

# THE POWER OF DATA

**DAWSON, YUKON** – Located between the shores of the Yukon River and the shadow of the Midnight Dome mountain peak, Dawson City is easy to love and notoriously difficult to leave. Known around the world for its unparalleled beauty, this tiny community in central Yukon has a lot going for it: a vibrant arts and culture scene (it's home to two art galleries and hosts nearly a dozen festivals a year), a rich backstory (it's the birthplace of the Klondike Gold Rush), and a legendary laid-back lifestyle (local legend says it boasts a bar stool for every resident).

It's also home to the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation, who make up nearly half of Dawson's 1,400 permanent residents. Descendants of the ancient Hän-speaking people, the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in (which means "People of the River") have called the Dawson area home for thousands of years, and currently share the town with their non-First Nation neighbours.

Though uncommon in the rest of Canada, this living arrangement is the norm in the Yukon where reserves have been non-existent for decades. The result is refreshing and occasionally eye-opening: Dawson's Robert Service School is attended by both First Nations and non-First Nations students (all of whom take mandatory Hän language classes), the local First Nations festivals and feasts are community-wide events, and the Aboriginal Head Start Program opens its doors to non-First Nations kids once a week. It's just another unique fact-of-life that most Dawson residents take in stride.

"To me it's normal" says Dolores Scheffen, a member of the Tr'ondëk First Nation who grew up in Dawson.

"I think it's like that for most of the people here, because things have always been mixed."

Scheffen knows a thing or two about the value of team work. As Dawson's Home and Community Care Coordinator she oversees a team of 12 home-care workers and is responsible for helping more than 50 First Nations clients (some as old as 94) make it through their days with dignity and self-respect.

**“ I think we're really blessed with how well we work together. We all do our part. ”**

## Dawson City

**Mining the power of First Nations data in the heart of the Klondike**



**Downtown Dawson, with the Midnight Dome in the background**

"Every day is different" she says "I could come into the office and think my day is planned out then I'll get a phone call that will change my whole day. I do a lot of home visits, I assist citizens to their appointments, I liaison for them, and I also work with the hospitals."

"We become like a support network for the clients; they end up depending on us to come regularly."

The Home and Community Care program, administered by Health Canada's First Nations and Inuit Health Branch (FNIHB), is just one of dozens of government programs designed to serve the needs of First Nations communities across Canada.

Others include the Children's Oral Health Initiative, Aboriginal Diabetes Initiative, First Nations Policing Program and the Aboriginal Head Start Program.

What do all of these things have in common? They all exist thanks in part to data gathered by the **First Nations Regional Health Survey** (FNRHS, or RHS for short). For two decades the RHS has been a reliable source of data about First Nations communities for FNIHB, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, Public Safety Canada, the Public Health Agency

— and First Nation communities themselves — all of whom have come to depend on it for policy, planning, and renewal purposes.

Established in 1997, the RHS is the only First Nations-governed, national health survey in Canada. Overseen by the **First Nations Information Governance Centre (FNIGC)**, a First Nations run non-profit, the RHS collects important information in more than 250 on reserve and northern First Nations communities using both Western and traditional understandings of health and well-being.

“RHS data is by First Nations for First Nations, which is important.” says Sonia Isaac-Mann, Associate Director of Health at the Assembly of First Nations. “We use it in our policy work, especially to support our work with FNIHB advocating for issues that are important to First Nations people including obesity,



Clara Van Bibber, Treena Raven and Addie Pryce in Dawson

Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities) Dawson opened its own AHSP the same year, and it's grown considerably since.

“It was just a small room in the Health and Social building back then” says Kyrie Nagano, Dawson's AHSP Coordinator. Now the program is located in its own \$2-million facility that houses a preschool, daycare, and afterschool program for the community's First Nations children.

According to Nagano a typical day for the students involves circle time, Hän language lessons, and the teaching of traditional knowledge and culture.

“Some of the parents are so involved I have them come in to teach the kids. Last year I had a father come in to teach the kids how to cut up grayling [a local fish] and a mother came in to teach the kids a craft and sewing sessions; a lot of Elders will come in and teach the kids how to skin rabbits and a beaver. We make a lot dry moose meat for the kids too. They love it.”

The program, which has graduated nearly more than 150 students since its launch, also includes Total Physical Response learning and Orff Schulwerk programming (a music-based approach to learning founded by the German composer Carl Orff). The program, which is free for First Nations families, has become a cornerstone of the community and is planning an expansion in the coming year.

“People from all across Canada have come here to look at our facility,” says Nagano. “Everyone from the families to the staff and the students, we're really, really blessed. We know we are.”



Dolores Scheffen, Treena Raven, FNIGC Communications Coordinator Brad Mackay and RHS and Capacity Development Coordinator Addie Pryce chat in Dawson's Home and Community Care offices

cancer, and diabetes. Ottawa is all about high-level, senior people sitting at the table. And we rely on RHS data to help us push our agenda there.”

RHS data is also key to the continued success of the Aboriginal Head Start Program (AHSP), which was launched in 1998. Managed in the Yukon by the Public Health Agency (under the banner of the Aboriginal

**For more information about the  
RHS and FNIGC, please visit  
FNIGC.ca**