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Building Capacity in the Aboriginal Community

The Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre has been strengthening children, families and communities since 1984. Michelle Boivin of the centre said they were set up as an alternative to the Child Welfare System, which was missing a segment of society.

She said all of Ma Mawi's programs and services are community based and operate within a philosophy that is embodied in their name – which translated from Ojibway means; "We all work together to help one another."

These words reflect traditional Aboriginal values of collective responsibility and reciprocity towards helping each other. More telling is Ma Mawi's recognition that at some point, all families need help to deal with the challenges that arise from living and raising children in an urban environment.

The Centre runs about 30 programs ranging from targeting new parents and providing parenting and life skills to the newest program, which helps teen mothers.

"What we want to do is to empower the community so they can take care of themselves. We do this through building relationships," said Boivin.

While Ma Mawi is not mandated, in other words, it cannot remove children from their homes, they do have foster care homes that are culturally relevant for children in their care.

There are also programs run through the centre, which help urban youths reconnect with their culture. These programs are offered to the community free of charge and involve not only the youth but their families as well. One program that has met with great success is the "Rising Sun" program. This program is offered four days a week, and provides a gathering place for the community and a chance for families to learn the Aboriginal culture. Boivin said there is a great need to provide positive opportunities for young people.

Ma Mawi has a strong neighbourhood presence and has worked hard to develop positive relationships with the community it serves. Boivin stated that Ma Mawi is instilling a sense of community control and empowerment with Winnipeg's inner city youth.

A Ma Mawi publication notes "The positive signs of youth making a difference and neighbourhoods caring like never before shows that despite the negative reputations, stories and stereotypes, hope and strength is plentiful in Winnipeg's Aboriginal community. Neighbourhoods are experiencing a resurgence of culture, education and community development initiatives like never before."

For more information on Ma Mawi you can contact them at 925-0300 or visit their website at www.mamawi.com