# "LIKE RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL ALL OVER AGAIN"
# "tāskoc kitimāhtāsowi kiskinwahamākewin asamīna"

**EXPERIENCES OF EMERGENCY EVACUATION FROM THE ASSIN'SKOWITINIWAK (ROCKY CREE) COMMUNITY OF PELICAN NARROWS**
**(with a special focus on Elders and the elderly)**

**kā esi wāpahtahkik e wayawihtahihcik osci ekota asiniy nehiyawak māmawi wīkiwin ohci wapāwikoscikanihk (kise ayak ekwa kihte ayak)**


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eta nehiyaw pihtamihk wihtamākewinasinahikan kā kī miskācikātew ekota:

Audio of the Executive Summary in Cree can be found at:

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or

https://youtu.be/Jp9HNjR5SCg

kahkiyaw masinahikana osci ōma wihta ayimihcikan ka kī itisahamihk esi:

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“tāskoc kitimāhtāsowi kiskinwahamākewin asamīna”
kā esi wāpahtahkik e wayawihtahihcik osci ekota ASSIN’SKOWITINIWAK (asiniy nehiyawak)
māmawi wīkiwin ohci wapāwikoscikanihk (kise ayak ekwa kihte ayak)

## Executive Summary


ekota kā kanātahk askiy, kiwītinohk iyiniwak eta kā māmawi wikicik e wayawihtahihcik tahtwā askiy pihtaw osci e papasteyik ekwa e ka iskipek, māka moy mistahi kiskehcikātewa tānsi esi wāpahtahkik ohi kā wayawihtahihcik. Ōma kā esi akihcikātek, kā esi wāpamihcik, eta kā wīkicik, ekwa māmawi nitonikewin e ayamihtācik niyāna mitanaw nikotwāsikosap ācimowina osci ayisīniwak kā wīkicik ta wihtahkik ka esi mōsihtācik ka wayawītisahocik osci ekote Assin'skowitiniwak (Rocky Cree) māmawi wīkowin osci wapāwikoscikanihk ekote kiwītinohk Saskatchewan pihtaw osci kā pastek ekospihk nīpin 2017. peyak kā nohte kiskehtamihk osci oma nitonikewin osci kihte ayak ekwa kise ayak ka esi wāpahtahkik.

māmawi, e miskācikatek ka apacihtak ka wayawihcikewin itotamowina ekwa mamisitotawina osci ispimihk esi nihcayihk, āskaw moy waskawewin, tāwāyihk itōtamowina cimiskākewina māmawi wīkowin itasiwewina kwayisk itasiwewina ekwa moy kaskihtawak ta tawahahkik kihcināc nitawehcikewina. eyikoni kihci okimānāhk atoskewak ekwa moy-kihci okimānāhk atoskewikamikwa tāskoc Red Cross pimipayihtāwak wayawihcikewina, ekwa nistohtākwan apisīs osci makweyimowin ekwa āskaw ayimahki ka ispayiki, itōtamowina osci ayisīniwak ekota kā wīkicik ta wīcihtāsocik wawīwinihk, isi itōtamowin, ekwa atoskewin moy mistahi ihtakwana.

eyakwa ōma osci ka pah piskihcipitihcik peyakohewahonak, moy waskawe ekwa isihcikewin wīcihihcik, kisowāsowin mōsihowina osci wayawihcikewin, ekwa saskatehtamowin pihtaw osci moy kiskehtamowina osci okaskihtawinowa ekwa kiskehtamowin osci iskotew pimipaycikewin. ōma nitonikewin miskam e ayimahki kīkway osci nitawehcikewina osci kiwītinohk iyiniwak ekwa kā-piskihtahastāhk mākwemowin itōtamowin masinahikana ekwa itasiwācikātew meskocipayinikewina kwayask ta esi mōsihtācik wayawihcikewina osci kiwītinohk iyiniw wīkiwina. kā ahkami wanihtācik itotamowin ka mōsihtācik  māmawi iyiniwak

tapiskoc peyakwan kitimahtawin kiskinwahamātowikamikwa, ekwa kiskisowina osci awāsisak kā otinikocik simākanisa, ekwa tāpitaw e pihtikwahihcik misi otāpānaskohk, kiyāpic kiskisiwak ayisiniwak. Māmīnipitamowin itastew kihci okimānāhk ekwa moy kihci okimānāhk māmawipicikewina ta kiskehtahkik kā kī pe kitimahicik iyiniwak ekwa tānihki kā esi ispayihocik anohc.

ka koteyihtamihk, ka kakihcisāyāhk, ekwa sohkātisiwin (osci sihcikewin nihtā mīnowin) e masinahikāteki ōta masinahikewin. nimiskenān moy miywāsiki kīkwaya osci kā itasinahamihk ka kakihcisāyāhk, kā wīhihcihk ayisīniwak "mistehtākosiwak peyak" kā wayawihtahcik pihtaw osci kotakwa kīkway tāskoc piponewin. nitonikewinān itastew peyak poko tāskōhamihk awīna e koteyihtahk ekwa tānihki nakoc ta miywāsin, ekota kā kiskehcikātew awina ta kinwāpamihcik ekwa e miywāsik kīkway ka itōtamihk. niwihtenān anima "kā akihcikātek ka koteyihtamihk" asamīna ta wīhcikātek esi pimātisiwin ahpō wahkohtowin ekota kā wīhiht ayisīniw tāskoc " e koteyihtamot" e masinahikātek, ta kiskehtamihk ayisīniwak nayistaw kā māmawi wīkicik. ōma nitonikewin, tāskoc kotakwa, e wēhcikātek kā paskīhihcik peyakohewahona e āyimahk e āyamīhkocik ayisīniwak ekwa kā māmawi wīkicik kahkiyaw eta e kiskehtahkik ta kaskihtācik ta miskahkik askiy mīcowin ekwa itōtamowina ekwa ta pakitinehcik ta itōtamāsocik kwayisk ta wīcīsocik kā māyipayik kā wīcihtāson ekota sihcikewin nihtā mīnowin ekwa kā wāpacikātew esi sihcikewini miyohk kā ayāhk masinahikan.

tāskoc, nikinwāpahtenān tānsi esi wāpahtahkik kihte ayak ekwa kise ayak. Moy anima ka kī itehtamihk kā kihte ayayōcik ayisīniwak tāskoc ka koteyihtamihk kā pastek. mihceyit kihte ayak kaskihtāwak ta nākateyimisocik ekwa owahkōmākaniwāwa. ayisīniwak ayimihowak ta wāpamisocik e kakihcisācik pihtaw kā piponecik. kā esi āpacihcihk kihte ayak masinahikātew, pihtaw e maskowisīcik ekwa e nihtā wīcihitocik māka tāpitaw wepac e wayawihtahihcik ekwa e paskīhihcik osci owahkōmākaniwāwa ta wīcihācik ta wihtamowācik kīkwaya.

mihceyit ayisīniwak wāpahtamok kīkway e itehtahkik mōniyāw pokwātotātowin. Tāskoc eta kā kapīsicik ōtīnāhk, moy kihci okimānāhk atoskewikamikwa, ekwa cikāstepayicikewinihk ācimowinihk. kwayisk kiskehcikātew kiyām tahtwā kā wayawihtahcik otaskīwāhk kiyāpic e astek makīkway kiskehtamowin ekwa makīkway kisewātisiwin eta kā miskāsocik kā wayawihtahihcik ayisīniwak. kā wicihtāsocik atoskewikamikwa nitaweyimewak kā wayawihtahihcik kwayisk ta paminisoyit ekwa ta nanāskomocik kā wīcihihcik, ekwa wihtamok kîspin moy ōhi kīkway kā nakiskāteki.

ayimihowina osci eta kā atoskihk ekwa wihtamātowin sākipayinwa asamīna ōta nitonikewin. ayisīniwak itehtamok moy kākatāc kinwes ta nakihk kā nōtinimihk iskotew ekwa kā itasiwihk ta wayawihtahcik ayisīniwak, ekwa itehtākwan nakoc mōniyāwak ayiwāk kwayisk e paminihcik. Pīkwihtamowin astew osci anima "pakitina ta pasteyik" masinahikan osci kihci okimānāhk, itehtamihk ekota ayiwāk ta kihceyimihcik sāwanohk "wāpiskiwiyās" itehtamowina pihci kīwītinohk iyiniwak. anihi kihci okimānāhk moy kā tāpwihtahkik anima masinahikan kīpihtewak moy kā nitohtawihcik ekota ayisīniwak kā wīkicik ekwa moy kā kwecimihcik itasiwewina ekwa wihtamākewin moy miyopayin. Pīkwihtamowina osci awīna ta tipahahk kā wayawihtahcik kîspin ayiniwak itasiwewak mākwemowin ekota kā moy kā kaskihtācik ekota kā wīkicik onīkānewak kwayisk ta itōtawācik pokwāwiya ekota kā wīkiyit.

## RECOMMENDATIONS
### kīkwaya ta itōtamihk

1. kā māmawi wīkicik ayisīniwak ekwa kā peyako wīkicik ka kī wīcihtāsocik ka mākwemo ispayik kwayisk itōtamowin wawewin ekwa wihkīmowin, ta pakitinihcik ta kinwāpahtahkik ka koteyihtamihk ekwa ka kakihcisāyāhk esi ka kiskehtamihk nātohk ka kakihcisāyāhk kā astek ekota kā mākwemo ispayihowin. eyako nakoc kwayisk kā wīkicik ekota pimatisiwin ekwa sihcikewina ta masinahikāteki ekota mākwemo ispayihowin

2. peyak esi ka kaskihtahk ta āpacihihcik kā māwawi wīkicik ekota māyahkamikan wawewin ekwa kwayisk itōtamowin poko ta apacihtāk sihcikewina masinahikana ekwa itōtamowina. ekosi kā esi wāpahcikātewa anihi sihcikewina osci "tānsi esi itōtamihk kīkwaya" kwayisk, ta miywihtamok ka nitawehtamihk ta mistohtamihk ayiwak sihcikewin ekwa pimātisiwin itōtamowina ekwa peyako pītosiwewin, kwayisk ta kiskehtamihk wayawihtahowewin moy ka ayimahki esi pimātisiwina osci kā māmawi wīkicik ayisīniwak. ta wihtamihk anihi kā ispayihki ekwa kayāsi wahkohtowina esi iyiniwak ekwa askiy okimānāhk ekwa atoskewina poko ta astek osci sihcikewin miyopayiwin. poko ta kiskehtamihk kwayisk ta nistohtamihk itasiwewina ta wīcihihcihk, ekwa ta isinākosicik tāskoc e pihtikwe itisahohcihk misi otāpānāskohk ekwa e sipwihtahihcik ohpime esi tāskoc peyakwan kā kī itōtawehcik ikospe kitamahtāsowina

kiskinwahamātowikamikwa ekwa anihi “awāsisak kā otinehcik ekospihk 60’s.” kīwītinohk nehiyaw pimātisiwina ekwa wahkohtowina ka kī osihtācik wayawihtahihcik masinahikan, eyikoni ōhi wīcihisowin ekwa ka kī kinawehtamihk kā mākweyimohk, pihci ka mayipitamihk. itwemakan, kāwi ta māmitonehtamihk tānsi esi ayisīniwak esi wayawihtahihcik, ta kanaweyimihcik ta māmawi āyācik peyakanohk.

3. kā māmawi wīkicik ayisīniwak ta kī miyihcik kīkwaya ta osihtācik ekwa ta kanawehtahkik ayisīniw masinahikan osci kakihcisāyāhk ayisiniwak. eyikoni kā mōsihtācik “ka koteyihtamihk” ka kī wīhisowak esi kā pimipayicikecik, pihci kā pimipayicikecik ta itehtahkik ka koteyihtamihk osci anihi ayisīniwak pihtow ohci sāwanohk mākweyimowin itōtamowina. eyakwa “nohte itōtamowin ‘misiwanācihcikewin masinahikan’ osci kihte ayak ekwa ka māskisicik ayisīniwak, osci moy ta kiskehtamihk kiskehtamowin osci kā isāyācik, ka kī osihcikātew. eyakwa masinahikan ta wīcihikowak ayisiniwak ekota kā wīkicik ta māci pīkiskwātahkik anima ka kakihcisāyāhk ekwa misiwanācihcikewin atoskewin, ta wīcihācik nanātohk kā wīcihtāsocik kakwe wīcihikocik.

4. anima ka akihcikātek ka koteyihtamihk kāwi ta kiskehtamihk esi wahkohtowin itwewina, ka koteyihtamihk moy anima peyak ispayihowin; eyakwa anima peyakohewahon wāpahtamowin. eyakosici eyikoni ayisīniwak “ka koteyihtamihk” māna peyak ayisīniw kā esi waskaweyit.

5. kihte ayak ka kī kiskeyimihcik esi sohkātisicik ekwa e wicihisocik ekospihk pīkwihtamowin ka ispayik. kā paskīpitihcik kihte ayak ohci kotakwa tepiyāhk kîspin makīkway kotak miskācikātew. moy kākatāc kwayisk ta kī paminihcik kā wayawihtahihcik otaskīwāhk kîspin nitawihtahkwāw eyakwa. kihte ayak ta kī kwecimihcik kīkway ta itōtamihk ekota kā wīkicik. kihte ayak mīna ka wīcihtāsocik kā māyahkamikahk kwayisk ta wayawihtahihcik ayisīniwak ta wīcihisocik kwayisk sihcikewinihk, moy tīpiyāhk papeyahtik ka paminihcik kīyām āta moy nitawehtahkik wīcihowin ka pīkopicikīmakan wīcisānihtowinihk, ekwa moy tāpacihāwak osci sihcikewin sohkātisiwin osci kahkiyaw kā māwawi wīkicik ayisīniwak.

6. iskwiyāc ta kī wayawītahihcik ayisīniwak sāwanohk esi. kotakwa kīkwaya ta kī apacihtāhk. ōhi kotakwa kīkwaya tāskoc ta kanaweyimihcik ekotī kīwītinohk ahpō ōtīnāhk askihkānihk tāskoc La Ronge ahpō Prince Albert eta pimātisiwina, sihcikewina, ekwa miywāyāwina e kwāci asteki (e kīsasteki sōniyāw masinahikan ekwa ta kaskihtāhk ta itohtek ekotī nanātohk kā wīcihtāsocik). poko ka miskamihk eta kā astek wikamik ta kinaweyimihcik ayisīniwak kā wayawihtahihkcik otaskīwāhk.

7. ohpimī kā wīkicik wītisānak kā misi wīcihtāsowak ka wīcihācik kā wayawihtahihcik ekwa e ayācik eta ka kapesihk, mīcowin, ekwa miyomahcihowin. ayiwāk sōniyāw ta kī mīyihcik kā wīcihtāsocik, pihtaw eyikoni kā māci apacihihcik kā ispayik ekwa moy mistahi e otamihtāsocik pimātisiwinihk ekwa sihcikewinihk.

8. wayawihtahiwikamikwa tāskoc sōniskwātahikewikamikwa ta kī pakitinācik ayisīniwa ta atoskeyit ekwa ka pimipayisowiyit ispihci kaskihtācik.

9. “kiskehtamowin” eta kā wīkihk ta kaskihtāhk mākweyimowin wīcihowina ta kahtinamihk nayihtāwan ekospihk kā pīkwīhtamihk. ta wihtamihk ta kī miywāsik pihci kotakwak ta kwecimihcihk mīna.

10. kā kīsi wayawihtahihcik ta kī kīskimihcik awiyak kîspin nitawehtamok ta pīkiskwātiht.

11. nitawehcikātew kwayisk ta wihtamihk tānsi esi wāpahtahkik kā wayawihtahihcik ayisīniwak osci cikāstepayicikanihk. tāpitaw ta wāwihtamihk mistahi kā miywāsin. māka kā wihtahkik ācimowina cikāstepayicikanihk ta manācihācik kā wayawihtahihcik ayisīniwak ekwa ta ka kwe nistohtawācik ka ispahowiyit. ekosi, ta kakwe nitonahkik kiskehtamowin osci kā kiskehtamoyit ayisīniwa pihci osci kā wayawihtahcik ayisīniwak pihtaw āpihtikwe moy mistahi kiskehtamok cikāstepayi ācimowin.

12. eta kā wīkihk nitonikewin poko kahkami itōtamihk ekotī kīwītinohk kā wāpahtahkik pastipewin ahpō pastewin kwayisk ta kaskihtāhk ta wayawihtahihcik ayisīniwak. Peyak kīkway astew ohci anima “kāhkami ispayik” wāpahtamowin osci wayawihtahiwikamikwa, kā kī kinwāpahcikātewa ikospihk kā wayawihtahihcik ayisīniwak.

## Executive Summary

In Canada, northern Indigenous communities are evacuated on an annual basis due to fire and floods, but little is known about their experiences of these evacuations. This qualitative, ethnographic, community-based, and collaborative research relied on 56 interviews of community residents to detail the experiences of evacuation from the Assin'skowitiniwak (Rocky Cree) community of Pelican Narrows in northern Saskatchewan due to wildfire in the summer of 2017. One focus of this research is the experiences of Elders and elderly.

Overall, it was found that application of provincial evacuation models and reliance on top-down, often inflexible, centralized approaches stunted the community’s ability to make decisions in its best interests and failed to meet their specific needs. Both government agents and non-governmental organizations such as the Red Cross tend to take control of evacuation processes, and while this is understandable to some extent by the emergency and often chaotic nature of such events, opportunities for local people to be more active in planning, organization, and service delivery are rare. This led to separated families, unmet physical and cultural needs, negative emotional experiences of the evacuation, and frustration due to the lack of acknowledgement of their skills and knowledge relating to fire management. This research found that there is incongruence between the needs of the residents of northern Indigenous communities and current provincial emergency management policies and suggests changes to improve the experiences of evacuations from northern Indigenous communities. The continued loss of control felt by community members conjures up unfortunate comparisons with residential schools, and memories of children being forced away from their families by government agents, and often onto busses, are still fresh in resident’s minds. Reconciliation demands that

government and non-governmental organizations be acutely aware of the impact of colonial history on Indigenous peoples and its enduing impact.

Risk, vulnerability, and resilience (specifically cultural resilience) are key issues addressed in this report. We find problems with the categorical approach used to define vulnerability, in which some residents are defined as "Priority One" evacuees because of some defining characteristic, such as age. Our research suggests that a more individual-centered approach to determining who is specifically at risk and why would be better, as it would ensure that only relevant individuals are identified along with appropriate action. Further, we suggest that the "unit of Risk" be reconceptualised as the social or relational unit in which an "at risk" individual is embedded, to ensure that important social groups remain intact. This research, like others, has identified the separation of families as a key problem which affects the ability of individual and communities to invoke cultural mechanisms of resilience. Keeping families and communities together in familiar settings with access to traditional food and activities and allowing them to be more involved in their own disaster mitigation efforts would help to tap into this cultural resilience and would represent culturally safe policy.

As an example, we focus on the experiences of the elderly and Elders. Advanced age in itself should not be seen as a risk factor when wildfire occurs. Many older individuals are quite able to take care of themselves and their families. People had difficulty seeing themselves as vulnerable because of age alone. The special role of Elders is also noted, as these individuals are sources of strength and resilience but were often evacuated early in the process and separated from family and others who would benefit from their guidance.

Many residents experienced unfortunate incidents which they interpret as racist. This includes experiences with hotels, non-governmental aid organizations, and the news media. It remains clear that despite the annual nature of evacuations there continues to be ignorance of and lack of empathy for the situation in which evacuees find themselves. Service providers expect evacuees to conform to their expectations regarding behaviour and to be appreciative of aid provided, and are freely critical when these expectations are not met.

Issues of jurisdiction and communication also emerge again in this research. The residents feel that there was an unnecessary delay in fighting the fire and calling for the evacuation, and point to non-Indigenous communities receiving preferential treatment. There remains widespread concern about the "Let it Burn" policy of the government, which is locally

interpreted as a means to prioritize southern "white" values over northern Indigenous ones. The government's continued denial of this policy falls on deaf ears when local people are not involved in the decision-making and when communication falters. Concerns over who would pay for the costs of the evacuation should the First Nation declare an emergency on its own clouded the ability of local leadership to act in the community's best interests.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Communities and individuals should be actively involved in their own disaster mitigation planning and efforts, allowing them to assess their own risk and vulnerability in a way that accounts for the variable nature of vulnerability apparent in any disaster. This would better allow for local social and cultural norms to be integrated into disaster planning.
2. One way of attaining the goal of involving communities in disaster preparedness and mitigation is to use culturally safe policies and procedures. These would be reflective of local cultural sensibilities of "how to do things" the right way, would appreciate the need to understand both broader cultural and social patterns and individual variability, and ensure that evacuations did not pose a challenge to the sociocultural fabric of the community. An acknowledgement of the ongoing and historical relationships between Indigenous peoples and the state and its agencies is central to cultural safety. This means a clear understanding of how making decisions on their behalf, and appearing to order northern Indigenous people on to buses and taking them to unknown destinations may invoke parallels with, and traumatic memories of, residential schools and the "sixties scoop." The nature of northern Cree sociality and family structure should form the backbone of evacuation policy; these are sources of resilience and should be protected in times of crisis, rather than disrupted. This would mean, among other things, rethinking how extended families are evacuated, with and eye to keeping them together in one place.
3. Communities should be provided with the resources to generate and maintain a more person-centred directory of vulnerable individuals. Those who feel "at risk" could identify themselves to authorities, rather than having authorities presume the risk of those

people based on southern emergency protocols. A “voluntary ‘Disaster Registry’ for elderly and disabled individuals, with confidential information about their medical condition, functional abilities, and social resources, and related needs in the event of emergency, could be generated. Such a registry would encourage local people to become involved in conversations about vulnerability and disaster response, and work with the agencies that are attempting to assist them.

4. The unit of risk should be reconceptualized in relational terms; risk is not an individual experience; it is a family experience. Hence it is the social group that is “at risk” when a particular individual exhibits a risk factor.
5. Elders should be recognized as a special resource and source of resilience during stressful times. The separation of Elders from others should be a very last resort. They should not receive special treatment during an evacuation unless they need it. Instead, Elders should be drawn upon for their knowledge and experiences, as well as their influence and status within the community. Including Elders in disaster response could help to create culturally safe evacuations which encourage cultural resilience, but treating them only as vulnerable regardless of actual need can lead to the fracturing of families, and a loss of resources for cultural resilience for entire communities.
6. Evacuation of northern residents to southern cities should continue to be a last resort. The time to consider other options has arrived. These options include developing hosting capacity in northern Indigenous communities or on First Nations reserve lands in smaller northern cities such as La Ronge or Prince Albert where social, cultural, and health resources and capacities are well developed (complete with the necessary budget lines and access to services). Serious consideration of a more permanent evacuation centre is needed.
7. Expatriate family members are important resources during evacuations, and often provide shelter, food, and comfort. More resources should be directed toward assisting them with the extra expenses involved, as these placements are amongst the most preferential for evacuated residents and help to minimize the social and cultural disruption.
8. Where evacuation centres are utilized, such as arenas, the evacuated residents should be afforded active and meaningful roles in centre procedure and governance to the practical extent possible.

9. “Proof” of status or residency to obtain emergency services creates an unnecessary barrier during a time of stress. Oral confirmation should be sufficient and without the need for affirmation by others.
10. Post-evacuation counseling should be more readily available for those needing it.
11. There continues to be a need for insightful and empathetic reporting of the situation of evacuees by the news media. Regular briefings of media by community officials during evacuations would be valuable. But media must be reminded to be respectful of evacuees and make better efforts to understand their situation. To this end, they should be encouraged to seek information only from official channels rather than the evacuees themselves who are unlikely to have experience with the media.
12. Community-based research should continue to be carried out in northern Indigenous communities affected by flood or fire in an effort to improve evacuations. One black hole remains the “real time” experience of the evacuation centres, which could be studied while occupied during an evacuation.

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All names in this report are pseudonyms. Some quoted passages have been altered to improve readability and to protect identities.

## Ethics and Community Approval

Following consultations, this project was approved by the Chief and Council of the Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation, and the Prince Albert Grand Council. The Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation has approved the release and distribution of this publication.

Ethics approval was granted by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Saskatchewan.

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# PART 1: INTRODUCTION

Each year in Canada, Indigenous communities are forced to evacuate due to wildfires. Despite the annual nature of these events, there is very little research on the experiences of those evacuated. This report extends from one such study of the evacuation of Hatchet Lake Denesuline First Nation and the community of Wollaston (Scharbach and Waldram 2013), by chronicling the experiences of Pelican Narrows residents with an evacuation due to wildfire in the summer of 2017. It addresses issues relating to risk, vulnerability, resilience, and the implementation of government policy framed for a non-Indigenous, southern, and national context. Special emphasis is given to the experiences of Elders and the elderly. In this report, "Elder" refers to the ascribed status of an individual whose experience and knowledge is a source of guidance and respect, and such status is not necessarily linked to a particular age or age category. "Elderly" refers to chronologically older individuals, typically from their 60s onward, who may or may not also be Elders.

During evacuations, Indigenous elderly people, those with chronic illnesses, young children, and pregnant women are assumed to represent de facto 'at risk' or 'vulnerable' groups, which leads to them being removed first and separated from other family members. This separation can cause distress and various social problems when the traditional social structure centred on the elderly and especially Elders to provide guidance and direction is absent (Scharbach and Waldram 2016). Elders are sources of knowledge, resilience, and comfort for the community, and vice versa, during times of heightened community stress. While it might seem logical to assume older individuals are an 'at-risk' population, this assumption is potentially harmful to individuals and communities during evacuations. Our research suggests that vulnerability should be understood situationally rather than categorically. That is, *some* but not all members of vulnerable categories may need to be evacuated early and provided with special accommodation. Further, vulnerability needs to be reconceptualized as a collective – but not a group – characteristic through the recognition that the evacuation of any individual creates a risk situation of varying types and degrees for significant others, especially family members. The extent to which evacuation procedures compromise a community's capacity to be resilient is an important question, and the acknowledgement of Elders especially as key sources of community and cultural resilience is crucial.

This research project addresses several key questions:

- What were the experiences of Pelican Narrows residents who were evacuated because of the 2017 fires?
- What were the cultural, social, and health needs of Pelican Narrows residents, and to what extent were those needs met during the evacuation and return?
- How are the concepts of 'at risk,' 'vulnerability,' and 'resilience' applied to elderly Indigenous people and understood in the community?
- How could the effects of separating the elderly from other community members be mitigated or avoided?
- How could the evacuation experience have been made better for all community members?

## 1.1 Community Context

The research took place in the Assin'skowitiniwak (Rocky Cree, or "people of the rockyarea") community of Pelican Narrows in northeastern Saskatchewan, which experienced evacuations due to fire in the summers of 2008 and 2017 (Gillis 2008). Pelican Narrows, or Opawikoscikcan (meaning "the Narrows of Fear") is often referred to by residents as simply "Pelican." The reserve is located between the Churchill and Sturgeon-Weir River systems. Pelican is a relatively small community that rests between the narrows that join Pelican Lake and Mirond Lake, on the Canadian Shield. It is surrounded by waterways, trees, and beautiful rocky territory. Their traditional land spans over 20,000 square miles. Many residents have lived in Pelican for their whole lives, and some rarely leave the reserve.

The community is a member of Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation (PBCN). PBCN signed Treaty 6 in 1889. PBCN is the second largest First Nation in Saskatchewan (PBCN 2019c), and Pelican is the largest community governed by them (PBCN 2019d). According to the PBCN, (2019d), about 4,000 people were in living in Pelican Narrows in 2013. The community population has experienced over 50% growth since 199, with more than half the residents under age 21. (Siggins 2006, 47).

Although hunting, trapping, fishing, and gathering have been replaced by part-time or full-time work for many younger people, many still take part in these activities, and they remain culturally important (PBCN 2019c). Numerous people we spoke to continue to hunt in the winter

and fish in the summer, and the elderly usually prefer the food caught locally to food bought from stores. Many families have cabins throughout the traditional territory.

Before the band system, the extended family group was the primary source of authority and social control. The shared political values of the Assin'skowitiniwak have been referred to as "communal, cosmocentric, cooperative, kinship-based, and egalitarian" (Beatty 2006, 16). Men tended to be the head of the family and earned prestige through age and skills such as caring for and supporting their families, being diplomatic, developing expertise in hunting and trapping, "and for some, special shamanistic abilities" (Beatty 2006, 17). Although these values are not as obvious today, they have continued to be important in community politics

According to PBCN, "The cultural values of respect, sharing and spirituality developed as a way of life with families working together on the land as means of survival in a harsh environment" (PBCN 2019c, n.p.). In the past, these large, co-operative kinship groups helped to ensure that assistance would be available in times of need (Beatty 2006, 101), and they continue to be of great importance today (Laderoute 1994, 14). These familial relationships are ones of reciprocity, where a person is expected to assist their kin when they are in need, and in return receive help from others when they require it (Reid 1984, 320). This interchange is still present in Pelican.

PBCN represents groups of people who were once spread out because of their hunting lifestyle but who were brought together by the Canadian government's policies into a permanent settlement (Beatty 2006, 16). Before sedentarization, the most common pattern of settlement was comprised of groups of dwellings consisting of "kin-based residential units, often reflecting old bands, and usually with important economic, political, and religious functions" (Waldram 1987, 119). Changes to these settlement patterns began to take place when children were forced to attend residential schools by the Canadian government from mid-August until June (Siggins 2006, 46). Guy Hill Residential School was opened in Sturgeon Landing in 1926, followed by a local school built around 1950 (Brightman 1993, 15). People began to settle in Pelican Narrows in the 1960s because children were required to go to school, and families would lose their family allowances if their children did not attend (Smith 1975, 177).

Many older research participants shared that they had gone to residential schools. The experience of being separated from friends and family has "broken up" kinship groups and

changed the community for the worse. The residential school experience very much influenced how people experienced and recalled the evacuation.

Elders remain essential pillars of the community and are respected for their knowledge and wisdom, which they use to support and teach others (Beatty 2006, 102). They are especially important in helping to keep the knowledge, identity, and history of the Assin'skowitiniwak alive through their knowledge keeping and acquired skills (Sitchon 2013, 4). They work to sustain traditional ways and activities by speaking Cree, preferring and eating traditional food, and offering advice to younger people. The stories Elders share with children and younger adults illuminate the values and ethics that are important to them and their culture. Laderoute (1994) found six common themes in the Elders' stories: "respect and desire to maintain the Cree way of life," "respect for teachings from Elders and parents," "the importance of good work ethics," "the positive and negative ends of child rearing *[sic]*," "hunting and trapping was a way of life," and avoid "disrespectful and undesirable behaviour" (Laderoute 1994, 153-156). These lessons are the building blocks of community resilience.

### 1.2 History of the Evacuation

On August 29, 2017, about 450 residents of Pelican Narrows categorized as "vulnerable"(CBC News 2017d) were evacuated to Saskatoon and Prince Albert (National Post 2017), many taking buses, leaving without their families, and traveling to destinations determined by officials. On August 30, the rest of the community was put under a mandatory evacuation order; some residents were sent to the Henk Ruys Soccer Centre in Saskatoon, some stayed with family in Prince Albert and elsewhere, and some were put up in hotels in Prince Albert, Saskatoon, or Regina.

By the time the evacuation was called, fire was blazing on both sides of the only road out of Pelican and neighbouring Sandy Bay. The smoke was thick and had been present in differing amounts over the weeks leading up to the evacuation. Sam said, "This community was boxed in, there was a fire in Jan Lake area, Deschambault, Mirond Lake. We were surrounded. No matter which way the wind blew we were getting smoked out."

The evacuation happened hurriedly. A woman, leaving with her baby, did not have time to get a car seat, clothing, or other essentials (CBC Saskatchewan 2017), and one Elder left in such a rush she forgot her dentures and was without them for the duration.

The same day, an official with PBCN encouraged compliance with the evacuation and posted on Facebook that anyone who chose to stay in the community would be "on their own" (National Post 2017). By the end of the first day of the full evacuation, the Soccer Centre in Saskatoon was nearing capacity even though most people who were elderly or ill were staying in hotels (Lesko 2017). Yet on August 31 it was reported that still there were 1,000 people left in the community, even though smoke remained thick, and that those who stayed behind were safe but could still evacuate (CBC News 2017f). Although the main road out of Pelican was closed, community members were escorted out by convoy; however, they could not return if they chose to leave. Duane McKay, Saskatchewan Commissioner of Fire Safety, stated that anyone trying to return to the community "Will be stopped at the roadblock," and clarified, "It's to ensure that we're not increasing our risk" (CBC News 2017f, n.p). For those remaining, a curfew was imposed from 9pm-7am, and security was hired to provide "peace of mind" for evacuees that their houses would be safe (CBC News 2017c).

By the first two days of September most residents had registered for emergency services. About 350 people remained in the community (CBC News 2017b), and 432 evacuees had been sent to hotels because they were thought to be at high risk. The Chief of the PBCN lifted the evacuation order on September 13 (CBC News 2017d), and on September 14 most Pelican residents began heading home. Buses, as well as gas reimbursements, were available to most people who were returning. The elderly and those with medical conditions or small children were not allowed to go back home with their families, because they were still seen to be at risk (CBC News 2017e).

The next week, children went back to school (CBC News 2017e), and everyone was able to return home to Pelican by September 21 (CBC News 2017a). Air filters and cots were set up in the local school's gym to assist those who were reacting poorly to the residual smoke (CBC News 2017a).

### 1.3 Research Methods

The methodology used for this research is ethnographic and community-based. The involvement of Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation and the community of Pelican Narrows in the research process was facilitated in a number of ways: a meeting with the Health Board of PBCN in November of 2017 where board members approved this project to go forward and saw benefits to Pelican Narrows and other PBCN communities; a meeting with the Prince Albert

Grand Council (PAGC) about the project in December 2017; a Band Council Resolution created and signed by the PBCN shortly after our meeting with the Health Board; the inclusion of John Merasty, an Elder (and university student) from Pelican Narrows, on our research team as a translator, cultural and social guide, and collaborator; the development of questions and interview protocols through an iterative process with Mr. Merasty during fieldwork; ensuring Mr. Merasty had the opportunity to ask non-scripted questions of interviewees; and PBCN and PAGC review of a draft of this report.

Research in the community lasted eight weeks. Most of the data reported here stem from interviews. Co-author John Merasty attended almost all of the interviews, acting as a translator, facilitating the interview process, and providing a familiar presence for interviewees. Only three interviews were conducted entirely in Cree, with the rest in English with some Cree mixed in.

The interviews for this project were conversational and exploratory to allow individuals to share their unique experiences and stories. Like Scharbach and Waldram's (2016) study, this research was interested in all parts of the evacuation, from the moment participants knew about the fire, to the aftermath one year later. All interviews began by asking them to tell a little bit about themselves, followed by a question along the lines of "What were your experiences during the evacuation last year?" This type of broad question allowed participants to share the experiences that were most meaningful to them.

Depending on the types of answers given to the this question, different follow-up questions were used to probe the various episodes of the evacuation experience. These included: learning of the threat; travel; anxieties; the social context of the evacuation centers; family issues when families were separated; adjustment to the city; engagement with social and recreational services in the city; the return trip; and recommendations to improve the evacuation experience.

In total 56 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Pelican Narrows residents, including 25 Elders. Each participant was interviewed once. The average interview was approximately 30 minutes long, with some lasting only 15 minutes, and others lasting over an hour. Participants were chosen on the basis of their willingness to participate, availability, and ability to take part in an interview, which included issues of age (because no one under 18 was interviewed), health (including conditions such as dementia), and our ability to find a mutually suitable time and place to meet. Recruitment strategies included phone calls, sending Facebook messages, visiting, and asking previous interviewees to suggest participants. Mr Merasty located

most of the older participants because of mutual familiarity. Posters were also displayed in the Administrative Office, Health Centre, and gas stations, and an ad was placed on the "Bulletin Board of Pelican Narrows" Facebook group, which drew many younger interviewees. Each participant was given a small honorarium for his or her time, and Elders were offered tobacco as well.

Participants were able to give oral or written consent to participate. The consent information was available in both English and Cree, and, when needed, Mr. Merasty explained the form. Oral consent was always gained with the presence of a third party. Participants were allowed to withdraw from the research at any time during the fieldwork without question or repercussion if they wished to do so.

## PART 2: RISK, VULNERABILITY, AND RESILIENCE

### 2.1 Risk

There is much confusion over the terms risk, vulnerability, and resilience. Risk and vulnerability are often used interchangeably, but it is useful to distinguish their specific meaning within disaster studies. Risk is "a measure of the probability and severity of adverse effects" (Haimes 2009, 1648), or, in other words, the likelihood that a person or group will experience difficulty from a specific hazardous event. Risk is an attempt to understand the possibility of negative exposure, and thus relies on probability and past experience to estimate who is most likely to be affected (Kaplan and Garrick 1981, 12). Risk combines data on individual group characteristics – such as age or specific health condition – with a specific hazard – such as smoke from wildfire. No one is "at risk" until the event occurs, and the nature of the event is crucial to understanding who is at risk. A wildfire in the forest invokes very different risk factors than, say, an earthquake or flood would. Risk also pertains to more than the disaster event itself, as the disaster does not end as soon as one is out of harm's way. Disasters span the hazard onset, time away, return, and recovery (Oliver-Smith 2002; Adams et al. 2011). As Scharbach and Waldram (2016, 63) show, immediate, predefined risk "may give way later in the process to other social and cultural risks affecting those individuals not initially seen to be 'at risk' at all." Through the evacuation, time away, return, and recovery period, people may become at risk when they had not been before, depending on what circumstances they find themselves in and the resources they have to address the threats they face. It is in such circumstances where unanticipated existing vulnerabilities, often hidden, become suddenly visible and salient.

### 2.2 Vulnerability

The most common definition of vulnerability during disasters involves "the characteristics of a person or group in terms of their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist, and recover from the impact" of a disastrous event (Oliver-Smith 2002, 28). People's vulnerability cannot be understood in general terms, as it is specific to certain events. For instance, a community built within a boreal forest environment, like Ft McMurray or Pelican Narrows, is vulnerable should a forest fire occur. The city of Saskatoon, built further south on the prairie, is not vulnerable to forest fire, but grass fires have proven to be a problem in recent years. While

risk speaks to the likelihood that a person or group will have a negative experience, vulnerability involves the ability of people to cope with a hazard.

Vulnerabilities become specific risk factors for specific individuals when the hazard occurs. Vulnerability and risk are linked together because even when we can anticipate risk, some people are unable to mitigate it. But it is the misapplication of the concept of vulnerability that leads to categorical pronouncements – that members of a given group are by virtue of that membership more likely to be at risk of adverse effects.

For example, people occupying a certain age category, such as the elderly, are seen as inherently vulnerable regardless of their individual circumstances or the specific hazard (Scharbach and Waldram 2016, 62). For the most part, these categorical checklists do not address social and cultural variables in their assessments (Fass 2016, 23) and fail to recognize that it is "those whose needs are not sufficiently considered in the planning of local response and relief organizations" that are often the most vulnerable in a disaster (Flanagan et al. 2011, 3). When individuals are defined only as physically vulnerable and thus needing protection, what Scharbach and Waldram (2016) characterize as a "body count" approach, it can lead to "overriding their priorities" and their disempowerment (Schröder-Butterfill and Marianti 2006, 15).

The enactment of the concept of vulnerability can influence how people understand themselves, which "may ultimately hinder their efforts to gain greater autonomy over their own affairs" (Haalbloom and Natcher 2012, 319). While residents of Pelican were often well taken care of physically, including access to hotels, food, and sometimes transportation, their agency – that is, the ability to act in their own best interests - was stunted because they were forced to rely on outside agencies to assist them. This is an example of a structural vulnerability characteristic of many northern Indigenous communities which have existed for decades under conditions of tutelage. For the most part, evacuees felt they had to follow the instructions they were given and take what was offered to them, suggesting that they did not feel they had much if any control over the situation, leading to agency-based vulnerability. The residents of Pelican have not been empowered to define their vulnerability, and instead, the government does this for them through the application of a categorical approach that defines levels of risk. This in turn has been somewhat internalized by community members.

Communities are expected to "maintain a 'Priority One list of vulnerable persons'" to be used during an evacuation (Scharbach and Waldram 2016, 63). This is largely a list of those "at risk." With wildfires, this Priority One list is typically based on the complications of smoke and concerns over the quick movement of dependent individuals out of harm's way. It consists of "categories such as (i) people with respiratory or cardiac conditions, (ii) the elderly and infirm, (iii) infants under age two, (iv) people requiring special care, such as disabled individuals, and (v) women in late stages of pregnancy" (Scharbach and Waldram 2016, 63). This checklist is more or less seen as best practice to risk triage in Northern Canada.

Two principles are invoked in this model: the first is to ensure each "at risk" person travels and stays with a caregiver throughout the evacuation; and the second is to keep families together (Scharbach and Waldram 2016, 63). The family group is not required to be the extended or even nuclear family, as only those who "need" to be together are considered to be a family. In the cases of the Hatchet Lake and Pelican Narrows evacuations, these principles were compromised: the provincial government's definitions of vulnerability and family do not fit with local understandings of the extended family as fundamentally important to resilience and adaptability (Scharbach and Waldram 2016, 63).

This type of risk triage is commonly used in northern Indigenous communities, regardless of its "southern, non-Indigenous cultural sensibilities about family and community structure" (Scharbach and Waldram 2016, 66). This model assumes that individuals, not families, are at risk and relies on an egocentric model of the self (Scharbach and Waldram 2016, 66), in which each person is seen as a discrete, autonomous entity. It overlooks the importance of the extended family, cultural considerations, and the "sociocentric model of the self that intimately interconnects individuals" in many Indigenous communities (Scharbach and Waldram 2016, 66), where the self is understood relationally (Suh 2009, 319).

This model also assumes risk is a static medical and health issue, not a dynamic social and cultural issue. For instance, older Indigenous individuals are seen as at risk because of their age, but not because of their "unilingualism in an Indigenous language and lack of familiarity with non-Aboriginal, southern ways" (Scharbach and Waldram 2016, 66).

The Health Centre in Pelican was the main institution in charge of identifying Priority One vulnerable people and encouraging community members to evacuate. While the evacuation was managed mostly by the local health personnel, and they are expected to have an updated list

of vulnerable people, there is no funding allocated to them for this purpose (PBCN 2017, 2). “We try our best here to keep up,” said one worker, “but there are so many people, and people come and go, some people die, some people move, some people come back home.” “There is no system in place to count each member,” added another. A third stated, “When we were using the list it was dated back maybe a decade. The ‘chronic registry.’ And that’s what we were going by.” She continued, “Some of them, their names are not on there, or their type of condition, so we didn’t know if they were priority one or two.” Several suggested using a registry for future evacuations where people could identify themselves as vulnerable. Ultimately, those who work for the Health Centre had to identify Priority One evacuees based largely on their personal knowledge of community members.

Not understanding or speaking English and being unfamiliar with the city were problems for many older Pelican Narrows evacuees, who often had issues adjusting, causing unnecessary stress that could have been avoided had vulnerability been conceptualized differently. Younger people who were removed from hotels for their behaviour, single women without childcare, those without transportation, Cree-speakers without translators, those unable to access traditional foods, and so on, were not initially thought to be vulnerable, but their needs were not met, and thus they faced negative repercussions.

The terms ‘risk’ and ‘vulnerability’ seem to hold little meaning to the residents. Participants understood that certain people had a more difficult time during the evacuation, but in response to the question, “Who has the hardest time in an evacuation?” many simply reiterated the Saskatchewan Government’s definition of vulnerability, with participants listing categories of people who are considered ‘Priority One’ evacuees by the province. This internalization of an externally generated concept prevents more locally salient understandings of risk and vulnerability from being invoked. The community seemed passive, because they had no alternative action, but this does not mean that they are not able to care for themselves. In fact, they would likely run the evacuation in a way that attended to both physical and sociocultural needs, based on the suggestions made by participants.

Many Priority One evacuees actually did not refer to themselves as being vulnerable per se. The negative connotation around ‘vulnerability’ may explain why residents did not tend to define themselves that way. People also seemed to understand their vulnerability as a community as being created, in a way, by perceived inaction in responding to the fire, rather than being a

attribute of specific individuals. They did not see vulnerability as a pre-existing trait of elderly or other groups, but rather they saw the entire community as being vulnerable from a provincial policy that allowed fires to burn until they became a major threat.

This research specifically questions the assumption that the elderly population is categorically more vulnerable than the general population and contends that not all aged people experience the same personal issues, health status, and levels of social and financial support. The elderly should not be understood as equally vulnerable simply because of their age. Furthering Scharbach and Waldram (2016), we maintain that a form of individualized risk triage, where individuals are designated as 'at risk' because of a particular ailment or issue, rather than categorically by "old age," should be used in evacuations, and that a person's "risk" should not be seen as static throughout the evacuation, time away, and recovery, because risk emerges under different circumstances for different people. That said, since any "at risk" individual is embedded in important sociocultural networks, the "unit" of risk needs to be understood relationally. In other words, individuals evacuated because they are at risk in a specific event should be accompanied by significant family members, and not simply a caregiver, regardless of the risk status of those individuals. The unit of risk in such cases should be the social group within which a specific "at risk" individual is embeded.

### 2.3 Resilience

Resilience involves "the ability to prepare and plan for, absorb, recover from, or more successfully adapt to actual or potential adverse events" (Kirmayer et al. 2011, 84). It is not the opposite of vulnerability, but rather "a separate concept referring to the capacity of a society to withstand impact and recover with little disruption of normal function" (Oliver-Smith 2013, 277). In other words, resilience is "the ability to do well despite adversity" (Kirmayer et al. 2011, 84). Canadian Indigenous peoples tend to see resilience as being "grounded in cultural values that have persisted despite historical adversity or have emerged out of the renewal of indigenous *[sic]* identities," including distinct concepts of personhood that are rooted in connectedness to the environment, collective history, language, traditions, non-human spirits, agency, and activism (Kirmayer et al. 2011, 88). In this way, the idea of 'cultural resilience' is especially pertinent, referring to the ways culture helps to make individuals, communities, and entire cultural systems resilient. Cultural resilience is "the capacity of a distinct community or cultural system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change so as to retain key elements of structure and

identity that preserve its distinctness" (Fleming and Ledogar 2008, 3). Feeling connected to and involved with one's culture, family, and community can help one make sense of a situation, create solutions, and foster relationships. The importance of the family – in its extended form – as the core of Indigenous cultural resilience cannot be understated.

To varying extents, the residents of Pelican demonstrated resilience during the evacuation because they were able to adapt to a stressful evacuation process and adjust to their lives after their return. However, residents' experiences of the evacuation suggest that, in many ways, their ability to tap into cultural resilience was stifled because families were separated, child-rearing philosophies could not be followed, the community was divided and spread out over great distances, and many evacuees did not have access to Elders, religious leaders, traditional food, or a familiar environment. Although some residents were able to draw upon their community and culture to mitigate the evacuation, many could not tap into cultural resilience because they did not have access to the people, tools, or a familiar setting that would allow them to do so. Elders have a particular role to play in the invocation of resilience during times of stress. Disconnecting them from their communities creates additional risk for others. Enabling communities to come together and maintain their social fabric is a way to tap into cultural resilience and should be encouraged and facilitated during evacuations. Thinking of resilience as an individual trait ignores the importance of social supports, including the extended family and the community.

### 2.4 The Elderly

In Pelican Narrows, most interviewees understood the elderly as individuals, each with their own family units, who sometimes need, and sometimes do not need assistance. While some elderly might not have any family members who spend time with them, others might have many children and grandchildren to assist them. Some elderly felt they were at risk during the evacuation, and others did not. Many longed for home and stated that they would have wanted to go home early if they had been allowed, regardless of the smoke and fire they would face when they got there and their Priority One status. They did not usually conceptualize themselves as more vulnerable or at risk than other community members unless they had a chronic illness or impairment, and even those with these conditions did not always say that they felt more vulnerable than other residents.

Advanced age and Elder status are often conflated. Community members often spoke about Elders as being wise guides but were also described by younger people, and sometimes

other Elders, as being feeble and in need of assistance, often in the same breath. Elderly are categorized as vulnerable people in a disaster, as are infants, and while talking about the evacuation elderly people were sometimes infantilized or compared to children by Pelican residents. For instance, one participant suggested that as the elderly get older, "their mindset is more like a toddler, like their attention span is shorter," and another that Home Health Aides had to "babysit" the elderly while they were evacuated.

While part of this infantilizing is related to their perceived poor health and related dependency, they were also seen by some categorically as a vulnerable group, needing special care because of assumed poor health and infirmity. While some elderly do need a great deal of care, Home Health Aides would have likely been caring for others before the evacuation as well as during it. That being said, their need for care did increase when they were separated from their family groups. Residents seemed to uncritically accept the concept of Priority One evacuees, except when that label was applied to themselves. One health worker mentioned that there were 90-year-old's in the community "that are on their own and we don't do much for them." Another resident mentioned that the Health Centre hired his 79-year-old father during the evacuation in Saskatoon. "He was making money over there, so he was having fun, and he wasn't bored. He was free in the evenings. He was okay with it." There were many seniors who appeared to be in good physical shape, had no mobility issues, cared for their families, and were active members of the community.

Most elderly had experienced multiple evacuations, were used to fires starting in the area, and were knowledgeable about fire management techniques. Often Elders saw themselves as needing to protect and assist younger people. If older adults have resources for combating stress that younger people do not, we must question their inherent vulnerability. Older adults have "valuable contributions to make in a disaster. One of these is to provide ways for others to make sense of an extraordinary event" (Tuohy and Stephens 2012, 33). Elders remain an important part of their family and community in Pelican. Younger people lean on Elders for comfort, advice, and assistance. Many interviewees saw having an Elder nearby as a useful resource, rather than a burden. Elders, like grandparents in many families, can act as 'the glue' of the family, often keeping an eye on the younger people, and acting as guardians.

The individuals who make up the elderly population differ in terms of their age, even though age is what they are said to have in common. Some are still very active, remain involved

in their community, and are self-sufficient, while others need multiple daily visits from Home Health Aides and additional care from family members. In this way, the terms ‘Elder,’ ‘senior,’ or ‘elderly person’ hold very little meaning regarding the age, needs, and desires of any individual resident.

Much like definitions of vulnerability, definitions of frailty tend to ignore personal and social factors which can help individuals cope with their difficulties. One Elder participant has what most people would consider an extensive physical impairment. While he does have trouble at times, he is able to leverage his own resources and relationships with others. He is still able to drive his own car, stayed at the Soccer Centre in Saskatoon during the evacuation with no complaints or intentions of moving to a hotel, and is known to help others when he can. This Elder could be seen to be ‘frail’ or ‘vulnerable,’ but his perceptions of himself, and ability to draw on social resources, make these descriptions inappropriate.

## PART 3: COMMUNITY EVACUATION EXPERIENCES

Disasters such as wildfires are social and cultural events (Oliver-Smith 1999; Button 2002; Laska and Morrow 2006). Collective and individual experiences of trauma are influenced by culture "at many levels: the perception and interpretation of events as threatening or traumatic; modes of expressing and explaining distress; coping responses and adaptation; [and] patterns of help-seeking and treatment response" (Kirmayer et al. 2010, 156). Culture gives meaning to disasters and helps make sense of them, yet "cultural issues have been only minimally integrated into current disaster guidelines" (Kirmayer et al. 2010, 168). While many of the issues raised by participants may not seem inherently cultural, they are related to the broader disruption of their "routine" culture, that is, "*roughly* the same people, or groups, repeatedly reoccupying the same places at the same times" (Downing and Garcia-Downing 2009, 228). The essence of culture is found in the familiarity of daily life in one's local social world, a familiarity that is routine and hence rarely thought about. This means even short-term evacuation to new communities and social contexts risks severe disruption.

### 3.1 Attachment to Place

Many participants expressed concern over what they saw as a delay in calling for evacuation. As is typical of such events, however, calls for evacuation are often accompanied by strong desires to remain. Regardless of the imminent threat from encroaching smoke and fire, many residents wanted to stay to ensure their homes, belongings, and pets were safe. Susan, an Elder, said that her husband refused to evacuate, and while the RCMP tried to find him to force him, he did not leave until a week after the general evacuation. Another Elder, Fred, reported that his brother stayed behind until the smoke aggravated his heart so much he had to leave. Wilson, a Pelican resident who works for PBCN, wanted to stay, but felt chest pains after three days and evacuated.

Five participants chose to stay in Pelican for more than a week during the evacuation. Gilbert and Alfred stayed for a week or two each, Hubert stayed for about three weeks, and Cynthia and Reggie remained during the entire evacuation. Gilbert was taken out of the community by ambulance after a week due to a medical emergency, but the others stayed behind to work. Alfred worked as a 'boat man,' which meant he was to keep his boat in the water and be ready to take others out if the fires got too close to the community. Hubert stayed to work on call as a health worker, taking calls from residents in need. Reggie worked as security. Cynthia

fought the fires. The town remained quiet, with only a few people causing trouble, such as breaking into houses or drinking excessively, after which they were promptly removed.

Food was an issue for those who stayed in Pelican because no one was bringing in more supplies. Some people went door-to-door asking those who stayed if they could spare some of their food until the evacuation was over. Overall, those who did not evacuate seemed to appreciate being able to stay behind and work and enjoyed the peace and quiet of the empty town, despite the smoke and looming danger.

### 3.2 Evacuating to the City

Evacuees left on buses or with their own vehicles and were sent to Prince Albert, Saskatoon, and Regina. Each of these places is much larger than, and very different from, Pelican. The city is daunting and unfamiliar to many residents. Every Elder interviewed declared their dislike of the city. Hubert, who stayed in Prince Albert and visited his elderly grandparents often during the evacuation, said "you know, they've lived most of their lives in a camp setting or maybe on a trapline or a fish camp. So, it's kind of hard for them because they are used to being in the wilderness." He continued, "It's very different in the city. I can spend a couple of days in the city, maybe a week, but after that, I don't like it at all."

While some younger people did not mind being in the city, for the most part participants did not care to spend much time there. One health worker noticed that after being evacuated for a while, "Everybody was getting tired, you could see the stress on their faces. They went outside and saw cement. That's not good." A teacher spoke about one of her students who said that after the 2017 evacuation "there was no way I would go to the city. I would never go to the city; I would rather stay here. He was adamant." She continued, "It's almost like an oil and water thing; we have our own way of doing things in Pelican that doesn't mesh with living in the city." This stance was a common one; a city is a place from which to procure goods and services, not a place to live.

While people often felt uncomfortable and out of place in the city, Prince Albert was the most familiar of the evacuation locations because residents often travel there for groceries, and it is where the PBCN central Administrative Office is located. While evacuated to Prince Albert, people stayed in hotels, or with family or friends, which was more common there than in Saskatoon, where evacuees tended not to know anyone. Hotels and family residences were overcrowded during the evacuation. "I hate Prince Albert, I hate eating French fries; I hate living in a hotel," emphasized one participant.

Some people who stayed in hotels were moved several times with their children, which they found frustrating. In Saskatoon, many stayed at the Henk Ruys Soccer Centre, and others in hotels. The Soccer Centre was the least favoured location, as people slept on small cots in a large, hot, open area with very little privacy. Some parents with four or five children stayed there, and watching so many all the time proved difficult. Overcrowding was an issue; as an example, one resident estimates (clearly high) over 1,000 people at the gym in Saskatoon. While overcrowding of family homes is a problem in Pelican, as one Elder explains, "when it spills over to some other places like that, it gets even worse." Some evacuees reported stolen ID's and money, and disagreements were common. Fred lamented the living conditions at the Soccer Centre. He said they were "terrible:"

> But there was not much I could do when I came there. I just advised and recommended to Red Cross people, as much as I could, that certain people should be put in hotels due to their conditions. Perhaps even some families wanted to keep their families together to control them better. With the wide-open spaces, kids are almost uncontrollable. They can really get in the way of other kids, other people, get into mischief.

Some residents felt that during the evacuation they were mistreated due to their Indigeneity. One middle-aged participant said there was "a lot of racism happening" during the evacuation in Prince Albert and recalled several experiences. In one incident, she was walking, and someone yelled at her from a truck to "Get the Fuck out of PA." In a second encounter, an older "white" woman working at one of the hotels was "very stingy" with their breakfasts:

> She was even blocking people. At one point she asked me 'So when do you think *you people* are leaving?' And I ignored her. She kept asking 'When do you think you people are leaving?' I knew she wanted to get into some kind of conflict, so I told her I didn't come here to make conversation.

Several evacuees reported issues with hoteliers. Fred felt there should have been more

allowances made for those who were evacuated, such as not kicking people out of hotels after their first offence, and that they should be treated with more respect and understanding. Poor treatment of evacuees in hotels was reflective of the situation in Hatchet Lake, where it was found that some residents who stayed in hotels for health reasons felt they were discriminated against by hotel staff (Scharbach and Waldram 2016, 64). In both cases, vulnerable people who were taken to hotels to reduce their vulnerability experienced discrimination because they stayed there, a good example of emergent risk.

Health workers mentioned that they felt the Elders in the community should have been better accommodated. In one hotel staff wanted the Elders to go up and down a flight of stairs to get their meals, which they were not able to do. Only reluctantly did the hotel staff agree to allow them to eat in the dining room or the kitchen.

Another issue raised by interviewees was suspected racism regarding how the fires were fought back home while they were away. Willie mentioned that firefighters seemed only to attack the fires when they got close to the resort village of Jan Lake. He said, "The way I was looking at it, they were kind of prejudiced. Caucasian over here, Native over here." Hubert echoed Willie's thoughts, saying "I don't want to sound racist or anything. This Caucasian man said they had more boots and machinery on the ground in Jan Lake than they did in Pelican. That's what he said." A government worker in Pelican Narrows explained that eight fire crews were sent to Jan Lake, where property owners had insurance, and fewer were sent to Pelican Narrows, where almost no cabins or houses are insured, and they had "more to lose."

While no property was burned in Pelican during the fires, several nearby cabins owned by Pelican residents were destroyed. Samantha explained that they had gone to their cabin three times to try to save it, to no avail. Eventually, they had to stop trying because the fire was dangerously close. They had mentioned to fire officials at North Bay fire station that the fire was encroaching on their cabins, but they could not save their cabin either.

Martin mentioned that a non-Indigenous man's cabin across the water from his, at Granite Lake, was saved and it was still "green all around his cabin," which Martin attributes to firefighters putting more effort into saving the cabins belonging to "white" people than to those owned by Pelican residents. A teacher noted that several of her students had family cabins burn down during the fire, but Saskatchewan Environment and Resource Management had protected other cabins. One of the cabins that were saved was owned by a "white" man, which the children

assumed was the reason for his cabin being saved instead of theirs. They felt a great deal of unfairness in this outcome, and it created animosity.

### 3.3 An Alternative to the City

Twelve participants mentioned that they would prefer a camp setting to the city. The bush is more familiar and serene, and a camp would allow for families, no matter how large, or in what way 'family' is defined, to stay together. Young people would have room to play, and a camp would feel more like home to them. Residents would also be able to stay out of trouble because family groups would be together to keep an eye on one another, and it was assumed there would be no access to alcohol. They envisioned open spaces, trees, hunting, fishing, fresh air, and lakeshores. Wilson said, "I think the food would taste better and people would sleep better, you know. Getting up would be more comfortable, more at ease, if we had similar surroundings."

### 3.4 Unmet Needs

The needs that evacuees mentioned most frequently were food, money, transportation, and lodging. Evacuees quickly became tired of eating the same food day after day. Some residents had vouchers to eat at restaurants in the hotel where they were staying, others ate at the Allan Bird Centre in Prince Albert or the Soccer Centre in Saskatoon, and some used vouchers or their own money to purchase food from grocery stores and restaurants. Some restaurants that accepted vouchers given by the Red Cross had lineups that took one or two hours to get through.

The hotel rooms offered no way of cooking food other than a microwave, so options were limited. Some evacuees were lucky enough to have family in Prince Albert and went to their houses to cook and eat together, which made their experience better. Other residents, especially Elders, found the change in their diets to be hard on their bodies. They wanted tea but were only given coffee. They wanted porridge but were given bacon and eggs.

Some residents felt sick, which they attributed to the food they were served that was quite different from what they would be eating at home. A health worker said, "my kids were not used to eating steak or mashed potatoes from a box. Those kinds of foods, my kids were throwing up, they had diarrhea." Such gastrointestinal responses to unfamiliar food have been confirmed by other research (Pearce, Murphy, and Chrétien (2017, 18).

Six participants talked about the importance of traditional food. In Prince Albert and Saskatoon, a few residents cooked and brought duck soup, fish, bannock, blueberry jam, and tea

to the Elders and other community members. Several people mentioned that the Elders appreciated having traditional food available to them. Sandra stated, "People said the same thing; 'I can't believe that it's so hard to get some kind of comfort food here.'" While some evacuees were able to procure traditional food, and at times it was available at the gym in Prince Albert, others did not have access to it.

Fred stated that, at one point, someone in charge said the First Nation could provide traditional food, such as wild meat or duck soup, but later they were told that they could no longer serve it because it wasn't made in an inspected kitchen. He explained, "I think it had to do with food handling or whatever. I know there is always a concern, but, our people have always eaten those kinds of foods." Residents, including Elders, were not allowed to eat traditional food that was brought into the hotel dining rooms. They had to eat it in the lobby where there were no tables.

Money was tight for most evacuees, and some family members who housed them found it difficult to support them. One Elder who evacuated with her daughter and granddaughter, mentioned that she was upset that everyone she knew seemed to be having financial trouble during the evacuation. She noticed that friends and family who were housing evacuees "couldn't really support them; they felt they were a burden. You know, imposing on them. And not only that but using the food, whatever they had. So, I don't think the families and friends really mind, but it was like 'Okay, you know, I can't really afford this.'"

Many people paid for things themselves while evacuated. While vouchers were provided for food, hygiene products, and clothing in Prince Albert, there were no vouchers for items such as gas, tobacco, and other necessities. Without much money, people could not afford taxis to visit with family, go to the Administrative Office, or shop. The Nation provided transportation in Prince Albert in the form of a van-taxi service, but there were not enough vehicles or volunteers to assist everyone.

Childcare was an issue mentioned by six participants, mostly young mothers, which they felt should have been better addressed during the evacuation. Babysitters were often not available, and when they were, the parents did not necessarily have the money to pay them. One female teacher noticed that quite a few mothers were nearing their 'wits' end.' She noted that if childcare and a support system for mothers had been available, or if extended families had been kept together, it would have likely alleviated a lot of the parents' stress. One young mother heard

that Child and Family Services were seen at the Soccer Centre because children were being left unattended. She said,

> The parents were leaving their children in the gym with other parents to keep an eye on them in that big area. Even at the Travel Lodge, they hung up a paper, and they put it to every hotel room because too many kids were in the hallways wandering around alone. They put 'If we find your kids in the hallway, we are going to keep them for half an hour downstairs in the lobby, and if you don't come, we are going to call mobile crisis.' 'Cause it was getting out of hand. It was all these kids running around all over. They stopped as soon as they handed out the posters.

Several health workers felt mandated to work throughout the evacuation and noted that it was difficult to find someone to care for their own children while they were working. Often their children were left alone in hotel rooms. They were frustrated that they had to work while being evacuees themselves, especially because they did not have the support they needed. One stated, "If you're evacuated, you're evacuated, you're not there to work. We were in our own crisis; we had to deal with our own family." She continued, "Family comes first, right? You have to take care of your family first before you take care of someone else. The stress levels were crazy."

**3.5 Family Separation**

People in Pelican tend to have big, often blended, extended families. For example, Suzette, an Elder who has ten children and sixty grandchildren, all of whom are important to her family group. One resident explained, "It's totally different for First Nations people. Like me, I have my niece living with me, and I have an adopted brother, I have a step-father." Another resident elaborated,

> First Nations families are different from the South. It's not a nuclear family; it's extended. And I think that's what the government doesn't understand. When they say 'immediate' family they mean your spouse and your children, but what about your adopted baby, or you're caring for your grandmother?

The importance of the family unit was a theme throughout most interviews. Being separated from one another caused much distress during an already trying time, which could have been avoided had families been kept together. Alfred recalled the worst aspect of the evacuation: "Mainly, the bad thing would be, not being with family. Some of them were separated from their families." He explained, "I know two of my daughters were in PA [Prince Albert] and two of their sisters were in Saskatoon. They would like to stay together, at least in the same hotel."

During the evacuation, residents shared stories, photographs, and videos through Facebook, text messages, and phone calls. Family members visited with one another when they got the chance if they had available transportation, but with some evacuees in Prince Albert, and others in Regina over 350 kilometres away, this was not always possible. Those who stayed behind in Pelican gave updates to evacuees, generally through Facebook, about the progression of the fire, and let them know their houses had not burned. While some residents were able to communicate with their families, others did not know where their family members were and could not ensure they were safe, which evacuees found stressful.

After the state of emergency was declared, those seen to be most 'at risk' were evacuated from the community first, leading to the splintering of family groups. In both the Hatchet Lake and Pelican evacuations, family members tended to be separated because people left at different times from different places and did not necessarily know where each other had gone, often not knowing where they would end up themselves. Some people had to leave children and spouses behind, which created an unconscionable amount of distress.

Both Scharbach and Waldram (2016) and the First Nations Wildfire Evacuation Partnership (n.d.) mention the importance of keeping Elders, their caretakers, and their dependents, together. One PBCN employee said that many Elders were separated from their families, which meant Home Health Aides had to care for them throughout the evacuation. While it is logistically implausible that entire communities could be kept together, to help ensure as much normalcy and social support for community members as possible it is important to keep at least the core of specific families together.

Members of families that did get to stay together in the same hotel, or at least the same city, reported that they were happy to be together and helped one another. For example, Frank mentioned that staying with his father meant he had access to a vehicle; Gilbert's presence allowed him to help his daughter and grandchild; and Cynthia was happy that her children got to stay with her parents while she stayed behind as a firefighter in Pelican. Fred stated,

> I'd rather see families stay together. The people that are comfortable and identify that they feel a lot better staying with certain people, that's who should be staying together. They should be given that option, instead of just being ordered, 'just because we are providing the service you are going to do what we tell you.' I don't like that attitude. There should be a little bit of discretion given to people.

Emotions ran high during the evacuation, and many residents worried about their family

and friends, as well as the possibility of their houses burning or being broken into. Grandparents worried about grandchildren, and parents worried about their children, but there was a tendency for older people to worry about younger people more than the younger people seemed to worry about their older family members. One participant explained, “I don’t think [the younger people] have that sense of belonging.” One Elder with eight adult children, kept receiving calls from his family asking for help. He had nothing to offer them and became very upset because he could not solve their problems. Mr Merasty stated, “The young people still rely on the Elders to save them from discomfort and from a bad situation. It’s pretty hard for the Elders to help out with their limited resources. It was hard for the Elders too.”

**3.6 News Media**

We were told of “bad” behaviours that occurred during the evacuation, but many residents felt that a few “bad apples” had made them all look like they were out of control law-breakers. A group of children tried to light fires and got into mischief, and a few adults drank too much, committed theft, and got into fights. One participant was shocked when she found children attempting to light a tree on fire in Prince Albert, because they had just been evacuated due to fire, and she asked the children to keep an eye on one another and let an adult know if anyone was causing or in trouble. She explained, “We don’t need anyone saying, ‘Oh, Peter Ballantyne caused a lot of grief in Prince Albert,’ and blame everybody for the actions of one.” She continued, “A lot of people were concerned about that. They were saying, ‘Those [evacuees] should be more thankful.’ But people don’t all cope with stress the same way.”

One resident suggested that many children were bored and had nothing to do, and people simply assumed they were being mischievous most of the time because they seemed out of place. One woman also noticed some children were getting into trouble, which she thinks could have been averted with better parental supervision. She also remembered a few adults drinking heavily and being disrespectful to the hotel staff. “That was, I thought, sad for them, for the people. It’s embarrassing. Too much drinking. They were disrespectful to the staff. I saw at least two incidents where there was theft in a hotel room, but those people got evicted.” Stories of residents being evicted from hotels and left with nowhere to sleep were common but only happened to a small number of people, some of whom ended up sleeping in the graveyard in Prince Albert. Fred thought people should not have been kicked out of the hotels immediately for these behaviours. When tensions are running high during an evacuation, he explained, it is

unreasonable to ask that every person acts appropriately, especially when they are not used to being in the city. Dougal agreed with Fred and thought that the reason these people were getting in trouble was that the rules are different than in Pelican. “[In Pelican] you could go anywhere [and drink]. Out on a country road. But in the city, if you hang around there is nowhere to go.” When in Pelican, people often walk down the road with open liquor containers without repercussion, but in the city this is problematic.

A handful of people mentioned that the news coverage had made Pelican look bad because the stories were overstated and negative. One teacher from Pelican became angry at reporters because they were trying to interview people who had been evacuated who were unaware of their rights to decline. She told the residents that they did not have to talk reporters and they could simply walk away. The types of questions asked also angered her. “They were more for the ‘aren’t you devastated, your home is going to go up in flames’ kind of thing, trying to get a reaction from people.” She continued, “They would camp outside the fieldhouse waiting for people to come out. I’d say [to the people], ‘don’t go out there’ and then I started telling everybody, ‘you don’t have to say anything to them if you don’t want to.’” The reporters focused on the negative aspects of the evacuation, and in the process, they represented Pelican in a poor light.

Others echoed the feeling that the news media had depicted them improperly. Some felt that the reporters who documented the evacuation exaggerated their behaviours and made them look like they are not doing a good job of policing their own people. Said one, “Well that’s the thing I don’t appreciate myself, this sensationalism … They don’t really understand the situation.” Another resident agreed and said the reporters blew the theft and drinking out of proportion. They even interviewed drunk people, which made everyone look bad.

One news report about the evacuation in Saskatoon stated, “Area residents raised concerns over yelling at all hours, fights in the field and garbage being strewn as evacuees poured in from the northern community last week” (Grimard 2017, n.p.). J.B. Custer, an Elder from Pelican Narrows, apologized for their conduct and suggested more activities were needed to prevent this kind of behaviour. He recommended traditional activities such as dancing, conversations with Elders, and drum circles would be helpful, but the ultimate solution was being allowed to go home. Custer made it clear that many evacuees had never been to a large city, especially children and youth. He said, “They’re used to the countryside where there’s fun”

such as “swimming and hunting – they’ve never seen cities like this before” (Grimard 2017, n.p.).

Scharbach and Waldram (2016) found similar experiences with the news media in their study of the Hatchet Lake Lake evacuation. In these cases, “Some very unflattering headlines regarding the evacuation suggested a whole host of adjustment problems,” which damaged their “public image” (Scharbach and Waldram 2016, 65). It was expected that the people who lived in the host communities would know that evacuees were not used to the city and do not all speak English, but the media “represented them as problematic without contextualizing the situation” (Scharbach and Waldram 2016, 65).

## PART 4: JURISDICTION AND COORDINATION ISSUES

A report regarding fire safety and emergency management from INAC stated that First Nations people should be treated as equal partners, that roles and responsibilities should be clarified, and that funding should be available for First Nations involvement in emergency management, planning, and fire prevention campaigns (Standing Committee 2018, 3-5). These suggestions were not well implemented during the 2017 evacuation. Future disaster planning would benefit from an increase in knowledge sharing between the provincial and local governments, which would help to adapt disaster planning to a community's specific needs and could lead to increased resilience in times of disaster.

### 4.1 Calling the Evacuation

On First Nation reserves in Saskatchewan, an emergency must be declared by the Chief (PNWBHA 2012, 1), but they must do so "in light of information from other agencies regarding the nature of the smoke distribution, weather predictions, where the smoke is coming from, road visibility, etc." (PNWBHA 2012, 4). This consultation could involve the Ministry of Environment's Fire Management Office, an Emergency Operations Center, and other agencies (PNWBHA 2012, 4). "In order to ensure coverage for expenses of transportation and accommodation," the community must consult with one or more of: "[the] Saskatchewan Ministry of Health Emergency Management; Saskatchewan Public Safety – Sask 911; Regional Medical Health Officer or Emergency Planning Coordinator; *and* Social Services" (PNWBHA 2012, 4). This required consultation process suggests that if the Chief, who is required to declare the state of emergency, feels the fire is a threat, and one or more of the agencies they consult with do not, then the transportation and accommodation for the evacuation may not be funded.

Several residents understood that the evacuation order had been made by the province and was then announced by the First Nation. It was understood that that if local leadership called the evacuation on their own, they would bear the cost, and so there had been a waiting game to see who would declare a state of emergency. According to one resident, "The province was in charge of the evacuation to give the order. They just told the Chief, and the Chief gave the order. But the province made the order." Fred, an Elder and council member at the time of the evacuation, felt that in cases like this, where a fire is threatening the community, local leadership should be given the power to make the call right away without having to worry about who is

going to pay the cost. We should be using the Jordan's Principle here; it's something similar." He continued,

> We shouldn't care about who is going to take on the cost; we will talk about that later. That's the least of the worries right now. Right now, we have an emergency, we need to do something about it, and if we feel that we are threatened, that the lives of our people are threatened, then we should do something about it quickly.

The 'Jordan's Principal' ensures that Indigenous children have access to the same supports, products, and services that are available to non-Indigenous children, including speech therapy, educational support, and mental health services (Indigenous Services Canada 2019). It is intended to provide fast care by requiring that the "government department of first contact" provide these services, and then apply to be reimbursed through this federal program (Indigenous Services Canada 2018). Fred's suggestion would mean that the province would fund the entire evacuation and then be reimbursed, rather than requiring the First Nation or local government to cover much of the costs of an evacuation until they are refunded, which would eliminate any fiscal standoffs.

Community members expressed concern that the community had to cover many expenses relating to the evacuation, and that assistance from the Red Cross during that time would have to be paid for out of pocket until the federal government reimbursed them. One said, "I don't know if this is factual or not, but I was told that the money we got from Red Cross would have to be reimbursed by Indian Affairs or by the band." She felt that local people had been misled because they did not know that the costs associated with Red Cross's assistance would have to be paid for by the First Nation. She said, "They were just first responders helping us temporarily. It's going to cut into our budget somewhere, somehow, and then no one could actually say what budget that was." She asked, "What does that mean now for the future? Does that mean we aren't going to get coverage? Or we aren't going to get coverage for education? Is it the education budget that has to pay this back?"

A member of the local government confirmed that they had not been reimbursed for most of their costs by the time the researchers arrived a year after the evacuation. He explained that dealing with INAC was a frustrating and challenging process and that they had only been reimbursed for about 33% of their $700,000 costs so far. He felt that the evacuation would not have been necessary if provincial fire suppression had taken the fires seriously when they were

small and controllable, and that it was unfair that they should have to bear the cost for a provincial decision.

**4.2 The Importance of Open Communication**

Communication and coordination between the Federal, Provincial, and First Nation was problematic. One man who works in health and social services in several PBCN communities felt that when the evacuation order was made there was a lack of communication between the Provincial government and local government because "decisions and plans were made without consultation." Fred agreed that there should be better communication between the province, other agencies, and local government so that the local government can understand its roles and responsibilities. He suggested a yearly roundtable where "we could all sit down before the fire season to refresh and go over certain things," including developing a clearer action plan for if something like this happens again, which would involve "a step-by-step procedure." If the community is under threat, there should be daily meetings with wildfire management and local council members to "update and plan as we go," so local government understands the situation and can inform community members and be better prepared.

A source of confusion for local officials was the technical language or jargon used by the province. The province said they were "actioning" the fire, which residents took to mean that the province was acting to suppress the fire, but in reality, "actioning" in this context could refer to suppression efforts or to watching the fire as it progresses. Fred stated, "They say we are monitoring, we are 'actioning' the fire. Well, certain terminology, by saying 'actioning,' they are just watching the fire, they aren't doing anything to extinguish the fire, they are just managing it more or less. So that's not, to me, that's not 'actioning' a fire." Others echoed these complaints, saying they had assumed that 'actioning' referred to action, not inaction.

Some community members felt there could also have been better communication between the First Nation and its residents as well. For instance, one participant wished there had been a daily notification on Facebook that gave people updates about the fire's progression. She stated, "I felt the lines of communication for the common person were not there, and like it was up to me to decide shall I go, or shall I stay. I guess they don't have a responsibility to us to inform us what the situation is."

While some saw council members and the Chief while they were evacuated, others did not, in part because people were dispersed across such a large area.  One middle-aged woman

felt that seeing authority figures and being able to discuss issues with them during the evacuation would likely make many community members feel better. She said, "I think it would have really helped to have them come by and say, 'How are you doing?' You know, do some glad-handing. 'How are you? I'm concerned for you, is there anything you need?'" She noted that she did not see this type of interaction happening while she was evacuated to Saskatoon and felt that it would be useful for residents to see that the Chief and Council were "still thinking about them and were concerned about them." A perceived lack of communication led to concerns from residents which could have been addressed early in the evacuation process to quell the fears of community members.

Confusion regarding the existence and content of an emergency plan may be inevitable in a community the size of Pelican Narrows. A handful of people were not confident that there was a plan because the evacuation felt hectic and disorganized, and residents were not briefed on the evacuation process. One resident stated, "I'd sure like to see if anybody has actually sat down and met to come up with a plan, A, B, and C because as far as I know, nothing has been done." She would like this plan to include a list of things people should have ready for families, information about what is the First Nation's responsibility and what is not, and who should be evacuated first. She asked, "If you have a family with five kids and the baby is asthmatic, what does that mean? Do the mother and the baby get to go on the bus? Or the mother and all of her children?" Dianne, an Elder, also thought the evacuation was disorganized. She suggested increased planning, and notifications to the community about those plans, as well as the inclusion of community members in the improvement of future evacuations. Residents might have been less fearful if they had been confident that the Nation had a plan.

Several other residents also felt that planning was lacking, and should be improved. One stated, "Plan for the crisis. It's going to happen again," do not "just throw them on a bus and go." "It wasn't organized before the evacuation," said another, "so everything was in a rush. It happened so fast, and there was a lot of confusion, a lot of complaints and not enough manpower." He suggested a type of yearly program or training where people could learn to be prepared for evacuations. As he explained, an evacuation can seem like "going overseas for the first time," because people do not know what to bring or expect, but they can learn more about the place they are going, which would "prepare you mentally, so once you get there you don't freak out."

But another resident stated that the Chief and council had spoken previously about what they would do in case of an evacuation. Although there is a plan in place, he said, “I’m not sure if it was exactly put on paper, you know, as such, in terms of something you look at a glance and you know what to do. I don’t know if we got that far. But I know we did have a plan. Those are the kinds of issues we discussed, you know, how we should react when it comes to those kinds of emergencies.”

### 4.3 The “Let it Burn” Policy

Over a third of the participants expressed that a state of emergency should have been called more promptly, mentioning that the fires had been burning for quite a while, and became dangerously close before the Province deemed it a threat to their community. Willie, an Elder with firefighting experience, said, “I kind of thought to myself, you know, why did we wait so long to get an evacuation order? This could potentially have become a disaster. And that kind of angered me … because we shouldn’t have to wait that long to make that call.”

The widespread belief in the “let it burn” policy is implicated in complaints that the province failed to act in a timely manner. Many residents mentioned that provincial fire suppression policy that lets some fires burn. Before this policy was in place, all fires would be put out, several suggested. Willie stated, “That’s one thing I’ve noticed when there is a big fire, people just leave it. We used to firefight.” Adam, an Elder and retired firefighter, agreed. “I think it was better before that ‘let it burn’ policy, eh? ‘Cause we used to go and fight the fire right away. We had initial attack when it was small. And we never had any big fires like that when we were firefighting. We used to put them out.” He explained, “Other firefighters would come support us. We used to call water bombers to help us out. We didn’t lose against the fire.”

The province denies having a “let it burn” policy (StarPhoenix 2015). Instead, they do have “Full Response Zones,” which represent “a 20km radius surrounding a community, where initial attack and sustained action with the intent to extinguish all wildfires takes place” (Michaels 2013, 6). Outside of this designated 20km zone, fires are often left to burn unless they impact what the province calls “values,” by which they mean “human lives, communities, major public infrastructure and commercial timber” (Michaels 2013, 6). But the “values” that the province feel are important are not necessarily aligned with these priorities of First Nations people.

A younger participant explained that allowing those fires to burn negatively affects the land and the people who rely on it, even if it has environmental benefits. Others dispute the environmental benefits of fire. Sam stated, “They say that it regenerates the forest and kills the bugs, but it doesn’t work that way.” These conflicting ideas of what to do about northern forests make this discussion especially difficult because those running fire suppression efforts decide how traditional lands are dealt with during a wildfire, but those lands are incredibly important to the residents of Pelican. One hunter explained that the policy is “destroying people’s livelihood. You’re destroying trap lines, you’re destroying cabins.” He continued, “[But] once that little spark goes to an outfitter, who probably pays taxes, there is a whole suppression going to shut off that spark. But they let the trapline burn.” This statement, along with others, suggests that local people feel as though these full response zones disproportionately affect First Nations people and that threats to their values are seen as less important than threats to the values belonging to other citizens.

### 4.4 Fighting the Fire

The Saskatchewan Ministry of Environment oversees fire suppression for most of the province, and provincial fire suppression in the area is run out of the North Bay Fire Centre, which lies just outside of Pelican Narrows. Local people explained that “white” government workers run the Fire Centre and have all the decision-making power and equipment; they have “the final decision with respect to whether wildfire suppression activities are undertaken” and to what degree (Michaels 2013, 3).

Several community members reported the fires that caused the evacuation when they were deemed small and manageable. For instance, Alfred went to North Bay and told them the fires were likely going to get out of control if they did not fight them, “and sure enough it came to Pelican. They just dismissed me like I didn’t know anything.” Reggie stated that the Chief was also trying to get the firefighters from North Bay to attack the fire, because “nobody was there fighting,” and then the fires got worse. He continued, “That’s crazy. Why weren’t they there?”

In the case of the 2017 evacuation, many outside firefighters were brought in, instead of relying on local people, which frustrated Pelican residents. Similar complaints were made during the evacuation from Hatchet Lake (Scharbach 2014). The consensus from Pelican Narrows was that local people should be trained and hired before bringing in outsiders. For instance, Willie, an Elder who fought fires for many years, felt local people from Pelican should be hired, along with

"all of the local people from the surrounding communities too, not [just] hire people from down south who don't even know how to firefight." He was frustrated that "white" government workers were recruited instead of relying on local people who know the land and would financially benefit from the work.

Another man, with firefighting experience, also thinks they should have used local firefighters because they are devoted to the land and were willing to fight the fire; "That's the thing. So many able-bodied firefighters here, and still they brought down some other people." Hubert agreed, "I just didn't like the way SERM [Saskatchewan Environment and Resource Management] treated the firefighters that wanted to go. I understand it was dangerous, but they should have at least had them on standby, or for a mop-up crew or something." He clarified, "They turned a lot of the guys away, but I heard a couple of busloads [of local firefighters] came in after all of the complaints." One council member explained that workers (including cooks, cleaners, firefighters) were brought in from the outside, including Dene people, who he heard were "laughing that Pelican Narrows didn't care about their homes and they were lazy." This upset many people because they were literally not allowed to help themselves in this situation.

One of the reasons local people were not utilized as well as they could have been is that the province requires certification to be a firefighter but does not offer training very often. A few residents suggested that training was necessary to keep firefighters safe, while others stated that they had not needed this training in their youth and that the need for certification has gotten out of hand. Willie thought the rules around certification were unnecessary, "I told them [North Bay] 'to hell with you, you were in pampers when I was fighting fires.' I don't need to be certified to fight fire." Alfred stated, "I've been a firefighter for many years. I know how to firefight. I know how it behaves. But I don't have the papers they do, that's the thing." Other residents echoed these statements, feeling that the reliance on highly certified firefighters creates an unnecessary barrier for local people wanting to fight fires imminently threatening their communities. Some residents perceived this reliance on centralized, highly trained fire crews consisting mostly of "white" people as the Provincial Wildfire Management crew "sticking with their own" to the exclusion of local people.

**4.5 The Red Cross**

Red Cross assisted with the daily needs of evacuees such as lodging, and food, clothing, gas, and laundry vouchers. Many participants mentioned that the Red Cross was helpful and

treated them well; they were happy for their help. Evacuees knew where to find Red Cross workers because they had booths set up at the Allen Bird Centre in Prince Albert and had workers at the Soccer Centre in Saskatoon. One health and social services worker stated, “The Red Cross was very accommodating. They did a great job. We had clients that needed certain services, and we worked with them to accommodate them.”

Although some evacuees had positive experiences with the Red Cross, others did not. A few residents volunteered with Red Cross, but for the most part, Red Cross workers were non-Indigenous and unfamiliar. There was an air of general distrust for some, issues with translation, trouble registering, and denial of assistance. One local government worker suggested that the Red Cross did whatever was easiest for them, not what was best for the people. They were “not trying hard enough” to accommodate those who were evacuated, and focused on physical, rather than social and cultural, needs.

Health workers from Pelican acted as advocates and translators for community members dealing with Red Cross. One stated, “They [Red Cross] looked to us for a lot of ‘Can you vouch for this person? Do you know who they are? Can you help us talk to them?’ One female volunteer from the community “basically bee-lined to the Elders and to people who looked totally lost, and she would say ‘If you know of anyone who is struggling, please let me know and I will help them find the help that they need right now.’ And so, thank God for her, because she was the only Cree-speaking volunteer. She was the only brown-face working behind the counter. And if they didn’t feel confident to ask a question, they didn’t ask it because they didn’t recognize anyone behind the desks.”

Some evacuees also had trouble registering with Red Cross. Several residents felt that registering was too complicated, because people were required to have an ID and a permanent address to register, which many people do not have at all, or may have forgotten to bring with them.  A social development worker in Pelican Narrows, said “Yeah, I had to vouch for people, for others, yes. A few times I did that for others because they didn’t have IDs.” Some residents do not have identification because it costs money to get it, or they face other barriers to receiving one.

Wilson clarified that in order to get a photo ID and treaty card, residents must first get other identification, such as their SIN number, a health card, and birth certificate, which can be difficult to obtain. He explained, “I deal with that pretty much every month with the local people.

Getting IDs, that sort of thing." The requirements for registering with Red Cross seem to have overlooked that some residents cannot prove that they live in Pelican.

Numerous residents suggested that the Red Cross should work in tandem with local people in a more effective way to improve evacuation experiences. One participant specifically suggested that the membership clerk for the community could assist Red Cross during an evacuation because they have a list with the names and birthdates of community members as well as their scanned ID's, SIN numbers, treaty numbers, and health card numbers. This would make it easier to register for those people who do not have their documents during the evacuation.

One theme throughout the interviews was that evacuees were not comfortable speaking up about their worries or needs to outsiders. Indeed, northern Cree people tend to be reserved and reluctant to talk about themselves. One First Nation official explained, "As Aboriginal people, you don't voice your concerns. If you have a question, you don't ask it. That's probably why some Indians say nothing and just went without their family unit" without asking questions, regardless of the impact it would have on their evacuation experience. Another First Nation official continued,

> They came to us, the local people. They didn't seek the support or the help from the third party because it was so new, and it was almost like invading, "I don't want to ask them, I don't know who they are. Can I trust them?" Like, "*You* go ask! *You* know English! Go ask and tell me." It was like that for our members. Even the younger people. I had 15, 16-year-old girls come up to me and ask for sanitary pads or shampoo. "Can you go ask for me?" I said, if you have your ID and your bracelet, there is nothing wrong with asking, it's a basic need. They said they didn't want to ask because [Red Cross] would say no.

A teacher also saw this happening. "People would just sit there," she said, "and when you sit there and don't speak up, it's almost like you're agreeing with everything the person says."

## PART 5: CONCLUSION

The experience of the fire and evacuation has left a lasting impression on several people we interviewed. Sandra still worries another fire is going to come and threaten the community. She said, "I still feel, sometimes, 'Gee, do I smell smoke in the air?' You know? It looks kind of hazy out, doesn't it? And I almost feel like I have, not PTSD full-blown, but I feel like I have that same sense of caution." A second middle-aged woman was also affected by the evacuation. She mentioned that she felt the emotional side of the evacuation was not addressed with residents, stating "there is that emotional, 'if my house burns and my photos burn, my family history in that house burns;' I don't think the emotional side of it was addressed as much as the physical needs were." Both women were happy to have someone to talk to about the evacuation and felt that no one wanted to talk about the event after it was over. The second woman stated, "you don't have people coming and asking how you are feeling afterward. You know, what we're told, is 'Hey, it's in the past, move on, deal with it.' But still, there is a lot of trauma that was involved with that evacuation."

Many of the themes found throughout this research relate to issues of power and the lack of agency or control at the local level, observations also noticed in the Hatchet Lake study. One individual we interviewed mentioned that she had spoken with two Elders, and another two middle-aged men, all of whom stated the evacuation was "like residential schools all over again." This is a remarkable and disconcerting interpretation of the evacuation, yet it appears to be common. Similar experiences were heard by the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs, where Indigenous "witnesses from British Columbia and Manitoba said that the way the evacuations are conducted triggered the traumatic memories of being taken away to residential schools and/or the 'sixties scoop'" (Standing Committee 2018, 22). During the Pelican Narrows evacuation, some residents were taken out of the community without their families, often on school buses with no washrooms for a four to six-hour trip, not knowing where they or their family members would be evacuated. Forced family separation, having to adjust to an unfamiliar environment not of their choosing, a lack of knowledge of their values, language, and culture from those assisting them, and missing home were reminiscent of being taken away from their communities in their youth. This reaction is precisely what fire policy and those assisting evacuees should be trying to avoid. Empowering northern Indigenous communities is crucial.

The conceptualizations of risk, vulnerability, and resilience in the context of evacuations is especially important. In this research we focused on Elders and the elderly. “Priority One” evacuees, including Elders, were taken out of the community first, which led to family separation. This categorical understanding of risk and vulnerability is problematic for several reasons. First, it separates out individuals whose guidance is typically valued in times of stress. Second, it treats all elderly essentially as vulnerable when in fact this is not the case. Third, it misses emergent risk, the idea that being “at risk” is dynamic and variable throughout the entire evacuation process. That is, those “at risk” at the time of the evacuation may experience subsequent lower risk of problematic responses, whereas those at “low risk” may see problems arise related to the evacuation centres and relocation contexts (such as being in an unfamiliar city). Simply put, not all elderly are equally at risk, and not all young or middle-aged people are less vulnerable than all aged community members, which suggests that a focus on specific reasons people of any age may be at risk would be a more appropriate.

Although risk and vulnerability can be useful concepts before, during, and after hazardous experiences, they should be conceptualized differently when applied to Indigenous communities. Conceptualizing vulnerability categorically and primarily as a health issue misses many aspects of risk, including social, economic, and cultural issues. This type of risk triage did not reflect vulnerability as experienced by residents throughout the 2017 evacuation. But if risk is marked by a particular ailment or issue and attention paid to issues such as unlingualism, the importance of family, community, and culture, and the location of the evacuation, risk would be a more effective policy tool. Add to this an appreciation of the Elders and family as particular sources of resilience that can be tapped to minimize risk and negative experiences and the makings of a new policy approach to community evacuation are clear.

Accurately anticipating risk is often an exercise in futility, but self-registering, or registering loved ones, with the health centres before or during an evacuation would ensure that those who felt at risk or had a particular ailment would be evacuated first, and housed with their families. Vulnerability should be understood as being both harm-based, and agency-based, meaning that it should attend to physical issues and issues of individual self-determination. If an individual is in danger of physical harm, they are vulnerable, but if they face manipulation or force that prevents them from living their lives in a meaningful way, that is a form of vulnerability as well.

Encouraging First Nations' priority involvement in disaster planning and mitigation would allow communities to tap into cultural resilience by keeping families together, providing access to traditional food and activities, choosing familiar environments for evacuations, and allowing communities to decide what they need. The enactment of current policy in the midst of community emergency does not allow these communities to be self-determining, which works as a barrier to resilience. While all Pelican residents survived the fire and evacuation, they tended to remember the evacuation as a negative experience over which they had very little control, likening the experience to residential schools.

The control exercised by evacuation and relief agencies is also an issue. The evacuation was mostly run by the province and Red Cross. There was confusion about responsibilities, issues with funding and reimbursement, and a lack of communication between these agencies and local government. Local leaders were 'left out of the loop' regarding planning and decision making and would have liked to be involved in planning efforts before, during, and after evacuation. Community members also felt ill-informed, which led to a loss of confidence in the disaster plans of the local government.

There remains criticism of the manner in which the so-called "let it burn" policy of the province is invoked, especially perceived threats to traditional lands. Community members explain that by allowing the fires to burn, traditional lands, traplines, animals, medicinal plants, and so on, are destroyed, compromising the community's ability to use their traditional territory. This indicates a fundamental difference between provincial and northern Cree values regarding the land and its resources.

The Red Cross workers were seen as a group of unfamiliar outsiders, which led to general distrust. This distrust is related to a greater issue within Pelican, where "white people" are often seen as untrustworthy or threatening, resulting in many residents not speaking up about their needs or asking others to speak to the Red Cross for them. Issues with translation, registering, and being denied assistance compounded this.

In summary, the residents of Pelican Narrows have different abilities and needs than southern communities. They tend to have large, extended families, have experienced a history of residential schools, and already feel disenfranchised and unheard by "white" government. Residents found the city unfamiliar and uncomfortable, with many suggesting they would prefer a more familiar setting. Additionally, countless community members have had extensive

experience fighting fires in the past, and the community has its own local government which is distinctly different from city government. Provincial standardization and reliance on top-down, centralized approaches stunted the community's self-determining capacities and did not address their specific needs.

## PART 6: RECOMMENDATIONS

Many recommendations have been made by the Prince Albert Grand Council (2018), Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation (2017), and the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs (2018) to improve disaster planning, mitigation, and recovery in Indigenous communities. Recommendations are also a component of the Hatchet Lake study (Scharbach and Waldram 2016). Recommendations that emerge from this study of Pelican Narrows, most of which are supported by these other sources, are as follows:

1. Actively involve communities and individuals in their own disaster mitigation planning and efforts, allowing them to assess their own risk and vulnerability in a way that accounts for the variable nature of vulnerability apparent in any disaster. This would better allow for local social and cultural norms to be integrated into disaster planning. One way of attaining the goal of involving communities in disaster preparedness and mitigation is to use culturally safe policies and procedures. These would be reflective of local cultural sensibilities of "how to do things" the right way, would appreciate the need to understand both broader cultural and social patterns and individual variability, and ensure that evacuations did not pose a challenge to the sociocultural fabric of the community. An acknowledgement of the ongoing and historical relationships between Indigenous peoples and the state and its agencies is central to cultural safety. This means a clear understanding of how making decisions on their behalf, and appearing to order northern Indigenous people on to buses and taking them to unknown destinations may invoke parallels with, and traumatic memories of, residential schools and the "sixties scoop." Reconciliation demands that government and non-governmental organizations be acutely aware of the impact of colonial history on Indigenous peoples and its enduing impact. The nature of northern Cree sociality and family structure should form the backbone of evacuation policy; these are sources of resilience and should be protected in times of crisis, rather than disrupted. This would mean, among other things, rethinking how extended families are evacuated, with and eye to keeping them together in one place.
2. Provide communities with the resources to generate and maintain a more person-centred directory of vulnerable individuals. Those who feel "at risk" could identify themselves to authorities, rather than having authorities presume the risk of those

people based on southern emergency protocols. A "voluntary 'Disaster Registry' for elderly and disabled individuals, with confidential information about their medical condition, functional abilities, and social resources, and related needs in the event of emergency, could be generated. Such a registry would encourage local people to become involved in conversations about vulnerability and disaster response, and work with the agencies that are attempting to assist them.

3. Reconceptualize the unit of risk in relational terms; risk is not an individual experience; it is a family experience. Hence it is the social group that is "at risk" when a particular individual exhibits a risk factor.
4. Recognize Elders as a special resource and source of resilience during stressful times. The separation of Elders from others should be a very last resort. They should not receive special treatment during an evacuation unless they need it. Instead, draw upon Elders for their knowledge and experiences, as well as their influence and status within the community. Including Elders in disaster response could help to create culturally safe evacuations which encourage cultural resilience, but treating them only as vulnerable regardless of actual need can lead to the fracturing of families, and a loss of resources for cultural resilience for entire communities.
5. Ensure that evacuation of northern residents to southern cities continues to be a last resort. The time to consider other options has arrived. These options include developing hosting capacity in northern Indigenous communities or on First Nations reserve lands in smaller northern cities such as La Ronge or Prince Albert where social, cultural, and health resources and capacities are well developed (complete with the necessary budget lines and access to services). Serious consideration of a more permanent evacuation centre is needed.
6. Direct more resources toward assisting expatriate family members with the extra expenses they absorb. They are important assets during evacuations, and they experience unexpected costs when they take in evacuated family members. These placements are amongst the most preferential for evacuated residents and help to minimize the social and cultural disruption.

7. Actively engage residents in meaningful roles in procedure and governance to the practical extent possible when people are relocated to sports facilities, community centres, or other off-site facilities.
8. Change identification criteria for accessing social services. "Proof" of status or residency to obtain emergency services creates an unnecessary barrier during a time of stress. Oral confirmation should be sufficient and without the need for affirmation by others.
9. Make post-evacuation counseling more readily available for those needing it.
10. Remind media to be respectful of evacuees and make better efforts to understand their situation. There continues to be a need for insightful and empathetic reporting of the situation of evacuees by the news media. Regular briefings of media by community officials during evacuations would be valuable. Media should be encouraged to seek information only from official channels rather than the evacuees themselves who are unlikely to have experience with the media.
11. Continue community-based research in northern Indigenous communities affected by flood or fire in an effort to improve evacuations. One black hole remains the "real time" experience of the evacuation centres, which could be studied while occupied during an evacuation.

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