

PAGC engaged in a feasibility study toward the goal of a self-administered Indigenous Police Service

By Ron Merasty

It has been a long-term goal of the Prince Albert Grand Council to have a self-administered Indigenous police service for its 12 First Nations and 28 communities that has a total population of approximately 47,000 members.

All PAGC communities at present are policed by the RCMP. The goal of having an Indigenous self-administered police service would be to improve community safety by ensuring effective and culturally-appropriate police services within the community.

Approximately five years ago in November 2019 PAGC held a First Nations Policing and Indigenous Justice Symposium in Saskatoon. A PAGC report filed after the symposium said that it was clear that “PAGC must occupy the fields of policing, courts and corrections.”

It further said that First Nations have an Inherent and Treaty Right to establish their own court systems and police forces. This message was reinforced in the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission final report and the 2019 final report on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

On October 17, 2022, PAGC, Government of Canada, and the Government of Saskatchewan signed a Letter of Intent to explore new community-oriented 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.

The next step was writing a proposal to



David Sanderson at his office in Cottage 11 at Chief Joseph Custer I.R. 201 in Prince Albert.

Ron Merasty Photo

Public Safety Canada and the Government of Saskatchewan to obtain funding for a PAGC feasibility study for a self-administered police service. That proposal was prepared by Vince Brittain and Vice-Chief Joseph Tsannie. A total of \$1.4 million was obtained and a PAGC Public Safety Implementation Team was created.

David Sanderson, a retired 33-year veteran of the RCMP was hired to be the Team Advisor and began work in February 2024. He is from Moose Lake, Manitoba, a Swampy Cree community. His assistant is Donna Campbell.

Sanderson served in eight different communities in Manitoba and Saskatchewan – First Nation communities such as God’s Lake Narrows, Oxford House, Sagkeeng First Nation (Pine Falls) and The Pas in Manitoba. In Saskatchewan

he was stationed at Sturgeon Lake, Montreal Lake and Prince Albert, and served out his career in an administrative role.

Sanderson says he knows about the struggles the RCMP and the communities had. Some of the recruits – not all – experienced culture shock when they were placed in Indigenous communities, especially if they were setting foot in one for the first time.

Regarding the feasibility study, Sanderson says his main role is “community engagement and then data collection from the communities.”

Eight months into the job, he says that they have travelled to 22 communities out of 28. Some of them they have gone to twice already, such as Hall Lake, a Lac La Ronge Indian Band community.

Community engagement sessions include having respondents filling out a survey that has about 13 questions. It takes about five minutes to fill out the survey. Some of the questions are as follows, but may not be necessarily in that order:

- Are you a band member of the PAGC of the Prince Albert Grand Council?
- Do you feel safe in your community?
- How would you rank which of the following issues are currently most important for police to address you in your community? (Is it a substance abuse drug, drug trafficking, bootlegging, gang activity, enforcement of First Nation bylaws, assaults, mental health, property, crime, traffic violations?)
- Have you dealt with police before?
- How did you feel dealing with them?
- How would you rate the quality of personal interaction with the RCMP in a PAGC community? (‘Very good, good, acceptable, poor, very poor, not acceptable.’)
- If you can improve policing, how can you improve policing?
- What are your thoughts on having your own self-administered police service?

Sanderson says that all PAGC communities are served by the RCMP but some of them like Hall Lake and Grandmother’s Bay, do not have a detachment. Some, like Pelican Narrows and Sandy Bay have detachments, but Deschambault Lake, which has about the same population number as Sandy Bay, has a drive-in model.

He explained it this way: “The RCMP drive in there. They do seven shifts, and then they get rotated out, and another crew of police officers come in and do seven shifts. They rotate.”

Sanderson says that some community

members have not even conceived of having their own Indigenous police service, but many others have.

When confronted with the possibility, Sanderson says, “They think it’s a wonderful idea,” and that the cultural component of having Indigenous police officers is the clincher.

“I think it’ll be more, because a lot of times they’re getting people from outside that have never been on a First Nation and they don’t know the culture.”

They would see an Indigenous police officer as someone better understanding their community, but that people also want ‘better response time, more visibility, meaning they want to see them patrolling the community, more engagement by the police, they want to get some feedback if they file a complaint, and they want to be treated with respect.’

Sanderson with all his experience says that in a community with fewer police officers – and he says that he’s been the only RCMP officer in a small community: “Sometimes they get caught up [working in real time] on a file. It could be an impaired rollover and somebody died, and all of a sudden there’s only two officers working in that whole area. They could be tied up there for hours.”

Community consultation sessions average about three hours, that some start talking about their experiences with the police, “how they feel about it ... they express their emotions and what they’ve physically seen, etc.”

Sanderson encourages them just to be honest about their response, and says that sometimes “I know exactly the pain they’re going through.”

The feasibility study has to be completed by March 2026, which is about 16-17 months away. The community engagement portion must be completed by June 2025, about 8 months away. Sanderson feels confident that they will complete the latter in that timeframe.

The PAGC Public Safety Implementation Team gets professional help from MNP, an accounting firm that has experience in these types of engagements, and from Creative Fire, which has helped them design a PAGC community policing webpage and assisted them in public engagement and communication consulting.

If the community engagement team is coming to your community, Sanderson would like to see more people providing information which will ultimately help decision makers in far-away places. They can do that by filling out the survey.

Rome wasn’t built in a day and so PAGC keeps moving toward the ultimate goal of a self-administered police force.


ELECT


Hector H. Morin

for **CHIEF**

Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation

2024 Election





PBCN 2024 Election

Advance Polls: November 7, 2024

Election: November 12, 2024

IT'S TIME TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE!

HONESTY FAIRNESS EQUALITY TEAM PLAYER