

BEST PRACTICE

Supporting Indigenous Recruitment, Hiring and Retention in Public Health Units

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Background

Public health units serve increasingly diverse populations, including First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities. Despite this, Indigenous Peoples remain underrepresented across the public health workforce, particularly in professional and leadership roles.^{1,2} This limits the system's ability to deliver culturally safe, equitable, and effective public health programs and services.^{1,2,3}

Increasing Indigenous staffing is a critical strategy to:

- Improve access to culturally relevant services and program design^{2,3}
- Build trust and strengthen relationships with Indigenous communities¹⁻⁴
- Integrate Indigenous knowledge and lived experience into public health practice¹⁻⁴
- Advance health equity and reconciliation commitments²⁻⁴

A workforce reflective of the communities served strengthens public health impact and responsiveness.^{1,2}

Alignment with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action

This work directly supports several Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Calls to Action:

- **Call to Action 19:** Closing health gaps requires equitable and appropriate services supported by a representative workforce.⁵
- **Call to Action 23:** Increase Indigenous professionals in health care, ensure retention, and provide cultural competency training.⁵
- **Call to Action 92(ii):** Ensure equitable access to jobs, training, and education opportunities for Indigenous Peoples.⁵

As public-sector employers, public health units are well positioned to operationalize these calls through intentional workforce strategies.

Guiding Principles

Effective Indigenous recruitment, hiring and retention strategies:

- Recognize Indigenous Peoples as rights holders with distinct strengths and perspectives¹⁻⁴
- Address systemic and organizational barriers rather than placing responsibility on individual applicants.²⁻³
- Are grounded in relationship-building, respect and collaboration¹⁻⁴
- Value Indigenous knowledge, lived experience, and community connection as professional assets.²⁻⁴
- Prioritize long-term success, wellbeing, and career growth within the workforce¹⁻²

These efforts require organizational readiness, leadership commitment and sustained accountability.

Key Strategies for Public Health Units

1. Build Relations and Partnerships

Strong, ongoing relationships are foundational to Indigenous recruitment and retention.^{1-4,6} Public health units should:

- Partner with local First Nations, Inuit, and Métis governments and organizations^{1-4,6}
- Engage Indigenous-serving agencies, friendship centres, and community health entities¹⁻⁴
- Connect with Indigenous educational institutions and student support centres¹⁻⁴
- Participate in community events and spaces (e.g., powwows, round dances, National Indigenous Peoples Day, National Day for Truth and Reconciliation).⁵

These partnerships support trust, co-created opportunities (e.g., internships, student placements), and sustainable workforce pathways.^{2,3,6}

2. Review Job Postings and Hiring Processes

Job descriptions and hiring processes should:

- Clearly value knowledge of local Indigenous cultures and languages^{1-4,6}
- Ensure educational requirements align with the actual duties of the position.
 - In 2021 approximately 13% of Indigenous adults hold a university degree compared to 34% of non-Indigenous adults in Canada.⁷ Graduate level degrees are even less common among Indigenous populations.
 - Consider whether a role truly requires a master's degree or if an undergraduate degree in health, nursing or related fields is sufficient.

- Recognize lived experience, community involvement and cultural knowledge as assets^{1-4,6}
- Use culturally informed interview practices that respect different communication styles and expressions of humility.^{2,4}

Interviewers should enter each process without assumptions and with cultural sensitivity.² See [Appendix A](#) for information on culturally informed interview practices.

3. Use Indigenous-Focused Recruitment Approaches

Where appropriate, public health units may prioritize Indigenous applicants through targeted recruitment strategies including:

- Posting positions through local Indigenous-specific channels, including Friendship centres, community newsletters etc. ²⁻⁴
- Indigenous job boards and networks platforms increase visibility among Indigenous job seekers and support targeted outreach.⁴
 - [Amik Inc. Professional Indigenous Engagement Services](#)
 - [Canadian Indigenous Nurses Association](#)
 - [First Nations Jobs](#)
 - [First Nations Jobs Online](#)
 - [Aboriginal Job Board](#)
 - [Government of Canada Job Bank: For Indigenous Peoples](#)
 - [IndigenousCanada.org – National Job Site for Indigenous Job Seekers](#)
 - [Indigenous Link Careers](#)
 - [Indigenous Careers](#)

**The inclusion of Indigenous-specific job boards and networks is intended solely to support awareness and outreach. Public Health Ontario does not own, operate, or formally endorse any external job boards or third-party websites. Listing these platforms does not constitute a recommendation, approval, or validation of their content, services, or practices.*

4. Educational Partnerships and Outreach

Creating pathways from education to employment strengthens recruitment and long-term workforce sustainability.²⁻⁴

Public health units should consider partnerships and outreach with Indigenous post-secondary institutions and programs including:

- [Seven Generations Education Institute](#): Nursing, social services, health administration.
- [Anishinabek Educational Institute](#): Mental Health, addictions, practical nursing, social services.
- [First Nations Technical Institute](#): Social services, mental health, Indigenous governance, public administration, Master of Social Work.
- [First Nations University of Canada](#): Various academic programs supporting community leadership and health careers.

Engagement with Indigenous student centres at mainstream post-secondary institutions can also support placements, internships, and early career recruitment.²⁻⁴

5. Preparing the Workplace

Recruitment efforts must be matched by workplace readiness. Public health should:

- Provide cultural competency, anti-racism and Indigenous-led learning opportunities for staff¹⁻⁴
- Address workplace attitudes, policies, and practices that may contribute to exclusion or harm¹⁻⁴
- Embed organizational commitments to Indigenous inclusion at all levels¹⁻⁴

Workplace culture plays a critical role in retention and employee well-being.¹⁻⁴

6. Remote Work and Flexible Employment Arrangements

Flexible work arrangements can be a powerful recruitment and retention tool for Indigenous employees, particularly those who wish to live and remain connected to their home communities.¹⁻⁴

Public health units should consider:

- Offering remote or hybrid work options where job functions allow.
- Designing roles that can be performed fully or partially from Indigenous communities, including reserve and rural or remote locations
- Providing flexible scheduling to support cultural, family, and community responsibilities
- Ensuring employees have equitable access to professional development, advancement opportunities, and workplace supports
- Enabling employees to live in their Indigenous community:
 - Supports cultural continuity, family responsibilities, and community leadership roles¹⁻⁴
 - Reduces relocation barriers that disproportionately impact Indigenous applicants¹⁻⁴
 - Strengthens community-informed public health practice through employees' ongoing lived experience.¹⁻⁴

Remote work options should be implemented thoughtfully to avoid isolation and ensure Indigenous employees remain fully integrated into teams and organizational culture.

7. Supporting Retention and Career Growth

Indigenous health professionals may experience racism, isolation or barriers to practicing with self-determination within mainstream systems.¹ Retention strategies include:

- Creating culturally safe, inclusive and respectful work environments¹⁻⁴
- Supporting mentorship, career advancement, and leadership development^{2,3}
- Ensuring Indigenous initiatives have adequate resources
 - Indigenous people are often asked to take responsibility for all work that touches on Indigenous people, without adequate resources, this can lead to burnout.¹
 - Establishing Indigenous employee networks or advisory groups²

- Visibly recognizing Indigenous presence in physical and organizational spaces^{1,2}
- Learn from exit interviews and ongoing feedback from Indigenous staff²⁻⁴

Indigenous employees are essential partners in strengthening recruitment, retention and organizational change initiatives.²

8. Supporting Indigenous Employees Through Awareness of Income Tax Exemptions

Removing financial and administrative barriers is an important aspect of Indigenous recruitment and retention.^{2,4} Awareness of Indigenous-specific employment rights and legal contexts, including income tax exemptions for eligible employees working on reserve, demonstrates organizational readiness, builds trust, and supports workforce sustainability.

In certain circumstances, **Status First Nations** employees whose employment duties are performed on reserve may be eligible for income tax exemptions under section 87 of *the Indian Act*.⁸

Public health units that understand and appropriately support these exemptions are better positioned to recruit and retain Indigenous employees, particularly those working in or for their home communities. See [Appendix B](#) for additional information.

Moving Forward

Intentional recruitment, hiring, and retention of Indigenous employees is an ongoing organizational commitment that advances public health effectiveness, equity, and reconciliation. Success depends on sustained leadership support, meaningful partnerships, and inclusive workplaces where Indigenous staff are respected, supported, and able to thrive.

Public health units should work in partnership with Indigenous employees to support continual improvement. Using safe and culturally appropriate approaches such as employee engagement surveys or other feedback mechanisms can ensure Indigenous staff experience a supportive, respectful, and culturally safe work environment.

Appendix A: Culturally Informed Interview Practices

Culturally informed interviews recognize that communication styles, expressions of confidence, and storytelling may differ across Indigenous communities. Indigenous cultures are diverse, so interviewers should take a moment to consider assumptions, biases and the diversity of Indigenous experiences.^{1,4,9}

General Principles

- Recognize that cultural communication styles vary and that typical Western interview norms such as direct eye contact and frequent use of “I” may not reflect competence or confidence among all Indigenous candidates.^{1,9}
- Humility and collective framing (“we/us”) may be valued more highly than individual self-promotion (“I/me”) in some Indigenous cultural contexts.^{1,9}
- Non-linear storytelling or pauses may reflect thoughtful consideration, relational thinking, or culture-based communication approaches.⁹

Practical Tips for Interview Panels

Communication Style and Content

- Allow time for reflection before responding; avoid rushing answers.
- Be comfortable with pauses or quieter communication styles.
- Avoid equating confidence with self-promotion; recognize humility as a cultural value rather than a lack of ability.
- Use open-ended questions that invite storytelling and lived experience.
- Frame questions broadly so candidates can speak to community-based contributions (“we”) rather than forced individual accomplishments.⁹

Use of Language

- Avoid over-reliance on “I” statements as markers of competence, recognizing that some cultures discourage self-assertion in favour of community focus.⁹
- Use clear, simple language; avoid jargon and Western interview idioms.⁹

Non-Verbal Communication

- Be aware that limited or minimal eye contact and a quieter voice may be a sign of respect in many Indigenous contexts and should not be interpreted negatively.^{1,9}
- Arrange seating at angles rather than directly face-to-face when possible to reduce pressure and support natural communication.⁹
- Recognize that silence and thoughtful pauses can be meaningful and reflective, not hesitation.⁹

Interview Structure and Process

- Clearly explain the format and expectations at the outset.
- Where possible, include Indigenous representation on interview panels to enhance cultural understanding and fairness.
- Ensure panel members have access to basic cultural awareness training before interviews. [1.4.9](#)

Examples of Supportive Questions

- “Can you share an experience where your community knowledge informed your work?”
- “How do you approach relationship-building in your role?”
- “What supports help you do your best work?”

Appendix B: Income Tax Exemptions

Income tax exemptions for eligible Indigenous employees are **set out under section 87 of the Indian Act** and interpreted through **Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) guidelines**.⁸ These exemptions may apply to **Status First Nations employees** depending on where employment duties are performed and the employees specific circumstances.

Understanding and appropriately supporting these exemptions demonstrates organizational readiness, reduces administrative barriers and supports recruitment and retention, particularly for employees working in or for their home communities.

Employer Awareness and Responsibilities

Public health units should:

- Be aware that **income tax exemptions** may apply when employment duties are conducted on reserve lands, including through remote or hybrid arrangements.⁸
- Understand that eligibility is commonly assessed using CRA guidelines, including whether **50% or more** of an employee's work duties are performed on reserve.⁸
- Provide clear, accurate information to eligible employees or refer them to appropriate tax guidance.⁸
- Avoid placing the burden on Indigenous employees to educate employers about tax-related considerations.²

Benefits of Supporting Employees

- Improves the financial accessibility and competitiveness of public health employment.^{2,4}
- Supports recruitment and retention of Indigenous staff working in or connected to their communities.^{2,4}
- Demonstrates organizational awareness of Indigenous-specific rights and legal obligations.^{2,4}

Onboarding and Non-Taxable Income Considerations

As part of onboarding and ongoing employment support, public health units may provide information on non-taxable income for eligible Indigenous employees.

As a general reminder:

- **Status First Nations** employees who perform **50% or more of their employment duties on reserve** may be eligible for non-taxable employment income, depending on individual circumstances and CRA guidelines.⁸

Organizations should ensure that:

- Payroll and benefits specialists are informed and equipped to process income tax exemptions appropriately.⁸

- Internal procedures are in place to support amended T4s or payroll adjustments where applicable.⁸
- Employees are directed to credible, authoritative guidance to confirm eligibility.⁸

Forms Commonly Required

While each situation is unique, eligible **Status First Nations** employees are typically required to complete the following forms to support non-taxable income determinations:

- [TD1-IN](#): Determination of Exemption of an Indian's Employment Income^{10*}
- [TD1](#): Federal Personal Tax Credit Return¹¹
- [TD1-ON](#): Ontario Personal Tax Credit Return¹²
- [Form 15](#): PBA Exemption Election¹³

Public health units should clearly communicate internal submission processes (e.g., HR or payroll contact points) to reduce administrative burden on employees.⁸

*The Canadian government still uses the outdated term 'Indian' to refer to 'Indigenous people'.

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