



Lessons Learned from Implementing the Action Plan

Responding to and Preventing Sexual Violence

in Paqtnkek Mi'kmaw Nation

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Developed by Peggy Mahon, External Evaluator, based on discussion by the Advisory Committee and the Supporters Team and interviews with project partners, and staff.

1. Overall Approach

What worked well:

- Early in the project it was agreed that the project would be community-based and community-led. Therefore, the needs assessment activities were designed to engage community members and to elicit community input and feedback. Community members then had an opportunity to prioritize the recommendations from the needs assessment. The activities outlined in the action plan reflected those priorities; therefore, the strategies implemented were what the community said they wanted to happen.
- It is important to both recognize and build on what is already working in the community. Community assets were identified early on in the project. These included “people resources” (informal supporters, Health Centre and Band staff, Chief and Council, project partners); services available; potential training opportunities; access to tools and resources that could be used/modified for use; and, community facilities for meetings and programs.
- The support by community leadership at the beginning of the project and their engagement on the Advisory Committee and in project activities was critical to the success of the project.
- The support provided by the Health Centre Director and staff was central to project implementation from providing advice and expertise, office space, support for meetings and workshops, to getting community members engaged.
- All participants, including external partners, were cognizant of the need to be respectful of Mi'kmaq rights and traditions.
- Participation in the project was open. There wasn't anything that was exclusive and every effort was made for participation to be safe. For example, confidentiality agreements and respecting confidentiality, which started with the focus group process, contributed to the ability for community members to participate in strategy activities, such as the supporters group and the healing ceremonies.

2. Cultural Relevance and Cultural Appropriateness

What worked well:

- Elders were included on the Advisory Committee, were part of the support team during the needs assessment, and gave opening and closing prayers for each focus group. It was

pointed out that it would have been good to have the involvement of more Elders and the 'older population' or grandparents.

- Community leaders were engaged in all phases of the project and consulted on an ongoing basis.
- Ceremony, such as prayers and smudging, were integral to the focus groups and the Community Healing Circles.
- The Community Healing Circles created culturally safe spaces for community members to share their experiences. Confidentiality agreements, a support team and trusted Mi'kmaw facilitators, who don't reside in the community, enabled community members to trust the process and feel safe enough to share their stories.
- Traditional knowledge, such as the Seven Sacred Teachings, was integrated into educational curriculum and resource materials.
- Presentations for external service providers included the trauma experienced by residential school survivors, the broader context of trauma as a result of colonialism, and what constitutes culturally safe, trauma-informed and holistic service delivery.
- The project accommodated as best they could the familial needs and the work needs of the team, which was respectful.
- All project meetings were held in the community. The fluidity of engagement at the table was culturally respectful.
- The community facilitator was from the community and the project office and staff were situated in the community.

3. Project Partnerships

What worked well:

- Partnerships provided opportunities to access external support mechanisms. Also, the community has become more aware of external supports.
- Collaboration helped to build and strengthen relationships and trust with external organizations and know that they value the community.
- External partners understand the community better and are more accessible by community members. It is less intimidating to reach out. "It is like the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre and Sexual Assault Services Association (AWRCSASA) is part of Paqtnkek through building a level of comfort and trust with each other."
- Partnerships provided opportunities for reciprocal engagement, to expand the network, and to support collaboration on other initiatives.
- Collaboration provided opportunities for students to engage in research and build their understanding and capacity (for example, StFX students).
- Partnerships have built capacity on many levels.
- Through information sharing by partners, other communities have become aware of the project.

4. Advisory Committee

(a) Membership - what worked well:

- Having a diverse membership worked very well. Membership included men, women, and a balance of community members and external organizations, communities, and resource people.
- This diversity enabled tremendous cross-cultural learning from sharing and respecting the knowledge and skills that all members were able to bring to the project. Given the above principle, that the project would be community-led meant that the external partners understood their role as contributing their knowledge and skills in a support role following the community lead. Therefore, all processes and decisions were made through the community lens and were community-informed.
- The diverse membership provided opportunities for other communities to get involved and to share information and resources.
- It would have been helpful to have had a youth on the Advisory Committee to inform and support youth engagement/involvement.

(b) Meetings - what worked well

- There was good participation by members and the engagement among members was respectful. Everyone listened and took the project seriously.
- It was important to be able to talk openly about the normalization of sexual violence and how members can work together to implement strategies to address and not accept that normalization.
- The meetings supported overall project coordination.
- The Coordinator and Advisory Committee members were well prepared with agendas and meeting information sent out ahead of time.
- There was good communication during and between meetings from the Project Coordinator to members.
- Meetings were frequent (monthly) and ongoing throughout the project.
- It was helpful to have the opportunity to share upcoming events as well as project information.

(c) Advisory Committee Education Sessions - what worked well

- Formal educational sessions were helpful for Advisory Committee members.
- Group members said they learned something new every time, have a better understanding of experiences of community members, and can do more to assist and guide them to recovery.

(d) Challenges:

The Advisory Committee faced some challenges, but worked as a group/team to overcome these as follows:

- How to address/work through the normalization of sexualized violence;

- How to support every aspect of the issue, including how to work with and support perpetrators;
- Intergenerational trauma was new discussion for the community and there is no venue to discuss this. This is linked to mental wellness and a challenge is that there is no sustainable funding for mental wellness.
- Feel we are just “scratching the surface.”

5. Support for Supporters – Response Strategy

(a) What worked well

- One of the response strategies, Support for Supporters, acknowledged the strengths of the community by recognizing that there were already people in the community who provided support, but that they needed support to continue this activity. The outcome was continuing to build and strengthen community capacity for this work.
- Members of the Supporters Team indicated that benefits of having the group were learning more about different forms of violence and trauma, about laws, about healthy coping skills, and how to practice self care. Some pointed out that they learned a lot, felt more prepared, and were able to use what they learned. They indicated, however, that there is still more to learn. They also identified benefits of involving men in the Supporters Team as being important to engaging men and boys.
- Members of the Supporters Team pointed out the importance of opportunities for sharing, debriefing, and to have support available. They appreciated the support of other group members, the mental health counsellor who attended their meetings, and other supports that they accessed in the community.
- When asked about their vision to move this forward, group members indicated that this work must continue and it would be good to involve others. They suggested either involve others as group members and/or, possibly, to provide broader community education about how to provide support with family and how to practice self care.
- Beginning each session with the confidentiality agreement, made the group stronger and also able to open up to each other, support each other and feel safe in the group.

(b) Challenges as Identified by the Supporters Team

- Some group members pointed out that it was emotional and stressful to be an informal supporter. This was partly because they had learned more about the issue and wanted to do the right thing; and, partly because learning more raised issues for some members, personally, that they were dealing with. This is why the supports noted above were very important.
- Group members pointed out that learning about vicarious trauma was important as it put a name to the trauma that many in the community experience. It was, however, hard to talk about it, to acknowledge it, and to cope with it.
- Learning more about it and putting a name to the trauma that many experience, raised the challenge of how best to approach working with youth to help them to recognize

the trauma they experience, while at the same time building resilience to be able to handle it appropriately.

- Group members talked about the challenges of living in a small community where everyone knows what is happening, yet individuals who have experienced violence feel so alone and think they are the only one going through the experience.
- Group members pointed out the need to strengthen the healing process and the understanding of formal supports so that community members can get further support for their healing.

6. Healing Ceremony – Response Strategy

What worked well:

- The healing ceremony resonated culturally.
- The ceremony provided an opportunity to have a voice and to talk about your experience “out loud.”
- Starting with the confidentiality agreement was important for participation. People’s stories were kept confidential, so people didn’t talk about it afterward.
- Having external facilitators, who were trained to do family circles, enabled the community members to participate. Also, there was a male and female facilitator which supported participation by women and men.
- Those with historical abuse experiences were more confident with external facilitators;
- The facilitators shared their story which helped participants to tell their stories.
- A flyer was sent out to community members indicating that the ceremony was open to all community members; and, therefore, attracted new participants.
- Recognizing that it was a process to healing worked well.
- It built relationships among those who participated.
- Having support people was an important and good back-up plan.
- The men who were involved shared and supported one another. It increased understanding of their perspective.
- The first ceremony was a bit short due to another activity in the community, but participants expressed interest in another session.

7. Policies and Procedures – Response Strategy

What worked well

- Through the needs assessment and the strategy prioritizing session, the community expressed the need to have this as a component of the action plan to promote a violence-free, harassment-free and safe workplace.
- It was not only a review of Paqtnkek policies and procedures related to harassment and sexual harassment, but other First Nation communities were invited with the intent of learning from each other to create really strong policies and promising practices to address sexual violence.

- The report has been completed and is going forward for consideration by Chief and Council.

Challenges

- There were some challenges with communication being primarily over email and telephone. A suggestion was that face to face conversations within and among communities would have strengthened the process to develop the report.
- While the original intent was to have a task group work on the policies and procedures, the report ended up being put together by one individual, with the support and guidance from others. It was felt that the process and the report would have been strengthened if developing the report and the recommendations was more of a collaborative process.

8. Education – Healthy Relationships and Online Safety - Prevention Strategy

What worked well

- Having education sessions for both parents and for youth was important. The session for parents was held first so that parents would have an idea of what would be discussed and distributed to their children. After the session, the materials for the youth workshops were distributed to those who attended.
- Youth sessions were divided into Grade 5's, Grades 6 to 8 and Grades 9 – 12. This enabled youth at different stages to ask questions and have discussion without being judged or criticized.
- Incorporating the Seven Sacred Teachings into the curriculum was very important to helping the youth understand the relationship of violence prevention to traditional cultural values and beliefs, and how they can use these to better themselves and their relationships. It was pointed out that there is still an opportunity to strengthen this cultural component, so that young women and young men can see what it means to be a strong Mi'kmaq woman and a strong Mi'kmaq man, both traditionally and today. It would be an opportunity for lifelong learning to look at things holistically. This will require more education and discussion about how to best approach this by those who will be facilitating these sessions in the future.
- Incorporating online safety and social media into the education sessions was important for both parents and youth. For parents, learning about the different apps (over 90) and parental controls on computers was helpful. For youth, while the topics were covered in the workshops, there is still more awareness needed for cyber bullying, sexting, and other things they are involved with on social media.
- Involving external partners as resource people was helpful for youth to learn about services and supports available to them.

Challenges

- The education sessions for Grades 9 – 12 did not have any participants. It was felt that what was needed was someone in their own age group or who was working with them

to support their involvement and remind them to come to the session. “We needed a champion among them.”

- Another related challenge was that there is currently no-one in the school to encourage students to get involved/participate which would have helped to support participation.
- Also, as noted above, having youth on the Advisory Committee may have helped student involvement. “The summer student reminded us of things we needed to develop for youth.”

9. Educators Team – Prevention Strategy

The original intent was to recruit interested community members to be part of an “Educators Team.” They would participate in a training workshop to learn about the educational modules and work together to deliver the educational sessions for youth in Grades 5, 6 to 8 and 9 to 12, as well as to parents. They were offered a per diem for participation and facilitation.

Challenges:

- There were call-outs for facilitators; however, only a small number showed interest. Two members came to the training workshop, in addition to the Community Facilitator. In hindsight, it may have been “too big of an ask,” as it may have been a bit intimidating for individuals who hadn’t done this kind of work before. Facilitation requires a certain amount of knowledge of the topic, experience, and commitment. In addition, community members may have felt uncomfortable with leading a group on these topics, as many were just starting to discuss and learn more about these topics themselves.
- Suggestions to involve parents were: (1) to provide a bit more time after the parents’ session to see if those parents might be interested in being involved on the Educators Team to help teach the youth; (2) have a parent co-facilitate with another facilitator.

The result was that the Project Coordinator and Community Facilitator co-facilitated the education suggestions. One suggestion was to have Health Centre staff, who are going to have this ongoing education built into their work plans, assigned to participate in training and co-facilitation from the beginning. This would have contributed to building and strengthening capacity within the community for ongoing education related to sexualized violence.

10. Awareness Activities – Prevention Strategy

What worked well

- The videos that were made (the Respect Campaign, Healing, and Chief and Council Election videos) enabled people to see themselves and others talking about the issue, stimulated further discussion, and were easily shared electronically.
- Several awareness events, the “Think Respect” Campaign, and the healing video helped to raise awareness about sexual violence, about respect in relationships, and about healing.

- The fridge magnets were distributed to every household. These shared messages of believing survivors/victims, understanding the impacts of sexual violence, and practicing self-care, along with the 24/7 Crisis Line phone number for the Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner Program. These were produced to create community awareness of the issues and a community of support beyond the formal and informal supporters.

11. Community Engagement

What worked well

- It is critical to have a Community Facilitator who knows the community and can reach out to community members.
- Multiple strategies engaged different participants when implementing strategies. For example, the healing circle and educational sessions engaged different community members. Similarly, people came to the community meetings who didn't go to the focus groups. Eventually, more people got involved and were sharing conversations and stories.
- The participatory methods used and implementing the priorities identified by community members was crucial to their participation. Community members felt their contribution mattered. "They implemented what we said was needed."
- The videos and online presence helped to engage community members.
- How information was worded was very important to get the message out. It was important to have messages that would appeal to different age groups.
- It would have been helpful to have the project staff as administrators on the website. This would have supported better communication with the community.