



Association of
Ontario **Midwives**
Delivering what matters.

**Giinwi Gaashi
Maamwiziying
Ndaadzikeying**

*How We Used to Be:
One Who Assists in
Giving Life Together*

INDIGENOUS MIDWIFERY GATHERING

December 2020

**Increasing Awareness
and Supporting
Indigenous Midwifery
Learning Ecosystems:**

An Indigenous Midwifery
Action Plan



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Gathering the Circle

Recognition of the value of Indigenous midwifery has been emerging more broadly in recent history. Indigenous midwives have had ways of knowing and understanding about birth since time before time. To bring birth home is an inherent right that ensures that new life is welcomed safely into this world as a vital part of Indigenous family life, community life and nationhood. Bringing birth home provides balance to community. Hearing the cries of a newborn baby, birthed on the land, brings a sense of belonging and creates an interest in reproductive health and justice in community members.

In February 2019, over 120 Indigenous midwives, partners and stakeholders gathered for the [*Indigenous Midwifery Summit*](#) at Fort William First Nation within the Robinson-Superior Treaty territory. From that meeting, recommendations were made regarding the growth, sustainability and development of Indigenous midwifery programs and services for Indigenous communities.

Several recommendations were made, most notable in terms of priority:

- **Recommendation 1: Strengthen Public Education about Indigenous midwifery; and**
- **Recommendation 2: Increase Indigenous Midwifery Education Opportunities.**



In response to those recommendations, Indigenous midwives, birth workers, health and education leaders and advocates of the movement to “bring birth home” gathered on March 6 & 7, 2020, on the traditional lands of Fort William First Nation. The event was given a name in Anishinaabemowin, *Giinwi Gaashi Maamwiziying Ndaadzikeying*, meaning, “*How We Used to Be: One Who Assists in Giving Life Together.*” The name is significant in that it describes the work of midwives and how they work together with the parent to bring forth new life.

Over the course of two days, participants engaged in a series of guided dialogue sessions. Members of the gathering had the opportunity to share knowledge that ultimately provided the key components of the following *Increasing Awareness and Supporting Indigenous Midwifery Learning Ecosystems: An Indigenous Midwifery Action Plan.*

Shown in the photo:

On the Left: Suzanne Fitzpatrick

On the Right: Darlene Curci

// Nationhood begins at Birth

Marla Monague

*Policy Analyst, Indigenous Midwifery
Beausoleil First Nation*

The purpose of the gathering was threefold:

1. **To discuss ways to bring Indigenous midwifery education to community and support learning pathways;**
2. **To amplify public awareness surrounding Indigenous midwifery;**
3. **To determine the foundational requirements to bring birth home.**

The Proposed Action Plan

The Association of Ontario Midwives team will work in partnership with Indigenous midwives, Provincial Territorial organizations, the National Aboriginal Council of Midwives, health and education partners and Indigenous communities. The themes will be education and public awareness, with these four priority areas:

1. **Supporting Indigenous Midwifery Learning Ecosystems;**
2. **Advocating for Indigenous Midwifery Infrastructure, Funding and Systemic Change;**
3. **Strengthening the Indigenous Midwife, Birth Worker and Student Circle; and**
4. **Expanding Public Awareness of Indigenous Midwifery and Birth Work Through Networks and Communications.**

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Indigenous peoples want to administer and deliver the reproductive health services in their communities, including the education of student midwives.

Indigenous Midwifery Summit

PRIORITY 1

Supporting Indigenous Midwifery Learning Ecosystems



Traditionally, children would have attended the birth. There was a natural laddering process, where elders would see the gifts of children and were able to identify which ones would be good birth workers.

Gathering Participant

A main focus of discussion during the gathering was on supporting Indigenous midwifery education. It was suggested that “education” may bring up preconceived ideas, usually related to institutions, grades, timelines and textbooks, when the focus should be on creating an accessible learning environment.

Supporting Indigenous midwives through their learning journey means that students have the skills and confidence to provide high quality care beyond the classroom. Clinical skills are only one aspect of this learning journey, which should also include learning ceremonies and protocols, and developing the emotional intelligence to relate to clients who may be living with intergenerational trauma and the impact of that trauma on their current situation.

There are several institutions that either offer midwifery programs or could be approached as partners in offering an Indigenous midwifery program. These institutions are natural partners to engage in a dialogue regarding opportunities to provide Indigenous midwifery programs. It is important to keep in mind that culturally aligned programs may require a paradigm shift in curriculum development to ensure that the learning ecosystem is congruent with Indigenous worldviews.

Supporting an Indigenous Midwifery Learning Ecosystem means:

1. Learning programs have Indigenous knowledge, ceremony, language and worldview as their foundation.
2. Prioritizing community-based learning.
3. Recognizing the learning journey of each student Indigenous midwife is a unique process.
4. Whenever possible, Indigenous midwifery students should be trained and mentored by Indigenous midwives. To this end, Non-Indigenous registered midwives must support Indigenous midwifery students as best they can so the cohort of Indigenous midwives grows. Non-Indigenous midwives who train Indigenous midwifery students must demonstrate knowledge in cultural safety.

In the Indigenous midwifery summit report under recommendation 2 “*Increase Midwifery Education Opportunities*”, it was stated that optimal training of Indigenous students should be by Indigenous midwives as it used to be, prior to the medicalization of childbirth and the attempts at eradication of Indigenous midwifery knowledge during colonization. In current times, it is recognized that more Indigenous midwives are needed in the healthcare workforce and system, including in Indigenous communities, to train Indigenous midwifery students. Due to issues of capacity, non-Indigenous midwives are often training Indigenous midwifery students.



Indigenous peoples want to administer and deliver the reproductive health services in their communities, including the education of student midwives.

Indigenous Midwifery
Summit Report

ACTION:

- Development and implementation of a cultural safety strategy for all members of the healthcare workforce who are involved in the training of Indigenous midwifery students. These healthcare professionals must be properly trained to work with Indigenous midwives and students in a non-hierarchical and relational manner free from racism, discrimination and misogyny. Antiracist and culturally safe training should be mandated for every person who works in a facility that serves Indigenous peoples so that these spaces can be free from discrimination.

PRIORITY 1: ACTION PLAN

1. Learning programs to have Indigenous knowledge, ceremony, language and worldview as the foundation.

Regardless of whether learning is institutional or community-based, it was agreed that all programs must have traditional knowledge and practice built into the foundation of the program. This includes the use of traditional medicines, songs, prayers and spaces. It was also identified that any learning program, be it institutional, apprenticeship or community-based, also needs a paradigm shift in the way it is formed. Typical programs are developed through an educational institution lens. There is a desire to develop programs through a more culturally focused lens.

ACTION:

- Research Indigenous education methods to understand how other sectors have implemented learning programs through an Indigenous lens.
- Create tools and resources to share this information with communities and institutions.



2. Prioritizing community-based learning.

Bringing birth back to communities was a strong message reiterated throughout the 2 day gathering and will be a central focus for Indigenous midwifery. While there were many challenges identified (e.g. lack of housing for students and mentors, communication issues with broadband internet connectivity), there were also many innovative solutions that would allow for Indigenous midwifery programs to be initiated in communities.

Indigenous people are the experts of their own communities. They know what they need. Creating a safe space for meaningful dialogue, planning and implementation will encourage Indigenous ownership to bring birth home.

ACTION:

- Create a pilot program for “Indigenous Midwifery Community Knowledge Hubs” to centralize and share resources. Strategic placement of these hubs would act as satellite offices, midwife residences, remote student support and spaces for collective learning.
- Secure financial resources to engage community groups in the design and implementation of Indigenous midwifery community-based learning opportunities.
- Design an engagement process and tools to work with communities to assist in establishing the skills required to practice midwifery in that community. This information would be used to measure a student’s confidence and ability to provide quality care to parents and babies in that community.

3. Recognizing that the learning journey of each student Indigenous midwife is a unique process.

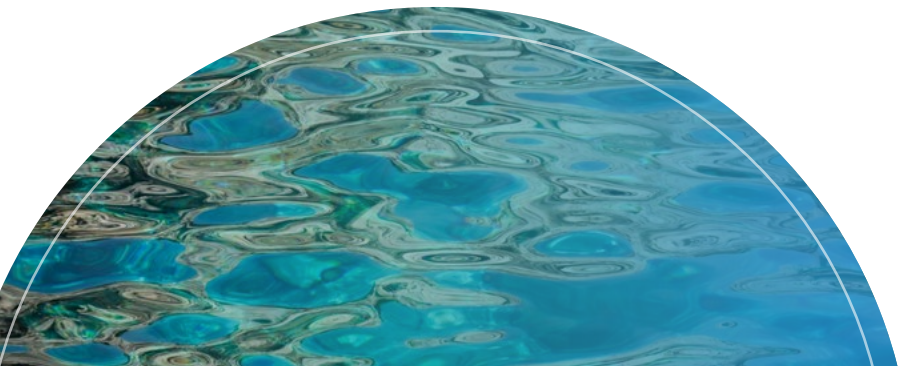
The ultimate goal of teaching Indigenous midwifery students is to ensure they have the confidence to provide high quality and culturally aligned care to parents and babies in practice. This needs to be recognized and communicated to students, who often pursue a high grade-point average (as per socially accepted norms) instead. The learning journey is a process that extends beyond one class, in one semester. Long-practicing midwives would likely agree that every pregnancy and delivery is unique, with many opportunities to learn new things. Midwifery is a practice and a learning journey that extends the length of a career and beyond.

Students need to feel supported throughout the entire process. This could include preparatory access programs for course upgrade and skills development, mentoring, bridging programs and programs that allow students to go at their own pace. A more culturally aligned model recognizes the individual's learning style and pace while acknowledging the individual path and gifts of each student.

Leaders in the field of Indigenous midwifery have an important role to play in the learning journey of students by sharing their knowledge of the practice and how to balance the rigors of midwifery practice with a healthy family and personal life.

ACTION:

- Create resources for potential students to attend preparatory or post-secondary access programs and opportunities for course upgrade and skills development. This will create a strong foundation for students entering first year programs.
- Create a mentoring program that links practicing Indigenous midwives with student Indigenous midwives. Create a mentor training program to prepare mentors for this leadership role. Mentors should support knowledge transfer of midwifery skills, traditional knowledge, cultural practice, life balance and self-care.
- Advocate and encourage post-secondary partners to develop an Indigenous midwifery bridging program that would recognize past experience and Indigenous traditional/cultural skills as valuable, transferrable experiences.
- Use the research to inform educational partners on how to design Indigenous midwifery programs that allow students to go at their own pace, respecting their individual learning journey.
- Develop a Midwifery Student Support position to coach and support students while they are in school. Also work with students to develop student specific events throughout the year and during annual gatherings. Provide a support system outside of the school environment.
- Provide space for different learning styles and approaches, so that students can learn in ways that best suit them.





PRIORITY 2

Advocating for Indigenous Midwifery Infrastructure, Funding and Systemic Change

Providing a safe and meaningful birthing practice requires reliable infrastructure and a supportive and capable learning environment that encourages confident Indigenous midwives.

It may be useful to create a matrix demonstrating the roles and responsibilities of all providers in conception, prenatal, postnatal care and education. This matrix could show how students, doulas, midwives and health care workers can interact to best support the parents and baby. The creation of such a matrix would help to ensure that quality of care remains top of mind, and that everyone has a role to play in that quality care. Please see Appendix A for an example of a Birth Work Care Matrix.

Advocating for Indigenous Midwifery infrastructure, funding and systemic change action items:

1. Advocate for amendments to the Ontario Hospital Act and other interconnecting legislation.
2. Work with funders to establish funding opportunities that allow for the establishment and operation of community-based midwifery programs.
3. Work with funders to create additional funding streams for local/regional birthing hubs and community buildings.
4. Work to create a permanent and sustainable doula program.

PRIORITY 2: ACTION PLAN

1. Advocate for amendments to the Ontario Hospital Act and other interconnecting legislation.

In some regions, being excluded from hospital privileges by the Ontario Hospital Act is hindering the practice of Aboriginal Midwifery. This is especially prevalent in areas without community-based infrastructure.

ACTION:

- Conduct relevant research to understand which legislation influences the Ontario Hospital Act, and how changes could be implemented to support Indigenous midwives' access to the hospital.
- Create a political strategy to advocate for legislative changes.

2. Engage with Indigenous communities to establish baseline requirements including funding opportunities to allow for the establishment and operation of community-based midwifery programs.

Bringing birth home means establishing needed support systems in communities, so that a high quality of care can be provided to parents and babies. Supporting a successful program would require innovative funding models that reflect the needs of Indigenous communities and for initiatives such as:

- Staff wages
- Engagement with Elders, parents and families
- Professional fees
- Travel expenses
- Administrative expenses
- Scholarships for students and apprenticeships

ACTION:

- Work with established Indigenous partners and champions to develop a well laid plan for funders.

Shown in the photo:

On the Left: Lisa Bishop RM, In the Center: Ellen Blais, On the Right: Dr. Naana Jumah





3. Work with funders to create additional funding streams for local/regional birthing hubs and community buildings.

Bringing birth home also means having the proper infrastructure in place to ensure success locally or regionally. Buildings and infrastructure, such as broadband internet and midwife/student lodging, allow the practice and learning environment to be flexible enough to meet local practice needs. Lack of proper infrastructure is infringing on quality care and opportunities for student Indigenous midwives to learn and practice in communities. Birthing hubs would allow space for meeting clients, undertaking administrative functions and act as temporary lodging for students and midwives.

ACTION:

- Work with local/regional partners and champions to conduct an environmental scan to establish what infrastructure currently exists and what infrastructure requires development.

4. Work to create permanent and sustainable doula programming.

Doulas play an important role in the birth process and can be a great support to parents, students and midwives. Presently, funding is only available to doulas on a case by case basis and cannot reasonably sustain anyone wishing to practice. Incorporating doula services into the spectrum of care could alleviate some of the strain on large practices or practices with large geographical territories. Advocacy efforts are needed so that doula training and education in community is offered and funded for all birth workers as part of their learning journey. Advocacy efforts include the AOM bringing key stakeholders together to discuss funding sources for this kind of training.

ACTION:

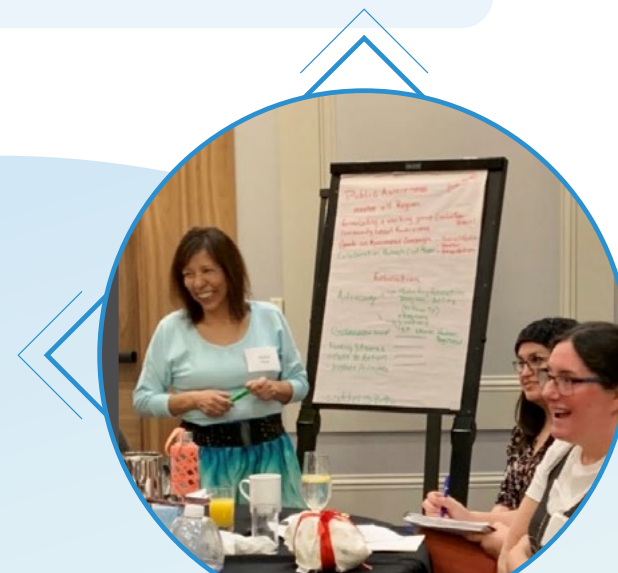
- Advocate for sustainable doula programming to assist with the birthing process at various levels and provide additional support for students.

Shown in the photo:

On the Left: Elaine Ross

In the Middle: Donna Diaz Lopez

On the Right: Carol Couchie, RM



PRIORITY 3

Strengthening the Indigenous Midwife, Birth Worker and Student Circle

Strengthening the Indigenous Midwife, Birth Worker and Student Circle means:

1. The Association of Ontario Midwives and partners will provide safe spaces for Indigenous midwives and birth workers to share information and learn from each other.
2. Create networking pathways for more collaboration between midwives and doulas.

Shown in the photo:

Starting on the Left: Elder Katherine Fobister, Sherry Copenace, Sharona Crane, Rhonda Mose, Elaine Ross.

The workday of a midwife can be variable and unpredictable. It requires midwives to be flexible and responsive. They are natural caregivers, who think of others before themselves. While these traits contribute to high quality of care for parents and babies, they can negatively impact the individual, and create an overworked profession.

Strengthening the circle will allow midwives and birth workers to feel supported, so they can be strong leaders and mentors for students. The intent is to create a healthy and balanced ecosystem for all to flourish.



PRIORITY 3: ACTION PLAN

1. Provide safe spaces for Indigenous midwives and birth workers to share information and learn from each other.

ACTION:

- Coordinate a two-day annual Indigenous Midwifery Gathering. The first day of the gathering would create space for:
 - information sharing;
 - updates on community midwifery initiatives;
 - and opportunity for dialogue to establish new partnerships and champions.

The second day would provide workshops for upgrading clinical skills development, administrative functions and special student events.

- Create networking pathways for more collaboration between midwives and doulas by hosting quarterly gatherings outside of business functions that would allow for dialogue and relationship building.

2. Establish professional development retreats and online programs to enhance leadership skills, communication, administrative functions and clinical skills.

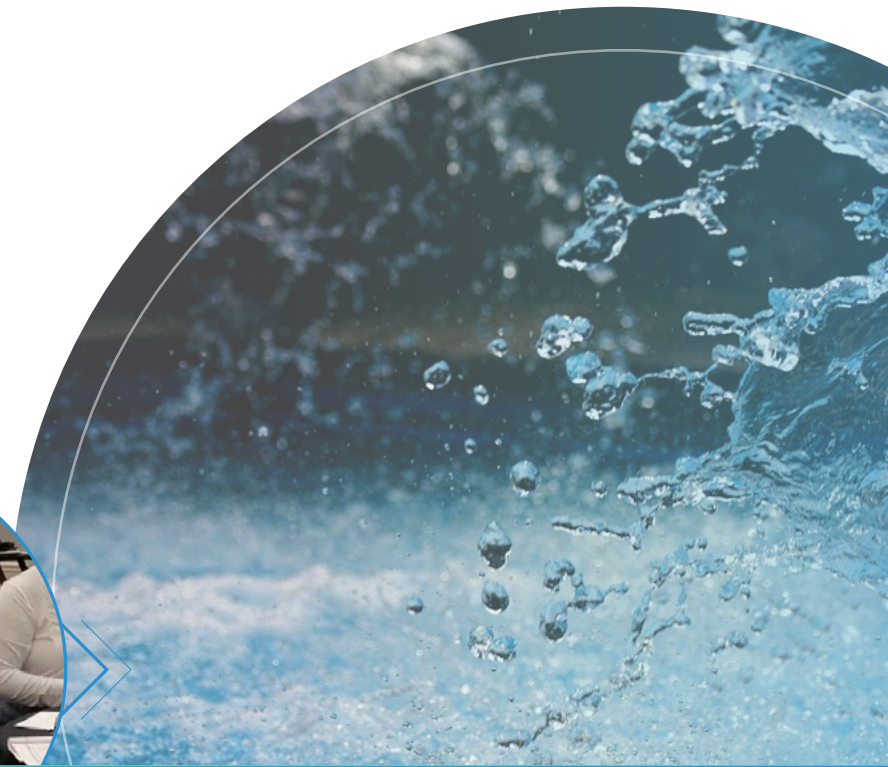
ACTION:

- Create additional learning opportunities throughout the year to support continuing education for midwives, doulas, students and communities.

Shown in the photo:

On the Left: Elder Katherine Fobister

On the Right: Sherry Copenace



PRIORITY 4

Expand Public Awareness of Indigenous Midwifery and Birth Work Through Networks and Communications

Indigenous midwifery and birth work are a traditional practice within Indigenous communities. Historically, births would have been done in homes and communities, not in the hospital. However, due to the institutionalization of health care, home births are not as commonplace as they once were. There is an unwarranted perception that exists in Indigenous communities that hospital births are safer. Messaging around the safety of home births and the value of bringing birth home needs to be communicated within diverse Indigenous communities and the health care system more broadly.

Shown in the photo:

On the Left: Tamara Cascagnette

On the Right: Elder Katherine Fobister

Expanding public awareness of Indigenous Midwifery and birth work through networks and communications means we will:

1. Work with Indigenous midwives and champions as advocates and experts to share the message of the positive impacts of Indigenous midwifery and birth work by and for Indigenous communities.
2. Create stronger network pathways with health care providers and policy makers.
3. Create a communications strategy utilizing social media and engaging established partners.



PRIORITY 4: ACTION PLAN

1. Work with Indigenous midwives and champions, as advocates and experts, to share the message of the positive impacts of Indigenous midwifery and birth work by and for Indigenous communities.

ACTION:

- Create an engagement strategy to define key messages around Indigenous midwifery. Messaging could be geared towards encouraging students to choose midwifery as a career, communicating the benefits to parents, families, community leaders and program developers.



Shown in the photo:

Back Left to Right: Lana Smith, Darlene Curci, Sharona Crane, Donna Diaz Lopez

Front Left to Right: Sherry Copenace, Elder Katherine Fobister



2. Create stronger network pathways with health care providers and policy makers.

ACTION:

- Create opportunities and resources for building relationships with health care providers and policymakers, so they can be aware of the positive community impacts of bringing birth home.
- Create advocacy documents to show systemic impacts and long-term value.

3. Create a communications strategy utilizing social media and engaging established partners.

ACTION:

- Create a communications strategy based on engagement with Indigenous midwives and champions. This messaging will be shared with a broad audience.

SUMMARY OF THE GATHERING

Implementation of the *Increasing Awareness and Supporting Indigenous Midwifery Learning Ecosystems: An Indigenous Midwifery Action Plan* will require a whole systems approach to ensure Indigenous midwifery continues to grow and benefit diverse Indigenous communities.

The Association of Ontario Midwives is committed to working with Indigenous midwifery partners at both local and national levels in the implementation of this comprehensive plan.

The National Aboriginal Council of Midwives has developed a document titled: *Indigenous Midwifery Core Competencies* which details the clinical and cultural responsibilities of the profession and they are a key partner in advancing this work. A united force will create the momentum needed to bring birth home.

Building awareness of the value of Indigenous midwifery along with increasing options for educational pathways will take coordination of efforts across many sectors of the healthcare system. Education of Indigenous midwifery students will require culturally safe and appropriate relationships of all members of the healthcare workforce.

Shown in the photo:

Left to Right: Suzanne Fitzpatrick, RN Midwifery Apprentice, Lisa Bishop RM, Ellen Blais AM, Ashley Lickers AM, Cherylee Bourgeois AM, Christine Roy RM, Claire Dion-Fletcher RM, Carol Couchie AM, Akinisie Qumaluk RM, Samantha Chicago - Student, Gillian Kyle - Midwifery Student, Aimeé Carbonneau RM, Alyssa Gagnon - MEP Student.



Chi miigwech Thank you Nia:wen

We would like to express our gratitude to the planning committee for giving of their time to support the planning of this gathering and to all of those who graciously gave of their time to add their voice to the *Giinwi Gaashi Maamwiziying Ndaadzikeying Indigenous Midwifery Education Planning Gathering*.

PLANNING COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

- **Alyssa Gagnon**
Indigenous Student Midwife
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- **Bernadette deGonzague**
Chiefs of Ontario
- **Carol Couchie RM**
K'Tigaaning Midwives
- **Cecilia Spence**
Nishnawbe Aski Nation Women's Council
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APPENDIX A: Birth Work Care Matrix Example

		Conception	Prenatal Care	Postnatal Care	Education
Pregnant Person	Responsibilities				
	Parameters				
Community	Responsibilities				
	Parameters				
IM Students	Responsibilities				
	Parameters				
Midwife	Responsibilities				
	Parameters				
Doula	Responsibilities				
	Parameters				
Health Care System	Responsibilities				
	Parameters				