



Skookum Youth:

COMMUNITY CAMPFIRE REPORT



OCTOBER 2023

**Strong.
Powerful.
Brave.**

Introduction

This report captures the outcomes from a Community Campfire held by Surrey Urban Indigenous Leadership Committee (SUILC). It was a full day event guided by the recommendations that came out of the Spring 2023 SUILC report: *Skookum Youth: Recommendations to Support Indigenous Youth in Surrey* (herein referred to as the Skookum Youth report).

The Skookum Youth report provides a summary of academic research examining existing and exemplary Indigenous youth programs and integrates outcomes from numerous engagement sessions with Indigenous youth in Surrey. The report developed the following three overarching recommendations:

1. Develop programming for Indigenous youth that builds on best practices from elsewhere,
2. Honour Indigenous youth voices from Surrey, and
3. Follow up with a Community Campfire with a focus on implementation.

The full Skookum Youth report can be found on the SUILC website: www.surreyindigenousleadership.ca

Community Campfire

A “campfire” is a process created by SUILC to bring people together for a facilitated session that is grounded in traditional Indigenous practices and values. Cultural practices are embedded into the day and guide a respectful and reciprocal engagement process with the participants. A campfire is designed to build positive relations and community connections through engagement. This approach counters the common experience for many Indigenous people where engagement is extractive and, in some cases, harmful. The focus of the campfire is to create a culturally safe and welcoming environment where people are respected and heard. Ceremony and cultural teachings guide a campfire to honour the people attending and give back in the spirit of reciprocity.

The Community Campfire was designed for youth voices to be heard by a range of government agencies, educational institutions, and non-government organizations who have the will or capacity to support Indigenous youth in Surrey in some way. Participants were asked to think about how their learnings from the day could be brought back to their respective workplaces and bring positive change for Indigenous youth in Surrey.

Eleven Indigenous youth from Surrey attended the campfire, along with two Indigenous Child and Youth Care Workers, four Indigenous Elders, and the Skookum Surrey team of young Indigenous facilitators who are the engagement team that support SUILC’s work. The Skookum Surrey team included Indigenous Ambassadors who are part of a Skookum Surrey – Simon Fraser University initiative to build leadership skills for Indigenous women. The Ambassadors role for the day was to be the “aunties” for the youth and provide them support. They also provided support to the Elders.

Invited guests who attended included employees from Surrey Schools, Ministry of Children and Family Development, City of Surrey, Ministry of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation, Simon Fraser University, Kwantlen Polytech University, Surrey Libraries, Fortis BC, Central City Foundation, Fraser Health Authority, and Indigenous Services Canada.

Past SUILC campfires have had success in inspiring participants to initiate change. One example is when an employee of the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction attended a SUILC campfire and was struck by the stigma and barriers Indigenous people face when seeking to access income assistance. He returned from the campfire driven to make change. He brought information forward to senior management and garnered support for a pilot project to have income assistance delivered through an Indigenous organization in Surrey. The pilot was successful, and this model is now used by the province across BC.

It was this kind of action that our Community Campfire was seeking to inspire.

Overview of the Day

Presentations

The Skookum Youth report was presented to provide attendees background on the work done to-date. In addition to sharing the findings and recommendations from the Skookum Youth report, four groups of Indigenous youth were invited to come forward to speak about their personal experiences and why the recommendations were important to them. Youth spoke about youth leadership, cultural activities, physical space, and support systems. It was a powerful experience to witness youth having the courage and support to speak their truth.

"[I was] inspired by youth having a voice and telling us what they need. We need to continue to create space and opportunity for this." Campfire Attendee

"[This was my] first time speaking without a script. Opportunities and mentorship for this are important and rare." Indigenous Youth Campfire Attendee

Inspiration Exercise

Following the presentations, people were asked to write out how they were inspired by the report and the stories from the youth and find others in the room with a similar expression. These were then posted on the wall and clustered into themes.

Five themes arose: an understanding and appreciation for the need for an Indigenous gathering space in Surrey, housing for larger families, cultural safety, educational success, and the value of supporting youth to take leadership roles.



In the words of the participants, these are some examples of what was expressed:

“The report let me know that our youth are incredible leaders, with so much passion and so many ideas and concrete recommendations.”

“That services are being delivered to our youth and they are being impacted and are hungry for more culture!!”

“Simply put, [I am inspired by] the bravery and strength of youth to take on leadership and seek a (re)connection to culture in their community and beyond.”

Following this exercise people were invited to speak about how they feel inspired. One person shared her experience witnessing intergenerational connections at a previous youth campfire, and how inspired she was to see Indigenous youth, “aunties” and Elders come together and support one another. Another participant expressed how impressed she was with the strength and courage of 2SLGBTQA+ youth she has come to know and would love to see ways to provide these youth intergenerational connection and support.

An idea was raised to support a gathering of youth across turtle island and support forming a youth council. Another person was inspired to hear how valuable it is for the youth to have a safe place to learn about and express their culture. An Elder shared her concern for the many youth facing homelessness, and how important it is to put our attention to housing for Indigenous youth.

Closing remarks from the facilitators reminded everyone to keep these thoughts and inspirations and bring them forward into their work. People were encouraged to take a chance, do something new, and to challenge the narrative that you can’t do it because it has never been done like that before.

Break-out Group Discussions

The youth came up with four questions to put to the Campfire attendees. Young Indigenous facilitators then facilitated small group discussions about each of these questions. The youth participated in each of the discussion tables.

The following is a summary of these discussions.

Youth Leaders

Question 1: What would you need to change in your organization to uplift youth leaders, while still recognizing the systemic barriers we face?

Participants discussed involving youth in the design of youth programs, and creating a supportive environment for youth to guide decisions about how programs are offered and run.

Places for youth need to be safe and welcoming to the diversity of Indigenous youth living in Surrey. Indigenous youth are seeking to connect with their culture and Indigenous community. Youth have also expressed feelings of “imposter syndrome”, feelings of not being Indigenous enough. Programs need to be mindful of these complexities and make consistent and lasting efforts to make Indigenous youth feel welcome.

Uplifting youth leaders requires listening to youth, valuing what is heard, and seeking a deeper understanding.

Cultural Activities

Question 2: How do cultural activities uplift Indigenous youth? (i.e. Culture saves lives) What could you do to support this?

Discussions about how to support cultural activities for youth included language learning opportunities, celebrations for youth achievements, outdoor experiential learning, and supporting Indigenous knowledge keepers and cultural teachers.

Cultural activities can facilitate cultural teachings in a way that is not forced, but instead respects youth boundaries and encourages dialogue. The Skookum Surrey youth engagement sessions that occurred over the past year was an example of such an approach. Skookum Surrey engagement with youth offered cultural activities that led to dialogue, trust, and learning.

Physical Space

Question 3: How would it feel not having a safe physical space to work? What do you need to support a multi-generational physical space for Indigenous youth in Surrey?

Many people shared the importance of having safe and secure physical spaces, and the stress that occurs when such a space is lacking. Physical space is also essential for cultural learning and community connection. A consistent, reliable, and welcoming space for Indigenous youth in Surrey is needed.

Workers who are offering Indigenous community events and activities in Surrey shared the toll of not having a central space to run activities and store supplies. An outreach worker shared how without a space to offer her community activities, she is left to store supplies in her home and transport supplies back and forth to events. It is an extra burden of work that causes stress.

It was expressed that an Indigenous gathering space needs to be a “hub” that is accessible by transit and welcoming and inviting for all Indigenous people. The importance of honouring the land-based nations whose territory we are on was also highlighted. Proper protocols and engagement with the land-based nations would need to occur in the work to create an Indigenous gathering space.

Participants in this discussion grew as the day progressed. There were many expressing their desire to support the development of an Indigenous gathering space in Surrey.

Educational Supports

Question 4: How could you provide educational supports, skill development programs and affordable housing? (i.e. Peer tutoring, support to apply for scholarships, post secondary programs and classes, and access to safe and affordable housing that accommodates multi-generational families)

Educational supports through Surrey Schools were discussed and the emphasis was on making Indigenous students, parents and guardians feel welcome within the school environment and connected to other Indigenous families. The great work done by the Indigenous support workers was recognized and it was expressed that more are needed.

Schools also need to be mindful of addressing the racism that students and parents face. This can be done by teaching teachers about Indigenous knowledge and culture and providing cultural safety for educators and administrative staff. Overall, Indigenous knowledge needs to be deepened within the educational system.

Commitments

The facilitated discussions closed with each person expressing their commitment coming out of the day. Attendees expressed commitments to taking what they heard and learned from the day, and to bring it back to their respective workplaces to advocate for change.

Some specific commitments included:

- Providing funding toward the development of an Indigenous Gathering Space in Surrey.
- Hosting another campfire to further discuss an Indigenous gathering space through the lens of the youth.
- Seeking provincial funding to support discussions about an Indigenous gathering place in Surrey.
- Bringing more Indigenous people into every level of the school system.
- Creating space for youth to be heard and taking action to bring those ideas to fruition.
- Advocating for Indigenous students.
- Building stronger relationships with SUILC and Skookum Surrey.
- Bringing youth into the Provincial Urban Indigenous Leadership Gatherings Dialogue.
- Facilitating more youth-led events.
- Supporting youth by acknowledging their gifts, listening with compassion, and witnessing their growth.
- Advocating for federal Urban Program Funding for youth at a regional level.
- Challenging colonial versions of leadership and uplifting Indigenous conceptions of leadership.

I commit . . . “to share and advocate based on what I have hear and learned from this campfire. There are other decision-makers in my organization that I can include and update. And, importantly, when funding opportunities or partnerships become available this can be prioritized.”

Ceremony

The campfire concluded with a ceremony to honour the youth. The ceremony invited all the youth and youth workers to come forward to be recognized and blanketed in accordance with the Kwantlen First Nation cultural practice. Witnesses were called up to share what they learned from the day. The experience was profound. The youth were visibly uplifted. The witnesses expressed with sincerity their admiration for the youth and their commitments to better support them. The ceremony brought everyone together in a meaningful and memorable way.



Kaley Best, an Indigenous Enhancement Worker for the Surrey School District who attended the campfire, shared how this experience was deeply appreciated by both the youth and herself and colleagues as youth support workers.

"You guys gave a piece of our youth their spirit today and for a lot of them that was their first ceremony. It was so sweet watching them all leave the school still wrapped in their blankets. We have never felt so uplifted and acknowledged especially in our role and talked about how you guys are doing all the right things!"

Kaley Best, Indigenous Enhancement Worker, Surrey School District

Closing comments from the day highlighted the work that lies ahead, and to honour the commitments each person shared with the group.

Conclusion

The Community Campfire brought together Indigenous youth and Elders, youth workers, government agencies, educational institutions, and non-government organizations to discuss program needs for Indigenous youth in Surrey. It was a day devoted to hearing directly from the youth about their needs, and inspiring action.

Many attendees from the Campfire shared that they came out of the day with a deeper understanding of Indigenous youth experiences and for some it even shifted their perspectives on how they should be supporting youth needs. These outcomes demonstrate the value of having meaningful and direct interactions with youth when seeking to develop youth programming.

Essential to the success of the campfire, was the work done prior with the youth. The Indigenous support workers and the Skookum Surrey engagement team took the necessary time to build a supportive relationship and trust with the participating youth. They were careful to ensure that the youth attending the campfire felt supported and prepared to speak openly about their experiences and ideas.

The youth who attended shared how much they appreciated being heard and how the ceremony was an uplifting and validating experience for them.

"The highlight of my day was sitting with all of the adults and other youth in the room to discuss issues that impact us, and have our voices heard."

Zee Ali, Indigenous youth campfire participant

"That was the first time I had ever been honoured in a traditional way. I felt seen and appreciated."

Ryaan Ali, Indigenous youth campfire participant

Support for Indigenous youth requires a community effort. Commitments were shared by all the attendees about how they can better support Indigenous youth in Surrey through their respective workplaces. Further work is needed to build on these commitments, foster partnerships and collaboration, and carry forward the energy, inspiration and ideas that came out of the day.

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All Our Relations.

