

Halifax, NS | Wed, January 16th, 2008

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## Supporting survivors of residential schools

By JOHN PAUL  
Wed, Jan 16 - 4:46 AM

This week, residential school survivors, mental-health and law-enforcement professionals will gather in Dartmouth for a meeting sponsored by the Atlantic Policy Congress of First Nations Chiefs (APC) – one in a series of sessions intended to help survivors on the path to healing.

APC supported the Assembly of First Nations to negotiate a fair, just and comprehensive agreement with the federal government. The final agreement is the largest settlement in Canadian history and includes payment to survivors to compensate for loss of language and culture, and provides for a more efficient and effective process to deal with serious claims of abuse. More than 150,000 children attended residential schools, many of them in Atlantic Canada.

Since 2005, the Atlantic Policy Congress of First Nations Chiefs has provided outreach and information to Atlantic survivors, their families and communities.

Survivors are finally receiving compensation, in the form of Common Experience Payments (CEP). Some survivors, however, have told us that they have been victimized through thefts, assaults, fraud and abuse since they have received their CEP cheques. This has presented a number of challenges.

Many Atlantic residential school survivors are living on fixed incomes. The CEP payments, while being very beneficial to some survivors, may prove difficult for others who have never received a substantial lump sum of money at one time. This is a major issue that is being experienced across the country as First Nations people struggle with the legacy of the Indian residential schools.

As we have worked with the survivors and their families, it has become very clear that there was more to the residential school issue than we had thought. APC, with the guidance of survivors, has decided to address the problems faced by survivors head-on – by providing information, support and services to survivors to help them deal with not only the legacy of abuse, but the challenges faced in the community as they continue to heal.

Since 2005, we have held over 250 sessions in our region, and have touched nearly 1,400 people – both native and non-native. We have worked with government organizations, mental-health experts and many other partners to provided information to survivors and their families. We recently held a front-line workers conference to ensure that our communities have the capacity to provide information about the final settlement agreement and support services available to survivors.

As a result of our ongoing efforts, many survivors are making good decisions and improving their lives. This week the healing process will continue and we are committed to taking a proactive approach to this issue. But we do not expect that this conference will solve the problem. We all clearly understand that the problems facing our communities are serious and cannot be addressed in one session; they will take time.

Just as the abuses that were perpetrated against our people didn't happen overnight, healing cannot happen overnight. We want to ensure there continues to be a focused effort and measures which assist and support the vision of a better future for all our people. We are committed to providing First Nations communities in Atlantic Canada with the protection and support they need to continue on the journey towards healing.

We, as well as the many agencies, government departments and people who support our vision of a better tomorrow, will continue do our best to move in the right direction with everybody's co-operation and support. Atlantic aboriginals are confident in our future, and we have many successes on which to build. But as we look to the future, we must also ensure that we address the difficult issues that have been a part of our past.

It is not a short or easy path. But it is one we are committed to following, together.

John Paul is executive director, Atlantic Policy Congress of First Nation Chiefs.

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