



~ APRIL 1, 2021 ~

2021 Community Report

~ MARCH 31, 2022 ~



Esquao

Institute for the Advancement
of Aboriginal Women



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President's Message

As I reflect on our work this past year, I observe Esquao, the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women, to be the leading advocacy organization in Alberta to break down systemic barriers faced by Indigenous women in this province.

This past year the COVID-19 pandemic continued to have a negative impact on Esquao's ability to offer in-person support, our preferred way of providing support, to Indigenous women and girls. However, with the support of solid leadership, and creative, committed staff, we were able to modify most of our programs in a manner to continue to provide crucial support and connection to the Indigenous women and girls we serve.

Since our last community report, we have taken our support to Indigenous women and girls to the next level—both through direct program delivery, and collaborative relationships. Through our Justice Navigator program, operated in both north and south Alberta, we have supported hundreds of women who find themselves interfacing with the justice system, either as victims, parents, grandparents, or as accused persons. Our approach to systems navigation and advocacy is to provide compassionate, culturally relevant, and respectful support—and in doing so, empowering Indigenous women in their journey toward reclaiming power and place.

Throughout the year we continued to support culturally respectful and relevant group programming in addictions, violence prevention, financial literacy, healthy relationships, and leadership development for Indigenous women and girls. These programs have been a lifeline to many of our women and we are so grateful and humbled by the experiences they have shared.

May 13, 2022, was the first time the Esquao Awards were held since the start of COVID, and our 26th annual gala was completely sold out with over 400 guests attending! This year we were



proud to pay homage to our founder and former president, Muriel Stanley Venne, with the establishment of an award named in her honour. It was her courage and fearlessness that led to significant advancements for Indigenous women in Canada. Muriel created a north star for Esquao that continues to guide our work today.

With this goal as our guiding star, we continue to place priority on the establishment of the "Esquao Resiliency Centre" for Indigenous women in Alberta and Western Canada. The Esquao Centre will be a place owned by Indigenous women, operated by Indigenous women, for Indigenous women.

Over the next number of months, we plan to engage with the community on our vision, and to make the Esquao Centre a reality.

On the national level, Esquao continues to be represented on the national board of the Native Women's Association of Canada, and to engage in discussions at the national and international level on matters impacting Indigenous women and girls.

Please take a moment to peruse this year's community report which highlights some of the incredible work that Esquao has done this past year, and will continue to do as we move forward. I am so very proud and honoured to work alongside the dedicated Esquao board and staff to make life better for Indigenous women, girls, and families.

Respectfully,

Lisa D. Weber, President



CEO's Message

This has been one of the most challenging years, not only for Esquao, the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women, but also for the women and the families that we work with.

Our staff were busy balancing their work and home lives, setting up work spaces in their homes and Zoom accounts. Wellness activities and training with staff are very important and happened on a regular basis throughout the year.

We continued to adjust to delivering programs and services online and over the phone. We realized that we were hampered in our ability to help some people as these methods of delivery were not ideal. With more people getting vaccinated, we are hoping that face-to-face and in-person delivery will resume this coming year.



Thank you to our supporters, our funders, and our department contacts that we spend many hours with. I am proud of what we have accomplished this year, and look forward to another prosperous year.

Rachelle Venne, CEO





Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women

We seek to be a source
of truth... and a place
where spirits are lifted.

We know the challenges that Indigenous
women in our communities face every
day. And in the face of such adversity,
Indigenous women thrive as beautiful
leaders, breaking down barriers for
future generations.

We are a voice for change... a voice
for healing... a voice for reconciliation...
and a voice for Indigenous
women everywhere.

We are at the forefront of breaking
down systemic barriers—as leaders
and advocates, experienced in taking
on larger issues, shaping policy, and
collaborating with our partners.

A voice that proudly highlights
the strength, courage, and
resiliency of Indigenous women
and gender diverse populations
across Alberta and Canada.

We are deeply connected to our
traditions and committed to providing
programs and developing opportunities
for the women we serve.

Esquao, the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women, is an Alberta non-profit organization that serves to amplify and share the voices of Indigenous women on the issues and challenges they face.

Serving as a conduit to government, boards, academia, funders, and the public, we are at the forefront of breaking down systemic barriers—as leaders, experienced in taking on larger issues, shaping policy, collaborating with our partners, and developing positive outcomes and opportunities for the women we serve.

Esquao is the stylized version of the Cree word for woman. We recognize and celebrate the role, value and achievements of Indigenous women. Our organization is open to all First Nations, Métis and Inuit women and their families, offering services and programs developed by Indigenous women for Indigenous women.

We are equally connected to our traditions and committed to advocating for the women we serve. As proud Indigenous people, we continually strive to empower all Indigenous peoples in the reinforcement and rediscovery of their language, culture, and spiritual practices.



Our Purpose

We are experts in the field of advocacy, policy, program delivery and support, and continually work to advance the capacity of Indigenous women, their families, and communities.



Vision

Indigenous women are recognized as strong contributors in Canadian society.



Values

We practice and promote respect, dignity, equality, sharing, and cooperation in our efforts to advance social justice for Indigenous women in Alberta.



Mission

We advocate for the rights and protection of Indigenous women and support Indigenous women with educational and self-development programs.

We honour the 'Angels Among Us'—recognizing Indigenous women for significant accomplishments in their communities.

We support individuals and enterprises to improve economic self-reliance for Indigenous women.



Objectives

Develop and deliver services that advance the individual capacity of Indigenous women, their families and communities.

Create opportunities to address discrimination against Indigenous women.

Identify and promote opportunities for Indigenous women to participate in policy development and decision-making.

Celebrate the strengths and achievements of Indigenous women.

Establish forums and networks for Indigenous women to exchange information and experiences.



Organizational Profile

- Esquao, the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women, recognizes the role, value, and achievements of Indigenous women in society and raises awareness around the challenges they face.
- We are a non-profit organization based in Edmonton and conduct outreach to several communities throughout Alberta. We value the support and partnerships of 500 individual and corporate members.
- Our projects, services, and programs are developed by, and for, Alberta's Indigenous women.
- Projects are dedicated to Indigenous women living on and off reserves, on and off settlement lands, and within rural and urban settings.

Incorporation Information

- **Scope of Territory:** Provincial/Territorial
- **Incorporation Information:** Non-Profit Society
- **Date of Incorporation:** September 29, 1995
- **Charitable Status:** In process of applying for Charitable Status



Board of Directors

Indigenous women have a voice.
We serve to amplify their voices
and provide a platform for Indigenous
women leaders to advocate for
the rights and freedoms of all
Indigenous women.

Board of Directors

Lisa D. Weber
PRESIDENT, BOARD CHAIR

Marggo Pariseau
VICE PRESIDENT

Lisa Higgerty
TREASURER*

Muriel Stanley Venne, CM, AOE
FOUNDER AND PAST PRESIDENT

Josie Nepinak
DIRECTOR

Irene V. Loutitt
DIRECTOR

Rachelle Venne
CEO

**Resigned February 6, 2022.*

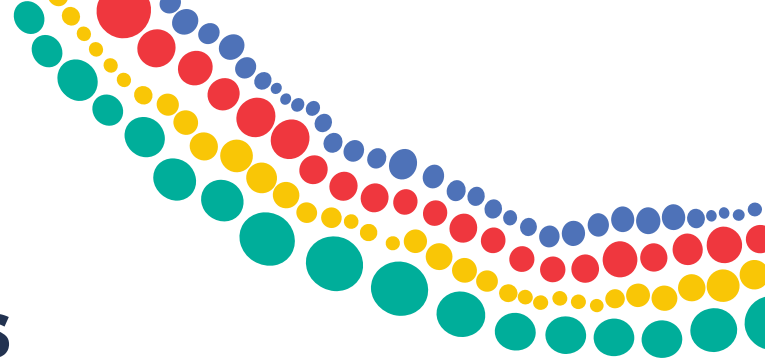


Elders, Board and Honour Guard at 2019 Esquao Awards Gala.

L to R (top): Three RCMP, Vi Marten, Irene Loutitt, Josie Nepinak, Lisa Higgerty, Bernice Martial, Three Veterans. **L to R (seated):** Mary Brown, Blanche Bruised Head, Marggo Pariseau, Marion Lerat, Lisa Weber, Loretta Bowen, Alma Desjarlais, Myrtle Calahaisen, Elsie Paul, Muriel Stanley Venne.



Elders Circle *and* Knowledge Keepers



The Elders Circle and Knowledge Keepers bring the Esquao, Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women, board and staff unlimited joy and good medicine.

They offer a great connection to culture through stories and provide young women and leaders with support, guidance, and lasting benefits for future generations. We recognize and value their unique contributions to thought, action, leadership, and conscious change.

Loretta Bowen
EDMONTON

Mary Brown
SLAVE LAKE

Myrtle Calahaisen
EDMONTON

Alma Desjarlais
HIGH PRAIRIE

Marion Lerat
CALGARY

Elsie Paul
EDMONTON

Lorraine Savard
EDMONTON

Blanche Bruised Head
LETHBRIDGE



1st Annual Esquao Award Recipients

L to R (back): Bertha Clark-Jones, Alvena Strasbourg, Marge Johansen.

L to R (front): Clara Woodbridge, Nellie Carlson.

Our History

2004-06

Participation in a national project involving 38 communities across Canada, with programs developed to combat discrimination, poverty, isolation, violence—common barriers facing Indigenous women.

2012

Began providing Elder services to the women in federal correctional facilities through the Edmonton Parole Office.

2015

Started Healthy Relationships and Safety in the City programs. IAAW leaders attended United Nations Forum on Indigenous People.

2017-18

Hosted Indigenous Women's Justice Forums in Edmonton.

2019

Partnered with Native Women's Association of Canada as Alberta PTMA. Lisa D. Weber named President. Started Indigenous Skills Education and Training (ISET) program. Partnered with Kapawe'no First Nation to provide COVID supports to off-reserve members.

2021

Started Justice System Navigator program in Edmonton and Calgary.

1994-95

IAAW founded by Muriel Stanley Venne to help Indigenous women be heard and bring their issues to the forefront. IAAW incorporated as a Society in Alberta. First Esquao Awards held, co-founded by Muriel Stanley Venne and Marggo Pariseau.

2010

Expanded across the province and built a stronger connection to outlying communities. Made a presentation to the UN Secretary General on the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. Started Financial Independence Training program.

2014

Focused on increasing safety for Indigenous women through sharing information on a safety app, educating young girls and youth on predators, and developing a video series and workshop to create awareness of the dangers.

2016-2017

Started Youth Leadership Development program. Formally partnered with the Women's Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF) as intervenor on Bradley Barton, Angela Cardinal and Justice Camp cases.

2018-19

Participated as a National Party with Standing on the National Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG). Travelled to hearings across Canada and provided a final submission.

2020

Secured funding from Indigenous Services Canada to engage with families of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) on identifying priority actions for a National Action Plan to address violence against Indigenous women and girls. Participated on the Alberta Joint Working Group on MMIWG.

2022

Enhanced ISET program to include pre-employment and job retention supports through Employment Partnership Program.



Programs & Services

2021 - 2022



The wolf teaches us humility

Esquao, the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women, offers a range of empowering programs and services for Indigenous women aimed at reducing barriers and promoting equal access to opportunities for women in our community.

Our programs reflect the seven sacred teachings as part of connecting with and restoring our culture, beliefs and practices. Areas of focus include leadership development, poverty reduction, achieving justice, violence prevention, housing, capacity building, and community outreach.

During 2021-22, a total of 667 women participated in programs delivered online and over the phone.

Financial Literacy

The Financial Independence Training (FIT) program addresses poverty in a cultural context by building skills and confidence in women and girls. As part of the Empower U collaborative, participants' savings are matched to increase their ability to learn, build, or save.

- The Empower U - FIT program was offered online over 10 weeks, two hours per week, with a matched savings component.
- The program explores our relationship with money and its link to trauma and addiction.
- One- and two-day workshops are available for a company's employees or communities.
- Free training is available on how to facilitate the program in your own community.

2021/22 Highlights

Esquao, the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women, continues to apply for funding to build on our programs with partners E4C and Bissell Centre. Nationally, Esquao is one of only a few Indigenous-led organizations in this field. Through the Empower U collaborative, we have expanded programming to include coaching through volunteers. Plans are underway to offer financial literacy to those who are in new jobs or saving for work equipment. **Of the 37 women who enrolled during the year, 33 completed the program**, with total matched savings of \$7,835 from the 17 women who were able to save.





Esquao Youth Leadership Development

Building skills and confidence in young women aged 13-17 years old, this leadership development program includes overnight camps, exposure to community leaders, and discussions about career opportunities.

Personal skills development activities include public speaking workshops, discussions of current events and community issues, and discussions and presentations on healthy relationships.

The annual four-day Leadership and Safety Summer Camp offers young women an opportunity to interact with community elders, take personal safety and self-defense workshops, and engage with their culture.

The program offers group home/youth group outreach services that are planned collaboratively with our communities. These include presentations and workshops on personal safety and personal skills development.

2021-22 Highlights

The Building Our Bundle online program to address the mental health wellness of isolated youth was our most popular program. In the last three offerings, **over 270 youth participated in the six-week sessions.** The program has included boys upon request, which was well received.



The *buffalo* teaches
us respect

Annual Esquao Awards Gala

Since 1995, we have proudly coordinated a community recognition ceremony to celebrate the accomplishments of exceptional First Nation, Métis, and Inuit women in Alberta.

- Community members nominate women with three letters of support, there is no jury.
- Since that inaugural Esquao Awards, nearly 500 women from 93 communities have been honoured in what has grown to be the single largest recognition event of Indigenous women in Canada.
- The Esquao Awards Gala is an excellent networking opportunity and a chance to recognize women who may not receive other awards.
- We continue to promote and connect recipients to leadership opportunities.



2021-22 Highlights

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the 25th Annual Esquao Awards were postponed. **The 2020 recipients were recognized at the 2021 Esquao Awards Ceremony** held in March 2021. The video of the Gala was released in May 2021 and can be found here: youtube.com/watch?v=yDGT9qWI66Q

Award recipients were: Edna Blyan, Matricia Brown, Rosemary (Rose) Crowshoe, Andrea Rosenberger Deleeuw, Rain Desjarlais, Eva John Gladue, Amanda Gould, Donna Knebush, Kristina Kopp, Rosalie Nicholls, Rosemary Nipshank, Pollyanna Mcbain, Janice Randhile-Papastesis, Terri Suntjens. The Leadership Esquao Award went to Marlene Poitras, and the Circle of Honour Inductee was Dorothy McDonald.





Transition Services

Transitioning Indigenous women from a correctional facility to a new residence by building skills and confidence is paramount. Esquao, the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women, helps provide support in opening doors to welcoming communities.

- Housing diversion program assists with move-in costs while enrolled in Esquao programs.
- The Firekeepers Wellness program focuses on addressing addictive behaviours through cultural understanding and ceremony.
- Supportive, non-judgement transition services focus on giving back to the community.
- Emphasis is placed on building new healthy activities and sharing their stories of resilience.

2021-22 Highlights

Housing, food insecurity, and wellness support for those in transition increased over the year. Many of the sessions were held on Zoom, while some activities like new home furniture deliveries were done in person with appropriate safety protocols. During the year **66 women participated** in the Firekeepers Support Circle and **62 were assisted with housing, for a total of 128 women receiving transition supports.**



*The eagle teaches
us love*



The *bear* teaches
us courage

Justice Initiatives

Esquao, the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women, has extensive experience in collaborative action planning on reforms needed to improve outcomes for Indigenous women accessing or involved in the justice system.

Current justice initiatives include:

- Positive relationships with government, police, and communities developed over 25 years.
- Action planning on National Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG).
- Assistance to families pursuing justice in the courts for their missing or murdered family members.



Community members at the Alberta Legislature with Minister Wilson to announce the upcoming work to address the National Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2020

2021-22 Highlights

Continued our partnership with Indo Canadian Women's Association to improve training to enhance cultural competencies for home visitations by social workers. Esquao participated in various Government of Alberta and City of Edmonton engagements on Alberta Provincial Police and First Nation policing, and both Métis and First Nation Women's Economic Security Councils. Our CEO and two Board members were appointed to the Alberta Joint Working Group on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women to **build a plan to implement the 231 Calls for Justice**, with recommendations to government presented on December 23, 2021.



Path to Justice Navigators

This culturally-relevant navigational and advocacy support service is provided to Indigenous women in Alberta at our Edmonton offices and at the Awo Taan Healing Lodge in Calgary.

Services include advocacy and referral, court support, training, and creating awareness about barriers for Indigenous women. Emotional support and local resources are provided, especially to those women who are victims and not able or comfortable in accessing supports.

In addition to assisting women, navigators give presentations to organizations and groups across the province, creating awareness about intergenerational trauma, cultural connections, and human rights.

2021-22 Highlights

The roles of the navigators differ in each city which allows for excellent cross-training opportunities. There is more court work in the southern part of the province as the navigator is situated in the Healing Lodge and is easily accessible to the women. Women accessing the navigator in the northern part of the province come primarily for housing advocacy and emergency connections. **The navigators assisted 96 women with 342 total interventions and 269 advocacy/referrals provided.**



*Muriel Stanley Venne and Bev Jacobs
at Supreme Court of Canada*



Supports to Indigenous Women During COVID-19

Esquao, the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women, was able to assist Indigenous women who did not have access to supports as a result of COVID-19, such as:

- Services to Indigenous women leaving correctional facilities.
- Services to Indigenous women rebuilding their lives after fleeing violence.
- Services to Indigenous women who are in poverty.

2021-22 Highlights

Funding received from three sources: Indigenous Services Canada, Indigenous Relations (GoA) and Homeward Trust Edmonton to address increased needs for Indigenous women in the Edmonton area. Esquao, the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women, staff continued the partnership with Kapewe'no First Nation on a pilot project to assist their members living off reserve and initiated two care package deliveries to women and families in Esquao programs. During the year, we provided **15 laptops, two desks, bus tickets, 12 internet service connections, \$28,888 in utility fees, \$96,450 in rental support, and \$19,315 in food gift cards to over 200 women and their families.** Coupled with advocacy, housing and program referrals, over 1,015 women received COVID supports. With the cost of utilities forcing families to choose between paying the utility bill or rent or buying food, our staff stepped up to assist women in navigating supports to food banks, food security programs, and bridge funding.



Alberta Indigenous Women Guardian Angels Project

Esquao, the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women, is honoured to partner with the Government of Canada on the Alberta Indigenous Women Guardian Angels Project. The project is part of our efforts to implement and evaluate a mechanism to hear the voices of Indigenous women in over 20 Alberta communities, and build local solutions to address the root causes of gender-based violence.

Through established communications channels with established women's groups across Alberta, Esquao will engage in conversations about shared concerns and challenges. Working together, we will identify positive ways forward for Alberta women post-pandemic.

Working closely with Indigenous Women Guardian Angels—often leaders in the community—Esquao will work with these women and women's groups to identify priorities and build connections to services that advance the individual capacity of Indigenous women, their families, and communities by implementing actions on employment and training, poverty reduction, violence prevention, and mental health and wellness.

Stories of resiliency and perseverance throughout COVID-19 will provide positive ways forward to pandemic recovery.

2021-22 Highlights

This project started in November of 2021, with the hiring of a project coordinator. Due to COVID-19 restrictions on meeting in person with communities, **the coordinator met with women online or in small group settings.** A third party evaluator has been hired and plans are underway to engage with the community in February 2023.



Employment Partnerships Program

Esquao, the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women, successfully obtained funding for staffing and other resources to provide support to women through two streams—pre-employment skill development and barrier reduction; and retention and employer supports.

2021-22 Highlights

This project started in November of 2021 with an extensive review of the Program intake process. This included participant confidentiality, storage of information in database, roles of staff, time management, and more. As a result, two positions were added to address literacy and barriers. In March 2022, we hosted an Employment Readiness four-day workshop, where **12 women built confidence and acquired skills on time management, family/work balance, and interview and ProServe training.**





Healthy Relationships Program

Held weekly, this two-hour session supports women in learning about mental, spiritual and cultural teachings and how these can support new or existing relationships. Some of the weekly topics include cultural and kinship teachings, how to build self-esteem, and historical trauma.

The Walking In Your Moccasins program was developed to focus on healthy relationships through weekly online sessions on Zoom. A project coordinator from Esquao, the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women, and an Elder offer emotional, spiritual and cultural teachings to support Indigenous women, including Elder/knowledge keeper support and teachings, cultural crafts, social connections with other women, and Wellness Wheel teachings.

2021-22 Highlights

This program was very popular, especially when health restrictions prevented in-person meetings. In all, **77 women signed-up for the two-hour online sessions** over eight weeks, with one-third completing the program. Through evaluations and testimonials received, participants rated gaining cultural knowledge, increased social interaction, and confidence to speak up for themselves as the most beneficial.



Indigenous Skills Employment Training (ISET) Program

The ISET program supports Indigenous women to improve their skills through training and education, and to find meaningful employment. Supports and services include individual training purchases, self-employment benefits, group training, special projects, and on-the-job training.

The Esquao, the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women, ISET program provides employment and training support services across Alberta for First Nation, Métis, Inuit, urban and non-affiliated Indigenous women aged 15 years or older.



2021-22 Highlights

Although the program was difficult to deliver online, **33 women received funding for post-secondary schooling** and associated supports during the year. Esquao supplemented this program with online Flagging, Food Safe, **ProServe group training for 18 women** and Warehouse Worker training for five women in correctional facilities.

2021-22

Programs and Projects *at a glance*

Achieving Justice

- Elder Services Corrections Canada - Edmonton Parole Office
- Indo Canadian Women's Association - culturally appropriate and safe assistance through home visitation for survivors of violence
- Path to Justice Navigators
- Transition Services

Capacity Funding

- Alberta Indigenous Relations - Indigenous Women's Initiatives
- Native Women's Association of Canada

Community Outreach

- Alberta Indigenous Women Guardian Angels Project
- Networking and support services to women who would like to start programs in their community
- Referrals and connection to women with expertise
- Short-term workshops and training sessions on various topics

Employment and Training

- Employment Partnerships Program
- Indigenous Skills Employment and Training

Housing

- Housing Diversion Program
- Supported Referral, Basic Needs

Leadership Development

- Building Our Bundle
- Esquao Awards
- Esquao Youth Leadership Development Program

Poverty Reduction

- Empower U - Financial Independence Training
- Supports for those affected by COVID-19

Violence Prevention

- Healthy Relationships Program



Land Acknowledgment

We acknowledge that our office is located in Edmonton, amiskwacîwâskahikan, on Treaty 6 Territory, a traditional meeting grounds, gathering place, and traveling route for many Indigenous people whose footsteps have marked these lands for centuries.

As a provincial organization, we acknowledge this is the Homeland of the Métis and also includes Treaty 4, 7, 8 and 10 Territory. We also honour Mother Earth and give thanks to the animals and all life forms who made sacrifices so that we humans could build homes, roads and communities on this land.



Thank you to our Supporters



ATB Financial
City of Edmonton
Culture and Tourism: CIP
Government of Alberta / Indigenous Relations
Homeward Trust Edmonton
Indigenous Services Canada
Native Women's Association of Canada
United Way of the Alberta Capital Region
(Fiscal Agent Empower U)
Women and Gender Equality (WAGE) Canada

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