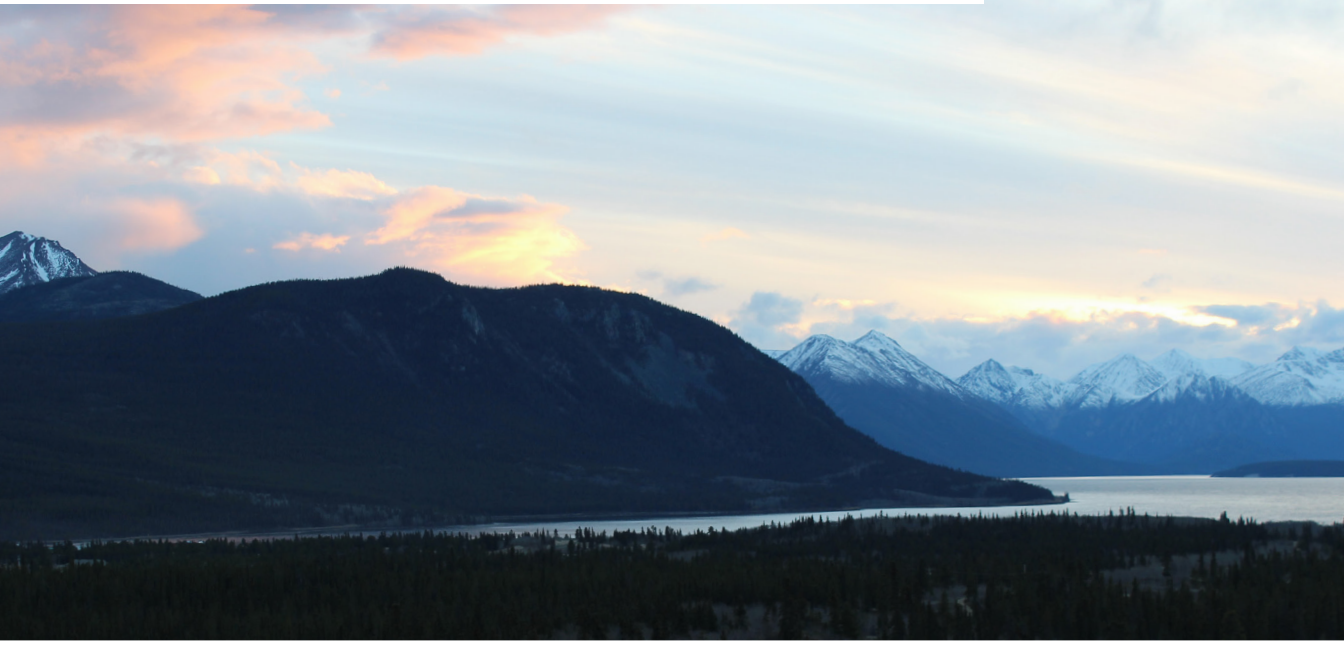
Ashley Carvill

Turning to Traditional Processes for Supporting Mental Health



THE GORDON FOUNDATION

JANE GLASSCO NORTHERN FELLOWSHIP

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The Gordon Foundation undertakes research, leadership development and public dialogue so that public policies in Canada reflect a commitment to collaborative stewardship of our freshwater resources and to a people-driven, equitable and evolving North. Our mission is to promote innovative public policies for the North and in fresh water management based on our values of independent thought, protecting the environment, and full participation of indigenous people in the decisions that affect their well-being. Over the past quarter century The Gordon Foundation has invested over $37 million in a wide variety of northern community initiatives and freshwater protection initiatives.

The Jane Glassco Northern Fellowship is a policy and leadership development program that recognizes leadership potential among northern Canadians who want to address the emerging policy challenges facing the North. The 18-month program is built around four regional gatherings and offers skills training, mentorship and networking opportunities. Through self-directed learning, group work and the collective sharing of knowledge, Fellows will foster a deeper understanding of important contemporary northern issues, and develop the skills and confidence to better articulate and share their ideas and policy research publicly. The Fellowship is intended for northerners between 25 and 35 years of age, who want to build a strong North that benefits all northerners. Through the Fellowship, we hope to foster a bond among the Fellows that will endure throughout their professional lives and support a pan-northern network.

Ashley Carvill was born into a family of leaders within the Carcross/Tagish First Nation (C/TFN). Her training in traditional Indigenous values came at the knee of her paternal great-grandmother, T'sint. As a young child, she was known in Carcross for her high sense of justice and her ability to advocate for the downtrodden youth and Elders in her Traditional Territory and surrounding areas.

Ashley graduated high school in the city, one of only a handful from her community. She worked as a walking and ATV tour guide, giving Indigenous history lessons and teaching about the values that her First Nation espouses. Her next position was in Yukon's criminal justice system as a Corrections Officer. It was there she came to realize that root causes of many negative justice issues stem from unresolved multi-generational childhood trauma and family breakdowns, this realization lent a hand in her future career path.

As a young woman, Ashley began her career by putting a focus on working with children and families. She has worked for her First Nation in various departments, which has brought her closer to the very real issues that inhibit her Nation from progressing. She was instrumental in helping shape the Family Council, a body established to effectively manage family matters that come before justice or social service institutions. Ashley is a Jane Glassco Northern Fellow Alumni and her required social policy paper has a focus on strengthening community through traditional virtues, values and pursuits. Ashley brings her vibrancy and joyful enthusiasm to difficult issues, ensuring efficiency and accountability to the values of her ancestors.

INTRODUCTION

First Nations culture, traditional values and practices are fundamental to our physical, mental, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. This importance is highlighted by examining how reliance on traditional values and practices makes an instrumental contribution to maintaining mental wellbeing and responding to mental health issues. The importance of drawing on our cultural traditions as First Nations people in addressing contemporary challenges in our communities cannot be overstated.

Traditionally, the people of Carcross\Tagish First Nation (C/TFN) in the Yukon were more than just a community; they were family. During the pre-contact period, each community member had designated roles and knew their roles and responsibilities to the community, so that members were able to depend on one another for support, help in emergencies and in times of need. Before the dark days of mission (residential) school, there were few if any suicides, less depression and hopelessness, and the broad spectrum of other mental health issues was not rife throughout our community.

In 1910, the territory's first residential school, Choutla Residential School, was built in Carcross. The school was in operation from 1911 until 1927, when an Education Centre opened in its place.[1] The suicide rate among First Nations people in Canada was three times higher than in non-Indigenous populations between 2011 and 2016, according to Statistics Canada. Suicide rates were highest for youth and young adults aged 15 to 24 years old among First Nations men and Inuit men and women.[2] Statistics Canada says the higher risk of suicide for Indigenous people compared to non-Indigenous [people] is due to "socioeconomic characteristics," such as household income, labor force status, level of education, marital status, as well as whether they live on or off a reserve and the community size.[3]

Today, mental health issues challenge the wellbeing of our families and community. Mental health challenges are made apparent in addictions, depression, stress, post-traumatic stress, breakdowns in our families, dysfunctional behavior including crimes, and an escalating number of tragic suicides.

My thesis is simple: the reason mental health was not a serious problem in the past amongst First Nations, and now arises as an escalating problem, is directly and indirectly related to engagement in and practice of traditional cultural values and processes. When traditional values and practices permeated the lifestyle of our community, mental health issues were relatively rare. Currently, our traditional values and practices are not central to our community governance, workplace and families. Today mental health issues feature prominently in the many challenges our community faces. Our cultural belief is that the active engagement and use of traditional values and practices can fundamentally address the escalating mental health issues currently affecting the wellbeing of individuals, families and our community. The invigoration of traditional values and practices is as essential to creating and maintaining good governance as it is to creating and maintaining mental health. This paper explores the positive impacts traditional values and practices can have on mental health and wellbeing.

1 Eric Stober, "First Nations suicide rate 3 times higher than non-Indigenous people: StatsCan." Global News, June 30, 2019. Accessed August 22, 2019, https://globalnews.ca/news/5448390/first-nations-suicide-rate-statscan/
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.

BACKGROUND

Mental wellness derives from many different things: a healthy sense of self; self-worth; self-respect; loving others and being loved; loving what you do; having something you love to do and look forward to doing every day; being appreciated for who you are; having self-confidence; being included; and feeling connected within one's family, clan and community. These practices reduce stress in life and provide the foundation for hope and joy in life.[4] All of these factors support mental health and all of these factors are generated and can be supported by traditional practices and values.[5]

Basing our governing processes on traditional values and practices would work towards breaking a historical cycle that has repeated the lesson many times in the development of Indigenous governments: reliance on and adaptations of western laws, processes, practices and values. Changing who "rules" without changing governing structures, processes and traditions, ultimately changes very little from colonial regimes in outcomes, in the relationships among citizens and between citizens and government. One option to change how governing structures operate would be changing the values and virtues that design and drive all parts of the governing process, resulting in a more inclusive and traditional structure. Doing anything less has repeatedly sustained the primary power structures and outcomes of a colonial system. Failing to begin building a new governing process by establishing shared values in the design, despite best efforts to govern in a different way, has resulted in returning to colonial practices and thus, to similar outcomes and to destructive conflicts within a new nation.

C/TFN sought to build a self-governing process capable of generating different outcomes and positive relationships among all citizens. To secure and sustain real changes in governance, C/TFN began by drawing from the advice of Elders, from lessons in traditional stories, songs, traditional practices, and the core values and virtues of *Haa Shagoon* (our ancestors). These values and virtues became the foundation for designing our laws, processes and governing practices. This was our first step in developing a system of governance that would support the revival of our culture, rebuild our nation based on traditional values, and regenerate the traditional unity within and among clans, most importantly, to not ever leave any one behind or to treat any one as disposable simply because they are mentally, physically or emotionally struggling.

4 First Nations Health Authority, *Traditional Wellness Strategic Framework*. Accessed September 10, 2019, https://www.fnha.ca/WellnessSite/WellnessDocuments/FNHA_TraditionalWellnessStrategicFramework.pdf
5 Ibid.

First Nations peoples have used stories to guide us, to communicate our worldviews, and to help us work through difficult times and decisions. There are teachings from our ancestors passed down through time from Elders to family to community, and they will continue to be passed down to our future generations. Stories are regularly utilized as a resource for our people, like an encyclopedia or a history book. When we endure hardship, conflict, or are seeking direction, reflecting on a story will provide the insight to assist us during these times.

A traditional story based on what actually happened to Keish, a member of our Nation best known by his nickname, Skookum Jim, provides invaluable lessons for our community. The story called “Skookum Jim’s Frog Helper” reveals how Skookum Jim saves the life of a frog who had been trapped in a deep hole by providing a board for the frog to crawl out on, to be carried to the safety of a creek. About a year later, because he was a natural peacemaker and attempted to make peace between two men he had never met, Skookum Jim was kicked in the stomach by one of the men. The kick developed a large wound that threatened his life. His aunt, who was tending to him during his illness, found a frog licking his wounds. The frog would not leave him until his wound was healed. It was the same frog that he had saved a year prior! Once back to full health, Keish travelled home. During his journey he had a dream about finding gold; in the dream the frog is thanking him and says he will find gold. Keish did in fact find gold, the most important gold discovery in North America, the discovery that triggered the Gold Rush of 1898.

The teachings of this story are about respecting mother earth’s creatures, the relationships between life and land, about trust, the wellbeing of nature and of caring for others only because it is “the right thing to do.” Several things about storytelling relate significantly to mental wellbeing. Firstly, storytelling connects us to others, to our past, to our core guiding values and to our history and ancestors. All of these connections are important sources of reassurance, of centering our lives on concrete understandable things that reinforce who we are and what our purpose is in our life. Stories we hear are ours to share with others and thereby render us valuable teachers

in our community. Sharing stories as teller or listener connects us to others in positive ways.

Processes used to deal with conflict can significantly determine whether the conflict can be an opportunity to save or rebuild a healthy relationship between the affected community members, which is vital in small populations. The style of mediation used within a conflict can inspire innovative outcomes to seemingly entrenched differences and can be the determining factor in sustainable resolutions. With increasing mental health issues, we have learned the hard way that if the process used to deal with these issues does not rebuild or build sustainable healthy relationships, the ultimate outcome is destructive to individual and community wellbeing. Relationships are invigorated by our traditional values and practices and are fundamental to the emotional and mental health of all community members.

Involvement in adversarial processes such as the court and justice systems, which are primarily western models, inflicts stress on anyone captured in these processes and undermines the mental health of the entire community. Regardless of whether community members are directly involved as parties, witnesses or as family and friends of those involved, the ripple effect of impact is evident. Addressing conflict and engaging people suffering from emotional or mental health issues in western adversarial processes is harmful to the best interests of the parties involved. These processes are less likely to find solutions that will serve the needs of the parties involved, but also the critical need to address the needs of a small collective. Collaborative and constructive dialogues are essential to find suitable outcomes that will address the unique mental health issues that arise, particularly solutions created for long-term support.

Peacemaking circles were effectively used in the early 1990s, mainly to address justice and community conflict. They are a process that brings together individuals who wish to engage in conflict resolution, healing, support, decision-making or other activities in which honest communication, relationship development and community consensus are required. The premise of a peacemaking circle is that they are another option to build capacity within communities and facilitate a process that fosters connections, with the ultimate goal being to reach consensus on the particular option or issue.

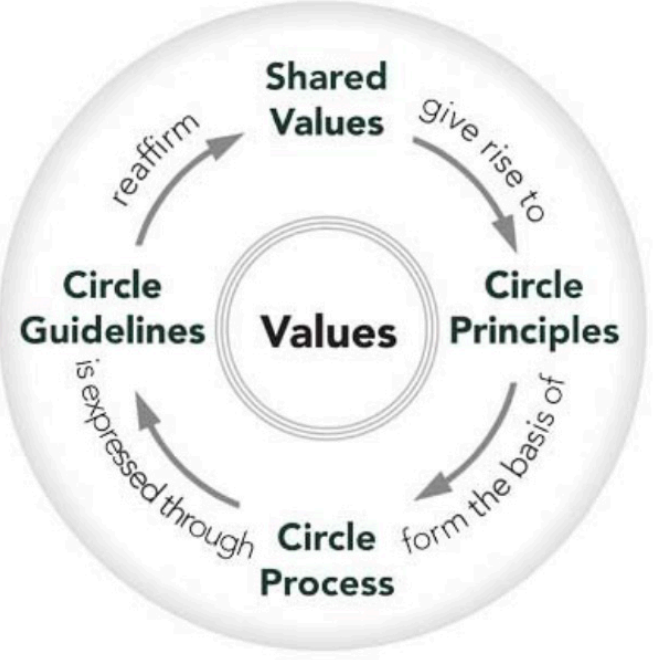
Circles become a way that conflict can be transformed into opportunities to build healthy, loving and resilient relationships. Circles bring balance to our lives, rebuild our connections and bring another way to work through justice.

Although each circle develops its own set of values, principles and guidelines, all peacemaking circles generally include the following elements:

- Are designed by those who use them
- Are guided by a shared vision
- Call participants to act on their personal values
- Include all interests, and are accessible to all
- Offer everyone an equal, and voluntary, opportunity to participate
- Take a holistic approach, including the emotional, physical, mental and spiritual
- Maintain respect for all
- Encourage exploring instead of conquering differences
- Invite accountability to others and to the process[6]

When working to reignite our traditional ways of doing, Tlingit clans will begin to assume critical responsibilities as an integral part of rebuilding community and reestablishing relationships. Each clan can develop how it will carry out its responsibilities. The Carcross/Tagish area has six clans that are recognized. Two of the six are Wolf moiety and the other four are Crow moiety.[8] Daklaweidi (Killer whale) and Yen Yedi (Wolf) are both of Wolf Moieties. Deisheetaan (Beaver), Ganaxtedi (Raven), Kookhittaan (Crow), Ishkahittan (Frog) are all of Crow Moiety.[9] It is also important to mention that all clans have either hereditary clan leaders, or clan leaders chosen by their respective clan members to be their spokesperson and speak on behalf of the clan at meetings, ceremonial activities and public events.

Circle Dynamics: Putting Values into Practice[7]



Restorative practices, including Circles, are derived from and build on Indigenous teachings and other wisdom traditions.
Excerpted from *Peacemaking Circles: From Conflict to Community*, by Kay Pranis, Barry Stuart, and Mark Wedge.
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6 "Peacemaking Circles: A Process for Solving Problems and Building Community." Accessed October 1, 2019, https://www.ousd.org/cms/lib07/CA01001176/Centricity/Domain/97/PeacemakingCircles.pdf
7 Ibid.
8 Encyclopedia Britannica, "Moiety System." Accessed October 1, 2019, https://www.britannica.com/topic/moiety-system
9 Carcross/Tagish First Nation, "Clans." Accessed September 19, 2019, https://www.ctfn.ca/haa-kusteeyi/clans

By including clans, the *Carcross/Tagish First Nation's Family Act* respects the traditional role of clans and recognizes their vital role in the overall governing process. The *C/TFN Family Act* is designed to support healthier families and communities. The Act is comprised of Book 1 and Book 2, which are intended to be the beginning steps to breaking down colonial laws and returning to traditional values and ways of doing. Book 1 breaks down traditional beliefs and laws and are the primary resources to interpret the intent and meaning of any part of this Act. Book 2 focuses on family law recognizing and emphasizing the central place of family in our Kustéeyi (culture).

Clans are crucial in the sharing of responsibility for responding to and developing resources for appropriate responses to mental health challenges. By establishing processes that invite self-initiated actions to rebuild relationships, and support others in these actions, the sense of connection with, and service to, a community can be enhanced and shared. When each of us acts "in a good way," all of us benefit.

At all times, the rights of anyone subject to mental health issues deserve to be acknowledged and must be fully respected. All members of a family and Clan have a responsibility to care for people dealing with mental health challenges. This responsibility requires appropriate government assistance.

Without a vibrant culture, we lose our connections to each other. We lose the underlying complex systems of support that have enabled us to survive for centuries. The wellbeing of our people is at risk and is directly and profoundly affected by their connection to our culture. We can and do adapt our culture to changing times, but in adapting to change, we need to preserve the essential features of our culture that bind us together and generate a powerful sense of belonging within a caring community.

Currently, a majority of self-governing Yukon First Nations operate with a western style of bureaucracy, and after 30 years of implementation, they are in a stable financial position to adapt the model to best fit the needs of their First Nation. In order to shape a government to meet our needs and to effectively run our government utilizing our virtues and values, we need to engage with our citizens and staff in an inclusive and holistic manner. Traditionally, community was more than a word and was very much about the people coming together to take care of one another. The times when we put tradition at the forefront of our ways of doing and living are quickly dissipating, and reigniting that passion within people to be part of the bigger picture of change is difficult.

Negative emotions, defensive reactions, fear and hostility are habits created by lack of transparency and barriers pushed by policy and procedures. Approach is everything, and government taking the time to invest in relationships and community is the first step to create bridges that will, in turn, provide heathy communal relationships and increase positivity. First steps may be as simple as sitting with community members, listening to what they have to say and working with them to reach mutually beneficial solutions. People are used to “win or lose” situations, but by taking the time to “be soft on people, but hard on the problem” we learn a new way to reach consensus.

When governments push programs or solution-based initiatives onto the community without including the community in the development of these, there are many things that become damaged over time. Broken connections happen; how do we begin to repair what has been done? Loss of relationships, connections, independence and pride are a few. Doing things as a team, united as a community, may begin to ignite the ownership and pride within individuals and their clan affiliations within the community. By operating with a more citizen-driven approach, the government may begin to break these barriers that have become a reality within communities. Citizens and community members may have a unique opportunity to participate in the designing phase of community wellness, where they can gain independence, unity and community pride.

Starting to work toward a more holistic and traditional community way of living will, in turn, build relationships, communication and connection, ultimately resulting in a strength-based, traditional manner of dealing with current mental health shortcomings.

POLICY OPTIONS & ANALYSIS

Three options that begin to address supporting mental health more effectively within community are:

1. **Maintain the status quo.**

2. **Strengthen community by building upon the capacity of community to address mental health issues through a Peacemaking Circle training mentorship project.**

3. **Engage the C/TFN Family Council to become the lead in developing next steps for a community mental wellness strategy.**

These options could include other existing programs, and further collaboration with external agencies within community would continue to be encouraged.

1 **Maintaining the status quo** is an option that would continue along the current way we are working. In doing so, there would be little to no cost increase to the C/TFN, as preventive and traditional pursuits would not be increased. However, there may be a potential increase of costs over time due to sustained dependencies on social programming and emergency services required for community members suffering from a mental health crisis. If things do not change, some community members may, in turn, begin to resent the government and agencies working locally as they are not recognizing the need for an increase of services and supports. The health care system and Royal Canadian Mounted Police will see an increase in the need for their services, which, in turn, increases territorial costs for time and services provided.

2 **Peacemaking Circle training** would focus on empowering youth to champion a process that begins to break down western barriers and focuses on utilizing traditional knowledge and teachings to strengthen relationships, communication and community, which all impact mental health. Local Elders would serve as mentors and would provide assistance to develop the curriculum to ensure that cultural relevance and traditional virtues and values are embedded in the foundation of the program. The peacemaking circle mentorship would begin with the fundamentals of a peacemaking circle.

Since the start of 2018, there have been four Peacemaking Circle training courses offered within the community of Carcross, Yukon, which have been a positive form of community engagement. There have been over 82 graduates; each graduate completed 18 training days consisting of four separate courses, with class sizes of 20 to 25 students, led by two instructors. Each course had a diverse mix of participants including youth, Elders, community members, Yukon Government employees and elected officials. Each course includes assistance provided by fellow community members who are considered peacemakers-in-training. The four courses are: Traditional Values and Practices; Intergenerational Trauma; In Dignity: Justice on the Land and Resistance to Violence; and the Fundamentals of Peacemaking Circles. As the community has used circles for many years, there are sufficient skills within the community to commence this initiative on a specified range of mental health issues. By beginning the program with circles, learning the basics of our traditional virtues and values and how we practice and live within the two worlds (western and First Nation), this may be the lever to get things moving within community.

The cost to attend the Peacemaking Circle training course is $4,000 per participant, and if you are a C/TFN citizen, the cost is waived. There is also the possibility of non-citizen youth to receive sponsorship from the Government of C/TFN to attend. If a community wanted to host the training in their community, the other costs include:

Advertising (Graduation & photos)	**$6,000.00**
Instructor Contracts	**$42,000.00**
Support's Honorarium	**$14,200.00**
Resource/Classroom Materials	**$2,500.00**
Materials & Supplies	**$8,000.00**
Honorarium (other)	**$5,000.00**
Travel (Instructors)	**$8,000.00**
Misc. (travel, mtg., room, etc. supports)	**$3,000.00**
TOTAL EXPENSES	**$88,700.00**

This estimated cost is for a group of 25 people for the duration of 18 days. Comparatively, if the program were to be reduced in class size and content for students/youth, the cost to run the program would be considerably less because the course would only run 5-10 days, and would cover two to four of the Peacemaking Circle Training sessions and an evaluation process.

The program would also assist in building individual and collective capacity while building trust to once again be able to “rely on thy neighbour” in times of need and celebration. Giving youth opportunities to build relationships that are rooted in their cultures and traditions would lend a hand to a larger shift within the community.

There are alternative avenues for funding this program through the Carcross/Tagish First Nation, through collaboration with the Capacity Development department of the C/TFN. For example, there is flexibility to work with the Ghuch Claw community school for an hour a week to do traditional pursuits programming. The program may run for nine weeks with the curriculum focusing on areas such as how to address/safely discuss historical families issues; traditional

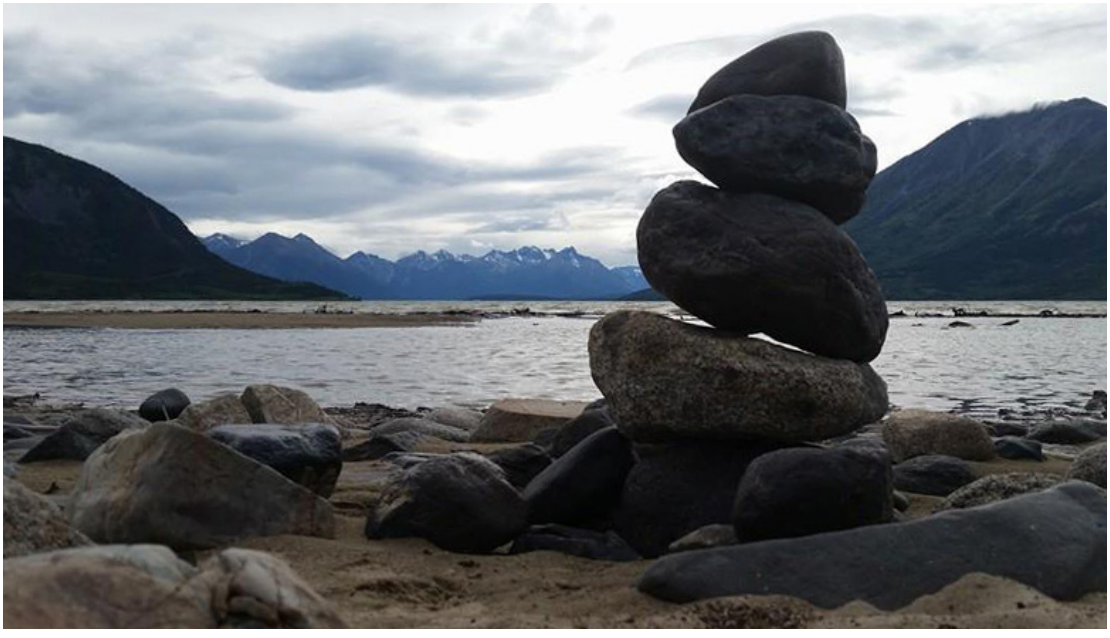
harvesting; traditional place names on a map developed by the participants; what does safety look like among their peers; and a community map developed by the participants that reflects safe places within community high risk areas and dangerous areas. Through the duration of this program, mental health supports services, Elders and educators will be available to assist the youth, as well as work as a team with the youth demonstrating what a healthy and collaborative community may look like.

Time will be required to explore ideas with the youth, Elders, public servants and community members to begin in the development of what support in dealing with mental health issues within community looks like. This mental health initiative seeks to raise the level of civic responsibility throughout the community by creating meaningful participation in community issues along traditional lines for all members of the community. The program would be evaluated as self-governing implementation evolves and experiences change and growth.

3 A final option is **engaging the C/TFN Family Council** to lead in developing next steps for the community to take ownership, and lead the initiative of change through practicing our traditional knowledge.

The *Family Act* of the C/TFN places the primary responsibilities for the wellbeing of all family members, all community members upon each person based on their relationships to all members of their family, to Elders, to their clan, to the community and to the First Nation. The most important part of the Act specifies what each person is expected to do in all of their different capacities as a child, teenager, brother, sister, spouse, parent, maternal and paternal uncle or aunt, grandparent, elder and member of a clan. The Act clarifies the different ways of how each person throughout his\her\ their life can make meaningful contributions to their families.

The key to the success of the *Family Act* approach depends on all community members taking up their traditional responsibilities in engaging with others who are requiring



help, or to address a specific need in the community. Responsibilities for all things in communities and in families are shared amongst the community as they were when traditional processes governed daily life. An individual's responsibilities are based on every relationship each person has to others, traditionally. For example, a grandmother may have responsibilities not only to her children and grandchildren, but in her role as an aunt, cousin, sister and to her clan. Thus in every stage of their life, new kinds of relationships arise with new responsibilities. In respect of the challenges facing those with mental health issues, two powerful constructive impacts result from reliance on sharing traditional responsibilities throughout the community. First they are included in this work to the extent they are able. Including them provides a means of constructive inclusion in their families, clan and community. Secondly, others in the community have an opportunity to make important and meaningful contributions that make a difference in their community and thereby in their lives. Traditional sharing of responsibility in respect of mental health can be set out in the same way the *Family Act* sets out shared responsibilities in a community to share in the care of healthy families and children.

The same identification of traditional responsibilities based on relationship lines can be made for mental health, education, land, wildlife, justice, etc. The important difference flowing from this approach lies not just in outcomes, but in the ways outcomes are developed. The inclusive and consensus-based decision-making processes built on shared values promotes connections and creates opportunities for each person to be a provider and a receiver, to be supported and to provide support, and, in essence, to feel and experience a true sense of belonging to a family and community.

With the Family Council collaborating with the C/TFN Government for citizens and families at risk, there is accountability, support networks established and constructive relationships to each person involved in the process. With Family Council taking the lead in creating the environment for inclusion, problem solving and community lead initiatives, the pride, accountability and responsibility belongs to the whole community.

In order to engage the Family Council, the Council would need to develop an implementation plan that should include the following:

1. Establish the initial leadership in the Family Council by designating a community prevention and safety lead person.

2. Ask each clan to appoint a representative to join other community members at large interested in mental health issues.

3. Form a task force within the Family Council to develop protocols for working with all affected departments of C/TFN and to review other similar initiatives.

4. Identify through this task force any training courses that can provide skills and knowledge related to key mental health issues.

RECOMMENDATION

My recommendation is that in order to begin addressing and supporting mental health more effectively within the community, we must begin to look back and down the trails that were once walked by our Elders and ancestors.

The urgency of enhancing services for mental health issues is compelling, and the community is ready. Government support and funding is within reach to pursue option 2: **Strengthen community by building upon the capacity of community to address mental health issues through a Peacemaking Circle training mentorship project.**

If the Government of C/TFN supports the long-term vision of rebuilding and rekindling our ancestors' teachings, a phased approach can begin the path to greater community engagement, which would start with community input and consultations. If we start slow and build with sustainability in mind; starting in a way that avoids setting up volunteers for failure, then government-to-community and person-to-person relationships will have an opportunity to be strengthened and the people will grow to feel more united.

CONCLUSION / IMPLEMENTATION

While policy option 2, strengthening community by building upon the capacity of community to address mental health issues through a Peacemaking Circle training mentorship project, requires consistent funding, the solutions would be innovative, creative, inclusive and developed through consensus. The hope for the future would be that the facilitators are eventually worked out of a job and the participants fully absorb their traditional rolls within community. Six suggested steps are provided to begin the planning of the implementation of option 2.

The primary guidelines governing the implementation of option 2 are:

1. Phasing in development to match capacity with evolving engagement.
2. Respecting the needs of people seeking help.
3. Relying on traditional values and practices.
4. Avoiding duplication of services.
5. Accessing ability to serve needs.
6. Monitoring implementation and completing a minimum of two program evaluations yearly.

The change that we seek begins with the recognition that we ourselves have a large responsibility to take on, being of people who believe in a deep connectedness to all life forces; everything on earth, rocks, plants, rivers, animals, fish, birds and insects all share a common origin. I hope that my policy paper will have an impact on the community of Carcross and encourage those who may feel excluded, or in the shadows, that they have a voice and deserve to be heard and listened to. By igniting the sacred fires that carry our traditional virtues and values to the forefront of how we conduct our lives and how we interact with one another, we will begin the process of healing our community.

Turning to Traditional Processes for Supporting Mental Health

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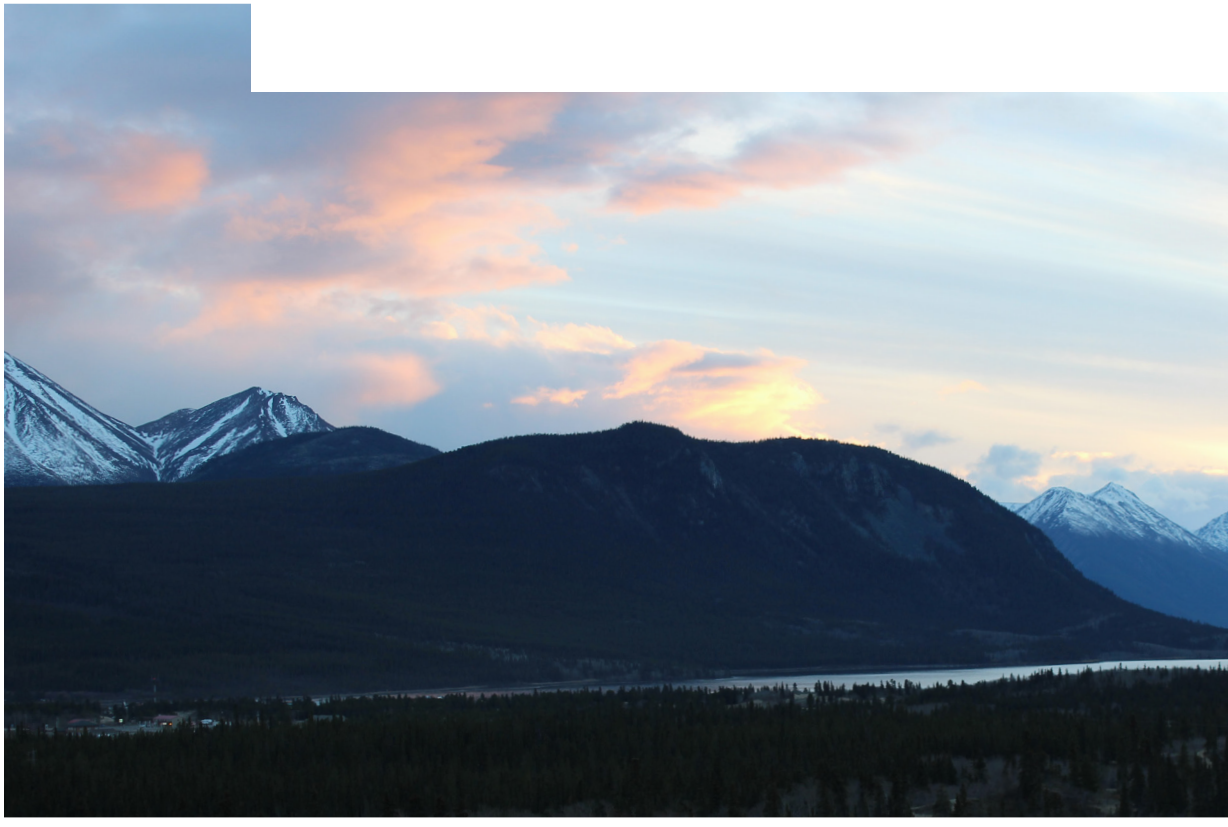

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