



Canadian Archaeological Association  
Association canadienne d'archéologie

## Open letter to Canadian politicians at all levels of government

June 22, 2021

On behalf of the Canadian Archaeological Association, we call for immediate action to support communities to locate the children who died at and went missing from Indian Residential Schools, as outlined in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action 71-76. We also call for immediate action to support Indigenous communities searching for lost loved ones who never came home from other schools, hospitals, and sanatoria across the land we now call Canada. Any searches for the graves of these missing people using remote sensing technologies must be led by communities and must follow established best practices for burials. Based on our collective experience working with Indigenous communities on projects using remote sensing to locate their ancestors, we have the following recommendations:

1. National and regional coordination is essential to ensure communities are being supported with the best available guidance. This process will be highly complex because it crosses jurisdictional boundaries, and potentially involves questions of criminality that should be assessed by independent, non-governmental bodies. We recommend the establishment of **an independent, national committee and provincial committees** to engage in and help coordinate this work.
  - Committees should include survivors, Indigenous leaders, Indigenous researchers, subject matter experts, and Elders.
  - A national strategy should be developed in consultation with regional bodies.
  - Regional and individual school research plans need to be developed through engaging with all Indigenous communities whose relatives attended the schools.
  - Individual school plans must be survivor and community-led with attention to the history and composition of each school.
  - The IRS Unmarked Grave Project should have full-time staff, including project management, technical expertise, and cultural knowledge to support and advise communities and advisory committees.
  - The staff should be at arm's length from the Federal government but play a key role in liaising between CIRNAC, the NCTR, regional committees, and the school communities.
  
2. Although the pressure to conduct surveys quickly is growing, we recommend that all necessary background historical, archival, and land use research be conducted in advance of any fieldwork.
  - Supports should be put into place to conduct this research at a community level or with strong community input.
  - Where barriers exist, access to archival material, school, and church records needs to be granted to school research committees.

- Current school property ownership, history, and use must be researched and documented. Governments at all levels should support communities in accessing any lands not on reserve.
3. For those communities that choose to undertake them, unmarked grave surveys should proceed only once research is conducted, survivor testimony considered, survey options discussed, and plans are approved at the community level.
- Wherever possible, these surveys should involve a training component to support capacity building.
  - Any surveys, whether conducted by private companies, academic researchers, or others, must be conducted by people with the appropriate expertise in locating unmarked graves, and to the highest standards, as defined by the CAA Working Group on Unmarked Graves. Survey data shall be the property of survivors communities, but supports need to be established to protect and preserve these data and vet research access if community permission is granted.
  - The NCTR is the logical repository for these data, unless other agreements around repositories already exist.
  - Data agreements should be in place prior to any survey being conducted and should uphold OCAP principles or other principles defined by the community.
4. The Canadian Archaeological Association will provide information to communities on the use of remote sensing for locating unmarked graves.
- An introductory video and FAQ are already available on our website and additional resources are in development and will be available soon.
  - The CAA Working Group on Unmarked Graves is in the process of developing a set of technical standards to guide such work.
  - The CAA is also creating a list of CAA members from different regions of the country who have self-identified that they have relevant expertise and may be able to support communities in this work.

There is a great sense of urgency to put planning and operational guidelines in place prior to the commencement of survey work. We ask that these recommendations be adopted immediately so that work can begin assisting survivor communities in finding their lost children and other missing loved ones.

Sincerely,



Lisa Hodgetts, CAA President



Kisha Supernant, Chair, CAA Working Group on Unmarked Graves