

COUNCIL TRAVEL REPORT



WHAT: Mental Wellness and Substance Use Conference

WHEN: Jan. 28-30, 2025

WHERE: Blue Mountain, ON

WHO: Chief Vanessa Adams
Chief Lisa Francis-Benedict
Chief Tesha Rourke
Chief Sarah Sunday-Diabo

WHY: The conference focused on addressing mental wellness and substance use challenges in Indigenous communities, highlighting youth-led perspectives, crisis response strategies, and culturally based mental health programming.

NEXT STEPS:

- Supporting the Youth, Elders, Culture & Language (YECL) Committee in developing governance documents.
- Partnering with Independent First Nations (IFN) leadership to enhance youth empowerment strategies.
- Exploring partnerships to integrate culturally grounded mental wellness initiatives into Akwesasne's programs.





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For Immediate Release:

Enniskó:wa/March 18, 2025

MENTAL WELLNESS AND SUBSTANCE USE CONFERENCE

CHIEF TESHA ROURKE

Tsi Snaihne District Chief Tesha Rourke recently attended the Mental Wellness and Substance Use Conference in Blue Mountain, Ontario, from January 28–30, 2025. The event focused on addressing mental wellness and substance use challenges within Indigenous communities, highlighting youth-led perspectives, crisis response strategies, and initiatives for culturally based mental health programming.

Chief Rourke was joined by Tsi Snaihne District Chief Sarah Sunday-Diabo, Kawehno:ke District Chief Vanessa Adams, and Kawehno:ke District Chief Lisa Francis-Benedict.

BREAKOUT SESSION SUMMARIES:

Youth Panel Discussion:

The Youth Council led a powerful discussion on intergenerational healing, breaking the stigma surrounding mental health and substance use, and designing effective wellness programs for Indigenous youth.

Questions included:

- *What does intergenerational healing mean to you?*
- *How can First Nations youth break the stigma of mental health and substance use?*
- *If you could design a mental wellness program for youth, what would it look like, and how would it differ from current programs?*

Key Insights & Takeaways:

- The importance of mentorship, attending ceremonies, and carrying on the legacy of healing.
- Providing unconditional love and recognizing that those who came before that have broken barriers to allow today's youth to speak their truth.
- Creating an inclusive environment where youth are encouraged to speak for their people, rather than just for themselves.
- Prevention should start at birth, ensuring that children grow up with a strong sense of identity.
- Emphasizing the belief that it takes a community to raise a child, reinforcing traditional values of collective responsibility.



This session reinforced the need for community-driven mental wellness initiatives that reflect Indigenous youth's unique experiences and strengths.

Workshops Attended:

- To All My Relatives & Voices of Indigenous Youth Leaders on Mental Wellness Pathways: Explored youth-led approaches and culturally relevant mental health supports.
- Responding to the Toxic Drug Crisis: Addressed community frameworks for harm reduction and wrap-around support.
- Indigenous Land-Based Counselor Certificate Program: Examined the integration of traditional healing practices with clinical approaches to mental wellness.

NETWORKING & COLLABORATION:

- Collaboration with the Youth Council: Shared that Akwesasne's Youth, Elders, Culture, and Language (YECL) Committee currently lacks a charter or terms of reference. The Youth Council provided governance documents, which have since been forwarded to the YECL Committee for review to help establish a structured foundation for future initiatives.
- Networking with Independent First Nations (IFN): Established a connection with the IFN Director and scheduled a follow-up meeting to discuss youth empowerment strategies.
- Ongoing Partnerships: Engaged with presenters and organizations to explore culturally based mental wellness approaches for potential integration into Akwesasne programs.

KEY TAKEAWAYS & NEXT STEPS:

- Support the YECL Committee in structuring governance documents based on the Youth Council's shared framework.
- Follow up with IFN leadership to discuss strategies for youth leadership and empowerment.
- Continue exploring partnerships for integrating culturally grounded mental wellness approaches into Akwesasne's programs.