



REGROUPEMENT
DES CENTRES D'AMITIÉ
AUTOCHTONES DU QUÉBEC

POSITION PAPER

Closing persistent gaps: Ensuring investment
in health, justice and education for
Indigenous people in urban settings

Position paper tabled during pre-budget consultations, 2026–2027

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SUMMARY OF REQUESTS

Health

Request 1: That the Government provide stable, long-term funding to Native Friendship Centres, in recognition of their role as pillars of health and social services for Indigenous people in urban settings, and that it provide them with the resources required to sustainably implement an urban Indigenous governance model and a culturally safe service delivery model.

Request 2: That the Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux (MSSS) revise the structure of its regulatory framework so that fund management is entrusted to the RCAAQ.

Request 3: That the MSSS increase the funding for Indigenous health and wellness services to the amount of \$14 million per year (\$72 million for 2025–2030).

Justice

Request 4: That the Ministère de la Justice commit to funding the delivery of continuous justice-related services for Indigenous victims in urban settings.

Request 5: That the Ministère de la Justice provide funding of \$2.4 million for 2026–2027 (\$7.35 million for 2026–2029).

Education

Request 6: That the Ministère de l'Éducation commit to long-term funding for the Education Strategy of the Native Friendship Centre Movement, in order to improve academic success among Indigenous students in urban settings.

Request 7: That the Ministère de l'Éducation provide funding of \$2.45 million for 2026–2027 (\$7.35 million for 2026–2029).

The Native Friendship Centre Movement

The Quebec Native Friendship Centre Movement constitutes the largest urban service network for Indigenous people. Its core mission is to drive a broad social transformation, led by and for Indigenous communities in urban settings, to support their social, community, economic and cultural development. The Movement is made up of affiliated Native Friendship Centres, the Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec (RCAAQ), the Société immobilière du Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec (SIRCAAQ) and the RCAAQ early childcare centre (CPE).

The Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec

Since 1976, the Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec (RCAAQ) has served as the provincial association of Native Friendship Centres. It has been advocating for the rights and interests of First Nations and Inuit in Quebec's cities, while actively supporting member Native Friendship Centres. The RCAAQ is a key partner for public authorities on urban Indigenous issues and a central player for ensuring equity in service delivery to Indigenous people in cities. By supporting and contributing to the development of concrete solutions and public policies, the RCAAQ strives to better document the presence, needs and realities of urban Indigenous people through consultations, research and evaluations.

The RCAAQ supports each Centre and service point in their daily operations and interactions with local partners while affording them the freedom to operate according to their unique local needs.

Community living environments

The RCAAQ founded the Société immobilière du Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtones (SIRCAAQ) in 2019, beginning its project to make housing more accessible to Indigenous people living in cities. The SIRCAAQ is responsible for developing residential living environments specifically designed to support Indigenous students (First Nations and Inuit) living in urban areas. These environments offer far more than housing; they are true community spaces that are safe, culturally relevant and thoughtfully designed to foster academic success, family wellness and cultural anchoring.

Each living environment takes a respectful long-term approach to addressing the social and cultural realities of First Nations members and Inuit in urban areas. This innovative model allows Indigenous people pursuing postsecondary studies to live and learn alongside their families. For many individuals coming from remote communities, such opportunities are difficult to find in urban areas and play a critical role in academic success.

The following living environments are operational or under development in several Quebec cities:

- Nutshimit in Sept-Îles (2023): 32 housing units
- Waska Witcihitowin in Trois-Rivières (2023): 42 housing units
- Yahndawa' in Québec City (planned opening in 2026): 94 housing units
- Living environment in Chibougamau (planned opening in 2026): 16 housing units
- Living environment in Loretteville for Elders and families (planned opening in 2026 or 2027): 30 housing units

In 2024, the RCAAQ established an early childcare centre (the RCAAQ's CPE), an initiative designed to support Indigenous families in urban settings. The RCAAQ's CPE carries out an educational, social, community and cultural mission that places the child and their family at the heart of a caring environment rooted in Indigenous cultures. This new institution also plays a strategic role in the development of future facilities, meeting the needs of Indigenous families in the long term and helping them to thrive in Quebec's cities.

The Native Friendship Centres

In Quebec, 11 Native Friendship Centres and three community service points operate under the RCAAQ banner in 14 cities, where nearly one third of the province's urban Indigenous population resides. Rooted in the communities they serve, these organizations carry out social, community and civic mandates and welcome Indigenous people of all genders and all ages. Committed to a culturally safe and relevant approach, the Centres offer a range of integrated

and interconnected services, making them crucial hubs for frontline services. They play a pivotal role in enhancing the quality of life for urban Indigenous residents, promoting Indigenous cultures and bridging gaps between different peoples.

Data on urban Indigenous realities

In Quebec, the Indigenous population displays sociodemographic characteristics distinct from those of the general population: individuals are younger on average, families are often larger, and the population is significantly more mobile than the non-Indigenous population (Lévesque et al., 2019; RCAAQ, 2018; Gagnon et al., 2023). Mobility between communities and urban centres among Indigenous people is both high and incredibly diverse. It is estimated that more than half of First Nations members and Inuit live in urban settings (Statistics Canada, 2018 and 2021). However, research has shown that the Indigenous presence in Quebec's cities extends well beyond the number of people officially residing there (Gagnon et al., 2023). Many Indigenous people in urban settings experience housing instability, are temporarily present or are living in cities for specific periods for various reasons, including, among other circumstances, access to health care, education, fleeing situations of violence and involvement with the justice system (Lévesque, 2016; RCAAQ, 2024).

In recent years, numerous studies, commissions and inquiries have examined the health status of Indigenous people in urban settings and their relationship with public health and social services. These analyses converge on several clear findings:

- In Quebec, as elsewhere in Canada, significant barriers continue to limit Indigenous people's access to public services (CERP, 2019; Kamel, 2021; RCAAQ, 2018).
- The health inequities experienced by the First Nations and Inuit are linked to the harmful impacts of colonialism and its ongoing intergenerational effects, which continue to affect Indigenous people's health, ways of life and overall well-being at the individual, family and community levels (Browne, 2021; CERP, 2019; TRC, 2015).
- In urban settings, the health inequities observed between Indigenous people and the rest of the population are equally present and, in some cases, exacerbated (CERP, 2019; RCAAQ, 2018, 2022 and 2023).
- Despite urgent needs, services available in urban settings are often poorly known and underused by Indigenous people (CERP, 2019; RCAAQ, 2018).
- Services offered to Indigenous people in urban environments are often misaligned with their realities, specific needs and cultures (CERP, 2019; RCAAQ, 2018).
- Health and social services within Quebec's public system that are available in urban settings are unable to provide Indigenous people with the urgent support they require, resulting in serious consequences that could, and should, be avoided (CERP, 2019; Kamel, 2021).

Moreover, a survey conducted by the RCAAQ in 2025¹ among 2,003 First Nations and Inuit respondents confirmed that Indigenous people living in urban settings face multiple, cumulative life challenges (RCAAQ, 2025):

- 27% of respondents have been in the Quebec justice system as a defendant or an offender.
- 22% of respondents who have had dealings with the Quebec justice system have been detained in a correctional facility.
- 62% of respondents reported they had experienced racism or discrimination at some point in their lives.
- 62% of Indigenous respondents reported encountering barriers to educational success, including loss of connection to culture and lack of support.
- Fear of racism remains the primary reason preventing Indigenous respondents from seeking services.

The majority of First Nations and Inuit members (64.1%) live permanently in urban areas, and this proportion continues to grow (Gagnon et al., 2023). This increasing urbanization over recent years reflects both individual and family choices as well as socioeconomic dynamics that bring more Indigenous people to study, work and establish roots in urban

¹ The data were collected from a sample of 2,003 Indigenous respondents surveyed between July 2024 and February 2025. The full methodology and results will be published soon. The results presented here have been weighted and may vary slightly.

centres. The accumulation of calls to action and deeply troubling, high-profile events have raised public awareness of the issue. Consequently, a growing number of key players are rallying around the idea that the status quo of strained relations between Indigenous people and public services in Quebec is unsustainable.

The demographic context must be taken into account in the organization and delivery of services, as well as in housing policies for Indigenous people in Quebec. The Indigenous population is young, increasingly urban and growing at a faster rate than the non-Indigenous population. These demographic and migratory trends highlight the need to adapt services, infrastructure and living environments while developing local and community-based strategies that respond to the specific needs of First Nations people and Inuit. They also underline the importance of ensuring access to services that are culturally appropriate and respectful of their realities.

A challenging socioeconomic context

The current challenging economic climate, and the growing needs that result from it, is increasing pressure on Indigenous people and further widening the socioeconomic gaps between the Indigenous population and the population of Quebec as a whole. Increased investment is required to support frontline services, combat poverty and improve access to affordable housing, a key social determinant of health. In this context, investing in the services delivered by Native Friendship Centres is even more crucial. These Centres provide daily support to vulnerable individuals seeking improved overall wellness. Funding cuts by various levels of government have significantly impacted budgets, programs and services, placing additional strain on non-profit organizations. As the socioeconomic context intensifies vulnerabilities and the needs of Indigenous people living in urban settings continue to grow steadily, the Native Friendship Centre Movement is delivering essential programs that require stable, predictable and long-term funding to ensure their continuity and impact.

Our requests

Renewal of health funding

First Nations people and Inuit living permanently or temporarily in urban settings must be able to access equitable health care in an environment that is respectful of their cultural, linguistic and social realities. Yet significant obstacles persist, including socioeconomic insecurity, language barriers, cultural shock and social isolation, limited understanding of Indigenous realities, values and worldviews, as well as the misalignment of approaches and intervention methods in the healthcare system.

Moreover, the historical mistrust of Indigenous populations toward the State, and more specifically toward the health and social services system, is well documented. It is precisely in response to this situation that the Quebec government adopted the *Act to establish the cultural safety approach within the health and social services network*, making Quebec the first province or territory in Canada to establish such a legislative framework. However, recent findings by the Québec Ombudsman confirm that significant gaps remain in the implementation of this legislation and of the calls to action of the Viens Commission. In its situation report published in 2025, the Québec Ombudsman notably highlights that the absence of a coherent government-wide strategy on cultural safety, combined with a lack of dedicated funding, undermines key gains and even risks, leading to setbacks in services for First Nations people and Inuit (2025).

In this context, the Quebec Native Friendship Centre Movement is an essential partner of the Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux (MSSS) and its network in achieving its objectives, not only to improve access to culturally safe health and social services in urban settings but also to enhance the quality, complementarity and continuity of services across organizations. It is well established that the active participation of First Nations members and Inuit in the governance and delivery of health care contributes to reducing persistent health inequities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations (RCAAQ, 2023). Native Friendship Centres have long operated within a community-based management model, enabling agile and responsive action that remains closely aligned with the needs of the populations they serve, in collaboration with multidisciplinary teams and through the exercise of community-based Indigenous governance (RCAAQ, 2023).

The development of Indigenous health and wellness services within the Quebec Native Friendship Centre Movement

has had a significant impact on Indigenous people's access to services in urban settings. The Indigenous health clinics operated by Native Friendship Centres have demonstrated both their effectiveness and relevance. They represent a concrete, human and culturally safe response to urgent and growing needs, and are the result of years of work, collective efforts and a partnership with the Quebec government.

Every day, each Indigenous health clinic within the Native Friendship Centres conducts up to 36 health interventions, enabling as many as 47 individuals to access essential, culturally safe services tailored to their realities (RCAAQ, 2024). In 2024, more than 2,500 Indigenous people received care at the eight Indigenous health clinics currently operating in Quebec. This figure has more than doubled since 2021, following the allocation of funding by the MSSS, clearly demonstrating the direct impact of this investment on service accessibility and the expansion of services delivered through Native Friendship Centres (RCAAQ, 2024).

Beyond their local impact, these initiatives are part of a foundational long-term vision: the creation of a provincial network of Indigenous clinics, supported by an active coalition of partners, shared practices and increased recognition of these models of care by government authorities. Such recognition—of the RCAAQ and Native Friendship Centres as focal partners in the management of health and social services in urban settings—would allow this model to be firmly embedded in institutional practices, rather than treated as a secondary consideration. These clinics are not limited to the delivery of medical services alone. They lie at the heart of a comprehensive and integrated service offering, working in complementarity with the social, cultural and community services of Native Friendship Centres, and fully embodying the holistic approach inherent to Indigenous conceptions of health. In a context where the Indigenous population in cities continues to grow and health needs are becoming increasingly acute, demand for these services continues to rise.

In direct response to Call to Action No. 97 of the Viens Commission—which calls for recurring and long-term funding for services inspired by the Indigenous health clinic model of the Val-d'Or Indigenous Friendship Centre, developed in urban settings for Indigenous people—it is essential to maintain and strengthen the funding currently in place. Such long-term funding is indispensable to consolidate gains, respond effectively to evolving needs and ensure equitable access to culturally safe care for Indigenous people living in urban settings.

The RCAAQ therefore calls for the following:

- 1. That the Government provide stable, long-term funding to Native Friendship Centres, in recognition of their role as pillars of health and social services for Indigenous people in urban settings, and that it provide them with the resources required to sustainably implement an urban Indigenous governance model and a culturally safe service delivery model;**
- 2. That the MSSS review the structure of its regulatory framework so that fund management is entrusted to the RCAAQ;**
- 3. That the MSSS increase the funding for Indigenous health and wellness services to the amount of \$14 million per year (\$72 million for 2025–2030).**

Renewal of justice funding

For more than four years, Native Friendship Centres have received funding from the Quebec Ministère de la Justice (MJQ) to develop justice support and accompaniment services. This funding aims to improve access to justice for Indigenous people, promote Indigenous community-based justice approaches and help reduce the over-representation of First Nations members and Inuit within the justice system. Indigenous people involved with the justice system in urban settings often have complex life trajectories and significant needs across multiple areas, making it essential to provide tailored support before, during and after involvement with the justice system. This need is even more pronounced in urban environments, where “the high rates of victimization and criminalization among Indigenous people are disturbing and are significantly different from the non-Indigenous population” (RCAAQ, 2018, p. 27).

The initiatives developed and consolidated within Native Friendship Centres over recent years clearly demonstrate their relevance and indispensable contribution. It is essential to recognize not only the Centres' expertise but also their leadership in the development and implementation of adapted services. The \$5.2 million in funding provided by the

Ministère de la Justice since 2021 has generated significant impacts and played a central role in the evolution of a transversal and integrated justice service offering. This funding has also enabled the development of preventive services, contributed to reducing mistrust toward the justice system and strengthened organizational capacity and justice-related expertise in Native Friendship Centres.

Concretely, a range of programs and services have been developed to respond to the specific realities of Indigenous people living in urban settings, including legal clinics, alternative measures programs, justice accompaniment, community interventions and respite and land-based healing accommodations. Although public services do exist, they often remain difficult to access due to systemic barriers and the inadequacy of prevailing intervention approaches (RCAAQ, 2024). The services offered by Native Friendship Centres therefore do not duplicate the public system; rather, they address persistent gaps and operate in partnership, providing culturally relevant and culturally safe interventions. The approaches used by many organizations within the public network do not always align with the needs, cultural realities and life trajectories of Indigenous people, which limits their reach and effectiveness. In contrast, Native Friendship Centres adopt integrated and holistic interventions that consider not only the individual but also their family, their support network and future generations. This comprehensive approach helps prevent involvement with the justice system, reduce recidivism and break cycles of vulnerability experienced by many Indigenous families.

In this context, maintaining and strengthening justice-related funding is essential to ensure the continuity of adapted, effective and transformative services for Indigenous people in urban areas. An adequate and stable renewal of funding would have a positive effect across the entire service network, including the 11 Native Friendship Centres, the three service points and the Indigenous community living environments—two currently in operation and three under development—that directly benefit from this provincial coordination and these essential levers for action.

The RCAAQ therefore calls for the following:

4. That the Ministère de la Justice commit to funding the ongoing delivery of justice services at levels that meet actual needs, in order to prevent any disruption to essential services for Indigenous people involved with the justice system and Indigenous victims in urban settings;
5. That the Ministère de la Justice provide funding of \$2.4 million for 2026–2027 (totalling \$7.35 million for 2026–2029).

Renewal of education funding

Native Friendship Centres play an essential role in the educational success of Indigenous students in urban settings. Given their expertise and holistic, culturally safe approach, they are best positioned to respond to the growing needs of urban Indigenous families through effective, coordinated actions aligned with ministerial priorities. For nearly 10 years, the RCAAQ and Native Friendship Centres have received financial support from the Ministère de l'Éducation to provide services complementary to those of the public system, thereby promoting educational success and school retention for Indigenous students in cities.

The Quebec government's support for the Native Friendship Centre Movement demonstrates a clear commitment to renewing and deepening its engagement to support the well-being of urban Indigenous populations. It also recognizes the essential role played by Native Friendship Centres in supporting Indigenous individuals, families and communities, particularly in the areas of education and school retention.

This support directly responds to the calls to action set out in the report of the *Public Inquiry Commission on Relations Between Indigenous Peoples and Certain Public Services in Québec: Listening, Reconciliation and Progress*. More specifically, Call to Action No. 11 urges the Government to prioritize the implementation of measures supporting school retention and educational success for Indigenous children and students, allocating the necessary resources while relying on needs defined by Indigenous people themselves, in a manner that respects their traditions. This recommendation is also consistent with the *Government Action Plan for the Social and Cultural Wellness of the First Nations and Inuit 2022–2027*, particularly Measure 3.1, which aims to support initiatives that promote school retention and educational success for Indigenous students. The actions developed and implemented by the Quebec Native Friendship Centre Movement are fully aligned with this approach, offering adapted, culturally safe interventions

grounded in urban realities. Furthermore, the implementation of the Quebec Native Friendship Centre Movement's Education Strategy contributes directly and significantly to achieving the targets associated with the objectives of the Ministère de l'Éducation's *Strategic Plan 2023–2027*, in particular the objective of increasing student success. Through its comprehensive, community-based and culturally relevant approach, this strategy aligns with ministerial priorities while addressing the specific needs of Indigenous students in urban settings.

In cities, Indigenous people are often in a cultural and linguistic minority and may also experience heightened isolation due to distance from their family and community networks. This context increases the vulnerability and marginalization of many Indigenous people, particularly children, young parents and students. Over the past several years, there has been a sustained increase in the number of individuals and families turning to Native Friendship Centres to access services in culturally safe community spaces free from racism and discrimination. Educational issues are particularly concerning: nearly one third of Indigenous students in urban settings are behind academically when entering secondary school (RCAAQ, 2022).

The RCAAQ and Native Friendship Centres also provide community-based services within the living environments developed by SIRCAAQ, which accommodate residents with diverse and complex backgrounds, sometimes faced with personal, family or social challenges. This diversity, combined with the coexistence of single individuals, families, single mothers and students, creates a complex social dynamic that requires structured support tailored to each resident's needs. Government support is therefore a key lever to ensure the continuity and delivery of proven initiatives that respond both to ministerial priorities and the real needs of urban Indigenous students.

The RCAAQ therefore calls for the following:

6. That the Ministère de l'Éducation commit to long-term funding for the Education Strategy of the Native Friendship Centre Movement, in order to improve academic success among Indigenous students in urban settings;
7. That the Ministère de l'Éducation provide funding of \$2.45 million for 2026–2027 (\$7.35 million for 2026–2029).

Conclusion

Indigenous people in urban settings continue to face systemic inequities that limit their access to essential services and opportunities for development. While they play a central role and possess recognized expertise, Native Friendship Centres still lack all the levers necessary to meet the growing needs of their members.

The upcoming budget represents a critical opportunity to close these persistent gaps, while generating lasting economic benefits for Quebec society as a whole. Without significant financial support, these inequalities are likely to widen further, undermining efforts to build a more just and inclusive society. By strengthening its partnership with Native Friendship Centres and strategically investing in health, justice and education, the Government not only supports Indigenous self-determination but also stimulates economic growth, promotes job creation and enhances the attractiveness and vitality of urban communities.

Supporting the requests outlined in this position paper is an investment in the foundations of long-term progress. The Native Friendship Centre Movement should be recognized both as a key actor in the wellness of urban Indigenous populations and as a driver of economic development capable of generating tangible, lasting benefits for all of Quebec.

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