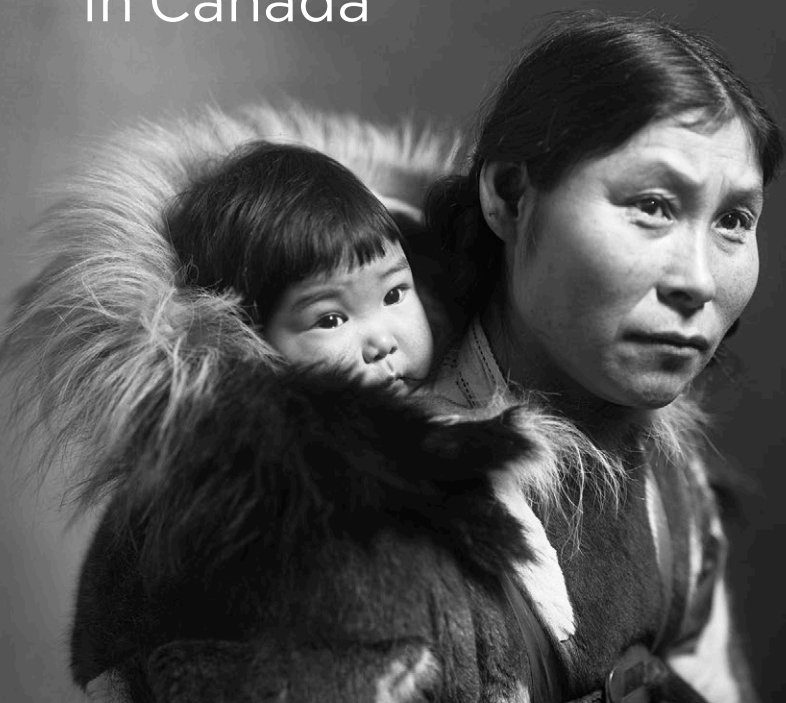


# Restoration and Renewal:

## Aboriginal Midwifery in Canada



“My first breath of life came with the helpful assistance of a qualified person trained in a Cree culture... [She] was knowledgeable, experienced, and confident in her abilities. For her it was a way of life. It was also spiritual and communal. Babies were not just delivered. Babies were prayed into this world. It was a sacred undertaking. It was a family affair and a community event.”

— Chief Ovide Mercredi,  
Misipawistik Cree Nation

“I think it enriches the community so much. To bring birth back to the community is so vital because many communities have lost birth altogether. We really need to bring birth back to help balance the cycle so that there are celebrations and a renewed reverence for life. I think birth is part of healing the community.”

— Lesley Paulette, Aboriginal Midwife,  
Fort Smith, NWT



Midwives and midwifery students from Nunavik and Nunavut at a NACM Gathering.





An Aboriginal midwife is a committed, primary health care provider who has the skills to care for pregnant women, babies and their families throughout pregnancy and after the birth of the baby. She is also a person who is knowledgeable in all aspects of women's medicine and she provides education that helps keep the family and the community healthy. Midwives promote breastfeeding, nutrition, and parenting skills. A midwife is the keeper of ceremonies for young people like puberty rites. She is a leader and mentor, someone who passes on important values about health to the next generation.

## WORDS IN OUR LANGUAGES FOR 'MIDWIFE':

- **"She who can do everything"**  
(Nuu-chah-nulth)
- **"To watch, to care"**  
(Coast Salish)
- **"The one who waits for the birth"**  
(Inuktitut)
- **"The helper"**  
(Inuktitut)
- **"The one who delivers"**  
(Cree)
- **"She's pulling the baby out of the water, or out of the earth"**  
(Mohawk)





Learning Mohawk language at the Six Nations Birthing Centre.

The National Aboriginal Council of Midwives seeks to restore the provision of midwifery services, and choice of birthplace for all Aboriginal communities, consistent with the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

## RESTORING MIDWIFERY IN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

Aboriginal communities across Canada have always had midwives. It has only been in the last hundred years that this practice has been taken away from our communities. This occurred for a number of reasons, including colonization and changes in the health care system in Canada. As a result of losing midwifery, many women in rural and remote Aboriginal communities are currently required to deliver their babies and access care outside their communities. Nevertheless, there are some Aboriginal midwives that practice in a variety of settings across Canada. The vision of these midwives is to one day see “An Aboriginal midwife working in every Aboriginal community”.



## **CORE VALUES OF ABORIGINAL MIDWIFERY**

**Recognizing that the good health and well-being of Aboriginal women and their babies is crucial to the empowerment of Aboriginal families and communities, Aboriginal midwives uphold the following Core Values:**

### **HEALING**

Aboriginal midwives enhance the capacity of a community to heal from historical and ongoing traumas, addictions, and violences. Aboriginal midwives draw from a rich tradition of language, Indigenous knowledge, and cultural practice as they work with women to restore health to Aboriginal families and communities.

### **RESPECT**

Aboriginal midwives respect birth as a healthy physiologic process and honour each birth as a spiritual journey.

### **AUTONOMY**

Aboriginal women, families and communities have the inherent right to choose their caregivers and to be active decision makers in their health care.

### **COMPASSION**

Aboriginal midwives act as guides and compassionate caregivers in all Aboriginal communities, rural, urban and remote. The dignity of Aboriginal women is upheld through the provision of kind, considerate and respectful services.

### **BONDING**

Well-being is based on an intact mother and baby bond that must be supported by families, communities and duty bearers in health and social service systems.

### **BREASTFEEDING**

Aboriginal midwives uphold breastfeeding as sacred medicine for the mother and baby that connects the bodies of women to the sustaining powers of our mother earth.



## CULTURAL SAFETY

Aboriginal midwives create and protect the sacred space in which each woman, in her uniqueness, can feel safe to express who she is and what she needs.

## CLINICAL EXCELLENCE

Aboriginal midwives uphold the standards and principles of exemplary clinical care for women and babies throughout the lifecycle. This includes reproductive health care, well woman and baby care and the creation of sacred, powerful spaces for Aboriginal girls, women, families, and communities.

## EDUCATION

Aboriginal midwifery education and practice respect diverse ways of knowing and learning, is responsive to Aboriginal women, families and communities and must be accessible to all who choose this pathway.

## RESPONSIBILITY

Aboriginal midwives are responsible for upholding the above values through reciprocal and equal relationships with women, families and their communities.



Aboriginal Midwife Nathalie Pambrun weighing baby.

# ABORIGINAL MIDWIFERY PRACTICES IN CANADA

## 1. Inuulitsivik Health Centre, Nunavik, Quebec:

Since 1986, midwives have been the on-call, primary care providers for maternity care for all women. This program is located in three communities along the Hudson Bay coast. The birth centres are a midwifery-led collaborative model of care that involves effective teamwork between midwives, physicians, and nurses working in remote villages and at regional referral centres. Transfers from the community to the south have been greatly reduced, from 91 percent in 1983 to less than 9 percent in 1998. Training community members as midwives has sustained the program and been one of its key elements of success.

## 2. Tulattavik Health Centre, Nunavik, Quebec:

Since midwives started providing maternity services in 2009, transfer rates have significantly gone down and satisfaction for women and their families has increased. There are currently four midwives working in Kuujuaq and they are the on-call primary care providers for all women on the Coast. Additionally, a community-based training program just started in August 2013 in Kuujuaq.

## 3. Rankin Inlet Birthing Centre (RIBC), Nunavut:

RIBC was established in 1993 and provides women with the option of community-based birthing. The midwives provide prenatal care and attend births. A Perinatal Committee conducts weekly reviews involving risk assessments and suitability of women to give birth in the community. A Maternity Care Worker Program and Midwifery Training are currently being offered through Arctic College.

## 4. Cambridge Bay Birth Centre, Nunavut:

In January 2010, the birth centre in Cambridge Bay was opened and began offering maternity services, including low-risk deliveries. The midwives working at the centre are also involved in midwifery education and use the same model of training available in Rankin Inlet offered through Nunavut Arctic College in Cambridge Bay.

## 5. Fort Smith Health and Social Services Midwifery Program, NWT:

In April 2005, the Fort Smith Health and Social Services Authority (FSHSSA) officially integrated midwifery services into its programming after a three-year developmental project. A key part of the project was developing a multi-disciplinary approach to maternity care services. This included forming a Maternity Care Committee made up of midwives, physicians, nurses, and clinical care managers.

## 6. Kinsoo Sipi Midwifery Clinic, Norway House Cree Nation, MAN:

This midwifery practice was established in conjunction with the Kanaci Otinawawasowin Baccalaureate Program (KOBP) at the University College of the North in 2006. The clinic, located in Norway House, serves women both in pre- and postnatal periods, and arranges transportation to a tertiary centre for their clients. The development of a low-risk elective birthing program is still being negotiated.

## 7. Seventh Generation Midwives Toronto:

This urban Aboriginal Midwifery practice was established by a group of Registered Aboriginal Midwives and students in 2005 with a focus on serving the Aboriginal community in downtown Toronto. SGMW works with the urban community to improve Aboriginal maternal and infant health by supporting women to reclaim control of birth for themselves, including the choice to incorporate traditional teachings and ceremonies. The clinic has a special designation from the university-based Midwifery Education Programs in Ontario to prioritize clinical placements for Aboriginal students at their clinic. Midwives attend births at home, at the new Toronto Birth Centre, and at Sunnybrook hospital.

## 8. Tsi Non:we Ionnakeratstha Ona:grahsta' Six Nations Maternal and Child Centre, Ontario:

Opened in 1996, the Birth Centre provides a balance of traditional and contemporary midwifery services and programs. The establishment, direction, and ongoing operation of the practice is a community-driven process, supported by an Advisory Committee and a Grandparents Committee. The midwives work under an exemption clause in the Midwifery Act that allows them to practice and serve families in southwestern Ontario. The Centre also supports an Aboriginal Midwifery Education Program.

### 9. Kontinenhanónhha Tsi Tkaha:nayen Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory, Ontario:

This private practice opened in May 2012 with a focus on returning traditional birthing practices to Tyendinaga. The midwife works under an exemption clause and provides Aboriginal women and families the option of community-based birthing in both rural and urban areas. The Kenhte:ke Birth Advisory Working Group was formed in February 2012 to develop plans for the Kenhte:ke Birthing Centre.

### 10. Neepeeshowan Midwives, Attawapiskat, Ontario:

'Neepeeshowan' is Cree for a blooming flower. This practice opened in the Fall of 2012 in Attawapiskat, a Cree community of 1,900 people located 500 km north of Timmins. Currently, Neepeeshowan Midwives serve most pregnant women of the community. Planned community births for women experiencing healthy pregnancies are starting to take place. They provide care and services in the Weeneebayko Area Health Authority (WAHA), which includes the communities of Moose Factory, Moosonee, Fort Albany, and Attawapiskat.

### 11. K'Tigaaning Midwives, Powassan, Ontario:

Two Aboriginal midwives bought in October 2013 a long-established practice in the North Bay region and renamed it K'Tigaaning Midwives in honour of their community in Nipissing. The catchment area includes North Bay, Nipissing First Nation as well as surrounding areas. They are delighted to be able to provide care in their home community.

### 12. The Ionteksa'tanoronhkwa "child-cherishers" Homebirth Midwives of Akwesasne

Their mission is to revitalize their culture and strengthen their people through a modern Onkwehon:we midwifery practice that uses both traditional knowledge and non-Indigenous midwifery training to ensure the safety of the child and the well-being of the family.

### 13. North Channel Midwifery, Ontario

North Channel Midwifery is a solo practice operated by a registered Aboriginal midwife. She provides midwifery care from Massey to Thessalon First Nation, including communities in between.

