

First Nations rally to save healing program

Last Updated: Thursday, October 1, 2009 | 1:49 PM CT

[CBC News](#)

First Nations people are gathering at the Manitoba legislature on Thursday to protest the end of a program that provides counselling to former students of Indian residential schools.

They say it is cruel to expect residential school victims to dredge up painful memories in public then be left hanging without any psychological support.

The Aboriginal Healing Foundation — established on March 31, 1998, with a grant of \$350 million from Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) — supports 135 community-based mental health and healing programs in Canada.

Of those, 26 are in Manitoba.

The funding is scheduled to end March 31, 2010, although the federal government has not yet decided on whether it will be renewed or not.

A federal official said INAC is evaluating the Aboriginal Healing Foundation's work and should have a report done by the end of October.

"There are other services available related to mental health in the aboriginal community. Health Canada has a very extensive program it operates regionally," said Mike Degagne, executive director of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation.

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—Mike Degagne, Aboriginal Healing Foundation

"But a lot of the abuses that happened at residential schools — especially the physical and sexual abuse — are dealt with best by community-based healing services like the ones we're offering.

"This is a very unique response to a unique situation."

Thursday's rally is being organized by the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs and the Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak, an organization that represents most First Nations communities in northern Manitoba.

Residential school survivors preparing to share stories

Survivors say the supports provided by the funding will be even more important as they start to tell their emotional stories at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The commission is expected to hear the stories of residential school survivors over the next few years, perhaps starting by the end of the year.

Mel Chartrand and his wife, Shirley, operate the Winnipeg-based Eyaa-Keen Centre, which provides "physical, emotional, mental and spiritual treatment, healing and development" for aboriginal adults.

Its core funding comes from the Aboriginal Healing Foundation.

"We wouldn't be able to continue to the degree we are [without the funding]," said Mel Chartrand.

"We'd have to downsize to a skeleton crew — myself and Shirley and try and figure out a way to help people.

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—Mel Chartrand, *Eyaa-Keen Centre*

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The Truth and Reconciliation Commission is being chaired by Justice Murray Sinclair, the former associate chief judge of the provincial court of Manitoba.

He was appointed this summer after infighting forced the resignation of the former chairman and commissioners.

Sinclair is hoping to move the commission's headquarters to Winnipeg from Ottawa by the end of the year, since most residential school survivors are from the West.

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