

# A Qualitative Study of Experiences at Women's Healing Lodges

*Women's Healing Lodges offer culturally-relevant support through a trauma-informed and gender-based lens.*

## Why we did this study

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 collectively 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*.

## What we did

The study consisted of site visits and semi-structured individual interviews with residents, staff, and Elders/Spiritual Advisors 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 were collected and thematically analyzed for 30 residents, 26 staff members, and three Elders/Spiritual Advisors, offering a holistic understanding from a range of perspectives.

## What we found

While the overall environment at each of the Healing Lodges are multifaceted, the narratives revealed that consistent across all are the holistic, trauma-informed, 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 provide 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 this holistic approach, 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. Concurrently, the positive, supportive relationships fostered throughout the Healing Lodges helped instill a sense of community. 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. These findings tended to diverge when examining the CSC-operated Healing Lodge and the Section 81 facilities. As with any operational environment, each site offers its benefits and challenges, though all have demonstrated their resilience as communities as they adapt to shifting realities such as a more challenging population and the COVID-19 pandemic.

## What it means

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-relevant interventions and support.

## For more information

Hanby, L., Reist, R., Smeth, A., Cram, S., & Derkzen, D. (2023). *A Qualitative Study of Experiences at Women's Healing Lodges* (Research Report R-470). Ottawa, Ontario: Correctional Service of Canada.

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