



Laura Ducharme, Co-Chair

*Strengthening the Spirit Committee, Aboriginal Domestic Violence Treatment Program*

Theme: Culturally Appropriate Services for Indigenous Communities

Oskâyi Kiskinotahn: Building a Comprehensive Response to Family Violence in Aboriginal Communities was first developed by the Strengthening the Spirit Committee in 2001. It is an innovative prevention program for Indigenous families at high risk of violent behavior and contact with the criminal justice system. The program was designed to reduce the incidence of domestic violence in families, reduce the risk of violence for children and support families' healing and wellness. Oskâyi Kiskinotahn was initially run at YWCA Calgary Sherriff King Home and is now being delivered at the Men's Corrections Centre in Calgary as well as at three surrounding reserves and in partnership with Métis Child and Family Services.

#### *Critical Elements*

- The program includes group session (or circles) for facilitated discussions on topics related to risk factors.
- Cultural elements such as the colonization history, intergenerational trauma, residential schools, ceremonies, use of the medicine wheel (four directions), cultural identity and healing, sweat lodges, pipe ceremonies, smudging and role playing are embedded throughout the sessions.
- The Strengthening the Spirit groups are based on the traditions of the Treaty 7 area, but the model is also developed so that it could be used by other nations. To fully adapt the model, the other nations would have to integrate their own cultural pieces and ceremonies so that the program could be relevant to their participants.
- The success of the program is due, in the large part, to involvement of the First Nations peoples in its development, management and facilitation. First Nations facilitation is particularly important to help quickly build cohesion within the group as well as trust, as subtle cultural nuances are shared and understood.
- Clinical elements focusing on mental health (and connections to Indigenous mental health resources) are important because many participants suffer from depression, anxiety and substance abuse and have been exposed to significant trauma.
- When participating in groups while in jail, the men have a better chance to process the materials. They are more likely to be sober, have been eating and sleeping well, do not any longer have the distraction of living with their spouses or families.
- Many of these men have spent much of their lives focusing on surviving, and the groups help them distinguish instances of real from perceived threat and develop new ways to respond.
- Handouts are very important in these groups – they give the participants something to read through and think about between the sessions.

- The groups follow the Alberta Health Services Framework for Services to Aboriginal People, which are currently under revision and are guided by clearly defined group rules based on mutual respect as well as group space as sacred space to allow disclosure and sharing.
- Food is always provided and is an important component contributing to participant engagement and reconnection with culture.