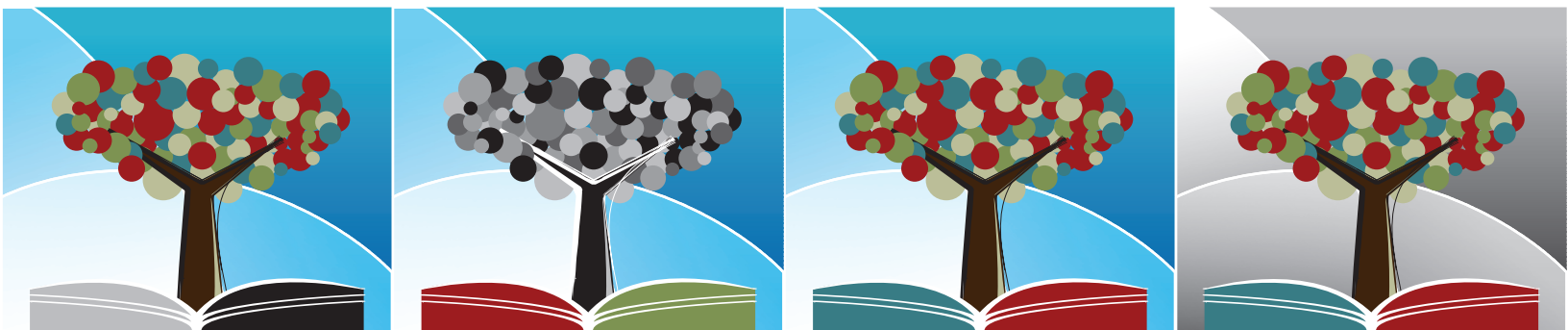


K N O W L E D G E   D E V E L O P M E N T   C E N T R E



# Guidelines for the Recruitment and Retention of Aboriginal Women Volunteers

Handbook

Brandy Mowatt and Jacqueline Young  
Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women  
(IAAW)

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The logo for Canada, featuring the word "Canada" in a serif font with a small Canadian flag icon above the letter "a".

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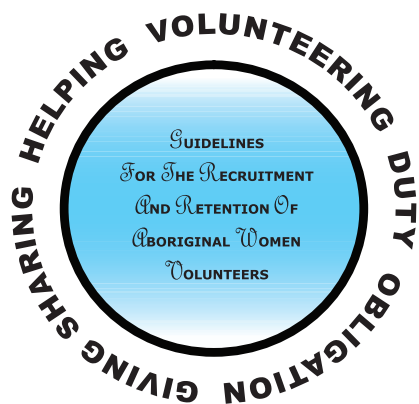
# Acknowledgements

The Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women (IAAW) is a nonprofit organization composed of Aboriginal women dedicated to their own promotion, improvement, and self-fulfillment within the concept of self-government and their own community.

The Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women extends its sincerest gratitude to the 99 women who participated in the gathering sessions, case studies, and focus group that formed the basis of this handbook. We would not have been able to produce this resource without their wisdom and guidance. We would also like to thank the following organizations for graciously providing facilities for the gathering sessions and the focus group: Native Network (Calgary, Alberta), Mission Indian Friendship

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We are grateful to the excellent research conducted by Brandy Mowatt and Jacqueline Young. Special thanks to Doreen Crapeau, who helped “break the ice” in the Northwest Territories, and to the many other women who contributed to this study. We trust this handbook will be useful for many endeavours within our community.



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# Guidelines for the Recruitment and Retention of Aboriginal Women Volunteers

## Why we wrote this handbook

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The Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women's (IAAW) main objective for this handbook is to further increase recruitment, recognition, and retention of Aboriginal women volunteers. We hope that this handbook will show organizations the advantages and benefits of including Aboriginal women volunteers. The information provided in this handbook is based on the ideas of the Aboriginal women who participated in the gathering sessions that we held across Canada in 2005.

## How we developed this handbook

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We used gathering sessions, case studies, and a focus group to learn about the experiences of Aboriginal women volunteers, to gather the perspectives of Aboriginal women who had successfully recruited and work with Aboriginal women volunteers, and to get feedback and suggestions on this handbook from Aboriginal women.

### Gathering sessions

We held gathering sessions to bring together Aboriginal women volunteers in a safe and non-threatening environment so that they could share their volunteering experiences. We ensured that their confidentiality was protected at all times and that they

could speak freely and frankly. In order to represent the diversity of Canadian Aboriginal women, we held nine gathering sessions involving 77 Aboriginal women in urban, rural, and First Nations communities across Canada between January and March 2006 in:

- Alberta – Edmonton and Calgary
- British Columbia – Vancouver and Mission
- Northwest Territories – Rae and Yellowknife
- Manitoba – Winnipeg
- Nova Scotia – Halifax and Millbrook.

Our research was designed to be progressive and interactive from beginning to end and to foster fairness, reciprocity, equanimity, and enjoyment. We stressed the importance of participation to participants because they are the experts and we were simply there to guide discussion and record their voices so that they could make their concerns heard, pass along the lessons they had learned, and share their stories. Participants in the gathering sessions provided the basis and outline for this handbook by bringing to light the major topics and themes that the handbook would cover.

### Case studies

After we reviewed the information presented at the gathering sessions, we decided that more questions needed to be answered so we spoke with six Aboriginal women from across Canada who were

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familiar with recruiting volunteers and asked them for their opinions. We asked them to review the outline of the handbook that we had developed based on information obtained at the gathering sessions. Their input and suggestions were used to further develop the handbook.

## Focus group

The final step in the development of the handbook was a focus group that we held with 16 Aboriginal women. We asked them to review and edit the first draft of the handbook. This final version of the handbook incorporates their suggestions.

## Background

A participant in one of our gathering sessions pointed out that it is “taboo in our nation if someone asks you for help, not to help.” Helping out family, the community, and those around one is culturally and personally significant for Aboriginal women. This idea was brought forward in every gathering session. Many of the Aboriginal women we spoke with felt the need to give their time and share their knowledge in order to show proper respect for their traditions and to fulfill community obligations. Organizations that want to involve Aboriginal women volunteers should keep this in mind; let these volunteers teach you the significance of sharing and giving that is inherent in Aboriginal culture.

*“We operate from a holistic community perspective and women are an integral part of our family and are seen as assets and highly regarded. By providing opportunities for Aboriginal women to volunteer, they become part of the family; they take ownership in what services or programs are being delivered in our Aboriginal communities or organizations.”*

*(Gathering session participant)*

## What do we mean by volunteering?

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For the purpose of this handbook, it is important to distinguish between different types of volunteering and the different ways of referring to volunteering in Aboriginal communities. There are two types of volunteering. Formal volunteering is a structured activity to assist the community and is often done under the supervision of and on behalf of a registered nonprofit or voluntary organization. Informal volunteering is usually a non-structured activity in which people assist others or contribute to their community as needed on their own, without working through an organization.

The Aboriginal women who participated in the gathering sessions related better to the notion of giving their time rather than to the term volunteering. The notion of giving time applies equally to formal and informal volunteering. Participants described volunteering in many different ways. The terms that came up most often were duty, obligation, helping out, giving time, responsibility, and giving back.

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## Recruiting Aboriginal women volunteers

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### Ask for help

By far the most effective means for recruiting Aboriginal women volunteers is simply to ask them. In a culture where community is highly valued, making the effort to personally ask for someone's help has more meaning and will afford you with a higher response rate to your request for people to help out. Also, if you have contacts in an Aboriginal community, use them. Ask whomever you know who may have ties to an Aboriginal community to introduce you to people in that community. This shows respect and will lend you credibility. Once you have been introduced to people, you can ask if they are interested in helping you out or if they know of someone who would be interested. Word of mouth can take you a long way. If you do not have any contacts, try Band offices, friendship centres, cultural centres, advocacy groups, or seniors' centres. It would be prudent to explain who you are and your interest in contacting Aboriginal women to help out. For example, you may want to explain how their values and sense of community would inspire cohesion and respect within your own organization and so make it more effective in achieving its mission. The women who participated in the development of this handbook emphasized that regardless of how you make contact, as long as you let people know where the need is, they will come.

*“Invite prospective volunteers to functions, events, and activities that you are hosting; let them get to know you and your organization; give them the opportunity to get involved; ask them if they would like to volunteer or help out the next time you have need of volunteers. Sometimes people do not know how to get involved and it is as simple as asking for their help.” (Gathering session participant)*

Advertisements in community newspapers are a good way to get the word out, as are flyers and sign-up sheets posted in local grocery stores, arenas, friendship centres, health centres, cultural centres, seniors' centres, or administrative centres.

Keep your recruitment message simple, clear, and concise. Explain:

- what your organization does,
- what you need volunteers for,
- how long you need volunteers for,
- when you need volunteers,
- where they will be helping out, and
- what their duties will be.

Avoid using the word “volunteering.” People will be more receptive to terms such as “helping out,” and “giving your time.”

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## Show respect and thoughtfulness

The Aboriginal women in our gathering sessions stressed the importance of showing respect and thoughtfulness. For example, you should do the following:

1. Give plenty of notice beforehand so that prospective volunteers can plan ahead.
2. Offer to provide help with transportation (e.g., reimburse volunteers for parking, bus or taxi fare, or help to arrange car pooling); lack of transportation is often a barrier to volunteering.
3. Let volunteers know that it is fine to bring their children along. Bringing children along is common practice and is seen as common sense in the Aboriginal community. Many Aboriginal women explained that if you allow us to bring our children, it will foster in them a sense of responsibility and community. Moreover, allowing children to help out will eliminate recruitment for future generations because they will already be there. If, for whatever reason, having children around would be inappropriate, provide child care.
4. After you have made initial contact with an Aboriginal woman and she is interested in coming to volunteer for your organization, send a personal letter of invitation. This will show that you are willing to take the time for her and will foster reciprocity. Thank her for her commitment to help out, reiterate place and times and provide any extra needed information such as directions, where to park, whether food or refreshments will be available etc.

## Explaining the benefits

Be sure to tell prospective volunteers the benefit of “helping out.” Explain the importance of what they have to offer. Giving people the opportunity to give their time and share their knowledge, life experiences, and skills with others can instill great pride. Let them know “what’s in it for them.” Sometimes the payoffs are not readily apparent and listing them opens people’s eyes and compels them to participate. For example, you should explain some of the potential benefits such as learning employment-related skills, meeting new people, networking, satisfaction after a job well done, and, of course, helping a good cause.



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## The importance of Elders

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When you are recruiting Aboriginal volunteers, it is good practice to involve an Elder right from the start. Elders can offer guidance on whom you can contact for help. They provide a level of comfort, as their wisdom and knowledge serves to guide and protect and can help to ensure smooth interaction between Aboriginal volunteers and your organization. It is imperative that when you bring an Elder on board, you treat them with the utmost respect. You must find out the proper protocols to follow, as each Aboriginal culture differs.

A first step in learning about diversity of Aboriginal people may involve checking the Internet to find out such things as: the names of First Nations groups in your area, what reserves they inhabit, their traditional names and languages, and perhaps what treaty they reside in. Also, by looking up Aboriginal events you can find out what traditions, ceremonies, or festivals are held in your area e.g. round dances, potlatch, powwows, music and art festivals etc. More importantly, attend some of these festivities to see, hear, and experience Aboriginal culture and meet volunteers.

### Who are Elders?

In Aboriginal cultures, Elders are recognized as having great wisdom. They act as spiritual guides and as authorities on important family and community matters. They are also teachers of tradition and language. Because of this, Elders provide balance and harmony in their communities, are held in great esteem, and are treated with the utmost respect.

### How do you contact an Elder?

If you do not have an established relationship with an Elder, you can make contact through an intermediary (e.g., a family member, an Elder assistant, a helper, or an assigned community member). An intermediary will facilitate your interaction with the Elder and will translate, if necessary. When you invite the Elder to a function or meeting, always invite the intermediary, too. If you need a referral to an intermediary, contact an Aboriginal community organization (e.g., a Friendship Centre).

### How do you treat an Elder?

It is very important to be respectful to the Elder whom you have contacted. Show humility. Do not be aggressive or overbearing. Always listen to what they are saying and follow their direction. If you are unsure what they are telling you, seek clarification. Always ask permission for your questions. For example, always preface a request with something like, “May I ask you a question about...” Be prepared for them to decline to answer if the question is too personal or too direct (National Aboriginal Health Organization, n.d.).

Provide transportation whenever you invite Elders to your organization. Always ask whether or not they will be bringing an assistant or intermediary. If they are not, ask if they would like you to arrange one for them.

At the very least, you should provide the Elder with food and refreshments. In Aboriginal communities, eating together is a social event that allows people to talk with one another and connect in a relaxed atmosphere. If food is going to be provided, make sure that the Elder is served first (give Elders the choice of being served or helping themselves). After the Elder has been served, serve the intermediary or assistant.

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Show your respect by welcoming the Elder with a gift. If you are unsure of what type of traditional gift to give, you can give something that is not traditional – be creative. As with all people, it is the thought that counts. For First Nations Elders and some Métis Elders, tobacco is a typical offering:

*“Tobacco is one of the four sacred plants. The other three are sweet grass, sage, and cedar. A gift of tobacco is sometimes offered in recognition of the wisdom the Elder will share. Tobacco can be given as cigarettes, pouch tobacco, or tobacco ties (loose tobacco wrapped in a small square cloth). Offering tobacco to an Elder establishes a relationship between you and the Elder... Inuit Elders do not expect a tobacco offering. Tobacco is not used ceremonially in Inuit culture. [However] a small gift may be offered in appreciation for the Elder’s time and assistance.”*

(National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2006, p.2)

*“Although there have been times when a Métis Elder in our community has been offered tobacco, to some this is not a comfortable situation and I recommend to those wishing the services of a Métis Elder to offer a gift instead. I have found that many of our Métis Elders in our community have strong ties to the church and not to traditional First Nations ceremonies and teachings.”* (participant)

*“Because our Elders are an integral part of our community and provide guidance and direction into our organizations and service delivery, in addition to the numerous volunteering activities they do, we recognize their commitments and we honour our Elders every year with an Elders Appreciation Banquet. The Elders that consistently volunteer throughout the year are given a special presentation at the banquet. We also do Elders Appreciation teas and luncheons throughout the year.”* (participant)

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## Retaining Aboriginal women volunteers

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Volunteer retention is a complex and on going process that requires forethought, planning, and commitment. The retention practices that are covered in this section include respecting diversity, ensuring a comfortable and fun atmosphere, building relationships, offering support and encouragement, and showing appreciation.

### Respect for diversity

Participants at our gathering sessions pointed out that Aboriginal women come from many different backgrounds and that there are many differences in community, traditions, history, culture, spirituality, language, and protocol. This means that when you are working with Aboriginal women volunteers, you should:

- keep an open mind and remain non-judgemental,
- be genuine and approachable,
- be mindful of the cultural mores associated with gender and age, and
- treat each individual with esteem and respect.

By respecting the differences among Aboriginal women, you not only foster a safe and friendly environment but you also model behavior for those around you. This allows Aboriginal women to feel proud of their differences and unique perspectives, and gives them an avenue to share their knowledge and experiences, teach others about their own culture, and show how their culture is distinctive from other cultures (including other Aboriginal cultures). As one of the Elders in our case studies explained, “Wisdom isn’t wisdom unless you share it.” A sure way to learn about these differences is to ask. Ask about

their family, kids, where they grew up, what they like to do...the same questions you would ask of anyone.

### Comfortable and fun environment

If you provide comfortable and fun environment, volunteers will keep returning to your organization whenever you need their help. It is common sense that people who have fun while working, get along better with the people they are working with. By increasing the fun factor of your organization, you reduce tension among your volunteers. Brainstorm with your volunteers for ideas on ways to make the atmosphere fun. Having fun, laughing, and building a relaxed atmosphere is a part of community building. It allows people to feel comfortable, safe, and most importantly happy. Aboriginal women have strong ties to their communities and humour has always provided relief in difficult times. To smile and laugh at life in times of stress is without question a virtue.

Be mindful that some women, whether Aboriginal or not, find it uncomfortable to work closely with men. Be careful to keep your volunteers in a safe and non-threatening environment.

Be sensitive to your volunteers’ needs by scheduling break times. Let volunteers know when they can expect their break. Provide snacks and beverages and allow enough time for volunteers to take care of other matters if necessary. You must keep in mind that there is a rise of diabetes among Aboriginal people, therefore it not only important to provide healthy snacks, but allow for breaks that are long enough for someone to administer insulin as well as relax or have a bite to eat.

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## Building relationships

In a confidential binder, keep track of important personal information about your volunteers, for example, names of family members, important dates (e.g., birthday, anniversary), and hobbies and favourite activities. This will help you get to know your volunteers better, show that you are interested in them as people, not just as volunteers, and will lead to an enhanced relationship with them. Aboriginal women also have close community ties: they have grown up in communities where you know everyone and virtually everything there is to know about them. To be uninformed about another person's life shows disregard. So it is important to be informed and show your concern so that you too can help out if needed.

## Support and encouragement

In all Aboriginal communities, Elders are at the core of decision making, and stability. They provide knowledge, assurance, guidance, and faith through mentoring. This style of learning, of having a mentor, is what these women know and respect. A mentoring program can be beneficial to both new and veteran volunteers. Providing mentors to new volunteers ensures that they have someone to turn to for advice, help, and support. It also encourages a sense of community among your volunteers. Asking an established volunteer to be a mentor shows that you recognize and trust their strengths and abilities, and respect them enough to ask them to share their gifts. Giving volunteers an opportunity to share their knowledge and skills fosters pride. In general, with regard to support and encouragement, a nonprofit organization staff member must use common sense, be respectful, and most importantly be culturally aware in order to effectively engage Aboriginal women volunteers.

Make sure that you give volunteers ownership over their task so they are more inclined to do it well and take pride in what they are doing. Allowing a person to make decisions and put their own ideas into action instills confidence and trust which is very important in the Aboriginal context. Again, it is about community building.

## Appreciation

Volunteers are more likely to remain with your organization if they feel that their contribution is appreciated. There are many ways to show appreciation. Foremost on the list of the women who participated in our gathering sessions was simply saying thank you. Certificates can be used to acknowledge the special contributions of your volunteers. A fun way to include all of your volunteers is to have them come up with categories for certificates (e.g., "Best Sense of Humour" or "Perpetual Smiler") so every volunteer receives one.

Letters of appreciation are a good way of showing your gratitude. Volunteers can include these in their portfolios when they apply for paid employment or other volunteering positions. If appropriate, you can also offer to write letters of reference for volunteers who are seeking paid employment. Be sure that you can honestly write that the person requesting the letter has positive attributes and characteristics. If you cannot do this, gracefully decline. If you agree to write a letter of reference, talk with the volunteer to make sure you are giving the type of recommendation they need.

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A participant in our research shared her organization's experience with showing appreciation: *"We host summer Volunteer Appreciation BBQ's; we nominate them for community awards; we give out gifts or flowers in recognition of their volunteerism; we invite them to cultural events and on field trips; and we say thank you at every opportunity."* Be creative in obtaining small perks to pass on to your volunteers. Ask companies and businesses in your community to donate free tickets, passes, or small gift items that you can use to recognize the contributions of your volunteers.

Follow-ups will provide an opportunity to say hello and thank you and to keep in touch with your volunteers. This is a good time to interject with some of the personal information you gleaned while getting to know them. This shows that you have taken the time to learn something about them and that you care enough about them to take the time to call. Use this opportunity to ask for their suggestions and feedback in a unobtrusive, and non-threatening manner. As well, inform them of upcoming opportunities and give them the chance to offer their time rather than you just calling to ask them for help. If your volunteers feel a personal connection to you they will be more likely to return to help your organization in the future. Again, these steps are a part of relationship and community building, by keeping in touch with your volunteers, you are building a lasting relationship.

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## Training Aboriginal women volunteers

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All volunteers must be properly prepared for their volunteer assignments. Not only does this ensure that they can successfully complete the assignment, but it will also boost their confidence and increase the chances that they will continue to volunteer. Preparation should consist of an orientation to the organization and the volunteer assignment and any training that the volunteer will need to successfully carry out her assignment. Remember, you are recruiting women who may only be familiar with the cultural rules and regulations within their own community, where the social atmosphere is often more relaxed than in non-Aboriginal communities. Therefore, you must make the rules and regulations of your organization clear in order to save Aboriginal women volunteers embarrassment. For example in their own community it may be fine to wear jeans and a t-shirt to help out – if this is not the case in your organization they will not come prepared and feel out of place.

Orientation should include:

1. an introduction to your organization;
2. an explanation of the duties of volunteers and what is expected from them;
3. an introduction to the people volunteers will be working with, including the executive director of the organization;
4. volunteer procedures (e.g., sign-in, evaluation, etc.) and protocols (dress code, Volunteer Code of Conduct);

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5. who can be contacted to answer any questions or discuss any concerns; and
  6. an explanation of why volunteers are important to the organization and how their contribution makes a difference.

Give volunteers a copy of the Volunteer Code of Conduct (if your organization has one).<sup>1</sup> Provide them with written descriptions of their volunteer assignments. Allow plenty of time to answer questions and discuss concerns. Have pens and paper on hand so that volunteers can make notes. Serve refreshments and allow time for socializing.

If you are bringing in a group of new volunteers and budget permits, then set up the training session as a retreat or a conference. This will instill respect, pride, and enthusiasm from the beginning of volunteers' relationship with your organization.

After volunteers are oriented to your organization, they need training to prepare them for their volunteer assignments. The most popular method of training among Aboriginal women is mentoring. Have new volunteers "job shadow" their mentor. Mentors should encourage new volunteers to ask questions and share concerns.

Training can be stressful, especially if there is a lot to learn. Alleviate stress by creating a comfortable, community environment. One way to do this is to have Elders present. Make training creative, interesting, and motivating. The best way to do this is to actively involve the volunteers in the learning and training process instead of having them just listen and read handouts.

In addition to preparing volunteers for their assignments, training can be an important incentive to volunteers and can equip them with valuable knowledge and skills that volunteers can apply to other areas of their lives. Consider offering CPR/First Aid Certification, food safety or management classes. Many Aboriginal women do not have the opportunity to learn professional skills as their communities are often isolated or insular so even being able to take a computer class or typing class is beneficial and appreciated. With regard to cultural orientation to a non-Aboriginal environment, Métis family services or First Nations Friendship Centres can assist in this process by providing a culturally comfortable environment to learn in before they undertake volunteer activities.

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<sup>1</sup> Visit the Volunteer Canada website to learn more about volunteer codes of conduct and other volunteer management issues: [www.volunteer.ca](http://www.volunteer.ca).

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## Conflict resolution

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Conflict is inevitable in any organization. The important thing is successfully resolving conflicts as promptly as possible and in a constructive way that allows all parties to come to a mutual understanding.

Talking and healing circles are an effective means for conflict resolution in the Aboriginal community. A talking circle allows participant to talk, vent, and heal. Talking circles are initiated by an individual or group of people who are in conflict with another individual or group of people and are looking for resolution and guidance.

Here's how it works. Begin by arranging a time and a place to hold the talking circle. Invite everyone involved with the conflict, even people who are only slightly involved. You should try to arrange for an Elder to be present at the talking circle; they will provide a sacred object for the talking. If you do not have an Elder present to provide a sacred object; a stick can be used.

The stick has been used for centuries in talking circles. It empowers the person holding the stick to speak without interruption, or attack. It allows them to say what they need to say and not be ignored or discredited. The stick is a tool which aids in resolution and allows the speaker to feel safe. An Elder may also have everyone smudge before commencing. This is a cleansing ritual where usually sweetgrass or sage is burned. The significance is to purify people and objects. Anyone can decline to participate if they are not comfortable. Have everyone sit in a circle, either on the floor or in chairs and let them begin the talking circle with a prayer followed by a moment of silence. If an Elder is not present, still have a moment of silence;

this allows participants to gather their thoughts and prepare to speak. An Elder will speak first while holding the stick. When the Elder is finished, he or she passes the stick to the person on the left. That person then speaks and passes the object to the left again. Everyone is given the opportunity to speak without interruption, and everything that is said remains confidential. *"This encourages a safe atmosphere and allows people to get out their thoughts without fear of retribution."* (participant)

People continue to express their thoughts one by one, passing the stick when they are finished. If the conflict has not been resolved in four rounds of the stick, you will need to try another method of conflict resolution. It may be wise to hold a talking circle once a month to maintain harmony and diffuse gossip and conflict before it occurs.

If a talking or healing circle does not resolve the conflict, or if the individual or groups in conflict do not want to hold a talking or healing circle, contact an Elder to help sort out the problem. If you involve an Elder, be sure to follow correct Elder protocol: arrange for an Elder assistant, provide transportation and food, and offer a small gift as a token of appreciation (see page 5).

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## Final points

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It is in your best interest when reviewing and using this handbook to always keep in mind that Aboriginal women across Canada come from varying cultures and communities. Showing an interest in learning what these differences are is the first step in including Aboriginal women in your organization. And don't be afraid to ask about these differences. If you take an interest, they will take an interest in your activities and organization. Learning first-hand is the best way to gain acceptance and trust and thus open doors for future collaboration. Making the effort to include Aboriginal women in your organization will require effort and determination. Going into Aboriginal communities and asking for help may even feel daunting. But the benefits will more than make up for it. You are giving yourself and your organization the chance to learn from these women, to learn values that many of us have lost such as the value of community, the value of difference, the value of our Elders, the value of respect, and the value of helping. You will be doing what few people do – simply asking for help. What you will get is a gift. In turn, you are giving Aboriginal women the opportunity to teach their values and protocols, to be heard, and more importantly to be respected outside of the Aboriginal community. And this will be your gift to them.

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## Additional information

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### Aboriginal communities across Canada

- For a complete listing of Canada's First Nations, Reservations, and Métis Settlements visit Aboriginal Canada Portal at <http://www.aboriginalcanada.gc.ca/acp/site.nsf/en/index.html>
- For a complete listing of Canada's First Nations and contact information visit the First Nation Information Project at <http://www.aboriginalcanada.com/firstnation/>
- For a complete listing of the Métis Nations contact information visit the Métis National Council Homepage (Links) <http://www.metisnation.ca/>

### Friendship centres across Canada

- For a complete Listing of Friendship Centres across Canada, visit the Alberta Native Friendship Centres Association web page at <http://www.albertafriendshipcentres.ca/index.htm>



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