

Indigenous

Northwest Indigenous Council aims to advocate for B.C.'s urban aboriginal people

New organization to 'take up off-reserve peoples causes,' says Ernie Crey

[Wawmeesh G. Hamilton](#) · CBC News · Posted: Jun 02, 2015 3:28 PM ET | Last Updated: June 2, 2015



The majority of B.C.'s aboriginal people live in cities now, and the Northwest Indigenous Council plans to lobby all levels of government for them, spokesperson Ernie Crey said. PICTURE: Crey visited Oppenheimer Park pitched a tent camp last summer. (Wawmeesh Hamilton)

A new group led by a veteran aboriginal rights leader hopes to be the political voice for B.C.'s urban aboriginal people.

"There is no regional or B.C.-wide organization to take up off-reserve peoples causes and their issues," Northwest Indigenous Council (NWIC) spokesperson Ernie Crey said.

Crey hopes the NWIC will fill that gap.

"There is a crying need for an advocacy voice and that's where we plan to step up to bat and fill that role," he said.

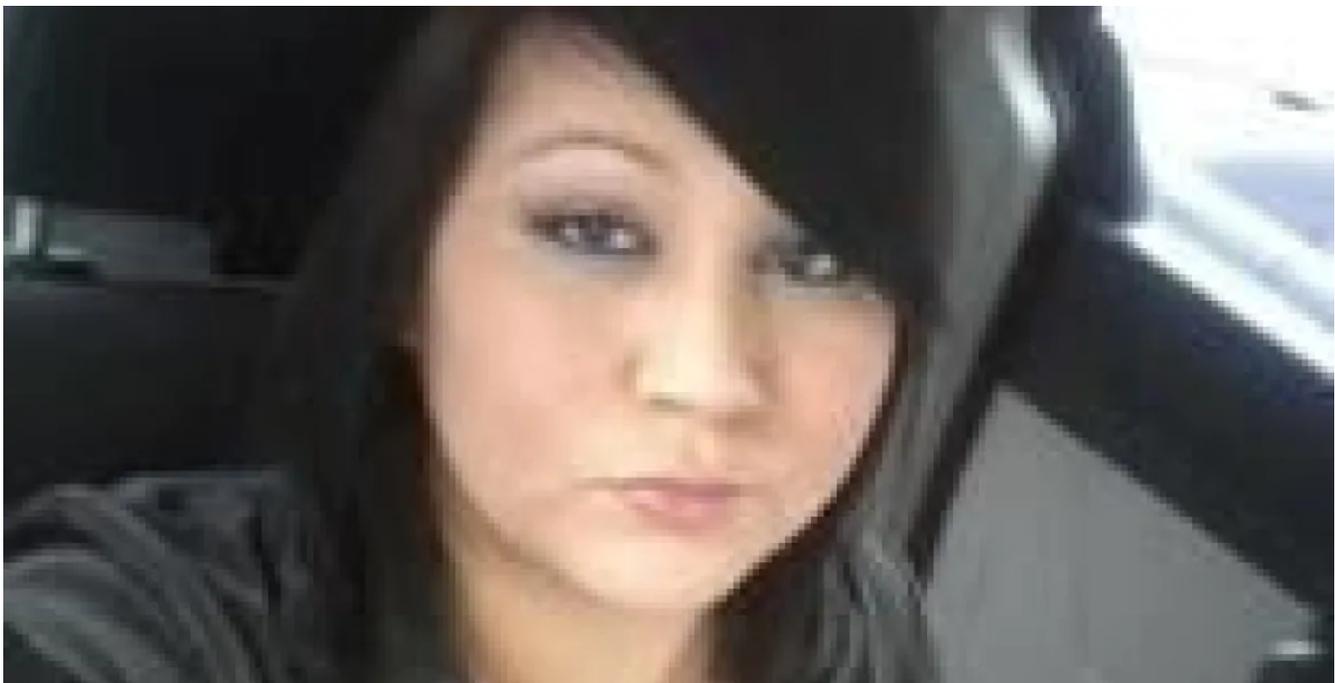
B.C.'s urban aboriginal people have been without a political voice since the collapse of the United Native Nations Society in 2013.

The NWIC will advocate with federal, provincial and municipal governments, other aboriginal organizations as well as with education and employment agencies.

According to the National Household Survey:

- More than 196,000 aboriginal people live in B.C. - half of them off reserve.
 - B.C.'s urban aboriginal population is growing at four times the national rate and half are under age 24.
 - In 2011, 52,000 aboriginal people lived in Vancouver, an increase of 12,000 people since the 2006 census.
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Getting down to business



Paige, 19, died of a drug overdose after a troubled life on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. (B.C. Children's and Youth Representative)

There was never more of a need for an urban aboriginal political advocate than recently, said Crey, when the B.C. Representative for Children and Youth released the results of an investigation into the death of a young aboriginal girl in 2013.

Described as one of her office's most troubling investigations, representative Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond leveled criticism at the Ministry of Children and Families (MCFD) among others, saying the organization's professional indifference contributed to the girl's death.

The report was nothing new, said Crey, who has advocated for aboriginal children's issues for more than 40 years.

- [Death of B.C. aboriginal teen Paige blamed on 'brutal and cruel' support services](#)
- [Paige's tragic story hits close to home for aboriginal mother in Vancouver](#)

"Sadly, this report once again chronicles the abject failure of the Ministry of Children and Family Development, and its designated agencies to provide protection to a child in need," he said.

Crey thinks an aboriginal advocacy body could have made a difference.

"NWIC would have gone to bat for this young lady with the housing societies and the province," he said. "We would have been relentless in a way the province isn't used to."

The NWIC plans to be vigilant about the implementing the report's recommendations, he said.

Government funding eschewed

NWIC organizers have vowed to be self-reliant and will seek grants and private donations rather than government money.

Government-funded aboriginal organizations become cautious when advocating with the very people who fund them, said Crey.

"We want to be a clear and strong voice for off-reserve people, no strings attached and independent - that's our goal."

Scott Clark is Coast Salish, from the Sc'ianew First Nation on Vancouver Island but he's lived in Vancouver for more than 30 years.

"The needs and aspirations of the off-reserve aboriginal population don't get heard, and as a result we see our peoples get further alienated and that's unacceptable," said Clark.

He's an interim board of director of the NWIC. He's running in the NWIC election in June because he wants to help give voice to urban aboriginals.

Jury still out

The NWIC is a new organization and the jury is out on how effective it will be, according to Luma Native Housing Society president Kent Patenaude.

"I support the idea of an aboriginal group beginning the difficult task of politically advocating against injustices suffered by urban aboriginal peoples. This is sadly needed," Patenaude said.

"I'm hopeful that a new council can advocate for better conditions."

CBC contacted the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation to get their response to this new body but they didn't respond by deadline.

NWIC plans are in the works for an eventual office in Vancouver, but for now outreach will be conducted through Facebook, Twitter and in-person meetings.

The agency is a non-profit and will be guided by a board of directors. An interim board is in place. Formal elections are being held in June.