



# Supporting Wellbeing on the Land

## Final Report

### BACKGROUND

There is a growing interest in providing on the land programming in the Northwest Territories (NWT), with a variety of organizations actively engaged in supporting and delivering land-based programs. A common experience of program organizers and delivery staff is that participants are sometimes triggered by an aspect of the program or the environment, which results in them re-living past trauma and experiencing overwhelming emotions. These situations can be stressful for the affected individual, for program staff, and for other participants. They may also impede the achievement of the program's desired outcomes for all involved.

Recognizing the need for proactive, effective action to address this issue, staff from the NWT Recreation and Parks Association (NWTRPA) and the Sahtú Renewable Resources Board (SRRB) collaborated to bring together representatives of organizations involved in land-based programming in the NWT to explore the issue and potential solutions. The meeting was not advertised; rather, the organizers approached colleagues in organizations known to have an interest in land-based programming or experience in supporting mental wellness and invited them to participate.

The objective of the meeting was to: share experiences; discuss existing approaches; identify strengths and gaps in existing approaches; and explore opportunities for collaborative action. Organizers stressed that it was not expected that the meeting would end with agreement on a solution; rather, the intention was to identify what next steps may be needed to move forward.

The meeting was held in Yellowknife on October 16-17, 2018. A list of participants is attached (Appendix A).

## MEETING HIGHLIGHTS AND THEMES

### Description of programs

Participants shared information about their respective programs, including an overview of program design and delivery structure, types of activities, locations, and what steps are taken to ensure safety of participants (physical, mental, and emotional).

Participants collectively brought to the table experience with a variety of program types:

- Project Jewel, an initiative of the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation (IRC), is an on the land wellness program that supports a diverse client group including adult men, adult women, youth, families, and couples. Programs are delivered for varying lengths of time at different land-based locations across the Beaufort-Delta region. Project Jewel camps are open to any residents of the region, regardless of background. Project Jewel's programming also includes after-care and participant support services.
- The Arctic Indigenous Wellness Foundation (AIWF) provides urban land-based programming in Yellowknife. AIWF activities are open to everyone, although there is a focus on engaging street-involved and homeless people. Programs include personal healing, structured counselling, and more informal activities like participating in camp maintenance and sitting around the fire.
- Dene Nahjo is an Indigenous leadership collective that delivers programs serving a broad population, including an urban hide tanning camp in Yellowknife and regional rites of passage camps. Their programs face many of the same organizational challenges as those delivered in more remote locations.
- ʔehdzo Got'ine ʔots'é Nákedı (Sahtú Renewable Resources Board – SRRB) has delivered a number of regional land-based programs in recent years, most of which are focused on building relations between youth and Elders, and supporting the resurgence of Dene ts'ı̄ı̄ (Dene way of life). Recently, the SRRB has turned its focus to the design and delivery of Ne K'édiké, an Indigenous Guardian training program.
- FOXY/SMASH delivers trauma-informed youth programs that have evolved from a focus on sexual health to also include mental health. FOXY/SMASH programs are delivered in both community- and land-based locations across the North.
- Kátł'odeeche First Nation (KFN) has been given access to a residential treatment facility and is designing a Dene Wellness Program with an on the land component, which will focus on trauma treatment.

On the land programs in the NWT vary in their maturity and stability: some are well established and evolving with long-term staff (Project Jewel, FOXY); some are new, but have funding, support and the potential for longevity (AIWF, KFN); others are ad hoc or intermittent (many community programs, some of the projects funded by the NWT On The Land Collaborative). The duration of time spent on the land varies from a day to several weeks. A common feature of all programs includes the critical role played by Indigenous Elders.

It was generally agreed that there are two broad categories of on the land programs: those which include an explicit healing component and those with a broader goal of cultural immersion or resurgence. Both need to be equipped to deal with the impacts of trauma.

### Expressions of trauma in land-based programs

The meeting participants used a case study approach to share their experiences of situations in which program participants or staff were triggered or evidenced trauma. They further discussed the response to the situation. Given the ubiquity of these experiences, there was a general agreement that programs need to be designed and delivered with a trauma-informed lens.

The issue of terminology was discussed, i.e. whether the use of the term “trauma” is appropriate. Some felt that people can feel victimized if they are told they have experienced trauma; others felt it is important to “name it and tame it.” There was also recognition that the concept may be difficult to translate accurately into Indigenous languages. Recognizing the limitations of the term, we were nevertheless unable to identify an alternative during the workshop and so continued to use trauma as a shorthand for an “event or series of events that involve real or perceived threats of death or serious injury, or threat to the physical integrity of the person or others” and produce feelings of “overwhelming fear, hopelessness, helplessness, or horror.” Communities and organizations are encouraged to use or develop language that makes sense for them.

Participants agreed that it is critically important that program organizers and staff understand trauma and can identify when a participant is being triggered, but also that they have access to effective resources to support participants who have experienced trauma and/or are being triggered. A trauma-informed lens is equally important for program design and planning.

Participants noted that land-based programs do not occur within a vacuum. Events that occur in program participants’ home communities, such as suicides or accidents, may also impact or derail planned program activities.

Program staff can experience vicarious trauma during or after an on the land program. Thus it is important to ensure not only that staff have training to recognize and effectively respond to expressions of trauma, but also that there is ongoing support for staff before, during, and after programs.

Training in “trauma-informed” approaches (i.e. understanding trauma, how it can be manifested, and basic approaches for responding) is vital for people designing, organizing, and delivering on the land programs. Clinically trained staff (e.g. social workers, counsellors) are critically important for programs that have a healing focus, and should be available to all programs in some form (e.g. by phone).

### **Possible Solutions**

Participants brainstormed resources and supports that would benefit all land-based programs in the NWT. They included the following:

- A resource hub where on the land program staff can find checklists, program curricula, training materials, best practices, and other resources to support trauma-informed program design and delivery.
- A staff person dedicated to maintaining this hub and supporting trauma-informed on the land program delivery throughout the NWT, or perhaps two half-time positions, north and south.
- A made-in-the-NWT part-time certificate to train program delivery staff on how to deal with trauma (like an intensive first aid program), designed and delivered by northerners with clinical background.
- A shared resource to ensure that on-call counselling expertise is available for programs that do not have on-site counsellors.
- A conference exploring the linkages between on the land programming and wellbeing that brings together all communities and organizations in the NWT involved in delivering on the land programming.

Participants recognize that the vision will not be realized quickly or easily, and that issues like funding, governance, and accountability need to be explored further.

## CONCLUSIONS AND LEARNINGS

Some common understandings and important learnings emerged from the discussions:

- The NWT is a leader in Indigenous land-based programming in Canada.
- The land is often the driver for individual healing and wellness. Not only is the land vital to healing, but offering programs on the land also provides the motivation for individuals to participate. At the same time, being on the land may be a trigger for some individuals for a variety of reasons: because they feel safe in this environment, they “let their guard down”; they are removed from their usual support systems or coping strategies; they come face-to-face with the deeper reasons for their trauma (e.g. colonialism).
- For the safety and well-being of participants, land-based program staff (including Elders) must be healthy and have taken steps to deal with their own trauma.

### Need for training and resources

Although participants represented a variety of programs with different goals and offerings, there was common agreement on several key themes relating to the need to develop improved capacity for dealing with trauma:

*1. There is a need for made-in-the-NWT training for people delivering and supporting land-based programs.*

The NWT has a long history of importing southern programs, only to discover they are not appropriate for the context and cultures of the North. Currently, the GNWT provides training in Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) and Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) free-of-charge on an ad hoc basis to NWT residents. While these courses have their place, they are not adequate in equipping on the land leaders to recognize and respond effectively to trauma in their programs.

We need to invest in training resources that are northern-designed, flexible, and adaptable to the needs of different programs and to the cultural protocols and realities of different regions and Indigenous groups in the NWT. Every program that takes participants on the land, but particularly those focused on healing and mental wellbeing, needs this kind of expertise.

There was no consensus on who should lead the development of this kind of training. Some suggested it should be undertaken by GNWT Department of Health and Social Services, similar to the delivery of the Mental Health First Aid program.

*2. Programs that do not have on-site counsellors need to have access to on-call resources to ensure that support is available if a situation arises that can't be handled by staff on site.*

Some programs have been able to involve clinicians in their programming by building relationships with Health and Social Services staff or independent practitioners. More commonly, programs have encountered barriers to the participation of GNWT community counsellors (e.g. lack of interest, administrative support, timing, lack of familiarity with on the land programs) and they are rarely able to cover the costs of independent practitioners.

*3. There is a need across the NWT for increased investment in aftercare and community-based support programs.*

Although it is to some extent beyond the scope of what this group meant to discuss, there was universal agreement that participants in land-based programs with a focus on healing or recovery are more successful when they have access to on-going support services and case management in the community. Aftercare improves outcomes for other types of on the land programs as well. While

some programs build this service into their program design (Project Jewel, AIWF), it strains capacity, especially since each intake of participants increases the on-going caseload.

*4. For programs that take groups of participants out on the land for extended periods, it is critically important to pay attention to participant dynamics, and be aware of medical/emotional/mental health issues of participants.*

Program organizers should consider what mix of gender, age, and other demographic characteristics is effective and appropriate when designing the intake process for programs. They should also ensure that applicants provide information on their current physical, emotional, or mental well-being and any issues that could lead to challenges during the sessions whether in the form of a written application or a verbal interview.

*5. Everyone dealing with designing and delivering on the land programs in the NWT could benefit from a “resource hub,” to avoid duplication of efforts when exploring, designing, or adapting guidelines, policies, checklists, training programs, etc.*

Some of the ideas for useful resources that were discussed include: mental well-being checklists; program equipment checklists; information on ethics when dealing with disclosure and consent; and manuals or curricula for programs.

*6. On the land practitioners benefit from opportunities to gather and learn from one another, especially on a subject as critically important as trauma.*

In recent years, there have been a number of successful conferences, workshops, and symposia for people designing, organizing, and delivering on the land programs. These have been important opportunities for people to share experiences and learn from other practitioners. A gathering devoted to exploring the linkages between on the land programming and wellbeing that brings together communities and organizations in the NWT involved in delivering on the land programming would not only create an opportunity for practitioners to learn from one another, but it could help to guide other activities outlined in this report.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS**

The following resources were identified by the group members to support the achievement of the vision:

- The NWT On The Land Collaborative has a website which could be used as a resource hub to share materials. The website is currently being managed by the NWTRPA.
- Hotì ts'eeda is funding two literature reviews – one on the evaluation of land-based programming, and one on best practices in land-based healing programs.
- AIWF has mentorship/apprenticeship opportunities for training community members on trauma-informed methods.
- All organizations have materials that can be shared on the resource hub that could be useful to those developing on the land programs/camps.

Other recommendations for short-term actions included:

- Conduct a survey of NWT organizations offering on the land programs to determine their needs for training and support.
- Develop a checklist for program organizers, specifically related to ensuring appropriate measures have been taken deal with trauma while on the land.
- Create a map and directory of organizations in the NWT who are involved in delivering on the land programming, so that people know who to call for information, help, or advice.
- Those organizations that are willing and able can use the resource hub to share funding proposals.
- Create a community of practice group that touches base every six months or so to share information and best practices.
- Review the GNWT's policy to guide delivery of land-based programming.

## APPENDIX A: MEETING PARTICIPANTS AND AFFILIATION

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Jess Dunkin (Co-Organizer)	NWT Recreation and Parks Association
Donald Prince	Arctic Indigenous Wellness Foundation
Sara Chorostowski (Day 1 only)	GNWT Department of Health and Social Services
Marlene Villebrun (Day 1 only)	GNWT Department of Health and Social Services
Candice Lys	FOXY/SMASH
Hiedi Yardley	K'atł'odeeche First Nation
Jimmy Ruttan	Project Jewel, Inuvialuit Regional Corporation
Mandee McDonald	Dene Nahjo
Debbie DeLancey (Facilitator)	D.J. DeLancey Consulting
Kirsten Jensen (Notetaker)	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑯᑦ ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑯᑦ ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑯᑦ ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑯᑦ (Sahtú Renewable Resources Board)