**Report on NDMS trips to Baker Lake and Rankin Inlet**

Nov. 14th-18th, 2016

 On Nov. 14th, Emily Breen, Executive Director, Alex Rowlson, Project Manager, and Sandy Kownak, Board Member, travelled to Baker Lake to undertake a community consultation and support to a local group of people with disabilities establish a social enterprise. While there, we met with representatives from local government agencies, co-hosted a community engagement feast, and took part in the inaugural Baker Lake Social Enterprise Advisory Committee meeting. On our return trip, we spent a day in Rankin Inlet, where we met with more government representatives and visited the Rankin Inlet Adult Group Home.

 On Tuesday, our first day in Baker Lake, we spent our day with participants in the Employability Skills Training Program being run by our colleague Erin Strachan from Performance Management Consultants (PMC), an Ottawa-based training and consulting firm. The training program consists of 2 groups of 8 participants who meet daily to improve their employability skills. The group is also trying to start a social enterprise in Baker Lake to help provide employment for program graduates and other local people with disabilities, while also providing a needed service to the community. Figuring out exactly what that service will be was a key focus of this trip.

 The Employability Skills Training Program is held at the Nunavut Arctic College campus in Baker Lake. While there, we heard from locals that the program is a much needed addition to the community. Interest in the program outpaced enrollment caps, and some people were turned away for not meeting the minimum requirements of the program. NDMS is also running a similar Employability Skills Training Program in Iqaluit. At first, I was worried that these two programs would represent a duplication of services, but our two programs are tailored towards two different cohorts of participants, with the NDMS program more suitable for those with lower levels of ability and the PMC program is more suitable for those who can work more independently. The enthusiasm for the PMC program, as well as the continued interest of those who did not make it into the PMC program, suggests that both the NDMS and PMC training programs could be carried out in Baker Lake in the future.

 During the day, we helped organize the final details for the community engagement feast. The feast allowed us the opportunity to present to the community about the services and supports offered by NDMS. It also allowed us to give an update to the community on the social enterprise project and issue a call out for members of the Social Enterprise Advisory Committee. The Advisory Committee had been receiving a good deal of support through donations of stock to sell in the thrift store, but for the project to be successful and sustainable long-term, it needed the commitment of local people from the community to take an active role in the project.

In addition to preparing the community feast, on Tuesday afternoon NDMS also visited with Mental Health worker Rachel Wunder and Child and Youth worker Paula Rumbolt. When consulting with them about resources and needs, a familiar request was raised: the need for improved accesses to services and professional assessments and consultations. They also identified some of the barriers faced by their clients with disabilities. For instance, one client was trying to get into the PASS program, but because he cannot use his hands he was rejected from the program as it requires a computer. Ultimately, the PASS program and Arctic College needs to reassess its enrollment criteria to make the institution more accessible and inclusive, but as a temporary measure we provided Rachel and Paula with information on the Nunavut Solutions Grant NDMS administers on behalf of the Rick Hansen Foundation. Rachel and Paula also noted that more works needs to be done to educate employers about mental health accommodations, noting that locals with mental health issues have felt discriminated by local employers, especially by Meadowbank Mine, where there is a desperate need for mental health resources. The hamlet of Baker Lake also needs more resources to deal with mental health issues. Students at the local high school with mental health issues are often suspended, as this is the only way administrators know how to handle problematic cases. We also heard that community members with mental health issues often end up in cells at the RCMP detachment.

Rachel and Paula also highlighted the need for more respite relief for caregivers. With little infrastructure or resources to support people with disabilities, this duty regularly falls on family members. While respite relief is sometimes available, it is only on a temporary basis. This does not give caregivers enough time to recuperate, and often leads to crises.

 The feast later that night was a big success. Approximately 300 community members attended the event, which was an exceptional turnout, particularly for a Tuesday night. Food was provided by the training program participants, who had harvested 17 caribous during a field trip the week prior. The caribou was cooked by 6 separate community members, and served to the public by program participants. NDMS donated 20 loaves of banana bread made by staff at the Inclusion Café. In addition to the presentations by NDMS and PMC, the community feast also featured an open mic and square dancing, with attendees dancing late into the night. The turnout was exponentially better than the turnout we got for our community consultation in Pangnirtung, where about 20-25 people attended. In the future, it would be good practice for NDMS to hold community feasts during our community visits to give back to the communities and ensure maximum reach of our message.

At the feast, NDMS was able to speak with local residents with disabilities and their families. In particular, we spoke with Mona, a young mother who is the primary caregiver for her daughter who is not able to walk. Her daughter is waiting on a wheelchair, and until it arrives has to be carried everywhere by her mother.

On Wednesday, NDMS went on a site tour of the potential location of the Baker Lake thrift store. The house is owned by a local property management firm QDC. The house is in poor condition and needs extensive repairs. PMC has already spent about $10,000 on repairs for the location, assuming they’d be able to recoup the costs through government funding, which has yet to be secured. This is indicative of the problems that arise when people from down south initiate projects in Nunavut without having first visited the communities they want to serve or knowing what it’s like living and working in the North.

On Wednesday afternoon, I went to visit Ben Gosling, Nunavut’s community services librarian and representative of the National Network of Equitable Library Services. Ben has been working on a project to roll out DAISY e-readers to allow visually impaired library patrons to enjoy printed material. Ben has been experiencing some problems with the rollout, particularly in terms of bandwidth access, which is needed to download files for the DAISY reader. As a work around, Ben is trying to pre-load USB sticks with material to distribute along with the readers.

After this meeting, there was the first gathering of the Baker Lake Thrift Shop Advisory Committee. The committee was formed of some participants and staff from the training program, a representative from QDC, Erin Strachan from PMC, and representatives from NDMS. It was decided that priorities would be applying for registration as a society, obtaining a business license, and fundraising to cover initial costs. PMC’s initial intention was that project funding would be secured through ED&T or the Opportunities Fund; however, more work needs to be done on the business plan and fostering local support before territorial or federal funders will support the project. To help get the funds needed to complete the business plan, the committee decided to explore getting a license to run a series of bingo nights, which could bring in between $5,000-10,000 per night. The costs of applying for a bingo license would come out of funds raised during the community feast through an airline ticket raffle. In all, $3,112.40 was raised at the community feast.

There was also a discussion about what the mission of this social enterprise would be. While the thrift shop idea had been what was originally pitched, Erin believed that the proposed location could be used for more uses, such as for a food bank and food centre. However, it was pointed out that there was already a food bank society in Baker Lake. Although this food bank was struggling with its own internal problems, it was the view of the group that we shouldn’t step on their toes and instead of taking over for them, we should instead see how we could partner with them and support them.

Returning to Iqaluit, we had a day-long stop-over in Rankin Inlet. We took advantage of this opportunity to meet with as many organizations and government agencies as possible. On Friday morning, we visited the Rankin Inlet Adult Group Home. The home currently serves 14 clients and has 6 residents. 4 of the residents are working regular jobs in the community. For those not working, day programming is provided from 8:30-4:30. The Rankin Inlet Adult Group Home is doing a great job serving its clients. It would be great if we could get regular day programming for the residents of the Isaccie Adult Group Home in Iqaluit.

After visiting the Group Home, we met with representatives from ED&T to discuss possible future funding for the Baker Lake Thrift Store project. They reiterated the concerns already expressed that the project needs to make more progress and have more community support before it can be funded.