

Reconciliation on Hold: The Impact of Pausing Residential School Survivor Funding

by Cassandra Blondin Burt

SINCE 2006, like other jurisdictions, the Northwest Territories (N.W.T.) has received funding through Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) via the Indian Residential Schools Resolution Health Support Program, established as part of the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement. Through organizations like the Indian Residential School Survivors Society (IRSSS), the program offers cultural, emotional, and mental health support services, including counselling, to Residential School Survivors, Intergenerational Survivors, and their families.

The impact of residential schools continues to have a negative intergenerational impact on Indigenous Peoples across many aspects of their lives. Residential School Survivor funding support allowed me to attend a full year of counselling during the aftermath of a challenging intimate relationship. Through a trauma-informed lens, the program supported my healing alongside my diagnosis of acute post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and toward an autism diagnosis. Through intersections in disability advocacy around neurodivergence, colonialism, and medical feminisms in the mental health field, it helped me to make sense of decades of my own frustrating misunderstanding of my patterns, gifts, and limitations.

In the 2025 Budget breakdown, the Indian Residential Schools Resolution Health Support Program received \$48 million dollars from ISC. According to Cabin Radio, ISC approved a renewal of funding in March 2026 for \$630 million over two years, designated to support the availability, accessibility, quality, and effectiveness of mental wellness services for Indigenous Peoples across the country.

Yet, as of May, despite the approval and flurry of new funding announcements, patients, therapists, and service organizations have been put on hold – waiting for administrative renewals, intakes, and funding approvals for IRS counselling supports to resume.

The Politics of Healing

When my cousin, Catherine Blondin, posted a personal account on Facebook regarding the impacts of the pause in funding, it went viral:

The IRSS counselling program is on HOLD. For those who don't know, this is the mental health support meant for survivors of the residential school system and their families. It exists because that harm didn't stop when the schools closed. It moved into our homes, our bodies, and into the next generation.

My dad is a survivor. My grandparents were survivors. I grew up with the after shocks of this. Counselling through this program has been one of the only supports that actually understood what I was carrying and where it came from. I have been seeing a psychologist for the past 2.5 years [who] is amazing. She's helped me heal deep seated trauma and change patterns within myself I could have never done on my own. I can't access this program right now. Soon, my child won't be able to either.

This isn't a policy debate to me. This is my dad. This is me. This is my kid. This is a program that exists

because of a documented, government-acknowledged harm, and it's not there right now.

Dozens of cousins, aunties, uncles, and parents shared and reshared Catherine's post. The post called attention to what Indigenous Peoples have become familiar with — seeing a necessary, beneficial program focused on our needs and healing being revoked by the very system that created those harms to begin with. This interruption of services is one more devastating moment of many, and the quick uptake of Catherine's post demonstrates the frustration that so many have lived with for generations.

Survivors Need Support

In late May 2026, IRSSS presented a petition to the House of Commons calling on the federal government to honour its commitment to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action:

IRSSS programs provide critical support during moments of profound vulnerability, including mental health and emotional crises, community emergencies, and environmental disasters — services that are uniquely tailored to the needs of Survivors and Indigenous communities. Any disruption or loss of these well-established supports would significantly impact community wellbeing and undermine reconciliation efforts.

This funding crisis is coming to the fore as First Nations across Turtle Island bear the brunt of climate injustice in their home communities — like my cousin, whose original post was made during an evacuation of her home community, Lidlji Kų due to wildfires. Lidlji Kų was evacuated to my hometown of Yellowknife at the end of June, and community members were finally able to return to their homes over the third weekend in July.

This is just one of multiple evacuation orders that have been issued for many of our communities (Yellowknife included) over the last four years — a pattern that persists across the country as First Nation communities in Northern Ontario are evacuated at best, and burned to the ground at worst.

As a part of the relief effort, I put Lidlji Kų organizers in touch with the IRSSS to seek emergency funding for mental health support for evacuees. I later heard that those organizers were not only denied, but informed that there was no support available at the time — not even emergency relief.

Bureaucratic Reconciliation

Indian Residential School Survivors have been pushed into bureaucratic processes where the reality of support begins with invoices, budget lines, and the limitation of "the fiscal year."

In this space of bureaucratic reconciliation, what is the function of governments when our systems fail us in such simple, practical, human ways and which, in turn, have such devastating, wide-spread results?

The funding will continue, but for how long and through which criteria and eligibility frameworks remain to be seen. For Canada to take reconciliation seriously, dedicated, ongoing mental health support for Indigenous Peoples must be stable and predictable. Otherwise, the flames of colonialism continue on, one spreadsheet at a time.

CITATION

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