

VOICES | JULY 2022

Talking Stick is an anonymous chat platform that connects First Nations individuals to culture-based peer support and confidential conversations.

Highlights from this edition:

- Talking Stick was launched on May 30, a free chat app available to every First Nations person in Saskatchewan.
- The program has created more than 200 new jobs for First Nations people in the province. Talking Stick has attracted a diverse roster of Peer Advocates who are trained to listen. The workforce behind Talking Stick includes Youth, Adults, Elders, as well as members of the 2SLGBTQ+ and Veteran communities.
- Community Spotlight: Indigenous youth urges others not to stay stuck in the past.



TALKING STICK: PRESERVING LANGUAGE, COMMUNITY, AND CULTURE—ONE CONVERSATION AT A TIME

The Saskatchewan-led “By First Nations, for First Nations” initiative came together with a simple yet powerful belief: Every Voice Matters. For far too long, the voices of First Nations people have been ignored. It’s time to create safe spaces to listen, one conversation at a time. From idea to execution, Talking Stick was rolled out on budget and ahead of schedule, officially launching on May 30, 2022.

In the weeks since Talking Stick’s launch, a grassroots, on-the-ground effort has been underway to reach every community across the province. The response has been phenomenal. People are using Talking Stick. Day and night, First Nations individuals from all regions of the province—North, East, South, West, and Central—are turning to Talking Stick to access confidential support from community-based Peers. Anonymous guests can choose to connect with someone from their own community or from anywhere across the province. For those using the app for the first time, their reaction is the same: this anonymity is crucial.

The program has received positive early feedback from those using the service themselves, to engage in confidential conversations. Here’s what our anonymous guests are saying about their experience:



“Amazing support and advice. Thank you!”
-Anonymous guest



“Thank you for listening to me”
-Anonymous guest



“Very honest. I felt very comfortable”
-Anonymous guest

This first-of-its-kind launch is supported by a trained network of First Nations Peer Advocates, each having a personal connection to why they wanted to be part of this program. Peer Advocates must be residents of Saskatchewan and First Nations. The diverse roster includes individuals includes Youth, Adults, and Elders, as well as members of the 2SLGBTQ+ and Veteran communities.

Here are some of the reasons Talking Stick’s Peer Advocates love the program:

“I have battled against mental illnesses, so I know how hard it can be.”
- Peer Advocate from Whitecap Dakota First Nation

“I want to help. I have lived on-reserve and off-reserve so I understand the difficulties and frustrations of our people.”
- Peer Advocate from Lac La Ronge

“I know how it feels to not have anyone to talk to or to not trust anyone. I can help people feel comfortable because it is confidential and anonymous!”
- Peer Advocate from Beardy’s & Okemasis Cree Nation

The communities we serve believe that Talking Stick will have widespread economic and social benefits in the near and long term. From mental health support to creating jobs for First Nations, Talking Stick is helping build foundational business skills while preserving and revitalizing language, community, and culture. And we’re just getting started.

The program will continue to recruit and hire Peer Advocates over the coming months.

Because every voice matters.

CASTIEL'S STORY: MOVING FORWARD BY NOT STAYING STUCK IN THE PAST

SEVEN GENERATIONS OF HEALING

It's been a long journey for Castiel McKay, and he's still in high school. At 17 years old, he's endured far too much suffering already. Castiel seeks no sympathy, only understanding and the opportunity to listen to others who may feel exactly as he did as an early teen.

Castiel and his family are from Waterhen Reserve, a Cree First Nation in northwestern Saskatchewan. Both his grandparents attended residential schools, making Castiel a third-generation survivor. Today, his cousin, a graduate student in archaeology at the University of Saskatchewan, has been part of the efforts to search for unmarked graves using ground penetrating radar technology. His family cannot escape the trauma and pain, knowing that this damage can take as many as seven generations to heal.

While he speaks fondly of his grandmother, aunt, and other family members, he knew he had to distance himself from his community to break the cycle. Now, Castiel lives in a group home in Saskatoon. He feels sad to see the majority of people in the group home are like him. Indigenous youth, who have been neglected and ignored. While the group home itself has been a positive experience overall, it can also be very lonely. Castiel chose to move away and commit to educating himself.



TRAUMA INSPIRES IDENTITY

By observing his own family story, Castiel is in constant pursuit of education and healing, and wants to teach his own children about their history. He believes the only way to move forward is by not staying stuck in the past.

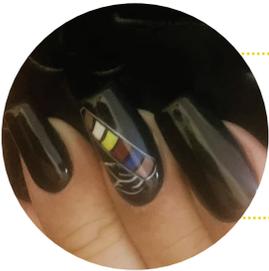
"I want to show people that I'm okay. I'm pursuing an education because I know I can make a difference."

His grandparents always taught him that schooling is the one thing they can't take away from you. Entering his final year of high-school, Castiel is looking forward to college.

HEALING BY HELPING OTHERS

Castiel wanted to help other Indigenous Youth, but he didn't know how. Then, he saw the job posting to get involved with Talking Stick and he knew he wanted to be part of it. Castiel loves helping people and knew he had to get involved. Why? Because he believes everyone deserves a voice, no matter who – especially people who have been silenced for way too long. He understands feeling like his voice was not heard, feeling like he had no one to turn to. Now, Castiel is a trained Peer Advocate with Talking Stick and says this program makes him feel hopeful, appreciative, and grateful.

He's determined to shatter colonial norms and break negative stereotypes by choosing to use his voice as well as encourage others to raise theirs.



Cecile McKay, Assistant Provincial Director for Talking Stick demonstrates her passion by getting the program logo imprinted on her nails.



Need to chat? You Talk. We Listen.

- **First Nations Peer Advocates are available now.**
- **Always Anonymous.**
- **Confidential. Safe. Secure.**
- **1 on 1 private conversations.**



Download our free app:
Talking Stick-Indigenous



Or go to our website:
my.talkingstick.app

Thank you to our partners

Talking Stick was created in partnership with Saskatchewan's Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations (FSIN), Indigenous Services Canada (ISC), and TryCycle Data Systems.

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