



Brief concerning Urban Aboriginal Homelessness in Quebec

Submitted to the Public Hearings on Homelessness
held by the Social Affairs Committee

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Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec



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des centres d'amitié
autochtones du Québec

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INTRODUCTION


The Native Friendship Centre Movement has been present at the national level for more than fifty (50) years. In Canada, there are 120 Native Friendship Centres working on behalf of the urban Aboriginal population. They are represented by the National Association of Friendship Centres (NAFC). In Quebec, the Movement will soon mark its fortieth year of existence. There are eight (8) Native Friendship Centres in Quebec; their missions are to improve the quality of life of Aboriginal people, promote culture, and build mutual understanding among peoples.


The Native Friendship Centres are urban service institutions for Aboriginal people. They have also become important educational and training organizations for thousands of Aboriginals. They advocate on behalf of the rights and interests of Aboriginal people, and work daily to promote better understanding, not just by Quebecers but also by Aboriginal people living in their communities, of the issues, problems and challenges facing urban Aboriginals.


Since their inception, the Native Friendship Centres have served as incubators for important initiatives leading to the implementation of numerous programs and services for Aboriginal people in the urban setting. Over the years, the Native Friendship Centres have become focal points for the expression of the needs, hopes and claims of urban Aboriginal people, who today make up an important segment of the overall Aboriginal population.





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I. Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec

The mission of the Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec (RCAAQ) is to promote the individual and collective rights and interests of Aboriginal people in the urban setting. It works to achieve this mission on two levels. First, it supports the development and implementation of province-wide projects and programs; in so doing, the RCAAQ assists its members in accomplishing their missions by providing them with the necessary advice, support and technical resources. Secondly, the RCAAQ provides representation for the Native Friendship Centres and establishes partnerships at the provincial and national levels. It encourages joint action and exchanges among the members of the Quebec First Nations and the various Quebec and Aboriginal government organizations.



Furthermore, **since May 2005, the RCAAQ has been designated by the Assembly of First Nations of Quebec and Labrador (AFNQL) as the privileged interlocutor with regard to urban issues involving the First Nations.**

In carrying out its support and representation mission in Quebec for more than 30 years, beginning in 1976, the RCAAQ has been able to obtain an overview of the problems facing Aboriginal people in the urban setting. Through our mission, we have also acquired extensive knowledge of the needs of Aboriginal people, whatever their nation, in the urban setting. Finally, this lengthy experience has allowed us to develop important expertise in the development and delivery of services, including referrals and various types of support, to Aboriginal people confronted by the reality of urban life.

The above description of our mission reflects the specific nature of our objectives, which are to improve the quality of life of urban Aboriginal people and promote mutual understanding among peoples, through a holistic approach encompassing the notions of empowerment, culture, community and the social economy.

In this context, the growing problem of homelessness affecting urban Aboriginal people is a reality of which the RCAAQ has direct knowledge. Every day, the Native Friendship Centres must confront the challenge of this ever-increasing phenomenon which appears in several forms, and they must do so by showing creativity and innovation using the often limited means at their disposal.



II. URBAN ABORIGINAL HOMELESSNESS

a) Homelessness... in urban non-Aboriginal societies

Since the 1980s, homelessness and extreme poverty have taken on a troubling severity and amplitude in all of Quebec's regions, as borne out by numerous indicators even though few systematic studies have been conducted. These indicators include the maintenance or increase in the number of people in extreme poverty,¹ increase in child poverty,² greater numbers of people going to shelters,³ and a massive turning to the use of food banks.⁴ This phenomenon is due to clearly visible reasons, such as cutbacks in government services, de-institutionalization, etc. Researchers agree that the situation reflects what has been called the "weakening of the social bond".⁵

Extreme poverty is not due solely to the lack or insufficiency of income; it is explained by a combination of social and cultural factors, which also allow us to better understand why homelessness and extreme poverty take on new forms. Homeless people today are no longer just adults or males. They include individuals caught up in numerous and various types of social ruptures: single parents, young drop-outs, people with mental illnesses or addictions ranging in severity, etc. They may not all directly be victims of homelessness but they risk becoming homeless at different times because they live in a world where they are increasingly subject to social risks with possibilities for emotional rupture (traumatic separation), economic rupture (loss of one's job), or cultural rupture (loss of meaning), all of which are on the increase.⁶ For this extremely fragile segment of the population, living in society only increases their vulnerability. As noted by Michel Simard, one of the founders of Le Havre, a shelter in Trois Rivières: "*Homelessness may be seen as a way of inhabiting the space created by the breakdown of the social bond, of weaving one's very nest out of the despair of the world.*"

1 The National Council of Welfare estimated that in 1999, 16% of Canada's population was living below the poverty threshold.

2 According to Statistics Canada, the rate of child poverty increased from 11.8% in 1989 to 17% in 1996. It then tapered off to 13.7% in 1999.

3 See, for example, reports from shelters outside of Montreal such as Le Havre in Trois-Rivières or Oeuvres Isidore Ostiguy in Outaouais; both have seen a doubling in the demand for their services beginning in the early 2000s.

4 Between 1998 and 2001, the number of Canadians who went to a food bank doubled.

5 See the landmark work on this issue, *L'Errance urbaine* (Danielle Laberge, ed.). See also the point of view defended by Michel Simard, founder of Le Havre, a shelter in Trois-Rivières.

6 These forms of rupture also help to explain the broad official definition of homelessness today and the various forms it can take: situational homelessness, cyclical homelessness and chronic homelessness. A homeless person is considered to be a person who has no fixed address and no stable, safe and healthy housing, has a very low income and no discrimination-free access to services, suffers from physical or mental health problems or problems related to substance abuse, family violence or social disruption, and does not enjoy the support of a group of belonging (Government of Quebec, 2008, p. 3).



b) Homelessness... among Aboriginal people

Few systematic studies have been conducted on Aboriginal homelessness and urban wandering; but there are indicators which tell us that a significant percentage of homeless people in Quebec and Canada are of Aboriginal origin. In any event, homeless Aboriginal people are highly over-represented in terms of their percentage of the Canadian population. We know that although they make up **3% of Canada's population, Aboriginal people account for 10% of the country's entire homeless population, for a homelessness rate three times higher than that of non-Aboriginal people.**⁷

We therefore clearly note an **Aboriginal dimension to homelessness**, one which is explained by the specific conditions experienced by First Nations members. And these conditions are not simply economic in nature, but they are also of a social, political and cultural nature. Social and economic inequalities, social exclusion and political guardianship combine their effects with dramatic results.

We must also bear in mind that according to the Human Development Index of the United Nations, Canada is ranked 8th among 174 countries. But when we consider just the indicators for Aboriginal people in Canada, the country falls to 48th (just ahead of Mexico), while climbing up to 37th when urban Aboriginals are taken into account.⁸ This helps to explain that among the 15% of Canadians who have not completed high school, 50% are dropouts from the Aboriginal population in the communities and 30% are from the urban Aboriginal population. We also see that Aboriginal people living in or away from their communities are strongly disadvantaged regarding employment, housing types and quality of life in general, in comparison to the non-Aboriginal population.⁹

In this regard, we cannot set aside the **issue of housing**, not only because, as we indicated, Aboriginal housing conditions are clearly inferior to those in the non-Aboriginal population, but also because the Aboriginal demand for social housing (in the communities and urban centres) is infinitely higher than what is offered and available.¹⁰ Here we must add that government programs (particularly those of the federal government) have been largely inadequate over the past several years.¹¹

7 Sider, Deb, *A Sociological Analysis of Root Causes of Aboriginal Homelessness in Sioux Lookout, Ontario*, The Canadian Race Relations Foundation, May 2005, 153 p.

8 UN statistics for 2005 (Report submitted to the UN Human Rights Commission).

9 In 2001, 14% of Aboriginal people living away from their communities were unemployed, versus 8% of non-Aboriginal people. One of every ten Aboriginal persons living off-reserve reported not having potable drinking water at home, while 16% were living in overcrowded housing compared to 5% of non-Aboriginal people (Data for, 2001 and 2006 from Statistics Canada).

10 There is an enormous housing deficit in the Aboriginal communities; Quebec would have to build 8,800 new units, renovate 5,000 units and decontaminate 1,700 units to overcome this deficit. The overall housing needs for all the First Nations in Quebec are estimated at 1.5 billion dollars.

11 The federal government stopped funding the construction of public housing between 1993 and 2001. From 2001 to 2006, a new initiative to promote the construction of affordable housing was developed by CMHC in partnership with the provinces, but it brought about few results. Since then, the federal government has not developed any initiative to promote social and co-op housing. Furthermore, even though Aboriginal people living away from their communities can benefit from the public housing program offered by the Waskahegen Corporation, there is a long waiting list. Therefore, this program cannot meet the demand; one urban housing worker noted in this regard that there was a three-year waiting list in her urban centre for the public housing offered by the Waskahegen Corporation (Survey, 2008). For more data, see the brief which was submitted by the AFNQL to the Social Affairs Committee and which form the basis of the above observations.

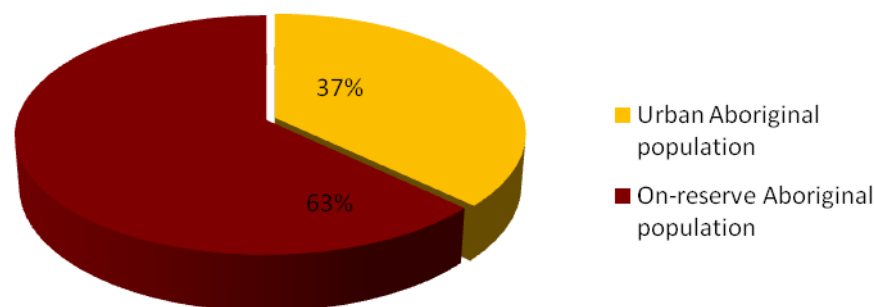


c) Homelessness... among urban Aboriginal people

Further to the economic factors more directly linked to the lack of income and financial resources, we must consider another dimension of the reality experienced by urban Aboriginal people to better understand the “Aboriginal dimension” of homelessness. In this regard, we note that the federal *Indian Act*, still in effect, keeps Aboriginal people at a lower level by forcing unequal status on them and by emphasising the role that the State plays in their lives.

Indeed, for several decades during which the economic and social situation on the reserves has stagnated, many Aboriginal people have been leaving their community in the hope of improving their lives. Others find that they must go to urban centres to continue their general or occupational training or to receive health services. Others yet, such as women and children, leave in order to escape domestic violence and the bleak future awaiting them in their own communities.

This migration has grown to such an important extent that today, **urban Aboriginals account for 37% of Quebec’s entire Aboriginal population**, or between one-third and one-quarter of the registered Aboriginal population in Quebec (about 25,400 out of a total Aboriginal population of 68,738).¹² Migration to the cities for different reasons has significantly increased the population of Aboriginal people living away from their communities. As a result, succeeding generations of Aboriginal people are being born in the urban centres and more than one-half of the Aboriginal population is younger than 25.¹³



To summarize, having been led for numerous reasons to leave their home territories (already restricted to the narrow confines of the reserves), an increasing number of Aboriginal people find themselves forced to confront the urban reality. They are being suddenly thrust into a setting that is not their traditional one; they are isolated

¹² Statistics from Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (2005)

¹³ National Association of Friendship Centres and Law Commission of Canada, *Urban Aboriginal Governance in Canada: Re-fashioning the Dialogue*, page 8 (1999).



and cut off from all of their usual social bearings that define their culture and identity, far from the minimal protections they can receive from their communities of origin.

They find themselves in a particularly vulnerable position which can lead them experience situations of severe poverty and to undergo the breakdown in the social bond of which we spoke previously. In short, urban Aboriginals are brought up against the possibility of multiple ruptures at the affective, economic and cultural levels, which so aptly characterize homelessness today

This phenomenon may first appear among urban Aboriginals as a particular type of "urban wandering," as a step towards chronic homelessness which is expressed as a form of social exclusion often leading to difficulties in finding a stable and sustainable place to live and even the incapacity to do so.¹⁴

Although urban wandering may reflect certain cultural traditions stemming from the nomadic lifestyle of the past, it proves to be a very difficult way of life in today's socio-economic context of overcrowding combined with a sharply felt lack of work and housing. In the end, it is self-destructive for the people who must find accommodations with others as well as for the natural helpers who provide them with this support.¹⁵

Furthermore, if urban Aboriginals today are more at risk than other social groups of experiencing severe poverty and homelessness, it is because they are isolated and marginalized in the cities they have gone to live in. They are also more at risk of being directly subject to racism and social exclusion because of their ethnic origin.

Language is yet another challenge because some Aboriginal people speak their traditional languages while others use English. It is not rare to see French used as a third language by some Aboriginal people. This creates difficulties in receiving services, including health services. Consequently, Aboriginal people in the urban setting risk not being able to access culturally-adapted services that correspond to their needs. In short, they are more at risk than other social groups of being in situations that will aggravate all the possibilities of experiencing a breakdown in the social bond, which opens the door to urban wandering and from there to situational, cyclical or chronic homelessness.

The above observations explain the enormous task that faces the Native Friendship Centre of Montreal and poses a real threat to its entire mission and all the programs it has implemented with other organizations, such as the street patrol, referral services and the Inter-Tribal Youth Centre.¹⁶

They also explain why Aboriginal homelessness and urban wandering, in all of their specific forms, are seen in such urban centres as **Quebec City, Sept-Îles, Val-d'Or, Joliette, La Tuque, Chibougamau and Senneterre**. The statistics are for the most part fragmentary, but they show that Aboriginal homelessness is a serious and growing problem. The Quebec Native Friendship Centre Movement lacks the resources today to address this problem, yet our lengthy experience points the way towards the

14 See *National Initiative for Homeless Urban Aboriginals* (RCAAQ and NFCSI).

15 (...) During the summer, we meet with homeless people in public places such as corner stores, public parks and bars. Aboriginal housing problems such as overcrowding are factors which accelerate the phenomenon of urban wandering (...) Kapakan, *Target Population*, p. 5.

16 See the brief submitted by the Native Friendship Centre of Montreal to the Commission.



numerous possible solutions we can bring forward and at the same time contribute to Quebec society as a whole.

III. POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVES: HOW DO WE ADDRESS THE PROBLEM OF ABORIGINAL HOMELESSNESS?

It cannot be stressed enough that homelessness is caused by numerous factors, with the lack of financial resources (especially for housing) among the most important ones. Until governments make substantial efforts to build new housing in the communities and to offer accessible social housing in the urban centres, it will be difficult to make any real progress on this problem. We must work upstream of the problem; that is, prevention activities are necessary for overcoming homelessness.

a) The expertise acquired by the Quebec Native Friendship Centre Movement

The Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec carries out its mission on two levels, namely support for the Native Friendship Centres and representation to the various Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal authorities. We thus seek to coordinate the actions of the different Centres by assisting them in positioning themselves locally (and autonomously), but at the same time within a broader context. This is why the RCAAQ has developed a common intervention philosophy for the Quebec Native Friendship Centres – a holistic approach encompassing the notions of empowerment, culture, community and the social economy.

But beyond these considerations, when we look at homelessness itself and the breakdown in the social bond that it represents, we see that the Native Friendship Centres are well placed to be decisive stakeholders in the search for sustainable solutions. This is precisely because we make the individual the focus of our work, in taking account of the component made up of Aboriginal identity and culture. What we seek, then, is to reinforce the social bond which is so important for those who leave their communities for the urban centres, where they find themselves marginalized and isolated, even if not due solely to discrimination or racism.

Furthermore, using the notion of "Aboriginal empowerment" allows the Native Friendship Centre Movement to help individuals regain power over their own lives and ultimately to play their rightful role as citizens within the urban political framework and as part of the urban setting in itself. Our approach goes well beyond the delivery of services.

The RCAAQ must be proactive in building awareness among civil society stakeholders of the specific conditions affecting urban Aboriginal people and of the solutions to consider. In this regard, the First Nations Socio-Economic Forum (FNSEF), which was held in 2006, allowed us to create alliances and to formalize partnership agreements with stakeholders such as the Chantier de l'économie sociale, the Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN), the Union des Municipalités (UMQ) and Réseau interuniversitaire *Dialog* (INRS).



The Quebec government made several commitments with the RCAAQ covering the areas of health, social services, early childhood and social development, education, culture and languages, economy, employment and income security, infrastructure and housing, sustainable community development, and support for youths.

In this regard, the RCAAQ proposed to Quebec's Ministère de l'emploi et de la solidarité sociale that the two parties collaborate closely in the development of the Quebec government's second strategy for combating poverty and social exclusion. The purpose of such collaboration is to ensure that the plan will take account of the specific situation of Aboriginals living away from the communities and to promote joint action, according to an integrated territorial approach, of the eight Native Friendship Centres in Quebec as part of the effort to combat poverty and social exclusion.

Therefore, the Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec recommends, on the basis of its expertise in the search for sustainable solutions, its delivery of services and its positioning within Quebec's urban society, that the Quebec Native Friendship Centre Movement become a key stakeholder as part of the action plans of the Government of Quebec, to ensure that such action plans take account of the specific realities affecting urban Aboriginals.

The RCAAQ ensured that the entire series of commitments made at the FNSEF would be elaborated on the basis of the following strategic direction: **Improving the quality of life of urban Aboriginal people depends directly on efforts made to combat poverty and social exclusion.**



It was in keeping with this philosophy that the **RCAAQ brought forward 11 commitments** in the areas of health, social services, early childhood, education, economy, employment, infrastructures, sustainable community development and youth.

COMMITMENTS STEERED BY THE RCAAQ FIRST NATIONS SOCIO-ECONOMIC FORUM, OCTOBER 2006

- Build awareness of the specific situation affecting First Nations citizens who live away from their communities;
- Promote mutual understanding among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to combat prejudice and discrimination;
- Contribute to the mission of the Native Friendship Centres;
- Offer culturally-adapted psychosocial services;
- Encourage the start-up of enterprises based on the social economy that will support the social and economic development of the First Nations;
- Support the socio-occupational integration of young urban Aboriginals;
- Improve existing infrastructures to ensure the development of the Native Friendship Centre network in Quebec;
- Obtain the communities' support for the education of urban Aboriginal children and youths;
- Encourage the involvement of the Quebec Urban Youth Council in joint actions;
- Support the overall strategy for First Nations early childhood services,



- including access to funding for off-community childcare services;
- Fund the construction of a First Nations pavilion at the Val-d'Or campus of Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue.

Therefore, the Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec recommends that the commitments made at the First Nations Socio-Economic Forum be formalized and renewed by way of services agreements between the Native Friendship Centres and the various departments of the Government of Quebec.

We also recommend that support be given to the social economy initiatives developed by the Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec for purposes of diversifying Aboriginal economic development.

Further to establishing initiatives following the First Nations Socio-Economic Forum, the Quebec Native Friendship Centre Movement has been responsible for the development of a comprehensive series of services offered to more than 18,700 members, in such areas as housing, food services, psychosocial support, literacy, cultural promotion, development of community kitchens, and the launch of cultural awareness campaigns or demonstrations to combat racism and promote the richness of Aboriginal culture.

The RCAAQ has also mobilized more than 100 volunteers and provided stable jobs to more than 165 people in coordinating its homework assistance service in partnership with 27 Francophone and Anglophone schools, with 1,250 students receiving this service.

Our expertise is also seen in our numerous publications, including:

- Implementation of a Native Friendship Centre in Sept-Îles: Urban Aboriginal Clientele Needs Assessment and Profile
- Needs Assessment of the Aboriginal People in the Urban Setting of Montreal
- Portrait of Literacy within the Quebec Native Friendship Centre Movement
- Provincial Evaluation of the Needs for Psychosocial Services at the Quebec Native Friendship Centres
- Directory of HIV/AIDS Intervention, Detection and Support Organizations
- Brief concerning racism and discrimination
- Brief concerning sustainable development
- Brief concerning the *Youth Protection Act*
- Brief concerning the renewal of the Youth Action Strategy of the Quebec Government

But the strength of our Movement is based on our democratic governance which allows all Aboriginal people in the urban setting to express their needs and hopes, whatever their status, nation of origin or place of residence.

The RCAAQ stands for change and in that role is a major spokesperson for the Aboriginal desire to overcome the challenges of today. And it is through the expertise we have acquired to date that we are well positioned for identifying innovative solutions to the problem of urban Aboriginal homelessness.



IV. OTHER APPROACHES

a) Build on earlier accomplishments and develop promising initiatives together

It is also imperative to **promote joint action by all urban stakeholders** who seek to address the issue of homelessness: community organizations, governments, municipalities, health and social services, and so on. But actions directed towards combating Aboriginal homelessness **must take account of the cultural dimension**, which is the means for remedying the breakdown in the social bond. In this respect, the Native Friendship Centres can provide invaluable support because they are already devoting efforts towards restoring and strengthening the social bond. We cannot combat homelessness without restoring this bond and we need the close collaboration of our partners to do so.

Therefore, the Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec recommends that confirmation be given concerning renewal of the Homelessness Partnership Initiative, which ends March 31, 2009 and that its budgets be revised.

Combating homelessness requires concrete and adapted approaches. In this regard, a province-wide study is essential for purposes of identifying strategies adapted to the Aboriginal reality.

Therefore, we recommend that the Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec conduct a study to identify intervention strategies adapted to the Aboriginal reality, based on a holistic philosophy of Aboriginal empowerment as means of ensuring that efforts are carried out in complementary manner with partners from the Quebec network.

For example, the idea of promoting **public housing for Aboriginal people with community support takes on its entire meaning in this context**. We know that if Aboriginal people at risk of being homeless cannot benefit from housing conditions within their means, combined with support from genuinely warm and human contact which takes account of their situation, including the cultural aspect, they will only run a greater risk over the long term of falling into the trap of vagrancy and from there, homelessness. We must therefore seek solutions which in all cases are based on the cultural dimension. It is in this area where the RCAAQ can play an extremely important role.

Therefore, we recommend that the Government of Quebec encourage the development of public housing by increasing the number of housing units through the renewal of the Accès Logis program.



V. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRESS FROM AN ABORIGINAL PERSPECTIVE

The recommendations formulated by the Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtones to address the problem of homelessness are intended to reinforce our mission of advocating on behalf of the rights and interests of Aboriginal people in the urban setting and to support the Quebec Native Friendship Centre Movement in its actions to improve the quality of life of Aboriginal people. We call on the Quebec government for its support in implementing these recommendations.

Recommendations by the Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec:

- **Ensure that the Quebec Native Friendship Centre Movement is a key stakeholder as part of the action plans** of the Quebec government;
- By way of services agreements between the Native Friendship Centres and the different departments of the Government of Quebec, **formalize and renew the commitments made at the First Nations Socio-Economic Forum**;
- **Support the social economy initiatives** developed by the RCAAQ for purposes of diversifying Aboriginal economic development;
- **Confirm the renewal of the Homelessness Partnership Initiative** which ends on March 31, 2009 and review the budgets allocated for this program;
- **Conduct a study for identifying intervention strategies** adapted to the Aboriginal reality, based on a holistic philosophy of Aboriginal empowerment as means of ensuring that efforts are carried out in complementary manner with partners from the Quebec network;
- **Encourage the development of public housing** by increasing the number of housing units through the renewal of the Accès Logis program.



CONCLUSION

According to the needs assessment of urban Aboriginals in Montreal, **the vast majority of Aboriginal respondents considered that their main needs, apart from the basic needs of food, clothing and shelter, were to be able to develop a feeling of belonging to their community, to have a place where they could gather and interact with others, and to be able to count on a social network for support.** We see here more proof of the importance of the “social bond” and of the need to offer homeless Aboriginal people culturally-adapted services based on a holistic philosophy of empowerment, i.e., services that will allow them, little by little, to reconstruct this broken social bond that has thrust them into homelessness.

This is precisely what the Regroupement des centres d’amitié autochtones du Québec is seeking to accomplish through its mission to improve the quality of life of urban Aboriginal people and to develop effective, innovative strategies for combating poverty and social exclusion. Some Centres, such as the Native Friendship Centre of Montreal, have obviously been required to offer front-resources, as well as assistance and referral services for people who are going through the transition to urban life. We are also convinced that these Centres can do this work on the basis of a cultural approach, which would strengthen their actions significantly.

But we must stress once more; we require adequate resources that meet the needs which have been assessed. We must join forces with all other involved stakeholders. And all those involved must acknowledge the importance of this cultural dimension and the role it can play in rebuilding a genuine social bond.

Improving the quality of life of urban Aboriginal people depends squarely on efforts made to combat poverty and social exclusion. This is the condition that must be met if we are to effectively address the problem of Aboriginal homelessness, as has been well demonstrated by the extensive experience acquired by our Native Friendship Centres.



**Regroupement
des centres d’amitié
autochtones du Québec**



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