



# A NEW PATH FORWARD

*Supporting First Nations throughout and beyond  
the COVID-19 Pandemic*

*August 2021*



## Executive Summary

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) Knowledge Keepers noted that *“There will be a time for renewal, a time we can understand unknown threats such as COVID-19.”* As we continue to learn and respond to this evolving and unpredictable virus, we must recognize the lessons learned from our pandemic response and apply improvements to our health emergency plans. The pandemic has emphasized that First Nations are at greater risk to the direct and indirect impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic due to systemic inequities that have remained unaddressed through long-standing inaction and negligence of Canada. This failure to address basic human rights must be rectified in light of Canada’s commitments in Bill C-15 An Act respecting the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). As stated by Article 23(2) of UNDRIP *“Indigenous individuals have an equal right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. States shall take the necessary steps with a view to achieving progressively the full realization of this right.”*

This paper has been put forward by the AFN COVID-19 National Task Force (Resolution 03/2020) to examine key challenges First Nations encountered during the pandemic using a rights-based approach that encompasses the social determinants of health. It accentuates the need to fully understand the holistic impacts of the pandemic to identify solutions that not only protect but promote the well-being of First Nations. The pandemic has highlighted that when First Nations have input into decisions impacting the well-being of their people, responses are more effective. As we transition into a stage of post-pandemic recovery, we highlight that solutions must be anchored in the right of First Nations to self-determination. The path forward must include a commitment from Canada to transformation that is grounded in a pledge to reconciliation and building equitable relationships with First Nations.

### Understanding the Context

Health disparities and inequities in housing, healthcare and supportive infrastructure have made First Nations vulnerable to poorer outcomes from the direct and indirect impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. While there is no single definition of First Nations wellness, there is a shared understanding of the interconnectedness between the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual realms and the understanding that these are shaped by the environment in which we live. A social determinants of health approach incorporates the intersecting conditions and systemic factors that impact our well-being. A key element within this approach includes assessing the roots of colonial legislative parameters that continue to shape the lives of First Nations today and that shaped pandemic responses. A social determinants of health approach is used as a lens through which to examine First Nations pandemic realities.

### First Nations On-Reserve Pandemic Public Health Responses

First Nations responded to the pandemic through the introduction and enactment of public health measures to maintain and protect the well-being of community members. These measures were most



effective when supported by federal, provincial, and territorial governments and in coordination with regional health authorities, despite long-standing needs and chronic under-funding of health and social programs and delayed access to resources. First Nations-led public health communications was a priority for many as the quickly evolving flow of information and changing national guidelines resulted in numerous questions. Many First Nations exercised their rights over their territory through security measures to manage the movement of people in and out of their communities. This review of First Nations pandemic responses emphasizes that First Nations responded to the pandemic with limited capacity and resources. First Nations with established pandemic plans identified human resource capacity challenges when implementing their plans. Infrastructure capacity limitations challenged the ability to quarantine and provide self-isolation space for those recovering from the virus. Access to personal protective equipment, COVID-19 testing, contact tracing and management was limited, most evident during the early phases of the pandemic, and was hampered by a lack of jurisdictional coordination. The vaccine roll-out, while not the focus of this paper, was met with similar obstacles and showed the greatest successes when First Nations participated at decision making tables.

#### *Exposing Gaps, Recognizing Opportunities*

Public health restrictions and measures to contain the spread of the virus came at a great cost for many Canadians, but for many First Nations, these measures further stressed flawed systems and exacerbated inequities. The long-term impacts of these measures remain unknown. The pandemic has emphasized that First Nations-led innovations, when supported, provide strategic, long-term solutions that seek to address our wellness from a balanced perspective. As emphasized through UNDRIP, Indigenous Peoples have the right, without discrimination, to the improvement of their economic and social conditions (Article 21(1)). Key learnings include:

- Health resources, infrastructure and supports were stretched throughout the pandemic, emphasizing the need to recalibrate funding formulas and to revive First Nations determined solutions that stimulate individual and collective wellness.
- The rise in mental wellness challenges and substance misuse signals the impact of compounding stressors, increased isolation, and reduced access to supports and safe outlets. While First Nations mental health workers stretched their resources, adapted to virtual service delivery, and utilized land-based service delivery to support First Nations, their already stretched capacities and minimal resources emphasized the need for strategic and sustained investments.
- Community infrastructure needs, including housing, water and connectivity were brought to the forefront during the pandemic as the lack of equitable and sustained access has impacted the rights of First Nations to achieve physical and mental wellbeing.
- The inequitable impact of the pandemic on First Nations children and youth is yet to be fully comprehended. First Nations have advocated for increased funding to education and supportive services, including Child and Family services, and to support First Nations control, to enhance the well-being of youth and children. With a rise in needs driven by the stresses of the pandemic, these investments are even more critical.



- First Nations people living in urban and associated homelands were equally vulnerable to poor outcomes from the pandemic. Urban Indigenous organizations continue to play a vital role, and these organizations must receive greater financial and capacity support to ensure that all First Nations citizens can access culturally safe services, regardless of their residency.
- As we look towards recovery, the economic impacts of the pandemic will become more defined, however, early data shows the disproportionate impacts on First Nations businesses and workforce. With increased federal supports to businesses and strengthened opportunities for First Nations workers to enter the job market, there comes increased participation in the economy and decreased reliance on social programs, and a recognition of the value and innovation First Nations citizens bring to Canada's economic recovery.

### *A New Path Forward*

*"A Canada that respects the rightful place of First Nations will benefit everyone. There is a healing path forward and we can only get there working together."<sup>1</sup>*

As we begin to collectively recover from the pandemic, First Nations refuse to accept a return to the 'status quo'. The knowledge gained throughout the pandemic and the inequities exposed, highlight that First Nations rights have been systemically undervalued and ignored for generations. The opportunity now rests with federal, provincial, and territorial governments to commit to meaningful acts of reconciliation through collective actions that support First Nations' rights to self-determination. A new path forward requires changes to the fundamental elements that support First Nations rights. This includes:

- Prioritizing the need to address systemic racism that continues to influence First Nations experiences with healthcare systems, as well other systems, and institutions.
- Respecting and providing space for the inherent role and value that language and culture play in First Nations self-determination.
- Utilizing a First Nations intersectional Gender-Based Analysis (GBA+) lens in pandemic recovery strategies to ensure we leave no one behind.
- Advancing First Nations data sovereignty and capacity as a critical element required to support self-determination and self-governance.

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<sup>1</sup> AFN. Healing Path Forward. 2021 Federal Election Priorities for Strengthening and Rebuilding First Nations. August 2021.



*“The pandemic has affected all First Nations across Turtle Island. Therefore, it’s essential to support First Nations, Treaty Nations and regions to develop post-pandemic recovery plans in the areas of health, economy and social.”<sup>2</sup>*

A fair and just recovery requires an approach that reflects the interdependency of systems and policies. An emergency management framework is used to illustrate the cyclical nature of the work required as we move forward and continue to respond to the crisis at hand. The long-standing systemic inequities faced by First Nations must be addressed, evidenced in human resource and infrastructure capacity gaps. Respectful relationships and appropriate governance processes must be established, enabling First Nations to be a full and active partner in Canada’s recovery. This requires a vision of transformation that honors the commitments made by the Crown, embedded in Treaties and through its mandates through the *Department of Indigenous Services Canada Act* and *Department of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada Act*. UNDRIP offers principles for affirming the rights of Indigenous peoples, and that when properly supported, provides a roadmap for a path forward.

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<sup>2</sup> National Chief Roseanne Archibald’s Platform Document. 2021. Roseanne Archibald’s Vision, Values & Goals. Setting a Strategic Direction toward Evolutionary and Positive Change.