



School, Family and Community: Sharing the responsibility

This chapter will help teachers to:

- appreciate the value for all students of positive school involvement with Aboriginal family and community members
- understand the significance of creating school and classroom environments that welcome Aboriginal parents
- understand the role of the school/community liaison worker
- understand and follow protocols for communicating with, welcoming and showing appreciation for Elders and other Aboriginal guests to the classroom
- understand and follow protocols for arranging a visit to an Aboriginal community.

In traditional Aboriginal life, mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, Elders and the greater community shared the responsibility for educating the children. Young people saw the skills and knowledge they were developing embodied among the people in their families and community. Today, with increased mobility and disruption of families, this traditional means of education is breaking down.

When schools and teachers make an effort to invite Aboriginal families and community members to take part in classroom and schoolwide activities, Aboriginal children have a valuable opportunity to interact with role models who reflect their cultures. Their non-Aboriginal classmates also benefit from relating to and learning from adults with worldviews different than their own. Aboriginal visitors are especially important role models in the school community because there are currently so few Aboriginal teachers.

Research shows that parental involvement results in higher student achievement and safer school environments. Studies also show that for students who are at-risk, parent and family involvement is the single most important determinant of success (Mills 1994 cited in Kavanagh n.d.).

The vision of success for Aboriginal children includes classrooms and schools where:

- Aboriginal families and community members feel welcome and comfortable
- the physical environment reflects a respect for Aboriginal cultures
- Aboriginal parents and community members participate to create responsive and rich programming
- there are frequent opportunities for positive interaction among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people of all ages.

Teachers can help make this vision a reality in the classroom and the school by creating a welcoming environment for parents, Elders and other Aboriginal guests. Aboriginal parents, families and community members will begin to feel welcome in a school environment that expresses knowledge of and respect for Aboriginal cultures, and values their involvement.

Parents and community members will feel more welcome when the physical and visual elements of the school and classroom reflect an informal, comfortable atmosphere that celebrates diversity. This could include:

- art by students and others, such as posters, wall hangings, displays of books and CDs that reflect Aboriginal peoples and their cultures
- a room or a space for Elders to use as needed
- setting aside a space with a change table, picture books and appropriate toys for parents with young children
- tea, coffee, water and bannock or other snacks.

Ask parents for their ideas about how to create a welcoming environment.

Welcoming Parents

Like all parents, Aboriginal parents play a vital part in the success of their children. (The term parent also refers to significant others including extended families and guardian relationships.)

A key to welcoming Aboriginal parents is to establish a positive relationship with them as soon as their children join the class. This will help ensure that a teacher is not contacting parents for the first time if and when a problem arises. Invite parents to:

- meet informally in the classroom or, if this is not practical, ask to visit them in their home or at a friendship centre, recreation centre or Métis/band office
- attend student presentations, portfolio reviews and other activities throughout the school year.

Ask parents for their insight and suggestions on how to build cultural continuity in the classroom and the school. Invite them to:

- contribute their knowledge about their cultures to curriculum-related activities
- contribute their talents to classroom and schoolwide activities such as organizational skills or carpentry, craft and creative skills.

story

Liaison

Parent involvement

“Once we started asking our Aboriginal parents to take an active part in what we’re doing, we found so many ways to involve them! We have parents teaching conversational Cree, grandparents teaching about traditional values, parents inviting artists from the community to visit our school, parents who are dancers and musicians themselves.”

Time and place

Being flexible about when, how and where you involve parents and families creates more opportunities to connect with them. Many Aboriginal parents are working and busy with family and community commitments. They may find it difficult to participate in activities or attend meetings during school hours. Increase parent involvement with the school by considering the following strategies.

- When scheduling classroom and school events, consider the work hours of your parents and how to best accommodate them.
- Arrange for childcare during family events at the school.
- Offer to meet with parents at their home.
- Offer parents who are unable to volunteer during school hours other options for contributing.
- Be sensitive to the fact that some families may be dealing with economic stress. Consider this when setting field-trip fees, asking for contributions for bake sales or planning events that involve transportation.

Liaison story

Parent volunteer

“My colleagues were originally very reluctant to support a parent coming into our school to teach cultural activities. They were concerned about confidentiality—worried that she might overhear something in the staff room about other students and families. They were also concerned about her younger child coming to school with her. I was sure this mom would be a really strong support for our students so I worked very hard to convince my colleagues to give her a chance—I spoke with the mom about confidentiality and we set up a play space for her kids in the classroom. In the end, it worked out very well. Both the teachers and students loved her!”

Meaningful involvement

Above all, Aboriginal parents seek meaningful involvement with their child’s program and learning team. In her review of First Nations parent and community involvement in schools, Barbara Kavanagh (n.d.) makes the following suggestions for meaningful parent involvement.

- Recognize that parents have a genuine right to be involved in decision making and activities. Successful parent involvement is student-centred and ongoing.
- Help parents understand their rights, and the procedures and protocols to follow if they disagree with school decisions. All school authorities are required to have a process in place for parents to appeal decisions at the local level. Each reserve school has its own policy in place—and policies may differ from one federally run school to the next.
- Develop strategies with parents, not for parents. Invite parents to actively participate in decisions concerning their child. Schedule meetings around their availability. Ensure that they are kept up-to-date through classroom newsletters or phone calls.
- Do not underestimate parents and families. Set high standards for their involvement. Recognize parents’ strengths and commend them for the ways they support their children’s education and learning. If problems with involvement come up, try to look at the situation from the parents’ point of view. Recognize when differences in worldviews and issues such as economic and other stresses create barriers to involvement. Be flexible.
- Be clear about the importance of regular attendance at school. Help parents and students understand the benefits and work collaboratively to develop strategies that support and enhance student attendance.

- Help parents find support and programs in the community.
- Recognize that meaningful parent involvement will take many forms. Parents have differing personal histories related to school experiences, comfort levels, interests and strengths. Look for ways to value and use every parent's unique insights and talents. Ask parents how they would like to be involved. Encourage them to increase their involvement at a pace that is comfortable for them.
- Consider how student-led conferences could enhance parent involvement. Help students develop formats and practise the skills needed to effectively and meaningfully share their learning with their families.

Effective communication

When communicating with parents about their child's learning progress and challenges:

- balance positive comments with comments about concerns
- describe students' behaviours in nonjudgemental language. For example, "Alex often needs to have instructions repeated several times"
- avoid blaming.

Do not mistake a nondirective approach for a lack of concern. Parents who live by the principle of noninterference may feel that it is appropriate for them not to become involved, since teachers are the professionals. Use information from research and classroom examples to show parents how their involvement will benefit their children.

story

Teacher

The classroom as a meeting place

One teacher shared her experience with parent involvement in a class of secondary students:

"In an indigenous family, parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents and all forms of an extended family are significant in the lives of the students and therefore, the school. One of the reasons why I use monthly presentations of learning is for the extended families to feel welcome in the school and to also begin to increase the understanding of provincial curriculums within the community. In urban, multicultural classrooms, it is important for a school to be a centre of community, bridging many cultures. I planned monthly presentations by each student to their parents and others. On the first parent evening, I had each student guide their parents to their work area. They reviewed the curriculum for their grade. Then they presented their work

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Teacher story

The classroom as a meeting place (continued)

and showed a video of their in-class presentations. The videos gave the students and their families a chance to see the classroom process and allowed the students to reflect back on their presentation skills. The parents completed a feedback form of their perceptions of the student's strengths and the areas that they could work on. They were also invited to write any questions that they had and to offer suggestions for future nights.

The classroom became a meeting place. Parents visited with one another and shared in the work of other students. Clusters formed and families began to talk about their experiences.

Later that week, students asked me if their parents could come into the classroom during the day. Students who had previously said, "I don't want my parents near this place" were now changing their minds. I had parents phoning me and asking me more questions about how their son or daughter was learning. They wanted to know more about the curriculum so that they could help. They were involved. The previous year I had only five parents come to parent conferences. Now I have parents volunteering all over the place.

The neatest stuff, though, is in the more subtle changes. I've seen families come together that had been struggling. I've seen teens wanting their parents to be involved for the first time in years.

One family comes to mind. The grandparents of one girl invited our whole class to come and visit them at their lakeside home in the northern part of the province. The entire family—parents, grandparents and kids—were all involved. A year before, that young girl wanted to leave her home. This girl now has a personal mission—she wants to work in a developing country as a nurse. Her family is actively supporting her mission and her daily attendance in school. Last year she spent a large part of the year away from school. This year, so far she hasn't missed a day."

Resolving differences

If parents become frustrated, be careful not to minimize their concerns, argue or become defensive. In many Aboriginal cultures, those who display their tempers lose respect. Consider the following strategies.

- Let parents know that what they say is important.
- Write down the concerns or suggestions of parents.
- Ask parents to clarify if the concerns are too general.
- Work on solutions together. Write them down.

Parent advocacy

Advocacy means speaking out and taking positive action to make a situation better. For example, Aboriginal parents may want to advocate for extra help for their child in school, for building on their child's special interests or for culturally relevant approaches to instruction or to discipline. This can be a challenge for some Aboriginal parents who may not feel comfortable in a school environment.

Depending on their experience, some parents may be unsure of how to advocate on their children's behalf. Some parents also may be reluctant to do so because they may not want to interfere in what they see as the school's business. They may also want to avoid conflict or feel that they will not be listened to.

Parents need to know how advocacy will help their child. They need to see teachers modelling this process. If the school has an Aboriginal liaison, it might be appropriate to involve the liaison in the advocacy process.

To help parents become more effective advocates for their children, consider the following strategies.

- Before contacting other teachers, school staff and professionals on a student's behalf, consult with the student's parents and seek their advice and support.
- Include parents in preparations for meetings. Share information and ask for their input on agendas and who should be invited to meetings.
- Model appropriate language when talking to parents about their child's learning concerns. Model the collaborative "win-win" attitude of successful advocates.
- Involve parents in meetings with other teachers and consultants. Encourage them to observe the process of collaboration and problem solving with others.
- Commend parents for their efforts at advocacy.
- Share information with parents such as the following suggestions that Aboriginal parents share in the Alberta Education resource, *A Handbook for Aboriginal Parents of Children with Special Needs* (2000).

wisdom

Shared

Aboriginal parents offer advice to other parents

- Come to the school—the school belongs to your child. Visit your child’s school anytime throughout the school year. At the beginning of the year, ask your child’s teacher how to make arrangements to visit the classroom.
- Let your voice be heard by the teacher and, if need be, by the administration. If you have a concern, continue to speak up, as it is the only way positive changes will happen.
- Ask to sit in on classes to see what is happening.
- Talk with other parents who have children in the class.
- Look for local parent support groups and find out about other resources.
- Get to know the teacher by name and make sure he or she knows how to contact you.
- Tell the teacher how you may be contacted if you don’t have a phone.
- Make an appointment with the teacher to discuss any specific concerns. Make arrangements to telephone or write a letter if you are unable to meet.
- Ask that the teacher, principal, liaison worker or school counsellor meet with you in your home if you would feel more comfortable meeting there.
- Read the school newsletters, as they often contain valuable information that concerns your child.
- Become familiar with the school’s policies and procedures about attendance, discipline and other issues.
- Don’t be afraid to ask questions.
- Go to all parent-teacher conferences.
- Keep all school information in one place so it’s handy for meetings at the school or when seeing others in the community about your child.
- Volunteer to share a craft or special skill from your culture.

Adapted from Alberta Learning, *A Handbook for Aboriginal Parents of Children with Special Needs* (Edmonton, AB: Alberta Learning, 2000), pp. 30–31.

For a blackline master of these suggestions, see *Appendix 7: Aboriginal Parents Offer Advice to Other Parents*.

Liaison Workers

A number of school districts are finding that liaison workers, employed at either the district or school level, can be important sources of information and support for Aboriginal students and their families. Job descriptions for liaison workers across the province vary, but they often include the following types of responsibilities:

- establishing and maintaining a trusting relationship with Aboriginal students and their families
- acting as a communication link between home and school to assist with school-related issues
- meeting with individual students on a regular basis to find out what these students need
- connecting with Aboriginal organizations and community services so they can refer and connect students and families to the community resources they need
- providing assistance to teachers for presentations related to Aboriginal cultures, issues and languages
- organizing cultural events and activities for the school community.

In-depth knowledge of Aboriginal cultures, communities and languages is key to the success of liaison workers.

Liaison workers can help increase the involvement of Aboriginal families in their children's education and can reduce the effects of discrimination and racism for these students. The efforts of liaison workers can contribute to improved student attendance, achievement, self-confidence and decision making. Having a liaison worker in the school can also promote the development and implementation of appropriate cultural and educational services for Aboriginal students.

story

Principal

Role of the liaison worker

"I had a lot to learn as a new principal. Although as a teacher, I always enjoyed positive relationships with the families of my Aboriginal students, I was finding it more difficult to reach parents in my new role as administrator. In retrospect, I guess I really didn't understand how truly negative many of the families felt toward anything to do with school and education. A principal represents authority for some people, and for some Aboriginal parents, this can stir up many negative memories of their own personal experience with schooling. At the beginning of the school year, I was having difficulty getting parents to return my phone calls or meet with me.

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story

Principal

Role of the liaison worker (continued)

Connie, the Aboriginal liaison worker at the school, really helped me build my knowledge base and learn the community protocol that first year. She also shared background information about families with me. This helped me develop a better understanding of not only the kinds of challenges these families faced but also the strengths and gifts these families had. She offered me, and other teachers on staff, practical ideas for making sure our Aboriginal families feel welcome at the school. She would often pave the way for us by meeting informally with a family before we phoned them or asked them to come for a meeting. With her guidance, the staff also began to do more home visits and use talking circles for meetings.

As a liaison worker, Connie had many roles in the school. In addition to coordinating cultural events, she organized a number of low-key opportunities for parents to come into the school, such as coffee mornings and beading classes. This really helped create a new comfort level for many of the parents. This informal socializing also gave her opportunities to talk one-on-one with parents, and by doing this, she found out what was going on in their lives and then was better able to offer support and advice.

The whole community valued the preventive work she did on behalf of our students. Using her excellent connections in the community, she was able to help a number of families put much-needed supports into place before problems escalated into full-blown crisis situations. The number of families in the school needing formal Child Welfare involvement dropped significantly after her first year on staff.

Connie also developed strong relationships with individual students. In our annual school survey, Aboriginal students consistently identified Connie's most important role as being 'someone at school who really understands and cares about me.'

Welcoming Elders

Elders are men and women regarded as the keepers and teachers of an Aboriginal nation's oral tradition and knowledge. Age is not considered a determinant of wisdom; young people of sixteen years may have essential knowledge. Different Elders hold different gifts. Their contributions to schools and classrooms can be significant when they are involved in meaningful ways such as bringing traditional ceremonies and teachings into the school or classroom; providing advice to parents, students, teachers and school administrators; providing accurate information about Aboriginal heritage and Aboriginal communities; and acting as a bridge between the school and the community.

Elders are considered vital to the survival of Aboriginal cultures and the transmission of cultural knowledge is an essential part of the preservation and promotion of cultural traditions and their protocols. Elders are always to be treated with great respect and honour.

The roles of Elders vary greatly from community to community, as do the protocols and traditions they teach. Elders can be spiritual guides, healers, medicine men and women, artists, seers and counsellors. Elders often perform such services as:

- giving prayers before meetings
- describing or performing traditional ceremonies
- sharing traditional knowledge
- giving spiritual advice to individuals
- demonstrating traditional crafts and practices
- teaching the community's protocols.

The wisdom of Elders can be divided into two types: spiritual advice and traditional knowledge. According to Elders' teachings, spiritual advice is the teachings of prayers to the Creator for personal well-being or ceremonial activities. Traditional knowledge has to do with knowing how to live in a way that is respectful to Mother Earth.

It is important to make Elders welcome by following protocol or a code of etiquette appropriate to the customs of the people or community. *In Alberta, each Aboriginal community has its own cultural and social traditions that translate into protocols that should be carefully followed.* Although regional and tribe-specific protocols have evolved over time, there are many similarities and common themes that are important to remember.

Using proper protocol means following the customs of the people or community. As protocol varies between communities and individuals, it is important to ask an informed community member about the protocol that needs to be followed. Generally, people respect those who care enough to ask.

story

Principal

Elder in the school

“In the past, if there was a problem, we would set up a meeting with a counsellor or a community agency for our Aboriginal families and more often than not, the family would choose not to take that route with the problem. When we began working with an Elder, we saw a distinct change in the families’ response—they would attend meetings where the Elder would be present, and often, the Elder’s parenting circle as well. As an added benefit, students regularly seek out our Elder to talk about personal issues.”

story

Liaison

Elders’ support

“We had an escalating situation with one high school student. The school’s administrators had reached their limit and called in the parents. Having heard their son’s side of the story, the parents were extremely angry with the school. There didn’t seem to be much of a chance of resolving anything, everyone was so upset. So we requested the help of two Elders, a man and a woman, to mediate at a meeting between the administrators, the student and the parents. They met in a conference room rather than the administrator’s office. They sat in a talking circle, not across a desk from each other. Everyone’s attitude began to shift when they heard the other person’s side of the story. This process had a lasting effect—the student is still struggling with school but because he’s stopped challenging authority, he’s finding the support he needs.”

Approaching an Elder

The best way to contact an Elder and learn the protocols to follow is to ask contacts in the community, such as Aboriginal liaisons in the school system, parents or Friendship Centre staff. Community members will be able to provide the names of respected Elders.

For a list of Aboriginal organizations and agencies that can advise schools on choosing and working with local Elders, see *Appendix 8: Aboriginal Organizations and Agencies*.

These community members can help teachers determine which Elders would be appropriate visitors to the school or classroom. For example, one Elder might have significant knowledge of a ceremony, while other Elders might be knowledgeable about the history of the community or a traditional skill.

Aboriginal people believe that if you want to know something, you must be willing to sit with someone who has the knowledge. Be aware that when you approach an Elder, you must be patient.

Other potential topics for Elder presentations include:

- kinship
- role modelling
- parenting
- importance of education
- planning for the future.

When approaching a First Nations or Métis Elder, protocol *usually* requires the offering of tobacco, a sacred traditional plant that is used to open the door to consult with Elders. An Aboriginal liaison or Elder's helper can provide the necessary guidance when determining when tobacco is necessary. Consider the following guidelines when offering tobacco to an Elder.

- When the Elder indicates that he or she is ready and introductions have been made, state your request in a respectful way. Be clear, open and honest, and speak plainly. For example,

“We would be honoured if you would give a prayer at our next meeting.”

“I would be honoured to benefit from your advice and guidance.”

“We would be honoured if you would visit our class to share your knowledge on ...”

It is also important for the Elder to understand what kind of guidance you are requesting: spiritual advice or traditional knowledge.

- If the Elder accepts the tobacco from you, he or she is accepting your invitation or request. The tobacco will then be offered to the Creator during a prayer for life and good health.

If the Elder declines the tobacco, he or she is declining your invitation or request. The Elder may have prior commitments or be unable to help you. Ask your community contact for clarification.

Hosting Elders in the classroom

Elders are respected community members and should be treated well. Elders are very humble and do not ask for anything, but they are usually busy people, and the gift of time and wisdom they bring needs to be valued. Consider the following guidelines for hosting an Elder in the classroom.

- Ensure that transportation, accommodation and meals are taken care of, either by providing them or by giving an honorarium to cover expenses. Sometimes an Elder may need to be driven to an event. If an Elder brings a helper, their costs should be covered, as well.
- Prepare the students for the visit from the Elder by reviewing good listening practices and manners such as avoiding eye contact and not asking inappropriate questions. Explain the importance of the Elder's role in the community and the value of his or her knowledge.
- Invite the Elder to the school to meet informally with the students and staff before he or she visits the class so that the Elder can become familiar with and comfortable in the school environment.
- While the Elder is visiting the class:
 - ensure that the students listen politely and are helpful and welcoming to the Elder
 - have one of the students show the Elder around the class, the Elder's sitting area and where to find the washroom
 - have breaks during which the Elder can relax in another room if the visit is a long one
 - always supervise the students' interaction with the Elder to ensure that he or she is treated with respect and courtesy
 - provide a light lunch or snack for the Elder, such as tea, bannock and jam. Protocol usually requires that Elders are served first, followed by the students, followed by others.

Thanking an Elder

At the end of the visit, thank the Elder formally with a handshake and have the students express their appreciation for the visit. Present the Elder with a gift such as a blanket, towel set, slippers or socks, and encourage the students to present a class gift, such as a food basket containing preserves, cheese, crackers, fruit, bannock and cans of soup. This exchange of gifts is an honoured tradition arising out of the principle of reciprocity.

Welcoming Community Members

Invite guests from the Aboriginal community to the school and classroom to take part as guest speakers, performers, resource people and volunteers. Aboriginal business people, visual and performing artists, professionals, traditional teachers, athletes, storytellers and others have much to offer that will enrich programming and support cultural continuity. Consider the following guidelines when hosting Aboriginal members of the community.

- Ask contacts in the community such as liaison workers, parents and Friendship Centres to help contact appropriate visitors and to help with appropriate protocol.
- Understand that it takes time to learn about Aboriginal communities and their members. It takes time to build networks, understand the community dynamics, and honour the customs and traditions they practise.
- Take time to build a relationship with prospective guests. Invite them to visit informally or be prepared to visit them.
- Honour the principle of reciprocity when guests have completed their visits by offering an honorarium and/or a small gift of appreciation.

Welcoming the community into the classroom increases the effectiveness of teaching practices and, as a result, accountability to Aboriginal students.

story

Teacher

Shared teachings

“A traditional teacher visited our class of students with behavioural challenges and brought his teachings about the drum. Students who normally wouldn’t have been able to focus for more than five minutes sat still and gave this teacher their undivided attention for half an hour. He was teaching about something that mattered to them.”

Awareness of Community Protocols

Protocols are codes of etiquette that describe appropriate and respectful behaviour and ways of communicating when working with or visiting Aboriginal communities. Using proper protocols means following the customs of the people or community you are working with. Understanding and following protocols can bring about meaningful conversations that are relevant to the people involved.

Each Aboriginal community has its own protocols. Protocols can change in a community without notification, for example, when a new chief and council are elected. Protocols also change depending on whether the situation is informal or formal.

Some examples of situations that involve protocols include:

- giving tobacco (Cree) or blankets or towels (Inuit) to an Elder when seeking their knowledge or counsel
- contacting the council and explaining your intentions before visiting an Aboriginal community
- opening or closing a meeting with a prayer.

By following protocols, teachers can:

- build trusting, honest relationships
- show respect for Aboriginal cultures, values and beliefs
- allow people to speak in the voice and style of their cultural group
- create balance in the consultation and negotiation process
- improve relationships with Aboriginal communities.

Understanding protocols

When working with an Aboriginal community, it is important to understand what is important to the people who live there. When following protocols, teachers need to keep in mind the following Aboriginal beliefs and values.

Respect

Get to know the community members, and understand and honour their protocols, expectations and unique qualities without stereotyping.

Diversity

There are similarities and differences within and between Aboriginal communities, related to languages, cultures and traditions.

Oral traditions

Personal contact and dialogue are extremely important.

Time

It takes time to learn about Aboriginal communities and their members.

History

Western cultures have played a role in shaping Aboriginal communities in the past and present.

Humility

Treat each person as an equal. Titles and positions, such as teachers and school administrators, may not be considered authoritative positions in a community.

Family

Family, extended family and community obligations have a higher priority than business and other concerns.

Arranging a Visit to an Aboriginal Community

When arranging to visit an Aboriginal community, consider the following guidelines.

- Find someone who can guide you, such as an Aboriginal liaison worker, cultural advisor or another member of the community, such as a parent or teacher. Consider whether you will be covering topics that are gender-specific during your visit. If so, you should choose a female guide for female topics and a male guide for male topics.

If you do not know anyone who can help, look on the Web site of the department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada for a community profile. Scan the community profile for the name of an organization that has a successful working relationship with the community, and contact them for advice and information about the community dynamics.

- Educate yourself on the structure, history, protocols, values and beliefs of the Aboriginal community you will be visiting. Write down any questions you have. Your guide should be able to provide much of the information you need.
- Ask your guide to make arrangements for your visit to the community. Be prepared to share background information about yourself and the purpose of your visit.
- If you are still waiting to hear about your visit after several days, follow up informally by phone with the Aboriginal liaison worker to see how the arrangements are going. Be patient and as flexible as possible. Allow time for a response.
- If more time passes and you have not heard back, follow up with a more formal letter to the chief and council.
- If more time passes and you have not heard back, contact the local Band Office Administration by phone to explain your needs. Discuss what you would like to do on your visit and get direction on how to proceed.

