

CORRECTIONAL SERVICE CANADA

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Buffalo Sage Wellness House: Resident, Elder, and Staff Experiences

Through a holistic and trauma-informed approach, BSWH supports the healing journeys of Indigenous offenders.

Why we are doing this study

Buffalo Sage Wellness House (BSWH) is a women's Healing Lodge located in Edmonton and operated by the Native Counselling Services of Alberta.¹ The goal of the current study was to gain an understanding of the 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 qualitative research represents a collaboration with the Indigenous Initiatives Directorate and aims to provide a more holistic understanding of BSWH through the experiences and 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 8 residents and 11 Elders and staff at BSWH in June 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

While there is a strong emphasis on culture and spirituality at BSWH, this is supported by programs, addictions treatment, release planning (e.g., employment, housing), and the development of community connections and prosocial supports. This holistic approach provides residents with a sense of belonging, purpose, and stability. Overall, the positive, supportive relationships between residents, staff, and Elders promotes a sense of family and community, which teaches residents a way of life.

Numerous opportunities for cultural engagement are available to both residents and staff. In this way, the Healing Lodge plays an essential role in reuniting Indigenous peoples with their cultural traditions. In many cases, BSWH was described as instrumental in helping initiate a resident's healing journey and connection to Indigenous identity. The Elder was highly regarded by residents as integral to their healing journeys. The trauma-

informed approaches offer residents an opportunity to examine how their past traumas impacted their offence history. Residents praised the intensive programming offered, particularly the Spirit of the Warrior program.

Staff turnover was identified as a concern both by staff and residents. Staff reported that the pay is significantly lower than equivalent positions in the Correctional Service of Canada, resulting in staff leaving BSWH for higher paying positions. Residents reported that they have a desire for stability and consistency in staffing. The revolving door of staff affects continuity in their case management and the availability of staff for Escorted Temporary Absences. Staff training was also identified as an area of improvement, as the high levels of turnover often result in fairly new staff training new employees.

While residents are routinely exposed to potential triggers (e.g., crime, drugs), the urban location also provides access to services and resources in the community, family and prosocial supports, and natural spaces in the river valley. The changing profile of residents has resulted in BSWH having to adapt where needed (e.g., addressing higher mental health needs). However, the Healing Lodge is keen to provide an avenue for reintegration that may not always be considered (e.g., offenders in the Mother-Child program or outside of the Prairie region).

What it means

As an urban Healing Lodge, BSWH faces many unique challenges that shed light on the complex realities facing women's Healing Lodges. The experiences of the residents, Elders, and staff reveal a unique environment that emulates a family and community. Through a trauma-informed and gender responsive approach, BSWH promotes healing and encourages a stronger connection to Indigenous culture. Efforts to improve staff retention and training would be beneficial to both the staff and the residents.

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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¹ Through an agreement with CSC under Section 81 of the *Corrections and Conditional Release Act*.

