

PAW Den PAW-licy

Aboriginal people across Canada are working to address the impacts of HIV and AIDS in the lives of Aboriginal women. The Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network (CAAN) completed the research project *Our Search for Safe Spaces: A Qualitative Study of the Role of Sexual Violence in the Lives of Aboriginal Women Living with HIV/AIDS* in 2009. This research maps connections between gender, culture, HIV, sexual violence and impacts on health management. The report clearly provides evidence regarding the gendered issues of colonization, poverty and sexual violence. These issues continue to disrupt the collective wellbeing of Aboriginal communities, establishing harmful beliefs and practices that put Aboriginal women and girls at high risk for violence, HIV and AIDS. In response to this context, HIV Positive Aboriginal Women (PAW) along with representatives of CAAN member organizations have organized nationally as the standing committee CAAN Voices of Women (VOW).

Environments of Nurturing Safety (EONS): Aboriginal Women in Canada, Five Year Strategy on HIV and AIDS, 2010 - 2015 (CAAN, 2010), details a coordinated effort among existing organizations and strategies to make desirable outcomes for 2015 achievable. Central to this effort is the creation of safe spaces and networks which support Aboriginal girls and women to learn, heal and contribute to the strategy. These “PAW Dens” are havens for women, whose healing and experience will provide guidance, wisdom and support for all other branches of the strategy.

There is an immediate need to improve the circumstances of PAW, by alleviating poverty and improving access to services which help PAW to manage their health and to sustain their families and communities. The continuum of sexual violence present in the lives of many PAW makes it difficult to manage chronic illness. Gender-based violence occurs in public and private domains and includes any act that is likely to or does result in harm or suffering of a girl or woman, including threats of violence, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty (WHO 2009:1). To respond to this, CAAN recommends the creation of environments where PAW can thrive; nurturing spaces to address the impact of trauma and violence. Together, men, women, children, and Elders can all support PAW and their children in every region of Turtle Island. We invite all CAAN member agencies and organizations which provide services to PAW to join us in this work by adopting and implementing the policy statement below;

Policy Statement

The {insert organization name} is committed to “stand up and speak up” to stop gender-based violence and its role in the spread of HIV and AIDS among Aboriginal women and girls. Specifically, establishing safe spaces that support PAW wellbeing in the context of HIV and AIDS is a priority. These safe spaces, “PAW Dens” are part of rebuilding the sacred circle within Aboriginal communities. As an organization, {insert org acronym or name} is committed to:

- 1. Strengthen the networks and supports for PAW, their children and their partners (whether male or female).*
- 2. Collaborate in the improvement of the availability and accessibility of culturally appropriate care, treatment and support services for PAW.*
- 3. Contribute to policy shifts to remove and /or alleviate existing barriers to services and safety for PAW and their children.*
- 4. Increase prevention, education and awareness of HIV and AIDS for ‘at risk’ populations of Aboriginal women and girls.*
- 5. Continue to undertake community based research specific to Aboriginal women and girls.*

Policy is most effective when it is directed to a specific audience. The following recommendations are suggestions to meet the unique needs of PAW in various settings and/or systems:

Recommendations for Aboriginal Organizations:

- Allocate space, money, and/or time for Positive Aboriginal Women (PAW) to meet, share and support each other.
- Creatively and directly respond to child care, transportation, scheduling and accessibility needs.
- Use technology and travel to connect PAW who are isolated.
- Consult with PAW about ways to involve men and boys in this initiative.
- Consult with PAW about ways to involve their life partners in this initiative.

Recommendations for HIV and STI clinics:

- Learn about the role/impact of violence in Aboriginal Women's lives.
- Link services with trauma counselling that is culturally safe and gender specific.
- Account for the context of trauma in all service delivery: sexual, emotional, and discriminatory violence are all traumatizing; services must not re-traumatize.
- Eliminate gender based barriers to accessing HIV and AIDS service provision such as:
 - o accommodating children and/or childcare needs,
 - o building awareness and sensitivity to trauma-based anxiety surrounding medical examinations (particularly related to women's health).
- Provide anonymous testing in discrete settings for women at risk for violence with increased awareness that the risk of violence may be from intimate partners.

Recommendations for communities and governments:

- Pursue policy, programs and infrastructure to support secure housing, income, food and clothing for PAWs and their families.
- Provide domestic services for PAW in response to episodic needs which will contribute to supporting families remaining together.
- Educate Positive Aboriginal Women: trauma and illness interrupt learning.
- Implement Harm reduction strategies that reduce HIV and AIDS infection rates.
- Encourage, promote and increase early identification and treatment of HIV to reduce AIDS.
- Fund and promote education by and for Aboriginal people and communities about HIV and AIDS.

Recommendations related to Justice Systems:

- House Trans-gendered PAW safely and respectfully when they are in jails or prisons.
- Deliver continuous care and nutritional supplements to PAW inmates.
- Provide opportunities for PAW inmates that include counselling, traditional and cultural healing methods such as access to an Elder, smudge and prayer.
- Create awareness that supports PAW who have partners in institutions and are striving to care for them while also maintaining their own health and possibly caring for a family
- Develop resources that help people newly released from jail or prison and their partners to reduce risk of harm while transitioning to a return to community life.