

# I'taamohkanoohsin (everyone comes together): A Blackfoot cultural program supporting people with concurrent mental health challenges and other complex needs

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## ABSTRACT

Trauma, addiction, and homelessness for Indigenous people are interwoven with colonialism and the loss of culture. I'taamohkanoohsin is a grassroots program that was developed to support healing and recovery for a highly marginalized Indigenous population with concurrent mental health challenges and other complex needs in a downtown core neighbourhood.

**Keywords:** addiction, cultural connection, healing, homelessness, Indigenous peoples

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## RÉSUMÉ

Chez les populations autochtones, les traumatismes, les situations de dépendance et l'itinérance sont des problèmes récurrents qui sont intimement liés au colonialisme et à la perte du patrimoine culturel. L'taamohkanoohsin est un programme communautaire qui a été développé pour favoriser la guérison et le rétablissement d'une population autochtone très marginalisée d'un quartier urbain, confrontée à des problèmes de santé mentale et ayant divers besoins complexes à satisfaire.

**Mots clés :** dépendance, lien culturel, guérison, itinérance, populations autochtones

Addiction and homelessness among Indigenous peoples must be understood as the outcomes of colonial oppression, racist policies, genocide, and suppression of traditions, not as individual pathologies as suggested by the biomedical model (Gone, 2013). These events wrought historical and ongoing intergenerational traumas that communities are still struggling to resolve. Government prohibitions against traditional ceremonies and languages while confining peoples to reserves effectively removed the very things that kept Indigenous people strong and healthy.

Reconnection to Indigenous knowledge and traditions facilitates a healing process by restoring what was lost through colonialism: identity, sense of belonging, self-worth, and the knowledge about how to live in healthy balance (Twigg & Hengen, 2009). Traditional practices work holistically with spirituality as the foundation for balancing the physical, mental, and emotional aspects of self. These practices are embodied processes that heal by strengthening the connections among individuals, their sociocultural worlds, ancestors, extended relations, and the natural world (Lincoln, 2010).

## THE I'TAAMOHKANOHSIN PROGRAM

### Context

Lethbridge is a city of 100,000 people situated in southwestern Alberta in the heart of traditional Blackfoot territory. The Kainai (Blood) Nation is adjacent to the city and the Piikani (Peigan) Nation is roughly 80 km distant. The combined membership of these two reserves is over 16,000 people, many of whom reside in Lethbridge permanently or transiently.

We are a small group of Indigenous and Settler community members who do community development work. Chelsey works at the Aids Outreach Community Harm Reduction Education Support Society (ARCHES) Lethbridge, a harm reduction and capacity-building agency that operates a supervised consumption site in the city. Les is the community diversity liaison officer with the Lethbridge Police Service (LPS). Janice is an assistant professor in Aboriginal Health at the University of Lethbridge who was asked to document the project. We work closely with Blackfoot community members to deliver the program.

## Program

Observing an absence of Indigenous-based services for people experiencing an array of complex issues, especially addiction and homelessness, Chelsey consulted with Elders and informally surveyed clients, service providers, and other people on the street to assess the need for different cultural resources and activities. She connected with Les who wanted to improve relationships between the police and the Indigenous community. He had access to a tipi belonging to the Lethbridge Police Service, and together, the two brought I'taamohkanoohsin to life in January 2017.

This program targets people who face significant barriers in their day-to-day lives. Some have concurrent mental health challenges, while others have developmental disabilities, and many are homeless. Nearly all live with alcohol and/or drug addictions as a way to cope with the traumas they have survived. As Indigenous people, their experience of homelessness is deeper than a need for stable housing. Indigenous homelessness involves dislocation from kin, culture, language, land, and the accompanying sense of belonging (Thistle, 2017). Those who live in the shelters or on the street are routinely confronted with social marginalization, the risk of violence, and thus live precarious lives.

The core event for I'taamohkanoohsin has been the setting up of the tipi every second Friday morning in the central downtown park, but it has since grown to include several activities. This park is a main hub and meeting place for people living on the street. The tipi is raised from nine until noon during which time an activity connected to Blackfoot culture is offered. Activities change depending on availability and interest and have included drumming, singing, storytelling, traditional games, a mini-powwow, crafting sessions, and face painting—a form of Blackfoot blessing. The program occasionally moves indoors, partly to bring the program to people (i.e., homeless shelter) and partly due to weather.

Coffee and pastries are sponsored by McDonald's. Traditional mint tea is sometimes available. Lunch is always provided with responsibility for its preparation alternating between ARCHES and a supporting agency. Program participants would sometimes meet at ARCHES the night before to help with food preparation.

Day trips are also part of the program. Participants have harvested trees in the Rocky Mountains for new tipi poles. Another trip was made to harvest smaller trees for tipi pegs. Other day trips included visits to different sacred sites and a fishing trip. Day trips sometimes included spiritual activities like smudging, a sweat lodge, or pipe ceremony.

## PRELIMINARY EVALUATION FINDINGS

Janice evaluated the program at the end of the first year and what follows are the initial findings pertaining to the program's benefits and challenges. These findings are derived from participant and key informant interviews and participant observation.

### Benefits

In line with the meaning of I'taamohkanoohsin, "everyone comes together," a significant benefit of the program has been relationship building. Program participants are able to gather in a safe space to socialize and share stories in a way that instills a sense of belonging. Laughter is always present. This sense of belonging

counters the disconnection that is part of the experience of Indigenous homelessness. The tipi is a powerful symbol for instilling peace, transmitting strength of spirit, eliciting positive memories, and creating a sense of home. In the words of one male participant, "I like the tipi... it makes me feel safe [and] brings out my light.... This makes me feel at home." These are profound outcomes for a population that lives precariously on the extreme margins of society.

The program facilitates connections between the homeless population and community workers. The tipi and central location attract people from all walks of life providing opportunities to learn about one another and alleviate fears or stereotypes among groups of people who would otherwise have little interaction. There are some indications that the interaction between police and Indigenous people through program activities has had a positive effect on what is typically an inimical relationship.

The program supports cultural restoration, foremost by transmitting and reinforcing the value of Blackfoot knowledge and traditions. Colonialism has devalued Indigenous cultures so the restoration and revitalization of Indigenous ways is a primary route to healing through the rebuilding of cultural identity and spiritual practice (Gone, 2013). Many of the program participants have been through the foster care system in non-Indigenous homes and thus experienced cultural disconnection. This program supports people to reconnect with their culture.

### **Challenges**

The program started with great momentum and enthusiasm but attendance began to wane at the beginning of its second year and has been fluctuating since. One factor is that activities have become somewhat limited and repetitive for several reasons. First, cultural protocols are complicated when it comes to ceremonial activities. Not all Elders are able to do certain activities and they must be approached properly well in advance. There is concern that certain ceremonies not be made into public spectacle. To date, the program has been focused on Blackfoot culture but there has been some desire to open it up to a more multicultural offering of activities. Capacity is big challenge because there was almost no funding for the first year and organizers were doing the work in addition to their regular full-time jobs.

A second factor for fluctuating attendance is that the motivation to attend is low when participants are actively using substances. The population lives in a state of disempowerment so, for them to decide to attend, they frequently need to see something tangible in it for them. The food is a big draw but people will show up when it is served and then depart. At times, only a dedicated few come and stay for the entire time the tipi is set up.

### **IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

The benefits of the program for participants so far appear to be somewhat temporary but that does not mean they are inconsequential. Being part of the program improves moments and hours within a day and can give people something to look forward to when they are not consumed with substance use and other daily activities of survival. Our hope is that the moments of benefit will accumulate into greater agency, stronger identities and self-worth, and the beginning of a healing journey to sobriety. Moreover, the central and very visible presence of Blackfoot regional identity is a statement that Indigenous cultural knowledge

and traditions are strong, vibrant, and immeasurably valuable. It is a message for the participants that they, too, are immeasurably strong and valuable.

In early 2018, ARCHES opened up a supervised consumption site and received funding to hire a staff member to work on the program. These changes have helped build even stronger relationships with clients and increased program capacity, but also shifted the work to become more individual and less community-oriented. The funding structure limits the shared ownership under which the program began. We are currently working through these changes by continuing to assess the program's vision, goals, activities, and outcomes in an adaptive manner that includes elements of an Indigenous evaluation framework and respects participants' personal sovereignty and the "sense of becoming" that is the on-going evolution of personhood (LaFrance & Nichols, 2008, p. 21). The program's success depends on continually adapting it to the needs and interests of our continually changing target population. Flexibility and ongoing grassroots communication are required to maintain program relevance. Future research will focus on facilitating cultural reconnection in this marginalized and complex population to enhance their lives and support their journey toward healing and sobriety.

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