

An examination of healing lodges for federal offenders in Canada

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One of the Correctional Service of Canada's (CSC) initiatives to reduce the incarceration of Aboriginal people in Canada is through the use of healing lodges. This process is implemented through Section 81 of the Corrections and Conditional Release Act (CCRA), which allows Aboriginal communities to provide correctional services.

In an effort to better understand federal healing lodges, an examination of the physical aspects of the lodges and a profile of residents was conducted. Interviews were also conducted with 56 staff in the federal correctional institutions, 18 staff in the healing lodges, and 20 residents of healing lodges, in order to examine how they viewed the healing lodge experience and issues facing healing lodges.

Description of healing lodges

There are currently six healing lodges in operation in Canada for federal offenders (see Table 1). Two healing lodges (Okimaw Ohci and Pê Sâkâstêw) are managed by CSC. The remaining four healing lodges (Stan Daniels, Ochichakkosipi, Wahpeton and Waseskun) are managed by Aboriginal agencies and/or communities.

while others take up to 100 residents. They differ in location from remote to urban areas. Some resemble small correctional facilities while others are very traditional in design. Finally, some offer structured programs while others do not offer programs per se, but instead offer in-depth individual counselling. Okimaw Ohci is the only healing lodge for women offenders and it is also the only facility that accepts both minimum- and medium-security offenders. The other lodges only accept minimum-security offenders.

Offender profile

From 1995, when the first federal healing lodge opened, until October 2001, 530 offenders have resided in healing lodges. Over the last four years, about 104 offenders have been transferred each year. This number is expected to increase as two new healing lodges are expected to open in 2003 (Kwîkwêxwelhp in British Columbia and Willow Cree Healing Lodge in Saskatchewan).

Socio-demographically, residents of healing lodges resemble Aboriginal offenders in minimum security. However, significantly larger proportions

Table 1

Healing lodges currently in operation in Canada				
Healing Lodge	Location	Clients	Opened as Healing Lodge	# of Section 81 Beds
Okimaw Ohci	Maple Creek, Saskatchewan	Women	November 1995	28
Pê Sâkâstêw	Hobbema, Alberta	Men	August 1997	40
Wahpeton Spiritual Healing Lodge	Prince Albert, Saskatchewan	Men	August 1997	5
Stan Daniels Community Corrections Centre	Edmonton, Alberta	Men	June 1999	15-20
Ochichakkosipi Healing Lodge	Crane River, Manitoba	Men	February 2000	24
Waseskun	St. Alphonse-de-Rodriguez, Quebec	Men	August 2001	15

Although healing lodges share a number of characteristics, there is also a great deal of diversity. The main differences are between the CSC-managed and Aboriginal-managed healing lodges. CSC-managed lodges focus on traditional Aboriginal ideologies but are considered minimum-security CSC facilities. Aboriginal-managed lodges are privately-run and operate within certain guidelines as outlined in their contracts with CSC. However, they do not necessarily maintain the structured approach of a CSC facility.

Healing lodges also differ in size, location, design and operation. Some house only a few residents,

of Aboriginal offenders in minimum security are currently serving sentences for sex offences (20% versus 13%). However, the two groups have similar aggregate sentences. Interestingly, residents of healing lodges appear to have a slightly more extensive criminal history than Aboriginal offenders in minimum security. For example, larger proportions of healing lodge residents had been previously segregated for disciplinary infractions (25% versus 17%) and attempted/successful escapes (34% versus 21%). Furthermore, larger proportions of healing lodge residents were rated as higher risk to re-offend (53% versus 45%), higher overall need (64% versus 50%),

and to have lower reintegration potential (45% versus 33%) at the time of admission to the federal facility.

Healing lodge experience

The majority (80%) of healing lodge residents interviewed said they were very satisfied with their experience at the healing lodge. It was noted that the healing lodge helped them better understand themselves and furthered their healing journey. It was noted that they were less angry and more in control of themselves. Important aspects included Elders, access to sweat lodges, cultural activities, as well as access to outside activities. One respondent indicated:

[I] don't respond violently anymore. Emotionally, I feel more at peace with myself [and] don't have negative thoughts anymore.

Furthermore, 95% of the offenders felt that their experiences and interaction with the staff was positive. As one respondent noted:

[The healing lodge staff are] very interactive. [It's] not like in prison where guards have nothing to do with them. [There is] no tension with staff and inmates [here]. Communication is better, the staff helps the [offenders] deal with their problems.

Staff from healing lodges and federal facilities seemed to have some common perceptions about healing lodges. Both said that there is a lack of communication between federal institutions and healing lodges. Some concerns were that federal institutions lacked an understanding of the role of healing lodges and Section 81, did not trust the healing lodges' ability to manage offenders and lacked commitment to the implementation of Section 81. Two-thirds (63%) of the federal staff felt that they had a good understanding of Section 81, but less than one-third (30%) felt they had a good understanding of what occurs at healing lodges. Furthermore, almost one-quarter (22%) of the federal staff felt that the healing lodges were not effectively managing offenders.

It was noted that some of the most beneficial aspects of the healing lodge include the Aboriginal culture and tradition. Another benefit was providing residents with the opportunity to heal. As was also noted by the residents, staff felt that improvements to facilities would be useful (e.g., more space, security). They also said that more funding was necessary in order to increase the space, improve programming, hire more staff and interact more fully with the community.

Respondents were asked what federal institutions could do to help healing lodges implement Section 81. It was suggested by a number of respondents that, in order to get a better understanding of healing

lodges and facilitate a good relationship, federal staff should interact with healing lodge staff and residents. Similarly, healing lodge staff could spend more time at federal facilities. It was also suggested that staff from the federal institutions could help train healing lodge staff on the implementation of Section 81.

Many respondents noted that success in a healing lodge will vary depending on the offender and the healing lodges. Some respondents said that healing lodges may work for offenders who are sincere and motivated. Similarly, certain structures of healing lodges may work better for some offenders than others.

Finally, it was suggested that healing lodges have more involvement with families of offenders and communities in general.

Issues facing healing lodges

It is clear that there are many positive aspects of healing lodges. Many of the lodges are located in beautiful physical settings that may aid offenders along their healing path. The environments appear to be conducive to relaxation, which may allow offenders to open up emotionally and begin dealing with the factors that have contributed to their criminal behaviour. Stan Daniels is different in that it is located in an urban setting, but this allows offenders to be closer to their families and can provide more opportunities for employment, a significantly high need area for many transferred offenders.

In addition to the setting, most healing lodges focus on Aboriginal culture. They all provide access to Elders or spiritual advisors, as well as a variety of cultural activities. As some of the offenders indicated, their awareness of Aboriginal culture appears to have increased while they were at the lodge. This exposure seems to have had a positive impact on them. One of the more striking findings comes from offenders who were fairly ambivalent about Aboriginal culture or traditions prior to coming to the lodge. Once they had an opportunity to learn about their culture, it greatly enhanced how they viewed themselves and others, as well as their behaviour.

In addition to feeling at ease at the lodge, many offenders reported feeling more comfortable with the healing lodge staff because the staff were predominantly Aboriginal, which ultimately may aid them in their healing process. Furthermore, the healing lodge staff appear to have a strong desire and commitment to working with offenders, aiding them in their healing and working with CSC to accomplish this objective. Having staff who believe in what they do creates a positive and accepting environment that should contribute to healing.

Although there are many positive aspects of healing lodges, there were also some issues identified as facing the healing lodges.

Resources

One of the most pressing concerns noted by all Section 81 healing lodges is the lack of resources. At the basic level, Section 81 lodges are in need of some physical improvements. Furthermore, the lack of funding has affected recruitment, training, and retention of lodge staff. Recruitment is especially difficult as Aboriginal people with the required skill sets are in high demand and the lodges cannot afford to pay what the market dictates. In terms of training, most Section 81 lodges do not have the funds to adequately train their staff regarding CSC procedures.

Programming is another area that has been affected by the lack of funds. Smaller facilities do not offer structured programs as they do not have the resources to offer programs given the small number of residents that need them.

Transfers

In addition to Section 81 transfers, non-CSC run healing lodges accept offenders on day parole, full parole, statutory release, as well as provincial offenders. This can be a problem for the lodges in that these different offenders have a variety of conditions that govern their release that may result in confusion and complication. Furthermore, the needs of these offenders may differ substantially, making it difficult for one lodge to accommodate all the differences.

Another issue is who is being informed about transfers, who applies and who eventually receives approval for a transfer. One of the main factors institutional review boards use to determine if the offender is appropriate for a transfer is involvement in cultural practices. Some offenders may be rejected by the institutional review boards based on their lack of cultural involvement, but may still greatly benefit from the healing lodge experience.

Relationships

There appears to be an overall lack of communication between healing lodges and federal correctional facilities. This lack of communication may contribute to issues relating to the identification of potential transfers, the effectiveness of the transfer process, and the likelihood of parole officers encouraging offenders to apply to a healing lodge.

Another issue is the understanding of the role and approach used by healing lodges. Some healing

lodge and federal staff felt that federal institutions lacked an understanding of the role of healing lodges, did not trust the healing lodges' ability to manage offenders, and lacked commitment to the implementation of Section 81. This points to a need for better communication among federal staff and healing lodges, as well as some agreed-upon policies regarding the role of healing lodges.

Community involvement

Community involvement may be one of the main factors that determines the effectiveness of a healing lodge. The extent of community involvement differs from lodge to lodge, with some having little involvement, and others having strong community links. Community involvement is the key to access to cultural activities and Elders as well as offender reintegration. In addition, links with communities can create employment and housing opportunities for the offenders upon release. At this point, there does not appear to be adequate resources for healing lodges to focus on community involvement. However, it is clear that, in order for healing lodges to be effective, this is a crucial component.

Conclusion

It is clear that there are some very positive and effective aspects of healing lodges. The culturally-appropriate environments can contribute to the healing process of the offenders. In addition, the staff at the lodges, which are predominantly Aboriginal, contribute to an environment that is more conducive to building respect and positive relationships. Ultimately, this directly affects the offenders' healing.

The effectiveness of different models of healing lodges with different types of offenders should be examined in more detail. Some offenders may do better in structured environments with set programs, whereas others may need a quiet setting without distractions to begin examining their behaviour and travel along their healing path.

Although there are issues facing healing lodges, many can be resolved by improved communication between the healing lodges and federal facilities. A better understanding of healing lodges among federal staff, and of CSC policies among healing staff, would go a long way towards helping the relationship and, ultimately, improving the services provided to offenders. ■

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