



**SPEAKING NOTES OF GRAND CHIEF DR. ABEL BOSUM**

**FOR THE**

**EYYOU EENOU REGIONAL ASSEMBLY ON HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES**

**OF THE**

**CREE BOARD OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES OF JAMES BAY**

**WASWANUPI**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>A.</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>B.</b>	<b>CREE UNITY – WORKING TOGETHER.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>C.</b>	<b>ORIENTATION 2 – ACCESS TO SERVICES .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>D.</b>	<b>ORIENTATION 3 – ACCESS TO TRADITIONAL MEDICINE.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>E.</b>	<b>ORIENTATION 4 – HUMAN RESOURCES AND THE CREE SUCCESSION PLAN .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>F.</b>	<b>CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>10</b>

## A. INTRODUCTION

1. Madam Chair Bella Moses Petawabano, Executive Director Daniel St-Amour, Chief Marcel Happyjack, council members, community representatives, ladies and gentlemen, Wachiya. Thank you for the invitation to share the perspective of the Grand Council of the Crees (Eeyou Istchee) / Cree Nation Government on the theme of this Regional General Assembly – partnership. I will address this theme by focussing on **three themes: Cree unity, the role of our Cree hunters and trappers** as carriers of our culture and language, and **capacity building** for our Cree youth.
2. But let me start by **congratulating you** on this, the **40<sup>th</sup> anniversary** of the **establishment** in April 1978 of the **Cree Board of Health** and Social Services of James Bay. The Cree Health Board grew out of the Cree vision in our treaty, the *James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement* of 1975, of Cree self-governance in all the most important areas of our life. Health and social services were clearly critical areas for us to control. That is why Section 14 of the JBNQA provides for the establishment of the Cree Health Board as a Cree-controlled institution of health and social services.
3. Over the past 40 years, the Cree Health Board has **met the challenge** of taking control of health and social services in the Cree communities. You have developed **two Strategic Regional Plans**, in 2004 and 2016, and, in partnership with the Grand Council / Cree Nation Government, you negotiated **funding agreements** with the Government of Québec to implement these plans. In doing so, you have grown to **more than 2,000 employees**, **expanded your services** to sectors we didn't dream of in 1975, developed **Community Miyupimaatisiun Centres (CMC's)** and specialized facilities in all the Cree communities, and **trained** increasing numbers of Cree employees to assume **professional and managerial duties**.

4. These are **remarkable achievements** by any standard. On behalf of the Cree Nation, I **salute the Chair**, the board of directors and all the professional and non-professional staff of the Cree Health Board for your **dedication and hard work** that made these achievements possible.

**B. CREE UNITY – WORKING TOGETHER**

5. It does not detract from the achievements of the Cree Health Board to say that they could **not have been possible without partnerships**. In reading the Board's last annual report and its *Strategic Regional Plan 2016-2021*, I was struck that they emphasize, time and again, the **importance of partnerships** in carrying out the Board's mission. They also point out the **increasing pace of partnerships** between the Board and the Cree Nation Government in recent years.
6. The Grand Council / Cree Nation Government has developed very beneficial partnerships with the Cree Health Board over the years. As mentioned a moment ago, we worked closely together to negotiate the **2005 and 2012 funding agreements** with the Government of Québec. These agreements put in place the **Financial Framework** needed for the Board to implement its first *Strategic Regional Plan*. They also represent another partnership, one between the Cree Health Board and the **Department of Health and Social Services of Quebec**. We look forward to working again with the Board in the negotiation of the next funding agreement with Québec to implement the priorities identified in the Board's new *Strategic Regional Plan*.
7. The Cree Health Board and the Cree Nation Government are partnering in many specific areas. One powerful example is the **Women's Shelters** built by the Cree Nation Government and operated by the Cree Health Board, both here in Waswanipi and in Waskaganish. Women's shelters were a treaty commitment in the JBNQA of 1975, but it took years of collaborative work between the Cree

Health Board, the Cree Nation Government, acting through our Departments of Justice and Capital Works, as well as local, regional and government partners, to make them a reality.

8. The **Department of Justice and Correctional Services** of the Cree Nation Government, led by Director Donald Nichols, is working with the Cree Health Board on various **services for youth**, including the Youth Healing Services pilot project, the Youth Reception Centre and the Youth Custody Centre in Mistissini. Our Justice Department is also working with the Cree Health Board to promote Cree **Customary Adoption** in the context of the recently adopted Bill 113. We are coordinating our efforts before the **Viens Commission** to eliminate discrimination in public services for Indigenous people, in particular, vulnerable Cree women.
9. The **Child and Family Services Department** of the Cree Nation Government, led by Director Kelly Pepabano, is working with the Maternal and Child Health program staff at the Cree Health Board in order to foster positive collaboration between the **Head Start and Maternal and Child Health Programs**, and to avoid duplication of services provided to the communities. I understand that this collaboration is working well and producing positive results.
10. We **cannot take for granted** these partnerships, either between Cree entities or between the Cree and Quebec. They have come about only as a result of **many years of struggle. And the key to the successful outcome of the struggle was Cree unity**. So it remains, to this day.
11. Two weeks ago, I addressed the Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples in support of Bill C-70, the law to give effect to our ***Cree Nation Governance Agreement*** and ***Cree Constitution***. I said that, to appreciate fully their significance for the Cree Nation of Eeyou Istchee, it is necessary to say a few words about our treaty, the *James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement*.

12. Our treaty was not a gift from the Crown – we had to fight for it. It followed an epic court battle, caused by Quebec’s launch in 1970 of the massive **James Bay Hydroelectric Project**. Faced with this threat to our way of life, the Cree **communities came together to assert our rights and fight the project**. This was perhaps the first time that we came together as a Nation to fight an external threat to our way of life. Together, we took **legal proceedings** against Quebec and Canada and we won a court decision to stop the project. That judgement brought Quebec and Canada to the negotiation table. After two years of negotiations, we signed the *James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement* on November 11, 1975
13. When the Cree signed the James Bay Agreement in 1975, we saw it as a **partnership in governance and development** with Canada and Quebec. But in the years after the signature of the James Bay Agreement, relations between the Cree and Canada and Quebec deteriorated. **Many disputes** arose during the 1980’s and 1990’s, largely due to government failure to implement the Agreement. By the year 2000, relations were at an impasse.
14. Over the last 15 years, we can see several turning points that put an end to this impasse:
  - (a) The first was the *Paix des Braves* of 2002. It resolved most of the disputes between the Cree and Quebec over the implementation of the James Bay Agreement, and established a **new partnership** between the Cree and Quebec concerning economic development in Eeyou Istchee.
  - (b) The second turning point came in 2008, when the Cree and Canada signed the *Federal New Relationship Agreement*. This Agreement put an end to litigation between the Cree and Canada over the implementation of the James Bay Agreement.

- (c) The third turning point was the *Cree – Québec Governance Agreement* of 2012. This Agreement ended the exclusion of the Cree from the governance of the Eeyou Istchee territory, **expanded the jurisdiction** of the Cree Nation Government over **Category II lands** and made the **Cree equal partners** with the Jamésiens in the governance of **Category III lands**.
  - (d) The recent *Cree Nation Governance Agreement* and *Cree Constitution* **expand Cree self-government** over Category IA lands. They **end federal oversight of Cree governance** on Category IA lands, and they bring our governance home to where it belongs, with us, the Cree.
15. Why do I mention these milestones here? None of them, starting with the JBNQA treaty, would have been possible without **Cree unity**. It is no exaggeration to say that **Cree unity** was the “**secret sauce**” that made all these accomplishments possible. **Cree unity** has always been our secret weapon in overcoming **external challenges**.
16. **But Cree unity is not just about fighting external threats together**. It is also about **building together the peace** that follows. We are entering a **critical phase right now of Cree Nation building**. We have fought, and won, the battles to put in place the agreements, the institutions and the processes needed to take our self-government to the next level. We are seen as a model and an inspiration across Canada and abroad.
17. **Our challenge now** is to **marshal the same Cree unity**, the **same passion to work together**, in implementing the agreements, institutions and jurisdictions that we felt in winning them. So let us see how **Cree unity** and working together apply to some **specific subjects** identified in the Cree Health Board’s *Strategic Regional Plan*.

**C. ORIENTATION 2 – ACCESS TO SERVICES**

18. **Orientation 2** of the *Strategic Regional Plan* concerns **access to quality first-line services and specialized care**. A related Strategic Objective is to improve regular **access to first-line services** in the Cree communities. To do this, the Plan calls for **collaboration with local leadership** to strengthen community-based services. The Plan also points out the need for **modern buildings and housing** to expand services in the Cree communities, and notes that this is another area in which the Board depends on **local and regional partners** to achieve shared goals.
19. At the **local level**, the Cree First Nations and local Cree entrepreneurs are essential partners in this work. At the **regional level**, the various Departments of the Cree Nation Government can provide valuable support. These Departments include Human Resources, Commerce and Industry, Capital Works and Services, Child and Family Services and Justice and Correctional Services, to name just a few.
20. These partnerships in developing new facilities will become all the more important so as we work with the Cree First Nations and with the Cree institutions, like the Cree Health Board, to implement the **treaty commitments** of Quebec and Canada in the JBNQA regarding **Cree priority in contracting and employment**.

**D. ORIENTATION 3 – ACCESS TO TRADITIONAL MEDICINE**

21. The *Strategic Regional Plan* identifies as major **Orientation 3** the need to access traditional medicine and land-based healing in a timely manner. To achieve this end, the Board's Nishiiyuu Miyupimaatisiun Department has entered into a **Collaboration and Contribution Agreement with the Nishiiyuu Council of Elders**, as knowledge carriers and holders of traditional knowledge, including traditional medicine. The Board recognizes the need for a partnership with the **Nishiiyuu Council of Elders** to benefit from its guidance.



22. Another partnership that should be considered in this regard is with our **Cree hunters and trappers**. They are modest people; they don't like to call attention to themselves. But they are another **hugely valuable resource** for the Cree Nation as **carriers of our traditional Cree culture, knowledge and language**. They live on the land, they live our traditional culture, day in and day out. Who better to teach us the path to **traditional medicine and land-based healing**? They could certainly complement the Nishiiyuu Council of Elders as a source of expertise in these fields.
23. Strategic Objective 42 of the Board's *Strategic Regional Plan* is to "Provide **land-based healing and bush programs**". It calls for the development of land-based and bush programs in collaboration with the Cree communities. The Cree trappers could be **valuable partners** for the Cree Health Board in this excellent initiative. Such a partnership could provide the Cree Health Board with the trappers' expertise in traditional Cree life on the land. It might also be interesting to explore if the trappers could **host Cree guests** in land-based activities.
24. Through no fault of their own, some of our Cree hunters and trappers are currently **struggling economically**. A partnership between them and the Cree Health Board could also benefit them by providing them with **economic support** for the vital work they do in preserving and protecting our Cree culture and way of life.
25. More important still, such a partnership would provide the Cree trappers with **validation for their important contribution** to the Cree Nation. It would serve as recognition by an important institution like the Cree Health Board of the value of the traditional culture and way of life led by the Cree hunters and trappers. Without presuming to speak for them, I suspect that the leadership of the Cree Trappers Association would welcome a conversation with the Cree Health Board on such a partnership.

**E. ORIENTATION 4 – HUMAN RESOURCES AND THE CREE SUCCESSION PLAN**

26. The *Strategic Regional Plan* recognizes that the Board's long-term success requires a **strong, stable and predominantly Cree workforce**. In her introductory message to the Plan, Chair Moses Petawabano states, in part:

What I have heard is that people want culturally-based and culturally-safe care close to home. ... They want to see **Cree people in professional roles in our local clinics and hospital**. This is a powerful vision that is embedded in this Strategic Regional Plan. [...]

I echo my colleague Daniel St-Amour in underlining the **importance of developing our Cree human resources**, and **urging our youth to continue their education so that they can help us build a great Cree institution**.

27. In his introductory message to the Plan, the Executive Director seconds the Chair's remarks on the importance of **developing Cree human resources** within the Cree Health Board, in part through the **Cree Succession Plan**:

The long-term success of our organization requires a strong, stable and predominantly Cree workforce. The Cree Succession Plan is a key element to achieve this vision. The plan helps us identify employees with leadership potential, and supports them with continuing education in collaboration with McGill University. The Cree Succession Plan also provides employee stability and reduces turnover.

28. With the **Quebec funding agreements, Financial Framework and Strategic Regional Plan**, the Cree Health Board now has the resources, processes and strategies to increase the number and responsibilities of Cree employees. The Board is taking **steps to stabilize the workforce** by making many temporary positions permanent, improving employee retention and recruitment. In 2016-2017, the Board's Human Resource Development team provided **training activities** for some 500 employees and managers, and developed a **training plan** aligned with the *Strategic Regional Plan*.

29. All of these initiatives fall under the heading of **capacity building**. As you may know, **I feel strongly about capacity building** for our Cree youth and workers. I made it a central plank of my election campaign last summer for the post of Grand Chief. Over the past five years, I organized a number of **conferences** for Cree youth, both in Eeyou Istchee and in the south, to make them aware of the **employment opportunities** created by the 80 or so agreements signed by the Cree with government and industry over the past 40 years. And, of course, to let them know about the **educational and technical qualifications** increasingly required to take advantage of these opportunities.
30. So it will come as no surprise that I **applaud the active measures** taken by the Cree Health Board to build capacity among Cree employees to allow them to gain access to more senior and responsible positions. We are **taking similar measures at the Cree Nation Government** through our Department of Human Resources, led by Director Nancy Bobbish, and in partnership with the Cree First Nations through our Department of Human Resources Development, led by Director Kelly Pepabano.
31. **Capacity building is, after all, what real self-government is all about.** Self-government cannot just be words in an agreement. It's about equipping ourselves with the **skills needed to actually take charge** of our institutions and run them. That means that Cree employees must have the skills to fill the whole range of professional, managerial and technical positions within the Cree institutions for the benefit of their communities and their Nation. **This is what Cree Nation building means. This is what will keep our young people with us, to grow and prosper in our communities. This is the future of the Cree Nation – an exciting challenge.**

**F. CONCLUSION**

32. On the theme of partnership, I have the impression that I have been **preaching to the converted** here with the Cree Health Board. More than that, I have the impression that the **Cree Health Board has much to teach** us all in your recognition of the need to work with both Cree and external partners, and in your proactive approach to building partnerships and making them work.
33. So I will conclude by simply **encouraging the Cree Health Board to continue the fine work already started** in building partnerships for the benefit of the Cree Nation. It goes without saying that you can count on the **full and enthusiastic support** of the Cree Nation Government. Please do not hesitate to call on me or any of our Department Directors if we can be of any assistance at all in this exciting effort.

Meegwetch.