

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

## Highlights from this edition

- Celebrating Indigenous Women Leaders
- FSIN Wellness Conference
- Big Vision at Big River First Nation

## Celebrating Indigenous Women Leaders

On March 3, Saskatoon played host to the annual Indigenous Women’s Empowerment Summit, an event that celebrates the strength, leadership and resilience of Indigenous women. The summit featured six Indigenous women, who shared their stories of strength and resilience with the delegates.

The Talking Stick team attended, setting up an information table to welcome attendees and answer questions. The team was very pleased and excited to sponsor attendance at the event for two Talking Stick Peer Advocates, who were able to learn from the presentations, while also providing first-hand stories and answer questions about their work experience with Talking Stick.

Thanks to Charlene and Cecile for their leadership and for being amazing ambassadors for Talking Stick, and to Peer Advocates and Regional Managers for their participation!



Talking Stick Team, left to right: Christy, Nadine, Cecile, Charlene, Shyanne, Leigh



Reggie Leach took the time to drop by the Talking Stick booth to connect with Leigh and Charlene!

## FSIN Wellness Conference: Focus on Access to Care

Over 550 people came together at the FSIN’s very successful Wellness Conference, in Saskatoon on March 21-23. The topics were wide-ranging, but focused on alcohol and drug use, with a particular emphasis on methamphetamine and opioid use.

One of the conference’s keynote speakers was retired NHL star, Reggie Leach, who was the first Indigenous player to reach “superstar” status in the league. He shared his own experiences with substance use, and recovery.

The Wellness Conference provided another opportunity for Talking Stick to be present and for the team to make connections with participants from Nations across the province.

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# PROACTIVE Teamwork and Big Vision at Big River First Nation

Big River First Nation (BRFN) is a community of 2,900 members that lies a couple of hours north of Saskatoon. It is rural and isolated from mainstream services, which for Indigenous communities is often regarded as a barrier to good health, recreation, employment, and education. For Big River, it was seen as an opportunity. A chance for the members of the Nation to challenge conventional thinking and imagine something better; and to be innovative!

While I was not counting, during our 30-minute interview, Michelle Dreaver-Bill, Economic Development Officer at BRFN said “proactive” at least half a dozen times. She spoke of the importance that the community leadership has placed on the need to anticipate and to plan for what may be coming down the pike in the community.

Michelle shared some areas where the team at BRFN has successfully built infrastructure to address the impact of the social determinants of health on her community. The Nation determined that the solutions to common problems being faced by Indigenous people lie “upstream” and the keys are prevention and proactive programming. She was also very clear that everything accomplished has been the result of the contributions of many members of the community, all dedicated to positive change.

Its geographic isolation means that BRFN has had to figure out how to address health challenges on its own. Through strategic infrastructure investments and a willingness to embrace technology, significant gains have been made in addressing HIV and Hepatitis C infections, as well as mental health and substance use.

When HIV and Hepatitis C were invading BRFN, the need to address these afflictions was driven by a desire to stop the spread before it became unmanageable. Through a structured response that included education, treatment, counselling, and harm reduction, the BRFN health team was able to dramatically reduce transmission rates and ensure quick access to treatment, when required. The program received international recognition, and its success led ISC to fund a project that allowed the Nation to establish a facility to allow for the approach to be developed further and shared with other Nations.



The Big River First Nation Health Services Team.

Like many other Nations, mental health and substance use are top-of-mind for health services providers. In 2020, the BRFN health team turned to technology to augment their behavioural health services, and began to use TetherAll, an interactive app that allows care teams to remain in connection with their clients at all times. It uses a “digital compassionate tether” between the client and the provider and provides data in real time that can assist in preventing crises and relapses.

There are 7 practitioners on the health team trained in the use of TetherAll, and they are working to bring training in-house. The health team pressed for and was encouraged by the efforts made to translate the platform into Cree, to make it more inclusive and culturally safe.

**“The team appreciated that the app was translated into the Cree language,” says Michelle. “It shows that there is an understanding of how it will be used by clients and how to make the biggest impact.”**

A report from November 2022 indicated that since TetherAll was introduced, there have been over 130 clients enrolled, and the data collected resulted in 575 interventions being initiated by the care team. The implementation has been so successful that BRFN is in the process of establishing a Centre of Excellence for mental health and substance use treatment, using technology and traditional methods to achieve recovery.

Education is a cornerstone of success. Investments made in school and recreation infrastructure on the Nation to offer its children and youth access to the best facilities and programs possible, including land-based cultural learning.

Improvements to the Nation’s high school have created a learning environment that has not only increased enrolment but has also triggered an increase in graduation rates. The school’s focus on trades has realized two important outcomes: first, it has given graduates the skills necessary to move directly into employment; and second, given the many infrastructure projects, graduates have been able to get work on the Nation, meaning that they do not have to leave home to get jobs.

To promote healthy lifestyles, the Nation made the decision to attach its new Jim Neilson Arena directly to the school! The arena is a multipurpose facility that can seat 1,500 people in the stands and offers community space, as well as an indoor soccer field with artificial turf.

Vision, innovation, dedication, and perseverance, without compromising culture and tradition have driven Big River First Nation’s success in overcoming many obstacles.

A team of true community builders, with vision and determination has contributed to the remarkable successes achieved at Big River First Nation that promote health and wellness now and will endure for generations to come.

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## 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**

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## 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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