

The vision of a PAGC Indigenous self-administered Police Service

By Ron Merasty

After discussing the issue for over three hours the Prince Albert Grand Council (PAGC) Chiefs, Executive, Senators, Directors and members of its Public Safety Implementation Team (PSIT) heard encouraging words. It was that out of perhaps two dozen tribal councils across Canada working towards implementing a self-administered Indigenous Police Service, “I will say that the Prince Grand Council work is furthest ahead and that the grassroots discussions, the type of engagement that you’re having, I think, is setting you apart.”

The words were spoken by Chris Moran, Assistant Deputy Minister, Indigenous Affairs Branch of Public Safety Canada and Emergency Preparedness. She is a member of the PSIT, a project leadership group created by PAGC, which meets from time to time to oversee the development of a future police service. However, Moran’s role is more as a monitor for her Department – their eyes and ears.

The discussion on Indigenous Policing was an agenda item on the first day of a PAGC Directors’ meeting held on January 22-23 in Edmonton. It was a comprehensive review after a year of PAGC’s public engagement effort to get public input from the communities about the initiative. Listening in on the meeting online from Ottawa were other Public Safety Canada personnel.

PAGC Vice-Chief Joseph Tsannie said that “a lot of work” has gone into the initiative, adding, “The mandate was given to us by our communities in 2017.”

The Grand Council has 12 member First Nations, 28 communities and close to 50,000 people scattered over the top half of northern Saskatchewan. It may be the largest tribal council in Canada and has Cree, Dene, and Dakota representation.

All PAGC communities are policed by the RCMP at present through Provincial

Police Services Agreements and Community Tripartite Agreements. The goal of a stand-alone Indigenous self-administered police service would be to improve community safety by ensuring effective and culturally-appropriate police services within the community, staffed by Indigenous police officers. That is the vision. It would be overseen by a board of directors to which the chief of police would regularly report quarterly.

First Nations assert that they have an Inherent and Treaty Right to establish their own court systems and police forces. Those rights were reinforced in the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission final report and the 2019 final report on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

In November 2019, PAGC held a First Nations Policing and Indigenous Justice Symposium in Saskatoon. A PAGC report filed soon thereafter stated that it was clear that “PAGC must occupy the fields of policing, courts and corrections.”

The initiative was given a major boost in October 2022 when PAGC, Government of Canada, and Government of Saskatchewan signed a Letter of Intent to explore ways to deliver police services and improve public safety in PAGC communities. The partnership anticipated the creation of an implementation plan that will improve public safety and policing in its communities.

Public Safety Canada and the Government of Saskatchewan provided funding for a PAGC feasibility study for a self-administered police service. A total of \$1.4 million was resourced for what is called “community engagement” which has involved community meetings, research, and data collection through a survey. A PAGC PSIT was created.

Sanderson, a retired Indigenous RCMP officer, was hired by PAGC to work as Team Advisor, and lead in community engagement, beginning

work a year ago in February 2024. Sanderson has been assisted by Donna Campbell and Senator Noland Henderson in community engagement. They will be conducting their work until about September 2025.

The work plan for the project was determined by the PSIT. Some members of that team include: Province of Saskatchewan representative, Matt Mirasty; Vince Brittain, Grand Chief Brian Hardlotte, and Vice-Chief Joseph Tsannie from PAGC. Mirasty is the Executive Director, First Nations and Indigenous Policing. He is a retired RCMP officer from Lac La Ronge Indian Band, and the son of former RCMP Commissioner and recently the Lt. Governor, Russ Mirasty.

“Our scope of work is through community engagement and research,” Sanderson said of public engagement. “A final report will determine the current policing models, community readiness, governance models, financial analysis and recommendations that will make up a comprehensive plan for implementation of a community-oriented policing model for PAGC.”

Their final report will be released in March 2026, about a year from now.

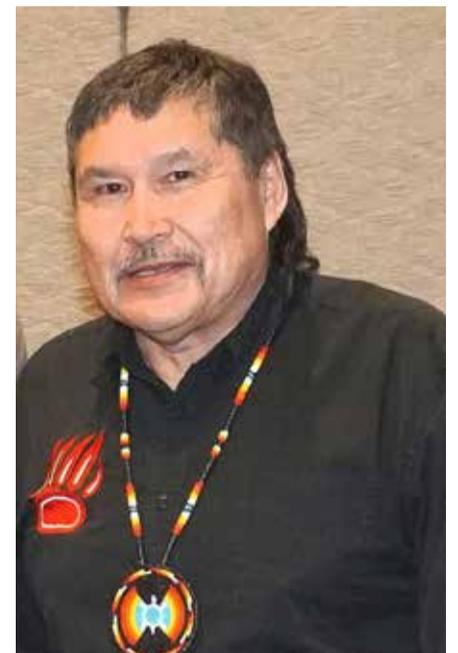
Two members of the PSIT are from the accounting firm MNP, assisting with assessing the feasibility of a regional police service and determining the resources needed. They are also working for and with other First Nations organizations across Canada that desire to create their own Indigenous police services.

Caitlyn Brown and Alana Jones of MNP provide consulting services. Jones, a retired Ontario Provincial Police Inspector said MNP is there to ensure “equality when it comes to funding, but also when it comes to what is required for the board and the governance to set up for success.”

Jones pointed out that when some of the first First Nations police services were established 30 years ago they were underfunded, i.e., “they weren’t set up for success and a lot of them failed.”

“The role of NMP is to support you to have an evidence-based policing feasibility study that can be articulated and can be grounded in evidence-based staffing, what is required to deliver adequate and effective policing and to ensure that you have the funding to be able to succeed,” Jones explained, which will go a long way toward preventing any fiscal shortfalls.

Brown said that the RCMP has been helpful in providing them data on not only human resources, equipment, and infrastructure, but also about their activities – what they’re spending their time doing at what service levels. They’re also collecting data on the hours of service for each of the 14 detachments in PAGC communities, what specialized services are available within those detachments. All of this data will determine future resourcing levels in a future regional Indigenous police service.



Ron Merasty Photo
PAGC Directors’ Meeting on Indigenous Policing
PAGC Grand Chief Brian Hardlotte



Ron Merasty Photo
PAGC Directors’ Meeting on Indigenous Policing
Caitlyn Brown, MNP



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PAGC Directors’ Meeting on Indigenous Policing
David Sanderson, Moose Lake Cree Nation, MB

Sanderson explained how community engagement has gone and what questions they are asking community members. The people they have talked to include: “chiefs, councillors, band managers, elders, educators, justice workers, nurses, mental health workers, youth workers, security officers, data consultants, health directors,” and other community members.

He also had statistics as of January 7, 2025 – since added to – that they had



Ron Merasty Photo
PAGC Directors’ Meeting on Indigenous Policing
Rosie Charles, LLRIB; and Senator Craig Bighead, Sturgeon Lake First Nation

that will improve community safety is still on the Horizon



engaged with 518 people in total in the past year with everything being recorded and transcribed, the sessions lasting anywhere from two to four hours, in groups, that people have expressed “emotion” and that “people definitely want change for sure.”

One of the questions asked is, “How are you being policed in your community?”

Sanderson said that that one question may sometimes take up two hours of discussion time; and that the responses may sometimes be: ‘Lack of communication between police and the community; or lack of presence or engagement from the police; and delayed response time.’

Not all communities are like that, Sanderson said, that in some the RCMP staff-sergeant and leadership, the Chief and Councillors, get along well, with “a lot of good disclosures.”

Question two, Sanderson said, is, “What major trends have been affecting policing and safety in your community? What is keeping you up at night?”

The list is lengthy and includes: legal or illegal substance disorders (alcohol and drugs), gang activity, extreme violence and intimidations, unsolved homicides, not feeling safe at night, limited resources (not enough police to keep the community safe), vandalism, break and enters, drug dealers, bootleggers, mental health, homelessness.

Question four asks, “Does the community have any safety programs or initiatives in addition to policing service delivered by the RCMP? If so, what is their role in the community?”

Sanderson mentioned that PAGC has a search, rescue and recovery team that attends to emergencies in all its communities when asked to assist, such as in the case of missing persons.

There are Canadian Rangers stationed in Fond du Lac, Wollaston and La Ronge that assist in search and rescue.

Some First Nation communities have Community Safety Officer (CSO) programs, funded by own-source revenue.

“We have advocated so hard for that (CSO funding) to the federal government, nothing come of that,” Grand Chief Brian Hardlotte told the directors’ meeting. “But we don’t stop.”

Some provide other security services in their communities that they also pay for out of their own-source funding. They include Lac La Ronge Indian Band, Sturgeon Lake First Nation and Hatchet Lake First Nation. They may provide security at their health clinics, band offices, schools, and some may have night patrols in their communities.

Lac La Ronge has spent approximately \$3.8 million on security in the past three years. Hatchet Lake, with four or five security officers, has spent up to \$600,000 in one year. Sturgeon Lake has recently trained 14 people in security. They have security paid from own-source funding to protect public buildings, such as the traditional birthing centre which is presently being constructed. Cumberland House has hired a private security firm from Saskatoon and has had to provide housing and vehicles.

Grand Chief said that some communities have taken to installing surveillance cameras, and that in one instance that system helped locate the body of a deceased person.

In his home community of Southend, a PBCN community, Vice-Chief Christopher Jobb said, they have installed 32 such cameras and that what he has heard is that people don’t want to identify offenders because they don’t “want to be a target as a family.”

The surveillance cameras could prove to be equally reliable as a witness. Sturgeon Lake has installed surveillance cameras paid out of own-source funding.

Another question asked in the community engagement is, “What’s not



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PAGC Directors’ Meeting on Indigenous Policing
Chief Joyce Naytowhow, Montreal Lake; and PAGC Vice-Chief Christopher Jobb

working? What’s working? How can we improve policing your community?”

“But really at the end of the day, they just want somebody on the ground 24/7, a set of boots on the ground 24/7 to police their community because the response time is could be an hour away, it could be two hours away,” Sanderson said.

Some respondents say they want improved communication between police and community, cultural understanding, and ‘More of our own [Indigenous] police working as police officers.’

Another question asked is, “What do you believe would be the major benefits and drawbacks of a regional First Nations police service led by PAGC communities?”

This idea may be rather new to many PAGC members, but the responses trend toward improved safety, culturally-sensitive policing, that First Nations people would be looking after their own, that communication would improve.

Black Lake Denesuline Nation Chief Coreen Sayazie has issues with the quality of RCMP service in her Black Lake First Nation community. It is the northeastern-most community in the province. In the nearby municipality of Stony Rapids, she said that the Province of Saskatchewan issued a liquor license to a hotel. Chief Sayazie and the mayor were concerned about not being consulted by the province about the issuance of the liquor licence, and problems have ensued. One person from Black Lake died in a road accident after attempting to return home in an ATV – this after they had been drinking.

A tragedy resulted on the road back to Black Lake one evening after some of her members frequented the hotel’s restaurant and bought liquor.

Chief Sayazie told the directors’ meeting that the local RCMP are slow to respond to complaints, and has concerns about the quality of service the RCMP is providing. She has sought outside help. The issues will have to be dealt with but the situation in the community seems



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PAGC Directors’ Meeting on Indigenous Policing
Rick Sanderson, Director of Justice, PAGC

to provide a good argument for having an Indigenous self-administered police service.

Some respondents have asked where the police officers will be coming from given that most First Nations currently have few, or even no trained officers. PBCN, with over 12,500 members has one RCMP officer from its seven or eight communities. There are none from Cumberland House and Montreal Lake. LLRIB has what Sanderson calls “a handful,” about a dozen, including one Depot graduate in 2024. Black Lake has two police officers working for the Prince Albert Police Service. One officer recently retired from Fond du Lac. The answer is that there are very few, available, Indigenous police officers.

Grand Chief Hardlotte suggested that school guidance counsellors could steer students in that direction. He also mentioned the First Nations cadet program.

PAGC Director of Justice, Rick Sanderson, a retired RCMP officer from James Smith Cree Nation, said that there are 52 First Nations cadets in the program from Prince Albert and Sturgeon Lake, and that 17 of them have told him they are interested in pursuing a future career in an Indigenous stand-alone police service. That is about one-third of the cadet corps. *continued on page 14*



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PAGC Directors’ Meeting on Indigenous Policing
Pierce Pellerin, PAGC Search, Rescue & Recovery and Chief Tammy Cook-Se arson, LLRIB

The vision of a PAGC Indigenous self-administered Police Service that will improve community safety is still on the Horizon

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“We must expand that beyond Sturgeon Lake and Prince Albert area,” Rick Sanderson said, adding that non-First Nation air, sea and army cadet corps are government funded, whereas First Nations cadet programs are not.”

Sturgeon Lake First Nation’s Chief Christine Longjohn spoke supportively of the “unfunded cadets.”

She said they:

- Live a healthy lifestyle;
- Benefit from the teachings in the program;
- Are being instilled with pride, confidence and leadership skills; and
- Exude that pride and change in their lives.

“I think there’s a really big opportunity here for us to do something adjacent to this project, but also through this project as well,” Mirasty said.

LLRIB Chief Tammy Cook-Searson commented that First Nation cadet corps not being funded is “systemic racism there, plain black and white.”

She believes that if the system is set up so that First Nations succeed, they will. However, the way things are, “the system is not set up for us.”

She believes many more of her members are interested in policing careers but feels that there may be impediments and possible bottlenecks



Take Our Survey!

The Public Safety Implementation Team wants to hear from you as we co-create a vision for safer, thriving communities. Help us better understand your community’s successes and challenges as we explore models for Indigenous-led policing and improved community safety.

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in the federal and provincial system but is not sure where they may be. She gave an example of where one of her members was being interviewed by an RCMP recruiter but was later disqualified because the interview was conducted in the interviewee’s small living space and that her grandmother, whom she lived with, had to walk by them to get to the bathroom.

The reason given for her not passing the interview? The loss of confidentiality. That would-be RCMP officer has since chosen a different career as a paramedic, Chief said, and is now a successful frontline person working for an ambulance service, “but she could have been a police officer.”

Indigenous Police Services exist elsewhere in Canada, and the largest and longest-existent one, since 1990, the Nishnawbe Aski Police Service (NAPS), also serves the largest geographic area of any police service anywhere in Canada. It is in northern Ontario, headquartered at Thunder Bay, serving 34 communities, 22 of which are fly-in.

Soon following the director’s meeting in Edmonton a PAGC contingent of about 18 went on a two-day visit to NAPS in Thunder Bay to ask questions about board governance, their governance system, and their operations.

If Indigenous self-administered police services were underfunded in the past, they are now considered “essential services.” What that means is that NAPS has statutorily-guaranteed funding like other police services and their board does not have to worry about their funding being ended arbitrarily, or of being underfunded.

Caitlyn Brown provided some of the statistics from the survey to-date. The responses to the quality of RCMP service are divided. She said 29% of the respondents thought the RCMP service was good or very good, while 24% thought the quality was very poor.

“There are folks that feel the service is responsive and members are respectful to them,” Brown said. “There’s also the other side of members not being visible in their community as well as a lack of



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PAGC Directors’ Meeting on Indigenous Policing
Matt Mirasty, Executive Director, First Nations and Indigenous Policing

trust and lack of community presence and just a lack of understanding of the nation’s needs.”

If bootlegging is considered a problem, many respondents said the RCMP is not enforcing the bylaws that Chief and Council have made.

How safe do people feel in the communities? The answer, Brown said, is that 54% of the respondents indicated that they did not feel safe in the community, while 46% indicated they did feel safe. Related to this was that 43% indicated that they did not feel that their needs, re community safety, were being met, whereas 21%, significantly less, did feel that they were.

Another important statistic is that 76% – a majority – felt it would be beneficial to have a self-administered First Nation-led police service.

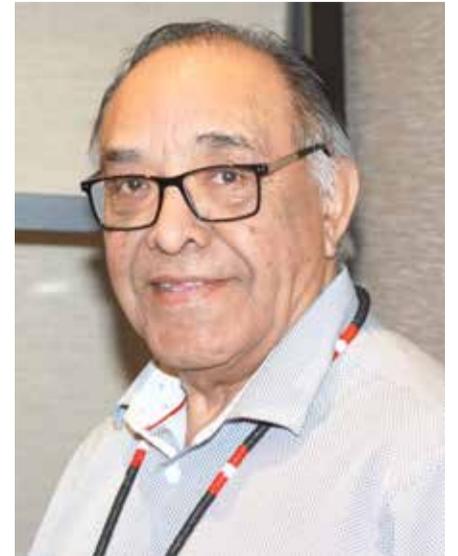
The community engagement is still ongoing. Dave Sanderson, the lead in community engagement, wants more people from PAGC communities to fill out the questionnaire. It will take, at most, perhaps 10-15 minutes to fill it out, and the data gathered is very important. People can access the questionnaire by using their smartphone to scan the QR code found on this page. Fill it out.

The six main questions in the survey are:

1. What is your role in your organization?
2. How are you being policed in your community?
3. What major trends have been affecting policing in the community?
4. Does the community have any community safety programs or initiatives in addition to policing services delivered by the RCMP? If so, what is their role in the community?
5. How can policing be improved in your community?
6. How do you hope, or vision, to see from a new regional First Nations police service? – Outcomes, benefits, drawbacks.

The initiative is far from being a slam dunk. One concern is whether a future federal government would consider it a priority, or perhaps not. The onus is on PAGC to ensure that they create the best possible case for them to be greenlighted in the future.

“We can have all the good meetings that can happen and a good everything – it’s the work that has to happen. We have to work together to make it happen,” Grand Chief Hardlotte told the directors’ meeting



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PAGC Directors’ Meeting on Indigenous Policing
Chief Marcel Head, Shoal Lake Cree Nation



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PAGC Directors’ Meeting on Indigenous Policing
Chief Bart Tsannie, Hatchet Lake



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Chief Kirby Constant, James Smith Cree Nation



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Senator Hector Khailther, Hatchet Lake



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PAGC Directors’ Meeting on Indigenous Policing
PAGC Vice Chief Joseph Tsannie and Chris Moran - Assistant Deputy Minister