





Good morning, and thank you for inviting me to this Cree Youth Health Conference. I am Bella Moses Petawabano, Chair of the Cree Board of Health and Social Services of James Bay.

First, let me say how happy I am to be here, especially as your conference theme, “Building a Healthy Nation”, aligns with one of the primary objectives of the Cree Health Board. This shared objective is a fundamental reason why it makes good sense for the Cree Youth Council and the Cree Health Board to work together. So one of my goals in being here is to ensure that we build strong connections and collaborations, and to deepen those collaborations that already exist, in order to build that healthy nation. We have already taken important steps in this direction: The Cree Health Board has initiated projects for youth and families across Eeyou Istchee and we are looking to build strong partnerships with the Cree Youth Council in further efforts to create and support healthy communities.

One reason such collaborations make so much sense to us, and to older individuals such as myself, is that not only are you, our youth, the future of the Cree nation, you are also very much the *present* of the Cree nation.



The most recent demographic information says that a third of Cree people are between 15 and 34, and over half – including children – are under the age of 30. So what does this mean to the health of the Cree nation, and to building a healthy nation? For one thing, it means that we need to do all we can to empower you, our young people, grow and mature in nurturing environments, environments that are characterized by miyupimaatsiun.

Sadly, that is not always the case today. A range of interconnected factors, often rooted in poverty and cultural displacement, are bringing harm to our people – harm that resonates across generation. The consequences of these factors – the harm they cause – are wide-ranging: they include domestic disharmony, addictions, mental despair, insecure food and housing, and unhealthy lifestyles. Two major concerns of the Cree Health Board, mental health and diabetes, are closely connected to these factors. Notably, these are also two challenges facing our youth.

For an example, we can look to the high rate of diabetes among our people, and the increasingly early ages of onset diabetes. Diabetes does not begin in middle age; the groundwork for the disease is laid in youth,



and we need to find ways of ensuring that diabetes does not become the devastating time bomb that it has the potential to be.

In terms of mental health and illness, we can also look to the number of suicide attempts among youth in Eeyou Istchee. Our suicide rate is deceptively low – but our rate of attempts is significantly higher than in the rest of Quebec. This speaks not only to the issues facing these young people – including a sense of powerlessness or of despair – but also to their cries for help, and to our responsibilities to respond urgently and wholeheartedly to those cries.

We are seeking ways to address these issues. In 2012 the Cree Health Board began two years of consultations in five communities to define and plan services addressing the whole range of health needs of youth. This effort led in 2017 to a final recommendation report shared with communities, which in turn, has led to the Cree Health Board's Healthy Eeyou Youth project – also known as HEY. The HEY project focuses on three important areas:

- promoting clinical health and services so that youth know what clinical resources are available to them, when to use them, and how to take advantage of these resources,



- promoting and supporting wellbeing and healthy living, proactively addressing and resolving issues that could otherwise lead to problems,
- and collaborating with the Cree School Board which aims to enhance the physical and mental health, well-being and educational success of our students.

Today I want to talk about how can we work together to ensure a healthy Cree nation. At the Cree Health Board we are developing programs targeted at different needs among youth in Eeyou Istchee, but these programs will have a much greater chance of success, and a much broader impact, if we can combine our efforts with yours.

Let me give you an example of something we are currently implementing however we will be asking for your insight. The Cree Health Board's Nishiyuu Miyupimaatisiun department is charged with bringing traditional Cree knowledge and approaches into our programs and services, and as part of that mandate it will be running our land-based healing program. This program connects youth at risk – especially those in the Youth Protection program, or Youth Healing Services – with elders to work together in land-based activities, so they can benefit from the



therapeutic effect of the Cree way of life and Cree traditions. They travel into the bush, they learn to build shelters, they learn to construct a cooking area and to prepare meals, they learn to travel safely in the bush and on water. These activities connect the youth to the land and to their cultural roots in a healing and strengthening journey that is both physical and spiritual.

This land-based healing program is a collaboration between -Nishiiyuu Miyupimaatisiun Department and the Elders' Council, but to be a true success it needs your engagement as well. The land-based healing program builds a strong connection between our Cree history and our future – it looks back to our strong and healthy forbearers, who lived on and with the land, to strengthen and heal our ailing youth today. You can help bridge this distance between our history and our future by bringing your awareness and energy to help us build the program, ensuring that it meets the needs of its participants.

Let me give you another example. The Mistissini Hub is an initiative that brings together representatives from front-line services in that community – including members of the Cree Health Board, Youth Protection Services, the police and justice departments, the school



board, and others – in order to address issues and define a care plan for at risk individuals, families and the community. The Hub is meant to provide a sensitive and holistic rapid response to support individuals where the level of risk, and the potential for harm to themselves and possibly others, is elevated. While it is not focused solely on youth, it certainly addresses circumstances affecting young people. This is a new project, one that we hope can reduce crises in the community by dealing with them and defusing them before harm results.

Similarly, the Cree Health Board has just launched a pilot program, “Empowering Youth and Families,” in Mistissini; this program aims to strengthen front-line services and develop community resources on how we can empower the youth to take control of their health and well-being. We want to provide people with the knowledge and resources to manage challenges, and to ensure they are aware of how we can help them. One pragmatic goal of this program is to reduce referrals to Youth Protection Services and foster homes by addressing problems before they grow out of control. And this program, targeted at young people and families, will not succeed without your participation. We need your insights and your engagement to make this one work.



All of these programs address areas where we can have a positive impact by working together. The nature of our collaborations can be varied, and shaped by the particulars of whatever issue we are working on together – but I believe the impact of our collaborations would be profound. There are so many ways in which we can work together – if we harness the strengths of the Cree Health Board, the Cree Youth Council, and other partners, we can create miyupimaatisiun in Eeyou Istchee. But we cannot do it on our own, in our own individual efforts. We must work together.

I know that since the 2018 Waswanipi Health Assembly, the Cree Youth Council has been defining its own health priorities, and I look forward to learning more about these. In the next three days you will be working with many individuals from the Cree Health Board as well, which provides a good groundwork for future engagement. I also want to note that, as the largest employer in Eeyou Istchee, the Cree Health Board is always interested in employing motivated and engaged Cree youth. Our Indigenous Succession plan aims to fill our managerial positions with Cree people, and we provide many other opportunities for people to bring their commitment and their talents to help build a healthy Cree



nation. Education is a key determinant that can support the health of individuals. I encourage the youth to remain in school, achieve higher learning and experience to eventually take over the leadership and management of the CBHSSJB. In order to do this, you need to be healthy; physically, mentally and spiritually. You are the future.

And that, of course, is why we are here – to discuss building a healthy nation. I am very happy that you have taken on this challenge and am excited by the opportunity to work with you toward achieving this vital goal.