

**Complementary Pathways: Strengthening Indigenous Justice Through Community-Rooted
and Institutional Collaboration**

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August 12, 2025

Abstract

Indigenous justice reform in Canada is entering a period of significant growth and innovation, with increased investment in initiatives such as the Prince George Indigenous Justice Centre's (PGIDC) 90-day diversion model. These system-navigation approaches bring valuable resources and structured pathways to justice. At the same time, research and lived experience confirm that many Indigenous clients—particularly those impacted by intergenerational trauma, substance use, and systemic inequities—require a flexible, relationship-based approach (Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman, 2014; van der Kolk, 2015).

The Prince George Urban Aboriginal Justice Society (PGUAJIS), now in its 28th year, offers such an approach through grassroots, culturally grounded programs, including partnerships with [Nusdeh Yoh](#) and early childhood initiatives like *Success by 6*. These programs reflect the understanding—reinforced by Richard Sampson's recent presentation in Old Hazelton—that trauma responses often manifest as fight (rage), flight (addiction), or freeze (isolation/withdrawal), and that love, and acceptance are essential to creating peace and safety for both individuals and communities.

This paper explores how institutional models like PGIDC and community-led approaches like PGUAJIS can work together to ensure justice investments are not only effective but also deeply rooted in local relationships, cultural identity, and the non-linear realities of healing. By aligning PGIDC's administrative strengths with PGUAJIS's long-standing relational networks, Prince George can offer a continuum of care that honours dignity, develops trust, and supports sustainable, community-driven outcomes.

Introduction

Indigenous justice reform in Canada stands at an important crossroads—poised between significant institutional investment and the ongoing need for community-rooted transformation. Recent funding toward Indigenous Justice Centres, such as PGIDC's \$7.5 million commitment, signals real, positive progress in addressing access to justice for Indigenous peoples. These initiatives offer important system navigation, efficiency, and visibility (Department of Justice Canada, 2021).

At the same time, research in trauma science, Indigenous justice, and cultural safety reminds us that healing journeys are rarely linear. Rigid timelines and standardized processes, while efficient from an administrative perspective, may not always match the lived realities of individuals impacted by intergenerational trauma, systemic racism, and socio-economic instability (Bombay et al., 2014; van der Kolk, 2015).

For 28 years, PGUAJIS has worked in Prince George as a trusted, culturally grounded organization. We believe that the most effective approach is not an either/or choice between structured diversion programs and community-based models, but a both/and approach—aligning institutional strengths with the flexibility and relational depth of local grassroots organizations.

Trauma and the Brain: The Neuroscience of Activation

Trauma is not simply an emotional event—it produces measurable neurological changes. External triggers activate the amygdala, which signals the hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis to release cortisol. Chronic activation can alter hippocampal function, which is critical for memory, learning, and orientation (van der Kolk, 2015).

In the justice context, even well-intentioned programming can become overwhelming if experienced as rigid, high-pressure, or overly clinical. This can impair a client's ability to retain information, participate meaningfully, or make decisions that align with their goals (Yehuda, McFarlane, & Shalev, 2005).

As Sampson noted in a recent community education session, trauma often manifests as fight (rage), flight (addiction), or freeze (withdrawal) (R. Sampson, personal communication, 2025). When services are time-bound without adequate cultural scaffolding, they risk unintentionally reinforcing these patterns.

Historical Trauma and Epigenetic Memory

The legacy of residential schools, displacement from land, and the criminalization of Indigenous culture has left not only social and emotional scars but also physiological imprints across generations. Historical trauma is increasingly recognized as an epigenetic phenomenon, where stress responses are biologically passed down (Brave Heart, 2003; Bombay et al., 2014).

For many Indigenous clients, entering a justice program involves navigating deep-seated mistrust of institutional systems. Without trauma-informed adaptation and cultural grounding, structured diversion programs—no matter how well-resourced—can inadvertently replicate patterns of alienation.

PGUAJS: A Community Mirror

PGUAJS operates not as a distant institution, but as a grassroots mirror of the Prince George community. Many staff members have lived experience and bring cultural fluency, deep relational networks, and the ability to adapt to clients' unique needs.

Our approach emphasizes walking beside clients rather than directing them through predetermined steps. This includes:

- Cultural reconnection through ceremony, storytelling, and Elder mentorship.
- Long-term relationship building beyond set program periods.
- Collaboration with other community organizations to provide wrap-around support.

Evaluations of Canada's Indigenous Justice Program (IJP) show that culturally grounded, restorative approaches yield higher trust, reduced recidivism, and improved client outcomes (Department of Justice Canada, 2021). Comparable success has been observed in Australian Koori

Courts and U.S. Tribal Healing to Wellness Courts (Lilles, 2002; Lucero, Bussey, & Bennett, 2018).

Risks of Over-Standardization

When clients arrive with internalized shame and are unable to meet rigid program goals, the result can be a self-fulfilling prophecy: “I cannot succeed.” This reinforces trauma narratives, undermines identity, and limits engagement (Yehuda et al., 2005).

Community-based approaches like PGUAJS can buffer this risk by providing relational safety, cultural grounding, and space for healing that is not dependent on a fixed timeline.

Conclusion: A Call for Partnership

Both PGIDC and PGUAJS share the same ultimate goal: a justice system that reflects and serves Indigenous peoples with dignity, safety, and cultural relevance. By intentionally aligning PGIDC’s resources and system-navigation strengths with PGUAJS’s community-embedded expertise, Prince George can offer a seamless continuum of care.

After 28 years of service, PGUAJS remains committed to walking alongside our community in ways that honour identity, embrace flexibility, and promote true healing. The path forward is collaborative—grounded in relationships, sustained by trust, and strengthened by the combined efforts of institutional and grassroots partners.

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