

# Willow Cree Healing Lodge: Resident, Elder, and Staff Experiences

*WCHL supports the healing journey of Indigenous offenders through cultural opportunities and Cree teachings.*

## Why we are doing this study

There is growing evidence for the relevance of Healing Lodges in providing culturally specific and effective interventions for Indigenous offenders. Through qualitative methods, the goal of the current research is to gain an understanding of the impacts that Healing Lodges have on Indigenous offenders, as well as the challenges that are currently facing the operation of Healing Lodges. This research represents a collaboration with the Indigenous Initiatives Directorate and aims to provide a more holistic understanding of Willow Cree Healing Lodge (WCHL) through the experiences and perspectives of residents, Elders, and staff.

## What we are doing

As part of a larger study, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 residents (referred to as "Nîcisânak" or brothers) and 9 Elders and staff at WCHL in November 2019. Interviews were conducted by two members of the research team, each taking approximately thirty minutes to an hour to complete. The interviews focused on the participants' experiences, involvements, and observations at the Healing Lodge.

## What we have found so far

From the perspectives of the Nîcisânak, Elders, and staff, WCHL has a positive effect on the healing journeys of the Nîcisânak. It offers a holistic approach that increases accountability and presents opportunities for introspection, and reflection. Ceremonies and the support of Elders were identified as playing a central role in guiding the healing process of Nîcisânak and providing opportunities for understanding and connecting to their culture. Overall, there is a sense of gratitude from the Nîcisânak for the environment of WCHL that fosters personal growth and allows them to gain knowledge about their culture, engage in ceremonies, and belong to a community.

Elders and staff highlighted the inclusive, barrier-free nature of the relationships promoted throughout the Healing Lodge. A strong sense of community was apparent in the relationships between the Nîcisânak, and the dynamics with staff were often described as supportive and positive. While there is representation of staff from Beary's and Okemasis First Nation, this was described as

both a benefit (e.g., increased community involvement) and a challenge (e.g., potential for conflicts of interest).

In addition to delivering nationally recognized correctional programs, a variety of in-house programs are offered at WCHL. These programs in the areas of parenting, grief, family violence, substance abuse, and anger management were identified as particularly beneficial for Nîcisânak, and often fill a gap for those who either have completed or do not qualify for correctional programs. One of the main challenges raised at WCHL is the limited hobby crafts, social programs, and unstructured leisure activities. Part of this issue may be attributed to the lack of a designated Social Programs Officer.

An additional challenge experienced at WCHL is the shortage of Escorted and Unescorted Temporary Absences (ETAs/UTAs), as well as work releases. Opportunities to attend and participate in ceremonies in the community was identified as particularly beneficial for the Nîcisânak, highlighting the importance of cultural ETAs and UTAs.

## What it means

The experiences of the Nîcisânak, Elders, and staff reveal a unique environment at WCHL that encourages a stronger knowledge of and connection to Indigenous culture. The interventions and opportunities offered at WCHL support the healing journeys of Nîcisânak, while addressing their needs, attitudes, and behaviours through an Indigenous lens.

In order to keep the Nîcisânak occupied in a prosocial manner and further engaged in their culture, hobby crafts, unstructured leisure activities and social programs represent an area of opportunity for WCHL. Additional opportunities for gradual release would be beneficial in promoting connections to the community and reintegration.

## For more information

Please e-mail the [Research Branch](#). You can also visit the [Research Publications](#) section for a full list of reports and one-page summaries.

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