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ACCESS TO JUSTICE

WEAVING A COMMUNITY-
INFORMED BUNDLE



INDIGENOUS
PEOPLES
RESILIENCE
FUND

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COMMUNITY ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We recognize the importance of honouring the traditional territories where we gather.

In **Thunder Bay**, we are on the lands of the Anishnaabeg, encompassed by the Robinson-Superior Treaty.

In **Timmins**, we stand on lands governed by Treaty 9, the traditional territory of the Ojibway/Chippewa, Oji-Cree, Mushkegowuk (Cree), and Algonquin peoples.

In **North Bay**, we are on the ancestral lands of the Nipissing First Nation Anishnabe, within the areas covered by the Robinson-Huron and Upper Canada Treaties.

We also honour the vital presence of the Métis, Inuit, and all Indigenous peoples who have contributed to these sessions and whose histories, cultures, and relationships to these lands remain strong and vibrant.

THANK YOU COMMUNITY

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the representatives from Indigenous communities and organizations in Northern Ontario who participated in the focus groups and offered invaluable feedback. Your insights and experiences have been instrumental in shaping this report and guiding strategic priorities for funding access to justice programs and initiatives.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCES WITH FUNDING PROCESSES

This report consolidates findings from engagement sessions held across Northern Ontario, focusing on the systemic and structural challenges Indigenous communities face in accessing legal resources and equitable funding as part of the *Northern Ontario Indigenous Community Outreach & Engagement Initiative*, created by the Indigenous Peoples Resilience Fund (IPRF) and funded by The Law Foundation of Ontario (the LFO). Change Agency was hired to conduct the engagement sessions and produce this final report reflecting the insights from representatives from Indigenous communities, organizations, and leaders in Thunder Bay, Timmins, North Bay, and surrounding regions. These discussions shed light on the pervasive barriers that hinder access to justice and opportunities to improve funding models to serve Northern Indigenous communities.

Indigenous participants described challenges rooted in systemic discrimination, cultural insensitivity, and the historical failure of Canadian justice institutions to align with Indigenous values, rights, cultural practices, and priorities. Geographic isolation, insufficient resources, and misaligned legal systems continue to exacerbate inequities, while overly complex funding processes and restrictive eligibility criteria often prevent communities from accessing the resources needed to address these issues. These barriers are compounded by the lack of culturally safe legal services and the limited integration of Indigenous knowledge and practices into mainstream systems.





The IPRF, established with the support of philanthropic, governmental, and seed funders, seeks to address these barriers through a community-driven approach. By respecting community autonomy, shifting decision-making power to Indigenous leaders, and embracing traditional knowledge. The Fund supports innovative solutions that align with the unique needs of Indigenous communities. The engagement sessions provided actionable insights to inform equitable funding practices that amplify Indigenous voices and create culturally appropriate pathways to legal support.

This report offers practical recommendations for funders, policymakers, and organizations to address systemic inequities. These include simplifying funding processes, adopting flexible and long-term funding models, and integrating traditional knowledge into legal systems. By centering Indigenous leadership, the IPRF aims to empower communities to develop sustainable, culturally safe solutions to improve access to justice in Northern Ontario. These steps will contribute to building more inclusive funding practices, supporting resilience, and fostering self-determination for Indigenous communities.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Actionable Recommendation to Create a Community-Informed Funding Program

THEME 1

SIMPLIFIED AND ACCESSIBLE FUNDING PROCESSES

Participants **emphasized simplifying complex funding guidelines and reducing administrative burdens, particularly for smaller grants.** Current funding mechanisms were seen as overly rigid, creating challenges for Indigenous communities to navigate. **Ensuring accessibility through both digital and non-digital solutions** was noted as critical, especially for remote communities with limited technological infrastructure. Simplified processes would enable broader participation, **empowering underfunded communities to access the resources needed for impactful initiatives.**

THEME 2

COMMUNITY AUTONOMY AND LEADERSHIP

There was a **strong call for Indigenous-led decision-making** in funding allocation. Participants highlighted the importance of authentic engagement and prioritizing **community-driven needs over externally imposed priorities.** Flexible funding guidelines that allow for grassroots advocacy and innovation were essential. This approach would amplify Indigenous voices in funding decisions and foster more **equitable outcomes tailored to each community's unique context.**

THEME 3

LONG-TERM AND BRIDGE FUNDING MODELS

Short-term grants were criticized for not providing stability for long-term projects. Participants advocated for **bridge funding to cover gaps between funding cycles** and multi-year agreements to ensure continuity. These models would **reduce dependency on competitive funding environments,** allowing Indigenous-led initiatives to flourish without the constant pressure of reapplying for support.

Accessing Justice for Northern Indigenous Communities

THEME 1

STRUCTURAL AND SYSTEMIC BARRIERS

Geographic remoteness and **the lack of culturally appropriate legal resources** were highlighted as significant challenges. These issues are compounded by over-policing, systemic biases, and **underrepresentation of Indigenous individuals in jury selection and other justice processes**. Participants noted that these barriers perpetuate inequities, creating a cycle of disadvantage for Northern Indigenous communities seeking justice.

THEME 2

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE JUSTICE PRACTICES

Traditional healing practices, such as **sweat lodges and ceremonies**, were identified as **integral to fostering healing and restoring identity**. However, limited awareness and funding for these culturally responsive practices present significant obstacles. Participants **stressed the need to integrate these traditions into justice systems** to build trust, bridge cultural gaps, and create pathways for wholistic healing.

THEME 3

WHOLISTIC AND TRAUMA-INFORMED SUPPORT

Access to justice was framed as a legal issue and a matter of mental health and well-being. **Wraparound services addressing intersecting challenges—such as trauma, housing instability, and unemployment—**were identified as important to improving outcomes. Justice systems must adopt trauma-informed approaches for both individuals and **justice workers to ensure culturally safe and effective support**.

THEME 4

REPRESENTATION AND ADVOCACY

Participants highlighted the need for stronger representation of Indigenous voices in decision-making processes within the justice system. **Misalignments between community priorities and systemic policies were seen as persistent challenges**. By creating opportunities for community-driven advocacy, justice systems can become more inclusive and responsive to Indigenous communities' lived experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous communities in Northern Ontario face unique and deeply entrenched systemic barriers that limit access to equitable legal support. Geographic remoteness, resource inequities, and the cultural misalignment of mainstream legal systems with Indigenous knowledge and traditions have exacerbated these challenges^{1–3}. Many Indigenous individuals encounter significant hurdles when engaging with justice systems that were not designed to reflect their lived realities or safeguard their inherent rights [1,4,5]. These barriers often manifest as systemic discrimination, cultural insensitivity, and processes that fail to respect Indigenous self-determination [1,5,6]. Compounding these legal inequities is the difficulty in accessing grants and funding programs due to intricate application processes and eligibility requirements that do not align with the unique circumstances of Indigenous communities.

The Indigenous Peoples Resilience Fund (IPRF) was established to foster long-term resilience and self-determination among Indigenous communities in response to these challenges. Guided by core principles of respect, community-driven solutions, and empowerment, the IPRF's innovative funding model seeks to transform capital and shift decision-making power directly to Indigenous leaders. The IPRF launched the Northern Ontario Indigenous Community Outreach & Engagement initiative as part of its ongoing efforts.

This initiative included engagement sessions with Indigenous leaders, organizations, and community representatives in Thunder Bay, Timmins, North Bay, and surrounding regions. These sessions aimed to capture important insights into the systemic and structural barriers Indigenous communities face and gather culturally-informed recommendations for creating equitable funding programs.



Objectives:

- 1 To identify strengths and gaps in programs for Indigenous communities, focusing on Indigenous-led initiatives and their potential to expand to meet broader needs.
- 2 To co-create culturally informed recommendations for funding programs by centring Indigenous voices to make future funding practices equitable and effective for Northern Indigenous communities.
- 3 To share their experiences with Indigenous communities' barriers and challenges in accessing legal systems and services.



This report summarizes the methods and findings from the focus groups and provides recommendations for creating a collaborative platform to address systemic inequities. It emphasizes the significance of community-driven solutions as the foundation for reimagining funding mechanisms, enhancing legal support, and empowering Indigenous communities in Northern Ontario. The Law Foundation of Ontario generously funded this initiative.

METHODOLOGY

Between August and November 2024, Change Agency consultants conducted four focus groups (between 2 – 5 hours each) with representatives from Indigenous communities and organizations in Northern Ontario, specifically Thunder Bay (23 participants), Timmins (12 participants), and North Bay (25 participants), and a virtual session (via Zoom). Community partners, service providers, and community members were recruited during Change Agency’s outreach activities, IPRF’s community networks and partnerships, and through word-of-mouth, purposeful and snowballing sampling methods. Most respondents provided or facilitated legal services and resources for Northern Indigenous communities. This group included non-profits, legal aid organizations, mental health providers, Indigenous Friendship Centres, regulatory officials, and individuals who had been involved in the justice system or had close relationships with those requiring legal services. The eligibility requirements for the engagement sessions included a minimum age of 18, self-identified as Indigenous or service provider that provides services to Indigenous communities.

The focus groups were administered by trained facilitators from Change Agency, led by Talon Fire Bird, a community member of Whitefish Bay and a renowned PowPow Emcee. Three engagement sessions occurred in local community spaces in Thunder Bay, Timmins, and North Bay, along with a virtual session to improve accessibility for participants who could not attend in person. The focus groups were audio-recorded interviews conducted in English, Ojibwe, Cree, or other Indigenous languages, which were then transcribed and translated into English for data analysis. Indigenous team member(s) translated any cultural inferences or motifs when necessary. Change Agency obtained informed consent from all participants, who received a \$150 honorarium for in-person participation (which involved longer sessions) or a \$75 honorarium for virtual participation. This compensation acknowledged the value of their time and contributions to the study.

An inductive thematic analysis was conducted, coding the data based on insights gathered during the engagement sessions to identify key themes and patterns. This analysis was further complemented by a review of relevant literature to contextualize the findings and identify any gaps in understanding or areas requiring additional exploration.

80%
ATTENDANCE RATE



Scope and Limitations

It is important to note that these engagement sessions occurred within a short time frame of less than three months. Given the under-resourced, overworked, and stretched nature of community-based work and the time sensitivity associated with providing legal services to clients, the number of participants may have influenced their responses and willingness to engage. Due to the focus of this work on informing the funding program, consultants refrained from soliciting more in-depth responses from participants regarding their experiences with injustices impacting their communities and broader institutional, structural, or systemic injustices, such as the social determinants of health (e.g., housing, recidivism, the prison industrial complex, Jordan's Principle, Glaude Courts, etc.). The lack of data specific to Northern Ontario Indigenous communities is minimal and could have provided further insight into our findings, such as whether future grants should be allocated exclusively to enhancing access to child welfare-related or land rights services. Other limitations include the fact that these engagement sessions encompassed only select Northern Ontario communities and reflected the experiences and insights of those who attended, highlighting vast opportunities to involve more Indigenous communities in Ontario and across Canada.

In terms of outreach, language barriers may have limited participation. While members of the Change Agency speak Ojibwe and receive support from IPRF for language assistance, there may still be challenges for participants who speak other distinct Indigenous languages in Canada. Additionally, although our methodology had its strengths, it also had limitations. The attendance in the virtual session was lower, with only 12 participants; however, over the four sessions, there was an overall attendance rate of 80% out of the 86 registered participants. This could affect the representativeness of our findings and may introduce potential selection bias due to the snowball sampling method used. Sociodemographic data was not collected during the engagement sessions because we recognized that trust and established relationships with participants had not yet been fully developed. This decision was made to respect any hesitations participants might have about sharing personal information and to ensure that the process remained culturally safe and focused on the needs of the participants.

RESULTS

Demographics: Who Did We Talk To?

The engagement sessions included a diverse range of groups, organizations, and communities from Northern Ontario. Participants represented various voices and perspectives, including individuals with direct experiences and those supporting Indigenous communities. Below is the list of participating groups and representatives (not limited to):

Algoma University
Amerlia Rising
Canadian Mental Health Association - North Bay
Children's Aid North Bay
Confederation College
Feathers Of Hope
Kunuwanimano
Lakehead University
Mushkegowuk
NAN Legal Service
Nature Defence
Nipissing University
Nishnawbe Aski Legal Corporation
North Bay Friendship Centre
Northwestern Ontario Women's Centre
Ontario Ministry of Attorney General
Perron Law
Red Cross
Thunder Bay Indigenous Friendship Centre
Timmins Native Friendship Centre
True Self
YES North Bay

GRANT & FUNDING PROCESS

Participant Experiences with Current Funding Processes

“What challenges does your organization face in securing and utilizing funding for community programs? How could support mechanisms like IPRF help address these issues and prioritize essential services?”

- **Community Experiences with Funding Processes: Strengths, Challenges, and Opportunities for Improvement Previous Experiences with Funding Processes**

Representatives from Indigenous communities and organizations shared their perspectives on IPRF’s funding processes, including applications and reporting. Participants noted positive advancements in community-driven and culturally sensitive approaches, emphasizing the value of smaller, more manageable grants.

- **Strengths in the Current Funding Models**

Participants appreciated the increasing focus on inclusivity, adaptability and the introduction of grant navigators to support applicants. Application assistance was praised as a key step in reducing barriers to funding access.

- **Areas of Improvement in Grant Processes**

Suggestions for improvement included simplifying application language, reducing administrative burdens, increasing transparency in requirements and deadlines, and providing timely feedback on funding decisions. Equitable access for remote communities was emphasized as a critical need. Table 1 summarizes the identified strengths and areas for improvement in grant processes based on participant feedback.

- **Ongoing Efforts and Future Strategic Goals**

Positive feedback reflects IPRF’s commitment to developing community-centred funding models. Continued refinement of these processes will enhance accessibility, equity, and responsiveness, solidifying IPRF’s role as a trusted partner for Indigenous communities across Canada.

Overall, the positive feedback reflects IPRF’s ongoing efforts to develop community-centered and responsive funding models. These efforts align with future strategic goals of enhancing accessibility, fostering equitable processes, and addressing Indigenous communities’ evolving needs and priorities through philanthropic actions. Continued refinement of these processes will ensure that IPRF remains a trusted partner within the diverse Indigenous communities they serve throughout Canada to support meaningful, community-driven initiatives.

Participant Experiences with Current Funding Processes

Areas of Strengths

Opportunity for Community-Specific Programs

- Funding enables localized initiatives that address specific community needs, such as diversion programs, cultural practices, and restorative justice.
- Indigenous-specific grants have successfully supported programs that focus on healing and empowerment.

Areas of Improvements

Complexity and Accessibility

- Applications often use inaccessible language (legal jargon, academic phrasing), making it difficult for community-led organizations to apply.
- Online application systems lack essential functionality, such as saving progress, printing forms, and confirming submissions.

Quotes:

- “The language in applications is often legal jargon, not accessible, and there’s no help to fill them out.”
- “We cannot save them as we are filling them out.”

Rigid Funding Guidelines

- Many grants have restrictive rules that do not account for real-world, community-specific needs.
- Items **central to Indigenous communities**, such as traditional foods or cultural events, are often excluded from funding eligibility.

Quotes:

- *“Flexibility with what you can spend the money on... sometimes it’s so rigid.”*
- *“They won’t provide funding for traditional foods or say the expense doesn’t fall within the scope of the grant.”*



Participant Experiences with Current Funding Processes

Areas of Strengths

Areas of Improvements

Gradual Improvements in Culturally Responsive Approaches

- Some funders are beginning to adopt culturally responsive and Indigenous-led frameworks.
- Grants that *incorporate flexibility for culturally relevant items*, such as traditional foods or ceremonies, show positive results.
- Example: Growing interest in Indigenous Peoples' Courts and culturally sensitive training.

Administrative Burdens

- Extensive paperwork and frequent reporting requirements disproportionately burden small and Indigenous organizations.
- Reporting requirements are often disproportionate to the size of the grant.

Quote:

- *"The amount of paperwork for an application... an eight-page application for maybe a \$3,000 grant."*

Established Process for Smaller Grants

- Smaller grants generally have simpler applications and reporting requirements, making them more accessible for organizations with limited resources.

Quote:

- *"For small grants, it's generally pretty good, but bigger grants need more flexibility."*

Short-Term and Insecure Funding

- Annual or short-term funding contracts lead to job insecurity, high staff turnover, and disrupted service continuity.
- Delays in funding approvals leave organizations scrambling to cover gaps.

Quotes:

- *"Funding is usually just one-year contracts, so your staff are just contracted for a year."*
- *"Contracts end at the end of March, and by mid-March or February, staff ask, 'Is there anything with my contract extension?' And it's, 'Well, no, we haven't heard back from funders yet.'"*

Participant Experiences with Current Funding Processes

Areas of Strengths

Areas of Improvements

Emerging Use of Grant Navigators

- Indigenous grant navigators or other supportive roles have shown effectiveness in helping communities navigate complex funding processes.
- Some funders like IPRF have implemented simpler reporting systems and accessible language, providing a foundation for improvement.
- Streamlined reporting intervals for smaller grants have reduced unnecessary administrative burdens in specific cases.

Quote:

- *“Having someone to help navigate the applications would be a game-changer.”*

Competitive Environment

- Limited funding pools create competition among organizations, hindering collaboration and fostering animosity.

Quote:

- *“Multiple organizations fighting for the same pot of funding, creating animosity.”*



Digital Barriers

- Expectations of reliable internet and digital literacy disadvantage remote or resource-constrained communities.
- No alternatives, such as phone-based application processes, exist for under-served areas.

Quote:

- *“There’s an expectation that everyone has reliable internet, but that’s not always the case.”*

Key Considerations and Additional Insights to the Grant Process

Recommendations:

Funding Allocations/Sustainable Funding

- Increase Long-Term Funding Commitments - Shift from annual funding cycles to multi-year funding agreements to improve job security, retain skilled staff, and ensure program continuity.
 - Bridge Funding - Provide financial support during gaps in funding cycles to avoid program disruptions.
 - Flexible Budgets - Allow organizations to allocate funding based on dynamic and community-specific needs, such as traditional foods, cultural ceremonies, or urgent issues.
 - Funding for Administrative Costs - Increase administrative caps to account for necessary expenses like audits, reporting, and training to ensure smoother operations.
 - Scale Grant Requirements - Align application and reporting requirements to the size of the grant to reduce administrative burdens for smaller funding amounts.
-

Relationship with Funders (Communication/Support)

- Open Dialogue - Foster regular, transparent, and bidirectional communication between funders and grantees to ensure shared understanding of goals and challenges.
 - Designated Points of Contact - Assign specific representatives within funding agencies who understand Indigenous contexts and can provide tailored support to applicants.
 - Feedback Loops - Create opportunities for organizations to provide feedback on funding processes, challenges, and improvements in a structured, meaningful way.
 - Accessible Application Support - Offer live consultations, technical assistance, and application navigators to support organizations throughout the grant lifecycle.
-

Capacity and Accessibility

- Simplify Applications - Redesign forms to use plain language and remove unnecessary jargon to make applications accessible to all, regardless of educational background.
- Online Functionality - Improve digital systems to save progress, submit drafts, and receive confirmations of submission.
- Multiple Access Points - Provide alternative application methods (e.g., phone-based processes, in-person consultations) to account for varying technological and geographic constraints.
- Centralized Resources - Develop a comprehensive, centralized database listing all available grants, eligibility requirements, and deadlines.

Key Considerations and Additional Insights to the Grant Process

Recommendations:

Education and Awareness

- Funding Literacy Programs - Offer workshops or training sessions for organizations to learn about grant writing, reporting, and compliance.
 - Knowledge-Sharing Forums - Create spaces where organizations can share best practices, challenges, and success stories related to funding processes.
 - Awareness Campaigns - Enhance communication efforts to ensure that Indigenous communities are informed about available funding opportunities, especially in remote areas.
-

Capacity Needs and Community Priorities

- Community-Driven Approaches - Prioritize funding that aligns with community-identified needs rather than top-down funder priorities.
 - Invest in Capacity-Building - Fund initiatives that build internal capacity, such as training for staff, hiring grant writers, and developing infrastructure.
 - Localized Autonomy - Empower Indigenous communities and organizations to lead their own decision-making processes regarding resource allocation and program development.
 - Streamlined Reporting - Shift focus from excessive reporting requirements to storytelling or oral reports that highlight community impact and outcomes.
-

Funding Allocation Preferences

- Equity-Based Distribution - Ensure funding prioritizes marginalized or underserved communities and accounts for systemic inequities.
 - Support for Smaller Organizations - Provide tailored support for grassroots and emerging organizations that lack the infrastructure to compete with established agencies.
 - Incorporate Community Voices - Develop advisory panels with Indigenous representatives to oversee and inform funding allocation processes.
 - Culturally Relevant Costs - Include provisions for culturally specific items and services within funding guidelines.
-

Key Considerations and Additional Insights to the Grant Process

Recommendations:

Expansion of Funding and Services

- Broad Spectrum of Justice Initiatives - Expand funding to support diverse areas such as housing stability, education, mental health, victim services, and restorative justice.
 - Geographic Equity - Address service gaps in remote and rural areas by funding mobile or remote service delivery systems.
 - Support Transition Programs - Invest in wraparound services that address reintegration challenges for individuals transitioning from jail or detox programs.
 - Holistic Approaches - Fund programs that address interconnected issues (e.g., housing, mental health, and legal advocacy) simultaneously to create comprehensive solutions.
-

Cultural Safety, Sensitive, and Informed

- Indigenous Leadership - Prioritize Indigenous-led initiatives and ensure that non-Indigenous organizations working with Indigenous communities are accountable and collaborative.
 - Avoid Tokenism - Ensure Indigenous community members are involved in meaningful, decision-making roles, not symbolic or advisory-only positions.
 - Mandatory Cultural Training - Require funders and their representatives to undergo cultural safety training to better understand the contexts and needs of Indigenous organizations.
 - Create Safer Spaces - Fund initiatives that create culturally appropriate environments within justice, education, and service systems (e.g., spaces for smudging, ceremony).
-

Additional Feedback

- Streamlined Reporting - Implement reporting intervals (mid-year, end-of-year) that align with the size and scope of grants to reduce administrative burden.
 - Stipends for Grant Preparation - Offer financial compensation to smaller organizations for the time and labour involved in preparing grant applications.
 - Innovation Incentives - Create special funding streams for innovative projects or pilot programs that address systemic gaps.
 - Acknowledgment of Systemic Barriers - Funders should recognize and adapt to Indigenous organizations' structural challenges (e.g., underfunding, geographic isolation).
 - Continual Improvement - Establish ongoing review mechanisms to adapt funding processes to changing community needs and priorities.
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EXPERIENCES WITH ACCESS TO JUSTICE

WHAT IS 'ACCESS TO JUSTICE'?

This section summarizes the findings on Northern Indigenous communities' access to justice, focusing on systemic barriers and potential solutions. Participants shared insights into challenges such as geographic isolation, cultural insensitivity, and discrimination within legal systems that often conflict with Indigenous rights and needs. They emphasized the need for culturally responsive legal services, integration of traditional knowledge, and trauma-informed approaches.

THEME 1

EQUITABLE JUDICIAL AND SOCIAL SYSTEMS

Participants provided insights into how systemic inequities within the Canadian justice system disproportionately affect Indigenous and marginalized communities. Engagements in Thunder Bay, Timmins, North Bay, and a virtual session revealed significant barriers that undermine equitable access to justice, including systemic discrimination, over-policing, and cultural misalignment.

The Disconnect Between Culture and Current Law

Participants highlighted the justice system's failure to reflect Indigenous cultures, languages, and ways of life. Systemic biases and over-policing were identified as pervasive issues, with Indigenous and Black communities facing disproportionate targeting and incarceration. Furthermore, the disconnect between Indigenous approaches to justice and healing and the dominant legal framework results in limited access to culturally informed support. Participants stressed the importance of integrating Indigenous governance policies, supported by chiefs, elders, and communities, into the justice system to bridge this gap and improve equity.

Financial Resources and Supports for Legal Proceedings

Access to justice is also hindered by financial constraints, especially for court representation and defence. Participants called for affordable, culturally relevant legal support from representatives who understand Indigenous experiences and can navigate language barriers. The lack of accessible resources exacerbates over-policing, perpetuates inequities in legal representation, and reinforces cycles between child welfare and incarceration. Programs like the Glaude Aftercare Workers program were praised for their holistic support, with calls for replication in other regions.

A participant praised the Glaude Aftercare Workers program in Fort Frances for its holistic support, assisting individuals throughout the legal process, from court appearances to reintegration. They suggested replicating this program in other regions.

Additional Supports and Resources to Improve Access to Justice

Participants emphasized the need for tailored, wraparound supports to address the overrepresentation of Indigenous people in justice and welfare systems. Resources should be informed by Indigenous ways of knowing and address gaps for individuals connected to the child welfare system. Wholistic frameworks that include culturally sensitive, community-informed solutions were highlighted as essential for equitable representation and meaningful access to justice.



THEME 2

REBUILDING TRUST AND ACCESS THROUGH EDUCATION, ADVOCACY AND CULTURAL AFFIRMATION

Systemic Discrimination and Identity Suppression

Participants linked systemic discrimination and underrepresentation in education and legal systems to identity loss and distrust. Historical traumas like residential schools and the Sixties Scoop continue to shape negative perceptions of government institutions and deepen justice barriers.

Legal Education and Advocacy

Early legal education, beginning as early as Grade 6, was suggested to empower youth with knowledge of their rights. The absence of culturally informed advocates, such as Justice Navigators, leaves many individuals vulnerable to unjust outcomes, emphasizing the need for educational and legal systems to affirm Indigenous customs and traditions.



THEME 3

RESTORATIVE PATHS - BRIDGING JUSTICE AND HEALING THROUGH CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PRACTICES

The integration of Indigenous spirituality and cultural practices into justice systems is critical for healing and restoring communities. Participants noted systemic failures in incorporating restorative justice practices rooted in Indigenous traditions.

Spirituality and Indigenous Cultural Practices

Participants stressed the transformative potential of traditional practices like sweat lodges in healing and addressing addiction. However, access to these practices is limited due to insufficient funding and systemic neglect. The "healing road" concept emphasizes the necessity of culturally affirming approaches to address justice issues.

Restorative Justice and Healing Approaches

Participants emphasized the need for systemic reforms that integrate restorative justice principles rooted in Indigenous traditions. This includes funding and institutional support for programs that embrace spirituality and cultural practices to reduce harm and strengthen community resilience.

THEME 4

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Mental health challenges contribute significantly to justice system involvement, particularly in northern Indigenous communities. These issues, compounded by systemic barriers, underscore the need for trauma-informed, culturally responsive interventions.

1

Unaddressed Trauma and Substance Abuse

Historical trauma often leads to substance abuse as a coping mechanism, increasing conflict with the law. Addressing trauma through culturally informed mental health support is critical.

2

Poor Impulse Control and Judgment

Mental health challenges like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or anxiety can impair decision-making, leading to behaviours that escalate into legal issues.

3

Social Isolation and Frustration

Social isolation due to mental health struggles often results in anti-social or disruptive behaviour, which may draw legal attention.

4

Difficulty Accessing Support and Employment

Lack of mental health support limits access to education and employment, leading to poverty and instability, which may contribute to survival-driven legal conflicts.

5

Limited Awareness and Understanding of Legal Rights

Cognitive impairments from mental health conditions make it harder for individuals to understand their rights, leaving them vulnerable in legal proceedings. Participants advocated for culturally informed, trauma-responsive mental health services to reduce system involvement and foster resilience.

RECOMMENDATIONS

INSIGHTS TO THE GRANT PROCESS

RECOMMENDATION 1: FUNDING ALLOCATIONS/SUSTAINABLE FUNDING

1. **Increase Long-Term Funding Commitments** - Shift from annual funding cycles to multi-year funding agreements to improve job security, retain skilled staff, and ensure program continuity.
2. **Bridge Funding** - Provide financial support during gaps in funding cycles to avoid program disruptions.
3. **Flexible Budgets** - Allow organizations to allocate funding based on dynamic and community-specific needs, such as traditional foods, cultural ceremonies, or urgent issues.
4. **Funding for Administrative Costs** - Increase administrative caps to account for necessary expenses like audits, reporting, and training to ensure smoother operations.
5. **Scale Grant Requirements** - Align application and reporting requirements to the size of the grant to reduce administrative burdens for smaller funding amounts.

RECOMMENDATION 2: RELATIONSHIP WITH FUNDERS (COMMUNICATION/SUPPORT)

1. **Open Dialogue** - Foster regular, transparent, and bidirectional communication between funders and grantees to ensure a shared understanding of goals and challenges.
2. **Designated Points of Contact** - Assign specific representatives within funding agencies who understand Indigenous contexts and can provide tailored support to applicants.
3. **Feedback Loops** - Create opportunities for organizations to provide feedback on funding processes, challenges, and improvements in a structured, meaningful way.
4. **Accessible Application Support** - Offer live consultations, technical assistance, and application navigators to support organizations throughout the grant lifecycle.

RECOMMENDATION 3: CAPACITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

1. **Simplify Applications** - Redesign forms to use plain language and remove unnecessary jargon to make applications accessible to all, regardless of educational background.
2. **Online Functionality** - Improve digital systems to save progress, submit drafts, and receive confirmations of submission.
3. **Multiple Access Points** - Provide alternative application methods (e.g., phone-based processes, in-person consultations) for varying technological and geographic constraints.
4. **Centralized Resources** - Develop a comprehensive database listing all available grants, eligibility requirements, and deadlines.

RECOMMENDATION 4: EDUCATION AND AWARENESS

1. **Funding Literacy Programs** - Offer workshops or training sessions for organizations to learn about grant writing, reporting, and compliance.
2. **Knowledge-Sharing Forums** - Create spaces where organizations can share best practices, challenges, and success stories related to funding processes.
3. **Awareness Campaigns** - Enhance communication efforts to ensure Indigenous communities are informed about available funding opportunities, especially in remote areas.

RECOMMENDATION 5: CAPACITY NEEDS AND COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

1. **Community-Driven Approaches** - Prioritize funding that aligns with community-identified needs rather than top-down funder priorities.
2. **Invest in Capacity-Building** - Fund initiatives that build internal capacity, such as staff training, hiring grant writers, and developing infrastructure.
3. **Targeted Funding** - To-empower Indigenous communities and organizations to lead their resource allocation and program development decision-making processes.
4. **Streamlined Reporting** - Shift focus from excessive reporting requirements to storytelling or oral reports highlighting community impact and outcomes.

RECOMMENDATION 6: FUNDING ALLOCATION PREFERENCES

1. **Equity-Based Distribution** - Ensure funding prioritizes marginalized or underserved communities and accounts for systemic inequities.
2. **Support for Smaller Organizations** - Provide tailored support for grassroots and emerging organizations that lack the infrastructure to compete with established agencies.
3. **Incorporate Community Voices** - Develop advisory panels with Indigenous representatives to oversee and inform funding allocation processes.
4. **Culturally Relevant Costs** - Include provisions for culturally specific items and services within funding guidelines.

RECOMMENDATION 7: EXPANSION OF FUNDING AND SERVICES

1. **Broad Spectrum of Justice Initiatives** - Expand funding to support diverse areas such as housing stability, education, mental health, victim services, and restorative justice.
2. **Geographic Equity** - Address service gaps in remote and rural areas by funding mobile or remote service delivery systems.
3. **Support Transition Programs** - Invest in wraparound services that address reintegration challenges for individuals transitioning from jail or detox programs.
4. **Wholistic Approaches** - Fund programs that simultaneously address interconnected issues (e.g., housing, mental health, and legal advocacy) to create comprehensive solutions.

RECOMMENDATION 8: CULTURAL SAFETY, SENSITIVE, AND INFORMED

1. **Indigenous Leadership** - Prioritize Indigenous-led initiatives and ensure that non-Indigenous organizations working with Indigenous communities are accountable and collaborative.
2. **Avoid Tokenism** - Ensure Indigenous community members are involved in meaningful decision-making, not symbolic or advisory-only positions.
3. **Mandatory Cultural Training** - Require funders and their representatives to undergo cultural safety training better to understand the contexts and needs of Indigenous organizations.
4. **Create Safer Spaces** - Fund initiatives that create culturally appropriate environments within the justice, education, and service systems (e.g., spaces for smudging and ceremony).

RECOMMENDATION 9: ADDITIONAL FEEDBACK

1. **Streamlined Reporting** - Implement reporting intervals (mid-year, end-of-year) that align with the size and scope of grants to reduce administrative burden.
2. **Stipends for Grant Preparation** - Offer financial compensation to smaller organizations for the time and labour involved in preparing grant applications.
3. **Innovation Incentives** - Create special funding streams for innovative projects or pilot programs that address systemic gaps.
4. **Acknowledgment of Systemic Barriers** - Funders should recognize and adapt to Indigenous organizations' structural challenges (e.g., underfunding, geographic isolation).
5. **Continual Improvement** - Establish ongoing review mechanisms to adapt funding processes to changing community needs and priorities.

DISCUSSION

COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE: EMBEDDING TRC CALLS TO ACTION AND UNDRIP INTO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The strength of a community of practice comes from the experiences and wisdom of its members. Indigenous communities showcase resilience and creativity in overcoming systemic barriers despite limited resources. Engaging the community is vital to acknowledge and elevate these culturally grounded, self-determined solutions.

WHOLISTIC AND INTERCONNECTED APPROACHES

Central to these efforts is the recognition that community dynamics are intricate and interconnected. Challenges such as systemic inequities, cultural suppression, and resource gaps cannot be addressed in isolation. Effective engagement requires a wholistic understanding of the social, cultural, and systemic contexts shaping these challenges. This approach aligns with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) Calls to Action, which emphasizes systemic reform and the incorporation of Indigenous culture, language, and governance into institutional frameworks. Similarly, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) Act provides a foundation for ensuring that Indigenous peoples' rights are respected within legal and social systems.

ADDRESSING EMERGING NEEDS AND UNJUST OUTCOMES

While some progress has been made through innovative community-led initiatives, much work remains to address unexamined areas and emerging needs. For instance, systemic inequities often force individuals to accept unjust outcomes rather than assert their rights, highlighting a critical need for culturally appropriate advocacy and legal support. The TRC Calls to Action specifically emphasize the importance of improving access to justice for Indigenous peoples, including addressing the overrepresentation of Indigenous individuals in the legal system and ensuring equitable representation in jury selection. Similarly, UNDRIP mandates the recognition of Indigenous governance and the right to develop and determine justice practices that reflect cultural values and traditions.

OPERATIONALIZING TRC AND UNDRIP IN COMMUNITY-LED PRACTICES

The TRC and UNDRIP frameworks provide valuable guidance, but the challenge lies in translating these frameworks into tangible, community-led initiatives. This requires:

1. Strengthening Cultural Anchors in Justice Practices

- a. Incorporating Indigenous values, traditions, and languages into solutions ensures that justice processes resonate with community members. Restorative justice practices, as emphasized in TRC Calls to Action, offer culturally appropriate alternatives to punitive legal systems.

2. Empowering Local Leadership

- a. Communities must be at the forefront of identifying priorities and driving solutions. UNDRIP underscores the right of Indigenous peoples to participate in decision-making processes that affect them, which can be operationalized through Indigenous-led governance in legal and social systems.

3. Building Capacity for Advocacy and Change

- a. Investing in training and resources for community leaders, advocates, and legal professionals strengthens the capacity to assert rights and pursue equitable outcomes. This aligns with TRC Call to Action 50, which emphasizes establishing Indigenous law institutes to develop and apply Indigenous legal systems.

A RESILIENT, RESISTANT, AND EMPOWERED COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

At the heart of these efforts are the culture, people, and collective voices driving meaningful change. By embedding the TRC Calls to Action and UNDRIP into community-led strategies, a resilient and resistant community of practice can emerge—one capable of addressing immediate challenges while building pathways for long-term empowerment. Centering culture, shared goals, and lived experiences ensures that solutions are effective and sustainable, fostering justice, reconciliation, and growth for generations to come.

Conclusion

KEEP THE PULSE

Building a strong connection with the community is crucial for nurturing resilience and enhancing the impactful initiatives already underway.

This report highlights the essential role of the community in this journey, as it proactively instigates change. To maintain and grow their initiatives, they need the capacity, resources, and support to continue advancing. The Indigenous Peoples Resilience Fund (IPRF) initiative is instrumental in linking communities and fostering the exchange of information, services, programs, and cultural knowledge. This support goes beyond conventional methods, establishing a wider network of collaboration and mutual aid. It is vital to honour and elevate the work of these communities. Recognizing their achievements not only commemorates their successes but also propels their efforts further. To strengthen their resilience and confront challenges, communities require ongoing support and funding to ensure their advancements persist and widen.

By fostering positivity and amplifying these communities' voices, we guarantee that their commitment and hard work receive the acknowledgment and aid necessary for success. Celebrating their triumphs, recognizing their contributions, and cultivating connections among communities will motivate and empower all participants. Collectively, we can keep learning from one another and driving significant, enduring change.

Appendix B: Glossary

Access to Justice

The Law Foundation of Ontario defines access to justice as the ability of the public to: Understand legal information and services, Use legal information and services, Afford legal information and services, Prevent and resolve legal disputes, and Achieve just outcomes without delay.

Anti-Indigenous Racism

Founded on settler colonialism, the ongoing occupation of land and the displacement of Indigenous peoples aims to establish an ethnically homogeneous national community, and anti-Indigenous racism leads to social and health disparities for Indigenous peoples. Anti-Indigenous racism encompasses a legacy of assimilation and myths of cultural genocide, portraying Canada as a nation rooted in immigration and settler origins⁷.

Autonomy

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) defines autonomy as the right of Indigenous peoples to self-government in matters related to their local and internal affairs. This includes the right to determine how to finance their autonomous functions.

Culturally Appropriate

Culturally appropriate Indigenous law in Canada is based on Indigenous ways of knowing and healing, and aims to address systemic discrimination and overrepresentation of Indigenous people in the justice system. Here are some examples of culturally appropriate Indigenous law in Canada:

Appendix B: Glossary

Culturally Affirming

Affirming that indigenous peoples are equal to all other peoples, while recognizing the right of all peoples to be different, to consider themselves different, and to be respected as such.

Affirming further that all doctrines, policies and practices based on or advocating superiority of peoples or individuals on the basis of national origin or racial, religious, ethnic or cultural differences are racist, scientifically false, legally invalid, morally condemnable and socially unjust,

Cultural Safety

Understanding the community's viewpoint involves considering the social, political, and historical contexts, as well as encouraging service providers to engage in self-reflection. The individual's experience is shaped by respectful interactions that acknowledge and aim to tackle the power imbalances present in our systems, with the goal of fostering an atmosphere devoid of racism and discrimination where individuals feel secure [8,9.]

Culturally Sensitivity

Recognizing the need to respect cultural differences. Cultural sensitivity involves exhibiting "behaviours that are considered polite and respectful by the [person of the other culture]." Similar to cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity focuses on the 'other' and the 'other culture.' Cultural sensitivity also does not require an individual to reflect on his/her own culture.

Appendix A: Glossary

Empowering

Empowering others means making a systematic and sustained effort to provide Indigenous people with information, knowledge, support and opportunities to be self-determined, based upon the individual or community's level of acceptance towards moving forward. An important step is acknowledging past mistakes and encouraging movement towards a positive future, at a pace and degree determined by Indigenous people.

Equity

Equity, in legal terms, is defined as justice according to natural law, free from bias or favoritism. It originated in the English chancery and was developed to ensure fairness, supplementing or even overriding common law in cases where strict legal rules might lead to unjust outcomes.

Facilitator

Process of bringing about an outcome (such as learning, productivity, or communication) by providing indirect or unobtrusive assistance, guidance, or supervision.

Gladue Report

The Gladue report is a pre-sentencing or bail hearing report, usually prepared by Gladue caseworkers at the request of the judge, defense counsel or Crown Attorney.

Appendix B: Glossary

Healing-centered

is holistic involving culture, spirituality, civic action and collective healing. A healing-centered approach views trauma not simply as an individual isolated experience, but rather highlights the ways in which trauma and healing are experienced collectively

Justice

Justice may be compromised when a serious imbalance of power prevails between the researcher and participants. Resulting harms are seldom intentional, but nonetheless real for the participants. In the case of Indigenous peoples, abuses stemming from research have included: misappropriation of sacred songs, stories and artefacts; devaluation of Indigenous peoples’ knowledge as primitive or superstitious; violation of community norms regarding the use of human tissue and remains; failure to share data and resulting benefits; and dissemination of information that has misrepresented or stigmatized entire communities.

Resilience

Resilience is the ability of Indigenous Peoples to exercise their right to self-determination, the ability to use their territory, their ancestral knowledge, their forms of governance, their internal norms, and their capacity to ally with external actors to face difficult situations.

Appendix B: Glossary

Restorative Justice

“an approach to justice that seeks to repair harm by providing an opportunity for those harmed and those who take responsibility for the harm to communicate about and address their needs in the aftermath of a crime.” - Federal-Provincial-Territorial Ministers Responsible for Justice and Public Safety (2018). Principles and Guidelines for Restorative Practice in the Criminal Matters.

Self-determination

Self-determination denotes the legal right of people to decide their own destiny in the international order. Self-determination is a core principle of international law, arising from customary international law, but also recognized as a general principle of law, and enshrined in a number of international treaties.

Social isolation

“Social isolation is commonly defined as a low quantity and quality of contact with others. A situation of social isolation involves few social contacts and few social roles, as well as the absence of mutually rewarding relationships”. [1,2]

OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

KEY TOPICS AND INSIGHTS

Topic	Findings	Recommendations
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Systemic Barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Over-policing and overrepresentation in justice systemsLimited funding and awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Address systemic inequities through equitable funding mechanisms and culturally safe practices
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Cultural Integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none">importance of spirituality and traditional healinglimited bridging of cultural practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Integrate indigenous practices into justice systems to build trust and address gaps
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Need for community networkingCompetitive funding hinders collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Encourage collaboration through shared resources and non-competitive funding environments
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Mental Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Trauma-Informed care needed to individuals and workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Expand wraparound services addressing mental health, housing and employment

EXPERIENCES WITH GRANT FUNDING

Positive Trends	Barriers Identified	Suggestions for Improvement
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Indigenous-focused programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Inflexible Guidelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Simplify funding guidelines and reduce administrative burdens
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Smaller grants with manageable processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Geographic and digital access challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Invest in digital and non-digital solutions for remote inclusivity
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Use of Grant navigators	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Competitive funding environments	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Stabilize funding through longer term agreements and bridge funding



Appendix D: Session Graphic Recording

Graphic recording of community engagement session in Thunder Bay

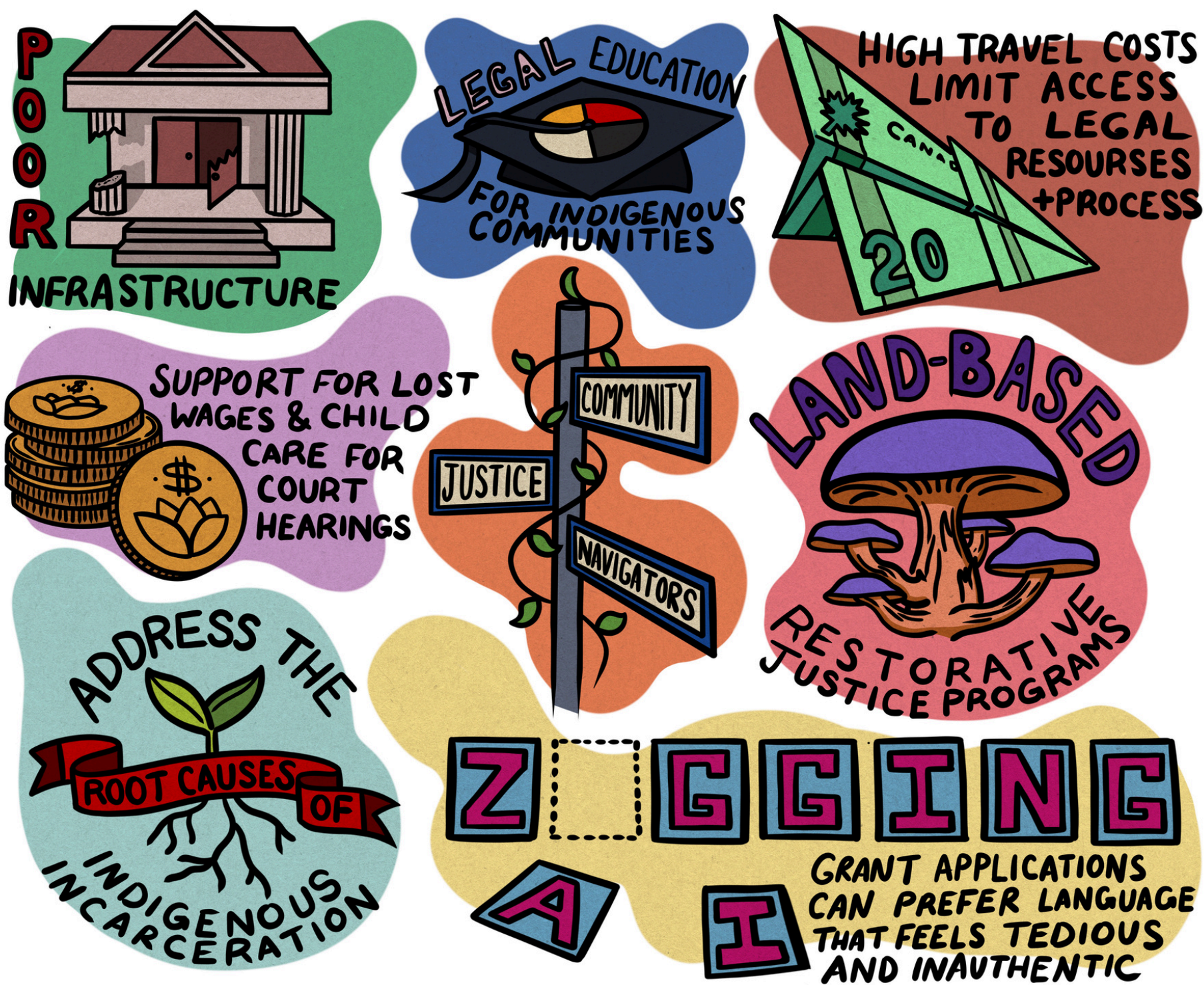
Access to Justice - Thunder Bay



Appendix E: Session Graphic Recording

Graphic recording of community engagement session in Timmins.

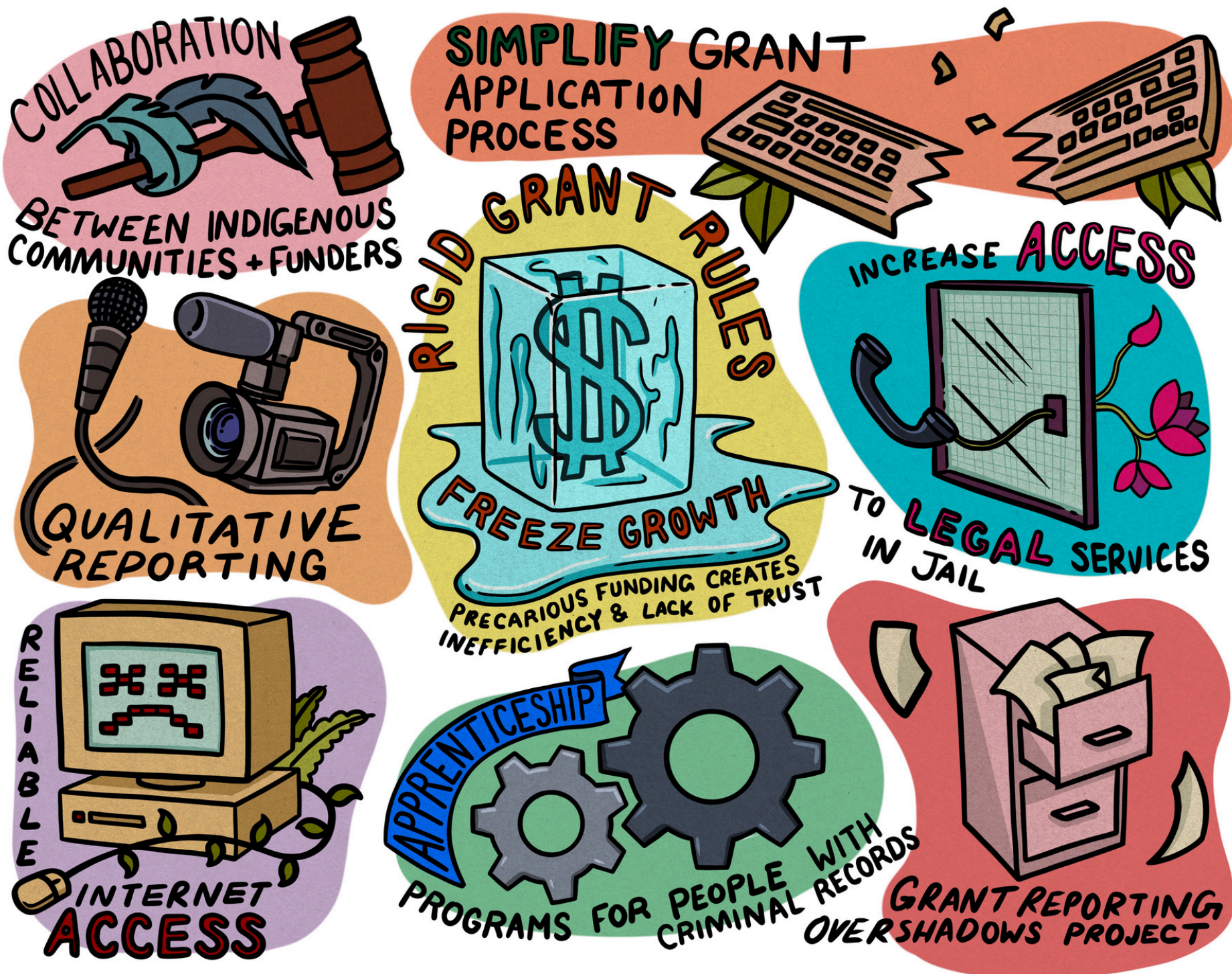
Access to Justice - Timmins



Appendix F: Session Graphic Recording

Graphic recording of community engagement session in North Bay

Access to Justice - North Bay



Appendix G: Session Graphic Recording

Graphic recording of community engagement session in Virtual Session

Access to Justice - Virtual



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