

Roots of Wellness Summit: Honouring Our Strengths Within

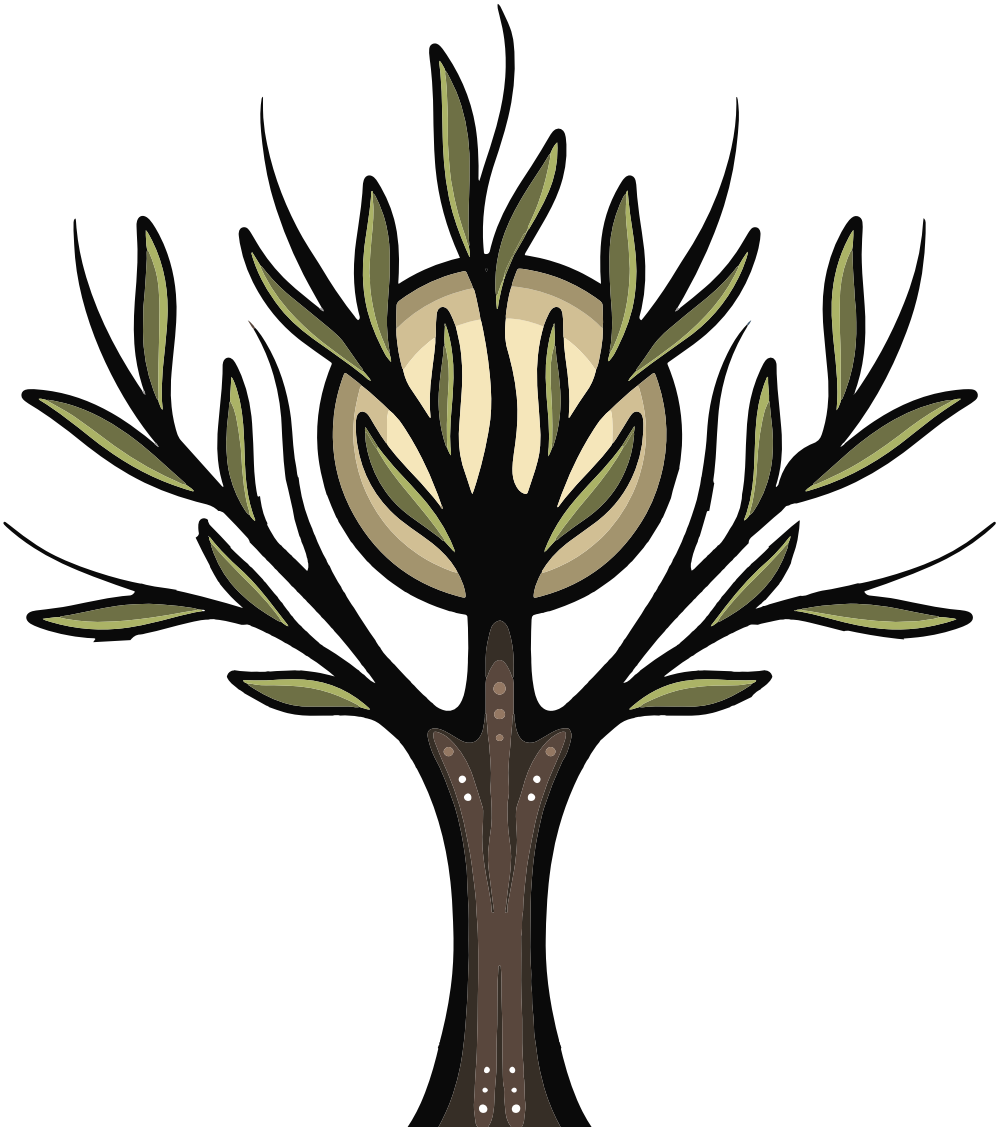
Nishnawbe Aski Nation
Mental Health Summit

Toronto, ON
May 14-16, 2024



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Executive Summary

From May 14–16, 2024, the Health Policy and Advocacy (HPA) Department of Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) hosted the ***Roots of Wellness Summit: Honouring Our Strengths Within*** in Toronto, Ontario.

- The event convened **162 delegates representing 37 NAN communities**
- This included **39 youth**
- Other perspectives included **Elders, mental health professionals, front-line workers, and community leaders**

Over three days, participants came together to speak openly about the ongoing mental health and addiction crises affecting NAN communities and to co-create community-driven solutions grounded in culture, connection, and collective healing.

This Summit was designed with the intention of being a space for reflection and a strategic planning. Guided by Elders and ceremonial knowledge keepers, each day began with smudging, prayer, and the sound of the Grandfather Drum to set intentions with honesty, safety, and respect. These cultural practices reminded participants that healing begins with balance between the spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental aspects of life.

Throughout the Summit, participants shared stories of **loss, resilience, and strength**. Youth spoke about the pressures they face and their desire to reclaim cultural identity. Elders reflected on how community care, language, and ceremony once formed the backbone of everyday life. They also spoke to how revitalizing these practices is essential to reclaiming wellness.

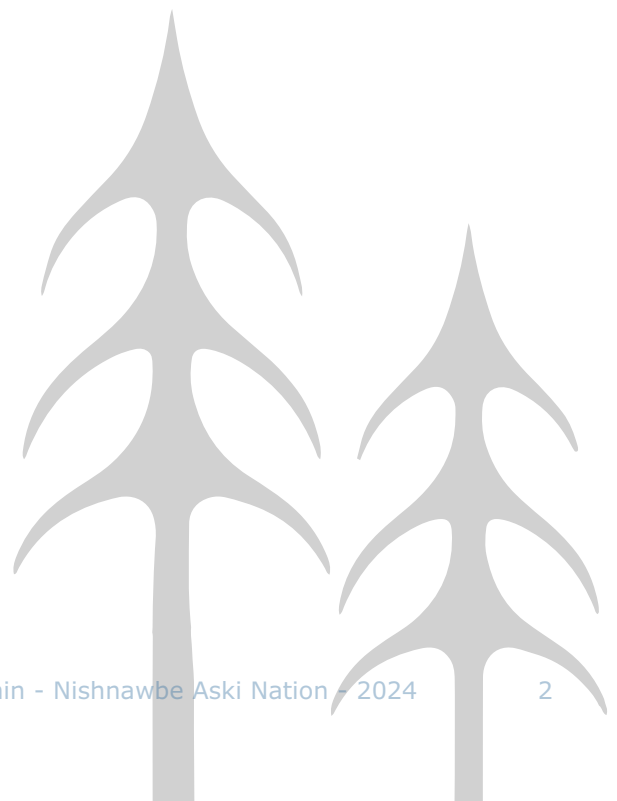
The gathering also served as a practical forum to identify immediate and long-term priorities that will guide NAN's Mental Health Strategy and Health Transformation process. This included direct input on service standards, land-based healing, crisis response, and culturally grounded approaches to care.

Over the course of the three days, delegates participated in structured dialogues, story-sharing circles, and collaborative “whiteboard sessions” where they identified key challenges such as suicide, food insecurity, housing shortages, and limited access to culturally safe care. This led to developing community-driven solutions. These insights now form the foundation for ongoing policy and program development under NAN’s Health Policy and Advocacy portfolio.

The Summit’s theme, ***Honouring Our Strengths Within***, reflected a central belief shared across discussions: that the answers to the crises faced by NAN communities already exist within the people, cultures, and lands of the Nation. Healing must begin from the roots, starting with restoring connection to land, language, ceremony, and one another.

By the closing ceremony, participants reaffirmed their commitment to collective accountability. As **Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler** stated in his opening address, *“What will make this gathering different is what we do when we go home, how we turn what we shared here into real action. We owe it to our children to bring back the care and strength we once knew.”*

The ***Roots of Wellness Summit*** stands as both a reflection of community truth and a roadmap for transformation — linking personal healing to systemic change and aligning directly with the Chiefs-in-Assembly Resolutions that call for NAN-led health governance rooted in sovereignty, equity, and Mino Bimaadiziwin.



Purpose and Guiding Vision

The **Roots of Wellness Summit: Honouring Our Strengths Within** was created as a space to bring together communities, leaders, Elders, youth, and service providers to speak openly and safely about the mental health and addiction challenges across Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) territory. The purpose was not only to share knowledge and lived experience, but to collectively reimagine how wellness can be strengthened through culture, connection, and self-determination.

The Summit recognized that many NAN communities continue to face overlapping crises from suicide, addiction, housing insecurity, and poverty, as well as limited access to timely, culturally appropriate care. These challenges are not isolated events, but the result of systemic inequities and intergenerational trauma. Yet, within these realities lies the deep strength of communities — the knowledge, relationships, and traditions that have sustained the people of Nishnawbe Aski Nation for generations.

The purpose of the Summit was therefore threefold:

1. To Listen and Learn:

Create an inclusive forum for community members to share their stories, experiences, and ideas for improving mental health and wellness in NAN territory. This ensured that the Summit reflected the voices of the people most affected by these challenges (families, youth, front-line workers, and Elders).

2. To Identify Strength-Based Solutions:

Move beyond crisis-driven conversations toward solutions grounded in Indigenous knowledge, cultural safety, and collective resilience. Participants were encouraged to identify what is already working in their communities and to explore ways to scale those successes across the Nation.

3. To Build a Shared Path Forward:

Translate community insights into tangible recommendations that will guide NAN's ongoing Mental Health Strategy, influence Health Transformation policy and service standards, and strengthen partnerships with Canada and Ontario through the trilateral process.

Guiding Vision

At the heart of the Summit was a shared understanding that healing must begin at the roots — within families, communities, and Nations — before it can grow outward into systems and institutions.

One Elder offered a powerful teaching: that our communities are like seeds planted in poisoned soil. Even with care and effort, seeds cannot thrive unless the soil itself (environment, culture, and community conditions) is restored. This teaching became a guiding metaphor for the Summit. It reminds us that suicide prevention and crisis response alone cannot heal what has been eroded by colonization, systemic neglect, and disconnection from the land.

To truly promote wellness, the soil must be made healthy again, nourished by cultural revitalization, language, ceremony, land-based healing, and the rebuilding of trust and relationships within and between communities.

The Summit was also guided by NAN's Charter of Relationship Principles (Resolution 17/21) and Resolution 19/10 on Health Self-Determination, which affirm NAN's right and responsibility to shape health systems that reflect First Nations worldviews and governance. The conversations and teachings gathered from the Summit directly inform this broader vision of Health Transformation, where care systems are rebuilt from the ground up to reflect NAN values, languages, and ways of knowing.

In this way, the Roots of Wellness Summit was not a single event — *it was a continuation of a movement*. It reaffirmed that the path toward wellness is not defined by outside systems, but by the people themselves — by their stories, their songs, and their commitment to ensuring that future generations can live in balance, dignity, and hope.

Day 1: Pathways to Wellness

Theme: Honouring Our Strengths Within

Day One focused on cultural grounding, sharing personal and community experiences, and reflecting on pathways to wellness.

Visual Story Map Themes (Whiteboard Activity)

Participants contributed to six whiteboards capturing words, drawings, and ideas under the theme “Pathways to Wellness.”

Recurring messages included:

- Honour strength within
- Keep moving forward: acknowledge the past, listen, teach, speak truth, and laugh together
- The drum can heal
- Empower youth and make space for them
- Always keep learning and growing
- Make connections; be a role model
- Reclaim your identity
- We owe our children care, wellness, and a collective path forward
- “We still remember how it used to be in our communities, let’s bring that care back.”
- Share stories and change the narrative
- Honour the Indigenous lens



Day 2: Confronting the Challenges

On Day Two, participants mapped the systemic barriers that shape mental health and wellness and shared stories and ideas for change by rotating through six large Bristol boards. The notes below bring those inputs together: first, the key challenges that communities face across daily life and services; then, the emerging themes that reflect how people want to move forward. This pairing captures both the problems and the direction for solutions grounded in community voice, youth insight, and the central place of land, language, and culture.

1. Suicide and crisis response:

Participants shared personal losses and community grief, underscoring the need for land-based and culture-based healing programs as both prevention and life promotion tools.

2. Food security:

Communities emphasized that access to traditional foods and land-based harvesting is essential for both physical and spiritual wellness.

3. Housing and infrastructure:

Overcrowding, poor conditions, and lack of safety were described as constant sources of distress that compound mental health crises.

4. Access to education:

Youth expressed that school environments must become safe spaces of belonging where language, identity, and pride are celebrated.

5. Connection to culture:

Land, language, and ceremony were identified as foundational to healing, not optional programming.

6. Recreation and youth spaces:

Youth noted that sports and creative outlets offer powerful prevention pathways but require sustained investment and community ownership.

Key Insights and Teachings

Across the three days of the Roots of Wellness Summit: Honouring Our Strengths Within, participants shared deeply personal stories, community reflections, and collective wisdom. While each voice was unique, common teachings emerged that speak to the deeper work needed to restore balance and wellness in NAN territory.

These insights go beyond program design – they represent the spiritual, cultural, and relational foundations that must guide how wellness is understood and how healing is pursued within a new NAN-led health system.

Healing Begins with the Soil

One of the most powerful teachings came from an Elder who described communities as seeds planted in poisoned soil. This metaphor was repeated and reflected on throughout the Summit. It represents the long-term impacts of colonization, residential schools, systemic neglect, and intergenerational trauma.

Participants agreed that programs and crisis responses alone cannot thrive in such conditions. Like plants, people need healthy soil, communities rooted in land, language, ceremony, safety, and belonging, before true healing can take place. This teaching redefined how many participants spoke about suicide prevention: not as a set of interventions, but as the rebuilding of the environment in which life can flourish. Land-based healing, cultural revitalization, and collective care were seen as the most powerful ways to begin restoring that soil.

Culture as Medicine

Repeatedly, participants reaffirmed that culture is not an “add-on” to mental health work, it is the medicine itself. The drum, the language, the land, and ceremony were described as central to individual and collective healing.

Youth and Elders alike emphasized that connection to traditional knowledge, identity, and spiritual teachings provides a sense of purpose, belonging, and strength that cannot be replicated through western clinical models alone.

Participants shared stories of how singing, crafting, ceremony, and time on the land bring peace to the spirit and reawaken resilience.

As one youth said,

“When we pick up our drum or walk on the land, we remember who we are, and that’s when healing begins.”

This aligns with the vision expressed in Resolution 23/25 (Implementation of the Moses Beaver Inquest Recommendations) calling for Indigenous Services Canada to support land-based and culture-based programs for those facing acute mental health crises in NAN territory.

Listening to Youth Voices

Youth were among the most vocal participants at the Summit, expressing both urgency and hope. They spoke about the **pressure of carrying multiple generations of pain**, but also about their deep desire to reclaim leadership, culture, and hope for the future.

They emphasized the need for:

- Safe spaces to express grief and identity without stigma.
- Mentorship opportunities that connect them with Elders, land-based knowledge, and ceremony.
- Youth-led recreation and art programs as tools for healing and prevention.

One youth delegate shared,

“We’re always being told that we are the future — but we are also here right now. We want to be part of creating the solutions, not just waiting for them.”

This call for intergenerational collaboration was a central takeaway: healing must involve all ages — each generation with its role to play in restoring balance.

Honouring Elders and Ancestral Knowledge

Elders at the Summit carried the weight of both lived experience and ancestral knowledge. Many reflected on how, despite the deep pain of loss and disconnection, the old ways of caring and community cohesion still live within the people.

Elders spoke about how communities once cared for each other collectively — where children were everyone’s responsibility, where healing was communal, and where spirituality guided daily life. They reminded participants that these systems of care are not lost, only buried, and that transformation begins by remembering and reclaiming those ways.

Elders also emphasized that traditional teachings about **balance, humility, and respect** must guide the development of new health systems. These values should inform not only what services are delivered, but how they are governed, funded, and measured under Health Transformation.

Restoring Connection and Belonging

A recurring theme throughout the Summit was the need to rebuild connection to land, to each other, and to purpose. Disconnection, isolation, and loss of identity were identified as root causes of many mental health challenges, particularly among youth.

Communities described how the erosion of traditional family structures, residential school legacies, and ongoing systemic racism have created cycles of loneliness and despair. Healing, therefore, requires rebuilding community bonds and creating environments where people feel seen, valued, and safe.

Participants called for more gatherings, feasts, ceremonies, and spaces for laughter and joy. As one Elder put it,

We need to gather not only to grieve, but to celebrate life — to remind each other that we are still here, and we still remember how to care.”

This teaching echoes Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler’s words during his opening remarks, encouraging communities to celebrate life as much as they mourn loss, and to turn collective grief into collective action.

Systemic Change and Accountability

While much of the Summit focused on healing and culture, participants also recognized that wellness cannot be achieved without systemic change.

They identified several structural barriers that continue to perpetuate harm, including:

- Fragmented funding models that separate physical, mental, and spiritual health.
- Lack of sustained investment in prevention and community capacity-building.
- Policy approaches that prioritize crisis response over long-term wellness.

Participants emphasized that Health Transformation must go beyond transferring programs, it must fundamentally change the way systems value and respond to First Nations knowledge and leadership.

Communities called for mechanisms of accountability and transparency, both within NAN and among federal and provincial partners, to ensure that the voices shared at gatherings like the Roots of Wellness Summit are translated into measurable action.

Collective Healing and Shared Responsibility

Finally, the Summit reinforced that healing is not the work of individuals alone, it is collective work that involves families, communities, leadership, and all partners in the health system.

As one participant summarized,

“It’s not just about what happens in crisis; it’s about how we care for each other every day.”

The Summit itself became an act of healing — people listened, cried, laughed, and reconnected. Through this shared experience, participants reaffirmed their responsibility to carry the work forward into their homes and communities, ensuring that the seeds planted in Toronto would take root in every corner of NAN territory.

Key Recommendations and Calls to Action

1. Support for Land-Based Healing

Participants overwhelmingly called for sustained funding for land-based and culture-based programs, aligning with Resolution 23/25 – Implementation of Moses Beaver Inquest Recommendations.

This directly supports Jury Recommendation 10, which urges Indigenous Services Canada to fund NAN-led programs for individuals experiencing acute mental health crises.

Existing models to learn from include:

- Ontario Native Women's Association Land-Based Camps
- Mushkegowuk Health Land-Based Healing and Detox Program
- Agichi'giizhigoonsag Program, Washagamis Bay First Nation

2. Build Community Capacity and Local Workforce

Communities called for more local mental health workers, youth mentors, and peer supporters trained in trauma-informed and culturally grounded approaches. Long-term investment in human capacity is essential.

3. Address Root Causes

Participants stressed that prevention cannot succeed without addressing housing, food security, and poverty, which continue to undermine wellbeing and hope.

4. Youth Empowerment

Youth emphasized the need for safe, welcoming spaces for recreation, arts, and dialogue, along with leadership development to sustain momentum for change.

5. Accountability and Follow-Up

Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler emphasized accountability: "Whenever you see me, ask me about this conference. What's changed since we gathered here in Toronto? We need to make sure we put these things into practice."

This commitment to ongoing accountability and action will guide NAN's Health Policy & Advocacy work going forward.

Alignment with NAN Health Transformation (Expanded)

The **Roots of Wellness Summit** was more than a gathering, it was a foundational engagement that directly informs the direction and priorities of **Nishnawbe Aski Nation's Health Transformation Initiative**. The stories, teachings, and recommendations shared at the Summit speak to the very heart of what Health Transformation aims to achieve: a First Nations-led health system grounded in sovereignty, culture, and self-determination.

A Continuum from Healing to Systems Change

Health Transformation is not simply about transferring services from federal and provincial governments to NAN. It is about transforming the entire foundation of how health and wellness are understood, designed, and delivered. The Summit reflected this by emphasizing that healing starts at the community level and must be supported by systems that uphold those same values.

Participants described how many health and social services currently operate in silos, disconnected from the realities of northern and remote life. The Summit's teachings reinforce that rebuilding these systems must begin from the ground up, ensuring that local voices shape policies, standards, and investments.

Guiding Future Service Standards

The Summit's outcomes are being used to guide the development of NAN's Mental Health and Wellness Service Standards, which will define what culturally safe, trauma-informed, and community-led mental health services should look like across the territory. These standards will help ensure that no matter where a person lives, they can access care that reflects their culture, values, and language.

This includes:

- Incorporating land-based and culture-based healing approaches as recognized and fundable components of care.
- Embedding Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and community mentors within mental health teams.
- Establishing clear accountability structures that connect local wellness initiatives to regional and system-level governance under NAN Health Transformation.

Reinforcing the Role of the Health Policy & Advocacy Department

For the Health Policy and Advocacy Department, the Summit reaffirmed the importance of community engagement as the cornerstone of all policy and systems design. It provided qualitative evidence and community guidance that will shape:

- The NAN Mental Health Strategy, currently under development.
- Trilateral policy dialogues with Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) and the Ontario Ministry of Health (MOH).
- Future NAN-led public health, crisis response, and wellness frameworks that place community voice at the center of decision-making.

By connecting frontline experiences to high-level policy and governance, the Roots of Wellness Summit helps bridge the gap between lived experience and system design, ensuring that transformation remains accountable to the people it serves.



Conclusion

The ***Roots of Wellness Summit: Honouring Our Strengths Within*** represented a critical moment of reflection and renewal for Nishnawbe Aski Nation. It was a space where community members, youth, Elders, and leaders came together not only to share pain and grief, but also to reclaim hope, strength, and collective responsibility.

Across the three days, the Summit reminded all who attended that the path to wellness does not lie solely in external systems or funding models, it begins with the people themselves. Healing is already happening in communities through land-based programs, cultural revitalization, traditional teachings, and acts of everyday care. What is needed now is sustained support, investment, and partnership to nurture these roots and allow them to grow.

The Summit reaffirmed key truths that will guide NAN's work moving forward:

- That culture and identity are at the center of healing.
- That youth and Elders must walk together as equal voices in building a healthier future.
- That communities already hold the knowledge and capacity to define what wellness looks like for them.
- And that systemic change, through Health Transformation, must be driven by community vision, not government design.

As **Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler** emphasized during his opening remarks, the test of this Summit's success will not be the words spoken in the room, but **the actions that follow**. *"We must hold each other accountable," he said, "so that what was shared here becomes part of the work we do every day — in our homes, in our communities, and in the new health system we are building together."*

The teachings and recommendations captured here will inform NAN's Mental Health Strategy, shape Health Transformation policy, and guide the creation of service standards rooted in the values of Mino Bimaadiziwin (living a good life).

In the words of one participant,

"We are rebuilding from the roots up — and those roots are strong."

