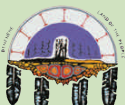


Meadow Lake First Nation News



Birch Narrows
Dene Nation



Buffalo River
Dene Nation



Canoe Narrows
Cree First Nation



Clearwater River
Dene Nation



English River
First Nation



Flying Dust
First Nation



Makwa Sahgaiehan
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Ministikwan Lake
Cree Nation



Waterhen Lake
First Nation



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MENTAL HEALTH COMMUNITY COUNSELLING

Community support worker: Janet Martell

Janet Martell is a community mental health support counsellor and crisis lead for the five southern bands of Meadow Lake First Nations.

She credits her father, the late Senator Fred Martell, and mother, Cecile Blackbird, as being teachers who taught her about wellness.

"Each one of the communities has heroes – those who can help others find their true purpose in life," Martell says. "Through a holistic teaching of the medicine wheel, we learn of those teachings. Everything has a reason, why go through what we go through to be where we are today, and there's even a reason why we meet certain people."

Her supervisor, Josette Couillon-neur, the director of mental health and addictions services, says their work in the crisis team is to build hope and belonging.

All the community crisis team members are trained in crisis intervention and aftercare. The work of crisis management is collaborative,

provincially with the Saskatchewan Health Authority and the mental health commission in Ottawa. Locally, they work with the Meadow Lake and Ile-a-la Crosse physicians.

"One thing this COVID-19 has taught me is inclusiveness and acceptability," adds Martell. "When this is over, some people still won't feel like going out."

COVID-19 has exacerbated some existing mental issues. When there is a return to normal, Martell wants to encourage people to continue reaching out using social media, texting and making phone calls.

She is concerned about the children during this time because Martell notes children shouldn't be worried about their parents becoming sick from COVID-19.

"First Nation educators and First Nation wellness workers can help the youth in their community," Martell continues. "The youth in the First Nation communities should be able to learn from the adults in their



Janet Martell

community about mental health awareness just by watching them work – just by watching them lead by example."

She says mental wellness should be fundamental – from their parents' teachings.

"It shouldn't be an add on. We can't worry about our mental health, we have to take care of ourselves on a daily basis," says Martell. "COVID-19 is a mirror of what's been going on. The question is what do we want to do with reflection and how can we change it going forward."

Martell says we are grieving with the world.

"Every day we wake up and almost forget this virus has shut our world down. We need to be able to talk, feel free to grieve as some are still grieving and trying to live the best life they can. This is a chance to build empathy and support for the greater community. It's not just about us, we're all in this together," Martell concludes.

Community support worker: Doris Woods

Doris Woods says her late mother used to tell her in Dene, *Náts'éte lq't'é* (like a dream) meaning always be prepared, stay grounded and pray.

Woods was born and raised on the Buffalo River Dene Nation. Today, she is employed with the Meadow Lake Tribal Council working as a mental health community counselling support worker. She has done this since 2018, primarily to the four Dene communities – Clearwater River, Birch Narrows, English River and Buffalo River.

As the team lead for the northern crisis team, Woods says she is always available.

"If, and when there is a crisis in any of the four Dene communities I can be reached by telephone usually by the First Nations health coordinator or wellness worker," she says.

During this COVID-19 pandemic, Woods stays in touch with the wellness counsellors in each of the four Dene communities via texting, phone calls and email. Some clients familiar with Facebook messenger, contact her that way.

"However, only telephone counselling is available at this time and



Doris Woods

people want to debrief issues they are facing presently, she adds. "They basically just want to talk."

Woods will also assist a First Nation community by telephone/conference call to assess the situation and plan the next steps. Each First Nation community within the Meadow Lake First Nations has its own crisis team, which includes their health coordinator and front line staff.

"They provide support in any areas of need for the affected people in the community," Woods explains. "If debriefing is required, other MLTC crisis team members will be contacted to provide support or referrals. A crisis is any situation or event that overwhelms an individual or family and in some circumstances, a whole community."

Examples of events that can throw individuals and families into chaos include suicide, a motor vehicle collision where there is a fatality, an epidemic or a natural catastrophe such as forest fire/flood evacuation which involves a threat to life.

"With the right support, the mental health of those affected, can be guided to a path to recovery and wellness," Woods adds.

She notes there are many different types of mental illness that affect people in different ways. Within each mental illness, people may have very different symptoms and challenges.

"Also, mental health is the way we think about ourselves, relate to others and interact with the world around us," Woods adds. "They affect our

thoughts, feelings and behaviours."

Woods says everyone has a story.

"My story, along with the support of my husband, Bobby, is about learning to live a more meaningful and respectful way of life," she says, adding she calls it a to-do list. "First pray; groom for personal hygiene; eat throughout the day; if not at work, read a good book; listen to music; sing; spend some quality time with family, either preparing a meal together, working on a new project in the house or yard; play a game with grandchildren and help them with school work; go for daily/evening walks for at least an hour. This routine has become an energetic spark and part of who I am."

The MLTC Community Crisis Team works closely with all First Nation community counsellors and wellness workers to promote wellness.

"Treat each other with love and respect. Listen closely to one another and read between the lines of what one is saying," adds Woods. "Make sure anything you do, or say, always comes from a loving perspective. Love is the greatest gift of all."



Waterhen Lake First Nation’s Waweyekisik Education Centre, in partnership with Your Choice Homes Inc., worked with school students to build a small house on the reserve. Here, (l-r) Robert Opissinow (Indigenous mentor), Carson Fiddler (student), Jason Leonzie (YC Homes liaison).

WLFN students help build home

Earlier this spring a couple of Grade 12 students from Waweyekisik Education Centre on Waterhen Lake First Nation began work on a new home with other youth from the community and now the home is completed.

“This has been a great way to teach the youth about housing shortages on the reserve,” explains WLFN councillor Blaine Fiddler.

Fiddler supervised the project which was in partnership with Your Choice Homes Inc. (YC Homes).

“I’m a journeyman carpenter and I oversaw the two apprentices – Jake and Rick Fiddler,” Blaine Fiddler says, adding YC is a construction worker 101 program which gives students real-life experience, apprenticeship hours, a high school credit and even a paycheck.

Jason Leonzie, the liaison between YC and Waweyekisik, says his main job is to make sure the students pay attention.

“I’m there to see they work on their in-class modules and learn to work with one another,” he says, adding when the rules sur-

rounding COVID-19 were relaxed somewhat the students returned stronger than ever. “What we like to do is pass on some life skills, along with some building experience.”

Judy Fiddler is the school’s counsellor and notes the students in the small houses program are motivated in this type of work.

“They love to get going in the morning and they say they are ‘coming to work,’” she adds. “I have watched the boys grow into a brotherhood.”

Leonzie says when his group comes to a community – they were in Makwa Sahgaiehcan First Nation last fall – they always stress the students need to work with the trades (workers).

“The youth who are involved from WLFN needs to get to know the guy who puts in the electricity not only as an electrician, but as someone they worked with to build a house,” says Leonzie

It was a great opportunity for the youth to get to know two of their community members who are working towards their carpentry journeyman tickets. Jake and Rick

Fiddler built the structure with the kids from the ground up.

Judy Fiddler says the kids have made a big step in their attendance.

“One of the great things about the small houses program on our reserve is the youth learn to respect the various tradespeople, and the trade itself,” she adds.

The youth of WLFN have learned to take charge and ownership of their work. At the start they did what they were told and have since taken the initiative.

Waterhen Lake Housing has some construction projects upcoming this summer where chief and council can see from this small house team that there are some strong candidates to be a part of building up their community.

“The community has an opportunity to benefit from the work of the youth,” adds chief Carol Bernard.

“The kids look to this opportunity in a different way now. It’s their first real job experience and they have learned to take instruction very well as it’s evident in the success they’ve had in building small houses here on the reserve.”

COVID-19 and MLTC education

For more than three months, since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada, MLTC director of education Heather Merasty, says resources were developed to support the nine Meadow Lake First Nations communities in implementing their supplementary learning plans.

“As of mid-March, all education staff were directed to work from home,” Merasty adds. “Provincial supplementary learning guidelines were provided to each school for their information and adaptation to meet their needs.”

Communication was provided to all school-based administrators (SBAs) regarding eEducation supports which are still available during this time.

“There is regular and ongoing communication between school-based administrators, MLTC Education senior administration and support staff,” Merasty says, noting her department also hosts monthly online SBA meetings with all principals and vice-principals to keep them up to date on all information. “We will continue these meetings throughout the summer to ensure transparent and up to date communication.”

She says the future state of education is unknown at this time with MLTC Education staff currently working on proposals to secure additional technology for each of the First Nation schools.

“We are preparing for the possibility it may be a digital format of education in the fall,” Merasty states, adding more desktop computers and iPads will be needed for distribution to the communities.

The Full Circle Education Conference, scheduled for March 18-20 was cancelled due to the COVID 19 pandemic.

“However, options are being explored to provide a digital online version of the conference in the fall,” says Merasty.

Another change in the works is MLTC Education is currently revamping their website and developing resources that would support an online education format in the fall.

The latest for MLTC Education is online high school classes.

“We have a partnership with the Saskatoon Catholic School Division to access their online high school program,” Merasty adds, noting students can take a full high school class online and costs will be covered through MLTC Education.

Any and all information regarding education options for the fall, as it becomes available, will be forwarded to each band’s chief, their board of education directors and school-based administrators.

“We’re prepared for an online back-to-school in the fall if that’s the way it should turn out,” says Merasty. “But if we’re in the classroom, we’ll have more technology available for our students.”



Waterhen Lake First Nation councillor David Fleury (shown above) started out wild rice harvesting with his father, Joe Fleury, in 1990. “He offered me an opportunity to buy in and it was the best investment I made in my life. What I see myself doing is living my dad’s legacy,” he says. Fleury is also the westside director for the Saskatchewan Wild Rice Council. Fleury says wild rice farmers work together at their annual meetings to bring forth issues such as flooding, insurance, price per pound, permit and licence fees, among others. “We need to stand together to ensure future generations benefit in the North from this industry as trapping is becoming a thing of the past.” Wild rice is an organic food source grown in harmony with nature and, Fleury says, farmers go to great lengths to ensure the pristine waters stay that way. Alex Mistickokat, a 30-year veteran grower from WLFN, says wild rice grows best in muskeg lakes in depths about two to three feet deep. “That spot in the lake needs to be deep enough to run our boats,” he says. “Before seeding, the rice is first soaked for a couple days then it’s spread out by hand on the lake, and the seed drops to the bottom. Once it’s planted, the wild rice grows back every year, “and if there is a spot where it stops growing, we will reseed that open area.”

Recreation directors building character among the youth

Flying Dust First Nation • Jon Mirasty

After 13 years as a professional hockey player, Jon Mirasty is back home on Flying Dust First Nation currently employed as the band’s recreation director and youth mentor. It’s a position he’s held the past two years.

Mirasty enjoys giving back to the community, and with the role as recreation director, he’s able to share as many positive messages as he can with the youth.

“The work I do with the youth here just happened naturally,” states Mirasty. “We do a lot of canoeing and kayaking excursions, and there is also an equine therapy program as well.”

The equine program builds self-confidence and communication skills.

“It has had a very positive impact on the participants, of which some are high-risk youth and adults with addictions.

Mirasty’s work is year-round, from land-based learning by hosting winter and summer camps. He teaches kids how to set nets and how to do fishfrys. The youth learn hands-on skills such as filleting fish and skinning deer.

“In the fall we hunt down in the Cypress Hills and return with elk,” he says. “While we’re down there, the youth have the opportunity to be mentored by some of our elders during this hunting trip.”

Flying Dust offers youth sleepovers – DOVE for the females and AXE for the males.

“It’s for youth 12-18,” Mirasty adds proudly. “They are two separate events where it’s 24 hours of fun with the idea of mentoring the youth and giving



Flying Dust First Nation youth prepare to take a trip down the Meadow River in their kayaks and canoes.

them positive life advice to help with their self esteem.”

Last year the sleepovers had about 23 youth in each of the two sleepovers.

Mirasty considers himself a leader in the community and during this pandemic with the most notable rule being ‘stay home.’

He and others go knocking on doors to check on the youth, elders and others to make sure they are alright.

“Back in March, chief Jeremy Norman and I were setting a lot of nets and taking fish to families on the reserve,” he says, reminding others that not everyone has that luxury to go to the grocery store.

As things begin to open up, Mirasty and other community leaders are planning to keep the

youth active.

Mirasty says all the offices on the reserve work well together.

“Like the saying goes, it takes a community to raise a child, we need to start at a young age and show the youth opportunities await them,” he adds. “All through my professional hockey career I was a team player. Here on Flying Dust I consider myself not only family, but also a part of the team. It’s great to see community members happy and enjoying themselves.”

Because of his many years playing hockey in places like New York, California and Russia, Mirasty has one message to all youth.

“Shoot for the stars, you’ll land on the moon. Shoot for the moon and you’ll land among the stars,” Mirasty concludes.

Makwa Sahgaiehcan First Nation • Richard Bearboy

“Thinking outside the box means we can’t just throw something together, like, for next week. We have to start thinking more long term.”

Those are the words of Richard Bearboy, Makwa Sahgaiehcan First Nation’s recreation director, who would like to instil in his community’s youth that, for example, now is the time to think about their upcoming volleyball training in August so they can be competitive when the season begins.

Bearboy has not always been the band’s recreation director. After university he returned home and wanted to do something for, and with, his First Nation.

“Since coming back I’ve worked in band membership, employment services, as a youth centre director and now, in youth and recreation,” he adds. “I see my role as showing our kids there’s a big world out there and they can do anything they want to.”

Bearboy says the youth need to imagine themselves as capable.

“Some think about being star athletes while others are looking toward a university scholarship or an all expense paid trip to something bigger – we need to help our kids dream big,” he says, adding the youth can gain and learn a lot about confidence with critical thinking in how to choose their destiny.

Bearboy enjoys working with others and says his best ideas come from being on a team.

“I see this work as a challenge, but I enjoy challenges,” he says, now that he’s been MSFN’s rec. director the past 12 months. “We want our kids to learn discipline and self-discipline and we want all the youth to feel included. I believe our youth group leaders can mentor them.”

Now that more things in the province are starting to reopen, Bearboy notes many are beginning to think outside of the box.

“How do we all move forward?” he asks. “We want to get the volleyball program going again because last year we had a group of boys who had never played volleyball before and they went to the FSIN Games and came in third. This time they plan on taking first,” says Bearboy.

The youth and recreation program is not just about youth.

“It’s also about incorporating elders who share stories of their experiences,” Bearboy says. “We need to continue to share the elders stories with all generations.”

Summer is now here and Bearboy says everyone must still be cognizant of



The MSFN new paintball course will be ready soon and these youth are ready.

the COVID-19 pandemic and remember to stay safe.

“Outdoor events like canoeing and camping are great opportunities for programming, but we still have to wipe everything down. And that includes the canoes, the paddles and life jackets,” he adds.

In his position, Bearboy plans on building a positive team atmosphere.

“We want our youth to be a part of that this summer and we want to continue that atmosphere into the next school year,” he adds.

FIRST AID AND FIRST RESPONDER COURSES SET UP

Emergency response teams crucial

Daryl Wright is the emergency response coordinator for the Meadow Lake Tribal Council and says the first step in his line of work is to set up First Aid and first responder courses in each of the nine Meadow Lake First Nations.

In most First Nations communities, especially in the North where many are remote, a first responder is crucial as an ambulance's response time is at least one hour.

"In that hour, if we have more people trained in First Aid or as first responders we can save a person's life," Wright says. "In some cases you have to first find cell service, then call for an ambulance."

Just before the pandemic hit, Wright says they held First Aid courses at Buffalo River Dene Nation and Clearwater River Dene Nation the first week of March. Soon after, all nine MLFN communities received six First Aid kits for their COVID-19 response teams. The idea was, if anyone contracted the virus, that person would get one of these kits. Among other things, these kits include a radio, a wind-up cell phone charger and flashlight.

"Our first response plan is like anywhere else," says Wright. "You just might have to wait 72 hours before someone will rescue you."

The point of the kit is to have a conversation and talk with your family about what might be needed for your family's safety and survival.

"The First Aid kits are good for a

medical emergency, but these kits also have a lot of room – they're basically little backpacks. When you are sheltering someone for 72 hours there are other things to consider. Things like dry food, board games, communication and a family plan," adds Wright.

Because many First Nations people go camping, hunting, or spend the weekend at their cabin, Wright says they encourage people to add to their First Aid kits.

"Of the people who have taken our First Aid course, we found less than 25 per cent have a First Aid kit in the home," he states. "Every home needs to have a kit, a kit they design."

Wright acknowledges having a family emergency plan is not a normal conversation, but says it should be normal.

Last summer, during the 2019 First Nations Summer Games hosted by Flying Dust, the FDFN first responder group was busy mostly at the canoe racing venue.

"We later learned one of the visiting tribal council teams stayed in The Battlefords, so every morning those athletes would wake up extra early, get on their team bus and didn't eat any breakfast before taking part in the canoe races," says Wright. "They would be winning all their races, but then they would collapse. They had heat stroke. At first I thought this was crazy as we were dumping water on them to cool their core temperature. After they



came through we focused on rehydration. After a few races with kids collapsing, we were able to predict which canoes would be collapsing and our first response team learned to recognize an emergency."

Wright says the Summer Games was a great example of how to assess a situation from an emergency response team perspective.

Moving forward, Wright and the nine First Nations health directors will document the conversations about the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We'll survey the various teams during the pandemic about what went well and what didn't go well," he says. "This is an ongoing conversation for the next emergency."

Wright commends the First Nations communities for taking care of their members and making sure everyone in their community had food delivered to them, not just to the homes that had people quarantined inside. Wright states during this pandemic, the communities knew best what they needed.



Jordan's Principle Haircut Day was June 17 on Waterhen Lake First Nation. At left, hairstylist Natasha Aubichon starts to cut Alma Vincent's hair, while, above, a number of community members were on hand to get a much-needed trim.



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The Meadow Lake Tribal Council
wish you and your families
all safety at this time.