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First-of-its-kind partnership to transform long-term care in Northern Ontario

New collaboration aims to bring care closer to home with a focus on culture and dignity

Espanola, ON — June 26, 2026 — Whitefish River First Nation, Sagamok Anishnawbek, the Town of Espanola, and Espanola Regional Hospital and Health Centre have announced a new partnership to explore the possibility of building a long-term care home that will serve the region and support people in aging closer to home.

“This project is about building a future where our people can age with dignity, surrounded by their culture, their families, and their community,” said Chief Rodney Nahwegahbow of Whitefish River First Nation. *“By working together as partners and respecting the sovereignty of First Nations, we are re-imagining long-term care in a way that will serve our communities for generations to come. We are ready to move this work forward and welcome provincial and federal partners to join us in making this vision a reality.”*

In Espanola alone, more than 130 people are currently waiting for just 32 long-term care beds, highlighting the urgent need for expanded capacity in the region. Across the Espanola-Manitoulin area, demand continues to outpace available spaces, forcing many families to seek care far from home.

“Our vision is to create a future where Elders can receive the care they need while remaining close to home to be connected to their families, community, and Anishinaabe traditions. This initiative demonstrates what can be achieved when we build partnerships where First Nations can lead the conversation about the services our communities need. We look forward to working with all partners to build the support and resources needed to make this project a success.” said Chief Angus Toulouse, Chief of Sagamok Anishnawbek.

The partners have signed a Memorandum of Understanding that sets the foundation for the project. Espanola Regional Hospital and Health Centre would operate the home, with planning and development guided collaboratively by all partners. The Town of Espanola has committed land for the facility near the hospital site, demonstrating its commitment to advancing the project.

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“The Town of Espanola is proud to contribute land and infrastructure to support this project as a sign of our commitment to working alongside our neighbours and the strong Anishinaabe Nations of this region to expand long-term care close to home. Together, in a spirit of respect, truth and reconciliation, we are helping build a future model for care that is collaborative, culturally safe, coordinated, and grounded in the values of each community.” said Mayor Douglas Gervais, Town of Espanola.

“This partnership brings together health care expertise and community leadership to create a model of care that is both high-quality and culturally meaningful,” said Martin Lees, CEO of the Espanola Regional Hospital and Health Centre. *“By planning together from the outset, we can ensure the home meets the needs of residents and families across the region, now and into the future.”*

This project represents a strong, community-supported solution that is ready to move forward with the right investments. It also reflects a shared commitment to improving access to long-term care in the North while advancing truth and reconciliation through respectful partnership.

Partners will continue to work together to advance planning and engage with provincial and federal governments to secure the support needed to move the project into the next phase. Community members can expect ongoing updates and opportunities to provide input as the project progresses.

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About Whitefish River First Nation

A growing Anishinaabe Nation of approximately 1,500 members, Whitefish River First Nation located on the scenic shores of Georgian Bay and the North Shore Channel, gatekeepers to Manitoulin Island, Ontario. Guided by its vision of working in harmony while preserving culture, traditions, and knowledge, WRFN is committed to improving community well-being through mutual cooperation, sustainable development, and cultural strength.

About the Town of Espanola

Located in the heart of Northern Ontario, the Town of Espanola is a vibrant and welcoming community situated along the scenic Spanish River. Home to approximately 6,000 residents, Espanola serves as a regional hub for commerce, healthcare, recreation, and cultural activities. The Town is committed to providing high-quality municipal services, fostering economic growth, supporting community well-being, and enhancing the quality of life for residents and visitors alike. With its rich history, natural beauty, and strong community spirit, Espanola continues to be a great place to live, work, invest, and explore.

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About and Espanola Regional Hospital and Health Centre

Situated in the Town of Espanola and within the Robinson Huron Treaty Territory, the hospital is a 79-bed health campus and serves a population of approximately 14,000 within the catchment area that includes the Town of Espanola, Townships of Nairn & Hyman and Sables-Spanish River, Baldwin and Sagamok Anishnawbek and Whitefish River First Nation.

About Sagamok Anishnawbek

Sagamok Anishnawbek is located on the north shore of Lake Huron. The community is party to the Robinson-Huron Treaty, 1850. The Anishinaabemowin language is still alive in the community and serves as the means by which the community is connected to its lands, ancestors, history, culture, laws and its right to self-determination. The community members of Sagamok number over 3,400. A majority of the membership lives on the reserve, with the remainder living in urban locations.

About the Partnership

Together, these partners are working to strengthen services, build relationships, and improve access to care in the Espanola-Manitoulin region. This collaboration reflects a shared vision of community-driven, culturally safe care close to home, leveraging the Espanola Regional Hospital and Health Centre's proven expertise in integrated rural health.

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