



Vancouver Native Health Society

449 East Hastings Street, Vancouver, BC V6A 1P5

Target population: Indigenous community of Greater Vancouver

Mission: To improve and promote the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health of individuals, focusing on the Indigenous community in Greater Vancouver. We aim to serve our community with programs and services informed by Indigenous knowledge and methods

Context

Vancouver Native Health Society was established in 1991 with a mandate to deliver comprehensive medical and social services to the Indigenous community of Greater Vancouver. Operating out of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (the country's poorest neighborhood), VNHS strives to promote the mental, emotional, spiritual and physical health of Vancouver's urban Indigenous people. VNHS is founded on traditional Indigenous knowledge and delivers services and programs with traditional methodologies.



Governance & Funding

VNHS is a non-profit group, run by a board of 10 directors who set all policy. The executive director is the liaison between the Board and staff and is responsible for implementing and interpreting policy. Most board members are First Nations professionals.

VNHS is partly funded by Vancouver Coast Health Authorities, the First Nation Health Authority and grants. The complicated funding structure between Federal and Provincial governments and organizations makes attempts to sustain programs and services, particularly those that go beyond medical services and address the social determinants of health, difficult.

What this initiative is about

VNHS provides culturally safe, flexible and non-judgmental care and strives to provide wrap-around integrated health and social care.

All VNHS services are accessible without fees (including those without valid medical coverage). Even bus and taxi tickets are covered in case someone has to go to the hospital.

Among others, VNHS services include: a medical clinic, the "All My Relations" Elders program, a dental clinic, aboriginal supported early childhood development program and "Sheway" – a prenatal health and social care program, cancer awareness program, Positive Outlook program, Family violence program, Urban aboriginal community garden project



Medical Clinic

VNHS was established as a one-man medical clinic in the early 1990s and has since grown to become a pioneer for integrated care models for medical clinics. The clinic is open seven days a week and offers programs addressing the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health of individuals. Particularly, the clinic meets Indigenous people's requests for adapted mental health care. This includes extra time with their primary care provider, access to counsellors, mental health workers, psychiatrists, specialized nursing care and Indigenous elders. The clinic also offers specialized programs focusing on chronic diseases, Hep C, HIV and opioid against addiction treatment (OAT).

Mmoooooke Sii Yea Ya- "All My Relations" Elders Program

This project aims to increase participants' wellness, family relations, personal resilience and mental health through connection to Indigenous culture, spirituality and Indigenous Elders by addressing the many intergenerational effects of residential schools and colonialism.

The MNSYY Elders program was created in response to community demand in 2014. In respect of their culture and identity, MNSYY is set out to improve individuals' resilience by offering:

- One to one visit with an Indigenous Elder
- Access to Indigenous ceremony – Sweat lodge, Burning ceremony, Seasonal feasts
- Therapeutic listening
- Referrals to many forms of health and social services – including detox centers, alcohol and drug counselling and housing support



Impact

- In 2017/2018 fiscal year there were approximately 17,000 patient visits with 2,000 individuals accessing services. Approximately 65 percent of patients self-identify as Indigenous and represent diverse First Nations communities across North America.
- In 2013, VNHS began a partnership program with Indigenous Elders to provide cultural mentorship to clinic staff and trainees. Their roles expanded in 2014 to include direct patient care through one-on-one visits, group cultural teaching circles and seasonal land-based ceremonies. The results are published in an article^a, showing that encounters with Indigenous Elders positively affected participants' overall mental health and well-being. Most identified the process of being with Elders - how they related to them, felt in their presence or what the Elders represented, as the primary sources of benefit.
- VNHS' integrated and holistic way of working, has inspired several other clinics in the Vancouver area to incorporate Indigenous Elders as part of patients' healing journey.
- Note that 'progress' or 'success' is most often left to non-Indigenous funding providers to define. This effectively disregards Indigenous understandings of health and wellness.

Insights (Key learnings)

- Access to services is of utmost importance when it comes to underserved populations, hence removing barriers such as fees.
- The disproportionate suicide and mental illness rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada reflect economic, social and political persistent inequities. Addressing these inequities is key.
- Mental health services in urban settings generally have not been adapted to serve the needs of Indigenous patients. Patients living in the inner city are therefore often found seeking out recognized Elders as informal sources of mental health care in lieu of mainstream services. Adapting services to fit the needs of those using them is necessary.
- Elders are recognized by their communities for possessing common qualities that are highly valued — leadership, accumulated wisdom, compassion, community devotion and dedication to personal healing. Elders represent an essential connection with the past; they are keepers of the community knowledge and supporters of its collective spirit. However, Elders are not recognized as legitimate care providers within Canadian health care systems.

a) Hadjipavlou G. et al. (2018) "All my relations": experiences and perceptions of Indigenous patients connecting with Indigenous Elders in an inner-city primary care partnership for mental health and well-being.

