

Prevailing Priorities of Indigenous-Led Charities



Sharon Redsky

In Canada, Indigenous-led charities are vital to many communities, including where I live in Winnipeg, Manitoba. These organizations deliver culturally appropriate services that holistically support Indigenous families. In turn, Indigenous people feel a sense of belonging and develop the resiliency needed to work toward undoing the damages of colonialism and recognizing our own potential.

However, while demand for culturally appropriate, high quality, evidence-based services is growing, many Indigenous organizations survive year-to-year primarily on project based funding, despite only a small portion of grants being allocated to these communities. According to the report 2017 *Measuring the Circle: Emerging Trends in Philanthropy for First Nations, Métis and Inuit Communities in Canada*, conducted in Manitoba, less than two% of philanthropic dollars went to Indigenous charities. More shockingly, this figure includes giving to Indigenous-focused charities that serve Indigenous peoples and to Indigenous-led charities that serve, employ and are governed by Indigenous people, who are an even smaller subset of these recipients. This is an important distinction that requires education across the sector because there is a critical need to consult with Indigenous people and create space to incorporate their voices.

Although our current systems create challenges and barriers for Indigenous-led organizations to access philanthropic

support, the philanthropic sector plays a vital role in fostering collaborative and supportive relationships between Indigenous charities and the government to ensure they receive access to sustainable, long-term funding.

SUPPORT FROM THE COMMUNITY

As an Indigenous person, I am passionate about this issue because of the critical values I have learned from my Ojibway culture and relatives. I learned early on that our connection to the land and each other is a sacred responsibility. Through them, I received important lessons about connecting to the land and only taking what is needed, honoring our elders and young children, caring for each other, and giving back to those who need it. There is so much richness and wisdom in traditional customs and practices that can influence transformative approaches. With this in mind, and the opportunities for the philanthropic sector to take action, I am optimistic for the future.

These teachings—along with the care and dedication I've seen from Indigenous staff in communities to ensure that everyone is taken care of regardless of age or circumstance—inspired me to become an Indigenous fundraiser. These charities know their communities better than anyone else, and they are incredibly innovative in developing and delivering services. It is my hope that their stories can be told and become more

widely known and recognized.

In 2015, when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada released its Calls to Action, members of Canada's philanthropic sector prepared the *Philanthropic Community's Declaration of Action* to promote and encourage positive action on reconciliation within the charitable sector. To date, the statement has been signed by more than 100 charities, nonprofits, foundations and community organizations throughout Canada. Last year, the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls released its final report. There were 231 calls for justice, which speaks to equity and opportunity.

Following this declaration and the Calls to Action, I hoped that Indigenous-led charities and communities would be overwhelmed with donations. This has not been the case. While awareness about the need to create equity, partnerships and a shared funding model with Indigenous charities has grown, substantial change has yet to happen.

However, I would like to share one example of how an Indigenous-led organization made a significant difference and the importance of philanthropy in making that happen.

In Winnipeg, there are many Indigenous children and youth in the child welfare system. The Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre—which translates to “we all work together to help one another”—is an organization dedicated to Indigenous

solutions that support and rebuilds families. Thanks to a \$1 million grant from The Winnipeg Foundation, the organization was able to leverage an additional \$1 million from the Province of Manitoba and \$500,000 from the federal government that allowed it to scale up a Family Group Conferencing Program. This innovative program assists parents and extended families in successfully reuniting with their children.

While many might believe that governments provide ample funding for Indigenous-led charities and communities, this is not the case. The matching government funding would not have been possible without the initial philanthropic gift, which was the result of years of relationship-building between the community, the Indigenous-led organization and the foundation.

DOING OUR PART AS FUNDRAISERS

An estimated 150,000 Indigenous children have been forced to attend residential schools, a school system created to deny Indigenous children access to their culture while assimilating them to Canadian traditions. As a child, my mother was forcibly removed from her community and placed in residential school. She never fully recovered from her experience, and this made my childhood difficult and challenging. But what I did have was the support of the Indigenous charities that served the community. They played a vital role for me and so many others. I would not be where I am today if it were not for my family and my community. I feel grateful to now be surrounded by people who change lives, take risks and speak up

against inequality.

Since then, I have committed to increasing my knowledge about fundraising and developing new networks and connections. I want to encourage more equitable and meaningful engagement with Indigenous-led charities. I have surveyed the successes and challenges of community and diversity and I feel grateful to now be surrounded by people who change lives, take risks and speak up against inequality. The results survey highlighted the need for education and building respectful relationships with Indigenous-led charities and communities within our sector.

The results prove why it is so important to not only have more Indigenous fundraisers, but also to provide them with opportunities like the ones I have received over the years.

We can initiate change. If we continue on this path, it is possible for the sector and government to recognize the critical role Indigenous-led charities play in our community's overall well-being. But it will require us to work together.

This effort will take many years of advocacy and education, but there is something that you can do right now. During this unprecedented time, the Indigenous community is expected to experience the most devastating impacts of COVID-19. While Indigenous-led charities and communities are mobilizing and developing their own strategies, the philanthropic sector can play a key role in ensuring organizations receive the required funding to address urgent needs. Your support in advocating for more funding Indigenous-led charities can help make this possible.

Sharon Redsky is a resident of Winnipeg, Manitoba, and First Nation member of Shoal Lake #40 with mixed heritage. She works as a strategic partnership coordinator for the Dakota Ojibway Child and Family Services, responsible for all aspects of fund development and strategic partnerships. Prior, she was the fund developer at the Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre, where she was responsible for fundraising, government relations and networking with key stakeholders to build strategic partnerships. She is a board member of the Association of Fundraising Professional Foundation for Philanthropy—Canada. Sharon was awarded the YMCA-YWCA Women of Distinction, Community Champion Award in 2017. Her recent education includes a Master Certificate in Project Management and a Certificate in Indigenous Evaluation through the University of Winnipeg

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