



December 14, 2020

Opening Ceremony - Williams Lake Indigenous Court

Chief Judge Gillespie participated in a virtual opening ceremony for the Williams Lake Indigenous Court live-streamed via social media on December 11.

Indigenous Courts or First Nations courts currently operate in six B.C. communities - New Westminster, Duncan, Kamloops, North Vancouver, Merritt and Prince George. The Indigenous Court working group in Williams Lake invited the Provincial Court to work with them to develop a court process that could help address the overrepresentation of Indigenous people involved in the criminal justice system.

As a result of their initiative, the Court collaborated with the Indigenous community, B.C.'s Ministry of Attorney General, the community of Williams Lake, B.C. Community Corrections, lawyers, Legal Aid BC, the Native Courtworker and Counselling Association of B.C., the Law Foundation, police, and support services groups to plan the province's seventh Indigenous Court. As well, the Aboriginal Family Healing Court Conference (AFHCC) in New Westminster which began as a pilot project in January 2016, continues to offer families support, flexibility, choice, and cultural connection.

An Indigenous Court is a sentencing court. It provides an Indigenous perspective, based on a holistic and restorative approach, to sentencing Indigenous persons who have acknowledged responsibility for their criminal offence(s). Local Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers who have completed a program of orientation give advice on a healing plan. The healing plan may then be incorporated as part of a fit sentence for the Indigenous person who has pled guilty.

The opening of the Williams Lake Indigenous Court was originally planned for April, but was delayed until adequate facilities could be found to permit physical distancing during court sittings.

Provincial Court Chief Judge Melissa Gillespie said, "The opening of this Indigenous Court represents an important step in reconciliation: a coming together and building a shared vision to create a court that will meet the unique needs of the Indigenous peoples in and near Williams Lake. The court will focus on building supportive and enduring relationships with the Indigenous leaders, Elders and community to bring Indigenous beliefs, culture and traditions in developing healing plans to support Indigenous people who come to the court, being accountable to their respective communities, with the support of their communities and Elders.

Our specialized courts have all been developed in collaboration with communities, service providers, and stakeholders, whose initiative and input are crucial. We are looking forward to opening BC's eighth Indigenous Court in Hazelton in the near future".

Event Recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKpnTicfsqc&feature=youtu.be>