

Back to Ottawa delivers a blow to native sobriety campaign

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Prohibition doesn't create sober societies. But desperate measures are needed when societies are in such crisis that most of the adults are drunk by midday. This was the problem in Davis Inlet, Labrador, that Canada has been trying to fix with a healing strategy called the Labrador Innu Comprehensive Healing Plan. That plan was set to run out of money in March, just when progress is being made.

In a recent statement, the federal government acknowledges the community has stabilized, but has no plans to extend the life of the plan. Perhaps the biggest measure of its success is the recent decision by the Davis Inlet people, now living in Natuashish, to extend a ban on the importation and consumption of alcohol. The vote was close and the community continues to teeter on the edge of self-destruction. Now is not the time to pull out the kind of comprehensive support that made the vote possible.

Just as the Innu have made some strides to curb their addiction crisis, so too have many other aboriginal communities, thanks to the work of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (AHF), a small Ottawa-based agency that was created following a recommendation of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. Its funding is not being renewed either, prompting a group of First Nations women to occupy Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl's office on Monday.

Over the past 10 years, the AHF has built momentum toward a remarkable addiction recovery in First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities, a fact acknowledged in the government's own evaluation. That evaluation recommends the foundation's mandate be renewed. Instead of doing so, Strahl's department politely thanked the foundation for its dedication and said the responsibility for all aboriginal social healing will revert to Health Canada. An extra infusion of cash, \$65 million over the next two years, will be used to help former Indian residential school students.

Pulling out support for both these social healing initiatives now is a big mistake. The Labrador Innu Comprehensive Healing plan was given high priority in Ottawa 10 years ago. The ministers of Health, Indian and Northern Affairs, Treasury Board and the PMO put it together as a kind of no-holds-barred effort to cure Canada's most famous addiction-ravaged native community. That year, 40 children had to be evacuated from two Innu communities in Labrador because they routinely inhaled gasoline.

Following the evacuation, tests revealed many of the children had been brain-damaged in utero because their mothers drank alcohol while pregnant. Two generations of a people – nomadic hunters and gatherers until the 1960s – were caught up in a spiral of self-destruction that Canada had no idea how to stop, despite the long history of solvent abuse in aboriginal communities, much of it linked to residential schools.

Davis Inlet was abandoned and a new community built in Natuashish, with a state-of-the-art infrastructure. The healing plan trained the Innu to deliver their own health care, including addiction recovery. An evaluation of that plan concludes the entire effort cost more than was necessary, due largely to missteps by Health Canada bureaucrats, and states valuable time was lost through this bungling. It should be extended now to make up for lost time. This is when the support should be pouring into Natuashish. What is learned there could help hundreds of other First Nations and Inuit communities that share similar distress.

Aboriginal communities are intensely uncomfortable about having alcohol sold in the open. Yet banning booze doesn't work either.



Alcohol addiction was a constant problem in Davis Inlet but the people of that community, now living in Natuashish, voted last week to extend a two-year ban on the importation and consumption of alcohol.

SCOTT DUNLOP/STAR FILE PHOTO

Bootleggers make a fortune on the misery of others, especially the children. A ban like the one in Natuashish does, however, make drunkenness less socially acceptable, and inconvenient if you're caught by the RCMP. Natuashish's alcohol ban will fail, however, if it is not followed by community and economic development.

A non-profit agency called the Four Worlds Centre for Development Learning is doing inspiring work with the Sagamok Anishnawbek First Nation in Ontario, combining addiction recovery with education on community planning and economic development, an excellent model for the future of First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities. The Aboriginal Healing Foundation funded this work.

Since then, the Sagamok reserve has achieved coveted ISO (International Standards Organization) certification, proving it to be a good place in which to invest. There have been few such success stories arising from the costly employment programs provided by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs that just maintain dependency, not economic growth.

The Aboriginal Healing Foundation models how effective a small bureaucracy can be in creating change when it's run by people with direct experience (most employees are aboriginal).

There are about 2 million aboriginal people living in our cities and spread out in hundreds of communities from Labrador to the Yukon. Alcohol and drug addictions remain the dominant problems. The bootleggers in Natuashish will triumph if the majority of Canadians don't get behind the aboriginal sobriety movement and insist provincial and federal governments support it until the job is done. Only then will a step forward actually lead us somewhere.

Marie Wadden is a former Atkinson fellow and author of Where the Pavement Ends; Canada's Aboriginal Recovery Movement and the Urgent Need for Reconciliation.