POLICY BRIEF: HEALTH LEGISLATION REGARDING MÉTIS MENTAL WELLNESS

LES FEMMES MICHIF OTIPEMISIWAK

Les Femmes Michif Otipemisiwak / Women of the Métis Nation (LFMO) is a National Indigenous Women's Organization that serves as the democratically elected, representative, national and international voice for Métis women across the Métis Motherland. LFMO is mandated to represent and promote the human and Indigenous rights and the economic, social, and political needs, interests and aspirations of Métis women, Two-Spirit and gender-diverse people across the Métis Motherland.

KEY TAKEAWAYS/EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Indigenous (First Nation, Inuit and Métis) communities are disproportionately impacted by mental health and wellness.
- Recent legislation and strategic frameworks, including TRC's Calls to Action and UNDRIP, urge calls to action to address disparities in social determinants of health for Indigenous communities.
- Targeted action steps are needed to meaningfully implement legislative recommendations to promote and strengthen Métis mental wellness across the Homeland.
- Ongoing evaluation mechanisms and collaborative relationships are essential to successfully implementing health-related legislation.

BACKGROUND

This policy brief aims to provide a Métis lens on the legislative calls to action to invest and strengthen the mental wellness of Métis peoples across the Homeland. The Government of Canada has recently made proclamations to align action with legislative recommendations to address disparities in the health of Indigenous populations in Canada. For example, the national initiative to bolster health, the Indigenous Health Equity Fund, will provide $2 billion over 10 years to support Indigenous access to culturally safe health services. [1]

[1] Government of Canada; Indigenous Services Canada, 2024

Although the Government of Canada has made steps towards addressing health inequities of Indigenous populations through legislation and funding, it is important to consider a distinction-based perspective to understand the unique needs of Métis. There is a paucity of research and service provision for Métis communities within the mental health sector. The Métis Nation have experienced a unique, rich, and complex history impacting Métis culture, identity and overall wellness. [2]

Cultural identity and well-being have been affected by the ongoing effects of colonization, as well as experiences of dispossession and historical denial of rights, land loss, and family disruption, as seen with the Sixties Scoop and the residential school system. [3] [4]

Available research indicates there is a disproportionate burden of mental wellness, as the Métis population has a higher prevalence and incidence of diagnosis, as well as higher rates of self-harm and health service use. [5] [6]

The Government of Canada has also adopted legislative and policy frameworks that promote determinants of health. Métis social determinants of health (MSDoH) specifically address Métis health from a multi-sectoral approach. It encapsulates multiple factors that affect health and wellness, including socioeconomic status, employment, housing, education, culture,and environment. It seeks to acknowledge the causes of inequities that result from these intersecting systems. [7]

LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS ON HEALTH AND MENTAL WELLNESS

Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Calls to Action

- Call 19: Calls for measurable goals and standardized reporting on health outcomes of Indigenous communities, including mental health.
- Call 20: Recognize the distinct health needs of Métis, Inuit and off-reserve Indigenous people.
- Call 22: Advocate for integration of Indigenous healing practices in the treatment of Indigenous peoples within the healthcare system.

2 Métis Nation of Alberta, 2021
3 Métis Nation British Columbia, 2021
4 Poitras et al., 2024
5 Métis Nation of Alberta, 2021
6 Statistics Canada, 2019
7 Métis Nation Council, 2021

- Call 23: Increase and retain Indigenous healthcare professionals and ensure cultural competency training.

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)

- Article 21: Indigenous people have the right to improve their economic and social conditions (such as education, employment, housing and health) without discrimination.
- Article 23: Indigenous people have the right to be actively involved in shaping health and social programs that impact their communities.
- Article 24: Indigenous people have the right to access traditional medicines, health practices and access to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.

Recent Canadian Legislation

- Bill C-15: Ensures Canadian laws align with UNDRIP, creating an action plan to implement Indigenous rights, including mental health support.
- Bill C-92: Protects the rights of Indigenous peoples in child and family services, addressing the long-term impacts of historical separations and fostering cultural continuity.
- Bill C-91: Supports the reclamation and maintenance of Indigenous languages, a component of Indigenous cultural identity.

STRENGTHS

Legislation, including UNDRIP and TRC, affirms Indigenous rights to self-determination while encouraging a holistic approach to health and well-being. Self-determination allows for the centring of diverse experiences and identities of First Nation, Inuit and Métis communities that fall within the legislation's definition of Indigenous or Aboriginal.

Many calls to action also address broader social determinants, such as UNDRIP Article 21, Bills C-91 and C-92, which can address factors contributing to disparities in mental wellness. The UNDRIP Action Plan was co-developed with Indigenous communities to determine community priorities. [8] [9]

Ultimately, existing legislation supports Métis leadership in designing and implementing culturally relevant mental wellness strategies and frameworks that seek to promote community healing and traditional medicines.

[8] National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019

[9] Mental Health Commission of Canada 2012

By attending to Métis wellness from a comprehensive and cohesive lens, there is an opportunity for transformative change to improve current and future states of mental wellness.

GAPS AND CHALLENGES

Although the calls to action and legions provide a foundation for the next steps, effective programming and implementation require sustained funding, capacity- building, and accountability mechanisms. In addition, the strategies outlined often use Aboriginal or Indigenous to encapsulate First Nation, Inuit and Métis. However, there is a paucity of mental health policies that directly address the intersectional issues of Métis communities, particularly Métis women and 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals, whose experiences of mental wellness are shaped by multiple layers of discrimination and oppression.

RECOMMENDATIONS IMPROVE DATA COLLECTION

- Ongoing research on Métis mental wellness and establishing measurable mental wellness indicators is needed to support Métis scholars and service delivery systems. To ensure ongoing service delivery, dedicated funding support is necessary for Métis Governing Bodies and Métis communities.

- Support Métis-led research endeavours, surveillance, and programmes investigating factors affecting Métis mental wellness.

- Sustainable accountability mechanisms must also be in place to ensure longevity. Establish a committee or caucus of First Nations, Inuit and Métis women and 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals, with Knowledge Keepers and community members to evaluate federal and provincial initiatives concerning mental wellness, such as reporting on the progress of Bill C-15, to ensure they align with community priorities.[10]

Rationale: Supporting Métis-led initiatives and committees ensures that community needs and priorities, such as preserving family systems, are addressed through mechanisms that directly impact outcomes. Additionally, research conducted at the community level ensures governance, sovereignty and data management. Finally, dissemination of findings would also occur at the community level.

[10] Les Femmes Michif Otipemisiwak, n.d.

ENHANCE MÉTIS-LED PROGRAMMING AND SERVICES

• Support capacity-building programs and services that foster community relations and address the unique needs of intersecting identities, such as Métis women and 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals. Expand both funding and timelines of the Indigenous Health Equity Fund and a dedicated funding initiative for Indigenous Mental Wellness Equity.

• Increase and provide sustainable funding mechanisms to support Métis-led health services and wellness programs that support Métis women and 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals.

Rationale: Métis-led initiatives ensure that wellness is addressed through culturally appropriate means, including maintaining traditional healing strategies. Such action steps further support Métis rights to self-determination and uphold Métis culture, tradition, and language.

DEVELOP A FRAMEWORK ON MÉTIS MENTAL WELLNESS

• Develop a standardized and unified approach to Métis mental wellness that has been validated by the community, to ensure a culturally-relevant approach to service delivery.

• Invest in developing a framework that approaches mental wellness from a Métis-centered and community lens.

• Provide sustainable funding to ensure evaluation mechanisms are in place to measure the validity of the framework and support adaptation as needed.

Rationale: Métis frameworks would guide programs and services while providing a stronger understanding of Métis mental wellness. Such a framework improves data collection and results in evidence-informed mental wellness initiatives.

STRENGTHEN COLLABORATION AND POLICY INTEGRATION

- Address recommendations provided by Métis mental communities on culturally relevant policy recommendations that target MSDoH.
- Provide dedicated funding for the national Métis peer support program, including Aunties and Elders, when navigating mental health systems.
- Promote collaboration between Métis organizations, government agencies, and broader communities to create comprehensive strategies to implement mental wellness at the individual, family and community levels. Continue consultations and engagement with Métis communities while ensuring community members outside governing bodies are included.

Rationale: Supporting MSDoH can improve Métis mental wellness by addressing health from a holistic and systems level. As health factors are influenced by various systems in place, stronger community, provincial and federal relationships are imperative to the transformative lens needed to result in change.

CONCLUSION: THE TIME FOR ACTION

The legislative momentum represents an opportunity to act now. Efforts towards reconciliation must expand beyond the written word. Implementing advisory committees, developing a Métis-informed framework on mental wellness and supporting Métis-led initiatives through sustained funding are actionable steps that can be taken to address the disproportionate impacts of mental wellness that Métis communities may experience. It is crucial to embed the perspectives of Métis women and 2SLGBTQQIA+ throughout research, analysis and decision-making processes to ensure the rights of women and gender-diverse populations are protected.

Implementing the UNDRIP Action Plan, an outcome of Bill C-15, and addressing the TRC's Calls to Action, along with other relevant frameworks and legislative acts, will contribute to transformative justice.[11] This process can potentially improve MSDoH and strengthen Métis health and mental wellness. Championing the mental wellness of Indigenous communities is a critical, essential, and actionable steps towards meaningful, complete change, healing and reconciliation.

[11] Government of Canada, 2023

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