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Creating Access to Land-based Healing Practices

Many Indigenous people living in Vancouver don’t have access to land-based healing. And few people have the skills to teach these traditional wellness practices that connect people to the land and each other. Vancouver Aboriginal Health Society (VAHS)—a leader in innovative Indigenous health care for over 30 years—is changing that.

Land-based healing refers to the cultural practices that connect Indigenous people to the medicines that the land provides, wherever we are. These practices range from building supportive community connections to engaging in spiritually powerful ceremonies and learning traditional ways.

Through its Our Circle Strong program and network of traditional healers and spiritual leaders, VAHS is ensuring that members of the urban Indigenous community have access to traditional wellness and cultural practices, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers.

Building an Authentically Indigenous Health Care System

Western health care systems have consistently failed Indigenous people. To address this, Vancouver Aboriginal Health Society (VAHS) is building an innovative, fundamentally Indigenous health care system.

Since 1991, VAHS has provided culturally grounded health care for the urban Indigenous community of Vancouver. Today, VAHS is creating a health system that reclaims and revitalizes traditional Indigenous health and wellness practices, incorporates the wisdom of Elders and the teachings of Knowledge Keepers, and creates pathways to healing that are trauma-informed, relevant, and unique to each person.

Accessing the Land Beneath the Concrete

In the 1990s, Sk̲wx̲wú7mesh Hereditary Chief Bill Williams brought thousands of people onto Sk̲wx̲wú7mesh Nation’s traditional territory to learn about the land and its integral role in Indigenous wellbeing. Today, he’s bringing land-based healing to the Downtown Eastside as part of VAHS’s Our Circle is Strong/Elders and Cultural program through his work building community, leading ceremonies, and sharing his vast cultural knowledge.

A respected political leader and conservationist, Chief Williams was instrumental in establishing Sk̲wx̲wú7mesh Nation’s traditional Territory and developing the Strategic Land Use Plan, the first Indigenous land use plan to be accepted by a Canadian government. This work resulted in the preservation of 50,000 ha of forest and wide recognition of Chief Williams as a leader committed to balancing the economic and environmental needs of his nation.

New VAHS Healing Centre Set to Open in Fall 2023

Opening in Fall 2023, the new VAHS Healing Centre will be an accessible, one-stop location for medical, dental, mental health, and social services. These key services will be supported by VAHS’s *Circle of Care* model, which braids Indigenous knowledge and land-based healing into health care for the urban Indigenous community of Vancouver. The first of its kind in Western Canada, this dynamic, three-storey facility, located at 52-92 East Hastings St., will be a place of healing and growth grounded in First Nations, Inuit, and Métis ancestral knowledge.

The new, purpose-built Healing Centre will increase clinical space and expand land-based healing opportunities. An outdoor Healing Garden will feature permanent ceremony space that will include a sweat lodge, a teepee for healing circles, and a medicinal plant garden. Inside, a traditional medicine pharmacy will offer medicinal plants, salves, teas, and other plant extracts, providing access to medicines not readily available in the city; Elders and Knowledge Keepers will have offices; and there will be dedicated space for community workshops. The new VAHS Healing Centre will be a place of true Indigenous healing.

Delivering Primary Health Care Supported by Traditional Wellness

VAHS’s Primary Care Clinic provides medical, mental health, and social support services to urban Indigenous people and other residents of the Downtown Eastside community. Opened in 1991, the clinic offers a wide range of culturally grounded primary health care services, from check-ups to OAT and HIV care. Guided by the *Circle of Care* document, the clinic employs a full-time Knowledge Keeper to provide client support and features an onsite consultation room for people wishing to access Elders or Knowledge Keepers for one-on-one counselling.

The Primary Care team employs the best of Western medicine while understanding that we cannot solely prescribe our way to wellness or disconnect any of our challenges from the systems around us. Good medicine is not just about things we put on or into our bodies, it's about anything that helps us act or feel better, including skill building, social supports, being on the land or in nature, and having a sense of security and belonging.  Recognizing that connections to Indigenous cultures are vital to Indigenous wellness, the Primary Care Clinic facilitates access to traditional teachings, medicines, and ceremonies as part of peoples’ healing journeys. In 2021-2022, close to 700 people accessed VAHS’ clinic services. The clinic is at capacity and is unable to accept new patients at this time.

Providing Low Barrier Comprehensive Dental Care

In 2023, VAHS’s Dental Clinic, also known as the Eastside Dental Clinic, will celebrate 15 years of delivering culturally appropriate, low barrier dental care. Established as a not-for-profit urgent care clinic, Eastside Dental now offers a full range of dental services, from preventative care to implant surgery to patients with little or no dental coverage. This is made possible through the clinic’s network of partnerships with schools offering dental schools, the First Nations Health Authority (FNHA), for-profit clinics, and dental suppliers.

A dedicated team of nearly 700 volunteer dentists, dental assistants, instructors, dental hygienists, and front desk staff help deliver services to Indigenous and non-Indigenous clients throughout the Lower Mainland.  In 2022, Eastside Dental opened a satellite clinic to address pediatric dental needs at Phil Bouvier Centre, which houses VAHS’s Indigenous Early Years program.

For More Information

For more information, or to arrange an interview with Executive Director Rosemary Stager-Wallace, Chief Bill Williams, or Policy Analyst/Director of Innovation Marlee Poole, please contact:

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