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RESEARCH REPORT

A Qualitative Study of Experiences at Women's Healing Lodges

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A Qualitative Study of Experiences at Women's Healing Lodges

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Executive Summary

Key words: *Healing Lodges, Indigenous offenders, women, residents, experiences, operations*

Healing Lodges are environments that use Indigenous values, traditions, and beliefs to offer culturally-appropriate services and programs for Indigenous offenders. The goal of the current research study was to qualitatively examine the impacts, interventions, and overall operations at women's Healing Lodges, whether operated by the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) or an Indigenous community or partner organization through an agreement under Section 81 of the *Corrections and Conditional Release Act*.

To capture a holistic and comprehensive understanding of these experiences, the study entailed site visits and semi-structured individual interviews with residents, Elders/Spiritual Advisors, and staff from the only CSC-operated Healing Lodge for women (Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge in Saskatchewan) and the two Section 81 facilities for women (Buffalo Sage Wellness House in Alberta and Eagle Women's Lodge in Manitoba). In total, interview data was collected and thematically analyzed for 30 residents, 26 staff members, and three Elders/Spiritual Advisors.

The narratives revealed that while the overall environments at each of the Healing Lodges were multifaceted, consistent across all were holistic, trauma-informed, and gender-based approaches. The strong emphasis on culture and spirituality and opportunities to participate in ceremonies and other cultural activities helped guide residents through their healing journeys. In addition, a range of interventions and opportunities were available for residents to engage in and provided further structure, including programs, education, vocational training and employment, family reunification, and other prosocial activities. For the most part, Healing Lodges were marked by strong connections between residents, open and dynamic relationships with staff, and strong bonds with Elders/Spiritual Advisors built on immense support and guidance. Residing in a Healing Lodge also promoted ties to family and friends and helped residents in developing community connections in preparation for release.

Findings revealed that through these approaches, women's Healing Lodges benefited the residents in terms of strengthening and/or maintaining their cultural identity, their sense of belonging, their connection to people and place, and their prospects at successful reintegration. These environments fostered a space for residents to engage in introspection and self-reflection, find balance within themselves, and enabled a sense of commitment and accountability both to their healing path and to the expectations of the Healing Lodge.

The research findings shed light on some of operational challenges and best practices present across the three women's Healing Lodges, including those related to population pressures, staffing practices and needs, and communications, policies, and practices. Taken together, this study highlights the unique environment of Healing Lodges emphasizing culture and spirituality, as well as the interventions, opportunities, and relationships that help foster a setting for healing, community, and preparation for reintegration. This study enhances understandings of the impacts of women's Healing Lodges for Indigenous offenders and contributes to the growing evidence for their relevance in providing culturally appropriate interventions and support.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	ii
Executive Summary	iii
List of Figures	v
List of Appendices	vi
Introduction.....	1
Indigenous Women’s Corrections.....	3
Healing Lodges and Correctional Outcomes	4
Healing Lodge Experiences	5
Current Study	7
Method	9
Procedure	9
Participants.....	10
Materials	13
Results.....	14
Overall Environment and Experience	14
Interventions and Opportunities.....	26
Relationships and Community	32
Reintegration.....	38
Operational Challenges and Best Practices.....	44
Discussion	53
Conclusions.....	54
Limitations and Future Directions	56
References.....	58

List of Figures

<i>Figure 1. Number of Participants by Site and Role.....</i>	11
<i>Figure 2. Risk, Need, and Engagement Characteristics of Resident Sample</i>	12

List of Appendices

Appendix A: Informed Consent Form for Healing Lodge Residents	62
Appendix B: Informed Consent Form for Elders/Spiritual Advisors and Staff.....	64
Appendix C: Interview Guide for Healing Lodge Residents.....	66
Appendix D: Interview Guide for Elders/Spiritual Advisors and Staff.....	68

Introduction

Within the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC), Healing Lodges¹ are environments that incorporate Indigenous values, traditions, and beliefs to offer culturally appropriate services and programs for Indigenous offenders. The main goal of Healing Lodges is to address the factors that led to incarceration, as well as prepare residents for their release into the community. Healing Lodges were introduced as part of CSC's Continuum of Care to address concerns around the applicability of mainstream institutional approaches for Indigenous offenders (CSC, 2019a). More broadly, Healing Lodges can be conceptualized as initiatives that support Canada's obligations to Indigenous Peoples, as outlined in important guiding documents such as the Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) Calls to Action² and The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).³ The Commissioner's mandate letter of 2022 further details CSC's obligations to the expansion and utilizations of Section 81 agreements.⁴ As part of a larger project that aims to holistically examine Healing Lodges, the purpose of the current study was to qualitatively examine the experiences, impacts, and overall operations of women's Healing Lodges through the perspectives of residents,⁵ staff, and Elders.

From a wider perspective, Healing Lodges represent an opportunity to address the over-representation of Indigenous Peoples within the correctional context. While only 5% of the population in Canada identify as Indigenous, this group represents almost 50% of federally sentenced women in the country (Office of the Correctional Investigator [OCI], 2021). To situate the experiences of individuals involved in Healing Lodges, it is important to acknowledge the wider sociohistorical context that has led to this persistent over-representation of Indigenous Peoples within the Canadian criminal justice system. According to the Royal Commission on

¹ There is a broader understanding and conceptualization of Healing Lodges within Indigenous communities across Canada, which offer culturally-specific healing programs. This study focuses on Healing Lodges within a correctional context.

² The TRC Calls to Action on justice include providing culturally relevant services to inmates, implementing culturally appropriate alternatives to incarceration, and eliminating barriers to the creation of additional Healing Lodges within the federal correctional system (TRC Commission of Canada, 2015).

³ The UNDRIP outlines the minimum standards for the survival, dignity, and well-being of Indigenous peoples and includes access to justice, safety, and culture (United Nations, 2007).

⁴ The Commissioner's mandate letter is provided by the Minister of Public Safety and represents the Government of Canada's priorities as they relate to CSC in order to establish key commitments.

⁵ Consistent with the approach and language used at the Healing Lodges, the term 'residents' is used herein to represent the federal offenders who are incarcerated/serving their conditional release at the Healing Lodges.

Aboriginal Peoples (1996), the greatest contributor to over-representation were the colonial values underlying Canadian criminal laws, policies, and practices that have had negative impacts on Indigenous Peoples. As a result of colonialism, Indigenous Peoples have been subjected to assimilation policies and practices that have created both individual and collective intergenerational trauma (Department of Justice, 2022). Other contributing factors include “physical, psychological and sexual violence; substance abuse and mental health problems and illnesses; poverty; and disconnection from their own cultures and languages” (Vecchio, 2018, p. 1). Negative impacts on social determinants of health, inadequate housing, and limited education and employment opportunities further contribute to Indigenous people being in contact with the criminal justice system more often and for longer periods (Department of Justice, 2022).

There are two types of Healing Lodges: (a) CSC-operated Healing Lodges, which are managed by CSC in cooperation with an Indigenous community; and (b) Section 81 facilities, which are managed and operated by an Indigenous community or partner organization through an agreement under Section 81 of the *Corrections and Conditional Release Act* (CCRA, 1992; CSC, 2019b). In Canada, there are currently three women’s Healing Lodges in operation. The first women’s Healing Lodge was Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge (OOHL), which opened in Maple Creek, Saskatchewan in 1995 and is operated by CSC. The two other Healing Lodges are Section 81 facilities. Buffalo Sage Wellness House (BSWH), which opened in 2010 in Edmonton, Alberta and is operated by Native Counselling Services of Alberta. The most recent women’s Healing Lodge is Eagle Women’s Lodge (EWL), which opened in 2019 in Winnipeg, Manitoba and is operated by the Indigenous Women’s Healing Centre. In order to be transferred to a women’s Healing Lodge as a resident, one must be classified as minimum-security (or in some cases, medium security),⁶ be committed to their healing journey and correctional plan, as well as respect the rules and Indigenous-centred approaches to healing. While Healing Lodges are designed for Indigenous offenders, non-Indigenous offenders may also be transferred to Healing Lodges under the expectation that they respect traditional healing concepts and demonstrate commitment to participating in Indigenous interventions (CSC, 2019c).

⁶ For the case of medium-security inmates, they may be accepted into a Healing Lodge upon review of the following factors: (a) an inmate’s sentence length, (b) the amount of time left before an inmate is eligible for an unescorted temporary absence (UTA), and (c) whether or not the offender is in the ‘preparation for release’ or ‘reintegration into the community’ phase of their correctional plan if they are a long-term offender (CSC, 2019c).

Indigenous Women's Corrections

Once Indigenous women find themselves in prison, their profile and needs are comparatively different from their non-Indigenous counterparts. Indigenous women are generally younger, have higher rates of unemployment, and less formal education than non-Indigenous women offenders (CSC, 2015). They are more likely to have been previously involved with the criminal justice system and receive longer sentences (CSC, 2015). They are also disproportionately more likely to be classified as maximum security (Public Safety Canada, 2012). Bell et al. (2004) identified that the highest areas of need for Indigenous women were Personal/Emotional Orientation, Substance Abuse, and Employment, which included issues of job security and education. Other important needs included access to their children, access to mental health services, as well as accessing community and culture (Murdocca, 2020). What is more, Indigenous women also face higher rates of victimization than non-Indigenous women (Department of Justice, 2019). In preparing women offenders for successful reintegration into the community, CSC is required to adopt programs and policies that are responsive to these unique needs of Indigenous women.

In response to the unique rehabilitation needs of incarcerated women, *Creating Choices: The Report of the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women* was published in 1990 and continues to exist as the framework for women's corrections in Canada. It identifies five principles for change that continue to be at the heart of programming to date, which include: (a) empowerment, (b) meaningful and responsible choices, (c) respect and dignity, (d) supportive environment, and (e) shared responsibility. The origins of Healing Lodges within Canadian corrections can be found in *Creating Choices*, as the Task Force recommended that one of the five new regional federal facilities for women should be specifically for Indigenous women. The Healing Lodge was intended to be premised on principles that promote a safe space for Indigenous women, a caring attitude towards self, family, and community, and pride in surviving difficult backgrounds and personal experiences, amongst others (CSC, 1990). The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) proposed the concept of a Healing Lodge.

Given the intersectionality of Indigenous women, they also have access to culturally relevant interventions through the Indigenous Continuum of Care model. This approach recognizes that Indigenous communities must be involved in supporting offenders during their healing journey and reintegration. The goal is to help offenders make a safer and successful

transition back to the community. An important part of the model is its centering on teachings from the Medicine Wheel,⁷ which help provide a balanced approach to Indigenous programming. Healing Lodges can be seen as a crucial part of the Medicine Wheel, offering community support and culturally appropriate care to Indigenous offenders. More broadly, Healing Lodges fall within CSC's priority to provide "effective, culturally appropriate interventions and reintegration support for First Nations, Métis and Inuit offenders" (CSC, 2022b).

Healing Lodges and Correctional Outcomes

Much of the literature that has examined Healing Lodges employ quantitative research methods to examine correctional outcomes. Research on women's Healing Lodges specifically has found that women released from Healing Lodges generally have similar post-release outcomes as their institutional counterparts (Didenko & Marquis, 2011; Hanby et al., 2022). For instance, a recent study involved a comparison of Indigenous women released from either CSC-operated or Section 81 Healing Lodges ($N = 134$) and a matched control group of Indigenous offenders released from mainstream institutions ($N = 134$) between April 2013 and March 2018. The post-release outcomes examined (i.e., suspensions and/or revocations of release) were commensurate, particularly when controlling for risk and need factors (Hanby et al., 2022). At intake, women Healing Lodge residents were higher in dynamic risk and lower in reintegration potential. However, compared to Indigenous women released from mainstream institutions, Healing Lodge residents were more likely to demonstrate reductions in the dynamic risk areas of Personal/ Emotional, Substance Abuse, and Associates. Prior to release, Healing Lodge residents had participated in more Escorted and Unescorted Temporary Absences (ETAs and UTAs, respectively) as well as work releases. Despite the efforts at gradual reintegration and improvements in dynamic risk, Healing Lodge residents were equally as likely to receive a discretionary release.

An earlier evaluation of Healing Lodges found similar results for the profile of residents and their post-release outcomes over a ten-year period from April 2000 to March 2010 (Didenko & Marquis, 2011). Focusing exclusively on the single CSC-operated women's Healing Lodge,

⁷ The Medicine Wheel varies according to different Indigenous traditions, teachings, and regions. It is commonly understood as a symbol of the circularity of life and the importance of wholeness or balance, as well as the interconnectedness of the four aspects of the self (CSC, 2013).

the evaluation found that conditional releases⁸ ($N = 153$) were equally as likely to be maintained in the community without a revocation of release as conditional releases from women's multi-level security institutions ($N = 441$). Indigenous women released from the CSC-operated Healing Lodge also demonstrated some improvements in dynamic risk areas, particularly in the Personal/Emotional domain. In contrast to the more recent study, women offenders from the CSC-operated Healing Lodges were more likely to be granted discretionary release than Indigenous offenders released from multi-level security institutions for women. There were significant differences in the profile of the offenders, with the conditionally released Indigenous women from the CSC-operated Healing Lodge demonstrating higher motivation and reintegration potential, and lower in static risk and dynamic need. After accounting for motivation and reintegration potential at intake, the likelihood of receiving a discretionary release was still greater for women from the Healing Lodge. The recent study and the evaluation report cannot be compared directly given that the evaluation study did not incorporate releases from Section 81 facilities. However, the findings of both studies indicated that the profile of women's Healing Lodge residents differed from Indigenous offenders released from mainstream institutions, and Healing Lodges had positive impacts on some of the highest dynamic need areas for women.

Healing Lodge Experiences

Beyond the correctional outcomes examined in quantitative research, a number of qualitative studies have provided a more nuanced understanding of the impacts of women's Healing Lodges on Indigenous offenders. In the most recent study of a women's Healing Lodge, Pilon and colleagues (2015) found that the culturally-informed approach of BSWH provided a positive, empowering, and supportive environment. In their interviews with nine residents and six staff, the results indicated that this model helped the residents to heal and gain a better understanding of themselves and their past, reconcile relationships, and increase their self-confidence. Residents praised the Healing Lodge for its ability to reconnect with their Indigenous culture, values, and ceremonies.

These generally high levels of resident experiences have been found at other Healing Lodges. Through the use of a survey, Barrett and colleagues (2010) found that residents ($N = 18$)

⁸ Note that a single offender may have contributed more than one release in the sample period. The unit of analysis was an offender's conditional release, and not an individual offender.

at OOH expressed high levels of satisfaction with the Healing Lodge's capacity to meet their spiritual needs and provide access to Elders. This is consistent with past research that has examined men's and women's Healing Lodges as a collective group. Findings from the evaluation of Healing Lodges (Didenko & Marquis, 2011) suggest that the majority of residents agreed that the Healing Lodge met their overall needs and increased their knowledge of their culture. Both residents and staff members reported that participation in Healing Lodges had a positive impact on residents' engagement in programs and cultural activities, as well as their self-awareness, self-confidence, motivation, personal responsibility, and pro-social attitudes. Interviews with women who had experiences at both a Healing Lodge and a mainstream institution revealed a preference for the holistic approach to Indigenous programming and the emphasis on connections between staff and residents (Pollack, 2009).⁹ Taken together, these studies underline the influence that Healing Lodges may have on residents' personal growth and connections to culture (Didenko & Marquis, 2011).

More broadly, qualitative research has highlighted a number of challenges facing the effective and efficient operations of these sites, though it should be noted that some of this research is dated. For instance, a number of evaluations have found that Healing Lodges are not operating at maximum capacity (Didenko & Marquis, 2011); however, some sites have succeeded in reaching occupancy levels near maximum capacity (Allegrì et al., 2012). A number of factors may be contributing to capacity challenges, such as difficulties with the transfer process (Allegrì et al., 2012), limited number of offenders who meet the security level criteria required to be eligible for transfer to a Healing Lodge (Didenko & Marquis, 2011), a lack of communication between federal institutions and Healing Lodges (Trevethan et al., 2002), and low staff and management awareness of Healing Lodge functioning resulting in low promotion to potential eligible offenders (Didenko & Marquis, 2011).

A number of the issues facing Healing Lodges relate to a lack of resources. A strain on resources directly affects the way Healing Lodges operate, particularly in terms of staff, training, programming, infrastructure, and community interaction (Trevethan et al., 2002). Resource related concerns are particularly prominent at Section 81 facilities. For instance, Combs (2018)

⁹ These results are part of a broader study which involved interviews with 68 women ($n = 22$ First Nations, Métis, or Inuit) who had served federal sentences in Canada. The article indicates that 11 of the women had been incarcerated at a Healing Lodge and another prison for women.

argues that the levels of funding targeted at Section 81 facilities are not comparable to those operated by CSC, resulting in lower wages for staff and, subsequently, higher levels of staff turnover and retraining requirements. Staff recruitment and retention challenges emerged in the recent process review of BSWH (Pilon et al., 2015). Building on this, different aspects of staffing issues have been identified in the Healing Lodge literature. The Office of the Correctional Investigator Annual Report 2017-2018 points out that while Healing Lodges were originally meant to be run primarily by Indigenous staff, this vision has not been achieved (OCI, 2018). McGuire and Murdoch (2022) argue that the low levels of Indigenous staff ultimately create an “ironic situation where Indigenous people get taught a generic Indigeneity by non-Indigenous individuals” (p. 14).

While overall women appreciate the access to cultural and spiritual traditions offered, residents have expressed concerns about the contradiction between healing and punishment present at Healing Lodges operated by the correctional system (Pollack, 2009). In particular, participants interviewed felt as though they were being forced to heal within the parameters set by CSC, as opposed to based on their own needs. Lastly, while community involvement is essential for the effective operation of Healing Lodges and maintaining an Indigenous-centered approach, an additional issue that has been identified is a lack of community involvement in the day-to-day operations of Healing Lodges (Trevethan et al., 2002).

Current Study

Overall, there is growing evidence for the relevance of Healing Lodges in providing culturally-specific and effective interventions for Indigenous offenders, though they are not without challenges. Despite the presence of some literature examining women’s Healing Lodges, much of this research is limited as it employs quantitative methodological approaches or combines results with those of men’s Healing Lodges. While previous research has looked at women’s Healing Lodges individually, it also has not looked at them collectively. This report will explore the first-hand experiences of both CSC-operated and Section 81 women’s Healing Lodges. Using semi-structured interviews, the goal of this study is to understand the experiences of residents, staff, and Elders/Spiritual Advisors to provide more insights about impacts that women’s Healing Lodges have on residents. This represents the second phase of a collection on qualitative study of Healing Loges. The first phase focused on men’s CSC-operated Healing Lodges (Ridha et al., 2023) and the final phase will examine men’s Section 81 facilities. This

research aims to identify the overall benefits of these environments, as well as the operational challenges and best practices at these sites.

Method

Procedure

Participants were recruited from Buffalo Sage Wellness House (BSWH; Edmonton, Alberta), Eagle Women's Lodge (EWL; Winnipeg, Manitoba), and Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge (OOHL; Nekaneet First Nation, Saskatchewan). This represents all of the women's Healing Lodges currently in operation. It includes the only women's Healing Lodge operated by CSC as well as the two women's Healing Lodges operated by Indigenous community partner organizations under Section 81 of the *CCRA*. Site visits and interviews were conducted between June 2022 and October 2022. All those residing in these Healing Lodges during the study period were eligible to participate, as well as Elders/Spiritual Advisors and staff working at these sites. Purposive sampling¹⁰ was used to recruit a sample of residents, Elders/Spiritual Advisors, and staff that were generally representative of the population. Posters outlining the overall purpose of the study were distributed to both the residents and staff in each site at least three weeks prior to the research team's site visit, with the assistance of a designated site contact. Participants were also recruited through announcements at assemblies and resident committees (e.g., Inmate Wellness Committee), staff referral, and directly recruiting participants while on-site. Sign-up sheets were provided in advance for participants, as well as being able to inform and sign-up with the research team directly in order to maintain anonymity.

Interviews across the Healing Lodges were conducted in-person during a one-week visit to each site. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted by two members of the research team in private offices at the Healing Lodges, each taking approximately thirty minutes to an hour to complete. Prior to commencing the interviews, all participants were provided with a brief verbal explanation of the project and an informed consent form to sign, which described the components of the study (see Appendix A for residents and Appendix B for Elders/Spiritual Advisors and staff). Participants were reassured that participation was voluntary and that confidentiality would be maintained through the removal and nondisclosure of any identifying information. Participants were also informed that they may withdraw from the study at any time, and that support services are available in the event they experience distress during or after the

¹⁰ Purposive sampling is a non-random sample whereby a specific target population is recruited. Given the nature and objectives of the study, participants entailed individuals who specifically reside or work at a women's Healing Lodge.

interview. Following these clarifications, informed consent was obtained, which included permission to have the interview audio recorded. All interviews were audio recorded, while detailed notes were also taken in the event that the audio recording failed. Following data collection, all interviews were transcribed verbatim by the research team to facilitate data analysis.

To identify emerging themes, interviews were thematically analyzed. All interviews were coded by one researcher to ensure consistency in analyses. However, it is recognized that bias may impact how responses were interpreted, coded, and categorized. Responses were grouped and coded into separate themes¹¹ or categories based on a review of all the interview data. As codes were generated, the emerging themes from the narratives of the participants were organized into main themes and over-arching, organizing categories. Codes were compared to each other to ensure that they were distinct, while those within the same theme were similar. In determining what constituted a discrete theme, effort was taken to preserve the language used by the participants.

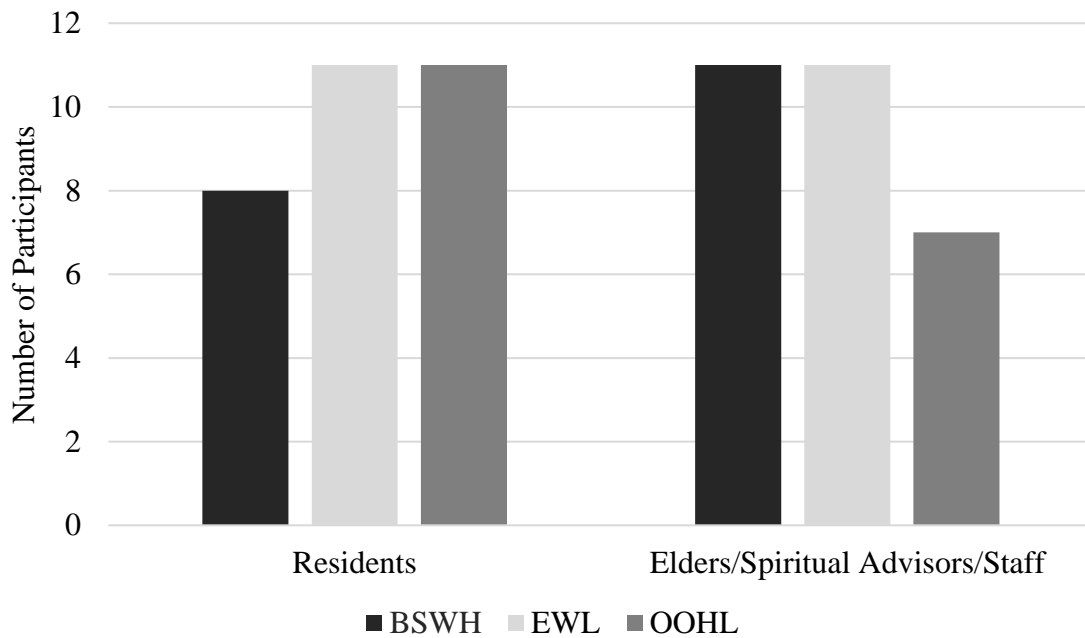
Participants

To capture a holistic and comprehensive view of the experiences, perspectives, and voices at the women's Healing Lodges, interviews were conducted with residents, Elders/Spiritual Advisors,¹² and staff members from across the three sites. In total, 30 Healing Lodge residents, three Elders/Spiritual Advisors, and 26 staff members were interviewed. Resident participants were fairly evenly distributed across sites, with slightly less resident representation at BSWH and less staff representation at OOHL (see Figure 1). Though position titles differed across site, staff participants represented a range of areas including programs, education, employment, resident support, case management, and senior management.

¹¹ A theme captures an important element from the data and represents a level of patterned response or meaning that often relates to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2013).

¹² Distinct from CSC staff, Elders/Spiritual Advisors within the Service are contractors.

Figure 1. Number of Participants by Site and Role.



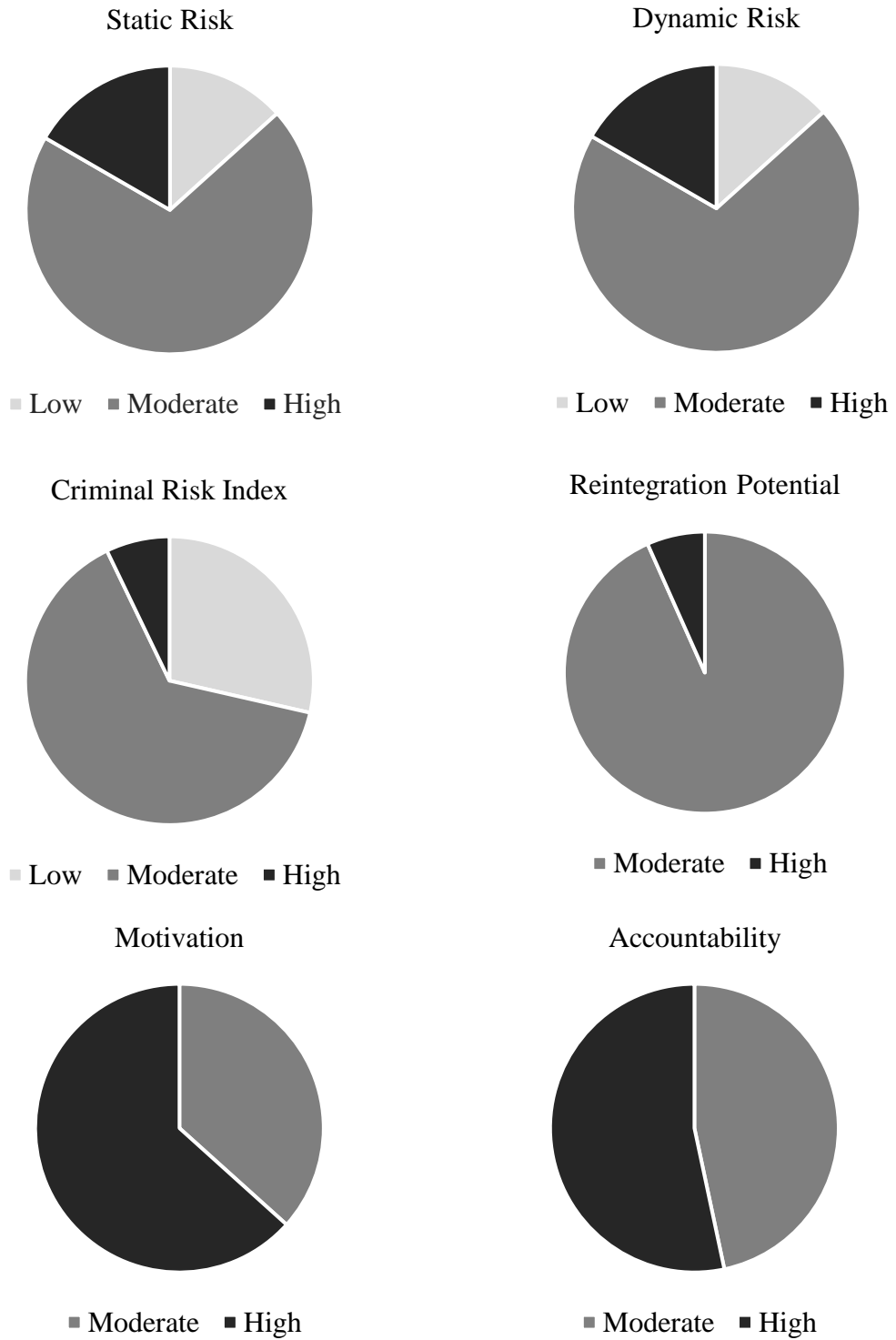
The majority of the residents (83.3%, $n = 25$) self-identified as Indigenous, and more specifically, as First Nations (56.7%, $n = 17$) or Métis (23.3%, $n = 7$). The residents were serving a determinate sentence in 90.0% ($n = 27$) of cases, with a mean sentence length of 4.2 years ($SD = 2.2$). More than half of the sample (60.0%, $n = 18$) was penitentiary placed at a Healing Lodge. Before being transferred to the current Healing Lodge, the mean length of time incarcerated was 1.1 years ($SD = 1.1$) for residents with a determinate sentence. While for the majority of residents their current residency represents their first transfer to a Healing Lodge, in a third of cases, the residents had previously resided in either the same or a different Healing Lodge (33.3%, $n = 10$).¹³ The average length of stay of the residents in the current Healing Lodge at the time of the interviews was 310 days ($SD = 274$).

The mean age of the residents was 36 years ($SD = 8$), and most of the women were single (53.3%, $n = 16$) or married/common law (23.4%, $n = 7$). As demonstrated in Figure 2, most of the participants had high (63.3%, $n = 19$) or moderate (33.3%, $n = 10$) levels of criminogenic need at their last assessment. The majority of the residents were rated as moderate on static risk (70.0%, $n = 21$), the Criminal Risk Index (60.0%, $n = 18$), and reintegration potential (93.3%, $n = 28$). All participants were rated as engaged, with a high (63.3%, $n = 19$) or moderate (36.7%, $n = 12$) level of engagement.

¹³ For policy regarding the transfer of inmates, refer to Commissioner’s Directive 710-2 (CSC, 2019c).

= 11) motivation level, and a high (53.3%, $n = 16$) or moderate (46.7%, $n = 14$) level of accountability. A quarter of the participants had identified responsivity factors (23.3%, $n = 7$).

Figure 2. Risk, Need, and Engagement Characteristics of Resident Sample



Materials

The semi-structured interview protocol was developed for this study based on the research questions and prior research on Healing Lodges. Specifically, interviews focused on the experiences, services/interventions, as well as the operation of the Healing Lodges. Separate interview guides were created for residents, as well as for staff and Elders/Spiritual Advisors in consultation with CSC's Indigenous Initiatives Directorate and each of the participating Healing Lodges (see Appendix C for residents and Appendix D for Elders/Spiritual Advisors and staff). Residents were asked about their participation/involvement in various interventions and activities (e.g., programs, employment and vocational training, education, hobby crafts and social programs, and temporary absences) and their experiences in each area. Residents were also asked reflective questions about their experience at the Healing Lodge, such as about their transfer, their healing journey, the dynamics, as well their preparations for release.

For staff and Elders/Spiritual Advisors, questions were more tailored based on their role within the Healing Lodge to obtain a thorough understanding of the different areas (e.g., case management, interventions, security). Staff and Elders/Spiritual Advisors were asked to speak about their work, experiences, and observations from being at the Healing Lodge, the areas that are having a positive impact, as well as on the challenges facing the operation of the Healing Lodge. Questions were listed along with possible prompts or follow-up questions that could be used at the discretion of the interviewers, leaving room for more open-ended or flexible discussions to take place. The interview guides were intended to serve as a reference for relevant topics and questions that may be asked, rather than a strict guide to be followed.

Offender demographic, sentence, and risk information were extracted from the Offender Management System (OMS), the automated system used by CSC to store decision-making and offender management data from the beginning of an offender's sentence until the sentence is complete.

Results

The interviews with the residents, staff, and Elders/Spiritual Advisors from BSWH, EWL, and OOHL revealed key themes around the experiences within the Healing Lodges, which are presented by five organizing themes. The first section explores the overall environment within the Healing Lodges and the impact that the experience has on residents and their healing journeys and cultural identity. The second section examines in more detail some of the interventions and opportunities offered within the Healing Lodges, such as the programs, employment, vocational training, and education. The third section examines the unique relationships and sense of community present within the Healing Lodges. The fourth section considers how the Healing Lodges facilitate reintegration, including ties to family, friends, and community. Lastly, the fifth section considers the operational challenges and best practices present within these sites. While the results of this study are presented into five organizing sections, the themes are not to be seen as strictly dichotomous as many of the themes are interconnected in that they contextualize each other and thus, collectively shed light on the overall experiences within Healing Lodges.

Overall Environment and Experience

The emphasis on culture and spirituality, including opportunities to participate in ceremonies and cultural activities, help guide residents through their healing journeys and maintain or strengthen their cultural identities. While the overall environment at each of the Healing Lodges are multifaceted, consistent across all are the holistic, trauma-informed, gender-based approaches that promote commitment and accountability. Also weaved throughout the perspectives of residents and staff are comparisons of the Healing Lodge experience to other correctional environments. The overall environment and experience of residents diverged in another key manner, whether the location of the Healing Lodge is in a rural or urban setting.

Emphasis on culture and spirituality. While ceremonies and cultural activities may also be conceptualized as interventions or opportunities, they are discussed within the theme of overall experience and environment as they are reflective of an Indigenous way of life that is fostered at all of the women's Healing Lodges. There are a variety of ceremonies offered to residents of the Healing Lodges, such as Sweat Lodges, Sundances, Pipe Ceremonies, Full Moon

Ceremonies, Smudges, and Pow Wows.¹⁴ Each site holds a morning circle, typically led by an Elder/Spiritual Advisor, and includes a prayer and smudge. There are various opportunities for engaging and learning cultural hobby crafts, such as beading, star blankets, ribbon skirts, and medicine picking. Each of the Healing Lodges also offers other cultural opportunities unique to their site. For instance, BSWH has a community garden that residents visit with the Elder, which also incorporates cultural teachings. Residents at EWL benefit from access to the sweat lodge at North Star Lodge, a residential sister site within the umbrella of the Indigenous Women's Healing Centre. At OOHL, many of the cultural and spiritual opportunities take place in the spiritual lodge, which was described as a “*special and sacred space*” (OOHL staff) to facilitate the ceremonies. Many residents report engaging with the Traditional Healers on site at OOHL, benefiting from their cultural activities and healing practices, performed in a comforting, non-judgemental manner.

There is a strong emphasis placed on these opportunities and an expectation that residents take part in or engage in the diverse range of ceremonies and cultural activities available to them. While residents report that there are plenty of cultural opportunities available both in-house and in the community, some concerns were raised by residents at BSWH regarding the requirements for mandatory participation, particularly when balancing other commitments such as programs and employment. At all sites, staff and residents highlighted that while participation in cultural activities and ceremonies is mandatory, some flexibility is offered in terms of what that participation involves. For instance, residents can assist with the Sweat Lodge ceremony if they are not participating in the sweat. Staff reported that patience is practiced in recognizing that each resident has varying degrees of exposure to their culture prior to transfer to the Healing Lodges and that they may be in different stages of their healing journey. As an example, residents will have an opportunity to learn the proper protocols prior to attending a specific ceremony. As a staff member at EWL expands:

You're in a Healing Lodge on a healing journey. We have an expectation for you to be part of it, and they do it in a very respectful way, meaning understanding that people are in different phases of their healing.

In many cases, the Healing Lodge was instrumental in helping initiate a resident's healing

¹⁴ While some of these ceremonies are common to all the sites, such as Sweats, other ceremonies are unique to specific sites, given differences in Indigenous teachings and traditions. However, common amongst all ceremonies across the sites are the guidance and leadership of the Elders/Spiritual Advisors.

journey and connection to their cultural identity. Many residents indicated that they did not have the opportunity to participate in their culture growing up or before they were incarcerated. In some cases (particularly those at Section 81 facilities), the resident had already started practicing traditional healing and begun their healing journey at a previous institution (e.g., engaging with Elder/Spiritual Advisor, participation in the Pathways Initiative¹⁵, previous Healing Lodge experience). Given that many residents were learning Indigenous cultures for the first time, they also did not have a cultural identity until they came into a correctional institution or the Healing Lodge. As a resident from OOHL explains:

Something was missing from me growing up and my life experiences and the way I was raised. [...] I never really had a good understanding of spirituality until I started engaging in those ceremonies and just acknowledging my culture and like yeah, it was just... so meaningful and that's exactly what was missing was my spirituality in that sense of identity and who I am.

A recurring theme that emerged was that opportunities to take part in ceremonies and engage in their culture are instrumental in the residents' path towards healing. In particular, residents share how taking part in ceremonies as well as learning and understanding associated teachings helps give a sense of direction and purpose. A resident from OOHL explains:

I never understood or appreciated myself or my culture and now I'm in a place where I really like myself and I really love myself and it's taken a long time to actually get to that place and I feel like understanding my culture and I guess being involved in it really helped me find myself, find that balance I needed.

More specifically, residents indicated the emotional healing resulting from participating in ceremonies, as they felt there were opportunities to be vulnerable and work through pains. For many of the residents, this was often expressed as opportunities to reconcile heavy feelings of shame, guilt, remorse, and grief. Through these experiences, residents benefit immensely from the Elder/Spiritual Advisors' knowledge and wisdom of traditional ways, as will be explored further below.

Involvement in cultural hobby crafts was often expressed by residents as being instrumental for healing and valuable for connecting to culture. This was often noted as providing residents with a creative outlet to heal and work through their emotions. In many of

¹⁵ Located at women's multi-level institutions, Pathways Initiatives are designed to provide a healing environment for those Indigenous offenders already engaged in and committed to their personal healing path with more intensive healing interventions.

these processes, residents expressed how they are able to reflect and build understandings of their culture, given that cultural items carry sets of meaning and teachings. Also emerging from the narratives of the residents is the experience to connect to people and place through cultural opportunities. As one OOHL resident describes her experience with drumming:

It's just a way to support each other and be there for each other and a way for all of us to come together. The Elders say the drum is like a heartbeat, so when you hear it, you feel it at the same time.

Overall, the cultural focus of the Healing Lodges was praised by the residents, particularly in comparison to their previous institutional experiences. This focus allowed them the opportunity to strengthen and/or maintain their cultural identity and spirituality. A resident of BSWH describe how the cultural opportunities have impacted her identity:

I just kind of have more sense of who I am in a sense and where I came from and how I got to be where I am. Like, I have more understanding because before I really didn't know too much about it.

Residents across the Healing Lodges commonly shared how their involvement and participation in ceremonies and cultural activities were instrumental as they create opportunities for building an identity outside of who they once were. As a resident at BSWH explains:

I try to keep that balance where I am taking care of myself, like the quadrants of the Medicine Wheel. Physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually. I have to keep that balance with me because I have to continue with my spirituality, that's what kept me going most of the time I was here. It's strong here because they teach... There's everything that's offered here, Sundance, sweat lodge, they take us out to round dances, pow wows. Anything they can offer to help us build up our identity and that is what helped me the most. 'Cause growing up in my community there was nothing like that. I didn't have an identity until I came to jail. I have strong values in my life and I didn't have that growing up as a youth.

Holistic approach. Beyond the emphasis on Indigenous culture and spirituality throughout the sites, the holistic and unique environments of Healing Lodges further help guide residents on their healing journeys. “We just try to be holistic in everything that we do,” a staff member at EWL indicates. While there is a strong emphasis on culture and spirituality, this is supported by an integrated approach with programs, addictions treatment, release planning (e.g., employment, housing), and opportunities to develop and/or enhance community connections and prosocial supports. This wraparound approach provides residents with a structure that many have not had up until that point. A staff member at EWL explains how this structure provides the foundation for learning new skills:

It's like, "I've never had structure before in my whole entire life," so I think even in institutions there's not, a lot of them talk about sleeping their time away, that's a huge thing that happens, but we don't let them do that. [...] Like I think that's a huge thing is having structure. They leave knowing how to cook. Some of them come in knowing, but lots of them don't. How to do chores, it seems simple, that's not, it's not common sense.

At the Section 81 facilities where many of the residents are on or approaching conditional release, the first-hand accounts reveal a strong emphasis on the release planning and community connections aspects of reintegration. Efforts focused on setting up a network of stability and support that would continue once released into the community, such as employment, housing, and AA/NA in the community. Many of the residents noted that they “*try to utilize the help that's available, here, right now*” (OOHL resident). A BSWH staff member explains how residents who maximize these opportunities benefit:

I think the changes that I see is like a weight has been lifted off their shoulders when they are here at the lodge. They are really able to connect with their culture and their spirituality and figure out a game plan for how they are going to move forward.

Both residents and staff at the Section 81 facilities highlighted how the smaller setting makes the residents feel like there is more focus on each of them personally. For example, some residents at BSWH perceived that they have more chances to participate in events in the community given the reduced number of residents contending for the opportunities.

At all of the Healing Lodges, most of the residents interviewed expressed that they had experienced some form of trauma in their past. Many of the residents also spoke of traumatic experiences while incarcerated. The residents praised the Healing Lodge for its trauma-informed approaches. Some residents had not considered the role that childhood trauma or intergenerational trauma had played in their offence history. Notably, it is the cultural and spiritual environment of the Healing Lodges that residents express as permitting them to unpack and understand their unaddressed histories, much of which were realized to have led to their current circumstances. As a staff member at BSWH explains:

I believe that the Healing Lodge, really kind of, it deals with their trauma in a way I think other institutions don't. In a way that really connects them spiritually with themselves and grounds them a different sense. And a lot of them have because of intergenerational trauma, don't know their culture, haven't known their culture, have been discarded of their culture.

While the Elders/Spiritual Advisors are evidently fundamental in supporting and guiding residents through this introspective work and journeys towards healing, the holistic approach

within Healing Lodges adopted by staff further assist residents in this regard. Across sites, staff spoke of how they assist residents in realizing how their current behaviour or circumstances may be interlaced or otherwise linked with their social histories and traumas. As such, the environment throughout the Healing Lodge is characterized by a sense of recognition and understanding of the experiences of the residents. Residents expressed gratitude for the opportunity to unpack these issues at the Healing Lodge. As a resident at OOHHL explains:

I feel like if I ended up anywhere else, I wouldn't be who I am today, I would probably be in that same mentality as I was before. The Healing Lodge has helped me out a lot like realizing my crime and my traumas and my grief. It helped me focus on rebuilding relationships with my daughter. I don't know, just everybody has helped me out a lot here.

In recognition of their unique social history, traumas, and experiences, staff employ a trauma-informed approach in supporting the residents. For instance, the trauma-based programming was highlighted by staff as particularly beneficial to residents' healing at all sites. The Spirit of the Warrior program that is offered at the Section 81 facilities was commended by residents and staff for its acknowledgement of childhood trauma and its impacts on healing and growth. As a staff member at BSWH explains, "*women really need to be brought back to a child like state because that's where their trauma first occurs.*" Due to the intense nature of some of the programs offered, staff work closely to provide participants the extra support they may need while participating in programs. For example, staff and residents indicated that there are extra check-ins with participating residents when they are covering especially emotionally exhausting content. At BSWH, the Native Counselling Services of Alberta (NCSA) resiliency model¹⁶ employed in their practices was praised by a number of staff as a framework to guide healing, introspection, and relationships.

Participants were provided the opportunity during their interview to offer feedback in regards to gender-specific needs. The resounding majority of residents reported that they are receiving care that is appropriate to their gender needs. Residents often provided examples related to health care to demonstrate the gender responsive care they are receiving. In addition, most of the residents highlighted how the Healing Lodge is a safe space for women and, for the

¹⁶ The NCSA Resiliency Model is an "overarching theory that guides our healing, resilience building and practice. Individual, family and community resilience is synonymous with the state of connectedness of the members of the family and community (broadly defined): it is the ability to maintain connectedness to family and community, as well as the natural environment and the cosmos" (NCSA, 2023).

Section 81 facilities that offer the Mother Child program and other family reunification efforts, their children.

The narratives reveal that the therapeutic environment and opportunities allow the residents to heal, recover, and reclaim their cultural identity. From the perspectives of residents, staff, and Elders/Spiritual Advisors, the Healing Lodges emulate a community which teaches residents an Indigenous way of life. It provides a sense of belonging, purpose, and stability and everything reinforces a sense of community and family. For instance, residents are required to learn to live together and address conflicts in a productive manner. In addition, staff report that they take a positive approach through encouragement, as opposed to an emphasis on the negatives.

Apparent from the perspectives of the Elders/Spiritual Advisors and staff as well as the experiences of the residents, the environment and approach within the Healing Lodges is one in which residents are held accountable for their engagement with and commitment to an Indigenous way of life. As a resident at OOHL explains, *“I think you get out of this place what you put into it.”* Unlike mainstream institutional settings, there are expectations that residents are engaging and taking part in ceremonies, cultural opportunities, and teachings throughout the Healing Lodge. At all sites, there are also expectations in terms of house rules and contributions to the Healing Lodge (e.g., programs, chores, work). As a staff member at BSWH highlights, *“accountability is key to being in a Healing Lodge.”* As a resident from OOHL explains, these expectations differ from institutional settings:

When I first got here, of course I wasn't too thrilled about having to, I guess be accountable for my time. I was used to being in provincial where you just did time really not doing anything, so it is nice to have something to do everyday and actually be expected to be there. I enjoy the expectations personally, it gives me that motivation to fill those expectations and then in return I have higher expectations of myself.

These expectations provide a sense of structure, and ultimately, help prepare residents for release, as a BSWH staff member explains:

I think it prepares them with a little bit of responsibility. So everyone here has to follow our rules. Like, it's getting used to doing curfew again, doing chores, following a schedule. And I think that routine and that responsibility kind of helps prepare them, like holding themselves accountable.

Across the Healing Lodges, residents are expected to sign an agreement to acknowledge and accept that they will commit, be engaged, and be dedicated to both their healing journeys

and the rules of the site. Signing this agreement is intended to be a method of holding residents accountable to their engagement throughout the Healing Lodges and serve as a reminder to their commitment. In addition, staff play a role in supporting and keeping residents engaged.

Throughout the interviews, staff provided examples where residents would be reminded of their commitment to their healing journeys in order to instill and reinforce accountability. Residents who are seen as disengaged in their healing journeys or show signs of complacency may have intervention from staff or Elders/Spiritual Advisors or a loss of privileges. For instance, at OOHL, there are a range of interventions (e.g., mediation, reminder circles) and consequences (e.g., extra chores) that are available to keep residents accountable. At BSWH, staff highlighted that while there is a recognition that residents may make a mistake, staff are understanding and offer second chances if residents demonstrate honesty and accountability for their actions.

Through this holistic approach, the Healing Lodge provides residents with a different way of looking at themselves and the world. Taken together, this holistic approach creates a positive environment that fosters growth and maturity. Residents and staff alike acknowledged the changes observed in residents' self-esteem, empowerment, vulnerability, and life skills in their time at the site. As a staff member at EWL explains:

They also leave with the ability to open up and be vulnerable. Lots of them were hardened or very, have like a street mentality. I'm generally speaking, but we allow them a space where it's like OK to share some of the things you're ashamed of.

The Healing Lodges fosters a space in which residents can work on themselves by engaging in introspection, reflection, and growth through culture and spirituality. Residents provided examples of how their individual healing journeys involved developing and maintaining balance, dealing with emotions, working through traumas and histories, breaking cycles, making connections, and/or figuring themselves out. A resident from OOHL describes her journey in reclaiming her identity, "*It's really about like your inner self, that balance in your life, you need that to be well.*" These themes, which emerge from the first-hand insights of the residents and are further reinforced by Elders/Spiritual Advisors and staff, collectively illustrate the ways in which residents are able to intricately engage in their healing journeys at the Healing Lodges. Though it can be a slow process, residents make significant gains from the time they arrive to when they are released. A staff member at EWL describes the growth observed in residents over time:

The growth, like I always use the Medicine Wheel. The Medicine Wheel has four stages:

child, youth, adult, and elder. When a lot of them come to us, they are in that child, on their way to youth, kind of section. And we walk them through that and try to when they leave, have them in that elder section. So it is growth, it is maturity. It's them developing self-love and believing in themselves. Um, yeah, that is our goal and to be, to be proud of their sobriety. And well structured. All of that. When they leave, you can see a huge difference. Some of them, when they come to us, a lot of them do not have the self-esteem. They don't have many skills, practical skills. So we just make sure they have all of that so that when they are leaving us, they actually don't want to leave. But they leave confident.

Comparison to other correctional experiences. A common theme in the responses shared by residents were the perceived dehumanizing aspects they reported experiencing previously in mainstream correctional institutions. Residents provided examples such as being referred to by their last name or a number, instability and conflict amongst inmates, and a sense of fear and survival as they learned to navigate a different set of rules. The Healing Lodge was often described as being a place of recovering from the damage done by the institution. A resident at BSWH explains how the environment at the Healing Lodge is different from the institution:

Everybody talks to everybody. Like it is a totally different dynamic than in the [penitentiary]. There you have to worry about survival and there is so many little, like rules the inmates expect you to follow, kind of thing. Like, it's different. Here it is more of a community and everybody is here to heal and that is generally like the energy.

Residents reported that unlike their institutional experience, in the Healing Lodge they “treat you like a human” (BSWH resident). As a staff member at OOHl explains, the residents talk about “how this place is different from any kind of place. From other places where they are just treated like a number. And here they are called by their name.” Many residents emphasized how they feel motivated and trusted given the living arrangements and environment offered within the Healing Lodges. For instance, there are no fences at any of the Healing Lodges, and a certain level of freedom is offered, depending on the residents’ status (i.e., whether they are inmate status or conditionally released). Many of the residents at EWL spoke with pride about having their own suites and the hard work they had put in to earn that privilege.

While the relationship between residents and staff within the Healing Lodges are open and dynamic, notably the narratives reveal that this type of interaction and sense of community is unlike those found in mainstream correctional institutions. Residents often highlighted the pivotal role of staff in re-inscribing into them a sense of humanity. A notable aspect of the environment that further contributes to the generally positive relationship between residents and

staff is the absence of uniforms amongst staff. This practice enhances the approachability of staff and eliminates a potential trigger of distrust of authority. While some residents reported feeling trepidation when they first arrived at the Healing Lodge and a tendency to put up a hard exterior, the welcoming approach at the sites helped ease their transition. For instance, at EWL, the residents are provided with a laundry basket with new essential items such as bedding, slippers, and toiletries. Overall, a common theme in the responses of residents was a sense of gratitude for the opportunity to be at the Healing Lodges and all that the therapeutic environment offers. As a resident from OOHL articulates, *“I belong here, this is where I’m supposed to be in my life and with everybody I’m meeting.”*

Location of Healing Lodge. The Healing Lodges are located in either urban or rural settings, allowing for an examination of the benefits and challenges of the locations of the sites.

Urban locations. BSWH and EWL are both located in urban areas, with similar experiences expressed by residents and staff. The location of the Healing Lodge was seen as beneficial for those residents who wanted to stay close to their family, promoting more face-to-face interactions with them. The central locations of the Healing Lodges in Edmonton (BSWH) and Winnipeg (EWL) also made it so residents could easily access services and resources in the community (e.g., programs, sponsors), or even trips to shopping centres which residents identified as an important step in their reintegration. Staff explained that residents often need to learn or relearn crucial skills such as how to navigate public transportation and the city in general. Learning these systems and establishing connections with programs and services is particularly advantageous for those residents that plan on staying in the city post-release, as the Healing Lodge is *“able to help them connect with resources within the city and it just helps them reintegrate”* (EWL staff).

At BSWH, access to natural spaces such as the river valley and a community garden was praised by residents: *“We are in a big city but once you end up on the trails, it is like you are in the woods.”* As a BSWH resident explains, this promotes healing and physical well-being: *“It’s good for your mental health. It’s good exercise. It’s nice to be able to connect with the city in a different way. Instead of like just always focusing on where you are going, what you have to do that day, it’s nice to just kind of reset.”*

While residents had many good things to say about the nature of having a Healing Lodge in the city, concerns were raised about the specific location of the Healing Lodges in the

downtown areas of Edmonton and Winnipeg as there is “*temptation everywhere*” (EWL resident). Residents reported that they were routinely exposed to crime, drugs, and violence, which can be triggering for them and negatively affects their healing. As a resident at EWL explains:

I mean we're in the West End, like it's not exactly the greatest neighbourhood either, right? And so as soon as I got into the city and we started to pull up, I immediately started getting anxiety. [...] Like it triggered me immediately. And then just being outside, sometimes you see all sorts of things.

However, many of the residents will also eventually be released to similar areas that might be considered high risk, offering the additional benefit of preparing residents to face “*real challenges that they are going to face once they are released*” (EWL staff). A resident from EWL explains, “*I know the area is not the greatest, but let's just be realistic here. A lot of us ain't going to be living in better areas, so if you can handle it in here you can handle it anywhere.*” One BSWH resident describes it as building up a tolerance to the high-risk situations:

So much is happening in the city. Like every corner, something horrible has happened or I know someone who has lived there. So it's kind of nice because then you are faced with all these little things and you eventually build up a tolerance and a different mind set as to just getting out and being thrown. Because it is nice idea, 'I'll be fine when I get out, I'll just stay away from these areas.' But you don't realize, even driving somewhere you are going to see addicts, you are going to see people that you don't want to see, places you never wanted to see again. So it is nice to have a little bit of that here.

Both residents and staff suggested that because many of them would eventually leave the Healing Lodge to live in a city, learning how to cope with potentially triggering events while having the support of the Healing Lodge makes them stronger and builds essential skills. As an EWL staff contends, “*This is great practice. This is a good place to get triggered, where you have support.*” A number of residents demonstrated their growth in encountering potentially triggering situations, such as past negative associates. As a resident from EWL explains:

Even if I do see people that I know on the street that I know, I just usually be like, “hey, how is it going” and I keep walking. Like I don't stand around and talk to them about whatever they are doing you know 'cause I really could care less about what they are doing. I am just out here to do me and that is it.

Rural locations. While OOHL is the only women's CSC-operated Healing Lodge, it is also the only rural site located on the land of an Indigenous community. Situated on Nekaneet First Nation in Saskatchewan, the location and its connection to nature is particularly

noteworthy. As a resident describes, “it’s very peaceful here, calm. There’s lots of nice trails, walking paths, the animals... it’s different from being in the city.” A common theme in the responses was how the location provides a therapeutic atmosphere for healing. As a resident articulates:

Being out here in the nature and I think that’s where a lot of my healing came from too, was just feeling really, like even though I’m locked up, I feel really free here. I haven’t had that feeling in a long time, I always felt really congested in my city I guess [...] I feel like here’s a lot of freedom and like I was able to clear my mind and I don’t know, I think it had a lot to do with the nature and just where we are and how we do things.

The remote location means that residents have fewer potential distractions and can focus on themselves. Beyond being surrounded by nature, being on the sacred land of Okimaw Ohci also offers comfort and a special connection to culture and spirituality. As an Elder explains, “it’s a sacred hills, Okimaw Ohci, our sacred hills, so there’s a lot of stuff that can help you here to go through your process of recovering your spirit and then moving on to healing journey.”

The sacred location resonated with the residents as well. As one resident expresses its impact on her healing journey:

I found it’s like really helpful because like my ancestors, my people are really connected to Mother Earth and just to be away from all the hustle of an urban city is great. It makes me take that time out to work on what I need to work on being in this environment. It feels very spiritual because I know when they started this place, they did it in a spiritual way and just like even the building being made of cedar and then if you look from up above, it’s in the shape of an eagle. It’s just like everything about this place is really spiritual, so I really like it that its way out here ‘cause it wouldn’t be the same if it was in a city. We have all our teachings that they give us are connected to this place, it’s part of Mother Earth.

The location also brings a sense of freedom to the residents that was perceived as key to their healing, as opposed to feeling institutionalized or “locked up.” As a resident explains:

It’s open, you don’t feel caged in. Even just leaving your house to come up to use the phone and stuff like that. You get that sense of freedom, just not being locked in. Being able to roam around, I think all that plays a part in the comfort, not feeling so institutionalized and so locked up.

While staff commended the beauty of the rural location of OOHL, its remote location brings auxiliary advantages from a security perspective, “we don’t need no fences, we got wildlife that is keeping them in” (OOHL staff). In addition to deterring resident escapes, the location also discourages security breaches from outsiders. As an OOHL staff member explains:

Because we're really isolated it's not like we have drones flying over or it's not like someone can drive up and drop off drugs because we are out in the middle of nowhere and if you drive onto the reserve, people will know.

From the perspectives of residents, the remote location is limiting in terms of access to in-person visits, which was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The distance from families, children, and positive supports emerged as the main drawback of OOHL. Staff pointed out that some services and resources for residents are limited given the location. From the perspectives of staff, some challenges were highlighted in connection to the remote location of OOHL, such as recruitment of staff and driving conditions to get to the site.

Interventions and Opportunities

Beyond the variety of cultural activities and ceremonies offered at the Healing Lodges, a range of interventions and opportunities are available for residents to engage in. These opportunities include programs, education/vocational/employment prospects, family reunification (i.e., Mother-Child program), and other prosocial activities. The narratives of residents, Elders/Spiritual Advisors, and staff shed light on the significance of these various opportunities within the Healing Lodges and reveal how they contribute to the overall healing and rehabilitation of residents, as well as preparation for release.

Programs. Across the Healing Lodges, significant opportunities are available for residents to participate in programs though the offerings differ by site. At OOHL, CSC's national correctional programs for Indigenous women are delivered to address the risk factors and needs of residents.¹⁷ These programs are viewed as instrumental as they target factors linked to offending through an Indigenous lens and the consideration of intergenerational impacts, childhood trauma, cycle breaking, and substance use. Residents at OOHL often reported that taking part in the correctional programs at the Healing Lodge aided them in their progression in their healing journey. As an OOHL resident explains about the engagement program component:

It was really relaxed and I felt really comfortable with the instructor and with the other people in there. I learned a lot about myself. I didn't really like the idea of taking programming at first, I was a bit stubborn, but once I kind of like... the instructor really helped a lot because she was able to provide a safe space where I could put my guard down and was able to open up and with that, it provided, with the other people that were there, they were able to provide me with trust as well.

¹⁷ OOHL delivers CSC's engagement, moderate intensity, and high intensity correctional programs for women, as well the engagement and self-management program components (CSC, 2021a).

In addition to the nationally recognized correctional programs, there are a number of other in-house programs (e.g., Self-Management and Recovery Training [SMART] recovery, parenting, Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous). Residents at OOHL are also offered the unique opportunity to participate in the Nekaneet Horse Program, a holistic program that promotes the four major components of the Medicine Wheel and a healthy lifestyle: physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional. While respecting Nekaneet beliefs, residents receive horse teachings and learn to care for the horses on site in a therapeutic setting, *“We get teachings like everyday, we are in the classroom all morning, in the barn in the afternoon, and it’s really good to just interact with the horses”* (OOHL resident). The program was perceived by residents as beneficial to their healing as it encourages self-reflection with the support of the facilitators in *“a safe space to share”* (OOHL resident).

At the Section 81 facilities, residents also benefit from a number of in-house programs (e.g., healthy relationships, parenting, grief and loss, substance abuse programming, life skills) that were often described as more in-depth and intense than those offered in institutions. For instance, the Spirit of the Warrior is a healing program offered at both BSWH and EWL that provides residents with an opportunity to gain insight into how violence and addiction has evolved in their lives, *“It makes you open your eyes and go places where you would just rather forget”* (BSWH resident). One resident at BSWH described it as *“deep and exhausting”* and something that *“physically takes everything out of you.”* Several residents stated that they had decided to come to BSWH specifically for the Spirit of the Warrior program. The residents acknowledged that the program was *“empowering”* and helped them to understand how problematic behaviours were passed from generation to generation, while learning new skills to manage their own behaviours. As a BSWH resident describes:

What struck me the most about the Spirit of the Warrior program was inner child, going back to my childhood. And that’s where a lot of my trauma stems from and I didn’t expect that because all the other programs it was more focused on the adulthood perspective. Spirit of the Warrior took me way back to my childhood. And it opened up old wounds, so it struck me a lot but it helped me.

In a similar vein, Recovery and Education for Addictions and Complex Trauma (RE/ACT) is a program offered at EWL designed to start repairing the effects of complex

trauma.¹⁸ Residents considered this program beneficial in helping them to understand how complex trauma had impacted them personally in all aspects of their lives including addiction. Similar themes were endorsed by the Elder/Spiritual Advisors and staff on the impacts of these programs on rehabilitation. For example, an EWL staff member reports, *“I’m so grateful that they do RE/ACT here. I think it’s really integral in their healing journeys to understand their traumas.”*

Common across all sites is that the majority of the programs offered are rooted in culture. As an Elder/Spiritual Advisor¹⁹ explains, *“The fundamentals of the program are culturally-based. Our program is based in spirituality, so the cultural activities and the cultural teachings here are what is the basis of the healing.”* As such, the programs incorporate cultural practices, such as opening and closing each day with a smudge and prayer and a sharing circle on the topic being discussed. Though emotionally exhausting, the residents at each of the Healing Lodges reported benefits from the culturally-appropriate programming offered at the sites. Residents felt that they were making progress in their healing and would leave the Healing Lodge feeling empowered and stronger.

While the programs at all sites were generally praised positively, some concerns were raised about the requirement to participate in programs at Section 81 facilities, particularly by those residents who had completed programs at other institutions or Healing Lodges. As an EWL staff explains, *“They tend to say that they’re programmed out a long time, some of them, especially ones that have done a lot of programs in the prison.”* In some cases, the programs were described as repetitive from those previously completed as there was overlap in the content delivered, and residents pointed out that having to continue to bring up old traumas was re-traumatizing.

Some residents raised concerns regarding the mandatory nature of programming as they felt it was an impediment to their reintegration. Specifically, given the time commitments involved in programs, they were unable to seek employment in the community. It is important to note that the Section 81 facilities inform residents of expectations to complete programming

¹⁸ Complex trauma is considered the result of a person living in an unsafe environment for an extended period of time (e.g., due to abuse, neglect, abandonment). The result is that in order to survive, a person must live in a Fight, Flight, or Freeze state of being. Living in survival mode creates systems of thought and behaviour that result in unhealthy relationships, unhealthy coping tools, shame, and in some cases, mental health challenges (Indigenous Women’s Healing Centre, 2021).

¹⁹ The sites of the Elders/Spiritual Advisors are not indicated where possible to protect their identities.

prior to their transfer. From the perspectives of staff, the opportunities to participate in programs within the Healing Lodge are a major benefit, *“I love that this centre offers all these things because if you were to go into the community, you’d have to find these yourself. And then there’s waiting lists. And then there’s costs. It’s challenging out there”* (EWL staff).

Employment, vocational training, and educational opportunities. Opportunities for employment and education are available at each of the Healing Lodges, though the emerging themes were distinct between the CSC-operated Healing Lodge and the Section 81 facilities. Given that OOHL is in a remote location and the full population is inmate status (as opposed to the Section 81 facilities that have a proportion of the residents on conditional release), many of the opportunities are on site. At BSWH and EWL, as residents prepare for or are already on conditional release, the focus is less on providing in-house opportunities and more on finding employment and education in the community that may continue into reintegration.

At OOHL, the residents benefit from a variety of employment and vocational training opportunities that are provided by CSC. There are a number of meaningful work placement offered, including some culturally-relevant jobs (e.g., Elder’s helper, hobbies) that allow residents to benefit from additional time with the Elders/Spiritual Advisors. Residents can also apply to work with CORCAN, a special operating agency within CSC that offers an employment and employability program consisting of on-the-job training, apprenticeship hours, vocational certifications, and essential skills training (CSC, 2022a). Residents spoke highly of their experience in the program, the CORCAN staff, and its impact on their employability as it *“opens up so many opportunities”* (OOHL resident). From the perspectives of staff, the expectation that residents work and contribute to the Healing Lodge helps prepare residents for reintegration. The work experience, certificates, and references that residents gain further bolsters their employment prospects in the community. The vocational training offerings (e.g., food handler safety, warehouse worker, chainsaw safety, forklift simulator, Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System [WHMIS]) are regarded as helpful as residents develop skills that can help them in finding future employment.

OOHL also benefits from educational opportunities offered through CSC, and there is a high demand for these opportunities to complete certificates and diplomas. The teachers on site were described by the residents as *“encouraging”* and *“motivating.”* One OOHL resident highlighted the significant role that one of the teachers had played in her rehabilitation:

Out of everybody has made me feel more confident in the future, like in my own abilities and being able to not do it alone, there is help even in the community, that there's people that are there, willing to help you no matter what.

With the focus and priority being on secondary school, there are few opportunities available for educational upgrading or post-secondary education. While this is similar to CSC as a whole, some residents reported that the teachers on site had assisted them with obtaining information and applying for educational programs outside of those offered within the Healing Lodge. Other gaps highlighted by OOHL staff include a lack of access to technology and other resources (e.g., Smartboards), as well as limited space, resulting in crowded learning spaces that are not “*conducive to learning.*” Overall, residents appreciated the educational opportunities available at the Healing Lodge. A common theme in the responses from residents was a sense of pride over the accomplishments for those who had achieved certificates or diplomas.

At the Section 81 facilities, the role of the Healing Lodges are in helping to facilitate employment, vocational training, and educational opportunities in the community. Given that many of the residents were nearing release or on conditional release, this model helps promote a smoother transition to the community in that the residents can continue these opportunities or have developed connections to progress in their employment and educational capacities. The Section 81 facilities also arrange vocational training (e.g., first aid, transportation of dangerous goods, WHMIS) on-site that aim to improve the employability of residents.

However, residents at the Section 81 facilities did express a desire for more employment opportunities. Residents on inmate status in particular noted their frustrations in this regard and highlighted a need for “*better opportunities, for people to save up and kind of get that community interaction in the workplace*” (BSWH resident). At BSWH and EWL, there were a limited number of in-house employment opportunities for those residents on inmate status. Residents at EWL expressed their concerns regarding favouritism in that the in-house jobs were not distributed equally. Given the recent opening of EWL, a new position of Employment/Volunteer Coordinator had recently been created and staffed, with an intention of increasing both in-house and community opportunities.

Mother-Child program.²⁰ Within CSC institutions more broadly, the Mother-Child program was developed to foster positive relationships between federally incarcerated mothers

²⁰ Quotes in this section are not identified by site to protect the identities of the participants.

and their children by keeping them together where appropriate and providing a supportive environment that promotes stability and continuity for the mother-child relationship (refer to CD-768 for more information; CSC, 2020b). Though the Mother-Child Program is a program offered at OOHL, there had been no recent participants at the time of the site visit. A similar program was active at both BSWH and EWL, with current and/or recent participants at both Section 81 facilities. As such, the findings presented therein are limited to the experiences presented at BSWH and EWL.

A common theme that appeared in the responses of the mothers interviewed was gratitude to have their children with them in the positive setting of the Healing Lodge, providing a comfortable and safe space for them. The mothers reported that being with their child during a crucial stage in their development helps with building a solid bond between mother and child. The mothers pointed out that being with their children was also beneficial for their healing journeys as they noted that they needed to be strong for their children:

When I was healing, having my child with me helped me to be stronger. It's just different, it is way different than doing it on your own. When you have your kid with you, you feel more stabilized and your child feels safe too. I think [the child] feels really safe, [the child] is comfortable here.

Residents were pleased to have their children with them as it provides the opportunity to “break the cycle.” They appreciated that they could take their children to cultural activities and ceremonies, which many of them had not grown up with. Residents valued the ability to teach their children the traditions, teachings, and values that they were not taught when they were growing up. Thus, the benefits of the program are numerous to mother and child, as one resident explains:

The benefits of being with your child is beyond anything. Like a lot of these ladies are separated from their family most of the time. For me, this is my family right, so I can't imagine being separated from my family a long time.

The Mother-Child Programs offered at BSWH and EWL were also perceived as offering more support and resources than what would be offered in CSC's institutional settings. For instance, mothers have access to supplies (e.g., diapers) for their babies and staff assist with booking and transportation to medical appointments during pregnancy and for the baby. It is important to note that both programs do not operate in the same manner and that while in CSC's program, mothers are responsible for meeting their parental responsibilities, CSC has a legislative responsibility to ensure that processes and staff support are in place and available to

enable mothers to do so. The urban locations of the Section 81 facilities assist with reintegration from the aspect of resources for mothers and their children, as staff point residents in the right avenues to develop a “*strong community support system.*”

The Mother-Child Programs at BSWH and EWL help women to maintain family connections by being with their child, but it also benefits the other residents in the house by promoting a sense of family and it “*gives them hope*” (staff member). While other residents were reported to be referred to as “aunties” to the children in the homes, many of the residents pitch in to help and it was described by residents, staff, and Elders/Spiritual Advisors as “*all hands on deck*” (staff member). Residents “*learn alongside the mum*” (staff member) and learn to take care of each other in a healthy environment. As a staff member describes:

At first, it's hard. Like some of the women that come from the institutions say it's hard to see the kids here because it makes them feel vulnerable like to the all the emotions that come with that. But then soon like they shed that kind of, I don't want to say if it's anger or guilt or shame, whatever it is, and then they realize that it actually is an opportunity for all of them to learn.

From the perspectives of staff, there are also fewer incidents when there are children on site, as residents are more cautious about their behaviour when there are children around.

While overall residents praised the Section 81 facilities for their Mother-Child Program, they did indicate that there is a need to allow older children to stay with their mothers as well. From the perspectives of staff, the Section 81 facilities can offer more flexibility to the program compared to mainstream institutional settings, such as exceptions to the age restrictions. The sites also demonstrated their creativity in augmenting the experiences of mothers and the children. For instance, at BSWH, a mentorship was initiated by staff between a new mother and a community volunteer. Reciprocal relationships such as these benefit both those in the Healing Lodge and in the community.

Relationships and Community

The relationships fostered throughout the Healing Lodges warrant consideration given their unique aspects that help instill a sense of community and guide residents through their healing journeys. Unlike other institutional experiences, the relationships that residents have between each other, with staff, as well as with Elders/Spiritual Advisors are collectively viewed as being valuable and strong. As a resident from OOHl explains, “*There is lots I can learn from here, from other people, from staff, from the Elders.*” Overall, the positive, supportive

relationships promote a sense of community and family within each of the Healing Lodges.

Residents. Across sites, residents spoke of the overall strong and supportive relationships they established amongst each other. Characterized by shared living units, residents expressed that through their time at the Healing Lodge, they learn to cooperate and live with one another. Residents regularly spoke of opportunities where they help and support one another with different skills and crafts, as well as contributions to the operation of Healing Lodge (e.g., chores, meal preparation) that supports a sense of community. While it can take some time for women to adjust to the Healing Lodge, residents were reported to be welcoming and supportive in helping onboard new residents. One OOHL resident describes:

I noticed that even with the women, you'll see it, they'll come in and they'll have that street mentality and they're trying to pick a fight and they're arguing and just this like, you'll find after they do programming or they get a job and settle in somewhere their attitude and their demeanour just changes and I think when you realize you can be comfortable here and this is a safe place to be I think people's like, they change completely.

Positive relationships and effective conflict resolution are encouraged by staff and Elders/Spiritual Advisors, and in turn, this sense of connectedness further reinforces the feeling of community. As an EWL resident explains:

We're like a little family. Yeah, when somebody new comes in it takes a little while to adjust, because the dynamics are always changing, but everything is good. There's no... there's hardly any conflicts, I should say. But when there is, people get over it pretty quick. It doesn't affect the rest of the lodge.

The positive relationships commonly noted amongst residents may be fuelled by their shared goal of working towards following a path of healing and an Indigenous way of life. Residents spoke of how being surrounded by other residents working on themselves helped foster a positive and more motivating atmosphere. A resident at BSWH explains the impact on her, “A lot of women have done so much work on themselves and I have seen it with my own eyes. And yeah, it's incredible, it's motivating.” The teachings that residents receive also help support more harmonious relationships amongst residents, as a staff member at BSWH explains:

I also find that a lot of the teachings that we do here, like with the resiliency model, it kind of helps people become better communicators because we are really against gossip and things like that. Some people are better at voicing their concerns, like that's miyo-wícehtowin.²¹ Yeah, less lateral violence. We are really good at having open, frank

²¹ Miyo-wícehtowin refers to Cree beliefs regarding the laws that direct us to have good relationships between

discussions.

With ceremonies representing a key feature of the healing journeys of residents, the narratives of the residents also reveal that they are imperative for fostering more meaningful connections and a sense of belonging. For instance, through sharing circles, residents can connect to one another at a more personal and trusting level, which reinforces the sense of community experienced by residents. Residents, staff, and Elders/Spiritual Advisors pointed out that sharing in these avenues encourages connection and bonding with other residents, as well as an opportunity to address traumas and learn about cycle breaking. One BSWH resident explains how sharing circles have been the most helpful part of her healing journey:

Getting to know the other ladies. Listen to their stories, me sharing my story. And it is different because it's a sharing circle, nothing is shared outside of that circle. And it's at a person level and you realize you are not alone. I realized that I am not alone in my path and there is other people that are in my situation and it just made me open up to realize that, yeah I did come from a traumatized background but I wasn't alone and there's other ladies under my own circumstances.

Across the Healing Lodges, there were some reports of gossiping, incompatibility with housemates or roommates, and bullying amongst the residents. These tensions were particularly noted at OOHL, especially amongst residents who were viewed as not being committed to their healing journeys. Given that the residents are living in houses at OOHL with more housemates as well as residents that are earlier in their sentence, there is a greater possibility of clashing personalities. At the Section 81 facilities, participants reported that there are some dynamics involved with having residents that are of inmate and community status cohabitating. While residents on inmate status sometimes felt a sense of unfairness seeing the additional privileges and freedom experienced by the residents on community status, this was mostly described as motivating for them to work their way to community status.

Staff. An additional aspect of the Healing Lodge experience that promotes a sense of community are the positive relationships between residents and staff. Rather than having a static or clear division, staff tend to be approachable and have both regular and open communications with residents. In comparing her experience at the Healing Lodge to a mainstream institution, a resident from BSWH explains, *“Here is just like a normal conversation with the staff. You don't have to fear, just be open and honest with them and they will help you as much as they can.”*

people. These laws provide healthy boundaries that ensure people will feel safe, secure, and able to live “the good life” (pimatisiwin; Native Counselling Services of Alberta, 2017).

Across the Healing Lodges, numerous staff spoke of having an “open door policy” whereby residents are able to drop by and chat as needed. As a staff member at EWL explains how staff differ from mainstream institutions, “*There’s a different interaction and they care about what the women, how the women feel, what they think.*” The role of staff was described as guiding, advising, supporting, and helping the residents. Positive relationships between staff and residents are developed through lots of interactions, informal discussions, and assistance. At BSWH, residents highlighted that the smaller group setting created an environment in which they felt like there is more focus on each of them personally. Staff across the Healing Lodges acknowledged the importance of maintaining healthy boundaries in cultivating therapeutic relationships with residents. At OOHL in particular, staff highlighted that the use of a dynamic security²² approach promotes positive relationships between staff and residents.

From the perspectives of residents at each of the Healing Lodges, there is a strong complement of Indigenous staff who share their knowledge, reinforce the culture, and understand and relate to their experiences and histories. From the viewpoint of staff, the strong representation of Indigenous staff shares a personal understanding and/or shared experience with the residents, putting them in a position where they can appreciate and understand where residents are coming from. At the same time, there is a recognition that some of the non-Indigenous staff are also heavily involved in and promote the culture. However, some concerns were raised about cultural awareness and sensitivity particularly amongst non-Indigenous staff. Residents and staff alike highlighted that more training in this regard would be beneficial.

At each of the Healing Lodges, there are opportunities for staff to participate in cultural activities, ceremonies, and events alongside the residents. Indigenous staff praised the Healing Lodge for providing the space for them to understand and connect with their culture and identity. A number of staff at BSWH and EWL reported not having access to ceremonies and cultural activities growing up, and appreciated the opportunity to learn and participate in those offered at the Healing Lodges. The sites differed in their expectations for staff participation, ranging from mandatory to encouraged. At OOHL, a number of staff pointed out that few staff currently

²² Dynamic security is defined as regular and consistent interactions with offenders and timely analysis of information and sharing through observations and communication as well as proactive practices that mitigate security incidents. Dynamic security is the action that contributes to the development of professional, positive relationships between staff and offenders, and is a key tool to assess an offender’s adjustment and stability (CSC, 2020a).

participate in these opportunities alongside the residents. As one OOHL staff member explains, over time there has been:

a lack of cultural awareness training, a lack of participation from all staff members in the culture. When it was first built and constructed, the idea was that all staff would come to morning circle, everybody would gather together because it was like a family.

Residents do notice and appreciate the staff engagement with ceremony and cultural activities, as it encourages connectedness and helps build trust. As a staff member at OOHL reports:

Staff should be coming to these ceremonies. You don't have to believe it but they need to understand it. How do you work with the women and encourage them to do something that you know nothing about? And those things are not being like encouraged, maybe a little bit here and there, but not like it used to be.

Although many of the residents provided positive responses in regard to relationships with staff, they were provided an opportunity to offer constructive feedback to highlight where improvements could be made. At OOHL and EWL, residents raised some concerns regarding favouritism and unequal treatment of residents by the staff. Not holding everyone to the same level of accountability and integrity was described as frustrating, especially for those who believed they were working hard. A number of residents at EWL raised difficulties they have faced in regards to their confidentiality not being protected by staff. As one resident explains, the perceived lack of confidentiality means that *"it's hard to open up. It's hard to reach out."* Lastly, some concerns were raised regarding decision making and communications from staff at EWL, with information being transmitted to residents often feeling inconsistent or like a one-way street.

At EWL a consequence chart²³ had recently been implemented just prior to the site visit, and as such, featured predominately in the findings related to staff relationships, as well as commitment and accountability. According to staff, the consequence chart was implemented to empower the front-line Resident Support Mentors to enforce the house rules (e.g., completing chores) and apply consequences (e.g., curfew restrictions, limitations on tablet time). Overall, the Healing Lodge rules and consequences were viewed negatively by residents, particularly for those that felt they had earned their way to a Healing Lodge. A recurring issue was the lack of fairness and favouritism by staff in applying the consequences, which residents believed was not in line with the intention of the consequence chart to create consistency and clear expectations.

²³ The name has since been changed given its potential for triggering residents.

In addition, the rules and behaviours that may warrant consequences were perceived as unreasonable by residents. A number of residents compared the system to being “*treated like children.*” Concerns were raised by residents that the consequences over “*trivial*” behaviours may reflect negatively on their chances of parole. From the perspectives of staff, overall they viewed the consequence chart as beneficial in improving behaviours and accountability, though some staff saw it as a detriment or a missed opportunity to explore the “why” of expectations are not being met.

Elders/Spiritual Advisors. Across the Healing Lodges, there is a strong bond between residents and Elders/Spiritual Advisors, one characterized by immense support and guidance. Elders and Spiritual Advisors guide Indigenous offenders to traditional Indigenous ways of life, based on their own teachings. Elders/Spiritual Advisors work with the residents from a uniquely personal and cultural approach involving healing, rather than a strictly correctional perspective surrounding risk. The participants highlighted the integral role of Elders/Spiritual Advisors in facilitating traditional ceremonies, providing one-on-one discussions and group circles, escorting residents on ETAs for ceremonial and other spiritual purposes, and weaving in teachings throughout each of these services.

In general, Elders/Spiritual Advisors are highly regarded by the residents as integral to their healing journeys as they help them with a range of issues (e.g., emotion management, addictions, grief). Raised often amongst residents is the role that Elders/Spiritual Advisors have in assisting them with understanding themselves, their traumas, and their experiences. As a resident OOHLC describes in how the Elders/Spiritual Advisors help her:

I'm able to talk to them about anything like my grief and loss, and my past traumas. [...] I was able to open up with them more, and that kind of like helped me to take the initiative to start my healing process. I don't know, they teach me so much. They tell me stories about my ancestors, they teach me traditional songs, how to respect myself, how to respect others, just how to be a good human being for the world.

Beyond encouraging positive changes in the residents, the positive, supportive relationships between residents and Elders/Spiritual Advisors are another aspect fostering a sense of community within Healing Lodges. Common amongst the narratives of the residents is the genuine appreciation they have towards the compassion and understanding demonstrated by the Elders. Residents indicated that the Elders/Spiritual Advisors take the time to get to know the residents and encourages them to take accountability and participate in cultural and spiritual

activities. OOHL is unique in that they benefit from multiple Elders/Spiritual Advisors from the local community on site. As a resident explains:

We get access to Elders a lot, so they help us with our traditional teachings and it's just really helping me get back to my roots and where my ancestors come from, and I'm learning about myself more and more in touch with my roots, that's pretty cool, I really like it, it helps keep me grounded.

There were some reports of judgemental and negative attitudes amongst Elders/Spiritual Advisors at OOHL, and residents felt that these attitudes were not consistent with their expectations of an Elder. However, the relationships formed between the residents and Elders/Spiritual Advisors at OOHL were largely characterized as positive and interlaced with compassion, guidance, and support for healing.

At EWL, while the residents praised the Cultural Advisor, a recurring theme was the lack of regular access to an Elder on site. Several residents reported that they had previously had regular access and developed positive relationships with Elders (e.g., in other Healing Lodges, in the institution) and felt a void where they had this support in the past. Residents highlighted the need for an Elder to provide support and help them as they work through their healing journeys. Frequently shared by the residents is the value of being able to talk to Elders candidly and have them share their insight, guidance, and teachings. Some staff also felt that having an Elder on site could also help provide support to staff as they manage the emotional labour involved in their work.

Reintegration

Beyond the relationships that are cultivated, residing in a Healing Lodge promotes ties to family and friends and helps residents in developing community connections.²⁴ These relationships support residents in their healing journeys, and further prepares them for release.

Ties to family and prosocial supports. Beyond the formal Mother-Child program, the narratives of residents, staff, and Elders revealed the significance of relationships with family and prosocial supports in the healing and reintegration of residents. In some cases, residents acknowledged that some of their prior relationships had been harmful to them and, as such, they appreciated the ability to decide who they remained in contact with. Overall, developing and maintaining relationships with family is a goal promoted by the Healing Lodges. As a staff

²⁴ For many Indigenous peoples, relationships are conceptualized in a concentric circle (i.e., relationship to self, family, community, Creation, and Creator).

member at EWL explains:

I feel that reunifying families together is important. Not just as an Indigenous organization but just for families. And these women to have hopes and goals, something to look forward to. And also just that importance of belonging. For the women and their kids. And also the reunification doesn't just include the children. Because it also includes parents and siblings. And other family members and supports.

A number of residents indicated that during their time at the Healing Lodge they had reconnected with family or that their relationships had improved. A resident at OOHL describes how her involvement with culture has impacted her relationships:

Overall I think it's just really improved my relationships. I've talked to multiple members of my family now. I've reached out to friends that I haven't spoken to in years because I wasn't doing very well, so it's just like I've improved myself lot despite all the hardship I've gone through here. I've done a lot of work on myself, and with that my family respects it, so I get the same back from them. 'Cause you know I understand why they didn't want to be around me 'cause it's hurtful watching somebody go down that path and I was just kind of destroying my life and myself.

In speaking of the strengthened ties to family and other prosocial supports, residents expressed gratitude in having these relationships again. A resident at OOHL speaks about the significance of reconnecting with an important family member, “*We never used to talk before but now I'm able to call him everyday. We connected on a level that I didn't think we would be able to connect on again and I'm very grateful for that.*” Connections to family were identified as motivating factor in their healing journey and rehabilitation by many of the residents. Given the substantial demands and emotionally exhausting nature of the work required in Healing Lodges, residents identified reunification with family as a goal that kept them determined to persevere.

As a resident at OOHL explains:

So I've like, uh, it motivates me more to even like stay sober and to work really hard for when I do get out, you know. So I don't have to, what do you call it, I guess be a failure again, to my - and let down my family again, you know.

Reunification with their children was described as a strong incentive and goal for many of the residents. A common theme in the narratives of residents were the struggles experienced in being away from their family, and their children in particular. When asked about the common issues or challenges the residents face, a staff member at BSWH explains:

I think a lot of the issues I find is where they are away from their family or when issues are going on at home, a lot of them they are mothers and when they are away from their kids or when their kids are in trouble, I feel like that is really difficult for them. And you

kind of see them, their behaviour change and you know that something is bothering them. That is also when a lot of them either relapse or you know, breach their conditions.

This theme was particularly prominent at OOHL, likely due to its remote location. A resident at OOHL describes her perception of the struggles that residents with children face in their time at the Healing Lodge:

I feel like for most of us, well I guess most of us have children, and the most traumatizing part about it is that relationship with our children. It makes us all really depressed. It places a strain on our healing because no matter what we do, at the end of the day, we still can't see our children until who knows when, and we're all feeling really shitty for having to leave our children, for what we've done to our freedom and our access to our children and if we could see our children more often, I feel like we'd feel more confident in ourselves. A little less inadequate, a little less distant. I know that almost all of us, our connection with our children are fairly severed, but there is nothing that we can really do about it. And they want us to keep our heads up and think positive for the future, you know you get another chance but if you could see your children for one weekend, I couldn't imagine the effects that would have.

Efforts towards family reunification were supported by the Healing Lodges in various ways. For instance, electronic communication options include phone, video visitations, and in-person visits. The availability of virtual visitation was reported by staff to have increased during the pandemic. At Section 81 facilities, many residents also have access to cell phones and/or tablets which provide additional opportunities for communication that do not rely on Healing Lodge resources and thus, allow for more frequent contact. Private family visits are available at OOHL, but most residents interviewed had not utilized this option often. Family contact ETAs are another option available at all of the Healing Lodges that leave residents “*more empowered, more focused on what they need to do on their healing journey to get out. It is like an incentive to work harder and a reminder that they are on that right path*” (OOHL staff). Overall, the various methods to communicate with family and friends were greatly appreciated by residents to maintain and in some cases, improve their relationships.

Community connections. Living at the Healing Lodge gives the residents the opportunity to build community connections to prepare them for their release. However, these experiences diverged for those in Section 81 facilities with ties to Indigenous community partner organizations and OOHL with its connection to Nekaneeet First Nation. As previously mentioned, OOHL is unique in that it is the only women’s Healing Lodge on the land of a First Nation. Staff and Elders/Spiritual Advisors spoke of the important spiritual and cultural history of OOHL and Nekaneeet First Nation. Some residents reported opportunities to engage with and cultivate a

relationship with the local community, as one OOHl resident describes:

Yeah, it is like a community here, it's like a little family here, it's pretty cool, yeah. Even the Nekaneeet community, they invite us to things. Yeah, giveaways and feasts, and I'm just really thankful for the community for letting us be here and it's like they give us a warm welcome here, they make us feel welcome, which is really nice, so I think it's really neat. And I plan on coming back here and there's horse dances and ceremonies and feasts, I plan on coming back when I'm released because they've, these people have helped me so much.

However, a number of residents indicated that they had not developed a relationship with Nekaneeet First Nation as they did not have a lot of occasions to interact with the community.

This was mirrored in the responses of staff that while there are ETAs available to attend ceremonies (e.g., Sundance, Horse Dance) and participate in other cultural activities, there has been a diminishing role of community over time. This will be explored further below within the context of operational challenges and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

BSWH is managed by the NCSA and benefits from their extensive network of community-based programs and services. According to staff, establishing healthy relationships and positive community connections is an important component of the NSCA resiliency model. This relationship can be seen in reciprocal in that:

the community learns who lives here. The women drum outside all the time. Our presence is well known. But we give back as much as we can. And for me, it teaches the women how to trust, how to be involved in the community in a healthy way. (BSWH staff)

In a similar vein, EWL is managed by the Indigenous Women's Healing Centre and benefits from their community-based approach and partnerships to create a continuum of support services. As an EWL staff member explains, as a Section 81 facility:

it makes it easier for me to access supports and networks that are outside of CSC networks. And I think it works really well for the residents and I think it works well for our outcome. You know what we are hoping for our residents' outcomes in life and exiting and transitioning into freedom.

Preparation for release. At all sites, residents, staff, and Elders/Spiritual Advisors highlighted ways in which the Healing Lodge experience sets the residents up for successful reintegration into the community and with the resources they will require once released. At the Section 81 facilities in particular, residents often spoke of the various activities within the Healing Lodge and in the community (e.g., ETAs, UTAs) that provide them with the opportunities for gradual reintegration. Residents and staff reported that the urban locations of BSWH and EWL benefit from access to extensive community resources and supports. An

Elder/Spiritual Advisor describes the significant role of the Healing Lodge in preparing residents for release:

We work on all aspects of ourselves, so their spiritual being, their mental, their physical. So you know, we ensure they're getting out that they again have resources that they need, that they're working, that they have really good supports in place. And like I said, relapse prevention plans if that's something that they struggled with. I think that you know it's a huge role that [the Healing Lodge] plays in how successful they're going to be out there in the community, but it also depends on the work that they're you know, willing to put in while they're here in the lodge.

This is significant growth for many of the residents who have struggled in the past, “*I have never been able to hold a job before, I have never had my own place.*’ And now they have their own place and they have a job” (BSWH staff).

Thus, the time spent by residents at the Healing Lodges is viewed by staff as an opportunity to develop the structure and prosocial support to set them up for positive reintegration (e.g., culture, addictions support, employment, education, hobbies, prosocial supports). Staff indicated that residents are supervised closely to ensure they are set up during time at the Healing Lodge to live a prosocial life and fill their time in a healthy and productive manner. This helps ease the transition once released as they have programs, services, and resources established in the community that they have already been utilizing, as staff member at EWL explains:

It is good to get the girls out there and connected too, so they are not just doing the programs in house. And then have a hard time leaving when they are ready to leave. We try to get them connected to those programs out in the community and then they start building those positive relationships.

A staff member at EWL describes the role of the Healing Lodge in giving residents the confidence they need for release:

We set them up with like pretty much everything that they need, right? Like employment, you know giving them a secure plan, making them into a routine and making sure they have like the daily, you know, like necessities. And just like also knowing how to take care of themselves like putting themselves on a strict routine and like taking care of themselves. You know, like hygiene wise and making sure they're budgeting, like we help them with that.

At the Section 81 facilities, many of the residents and staff spoke of programs offered in the community that complemented the in-house programs that are available. At OOHL, the Social Integration Program for Women was praised by residents as beneficial and pragmatic in

helping to plan for the logistics of their release. A resident at OOHL describes her positive experience with the program:

It helped get you ready and have you start pre-planning for your release and different resources and budgeting and finances and... it was really helpful honestly. It was kind of like specifically based around individually and we all got to focus on where we were going and what we were going to do and create plans.

In preparation for release, residents at the Section 81 facilities were noted to be required to save 30% of their income. Staff indicated that this normalizes the act of saving funds from a paycheque and sets the residents up with savings for their housing when they are released. At the Section 81 facilities, many of the residents that arrived at the Healing Lodge as “inmate” status planned on staying once they obtained parole (or had stayed once parole was obtained). Staff reported this was a common practice and provided a sense of continuity for the residents as they benefited from gradual reintegration opportunities.

Overall, the residents recounted receiving support and “a helping hand” (BSWH staff) from staff in developing release plans, though some report varying degrees of support. A number of residents reported that they had done a lot of their release planning on their own, but staff were always available to answer questions or point them in the right direction if needed. As a resident at EWL explains:

I mean, it doesn't look like an institution in any way, like we have our own apartments. [...] But this place I feel like is better for me because you're slowly stepping back into the community and you have the support of this entire place while you're doing that. And if you can't do things on your own, somebody always steps up to help you.

Though aftercare does not fall under the mandate of Section 81 facilities, this emerged as a notable theme at both BSWH and EWL. As a staff member at BSWH explains, “It's that continuum of care, like how do we wrap somebody in culture and then hand them over to someone who has no idea?” At BSWH, while formal aftercare is not offered to residents once released, staff indicated that residents that left on good terms are welcomed back to the house to visit, participate in drumming/singing, and so forth. At both sites, the ability to offer formal aftercare to residents once released was viewed as a significant gap. A staff member at EWL explains:

They provide a lot of support, but we have no aftercare. Like 'cause a lot of the girls here feel like they just get like pushed out. Then we go “bye” and wave at them from the window. Like there's no supports for them other than the ones that they set up for themselves. But they like the support that we offer here. Like, there's no aftercare

program, like we can't even call and check up on them, like we just have to take like a hands-off approach. And that's really hard and really frustrating, especially when we know that some of them are struggling having a hard time adjusting.

It should be noted that while staff expressed frustration in the lack of aftercare, there was also recognition of the resources that would be required and the hurdles involved in offering formal aftercare, as it is currently outside of their mandate.

Operational Challenges and Best Practices

Primarily through interviews with staff and Elders/Spiritual Advisors, notable themes and considerations emerged that shed light on the operational challenges of the Healing Lodges, as well as the best practices that have been employed in the face of these challenges. These themes centre around four main areas: population pressures; staffing practices and needs; communications, policies, and procedures; and the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings were often further contextualized by the experiences and observations of residents.

Population pressures. Across Healing Lodges, recurring issues related to bed capacity and a changing profile emerged as themes. These challenges result in population pressures in terms of reaching capacity and addressing the needs of a changing profile of residents. At the Section 81 facilities, one of the main challenges in reaching bed capacity is the small pool of prospective residents who have the required minimum security rating. Based on the perspectives of staff, transfers to EWL and BSWH can take a long time as *“for Indigenous offenders, especially, just to get that minimum security rating can be challenging”* (BSWH staff). In other cases, EWL staff noted that they have approved applications for potential residents, but the inmates are never transferred. Opening shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic started, EWL in particular has experienced challenges in reaching capacity. However, staff acknowledged that the focus is not just on filling beds but instead prioritizing residents having the common goal of being on a healing journey. EWL has a process for scanning for potential residents at other institutions and particularly those from Manitoba that may not be aware of the Healing Lodge, but staff indicated that more outreach and education is required earlier in their sentences so that inmates are aware of EWL and so that *“Eagle Women's can become more involved earlier in the process to kind of assist CSC in that transitioning towards”* them. Staff at BSWH reported that they *“have done a lot of bridge building”* with Edmonton Institution for Women (EIFW) in particular and they try to meet with inmates before they receive the required minimum security

rating so they have that goal to work towards.

In a different vein, population pressures were also described to have impacts on the infrastructure of the Healing Lodges. At OOHL, the recent increase in population has created pressures on infrastructure. An increase in the capacity at OOHL was reported by staff to require a new building to provide more common spaces and renovations to older houses that were initially built in the 1990s. The urban Healing Lodges also feel these impacts on infrastructure in terms of limited space to grow. At EWL, for example, staff highlighted the need for more opportunities for physical activity and sports as additional activities/services that would be beneficial for the residents. However, the space is limited within the building, requiring these opportunities to be established in the community. While this is an option for the community residents, staff indicated that it does create challenges for the in-house residents who face more restrictions on temporary absences in the community.

Staff at each of the Healing Lodges described challenges experienced related to the changing profile in residents. In general, staff perceived their population to be younger, more likely to have gang affiliations, and be serving sentences for drug offences. In addition, BSWH staff felt that *“there is a huge gap for mental health, high needs mental health women, complex case women”* in correctional settings. Though these changes in profile are consistent with the broader changes seen in the women’s population, staff highlighted that they create additional pressures for Healing Lodges in terms of managing more challenging cases with complex needs. As a staff member at BSWH explains, they are *“not a secure facility and these cases are very, very tough. But it’s taught the staff different ways. And then taught the girls, you know sometimes this is the only time they have ever gotten to the community setting.”* The changing profile of residents has resulted in the Healing Lodges having to adapt and pivot where needed. For instance, staff at BSWH reported that they are keen to fill gaps and provide an avenue for reintegration that may not always be considered (e.g., women interested in participating in the Mother-Child program, on Suboxone,²⁵ residing outside of the Prairie region, or the elderly).

As the only CSC-operated Healing Lodge and the only women’s Healing Lodge that can accept penitentiary placements, OOHL experiences another layer of population pressure. Over time, staff report that more offenders have been directly penitentiary placed at OOHL, having no

²⁵ Suboxone is a form of opiate agonist treatment (OAT) offered to patients with an opioid use disorder (OUD) in CSC institutions.

other correctional institutional experience. There have also been more residents admitted that staff perceived as there to “do time” and not committed to their healing journeys, in an effort to maintain the population. As a staff member explains, there are some residents who:

came to the Healing Lodge just to do easy time and they are not engaged at all, but at the same time we have to keep our numbers up, so as long as they aren't causing any problems, we'll just house them until their release date.

Staff felt that these shifts in population have resulted in challenges from a security perspective, increased workload (in terms of the intake process and documentation required), and fewer residents committed to their healing journey upon admission to OOHL. This represents a shift from previous practices as “*in the past, they would have to be interviewed before they came here and sign an agreement and then there would be more of a healing journey*” (OOHL staff).

Staff also acknowledged that some residents are only spending a short time period at the Healing Lodges before release, which creates an additional pressure as there are complexities and limitations associated with planning and what can be offered to them in the time they spend at the Healing Lodge. For instance, in regards to education, an OOHL staff member reports:

They're not here long enough to really get a full diploma so we try to get them at least something. And the 80 credit certificate will help them get into maybe a tech school or a trade school, that type of thing.

The efforts to provide as much intervention as possible during a short period was echoed by a staff member at BSWH:

Sometimes women come to us for a short sentence and they might never lower any of their dynamic factors because their sentence is just too short. So we do what we can before they go up in front of the [Parole Board of Canada].

Staffing practices and needs. Staffing practices and needs emerged as a notable theme across Healing Lodges, though there was a clear deviation in findings between the two Section 81 facilities and the CSC-operated site. At BSWH and EWL, the narratives revealed challenges in hiring and retaining staff, with substantial turnover of staff. Staff reported that they are often overworked due to staff shortages, resulting in stress and burnout. At EWL, staff indicated that they sometimes get pulled into other roles, carrying out the duties of two or more positions. In addition, staff shortages impact the opportunities for residents to get out into the community (i.e., on ETAs). At both Section 81 facilities, staff reported that the pay is significantly lower than equivalent positions in CSC, resulting in staff leaving the Healing Lodge for higher paying positions in CSC. While staff shortages and turnover were primarily highlighted as operational

challenges by staff, the effects also radiated to the experiences of residents of the Section 81 facilities. For instance, the “*revolving door*” (BSWH staff) of staff impacts continuity in their case management, as well as the availability of staff for ETAs. Turnover in staff that they have built relationships with and trust can also impact their healing as “*abandonment issues come up*” (BSWH staff). Residents expressed a desire for stability and consistency in staffing.

Staff training was identified as an area of improvement at both Section 81 sites, with particular training gaps noted for primary workers (BSWH) and resident support mentors (EWL). Numerous staff described the onboarding process of new employees as “*sink or swim*” (BSWH staff). As one BSWH staff explains, “*It’s almost like you have to seek out that knowledge yourself, it is not just provided to you. [...] You kind of just get plopped into your role and you figure it out.*” The high levels of turnover also result in staff that have only been on the job for a few months training new staff. At EWL, having a CSC employee on staff since the opening of the Healing Lodge was viewed as very beneficial by staff in terms of implementation, navigating policies and procedures, and providing ongoing support and training to staff.

The findings related to staffing practices and needs differed at OOHL, which is expected given that it is in a rural location and a CSC-operated site. The Healing Lodge benefits from a large proportion of long-term employees that bring a lot of experience and dedication to their roles. Given the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) commitments related to staffing from Nekaneet First Nation, staff highlighted that “*there are a lot of family dynamics*” amongst staff. However, staff highlighted that broader recruitment can be a challenge given the remote location of the Healing Lodge.

A common theme that emerged at all Healing Lodges was that staff share a pride in their work and a belief that they are making a difference in positively impacting the residents. There was a sense of a strong investment on the part of staff in seeing and helping the residents succeed. As a staff member at OOHL explains:

I think as a staff member that’s what keeps you going and keep you coming, even though there’s challenges and obstacles and different things. Like the reward from that, you can’t measure it, seeing those people change. And like when I work with new staff, I’ll just remind them that we are working with these folks. One day they will all go back to the community, so it’s the influence that we have on them and the impact here that will maybe change them into that community that our families are in, that our friends are in, that you could be part of that. And it is, it’s incredible watching them change, or being in

program and saying something that maybe they never heard and you watch and watch these little lightbulbs go on, like the lightbulb moments, that's what I live for in this job.

Concurrently, staff highlighted the immense amount of emotional labour in their work. Given the shared lived experiences, sometimes interactions with the residents had the capacity to trigger past trauma of the staff. Staff at BSWH acknowledged that opportunities to participate in programs and training (e.g., grief and loss, historical trauma training) was beneficial for them in this regard. Staff highlighted that additional supports would be valuable, as their roles require an immense amount of emotional labour. For instance, staff noted that staff sweats and Elder support would help them cope with the heavy emotional labour.

While staff at all sites were generally praised positively and many are described as “*going the extra mile*” (BSWH resident) for the residents, a further need expressed in some of the interviews across the Healing Lodges is the importance of having staff who demonstrate cultural competency and engagement. This was identified as essential given the significance of Indigenous culture, traditions, and practices within the Healing Lodges. At BSWH, there were some concerns raised about the lack of Indigenous awareness of some staff. In particular, there were instances reported in which staff that were perceived as not culturally-sensitive to Indigenous perspectives and cultural traditions, resulting in conflict between staff and residents. At OOHL, for the most part, there are common beliefs in regards to the vision of the Healing Lodge amongst staff. However, relative to the past, the narratives of staff revealed that improvements could be made in the cultural competency of staff through cultural awareness training. Staff also suggested that staff participation in ceremony and cultural activities is an important element of cultural awareness and sensitivity.

Communications, policies, and procedures. Common themes in the perspectives of staff surrounded communications, policies, and procedures, though there were some nuances between sites. At BSWH, communications between management and staff was identified as a challenge. As one staff member describes, “*that actually happens a lot here and it causes a lot of confusion between management and the primary workers. Because they will make decisions and they'll never explain it.*” Staff reported that the lack of explanation when decisions are made by management negatively impacts staff morale. A number of staff reported that the house rules were often changing, and in some cases staff would learn of new rules or information from residents instead of management, making it difficult for staff to effectively do their jobs.

Acknowledging that there “*is not a whole lot of unity*” when describing communication between staff and management, staff expressed a desire for more cohesiveness and information sharing. Some of the staff pointed out that the COVID-19 pandemic had partly contributed to the challenges surrounding communications and information sharing.

Another aspect of communications and information sharing within the Section 81 facilities is access to OMS. While OMS access is expected to be a condition of employment, staff reported that it takes a long time for new staff to get access. This lack of OMS access means that “*information isn’t being processed and distributed appropriately*” (BSWH staff). As a result, many staff do not have access to the latest up to date information on residents, impacting case management and resident interactions. A number of staff indicated that when they hear information from residents instead of management, this may be partly due to lack of OMS access and email access. This situation is also burdensome for those few staff with OMS access are responsible for downloading and inputting all of the resident documentation.

At OOHL, themes related to policies and procedures were felt more broadly in terms of challenges in finding balance between CSC policies and the Healing Lodge vision focused on Indigenous beliefs, traditions, and ceremonies. As one staff members explains, “*as much as we like to think the intent was to be a partnership between law and policy and our Nekaneet cultural, sharings, teachings, and so forth. It’s not that.*” Another staff member echoes,

I was expecting like feasts and sweats, and Elders being here and the community involvement, and there being programs here on Indigenous social history²⁶ and teachings and a whole bunch of things happening that doesn't happen. It's like a minimum security jail for Indigenous people.

Staff and Elders reported that over time, more security measures and policies have been introduced (e.g., x-ray machines, requirement for handcuffs for medium-security residents in community). In some respects, this represents a barrier to community involvement as staff indicated that community members are resistant to these measures, such as obtaining security clearance to attend events on site. Thus the diminishing role of community that was partly been attributed by Elders and staff to the COVID-19 pandemic, was also observed prior to the pandemic. As one staff member articulates,

²⁶ The various circumstances that may have affected the lives of Indigenous Peoples and which may be considered for alternate options when dealing with Indigenous offenders or residents. These can include circumstances such as effects of residential school system, Sixties Scoop into the adoption system, as well as family or community fragmentation (CSC, 2013).

I really do feel like we've done some excellent work here, I really believe in the value and mission of this place and like everything that goes behind it, but I think we've gone a little further from it than we need to be.

Staff perceived that the role of Elders in the operation of the Healing Lodge has also varied over time. While Elders were described as playing an important role in the case management of individual offenders and to a certain extent, provide spiritual advice and guidance regarding activities, ceremonies, and protocols, staff reported that there is an opportunity for senior management to collaborate more with Elders. Staff felt that there is a need to have Elders play a larger role in the direction and decision making of OOHL. As one staff member explains, “*Yes, we are in partnership with CSC, but we still have to respect and honour that culture and that tradition that built this place.*”

COVID-19 Pandemic. Across Healings Lodges, the COVID-19 pandemic was reported to have resulted in lockdowns, periods of outbreaks and isolation, rules surrounding quarantine for new residents, and public health measures. Study participants acknowledged that these policies were consistent with those in effect outside of the Healing Lodges, though the mask policies were noted to be in operated beyond broader public health policies. Overall, the pandemic was described as having a large negative impact on the correctional progress and reintegration of residents. Delays in programming resulted in residents delaying their parole applications and opportunities for release. As a staff member at BSWH explains:

It was a big step back for sure. A lot of people definitely did not get to progress how they would have if COVID would not have happened. So a lot of the people would be further along in their journey.

All sites reported to have continued to offer programming over the course of the pandemic, with modified delivery when necessary (e.g., smaller groups, virtual sessions). The pandemic also brought challenges in terms of keeping residents motivated and engaged, especially as interventions were put on hold or scaled back. In terms of relationship building with residents, a staff member at BSWH noted the challenges with limiting contact, “*It was the opposite of everything you learn when you come into this job. We are encouraged to go and talk to the residents and get to know them.*”

A recurring issue that emerged as a theme across sites was the decrease in ETAs and the damaging impacts that had on residents. In particular, a decrease in cultural ETAs to attend ceremonies or engage in cultural activities in the community resulted in residents received fewer

opportunities for teachings by Elders/Spiritual Advisors (as these often occur before and during ceremonies). Residents reported that they had fewer opportunities to develop community connections and less interaction with community members, which previously helped prepare residents for reintegration and improves chances of parole. Likewise, at OOHL, there were fewer opportunities for members of the community to attend events or ceremonies within the Healing Lodge, a common practice prior to the pandemic. This in turn impacted the cultural identities of residents in immeasurable ways. At OOHL in particular, staff expressed frustration in the restrictions against ceremonies, both within the Healing Lodge and ETAs to attend those offered in the community. Staff highlighted that ceremonies continued in the community, but there was resistance to develop creative solutions in order to maintain access to ceremony. As a staff member articulates:

The Elders would say if you want something to happen, you'll find a way to make it happen. I don't really feel like that was the case. It was, "Because of COVID, we couldn't do this, period." We can't problem solve and come up with different ideas. The Elders say that we still have our ceremony in the community, we never stopped. And the belief is that ceremony is what is going to keep people protected, keep people safe, keep people healthy. So completely removing that for two years, two and a half, you can see how that causes controversy and disheartens people because there has got to be a way. But if there is nobody pushing to make that happen, it's not going to.

The effects of the pandemic also presented an additional layer of challenge at EWL, as the Healing Lodge opened in September 2019, months before the pandemic started. Staff reported that the pandemic impacted the ability of the Healing Lodge to quickly achieve certain goals (e.g., reaching bed capacity, developing community connections) and instead focused on growing internally during that time. As restrictions were lifting at the time of the site visit, staff reported that they were shifting to incorporate those goals of “*connecting externally.*” In addition, a number of participants highlighted that a new position of Employment/Volunteer Coordinator was introduced in 2022 in hopes of expanding the opportunities for employment and volunteer work, both in-house and in the community.

The narratives reveal the impacts were felt in the correctional progress, reintegration, and community connections of the residents, as well as their cultural identities. Further, the pandemic impacted operations more broadly in terms of staffing and population pressures. At the Section 81 facilities in particular, staffing turnover and shortages were exacerbated and reaching bed capacity were identified by staff as challenges. While overall the impacts of COVID were

described as adverse, there were examples of innovation and adaptation of offering programs and cultural activities amidst restrictions throughout the sites. For instance, staff highlighted that video visits were increased at OOH, programs were offered virtually at BSWH, and COVID testing was offered before sweat lodge ceremonies at EWL. At the time of the site visits (June – October 2022), residents reported that the pandemic currently had a limited impact on them. As restrictions continued to lift, there was a sense of hope by all participants that operations would return to pre-pandemic methods.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to collectively examine women's Healing Lodges by exploring the experiences, perspectives, and voices of residents, Elders/Spiritual Advisors, and staff. The findings of this study shed light on the overall environment emphasizing culture and spirituality, as well as the interventions, opportunities, and relationships that help foster a setting for healing, community, and preparation for reintegration. Through the first-hand accounts of the participants, this study enhances the understanding of the impacts of women's Healing Lodges for Indigenous offenders and contributes to the growing evidence for their relevance in providing culturally appropriate interventions and support.

While the overall environment at each of the Healing Lodges are multifaceted, consistent across all are the holistic, trauma-informed, gender-based approaches that promote healing, commitment, and accountability. The emphasis on culture and spirituality and opportunities to participate in ceremonies and other cultural activities help guide residents through their healing journeys and maintain or strengthen their cultural identities. In addition, a range of interventions and opportunities are available for residents to engage in and provide further structure, including programs, education, vocational training and employment, family reunification (i.e., Mother-Child program), and other prosocial activities. For the most part, Healing Lodges are marked by strong connections and collaborations between residents, open and dynamic relationships with staff, and strong bonds with Elders/Spiritual Advisors built on immense support and guidance. Beyond the relationships that are cultivated within the Healing Lodge, residing in a Healing Lodge promotes ties to family and friends and helps residents in developing community connections, further promoting overall healing and preparation for release. Prominently noted throughout the experiences of the residents is how the Healing Lodge environment is seen as markedly different from mainstream institutional settings in many of these areas.

Findings reveal that through the holistic approach to interventions, opportunities, and overall environment, women's Healing Lodges benefit the residents in terms of strengthening and/or maintaining their cultural identity, their sense of belonging, their connection to people and place, and their prospects at successful reintegration. Concurrently, the positive, supportive relationships fostered throughout the Healing Lodges help instill a sense of community and guide residents through their healing journeys. This environment fosters a space for residents to engage

in introspection and self-reflection, find balance within themselves, and enable a sense of commitment and accountability both to their healing path and to the expectations of the Healing Lodge. Through the narratives of residents, and further reinforced by Elders/Spiritual Advisors and staff, it is evident that the opportunities that are offered throughout Healing Lodges play a fundamental role in the spiritual, cultural, and emotional healing journey of residents.

Conclusions

Cumulatively, the impact of the opportunities, atmosphere, and sense of community illustrate how Healing Lodges provide a space where residents can focus on healing, practice their spirituality and culture, and from a correctional perspective, address the risk and need factors that ultimately led to their offence. This is consistent with previous qualitative studies that have found that the therapeutic environment offered at Healing Lodges helps the residents to heal and gain a better understanding of themselves and their past (Pilon et al., 2015), positively influences their knowledge of Indigenous culture (CSC, 2012; Didenko & Marquis, 2011), and meets their spiritual needs (Barrett et al., 2010). These improvements are supported by quantitative findings that indicate positive changes in Indigenous women offenders' dynamic risk areas such as Personal/Emotional, Associates, and Substance Abuse (Didenko & Marquis, 2011; Hanby et al., 2022).

While the purpose of the study was not to compare or contrast women's Healing Lodges, some of the findings tended to diverge when examining the Healing Lodge operated by CSC and the Section 81 facilities that are run and administered by Indigenous communities through a Section 81 agreement with CSC. For instance, at OOHL, many of the findings were intertwined with the complexity of merging CSC institutional approaches with the Healing Lodge vision reflecting Indigenous cultures, traditions, and protocol. These tensions have been documented in previous reviews, including men's CSC-operated Healing Lodges (Didenko & Marquis, 2011; Ridha et al., 2023; Willow Cree Healing Lodge Joint Review, 2010). In some cases, the policies and procedures pertaining to the operation of traditional CSC institutions and offender management do not meld easily with the unique operational context and realities of the Healing Lodge environment. The narratives of staff at OOHL highlight that maintaining a clear and prominent role for Elders/Spiritual Advisors by including them in consultations and decision making is instrumental in remaining dedicated to the purpose and vision of the Healing Lodge. Of note, OOHL is rich in its availability of multiple Elders, access to a sacred spiritual lodge on

site, and the additional support of Traditional Healers.

At Section 81 facilities, staffing practices and needs emerged as a prominent theme across both BSWH and EWL, with challenges centered on hiring and retaining staff. The findings related to staff turnover and discrepancies in pay relative to CSC frontline staff in equivalent positions has been previously reported (e.g., Pilon et al., 2015). These staffing issues have been partly attributed to the funding differential for Section 81 facilities, and as such, additional funding for staffing has been identified as an area of opportunity that would help Healing Lodges fulfill their purpose and intent (Native Women’s Association of Canada, 2019; OCI, 2012). While there were many strengths associated with the Section 81 facilities, a clear advantage is its use of the Mother Child program and other opportunities for family reunification. These reflect some of the original qualities of Healing Lodges as outlined in the Task Force to be centered on principles that promote “a caring attitude towards self, family, and community” and “an appreciation of the healing role of children who are closer to the spirit world” (CSC, 1990, p.90). They are also consistent with calls for mother-and-child programming as recommended in the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG).²⁷

Beyond the operational nature of the Healing Lodges (i.e., CSC operated vs. Section 81), this divergence in experience also coordinated with the location type, with OOHL in a rural setting and both BSWH and EWL in urban locations. EWL is the first available Healing Lodge in Manitoba, allowing Indigenous women to serve their sentences closer to home. The OCI (2012) has reported that increasing numbers of Indigenous offenders are being released into urban centers rather than Indigenous reserve communities, which highlights the need for Section 81 facilities such as BSWH and EWL, as well as non-facility-based Section 81 agreements in these areas. The attention to urban-based Healing Lodges builds on existing conversations about the role that location has in facilitating healing and supporting Indigenous women as they transition from life in a federal prison to the city (OCI, 2018; NWAC, 2019). With Healing Lodges for women now available in three provinces in the Prairie region, this represents progress for healing for Indigenous women though a large demographic across Canada is still being missed (NWAC, 2019). It is important to note that the culture available to those residing in these

²⁷ The MMIWG also highlights the need to ensure culturally appropriate programming and services for incarcerated Indigenous women and recommends that Section 81 facilities receive funding parity with CSC-operated facilities.

Healing Lodges is unlikely to reflect their own Nations' culture. The location of these Healing Lodges may also deter Indigenous women who do not wish to transfer to these facilities located in Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan if it means being further away from their home communities. Given that Indigenous women are overrepresented amongst maximum security prisoners, this represents an additional potential barrier to accessing Healing Lodges (Vecchio, 2018).

In discussing the challenges at Healing Lodges, it is important to do so from a strengths-based perspective by focusing on strengths and resilience, while recognizing challenges. This means taking into account the social and structural issues underpinning the conditions for Indigenous peoples. Indigenous women in particular “face the loss of their status, culture, language, access to land, children, and family ties” (p. 23) through their gendered and racialized experience with colonization (NWAC, 2019). Strengths-based perspectives are important in considering individual and community resilience to the resources available to address problems in a positive way, emphasize a community's assets, and look for opportunities for growth. As with any operational environment, each of the sites offers its benefits and challenges. OOHL, BSWH, and EWL have demonstrated their resilience as communities as they adapt to shifting realities such as a more challenging population and the aftermath of a pandemic. Best practices can be drawn from one other to further strengthen the Healing Lodge experience for residents, help them advance in their healing journeys, and better prepare them for reintegration into the community.

Limitations and Future Directions

This research builds on previous research by providing a clearer picture of the experiences of residents at women's Healing Lodges and disentangling the impacts of those interventions, relationships, and environment that cannot be assessed through quantitative methods. The methodology for this study was further enriched by triangulating the range and diversity of perspectives (i.e., residents, staff, Elders/Spiritual Advisors) and jointly examining the three women's Healing Lodges currently in operation. Despite these strengths, a number of potential limitations of interviews with an incarcerated population that have been discussed in-depth elsewhere (e.g., Copes & Hochstetler, 2010) should be noted. For instance, residents volunteered to participate in the research, which may have resulted in a skewed sample (e.g., residents that were particularly engaged and satisfied with their experience, residents that were

especially critical of the Healing Lodge). In addition, in order to achieve a manageable amount of data, purposive sampling was used and may not be representative of the full women's Healing Lodge experience. Obtaining the perspectives of community members would have also been beneficial to obtain a more complete view of community involvement and partnerships, but was beyond the scope of the current study.

Women's Healing Lodges provide holistic, gender-based environments in which Indigenous cultures, spirituality, and traditions are regarded as one of the foundations for healing and reintegration. The growth to three Healing Lodges represents progress in expanding culturally-appropriate approaches to corrections that are responsive to the unique needs and reflective of the cultural realities of Indigenous women. More broadly, these initiatives represent advancement in Canada's obligations to Indigenous peoples. As part of the larger collection of researching looking at Healing Lodge, this report shed light on experiences at women's Healing Lodges. The final phase of this study will extend the holistic examination of Healing Lodges to men's Section 81 facilities.

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Appendix A: Informed Consent Form for Healing Lodge Residents

Informed Consent A Study on Healing Lodge Experiences

This form has information to help you decide if you want to participate in this study.

Invitation to Participate: You are invited to participate in a research study being done by the Research Branch of the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC), with the support of the Indigenous Initiatives Directorate.

Purpose of the Study: We are studying the experiences of Indigenous residents within Healing Lodges. In this research we want to understand some of the personal impacts that Healing Lodges have on residents.

Participation: To participate in this study you will take part in a 1-hour interview, which will be audio-recorded. Questions will be asked about your experience at _____ Healing Lodge, the environment here, as well as your involvement in the different activities, services, and programs offered within the Healing Lodge. We are also asking for your permission to look at your official files. All information we collect will not be shared with Healing Lodge staff or anyone else.

Potential Benefits: Your participation in this study will give you an opportunity to talk about your experience here as a Healing Lodge resident. This will help us better understand the importance of Indigenous-specific services and programs within the correctional system.

Potential Risks or Discomforts: Your participation in this study involves sharing your experience as a Healing Lodge resident. You may freely skip any questions that make you feel uncomfortable throughout the interview. If you experience any discomfort, you may use the support services available at _____ Healing Lodge (e.g., Elder, other support persons).

Confidentiality and Anonymity: Your participation in this study is confidential. Your information will be protected and will only be used for the purpose of this research study. You will remain anonymous and any personal information, like your name, will be removed. To protect your privacy, your information and interview responses will be safely stored on a password-protected computer that only the research team can access.

Voluntary Participation: Participating in this study and taking part in an interview is voluntary. You may also leave the study or stop the interview without consequences of any kind. Please note that participating in this study will not affect your status, services, or rights within the Healing Lodge.

Participant Signature and Consent:

By signing this form, I _____, understand what is required of
(Participant's full name)
me and agree to participate in this study as outlined above.

Signature

Date

Research Staff Signature:

In my judgment, the participant is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent to participate in this research study.

Research Staff full name

Signature

Date

If any participant is unable to read or comprehend the information in this consent form, consent can be obtained orally. The participant's verbal consent will be documented at the beginning of the audio recording of the interview. A copy of the written form will also be provided.

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form for Elders/Spiritual Advisors and Staff

Informed Consent A Study on Healing Lodge Experiences

Invitation to Participate: You are invited to participate in a research study being conducted by the Research Branch of the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC). This research is being done with the support of the Indigenous Initiatives Directorate.

Purpose of the Study: This research aims to gain an understanding of some of the experiences and personal impacts that Healing Lodges have on Indigenous residents. Part of this research aims to highlight the overall benefits of Healing Lodges, the types of interventions offered, as well as identify any challenges currently facing the operation of Healing Lodges.

Participation: To participate in this study you will take part in a 1-hour interview, which will be audio-recorded. Questions will be asked about your experiences and observations at _____ Healing Lodge, the environment here, as well as the impacts of the different activities, services, and programs offered.

Potential Risks or Discomforts: Your participation in this study involves reflecting on _____ Healing Lodge, which may cause some discomfort. To mitigate such discomfort, you may freely refuse to answer any questions throughout the interview. If the interview causes distress, you are encouraged to access any of the well-being tools or services available to CSC staff (_____).

Potential Benefits: Your participation in this study will provide you with the opportunity to talk about your involvement at _____ Healing Lodge. By sharing your experiences, you will highlight the overall benefits and/or challenges associated with Healing Lodges. This will help us to better understand the role and importance of Indigenous-specific services and programs within the correctional system.

Confidentiality and Anonymity: Your participation in this study is confidential. The information you share during the interview will remain protected and will only be used for the purpose of this research study. To ensure you remain anonymous, any information that may identify you, like your name, will be removed from the study. To protect your privacy, your information and interview responses will be safely stored on a password-protected computer that only the designated research team can access.

Voluntary Participation: Participating in this study and taking part in an interview is voluntary. You may also withdraw from the study at any time during the interview. Please note that whether or not you choose to participate in this study will not affect your involvement or position within the Healing Lodge.

Participant Signature and Consent:

By signing this form, I _____, understand what is required of
(Participant's full name)
me and agree to participate in this study as outlined above.

Signature

Date

Research Staff Signature:

In my judgment, the participant is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent to participate in this research study.

Research Staff full name

Signature

Date

Appendix C: Interview Guide for Healing Lodge Residents

1. Life at the Healing Lodge
 - How long have you been here? Have you been to a Healing Lodge before?
 - What does your typical day look like here?
 - What are some activities and programs do you participate in?
 - What do you find helpful about [x]? How would you describe your experience with [x]?
 - How has your experience been at the Healing Lodge?
2. Community questions
 - How is your relationship with the other residents/Elders/staff at the Healing Lodge?
 - Do you feel like you are a part of a community?
3. Gender-Specific Questions
 - Do you think the HL is a safe place for women?
 - Do you feel as though you are receiving care that is appropriate to your needs as a woman/man/gender diverse individual?
 - How has being at the Healing Lodge impacted your relationship with your family/children?
4. Employment/vocational
 - Are you currently working?
 - Have you completed any tickets or certificates (i.e., vocational training)?
 - Do you feel like you will be able to find meaningful employment after your time at the HL?
5. Release
 - What is your plan upon release? What kind of support are you receiving to prepare for your release?
 - How has the Healing Lodge prepared you for your release?
 - Section 81 non-incarcerated only:* Were you a resident in the Healing Lodge before your release? If yes, how has your transition been? Are there any differences from when you were incarcerated here (e.g., in your access to services/programs)?
6. Healing
 - Did you practice traditional healing before coming to the Healing Lodge?
 - How is your relationship with your [Indigenous?] community?
 - How has the Healing Lodge helped you better understand your culture and cultural identity?
 - To what extent do you feel like you have been able to develop community connections while here?

- What have you found most helpful about the Healing Lodge for your healing journey?
7. Overall experience
- Can you speak to us about being in this location (e.g., urban/rural) and the impact that has on you?
 - How has COVID-19 pandemic impacted your access to services/programs?
 - Is there anything you would change at the Healing Lodge?
 - Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience at the Healing Lodge?

Appendix D: Interview Guide for Elders/Spiritual Advisors and Staff

Note. Some questions may not be asked depending on the role of the interviewee within the Healing Lodge.

1. Life at the Healing Lodge

- Can you speak about your role within the Healing Lodge?
- How would you describe your experience of working in the Healing Lodge? Have you worked in any other CSC institutions? How is your experience unique/different?

2. Programming/Interventions

- Can you outline some of the programs/interventions that are offered at the Healing Lodge?
- Are all of the programs developed in house or are there any that are CSC programs?
- How would you compare the programs—are there any notable differences or similarities? (i.e., engagement, delivery, content)
- What are some of the activities the residents may take part in?
- Have you taken part in any escorted temporary absences with residents?
- Section 81 only:* What are some of the community services that are available? (for residents on supervision)
- What activities or programs do you find residents most engaged in?

3. Resident Experience

- From your experience, are there any particular issues or challenges you often see residents experience?
- What interventions/services/programs do you find best help to address these needs?
- From your interactions and observations, what are some of the changes you see in the residents at the Healing Lodge over time? (behaviours, attitudes, interactions, etc...)

4. Community questions

- In what ways is the community involved? How would you describe the response/engagement of the community to their involvement?
- Section 81 only:* Does your site offer Section 84 supervision? Does this have an impact on the services/activities available?

5. Service Delivery

- What role would you say the Healing Lodge plays in the preparation of the residents for release and reintegration into the community?
- Are there any services or involvements that are used as a follow-up for the residents upon their release?
- Do you think the urban/rural setting impacts service delivery?

- Do you think the experience of the residents would be different if the HL was in an urban/rural centre? Why or why not?
- How do you think the dynamics of HLs change depending on if they are Section 81 operated or CSC-operated?
- Are you aware of any benefits, services or resources that CSC run HL have that Section 81 HL do not have or should have?
- *Section 81 only:* Given that Section 81s can be used to supervise incarcerated individuals, as well as those on parole or statutory release, how does that impact the dynamics at the Healing Lodge?

6. Overall experience

- What are some of the challenges experienced by the Healing Lodge?
- Is there any service or activity you would like to see more of at the Healing Lodge?
- How has COVID-19 affected your service delivery?
- What interventions/services/programs were most impacted by the pandemic?
- How would you describe the relationship between the Healing Lodge and CSC? What is the level of communication like? How would you describe your access to CSC resources, services, and platforms?
- Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience at the Healing Lodge?