

# Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge: Resident, Elder, and Staff Experiences

*OOHL offers a therapeutic environment to encourage healing, growth, and connection to culture.*

## Why we are doing this study

Representing the only women's Healing Lodge operated by the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC), Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge (OOHL) opened in 1995. Located on Nekaneet First Nation in Saskatchewan, OOHL offers a unique experience relative to other women's urban Healing Lodges that are operated by Indigenous organizations.<sup>1</sup> The goal of this qualitative research is to gain an understanding of the collective impacts that women's Healing Lodges have on Indigenous offenders, as well as the challenges that are currently facing the operation of these sites. This study represents a collaboration with the Indigenous Initiatives Directorate and aims to provide a more holistic understanding of OOHL through the perspectives of residents, Elders, and staff.

## What we are doing

As part of a larger study examining all women's Healing Lodges, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 residents and 7 Elders and staff at OOHL in August 2022. 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

Overall, the positive, supportive relationships between residents, staff, and Elders promotes a sense of community and family within the Healing Lodge. Elders and Traditional Healers are highly regarded by the residents as integral to their healing journeys, helping them with a range of issues through teachings, ceremonies, cultural activities and traditions, and one-on-ones. The spiritual lodge was described as a special and sacred space to facilitate these opportunities. Staff were viewed as supportive, approachable, and knowledgeable and there is a strong complement of Indigenous staff who understand and relate to the experiences and histories of residents. Though some tensions were noted, overall the relationships between residents were described as positive and respectful.

There is a sense of gratitude for the opportunity to be at OOHL as the structure and opportunities allow the residents to heal and live an Indigenous way of life. In addition to the Indigenous-based programs offered, residents benefit from meaningful work placements, vocational training, educational opportunities, and other prosocial activities. The location of OOHL and its connection to nature is noteworthy in providing an atmosphere for healing. Given its remote location, there were struggles experienced by residents in being away from their family, and their children in particular. Reunification with their children was identified as a strong incentive and goal for many of the residents.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a notable negative impact on the correctional progress and reintegration of residents. Reduced programming resulted in some residents delaying their parole applications. The availability of cultural activities and ceremonies on site decreased, and residents were unable to participate in cultural Escorted Temporary Absences in the community. Staff noted a diminishing role of the community over time, which was further exacerbated by the pandemic. Staff and Elders also highlighted challenges in finding balance between CSC policies and the Healing Lodge vision focused on Nekaneet teachings and values.

## What it means

The experiences of the residents, Elders, and staff reveal a therapeutic environment at OOHL that supports the healing journeys of residents, while addressing their needs, attitudes, and behaviours through an Indigenous lens. As pandemic-related restrictions continue to lift, strengthening community connections with Nekaneet First Nation would be valuable in renewing the past reciprocal relationship.

## 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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<sup>1</sup> Through an agreement with CSC under Section 81 of the *Corrections and Conditional Release Act*.