

Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge: A federally sentenced women's initiative

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Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge, Correctional Service of Canada

Okimaw Ohci (Thunder Hills) Healing Lodge (OOHL) is a thirty-bed healing lodge for federally sentenced Aboriginal women, located in the Cypress Hills, Saskatchewan. This facility has been in operation since October, 1995.

Background

The Federally Sentenced Women's Task Force report, "Creating Choices," recommended that five women's regional facilities be built including the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge.

"Creating Choices" reinforces the findings of previous studies. It states that due to the small number of federally sentenced women (FSW), there are several issues that have placed this population at a disadvantage compared to men under a federal sentence:

- The geographical dislocation of many women from their families, cultures, and communities.
- The security over-classification of some women and the associated lack of significant opportunity for movement to other institutions or lower security facilities/community facilities.
- The lack of appropriate women-centered programs, services, and assessment tools, particularly for the federally sentenced women serving their sentences in provincial facilities.

Research² has demonstrated that Aboriginal offenders (men and women) are granted release at a lower rate than non-Aboriginal people. Aboriginal federally sentenced women also have experienced higher rates of physical and sexual abuse compared to non-Aboriginal federally sentenced women. Substance abuse, primarily alcohol, is another key factor involved in their offense history and is much more pervasive than in the Caucasian offender population.³

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal People reported that 95% of the male Aboriginal offenders in the Saskatchewan Penitentiary have been adopted, removed or displaced from their homes. Reports have shown that many Aboriginal people have been emotionally, physically and/or sexually abused in their childhood and youth. The Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) has built five regional facilities in the past five years. These

facilities for federally sentenced women are presently operating in Alberta, Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia and the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge in Saskatchewan. "Creating Choices" recommended that a healing lodge be built in the Prairie region, as a high number of Aboriginal federally sentenced women are from this region.

Planning of the Healing Lodge

The development of the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge was the result of a shared responsibility and partnership between CSC and Aboriginal people to ensure that it met the cultural and spiritual needs of federally sentenced Aboriginal women. The lodge is built to house up to thirty federally sentenced Aboriginal females and up to ten children under the age of four.

The Planning Circle (who is responsible for the planning of the Lodge) represented the communities of Maple Creek, Nekaneet, women's and Aboriginal organizations, and CSC. Elders from various First Nations played an important part of the planning group. There were additional consultations with female inmates from various institutions to ensure that programs, services and resources would be adequate as well as needs/risk oriented.

The Planning Circle assisted in the development of the architectural design, job descriptions, staff selection process, and the staff development-training plan. The holistic healing strategy is the focus of the Lodge and the planning committee designed this with special care. On conclusion of the planning process, a smaller Circle called *Kekunwemkonawuk* (Keepers of the Healing Lodge Vision) replaced the Planning Circle. This committee meets regularly to monitor, provide support and guidance to the Kikawinaw in the operation of the Lodge. Several Planning Circle members are a part of *Kekunwemkonawuk* to ensure that there is continuity in the operation of the Lodge.

Programs

All activities and programs are guided by the concept of Aboriginal healing. Healing is a lifelong process and the premise is that residents will start their road to healing at the Lodge, and will continue when they leave. Living without the pain of the

effects of physical and sexual abuse, freedom from substance abuse through reconnection with Aboriginal culture, language and spirituality continues on a daily basis at the Healing Lodge. Core programs recommended under the Corrections and Condition Release Act, such as Substance Abuse Prevention, Living without Violence, Cognitive Living Skills, Literacy and Education are offered at the Healing Lodge, but they are presented in a culturally and gender sensitive manner. An Elder is usually part of the program.

Native studies are taught where the positive history of First Nations is of paramount importance. This concept strengthens the positive role that the Aboriginal people have played in our history. The residents regain pride in their race, increase their self-esteem and well-being.

Cultural activities include beadwork, sewing, drumming and singing. Many of the residents make star blankets, moccasins, dream-catchers, ribbon shirts and dresses which are sold to the public. Round dances are held once a month. The residents are responsible for the planning of these events. Members of the Nekaneet and Maple Creek communities participate in these events.

Mother and Child Program

This program became a full-time program in August, 1997. The children live with their mothers and go to the Day Care Centre during the day, while the mother participates in programs. Children are an important part of the lives of Aboriginal and First Nations people. Children are considered close to the "Creator", and are special to Aboriginal families and communities. Therefore, having their children on site is important for offenders, and staff. The children bring joy, hope and anticipation to everyone.

Elder Services

Elder services are available on a 24-hour basis, providing support, guidance, inspiration and hope to the residents and staff. If a crisis occurs at any time of the day or night the Elders are available to assist. The Elders provide traditional and contemporary teachings to both residents and staff. Elders' teachings are held twice weekly. Oral teachings could include the spiritual purposes for fasts, feasts and sundances, as well as the importance of family, communities, and respect.

Mental Health Services

The institution has made provisions for the services of a psychologist who is available to the women offenders two weeks out of each month. The

psychologist is responsible for counseling and completing psychological assessments as the need arises. One-to-one counseling services fills the need for women to discuss their past abuse.

Counseling services, spiritual healing and program involvement is all part of the holistic healing of the residents. This integrated service has prevented major crisis situations from occurring when residents tend to self injure. There has not been a major incident at the Lodge.

Mediation/Conflict Resolution Circles

The residents at the Healing Lodge continue to face challenges, frustrations and anger in their daily lives. Spiritual Circles are held in the Spiritual Lodge every morning. Generally, everyone shares feelings of joy, pain, frustration and hope in the Lodge. It is a safe place to talk about how you feel as all the discussions that are held there are in confidence. Anything that is said there must stay there. It is a place to learn patience and self control and to respect what others say.

Mediation and conflict circles are a daily part of life at the Lodge. If two residents who are roommates are not getting along, they are brought to a talking circle with an Elder present. Often, there is more than one resolution circle to deal with the issue. However, it does get resolved. The concept is that the resident will learn to deal with conflict and frustrations in a respectful manner in a safe environment. This will prepare them for the outside world where there will always be conflicts and frustrations to deal with.

For example, two residents were involved in a minor altercation, as they were both angry with one other. Both residents were interviewed to get all the facts and then brought together to discuss the problem. The situation was resolved after two meetings with both parties agreeing to clean the Administration Building for two weeks. They had to work together to plan what each had to do. The result was that they learned to talk, plan and complete the duties that were expected of them. They became good friends and supportive of each other. They each stated that they had learned to deal with conflict and that if it had been done any other way, they would not have had the experience of working a problem out.

Talking and spiritual circles provide a safe and supportive avenue to deal with all issues. It breaks down the hierarchy that is often perceived of staff. In a circle everyone is equal and all the information that is shared is a learning experience. Generally, everyone learns from listening to one another. Everyone learns to speak honestly and openly about

life, family, experiences and feelings. Everyone feels that they have been heard, as they are not interrupted. The goal is in having talking circles become a part of a practice that can be taken into the outside world when the resident leaves. There is a great emphasis put on respect, in that we should treat others as we want to be treated.

Is the Initiative Working?

"Creating Choices" emphasized a vision for change, as set out by the following principles:

- a safe place for Aboriginal women prisoners;
- a caring attitude towards self, family and community;
- a belief in individualized client-specific planning;
- an understanding of the transitory aspects of Aboriginal life;

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² *Corrections and Conditional Release Statistical Overview*, Table D2, p. 56, (Ottawa, ON: Solicitor General Canada, November, 1999).

- an appreciation of the healing role of children who are closer to the spirit world;
- pride in surviving difficult backgrounds and personal experiences.

The Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge has been in operation for almost four years. The staff at the Lodge makes every effort to follow the principles as outlined by "Creating Choices". We provide a safe and supportive environment and treat the women with respect. We encourage the residents to take control of their lives. Children living at the Lodge contribute to a positive and happy environment. Community members continue to support the Lodge. The residents bring their personal experiences and others learn from these experiences. The Elders share their knowledge. Of the 50 women released to date, six have re-offended. ■

³ See L.L. Motiuk and M. Nafekh, Aboriginal offenders in corrections: A profile (this issue).

Let's Talk

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