

2024 Keep Our Language Alive Conference Summary Report

YXE Cree Speakers Society

MESSAGE FROM THE YXE CREE SPEAKERS SOCIETY

Thank you to everyone who attended and sponsored the 2024 pimācīhitatān nēhiyawēwin: Keep Our Language Alive Conference, hosted at Dakota Dunes Resort, located on traditional Whitecap Dakota Unceded Territory. The conference was a continuation of a two-year Indigenous language project intended to develop and retain the Cree Language in our communities, and which was funded by the Department of Canadian Heritage in 2022.

The 2023 and 2024 pimācīhitatān nēhiyawēwin conferences have provided participants with incredible learning and networking opportunities. Both conferences were soley funded by generous sponsors committed to establishing and growing positive relations with the YXE Cree Speakers Society. We are extremely grateful for this commitment.

The theme of the 2024 conference was "Awakening the Spirit of the Language". Through our consultations we heard of the limitations when language teaching and strategies are separated from spirit.

The goal of the 2024 conference was to inspire aspiring speakers, teachers and instructors, community leaders and policy makers in their journey to reinvigorate Indigenous language development. The focus on the Plains Cree "Y" dialect has been deliberate. We have learned that most institutions are mandated to support all Indigenous languages with limited resources, hence our decision to narrow the focus and then share what we learn with others. The conference also focused on how we "reclaim our space" through innovative methods in the development and retention of the Plains Cree "Y" dialect. Unique to the 2024 conference was the goal to have the co-MC's provide all information and introductions in the Cree language with simultaneous translation. This commitment of "reclaiming space" was a success and appreciated by those who understand how important it is to model the changes we aspire to have in our daily lives.

These conferences have provided the organizers with an abundance of information about the critical need to continue this work and very specific goals for planning the next conference. We are now looking forward to hosting a third conference in spring of 2025, and the organizers have committed to working with national contacts to plan a national Cree language conference in 2026. We hope to see you there.

Again, thank you to everyone who attended the conference, and to the organizations who sponsored the conference. We are so grateful for your support and for helping us to Keep Our Language Alive!

ēkosi pitamā,

Milton Tootoosis

THE 2024 CONFERENCE AGENDA



Sunday, May 12

The conference included a Pre-Conference Workshop held in partnership with Saskatoon Teachers Federation Professional Learning. The session provided participants the opportunity to work collaboratively to create a bank of Cree Language outcomes and indicators that are matched with provincial outcomes and indicators. It also provided Cree language teachers with practical ways to make connections between the Cree language outcomes and indicators for their class and grade level and then connect them to the Saskatchewan provincial outcomes in each of the subject areas.



Sessions included:

- · Ira Horse The Spirit of the Language
- · What messages do we take from the video of Ira's late Grandson Davis Horse, and how does it connect to our collective work with students to awaken Cree language and culture?
- · Sheila Kennedy and Norine Tourangeau -Modelling connecting process
- · Time for teachers to work in grade-alike groups to map connections to their Cree language content.

Monday, May 13

The conference began with a pipe ceremony and opening remarks revolving around the theme "Awakening the Spirit of the Language" from Alex Ahenakew, Elder/Traditional Knowledge Keeper; Izaiah Swampy Omeasoo and Councillor, Samson Cree Nation.









This was followed by a plenary panel which included Darian Âcikahtê, Mika Lafond, and Winston Walkingbear who shared their journey in awakening the spirit of the Cree language in their personal lives and how it manifests in their community work.

Dr. Lanny Real Bird then led a session in Plains Indian Sign Language (PISL).

Breakout Sessions included:

- Land Based Education: Dr. Kevin wâsakâyâsiw Lewis, a nêhiyaw (Plains Cree) instructor, researcher, writer and founder of kâniyâsihk Culture Camp shared information on his eco-tourism company that promotes First Nations experiences and funds Canada's only Cree Land Based Immersion School, kâ-nîyâsihk mîhkiwâpa Centre of Excellence.
- **Star Blanket Teachings:** Jeff Wastesicoot shared the Star Blanket Teachings and the origins of the Cree language.
- Learner to Teacher: Darian Âcikahtê shared his experiences of becoming of nêhiyawêwin learner and his best practices as a teacher at the First Nations University of Canada.
- Understanding the Impacts of Trauma in Language Development: Nina Wilson shared how the history of trauma has impacted our relationship to Indigenous languages and how we can reawaken our spirit despite our histories.





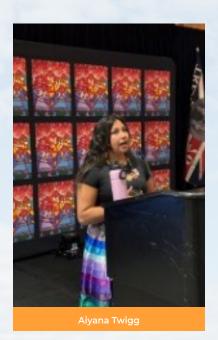


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Tuesday, May 14

Aiyana Twigg, Ktunaxa, Blackfoot opened the second day of the conference with remarks on How Can Youth Engage in Language Learning & Revitalization? Perspectives from an Indigenous Youth Language Advocate.

Daniel Sangrey, Steven Andreas, and Patrick Mitsuing then participated in a panel session where they shared their connection to the Cree language and how they promote revitalization and reclamation in their daily lives.







Breakout Sessions included:

- **Reclamation and Revitalization:** Daniel Sangrey shared how he models reclamation and the revitalization of the Cree language in the various roles he serves our communities.
- **Clint Chocan:** Clint shared various delivery methods and practices to effectively teach the Cree language to beginning speakers of all ages. He shared the importance of understanding and utilizing the foundational structure and sound system of the Cree language and the importance of teaching in a consistent manner.
- nêhiyawêtân / Let's all Speak Cree: A first language speaker of Plains Cree from Little Pine First Nation, Dorothy Thunder has been teaching Cree at the University of Alberta for over twenty years. Dorothy demonstrated some of her favourite classroom techniques for fun and success in the classroom with Cree students.
- Falynn Baptiste: Falynn discussed the topic of "methodologies" as it applies to language learning, with the overarching message being how language can aid in health and well-being. She also shared how she uses trauma informed care and practices to establish safe spaces and create an optimal space for students to develop a healthy and a well-informed understanding of who they are.

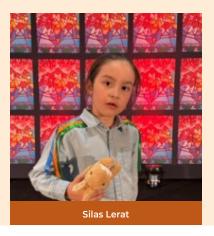






PRE-CONFERENCE WORKSHOP EVALUATION SUMMARY

- Fourteen people attended the workshop. Almost all participants said the workshop was helpful (21%); another 71% said it very helpful.
- Overall, participants said the presentations were engaging and new ideas, strategies, methods, and goals were shared. The presenters were also knowledgeable and informative.
- Participants said they will use what they learned at the conference in their classrooms, and with other teachers; they will use the resources, styles of teaching, and lessons to develop their own Cree language programs. In particular, participants mentioned the spiritual, physical, emotional, and mental aspects of Cree language, using Cree language daily in the classroom and using Cree for common daily phrases and finding creative ways to create learning material.
- Participants said the workshop could be even more valuable to Cree teachers by including more information on outcomes indicators, hands on learning and activities, templated language guides, more strategies to incorporate the Cree language into the classroom, continued collaborating and networking to learn from each other.



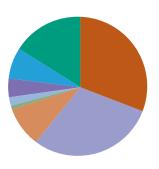
- Participants said they would recommend a session like this for other Cree teachers as it brought people together to learn and share with each other and added additional thoughts on improving it like adding more in-depth teaching and resources and inviting more Cree speaking teachers.
- Other ideas on learning opportunities that would benefit Cree teaching practices included more hands-on activities and games, invite young and old Cree speakers into the classroom, share stories, tips on how to structure a learning unit, curriculum development, resources to reinforce and promote cross curricular planning, create standardized assessments for language, land-based learning techniques and strategies.

CONFERENCE PARTICIPATION

The conference was attended by 200 people; however, the evaluation was only completed by 100 people.

Participants were from a variety of backgrounds:

Elders- 31%
Teachers – 30%
Teacher Associates – 9%
Community Leaders – 1%
Government Officials – 2%
High School Students – 4%
Post-Secondary Students – 7%
Other Ally (youth worker, community health worker, cultural coordinator, administrator) – 16%



Cree Immersion in Communities

Of those who completed the evaluation who were from a First Nation, 39 have Cree Immersion in their community, 38 do not, and 7 were unsure.

Broadband Technology in Communities

43 have broadband technology, 30 do not, and 9 participants were unsure.

CONFERENCE VALUE

85 participants said the conference was either "very valuable" or "valuable" in advancing their knowledge of how we can develop and retain the Cree Language in our communities. Another 6 said it was "somewhat valuable". The conference speakers were also ranked highly with 84% of participants rating the knowledge and experience of the speakers as "very knowledgeable" or "knowledgeable."







Value of Conference

85 - Very valuable or valuable

6 - Somewhat valuable

Knowledge & Experience of Conference Speakers

84 - Very knowledgeable or knowledgeable

7 - Other response

MOST INTERESTING THINGS LEARNED AT THE CONFERENCE

Participants were asked the most interesting or most useful thing they learned at the conference. The most mentioned topics have been collated into the themes below:

- · Land-based camps and education
- · Plains Indian Sign Language
- · Starblanket teachings
- · Having a Cree translator
- Importance of learning from Elders
- · Never too late to learn Cree keep trying
- · Importance of our language and learning it
- Listening to Aiyanna Twigg on language revitalization
- · School Vendors
- Language revitalization and how language is the heart of the people; there is hope for our people, especially the youth
- · Syllabics

- · Origin/history of the language
- Listening to and learning nehiyawewin in the presentation room – the main meeting room
- · Never knew about Ktunaxa people
- Need for more government support; challenge those in education and policy
- · Impacts of trauma
- Bridging the gap between the elders and the children
- Teaching strategies, master apprentice, TPR, ASSL, self-narration, teaching with song, self-guided language learning
- · Ceremony/spiritual is important in learning
- · Live audio translation service



IDEAS TO DEVELOP AND RETAIN THE CREE LANGUAGE IN COMMUNITIES

Participants were asked how they will use the information shared at the conference to help develop and retain the Cree Language in their community. The responses are summarized into the following points:

- · Use our language and resources consistently
 - Speak the language as much as possible
 - Cree classes, communicating with Elders. Visting with Elders, apprentice program.
 - Will bring more Cree language into my classroom post Cree words on the walls
 - "One word a day"

- Use our language in all places in the community like the store, clinic, admin, etc.
- Use the language when working with the children
- Start with greetings, weather, action words
- On Facebook, write to others in Cree
- Create groups where people can connect in person and on social media
- Use technology as a teaching tool
- Use sign language as a resource to teach
- · Share learnings and promote the language
 - Use songs & dances as a tool.
 - Start recording our elders who are in our school two times / week
 - Connect elders to heal with our students
 - Create a Cree speaking club
 - Would like to start conference at Whitebear First Nation
 - Create mentor-apprentice programs

- · Advocate for our language
 - Promote it as much as possible
 - Talk to the Boards of Education and start helping my Band with language revitalization
 - Seek out additional funds for the reserve program
- · Strengthen language through culture:
 - Create Cree immersion camps
 - Family trees/kinship | wahkotowin
 - Combine language and ceremony
 - Theme Cree terms based on the season
 - Use Cree term as we do our land-based activities

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION PARTICIPANTS WOULD LIKE TO SEE PRESENTED IN THE FUTURE

Participants said if a another Cree Language Conference were to be held, they would like to see the following information presented:

- · Youth participation and how youth can engage in language revitalization
- · Instructions for lower grades (younger children)
- · Presentations from all dialects in Saskatchewan
- · More about sign language, language nests
- Cultural and traditional teachings from Elders and Teachers (origin and history) including land-based teachings, Star stories, Pipe teachings, relationships and connections to all, natural law and connection to the language, art as a tool
- Cree resources we can use in the classroom and resources with different dialects (handouts with pronunciation and meanings)
- · More on summer immersion camps
- · Storytelling in Cree, Cree ice-breakers, more vendors
- · Interactive activities and games we can use with elementary students

- · Information on current programs for documentation and revitalization
- · Use of technology, YouTube tutorials, videos, mobile technology, social media, computer programs
- · Curriculum supporting teaching languages to students
- · More audience participation, hands-on learning techniques
- · Writing grant proposals
- · Sweat lodge ceremony for those hurting and traumatized
- · International speakers to share their strategies
- · Have small groups with fluent and non-speakers
- · Other Nations with progress should share their stats and findings (e.g., Onion Lake)

PLANNING FOR A FUTURE LANGUAGE CONFERENCE



In terms of logistics, 45 participants said they would prefer a conference to be held during the week, on weekdays only. Eight people said they would prefer a weekend conference and the remainder said a mix of a weekday/weekend.

26 said they would prefer a conference be held in the Fall, 49 said Spring, 14 said Summer (May-June), and 15 said in the Winter.

Other suggestions for a future conference included:

- Include our intellectually challenged, special needs youth and young adults.
- Have a conference for teachers that would help in "How" to implement our language, even for beginners language teachers in our classrooms.
- Marsii for a wonderful conference!!! You guys did an amazing job!
- · Thank you for a wonderful conference. I truly enjoyed every part of the conference.
- · A national Cree Conference is a Yes!
- · I always feel like a child when I am surrounded by our elders at such gatherings...when we lose our parents, we search for that love we no longer feel, being surrounded by the love and support is beautiful. Takaki soskwac.
- · Removing the stigma of having ceremonies as the colonizers did to us.
- · Have more plenary sessions as so much is lost in the breakouts.

MEDIA INTEREST IN THE CONFERENCE

A true Cree language conference where English is optional

Saskatoon Star Phoenix, June 5, 2024 • By: NC Raine, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter, Eagle Feather News

The pimacihtatan nehiyawewin conference is a large Indigenous language conference primarily in an Indigenous language.

The pimacihtatan nehiyawewin conference has become something rather unconventional: a large Indigenous language conference primarily in an Indigenous language.

"We asked our speakers to present in Cree first, and English second — if at all," said Milton Tootoosis, conference organizer and founder of the YXE Cree Speakers Society.

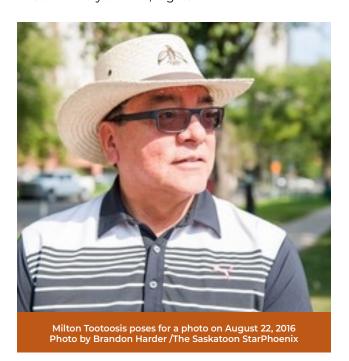
"It was the first time many of the delegates were in a room of 200 Cree speakers, where they could hear the language spoken a majority of the time."

The conference, held recently at Whitecap Dakota First Nation just outside of Saskatoon, became an instant Cree immersion experience for presenters and attendees. Its name — pimacihtatan nehiyawewin — translates to Keep Our Language Alive.

"Hearing the language the entire conference, it was like music to my ears," Tootoosis said. "Hearing new words, new phrases, new concepts. It was just amazing."

The second annual conference took place to provide time and space to identify ways to keep the language alive and thriving, and also give attendees the opportunity to connect and work collaboratively on Cree language outcomes. While Tootoosis said the conference was a success, he said there's still a great amount of urgency around language revitalization.

"There is a major language crisis in southern and central Saskatchewan," Tootoosis said. "I can converse with elders on the reservation, but with my generation, some understand but many cannot respond. When you go to 30 and 40 year olds, it gets worse."



This decrease in language speakers has many concerned, which motivates him to do something about it.

"Some people are saying the language is dead, or dying," Tootoosis said. "It's not dead, it's asleep. We need to awaken it. That's the message we wanted to share at the conference."

Tootoosis has hope in the young generations who are finding their voice and passion for language. Izaiah Swampy Omeasoo, a councillor at Samson Cree Nation in Alberta, and Aiyana Twigg, from Ktunaxa Nation in British Columbia, are both language speakers and leaders in their communities who are still in their mid-20s.

"We need these young leaders to preserve, protect, and promote their language," Tootoosis said.

"If we lose our language, we lose our culture," he added. "Within any language is its values, stories and culture. If we lose that, we are becoming little brown white-people, being totally assimilated.

Are John A. Macdonald's policies of assimilating the Indian actually going to happen? We are saying no. This is part of that resistance."

In order to keep making progress, Tootoosis plans on continuing to grow and evolve the pimacihtatan nehiyawewin conference. Announced at this year's event, it is set to evolve from a provincial to a national conference in 2026, when delegates from around Canada will be invited to share in Saskatoon.

Tootoosis also hopes efforts like the provincial conference this year and the national event in two years time will make language revitalization a priority for the provincial government, which has thus far had minimal investment, he said.

"I think the provincial government's investment in Indigenous language has been deplorable," Tootoosis said. "I know in B.C. and other jurisdictions, provincial governments are contributing financially to get programming going, but not so much here."

However he remains hopeful.

"Language has a spirit," he said. "I think many people felt that spirit at this conference. I think it will inspire guys like me to keep going."

The article above was also published in MBC News, June 6, 2024, SaskToday.ca, June 10, 2024 and Yahoo News Canada under the title below.

Tapwe, a true Cree language conference where English is optional

By: NC Raine, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter, Eagle Feather News

Now in its second year, the pimâcihitâtân nêhiyawêwin language conference is doing something unconventional – hosting a large Indigenous language conference primarily in an Indigenous language.

"We asked our speakers to present in Cree first, and English second – if at all," said Milton Tootoosis, conference organizer and founder of the YXE Cree Speakers Society. "It was the first time many of the delegates were in a room of 200 Cree [speakers], where they could hear the language spoken a majority of the time."

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CJWW News, May 14, Re-Run on The Bull 92.9, May 14, 2024

By Keira Miller · Focus of conference is keeping the Cree language alive

In an effort to make sure the Cree language isn't lost, over 200 educators, community leaders, youths and policy makers are gathering for this week's two-day Keep Our Language Alive conference at Dakota Dunes Resort.

Milton Tootoosis, founder of the conference, says attendees will get to participate in a full slate of presentations and discussions about how Cree language can be implemented both at school and in the home.

"It's part of our decolonization process, and it's part of the solution to addressing some of the social challenges that many of our people are experiencing because of the Indian Residential School experience, as an example."

Tootoosis says many older people forgo learning a new language as if it's too late, which is contributing to the crisis.

"There's young people, middle-aged people, and some older people that have been successful at it. (This conference) is to hopefully raise awareness that it's never too late, it can be done."

He reminds fellow Cree people that the language isn't dead, it is just asleep, and it's conferences like this that work to reawaken it.

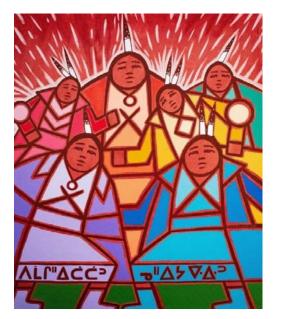
"Knowing who you are is first and foremost. Language is core to any culture. If you lose your language, you've lost your culture."

He adds that although this conference is beneficial to get discussions going, financial commitments from the federal government are also needed to ensure Cree culture doesn't die.

"We need to remind political leaders at the highest level that if you're going to have legislation, and you're truly committed to truth and reconciliation and cultural preservation of the Indigenous people... they also need to make a financial commitment."

Cree Literacy Network

Jerry Whitehead: "Let's Spread the Words" • By Arden Ogg, May 6, 2024



The YXE Cree Speaker Society is getting ready right now for its second annual conference, coming up May 13-14, 2024 at the Dakota Dunes Resort, located on traditional Whitecap Dakota Unceded Territory.

For registration and other information, email: info@yxecreespeakerssociety.ca

Here's a link to the final Conference Program, listing all speakers and events, that features this gorgeous new work by Jerry Whitehead, titled "Let's Spread the Words".

Here's what the painting says in Cree (y-dialect), thanks to Arok Wolvengrey:

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pimâcihtâtân nêhiyawêwin

[Let's] Keep Our [Cree] Language Alive

This new painting was commissioned by YXE Cree Speakers. Jerry Whitehead is a nationally renowned artist from Peter Chapman First Nation. Though he has practiced many different styles throughout his career, he is known for his vibrant depictions of powwows and powwow dancers. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in Indian Art from the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College and a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax.

He was also commissioned in (around) 1990 to paint illustrations to accompany a Cree story prepared for children by the late Dr Freda Ahenakew. The story itself was recorded and transcribed from the late Glecia Bear, and it is included (without illustrations) in the recently re-published kohkominawak-otacimowiniwawa-our-grandmothers-lives.

Sadly, the illustrated edition has been out of print for quite some time, but copies can still be found in public libraries across the country (and occasionally at used booksellers'). Here are its details: Wanisinwak iskwesisak: awasisasinahikanis = Two little girls lost in the bush: a Cree story for children. 1991. Bear, Glecia, 1910-; Ahenakew, Freda, 1932-2011.; Wolfart, H. Christoph.; Whitehead, Jerry.



Catholic Saskatoon News

Indigenous Reconciliation Fund (IRF): local partners gather to reflect on funded projects and their impact By Myron Rogal, Office of Justice and Peace, Roman Catholic Diocese of Saskatoon

At a recent partnership gathering focused on the impact of the diocesan Indigenous Reconciliation Fund, Shelly Tootoosis, co-founder and director of the YXE Cree Speakers Society, spoke about the pimācīhitatān nēhiyawēwin (Keep Our Language Alive) Conference held May 13-14, 2024. (Submitted photo)

The Indigenous Reconciliation Fund Discernment Circle in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Saskatoon hosted its first annual spring partnership gathering May 24, 2024 at the Cathedral of the Holy Family in Saskatoon.

In a casual Friday afternoon style, a diverse group of reconciliation supporters gathered in order to draw attention to funded projects from the year one of the Indigenous Reconciliation Fund (IRF), to facilitate networking opportunities, and to hear from the grant recipients how the diocese can further support reconciliation efforts in the wider community.

Four funded partners were present at the event including YXE Cree Speakers Society, Haven Indigenous Family Connections, People Bridge Advocacy, and the Central Urban Metis Federation (on behalf of Reconciliation Saskatoon). Also present at the event were parish reconciliation committee members, other individuals with an interest in the project, as well as members of the diocesan IRF committees.



After a brief welcome, Dr. Gordon Martell, co-chair of the IRF Discernment Circle in the diocese of Saskatoon, began the event by inviting Elder Irene Sharp of Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish to lead the opening prayer.

Martell then went on to express gratitude to the many stakeholders who make the fund successful, and to describe the unique features and mandate of the fund.

Bishop Mark Hagemoen presented information on the national IRF structure and impact of the fund, as well as providing a brief genesis of its evolution.

One organization was invited to share an in-depth impact presentation. Shelly Tootoosis who is co-founder and director of the YXE Cree Speakers Society spoke at length the impact of the recent 2024 pimācīhitatān nēhiyawēwin (Keep Our Language Alive) Conference held May 13-14, 2024. She shared the necessity of the conference, its development, learnings and growth projections. Some of the unique pieces added this year were a youth stream and sessions that taught participants how to speak through signing in Plains Cree. Participants were then challenged to become advocates for the preservation and growth of Indigenous languages.

Following the impact presentation, Martell invited each group to share how their organization has an impact on the local environment and how the various stakeholders present can further contribute to advancing reconciliation in the local context.



A rich time of sharing and awareness raising demonstrated the deep impact that the IRF fund investments have had in the community.

For example, Reconciliation Saskatoon shared how a significant part of their annual Rock Your Roots event honouring survivors would not be possible without the support of the fund.

Haven Indigenous Family Connections also offered an overview of their programming that brings families together through their spirituality and culture as well as offering practical life skills such as sewing and financial management.



The next partnership gathering will occur in the spring of 2025, as one of four Discernment Circle annual events rooted in its covenant statement.

As Martell described "this is more than distributing funds, it is a work of covenant, based on relationships and sacred teachings."

An annual public information event launched earlier this year will again be held in mid-winter as an annual opportunity for parishes and donors to learn about the fund.

In addition to these two annual events for partners and members of the public, members of the IRF Discernment Circle and Granting Committee also hold an annual spiritual gathering in the summer and a retreat each fall.





Revitalizing the Plains Cree Language at 2024 "Keep Our Language Alive" Conference

The XYE Cree Speakers' Society was founded in 2021 by Milton Tootoosis, a nêhiyaw of the Poundmaker Cree Nation in Treaty Six Territory, with the goal to revitalize the Plains Cree language and promote the teachings of Cree Elders and traditional speakers.

This learning process often challenges conventional Western education and requires a commitment to reconciling both worlds.

In May 2023, the Society hosted the "Keep Our Language Alive" Conference, which brought together Cree language teachers, instructors, and advocates from across Cree communities. The feedback from the conference indicated a strong desire to continue building opportunities for learning and networking. Attendees expressed a sense of responsibility to serve their communities by promoting the Cree worldview through language.

Thanks to a grant from the Indigenous Reconciliation Fund (IRF), the Society can cover key expenses for the 2024 conference, including advertising and marketing, entertainment, honoraria for Elders and teachers, cultural costs, translation services, and merchandise.

The 2024 pimācīhitatān nēhiyawēwin: Keep Our Language Alive Conference will also include a pre-conference session designed to support participants interested in aligning Cree language learning outcomes with the Saskatchewan Provincial Curriculum. This initiative will further strengthen the ties between Cree culture and mainstream education, providing a pathway for future integration.





pimâcihitâtân nêhiyawêwin **KEEP OUR LANGUAGE ALIVE** Conference 2024 ninaskomanānak oki kā-wīcīkowākohk

We thank the following who supported this gathering

Pēkopai (awaken)



Poundmaker Cree Nation

ayisiyiniw (human)







wītaskīwin (alliance)





wāhkōtowin (relationship)









































