

2023

Community Report

April 1, 2023 to March 31, 2024



Esquao

Institute for the Advancement
of Aboriginal Women

Highlights

2023-24

During 2023-24, a total of **917 Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit peoples** participated in Esquao programming.



Esquao **completed 2023 Research Report: On the Experiences of Indigenous Women and 2Spirit+ People in Alberta** to assess the current status of seven critical issue areas identified in *113 Pathways to Justice: Recommendations of the Alberta Joint Working Group on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2022)*.



Esquao **completed the Guardian Angels project** to establish a community pipeline and connect with Indigenous women across Alberta, addressing their needs and challenges and those of their families and communities.



Esquao announced a **new and ongoing partnership with Duchess Bake Shop** that supports empowerment and community.



Esquao **hosted the grand opening of Iskwewak Iskotew Nihkotawan**, Women's Fire Lodge, on July 24, 2023.



She Sings Her Song Performance Program introduced participants into performance by building basic skills in vocals, instruments, and song creation. Participants performed at the Indigenous Women, Two-Spirit, and Gender-Diverse Gathering in March 2024.



Esquao purchased a **22,000 square foot building** in west Edmonton with the support of Indigenous Services Canada.



Esquao hosted a national gathering in Gatineau, QC, called **Hear our Voices, Action our Solutions** to address the MMIWG2S+ epidemic.

Esquao hosted the **Indigenous Women, Two-Spirit, and Gender-Diverse Gathering** in March 2024, focused on sharing experiences and discussing key issues affecting Indigenous women and Two-Spirit+ peoples in Alberta.



Two **Women's Two-Spirit+ leadership series events** were held in January and March 2024, establishing a foundation for ongoing support, empowerment, and advocacy within Indigenous communities.

Regena Crowchild (Tsuut'ina Nation) was honoured with the **Muriel Stanley Venne Leadership Award** and welcomed into the Circle of Honour in ceremony.



Esquao proudly announced the **appointment of Josie Nepinak as President** of the Board of Directors, effective August 17, 2023.





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President's Message

Josie Nepinak

Esquao, the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women (IAAW), is a provincial organization dedicated to amplifying the voices of Indigenous women on various social and economic issues. Indigenous women have a voice. We serve to amplify their voices and provide a platform for leaders to advocate for the rights and freedoms of all Indigenous women.

Esquao focuses on policy areas including safety, housing and supports, human rights, education, training, employment, and protection from all forms of violence. Our founder, Muriel Stanley Venne, advocated for decades to ensure our voices were heard. Her actions and determination continue to guide our work at Esquao. We are also privileged to be guided by Marggo Pariseau, one of the original voices who, alongside many of our Elders, built Esquao into the dynamic and vital organization it is today.

Highlights from the past year include the leadership training of over 30 Indigenous women, an interactive provincial women's gathering held in March, and the formation of a new advisory committee of Indigenous women lawyers. I was honoured to attend meetings with Director Jeannette LaBrie and CEO Rachelle Venne in October 2023, where we met with senior leaders from departments including Women and Gender Equality, Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Development, Indigenous Services, Employment and Social Development, and Justice-Family Violence Prevention. We highlighted the work of Esquao, discussed current gaps, and advanced the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action and Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Calls for Justice recommendations.

Esquao also hosted a national gathering in Gatineau, Quebec with Indigenous women leaders, focusing on collective issues faced across the country and opportunities to leverage expertise and provide a collective voice on key issues. This work is made possible by the voices of our Elders, the dedicated staff, our membership, partners, and funders who make up the Esquao family. We are indebted to all of you for your love, guidance, and commitment in all that we do.

Sincerely,

[Original signed by]

Josie Nepinak, President



CEO's Message

Rachelle Venne



Over the past couple of years, Esquao has seen many positive advancements that I am very proud of. We have strengthened our internal capacity by reaffirming our Indigenous core competencies, updating staff performance and benefits, implementing a communications strategy, and upgrading our project management and financial management systems.

With the recent acquisition of a larger office space we now have room for all our programs, as well as community resource spaces for counsellors and health and wellness supports. We have also incorporated branding elements that reflect our connection to water, trees, and traditional medicines.

These improvements in our internal capacity have helped to elevate Esquao's presence both regionally and nationally. Although there is still significant work to be done to bring our women out of the shadows and into leadership roles in provincial and national initiatives, we are fortunate to have secured several multi-year funding agreements.

It is particularly exciting to work with the Alberta Inuit Women's Association (AIWA) as they take preliminary steps to design an organization based on their traditional values. We remain committed to supporting Indigenous women and young women across the province, and building collaborative partnerships with like-minded individuals, governments, businesses, and organizations along the way.

All my relations,

[Original signed by]

Rachelle Venne, CEO

About Us

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 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.

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

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.

Our Purpose & Values

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

Vision

Indigenous women are recognized as strong contributors in Canadian society.

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.

Values

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

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.

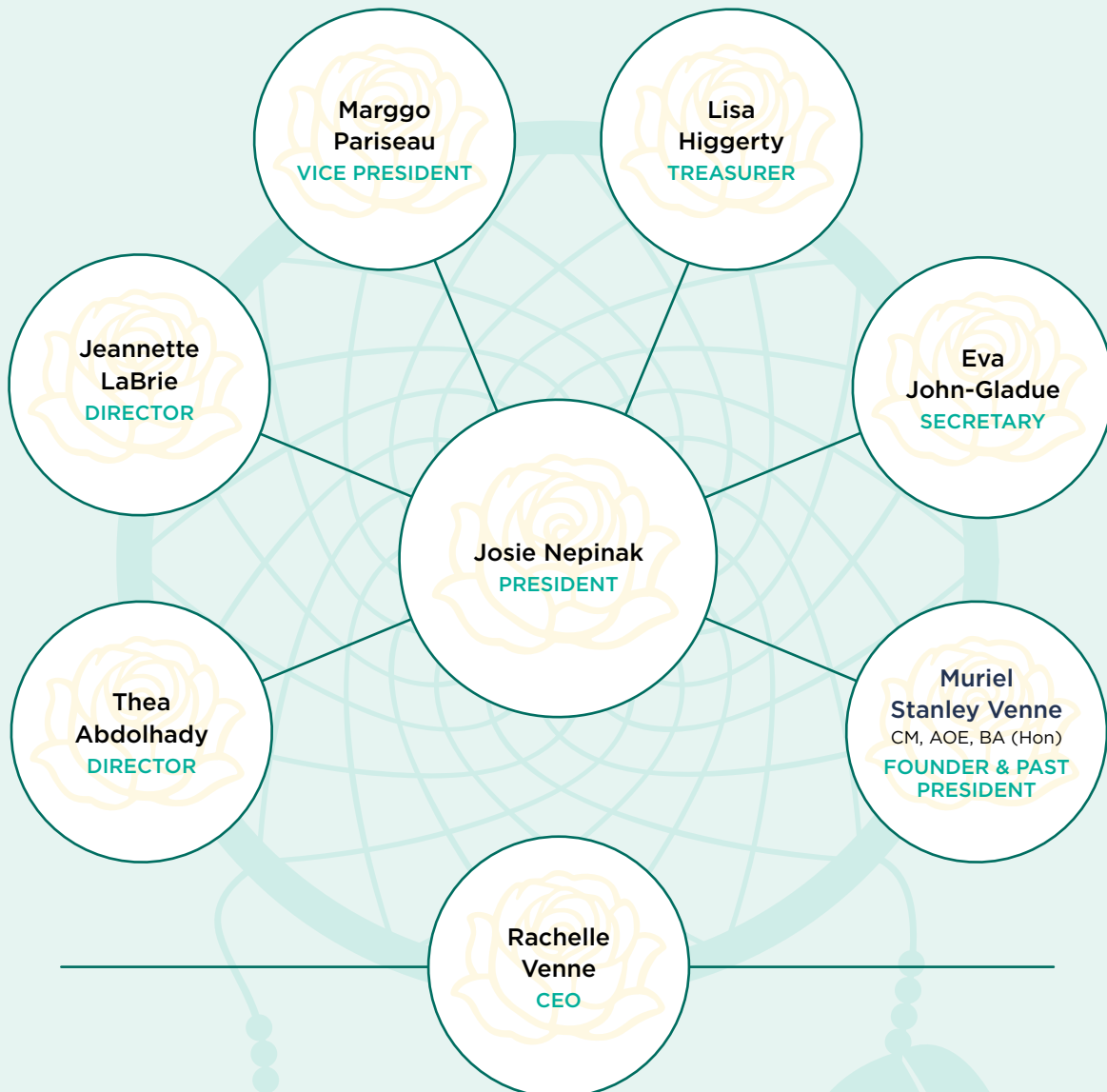
Organization Profile

- ▶ 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 organization is open to all First Nations, Métis, and Inuit women and their families. We offer culturally respectful programming in violence prevention, achieving justice, financial literacy, healthy relationships, housing capacity building, and leadership development for Indigenous women and girls.
 - ▶ 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.
 - ▶ Founded in 1994 by Muriel Stanley Venne CM, AOE, BA (Hon), the organization strives to empower all Indigenous peoples in the reinforcement and rediscovery of their language, culture, and spiritual practices.
 - ▶ 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.
 - ▶ We are guided by our Elders and Knowledge Keepers and a provincial Board of Directors.
 - ▶ Esquao is the stylized version of the Cree word for woman and is copyrighted.



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.





Elders Circle & Knowledge Keepers

The Elders Circle and Knowledge Keepers bring Esquao’s 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

Jackie Bromley
CALGARY

Mary Brown
SLAVE LAKE

Myrtle Calahaisen
EDMONTON

Alma Desjarlais
HIGH PRAIRIE

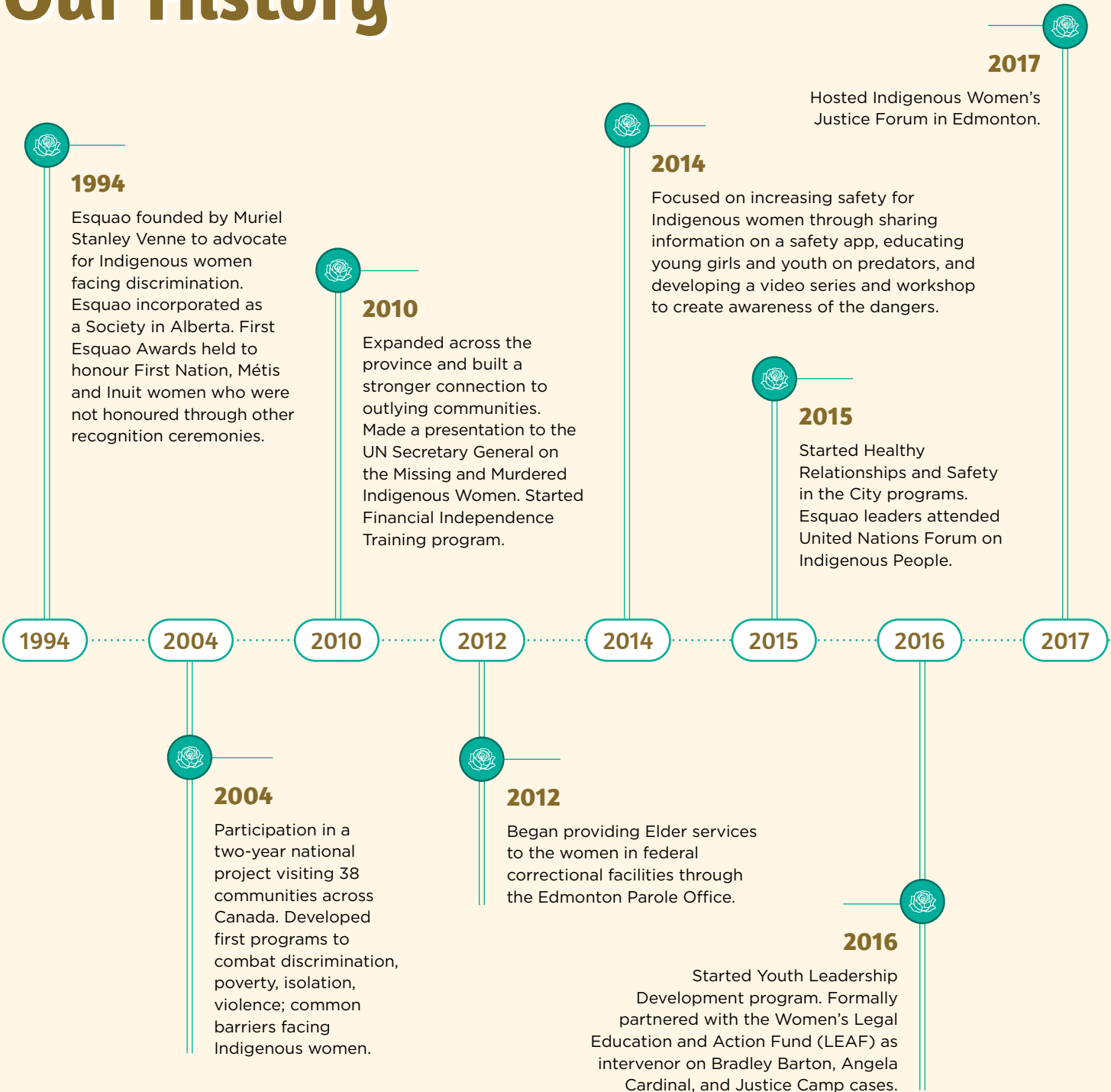
Marion Lerat
CALGARY

Vi Marten-Roberts
FORT VERMILION

Hazel McKennitt
ST. ALBERT

Lorraine Savard
EDMONTON

Our History





2024

Josie Nepinak is sworn in as Esquao's President. Esquao purchased a 22,000 square foot building in west Edmonton with the support of Indigenous Services Canada. Hosted two significant gatherings: one for Indigenous women and Two-Spirit+ leaders in Ottawa; the other in Edmonton to provide resources and information on Esquao initiatives, including the MMIWG Implementation Plan for Alberta. Leadership training sessions were delivered to increase the representation of Indigenous women in government agencies, boards, and committees. Released two research reports addressing the critical need for research focused specifically on Indigenous women in Alberta: *2023 Research Report: On the Experiences of Indigenous Women and 2Spirit+ People in Alberta*; and *Guardian Angels 2023-24 Report*.

2024



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. Participated on the Alberta Joint Working Group on MMIWG.

2020



2022

Enhanced ISET program to include pre-employment and job retention supports through Government of Alberta's Employment Partnership Program. Provided supports to Indigenous women and families to deal with basic needs as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2022



2018

Hosted second Indigenous Women's Justice Forum in Edmonton. 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.

2018



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-19 supports to off-reserve members.

2019



2021

Started Justice System Navigator program in Edmonton and Calgary. Partnered with Women and Gender Equality Canada on the Alberta Indigenous Women Guardian Angels project to build a communication pipeline for Indigenous women across Alberta.

2021



2023

Hosted the MMIWG2S+ Gathering, Moving Forward on the Pathways to Justice. Hosted the Women's Leadership Gathering. Opened Iskwewak Iskotew Nihkotawan (Women's Fire Lodge), a 20-unit apartment building to help participants transition to permanent housing.

2023

Programs



Esquao offers a range of empowering programs and services designed to reduce barriers and promote access to opportunities for Indigenous women in Alberta communities.

Our programs focus on reconnecting and restoring our culture, beliefs, and traditional practices. Key areas include leadership development, poverty reduction, system navigation, violence prevention, housing, and community outreach. **During 2023-24, a total of 917 Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit peoples participated in Esquao's programs in person, online, and over the phone.**

2023-24 Highlights

Twenty-one women completed the Empower U program and with a combined savings of \$16,525.00. Additionally, **12 participants received one-on-one coaching** that included mentorship in budgeting, tax filing, basic investments, boundary setting, and more.

Financial Literacy

The Financial Independence Training (FIT) program addresses poverty within a cultural context by building skills and confidence in women and girls. As part of the Empower U collaborative with United Way, participants' savings are matched to increase their ability to learn, build, and save. In June 2023, Esquao discontinued our partnership with the Empower U collaborative and transitioned to one-to-one financial coaching sessions.

- ▶ The Empower U - FIT program was offered in-person over 10 weeks, two hours per week, with a matched savings component.
- ▶ The program explored participants' relationship with money and its link to trauma and addiction.

Youth Leadership Development

The **Building Our Bundle program** aims to enhance skills and confidence in young women through cultural teachings, exposure to influential female leaders, and fostering relationships with youth in group homes. Personal skills development activities include one-on-one support for youth, assistance for young mothers, developing cultural skills, and discussions and presentations on healthy relationships.



2023-24 Highlights

A total of **47 girls and young women received support** through the Building Our Bundle program. Additionally, the program **established 11 new community connections** across Edmonton to build relationships with other organizations, support our youth, and collaborate on new ideas.

Supportive Housing

Supporting Indigenous women that are involved in Esquao's programs and providing them with safe, affordable housing is crucial for building their skills and confidence. Esquao plays a vital role in this process. With funding from Homeward Trust, we are able to offer essential supports such as the first month's rent, damage deposit, insurance, food, and furniture from FIND to build their independence and increase their safety.



2023-24 Highlights

Esquao **assisted 22 women and families with essential supports**, helping them secure safe and affordable housing.

Transitional Housing

Esquao has partnered with Homeward Trust to manage a 20-suite apartment building, Iskwewak Iskotew Nihkotawan (Women's Fire Lodge) in Edmonton. This program supports Indigenous women experiencing homelessness by providing a recovery-oriented program that facilitates their transition to independent, permanent housing. The program connects participants with culturally infused programs and support services. Each furnished one-bedroom suite is affordable and safe, offering a secure environment where women can stay for up to 18 months.

The housing support workers provided essential resources and support to participants, helping them navigate various systems. In collaboration with partners at Correctional Service Canada and other Esquao programs, the Lodge offered a comprehensive range of services including employment skills development, connections to community health and wellness supports, social wellness initiatives, access to an Elder, and assistance with justice system navigation.



Homelessness to happiness, I moved forward from a life of insecurity and uncertainty to a life of hope and safety. It takes a community to heal and prosper and patience to learn a new path forward; with Esquao, life is looking up. They offered opportunities and options to not only survive but live and offered me a network of individuals to help navigate life. Esquao is guiding me to make healthy choices in my personal and professional life. They are empowering me to advocate for myself and helping me build a prosperous foundation. The programs offered are engaging and follow the Seven Sacred Grandfather Teachings. I enjoy being part of Esquao.



2023-24 Highlights

Iskwewak Iskotew Nihkotawan (Women's Fire Lodge) was **home for 21 Indigenous women** over the past year.



Firekeepers

The **Firekeepers Wellness Program** addresses addictive behaviours through cultural understanding and ceremony. It offers a safe space for women to share their stories, learn traditional healing methods, and receive support from peers and Elders. Esquao is dedicated to holistic wellness within a safe and sober community, tackling the root causes of addiction and trauma.

Traditionally, a Firekeeper protects a body after a soul passes, keeping the ceremonial fire burning as mourners gather and grieve. This sacred role also symbolizes women at the heart of their homes and communities, nurturing the fire and supporting others in their healing and growth.

2023-24 Highlights

The Firekeepers program hosts a **weekly circle for women** at various stages of their healing journeys to support one another and create lasting friendships. Over the past year, **32 participants** have attended weekly meetings and social activities, listened to guest speakers, and shared meals and stories of resilience.



“
It is a privilege to connect with other women as equals in a safe, sacred setting.
”

“
I have found a sense of belonging in the Firekeepers program, I know every week I can look forward to Thursday to share my experiences.
”

Elder Services

Since 2012, Esquao has provided an Elder for **Indigenous Self Management Program (ISMP)** at Correctional Service Canada’s Edmonton Parole Office to provide support and cultural guidance to women transitioning out of correctional facilities. Additionally, participants attend the weekly Firekeepers wellness support circle and are connected to additional programs and community resources.

2023-24 Highlights

During the year, **21 women were provided support** through the ISMP program.



Employment Assistance

Esquao 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.



2023-24 Highlights

In the area of pre-employment, Esquao **connected with 40 women through a variety of workshops and activities.** These included resumé and cover letter workshops, a career fair featuring **over 40 vendors** along with mock interviews and resumé/cover letter assistance, Class 7 Learner's Licence training sessions, a Baking for Beginners workshop, and team-building workshops. Training opportunities included first-aid training, nail technician training, pedicure training, forklift training, ribbon skirt entrepreneur training, ribbon shirt entrepreneur training, and security guard training. **In the area of retention, 30 women were assisted** with transportation, childcare, housing, individual and group workshops, workplace conflict, cultural support, as well as necessary uniforms or equipment, and ticket upgrades.



I'm honoured and would like to thank Esquao with all the help and support in the training I took for Security Training. I ended up passing my course and got my security licence and found myself a full-time job in security. I always wanted to do this kind of work but didn't know where to start. I'm so thankful for this opportunity.



Leadership Development

The **Moving Indigenous Women Beyond Consultation to Full Participation** project is now in its third year of a four-year initiative. In the first year, the focus was on educating women about the history of the Indigenous women's movement in Alberta. The second year, conducted in collaboration with Brave Birds Studio, aimed to empower Indigenous women and 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals through leadership development workshops and networking opportunities. Core activities of the project included organizing the Women's Two-Spirit+ leadership series workshops, gathering feedback through evaluation surveys, and fostering community engagement.



2023-24 Highlights

Two Women's Two-Spirit+ leadership series events were held in January and March 2024, with a total of **34 attendees**. The main objective is to increase participation in decision-making and next steps include reviewing the current opportunities for Indigenous women and 2S+ peoples to join agencies, boards, and committees.



“

What an empowering way to spend a weekend with all the Warrior Women in attendance! I've gained so much knowledge, new perspectives, and left with a better sense of self and others to better lead in the future. Never felt like I belonged in a room more than this one. You gave us a huge gift.

”



Training and Post-Secondary Support

The **Indigenous Skills Employment Training (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. The program helps participants 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.



I completed the Business Administration program then moved into the Human Resource Management program. I was lucky enough to have the ISET program pay for my courses and my textbooks. This funding contributed to my success of completing my course and relieving the financial burden of going to school and I was able to complete my Human Resource Management Diploma with honours. I want to pave the way for other Indigenous women to see that, with a little effort put into filling out some paperwork for the ISET program and going back to school, they can also achieve their goals and aspirations. Education is vital in today's society to secure stable employment.



2023-24 Highlights

Throughout the year, the **ISET program assisted a total of 28 women**. The program provided funding support for various post-secondary studies, including academic upgrading, Addictions Counselling Program, Artisan Entrepreneur Diploma, Bachelor of Kinesiology, barber training, Human Resources Management Diploma, Indigenous Bachelor of Social Work, Licensed Practical Nurse program, and more.





System Navigators

The **System Navigator Program** provides information and referrals to access the justice system, housing, education, medical care, mental health, and social supports for Indigenous women. The goal of the program is to eliminate the social, economic, political, and cultural marginalization Indigenous women face by providing navigational support and advocacy.

Services include raising awareness about Indigenous history and trauma, building participants skills and confidence, increasing staff skills and competencies, modeling desired behaviours, holding confidentiality in the highest regard, continuous learning and improvement opportunities, and creating a comfortable and culturally safe environment.

2023-24 Highlights

The program assisted **101 women and their families across more than 70 communities**, offering referrals and support throughout Alberta. The seven key areas of advocacy included family and traditional wellness, child and youth support, legal aid, housing, food security, addiction supports, and mental health.

Justice Initiatives



Esquao has extensive experience in collaborative action on planning reforms to improve outcomes for Indigenous women accessing or are involved in the justice system. For several years prior to the National Inquiry, Esquao had been actively engaged in addressing the issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit+ people, including hosting gatherings, delivering comprehensive programs and services, and advocating for policy change.

Current justice initiatives include:

- ▶ Continuing to build positive relationships with government, police, and allies by sharing the work Esquao has completed since the 1990s to amplify the voices of Indigenous women in Alberta.
- ▶ As members of the Premier's Council on MMIWG2S+, we diligently monitor the government's response to the 231 Calls for Justice from the National Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG), as well as Alberta's 113 Pathways to Justice and Roadmap.
- ▶ Providing support to families seeking justice in court for their missing or murdered family members.
- ▶ Seeking opportunities for Indigenous women and family members of MMIWG2S+ to participate in committees and councils, allowing them to share their voices based on their personal experiences.
- ▶ Participating in government initiatives such as Indigenous Justice Strategy and UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People.
- ▶ Listening to women transitioning out of correctional institutions and partnering with community allies to address the disproportionate number of incarcerated Indigenous women and Two-Spirit+ peoples.

HELP Team

In collaboration with the Edmonton Police Service and five other partners, Esquao appointed a staff member to join the HELP Team to meet with Indigenous individuals who have interacted with the police and require assistance in accessing community support services.

2023-24 Highlights

The HELP Team member **assisted 11 individuals by connecting them with community supports and resources.** This included advocating for them, securing housing, arranging medical care, obtaining identification, and more.



Community Outreach, Events, and Gatherings



Meeting Indigenous women where they are means visiting both rural and urban communities, reserves, and Settlements as invited. It also involves hosting community gatherings and providing travel, accommodation, and childcare to minimize attendance barriers.

MMIWG2S+

Esquao hosted a **Sisters in Spirit** gathering on October 4, 2023 at Edmonton City Hall. Funded in part by the City of Edmonton, approximately 200 people attended to pay their respects, engage with guest speakers, hear from family members, and enjoy musical performances in honour of Missing and Murdered Indigenous peoples.



National Gathering

Esquao hosted **Hear our Voices, Action our Solutions**, a three-day gathering in Gatineau, Quebec in February 2024. Over 30 Indigenous women leaders from across the country gathered to discuss community priorities, exchange best practices, and collaboratively develop actionable solutions in regard to MMIWG2S+.

“

I loved the inclusion of ceremony and teaching activities. This conference was excellent to promote connection and foster relationships.

”



“

I appreciated the atmosphere and felt heard as a Two-Spirit person.

”

Indigenous Women, Two-Spirit, and Gender-Diverse Gathering

Held in March 2024 in Edmonton, the gathering focused on sharing experiences and discussing key issues affecting Indigenous women and Two-Spirit+ peoples in Alberta. The gathering featured panel discussions and guest speakers, research sharing, table discussions on the new MMIWG2S+ Implementation Plan, and opportunities for networking and connecting to community resources.

The gathering provided Esquao with an invaluable opportunity to hear from community members about the societal barriers they face, pinpoint gaps in supports and services, and identify action items for improving supports to Indigenous women and Two-Spirit peoples. Additionally, the gathering reinforced the importance of community and the empowerment that comes from giving people a platform to share their experiences and concerns.

In all, over 50 attendees had the opportunity to engage with the political leaders present, ask questions, and hear about recent research. They were also connected to various community resources, including housing, health services, family violence support, family wellness programs, and counselling services. Additionally, attendees received information on the National/Provincial Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence happening in Alberta.



Guardian Angels Project

Esquao led a two-and-a-half-year project called Guardian Angels. With funding from Women and Gender Equality Canada, Esquao aimed to establish a “communication pipeline” to local Indigenous women through women’s groups across Alberta, including in northern, rural, and remote communities. The goal of the project was to engage in conversations and listen to the concerns and challenges of Indigenous women; identify priorities; and build connections to services that advance the individual capacity of Indigenous women, their families, and communities by implementing actions on employment/training, poverty reduction, violence prevention, and mental health and wellness. This project is complete as of March 31, 2024, and the final report is available upon request via email at iaaw@iaaw.ca.



It is nice to know that there are people out there who travel from far to let us know that they are there for us, they care, and that they take the time to listen to us to try to figure out how to do things better.



Esquao engaged with this work guided by six principles:

1. Approach with respect, dignity, equality, sharing, and cooperation at the forefront.
2. Share, teach, listen, and provide support.
3. Establish trust and respect.
4. Recognize and support the leadership of Indigenous women and gender-diverse people.
5. Share challenges brought about or exacerbated by the pandemic.
6. Connect Indigenous women to services, information, guidance, and ceremony.



2023-24 Highlights

The Guardian Angels project team hosted nine gatherings across Alberta, with 76 women attending from communities such as Bonnyville, Calgary, Chateh, Driftpile, Elizabeth Métis Settlement, Grande Cache, High Level, Lethbridge, and Meander River.



2023 Research Report: On the Experiences of Indigenous Women and 2Spirit+ People in Alberta

From March to December 2023, Esquao conducted a comprehensive community engagement initiative. This effort included a research survey with over 300 respondents and four community gatherings aimed at understanding the needs of First Nation, Métis, Inuit, Indigenous women, and Two-Spirit+ individuals (18+) and their families in both rural and urban communities across Alberta.

The research focused on assessing the current status of seven critical issue areas identified in 113 Pathways to Justice: Recommendations of the Alberta Joint Working Group on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2022). These areas include Child Welfare, Court Services, Family Violence, Housing, Law Enforcement, Victim Services, and Missing Persons Alerts. The findings from Esquao's research highlight the urgent necessity for implementing the recommendations from the Pathways to Justice report and emphasizes the need for targeted interventions to address these pressing issues. This research report is complete and accessible upon request by emailing iaaw@iaaw.ca.

Two-Spirit Speaking Panel

Esquao collaborated with the St. Albert Public Library, Outloud Foundation, and the Fyrefly Institute for Gender and Sexual Diversity, and hosted an "Indigiqueer" event where guests were invited to watch the film *Veracity: Indigiqueer*. Following the screening, a speaking panel discussed Two-Spirit perspectives on reconciliation and decolonization.

She Sings Her Song Performance Program

The **She Sings Her Song Performance Program**, in collaboration with Debbie Houle, was an opportunity to introduce participants into performance by building basic skills in vocals, instruments, and song creation.

2023-24 Highlights

The program had a total of **nine participants** and was offered in-person over five weeks, two hours per week, with a final performance at the Indigenous Women, Two-Spirit, and Gender-Diverse Gathering in March 2024.



I'm happy to hear that someone [cares] about these issues and willing to put in their time and effort to making things better for us. Thank you!



2023-24 Highlights

This effort included a research survey with **over 300 respondents** and **four community gatherings**.



When singing in our group, I was able to sing out loud and this was huge for me. Whether my voice sounded good or not, the fact I even sang out loud was amazing for my spirit. I never had a voice growing up. This music program began to break down barriers and with the strength and support of so many strong iskwew around me, I was able to open my mouth and let the words spill out! It was so liberating! It brought about a freedom in this area I have never felt before.



Esquao Awards

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

Co-founded by Marggo Pariseau and Muriel Stanley Venne, the Esquao Awards highlight the significant role Indigenous women hold in their home, in the healing and development of their communities, and in the building of Alberta. The event is unique in that honourees are nominated and supported by their home communities.

The 27th Annual Esquao Awards were held on May 12, 2023, at the Grey Eagle Resort and Casino in Calgary, Alberta, with over 500 guests in attendance. This year's honoured Esquao Award recipients include leaders in trades and technology, education, and business; teachers of traditional Indigenous culture and holistic health; and advocates seeking justice for MMIWG2S+. We are grateful to our sponsors for their kind support.

Since that inaugural Esquao Awards, **524 women from close to 100 communities** have been honoured in what has grown to be the single largest recognition event of Indigenous women in Canada.





Esquao Award Recipients

- JOYCE BEAVER (Edmonton)
- MELISSA-JO BELCOURT MOSES (Edmonton)
- CHERYLE CHAGNON-GREYEVES (Calgary)
- AUDRA FOGGIN (MOYAH) (Calgary)
- LOUISE GADWA (Bonnyville)
- DEBORAH GREEN (GOPHER) (Calgary)
- MARNI HOPE (Lethbridge)
- LORI ANNE HOULE (Calgary)
- ECHO KEHEWIN (Edmonton)
- REBECCA KRAGNES (St. Albert)

- KAREN MACKENZIE (Edmonton)
- SAVANNAH POIRIER HOLLANDER (Calgary)
- LORI PRITCHARD (Calgary)
- MARGARET QUINTAL (Conklin)
- KAREN TURNER (Leduc County)

REGENA CROWCHILD (Tsuut'ina Nation) was honoured with the Muriel Stanley Venne Leadership Award chosen by Esquao's Board of Directors and welcomed into the Circle of Honour in ceremony.

Programs and Projects at a Glance

Achieving Justice

- ▶ Elder Services Correctional Service Canada - Edmonton Parole Office
- ▶ Justice System Navigator
- ▶ Transition Services
- ▶ HELP Team navigator with Edmonton Police Services
- ▶ Hear our Voices, Action our Solutions Gathering
- ▶ Sisters in Spirit Gathering
- ▶ Firekeepers

Capacity Funding

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

Community Outreach, Events, and Gatherings

- ▶ Alberta Indigenous Women Guardian Angels Project
- ▶ Indigenous Women, Two-Spirit, and Gender-Diverse Gathering
- ▶ *2023 Research Report: On the Experiences of Indigenous Women and 2Spirit+ People in Alberta*
- ▶ Indigiqueer Speaking Panel
- ▶ She Sings Her Song Performance Program
- ▶ Esquao Awards Gala

Employment and Training

- ▶ Employment Partnerships Program
- ▶ Indigenous Skills Employment Training

Housing

- ▶ Supportive Housing Referral Program
- ▶ Iskwewak Iskotew Nihkotawan (Women's Fire Lodge)

Leadership Development

- ▶ Esquao Youth Leadership Development Program
- ▶ The Moving Indigenous Women Beyond Consultation to Full Participation project

Poverty Reduction

- ▶ Empower U - Financial Independence Training





Land Acknowledgement

We acknowledge that our office is located in Edmonton, amiskwaciwâskahikan, 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.



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