

# Northern Ontario Tourism Webinar

February 19, 2026

Ministry of Northern Economic Development and Growth (MNEDG)  
Destination Northern Ontario (DNO)  
Ontario Cultural Attractions Fund (OCAF)  
Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Gaming (MTCG)

Ontario 

# Presenters



**Megan Boyd**

**Manager of Product Development and Investment  
Attraction, Destination Northern Ontario (DNO)**



**Kristi Cistaro**

**Northern Development Advisor / Ministry of Northern  
Economic Development and Growth (MNEDG)**



**Thomas Vaughan**

**Executive Director / Ontario Cultural Attractions Fund  
(OCAF)**



**Pamela Caland**

**Regional Development Advisor / Ministry of Tourism,  
Culture and Gaming (MTCG): Experience Ontario**

# Destination Master Plan & Partnership Program

**Megan Boyd** - Destination Northern Ontario, Manager of Product Development and Investment Attraction



BUILDING A STRONG TOURISM INDUSTRY IN THE NORTH

DESTINATION  
NORTHERN  
ONTARIO

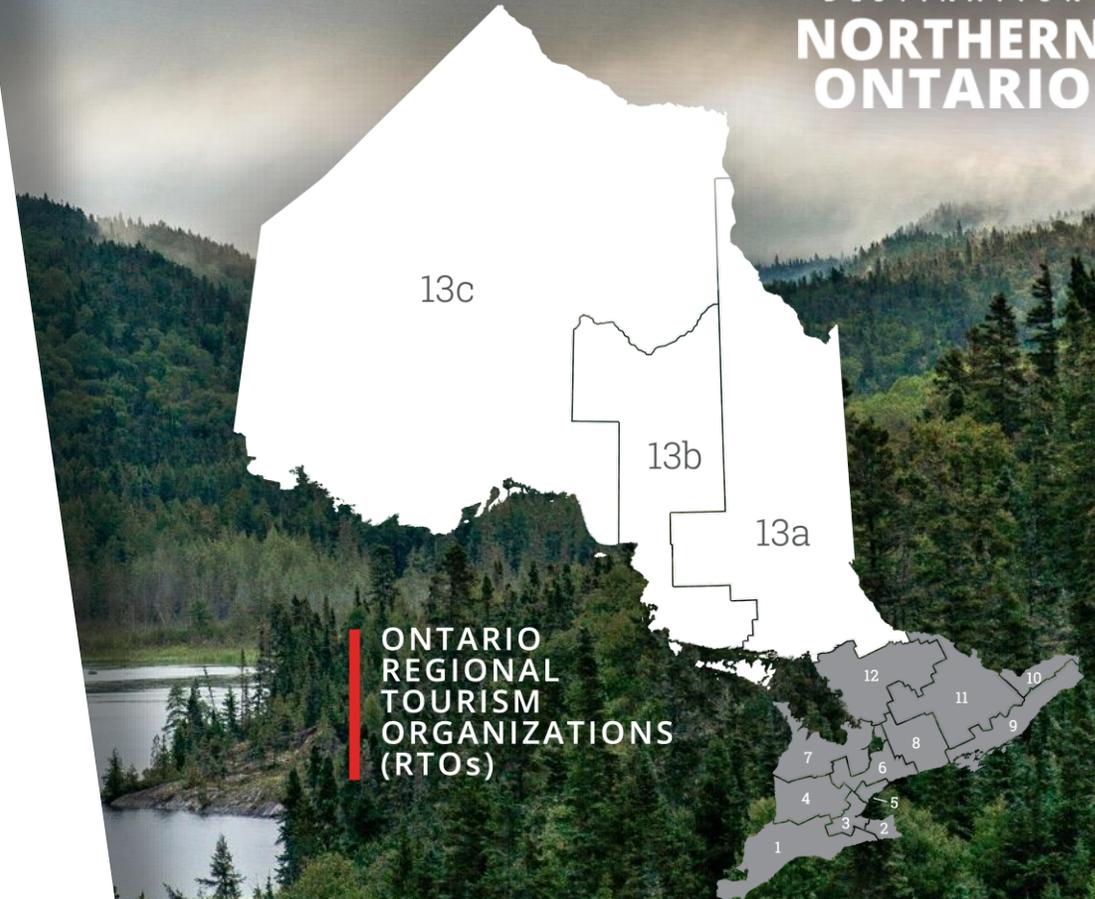
# Industry Support Through Partnerships

> [destinationnorthernontario.ca](https://destinationnorthernontario.ca)



# Who We Are

- **Destination Northern Ontario (DNO)** is Ontario's largest of the 13 Regional Tourism Organizations provincially funded by the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Gaming
- Covering **802,000+ square kilometres** from the Quebec border, north to the Hudson Bay, south to the French River and all the way west to the Manitoba border
- We **coordinate, align, and invest** in sub-regional programs and lead in pan-northern management functions



ONTARIO  
REGIONAL  
TOURISM  
ORGANIZATIONS  
(RTOs)

➤ **RTO#13**



# Strategic Framework



**Product Development** – enhance the visitor experience through well-designed tourism products that meet current and future customer demand.



**Investment Attraction** – increased investment in the tourism industry to enhance the visitor experience.



**Marketing** – increased awareness of Northern Ontario as a travel destination and increased conversion in target markets.



**Workforce Development and Industry Training** – raise the quality of the visitor experience through the Tourism Excellence North training program and develop tourism industry workforce capacity.



**Partnerships** – to become a catalyst in building strategic alignment and promoting collaboration within the industry.

## DESTINATION MASTER PLAN

The **Destination Master Plan** presents a comprehensive strategy to grow and enhance the region's visitor economy through sustainable, year-round tourism development. The plan is grounded in extensive community and industry engagement, including over 1,000 voices from across Northern Ontario and informed by a broad review of previous strategic work.





# Priority One

## Develop Integrated Experiences in All Seasons

Investments in Indigenous and outdoor experiences, luxury accommodations, and all-season programming are prioritized to counteract pronounced seasonality and drive visitation year-round.

01

02

03

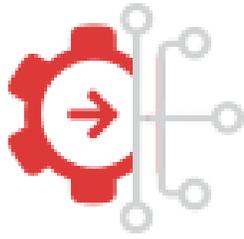
04

DESTINATION MASTER PLAN



DESTINATION  
**NORTHERN  
ONTARIO**





## Priority Two

### Foster Regional Collaboration and Industry Evolution

There is a focus on unified visitor journeys through coordinated marketing, training, and product development, with an emphasis on inclusivity, digital readiness, and service quality. Diversity and technology training, alongside workforce recruitment and retention programs, are key action areas.

01

02

03

04



DESTINATION  
**NORTHERN  
ONTARIO**

DESTINATION MASTER PLAN





# Priority Three

## Advocate for Strategic Infrastructure and Connectivity solutions

Strategic infrastructure enhancements for improved roadways, airports, and rail lines to digital connectivity and wayfinding systems are vital for overcoming geographic barriers and ensuring visitor satisfaction and economic impact.

01

02

03

04

DESTINATION MASTER PLAN





## Priority Four

### Champion Authentic Northern Identity and Environmental Stewardship

Embracing Northern Ontario's natural and cultural assets includes supporting Indigenous-owned experiences, sustainable event practices, and comprehensive accessibility improvements. Investments in walkability, cycling trails, and EV infrastructure underscore a commitment to sustainable travel and responsible growth.

01

02

03

04





# Partnerships



Initiatives are selected based on potential outcomes and alignment with priorities set out in DNO's strategic and annualized business plans reflecting all pillar areas. DNO's Board of Directors has set a goal of **50% of initiatives** being in non-marketing pillars.



The partnership pillar uses a cost-sharing model, **contributing up to 50%** toward eligible projects that advance the other pillars of product development, investment attraction, workforce development and training, and marketing.



**What does that mean this coming year?** Partnership requests should align with the Destination Master Plan strategic priorities.



**Sporting and Events** – strategic planning and program support



# Contact Us

Looking for more information or have any questions, please reach out to:



[communications@destinationnorthernontario.ca](mailto:communications@destinationnorthernontario.ca)

## Websites

Destination Northern Ontario / [destinationnorthernontario.ca](http://destinationnorthernontario.ca)

Tourism Excellence North / [tourismexcellencenorth.ca](http://tourismexcellencenorth.ca)

Domestic Marketing / [northernontario.travel](http://northernontario.travel)

International Travel Trade / [northernontarioitt.com](http://northernontarioitt.com)



# Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation

**Kristi Cistaro** - Ministry of Northern Economic  
Development and Growth - Northern Development  
Advisor

**Ontario** 

# MNEDG - What We Do

## Key Ministry Program Areas

### Regional Economic Development Branch

Works with northern communities, businesses, and other stakeholders / partners to identify economic development opportunities and to access government funding programs. Delivers programs in the North on behalf of MND and other ministries.

### Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation (NOHFC)

An agency of the ministry that offers a variety of funding programs to foster economic growth and diversification in Northern Ontario.



# NOHFC Programming

Four main programs targeting business support, community enhancement, workforce development, and cultural support, with eight funding streams:

## **Invest North Program**

- Innovation Stream
- Investment Stream

## **People and Talent Program**

- Indigenous Workforce Development Stream
- Workforce Development Stream

## **Community Enhancement Program**

- Rural Enhancement Funding Stream
- Enhance Your Community Stream

## **Cultural Supports Program**

- Community Events Stream
- Film and Television Stream



# Community Enhancement

The Community Enhancement Program is designed to help build strong and resilient Northern communities through infrastructure investments, to upgrade / repair existing assets to improve community quality of life, economic development infrastructure and strategic economic development initiatives.



# Community Enhancement – Rural Enhancement

Support priorities of rural communities to contribute to healthy and strong communities.

## Who is eligible?

Rural municipalities, Indigenous communities, not-for-profit organizations and Local Services Boards having or serving a population of less than 30,000.

## What is eligible?

Incremental improvements, repairs, and/or renovations to improve and extend the useful life of capital assets including; social and recreational facilities, municipal assets and community halls, that contribute to a healthy and vibrant community.

## Funding

Funding Stream	Funding Type	Available Funding
<b>Rural Enhancement Project</b> For Indigenous communities or communities with a population <u>under</u> 1,500.	Conditional Contribution	90% of eligible costs to a maximum of \$200,000 <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Firehall Renovations ( PUFF)</li><li>• Community Halls/Curling Rinks ( KEEWATIN CC)</li><li>• Outdoor Park Upgrades</li></ul>
<b>Rural Enhancement Project</b> For communities with a population <u>over</u> 1,500.	Conditional Contribution	75% of eligible costs to a maximum of \$500,000



# Community Enhancement – Enhance Your Community

Supporting priorities of northern communities and organizations that contribute to a healthy and strong community.

## Who is eligible?

Municipalities, Indigenous communities, not-for-profit organizations, and Local Services Boards located in Northern Ontario.

## What is eligible?

Incremental improvements, repairs, and/or renovations to improve and extend the useful life of capital assets including; social and recreational facilities, municipal assets and community halls, that contribute to a healthy and vibrant community.

## Funding

Funding Stream	Funding Type	Available Funding
Enhance Your Community	Conditional Contribution	The less of 50% of eligible costs <u>or</u> \$2 million <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Multi-Use Facility</li><li>• Sports Complex Upgrades/Renovations</li></ul>



## Cultural Supports– Community Events Stream

Supporting efforts of northern communities and organizations that hold events to boost their community's visibility and promote economic growth

### Who is eligible?

Municipalities, Indigenous communities, not-for-profit organizations, and Local Services Boards located in Northern Ontario.

### What is eligible?

Costs related to the hosting and production of multi-day events within communities that attract visitors to the region.

### Funding

Funding Stream	Funding Type	Available Funding
Community Events Stream	Conditional Contribution	The less of 30% of eligible costs <u>or</u> \$15,000 <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Seasonal festivals</li><li>• Cultural activities</li><li>• Sports tournaments</li></ul>



# People and Talent

The People & Talent Program is designed to attract, retain and develop Northern Ontario's workforce.



# People and Talent

## Who is eligible?

Businesses, municipalities, Indigenous communities, and not-for-profit organizations located in Northern Ontario that have been in operation for at least one year and have minimum of one full-time employee.

New entrants into the work force, are transitioning to a new career, or the unemployed or underemployed who are entering a new field; apprenticeships, address a labour shortage

18 Years of Age

Does not need to be a college or university graduate

Funding Stream	Funding Type	Available Funding
<b>Workforce Development Stream</b>	Conditional Contribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <u>Municipalities, Indigenous Communities, Non-profits:</u> 90% of intern's salary to a maximum of \$35,000</li><li>• <u>Businesses:</u> 50% of intern's salary to a maximum of \$35,000</li></ul>
<b>Indigenous Workforce Development Stream</b> (*Internship candidate identifies as an Indigenous person, including First Nation, Metis, or Inuit)	Conditional Contribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <u>Municipalities, Indigenous Communities, Non-profits:</u> 90% of indigenous intern's salary to a maximum of \$35,000</li><li>• <u>Businesses:</u> 75% of Indigenous intern's salary to a maximum of \$52,500</li></ul>

# Tourism Projects



- The Township of Sioux Narrows–Nestor Falls has completed a year-round recreational complex that serves the community in every season. In winter, it offers skating, hockey, and ice biking, while in summer it hosts farmers' markets, court sports, and community events.
- Tourism Sault Ste Marie recently completed a 30km expansion of the Algoma Trail Network at Hiawatha Highlands. This project established Sault Ste Marie as a premier mountain biking destination in Ontario by developing a year-round trail system capable of attracting cycling tourists for multi day stays.



**ONTARIO CULTURAL ATTRACTIONS FUND**  
**LE FONDS POUR LES MANIFESTATIONS**  
**CULTURELLES DE L'ONTARIO**

**Thomas Vaughan, Executive Director of OCAF**



ONTARIO CULTURAL ATTRACTIONS FUND  
LE FONDS POUR LES MANIFESTATIONS  
CULTURELLES DE L'ONTARIO

# Investing in Ontario's Cultural Tourism Potential



25+ years of connecting unique attractions with new audiences



The Ontario Cultural Attractions Fund (OCAF) was established in 1999 as an impact investment program with a mission to:



**Invest** in the capacity of arts, culture, and heritage organizations to contribute to a robust and resilient cultural tourism sector in Ontario;



**Increase earned revenue and private sector sponsorship** of cultural attractions; and



Support events that **foster local economic impact** and contribute to **job creation**.

# How does it work?

- ✦ OCAF achieves this by **providing up front working capital** directed towards the applicant's **marketing and promotional costs**, with the investment taking the form of a **partially repayable loan**.
- ✦ **Since 1999 \$55.75M in Government funding has generated over \$92M in direct program support of over 1,000 events.**

# Partially Repayable Investment

**30-50%**

Between 30–50% of the OCAF funding must be repaid (based on organization's annual operational revenue).

**30%**

Events in communities with populations under 300,000 and northern Ontario only ever pay 30%.



# Impact of OCAF Funding

“Not many grants let you use the funds for marketing. Without marketing, no one knows about your event.”

**80%**

Successfully increased earned revenue when compared to past events.

**94%**

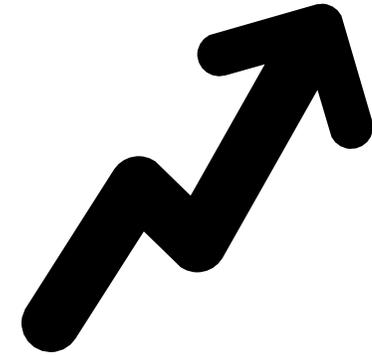
Expressed that tourist-targeted marketing was an effective tool for growth.

Photo: Muskoka Chautauqua Summer Festival



Photo: Kingston Solar Eclipse Promo

# Leverage the Loan



“ Having the backing of OCAF early helped us secure over \$35K the earliest in the cycle that we have ever secured sponsorship. ”



More marketing →  
more visibility →  
bigger audiences



Public funding builds  
confidence for other  
investors



Increased visibility  
attracts potential  
corporate sponsors

# Eligible Organizations

## Indigenous

First Nations, Band Councils, Metis, Inuit communities.

## Nonprofit

Incorporated Ontario-based, not-for-profit and/or charitable professional arts, heritage or cultural organizations.

## Municipality

Ontario municipalities/ municipal agencies.



The organization must have been in existence for at least one year.



Organization must be in compliance with the legal financial reporting requirements under the Canada Corporations Act or the Corporations Act of Ontario.



# Eligible Projects

- The project must be **distinct** from ongoing programming or activity (activity must be new or a **significant expansion or enhancement** to existing programming).
- The project must represent the **single largest new programming initiative** in the applicant's business plan for that year.
- The project must have a **marketing plan targeting new tourists** to the community.
- Projected attendance of at least **750**.
- Must demonstrate clearly the **capability of repayment** to the fund and with an aim to generate a surplus for the applicant.

# Budget Eligibility

- ◆ At least **10% of the projected total revenues must come from the private sector** (corporate, individual, and foundation funding included); **5% for areas with populations under 300,000.**
  - ◆ You must **project a budget surplus** equal to or greater than your maximum repayment amount.
  - ◆ **Requests may not exceed** the project's marketing budget, or **\$5 per projected attendee**, and **10\$ per projected attendee for areas with populations under 300,000.**
- 

# Eligible Marketing Expenses

- ◆ **Marketing is defined broadly** (ad buys, printed collateral, signage, PR, website design, app development, working with influencers etc).
- ◆ **Marketing budget cannot include in-house staff** (considered operational), but **can include short term contractors, consultants, marketing and PR firms.**
- ◆ **Locally targeted marketing** in addition to **tourist targeted marketing** are both eligible.

# Application Process and Timing

- **Two-stage application** process.
- Application process **should begin 6-8 months prior to event** start date.
- Please **contact OCAF staff before submitting** your Stage 1 (no deadlines).
- **Six Stage 2 application deadlines** annually (roughly every two months).

# Stage 2 Deadlines

Stage 2 Deadline	Board Meeting Date
November 7, 2025	December 4, 2025
January 9, 2026	February 12, 2026
February 20, 2026	March 26, 2026
April 17, 2026	May 21, 2026
May 29, 2026	July 2, 2026
September 4, 2026	October 9, 2026
November 6, 2026	December 3, 2026



## WAKE THE GIANT

📍 THUNDER BAY 2023



### PROJECT

Wake the Giant is a unique cultural initiative that fosters community connection, supports Indigenous youth, and combats racism through shared experiences. Anchored by Canada's largest orientation for First Nation students, it features the Wake the Giant Music Festival, Truth and Reconciliation Concert, and other programming that celebrate Indigenous culture alongside diverse artists. Through performances, workshops, and partnerships with local businesses, the project advances reconciliation, promotes inclusivity, and drives tourism growth in Northern Ontario.

### IMPACT



**6,600** attendees



**30** jobs created



**\$480,000**  
Direct GDP

Wake the Giant strengthens Northern Ontario's creative sector by centering Indigenous voices, creating paid opportunities for artists, and fostering partnerships that bridge cultural gaps, promote community wellbeing, and attract new audiences — building a more inclusive and sustainable cultural ecosystem.



*We partnered with a wide range of local vendors and businesses. Many participating vendors reported that the festival weekend was one of their busiest of the year, and our partnerships helped foster stronger relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous business communities.*

- Sean Spenrath

# Thank You

**Jeff Caires, Manager of Operations**

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**Thomas Vaughan, Executive Director**

Phone: 416-969-7449

Email: [tvaughan@ocaf.ca](mailto:tvaughan@ocaf.ca)

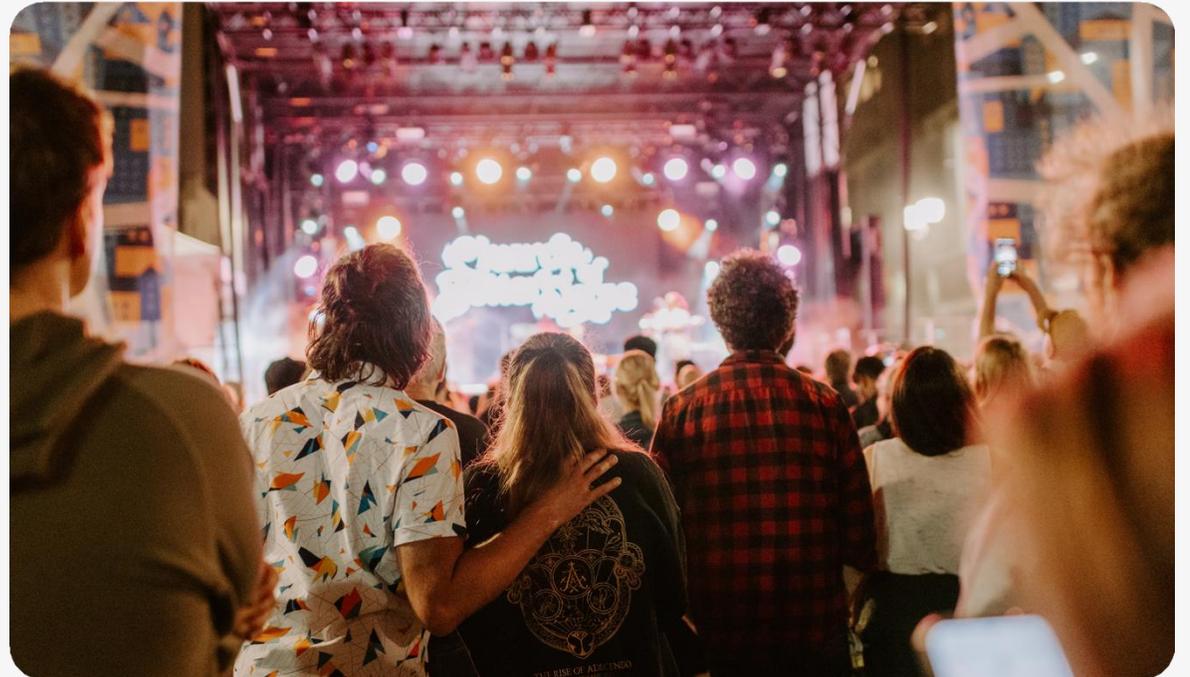


Photo: Supercrawl 2023

# Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Gaming

Regional Services Branch

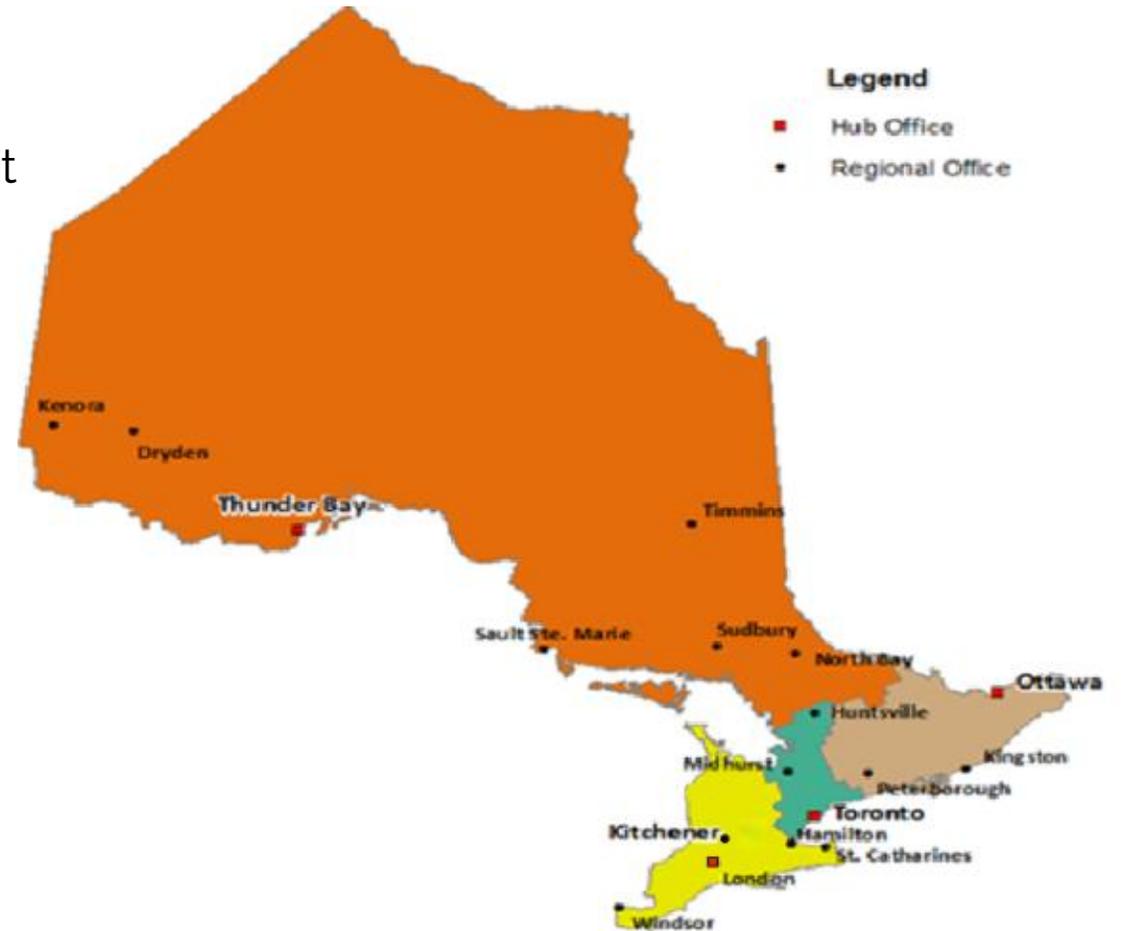
Pam Caland  
pamela.caland@ontario.ca

Ontario 

# WHO ARE WE?

The Regional Services Branch supports the delivery of programs and provides consulting services to organizations that can include municipalities, not-for-profit organizations, Indigenous organizations, First Nations and various stakeholder groups.

- Located in 20 offices across 4 regions of the province
- 52 Regional Development Advisors
  - 19 are French designated
  - 10 are specifically focused on Tourism
  - 2 Tourism Advisors are located in the north
- Pam Caland is in Thunder Bay (RTO 13c)
- Coral Ethier is in Timmins (RTO 13a and b)



Interactive map/RDA list available online.  
[www.Ontario.ca/page/regional-development-advisors](http://www.Ontario.ca/page/regional-development-advisors)

# Experience Ontario



Experience Ontario 2026 supports in-person festivals or events in Ontario that:

1. Offer programming that encourages people to travel, experience events in-person and celebrate Ontario.
2. Draw tourists and increase visitor spending through innovative programming in partnership with businesses and community partners.
3. Provide job opportunities for Ontarians in the tourism, culture and entertainment sectors.
4. Increase Ontario's profile through various media channels.

# Experience Ontario

**Experience Ontario 2026 provides support for festivals and events with a tourism economic impact to motivate visitors to discover Ontario, connect people with local experiences, and increase tourism spending.**

Experience Ontario is a **highly competitive** program. Applications will be measured against program criteria and there is no guarantee of funding.

We encourage all applicants to explore all prospective support and partnership opportunities when planning their festivals and events.



# RESOURCES

## Key Resources



**Application Guide:** [Experience Ontario 2026: Program and Application Overview](#)

**Experience Ontario Mailing List:**

Email [ExperienceOntario@ontario.ca](mailto:ExperienceOntario@ontario.ca) to be added to the mailing list.



**Other provincial gov. programs & supports:**

[Get funding from the Ontario government | ontario.ca](#)



**Business number and CRA program accounts:** find out how to register for a business number (BN) and Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) program accounts for your business. [How to register - Canada.ca](#)



# Questions?



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# Thank You



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