

WALKING THE RED PATH PROJECT

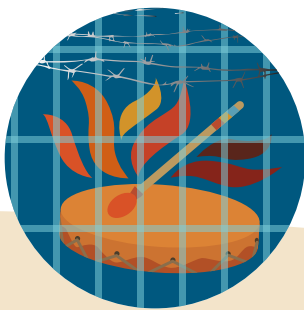


Re-forging connections,
Empowering Indigenous women to heal, and
Driving change for a healthy future

To respond to the identified needs of incarcerated Indigenous women and to help close gaps in access to culturally safe programs, NWAC designed and implemented the RED Path Project.

RED Path is a five-year Public Health Agency of Canada funded project that aims to develop sustainable, evidence-based, and culturally safe sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections (STBBI) interventions for Indigenous women.

RED Path currently works with women incarcerated at three federal correctional institutions, the Fraser Valley Institution for Women, Edmonton Institute for Women, and Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge for Aboriginal Women, as well as the Section 81, Buffalo Sage Wellness House, to deliver a three-day workshop designed by and for Indigenous women. The workshop aims to increase knowledge about STBBI testing and interventions, harm reduction, and build healthy relationships.



Results

RED Path has been successful in increasing knowledge of STBBIs and building the capacity of incarcerated Indigenous women to prevent infection and improve health outcomes while reducing stigma and promoting cultural connectivity.

In fact, the project's mid-term evaluation data completed by participating incarcerated Indigenous women shows an:

83% increase in willingness to **ask** about what health, social and support services are available to them **within** the correctional institution.

85% increase in willingness to **use** health, social and support services **within** and **outside** the correctional institution.

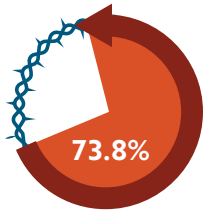
86% increase in ability to change personal behaviours to reduce their risk of getting HIV, HCV or related STBBIs.

50% increase in reported strong knowledge of HIV, HCV and related STBBIs.



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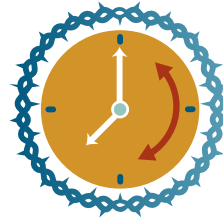
Why Federally Incarcerated Indigenous Women?



While admissions to federal correctional facilities have declined over the last decade, the number of Indigenous female offenders has actually increased by 73.8%.¹



Despite representing just 4%² of the female population, Indigenous women now account for 42% of federally incarcerated women with 80% identifying as First Nations, 20% as Metis and under 1% as Inuit³.



Indigenous offenders are more likely to serve larger percentages of their sentence and less likely to be granted parole, compared to non-Indigenous offenders.⁴



Indigenous women are disproportionately classified as maximum-security offenders (56%) and are under-represented amongst minimum-security classifications (31%).⁵



Of the federally incarcerated Indigenous women surveyed, 97% were diagnosed with a mental disorder and 92% were found to have moderate to high substance abuse needs, demonstrating the need for support—not punishment.⁶



6.03%
Indigenous
2.16%
Non-Indigenous

Federally incarcerated Indigenous women have the highest rates of HIV, at 6.03%, compared to non-Indigenous females, at 2.16%.⁷ The prevalence rates of hepatitis C (HCV) are also highest among federally incarcerated Indigenous women, compared to any other population group in Canada.⁸

Why Culturally Safe Programming?

- Indigenous women benefit from greater access to culturally safe programming, as evidenced by a 2017 report by the Office of the Auditor General, which found that individuals who participated in healing lodge programs had much lower rates of re-offending upon release.⁹
- Healing lodges arose out of a need for culturally safe and trauma-informed alternatives to institutionalization. They are correctional facilities that offer culturally safe services to offenders and incorporate Indigenous traditions, values, and beliefs.¹⁰
- Instead of punishment, healing lodges aim to understand and address the factors that led to an individual's incarceration, and prepare them for a successful reintegration back into society.¹¹

Barriers to Culturally Safe Programming

- Despite the evidenced benefits and demonstrated need for healing lodges, there continues to be limited access and few options for Indigenous women:
 - *There is currently only one CSC-run healing lodge, Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge, and two Section 81-run healing lodges, Buffalo Sage Wellness House and Eagle Women's Lodge.*
 - *Healing lodges only accept minimum-security or, on a case-by-case basis, medium-security women. As Indigenous women are disproportionately classified as medium and high risk, they are less likely to be eligible to access these facilities.*
 - *Further, these healing lodges are all located in the Prairie region. This makes it difficult for women to serve out their sentences close to their home communities and presents obstacles for supporting a healthy and successful reintegration after their sentence is complete.*

The need for transformative systemic change

Access to culturally safe programming and alternatives to traditional incarceration isn't just a suggestion being made by prisoners and advocates. Rather, it must be viewed as a part of Canada's commitment to reconciliation and obligation to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015), the National Inquiry Into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2019), and the Standing Committee on the Status of Women's recent parliamentary report *A Call to Action: Reconciliation with Indigenous Women in the Federal Justice and Correctional Systems* (2018)¹² have all concluded that the Canadian justice system contributes to the oppression and marginalization of Indigenous people by failing to take their unique histories with colonization, and its traumatic effects, into consideration. All three bodies have outlined immediate ways the government can take action to effect transformative change:

- **Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Call to Action #36:** *"We call upon the federal, provincial, and territorial governments to work with Aboriginal communities to provide culturally relevant services to inmates on issues such as substance abuse, family and domestic violence, and overcoming the experience of having been sexually abused."*
- **National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls' Call for Justice #14.8:** *"Ensure correctional facilities and programs recognize the distinct needs of Indigenous offenders when designing and implementing programming for First Nations, Inuit and Métis women. Correctional Service Canada must use culturally safe, distinctions-based and trauma-informed models of care, adapted to the needs of Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA people."*

- **Standing Committee on the Status of Women's** two specific recommendations:
 - **Recommendation #53:** *"That the Government of Canada partner with Indigenous peoples and organizations to offer programs and services for Indigenous female inmates that are culturally relevant, culture specific and administered within Correctional Service Canada institutions."*
 - **Recommendation #55:** *"That the Government of Canada, in collaboration with provinces and territories and working in partnership with Indigenous peoples and communities, provide culturally relevant services to inmates on issues such as substance abuse, family and domestic violence, and overcoming the experience of having been sexually abused, as directed by call to action #36 of the 2015 Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada."*

Despite the success of RED Path, there is much more work to be done. Not only do Indigenous women continue to be grossly over-represented within federal correctional institutions and amongst STBBI diagnoses, but considerable barriers to accessing culturally safe programs and community-based alternatives to corrections continue to exist. NWAC will continue to advocate for meaningful and transformative change within the criminal justice system and hold the government accountable to its commitment to the:

- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's (2015) 94 Calls to Action;
- National Inquiry Into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2019) 231 Calls for Justice; and
- A Call to Action: Reconciliation with Indigenous Women in the Federal Justice and Correctional Systems (2018) 96 recommendations.



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Funding for this document is provided by the Public Health Agency of Canada. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of the Public Health Agency of Canada.