

Residential school survivors need clinical and cultural care, advocates urge



'What really should be happening is that clinical and cultural workers should be working together'

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More than 150,000 First Nations children were forced to attend residential schools, and an estimated 6,000 died there. Organizations working to help survivors and their families in the North say more clinical workers should work with community-based healers to better serve people. (Department of Indian and Northern Affairs/Library and Archives Canada)

Trauma counsellors from Northern Canada gathered in Ottawa this week to talk about combining clinical therapy with cultural healing to better help residential school survivors and their families.

The three-day training event was organized by the Ilisqsiq Society — an organization based in Nunavut that helps residential school survivors — and the Department of Indigenous Services.

More than 75 counsellors from various organizations across Nunavut, the Northwest Territories and the Yukon came to share ideas and learn new ways to help people suffering from

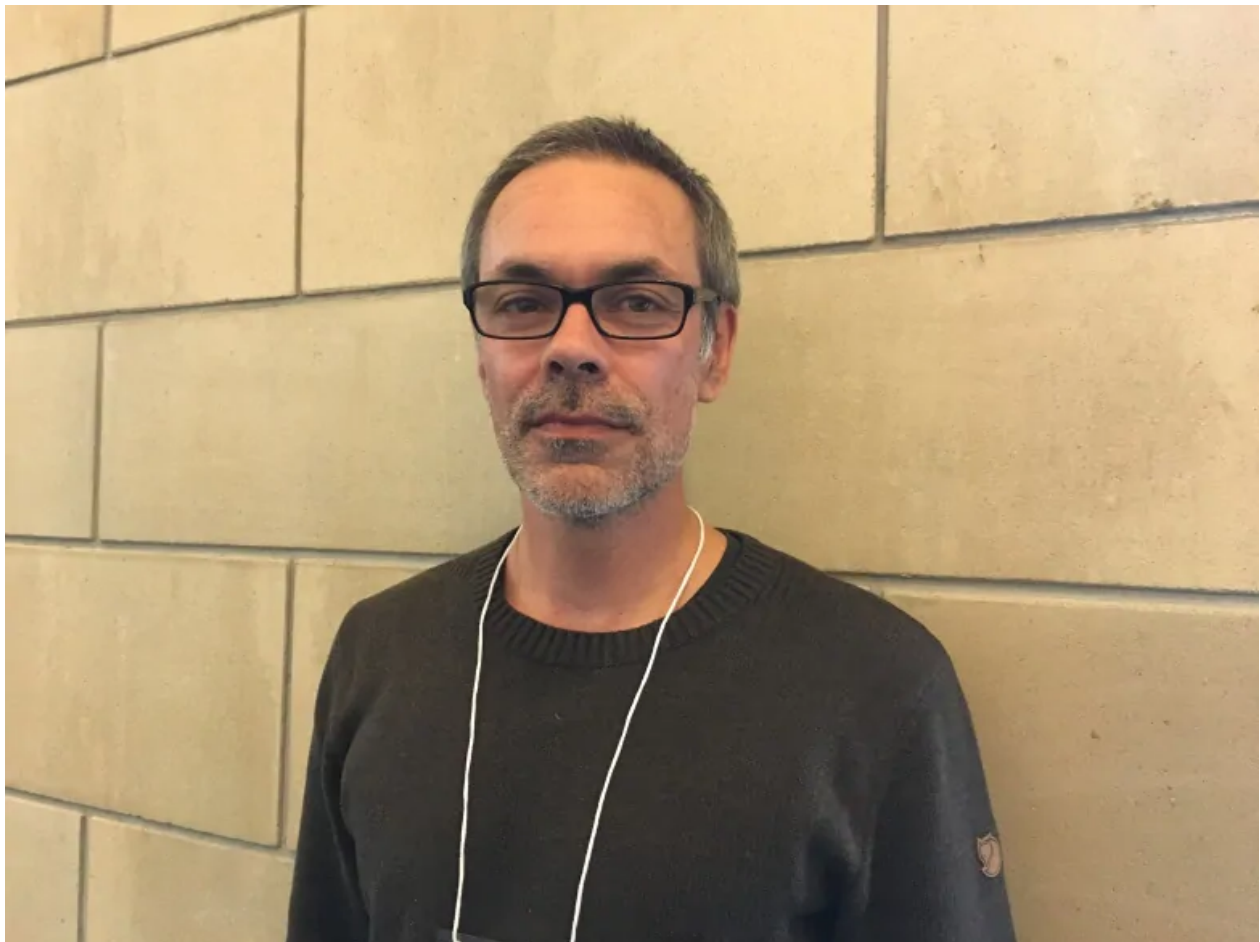
trauma.

"In mental health work [it often happens] that cultural, community-based workers and clinical workers don't work side by side," said Jakob Gearheard, executive director of the Illisaqsivik Society.

'Close to useless'

In the past, mental health services in the North comprised of the government "flying someone in with some credentials" only to see them leave later on, Gearheard said.

That system isn't consistent enough to help people with deep trauma, he said, adding he has seen the negative impacts it can have on both the community and the workers themselves.



Jakob Gearheard, executive director of the Illisaqsivik Society in Nunavut, said his organization has teamed up cultural counsellors with clinical psychologists to better meet the needs of residential school survivors in the North. (Aislinn May)

"They might have all the training in the world, they might be the best psychologist ever, but if they fly into the community where they don't understand the culture or the language, they're close to useless," Gearheard said.

That's why Gearheard believes partnering clinical workers, like psychologists, with cultural counsellors from the community would make a difference for people.

"What really should be happening is that clinical and cultural workers should be working together for the benefit of the client. It's all about providing a more holistic service because nobody has all the answers," he said.

'Best of both worlds'

Ilisqsiq Society is already doing it.

For the the past year-and-a-half, the organization has combined its trauma team, comprised of Inuit counsellors, with psychologists and social workers from an organization further south called Northern Counselling.



Pitsiulaaq Akavak, a cultural counsellor for the Ilisqsiq Society, said it's a good idea to bring counsellors like herself and clinical workers together, but that more resources are required. (Aislinn May/CBC)

They go to different communities together and work as an integrated team to offer support, he said, "so we are basically offering the best of both worlds."

Bringing clinical workers into the mix is important because counsellors often go into traumatic situations and might not have the skills needed to deal with suicides, or to diagnose someone with a mental health disorder, Gearheard said.

High demand, lack of resources

Pitsiulaaq Akavak, a counsellor for Ilisaqsivik Society's trauma team, said she thinks it's a good solution.

"We have been saying this for many years. It's always best to work together," she said.

She did say, however, that there continues to be a lack of resources and communication, on top of a very high demand for counsellors.

Akavak added that clinical workers should take an interest in the language and the culture of northern communities.

There have been mixed reactions about combining these services together, including positivity and fear of change, according to Gearheard.

One of the biggest challenges is the power difference between community-based counsellors and clinical workers.

Power struggles, tension

Many clinical workers come to the North with university degrees, secure government jobs, large salaries and pensions, which can cause power struggles and tension when counsellors don't have those things, Gearheard said.

He added the tension can also go the other way, when clinical workers don't speak the language or know the culture, making them feel isolated.

"It's a huge challenge and it's a huge barrier to working together," he said.

Despite the issues, Gearheard said he feels it's the right time to work together and move forward to provide better care for Indigenous people and their communities.