

# PROFILE OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

## Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre

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Brendan Reimer

“We all work together to help one another”

Ma Mawi, Canada's first and largest major urban native child and family support program, is a great example of a community taking charge of their own challenges and opportunities and empowering those who experience barriers to participation in society. They have reclaimed control over family and community support services available to Aboriginal people thereby ensuring that the services are culturally appropriate and serve to empower and build the capacity of individuals, families, and the broader community. In addition to improving these services, Ma Mawi employs 140 Aboriginal individuals who engage in a wide variety of community and family support initiatives.

### CONTEXT

Winnipeg, a city of approximately 700,000 on the Canadian Prairies, has seen a rapid growth in urban migration from rural and northern Aboriginal communities in the last few decades. By 1996, there were more than 52,000 Aboriginal people in Winnipeg, with 35% being under the age of 14.

The impact of centuries of colonization and disempowerment, including the living legacy of

the residential school system and child welfare interventions that saw non-Aboriginal people deliver services to the Aboriginal community in a way that broke apart families, communities, and cultures, clearly has contributed to the challenges for the Aboriginal community as they strive for individual, family, and community health and well-being. Although many in the Aboriginal community achieve considerable success in becoming great leaders and creating a healthy life in Winnipeg, Aboriginal people in the city continue to be over-represented in the areas of poverty (approximately 50% of Aboriginal children and youth live in poverty) and behaviours associated with poverty including incarceration, youth death rates and suicides.

However, as noted by John Loxley, economics professor at the University of Manitoba, “This is not a community given over to fatalism or one trapped, irrevocably, into some ‘culture of poverty.’ On the contrary, it is a community with an impressive depth of leadership, which has shown resolve and creativity in building institutions to serve the needs of Aboriginal people.”

### HISTORY

In the early 1980s, leaders in the Aboriginal community grew concerned about the number of

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### Winnipeg, Manitoba

**History**—Land of the Cree since time immemorial, first Scottish settlement in 1812, and incorporated as a city in 1873. Originally the transportation and economic “Gateway to the Prairies,” Winnipeg’s growth has slowed to 1.2% (Canadian average is 3.7%) and now sits as Canada’s 9th largest city.

**Economy**—One of the most diversified economies in Canada, low unemployment (at 5.1%, only Calgary and Edmonton are lower in Canada), strengths in manufacturing, finance, insurance, and research

**Social Need**—In the context of this case study, the rapid growth of the urban Aboriginal population (56,000 in 2001, 3.5 times what it was in 1981) present the Aboriginal community with both opportunities and challenges.

**Claim to Fame**—Home of the famous 1919 General Strike, a symbol of solidarity and advocacy among the working class. Another demonstration of people working together was seen during the 1997 “Flood of the Century.” Unfortunately, Winnipeg is also the site of the imprisonment and execution of Louis Riel, a Metis leader resisting colonization by the Euro-Canadians.

Aboriginal people in need of support services as well as the lack of Aboriginal people delivering those services. They saw that Aboriginal services delivered by Aboriginal people would be more effective at creating healthy individuals, families, and communities, providing culturally appropriate services, and would create employment opportunities for the Aboriginal community as well.

The Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre was created in 1984 as part of a much larger process of reclaiming control over the lives of urban Aboriginal people. Dilly Knol, chairperson of Ma Mawi’s Board, recalls that “back then, the excitement of providing services for and by Aboriginal people inspired us to dream big and to struggle against a system that demoralized our ability to meet our own needs.”

Ma Mawi has grown over the years and now has 6 different interactive sites including 3 private residential care sites and 3 open com-

### Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre

**Year Incorporated**—1984

**Activities**—Capacity building, support circles, training, community planning, respite homes and safe houses, cultural education and experiences, computer access and drop in centres, employment support, and much more.

**Impact**—140 jobs created, 500 volunteers mobilized, and more than 30 programs delivered

**Priorities**—Developing a database tracking system for all Ma Mawi activities involving staff, volunteers, and community people, and renewing the 5-year strategic plan through broad consultations and evaluation of the past 5 years.

munity care sites. Ma Mawi provides employment for 140 Aboriginal individuals and mobilizes the energy and skills of another 500 volunteers toward strengthening the capacity and leadership of Winnipeg’s Aboriginal community.

### ACTIVITIES

Ma Mawi provides culturally relevant prevention and support-based programs and services to the Aboriginal community. Essentially, they respond to any identified need and work with the community to create appropriate supports, which [is] why the range and number of activities is so large—even the listing of some of them below understates the breadth of their work. One can only imagine the diverse and multifaceted nature of the activities that occur on any given day, from providing bus tickets for those needing to attend an appointment or job interview, to offering shelter for those in crisis, facilitating support and learning circles, dreaming and planning with the community about their vision for the future, helping to write resumes and even attending interviews with people when asked to, or just hanging out with people and building relationships.

**Children in Care:** includes respite homes and services, a safe house for sexually exploited youth, an adolescent parenting residential learning centre and family group conferencing.

**Youth Services:** includes camp programs, cultural development, pow wow clubs, urban green teams, Aboriginal scouts, solvent abuse initiatives, traditional teachings and ceremonies, positive adolescent sexuality support, young fathers program, and mentorship programs.

**Child Development Centre:** a day care for 12-week to 24-month old children.

**Community Care Centres:** includes referrals, short term emergency services (such as food, bus tickets, etc.), community drop ins, in-home support services, parenting groups, volunteer programs, youth anger management, health lifestyle and healthy relationship programs, literacy, free internet access, capacity building workshops, and community employment projects.

**Community Training & Learning:** includes communications internships, team building and capacity building workshops, leadership training, PATH planning (Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope), mediation, Aboriginal culture, and retreats for women, men and couples.

**Spirit of Peace — Ending the Cycle of Violence:** Open and closed support services for groups of women, men, and children as well as individual support services.

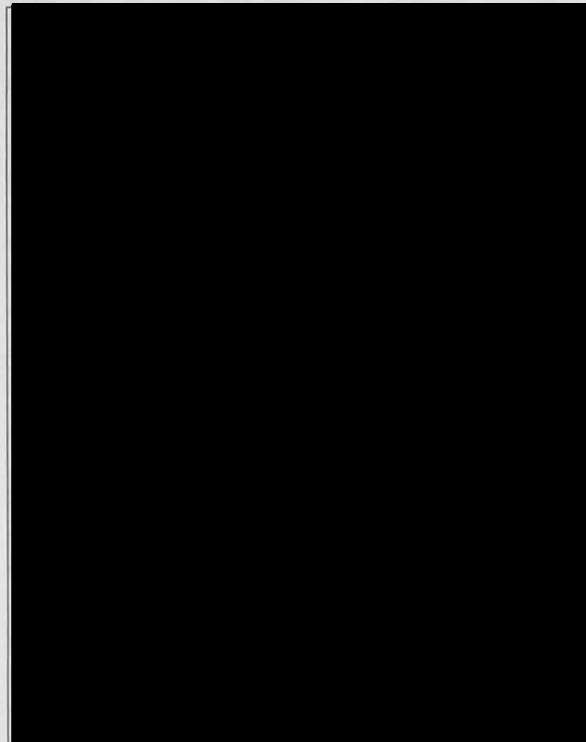
In addition to activities for all ages and nearly every facet of individual, family, and community health, Ma Mawi also builds on the existing resources and organizations in the community when developing these and other initiatives. For example, they joined with the North End Community Renewal Corporation (NECRC), Urban Circle Training Institute, Native Women's Transition Centre, Ndinawe Safe House, Andrews Street Family Centre, and the Community Education Development Association (CEDA) to lead an Aboriginal Visioning for the North End of Winnipeg consultation process.

## PARTICIPATORY AND COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS

While the range and integration of Ma Mawi's activities is impressive, what is much more profound is the approach that they take in what they do both in terms of their long-term vision and their everyday, person-to-person relationships. This approach is based on the medicine wheel and is guided by the values of reciprocity, respect, inclusion, learning, diversity, caring, independence, and leadership.

But things were not always this way at Ma Mawi. Although it was founded and located in the inner-city, for a long time Ma Mawi's offices were on Broadway Avenue, a hub of government and corporate services near Winnipeg's downtown. Not being located in the heart of the community meant that they were less integrated with the community and they were also not as participatory, services instead being delivered in a more case-worker/case-specific manner. Over time, they found that their services were being underused compared to the visible demand within the Aboriginal community.

So, beginning in 1997, Ma Mawi embarked on a thorough one-year consultation process with the Aboriginal community that included kids, youth, staff and board members, government representatives and people from other community-based organizations. The community told Ma Mawi that they needed to:



- become more connected and visible within the community;
- better understand and work directly within the community;
- work with community members to create a safe and loving place for children and families to grow; and
- model what they are doing through kindness and by valuing each other.

During the two years after this process, Ma Mawi responded by:

- committing to becoming a 'learning organization', where people continually expand their capacity to create the results that they desire, and continually learn together;
- moving from case-specific to community capacity building practices, including closing case files and developing programs and supports reflecting this new approach;
- physically relocating to neighbourhood sites;
- pulling all staff together to renew and affirm the credo that "we all work together to help one another"; and
- developing a 5-year strategic plan, with community direction, to put this new vision into action.

Through this process, Ma Mawi not only developed a vision for the community and an approach to social inclusion that was completely informed by the community, but did so through a participatory process that empowered and built solidarity and a feeling of inclusion in the Aboriginal community.

Ma Mawi's 5-year strategic plan is more a directional document than a list of specific actions and outcomes, but it is also an actual contract or covenant with the community. Diane Redsky, Ma Mawi's Director of Programs[,] explains, "We signed the document and so did the community through a representative. We asked how we could do things better, and decided that one way would be to make a contract with the people that mattered most." This instilled in the community a feeling of directional ownership and mutual responsibility and accountability.

In fact, their whole approach is now focused on participation, empowerment, and capacity building. Director of Communications Michelle

### Comprehensive Approach

- Focus on building healthy communities
- Facilitate greater involvement of the community through various economic and social opportunities
- Strengthen community capacity by transferring skills and opportunities to address those factors that affect the health of our community and its families
- Facilitate partnerships within neighbourhoods to ensure that support is focusing on community members helping each other
- Facilitate the development of the Aboriginal community through opportunities to learn from one another, collectively address local issues and build community capacity to support each other
- To work in close collaboration with the community to develop and maintain preventative services for Aboriginal children and families
- To use a community development and capacity building approach within neighbourhood-based sites
- Continue to maintain strong partnerships with private, public, and government stakeholders

Boivin makes it simple: "What we want to do is to empower the community so that they can take care of themselves (and) we do this through building relationships."

Ma Mawi translates this new approach into everyday action by ensuring that all activities are at all times guided by the four primary elements of their comprehensive vision: building capacity, being community-based, ensuring community involvement, and nurturing leadership.

**Capacity building** is about providing people with the opportunities to realize and share their gifts, increase their skills and knowledge, and building on strengths. Whenever the staff and volunteers at Ma Mawi interact with someone from the community, they try to draw out that person's interests and gifts and then look for

ways that this person can contribute those to the activities happening at Ma Mawi. This builds on that person's skills and gifts, greatly increases their confidence and their feeling of belonging, and continuously builds the "skill/gift pool" that makes up the Ma Mawi community. And, as Neighbourhood Site Manager Tammy Christensen explains, "Many of the community people have benefited from the services offered by Ma Mawi and they are very eager to give back, and so it is important for us to find a way for them to do this." Ma Mawi believes that the community has the capacity to deal with their own issues collectively and reclaim their community, this capacity just needs to be identified, used, and developed further.

*"You can't build the capacity well without actually being in the communities and building the relationships!"*

The ongoing learning happens in several ways and involves staff, board members, volunteers, [and] community members. For example, staff are encouraged to take on various roles from time to time to make sure that they are continuously learning more about Ma Mawi's various services and building on their skill sets. "Even the receptionist works in the day care once a week," says Redsky. "It is all possible if you focus on a strength-based approach."

The community learning and workshops are done at community centres which are set up as open, comfortable spaces that truly have a homey feel to them. The people at each site decide what it is that they want to learn about, and Ma Mawi then looks for people from the community to co-facilitate the workshop, usually pairing someone who is new to facilitation with someone who has some experience. This builds capacity in both the staff or volunteers and the participants through a peer-learning model. It is not uncommon now, given this approach, to see individuals progress from participating in the activities at Ma Mawi, to volunteering, and then becoming staff—moving into greater positions of leadership as they grow in capacity.

**Being community-based** means two things to Ma Mawi. Firstly, it means actually being located in the neighbourhoods where the people you support are living. And not just in one spot, but six

different sites, to provide maximum accessibility, visibility and community integration, increasing opportunities to build the relationships that are so important. Redsky says that when Ma Mawi was downtown, "the use of services was low, but participation exploded when we physically moved into the community."

But being community-based is more than just about location, it is also about the approach. The emphasis has shifted from offices and appointments to community involvement and building good relationships. Being community based is about approaching the community as a "helper" rather than a "fixer," a partner rather than a provider. Christensen says, "Now it doesn't feel like a business, it feels like a family. It's their place." Ma Mawi's contract with the community demonstrates how seriously they take their accountability to the community as partners.

**Community involvement** is demonstrated by more than just their new locations. Ma Mawi is very actively involved in the community and the community is actively involved in Ma Mawi. "While each of our sites' functional areas include emergency services, group workshops, community involvement, and individual support, the community is always involved in deciding, designing, and delivering each of these," says Redsky. One way they do this is through PATH planning, a tool in which the community comes together to envision what they want their community to be like, where it is now, and then plan incremental actions to make their vision a reality. Each community site has their PATH posted prominently in the open space, and again, this process builds a feeling of ownership and inclusion in the community. People gain confidence when they see their ideas taking shape; they dream of even more and want to get more involved. Whether it is the young women at the residential care site or the residents around the community care centre, "We no longer identify programs for the community—they tell us what they want," explains Redsky.

*"Community involvement to us is inclusion versus exclusion; the community is the expert and the benefit is huge if you empower them."*

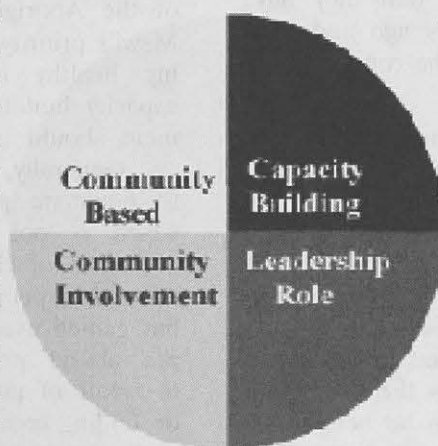
**Leadership development** builds on capacity building and community involvement. This includes co-facilitation opportunities and participation in workshops and support circles as well as a wide range of other activities including outreach and advocacy. "When we go to things like United Way consultations, we will take community members with us so that they can share their story and get involved. We will also support individuals who want to take the lead on various political and community issues. Leadership is an action word to us — 90% of our staff have come through various capacity building and leadership initiatives to the point where they have become employees at Ma Mawi."

*"Leadership is an action word. Again, the people in the community are the experts, we are the helpers and facilitators, driven by the community."*

These four strategies are completely integrated in all Ma Mawi's activities. Each of the six sites offers the whole range of activities and programs and focuses on capacity building, community involvement, and leadership development at all times. Although funders often like to see clear delineation of activities and outcomes, this is not the reality of people's lives.

**Conceptual Framework**

- Opportunity to access services
  - Grounded in community
    - In neighbourhoods
    - Closer to families
      - Accountability
      - Commitment
      - Partnerships
      - Visibility
  - Inclusion vs. exclusion
  - Supporting involvement
- Stronger voice for community
- Community input, design, and delivery
  - Community ownership & responsibility
- Expanding the community resource base
  - Creating opportunities



- Provide opportunity to realize & share gifts
- Value partnerships with community
- Community capacity for self-care
- Increase skills & knowledge
- Building on strengths
- Shift in practice
- Leadership in action
- Foster leadership opportunities
- Changing how 'the system' delivers to families and communities

**OUTCOMES AND EVALUATION**

One of the challenges of the new approach at Ma Mawi is the measurement of their impact. Instead of counting the number of case files opened and closed, dynamics that were not as easily quantifiable now needed to be evaluated: individual and community capacity built, strong relationships nurtured and leadership developed. What Ma Mawi now uses is a blended approach of three different types of evaluative processes that include the traditional project-specific outputs, their contract with the community, and a new database tracking system that is in development.

**Project-specific evaluation:** Clear evaluation criteria, indicators, and deliverables are part of each funded initiative and vary according the nature of the program and the expectations of the funders. Outcome measurements might include the number of youth hired for summer clean-up or greening projects, young mothers housed in the learning residence, attendees at parenting support circles, and other similar indicators. As well, Ma Mawi also tries to track other measurable outcomes that tell the before and after story of the individual's participation in areas such as running away from their homes, a parent's explosive episodes, gang involvement, employment, school attendance, and volunteerism.

Ma Mawi also evaluates each initiative (as well as their overall organization) on the impact it has on the community. This includes the service provided, the personal impact on individuals and their families, skill development, wages paid to those in the Aboriginal community, the level of community involvement that occurred, and much more. All of these goals are set by Ma Mawi staff and volunteers, the participants and their families, and by the community at large. In order to collect this data, they analyze their own information as well as conduct formal and informal surveys with program participants and the people around those participants (family, teachers, partners, etc.).

**Contract with the community:** Every year, Ma Mawi revisits their contract with the community and evaluates, together with people from the community, how well they are keeping to their end of the covenant. Are they integrated and involved in the community, are they building the capacity of the Aboriginal community, are they nurturing Aboriginal leadership, are they facilitating participation in and ownership of the direction-setting and activities of Ma Mawi, are they building on people's strengths and providing opportunities for people to use their gifts, and more generally, how have the health and well-being indicators for Aboriginal families in Winnipeg changed? Now at the end of the first 5-year contract, Ma Mawi is now in the process of renewing the contract with the community via an in-depth consultation process similar to the first one five years ago. They are asking the community to evaluate them on how well they have achieved the goals set five years ago and what Ma Mawi needs to focus on in the coming years.

**New Database:** A unique evaluation tool that Ma Mawi is currently developing is a database designed to capture how people are moving through the organization, what services they are utilizing, and any feedback (formally or simply in conversation) they provide regarding their interaction with the organization. This will allow Ma Mawi to evaluate which programs and services are used most and least, and how the use differs by neighbourhood. They will also be better able to track capacity building by recording the individual's resulting engagement in the organization[,] including whether they continue to use the

services and programs at Ma Mawi, become volunteers, workshop facilitators, staff, and/or board members among roles. In terms of empowering individuals and building their capacity and leadership, this electronic tool will help tell the success stories of Ma Mawi in more than just anecdotal ways.

### UNIQUE SUCCESS FACTORS, POLICIES AND LESSONS

Ma Mawi has really benefited from influential organizations such as the United Way of Winnipeg standing in support of Ma Mawi priorities. Redsky states, "When they start to voice our concerns, people start to pay attention!" As an Aboriginal organization, Ma Mawi has also greatly benefited from the times that governments and foundations have prioritized Aboriginal funding and partnerships as this naturally makes it easier for Ma Mawi to access resources. For example, half of all new monies raised by the United Way of Winnipeg campaign will go toward Aboriginal initiatives. Other examples of Aboriginal-focused initiatives include the Winnipeg Partnership Agreement and the Urban Aboriginal Strategy.

However, Ma Mawi does feel that not enough recognition is given to their youth leadership development outcomes by policy and funding decision makers. Redsky says, "We are making such a difference, but we could do so much more." Given that many of the Aboriginal people in Winnipeg are youth—the future of the Aboriginal community in Winnipeg, Ma Mawi's priority and effective practice of developing healthy individuals and families through capacity building and youth leadership development should be well supported.

Generally, though, Ma Mawi has been able to negotiate policy issues to their satisfaction, which is not surprising given their founding objectives of changing family service delivery for Aboriginal people and the respect that Ma Mawi has gained over the years. Redsky explains, "We are always proactive about everything we do in terms of policy, either getting changes made or finding creative solutions. For example, Child welfare's foster home licensing policies were unhelpful to Aboriginal families, but we started discussions with the province and Child and

Family Services and were able to come to an agreement on how to license Aboriginal foster homes.”

## LESSONS LEARNED

- The process and approach are part of the outcomes. It is not about service delivery; it is about building capacity, relationships, and leadership on an individual, family, and community level.
- By using an integrated approach to provide the same core functions at each site, all services are accessible to anyone who walks through any of their doors, making service delivery much more efficient, particularly for the community.
- Being located in the community and designed like homes rather than offices makes services more accessible and makes community members much more comfortable coming there.
- Using a strength-based approach is critical, providing an asset for the community to build on and identifying opportunities for people to contribute and build confidence.
- Approaching the community in the role of a helper who supports, promotes, models, and involves the community creates a feeling of mutual responsibility, accountability, and ownership between Ma Mawi and the community. Having the community decide the activities and approach Ma Mawi takes means that the activities will be more appropriate/effective and the empowered community is more likely to participate in delivering the activities and achieving the goals.
- By reclaiming responsibility for support services to Aboriginal individuals, families, and communities (in unison with their focus on building capacity, skills, and leadership), Ma Mawi has made a significant economic impact in the community by creating 140 jobs and training people from the Aboriginal community for those positions.