



### **Circle of Courage<sup>1</sup> Pilot - Overview**

The city of Prince George sits on the traditional, ancestral and unceded territory of the Lheidli T'enneh Nation. The word "Lheidli" means "where the two rivers flow together" and "T'enneh" means "the People." The original settlements of the Lheidli T'enneh could be found where the Nechako and Fraser Rivers meet. These two powerful rivers have sustained the material and spiritual needs of the community since time immemorial.

The Lheidli T'enneh are the original caretakers of these lands, waterways and its people and is home to a vibrant Indigenous community from many parts of Canada. However, the traumatic experience of colonization and its complex web of injustices and indignities has led to a growing Indigenous population experiencing homelessness in Prince George, many of whom are women. This vulnerability often leads to potentially harmful interactions with law enforcement, which only compounds feelings of despair and obstructs healing paths one might be considering (e.g. employment).

Tragically, Prince George also has been one of the cities hardest hit by B.C.'s toxic drug crisis, regularly recording the highest death rate per capita. In 2022, 87 people died of toxic drugs in the city, an average of one person every four days, and many of them were Indigenous.

Prince George is a service hub for many surrounding communities, and often community members can face multiple barriers to getting back home. Additionally, the Prince George Regional Correctional Centre, which is known to be overcrowded and unsafe, will often discharge community members without support. Indigenous people released from the correctional center find themselves back on the streets.

There is an urgent need to support the vulnerable Indigenous population living on Lheidli T'enneh territory with trauma-informed and evidence-based approaches. Grounded in Indigenous healing to save lives, we need a new direction to break the cycle of reoffending while enhancing public safety for all.

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<sup>1</sup> Note: engagement is underway with the Lheidli T'enneh for a culturally appropriate name for the pilot.

## **What is Pre-Charge Diversion?**

[2]

The BC First Nations Justice Council has secured five years of funding from Public Safety Canada to run a pre-charge diversion program in Prince George. The goal is wellbeing for community by reducing and preventing future encounters with both the legal and crisis systems. Legal responses to the complex social realities of substance use, mental health, chronic poverty, and systemic racism are needed.

The BCFNJC pre-charge diversion program aims to divert individuals at the point of contact with police, to reduce harm related to any charges against an individual. A single charge, even if the individual is never found guilty, can entangle a person in a cycle of costly and harmful legal system involvement. Crimes associated with people experiencing homelessness, such as shoplifting or public disturbance, are trauma responses while surviving horrific conditions. Many people experiencing homelessness commit crimes to survive and are not perpetrators – they are victims.

Pre-charge diversion programs rely on the discretionary authority and risk assessments of police, at the point of contact to divert individuals with unmet needs from the usual criminal justice sequence: charge, prosecution, incarceration, repeat.

Diversion is a systems approach that requires collaboration among many rightsholders and stakeholders. Pre-charge diversion programs provide rapid access to supportive services through a warm handoff, rather than a criminal charge, seeking prosecution and incarceration.

Beyond the de-escalation of a crisis, the team engages individuals in intensive case management, which seeks to pair participants with resources based on their individualized intervention plan. Plans consider housing, medical care, legal advocacy, job training, mental health and substance use services, cultural or spiritual support.

## **The Circle of Courage**

Any response to the growing homelessness and criminalization Indigenous people face in Prince George must consider the wellbeing of the whole person and recognize that many trauma responses are not individual failings.

This diversion program represents a significant culture shift from current public safety discourses and will require deep partnerships. The Circle of Courage program will lead with spirit, with culture and care, meeting community members where they are at on their journeys by helping to

provide the support required to survive, with the hope, but not the expectation, of healing.

[3]

### **Key Elements of the Circle of Courage**

1. **Ongoing Partnership and Engagement:** Collaboration and a sense of belonging to the Circle of Courage will be necessary with all service providers and legal system partners in Prince George, through formal and informal engagement mechanisms (e.g. Prince George situation table). Memorandums of Understanding will be developed with:
  - Lheidli T'enneh Nation (Chief, Council, Community Leaders) – The Nation's engagement and direction over this pilot will be imperative. Securing a relationship with Elders and Knowledge Keepers from community will be necessary.
  - Community Social Service Providers – Recognition and involvement of service providers who have worked tirelessly to support people experiencing homelessness and living with substance use disorder is crucial to the success of the pilot. The voices of front-line service providers must guide the direction of this program (e.g. Prince George Native Friendship Centre, Carrier Sekani Family Services, Northern Health, etc.)
  - The Prince George RCMP – Without full partnership of the RCMP, the pilot will not be successful, as they will be the main referral source for Circle of Courage support. Lessons will need to be drawn from the US where law enforcement agencies have led pre-charge diversion.
  - The City of Prince George – Local policymakers can help increase treatment capacity, become allies in working with various sectors of the community, and create access to funding. Many municipalities in the US have led pre-charge diversion programs.
  
2. **Outreach Team:** In partnership with the RCMP and when deemed to be safe, a mobile outreach team will assist in crises where care and support is required as an alternative to charges being laid. Team members will be trained in de-escalation and operate from a trauma-informed, culturally safe lens, appreciating the intersection between colonization, the neuroscience of addiction, trauma, poverty, and mental health. The following table outlines the roles and activities of the team members:

Title	Roles/Activities
BC First Nations Justice Council - Bundle G Steering Committee and Director of Community Based Healing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides strategic direction to the Circle of Courage through linkages to the Justice Council, provincial and federal partners, and subject-matter experts.</li> <li>• Ensures the continuity/permanence of the project through policy development, funding requests, etc.</li> <li>• Encourages the visibility of the project, and knowledge transfer to other communities in BC.</li> <li>• Ensures the Associate Director is supported.</li> <li>• Ensures all financial and narrative reporting is submitted.</li> </ul>
Associate Director	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides clinical supervision/oversight of the model.</li> <li>• Creates an internal database of partners – a circle of courage - and creates formal and informal mechanisms to engage regularly and provide feedback.</li> <li>• Leads partnership with all key partners in the community.</li> <li>• Hires members of the outreach team and other staff with support from BCFNJC human resources.</li> <li>• Develops protocols/policies around success of the model (e.g. occupation health and safety, etc.)</li> <li>• Acts as the public-face of the project in Prince George, communicating with media as necessary, in partnership with BCFNJC Communications.</li> <li>• Holds an ongoing relationship with the Lheidli T'enneh Nation to ensure all Nation-based protocols are respected.</li> <li>• Develops materials for education on the pilot for partners.</li> <li>• Defines training and support needs of staff with an eye towards staff wellness and preventing burnout.</li> <li>• Opens/oversees the operations of the Diversion Centre.</li> <li>• Is responsible for financial and narrative reporting of the project to Public Safety Canada in partnership with BCFNJC Chief Operating Officer.</li> </ul>
Social Workers (X4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responding to the pre-charge diversion calls (de-escalation, crisis response)</li> <li>• Long-term case management of community members, through the development of community-member identified goals and healing plans.</li> <li>• Leads regular check-ins with community members, acting as a compassionate support, operating with the lens that relapse is not failure and addiction is a disease.</li> <li>• Upholds ethical standards/practices of social work field.</li> <li>• One team member will specialize in youth, in women's support, LGBTQIA2S+ to ensure all needs are met.</li> <li>• One social worker will be identified as a team-lead (to provide coverage for the senior manager)</li> <li>• Navigate service coordination for community-members</li> </ul>

Peer/Harm Reduction Support (X3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accompanies the social worker on all crisis-response calls.</li> <li>• Provides a variety of supports to those living with substance use disorder, such as clean supplies, overdose prevention education, and peer support.</li> <li>• Acts as a professional friend, mentoring, boundary setting and conflict resolution skills free of judgement.</li> <li>• Provide other harm reduction supports such as socks, water, food, condoms, menstrual products, weather appropriate clothing, etc.</li> <li>• Leads peer-circles at the Diversion Centre, not focused on recovery, but rather a space to talk about substance use in a supportive, caring environment.</li> </ul>
Circle of Courage Coordinator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supports the team with submitting forms and following up with community members paperwork.</li> <li>• Submits offices expenditures and ensures regular collection of data and statistics.</li> <li>• Provides administrative support to the senior manager and the proper running of the Diversion Centre (e.g. inventory, ordering supplies, bills, etc.)</li> <li>• Supports events or initiatives as needed.</li> </ul>
Cultural Worker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Operating from an Indigenous healing modality, the cultural worker supports cultural, spiritual activities.</li> <li>• Organizes bi-annual or quarterly land-based outings with community members.</li> <li>• Coordinates sweats/ceremonies at the Diversion Centre.</li> <li>• Has medicines available to assist community members.</li> <li>• Potentially on call for outreach, can serve as an extra layer of support in times of high volume.</li> <li>• Regular touch-bases and debriefing with staff.</li> <li>• Liaise with Elders/Knowledge Keepers for events.</li> </ul>
Elder/Knowledge Keepers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Funding allows for ongoing involvement of community Elders and Knowledge Keepers.</li> </ul>
Security Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage Indigenous run security firm, if necessary.</li> </ul>
Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Third party partnership with co-investigators.</li> </ul>
Nurse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop partnership with Northern Health, UNBC for nursing rotation to provide health checks.</li> </ul>
Volunteers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Senior manager to engage volunteers as necessary.</li> </ul>

3. **Physical Diversion Centre:** A culturally safe physical space where police and social service providers can direct an individual in need/crisis. The Diversion Centre is not a housing space with beds, but will:

- Act as a social services hub, providing cultural connections, wellness services, counselling, employment, substance misuse supports, and housing, etc.
- Act as a restorative justice space for Crown diversion referrals.
- Act as a drop-in centre for Indigenous people experiencing homelessness or substance use disorder, providing snacks, clothing, harm reduction supplies, storage, etc. The Diversion Centre will enhance current services provided by the Firepit and the Prince George Native Friendship Centre, learning would be helpful to fill gaps.
- Explore the option of providing laundry services and providing a safe space for active use (e.g. overdose prevention site)
- Based on RCMP provided data, will provide services with extended hours to meet the needs of community members.



Lheidli T'enneh Memorial Park