



CNIB
RECONCILIATION
The Way Forward

Stronger Together



Stronger Together: Indigenous Strategy and Engagement

Year in Review 2023/24

In this report, we highlight **CNIB, Deafblind Community Services (DBCS)** and **Vision Loss Rehabilitation Canada (VLRC)** organizational achievements, internal activities, key learnings, and ongoing initiatives that have strengthened our commitment to holding our organizations accountable for its role in reconciliation by ensuring the work we do is built on relationships, partnerships and guidance with First Nations, Métis and Inuit people.

Together, we will break down barriers that Indigenous Peoples who are blind, Deafblind or low vision face as a marginalized segment of the population.

Our path to truth and reconciliation

CNIB is committed to building a welcoming, supportive community for Indigenous Peoples through collaboration and engagement with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities from coast to coast to coast.

It's all part of our truth and reconciliation journey and strengthening our commitment to the 94 Calls to Action by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

We're taking this journey with support and guidance from Tawi:ne Consulting Inc., an Indigenous-owned company specializing in Indigenous engagement and consultation, policy and governance, and capacity development, and our Indigenous Strategy Committee.

To help guide our work with Indigenous communities, CNIB created a new position: Lead, Community Outreach (Indigenous and Rural Communities). Meghan Mahon has been overseeing this area of work since September 2023. Her primary role is to build relationships with Indigenous communities while promoting CNIB, VLRC and DBCS programs and services in the spirit of Stronger Together, our principles for organizational collaboration.

Launching our reconciliation action plan

Last year, CNIB formally launched Reconciliation - The Way Forward, with measurable targets and specific actions to hold us accountable for this important work.

Since then, we have begun implementing the steps outlined in the action plan. As it relates to maximizing impact for Indigenous Peoples who are blind or partially sighted, we've worked with organizations and communities nationwide to identify gaps in program delivery and work toward addressing them through direct and indirect service. We're enhancing existing programs, including our CNIB Mobile Hub offerings, while developing new initiatives that are co-created to engage more Indigenous participants, and establishing meaningful relationships in rural communities.

We recognize that we cannot carry out this important work alone and need to develop purposeful allyship to ensure it is successful and intentional. This commitment is evident in our sharing of resources with sister organizations, participating in community events, and presenting externally about our reconciliation efforts and how other non-profits can begin their own journeys.

The launch of CNIB's reconciliation action plan has formed the foundation for the work we've accomplished in the past year and will continue to strive toward for years to come.

Iconography

With the launch of Reconciliation - The Way Forward, we required a visual representation of this plan that represented Indigenous Peoples.

We collaborated with Haida artist, April White, from Haida Gwaii in British Columbia and Mi'kmaq artist, Lorne Julien, from Millbrook First Nation in Truro, Nova Scotia, to collaboratively design a piece with meaning that signifies CNIB's journey toward reconciliation. The icon in its entirety holds representation of Indigenous Peoples across Canada.



The meaning behind the art

The icon is encompassed in a yellow circle to represent a Potlatch ring, coming full circle and to represent the four directions. A chief would receive a ring for each Potlatch that his clan hosted. These Potlatches, which represented a cultural supreme court and a means for oral histories to be carried forward, were banned in an effort to prevent Indigenous Peoples from gathering in large numbers and prevent the growth of culture and traditions.

The bottom half of the ring shows waves flowing from left to right and right to left. The waves represent the Pacific Ocean (left curling right) and the Atlantic Ocean (right curling left). In the middle of these waves sits an eye in black and white.

The eye represents being witness. The top eyelid symbolizes the soil across Canada, while the inner crescent in the iris represents the Canadian Shield, a solid plutonic rock coming up from below. The style used is identifiable to the Haida peoples of the West

Coast. It is perceived in Haida culture that islands or land are floating on the ocean, and the sea of yellow paired with the eye signifies a different way of seeing the world.

In the upper half of the inner circle above the eye sits an eight-point star, outlined in black and filled yellow. There are different versions of how the star came about. A fact is that the petroglyph was found in Bedford (near Halifax) and that the eight-pointed star is often used in designs and crafts to represent the Mi'kmaq people, L'nu'k (the people).

The meaning behind the art (cont'd)

Placed in the star's centre is an eagle head in white, outlined in black. The eagle is a symbol of respect, love, honour, strength, courage, and wisdom. The eagle is seen to be sacred as it flies closest to the creator. To receive an eagle feather means you are held in the highest respect. The feathers are also used to smudge and bless people, places, things, and gatherings. Typically, these feathers are earned or gifted.

Lastly, under the yellow ring sits a double curve mosaic design with a plant in the centre. This symbol is highly recognizable and related to Mi'kmaq arts and crafts. Used over many generations, the interpretation is of Mother Earth and nature. Each curve can represent plant life that holds a high significance to the people in terms of harvesting food, sacred medicines, and traditional healing properties.

Developing partnerships

Following the launch of the action plan, we became members of the Canadian Council for Indigenous Business and have begun the work toward achieving partnership accreditation in their Indigenous Relations certification program.

This program allows us to continue our journey towards reconciliation through an accountability program and access resources and networks within the Indigenous and Non-Indigenous business sectors. A critical part of this partnership has been revising our internal recruitment and procurement policies and working to boost Indigenous representation in these areas across all regions.



Community engagement highlights

Being visible and present within the community is a key component of reconciliation. As we expand our reach, we've been executing several strategies to make our organization more inclusive and representative of Indigenous Peoples, including building relationships with Indigenous service organizations and co-creating programs tailored to Indigenous participants.

By fostering relationships on behalf CNIB, DBCS and VLRC with the Wabanaki Council on Disability and Mawita'mk Society (Atlantic), and the Tsuut'ina Nation (Alberta), we've had the opportunity to participate in two memorable community events.

In March 2024, the Wabanaki Council on Disability and Mawita'mk Society hosted the Hearing Their Voices conference, which brought together Indigenous Peoples with all disabilities to take part in workshops, increase awareness of accessibility and discuss the need for increased tailored service. At the conference, CNIB was recognized as a partner in accessibility through conversations addressing the needs and considerations of participants who are blind or have low vision and by creating awareness about programs and services available to people impacted by blindness. Our team's participation in the conference led to valuable learnings about Mi'kmaw culture, including traditional perspectives, ceremonies and healing.



In July 2024, The Tsuut'ina Nation hosted a unique opportunity for those with special abilities (disabilities) to take part in traditional celebrations at their annual powwow through their special abilities dance category. All peoples with special abilities were welcome to join this dance and compete, feeling the strong meaning that celebration and traditional dance bring to Indigenous culture. The newly established category saw roughly 25-30 participants compete and brought awareness to other nations of the importance of inclusion. CNIB was a proud supporter of the 2024 Tsuut'ina National Powwow: Special Abilities Dance through a monetary contribution and Meghan Mahon served as a judge at the event.

Vision Loss Rehabilitation Canada

Non-insured health benefits for First Nations and Inuit

The Non-Insured Health Benefits (NIHB) is a federal program that provides eligible First Nation and Inuit clients with coverage for a range of health benefits that are not covered through other social programs, private insurance plans and provincial or territorial health insurance.

Until recently, this program provided limited benefits for eligible persons who are blind or partially sighted. CNIB SmartLife and VLRC, in partnership with Indigenous Services Canada (ISC), advocated to expand the NIHB formulary, allowing for the addition of a wider range of devices and services under the Low Vision Equipment and Supplies Benefits. Additionally, Indigenous Services

Canada recognized the certification of vision rehabilitation specialists to prescribe services and devices.

With these important changes, First Nation and Inuit clients will have improved access to these health benefits through VLRC and will be able to receive prescribed equipment and devices from CNIB SmartLife.

Mi'kmaw Client Care Navigator

As part of VLRC's commitment to building partnerships and gaining trust with First Nation communities, the Nova Scotia operations team has added a client care position to support Indigenous clients with accessing services.

The new Mi'kmaw Client Care Navigator position has been instrumental in VLRC meeting with the health directors of Nova Scotia's 13 Mi'kmaw First Nation communities and attending numerous community meetings and presentations throughout the province.

In addition to Indigenous outreach, the Client Care Navigator also supports staff training and development on topics of Indigenous history and experience, which includes awareness moments at every staff meeting.



Vision Loss Rehabilitation Canada

Eye Health Screening Initiative

VLRC has continued to expand its Eye Health Screening Initiative (EHSI) with funding from the Ontario Ministry of Health. The EHSI program provides screening for eye diseases like diabetic retinopathy using portable fundus cameras and Health Canada-approved AI software in partnership with communities where access to ophthalmology is scarce.

VLRC is proud to partner with the Indigenous Diabetes Health Circle (IDHC), having signed a strategic relationship agreement to promote Indigenous diabetes wellness in the area of eye care through the EHSI program.

Our collaboration with the Indigenous Diabetes Health Circle (IDHC) has enabled this program to reach many First Nation communities throughout Ontario, and we are currently seeking similar partnerships to expand the program to additional provinces and territories across Canada.

As part of their powerful advocacy work in support of comprehensive eye exams, CNIB promotes the EHSI program in conversations with Ministries of Health and connecting with Indigenous communities and organizations.

The Eye Health Screening Initiative was recently honoured to receive the Global Techquity Award for promoting inclusion and opportunity in Health Care for digital health and AI solutions. The award was presented to VLRC at the ViVe conference in Los Angeles.



CNIB Deafblind Community Services

DBCS is committed to collaborating with CNIB and VLRC to learn best practices in Indigenous engagement through established models and continue to grow internal knowledge towards reconciliation. Our Stronger Together initiative recognizes the importance of a community-centric approach, actively involving and listening to Indigenous communities.

Through transparent communication, shared decision-making, and collective accountability, the collaboration goes beyond resource pooling; it's about building trust.

Our commitment is reinforced by ongoing cultural competency training for staff,

ensuring that engagements are conducted with a deep understanding and appreciation of Indigenous cultures and a willingness to refine our approach based on feedback from Indigenous communities, showcasing responsiveness to evolving needs and circumstances.

Stronger Together

Joint Initiatives

Referrals

CNIB, DBCS and VLRC continue to collaborate and share information, services, programs and available supports for Indigenous communities and organizations to access. These referrals are essential as we continue to identify gaps in service, expand our reach, and gain an understanding of the lived experiences of those living with the intersect of blindness and Indigenous culture.



Stronger Together

Annual learning plan

CNIB, DBCS and VLRC have worked to develop a joint Indigenous Learning Plan. This plan set out to increase education, awareness and inclusion amongst all organizations as it relates to Indigenous culture and history within Canada and to ensure truth and reconciliation are cornerstones of our internal culture.

As part of the plan, we've delivered sessions on varying topics such as the importance of land acknowledgements and Indigenous History in Canada, and we facilitated a discussion, reflection, and debrief on the topic and the use of language and Indigenous language.

All three organizations are committed to sharing resources, collaborating around best practices, and continuing to identify gaps and opportunities for organizational education.

Our joint effort to transform the Non-Insured Health Benefits program truly underscores the importance of cooperation and collaboration between CNIB, DBCS and VLRC. As our three organizations strive to develop partnerships to better serve Indigenous communities, we continue to work collaboratively to promote each distinct organization and invite each other to participate in activities and events that are mutually beneficial to the people we serve.

