



Strengthening the Spirit – Oskâyi Kiskinotahn Building a Comprehensive Response to Family Violence in Aboriginal Communities

Introduction

Strengthening the Spirit-Oskâyi Kiskinotahn: Building a Comprehensive Response to Family Violence in Aboriginal Communities (Strengthening the Spirit) is an innovative prevention program for Aboriginal families at high risk of violent behaviour and contact with the criminal justice system. It was funded by Public Safety Canada's National Crime Prevention Centre (NCPC) from February, 2009 to September, 2012.

The NCPC defines innovative as prevention programs that test new approaches, theories and interventions with at-risk populations. They are based on a strong theoretical framework that links the proposed intervention to the risk factor(s), target population and desired outcomes. Innovative projects verify changes through limited research design, and require causal confirmation using appropriate experimental techniques. These programs are recognized and encouraged with the caution that they must be carefully evaluated.¹

The *Strengthening the Spirit* program was sponsored by the *HomeFront Society for the Prevention of Domestic Violence* (HomeFront) in Calgary, Alberta and delivered in the Siksika Nation, Tsuu Tina First Nations, and Morley First Nations communities. Four Calgary-based organizations – Aspen Family Services, Métis Child and Family Services, the Calgary Correctional Centre and YWCA Sheriff King Home – were also central partners in the project.

Goals and Objectives

Strengthening the Spirit was designed to reduce the incidence of domestic violence in families, reduce the

risk of violence for children, and support families' healing and wellness.

Participants

The participants came from three First Nations communities surrounding the city of Calgary and four Calgary-based organizations serving a high percentage of Aboriginal people.

Participants were referred by a variety of sources, including police services, shelters, correctional services, family members, Elders, First Nations peacemakers, Aboriginal-serving community agencies, and social services. Once in the program, families' levels of risk were explored using standardized assessment tools. A series of treatment groups and other interventions were then implemented.

A total of 34 treatment groups were held: 10 for men, 21 for women and 3 for children. There were 193 at-risk men and women who participated in the treatment group sessions, with the majority being women (65%) and 97% of participants were of Aboriginal descent (95% First Nations, 2% Métis). Twenty-seven percent (27%) of participants were 18–24 years old and fifty-six percent (56%) were 25–39 years old.

Key Elements of the Program

Strengthening the Spirit's design included adult and children's programs.

¹ Promising and Model Crime Prevention Programs – Volume I, 2008
– <http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/prmsng-mdl-vlm1/index-eng.aspx>



Adult men's and women's programs:

- Group sessions (circles) for facilitated discussions on topics related to risk factors
- Ceremonies, use of the medicine wheel, sweat lodges, smudging and role playing were important elements.

Children's program:

- Group sessions for facilitated discussions on topics related to risk factors
- The sessions incorporated age-appropriate traditional games, crafts, role playing and exercises to reinforce the concepts learned.

Staffing

11 Strengthening the Spirit Mentor Trainers were involved, including the HomeFront **Community Mobilization Officer**, who provided oversight for the pilot sites. The Community Mobilization Officer was the only salaried employee.

30 Community Facilitators were trained. They were members of the Aboriginal communities and were selected by their leaders. They completed 4–6 hours of orientation in domestic violence counselling and participated as trainees in at least one complete group program. Each of them also received approximately 1–2 hours of direct clinical supervision per month and they were able to access clinical support at anytime during the group process. They received fees for their services.

A **Clinical Psychologist** was assigned to each pilot site.

24 Elders who acted as role models, teachers, and transmitters of culture and identity were also involved in the program implementation. They received honorariums for their services.

HomeFront provided professional development training sessions for the team of *Strengthening the Spirit* Mentor Trainers, Psychologists, and Community Facilitators. Social workers from the YWCA Sheriff King Home provided crisis outreach services to client victims and children when required.

Partnerships

A steering committee including representatives from the main project partners and other stakeholders provided oversight and strategic direction to the program.

Members of the local community also created working groups to oversee the pilot projects, and First Nations community leaders were involved in the oversight of the treatment groups.

HomeFront was the financial manager, program initiator and coordinator.

Findings

The main findings for the *Strengthening the Spirit* pilot project show that:

- The clinical scale used for testing before and after the program indicated some positive impacts of the program on rates of recidivism. Among the 47% who did complete treatment groups, there was a 6% self-reported rate of reoffending, whereas the rate was 34% for those who did not complete the program.
- Full engagement of the three First Nations communities and four Calgary-based organizations was achieved. The desired level of adult participation was reached—and even surpassed—in terms of number and profiles, but the number of children the program intended to serve was not attained.
- The Community Group Facilitators (73% women and 27% men) reported high levels of satisfaction with the mentor model of training.
- Broad support for the pilot project was achieved, with 59% of the partnerships coming from within the Aboriginal sector, 23% from the community, social, and volunteer organization sector, 10% from the justice sector, and 8% from First Nations and the Tribal Council sector.
- Local levels of participation varied over time, partly due to demands on services and the time needed to respond to communities, families, and individuals in crisis (deaths in the community, evidence of domestic abuse, etc.).
- The Mentor Trainers, Community Facilitators and participants agreed that the facilitators' skills and knowledge, the group process, and the Aboriginal-focused content were strengths of the program model. Participants also identified transportation and child care as important success factors to support participation.

Implementation Observations

- Finding people in the communities to be trained as Community Facilitators was challenging. In some

of the communities, there was a limited pool of potential candidates.

- The number of children between 5–12 years was lower than anticipated. Many of those in the older end of this age group were at home babysitting younger siblings.
- Attending the program caused significant child care issues for the parent(s).
- Transportation for participants, inclement weather, the availability of meeting space and events such as funerals and community meetings/elections sometimes made it difficult to maintain the schedule of the program.
- Some participants experienced child apprehensions, suicides, overdoses and accidents that impacted their ability to participate in the group. Support was provided by *Strengthening the Spirit* facilitators to help participants complete the program. In the First Nations communities, participants also helped each other through these difficulties.
- Managing the privacy and amount of data collected from participants was a challenge. The difficulties were addressed when the YWCA Sherrieff King Home offered support through use of a system in place and help from their staff who had a history of managing the same kind of information. Ensuring this support is in place prior to beginning the program would have been helpful.
- Domestic violence in an Aboriginal context is complex and multi-dimensional, requiring flexible responses, accessible on-site support, broad-based interagency support, and culturally competent resources throughout the duration of the pilot project.
- Investments in the development of working relationships with community leaders and service providers were essential to the success of the program. The advisory group that had been in place for several years made the work go more smoothly for this project. Communities and organizations will be challenged when trying to meet the complex needs surrounding domestic violence and these challenges can only be overcome with a foundation of strong and committed relationships.

Cost Information

The total cost to implement *Strengthening the Spirit* was \$697,215 (71% funded by the NCPC).

The main in-kind contributions came from the *Strengthening the Spirit* Committee, the YWCA Sheriff King Home, the Calgary Correctional Centre, and HomeFront.

Additional financial support came from the Urban Aboriginal Strategy, Alberta Health Services, the Safe Community Secretariat, HomeFront, and United Way of Calgary.

Sustainability

The *Strengthening the Spirit* program continues to run in all of the sites where it was piloted.

All three First Nations communities secured funding, primarily through the Province of Alberta.

This pilot project fostered discussions with the Province on issues of victimization of women and children, and contributed to the development of a standardized domestic violence treatment protocol in Aboriginal communities in Alberta.

Sponsoring Organization Contact Information

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If you wish to register for the NCPC mailing list to receive information from the Centre, please visit the subscription page at: <http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/prg/cp/ml/index-eng.aspx>