



# ID Action Group

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## ID Matters: Final Report on Access to Personal Identification and the Social Determinants of Health in Northwestern Ontario (July 2025)

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## LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work was conducted on the traditional lands of the Anishinaabe peoples, within the territory of the Robinson-Superior Treaty. This region has long been a place of learning, community, and stewardship. We recognize that the histories and relationships between Indigenous peoples and those who have arrived more recently are complex and ongoing. We are committed to learning about these histories, deepening our understanding of the land we live on, and supporting respectful relationships with Indigenous communities today. We extend our respect to Elders, knowledge keepers, and community members, past and present, and to all Indigenous peoples who continue to care for and sustain these lands.

We acknowledge the university we work at resides on the traditional lands of Fort William First Nation, signatory to the Robinson Superior Treaty of 1850, and our Orillia Campus is on the traditional lands of the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Pottawatomi nations, collectively known as the Three Fires Confederacy.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A **birth certificate** is more than just a piece of paper—it's the **key to full participation** in Canadian society. Yet across northwestern Ontario, many people—especially Indigenous Peoples, individuals living in rural or remote areas, and people facing poverty or homelessness—do not have this vital document. Without a birth certificate, people can't obtain other forms of personal identification that enable access **basic health care, income supports, education, housing, or even open a bank account.**

This **community-based, action-oriented research project**, supported by funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), explored the impact of living without a birth certificate on access to essential services in Thunder Bay and the district, rural municipalities, and road access and remote First Nations in northwestern Ontario. Working alongside the **Thunder Bay ID Action Group**, a network of over 25 partner organizations, we held **in-person ID clinics**, completed **over 2,000 birth certificate applications**, and collected rich qualitative and demographic data to better understand the scope of the problem.

Our findings are clear: **not having a birth certificate creates cascading disadvantages** that impact health and well-being, make it harder for people to belong or fully take part in life and society, and reduce economic opportunities. Often, people discover they lack essential ID when they are facing a health emergency or life crisis and, as they are trying to address the problem, face the following barriers when applying for a birth certificate:

- **Application processes:** cost, confusing forms, and guarantor requirement;
- **Missing Information:** unknown personal and parental information;
- **Lack of recognition of nonconventional care arrangements** (i.e., kinship care); and
- **Poorer access to service locations:** long travel distances, rural terrain, limited road access, winter road dependence, and scattered settlement patterns.

Combined, these barriers are felt most acutely by Indigenous communities, seniors, youth aging out of care, people who are incarcerated, and individuals living with disabilities or mental health needs. This report summarizes the problems, highlights systemic barriers, and shares real stories of people impacted by this problem. It also offers concrete recommendations to begin to address these obstacles and ensure everyone has access to essential identification in a timely manner. Our work shows that **solving this problem is both possible and urgent.** This report is not just a summary of research—it's a **call to action** to build a more inclusive, accessible, and equitable society.

*"It shouldn't take nine months to help an Elder get a birth certificate so he can see a doctor. But it did." – ID Clinic Worker*

## INTRODUCTION

Imagine trying to open a bank account, visit a doctor, apply for a job, or register your child for school without government-issued identification. For many people living in northwestern Ontario, this isn't hypothetical—it's daily reality. A birth certificate is considered a “breeder” document because it serves as the foundational form of **personal identification (PID)** in Canada and is required to obtain most other forms of PID. Without a birth certificate, individuals cannot access essential services that support health, well-being, and full participation in society.

This report shares the results of a five-year, community-based research project that explored the barriers people face when trying to obtain PID and the consequences of living without it. The research focused on **northwestern Ontario** (see p. 6), including the city of Thunder Bay and district, rural communities, and fly-in First Nations in the region. People living in northwestern Ontario experience unique challenges due to geography, historical and ongoing settler colonialism, and inadequate access to government services.

The work was led by academic researchers from Lakehead University and community partners including Kinna-aweya Legal Clinic, NorWest Community Health Centres, Roots Community Food Centre, as well as over two dozen frontline serving organizations that form the **Thunder Bay ID Action Group**. Together, we held over 50 ID clinics, supported thousands of individuals in applying for ID, and collected firsthand accounts of the challenges people face. Many of these stories are shared in this report.

While lack of PID is often assumed to be a problem affecting only people who are unhoused in big cities, our findings challenge that assumption. **Across northwestern Ontario, Indigenous families, seniors, youth aging out of care, people with disabilities, and others in precarious living situations are disproportionately affected.** The barriers are systemic, not individual—rooted in unfriendly and unnecessarily bureaucratic systems, outdated policies and practices, and a lack of designated resources and supports.

Throughout this report, we offer real-world examples to show how the **lack of PID is both a cause and a consequence of inequality**. We also present practical recommendations to reduce these barriers and strengthen public systems. Our hope is that this report will increase public awareness of the unnecessary challenges people face in obtaining birth certificates, inspire systems change, and serve as a model for community-led and action-focused solutions elsewhere.

### What is PID?

Personal Identification (PID) includes government-issued documents like birth certificates, health cards, driver's licenses, and status cards. These documents are often required to access basic services, benefits, and rights.



## BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

### Why Does ID Matter?

A birth certificate might seem like a basic, taken-for-granted document that most people have tucked away in a drawer or wallet. For those who have one, its importance is easy to overlook. But in Canada, like many countries, a birth certificate is the **starting point for accessing all other forms of PID**. It allows people to get a health card, open a bank account, rent an apartment, apply for a driver's licence or social insurance number, and register for school or government benefits. Without it, a person becomes virtually invisible to many social and economic services and supports.

It is useful to think of PID as a **web**—interconnected forms of identification that hold each other together. At the center of this web is the birth certificate. Without a birth certificate, the rest of the web will unravel.

### *Web of ID*

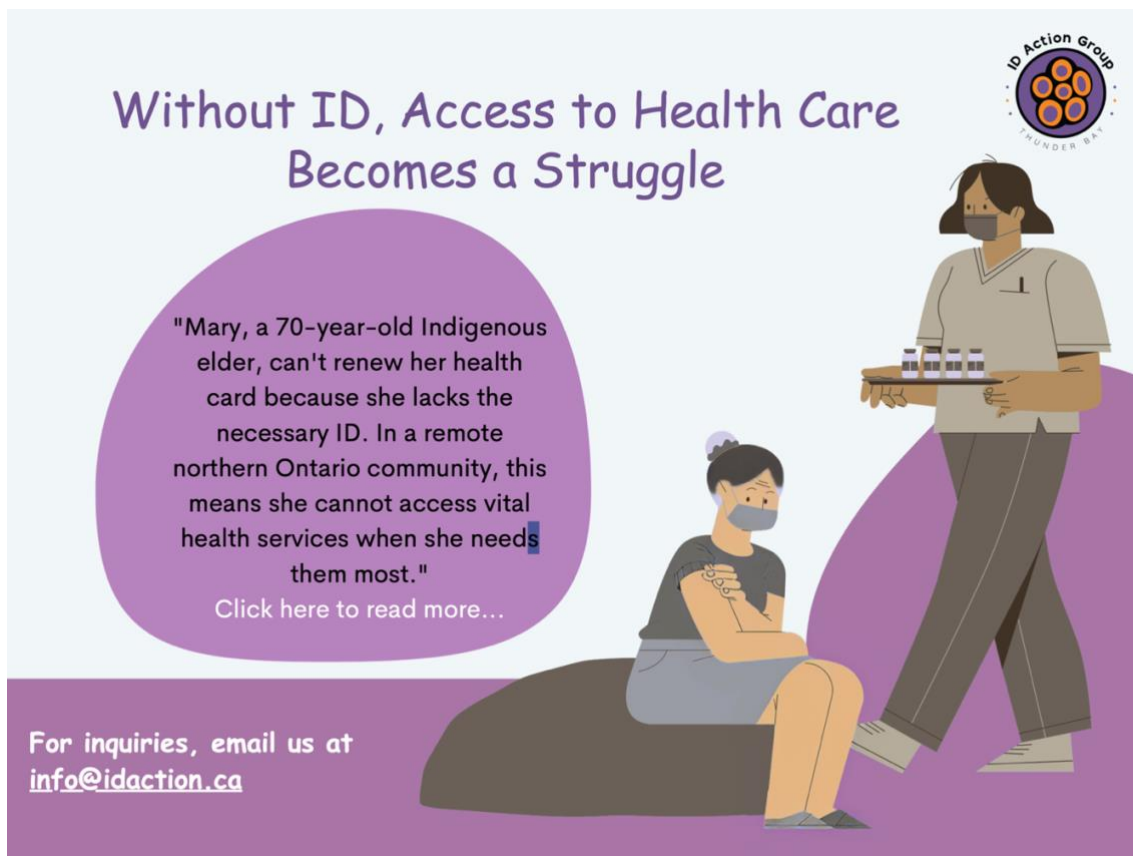


While many people often think the lack of PID is unusual in Canada, research shows that it's **surprisingly common in northwestern Ontario**, especially among Indigenous peoples, seniors, single parents, people who are unhoused, and those living in rural or remote communities. These individuals often face overlapping barriers—difficult and costly bureaucratic systems that are inflexible and hard to navigate, lack of recognition for nonconventional care arrangements like kinship care, missing or unknown personal/parental information, and long distances to service centers.

## Health and Social Impacts

The absence of PID has profound and cascading effects on people's lives. Without it, people are regularly denied access to:

- Health care (due to lack of Ontario Health Insurance Plan, or OHIP card);
- Income supports (e.g., Ontario Works, Ontario Disability Support Program, Old Age Security);
- School enrollment and child benefits (e.g., Canada Child Benefit);
- Housing and rental agreements;
- Employment and banking; and
- Basic travel (e.g., bus, plane tickets).



**Without ID, Access to Health Care Becomes a Struggle**

"Mary, a 70-year-old Indigenous elder, can't renew her health card because she lacks the necessary ID. In a remote northern Ontario community, this means she cannot access vital health services when she needs them most."

[Click here to read more...](#)

For inquiries, email us at [info@idaction.ca](mailto:info@idaction.ca)

**ID Action Group**  
THUNDER BAY

These exclusions are not just inconvenient—they are harmful. Missing PID can lead to poorer health outcomes, economic hardship, and deeper marginalization. People may end up paying cheque-cashing fees because they can't open a bank account, or missing job interviews and appointments because they don't have a photo ID. People may be denied housing, even in emergencies. These everyday harms add up.

*“It’s not just about paperwork. It’s about whether people are seen by the system—or shut out.”*  
– Community member

## A Deeply Canadian Problem

Globally, organizations like the United Nations and Plan International have long recognized the importance of birth registration for protecting children's rights and preventing statelessness. But in Canada, this issue receives far less attention. Birth registration is often assumed to be universal—but it's not.

In regions like northwestern Ontario, missing PID reflects **ongoing colonial legacies**, including the intergenerational impacts of residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and other state interventions that have disrupted family knowledge and record-keeping. For example, people may not know their birth details, may have had their names changed by state institutions or churches, or may lack access to legal documents due to disconnection from family or community.

## Why This Project Matters

This project began with a simple premise: **you can't access what you need if the system doesn't see you**. But as we worked alongside community partners and heard from hundreds of people living without PID, it became clear that this is not a small or isolated issue. It's a structural gap in Canada's social infrastructure—and one that we *can* do something about.

## RESEARCH APPROACH

### A Community-Based, Action-Oriented Approach

This project was designed to be about both **research and action**—to study the problem of missing PID and, at the same time, help people obtain the PID they need. We used a **community-based research model**, working in partnership with trusted local and regional organizations already serving vulnerable populations in northwestern Ontario.

Our lead partner was **Kinna-aweya Legal Clinic**, a Thunder Bay-based Indigenous-led poverty law agency with extensive experience assisting people who are homeless and/or low-income to obtain birth certificates. Kinna-aweya’s work providing identification services began in response to the acute needs of their clients at risk of losing their housing or access income supports. As the project evolved, it grew to work with Lakehead University Community Legal Clinic, Roots Community Food Centre, NorWest Community Health Centres and over 25 additional service providers that now comprise the **Thunder Bay ID Action Group**—a grassroots coalition.

The project was **interdisciplinary**, drawing on expertise from sociology, Indigenous studies, history, social work, public health, law, and social justice. We combined research methods with frontline service delivery, creating a model where data collection happened alongside real-time community support.

### What We Did

Over five years, the project team and our partners organized:

- 16 ID clinics directly (10 in remote First Nations);
- 35+ additional clinics with partner organizations;
- Over 2,000 birth certificate applications completed;
- 877 structured intake forms collected; and
- Dozens of interviews and focus groups with clients and service providers.

At each clinic, we helped clients complete long, complex applications, and covered application fees where possible. We offered food, transportation, and translation services to reduce barriers. For remote First Nations, we traveled in person or partnered with band membership clerks to deliver services at community events and local venues such as hockey tournaments, health fairs, friendship centers, and high schools.

We also developed a range of practical tools:

- **Standardized forms** to simplify the application process;
- **Educational videos** for clients and organizations; and
- **A website** ([www.idaction.ca](http://www.idaction.ca)) offering free resources.

## How We Gathered Data

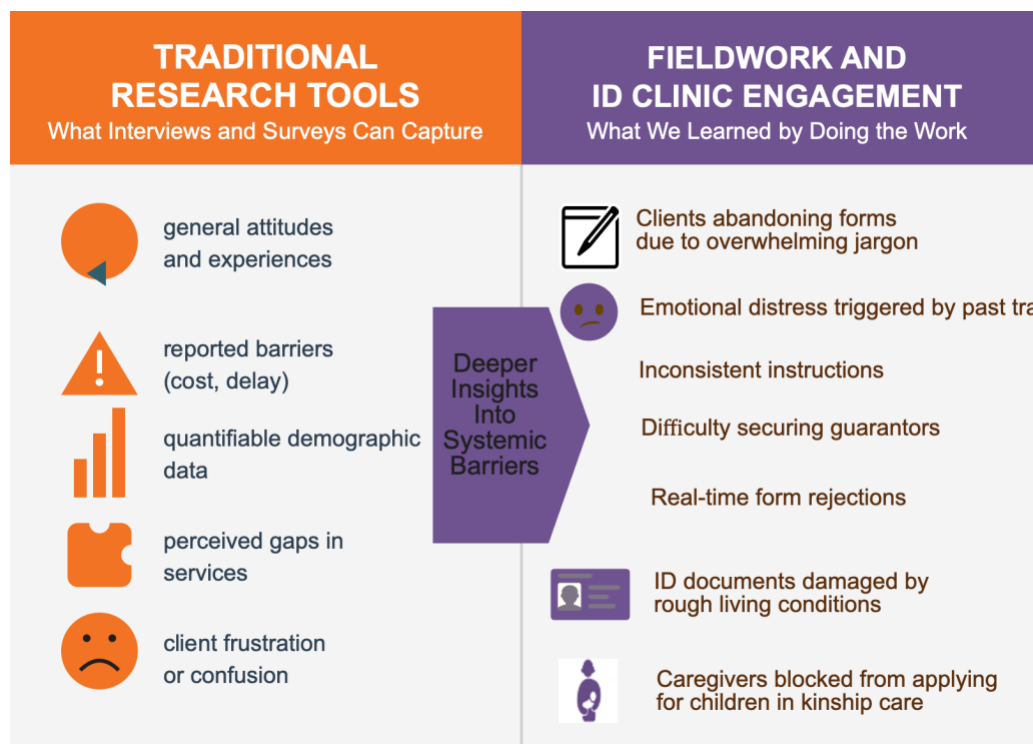
Our research relied on several sources:

- **Client intake forms** at ID clinics (demographics, barriers);
- **Field notes** from researchers and service providers;
- **One-on-one interviews** with individuals who were experiencing difficulties acquiring a birth certificate for themselves, a family member, or a person in their care;
- **Focus groups** with people seeking birth certificates, community workers, legal advocates, and healthcare providers; and
- **Policy analysis** of birth registration and ID application processes in Ontario.

We prioritized respectful, culturally grounded engagement, following OCAP® principles when working with Indigenous communities, ensuring confidentiality and informed consent.

## Limitations and Challenges

This was not a conventional research project. Many of our participants lacked stable housing, consistent phone access, or reliable contact information. As a result, **long-term follow-up** was often difficult. Despite our best efforts, we were unable to systematically track all outcomes over time. Nevertheless, our findings reflect a deep, qualitative understanding of the barriers faced by hundreds of people across diverse communities. The scale and intensity of the need, as well as the success of our service model, speak volumes.



## KEY FINDINGS

This section presents the most important findings from our research and service delivery. These findings are drawn from multiple sources: **877 structured client intake forms, interviews, focus groups, our direct experience organizing over 50 ID clinics, and thousands of birth certificate applications completed in collaboration with clients.** Many of the applications required **additional follow-up** due to missing or incorrect information, complex family situations, or significant systemic barriers.

At the heart of our findings is a simple but powerful truth: **without a birth certificate, people are locked out of nearly every system meant to support well-being and social participation.** This foundational document is required to obtain other forms of PID such as health cards, social insurance numbers, and status cards. It is the first link in what many clients described as a **“chain” of PID**, or a series of documents needed to access basic supports like health care, income assistance, housing, banking, and emergency services.

The barriers to obtaining a birth certificate are **rarely about individual failure or lack of effort.** They are structural. Our findings highlight how the process is shaped by poverty, bureaucratic inflexibility, administrative policies that fail to reflect people’s real lives, colonial legacies, and geographic isolation. The consequences are both immediate and far-reaching.

### 1. Application Process: Cost, Confusing Forms, and Guarantor Requirement

Applying for a birth certificate may seem straightforward, but for many people, the process is filled with hidden challenges that prevent them from even getting started. From unaffordable fees to unclear instructions and professional requirements few can meet, the application process itself becomes the bottleneck to acquiring the birth certificate.

#### Cost

The number one barrier to obtaining a birth certificate is cost. In Ontario, a birth certificate application ranges from **\$25 to \$45**, with **delayed registration fees and amendments** (e.g., name changes) adding up to **\$137 or more**. These fees are often unaffordable for low-income individuals, representing the equivalent of a **week's worth of groceries or rent.**

*"It's just a piece of paper, but I can't afford it. I have to choose between that and food."  
– Community member*

*"I've been trying for five years to get my ID. Every time I try, it costs more or they say something is missing."  
– Community member*

While Ontario’s **Fee Waiver Program** exists, it is **extremely limited in scope and eligibility**. To qualify, individuals must prove they are experiencing homelessness. As a result, people who are living in deep poverty, but are not “homeless enough,” are excluded. Most of the clients who attend our ID clinics report cost as the number one barrier to acquiring PID, yet **approximately three-quarters do not qualify** for the fee waiver, despite living well below the poverty line.

## THE COST OF IDENTITY: ACCESSING BIRTH CERTIFICATES IN ONTARIO

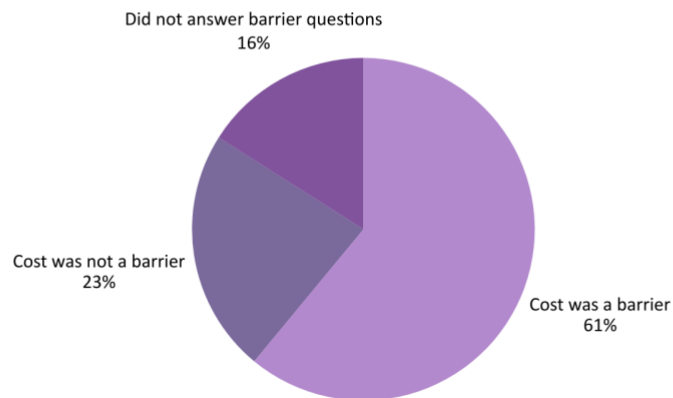


Different types of birth certificates serve different purposes. While a standard birth certificate is sufficient for many uses, individuals applying for Indigenous status registration, first-time passport applications, legal name changes, custody matters, court proceedings, and other legal or administrative processes often require a birth certificate that includes more detailed information.

### Costs Related to Ontario Birth Certificates\*

Certificate Type	Initial Cost	Replacement Cost
Birth Certificate (Standard)	\$25	\$35
Birth Certificate with Parental Information	\$25	\$35
Certified Copy of Birth Registration (Long Form)	\$35	\$45
Delayed Statement of Birth (more than one year after birth)	\$50	N/A

### ID Clinic Clients Reporting Cost as a Barrier



\*Costs accurate as of December 2025 from <https://www.ontario.ca/page/official-government-id-and-certificates>

## Confusing Forms

Applying for a birth certificate is often a **long and confusing process**. Application forms contain jargon, unclear questions, and assumptions about the applicant's knowledge of family details.

Common points of confusion include:

- Whether blanks can be left unanswered (many can, but people don't know);
- Questions about “place of parents’ birth” and maiden names;
- Unclear terminology like “attending physician;”
- Misunderstandings around which form is needed (e.g., short form vs. certified copy);
- Vague rejection letters requesting additional documentation; and
- Odd or unfamiliar questions (e.g., “how many older siblings,” which refers only to maternal, older siblings).

Many clients give up partway through or turn to **predatory third-party websites** due to inadequate public support from ServiceOntario. For example, one service provider found an application ripped up and thrown away in a parking lot because the applicant has been so confused by the application form and concluded there was no point trying.

*“People assume you’re choosing not to participate. But the system makes it impossible for some of us to even start. – Community member*

This challenge is exacerbated by inconsistent instructions from frontline staff. For example, one client was told they needed a doctor's note for a name change, despite this not being official policy.

## Guarantor Requirement

The guarantor requirement—which asks for a professional (e.g., doctor, lawyer, teacher) who has known the applicant for two years—creates an invisible barrier for many. Clients in **rural and remote areas**, or those who are **socially isolated**, often lack access to eligible guarantors. This is especially difficult for people experiencing poverty, housing instability, or who have had **limited interaction with professionals**. Some clients avoid applying altogether because they know they won't meet the guarantor requirement.

*“They told me I needed a doctor or a lawyer or a person like that to [serve as guarantor]. I don’t know anyone like that.”  
– Community member*

*“The list of who qualifies is made for people who live in cities and have money.”  
– Frontline worker*

# ONTARIO BIRTH CERTIFICATE: ACCEPTABLE GUARANTORS

FOR APPLICANTS 9 YEARS OF AGE OR OLDER

**BASIC REQUIREMENTS**



**CANADIAN CITIZEN**



**KNOWS APPLICANT  
≥ 2 YEARS**  
(Personal Relationship)



**PUBLIC OFFICIALS & OFFICERS**



**Mayor**  
(person city hall)



**Judge or Justice of the Peace**



**Police Officer**  
(municipal, provincial, First Nations, RCMP)



**Member of Legislative Assembly**



**Chief of a Band**  
(Indigenous leader)



**Minister of Religion**



**Notary Public**



**Signing Officer**  
of bank/credit union



**Municipal Clerk/  
Treasurer**

**IMPORTANT NOTES**

- **Practicing Members Only**  
(No retired professionals)
- **Relatives Are Allowed**  
(if requirements met)
- **Online Application:**  
Permission to provide info  
(verification possible)

**REGULATED PROFESSIONALS**



**Physicians & Surgeons**



**Dentists & Chiropractors**



**Nurses (RN/RPN/NP) & Pharmacists**



**Optometrists**



**Psychologists**



**Veterinarians**



**Principals or Vice-Principals**



**Professional Accountants**  
(CPA, CA, CGA, CMA, PA, RPA)



**Social Workers or Social Service Workers**



**Lawyers**



**Professional Engineers**  
(PEng.)



**Social Workers or Social Service Workers**

**WHAT IF YOU CANNOT FIND A GUARANTOR?**

**LETTER OF EXPLANATION**  
(detailing reasons)

**REFERENCE LETTER**  
(from approved professional but <2 years OR from non-citizen on list but x2 years)

\*Current practicing status required. Info for guidance only.

Ontario  ServiceOntario

## 2. Missing Information

Many people are unable to complete birth certificate applications because they are **missing Information** that is requested on the application form.

*“They wanted to know where my mother was born. I’ve never even met her.” – Community member*

Indigenous peoples who have been impacted by the Residential School system or the Sixties Scoop are disproportionately affected by lack of access to necessary personal information. For example, people who have lost connections with their families or their communities frequently do not know important information and do not have the connections or the ability to access this information. These barriers are intergenerational and structural, not individual. They are a form of ongoing systemic inequity.

*“My parents were in residential school. They don’t talk about that stuff. I was never told anything.” – Community member*

## 3. Lack of Recognition of Nonconventional Care Arrangements (i.e., Kinship Care)

Kinship arrangements are often fluid and deeply embedded in local social relations. For instance, a child may be informally cared for by someone who is known to the birth parent through community ties, and who is trusted enough to take on caregiving responsibilities. In many communities, particularly Indigenous ones, caregiving roles frequently extend beyond the birth mother to include grandmothers, aunts, friends, or other kin.

Many Indigenous children are raised in **kinship or customary care** arrangements, which are legally recognized in Ontario but **not accepted** by ServiceOntario as valid for ID applications. Only the birth mother can apply for a child's birth certificate, even if the child is being raised by an aunt, grandparent, or other relative.

*"I have legal [kinship care] custody, but they still wouldn't let me [apply] for his birth certificate. What's the point [of kinship care] if no one accepts it?"*

*– Community member*

*"They said I needed the birth mom to sign. She's been out of the picture for years."*

*– Community member (grandmother)*

This mismatch between law and lived reality means that caregivers who are legally responsible for children are often denied the flexibility, guidance, and authority needed to apply for vital documents on their behalf, **leaving children without access to education, health care, and benefits.**

#### 4. Distance to Service locations

In northwestern Ontario, geography and rurality present enormous challenges to getting PID. PID is often destroyed, damaged, confiscated, lost, or goes missing for a variety of reasons beyond the people's control. When this occurs in rural and remote locations, it becomes an insurmountable barrier. In other instances, as people age and they need to renew PID, they are often left without necessary ID like health cards. For example, when youth turn 16, they must get a new health card with a picture. For individuals living in remote First Nations, where there are no house numbers and ServiceOntario requires a civic address so that 911 can locate the residence, the process is further complicated.

*"The nearest [service center] is a six-hour drive. And that's only when the winter road is open."*

*– Community member from a remote First Nation*

*"We don't have house numbers in our community, so when the form asked for a street address, I didn't know what to write. It stopped the whole process."*

*– Community member*

## WHAT THE FINDINGS TELL US AND WHY THIS MATTERS

The findings from this project show that the problem is far more than a set of administrative roadblocks—it reveals a **systemic gap** in Canada’s civil infrastructure. The inability of people to get PID, particularly birth certificates, is a **structural barrier** that cuts across multiple social determinants of health, from income and housing to education, food security, and health care, including mobility.

### An Invisible Crisis

For many people in northwestern Ontario, especially those living in First Nations and rural communities, **missing PID is a chronic and compounding problem**. It’s not just that people lack one document; it’s that the **entire system of access** depends on having a document they cannot easily obtain. The result is a form of invisibility: people who are legally Canadian citizens, but who are functionally excluded from citizenship benefits and services.

The consequences ripple across the lifespan:

- **Children** can’t enroll in school;
- **Seniors** can’t access pensions or health care;
- **People** can’t collect income or pay rent; and
- **Those in crisis** (housing, health, legal) are told to “come back with ID.”

What’s more, the assumption that missing PID is only an urban or homelessness issue is both incorrect and damaging. In rural and remote areas, the **barriers can be more severe**, including travel costs, winter roads, sparse service locations, limited internet, fewer services and frontline workers, and seasonal accessibility. All these factors combine to make service delivery extraordinarily difficult. This issue is **national in scope but highly localized in impact**.

### Population-Specific Impacts

While many people experience ID barriers, **some groups face layered and disproportionate challenges**, revealing how inaccessibility intersects with geography, colonialism, and systemic discrimination:

- **People living in fly-in or road-inaccessible communities** face compounded difficulties: no ServiceOntario offices, limited or no internet, and seasonal travel restrictions. Even when babies are born in urban hospitals, the birth may not be registered once families return home. Registering later becomes extremely difficult.
- **Youth aging out of care** often lose PID when discharged from the system; some have never had it in hand. Without PID, they can’t apply for housing, jobs, or basic supports. They are left navigating adulthood without access to the tools they need.
- **People experiencing homelessness** often carry PID on their person. Unfortunately, this practice risks loss, theft, or weather damage that can invalidate it. Others avoid carrying it altogether. Either way, they are in a precarious situation. Without secure storage or

money for replacements, they are cut off from shelters, rentals, health care, emergency food supports, and banking.

- **Transgender and non-binary individuals** face additional administrative and emotional burdens. IDs that don't reflect their lived name or gender create safety risks and trigger discrimination. Updating PID requires additional forms, fees, and in some cases medical documentation. This makes it even harder for trans people to access the gender affirming, accurate PID they need.

These examples make one thing clear: **PID barriers are not evenly distributed**. They reflect and reinforce histories of **marginalization and systemic neglect**. Addressing them requires **solutions that are flexible, trauma-informed, and community-specific**.

### Bureaucracy Without Flexibility

The ID system in Ontario (and across Canada) was designed with a one-size-fits-all model in mind. It **does not account for diverse family structures, Indigenous care arrangements, low literacy, or histories of trauma and settler colonialism**. Instead, it assumes access to stable housing, professional networks, financial resources, and family records. These are assumptions that many of our clients simply cannot meet.

The result is a kind of **bureaucratic exclusion**. People are told to produce documents they never had or to contact estranged relatives. In some cases, they are asked to prove facts the government already knows but refuses to share with them. This is especially painful for Indigenous people whose identities and records were historically taken from them, but it can also be deeply harmful for others, including transgender people who have had to navigate deadnaming, misrecognition, and administrative barriers in order to establish identification that reflects their lived identity.

### A Health and Equity Issue

Lack of PID is not just a documentation problem. It's a **public health and human rights issue**.

People without PID are:

- Less likely to receive preventive or emergency health care;
- More likely to face delays, interruptions, or denial of care, medications, and referrals due to administrative barriers;
- More likely to experience unstable housing and food insecurity; and
- At greater risk of chronic distress, disability, mental health struggles, and poverty.

These are not abstract risks. They are measurable and tangible and they ripple across generations. By failing to make ID accessible, we are **reproducing cycles of inequality** and placing additional pressure on already strained government, community, and not-for-profit service systems.

## Kinship Recognition

Child welfare systems continue to default to an outdated nuclear family ideal. This model assumes the person who gave birth is the default or only legitimate caregiver. Indigenous and nonconventional care arrangements, such as kinship care or extended family caregiving, are often dismissed or not recognized. This makes it harder for caregivers to apply for PID on behalf of children. Fixing this isn't about abandoning accountability. It's about expanding recognition, so children aren't left unregistered because systems refuse to see who's really caring for them.

## Community Solutions, Systemic Inaction

Our research shows that **community-based models work**: ID clinics, local partnerships, and direct application assistance. But these solutions are **underfunded, patchwork, and reliant on overstretched organizations**.

The scale of the problem demands a **policy-level response**. Yet, provincial and federal systems have been slow to act. While we have seen promising moments—like the unsuccessful introduction of a private member's bill to eliminate birth certificate fees—structural reform remains elusive. The problem is not a lack of solutions, but a lack of political will to implement them.

## Moving Forward

The work of addressing PID barriers cannot fall solely on nonprofits, legal clinics, and community health centers. It requires **policy change, investment, and recognition that PID is a gateway to fundamental rights**. We need to:

- Rethink who gets to apply for PID;
- Remove cost and paperwork barriers;
- Respect Indigenous caregiving systems;
- Ensure that transgender and gender-diverse people can obtain identification that reflects who they are; and
- Make ID services local, low-barrier, and accessible.

What's at stake is more than paperwork. It's who counts, who is recognized, and who is left out.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Our research makes one thing clear: the current systems for obtaining and keeping PID in Ontario are not working for many of the people who need them most. These are not individual failings—they are systemic failures. Below are targeted recommendations for government, service providers, and community organizations, drawn directly from our findings and frontline experience.

### For Provincial and Federal Governments

1. **Eliminate all fees for birth certificates.** The current application fee poses a disproportionate burden on low-income individuals and families. The revenue generated by birth certificate applications is negligible to the province but is a barrier for many individual applicants. Birth certificates are a right and public good, not a luxury item. The current Ontario Fee Waiver Program is so limited that it does not address the problem.
2. **Simplify the birth certificate application process.** Make it clear which fields are essential, and which are optional. Use plain language and provide translated versions of forms including Indigenous languages. Reduce reliance on outdated or inaccessible information (e.g., name of attending physician or weight at birth).
3. **Remove the guarantor requirement or expand the category to include individuals that people are more likely to encounter/know in their everyday lives.** This requirement creates unnecessary barriers for people without professional contacts. Accept community leaders, Elders, or service providers in remote areas. Ontario is the only province with this requirement.
4. **Ensure consistent province-wide training for frontline and vital statistics personnel on legal name change processes and documentation protocol.** Additionally, service providers would benefit enormously from training on 2SLGBTQ+ affirmation, awareness, and inclusive service delivery to reduce harm and discrimination against trans, non-binary, and gender-diverse individuals.
5. **Reevaluate the assumption that online birth certificate applications represent the most efficient or equitable mode of service delivery.** Application triage should prioritize urgency and vulnerability—not digital fluency or ability to pay. Those unable to access or navigate the online system are often among the most marginalized and should not be relegated to slower, less supported paper-based processes.
6. **Recognize kinship and customary care arrangements across ministries.** Allow caregivers with agreements under Ontario's *Child, Youth and Family Services Act* to apply for a child's birth certificate. Current systems harm children by enforcing rigid, one-size-fits-all

models that fail to reflect diverse caregiving realities, especially in Indigenous communities. A more inclusive approach would recognize common caregiving scenarios that service providers could use to guide service decisions.

7. **Develop a more portable, durable birth certificate.** Return to the wallet-sized version and allow digital backups as a secondary form of proof. Large, fragile documents are unsuitable for people who have unstable housing situations or without safe storage.
8. **Fund permanent ID support services.** Currently, ServiceOntario is unable to adequately support complicated birth certificate applications. If government service agencies are going to continue to reduce in-person services, then provide stable funding to community-based ID clinics and legal clinics to continue supporting clients. Stop relying on temporary or ad hoc resources by under-staffed, under-funded community agencies for an essential service.

### Healthcare, Child Welfare, and Carceral Institutions:

1. **Clarify the difference between birth registration and hospital-issued cards.** Too often, new parents confuse the hospital-issued “crib card” or discharge papers with an official birth certificate. Provide clear, standardized materials at birth to explain next steps including the difference between birth registration and statement of live birth.
2. **Support ID retention for people in custody or care.** Ensure that people exiting carceral institutions, hospitals, or child welfare retain their PID or have help applying for new documents upon release or discharge, including the waiving of application fees.
3. **Improve service navigation.** Hire or assign dedicated staff to assist people with understanding form requirements, completing applications, submitting supporting documents, and communicating with ServiceOntario or Vital Statistics. This is especially important for youth exiting care, people being discharged from medical or psychiatric facilities, and those on release from custody.

### For Indigenous Organizations and Communities

1. **Train and empower local staff.** Continue to support band membership clerks, Elders, and frontline workers to help with birth registration and PID applications. Continue to provide access to funding to cover application costs and printing.
2. **Document and advocate for customary and kinship care.** Continue to acknowledge the diversity of Indigenous caregiving relationships/arrangements and press governments to recognize them in legislation and service delivery.

## For Community Organizations and Legal Clinics

1. **Keep copies of applications and signatures.** Retain documentation to assist with follow-up, especially when clients are later hard to reach.
2. **Prioritize PID as a social determinant of health.** Frame PID services as essential to housing, income security, health access, and education—because they are. Advocate accordingly in funding and policy discussions.
3. **Build organizational capacity to support your clients with birth certificate applications.** Offloading birth certificate application work onto organizations that are already under-resourced is not a sustainable solution. We need to grow cross-sectoral capacity around birth certificate supports and needs.
4. **Share tools and resources.** Use common templates, forms, and tracking systems (like those developed at [www.idaction.ca](http://www.idaction.ca)) to streamline services across organizations and regions.
5. In the absence of state support, **consider joining/forming a local group** that shares expertise and resources regarding PID.

These recommendations are not just about improving PID services—they are about restoring access to rights, services, and full participation in Canadian life.

## CONCLUSION

In Canada, we often take personal identification for granted. A birth certificate is widely assumed to be a basic, universal document—something everyone has and can readily access when needed to enroll children in school, visit a doctor, apply for a job, or collect a pension. But for thousands of people across northwestern Ontario, that assumption simply isn't true.

This project has shown that **lack of access to personal identification is a silent but powerful barrier to life and success**—one that blocks people from essential services, makes it harder for people to fully take part in life and society, and reinforces cycles of poverty and poor health. It disproportionately affects Indigenous people, people living in poverty, those in rural and remote regions, and individuals with complex life histories shaped by trauma and state intervention.

What's striking is not just the scale of the problem, but how easily it could be solved.

- The forms can be simplified;
- The fees can be eliminated;
- The rules can be changed to reflect real family structures; and
- Services can meet people where they are.

Community-led ID clinics work. So do band partnerships, trained system navigators, and culturally grounded outreach. These are not speculative ideas—they're things we did during this project, with meaningful impact.

### A Call to Action!

What's needed is system-level change. Governments must recognize that access to PID is a precondition for accessing any other rights or benefits. PID must be treated not as a luxury or consumer product—but as a **public right** that enables full participation in society.

We also urge service providers, policymakers, and funders to think beyond their silos. This isn't just a legal issue, or a health issue, or a poverty issue. It's all those things at once. PID access must be understood as part of a broader commitment to **equity, inclusion, and social justice**.

*"It's not a question of whether we know what to do. It's a question of whether we choose to do it."*

*— Community member*

Finally, we encourage others to use this report—not just as a summary of research, but as a **tool for advocacy, education, and action**. The materials, templates, and tools we developed are free and accessible at [www.idaction.ca](http://www.idaction.ca).

Let's stop asking people to prove they exist. Let's build systems that recognize them from the start.

For more information and resources please visit [www.idaction.ca](http://www.idaction.ca)

The Thunder Bay ID Action Group meets monthly via Zoom. New members and visitors are welcome to attend.

Thank you for reading about our project. Don't hesitate to reach out!

