

“We Work from the Inside Out”

Wellness in Sheway’s Indigenous Cultural Support Program

2025



We respectfully acknowledge the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples as the first inhabitants and traditional custodians of the lands where we live, learn, and work. This evaluation was conducted on the traditional and unceded territory of the Coast Salish Peoples, including the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səliłwətał (Tseil-Waututh) Nations.

Evaluation Team:

Lindsay Wolfson
Dr. Nancy Poole
Ella Huber

Sheway Indigenous Cultural Support Program Project Team:

Dr. Elder Roberta Price
Dana Clifford
Claudia Kobetitch
Kristen Farquharson
Dr. Janine Hardial



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An Opening Statement from Dr. Elder Roberta Price

Before we begin today, I want to take a moment to share a teaching that has been passed on to me by many of my teachers, mentors, and Elders:

All of our babies are gifts from the Creator, our gifts arrive to teach us, to guide us on how to love, care, and to respond to their needs.

We treat our gifts with the highest respect, kindness and love.

Our ceremonies such as this have taken place since 'Time Immemorial'. Indigenous communities have always known how to take care of each other and hold up our loved ones.

I share this today to remind us that all children need to be supported, protected, and lifted up by the community. That includes all of us in this room. Our task is to make sure that children feel that warmth and belonging—that protective blanket—starting in their homes, their communities and in their schools.

O Siem Ah Siem



“Indigenous communities have always known how to take care of each other and hold up our loved ones”

– Dr. Elder Roberta Price

Introduction



About the Sheway Indigenous Cultural Support Program

The Indigenous Cultural Support Program (ICSP) is offered by Sheway to increase the provision of cultural supports and activities for their clients in the Downtown Eastside (DTES) of Vancouver. Sheway offers services to people who are pregnant and parenting and use, or have used, substances. Their program offers a one-stop model, and includes nursing and physician medical services, social workers, and child welfare, housing, food, and Indigenous peer and family support. While nearly two-thirds of Sheway clients identify as Indigenous, prior to ICSP, comprehensive full-time Indigenous cultural support and programming was not fully possible.

Sheway received 27-months of funding through Health Canada's Substance Use and Addiction Program to offer ICSP. The objectives of ICSP were to: 1) improve cultural and spiritual wellness among Indigenous clients at Sheway, and 2) reduce the harms of substance use and addictions among women accessing services at Sheway.

Through ICSP, Sheway aimed to increase the provision of cultural support through the integration of Elders in drop-in services and provision of Indigenous cultural interventions and supports. Another goal of ICSP was to increase access to Indigenous cultural activities and skills workshops (e.g., drum workshops and circles, dream-catcher making, moccasin making, beading, cedar weaving, traditional medicine harvesting and preparation). Integral to ICSP was connection with culture and how culture can be used to reduce harms related to substance use.

ICSP is nested within multifaceted wraparound supports that address many determinants of health as well as the medical supports that are offered at Sheway. Sheway's program model is based on the recognition that the health of women and their children is linked to the conditions of their lives and their ability to influence these conditions. Since its inception in 1993, Sheway's service philosophy has included respect and understanding of Indigenous cultures, histories and traditions. It is with the ICSP that a fulsome approach to cultural support is now realized, so that cultural interventions are integrated along with all other services that support wellness and harm reduction related to substance use.

Land Acknowledgement

This evaluation was conducted by evaluators who live and work across Turtle Island. Vancouver Coastal Health, Sheway, and the Centre of Excellence for Women's Health acknowledge the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis as the first inhabitants and traditional custodians of the lands in which we live, learn, work, and play. This evaluation took place in Vancouver, British Columbia on the traditional and unceded territory of the Coast Salish Peoples including the xwməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Səlíl wətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. This evaluation was conducted in a way that sought to honour and celebrate Indigenous knowledge systems and capture the spiritual, relational, emotional, and physical connections to wellness.



Evaluative Process

In 2024, a culturally informed mixed methods approach was used to respectfully understand and document the impacts of ICSP on overall wellness and harms related to substance use. The evaluation has drawn upon the perspectives of Elders, Knowledge Keepers, clients and staff to articulate the value of the program and inform the program's long-term sustainability. The Indigenous Wellness Framework (Thunderbird Partnership Foundation, 2020) has been used to describe wellness from an Indigenous perspective and to demonstrate ICSP's impact through the voices and storytelling of Elders, Knowledge Keepers, staff and program participants.

The evaluation captures social, behavioural, and medical outcomes including: client satisfaction; staff, Elder, and client experiences; substance use outcomes; and outcomes related to intergenerational healing, cultural connection and identity. The evaluation was conducted by external evaluators from the Centre of Excellence for Women's Health with support from Dr. Elder Roberta Price, and Sheway's Manager, Director of Operations, Medical Lead and the ICSP Project Manager.

Indigenous Wellness Framework

The Indigenous Wellness Framework was articulated during the *Honouring our Strengths: Culture as Intervention in Addictions Treatment* study (Elder Jim Dumont & National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation, 2014). The *Honouring our Strengths* study examined the strengths of First Nations culture and the role of cultural interventions in drug and alcohol treatment. The study was led by a partnership between the Assembly of First Nations, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, the Thunderbird Partnership Foundation and the University of Saskatchewan and inspired by the leadership of Elder Jim Dumont. One of the evaluators for this project, Dr. Nancy Poole, was also on the research team for the *Honouring our Strengths* study.

The Indigenous Wellness Framework and its accompanying resources, including the Connecting with Culture Activity Guide, draw on the concepts of wellness and common cultural interventions to help clients, program leaders, and service providers think about Indigenous culture as a support for wellness (Thunderbird Partnership Foundation, 2020). The Indigenous Wellness Framework was initially developed to understand the impact of cultural interventions on wellness and substance use recovery for Indigenous people accessing National Native Alcohol and Drug Abuse Programs. Given that the objectives of the ICSP are concerned with improving cultural and spiritual wellness and reducing the harms of substance use for Indigenous women and families accessing services at Sheway, the Indigenous Wellness Framework was chosen to guide the analysis of this evaluation.

Elder Jim Dumont, who guided the *Honouring our Strengths* study and the collective development of the Indigenous Wellness Framework, offered a definition of wellness. It begins with this statement:



"Wellness from an Indigenous perspective is a whole and healthy person expressed through a sense of balance of spirit, emotion, mind and body. Central to wellness is belief in one's connection to language, land, beings of creation, and ancestry, supported by a caring family and environment" (Elder Jim Dumont & National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation, 2014, p. 2)

Integral to Elder Dumont's definition is his description of the Medicine Wheel's four areas of wellness: spiritual activities provide people with a sense of hope; emotional activities provide people with a sense of belonging; mental activities bring meaning to people's lives; and physical activities bring purpose to people's lives. These definitions guided the development of our evaluation and the analytical framework we used.

Spiritual – Connection to spirit comes from learning about one's identity as an Indigenous person. Hope for the future and the future of one's family is grounded in a sense of identity, unique values and a belief in spirit. Spiritual wellness creates **hope**.

Emotional – Emotional wellness comes from having connections to people, land and Creation. Family and community are important, as is a relationship to all living beings. A sense of belonging and connectedness to family, to community and culture is a part of wellness. Emotional wellness creates **belonging**.

Mental – Mental wellbeing comes from knowing and learning, including using intuition as a way of understanding the meaning of life. Having a reason for being gives meaning to life. A sense of meaning comes from an understanding of how one's life and those of one's family and community are part of Creation and a rich history. Mental wellness creates **meaning**.

Physical – Bodies are houses for the spirit and for moving and living life. Living life with purpose and on purpose needs a healthy body. A sense of purpose in one's life may come through education, employment, care-giving activities, or cultural ways of being and doing. Physical wellness creates **purpose**.

(Thunderbird Partnership Foundation, 2020)

Elder Involvement and Leadership

Elders honour the traditional ways of knowing and being and are a link between generations. They support and guide connection to culture and play an important role in teaching about Indigenous wellness and balance (Viscogliosi et al., 2020). A core component of ICSP has been the involvement of Elders and Knowledge Keepers. For this evaluation, Dr. Elder Roberta Price provided guidance to ensure that the evaluation was conducted in a reciprocal, culturally relevant, and collaborative way.



Dr. Elder Roberta Price is a devoted mother, grandmother, and great-grand mother and member of Snuneymuxw and Cowichan Nations. For over four decades has shared her leadership, wisdom, and teachings to support Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members to achieve improved outcomes in healthcare. Elder Price has been involved in the Elder Visiting Program for BC Children's Hospital and BC Women's Hospital + Health Centre. She has facilitated cultural teaching circles for 40 years in many settings, including lower mainland schools, within communities, St. Paul's Hospital, and the UBC Learning Exchange, among others.

Methods

Using the Indigenous Wellness Framework as a guiding tool, activity worksheets and focus groups were used to capture immediate and summative data. Sheway concurrently collected administrative and electronic medical records (EMR) data.

Activity Worksheets

Activity worksheets (Appendix 1) guided by the Indigenous Wellness Framework were developed to capture immediate feedback from program participants after engaging in ICSP activities. Due to the drop-in nature of the program, the activity worksheets allowed women to immediately reflect on how the day's activity impacted their connection to culture and their overall wellness. This created the opportunity to learn from clients when the session was fresh in their minds, and from those who may not have been interested or able to attend the client focus group.

On the worksheets, program participants could reflect on whether and how the session had connected them to any of the four wellness areas pictured on a Medicine Wheel. In addition, two questions with Likert scales offered the opportunity for women to indicate how important connecting to culture and wellness was for them in that moment, and their level of confidence as to their engagement with culture. The two questions offered a simple and direct way of understanding how important connecting to culture was for the participants, and if they were confident that the activities were helping them connect to culture and wellness. In the field of Motivational Interviewing, importance and confidence are recognized as key elements of behaviour change. If importance is high but confidence is low, or conversely, if importance is low and confidence is high, certain approaches to fostering each can be applied so that outcomes are achieved (Miller & Rollnick, 2002).

The worksheets also provided a space for the activity facilitator, Elder, Knowledge Keeper, or a Sheway staff member to provide observations or comments from the day's activity. At times, clients also used this space to provide additional feedback. Activity worksheets were handed out to clients after activities from June to November 2024 and sent to the evaluators for analysis. The evaluators gathered frequencies and means of client reported connectedness to each area of wellness, as well as the reported levels of importance of being connected to culture and wellness and confidence in growing connected to culture and wellness.



Focus Groups

Three focus groups were held in August 2024 with: 1) Elders and Knowledge Keepers; 2) clients; and 3) staff. For the first two focus groups, Dr. Elder Roberta Price opened and closed the focus group with a prayer. These focus groups included a meal and honoraria provided to participants.

Elders and Knowledge Keepers were invited to participate in the focus group through word of mouth. The Project Manager and Dr. Elder Roberta Price emailed Elders and Knowledge Keepers who had been involved in ICSP in various capacities (e.g., drop-ins, involvement in ceremony, cedar brushing and smudging, leading cultural activities).

Clients were recruited to participate via word of mouth. Postcards (see Appendix 3) were displayed in the client space at Sheway and on the second floor in the medical offices. They were also distributed during and after ICSP activities. To encourage clients' participation in the focus group in ways that felt most meaningful to them, the evaluators included one question where clients could draw or write how they have seen changes in their wellness from being involved in the ICSP. During the client focus group, in addition to opening and closing the focus group, Dr. Elder Roberta Price provided support to participants. Childminding was provided by Sheway staff.

The final focus group with staff was held following an all-staff meeting to ensure maximum availability and participation. Health and social service providers, including Indigenous family and cultural support workers, social workers, physicians, administrative staff, infant development consultants, cooks, nurses, peer support workers, and housing support workers participated.

The focus groups were recorded and transcribed, and analyzed using NVivo 11, employing the Indigenous Wellness Framework as the analytical framework. The coding in NVivo was led by one of the evaluators and reviewed by the two additional evaluators for consensus. The focus group questions are included as Appendix 2.

Administrative and EMR Data

Throughout the project, administrative data were used to document the number of Elder-led/Elder-involved programming, including Elder availability during drop-in services, the number of activities that have been offered through ICSP and number of attendees/clients have accessed programming. Additional data was collected using electronic medical records (EMR). At Sheway, clinical and non-clinical staff use EMR to systematically document client information including demographics, medical history, access to services, prescriptions, visits to other healthcare settings, and medical interventions. Included in this evaluation are the number of days that Opioid Agonist Therapies (OAT) was prescribed pre- and post-participation in a cultural activity and the walk-in data for everyone who participated in cultural activities irrespective of their OAT status. These data were captured by EMR and analyzed by the Vancouver Coastal Health Data Team before being provided to the evaluators for inclusion in this evaluation.

Fostering Wellness



Since the evaluation began, cultural activities have been offered at least 3x per week and on-site Elder support has been available 1 – 2x per week. As of December 2024, 275 SUAP-funded ICSP activities were reported, representing 75 unique activities. As of December 2024, 171 women had participated in at least one of the 275 ICSP activities. SUAP funded activities have included: 3 Baby Welcoming Ceremonies, 33 community kitchens, 22 beading circles, 21 ribbon skirt workshops, 19 cedar brushings, 16 cedar weaving workshops, 7 drum making workshops, 6 on the land walks with Knowledge Keepers, 5 West Coast button blanket workshops, 7 rattle making sessions, 3 baby moccasin workshops, and others. While many stories about client engagement and successes were shared throughout the program, this report captures what was shared for the evaluation via the activity sheets, focus groups, and in EMR.

ICPS has collaborated with facilitators and Elders from a range of Nations across Canada, to connect diverse and urban Indigenous clients with cultural traditions and Elders who are from their Nation. Descriptions of some of the aforementioned cultural activities held by Sheway can be found below:

Children’s Book Reading was led by a Squamish author who read a children’s book about the Squamish Nation. Clients gathered with their children to hear and learn about stories passed down through generations.

Cultural Packages are available to clients to take with them to the hospital or treatment centres. Packages include traditional medicines, smokeless smudge, and self-guided activities (e.g., beading kits, dreamcatcher kits, and Indigenous adult colour books) that they can do at home or while in acute/community care.

Drumming has been offered during parenting groups. For example, on National Indigenous Peoples Day, a father-daughter drumming duo drummed and sang at a parenting group. Following the drumming, the father presented Sheway with a Haida print that he designed, which has since been framed and hung in the drop-in space.

Faceless Doll Project was developed by the Native Women’s Association of Canada to generate awareness of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls through art. To honour Red Dress Day, materials were collected for the Faceless Doll Project so that clients could create their own felt doll to hang prominently in the drop-in space.

Hot Lunch Program now includes one Indigenous meal per week to further expand the reach of cultural programming. Traditional proteins are sourced from a local vendor and prepared in-house by the Sheway cook. The lunch program usually serves 75 clients and their children each day. Since the pilot began in September 2024, the food has been in such demand that it



continues to run out each week. By simply substituting in a traditional protein like elk, salmon, or bison, clients are now able to access traditional foods.

Indigenous Community Kitchen is led by a red-seal chef and Knowledge Keeper from the small Western Arctic community of Teetl'it Zheh. The Knowledge Keeper invites clients to learn how to cook meals incorporating traditional Indigenous proteins and foods. Bringing knowledge passed down by her Elders and the expertise from creating the Rooted in Indigenous Foods program at Simon Fraser University, the Knowledge Keeper shares teachings with clients and brings Indigenous cuisines to Sheway. Examples of meals include salmon chowder, baked bannock, bison stew, elk meatloaf, and venison penne pasta. Each of these recipes draw on historical Indigenous food traditions but have been adapted to use commercially available ingredients. All the recipes are created to easily substitute proteins for ones that may be more affordable and easier to access (i.e., through food banks).

Land-Based Healing has been offered through cedar harvesting on Burke Mountain. The activity was led by an Elder, who began the cedar harvest with a prayer and offering tobacco at the base of the cedar tree. On the Northwest Coast, cedar trees are sacred to many Indigenous peoples and are used as medicine, in crafting, spiritual ceremonies, canoes, etc. The harvested and processed cedar continues to be used in workshops at Sheway to make twisted cedar bracelets, woven bracelets, headbands, and earrings. Other land-based healing has included a visit to the x^wícícəsəm Garden at the University of British Columbia. The garden serves as an educational resource rooted in Indigenous knowledge and includes 60+ medicinal plants native to BC and beyond. Led by a group of Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers, clients first gathered around a sacred fire to express their intentions for the visit. Following this, the clients learned how medicinal plants native to BC can be used in medicine making. After providing an offering of tobacco, clients were able to harvest medicine and take it home with them.

Nature Walks led by Knowledge Keepers were offered at Stanley Park. During the nature walks, clients learned and were able to taste many of the traditional names of trees, plants, and berries. The walks were stroller and wheelchair accessible, making it easier for a range of clients to participate.

Orange Shirt Day Decorating has twice been offered during the last week of September to recognize and honour the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation and Orange Shirt Day. Activities included decorating adult and child-sized orange shirts using Coast Salish stencils, as well as ribbon skirt making, creating medicine bags using elk leather, beading orange shirt pins, designing mini orange shirts with felt, fabric and stickers to hang in the drop-in space, and Haida drumming. During the final day, 3 Elders were on-site, and a meal of bison stew and bannock was served at the end of the week.



Wool Weaving Workshops have been hosted by a Squamish Knowledge Keeper. During the workshops, clients and staff were invited to weave colourful strands of wool on a large loom in a diamond pattern to represent those at Sheway lifting each other up. The pattern was created to represent the seven generations before us and the seven generations to come. The four points of the diamonds represent the four directions of the Medicine Wheel. The weaving is now proudly hung in the drop-in area.

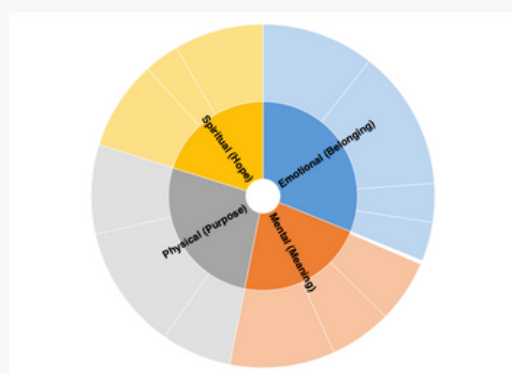
For this evaluation, there were 39 unique activity worksheets completed and 55 people participated in the focus groups, including eight Elders and Knowledge Keepers, 26 clients, and 21 staff members. Throughout the evaluative activities, there was a lot of laughter, connection, appreciation, and storytelling.

The client worksheets captured data from several of the described activities including children’s book reading, drumming during parenting groups, nature walks, Indigenous Community Kitchen, ribbon skirt making, beading, and medicine bag making. Additional activities captured through the client worksheets include shoe decoration, family art workshops, sweetgrass braiding, Medicine Wheel Teachings, cedar rose making, and a visit to the Vancouver Maritime Museum.

On the 39 completed worksheets, most clients suggested that the activities connected them to each area of wellness. On four of the worksheets clients reported feeling connected to one or two areas of wellness. In those instances, they always reported that the activity connected them to the mind (mental wellness). On the Likert scales, clients reported that it was important for them to be connected to their culture, and that they were confident in being connected to their culture. Almost all participants circled 5 (very important / very confident), with one participant writing in “10” to suggest that connection to culture was extremely important to them and that growing their connection to culture and wellness was something they were extremely confident in.

The findings from the focus groups further demonstrated how a balance in physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellness was understood and experienced, suggesting that ICSP helped improve client’s overall wellness.

Image 1: Sunburst Chart



This Sunburst Chart, developed in NVivo 11, demonstrates which themes (areas of wellness) were most prominent in the focus group analysis.



This next section of the evaluation will describe client wellness using the four quadrants of Indigenous Wellness Framework, as well as Elder's wisdom, and how ICSP further supported staff wellness and vicarious resilience.

Client wellness

Purpose (Physical Wellness)

Physical wellness is expressed through ways of being and doing. It involves taking care of our bodies, helping other people, and understanding our bodies as being home to our spirit, heart, and mind. Living a life that includes a focus on physical wellness contributes to building a sense of purpose.

Many of the activities involved in the ICSP were grounded in physical wellness (e.g., nature walks, sharing traditional food, sewing, beading, etc.) and fostered a sense of purpose. Physical wellness was frequently expressed by clients, staff, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers with great appreciation.

"It's my first my time here and I'm so grateful that I have found Sheway, because Sheway's just really been such a positive part of my life. I have nothing negative to say about Sheway, because Sheway is really good and has helped me along, in not only helping me raise my daughter but staying clean as well." – Client 19

However, the impacts of physical wellness were found to permeate all quadrants of the wellness wheel. For example, many of the Elders expressed that the inherent ways in which they shared teachings with women (e.g., ways of being), facilitated trust.

"One lady who, like she wouldn't talk at first. She never talked all the time that we're in here. But then, she's having her little drum going and she's singing to the baby and everything. But yeah, I always look around to see; to make sure that we touch base with everybody, like with their hearts and that. And I knew that she wouldn't say anything, but I saw her outside when we were leaving and I stopped her and I talked to her and we talked for a good 10 minutes and she felt so good after. She goes, are you coming back next week?" – Elder 4

This was further expressed by clients in the ways that participating in activities gave them a sense of hope (spiritual wellness).

"The name of Sheway is growth, and it is really true because I have growth since coming here, I call it a milestone. Making it to Sheway allowed me to have milestones in my life that I would never even have thought of." – Client 21



Activities, such as beading and drum making, were offered in a judgement-free and welcoming environment, which encouraged clients not only to participate, but feel grounded in their identity.

"I've been wanting my whole life to make a Two-Spirit regalia. But when I grew up, the way I was taught, is that you're not supposed to have Two-Spirit things. But they were colonized people. And so I learned here that it's OK. So somebody actually helped me start to make Two-Spirit regalia- so I honestly started to feel more comfortable existing, knowing they had proper ways of doing."- Client 14

Staff further shared how having program activities rooted in culture empowered women and allowed them to find different ways of coping or dealing with life stressors.

"One of our clients came with baby in tow. And doing the cedar harvesting with baby, you know, wrapped around her. And she shared stories of her family and doing this and how she wanted to create a group herself with other clients and just how it's really planting a lot of seeds - a rediscovery of heritage and in some respects, creating new traditions with one another." - Housing Support Worker

For many clients, ICSP re-introduced them to ways of being and doing that they had become disconnected from or had been lost across generations. Elders shared how when clients participated in activities, many were able to resume activities and skills from their childhood. Some clients took up leadership roles and helped others learn new skills and cultural traditions.

Providing clients with a sense of purpose helped break intergenerational cycles of trauma and substance use, and instead build new intergenerational cycles of healing. One client, who grew up in the DTES, shared,

"I feel my son and I have come full circle and I'm just so honored to be here with him, and to be able to break the cycles we are breaking or to [appear] together because it's something my parents never got to do with me, that I get to do with my son now. We really love the cultural programming here and we look forward to attending more and being more involved now that he's fully recovered." - Client 17

Many staff understood ICSP to be foundational to Sheway. Staff shared how, because of ICSP, there has been a whole new approach to families' health and wellness.

"This is the work that we do here. We can't do our work without this program. Like, I remember, when I was doing my training here. And it was a really hard few months and so we had this emergency staff meeting at the end of the day. And one of the doctors. Said like, I don't know what we're doing, like, I don't know. Like are we even helping people? We still have some really hard days, but I don't think that sentiment is the same anymore because we have this to offer and to engage with people... We were doing our

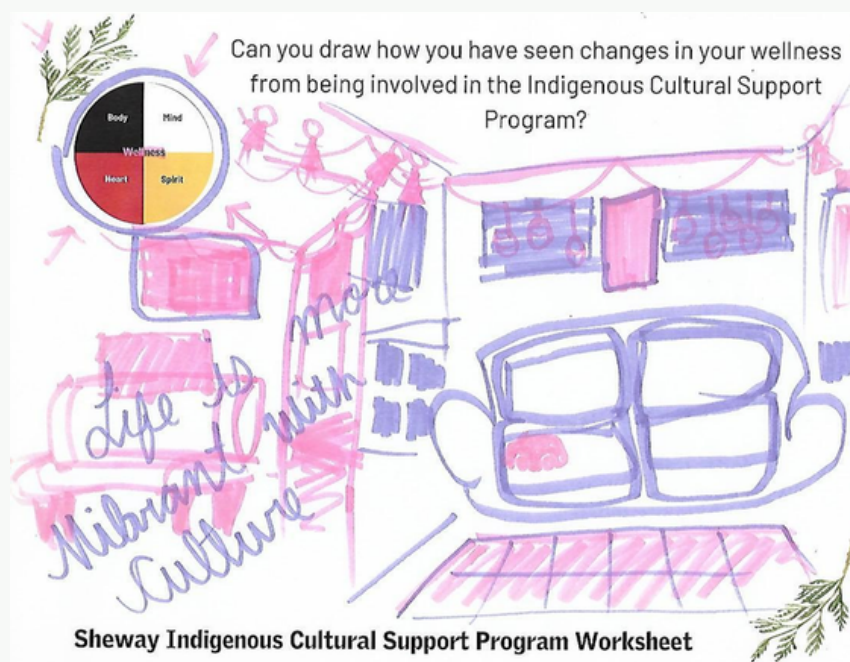


best with what we had for a very long time. But were really, really giving the help that people actually needed? We felt like we weren't until this got off the ground.” – Indigenous Family Physician

Staff, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers attributed this to how ICSP has helped transform the physical space and create a safer environment, which is one aspect critical in building culturally safe^[1] care for clients. Further, one staff member articulated that through the ICSP, they have been able to better integrate Indigenous art and cultural activities at Sheway. During the client focus group, one woman drew her perception of Sheway's space since the ICSP started, and commented on the changes she noticed:

“Before it was very empty and now there's like, Native art everywhere. So it's just representing the art. This is the Sheway corner where they all play, and this is it now. It's more vibrant because there's native art everywhere. And before, it just used to look like a clinic. No art anywhere.” – Client 14

This was also depicted in one client's drawing from the focus group, where she captured the dolls from the Faceless Dolls project alongside a quote, “life is more vibrant with culture.”



[1] Cultural safety is a patient-defined outcome that is based on respectful engagement and recognizes and strives to address and redress power imbalances. Culturally safe care results in an environment that is free of racism and discrimination, where people feel safe when receiving health care (First Nations Health Authority, 2016). Indigenous cultural safety is one of the four pillars at Vancouver Coastal Health that guides their commitment to delivering safe, quality care.



The ICSP was seen to facilitate meeting women's needs and reduce women's risk of relapse.

"I appreciate the sense of community and the sense of the women, seeing them change and seeing the girls that I've been talking with, they haven't had no relapses. They haven't had, you know, and I'm so proud of them. And I feel like more of them participating, more of them having peers to confide and to share, you know, and then that support that casual support and mentorship, like, that's not a part of, that's just it comes natural with our positions. All of us, like we're mentoring them to be better and to continue like focus on their, their healing." – Indigenous Peer Worker

One client shared,

"There's been times where I was in chaos and I'm like, OK, I'm going to go do, go use and go stop at Sheway, and then I stop and then they're beading or doing something, and I'm like this is kinda nice, oh the coffee's ready? [laughter] So think I'm going to stay. So, it's helped me on like over a handful of times, like the moment when you know you want to flee and go to relapse. This place has helped me so many times." – Client 20

Elders described that Sheway has become a "buffer" from the real world for their clients.

"And what I really love is all of those little children and babies running around all over the place and just being safe and having fun... It's like safety like and, and it's normal. They're normal. Whereas you know in some spaces that we go into that don't focus on our ways of knowing and being... 'shhh' 'shhh' 'be quiet' 'sit down' 'don't do this' 'don't do that'. But [Sheway]'s not. It's like running up and jumping on your lap and you know, so it is a safety. A buffer. I feel like it's like our sanctuary." – Elder 2

The impacts of ICSP on physical wellness have been seen at all stages of programming – from intake, where staff are able to share about the cultural programming – to the medical clinic – where sage is now available at the reception desk and clients can take medicine bundles home with them. Having medicine available upstairs has helped reach a variety of clients, including that are the most entrenched at Sheway and who have not otherwise engaged in ICSP or Sheway services. While integration in the medical setting is still ongoing, clients have been able to passively connect to their culture through picking up medicine bundles available at the front desk. As one nurse articulated:

"A lot of people who are very disconnected from healthcare come in here to engage in cultural programming and because of that are able to be like reminded of aspects of their care that need to be addressed and then see more positive health outcomes because they've been able to connect with the clinic upstairs from connecting with the culture down here." – Nurse 5



Through offering activities that focus on physical wellness, clients' overall wellness has improved. More Indigenous staff, including peer positions (funded by the BC Provincial Perinatal Substance Use Program) have been hired, and cultural activities are now offered on a consistent basis. For many women, this has (re)introduced ways of being or doing that is supportive of their wellness and (re)connects them to their culture. Clients expressed pride about what they have learned and excitement and gratitude to pass their learnings to future generations, offering them a sense of purpose.

Meaning (Mental Wellness)

Mental wellness is expressed through developing an understanding of our lives and integrating culture into everyday life. Mental wellness is built by connecting thoughts or feelings with Indigenous ways of seeing the world. Living a life that includes mental wellness contributes to bringing meaning to our lives and connects us to a larger Indigenous community and identity.

Just as Elders expressed that Sheway's physical space created a buffer for clients from everyday stressors, clients in the focus group articulated how Sheway's programming created that buffer, giving them a space for themselves and supporting their mental wellness:

"It gives you a timeout from the daily grind of life because when you step out the door, life sucks. When you step in the door that gives you a mental pause." – Client 7

The ICSP has allowed women to be present, have fun, and to enjoy connecting with others while participating in activities:

"I think my favourite part about like the groups would be like just like the aunties laughing together where we just come together. I think that's why my projects don't get finished, because I'm too busy talking." – Client 18

The established connection is a noticed change from before ICPS.

"Women have come always come here and gathered and shared their teachings. But now we have a really healthy space for that to happen too. in the sense when we see them sitting around participating with their families in a painting activity or doing the weaving or doing the beading and they're sitting with each other in a different way and in a different space and it's - it changes the vibe in the drop in centre, you know." – Social Worker 1

Clients also shared how activities offered through ICSP, including Elder support and cedar brushing, gave them guidance that they felt was integral to their wellness and healing. During the client focus group, one woman drew herself being cedar brushed by a previous staff member



involved in ICSP. She shared,

"I lost the two main pillars of my sobriety, that was getting me sober before. And if it wasn't for [staff] bringing me into cedar brushing, and like, when I picked the stones that have the words "to speak, to talk, to let people in". I would never done it. I have never done it ever in my life other than the two people. And to lose them, I kind of gave up... I think in that moment, the ancestors were saying we need to help this child. We need to guide her."
– Client 22

Women shared how they were able to see themselves as part of a larger community, that was grounded in their Indigenous identity. For many who identified as urban Indigenous or were disconnected from their Nations, clans, and families, ICSP provided them the opportunity to take part in activities that they never learned about or had access to. For example, one Elder shared how she was able to facilitate a baby welcoming ceremony for a client's son despite the client's concern that she was not connected to her family or Nation:

"And so she was saying, I want to give my son. I want to give my baby a name. I mean and try telling them how we go about it. But if they were in foster care, I said OK, there's still a way at this still a way around that, just like how you coming, what is your favorite animal? What is, you know, like, you know, where do you spend a lot of your time, whether it be in the Bush or whether it be down by the water? Like we get a lot of our energy from this."
Elder 4

Many clients expressed how they found a sense of meaning and resilience by being involved in cultural activities offered through ICSP.

"I learned a lot of different things that, in hard times or in times of need that we have our wonderful Creator who created all these wonderful plants and natural remedies and medicines."– Client 10

In the staff focus group, the ways in which meaning, or mental wellness, emerged for their clients was frequently articulated. One staff member described how ICSP has been transformative to many of their clients:

"Some of our clients who are really not doing well - it's been really amazing to see them, like all of a sudden, they, they light up and they participate in this activity and they're like 'wow'... when they come in and they're really entrenched and in their addictions. And we've seen some of these clients actually take on leadership roles, which is amazing." – Nurse 2

This extended to children in the program.

"We have a striking number of children with complex neurodevelopmental diagnosis



and lots of, yeah, really challenging behaviours. And you know what I hear from my staff when there is programming? These kids who are, usually buzzing and bouncing off the wall, and really hard to contain in the space, are all of the sudden like sitting down and drumming or sitting down and participating. And that is like, so healing for these children. Their brains are still so flexible to learn those pathways to sort of find ways to channel their energy in a positive way... The long-term implications of that for those children is immeasurable, really.” – Family Physician 2

Staff discussed feeling limited by Western medicine, and shared that they now provide referrals to the cultural programming, allowing them to offer a more holistic approach to improving health and wellness.

“I’ve very much recognized the limits of Western medicine and how much we can do with medications, in terms of improving mental health. So, what I tend, or often do, is refer folks to the cultural programming... And yeah. It’s a great benefit.” – Psychiatrist

Clients, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and staff members alike recognized the importance of mental wellness, and saw that it was, and could continue to be, improved through ICSP.

Belonging (Emotional Wellness)

Emotional wellness is expressed through connections and relationships with families (biological, clan and extended), community, and the land. Building and fostering these relationships can encourage people to live life to the fullest and create a sense of belonging. For many of the clients who attended the focus group, a sense of belonging was paramount to achieving their goals at Sheway.

“The first time I actually came here, to Sheway... I was quite scared to be honest... I don’t know anyone so and all the staff and everyone, they’re really kind and you know, and I gradually made friends. I made. I met a lot of other mothers along the way, you know? And we all have something in common. We’re all striving for the same thing. And, you know, we want to have a safe, secure, family and support system. And, you know, just knowing that we’re following through with our goal, because our goals will change. And they’re there for us, to help us carry that weight, and just to reassure us that we’re on the right path.” – Client 9

For some, this was the first time that they had trusting relationships with other women or service providers. As one Elder reflected,

“They never really had anybody to tell their stories to, I think. They gained some trust for us that go in and they start talking. They release what’s been bothering them and you know it’s all about trust to you.” – Elder 6



Many women expressed that their shared experiences helped build a sense of community and trust, because there was a mutual understanding of what each other was going through.

"We all become our babies' aunties. Yeah, it's like we're all cousins. Like, hi auntie. If you like run away from your family. You gain more family here. It's positive. It's like I love like I just love it. Yeah, I just love all the women like, it's nice." – Client 1

"At the group where we do, I could just talk and like everything stays there, you know, like no one goes. And that's what I like. Like the confidentiality about the woman's trust, like I trust. I feel safe. Like, I went to a treatment centre, I couldn't talk with all those women, like I felt when I walked into Sheway and I felt confident that I could." – Client 9

This trust also emerged from the multi-service, one-stop nature of Sheway. Clients spoke of the importance of accessing, pre- and postnatal care, counselling, childminding during certain cultural activities, and cultural support all in one place and with service providers that they trust. However, in all three focus groups, there was recognition that this trust was in part fostered through having culture at the core of the program.

"I think the really strong value of Sheway that we hold here is community and connection and that mentorship piece... the funding has allowed for that to happen within the space and prior to the cultural programming being here, it was generally like one staff taking a group of people off site and it created such a disconnect and it really created missed opportunities for the people who were, maybe too shy to go... Moments are had and you know that peer support that happens there and then the community that's built it was, it just didn't happen before the cultural programming happened and because it had to happen off site. And that's the resource that we had available. It was so evident that there was a need for it because there were people who would go off site with other staff to other programming, but it just lost that sense of community and like kind of like, holistic sense of belonging within our space. And so having to be able to have that funding to do the programming with it just really strengthens that community. And that's something Sheway has always, you know, we're a relational based program. There's so much mentorship that happens, so to be able to do that, you know the cultural level, the needs always been there and now we're able to provide that." – Social Worker 2

Elders expressed how some of these relationships with women had been fostered over long periods of time. Many of the Elders support other services in the DTES in addition to their involvement in ICSP. Having the same Elders be involved in the ICSP provided safety, as women were often glad to see a familiar face. One Elder shared,

"There's safety. There's like, I see myself reflected when we come into the space, you know, and everyone at Sheway always tells me. Oh, [Elder 2] when you walk in the room. All the babies even, like seeing that you're here. And I just want to say it's



because grandma's in the house. Grandma just walked in and and so it's that sense of – 'ah, see someone I know. I see myself reflected. I feel OK.' You know? That's really what we all wish for." – Elder 2

Relationships emerged from the consistency of cultural activities offered and having more Indigenous staff and Elders on-site. Staff noted how, since Sheway started offering ICSP, clients have bonded more as a community. From the clients' perspective, they noted how Elders and Indigenous staff acted as their Aunties and role models. This relational safety created space for clients to listen and share their histories, including the cultural protocols they were raised with, or partake in calming activities, like beading, which provided an environment that felt safe for them to open up.

"The fact that it's safe. Like the staff who are Indigenous they come with open arms, They're like 'you wanna bead?' 'you wanna do...?' They look at you and then 'ok we'll pull something out', you know." – Client 14

Staff recognized that for some clients, having another Indigenous voice in the room (via Indigenous cultural or peer support workers), created safety. Clients were more likely to attend meetings or appointments because they had the safety of a staff member they trusted alongside them. As one non-Indigenous staff member said, *"you know, they'll tell things to our Indigenous staff that they will not any of us white people, and rightly so."*

This sense of safety encouraged women to bond through the cultural activities offered through ICSP and build trust with each other and staff.

"There's just been some really beautiful examples of watching unexpected people connecting and sharing... People that generally don't talk, you know, are all of the sudden showing that another person, how something's being done... And them both doing the activity together and learning and growing." – Social Worker 1

Some clients expressed how, by better understanding their identity and culture, relationships were nurtured that otherwise would not have existed. Staff also recognized these shifts and the pivotal role of culture in fostering connections and a sense of belonging:

"I feel our clients have already lost a lot in their lives, whether it's connection to their culture or they've been kicked out of care or they've had their kids or you've lost your housing. But to be able to come here and finally have something from way back to be brought back again, and how that's so vibrant and have them be involved." – Infant Development Consultant

The impacts of emotional wellness were understood to go beyond the women, as direct clients of Sheway. Several women described participating in activities, like drum or ribbon skirt making, so



that they could offer gifts their children, siblings, nieces, and nephews to help empower them to connect to culture and wellness. For some clients, their children also participated in activities. As one client said (about participating in activities with her daughter),

"This has been a positive experience because every time that I get to make art, I get to share it with her and she is usually there onsite with me, so she gets to participate with me and she gets exposure to it which is important to me when I was younger." – Client 18

Another client drew a photo of her and her children together, with culture wrapped around them like wings.



All participants recognized that the shared teachings, learnings, and relationships that they experienced through ICSP would radiate across the generations to come.

"I have a lot of gratitude [for] the love and support of family and community – because when we don't have a lot of ones who know you... knowing you have a community to stand behind you, it makes you right, and to put forward our best and to know that our children are leading the next generations... So, united we stand and I am so gratitude and thankful for this life knowing that I have this group of women to support one another, to lean on everyone here, like a lending hand." – Client 10

Hope (Spiritual Wellness)

Spiritual wellness is ever present. It is felt within the body, heart, and mind and is expressed through culture, serving as the foundation to grow wellness, live in accordance with Indigenous values, worldviews, and identities.



For some women, ICSP helped them learn more about who they are,

"I've lived on the island all my life. So, I figured that's my home place. But really, my band is right over there. I don't know nothing about them. So, when I came here, and I knew some of the Elders, like, one of them is like my grandma I didn't know. She taught me how to walk apparently. So that was cool because like, I wasn't raised into my culture until I came back, and my daughter wanted to learn Squamish while I really want to know more about my band. Because I don't know nothing about them." – Client 12

For this client, it was not just about learning about her identity, but also connecting her daughter to her Nation's language and culture.

Many clients recognized how their culture and traditions could be the foundation to grow wellness – for themselves, but also their children and their children's children.

"I was just going to mention with having to do with the cultural stuff, with our children, and then we're teaching our children that, and then also to pass it down to the next generation, so it doesn't get lost, you know. So also like we're confirming that, with all the medicines and the healing and all that, right. Because with our seven generations of intergenerational trauma, and it's all four directions, right? And then so when we say all my relations, it's everything around us is alive, right? And that, so, that's just my point of view on that too as well. So yeah, I'm just really grateful that I came across Sheway. I've never had so much support in my life." – Client 9

Another client shared,

"I think we went to every program I'm pretty sure. And then the ribbon skirt you know. She grew out of hers. And then she just got out of foster care, so she has a new one. So that was really special. Thank you guys for holding these groups for us. It really helps us. And for intergenerational healing, right?" – Client 18

Several women described how Elders and Indigenous staff involved in ICSP provided insights on Indigenous ways of parenting and reassured women that they were succeeding in their roles as mothers.

"I think it's really good to have somebody who's familiar with the protocol of the land we're on because anytime I have questions where I don't know, like, I don't want to do something wrong or raise my kids wrong...so like learning to adapt and learn the protocol and to help raise kids properly, it's been helpful because it's not really that easy to go out and be like 'hey do you know the protocol?' Usually when I go out and ask for suggestions on how to properly raise my kids it's like, you know, everybody saying really wrong or bad or not great things, you know, and I'm just, it feels good to have guidance



that I know I can say 'I got this from an Elder', you know, like I can't mess up, you know I have periods of time when I know I'm ok." – Client 3

In all focus groups, it was recognized how healing it was for clients to have Indigenous role models embedded in the programming.

"In so much of healthcare, there's been erasure of Indigenous identity. And so many of our clients come in with these aspects of themselves that they feel have not been seen or have been erased, and so I think it's the fact that Indigenous cultural programming is being led by Indigenous staff. Indigenous representation is absolutely critical. And there's no other way to do it." – Psychiatrist

Sheway, and the programming offered through ICSP, encouraged diverse representation and provided women with services that not only aligned with, but celebrated their values and culture. This emphasis was supportive to clients who were working on their sobriety.

"They have the red roads stuff down here. Like once I got here, I totally like changed my mind and I was like, I didn't want to start relapsing. Nothing good comes from that like especially with like with me." – Client 11

The focus on spirit, culture, identity, and values brought forth through ICSP influenced women and changed the foci in their lives. As one Elder shared,

"When we're teaching the culture or we're doing something cultural, the conversation goes around like memories and stuff like that, it doesn't go around the substance use. That goes out the door. The substance use, or the guys, and the horrible guys, you know you hear a little bit of that, but I notice when we're doing something, like the teaching, the conversation doesn't go there anymore. Like it changes, so it brings them into a more positive frame of mind and thinking, that's what I've noticed all the times that I come." – Elder 2

With spiritual wellness, there was not only an emphasis on client's past and present, but also the impacts for the future. In all focus groups, spiritual wellness was seen as a seed that was planted that encouraged women to grow, learn more about who they are and where they are from, and promote wellness for themselves and future generations. In all focus groups, there was an emphasis that this work must continue.

"We think 7 generations ahead. And if we don't have the programming there for the kids to be able to learn, then how are they going to be OK?" – Indigenous Cultural Support Worker



Impacts of ICSP on Client Outcomes

"Over the years we've talked about needing culture. Because culture is healing. Well, guess what? I'm seeing the healing now, you know." – Housing Support Worker

In the activity sheet feedback and in each of the focus groups, it was evident that ICSP has created a safe, relaxed, and joyful environment that allows for healing and a balance of physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual wellness.

Since the beginning of ICSP, Sheway has seen an increase in walk-in visits. On average, participants of cultural activities had one additional walk-in visit per month, over a six-month period. This has resulted in more opportunities to connect with social, child welfare, financial and food supports; Indigenous cultural programming; Elders; counselling; and Infant Development Workers. Participants are able to access multiple services in one visit and have increased opportunities to address healthcare concerns for themselves and their children. It also increases access to prenatal care. For example, in one visit a mother coming into Sheway could attend the drop-in, sit with an Elder, receive food support, housing support, and attend a medical visit with her children.

Women spoke about how their participation was breaking intergenerational cycles, supporting family togetherness, helping them improve – or be more confident – in their capacity to parent, and in creating connections with other women and their culture(s). ICSP, through the Community Kitchen and hot lunch program has made traditional foods accessible. Clients reported how eating Indigenous foods and learning about traditional foods through the Community Kitchen, hot lunch program, and land-based activities have created a sense of belonging, pride about their identity, and promoted cultural safety in a healthcare system that has historically perpetuated anti-Indigenous racism and lacked acceptance of Indigenous health and healing models. Clients also spoke about how their involvement in ICSP helped with their sobriety and healing. This healing was further reflected in the administrative data, which found that clients who engaged in programming and have an opioid use disorder were prescribed OAT for 1 to 2 more days post-intervention compared to non-participants. As of September 30, 2024, 68 (approximately 40%) clients who participated in SUAP funded harm reduction services (via ICSP) are currently prescribed OAT.

Participation in the cultural activities have led to unexpected outcomes beyond those connected to intergenerational healing and harm reduction. One client's photo of the three dolls created during the Faceless Doll Project was selected for display at the YWCA's Rhythm of Resilience event. Another client co-presented the ICSP outcomes during a perinatal substance use conference. During the presentation, the client shared,

"I'm proud that I got out of not wanting to be Aboriginal because now that I have my son we are both being taught at the same time, that's the best things we could do, re-learn my culture and learn with my son."



The impact of the cultural activities has been undeniable. Not only have they provided essential supports for clients during vulnerable times, but they also have fostered a sense of belonging and cultural identity that is critical for recovery and healing.

Elder wisdom

The Elders and Knowledge Keepers in the focus group had differing connections to Sheway. Many have been involved in the 3 Baby Welcoming Ceremonies and 7 pre-Baby Welcoming Ceremony planning dinners offered since ICSP began. Others have also offered smudging and cedar brushing, cedar harvesting and weaving, land-based healing, drumming, Medicine Wheel teachings, and drop-in cultural support with clients.

Many saw themselves as teachers, counsellors, storytellers and role models in supporting healing. While some spoke of leading spiritual ceremonies, others shared how their role was to sit with clients who needed support.

"Our role was spiritual ceremonies. We were involved in the baby blanket ceremony, when people need to be brushed off, we do little bit of counselling if anybody needs. We don't have counselling experience ourselves, but as Elders, we've been through a lot ourselves and, like just from hearing, my mother and father, to pass those on because we've been there, done that, more or less..."

... We work from the inside out. We work with the heart, mind and then the soul. So this is just this is just one thing I would say, but there's ceremony for everything. That's how we took care of things a long time ago. And then so that's where we come in. Like whenever there's whenever, whenever they need us."

– Elder 4

The Elders, who like Sheway clients, come from different cultural backgrounds, spoke of the importance of honouring a multitude of teachings.

"And I think most of the people are multicultural, right? So there's not anyone teaching. Everybody has their own different ways. Yeah, but it's we're still teaching them, but it's we're not pushing it on them that it just a certain way. Like, no, you can't do it that way. You have to do it this way. You just help them." – Elder 3

Elders were able to do this through leading by spirit.

"When you follow that spirit, you know. Start following the spirit and following the way of our old people. You know you follow that you know from in here you never go wrong. Because Spirit will never guide you wrong, and so you know that, you know. Just so grateful to be a helper now today you know, that's all we're having is a helper. I'm no one



special. Doesn't matter who we are, you know, from the young mothers down there and the children and the people on the street and wherever they are from the four corners of the earth, we're all one." – Elder 8

This holistic approach was also present in how Elders provided support to a range of clients. Several Elders in the focus group shared how they support multiple other organizations in the DTES. During the focus group, they shared how being involved in and supporting multiple agencies was foundational to how they support Sheway clients, many of whom access services from multiple organizations in the DTES. Elders recognized how, even if their role at Sheway was minimal, by being involved with other organizations, they were able to create trust or build a 'safety net' around clients.

Elders also recognized how this model of relationship building has improved clients' health and wellbeing. One Elder had taught a client how to walk when she was a baby. They had been disconnected for decades but were reunited one day at Sheway. Similar to how other Elders noted the importance of interrelationships across community services, this intergenerational connection also was a turning point in this client's health.

"That was a big turning all that day because she was unsure, like - you know how it is, you gotta just check everything out. But that really super broke the ice that day. And she felt like, so lifted up and so happy. And every time I see her, she's got a big smile on her face and she, like. I really felt like she felt at home and that that was a good, good place for her. It like it really, really opened, like I witnessed it. It was meant to be." – Elder 2

Throughout the focus group, there was great appreciation expressed for the programming that has been offered through ICSP. Elders acknowledged the importance of being involved not just in ceremony itself, but also the planning of ceremony, or day-to-day activities at Sheway through drop-ins. There was an appreciation for the dedication that Sheway has had to building trust and relationships between clients and Elders in supporting clients' wellness.

"Once you create that relationship and that trust and that, that, that the safety, is that all of those skills, they they never did for years and years and years - I could not believe it. You know, I've done eight cultural teachings by my elders and teachers. And those women, they could outdo me!

Their artistry there, their skill, everything. Like that comes out, and when we were doing the prep for the baby welcoming ceremony, they start talking about what they did, or their grandma did, and they just start whipping things up, like they were never interrupted.

So this is what that prep did. It was to bring women together, create community, create sistership. Respect. "Oh, you could do that? That's so amazing." And then helping each other do it so that that was so exciting to do and then celebrate with food, celebrate with



food after. So I think this has just been the most amazing.” – Elder 2

Regardless of how they were connected to Sheway, all of them expressed how proud they were about the work that they do. They noted the immense excitement from clients to participate in cultural activities; and also, how their involvement supported their own wellness.

“It’s medicine for me too. To see them start there, you know... helping them is like helping myself.” – Elder 8

It is clear from all of the focus groups, that ICSP could not be offered without Elder involvement. There was great appreciation from the Elders as to the ways in which they were invited to support Sheway’s clients. As one Elder said in the closing of the focus group,

“I think you know the importance of this going forward is that it’s important for those mums and little ones to see the role models you see around this table. You know you’ve been to hell and back many, many times in our young, young lives. But look where we are today thanks to our aunties, our ancestors, our Elders, that you know, I’ve had close to 30 Elders that guided me. And I feel this is what the moms and the children and the babies need to witness and the staff as well need to witness, is us being the role models coming in.” – Elder 2

Staff wellness and vicarious resilience

Indigenous cultural programming has long been identified as a need at Sheway. However, the introduction of ICSP helped realize the extent of the benefits not only for clients, but also staff, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. The benefits for staff could be seen in multiple ways including integrated care provision, increased representation of Indigenous staff, and through the lens of vicarious resilience.

During the staff focus groups, several of the staff acknowledged that their role in ICSP was as a learner. Many of the medical staff saw themselves as learning how to integrate culture into healthcare provision. One physician described a distinct difference between how care used to be provided, versus how it is now that there is a larger cultural emphasis. With ICSP, nurses and physicians saw the increase in trust between themselves and their patients. Several noted that ICSP helped patients be more engaged in their healthcare, supported patient retention, and furthered collaborative decision-making. The inclusion of culture and Medicine Wheel teachings in clients’ care plans was also described. For many, ICSP provided the evidence for how culture is healing.

*“I think [ICSP] gives us a very visual and evident reflection of that... of how much healing can be done and how much safety, and what a protective factor that can be for families.”
– Social Worker 2*



Pragmatically, ICSP has increased resources for Sheway. Since ICSP began, there have been more Indigenous staff hired at Sheway. When sharing the impact of hiring more Indigenous staff and having a Project Manager to offer coordinated, consistent cultural activities led by staff, Elders, and/or Knowledge Keepers, one staff member said,

"[ICSP] actually shows a level of respect, and I just feel like it's made such difference just in the sense of women. Women have come always come here and gathered and shared their teachings. But now we have a really healthy space for that to happen too - in the sense when we see them sitting around participating with their families in a painting activity or doing the weaving or doing the beading and they're sitting with each other in a different way and in a different space and it changes the vibe in the drop in center, you know." – Social Worker 1

Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff noted that having more Indigenous staff onsite has helped clients feel safer. Indigenous staff who worked at Sheway before ICSP shared how the program allowed them to identify allies in their colleagues. This particular staff member was in awe during the focus group at how her non-Indigenous colleagues truly saw the value and advocated for a continuation of ICSP.

Both Indigenous staff who were hired during ICSP and non-Indigenous staff noted how they were drawn to Sheway because of focus on wellness and cultural programming. Their hiring also helped relieve pressure from other Indigenous staff having to bear the sole responsibility of developing education for clients and their colleagues. As the Indigenous Family Support Worker said,

"Now that we've gotten that a bit more Indigenous representation for staff here, it's been a lot easier. It's nice that I don't have to do it all now." – Indigenous Family Support Worker

This notion further supports the lens of vicarious resilience, which has been fully realized through ICSP. Vicarious resilience considers how staff may experience a positive impact on personal or professional growth from being exposed to clients' resilience. Connecting to clients' growth, wellness, and resilience has been found to change service providers' outlook on the world, including in regard to their spirituality, self-care, and work of the agency overall (Hernández et al., 2010; Hernandez-Wolfe, 2018). This lens was certainly evident in the staff focus group, where staff shared how they felt an increased sense of hope and a greater confidence and capacity to support their clients in meaningful ways.

During the focus group, staff recognized the overdue need to include cultural programming in a more realized way. Staff shared how they always wanted to have culture be central in programming, but they did not have the resources to do so. One social worker shared how, in her field, culture is seen as a piece of service provision. She noted:

"Culture is everything. It's a way of being. There's no way that culture can be of piece when it is, you know it's identity. It's the way that that people live. And I think if we didn't have



this programming, we would be providing a disservice. We have the ability right now to recognize and acknowledge that culture is everything for people. If we don't have this programming, we, you know, we're not seeing people as whole people.” – Social Worker 2

With ICSP, staff shared how excited their clients are when they participate in activities; how their substance use has decreased; how their confidence to parent has increased; and how trusting relationships have formed in new ways. For example, one staff member shared how prior to ICSP, clients would have to go offsite for cultural programming; having ICSP onsite and with consistent activities has allowed clients to participate, build community, and create a “*holistic sense of belonging within our space.*”

The sentiment resonated with other staff, who described feeling more grounded and uplifted. They shared the personal benefits of seeing ribbon skirts being worn and art being made in the space. They also shared the meaning of being a part of a program that aligned with their values. As one nurse shared,

“I work here because I very strongly value that everybody deserves safe equal access to healthcare and so work has always been a very important place to me because it's a place where I get to enact my values. My personal life has been really tough in the last couple of years and I have found that being able to still come to a place that is working so hard at a value that I really care about has been really, really important to me.” – Nurse 3

Many staff shared how having ICSP has made their work easier, removed stress and supported their own healing. Staff noted that ICSP and seeing the resilience of both their clients and colleagues has helped them see their own purpose and mitigate the feeling of helplessness that can occur in the caring professions. It has also helped with staff retention, as staff shared that without the program, they likely would have experienced burn out. For Indigenous staff, ICSP has helped them further connect to their culture and learn about different cultural practices. ICSP was seen by staff not as a complementary program to Sheway, but central to moving forward.

“This is the work that we do here. We can't do our work without this program. Like, I remember, when I was doing my training here. And it was a really hard few months and so we had this emergency staff meeting at the end of the day. And one of the doctors. Said like, ‘I don't know what we're doing, like, I don't know. Like are we even helping people?’

We still have some really hard days, but I don't think that sentiment is the same anymore because we have this to offer and to engage with people. So it just really feels like we're doing the work that we, you know, we were doing our best with what we had for a very long time. But were really, really giving the help that people actually needed? We felt like we weren't until this got off the ground.” – Indigenous Family Physician



Many staff felt that it would be unethical to move forward without a continuation of ICSP, emphasizing the many successes of the program.

"It feels like the Indigenous cultural program, it's really like the heart and lifeblood to the team here at Sheway rather than like a supplement or apparatus, or something complementary. It's for me. It's almost as if like all the other services are like spokes on the wheel with Indigenous cultural programming at its at its center... I think, you know, that it should set a precedent and then model or template, whatever you want to call it, as to how to decolonize healthcare spaces and yeah, it feels like yeah, it feels like without the indigenous cultural program here, it just feels like, you know, we're like the tin man without heart." - Psychiatrist

Summary and Future Opportunities



It is evident that ICSP has had a key foundational role in supporting wellness for clients, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and staff. In each focus group, participants shared how critical it was to have culture-driven programming available to Sheway clients, and the benefits that the service provision had for Elders' and staff wellbeing. The impact of ICSP has demonstrated the need for culture in healthcare settings that have, and in some cases continue to, perpetuate colonial harms.

Through the use of the Indigenous Wellness Framework as the evaluation framework for ICSP, we were able to see the evidence of hope, belonging, meaning and purpose that are central to wellness. Clients spoke in their own way about: learning about their identity as Indigenous peoples; the importance of connection to family, community and all living beings; their growth in understanding of how they are part of Creation; and about the benefits of doing cultural and recovery activities, which are the elements of spiritual, emotional, mental and physical wellness. In this way biomedical outcomes related to change in substance use were not the sole focus of the evaluation but rather how spiritual, emotional, mental and physical wellness act as the foundation for growth and change in any and all life areas, including reducing harm from substance use. The clients saw, valued, connected to and articulated how these elements of wellness were all-important to their growth and experience at Sheway.

ICSP has further allowed Sheway to create an environment filled with art, joy, laughter and community by using a culture-driven upstream approach. At the time of writing, it is already evident that the downstream effects are beginning to emerge. The mixed-methods data demonstrate how ICSP had helped reduce risk of relapse and supported harm reduction, family togetherness, self-reported intergenerational healing and connection with peers, staff, and culture(s) – thus actively supporting the two primary objectives of the initial funding. It has also enhanced staff's sense of purpose and wellbeing, and allowed staff of all cultural backgrounds to see how Indigenous culture is central to women's and children's growth, wellness, sense of identity and hope.

In moving forward, there opportunities that can support both the continuation of ICSP at Sheway, as well as its expansion to other sites. At Sheway, clients shared how they would be interested in additional activities like game nights, Regalia making, and potlucks; but many expressed how grateful they were for the program to continue as is. In the Elder and Knowledge Keeper and staff focus groups, a similar sentiment was shared – that ICSP must continue.

- 1. Elder Involvement** – Elders and Knowledge Keepers have been involved in ICSP at Sheway in many meaningful ways, including in ceremony, ICSP activities, and in providing teachings, mentorship, and support during client drop-in times. Going forth, there is a desire to have full time Elder support via an Elder-in-Residence or have more Elders be involved in the program to provide cultural support on a rotating basis.



There is a need for Elders to be involved in meaningful ways and be appropriately remunerated for their time using their preferred method of payment. This is a practice that has always been done at Sheway but is not always offered by other services looking for Elder and Knowledge Keeper support at their site.

The Elders at Sheway are a critical element of ICSP and widely desired for cultural support. While the Elders who are involved in cultural support at Sheway do not share teachings of abstinence, an unexpected barrier noted by the Program Manager was that some clients expressed feeling substance use-related shame when on-site because they were taught to not be under the influence of substances when speaking to Elders. However, Sheway continues to look for alternative ways to safely connect clients and Elders. Both at Sheway and at future sites interested in adopting similar programming, it is important that this tension is recognized and spaces and supports for both clients and Elders are created. Such opportunities may include hiring Indigenous peer support staff, as Sheway has done, who can support clients with continued cultural connection, and including an Elder's Assistant for Elders.

As Dr. Elder Roberta notes,

*"I have had to share the teachings from my Elders many many times in Hospital visits when nurses or social workers would say, 'oh they shouldn't be high or drunk when you visit or touch the sacred plants'. I share that **this** is when they need us most.*

My own Mentor and Elders shared that this goes back to the times when the Church brought their ways to our communities as well as Government Colonial White Policies. Despite their [the colonial] beliefs, I would take kind care of the patients and share Ceremony and sacred plants with them."

2. Medical Service Provision – The inclusion of ICSP in medical service provision has provided Sheway with unique opportunities. Sheway offers many of their social services on the main floor of YWCA Crabtree Corner with medical services upstairs. In their experience, the clients who are accessing cultural supports upstairs in the medical centre include those who, outside of medical services, may not participate in social or cultural activities available at Sheway.

While efforts to further integrate ICSP in medical service provision are underway at Sheway, physicians and nurses shared that further integration of culture into medical practice would be beneficial to supporting clients' wellness and healing. This approach would emphasize a strengths-based and resiliency focus, over one that emphasizes illness, problems or deficits. Providers recognized that further integration of ICSP and an Indigenous wellness model of care would be holistic and in line with efforts to uphold



the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action, promote cultural safety, and decolonize pregnancy care, as led by Vancouver Coastal Health.

This evaluation captures what was shared through activity sheets, in the focus groups, and available EMR data. However, this does not capture the richness of all the stories that have been shared since ICPS began. Further, there are opportunities where further data-metrics could be used to demonstrate wellness outcomes. The current EMR data does not capture information like the number of toxic drug poisonings or emergency room visits. Metrics which could provide more information on the impact of ICPS include: children's chart information and engagement in care and pre- and post-ICSP, self-reported overdose (in the medical clinic), number of clinic visits for patients where multiple encounter codings need to be captured (available as of 2025 within Vancouver Coastal Health), self-reported substance use, experiences in community-based/acute treatment, and impact of traditional medicine.

The ways in which culture can be included into medical services are vast. Some examples of what has been effective at Sheway include: cultural integration in assessments and medical service planning, offering traditional medicines and having medicine bundles available to patients in the clinical space, and offering cultural packages to patients/clients accessing detox or acute treatment. Stigma, trauma, and other factors can result in clients leaving clinical settings against medical advice. The cultural packages, which include a range of activities and medicines, support patients to stay onsite, increasing their likelihood of seeing a doctor or medical expert. These packages are also well received by clients who, outside of the evaluation, have shared photos of cultural items that they have made and/or requested additional activities to help them get through their stays.

In this way, Indigenous cultural interventions become truly central in the full spectrum of Sheway services and to women and their families experience of hope, belonging, meaning and purpose as the Indigenous Wellness Framework describes.

- 3. Outreach** - Due to the intersecting and overlapping challenges related to substance use, addiction, poor mental health, poverty, and lack of housing, many clients come to Sheway on an infrequent and drop-in basis. As a result, much of Sheway's contact with clients is through outreach. ICSP is limited in the cultural activities/workshops it can provide via outreach. In response, staff have been distributing smokeless sage bottles and medicine pouches during outreach and to clients to encourage them to come to Sheway and participate in cultural activities and events. It remains an ongoing effort to find additional ways to provide cultural supports outside of Sheway's walls for those who are unable to come in. Such opportunities should be further explored by services interested in offering similar programming.

4. Childminding – While childminding has been available for some cultural activities, Sheway has limited access to childminders who can care for clients’ children while they participate in cultural activities and workshops. As of December 2024, Sheway has successfully secured childcare for the weekly Indigenous Community Kitchen sessions, but it is not available for most other activities. Further, Sheway is not insured to care for children while their caregiver is off-site. As a result, all land-based activities must be appropriate for children of all ages to attend.

The program coordinators and many of the facilitators have embraced this challenge when planning activities at Sheway. For instance, many activities focus on and nurture the parent-child connection, whether it be through children’s book readings, drumming being offered during parenting groups, or bringing age-appropriate crafts/activities so that both clients and their children can participate. This is a unique opportunity, because limited cultural programming is available to families as a whole. However, it also limits the types of land-based activities Sheway can offer as part of the SUAP-funded project. It is important that future sites consider the importance of childminding when offering programs.

5. Long Term Sustainable Funding – Long-term sustainable funding allows for current and future generations of clients to access care and continue on their wellness journeys and (re)connection to culture. Long-term, sustained funding would allow for proactive planning and continuation of this key Indigenous cultural programming component. Funding supports should be inclusive of or consider the importance of having dedicated program staff, Elder support, traditional food and medicines, activities that align with programming needs, ongoing program evaluation, and knowledge translation and mobilization.

Given the immense importance of this program, it is encouraged that funding continue and that additional funding is sought to facilitate expansion to other sites.



“When we talk about healing, we’re not just talking about fixing an issue we’re talking about healing from the root and just because, like we’ve heard from everyone today, that there have been really great stories and really great success that that doesn’t mean that the problem is fixed and that everything’s done its job. It means that it’s working and it needs to continue to work because healing doesn’t just go backwards, it goes forwards as well.” – Indigenous Peer Worker 1



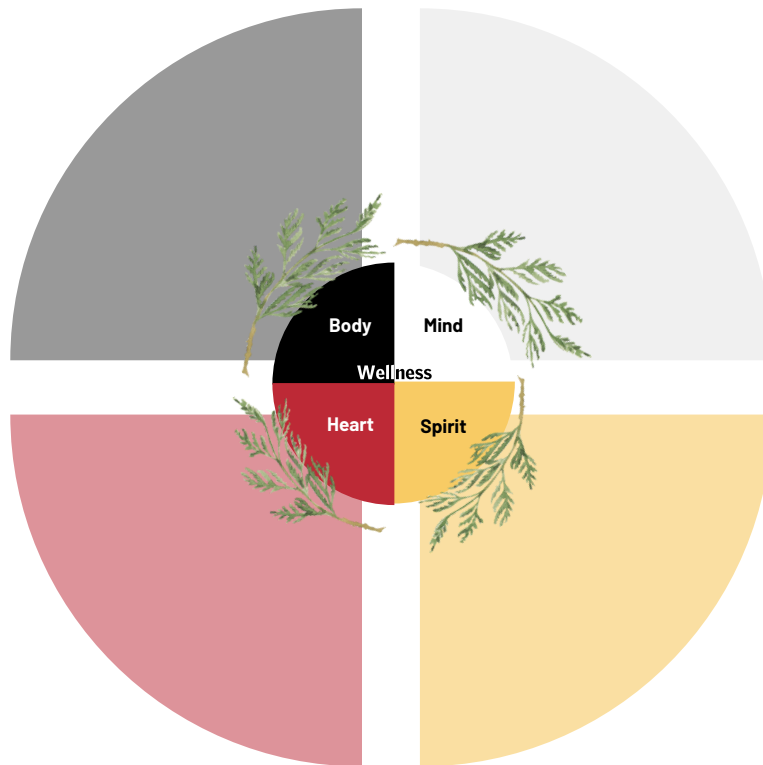
Appendix 1: Activity Worksheets

Sheway Indigenous Cultural Support Program - Activity Worksheet

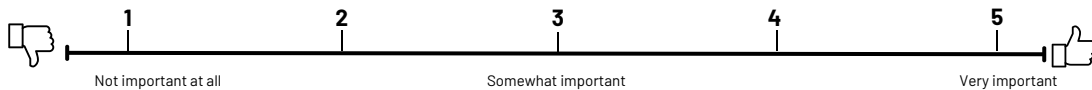
Wellness from an Indigenous perspective is a whole and healthy person expressed through a sense of balance of spirit, emotion, mind and body.
- Elder Jim Dumont

Activity/Activities _____ Date _____ Facilitator _____

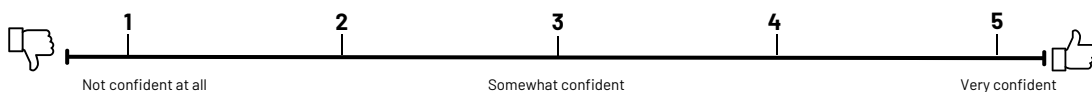
Has today's activity connected you to any of these areas of wellness? Circle the areas that you feel connected with and add any comments beside it.



Please circle the number that represents how important it is for you to feel connected to culture and wellness today.



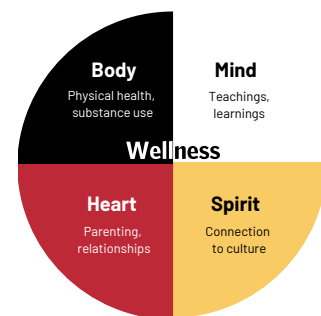
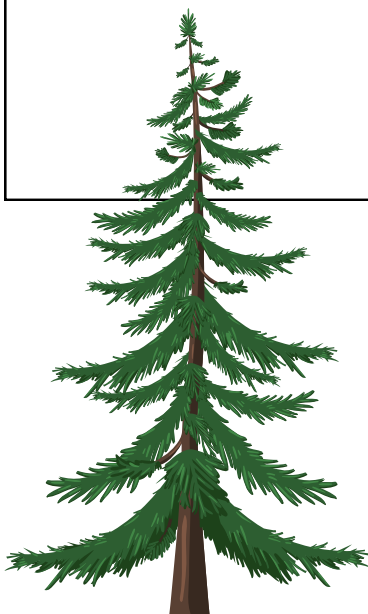
Please circle the number that represents how confident you are to be growing connected to culture and wellness.



(Front)

For Staff Use Only

Please write any additional comments and/or observations from today's activity in the box below:



(Back)

Appendix 2: Focus Group Questions

Elder and Knowledge Keeper Focus Group Questions

1. How did you become involved in the Indigenous Cultural Support Program and/or work at Sheway?
2. What programming do you participate in?
3. Can you describe how this programming can help women connect to culture?
4. How have you seen a change in women's connection to wellness through their participation in the Indigenous Cultural Support Program?
5. How have you seen the Indigenous Cultural Support Program affect Sheway's staff and leadership?

Staff Focus Group Questions

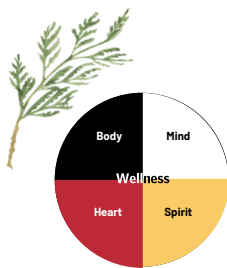
1. What is your role at Sheway?
2. How have you been involved in the Indigenous Cultural Support Program?
3. What do you see are the benefits of the Indigenous Cultural Support Program?
4. What challenges have you observed to the Indigenous Cultural Support Program's implementation?
5. Do you see the Indigenous Cultural Support Program as complementary to the programming that Sheway offers, and to your work at Sheway?
6. What impact has the Indigenous Cultural Support Program had on clients?
7. What impact has the Indigenous Cultural Support Program had on staff?
8. Do you feel a greater connection to wellness because of the Indigenous Cultural Support Program?

Client Focus Group Questions

1. What Indigenous Cultural Support Program activities have you attended?
2. What stands out as the best part of the Indigenous Cultural Support Program that you've attended?
3. Have you noticed changes in your health, substance use, or wellbeing after attending activities? Can you tell us more/describe the changes?
4. Have you noticed changes in your relationship(s) with your children since you both started attending Indigenous Cultural Support Program activities? Can you tell us more/Can you describe the changes?
5. Are there any other cultural activities do you wish Sheway's Indigenous Cultural Support Program would offer?

Optional: On the sheet attached, can you draw the way(s) you have seen changes in your wellness from being involved in the Indigenous Cultural Support Program?

- Can you describe your drawing?
- Has your idea of wellness changed through participating in the Indigenous Cultural Support Program?



Can you draw how you have seen changes in your wellness from being involved in the Indigenous Cultural Support Program?

Sheway Indigenous Cultural Support Program Worksheet



Appendix 3: Recruitment Postcard



(Front)



(Back)

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