

Building the Path Together: An Indigenous Framework for Advancing Fire Safety in Canada

By Len Garis, Mandy Desautels

Fire safety in Indigenous communities has long been shaped by structural inequities, chronic underfunding, and the absence of culturally grounded approaches to prevention and preparedness. Yet across the country, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities continue to demonstrate resilience, innovation, and leadership in advancing fire safety—often with limited resources and immense responsibility.

In 2022, the National Indigenous Fire Safety Council (NIFSC), in partnership with the BC Injury Research and Prevention Unit (BCIRPU), released a landmark framework designed to support Indigenous communities in identifying, understanding, and acting on their fire safety and prevention needs. The report, *Developing an Indigenous Process to Identify and Respond to Community Fire Safety and Prevention Knowledge*, outlines a community-driven, culturally sensitized approach to building safer futures. It is a framework rooted in respect, reciprocity, and the recognition that fire safety knowledge must be co-created—not imposed.

This article explores the framework, its development, and its implications for fire services across Canada.

Why an Indigenous-Led Framework Matters

Fire risk in Indigenous communities is not simply a technical problem—it is a product of historical, political, and social conditions. Many communities face aging infrastructure, limited fire protection resources, and geographic isolation. Funding formulas have not kept pace with modern standards, and fire departments often rely heavily on volunteers who juggle multiple roles.

Key participants in the NIFSC study emphasized that **funding structures are outdated**, noting that “*fire funding levels by Indigenous Services Canada are 30-years old*” and that communities often lack the resources to meet even basic standards for equipment and training.

Against this backdrop, the NIFSC framework offers something fundamentally different: a process that begins with community voices, honours Indigenous knowledge systems, and builds capacity from within.

A Four-Part Framework Rooted in Community Strength

The Fire Safety and Prevention Knowledge and Translation Framework is built around four interconnected phases:

1. Establishing the Path (Assessment)

Communities begin by examining their current fire safety landscape—strengths, challenges, behaviours, and risks. This phase emphasizes situational awareness and the importance of leadership commitment. As the report notes, this stage involves “*the decision to move forward with a community fire safety initiative*” and the gathering of foundational knowledge from leadership and program managers.

2. Engaging the Voices (Capacity)

This phase centres on listening—bringing together leadership, fire personnel, Elders, youth, and community members to share experiences and priorities. Engagement may take the form of surveys, gatherings, sharing circles, or small-group discussions over meals. Food, the report notes, is not incidental; it is a sign of respect and a way to ensure everyone sits “*at the same table, as equals.*”

3. Looking to the Future (Planning)

Communities identify priorities, explore available resources, and map out opportunities for action. This includes determining what is feasible now, what requires external support, and what long-term goals should guide future planning.

4. Sharing the Knowledge (Implementation)

The final phase focuses on developing and executing a community fire safety plan—public education, equipment needs, training, sustainability planning, and evaluation. Implementation is not a one-time event; it is a cycle of learning, adapting, and strengthening.

Listening to Communities: What Key Participants Shared

The development of the framework relied heavily on interviews with fire chiefs, fire marshals, technical advisors, and other key participants across the country. Their insights reveal both the challenges and the opportunities ahead.

Chronic Underfunding and Resource Gaps

Participants described a system where fire departments struggle to meet minimum standards:

- Personal protective equipment costing **\$4,000 per set**—or **\$13,000 including SCBA**—must be replaced every 10 years.
- Fire trucks scheduled for replacement every 20 years cost **\$589,000**, yet some trucks see minimal use and remain in service far beyond their intended lifespan.
- Many communities lack fire halls, training facilities, or even basic public education materials.

As one participant summarized, “*The list of what is needed is endless.*”

Training Barriers and the Importance of Local Capacity

Training remains a major challenge. Many firefighters cannot leave their communities for extended periods, and language barriers can make written training materials difficult to navigate. One jurisdiction addressed this by implementing real-time translation for every course—an innovation that significantly improved participation and success rates.

Participants also emphasized the importance of **in-community training**, which not only builds capacity but also inspires youth to join the fire service.

Community Buy-In Is Essential

Fire safety initiatives succeed when communities feel ownership. Participants stressed the importance of relationship-building:

- Attending community events
- Supporting Elders
- Hosting Fire Prevention Week activities
- Offering open houses and barbecues
- Ensuring quick responses to equipment issues

These actions build trust and demonstrate that fire departments are part of the community, not separate from it.

The Role of Leadership

Leadership engagement is critical. Yet participants noted that communication gaps often exist between senior administrators, councils, and fire departments. In some cases, fire chiefs now communicate directly with fire marshals to ensure essential information flows where it is needed.

Gathering Knowledge the Right Way

The framework emphasizes that data collection must be trauma-informed and culturally respectful. Many community members have experienced loss due to fire, and the report recommends developing a **Safety Plan** before beginning any interviews or surveys to ensure support is available if needed.

Multiple methods of gathering information were identified:

- Key participant interviews
- Community gatherings
- Online surveys
- Hard-copy surveys

However, interviews and gatherings were considered the most effective, given survey fatigue and limited internet access in some communities.

A Modified-Delphi Approach: Co-Creating the Tools

The NIFSC and BCIRPU teams used a modified-Delphi process to develop the interview guides and surveys. This iterative method allowed key participants to review, refine, and validate the tools through multiple rounds of feedback.

The process included:

- Drafting interview guides and consent forms
- Presenting the approach to NIFSC leadership
- Conducting interviews via Zoom or telephone
- Revising tools based on participant feedback
- Preparing the final report for endorsement

This collaborative approach ensured that the tools were not only technically sound but also culturally appropriate and grounded in community realities.

Piloting the Framework: The Next Step Forward

The NIFSC is now working to pilot the framework in one or two Indigenous communities. Recommendations for potential pilot sites include communities in Alberta (Treaty 6, 7, and 8) and Saskatchewan (Battlefords Tribal Council). The pilot phase will test the framework's usability, identify areas for refinement, and help shape a full toolkit for national implementation.

The report outlines three key next steps:

- Review the framework with the new NIFSC Board
- Seek additional funding
- Engage communities interested in participating in the pilot

What This Means for Fire Services Across Canada

The NIFSC framework is more than a research tool—it is a roadmap for systemic change. For fire services across Canada, it offers several important lessons:

1. Fire safety must be community-driven.

Top-down approaches rarely succeed. Communities must define their own priorities, risks, and solutions.

2. Cultural safety is essential.

Engagement must respect Indigenous knowledge systems, traditions, and experiences.

3. Capacity building is as important as equipment.

Training, mentorship, and youth engagement are long-term investments that strengthen community resilience.

4. Funding reform is urgently needed.

Outdated funding formulas undermine safety and place disproportionate burdens on volunteer departments.

5. Collaboration works.

The framework itself is a model of partnership—between researchers, fire service leaders, and Indigenous communities.

Conclusion: A Path Toward Safer Futures

The Fire Safety and Prevention Knowledge and Translation Framework represents a significant step toward addressing long-standing inequities in fire safety for Indigenous communities. It is grounded in respect, built through collaboration, and designed to empower communities to lead their own fire safety journeys.

As the report states, the goal is to create *“better community-level decisions and results, specific to fire safety and prevention knowledge and translation.”*

For fire services across Canada, this framework is both an invitation and a challenge: to listen more deeply, collaborate more meaningfully, and support Indigenous communities in building safer, stronger futures.

Authors

Len Garis is director of research for the National Indigenous Fire Safety Council, Ret. Fire Chief for the city of Surrey, B.C., Research Associate – University of the Fraser Valley associate scientist emeritus with the B.C. Injury Research and Prevention Unit. Contact him at lwgaris@outlook.com.

Mandy Desautels is Chief Administrative Officer at the National Indigenous Fire Safety Council. Prior to joining NIFSC, she worked for BC Emergency Health Services and prominent NGOs. Contact her at mandy.desautels@indigenousfiresafety.ca