

PAGC Policing Model Symposium explains what an Indigenous Self-administered Police Service might look like

PAGC Grand Chief Hardlotte calls for funding support from the Province; Chiefs of Police of Indigenous-run police services provide firsthand accounts



Ron Merasty Photo

PAGC Vice-Chief Joseph Tsannie receives a gift at the symposium.

By Ron Merasty

On March 26 Prince Albert Grand Council (PAGC) held a one-day symposium to provide its 12-nation members with a picture of what an Indigenous self-administered police service (ISAPS) might look like. The event was organized by PAGC’s public safety implementation team and held in the Ches Leach Lounge at Prince Albert’s Art Hauser Centre.

It was well-attended by PAGC executive, chiefs and councillors and non-elected leaders from all four PAGC sectors.

Statements by PAGC Leadership

PAGC Vice-Chief Joseph Tsannie, in his opening remarks, said that at the October 2026 PAGC annual assembly, their First Nations will be called upon “to approve our initiative to make the communities safe. We are ready; we are serious. The request/demand came from the communities.”

Grand Chief Brian Hardlotte, speaking later, rhetorically asked, “Are we happy with the policing we have in our communities?” The answer, obviously, is a ‘no.’

Funding for an (ISAPS), he said, is “the biggest challenge.” Noting that there is currently only one Indigenous police service in the province – the File Hills Police Service – Grand Chief spoke about the Province of Saskatchewan being able to create a

Saskatchewan Marshals Service, “just like that.” The legislation was created in November 2022. He said that he plans to tell the provincial government, “In a respectful way,” that “if you can change your Police Act to have marshals, that you can also have Indigenous police services.”

He voiced his support to the Community Safety Officer (CSO) program currently operating in PAGC First Nations and called for them to be provided funding by senior governments. CSOs are specialized, uniformed peace officers, in this case, employed in PAGC communities. They take calls to high-priority, low-risk, and non-emergency calls, allowing police services to focus on more serious crime. Appointed under the Saskatchewan Police Act, they focus on bylaw enforcement, traffic safety, and community safety. CSOs do not carry firearms.

Grand Chief Hardlotte said the CSO programs are not allocated funding by governments but are paid for by the communities with their own-source funding, and that they make a positive difference to increasing community safety in First Nations such as Cumberland House and James Smith Cree Nations.

About PAGC’s policing model feasibility study

Caitlin Brown, an MNP consultant, reviewed the PAGC’s 265-page regional policing model feasibility

study. The study had included public information meetings in all PAGC communities. Additional data was gathered by asking individuals to fill out a survey questionnaire about current policing practice.

First Nations will need to assess all the information and decide what’s going to work best for their communities.

“The goal of the study was to explore First Nations policing at a regional level that would serve all of the nations, as well as what would the differences be between an individual First Nation police service versus a more broad, multi-nation police service, with the goal of really being community-driven,” Brown said. It would be “sustainable, effective and equitable policing” for the communities, and be funded with the proper resourcing to ensure the best opportunity for success.

Such a future police service would operate under legislation provided by the Police Services Act, which guides policing services in Saskatchewan, and the federal RCMP Act.

Approval for the creation of such a service would come from the federal government’s First Nations and Inuit

Policing Program, FNIPP. Brown said that there are ISAPSs operating across the country. The Nishnawbe Aski Police Service (NAPS) in Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN), became larger than the Navajo Police Service in 2025.

Brown said that an ISAPS would have a “community-based, community-focused approach,” and “you’d see officers in the community not just responding when a crisis is happening, but controlling the streets, engaging the community, and then spending time and being present, and being at events and spending time at schools and again, being part of the community.”

Different policing options in First Nation communities were considered. A large focus was on what a multi-nation First Nations police service could look like for all PAGC First Nations. The study also described what a stand-alone or individual nation police service could look like too. Both models, however, would still need to continue to rely upon the RCMP in the future, because some aspects of policing could be too intensive for them to take on their own.

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“That reliance changes depending on how big and mature your police service gets as well. So, the more, the larger the service and the more service needs are in there, the less you need to rely on the RCMP, the more you can take that on yourself versus a small individual First Nation police service,” Brown advised.

Brown spoke of independent, civilian board governance providing oversight that will set the proper tone for a policing organization, and which will be separate from First Nations leadership. First Nation leadership, however, would:

- Determine what model of service would be chosen for their membership, depending on the feedback from their membership;
- Determine who will serve on the police board/commission, how they would be selected, what the rules will be for that service, and what the terms will be for that group;
- Take on an advocacy role for funding that ISAPS; and
- Be the signers of any funding agreement.

Including CSOs will be an important feature in that service:

- As additional eyes and ears in the community;
- As a good way for people to try out policing;
- As less expensive backup that, nonetheless, receives protection from police officers; and
- As a good recruitment and retention method because they will work alongside police officers and could choose to join the service.

A regional police service will have more people, workload, calls, financial transactions, people to manage for HR, and the organizational chart will get more complex. The executive leadership will be in a central location to provide oversight to the entire organization. It will have civilian and administrative supports for finance, facilities, information technology. They will ensure that everyone has the right equipment in good working order, provide the proper training, performance management, and internal training capacity.

The regional level will have crime and drug investigative resources both officer and civilian, and mental health supports.

There are distinct benefits to either pursuing a First Nation police service or a regional First Nation police service, Brown said. One is that it “provides you an opportunity to do policing in a different way and make this your own,” but she cautioned that it is not going to be “the answer to all of your public safety challenges,” that policing can’t solve many of the root causes,” but it is “an opportunity that will take time, commitment and effort.”

The Experiences of Three Indigenous Police Services

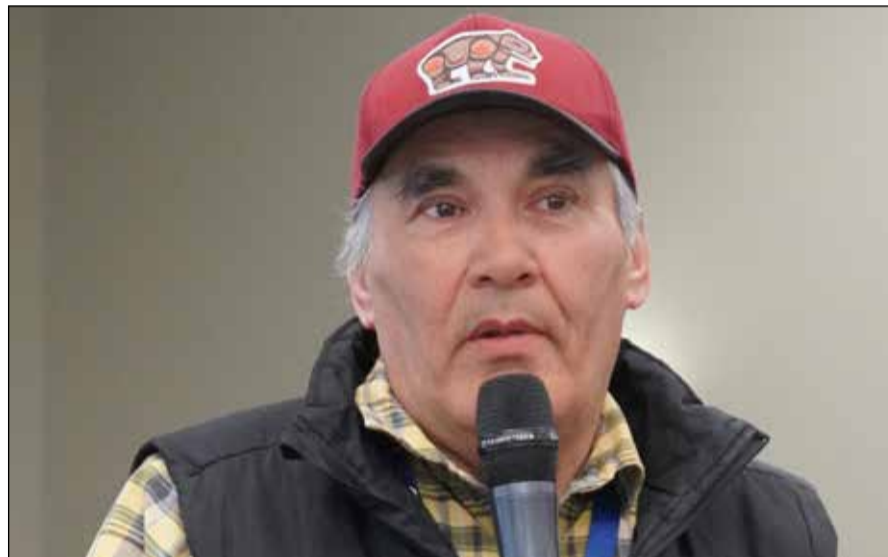
The symposium also heard from representatives, including all the police chiefs, from three successful Indigenous police services from northern Ontario, Manitoba and Alberta telling them of their experiences, challenges and successes. The participants were involved and asked operational questions.

NAPS police chief, Terry Armstrong, appearing virtually, said that



Ron Merasty Photo

Chief of Police for the Manitoba First Nations Police Service, Jason Colon, at the symposium.



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Eddie Head, justice worker at James Smith Cree Nation.



Ron Merasty Photo

Elder Roger Ratt.

they provide services to thirty-four of forty-nine NAN communities. Their service was approved after a year of negotiations in December 1993, signed on in January 1994, and was ratified by its chiefs.

Their police service board is comprised of one representative each from their seven tribal councils, and one from independent First Nations.

Their service now includes twenty special constables, who are “well-paid” and attend at special courts and transport prisoners, “So, it doesn’t take constables and sergeants out of the communities and compromise safety.”

Their officers wear body-worn cameras, employ the use of drones, have “good vehicles, ATVs and boats,” and have their own training centre at headquarters in Thunder Bay. “Our uniforms and equipment are second to none. We are a full-functional and staffed service,” Armstrong said, and that “many municipal police officers” want to join their service now that they

are fully resourced, with “brick and mortar detachments.”

They provide an annual bonus, as an incentive, to officers that speak their own language. It has been thirty-three years now for NAPS, and Armstrong says the government agreed two years ago to a NAPS aircraft.

Keith Blake, Police Chief of the Tsuut’ina Nation Police Service (TNPS) in Alberta, said they were formed in 1994 and have thirty-six sworn officers and thirty-five civilians on staff.

“De-escalation,” Chief Blake said, “is a priority because of relationships officers have with the community,” and that there are now fewer fatal incidents.

One positive note, which would satisfy a complaint often expressed by Saskatchewan chiefs, Blake said, “Crown prosecutors have agreed to prosecute First Nations legislation.”

Jason Colon, a member of Norway House Cree Nation, with over 28 years of service with various police servi-

ces, is Chief of Police of the Manitoba First Nations Police Service (MFNPS), headquartered in Brandon. Their first HQ was at a former Indian Residential School in Portage la Prairie.

One of the oldest Indigenous police services in Canada, it started in 1974 as the Dakota-Ojibway Police Service. They currently service 12 First Nation communities from Roseau River near the Ontario border in the southeast to Opaskwayak Cree Nation in the northwest and have a detachment in every one of them.

They currently have 112 members with twenty-eight in training. Originally, they sent their trainees “to different police training centres and they were trained to be municipal police officers, not a Manitoba First Nations police officer.”

They have now created a training academy at Portage la Prairie. Colon says that they have invested heavily in technology in the last two years. It includes body cameras in the last two months. Additionally, they have vehicle and detachment cameras.

The cameras, he says, “helps with people in crisis” and they can show the videos to develop trust.

Statistics compiled by the MFNPS “have increased 180 percent since they started.” Part of that may be because their average response time is eight minutes, Chief Colon says, hinting that the communities believe there will be a response by the police when they call for service.

The MFNPS is presently in a one-year funding agreement, which he says is not enough time, as “it affects recruitment and retention,” Colon says.

Attendee Participation

The day ended with questions and statements from participants. One was Eddie Head, a justice worker at James Smith Cree Nation.

He noted that there were only thirty-six ISAPSs in Canada, that one of them is NAPS, and that he was part of a delegation that visited their headquarters. “We are up against funding,” he warned.

“We visited Thunder Bay and they opened our eyes,” he said, commenting that “It is going to be a struggle for PAGC to establish their own self-administered police service.”

He said that two years ago there were no gangs on his reserve, but that there are now and that it is because of drug dealers.

“If we stay together, the bigger the voice we will have,” he said, asking for unity on the issue. “There is no room for politics when comes to justice.”

Elder Roger Ratt, of Lac La Ronge Indian Band, said he was proud to serve on his local Community Tripartite Agreement (CTA) board as chair for twelve years.

At one time, “Ninety-seven percent of our people wanted our own stand-alone police service,” he said, and that “after all the work we did, the motion didn’t pass.” At that time, he decided to step down.

Roger said the CTAs had had a good working relationship with the RCMP at the LLRIB communities of Sucker River, Hall Lake, and La Ronge.

“The message I have for all of you is to stand up - we are all sharing, listening about self-administered policing. Once they give us the word, we will do all we can to make sure we succeed.”