve Ontario's Aboriginal communities well.

- The project has resulted in a new cultural competence approach to relationship-building, including a better understanding of the different funding contexts of the Foundation and Aboriginal communities.
- This work has helped the Foundation identify opportunities to bridge the two contexts and enhance relationships with Aboriginal communities and organizations going forward.

In addition, Mr. L. Robin Cardozo, CEO and Marilyn Struthers joined the then Ontario Lieutenant Governor James Bartleman, and Grand Chief Stan Beardy of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) on a two day visit to four remote fly-in First Nation communities. This was an opportunity to see first hand the context of First Nation people in the North and gain a better understanding of the unique challenges facing remote communities.