Aboriginal Counseling Services of Alberta

Annual Report

June 2017

Organizational Summary

This has been a year of teamwork. I first want to acknowledge my team and my Board of Directors. Everyone pitched in and assisted with the running of the agency during my hip replacement surgery and recovery. I am blessed to have so many great people surrounding the agency. Everyone truly cares and remains extremely committed to ensuring our children, youth and families receive the support and guidance they need to walk further along their healing path.

We have now completed Beginner and Intermediate levels of Dr Peter Levine’s Somatic Experiencing training and will have certification in March 2018. We continue to integrate our trauma training into all aspects of our programming and can observe positive changes in the people we work with. The completion of this training coincides with the Province’s push to ensure that agencies receiving funding are trauma informed. The past six years of training have been invaluable and our knowledge about trauma, brain development and the nervous system has greatly improved our ability to support the people we work with. This year we also completed a two day training on FASD with Donna Debolt from Debolt Consulting. We are also in our second year of Transition Place’s Art Therapy pilot project. The Edmonton Community Foundation was gracious enough to support the project for one more year and we are currently applying to potential funding sources to continue the project. Mary Norton is the Art Therapist and has been very busy as the people in the building recognize the benefits of artistic expression as it relates to their own journey in life. The magical part involves participants from all agencies getting to know each other while sharing our space. This has positively impacted referrals among the three agencies as we all work towards positive health. This year two evaluation report will be completed by the end of July 2017.

This year, we were approached by Reverend Ann Barker from the Westwood Unitarian Church to inquire if our agency would be the recipient of their donation from their Winter Solstice Ceremony at City Hall. Each year the church selects an Aboriginal agency to be a recipient as they wish to support the Truth and Reconciliation recommendations. I attended the Ceremony and spoke about our agency and it was such a beautiful experience. The congregation were very sincere and supportive of our work with Aboriginal families and they displayed a sincere commitment to supporting Aboriginal programs. The church donated $4,050.50 to our agency and Reverend Barker informed me that this was the most the church had ever collected. The donation was used to support the children, men and women in our
programs. We provided a special feast for each of the programs as well as creative materials to use in the programs to help celebrate identity and healing.

Last year, we identified a drop in referrals from Child and Family Services and their CSD sites. In April a presentation took place with the CSD managers to offer free Aboriginal Family Violence training. Only two sites, Ubuntu and Catholic Social Services followed up with a request for training and these took place in April. Over the past year we have seen referrals slowly increasing and I remain committed to speaking out for the need for proper family violence training for the CSD sites and for Child Protection workers.

Last year all five programs under Child and Family Service’s Children’s Mental Wellness Initiative Grant suffered a funding cut and it didn’t turn out to be a 50% cut as was initially stated but rather a $40,000 decrease in funding which was a 26% decrease. Our 13 week Neurodevelopmental Screening program which is under this initiative is going strong despite the funding decrease and we just released the year two Developmental Evaluation completed by Jim Klingile of Emerging Directions Ltd. The program continues to be of interest in the community and this year we were asked to present at Align’s Annual Conference. The program also caught the interest of Dr Tammy Masterson who is in charge of the PKIC program at the Grey Nun’s Hospital. Dr Masterson evaluates all children who have just been apprehended and placed in care under Child and Family Services. She is very supportive of our work and indicated that she would like to exclusively refer children to the program. The Mental Wellness Initiative is undergoing numerous internal changes and I have chosen to focus this year on getting the program out into the Province while searching for a more stable funding source.

This year also involved some new requests from the community. I was honoured to be approached by the Edmonton Community Foundation to sit on the proposal review for their Health Initiative. This has been new learning for me but the committee members are very knowledgeable and supportive. I was also asked to assist as a Provincial Consultant on Aboriginal Family Violence issues with Alberta Health Services Provincial Treatment Initiative for Mandated Offenders. I will be hosting meetings for those in the Province who are servicing Aboriginal offenders of domestic violence to review and revise the Aboriginal Framework we developed and to work in conjunction as the Provincial Treatment Standards are revised. I have also been asked to support Aboriginal communities providing treatment services by assisting them with issues that may arise in their community. I continue to be a member of the Aboriginal Leadership Team which was initiated by Child and Family Services. Executive Directors from all the Aboriginal agencies who receive funding from Child and Family Services meeting monthly to develop strategies that work towards reducing the number of Aboriginal children who are in care. Lastly, I was invited to sit on the Domestic Violence Justice Response committee which consists of Edmonton Police Service, the Crown Prosecutor, Victims Services, the City of Edmonton and the Edmonton John Howard Society. The Committee is working towards developing a model that can be implemented within the Justice system that will be more victim orientated. My purpose for sitting on this Committee is to ensure the lived experience of Aboriginal victims of domestic violence is heard and embedded into the new model. I am learning about many different aspects of how the Justice system works and where it begins to fail victims.

Our Board of Directors continues to work towards supporting the agency and supporting me as we develop new policies aimed at enhancing the organizational structure. The Executive Director’s succession plan was approved and Jim and I continue to update agency policies and procedures. In 2018 we will be coming to the end of our four year Strategic Plan and I have been working with the Board and Jim Klingile to ensure all activities have been completed. Our data system will be ready to
roll out permanently in September 2017. We have had to expand our phone system to accommodate the number of team members who are working in the office as well as continue to upgrade and replace equipment as things age.

**Organization’s Priorities for Upcoming Year**

Priorities for this next year are to complete the Policy Manual and begin working with the Board to identify future work which will be integrated into the new Strategic Plan in 2018. There were some delays in completing this work due to my surgery and due to some health issues concerning Jim. Another priority involves getting the team on board with using the data system and identifying any revisions that may need to be made with the system. We continue to annually review the content and processes of each of our program components by reviewing their outcomes and indicators. Securing sustainable funding for the 13 week Neurodevelopmental Screening program is also a priority as it is unclear whether the Grant will be extended beyond 2018.

Last year the Children’s Advocate office published a special report titled *Voices for Change; Aboriginal Child Welfare in Alberta July 2016*. The document states that 70% of children in care are Aboriginal. This report reflected a consistently dismal state for Aboriginal children and families. Our Team’s priority is to influence change for our community so that these statistics begin to decline instead of increase. A few team members are developing a presentation that speaks to historical trauma and neurophysiological states that occur over generations that directly impact why our community continues to be over represented in suicide rates, domestic violence, incarceration, poverty and any other statistic that pertains to society.

Lastly, one priority for the upcoming year is to learn how to better delegate tasks to team members. I have been reminded that I need to delegate more so I can reduce the number of items on my plate. I have a willing team but my biggest obstacle is myself.

**Circle of Safety Family Violence Program:**

Funded by: (Women and Children) Edmonton Region Children’s Services, United Way and City of Edmonton, (Men’s) Alberta Health Services and Safe Communities

The Circle of Safety family violence program is a 16 (men’s) and 20 (women and children) week, open ended Circle that provides support, education and treatment to men, women and children impacted by family violence. Each Circle runs separately and has a parenting component built into the content. Parent-child Circles also run for the mothers and sometimes fathers who have children involved in the Circle. Food, bus fare and child care are provided. The men’s Circle is recognized as a court approved treatment program. One of the Provincial Standards for treatment involves completing a minimum of 3 partner safety checks on all the partners of the men who are involved in the Circle. Cultural Teachings are integrated into the content throughout the duration. Circles start off with a smudge and a prayer and every six weeks a Cultural Resource person comes to Circle to provide teachings.

**Men’s Circles:**

From the period of April 1, 2016 to March 31, 2017 there were 65 new intakes done in the program. 35 men were referred from probation, 18 from Children’s Services and 12 were voluntary. Of the 65 participants, 63 attended the program one or more times. There were also clients that were still
attending from last year so the total amount of men attending was 82. The program continues to provide three Circles for men. We also have follow up/support services one day a week. This has proven to be a great success as many men are returning for support after they have completed the Circle. The service also allows for crisis support for the men while they are still attending Circle. The organization continues to work with the Province in revising the Provincial Standards and developing Provincial outcomes.

Partner Safety Checks:
For the period of April 1, 2016 to March 31, 2017, 83 attempts were made to complete a partner safety check and out of those 83, 43 were successful. The Province has formed a committee to examine the challenges everyone has in attempting to contact partners. Many people have “pay as you go” cell phones making it difficult to contact people.

Women and Children’s Circles:
For the period of April 1, 2016 to March 31, 2017, there were 87 new intakes done for the women and there were 34 new children involved with the Circle of Safety program. There are 3 women’s Circles running each week and 1 children’s Circle. 54 women were referred from Children’s Services, 2 were on probation and 31 were voluntary. Of the 87 ladies who were registered, 72 attended the Circle one or more times. A total of 91 ladies attended; this number includes women that were still attending from last year. Of the 34 registered children, 29 attended one or more times.

The use of expressive arts continues to be an excellent tool for both children and women. The team is fortunate to have an Art Therapist in house and the women and children are benefiting from this expertise. Our children’s room is a blossom of colour, pictures and kind words that have been created during Circle.

Healing Anger Program for Aboriginal Women:
Funded by: Alberta Health Services
During the period of April 1, 2016 to March 31, 2017, 153 referrals were made to the program. Out of the 153 there were 58 participants registered. Of the 58 women registered, 10 were on probation, 6 were Children’s Services, and 43 were voluntary.

The Healing Anger for Women Program runs for 12 consecutive weeks in a closed group format on Tuesday afternoons for 3 hours. There are three 12 week sessions that run throughout the year. This was our third year running the program and it appears to be very successful so far.

The Healing Anger for Women program provides a creative, innovative, and comprehensive program to women of Aboriginal descent who wish to develop a better understanding of the historical factors that influence their abilities to express an array of emotions and memories that trigger feelings of anger. The Circle offers a historical and cultural perspective where women can learn more about the roots of anger and aggressive behaviour, and how to express anger in creative and healthy ways. The objective is to promote personal growth by healing from past hurts and trauma issues, and by developing
constructive ways to express feelings in healthy, creative and assertive ways. The use of Expressive Arts and movement are an integral part of the process.

**Early Intervention Counseling Program**
(Formerly called Creative Healing Early Intervention Program):

Funded by: Edmonton Region Children’s Services

For the period of April 1, 2016 to March 31, 2017, there were 53 participants in the supportive counseling program. There are four staff who provide this service, one of whom specifically works with children and youth. Each staff member works a total of 7 hours per week.

The Creative Healing Family program seeks to increase family safety by decreasing risk related behaviours within the family Circle. The overall goal of this program is to increase positive family interaction, communication and problem solving skills and to minimize the need for Children Services’ involvement. The children/youth who utilize this service have been exposed to family violence and substance abuse and are dealing with numerous losses. The counseling provides them with a place to express their thoughts and feelings in a creative way.

**Women's Parenting Program:**

Funded by: Edmonton Region Children’s Services

We ran 2 programs during this fiscal year. We had 33 women registered for the programs. Of the 33 registered 16 attended one or more times.

The program is a 12 week, closed group parenting Circle for women who are accessing the Circle of Safety Family Violence, Early Intervention Counseling and Healing Anger programs. The parenting model is based on a blending of the Positive Discipline model which was adopted by the UN Convention on the Rights of Children. Traditional Aboriginal teachings connected to parenting are woven throughout the 12 weeks.

Participants being referred or who are already attending services at Aboriginal Counseling Services were eligible to attend. Participants can attend parenting at the same time as they are attending other programs. A certificate was provided upon completion of all sessions.

This year, we opened up the parenting program to include participants from outside agencies. Numbers were low as our client base is small as well. We ran the program twice but still found the numbers to be low so after consulting with our contract specialist, we moved the funds into the Early Intervention program to address the long wait lists for children and youth wanting to get in to the program.

**Art Therapy Pilot Program:**

Funded by: The Edmonton Community Foundation.

The Creative Arts Therapies Project is a collaborative initiative of Aboriginal Counseling Services Association of Alberta, Canadian Mental Health Association – Edmonton and Edmonton John Howard Society. The project offers art therapy and creative arts programs to support wellness and resilience for people who access the partner agencies’ services. The project was initiated as a pilot in April 2015. Services during the pilot included art therapy with individuals, a Creative Arts Space drop in studio,
and Drawing out the Self program for women. Based on a positive evaluation we submitted a second Letter of Inquiry to the Edmonton Community Foundation asking for one more year of funding and it was approved. We are currently applying to the Stollery Foundation and the Edmonton Community Funds to seek out another year of funding. In addition to continuing services introduced in the first year, the project has offered art for self-care workshops for agencies’ staff and for distress line volunteers, has engaged two practicum students in co-facilitating Creative Arts Space programs, and has supported agencies’ staff to integrate arts-based approaches into two psycho-educational programs.

From September 2016 until June 30, 2017, 127 individuals participated in a total of 725 hours of Creative Arts programs and 139 hours of individual art therapy. Eleven staff and volunteers participated in art for self-care workshops. An evaluation of project services during the second year is being completed and applications for grants to fund a third year of the project are being submitted. Meanwhile, agency partners have allocated some funds to maintain the project until December 2017.

The intentions of the project include:

- to offer Creative Arts Therapies to support emotional healing and growth, and mental health maintenance for women and men who access services at Transition Place.
- to evaluate the pilot project with a view to continue to provide Creative Arts Therapies services.
- to identify and seek funding to continue to provide Creative Arts Therapies services.

Creative Arts Therapies include:

- Art Therapy with individuals and groups to address identified and emerging difficulties.
- Expressive Arts groups where people can step away from difficulties, connect with their creativity and imagination, feel positive, and perhaps gain fresh perspectives.

**Children’s Mental Wellness Program:**

Funded by: Edmonton Region Children’s Services Early Intervention and Prevention

Two Aboriginal Counseling staff members provide a 13 week Neurodevelopmental Screening for children and youth who have been apprehended by Child Protection. Due to funding uncertainty during the period from April to August 2016, staff only served children or youth already attending sessions. Once funding resumed in August 2016, staff again began serving new clients. Because of this funding situation, fewer children and youth were served in the 2016-2017 fiscal year.

A total of 38 children and youth were referred to between April 1, 2016 and March 31, 2017. Of these, 24 children or youth (63%) actively attended one or more sessions while 14 children or youth (37%) never attended a session. This compares to 48 referrals made in 2015-2016, resulting in 30 children or youth (62%) attending one or more sessions, while 18 children or youth (38%) never attended a session.

Eight children or youth (33%) completed all 13 sessions. Two children or youth (8%) attended 10 to 12 sessions. Seven children or youth (29%) completed seven to nine sessions, while three children or youth (13%) completed four to six sessions. Four children or youth (17%) attended one to three sessions.
Jim Klingle from Emerging Directions Ltd was contracted to do a second developmental evaluation on the project which was funded by the Edmonton Community Foundation. The Region continues to move towards a “trauma informed” approach when working with children and highlighted the need to be mindful of the need for unique interventions in our Aboriginal community due to intergenerational trauma. The program is in alignment with the three service pillars identified in the document completed by Region 6 titled “Foundations for Caregiver Support”.

**Community Partnerships:**

The organization continues to be involved in the following community initiatives:

Aboriginal Leadership Committee, Early Intervention Edmonton Region Children’s Services: The Executive Directors of the Early Intervention funded agencies were asked to assist in developing strategies and action plans aimed at lowering the number of Aboriginal children being placed into the care of Social Services.

Quarterly meetings continue to take place between the Senior Managers of each of the Probation offices, FACS, ACAPS, Changing Pathways and ACSA. These meetings are excellent and assist all parties in keeping the men accountable and ensuring collaboration of services.

As Executive Director, I am the Chair of the Leadership Team through the Community Initiative Against Family Violence (CIAFV) which meets monthly to address community trends and gaps as well as oversee the overall functioning of CIAFV.

The Provincial Family Violence Treatment Initiative meets monthly regarding the men’s mandated treatment initiative. We are currently reviewing and updating the Provincial Standards. I have been asked to head the Aboriginal Framework Committee and we meet to ensure that a cultural voice is embedded into the Standards.

**What Our Families Say About Our Programs:**

**Circle of Safety Family Violence Program**

**Women’s Circle:**

“Prior to this program I did not talk to my kids and now I can explain to them, talk to them and let them know that family violence is wrong”.

“My knowledge increased very much. There is so much more I know about family violence then ever thanks to the group”.

“What I liked most about the program is the interactions with other and the prayers which keep us grounded. The Circle helps us to think about ourselves, sharing what’s going on in our lives, getting new knowledge and hearing the opinions of others. We all realize that we are not alone”.

**Men’s Circle:**
“I have learned a lot of information about how to deal with conflict in a healthy way. Take a timeout, breathe, LISTEN, don’t react/respond. Be aware of self-body language/tone/words and attitude”

“How hurt children through neglect has been difficult for them to overcome. I’ve changed that”

“The program has taught me that I am not in control of anyone but myself. Also, time outs may be needed at times… Think before reacting”

**Children’s Circle:**

The children’s Circle of Safety provides a structured and kind environment for participants to express themselves through personal story sharing, art making and the development of friendships. As children participate and become comfortable with the circle routine, facilitators and peers they settle internally and connect into their natural resilience gaining a sense of hope and reconnection with themselves and the world they live in. Children attending the Circle have:

- Opportunities to express their personal opinions and experiences
- Ability to relax from defenses of self-preservation and protection
- Experience of positive social interactions with facilitators and peers
- Affirmations for their gifts and skills of encouragement and leadership
- Opportunity to establish friendships within Circle
- Experience structure, boundaries and kindness within the Circle routine
- Learn that they are not alone in the experience of family violence

**Healing Anger program:**

“I learned different ways to express anger such as song and dance. The anger mete really helped me a lot as well”.

“I learned why I am so angry and that I shouldn’t stuff my anger, it helped me understand where the anger was coming from and showed me ways to deal with it in a better way”.

“I am more aware and kinder with myself. I am learning to resist the idea of beating myself up since I am a survivor of being bullied and physically abused by strangers”.

**Women’s Parenting program:**
“I learned how to connect with my daughter, how to guide her and teach her better. I learned how my daughter thinks and feels and I learned how to guide her so she can be the woman that I want her to be”.

“I learned how to provide warmth and structure for my children at any age. I learned how to keep from “flipping my lid” and understand my kids better.”

“I learned a lot about every day practical stuff and I learned how to better things with my kids without getting angry”.

**Summary:**

Aboriginal Counseling Services is now in its twenty-fifth year and we have come a long way. Our programs have grown and will continue to expand as more Aboriginal people discover their own healing path and reach out for support. Over these twenty-five years, there have been organizations that have put their faith and trust in our ability to walk with integrity and honesty, and to deliver respectful services. We have always held that sacred trust close to our spirit and will continue to do so. The agency’s philosophy regarding funding has always involved a belief that we may be the keeper of the funds but the funds we are providing belong to the Aboriginal community and it is our responsibility to ensure our programs reflect the needs of those within the Aboriginal community.

We wish to acknowledge those who provide financial support to the organization:

- Alberta Health Services/Safe Communities
- City of Edmonton FCSS
- Edmonton Region Children’s Services Early Intervention
- United Way of Edmonton
- Edmonton Community Foundation

Thank you for believing in us.

Sue Languedoc BSW RSW STP (and her awesome team)
Executive Director