

## **Grandmother knows best in First Nation's effort to curb drugs, gangs**

A reserve near Regina is calling on its women, especially grandmothers, to help steer troubled young people towards a better life.

The chief and council of the Piapot First Nation are planning to set up an on-call service of "kokums," the Cree word for grandmother, to counsel teens and young parents. Mothers may also be involved with the project.

The First Nation held a recruitment drive on Wednesday on the reserve after taking out a half-page advertisement in a local newspaper. More than 50 women attended the meeting.

Gangs and drugs are a problem on many reserves in Saskatchewan. Last year, the Piapot First Nation held a conference to address gang violence.

A councillor on the reserve, Violet Piapot, said kokums command respect among the reserve's young people.

"They listen to their kokums, they will do anything for their kokums," Piapot said.

Although "kokum" refers primarily to one's grandmother, people also use the term to refer to their great-aunts, or to the grandmothers of other people.

Lena Agecourey, who is a kokum, said the wisdom and experience of grandmothers cannot be ignored.

"They are like library books to us.... They are the greatest things to really sit down and pay attention and to listen [to]," said Agecourey. "I am here for that, too, because I am learning as I go along in life."

The First Nation plans to create a committee of grandmothers that will meet monthly to discuss issues facing the community.

Kokums may also be asked to go to court appearances with young people and help them when dealing with police and social workers.

Community leaders have also suggested that kokums offer classes to young people to promote language and culture, which may include travelling to meet young people living off the reserve, which is 47 kilometres northeast of Regina.

The women will be paid for their participation.

Margaret Rockthunder, another Piapot kokum, said she used to make weekly visits to an elementary school in Regina.

She said she was often asked to counsel young people who had problems at home.

"We'd go sit in the office and talk one-to-one ... and I'd talk to them and try and help them to live a better life."

Rockthunder said the response from parents of students was positive, which suggests to her that the Piapot kokum program will also be well received.

Source: Thursday, July 9, 2009 CBC News