



The looking ahead project: A lesson in community engagement and positive change

Paul E. Pedersen*

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ABSTRACT

In response to the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls movement across the country, the Greater Sudbury Police Service initiated a community engagement approach to build a project with the goal of reducing violence against Indigenous women and girls. Recognizing a need for dedicated staff to lead this project, the Greater Sudbury Police Service and the N'Swakamok Native Friendship Centre partnered and made application to receive Federal Government Justice Canada Funds to hire a violence prevention coordinator. This individual, through a Memorandum of Understanding, would be employed by both the Friendship Centre and the police. The violence prevention coordinator teamed up with the police aboriginal liaison officer to bring the project to life. Resisting any sort of "top down" approach, Indigenous women, girls and agencies formed part of a working committee that was asked to answer a question about what can be done to work proactively and reactively to help reduce the possibility of violence at a local level. The project, which was focused on building spirit, on culture and ceremony, on listening to what people with lived experience felt would be helpful, was created and titled the *Looking Ahead to Build the Spirit of Our Women—Learning to Live Free From Violence* Project. The suite of achievements, accomplishments and activities is comprehensive and growing every day and includes a strategy document and the release of a missing persons toolkit. An outcome from this project is this example of how community engagement strategies, when properly applied, can yield success which would be impossible through any single agency approach.

Key Words Missing; murdered; indigenous women; girls; violence; spirit; culture; police; community engagement; missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls; MMIWG.

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A CALL TO ACTION

Police services everywhere continue to hear the calls to connect better with communities, to engage with people in a meaningful way, and to partner and collaborate with other agencies, service providers, interest groups, and individuals with lived-experience—all presumably with the intended benefit of building community safety and well-being. However, police services also hear these calls because the public expects to have a voice in setting priorities for and making public policy decisions about all public services, police services included. To that end, through the *Comprehensive Ontario Police Services Act* in Ontario, police service boards are required to prepare Strategic Plans to address the objectives, priorities, and core functions of the police service and to consult with a variety of community stakeholders to create that plan.

Consultation is mandatory, and the public expects to have a voice, yet meaningful citizen engagement continues to

present challenges for police services. This can be attributed to a host of reasons, not the least of which is an increasingly polarized public that continues to struggle with far left and far right approaches and ideologies to such complex issues as opioids and mental illness, and similarly polarized positions on Indigenous issues. Agreement and consensus are often elusive.

One such challenge facing not only police services but also the entire nation relates to missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG). A national inquiry resulted in a report with 231 recommendations; the Office of the Independent Police Review Director Report, *Broken Trust – Indigenous People and the Thunder Bay Police Service*, in Ontario resulted in 44 recommendations; and the Pickton Inquiry in British Columbia put forth 63 recommendations. All of these reviews speak to systemic failings which have led directly to the loss of lives. It seems almost trite to emphasize that protecting lives is inherently essential to building community safety and well-being, and if these aren't seen

Correspondence to: Paul E. Pedersen, Greater Sudbury Police Service, 190 Brady Street, Sudbury, ON P3E 1C7
E-mail: paul.pedersen@gspcs.ca ■ DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.35502/jcswb.101>

STRENGTHS

as calls to action for those in the business of safety, it is difficult to think of any greater call. The factors that have led to the current situation in this country are far too involved to address with any merit in this article; suffice it to say that colonialism and the 60s Scoop, laws and agreements, the lack of Nation-to-Nation relationships, power imbalance and a host of other inequities ranging from education, to income, to land, have all contributed to this narrative. It should also be acknowledged that the conditions behind this narrative have not impacted exclusively women and girls, but also Indigenous men and boys for generations.

Against this backdrop, it would be very easy to step aside and say this is too big, too complex, involves too many actors and agencies, involves too many tiers of government, too many nations, this is impossible to address, especially at a local level in a relatively small community. Yet in Sudbury, on the Robinson-Huron Treaty lands, people have come together and are bringing about change with a goal of reducing violence against Indigenous women and girls.

This paper will look at one specific project through the lens of citizen engagement, highlighting some work that is the direct result of listening to the voices of people outside of the policing community, informing shared objectives, priorities, and activities.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: WHAT WORKS?

Police services are public organizations, that much is obvious. It is incumbent upon the Greater Sudbury Police Service (GSPS), as a public organization, to work with and for the communities we serve. The challenge is that we serve many communities, and not exclusively geographic communities. There are also communities of interest, communities of religion, and communities of culture. One might argue that citizens align with those communities even more so than with their location-based neighbours. Police effectiveness is, in part, measured by public satisfaction based on the question of whether or not people believe their police service is meeting their needs. Community policing and the latest iterations of community mobilization and engagement models acknowledge that the police cannot deliver on expectations without help from the citizens it serves. The question of how best to engage the public in the business of public organizations can be answered by reviewing some of the literature on the subject, much of which informs us of not only what has worked, but also what has not worked.

Many past approaches to implementing solutions to problems facing our communities could have been described by the acronym “DAD”: Decide on a course of action; Announce the decision; Defend the decision from the ensuing protests. In reality, this approach is still widely used today. This inefficient system can be replaced by an approach described by the acronym “PEP”: Profile the community, together; Educate each other about the issues and alternatives; and Participate with the community for joint problem solving (*Consulting Citizens: A Resource Guide*, 2002).

How, then, do we implement effective citizen engagement techniques that actually improve the business of community safety and well-being? The research and literature on these subjects are deep and rich. Based on research, a number of guidelines have been developed, all with common themes,

which will ensure the legitimacy of the process used. Pierre Hamel (2002), studying the Montreal experience at the end of the 1980s, identifies a set of skills, methodologies, and procedures for public consultations that include the following:

1. The process of public consultation must be credible
2. The initiators of the public consultation must appear to be sincerely committed
3. The actors involved must show transparency
4. There must be follow up to the public consultation process so that the citizens feel that they contributed.

Katherine Graham (1998) lists what makes public participation effective as follows:

1. There must be a “contract” identifying the limits of the process
2. The timing is important. It must be undertaken before key decisions have already been made
3. The process must be community based. Identifying who is the community is important
4. The public participation process must be connected to the political process
5. The use of technology must include flexibility of methods and timing
6. It must be a mutual learning process.

The International Association for Public Participation lists the seven key principles to guide public participation:

1. The public should have a say
2. The process must include a promise that the contribution will influence decisions
3. The process must meet the needs of the participants
4. The process must involve those potentially affected
5. The process must define how to participate
6. The process must provide information to participants so that they can participate in a meaningful way
7. The process must communicate how the participants’ input affected the decisions. (*Consulting Citizens: A Resource Guide*, 2002)

While certainly up for debate, what comes through in a review of the literature about the elements which must be present to provide the best opportunity for effective citizen engagement are three recurring components: 1) A “contract” outlining the expectations, 2) Clear communication of information, and 3) Follow-up to the process (Pedersen, 2005).

LET OTHERS LEAD

In 2014, as the new Chief of Police with the Greater Sudbury Police Service and coming from over 30 years of policing in the Greater Toronto Area, I was, to be blunt, naive to many of the issues facing First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. I had never heard of Turtle Island, wasn’t clear on the purpose or benefits of smudging, and truly had no appreciation of the impacts of history previously described on Indigenous people and communities. I am still, candidly, very much on a learning journey. My education was founded in the colonial system, and the literature review referenced with respect to

citizen engagement came before I came to Sudbury and as such formed part of what I brought with me; however, this paper isn't about me. Perhaps the most I can take credit for is recognizing that there was much I didn't know and that I needed to listen to move forward. I knew that I didn't have answers, but I did know that we needed to engage with others.

I once learned a phrase that resonated well with me about a way to get answers and solutions from people about problems or issues that affected them: "We listened and gained a corner on the obvious" (Born, 2008).

What does it mean to listen and gain a corner on the obvious? Perhaps it means that for some in our communities, they hold the answers, the solutions for many of the problems, and it may even seem obvious to them. For those of us who are in the position and have the authority to develop and implement solutions, perhaps we need to listen more to what is obvious to others.

This, not coincidentally, is emphasized in the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls' *Final Report*, which says, "It is ... vitally important that we listen to Indigenous Women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people in addressing this pressing issue, as they are the experts and have the solution and important roles to play in ending this violence" (2019).

With that statement in mind, I will also take credit for asking one question. Hearing about the early steps of the National Inquiry, I asked one question of Constable Grant Dokis, a leader long before I came to Sudbury and the officer who held the position of Aboriginal Liaison Officer: "Is there anything we can or should be doing here about MMIWG?" Grant paused and replied that he thought things were pretty good in Sudbury: we had over 20 years of solid relationships with various Indigenous agencies, groups, and people; we had an Aboriginal Community and Police Advisory Committee; and we had an award-winning Aboriginal youth and police ride-a-long program. In his view, there was very little controversy in our community. One could argue there was no gap that needed to be addressed. Sudbury wasn't on the front page of any publications, we weren't under any directed reviews, and no one was ordering us to do anything. The National Review had yet to begin, so there were no recommendations to follow. Perhaps there was nothing that we needed to do specific to MMIWG.

Actress Ethel Barrymore is credited with saying that "the best time to make friends is before you need them," and we decided that perhaps this was the ideal time to reach out to people in the Indigenous community to hear what they had to say. We agreed that we could wait for several years for the recommendations of an inquiry or we could start to do more work today. We could wait for controversy or we could get out in front of the trends. With that, Grant paused again, deep in thought, and stated that he would connect with some Elders and gain some insight with respect to how to move forward and whether to move forward. He came back a little while later with the feedback from the Elders and indicated that we would be well received if we started to move forward with developing some sort of MMIWG Strategy, in full partnership with the Indigenous community.

What should be made clear is that, at this point, we had no idea what direction this would take, there were no pre-conceived objectives, no goals, no concrete plans or contracts.

We simply wanted to know whether there was anything that the police and the Indigenous community of women and girls could do together to strengthen community safety and well-being for Indigenous women and girls.

As a first step in the citizen engagement process, Constable Dokis arranged for a Town Hall-style meeting at the N'Swakamok Native Friendship Centre and invited any Indigenous community members to come forward with their thoughts on what could and should be done to improve safety. Constable Dokis, our Missing Persons Coordinator Constable Katherine Hucal, and I met with approximately 50 predominantly Indigenous women for a very positive interactive question-and-answer session.

The result was support to move forward with a working group/committee that included Indigenous community members to help build a strategy. That strategy would become a contract that outlined goals, objectives, and activities and had clear communication about intent and roles and responsibilities. The strategy could then be referenced for follow-up to ensure all were on course. In short, the strategy would be built with the principles of effective citizen engagement in mind.

A joint working committee was established consisting of members of the N'Swakamok Native Friendship Centre, the Greater Sudbury Police Service (GSPS) and Indigenous community members. As part of their commitment to ensuring the safety of Indigenous women and girls, the committee submitted a proposal for funding to Justice Canada that would provide for the recruitment of a paid civilian coordinator for a two-year period. This was an innovative and unique approach to staffing as the individual would have two employers, the police and the Friendship Centre. The idea of partnering an Indigenous social worker with an Indigenous police officer to co-ordinate a program intending to build strength and resiliency and reduce violence to Indigenous women and girls, even before the National Inquiry began its work, was unique, to our knowledge. We knew of no other Ontario police service that was partnered with a Native Friendship Centre to deliver community safety and well-being programs.

In April 2016, the Aboriginal Women Violence Prevention Coordinator (AWVPC) was selected and began work. She would work in partnership with the GSPS Aboriginal Liaison Officer, a social worker, and a police officer together in the same office. Essentially, this individual would have both the Greater Sudbury Police Service and the N'Swakamok Native Friendship Centre as employers. This meant that the project would be led by two Indigenous women, a recommendation that resonated throughout the National Inquiry Final Report. They began the engagement process by connecting at the grassroots level with Indigenous women and girls and with the leaders of Indigenous organizations seeking solutions to aimed at reducing or preventing further victimization.

BUILDING THE PROJECT

Through workshops and focus groups, the project came to life under the name *Looking Ahead to Build the Spirit of Our Women—Learning to Live Free from Violence*. For the first year, the AWVPC coordinated numerous learning and training opportunities for community members and professionals, including GSPS employees. The approach has been holistic and respectful of cultural values. Feedback from community members was

directly responsible for ensuring that the strategic pillars of the initiative were built from the Seven Grandfather teachings and that the Medicine Wheel guided the publication and was included in the document. Participants experienced sweat lodges, pipe ceremonies, Medicine Wheel teachings, creative writing, sharing circles, water walks, education on lateral violence and Indigenous culture training with George Couchie, a cultural trainer and educator.

This approach has had significant successes in the area of establishing and building respectful relationships and earning the Indigenous community's support of and participation in the project, which, in turn, lends authenticity to our grassroots approach. Meetings were held monthly, and a first-year anniversary celebration included numerous community partners from the Friendship Centre, Indigenous Health Centre, post-secondary educational establishments, and the families of MMIWG.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

At the end of year one, an official Strategy document was unveiled which includes a number of goals and actions. Each of these has been built with the feedback and support of community members and coordinated through the working group.

One of the goals that came from the community was to build a resource for family members of Indigenous women and girls to provide them with information on what to expect during a missing persons investigation by police. To that end, we are now in the process of having the MMIWG missing person toolkit approved by community partners and released publicly later this year. This toolkit puts information in the hands of family members whose loved ones are missing or have been murdered, including information about not only the resources available but what to expect from investigative processes, coroners' investigations, forensic reports, and court processes.

Two well-attended conferences have been hosted through the project, with hundreds of Indigenous community members, including families of people who have been murdered or are currently missing, in attendance. These conferences relied heavily on ceremony and healing while also bringing forward learning sessions from facilitators and keynote speakers including Tanya Talaga, author of the award-winning book *Seven Fallen Feathers*.

Learning included receiving more knowledge about culture, about survivor truths, about the impacts of colonization and the 60s scoop, about life before contact, and about lived experience after contact. The learning also included lessons specific to police about the importance of objective and non-judgmental investigations and about power imbalance.

The feedback from participants was overwhelmingly positive and included testimonials such as the following: "[The] violence prevention initiatives are felt by many in the community. By [targeting] culture as the main focus as well as understanding the roots of violence, many Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) community members are learning to love themselves and offer love unto others."

Two very significant additions to the police service came through this project. They are significant in that Indigenous communities have said that one step in building trust, and a trusting environment, between police and the community

is for the community to feel welcomed and see evidence of that inside the walls of the police station. One of these additions was to have a territorial acknowledgement displayed in the front lobby of the station. The journey to create this acknowledgement is a citizen engagement lesson in itself. Territory acknowledgements were gathered from various official offices within the area, the City's acknowledgement, opening remarks from a local Member of Parliament (MP) or Member of Provincial Parliament (MPP), and these were blended and then brought to Elders and to the Chief and Council of Atikameksheng Anishnawbek and Wahnapiitae First Nations for review. This process was slow and well thought out, involved many revisions and much discussion, and, when complete, the acknowledgement was translated into Ojibwe. From that, the words were engraved in stone and the stone was set in a carved woodwork stand and displayed at the very entrance of the front lobby of the police station.

The Greater Sudbury Police Service strives to build positive and respectful relationships with the original inhabitants of this land including First Nations peoples, Métis peoples and Inuit.

It is in this spirit that we, as a Service, honour and acknowledge that we serve in this land that is cared for from time immemorial by the Anishnawbek people of the Three Fires Confederacy.

We further acknowledge this land as "The Dish With One Spoon," and the Robinson-Huron Treaty region. ~ In peace, our first duty. 2017.

The other addition to the police service was the creation of a Sacred Medicine garden built on the staff lunchroom patio. A metal drum was purchased through the *Looking Ahead to Build the Spirit of Our Women—Learning to Live Free from Violence* project funds, and this would be the base for the garden. The Métis Nation of Ontario supplied paint and brushes for the project. Rocks were placed in the base with the soil on top. The rocks came from Atikameksheng. Community members offered sage, and a cedar tree was transplanted from Atikameksheng. Tobacco was offered to the Creator for the tree.

The garden was painted by local Indigenous high school students, high school support staff, the Aboriginal Community Police Advisory Committee, GSPS Officers, and the GSPS Summer Student with the Aboriginal Liaison Unit.

Tobacco was laid underneath the garden before we planted. In June 2019 shortly after the unveiling, we received our copy of the MMIWG Inquiry Report *Reclaiming Power and Place*, and with it we received strawberry seeds. The seeds were also planted in the garden.

The design of the planter is of the Medicine Wheel, with pictures related to the Medicine Wheel teachings, the Seven Grandfather teachings and our GSPS Rich Values. The unveiling included a ceremony and territory acknowledgement. It was windy and sunny, the right feeling for positive change.

Through the Project, both the Aboriginal Liaison Unit and the AWPVC have been involved in numerous speaking engagements. They have co-hosted drum "birthing" workshops for youth who have been in conflict with the law,

and they have printed a collection of poetry from women in the community entitled *I Am Not a Poet*, which has allowed women to express themselves in a unique medium. The Project participated in joint training initiatives with the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres focused on reducing incidents of abuse against Indigenous women. It has been part of the planning committees for local “Sisters in Spirit” awareness events for four years in a row, it has organized several sweat lodge and pipe ceremonies for women, and it took part in the Walking with Our Sisters Moccasin Vamp Art Commemoration Installation. The list of achievements, accomplishments, and activities is comprehensive and growing every day.

Overall, our successes have been rooted in the community, founded on listening and acting upon needs identified by community members, on having the AWPVC work with the Aboriginal Liaison Officer, a sworn member, and on conducting our work with a holistic approach.

CONCLUSIONS

This project was created without the benefit of any of the recommendations from the Inquiry or Inquests that have since been released. That being said, the achievements of this project have come to life through the principles of effective citizen engagement. In the first instance, a “contract” was created which saw the Friendship Centre and the Police make application for federal funding to hire a coordinator for the project. This application clearly set out roles, responsibilities, and expectations that ensured the voices of Indigenous women and girls would lead to outcomes. The engagement process ensured clear communication and education about the issues. This is where police did the listening, as Indigenous women and girls know the issues. Finally, follow-up continues in the form of a documented strategy that includes testimonials and a section on monitoring progress.

Recognition of community variation and plurality of community interests makes it even more important that the police become more sensitive to all group interests in the community they serve and devise flexible policies and programs which can meet and mediate community differences. (McKenna, 2000, 258)

This was achieved by resisting a top-down approach to problem solving. Instead of police saying that they know what survivors and families of victims need, this strategy was led by Indigenous women. It was created by listening to hear what is obvious to others, and by following the leadership of Indigenous women and girls. The work is ongoing and the outputs have been numerous. In some instances, individual support is being provided to victims of crime; in other instances, groups of women have come together

to express themselves through poetry. All of the efforts are focused on building spirit, spirit that existed but that all too often had been suppressed.

Longitudinal studies looking at the outcomes of the initiatives built through this project would help to clarify whether the lofty goals of increased freedom from violence have been achieved. Those outcomes should be compared with other communities without this work for increased validity. The project team is currently engaged with academic institutions to explore those possibilities.

What began as a quest for an answer to a rather simple question about what we can do in our area while national inquiries and inquests progress has yielded an impressive suite of activities that have brought people and communities closer. It has seen Indigenous communities and police staff work more closely together than ever before and it has yielded positive feedback at every stage. This work highlights the fact that there are people and there are entire communities who are willing to step forward, to mobilize and engage in the business of community safety and well-being when the principles of effective citizen engagement are practiced and when flexibility is put in the hands of those who often see the solutions as obvious.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

AUTHOR AFFILIATION

*Greater Sudbury Police Service, Sudbury, Ontario.

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