THE POWER OF DATA

Bigstone Cree Nation

How smart planning and quality data helped one Alberta First Nation transform its reputation for sickness to success

BIGSTONE CREE NATION – If you drive north out of Edmonton, up past the boundless farmer's fields, over the historic Athabasca River and right to the end of Highway 813, you'll find yourself in Bigstone Cree Nation. Located in the heart of the Albertan oil sands, about four hours from the provincial capital, there's no arguing that this beautiful and remote First Nations community is out-of-the-way—but that doesn't mean it's off-the-grid.

Made up of a total of seven communities that house more than 3,000 residents on about 21,000 hectares of pristine lake-rich Northern boreal forest, this sprawling Woodland Cree community is home to a wealth of services and facilities. This includes its own hospital, health-care centre, home-care program and school, to hotels, restaurants, gyms, a beach and a full-service hockey arena. There's even a nearby golf course.

At the centre of all this is Wabasca, the geographic and administrative heart of Bigstone's cluster of communities. Though it's derived from the Cree word *wapuskau*, which means "white rapids" (in reference to a nearby river) Wabasca's name could just as easily be interpreted as "where it all happens."

Here you'll find a spacious and modern Elder's lodge, the band-operated Oski Pasikoniwew Kamik (Bigstone's award-winning elementary school), a fleet of 20 healthcare vehicles (the largest of any First Nation in Alberta), and a hard-working staff of nearly 200, who are so good at what they do that the province regularly relies on them to provide services to the two-dozen First Nations communities in the surrounding Treaty 8 region.

But according to Bigstone's long-serving Chief this wasn't always the case.

"When I came to Wabasca 30 years ago there was only one trailer. It was for our community health workers – and there were just two of them. There was no medical transportation, or elder's lodge or school, absolutely nothing" says Chief Gordon T. Auger.

"Now look at us. We have nearly 200 employees, including dental technicians and registered nurses

FNIGC's Addie Pryce, Principal Christine Gullion and Andy Alook pose in Oski Pasikoniwew Kamik School, Bigstone's Community School in Wabasca

who do house calls; we also have a lot of our own businesses. We provide everything to our members. So, yes, we've seen a lot of change over the years, but it didn't happen overnight. Nobody offered us this: we had to fight for all of it."

Though it's now considered a model to neighbouring First Nations, in the 1980s it was a different story. Back then Bigstone was better-known for its high rates of crime and low rates of health, so much so that in the early 1990s a provincial bureaucrat called Bigstone 'the sickest First Nation in Alberta'. Unfortunately, the label stuck and became synonymous with news stories about the community.

It took time and determination, but Bigstone would eventually shake it off.

In 2010, a Health Canada report (*Health Determinants for First Nations in Alberta*) placed Bigstone at the top of its First Nations Community Well-Being Index (a UN quality-of-life measurement that takes into account education, labour force activity, income, and housing conditions) with a score of 85 out of 100.

An impressive transformation, but one that would not have been possible without a lot of hard work, a clear vision for change, and the relevant and reliable information to back it all up, says Chief Auger.

"You have to be tough, smart, and plan for everything. That's how you move forward. It's about hard-core politics and smart planning. I'll tell you nobody will give you anything without information."

As Chief Auger knows, quality information is often a key catalyst for change in First Nations communities. And good information has been the goal of the First Nations Information Governance Centre (FNIGC) since 1997, when it began to collect data about First Nations reserve and northern communities.

For the past 20 years, FNIGC has been gathering data in 634 First Nations communities through its survey work, which includes the First Nations Regional Health Survey (FNRHS, or RHS), the First Nations Regional Early Childhood, Education and Employment Survey (FNREEES) and the upcoming First Nations Labour and Employment Development Survey (FNLEDS), the non-profit organization is part of an established tradition of reliable First Nations data gathering that informs the health and well-being of First Nations people.

FNIGC data has become a key source of information for many First Nations communities, especially ones like Bigstone that are looking to support their policy and planning with quality, relevant data. And that's one of the reasons they've become a key FNIGC survey partner.

According to Andy Alook, who as Project Coordinator with the Bigstone Health Commission oversaw the survey process, Bigstone took data collection very seriously.

"We had one goal in mind: to get RHS data. My phone was on 24/7. We were everywhere getting the word out; I was even at yard sales."

Given the size and scope of Bigstone, it posed some unique challenges to conducting the surveys.

"Our Knowledge Gathers had to be people who know the community. For example, they have to know not to go to homes Monday or Thursday nights, because that's when Radio Bingo happens. That's stiff competition for us" Alook says with a laugh. "When it was on we were turned away at the door."

Despite the challenges faced by Alook and his team, their diligence and hard work paid off: Bigstone had a 92-percent completion rate for the RHS, a record within Alberta and one of the highest of any First Nations communities in Canada.

And they haven't wasted time putting the resulting information to good use. RHS data has already been used to inform Bigstone's 10-year Comprehensive Health Plan, report cards to Health Canada, and the Community Based Reporting Template (CBRT).

Shelly Gladue, Director of Community and Public Health, says the data is an important tool that will also help support a rage of programs including Community Health, In-Home Care, Wellness, Diabetes, and Mental Health.

"Years ago, we made an important decision to never turn away anybody who needs care. Data helps us meet that promise by making sure we continue to deliver and improve our programs" she says. "It helps me understand what the trends are and track what our members need."

One of the most important areas in any community is education, and Bigstone's Director of Education is no stranger to the power of data.

"For those of us in education data is about trying to improve our programs" says Chester Auger "It helps us to identify strategies and trends for how we can move forward."

"For example, the data has been telling us that our school population is growing, which is good. But it means that we need more space."

Auger says they recently used data in a proposal to Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada to help cover the cost of a portable classroom for Oski Pasikoniwew Kamik.

"We also want to open a middle school, and data will be a huge part of helping us make our case." he says "That's what data can do for us. It's evidence. It's like what our federal partners always tell us: show us the data."

" Nobody will give you anything without information. "

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