

ABORIGINAL HEALTH POLICY FOR ONTARIO

What is the AHP?

The Aboriginal Health Policy (AHP) for Ontario is the first provincial health policy of its kind in Canada. The policy reflects a new relationship between the Aboriginal and provincial governments, as partners in the goal to improve the health of the Aboriginal population of Ontario, regardless of residency, status, or income level.

The AHP provides a framework from which to concretely address Aboriginal health issues. It provides broad guidelines for Aboriginal community involvement in the planning, design, implementation and evaluation of programs and services directed at the Aboriginal population across Ontario, whether on- or off-reserve.

The ultimate goal of the policy is to improve the health of the Aboriginal community through equitable access to health care, Aboriginal-specific health care facilities, improved standards of care, the provision of culturally-appropriate health services, and the promotion of a healthy environment.

How was the AHP Developed?

Development of the Aboriginal Health Policy dates back to the Ontario Ministry of Health's initial commitment, stated in its 1992 *Goals and Strategic Priorities* document, to work in partnership with Aboriginal communities and organizations in the development of a health policy to meet the specific needs of the Aboriginal population of Ontario.

A policy was needed to address a number of issues such as: lack of Aboriginal influence in health planning; lack of Aboriginal involvement in legislation affecting the Aboriginal community; a need to identify strategic priorities in Aboriginal health; a need for ongoing provincial support for Aboriginal health; and, a need to clarify provincial versus federal responsibility for Ontario's Aboriginal population.

During 1992, the health policy development process was initiated jointly by representatives of First Nation/Aboriginal organizations and the Ministry of Health, and input was sought from the Aboriginal community through consultation workshops, meetings, traditional gatherings and individual interviews.

Thirteen major issues were identified through this process, which were grouped under three strategic directions: health status; access to services; and, planning and representation.

In 1994, the final document titled, "New Directions: Aboriginal Health Policy for Ontario", was submitted and approved by the respective partners, through their specific processes.

What is Highlighted in the AHP Document?

The Aboriginal Health Policy for Ontario is guided by a conceptual framework which incorporates three interrelated concepts for understanding Aboriginal health and how to improve it, namely, the life cycle, wholistic health, and continuum of care:

The *Aboriginal life cycle* explains life through the passage of stages which are celebrated and correspond to the four directions, seasons, elements and gifts. It reflects the interdependency of individuals, families and communities, and their responsibilities to each other.

Wholistic health incorporates the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual needs of the individual, family and community.

The *continuum of care*, or healing continuum, incorporates health promotion, prevention, treatment and curative programs and services, and rehabilitation.

The AHP document organizes the different issues identified in consultation with the Aboriginal community, as well as, approaches for addressing them, under three main strategic directions: health status; access to services; and, planning and representation.

Highlights of the policy include:

- C Health care services for Aboriginal people must be planned, designed and developed by Aboriginal people and be available in locations identified by First Nation/Aboriginal communities.
- C These programs and services must respect, accept and incorporate Aboriginal

values and beliefs, and must be flexible in order to support culturally-specific approaches to community health (e.g., talking circles).

- C Both provincial and federal government resources are required to support the efforts of First Nation/Aboriginal communities to achieve optimal health, and a process is required to clarify their respective roles and responsibilities.
- C Aboriginal representation on existing mainstream health planning and governing bodies is required until Aboriginal governing structures are set up to oversee Aboriginal-designed and delivered health programs and services.
- C All programs and services must be evaluated on an ongoing basis to ensure that they continue to meet the needs of the Aboriginal community.

What are some Advantages of having a Provincial Aboriginal Health Policy?

- C The AHP has raised the profile of Aboriginal issues within the provincial Ministry of Health.
- C The AHP sets out guiding principles for governments to deal with Aboriginal health issues, which must be respected.
- C There is official recognition of the unique status of Aboriginal/First Nation people and their decision-making processes.
- C With a policy in place, issues such as Aboriginal involvement in regional and local health planning structures can be addressed.
- C The AHP has led to the development of an office within the Ministry which acts as a point of entry for the Aboriginal community to the provincial health system (please see below).
- C The AHP provides a sound knowledge base for communicating Aboriginal priorities in planning and service delivery to the Ministry.
- C The policy has identified the need to still clarify key issues such as jurisdictional issues with regards to federal-provincial responsibility for Aboriginal health.
- C The AHP has set a precedent for other Aboriginal organizations/communities to

begin a similar process for identifying needs and strategizing in their own regions.

How is the AHP Useful to Aboriginal Frontline Workers?

Although the Aboriginal Health Policy is clearly a document for decision-makers rather than direct service providers, it gives frontline workers an understanding of the rationale behind the development of various Aboriginal community-run programs and services over the past five years. Decisions regarding these programs and services, provided under the Aboriginal Healing and Wellness Strategy, were all made in partnership with the Aboriginal community.

Thus, knowledge of this policy will help frontline workers in their own decision-making processes and advocacy roles in the community or organization which they represent.

Furthermore, the AHP can serve as a tool which frontline workers can use to provide awareness to mainstream service providers about the various barriers which the Aboriginal community faces in accessing Health care, as well as, joint strategies which have been proposed to improve the health status of the Aboriginal population (e.g., Aboriginal representation on local mainstream planning bodies).

The Aboriginal Health Office

The Aboriginal Health Office (AHO) of the Ministry of Health fulfills a number of functions including:

- C Development of relevant policies in conjunction and/or consultation with Aboriginal organizations/communities;
- C Advocate on behalf of Aboriginal communities/organizations with regards to new legislation or policy that directly affects service delivery to the Aboriginal population;
- C Liaise with other areas of the Ministry that impact on Aboriginal health ; and,
- C Provide assistance on individual complaints with the system, whenever possible.

For any further information regarding the Aboriginal Health Office, please contact Ms. Miriam Johnston, Acting Coordinator, at the telephone number (416) 314-5513.