

Community

APRIL 1, 2024 TO MARCH 31, 2025

Report 2024

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Esquao

Institute for the Advancement
of Aboriginal Women



Land Acknowledgement

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, 6, 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.



2024-25

Highlights

Esquao teams up with NAIT to offer a transformative cooking course. Food is medicine, part of ceremony and culture, and our Culinary Fundamentals course equips women not only with kitchen skills but cultural connection.



2024-25

Highlights

We partnered with Randy King from 80:20 Conflict Management Strategies to host the Speak Up Women's Self-Defense Workshop, empowering 10 participants with the skills and confidence to handle real-world dangers.

Message from the President

Having A Global Voice



As President of Esquao, the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women, I am proud of our long history. As leaders and advocates, we are at the forefront of breaking down systemic barriers. While delivering programming to support and empower Indigenous women on a grassroots and community level, Esquao also plays a key role as a regional Indigenous women's organization.

Sitting on the national board of the Native Women's Association of Canada gives us a voice at the federal ministerial level on discussions and larger policy issues important to all women—violence prevention, justice reform, reconciliation and economic development. This past year, Esquao participated on the international level at the United Nations Committee on the Status of Women, and will attend the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in May 2025.

From an organizational standpoint, we've increased our equity, establishing ourselves in our new building and focusing on financial stability and sustainability. We've come a long way from when our beloved founder, Muriel Stanley Venne, CM, AOE, BA (Hon.), would put up her personal collateral to sustain the organization. I know she would be really proud of where we are today, and for the optimism for the future.

As a practising lawyer, I see access to justice as a huge issue for Indigenous women and their families in Alberta. We are addressing these barriers through our ongoing advocacy work, and are working toward the establishment of new partnerships through institutions such as the University of Alberta's Faculty of Law, Norquest College and building on the existing agreement with Correctional Service Canada. Additionally, Esquao will continue to provide awareness, education and training opportunities for Indigenous women to build their personal and employment skills. And we will work to establish sustainable economic prospects and opportunities for key leadership roles for Indigenous women.

We are thankful for the many businesses and community partners who support our work. We encourage all businesses to become familiar with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Call to Action #92: to educate their workforce, commit to meaningful engagement with Indigenous women and ensure equitable access to opportunities in business.

Looking ahead, Esquao aims to expand our reach into rural and urban communities throughout Alberta, and continue to be a leading voice on the provincial, national and international level.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lisa D. Weber'.

Lisa D. Weber, KC

President, Esquao, the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women

Message from the CEO

Reflections on the Past Year

While this past year has been a tough one with the loss of our organization's founder, my mother Muriel, along with the passing of her close friend and my mentor Marggo Pariseau, we've been blessed to have been left with so many lessons from these two wonderful women. My mother always made sure that the people she interacted with were heard and respected, and we will continue to show kindness and responsiveness to the women who come in our doors.

This past year was also a year filled with many highlights and proud moments. Esquao signed an agreement for funding to renovate our offices, develop safety modules for women and youth, and provide more leadership development activities. We will move forward with our plans to develop an Indigenous Women's Justice Centre for legal services and advocacy to support women going through the legal system. This is a game changer for Esquao.

Staff continue to work hard providing programming support in the critical and complex issues facing our participants—domestic violence and safety, housing and food security, employment, attending post-secondary schooling and youth/adult leadership development. For example, the newly created Esquao Angel Fund will provide much-needed assistance to Indigenous women engaged in our programming who are facing food insecurity.

We listen to the women we serve to be better aware of what they want to see in our programming and to meet them where they need it. Examples include relaunching our financial independence training, and expanding our community outreach by delivering our programs online and being a point of contact for services in the urban setting.

Our organization has a reputation of being able to get things done. We serve as a conduit to all levels of government on the experiences of Indigenous women in Alberta. We face systemic discrimination and indifference in every area we are working in, and we need allies and the public to understand the transformational change that is needed immediately.

Esquao will continue the important work of amplifying the spirit, strength and resiliency of Indigenous women in Alberta for all of the kick-ass warrior women who made courageous decisions before us.



Rachelle Venne

CEO, Esquao, the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women



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.

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.

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.

2024-25

Highlights

Community partnerships like the one with the YWCA is just one of many Esquao has established in the community. Partnerships, including those with CN and Bird Construction, allow us to provide uplifting programming and supports to Indigenous women, girls, and families across Alberta.



2024-25

Highlights

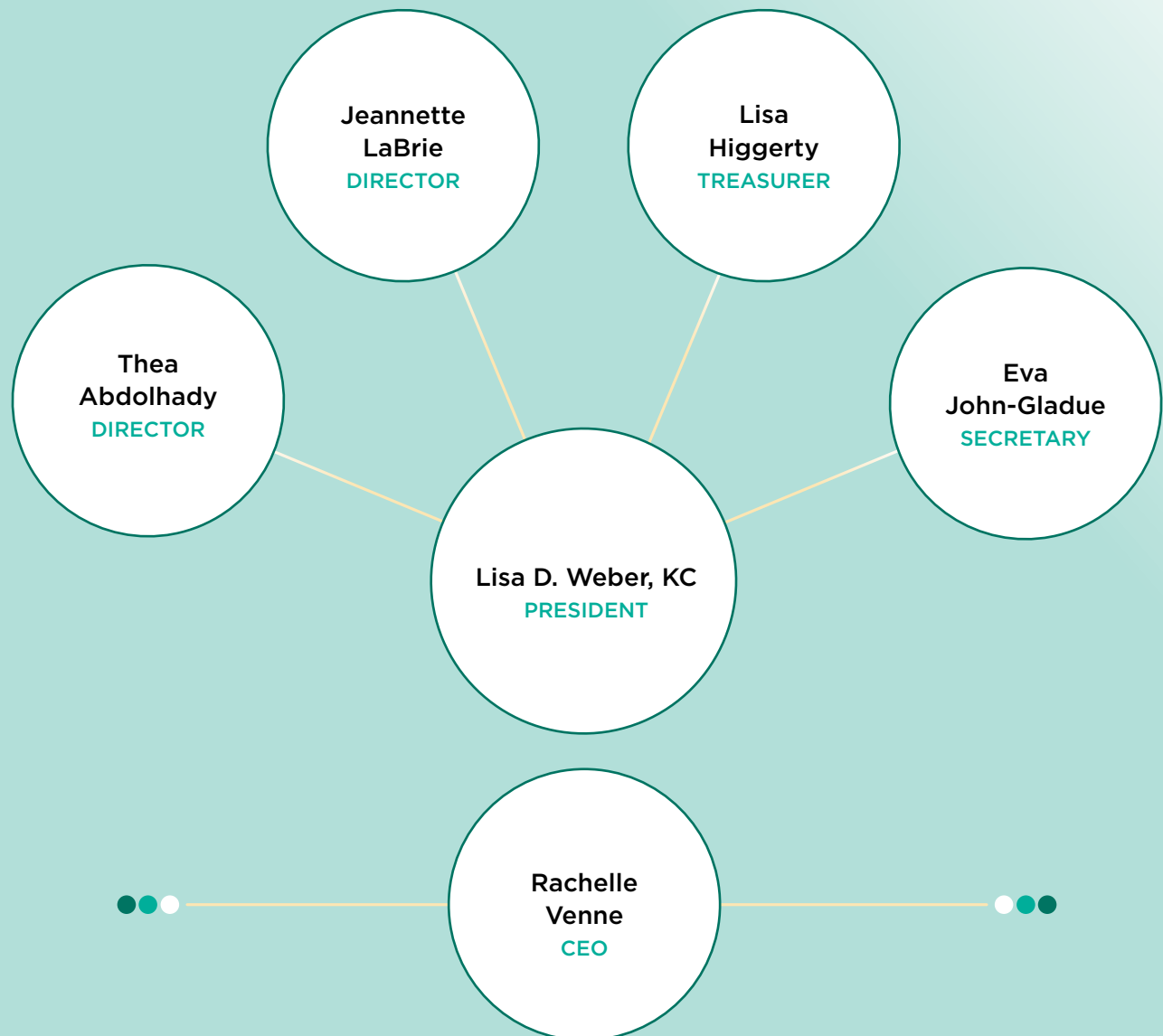
Esquao's employment programs, workshops, skills training helped Indigenous women prepare for and find meaningful work that changed their lives.



Board of Directors

Esqquao, the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women, is governed by a provincial board of directors.

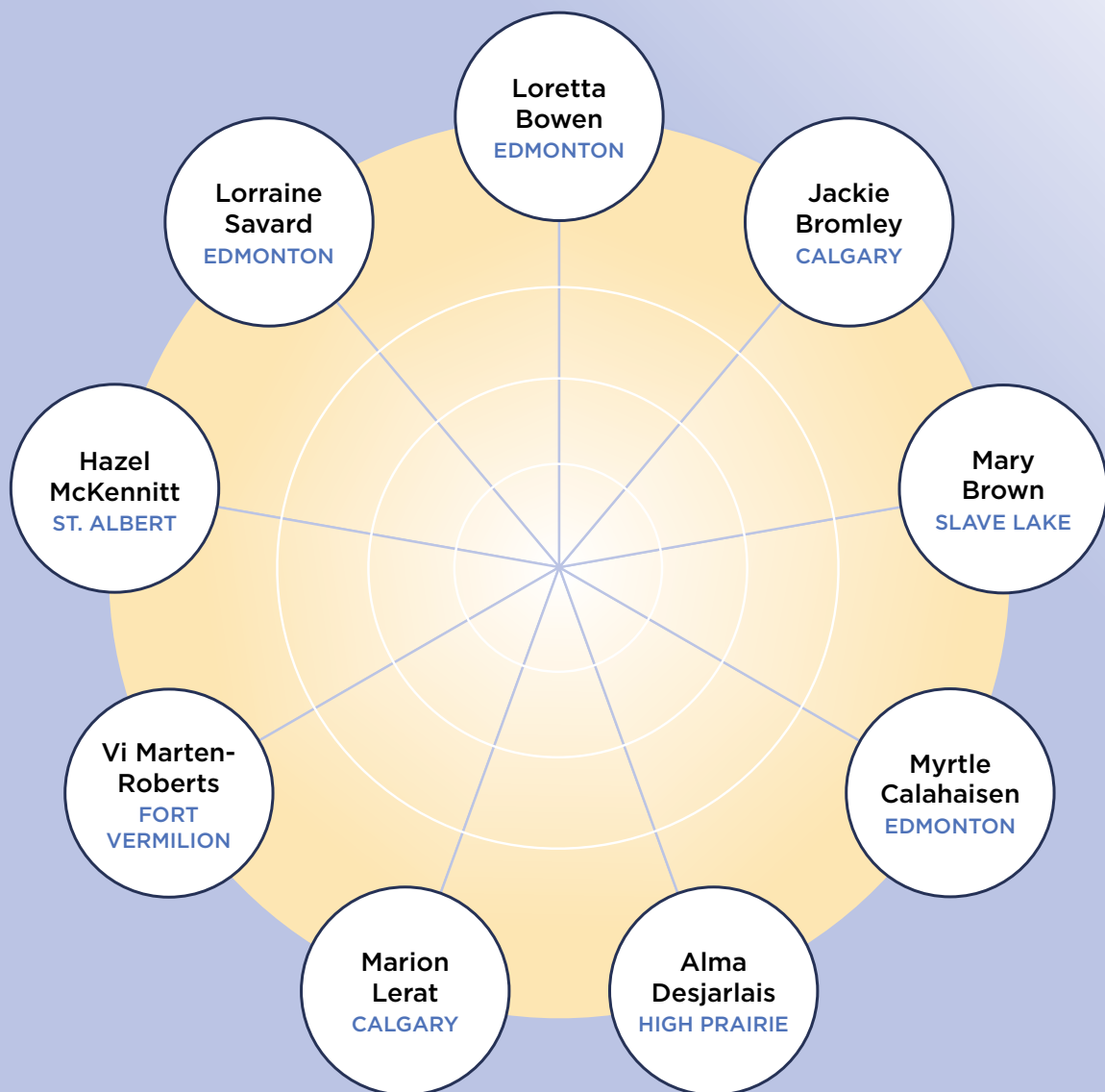
The CEO is the only staff member who reports to the board, and all contractors and staff report to the CEO. Elections are held every three years and directors can serve for multiple terms.



Elders Circle & Knowledge Keepers

Bringing unlimited joy and good medicine, the Elders Circle and Knowledge Keepers offer a great connection to culture through stories—providing 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.



Justice Initiatives

Esquao has extensive experience in collaborative action on planning reforms to improve outcomes for Indigenous women who are accessing or are involved in the legal 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 a member 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.
- ▶ Connecting families to wellness supports, advocacy and legal services 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 the Indigenous Justice Strategy and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act.
- ▶ Participating in personal development circles at federal correctional facilities. Listening to women transitioning back into the community, and partnering with community allies to address the disproportionate number of incarcerated Indigenous women and Two-Spirit+ people.
- ▶ Conducting community research that highlights the experiences of Indigenous women and Two-Spirit+ people in Alberta.



Remembering

Muriel Stanley Venne

CM, AOE, BA (Hon.)

1937 - 2024

A true trailblazer in the fight for Indigenous women's rights, Esquao's founder and guiding star, Muriel Stanley Venne's impact goes far beyond a list of accomplishments and titles—her work has reshaped Canadian culture and legislation, and her compassionate leadership and bold vision have changed lives.

Thank you for serving as a guide and role model, for living the value of service, and for your unwavering commitment to your family, community and to justice!

Muriel once said, *"The thing I was trying to change was to have people see my family and my people with love and caring. I really wanted people to be equal – with no hierarchy – just the right to be who you are and for women to be respected."*



Remembering

Marggo Pariseau

1952 - 2025

Mentor, Kokum and Auntie—from the earliest days of the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women (IAAW), Marggo Pariseau dedicated herself to honouring, uplifting and supporting Indigenous women in her work.

As vice-president of IAAW, Pariseau made a significant impact on the lives of many Indigenous women through her advocacy, leadership and service.

Thank you Kokum Marggo for your kindness, wisdom and mentorship, and for being a shining light for Indigenous women. Your legacy will continue to set an example of resilience and compassion.

Our History

1994

Esquao founded by Muriel Stanley Venne to advocate for Indigenous women facing discrimination. Esquao incorporated as a Society in Alberta. First Esquao Awards held to honour First Nation, Métis and Inuit women who were not honoured through other recognition ceremonies.

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.

2015

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

1994

2004

2010

2012

2014

2015

2016

2017

2004

Participation in a two-year national project visiting 38 communities across Canada. Developed first programs to combat discrimination, poverty, isolation, violence; common barriers facing Indigenous women.

2012

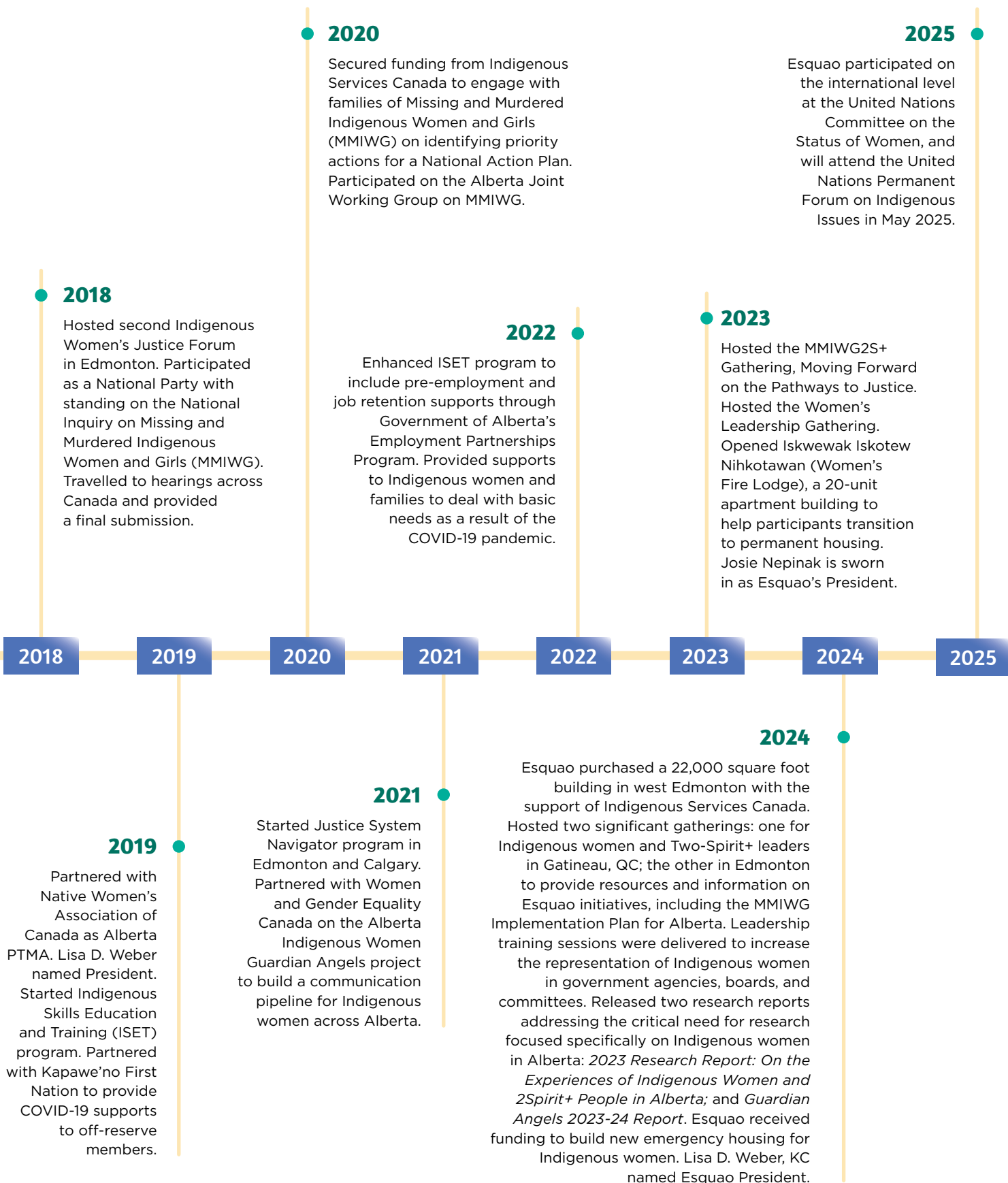
Began providing Elder services to the women in federal correctional facilities through the Edmonton Parole Office.

2016

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.

2017

Hosted Indigenous Women's Justice Forum in Edmonton.



Advancing Indigenous Women in Alberta

Programs to empower, employ and connect women.

Esquao is 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.

Esquao programs are developed by, and for, Indigenous women to provide a welcoming and non-judgmental environment to reclaim their power and place. We understand the diversity of our family units and support our men and gender-diverse kin who are fighting for the same rights.

Firekeepers Wellness Program

Focuses on addressing addictive behaviours through social inclusion, supportive discussions and access to ceremony and cultural teachings.

24
participants

Mêskanaw Violence Prevention Program

Assists women and youth in increasing their inner strength and confidence through discussion on eight real-life scenarios and cultural connections.

29
participants

Elder for Indigenous Self-Management Program

Provides support and cultural guidance to those transitioning out of correctional facilities, through Correctional Service Canada's Edmonton Parole Office.

21
participants

Job Retention Navigation Program

Helps participants maintain employment and advance in their careers, contributing to their long-term financial independence, stability and personal growth.

The program has established strong industry connections and employer partnerships, helping find meaningful employment for participants. Key connections and partnerships include:

- ▶ Elevate Aviation
- ▶ CN Rail
- ▶ Finning
- ▶ Edmonton Fire
- ▶ Alberta Parks and Recreation

30
participants

Education & Training

Addresses challenges that impede the success of women to obtain education and stable employment, creating pathways for them to enter and thrive in fields where there is a high demand for workers.

21
participants

Iskwewak Iskotew Nihkotawan Women's Fire Lodge

Offers short-term housing solutions for up to 18 months for women who are leaving correctional facilities, are experiencing homelessness or face multiple barriers that put them at risk of homelessness.

28
participants



Esquao Job Fair

Held at the Alberta Aviation Museum in January 2025.



55
businesses
participated

198
people
attended



Job Entry Navigator Program

Supports women in their transition to the workforce. The program provides participants with essential skills and resources needed to succeed in today's job market.

40
participants



Esquao AGM gathering

61
people
attended



Wellness Program

Offers traditional, alternative and western wellness supports to address violence in a trauma-informed manner.

60
participants



Adult Women's Leadership Program

Offers support and mentorship through speaking events, networking opportunities and workshops, helping participants build confidence to step into decision-making roles that honour the agency and experiences of Indigenous women.

90
participants



Youth Leadership Program

Supports individuals aged 13-29 by helping them connect with their peers, build confidence and establish a mentorship network.

84
participants



2024 Esquao Awards

600
people
attended

Stats are for 2024-2025

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 28th Annual Esquao Awards were held on May 3, 2024, at the Edmonton EXPO Centre, with 600 guests in attendance. This year's honoured Esquao Award recipients included leaders in the arts, business, culture, community involvement, children's futures, education, health and medicine, and justice and human rights. We are grateful to our sponsors for their kind support.

Since the inception of the Esquao Awards in 1995, 540 women from close to 100 communities have been honoured in what has become the single largest recognition event for Indigenous women in Canada.





Esquao Award Recipients

Joanna Rose Campiou
ALEXANDER FIRST NATION - CULTURE

Terri Cardinal-Nayawatatic
SADDLE LAKE CREE NATION -
CHILDREN'S FUTURE

Barbara A. Courtorielle
SLAVE LAKE - COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Cathy Cunningham
GIFT LAKE - EDUCATION

Beatrice Floch
EDMONTON - LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT

Patricia I. Goodwill-Littlechild
MASKWACIS - LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT

Sarah Houle
CALGARY - ARTS

Sherri Houle
EDMONTON - CULTURE

Ruby Littlechild, MBA, M.Ed, BA
MASKWACIS - BUSINESS

Julia McDougall
FORT MCMURRAY - EDUCATION

Melissa Nollski
ST. ALBERT - EDUCATION

Mona Ominayak-Auger
SLAVE LAKE - COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Lorraine Raine
MOUNTAIN CREE SMALLBOY CAMP -
CULTURE

Anna Stuffco
EDMONTON - JUSTICE & HUMAN RIGHTS

Beverly Ward
LOON RIVER FIRST NATION -
COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Tara-Lynn Wardman
EAST PRAIRIE MÉTIS SETTLEMENT -
HEALTH & MEDICINE

Teneil Whiskeyjack
EDMONTON - ARTS

Brenda Blyan,

Buffalo Lake Métis Settlement,
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.



Gatherings, Elders and Knowledge Keepers

Esquao's events and programming celebrate mentorship and resilience in our communities.

Esquao brings women together—sharing experiences, connecting to culture and inspiring each other. We are so appreciative of the guidance our Elders and knowledge keepers offer, and the time and energy they devote to Esquao's many programs. Their wisdom and dedication make our work possible.

Gatherings are held at least once per year to report back and receive feedback, create awareness on promising practices, foster collaborative discussions and come together to support each other.



Sisters in Spirit



Red Dress commissioned by Knowledge Keeper Teresa Snow



Holly Seniantha, Linda Semansha - Dene Tha'



Rosa Medicine Traveller and a gathering attendee



Elder Lorraine Savard and sister Loretta Bowen



Laughter as medicine presentation



Sisters in Spirit 2023



Edna Rain



Red Dress



Official opening of Iskwewak IskoteW Nihkotawan – Women's Fire Lodge

Programs and Projects at a Glance



ACHIEVING JUSTICE

- ▶ Justice Initiatives
- ▶ Contribution to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act

ELDER SERVICES

- ▶ Elder for Indigenous Self-Management Program
- ▶ Elder/Knowledge Keeper support for all programs

EMPLOYMENT, TRAINING & POST-SECONDARY SUPPORT

- ▶ Esquao Job Fair
- ▶ ISET (Indigenous Skills and Employment Training)
- ▶ Job Entry Navigator Program
- ▶ Job Retention Navigation Program

FINANCIAL LITERACY

- ▶ Financial Independence Training

HOUSING & SUPPORTS

- ▶ Iskwewak Iskoteh Nihkotawan (Women's Fire Lodge)
- ▶ Supportive Referrals Housing Program

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

- ▶ Adult Women's Leadership Development Program
- ▶ Youth Leadership Development Program

SYSTEM NAVIGATION

- ▶ Advocacy & Referral Services

WELLNESS

- ▶ Firekeepers - Addiction Support Circle
- ▶ Wellness Program

VIOLENCE PREVENTION

- ▶ Mëskanaw (The Path) Violence Prevention Program

Esquao
is the stylized version
of the Cree word for woman.



2024-25

Highlights

Esquao held a well attended Job Fair for Indigenous Women in January 2025 at the Alberta Aviation Museum.



2024-25

Highlights

Edmonton's Duchess Bake Shop partnered with Esquao to share kitchen skills, teaching Indigenous women about food and good quality ingredients, and how to bake.



2024-25

Highlights

The Esquao Angel Fund was created in 2024 to provide much-needed support to Indigenous women who are actively engaged in Esquao programming. The newly created Esquao Angel Fund will assist Esquao participants in need of food through the distribution of supermarket gift cards.

Thank you **to Our Supporters**



Government of Canada

Government of Alberta Indigenous Relations

City of Edmonton FCSS

City of Edmonton – Indigenous Relations

Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada (CIRNAC)

Correctional Service Canada (CSC)

Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC)

Homeward Trust Edmonton

Indigenous Services Canada

Justice Canada

Native Women's Association of Canada

Oski Pasikoniwew Kamik

Women and Gender Equality (WAGE)