



## **The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Institutional Hearing – Government Services, Victim Services Panel**

### **Overview of Family Information Liaison Units**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Family Information Liaison Units (FILUs) are a new service for family members of missing or murdered Indigenous women and girls across Canada. FILUs were established in response to concerns raised by family members about the ongoing structural and systemic difficulties they experienced in accessing information from government agencies in relation to their missing or murdered loved one.

FILUs work with, and for, family members to access all available information about the family's missing or murdered loved one from multiple government sources, including the police, prosecution services, correctional bodies, coroners or medical examiners, social services, child protection services, and health services. FILU teams work directly with families to assist them in identifying the information they are seeking, to request the information from the relevant agencies, and to arrange meetings and discussions where the information is subsequently shared with the families.

From outreach to information sharing, FILU teams work closely with family members to ensure that their approach is trauma-informed and culturally-responsive. FILU design, development and delivery is grounded in input and direction from family members and Indigenous community partners.

Throughout the process, FILUs ensure family members are aware of - or connected to - community services, knowledge keepers, Elders, or western counselling services, depending on the family members' wishes. FILUs also ensure that families have knowledge of other existing specialized networks and programs to assist and support them.

FILUs are separate from the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (National Inquiry), yet they are designed to complement it. FILU services are available to all family members across Canada regardless of whether or not they choose to participate in the National Inquiry and FILUs are available in every province and territory. Through a national network, under the lead of Justice Canada, FILUs work together across the country to ensure that family members access information from other jurisdictions.

Funding for FILUs was announced in August, 2016, by the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada. Funding for FILUs is provided to provincial and territorial governments through the Justice Canada Federal Victims Strategy (Victims Fund) and is available until March 31, 2019 (\$11.7M over three years).

At the same time that the FILU funding was announced for provincial and territorial victim services, the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada also announced additional funding through the Federal Victims Strategy (Victims Fund) to support community organizations to provide culturally-grounded and trauma-informed supports for families. Funding for community-based projects began September 1, 2016 and is set to expire March 31, 2020 (\$4.5M over four years). This represented additional funding to the approximately \$1M per year in funding that has been available for similar projects since 2010 (also described below). Building on the critical work that Indigenous organizations have been advancing in support of families for decades, this funding supports the design and delivery of specialized services and activities, such as healing circles, sharing circles, cultural ceremonies and sweats, trauma and grief workshops on loss, family gatherings, community events at sacred sites, and individual and group counselling with Elders or western based counsellors.

## **RATIONALE & ORIGINS**

Receiving information about a missing or murdered loved one is an important part of a family's healing journey. Some families have questions about the investigation, and the decisions made by government agencies and criminal justice professionals. Many families have reported barriers when attempting to acquire information about the loss of their loved one. In addition, families may not know where to turn to get answers, may have trouble accessing information, or may not be satisfied with the answers they have received. Further, many family members may not feel they have enough details to start the discussion with agencies. FILUs are structured to assist family members with these situations, and to work with them to ensure that they have all the available information they are seeking.

Justice Canada made funding available for FILUs in response to concerns raised by families during pre-Inquiry consultations about the importance of accessing information related to their missing or murdered loved ones from government agencies and the barriers they face in accessing that information.

Justice Canada funding for FILUs was also grounded in the outcomes and knowledge shared by community organizations working directly with families with federal funding since 2010, when dedicated funding (approximately \$1M per year) to advance specialized victim services for families of missing or murdered Indigenous women and girls was made available through the Federal Victims Strategy (Victims Fund).

That funding was intended to increase access to information and services, building on the initiatives underway in communities and provincial and territorial governments through victim services. Three types of assistance, informed and designed by families and communities, emerged as best practices within a victim services context: Family Police Liaisons, community-based grief and trauma counselling, and family gatherings.

From 2010-2015, Justice Canada officials worked with funded community partners and provincial and territorial victim services to nurture a “community of practice” among those supporting family members, to share experiences and best practices in meaningfully assisting family members within a victim services framework. In developing the FILU model, Justice Canada drew on that knowledge to inform key FILU objectives and elements.

While FILUs are not part of the National Inquiry, the FILU model was developed as a complement to the Inquiry’s objectives. As the Inquiry was not specifically mandated to provide information about loved ones to family members, FILUs were developed seeking to ensure family members were provided with a trauma-informed and culturally-grounded infrastructure to help them access that outstanding information.

As much of the information family members are seeking is within government agencies, FILUs are structurally located in the victim services sector to ensure access to all available information, to ensure privacy, and to increase access and accountability. Each jurisdiction ensured that the FILU model they have in place meets the needs identified by family members in their jurisdiction. FILUs are also delivering their services in partnership with Indigenous community organizations. The FILU partnerships in place at the federal, provincial, territorial and community levels provide new or strengthened opportunities for collaboration and shared responsibility in assisting family members access outstanding information they are seeking about their missing or murdered loved one in a family-centred and responsive manner.

## **FILU MODELS: VARIATION AND CONSISTENCY**

The design, development and operation of all FILUs have been informed by input from family members and Indigenous community organizations, as well as other government departments and ministries.

FILU design is also influenced by the victim services model in place in each jurisdiction. Provinces and territories, who are principally responsible for the administration of justice, have responsibility for the delivery of victim services within their jurisdictions. Each of the provinces and territories has developed its own model for the delivery of services to victims in accordance with their victims’ legislation. Victim services models vary and may be court-based, police-based, system-based or specialized community-based models.

As a result, the structure, composition, and location of FILU teams, and the nature of partnerships in place with community organizations and government agencies, varies between provinces and territories to reflect identified needs, policies, legislation, and existing victim service infrastructures.

While there is variation between jurisdictions on the structure and composition of FILUs, all FILUs share three core elements:

1. A coordinated, dedicated team to work with family members in gathering information (i.e., a one stop resource for families that facilitates the information gathering on behalf of, and for, families);
2. Services that are designed and delivered in a trauma-informed manner; and,
3. Services that are culturally-responsive and culturally-grounded.

## **PARTNERSHIPS WITH INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS**

Indigenous partners play a critical role by advising on FILU operations, leading outreach to families, and/or providing support to FILU family clients. FILUs are delivered in partnership with Indigenous community organizations who have been working with family members for decades, have knowledge about the best means of supporting family members in their healing journey, and have expertise on providing a trauma-informed and culturally-grounded FILU environment for family members.

Through these partnerships FILUs are seeking to ensure families are connected to community services and supports, and are aware of all the assistance and support that is available.

## **FILUS AND OTHER GOVERNMENT AGENCIES**

FILUs are also working closely with provincial and territorial government agencies, who, for the most part, are holders of the information that families are seeking. FILUs have established information sharing arrangements and strengthened relationships with key agencies, such as policing agencies, coroner/medical examiners, prosecution services, child and family services, and health care agencies.

FILUs are also working closely with federal bodies to ensure that families have access to information they are seeking from federal departments and agencies, such as the RCMP, Public Prosecution Service of Canada, Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs, Department of Indigenous Services Canada, Public Safety, Correctional Service of Canada, and the Parole Board of Canada. FILUs are also connected to a Global Affairs Canada official to ensure that families whose loved one went missing or was murdered in the United States are also able to receive FILU assistance.

## **FILU MANDATE LIMITS**

FILUs cannot act to resolve complaints against government agencies or employees, or to re-open investigations. If a family member seeks to lodge a complaint against a government authority, the FILUs will direct them to the appropriate office to do so, but will not be involved in that process with families.

In cases where a family member seeks to disclose additional information about their missing or murdered loved one, the FILU will direct the family to the relevant police service.

FILUs will not: undertake or participate in investigations; provide legal advice; assist with legal action on behalf of a family member; participate in legal proceedings; or provide a legal remedy for families. However, FILUs will identify agencies that can assist with the above, where and if available.

## **EARLY FILU RESULTS AND ACHIEVEMENTS**

FILUs are a new service for families, and have been in full operation across Canada for almost one and a half years. In that short time, significant developments and outcomes have been achieved.

FILUs are helping family members across Canada access information about their loved one's murder or disappearance that that up until now family members had felt was unavailable to them due to geographic barriers, the historical nature of their loved one's murder or disappearance, or other barriers to accessing government records. With direction from family members, FILU teams are researching court files, hospital records, coroner's records, police records, and vital statistics to gather the requested information.

With direction from family members, FILU teams have organized or scheduled information sharing sessions between family members and agencies (i.e., coroners and medical examiners, police investigators, prosecutors, corrections officials) to provide them with the opportunity to meet in person to ask questions about the file containing information about their loved one, including the status as well as how decisions were made (i.e., policy guidelines, regulations). These meetings can often include Elders and other supportive family networks.

## **ACHIEVEMENTS BEYOND INFORMATION SHARING**

While the primary mandate of the FILUs is to work with (and for) family members seeking information about their loved one, FILUs have also provided other forms of support and assistance, reflecting the nature of their responsive, family-centred approach to operations.

For example, FILUs are also providing opportunities for family members to move forward on their healing journey. FILU team members are, at the request of families, finding burial sites of murdered loved ones, coordinating the return of their loved one's remains, and participating in traditional healing and releasing ceremonies with families.

At the same time, FILUs are assisting families in coping with the grief and trauma of their loss by organizing, in partnership with local Indigenous community partners, family gatherings, ceremonies, and connections with Elders. Many FILUs provide opportunities for family members in the community to come together through sharing circles, community events, or ceremonies which provides opportunities to build a natural support network.

FILUs are re-connecting siblings who were separated as children, who are individually contacting FILUs in their search for information about their missing or murdered loved one - be it a mother, daughter, sister, grandmother or aunt - and are finding each other along the way.

In addition to these benefits for family members, FILUs provide an opportunity for organizational change. Through FILU liaison work, government agencies at all levels and across jurisdictions are learning more about how their actions and inactions have had a significant impact on families. Through the safe process FILUs have established, institutions are hearing directly from family members about their experiences, thereby providing opportunities for change in organizational operations.

FILUs have also provided an opportunity to build trust by re-defining the relationships between family members and police, medical examiners or other government agencies, grounded in recognition, respect and understanding.

Moreover, FILUs have been providing assistance to family members who are seeking to connect with the National Inquiry Commission team, to help them participate in the Inquiry, or to follow up with questions they have about the process. FILU teams have also organized family gatherings and drop-in services on site during community hearings. As many FILU team members have long-standing relationships with family members in their community, they have attended community hearings as support persons for the families.

## **CHALLENGES & RESPONSES**

### **(1) Inter-jurisdictional barriers in information sharing and accessing information family members are seeking**

This is a significant challenge, as many family members do not live in the city or the region where their loved one went missing or was murdered. Strategies were designed early on to ensure FILUs were not limited by inter-jurisdictional barriers in their efforts to meet the information requests of families. Having a national FILU network in place that meets weekly has ensured that FILUs are connected across the country, coordinating information and support across Canada, and working as a team for family members, whether they live in the Northwest Territories, Saskatchewan, British Columbia or Nova Scotia.

### **(2) Not all requested information is available**

How and with whom information can be shared is informed by access to information and privacy legislation and regulations at the federal, provincial and territorial levels as well policy directives as defined by each government agency holding the information. While family members are encouraged to contact their FILU to access the information services and assistance they offer, it is expected that not all of the requested information sought by individual family members will be available given legislative, regulatory or policy

directives applicable to the agency holding the information. In these instances, the FILU team, sometimes with the agency that is unable to release the requested information, shares why that information cannot be shared and ensures family members have a responsive and supportive environment to ask questions and share their concerns.

### (3) Gaps in services

Family members accessing FILU services often need more than the information about their missing or murdered loved one held by government agencies. They may also need access to a wide range of community services, culturally-grounded counselling and support, as well as linkages to natural support networks (such as family gatherings). One significant gap FILUs have identified is the availability of grief and trauma counselling, particularly in remote and northern communities.

In response, FILUs are providing a "hub" for family members where they can access information about their loved one, as well as increase their awareness about other community and social services that are available. FILUs are also piloting new initiatives in support of family needs.

The FILU network is also hearing from the families they serve that the FILU model may have benefits beyond families of missing or murdered Indigenous women and girls. The Federal Victims Strategy, in collaboration with Indigenous community organizations and victim services partners, is continually exploring means of improving services to Indigenous victims and survivors of crime.

Exhibit: *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*

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63

14