

# SHINING THE SPOTLIGHT

NATIVE WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF CANADA NEWSLETTER

NEW INITIATIVES • ISSUE 07 • FEB-MAR 2022



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

A Message from the CEO .....	5
NWAC brings attention to the serious issue of forced or coerced sterilization of Indigenous women .....	7
Removing barriers to equity through economic development programs .....	10
Reclaiming our place, power, and identity: A look back at 2021.....	11
IT apprenticeships.....	12
The impact of COVID-19 on virtual Elder-led supports.....	13
Wabanaki Resiliency Lodge holding mindful art workshops.....	14
Resources by the Dementia Team.....	15
The link between International Advocacy and Advancing Grassroot Priorities of PTMAs.....	16
Chelsea Resiliency Lodge: Building connections from coast to coast to coast.....	17
Shining a Spotlight: Environment Policy Team .....	18
New Policy and Research Unit for Resiliency Lodges.....	19
NWAC launches its Heritage Language Project.....	20

## A Message from the CEO

It is more important than ever that Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit, transgender, and gender-diverse people have their voices heard. Those voices will only grow stronger in the coming months.

### ENGAGING IN ADVOCACY

As NWAC continues to grow as an organization, so too does our commitment to advocate for more inclusiveness and respect. With the incredible help of our partners, we broadened our reach on the national stage and by taking action on our commitments, we were able to make a difference in 2021.

Looking ahead, NWAC will continue to advocate for a number of key actions. These actions include the full implementation of the Calls for Justice outlined by the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) in its Final Report and the Calls to Action outlined by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. They also include the establishment and growth of Indigenous-led healing programs, and the work we have been doing to end the economic marginalization of Indigenous women and girls.



### BUILDING RESILIENCY LODGES AND BUILDING PTMA CAPACITY

NWAC listens, supports, and advocates for the concerns and needs of Indigenous women, girls, and gender-diverse people at the grassroots level through our provincial and territorial member associations (PTMAs). Together, we collaborate by exchanging feedback and information at the board level on urgent policy issues and actions that must be taken to improve the lives of the people we represent and their families.

We will continue to support the PTMAs to deliver essential programming, and expand their capacity to meet the distinct needs of Indigenous women, girls, and gender-diverse people in their region. We will also work with our PTMA partners to expand - and build - resiliency lodges and healing programs across the country.

## DEVELOPING PARTNERSHIPS

NWAC continues to forge new relationships with compatible corporate partners. These relationships are crucial to helping us fill gaps in program funding, enabling us to provide more support to Indigenous women, girls, and gender-diverse people.

We are very pleased to continue our partnership with the Bank of Montreal (BMO) as we prepare to open our new Social, Cultural and Economic Innovation Centre to the public. The Centre, which is located in Gatineau, Quebec, will open this spring. It will house NWAC's new office space, feature Indigenous-designed meeting rooms, showcase cultural exhibits, and offer a café and an artisan boutique, along with meeting and training rooms.

Thank you, BMO, for your support in developing this critical space to support the resiliency of Indigenous women, girls, and gender-diverse people!

## NWAC TEAM

Despite the challenges the pandemic brought this past year, NWAC managed to expand its programs and services. In recent months, we welcomed a large number of new hires in all of our units to help with ongoing services and projects, and to tackle new work coming our way. At over 100 employees, we have reached a new milestone!

As we continue to grow, we will continue to support our staff through our flexible telework policy. And, as we are moving to Quebec, we are offering our staff French language training.

In this issue of Shining the Spotlight, hear more about our many projects and programs! From the Executive Policy team, hear about a CIHR-funded research project on Elder-led supports available during the pandemic. Also in this issue is an article on forced or coerced sterilizations based on research conducted by our Legal Team. We also feature an article on the connections between international advocacy and grassroots priorities from our International Department – and so much more .... We hope you enjoy reading this month's issue of Shining the Spotlight!

Miigwetch, Thank you, Merci,

Lynne Groulx

Special Opinion Piece

**NWAC brings attention to the serious issue of forced or coerced sterilization of Indigenous women**

By Leena Halees



Indigenous women traditionally held sacred and powerful positions in their communities as water carriers and life givers, commanding the highest level of honour and respect. Racism, sexism, and colonialism have disrupted this integrity for Indigenous women and gender-diverse people, including through forced and coerced sterilization, which is the practice of tubal ligation without free, informed, and prior consent.

Historically, in North America, forced and coerced sterilization resulted from colonization, assimilation, and the eugenics movement. Various eugenics policies allowed the government to determine which women were suitable to reproduce. Some forced and coerced sterilizations occurred without a guiding policy.

Based on eugenics beliefs and policies, sexual sterilization legislation was passed in Alberta (1928) and British Columbia (1933), which disproportionately, if not exclusively, targeted Indigenous women. Even though laws allowing for the sterilization of Indigenous women officially ended in Alberta and British Columbia in 1972 and 1973, respectively, and although they were the only two provinces to legislate this heinous practice, there is clear evidence that forced or coerced sterilization happened in other parts of Canada as well.

In her book *An Act of Genocide*, Karen Stote documents 580 sterilizations that took place in Indian hospitals between 1970 and 1975 across Canada. Records also indicate that, between 1966 and 1976, about 1,200 Indigenous women were sterilized and more than 70 sterilizations were performed on women in Nunavut. Data show that the Indigenous birth rate fell from 47 per 1,000 people in the 1960s to 28 per 1,000 people in 1980.

Some Indigenous women were led to believe the procedure (tubal ligation) was reversible or that they would still be able to have children in the future. Some have reported that child and family services threatened to take their children away if they did not consent to the procedure. In some cases where Indigenous women clearly denied consent, the procedure was nevertheless performed.

Before these acts were repealed in the 1970s, a eugenics board could order the sterilization of Indigenous women viewed as sexually promiscuous or “mentally defective” for fear of passing down “serious mental disease” or “mental deficiencies” to their children. In fact, the vast majority of Indigenous women (77%) in Alberta were sterilized during this time for being deemed unfit.

Surgeons who performed sterilizations believed they served the best interest of Indigenous Peoples, as a way of protecting Indigenous women from the burdens of larger families. The truth is this practice served as a means of population control, and a way to reduce costs associated with the implementation of necessary public health measures for Indigenous communities.

Population control policies have been enforced against Indigenous nations through various settler colonial policies and assimilation practices including, among others, the Indian Act, residential schools, and the Sixties Scoop. Forced or coerced sterilization is an invasive method of population control, which severs the ties between Indigenous women and future generations. By eliminating Indigenous women’s ability to procreate, it effectively reduces the number of those who can claim Indigenous identity, and consequently, the individual and collective rights of Indigenous Peoples, including the federal government’s obligation to them.

Forced or coerced sterilization undermines Indigenous women’s bodily autonomy and their agency to make choices affecting their personal lives. Indigenous women who have been forcibly or coerced into sterilization report several physical and emotional symptoms, including pain, hormonal imbalances, depression, anxiety, social isolation, loss of identity and self-worth, distrust in the health care system, and fear of authority. This puts Indigenous women at greater risk of preventable and treatable medical conditions, as many fail to seek medical attention in time.

There is also a plethora of evidence that forced or coerced sterilizations continue today. Between 2015 and 2019, more than 100 Indigenous women from Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, the Northwest Territories, Nova Scotia, Nunavut, Ontario, and Quebec reported being forced or coerced to undergo a sterilization procedure in Canada. There are currently several proposed class action lawsuits representing these women.

Forced or coerced sterilizations are not only serious violations of human rights, Charter rights, and reproductive rights of Indigenous women. According to the United Nations Commission against Torture, “sterilizing women without consent is a form of torture.” In addition, the Geneva Convention asserts that forced and coerced sterilization is a crime against humanity.

In partnership with Amnesty International, Action Canada, and Inter Pares, NWAC has been working to bring national attention to this serious issue and to advocate for immediate action by the Canadian government, the provinces, and medical authorities to bring an end to the forced and coerced sterilization of Indigenous women. NWAC has testified before the Senate and has issued statements supporting the victims before the United Nations and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, as well as to the Canadian federal government. NWAC's legal team is also currently preparing to file an application to intervene in a proposed class action lawsuit in Saskatchewan.

Disclaimer: This article may bring up difficult emotions or trauma for some readers. For support, please contact a member of NWAC's Resiliency Lodge Grandmothers Support Services.

ISSUE 7

**NWAC**  
Resiliency Lodge Support Services

If you need someone to talk to during these stressful times or to assist you in navigating your way to help, support is at the end of a phone line.

**Monday – Friday**  
9am to 12pm and 1pm to 4pm EST

**Roberta Oshkawbewisens**  
NWAC's National Grandmother  
TOLL FREE: 888-664-7808

**Esther Ward, B.Ed**  
TOLL FREE: 833-652-1381

**Isabelle Meawasige**  
TOLL FREE: 833-652-1328

NWAC's Resiliency Lodge Grandmothers Support Services  
Monday-Friday (9 am to 12 pm and 1 pm to 4 pm EST)  
All numbers are toll-free.

Roberta Oshkawbewisens  
888-664-7808

Esther Ward  
833-652-1381

Isabelle Meawasige  
833-652-1328



## Removing barriers to equity through economic development programs

As a leading national voice focused on enhancing, promoting, and advancing the social, economic, and cultural well-being of all Canadian Indigenous women, girls, and gender-diverse people, it's no surprise that NWAC's Economic Development Unit has been busy working on a multi-year project. Called Workplace Opportunities: Removing Barriers to Equity, this initiative supports federally regulated employers in their efforts to:

- improve the representation of Indigenous women, Two-Spirit, and gender-diverse people with disabilities
- increase understanding of the barriers they face in the workplace
- develop new inclusion tools and human resources for these employees



To date, NWAC, along with relevant like-minded industry partners, has organized several highly fruitful engagement sessions across the country with hundreds of Indigenous women, Two-Spirit, and gender-diverse people. The lived experiences and impactful accounts that were shared provide meaningful takeaways and will form the basis of our insightful and influential training material for federally regulated employers.



## Reclaiming our place, power, and identity: A look back at 2021

As we look back at 2021 and the unpredictability of the ongoing pandemic, there were many ways that NWAC quickly adapted—even thrived to fulfill its mission, goals, and objectives—despite the ongoing challenges.

We were vocal when it came to calling out the government for better strategies and support for specific Indigenous women, girls, and gender-diverse people, who faced increased isolation, were exposed to serious systemic, domestic, and conjugal violence, and had to deal with continued social, economic, and political marginalization.

NWAC released our own action plan in response to the MMIWG Calls for Justice. The plan included actionable items, for which we have already made significant progress. We worked hard to create a new Social and Economic Innovation Centre in Gatineau, Quebec, which opens this spring. The centre will act as a new workspace for employees and provide year-round programming for Indigenous women and gender-diverse people, including youth-specific education as well as cultural programming.



In *Reclaiming Our Place, Power and Identity 2020-2021 Annual Report*, NWAC outlined all of these accomplishments, and more. We had an incredible 2021—focused on critical advocacy, research, and service delivery.

Together, along with our partners, NWAC will continue to reclaim the place, power, and identity of Indigenous women and gender-diverse people across the country.

## IT apprenticeships

NWAC is currently finalizing a project to help Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) develop its IT Apprenticeships Program for Indigenous Peoples.



Through four webinar sessions and an online survey conducted in November 2021, we learned about the passion and interest that Indigenous women and gender-diverse people have for careers in IT. We also heard a variety of suggestions on how the program can be most effective for Indigenous women. These include a simple and accessible application process, stringent Indigenous identity requirements, micro-credentials, and valuing diverse experience.

ESDC is finalizing the design and content of the program based on feedback from NWAC and other Indigenous groups across Canada. ESDC expects to announce a launch date for the program in the coming weeks, with the first cohort of apprentices entering the program in the second half of 2022.

## The impact of COVID-19 on virtual Elder-led supports

NWAC developed the Resiliency Lodge in direct response to the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) Calls for Justice. The lodge offers Elder-led, land-based, holistic healing services. Programs include Elder-led support and ceremonies, navigation services, land-based activities, and agriculture and food-based programs, workshops, and training.

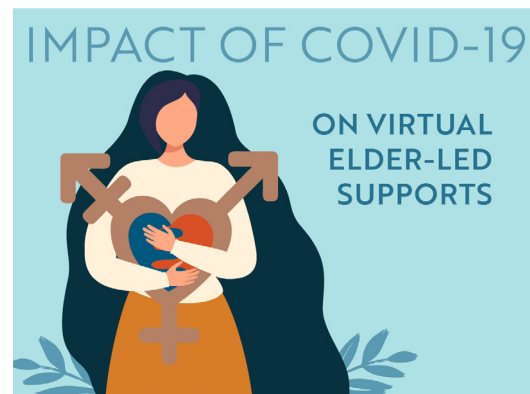
The advent of COVID-19 necessitated a new model, with the lodge offering virtual programming for its arts-based expressive workshops. Elder-led support and navigation services are also offered online.

Funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), NWAC's Executive Policy Team and Resiliency Lodge Policy and Research Unit are working on a research project that will:

- determine the impacts of COVID-19 on Elder-led support services
- examine how Elder-led services have adapted during COVID-19
- outline steps forward in developing, refining, and evaluating Elder-led support services

To this end, we hosted four sharing circles with NWAC's Elders, Resiliency Lodge staff, and Indigenous women, Two-Spirit, transgender, and gender-diverse people who have attended virtual Elder-led support services during the pandemic.

Preliminary research analysis is already showing quite clearly that Elder-led support services are essential—and yet many barriers to accessing support continue to exist. Over the next month and a half, our teams will continue to work diligently on this research project. We look forward to sharing research findings with you soon!



## Wabanaki Resiliency Lodge holding mindful art workshops

Indigenous women in Canada are significantly over-represented in the victim population of human trafficking. First Nations women and youth represent between 70% and 90% of the visible sex trade in areas where the Aboriginal population is less than 10% in Canada. Research has shown that art therapy and mindfulness therapy strengthen survivors' resiliency and sense of coherence as well as transform posttraumatic stress and surviving to posttraumatic growth and thriving.

The Wabanaki Resiliency Lodge has been hard at work on developing a series of mindful art workshops for Indigenous women and Two-Spirit survivors of human trafficking and sexual exploitation.



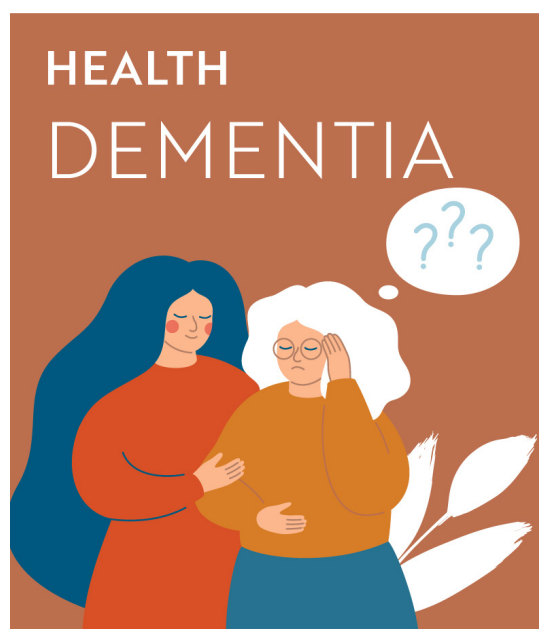
Marlena Robbins, a Diné (Navajo) woman from the Red Running Into Water People Clan who is committed to helping Indigenous women and gender-diverse people in their healing journey, will be facilitating the workshops. She obtained her master's in Indigenous rights and social justice from Arizona State University. Marlena's thesis, entitled "Art as a Spiritual Expression for Indigenous Wellbeing," focused on healing and the developmental principles and practices that may serve as paradigms for Indigenous communities to re-establish a

resilient connection to identity. This is the second series that Marlena is facilitating for the Native Women's Association of Canada.

Two advisory circle meetings, which will be held each year, will complement the workshop series. As well, a three-day in-person workshop will take place at one of the resiliency lodges in late 2022 or early 2023. We will also be creating an evaluation tool to ensure that our programming is culturally safe, sacred, and trauma-informed.

## Resources by the Dementia Team

The Dementia team has compiled a series of resources for Elders, families, caregivers, and health care providers. The goal of these resources is to reduce the stigma of dementia. The resources have been crafted into presentations and shared with participants during engagement sessions.



Resources include a toolkit for those living with dementia and their loved ones to learn about dementia and what to expect during its progression. Another toolkit is directed to health care providers to ensure that their practice is trauma-informed, culturally aware, and person-centred.

We have also created an Elder's booklet that can be personalized so that care providers have access to critical information to ensure that accurate, up-to-date care is provided.

The final resource provides key insights and guidance for health care providers or clinicians who may be providing care for Indigenous Elders in long-term care settings.

## The link between International Advocacy and Advancing Grassroot Priorities of PTMAs

Farrell Racette's 1990 painting "Ancestral Women Taking Back Their Dresses"

Provincial and territorial membership associations (PTMAs) are the backbone of NWAC. It is crucial that NWAC amplify regional grassroots voices. To achieve this goal, NWAC has an exciting opportunity.

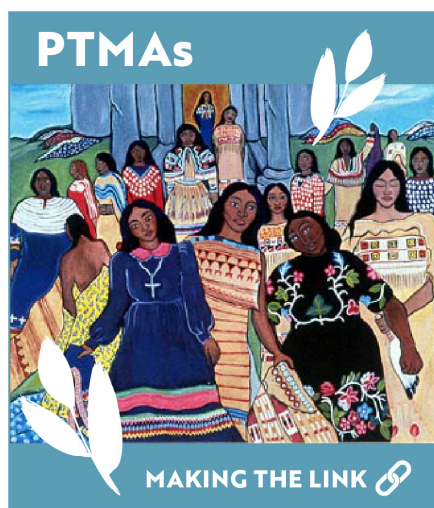
NWAC has been cordially invited to join Canada at the 66<sup>th</sup> Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). This begs the question: what is CSW?

A commission of the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) since June 21, 1946, CSW has been the principal global intergovernmental body exclusively dedicated to promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women. It is also plays a significant role in advancing women's rights while documenting the reality of women's lives throughout the world and influencing international standards on gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Practically speaking, CSW produces recommendations that take the form of negotiated agreed-upon conclusions on a priority theme. The outcomes and recommendations of each session are forwarded to ECOSOC for follow-up. CSW also contributes to the follow-up to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The priority theme of the 66<sup>th</sup> CSW is: "Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes". The theme reflects the ongoing work of the PTMAs. Therefore, this is an opportunity to advance priorities, connect with our sisters around the world, and influence global standards.

The CSW66 is fast approaching. It will take place from March 14 to 25, 2022. This is an exciting opportunity for you to get involved and amplify your voice on the international stage. If you are interested in participating and/or require further information, please do not hesitate to contact Lisa Smith at [lsmith@nwac.ca](mailto:lsmith@nwac.ca).





## Chelsea Resiliency Lodge: Building connections from coast to coast to coast

NWAC's virtual Resiliency Lodge programming emerged out of an immediate need during the COVID-19 pandemic. Offering this service moving forward will be critical, as Elder-led, trauma-informed programs enable Indigenous women and gender-diverse people to gather together safely and engage in Elder-led teachings and healings.

In January, NWAC offered participants the opportunity to learn new skills and express their artistic creativity through a number of workshops: Beaded Studs; Seal Skin Earrings; and Full Moon Teaching. All three workshops attracted many participants!

Given its success and positive impact across the country, we look forward to expanding our virtual programming to meet the demand. It is clear that these workshops are valued by Indigenous women across the country.

We hope to see you in our next workshops!





## Shining a Spotlight: Environment Policy Team

January 2022

### Environment team: Two national symposiums and three engagement sessions

The Environment Team has had a great start to the New Year! In addition to working on several multi-year environmental policy projects, the team is hard at work on a number of exciting new projects and partnerships. These projects grew out of two national symposiums the team held with experts and Knowledge Keepers before the winter break.

The first symposium focused on developing an Indigenous Knowledge Framework in relation to the Canadian Navigable Waters Act; the second on understanding Indigenous women and gender-diverse people's knowledge, perspectives, and concerns about the more technical aspects of the Act. With the knowledge shared during this second symposium, our team is now working on producing two high-level position papers, which will contain policy recommendations.

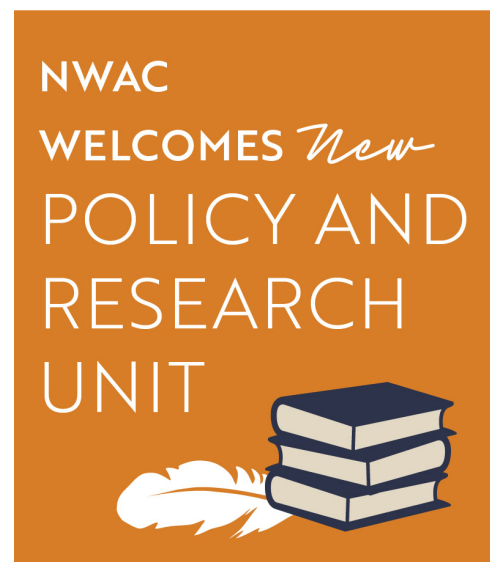
In January, the team held three engagement sessions with Indigenous women, gender-diverse, and Two-Spirit people to understand their knowledge, perspectives, and views on the Department of Fisheries and Oceans' Fish and Fish Habitat Protection Program (FFHP). As a part of the FFHP project, NWAC will also be making significant enhancements to our FFHP platform. Once completed, we will be able to share knowledge about the FFHP program with Indigenous women and gender-diverse people, as well as engage with them through surveys on all matters related to fish and fish habitats.



## New Policy and Research Unit for Resiliency Lodges

The beginning of the year has brought many changes here at NWAC, including the formation of a Resiliency Lodges Research and Policy Unit. The unit will specialize in areas that are unique to or significantly impact programs at the Resiliency Lodges. Some of these areas include:

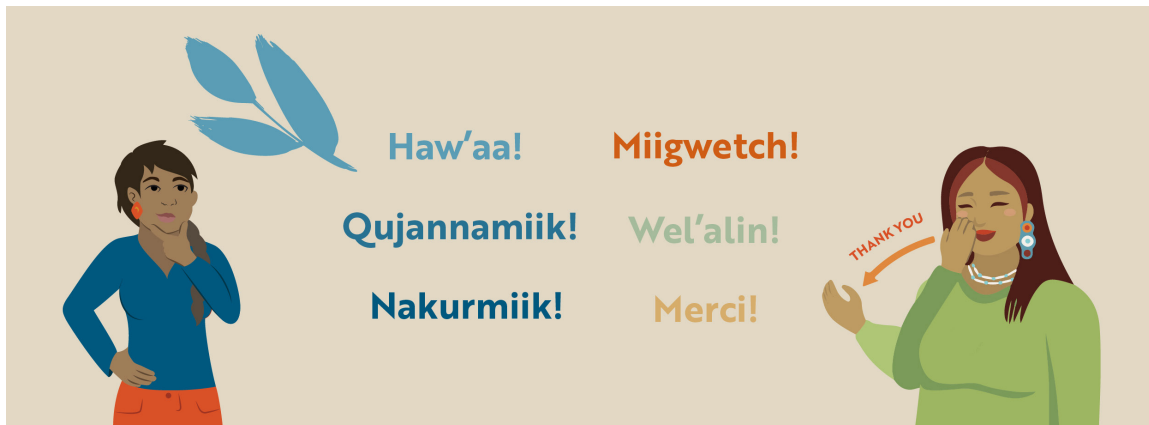
- programs and wellness supports for those affected by residential schools and federal Indian day schools
- programs and wellness supports for missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and gender-diverse people
- arts-based healing programs
- traditional medicine as a supportive element for healing
- Elder-led community support worker training and education programs



The eight staff members who make up the unit are looking forward to advancing the programs at the Resiliency Lodges and learning from the Elders, Elder helpers, and support persons who make these programs come to life!

## NWAC launches its Heritage Language Project

There are few fluent Indigenous language speakers, and as a result, Indigenous languages are becoming extinct. With funding and support from the Government of Canada, NWAC is launching its Heritage Language Project. The goal of this project is to provide task-based language learning (TBL) videos on YouTube that teach Indigenous languages to those who wish to learn or improve their knowledge.



NWAC has recruited First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Knowledge Keepers and Elders to lead the lessons, which will be offered at beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels. The TBL process provides online participants with an opportunity to learn a language after selecting a category of interest relevant to their personal lives, tradition, or region. The language teachers will teach key terms and phrases during their lesson.

The language being taught may include Indigenous linguistic variation (for example, Passamaquoddy contrasted with Wolastoqey), cultural expressions, and idioms relevant to Indigenous Peoples.

The language teachers will also share traditional knowledge about crafts, food, medicine, music, and tea.

A professional videographer will record each TBL lesson and add a closed caption, so viewers may understand Indigenous linguistic variation. The videos will be posted on YouTube this spring.

Participants may learn heritage languages at their own pace at any time or day. Providing an opportunity to share, learn and understand Indigenous language will contribute to elevating the importance of Indigenous languages.

The Heritage Project videos will also provide intergenerational opportunities to support Indigenous ontology. As such, NWAC is inviting participants to share what they learn with their family and friends.

