



Considerations at every stage of the search process

Health and well-being

- Culturally appropriate and trauma informed supports
- Available to Survivors, their families, the communities, and the people who carry out the search

Indigenous laws, protocols, teachings, ceremonies and ethics

- The foundation for carrying out searches in a good way
- A vital source of guidance and healing

Funding

- There is federal funding available for most aspects of a search process.
 - Access to funding is not limited to ground searches
- More information: nac-cnn.ca/resources

Possible Pathways



National Advisory Committee
on Residential Schools Missing
Children and Unmarked Burials

1

Preparations and Planning

- Decide how the planning process should take place**
 - How will Survivors and their families be involved?
 - Keep in mind that Survivors and their families may come from many different Nations
 - Decide on goals such as:**
 - Honouring the children
 - Commemoration activities can begin at any time
 - Locating missing children/determining their fate
 - Essential to have good tools to track and compare information from diverse sources
 - Locating human remains, and determining their identity, may require a combination of lengthy ground search processes and exhumation (unearthing) of burial sites – if it's possible.
 - Potentially pursue criminal charges
 - Important to open lines of communication with police and the provincial or territorial Coroner / Medical Examiner early in the process
 - If there is a possibility of pursuing charges, it is essential to carefully track how all potential evidence has been acquired, and protected throughout the whole process, including who has handled it (this is known as "chain of custody")
 - Begin the conversation about difficult decisions such as:**
 - If burial sites are located, should they be exhumed (unearthed)?
 - Is DNA collection appropriate?
 - If human remains are exhumed, DNA samples from close living relatives may be essential for identification.
- Misuse of DNA information could have serious consequences for families and communities.
- Does the community have the resources and capacity to undertake what may be a very long, and potentially expensive process?
- Hire staff and contractors**
 - Ensure everyone involved has appropriate background or qualifications for this highly sensitive and very specialized work.
 - Additional training may be required
 - Staffing also requires administrative support for things such as budgeting and payroll
 - Staff should also have access to health supports
 - Put other essential resources in place such as:**
 - Office and meeting space
 - Work stations and other equipment
 - Establish systems to manage and protect all the information collected**
 - Any database should enable secure storage for the long term (see 3.1)
 - Anyone adding information to the data-base must be trained to ensure all information is accurate and properly labelled
 - Make it clear from the beginning who owns and controls this information
 - Determine how affected communities and families will be kept informed**
 - Establish protocols for what information will be shared with families and communities vs what information will be share publicly

2

Commemoration

- Commemoration activities can be held at any time throughout the search process.**
- The information gathered through the search process may make different kinds of commemoration possible.**
- Based on existing knowledge of the residential school system, families and communities might want to consider:**
 - Holding a ceremony or regular, ongoing ceremonies at the former site.
 - Having the school location formally declared as a historic site.
 - Creating a physical monument reflective of the culture/cultures of the children.
 - Negotiating permanent protection of the land or its return to the Indigenous host Nation.
- As the research process identifies the names of children who remain missing, options for commemoration include:**
 - Add the names to the National Student Memorial Register.
 - Holding specific ceremony/ ceremonies in to honour Survivors and the children who never came home.
 - Including their names in a monument or other physical commemoration.
- If communities decide that possible burial sites will be exhumed, to confirm burial or help identify the remains, it is important to decide in advance whether the children will remain buried where they are found or if they will be moved to another location.**

3

Knowledge Gathering

- Building a database management system**
 - A wide variety of data may be gathered including Survivor statements, residential schools documents, maps, photos, and other spatial data.
 - A good database system helps make the connections between different kinds of information, such as maps and eyewitness accounts
 - Databases are important for keeping the information secure for future use
 - Each kind of database has its own strengths and weaknesses
 - Is the database capable of storing and displaying all the different kinds of data you will gather?
 - Do you have access to the expertise needed to install and maintain the database?
 - Is there an added costs to customize the database for your needs?
 - Is it compatible with the databases used by communities and organizations you want to share information with?
 - If the software requires a license? (as opposed to open source software), is the company likely to still be in business in 10 years time? In 20?
- Survivors and other witnesses**
 - Recording statements from Survivors who wish to tell their stories, but who have not yet done so, is an urgent priority
 - Guidance is available on gathering statements in a trauma informed way
 - Many statements have already been provided to the Truth and Reconciliation Committee or National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR)
- Keep in mind that Survivors and their families may come from many different Nations**
 - Survivors can always access their own statements
 - Keep in mind that Survivors and their families may come from many different Nations
 - Agreements can be negotiated for community researches to access the entire NCTR collection
 - Survivors can also request copies of statements they provided to the Individual Assessment Process
- Residential school records**
 - The NCTR is holds the largest collection of records kept by residential schools and government departments and agencies
 - NCTR can provide an initial profile of the school or schools being investigated
 - Agreements can be negotiated for full access to the NCTR Archives
 - Other records may be scattered through a wide range of archives and collections
 - The NCTR or other professional archivists can advise on where to look
- Previous historical research**
 - Academic researchers, police and others may have already carried out investigations
 - The NCTR and other historians can advise on where to look
- Existing maps, aerial photographs, and other surveys**
 - Critical data on how the physical site has changed over time may already be available
 - The NCTR and other historians can advise on where to look

4

Ground Searches

- The first step in any search process is to compile analyse all available data**
 - See 3. Knowledge Gathering
- Has Survivor testimonial, aerial mapping or other information gathering identified specific, priority areas to search?**
 - If yes, ground penetrating radar (GPR) may be viable
 - If not, other technologies might be used including
 - (a) 3-D Laser Scanning (LiDAR)
 - (b) Search dog team
- Is the site now under water?**
 - Is the flooding seasonal?
 - If yes, it is best to plan any search activity for when it has drained.
 - If not, is it possible to drain the location?
 - (a) If the site cannot be drained, sonar might also be an option.
- Have any of these techniques produced evidence of a possible burial site?**
 - How clear were the results?
 - Does the evidence line up with Survivor accounts and other information?
 - Is the evidence consistent with findings from other residential school investigations?
- Depending on the degree of certainty sought by the community and families, options include:**
 - Using other technologies to look for supportive evidence such as search dogs
 - Conduct further knowledge gathering
 - Decide whether to proceed with excavation
- Is the site secure?**
 - It's critical to protect potential search sites from further disturbance or potential vandalism
 - i. Legal assistance may be needed
- Do you have physical access to the site?**
 - If not, necessary steps may include:
 - Negotiating with the title or lease holder to gain access
 - Seeking assistance from federal, provincial or territorial governments
 - Consulting a lawyer on legal options
- Is the selected search site relatively undisturbed and free of trees and other obscuring vegetation?**
 - If yes, ground penetrating radar (GPR) may be viable

5

Exhumation (unearthing potential burial sites)

- It is important to recognize that there is always a risk that any disturbance of a burial site could potentially disrupt that site – if for example, changes over time have brought remains closer to the surface
 - Forensic experts should be involved in any level of exhumation in order to recognize and protect any remains
 - Decisions should be made in advance about what is to be done with any remains that are found.
 - Is it permissible for them to be removed for examination?
 - If a family cannot be identified, will the remains be left in place or moved to another location?
 - If moved for any reason, how will the remains be kept safe?
- Is it acceptable to the community/communities and families to disturb the site?**
 - If no, the community and families must decide how to honour the children based on the information that has already been gathered.
 - If it's acceptable to allow minor disturbance, removing just the surface layer of the soil may:**
 - Unearth physical evidence that a burial has taken place
 - Make it possible to get more detailed readings from technologies like GPR
 - If the community/communities determine that it is acceptable to open potential burial sites, it is possible to:**
 - Conclusively determine whether a gravesite has been located
 - Carry out forensic examination

6

Forensic Examination

- Through physical examination of human remains, it may be possible to determine/estimate**
 - Age
 - Biological sex
 - Possible cause of death.
- The condition of the human remains – which determines what can be learned – is affected by:**
 - How much time has passed
 - Ground conditions such as flooding
 - Past disturbances of the burial site
 - The age and health of the child at time of death and other aspects of the remains themselves.
- Positive identification of individual children may require a combination of forensic evidence and other information such as:**
 - historical reports
 - eye-witness accounts
 - any personal effects found in the burial site
- DNA testing can help identification if there are genetic samples of biological relatives available.**
- Some forensic information can be gathered at the site. Other information requires removing the remains to a special medical center.**
 - Before exhumation, decisions about any remains are recovered, there is a clear agreement about the process for the eventual repatriation of the remains to the family or community

7

Repatriation

- Based on traditions and the wishes of family members, community's and families may decide:**
 - That the human remains of their loved ones should be left in place where they are found.
 - That the human remains should be relocated to another location, such a cemetery that is closer to the community or family.
- Ideally, any plans for relocating the children should be discussed before any burial site is exhumed or before any remains are removed for examination.**

The National
Residential School Crisis Line
1-866-925-4419

The National Advisory Committee on Residential School Missing Children and Unmarked Burials brings together independent expertise on all aspects of the search process and makes this expertise freely available to Indigenous peoples.

nac-cnn.ca