

A WAY OUT

By Bryan Hansen

ONWA's Cheryl Bagnall is recognized for her key role in helping Indigenous women escape human trafficking

Cheryl Bagnall is a recipient of the 2021-22 Attorney General's Victim Services Award of Distinction. The Attorney General's Victim Services Awards of Distinction program recognizes individuals and organizations that have made exceptional contributions in their fields of service to victims, as well as victims or others who have been impacted by crime. As a recipient, Bagnall is recognized for her dedication to supporting people who have experienced victimization due to crime and to raising awareness of victims' issues in Ontario.



Cheryl Bagnall, right, with Vicky Woodbeck, ONWA Community Services Manager, left, and Mandy Tait-Martens, ONWA Assistant Director Community Services

Bagnall is an active band member and advocate for the Bingwi Neyaashi Anishinaabek First Nation on Lake Nipigon. She has spent 30 years working with Indigenous not-for-profit organizations and is currently the Director of Community Services at the Ontario Native Women's Association (ONWA). "I really think of it as a team approach – we have 10 managers, one assistant director and coordinator, and [we make] an incredible team," Bagnall says.

According to Bagnall, a safe space is "the ability for an Indigenous woman to safely have a voice and openly talk

about issues affecting them, their family, and community."

Bagnall has overseen the development and delivery of ONWA's Courage for Change Program, which supports Indigenous women and girls involved, at-risk, or entrenched in human trafficking. The work resonates with her. "For me, there is a specific connection being an Indigenous woman – part of my role and responsibility is to take up opportunity to create safe spaces for Indigenous women as a whole," she explains. "This past year in 2021-2022 we helped 221 Indigenous women exit human trafficking."

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Bagnall helped the community services program to pivot during the COVID-19 pandemic. It needed to come up with a response on how to coordinate and deliver services, and Bagnall and her team developed a centralized intake department. “There is one provincial support number to call to reach intake workers who will help assess needs and effectively support with immediate services, short or long-term case management, or service referrals,” she says. “We pivoted to the needs of the community and adapted our services to ensure the need was filled.”

The introduction of a single provincial support number helped to eliminate waitlists and ensured continued access to services during the pandemic. As well, ONWA has 10 program delivery sites with the capacity to deliver programming to an additional 11 program sites throughout chapters. Along with the program sites, ONWA is also now looking at a day treatment model for services at some locations. “The focus is you don’t have to leave your family or your home to receive services. The day treatment model removes a barrier. It provides an opportunity if you need services but may have children or extended family living with you, or you don’t want to leave your support system,” Bagnall says.

An important future consideration is healing, which ONWA will continue to make a priority in terms of access to having Indigenous practices, interventions and therapies. A centralized intake system combined with new models such as Day Treatment will allow Bagnall and her team at ONWA to continue providing services virtually and in-person to meet the needs of Indigenous women and their families.

Looking to the future, the association will continue to adjust as needed to meet changing service needs. With Bagnall playing a leading role, they are in good hands. ●

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