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- Health Sciences North/Northeastern Ontario Cancer Centre
- North-East Local Health Integration Network
- Northern Ontario School of Medicine
- Weeneebayko Area Health Authority

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# Contents

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- Introduction 1
  - Method 2
- Results and Discussion 4
  - Nature of Engagement 4
  - Organizational Experiences of Engagement 4
    - Strategic Plans 4
    - Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action 5
    - Aligning Programs and Services 5
    - Leadership Buy-In 6
    - Leadership and Staffing of the Direct Engagement Process 7
    - Staff Consultation 8
    - Taking Time 8
    - Resources 9
    - Links to Action 9
    - Coordination 10
    - Setting Realistic Expectations 10
  - Principles 11
  - Successes and Evaluation 14
- Conclusion 15
- References 16
- Appendix A: Interview Questions 17

# Introduction

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Ontario public health units deliver a broad range of population health programs aimed at improving the health of the community, protecting the health of all, and ensuring everyone has equal opportunities for health. Public health units are required to tailor programs and services to the local context and community needs. Thirty-five (35) public health units operate across Ontario (previously 36), and 21 of them intersects with the boundaries of 133 First Nations communities<sup>1</sup>.

Engagement is strongly encouraged within a number of health-related calls to action within the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC, 2015). The 2018 Ontario Public Health Standards contain enhanced language that explicitly calls for boards of health to engage with Indigenous communities and organizations as well as with First Nations communities (MOHLTC, 2018). Given this context, public health in Ontario has a need for guidance on principles and practices that can promote effective engagement with First Nations communities. Yet, little formal guidance is currently available to public health, and little is known about the wishes of First Nations communities with respect to engagement and collaboration with local public health units.

In response to this identified gap, the overall intent of this research project is to answer the following research question:

*“What mutually beneficial, respectful and effective principles and practices of engagement between First Nations communities and public health units in Northeastern Ontario can be identified, as an important step in working toward improved opportunities for health for all?”*

The project was structured in phases. The first phase of the project involved scoping what is already known from research and experience, through a literature review and public health unit survey. Four themes emerged from the literature review: **respect, trust, self-determination, and commitment**. The literature review findings helped develop and inform the Ontario public health unit survey, which focused on understanding the public health units’ perspective on current principles and practices of engagement between First Nations communities and health units, as well as perceived successes and challenges. The second (current) phase of the project involves key informant interviews with health organizations that have existing Indigenous health-focused strategies. The third phase of the research is called the Gathering and Sharing Learning phase. This phase consists of gathering information via focus groups, sharing circles and interviews with individuals from six

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<sup>1</sup> The term “First Nations community” is utilized throughout this report as a respectful alternative phrase for the term “reserve”. It refers to a community which is officially recognized and administered on land that was set aside under the Indian Act or under a treaty agreement, and which is governed by a band council. Alternately, the term “Indigenous” is used in a broader sense to include people of all Indigenous ancestry -- First Nations, Métis, and Inuit -- regardless of their place of residence.

First Nations communities from Northeastern Ontario. The information accumulated from this phase will contribute to identifying principles and practices that have been utilized or recommended for developing effective engagement between First Nations communities and public health. All components of the research project will inform and support the development of the final report. Those who are currently or planning to engage with urban Indigenous communities and organizations may also learn from this project's findings.

To ensure that the overall approach to this project is appropriately balanced, an Indigenous Circle comprised of representatives with expertise, experience and Indigenous perspectives from communities within the Northeast was established. The research team includes five health units (with Public Health Sudbury & Districts as lead agency), the Indigenous Circle, and two Laurentian University academic advisors.

This research project was supported with funding from Public Health Ontario's Locally Driven Collaborative Project (LDCP) stream.

The present report focuses on the second phase of the project: key informant interviews with representatives of health organizations that have existing Indigenous health-focused strategies.

## Method

The objective of the interviews was to learn about each organization's experience in engaging with Indigenous communities towards the development of an Indigenous health-focused strategy.

Representatives from the following five organizations whose work is based in or conducted within the Northeastern Ontario region were interviewed about their Indigenous engagement strategies:

- Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, Aboriginal Engagement and Outreach in the Provincial System Support Program
- Health Sciences North/Northeastern Ontario Cancer Centre
- North-East Local Health Integration Network (2 interviewees)
- Northern Ontario School of Medicine
- Weeneebayko Area Health Authority (WAHA)

Among the key informant organizations, there was one organization and one unit within an organization that were focused on Indigenous populations specifically. The other three key informant organizations have a mandate across the general population, with important representation of Indigenous health in their mandates and roles.

Key informants had to obtain organizational approval to participate and were asked to provide responses reflective of their organization's experience. One interview had two participants and four had single informants. All participants held Director or Senior Management roles within their organization and three of the six key informants self-identified as Indigenous.

Participants were provided with an information package and completed a consent form before the interview. The questions in the interview focused on the process each organization undertook to develop their engagement strategy, and their successes, challenges and lessons learned through this

process. Key informants were also asked about principles for effective engagement with Indigenous communities.

Interviews were completed by telephone in approximately 60-75 minutes each. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Transcripts were analyzed using NVivo 10, with themes and sub-themes identified for each of the interview questions. Anonymized quotations are provided to illustrate the themes, and have been edited to remove disfluencies. There are multiple quotations from each informant in order to reflect the voices of all participants. Key informants also had the opportunity to review the draft of this report for comments on its content and approve selected citations.

Responses are limited to the perspectives and perceptions of the key informants representing their organizations. As such, the quality and extent of their engagement work is not validated within the scope of this project.

This research component was approved by the Laurentian University Research Ethics Board and the Public Health Sudbury & Districts Research Ethics Review Committee.

# Results and Discussion

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## Nature of Engagement

The key informant organizations had all been taking steps to engage with Indigenous Peoples and communities for many years. For some key informants, their work was specifically focused on engagement with Indigenous Peoples and communities. For others, this work occurred within a broader organizational mandate that included, but was not only focused on, Indigenous Peoples. Their experience was not drawn only from one particular initiative or strategy but from many approaches and integrated ways of working. They also emphasized that the work of engagement can never be ‘done’; it is an ongoing process that requires attention, time and resourcing in order to be effective and valuable.

## Organizational Experiences of Engagement

This section describes important aspects of the experiences of the key informant organizations in their engagement with Indigenous Peoples and communities. The informant largely spoke about factors that supported and enabled their work; some challenges and difficulties were also discussed.

## Strategic Plans

When asked about the motivations or driving factors for engagement, informants talked about the important roles of strategic plans and strategic directions in directing the priorities of organizations. In four cases, the organizations had strategic directions or mandates that explicitly focused on Indigenous engagement. For the organization that did not have such a strategic direction, this lack was felt to be something of a hindrance in getting related issues on the top of the organizational agenda and getting the support and resourcing that would come with organizational priorities. Thus, strategic directions related to Indigenous engagement and Indigenous health can be identified as an enabler of activity in this area. That said, there were examples of action related to Indigenous health that happened without strategic directions, so this might be considered an enabler rather than a necessary condition.

In terms of how strategic directions or initiatives related to Indigenous engagement are operationalized, it was important to position the work as an organization-wide initiative, rather than one placed within a certain program or portfolio.

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*In the beginning we actually didn't want to call it a strategy. It was really about developing a process and a way of doing our work that was within our own scope but was also supported by our organizational objectives that fit well within what our overall strategic plan was.*

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*To move forward an organizational-wide priority around something like cultural safety training and cultural competency then that really needs everybody to see that as a priority and the starting point has to be having it called out as an organizational priority. I think the framework is there and there's been some progress but ... I think it will continue to be a bit opportunistic until such time that it's called out in a strategic plan.*

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*What I didn't want to have happen is for one [unit] to be leading this work, because then I was concerned it wouldn't have organizational buy-in particularly with our executive leadership. So right from the beginning we set out to have an internal steering committee of organizational leaders that spanned from across different areas ... And that was really helpful in helping us begin to think through, and put it on our agenda, that we better make sure that we're covering each of these organizational areas in the strategy conversation about what we need to develop.*

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## Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action

Informants also noted that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Canada: Calls to Action report had been influential and had created the need for increased attention and greater scrutiny of existing strategies and activities.

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*I guess it's a continuing journey, shall we put it that way that has taken a new and further development with the reports of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the calls to actions.... What we did ... was first look at what we were already doing in relation to the 94 calls to action...now we're looking at what further we should be doing, and we're certainly getting some strong messaging from our Indigenous reference group and from our elders group.*

*We actually just had one of our follow up meetings today, we had a really open conversation with Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff, and how do we feel about what's happening right now and the conversation about Reconciliation. We got some amazing ideas from the staff about what we can do, including having land acknowledgements read at every orientation session with staff coming in.*

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## Aligning Programs and Services

From an organizational mandate perspective, engaging with Indigenous communities was valuable in determining the local needs for programs and services. Being respectful of the needs of

Indigenous clients and wanting to understand how to provide best-quality services was part of the motivation as well. Some organizations have an explicit mandate for social accountability and responsiveness to the communities they serve; engagement is one aspect of responding to their communities.

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*It was really important that we undertook a process that was going to be able to help us understand and make some decisions about what we ought to do and also about what we shouldn't do.*

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*It isn't simply about numbers and just providing a service, it's about providing quality service and service that we hope results in clients and patients feeling that they have been treated with respect and have been culturally safe throughout our process whether that's through client care whether that's through research projects or whether that's participating in a systems initiative.*

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## Leadership Buy-In

When embarking on a specific strategy or process of engagement, it was important to involve senior leadership from the organization, in such a way that they can feel ownership and commitment, but also in a way that respects their limited time and multiple priorities. Being clear on what will be needed in terms of time commitment and resources was helpful in supporting participation from organizational leaders.

Informants also spoke about the important role of Indigenous staffing within their organizations. Having staff who identify as Indigenous is an enabler of engagement, in part because it gives credibility to the organization's claim that they want to work with Indigenous Peoples. An implication of this finding is that organizations seeking to engage with Indigenous communities may also need to consider their own recruitment and retention policies.

## Leadership and Staffing of the Direct Engagement Process

In terms of the actual structures and processes put in place in organizations to support engagement, it was important to have Indigenous leadership and advice, both in the staffing of the initiative and the advisory or reference groups put in place. The key informants all acknowledged the value of having a lead or key individual who identifies as Indigenous. They also drew on expertise of advisory groups made up of representatives from local Indigenous agencies and communities. Some also had Elders groups, and some had taken steps to hear specifically from youth about their priorities and concerns.

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*A recommendation was to have an Indigenous reference group, an advisory committee to ensure that [we are] held to task in terms of continuing to focus on addressing the needs and the expectations of Indigenous Peoples.*

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*I'm thinking about how ... we've come to work with elders and engage with elders, and we're really beyond that place where we just invite them to come and do an opening for a meeting and then sit all day and do the closing.*

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*I think the key to me was really having somebody to take on a lead in terms of developing those relationships and the trust early on that has credibility with the communities and has an Indigenous background, and has a history of having demonstrated that they can move these things forward, [in one example, an individual who] understood the political and decision making structures and decision making processes in communities that could help guide the development of that early relationship building that had to occur to be able to move the rest of the strategy forward. ... Even before you build your strategy you've really got to have some basic productive relationships and I think having somebody that's got the trust of the leadership and the trust of communities as a starting point gets you way further ahead.*

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## Staff Consultation

Although engagement with Indigenous communities tended to be talked about as an externally-focused strategy of reaching out to communities, there was clearly an important internal aspect to the work. Capacity building for staff was part of this process, but alongside capacity building was a need for consultation and involvement of non-Indigenous staff. Part of the effect of this approach is to avoid the risk of Indigenous engagement being sidelined or separate from the overall work of the organization.

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*When we took information back to the external advisory group they said to us “Did you check in with your non-Indigenous staff?” and we said “no, we haven’t done that.” and they said, “Why don’t you do that ... we’re curious to know what you might learn from them.” So we went and did that and then had a focus group with non-Indigenous staff and that actually was one of the most valuable pieces that we did because what they were able to do is inform us on what they felt were the issues with the First Nations, Inuit and Metis clients that we’re seeing and also they were identifying really important areas around capacity development that they felt they needed to be able to serve clients and patients from this population group confidently.*

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## Taking Time

It was also important to note that engagement strategies and approaches take time to be developed and implemented, and cannot be rushed or compressed to meet deadlines. Community protocols must be observed and respected, and each community will have their own ways of doing things. Each community is unique, and the implication for engagement is that engaging with one person, group or community does not mean that others do not also need to be engaged. The engagement process should involve as many individuals, groups and communities as possible to make it meaningful. Engagement must be personal, contextualized, and, when possible, done in-person and in the community setting.

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*People don’t realize the amount of work. You have to get buy in from your Chief and leadership and you get buy in from your community frontline people, then you have to make sure that you work with the right individuals to get your youth involvement, you work with the right individuals to get your senior involvement. You know, those kind of things that that stuff doesn’t happen in one phone call. So those would be definitely big learnings for us as an organization ... but what it should say to you as an outside provider coming in, is how meaningful it is to them...how important this is to the region to respect it.*

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## Resources

All organizations experience resource limitations, and this certainly was the case for organizations seeking to advance their work with Indigenous communities. One organization noted that they had achieved many of their planned objectives with respect to advancing Indigenous initiatives, but that those that remain to be achieved are the more resource-intensive ones. Resource challenges were noted as a common theme; time commitments, as part of resource considerations, are also significant when engagement is done in a dedicated and ongoing way. Organizations found that a planned strategy allows some clarity over what the resource needs are and will be, so that some predictability and sustainability can be found.

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*I think the challenges become that the items or the actions that... require less resources are the easier ones that we've been able to implement. And where we're having challenges is in areas where we know there are more resources needed, whether they're financial or human, to be able to move things through.*

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*I think one of the things I would say is that I hadn't really anticipated was just how much energy it would take to sustain engagement. Because what gets traction is well beyond just planning, it really needs to be resourced. As soon as we've fallen off on that, we've seen things dissipate in terms of the enthusiasm and engagement. I think that, setting those things up, you've got to go in with your eyes wide open that it can't be just a short term, one-off type project approach. It really needs to be an ongoing part of how you do business. And that takes energy and effort. I think that the consequences if you don't... if you can't put that in, then you actually run the risk of going backwards and again losing trust.*

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## Links to Action

Engagement strategies that linked to specific actions or had a valued outcome for the communities were seen as desirable. It was not the case that every interaction had to result in an outcome, but in a larger sense, it was important to understand what outcomes would be valuable, to outline what working together might do to achieve desired outcomes, and to be dedicated to following through and reporting back about what has been achieved.

## Coordination

True engagement with Indigenous communities has led to valued partnerships and collaborations, and along with those were multiple initiatives and lines of work. It was sometimes challenging to keep everything moving, and to build a cohesive strategy out of what may have started as small or unconnected elements. Coordinating the process and outcomes of Indigenous engagement, so that the same partners are not continually asked to participate, and spreading work out in such a way that valued actions happen without burning out the people who have initially shown interest, is important for maintaining a long-term, sustainable approach.

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*You do have a lot of these things coming up and we're coming to the same people over and over again in communities, not necessarily coordinating those things in an organized and comprehensive way, so that ... you can possibly get some fatigue on the receiving end.*

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## Setting Realistic Expectations

It was noted that when listening and engaging with Indigenous communities, a number of pressing needs and concerns may emerge. Organizations want to support communities in addressing these identified needs, and also want to be honest if they do not have a mandate or available funding to address some identified issues. It was important to set realistic expectations, and some challenges were encountered in this area. As relationships developed, it had been possible to build understanding of the respective roles and challenges of all parties, so that limitations are understood and can be talked about openly.

With respect to equity mandates or directions, one challenge was that many equity-seeking groups require attention and dedication of resources to support their health and well-being. When Indigenous engagement strategies are presented, organizations may encounter feedback that other groups also require engagement, distinct support, and allocation of resources. An understanding of Indigenous engagement relies on underlying understanding of the complex issues involved, and at times that understanding has been lacking. Ongoing discussion, education and leadership appear to be the strategies to address this challenge.

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*When I'm out there saying that we need more resources for this, I think that they're thinking 'what kind of implications does this have then for our other situations. I just think that there's a different way that we need to articulate this and when we have a country that's committed to reconciliation, that we've acknowledged the harms that have been done ... I think there's a higher-level way that we talk about it, but on that, not everybody has that language and not everyone actually sees it in that way to be able to say, 'oh this is the way to articulate it, so I feel like there's lots of work to that we need to do at the systems level to better understand how we do prioritize priority populations.*

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## Principles

Key informants were asked whether the principles identified in the literature review conducted for this project (trust, respect, self-determination, and commitment), resonated with their experiences. In general, the informants felt that these principles were very relevant to engagement work that they had been involved in.

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*Those four principles I would agree with entirely. And on the commitment side, to me it's showing progress and actually getting to implementing things that actually improve and make a difference. You know, it's no good just to have a plan. It's no good just to have a strategic plan, just as it's no good just to have a relationship protocol, you've got to have it all. So ultimately building trust, by saying we're going to do something, working with people, reporting back and making sure people are aware that you've done what you said you were going to do. That's really what builds trust. It's both the how you do it and the what you do, I guess.*

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*There are protocols that we need to respect and follow when we do want to engage with First Nations, like with the Chief and Council. Each community has their own set of protocols so it's difficult for me to talk about what each community has. ... Each community just has a different way and a different process, and that comes along with the respect piece. And if you don't know, ask, right?*

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*It's important that we give the choice to communities to really make the decision, so whether that's defined as self-determination, but they have the power with the relationship and the system to be able to move things forward in a way that is acceptable for themselves.*

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*The other key thing that was recognized in that plan was that we weren't talking about ... Indigenous people as a single group of people and that we were really working with Indigenous Peoples recognizing their independent nature, whether it was First Nations, Inuit or Métis, and even within First Nations, the different territorial organizations that exist within First Nations. Part of what I think [the organization] did a really good job of was making it clear that they understood that Indigenous is an all-encompassing term that, under that principle of self-determination, there are many different nations and groups within that ... and they need to work individually with those different groups.*

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Other principles or values that they felt were relevant included *relationships*, which were discussed in many aspects of their experiences described above. The fact that the relationship building takes time also means that sometimes the conditions will not be right for engagement or partnership, and this should not be taken to mean that the possibility would not exist in future. Informants also spoke about the history of colonization that colours potential collaborations and creates challenges to developing respectful relationships.

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*That's just to always remind us that every relationship takes time, there always is a renewal and a maintenance piece of it and just because we have developed a good relationship doesn't mean it's going to stay good and we don't have to work at it.*

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*We just have to acknowledge that the situation we're in now has developed over centuries and particularly... depends when you want to start but at least a couple centuries of colonization and the Indian Act is still enforced and so on and so forth, and all of the damage with the residential schools era and the 60s scoop and so on, there are long term implications of that, which we have with us and will be with us for generations to come. This is a long-haul situation and there'll be one step forward and two steps back and side steps.*

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*Reciprocity* was suggested as another principle, recognizing that in engagement we should offer something, not only ask.

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*Reciprocity is a really important piece ... if we're going to be asking things, we have to have something to be able to offer them as well.*

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In addition, *listening with humility* emerged as a critical approach. It was important to engage with communities with an intent of listening, learning and understanding, not necessarily with an agenda in mind or with a timeline to meet. Engagement was a process that happened over time. Being *humble* was another part of this approach: acknowledging that the organization does not know everything, and perhaps even that mistakes in the relationship have been made in the past, was part of creating the conditions for true and meaningful engagement. One of the key informants, who is Indigenous, talked about making the effort to reflect the Seven Grandfather Teachings, including humility, in her own work.

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*But actually I think what's needed, and this is definitely I think critically important in the post TRC environment, it's not just a seat at the table, at our table so to speak, the non-Indigenous table, for Indigenous Peoples, it's actually when invited and only where that's accepted, that we sit at their table and listen and learn respectfully and understand... try to understand... I mean its true self-determination, to determine the priorities and the most effective mechanisms, initiatives, programs, to improve the health of their population in their community setting.*

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*One of the other things that I would say is an important piece of information and it probably can fall under those principles but I don't think we can stress it enough is being able to sit back and do a lot of listening. And to be comfortable with silence because a lot of times they have to reflect and you need to realize the further up north you go the more and more translation will become an issue, so they have to think about how that translation might work in their own language to see if they feel comfortable with that information, is to let people have those moments of silence where you don't feel like you have to constantly close the gap of 'oh nobody's talking right now'. And it doesn't mean that you're doing something bad or oh the relationship's falling off course, it's just give people some time to process. And the other thing, and it comes with more experience, but sometimes you won't get a direct answer, you have to listen to answers in story.*

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*I'm here to listen, help me understand what can my group and I do better to make sure that this relationship changes. And that's okay, I think people need to realize, and it's okay if you get the door shut, just don't be not willing to come back, right? And I think that's where knowing a part of that history where people are so apprehensive in the beginning to want to close that door, because of prior experience and so, I think the fact of being humble enough to say, well we're not going to let prior experience dictate that. Whenever you need our help we'll be here, but we'll continue to ask in the meantime....*

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## Successes and Evaluation

Although none of the key informants had done specific evaluation of their engagement strategy itself, they were, in some cases, able to point to concrete achievements and changes that were associated with engagement. For example, one organization was approached by some First Nations to ask for their help in responding to a joint proposal call. This was seen as a result of trust that had been created over the long-term. Beyond the specific gains in their situations, it appears that having measurable outcomes to point to as an indicator of progress is important. Related to this is the need to report back to communities and advisors about what has happened and how progress is being made, as part of organizational accountability.

# Conclusion

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This exploration of the experiences of key informants from allied organizations was intended to contribute to understanding relevant considerations for public health in engaging with Indigenous communities. The key informants provided perspectives that complemented, and added richness to, some of the findings from the health unit survey and the literature review that have been completed as part of the larger project. These insights will also be used to shape further discussions as part of this project about engagement with First Nation communities in the Northeast.

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# Appendix A: Interview Questions

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Thank you for agreeing to participate in a key informant interview. As a participant, you have an important perspective on your organization's experience in work with First Nations communities. The questions from the interview will focus on the process you/your organization undertook to develop your Indigenous engagement strategy, will seek to better understand successes, challenges and lessons learned through this process, and will seek advice concerning methods of effective engagement with First Nation Communities and future opportunities for positive collaboration with public health units.

This interview will be recorded in order to transcribe it to text. After we transcribe the interviews, all the information that could identify you will be removed from the document.

1. Describe your/your organization's journey in arriving at your organization's First Nations or Indigenous engagement strategy.
2. Some key principles which emerged from our review of the literature included: **trust, respect, self-determination, and commitment**.
  - a. Do these principles of engagement with Indigenous Peoples and/or First Nations communities resonate with your experience?
  - b. If yes, can you share how you knew they were important in your own/your organization's experience?
  - c. Can you share how they were put into practice in the work of developing the engagement strategy and in its ongoing implementation?
3. Are there other important values or principles which emerged/which you came to be aware of in your development of the strategy or its implementation? If so, how did you learn of these and their importance and how did they guide your strategy?
4. What would you describe as some of the challenges encountered or key lessons learned as you developed and implemented this strategy?
5. What is a key success in your view, in developing or implementing your strategy? How do you know this?
6. Has anything changed over time? Were there any unanticipated consequences that have been identified?
7. Are there any other organizations that you would recommend to be approached for an interview because they have developed an Indigenous-focused health strategy?