



# **ALLYING WITH INDIGENOUS PEOPLES: THE PRACTICE OF OMANITEW**

**Evaluation Report**

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**Submitted to**

**The Alberta Centre for  
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(ACCFR)**

**and**

**The Alberta Association of  
Services for Children and Families  
(AASCF)**

**Submitted by**

 **McCaffrey Consulting**

## Acknowledgements

Many individuals and organizations contributed to the evaluation of the four-day experiential learning opportunity “Allying with Indigenous Peoples: the practice of omanitew”.

### Course Development

- In early 2012, the Alberta Association of Services for Children and Families (AASCF) created an advisory group to discuss the training needs of human service workers who work with Indigenous children and families. The group decided to pilot test a modified version of the five-day University of Calgary Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) course entitled “Social Work with Indigenous Peoples”. The main differences between the BSW course and the AASCF sponsored opportunity included the duration (four days versus five days) and course participants (human service workers versus students). “Allying with Indigenous Peoples: the practice of omanitew” was a four-day experiential learning opportunity for human service workers. The course was developed in partnership between Dr. Leona Makokis (Blue Quills First Nations College) and Dr. Ralph Bodor (University of Calgary, Faculty of Social Work).

### Evaluation Advisory Team

- A seven-member Evaluation Advisory Team was established in April 2013 to provide oversight and direction for the evaluation. Team members included:
 

	<b>Rhonda Barraclough</b>	Alberta Association of Services for Children and Families
	<b>Ralph Bodor</b>	University of Calgary, Faculty of Social Work
	<b>Amber Dion</b>	University of Calgary, Faculty of Social Work
	<b>Tara Hanson</b>	Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research
	<b>Leona Makokis</b>	Elder, Blue Quills First Nations College
	<b>Sandra Maygard</b>	Alberta Association of Services for Children and Families
	<b>Laurie McCaffrey</b>	McCaffrey Consulting, Applied Research and Evaluation

### Transcription

- Transcription services for the sharing circle data were provided by **Shari Conley**, University of Calgary Faculty of Social Work.

### Facilitators

- The four-day learning opportunity was co-facilitated by the following individuals:
 

	<b>Carolyn Barker</b>	Clinical Social Worker, Northland Family Counselling Centre
	<b>Ralph Bodor</b>	University of Calgary, Faculty of Social Work
	<b>Amber Dion</b>	University of Calgary, Faculty of Social Work
	<b>Carly MacArthur</b>	University of Calgary, MSW Student and Researcher
	<b>Leona Makokis</b>	Elder, Blue Quills First Nations College
- Facilitators shared their time and expertise by participating in follow-up evaluation interviews regarding the development, background, and purpose of the learning opportunity.

## Participants

- Twenty-two individuals participated in the four-day experiential learning opportunity (October 30 – November 2, 2012). The majority also participated in the evaluation through completing post-workshop surveys (n=17) developed and administered by the course facilitators, and subsequently by participating in personal interviews or group sharing circles (n=14) several months later to assess what difference the experience had made in practice.

## Agency / Organizational Support

- Fifteen organizations provided four days of staff time for one or two members of their organization to participate in the experiential learning opportunity.

Agency/Organization	Number of Participants
1. Alberta Association of Services for Children and Families	1
2. Act Now Consulting	1
3. Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society	2
4. Catholic Social Services	2
5. Crossroads Family Services	2
6. EnviroS	2
7. Family Centre – Edmonton	1
8. Family Centre – Lethbridge	2
9. Government of Alberta, Department of Human Services	1
10. Mariam's Footsteps	1
11. Parkland Youth Homes	2
12. Pathways Family Services	1
13. Terra Centre for Teen Parents	2
14. WJS Canada	1
15. Woods Homes	1
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## Funding

- The AASCF received grant funding from the Alberta Ministry of Human Services to develop training to support the implementation of Outcome Based Service Delivery (OBSD). Funding for the four-day experiential learning opportunity and evaluation was supported by this grant. The funding for the training was administered by the Alberta Association of Services for Children and Families (AASCF). The funding for the evaluation was administered by the Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research (ACCFRCR).

## Preface

It was early April 2013, and I was attending a meeting at the Alberta Centre for Child, Family, and Community Research (ACCFRC). I was introduced for the first time to Rhonda Barraclough, the Executive Director of the Alberta Association of Services for Children and Families (AASCF), and to Dr. Ralph Bodor, Associate Professor with the University of Calgary, Faculty of Social Work. Convening the meeting was Tara Hanson from the ACCFRC, with whom I had collaborated on previous applied research and evaluation projects. I had no idea at the time that the events to follow that first meeting would profoundly change how I look at the world.

I was about to embark on a journey that would not only strengthen my understanding of Canadian history, but would change the way I interact with my own family and the way I approach my work as an independent evaluation consultant. It would deepen my understanding of the historical and current circumstances of Indigenous people in Canada. Most of all, it would give me hope for the future.

We discussed, during the initial meeting in April, the proposed evaluation of a four-day experiential learning opportunity for human service workers that had been piloted the previous fall, “Allying with Indigenous Peoples: the practice of omanitew”. Omanitew is a Cree word that refers to the respect shown to visitors in one's home. The practice of omanitew is about showing respect for each other (our colleagues, our families, our clients, our communities) and making people feel welcome when they enter a new environment.

The experiential learning opportunity was developed by Dr. Leona Makokis, the former President of Blue Quills First Nations College, and Dr. Ralph Bodor. The four-day curriculum was adapted from the five-day University of Calgary Bachelor of Social Work course entitled “Social Work with Indigenous Peoples.”

In October 2012, the AASCF sponsored 22 human service workers on a pilot test basis, with a commitment to follow-up with them to determine what difference the experience had made. What, if anything, were they doing differently in their work with children and families as a result of their four-day experience? What impact did it have? And what was it about the experience that was making a difference?

My role would be to help explore the answers to these questions. When I first asked the question, “what difference did the training make”, it was possible of course that it had made no difference whatsoever. I was open to listening to their stories. What words did they use to describe the experience? Their words ranged from reaffirming, empowering, intense, profound, and transformational. Participants were clear that the experience had made a difference. Change happened at different levels and in different ways, but change happened.

After interviewing 14 participants (among those individuals that attended in October 2012), I had the opportunity to actively participate in the four-day experience myself, together with a new group of participants in August 2013. I did not arrive with pen and paper to “evaluate” the experience, but to truly participate in the four-day learning opportunity so that I could more fully understand what the previous cohort of participants had described. What followed was a very intense, personal experience. I had never immersed myself in this way with any other evaluation project, always believing that I needed to remain neutral, objective, independent. However, this approach is not congruent with traditional Indigenous beliefs. Nor is it congruent with many

Western models of qualitative research. And I felt strongly that I needed to truly experience the process to be able to write about it with integrity.

This is what I learned:

Everyone has a story.

As human beings, we have all experienced some degree of pain, suffering, or trauma in our lives. Trauma affects us physically, mentally, spiritually, and emotionally. Indigenous people have experienced an unfair and unreasonable amount of pain, suffering, and trauma.

Historical factors have played a role in this damage. Colonization. Residential schools. The sixties scoop. Policies and systems that contract for dependency. People have done some really bad things with good intentions.

Current factors continue to play a role. Racism. Blame. Othering (“us” versus “them” modes of thinking). Policies and systems that perpetuate dependency.

Everything is connected. We are all connected to each other in the human journey. We can overcome pain, suffering, and trauma. Change, healing, and growth are possible - and in many cases already happening.

Creating a safe place for relationships to build and for healing to occur is critical. Traditional Indigenous ceremonies and circle process have a lot to offer.

What difference did the four days make? What is it all about?

It’s about moving forward.

It’s not about laying blame.

It’s not about “us” versus “them”. It’s about “us”.

It’s about walking together, side-by-side, as allies for a better future.

It’s about making people feel comfortable. It’s about how we treat our guests and how we treat each other. It’s about the practice of omanitew.

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## Introduction

The disproportionate number of Indigenous children involved with the child intervention system has been identified as a systemic issue by the Alberta Child and Youth Advocate. In 2010, the Ministry of Children and Youth Services accepted a recommendation to “enhance the capacity and cultural competency of the child intervention system” to serve Indigenous children and families.

So, then, how does one enhance the capacity and cultural competency of the child intervention system? One approach has been through offering Indigenous Awareness training or cultural competency training to human service workers who work with Indigenous children and families.

To further address this question, the Alberta Association of Services for Children and Families (AASCF) created an Advisory Group to discuss the training needs of human service workers who work with Indigenous children and families. Based on recommendations from the Advisory Group, it was decided to pilot a four-day learning opportunity with human service workers with a responsibility for working with Indigenous children and families.

“Allying with Indigenous Peoples: the practice of omanitew” was a four-day experiential learning opportunity developed for human service workers. The curriculum was adapted from the five-day University of Calgary Bachelor of Social Work course entitled “Social Work with Indigenous Peoples.” The BSW course had been well received among students, and it was decided to pilot the course in a modified format. The key differences between the omanitew learning opportunity and the BSW course upon which it was based included the duration of the course (four days instead of five) and the participants (human service workers instead of social work students).

The “Allying with Indigenous Peoples” learning opportunity was developed as an alternative to eight-hour cultural competency training. Together, the course developers and facilitators believed that the term “cultural competency” did not quite reflect the type of learning opportunity they had to offer. Becoming competent in another culture in eight hours – or four days – did not seem realistic. The facilitators hoped to give participants an experience in Indigenous culture and to share information at the same time; thus, the term experiential learning opportunity.

Twenty-two human service professionals from a range of organizations participated in the four-day experiential learning opportunity. Participants included agency staff (from a mix of front-line, supervisory, management and director roles), one independent consultant, one representative from the AASCF, and one department staff member.

It was envisioned that through this experience, participants will be able to approach their work with Indigenous families and clients from the perspective of being an ally, through providing more relevant support, and ultimately reducing the number of Indigenous children and families involved with formal care systems.

## Curriculum, Tools, and Resources

The four-day experiential learning opportunity began and ended in ceremony. Day 1 commenced with an opening prayer and smudging ceremony. Each day participants were given an opportunity to reflect on what they were learning and how they were feeling, and to share this feedback in circle with each other. Day 4 concluded with a closing feast and sharing circle.

The following topics and activities were included in the course curriculum:

- Opening ceremony, prayer, and introductions;
- Smudge teaching, pipe ceremony, feast teachings and protocol;
- Opening feast (provided by facilitator team);
- Pre-contact era PowerPoint/slides;
- Teachings regarding men's and women's roles;
- The process and impact of colonization;
- The importance of language and protocol;
- Indigenous kinship concepts, turtle lodge teachings, and family development;
- Post-contact era including oppression, colonization, Indigenous and Western paradigms, and the process of de-colonization;
- Viewing of the short documentary film, *Gently Whispering the Circle Back* (2013, 49 minutes). The film "explores the journey of healing in a people wounded by the Canadian Indian Residential School system. This documentary is a celebration of Indigenous spirituality and ceremony and their power to transform the lives of individuals and communities. The film invites us to join in the Circle of Healing." (Source: <http://www.bluequills.ca>) More recently, a Facilitators Guide has been developed to accompany the documentary and to help support discussions emerging from the film.
- Tools for assessing Indigenous Identity (Indigenous Identity Framework) and Social Inclusion. These tools can be used to assess the extent to which Indigenous children and families have access to culturally relevant opportunities;
- Circle process;
- The role of story-telling and teaching stories;
- Trauma, attachment, brain development, addictions and traditional healing practices;
- Sweat lodge ceremony (postponed due to weather conditions, originally scheduled as part of the four days, rescheduled several months later);
- Human services and Indigenous people;
- Indigenous governance;
- Working in an Indigenous context – *kiskinohamatowin*;
- The meaning of *omanitew*;
- Relational accountability; and
- Closing feast (potluck), ceremony, and sharing circle.

For more information about the tools and resources used to support the delivery of the course, including the film, *Gently Whispering the Circle Back*, please contact Blue Quills First Nations College at 1-888-645-4454 or visit their website at <http://www.bluequills.ca>.

## Evaluation Methodology

### Purpose and Approach

The primary purpose of the evaluation was to find out what difference, if any, the experiential learning opportunity had made in practice. The approach to the evaluation was developed collaboratively through in-person meetings and ongoing discussions between members of the Evaluation Advisory Team. It was agreed that the approach to the evaluation needed to be respectful and congruent with the learning opportunity we were seeking to evaluate, and it needed to meet standard expectations of applied research and evaluation. We set out to accomplish this task from a blend of both Indigenous and Western world views.

### Evaluation Questions

1. What, if any, difference did the experience make for participants?
2. To what extent did the experience impact participants mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and/or physically? These four levels of impact correspond with the four interconnected aspects of the Indigenous medicine wheel.
3. How did participants characterize the differences and similarities between “Allying with Indigenous Peoples: the practice of omanitew” and other types of learning opportunities?
4. From the perspective of participants, what key elements of the experience should stay the same? What could be improved?
5. To what extent does the learning opportunity have the potential to impact change in practice in Alberta?

### Data Collection Methods

The following data collection methods were used in the evaluation:

- Group sharing circle (in-person);
- Individual interviews (in-person, online videoconference, and telephone); and
- Group interview (in-person).

The group sharing circle began with a smudging ceremony led by one of the course facilitators. The evaluation consultant participated in an active listening role, asking participants to describe the impact of their experience. One by one, participants were asked to share their experiences and stories, and to provide examples of things they were doing differently now in their work with Indigenous children and families.

The individual and group interviews were facilitated by the evaluation consultant. The group interview was facilitated using circle process (one person speaking at a time, no interrupting). The individual interviews were conducted using semi-structured interview questions.

All sessions (sharing circle, individual and group interviews) were audio-taped and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

## Participation Rate

Fourteen participants took part in the follow-up evaluation to further reflect on the impact of the experiential learning opportunity. An additional four individuals provided brief verbal and/or written comments to describe their experience and the impact it had on them, yet declined to participate in the formal evaluation process given professional time constraints and busy workloads. All four of these individuals indicated that the experience had been positive and beneficial, although they did not have time to participate in a follow-up interview. Two participants had left their respective agencies, and an additional two participants did not respond to requests to participate.

### Interview and Sharing Circle Participants (May/June 2013)

Participation Rate	Number of Participants
Sharing Circle	6
Group Interview	2
Individual Interview	6
Declined formal interview citing time constraints; provided brief comments by phone or e-mail regarding the impact of the experience	4
Did not respond to requests for interview	2
Left agency/unable to contact	2
	<b>22</b>

## Data Analysis

With the consent of participants, the sharing circle and interviews were audio-taped for transcription and analysis. The transcripts were shared with the members of the Evaluation Advisory Team. Team members were asked to review the transcripts and to consider: what is the data telling us? What key themes are emerging? What are some commonalities and differences in the participants' stories?

In late June 2013, members of the team gathered for an in-person opportunity to collectively reflect on emergent themes and findings from the evaluation. We used a circle process to provide the space for each individual's thoughts and reflections to be shared. The evaluation consultant incorporated the feedback from the Evaluation Advisory Team into the process used for coding and summarizing the data.

The data were entered into standard word processing software. The transcripts were reviewed multiple times, and participant responses were sorted into response categories based on overall evaluation question. Caution was taken to preserve the meaning of participant feedback, by not reducing their feedback into artificial categories, and to keep their stories intact.

## Ethical Considerations

Assessment tools developed by the Alberta Research Ethics Community Consensus Initiative were completed to assess level of risk to participants and to clearly articulate the intended use of personal information. Prior to collecting data, participants were informed about how their data would be used, and who would have access to their responses.

## Demographic and Background Information

### Who were the participants?

For the purpose of reporting evaluation findings, the term “participants” refers to those individuals involved in both the four-day learning opportunity and the follow-up evaluation.

A commonality between many of the participants was the extent of their experience as human service professionals working with Indigenous children and families. Participants currently served in a mix of front-line, managerial, supervisory, and administrative roles. The following comments were provided by participants to describe their background and experience:

✚ *“I have been working with children and families in various capacities for about fifteen years, ten of which have been here (with this agency). The last four, four and a half years have been working more primarily with Indigenous clients and their families and their communities.”*

✚ *“I entered children’s services approximately ten years ago and I started working in quality assurance, and then moved into a director’s position...and I oversaw a residential treatment program for adolescents, both boys and girls, and the program was the first program to receive an off-reserve designation, an Aboriginal designation for the program.”*

✚ *“I’m a program manager. I’m the manager of residential services here (at the agency) so I oversee an open custody home for youth between 14 to 20, males and females in that program, as well as a program for youth involved with children’s services, our passages group home, for youth 12 to 15, and an arch program which serves youth reintegrating from custody back into the community or to home...With (some of our programs) minimally over a year 30% of our youth are Indigenous. And that can go as high as 50% depending on the year.”*

✚ *“I’ve been with the agency for 14 years, and I’ve always had some Aboriginal resource or Aboriginal activities going on, or involved in them ever since I started...”*

✚ *“I haven’t worked anywhere else in twenty-six years. I had some breaks to have kids, but I’ve primarily worked in the area of children, youth, and family all that time. I spent many years in the area of adoption...I have always worked off and on with Aboriginal families.”*

✚ *“I’ve been with (this agency) almost since the beginning (18 years)...We grew from one little program for Aboriginal youth that was focused on pre-employment and education and job readiness and now, I think we have eighteen different programs that we run...One of our huge focuses and impact with our mission here...is to help people walk proudly in two worlds.”*

✚ *“I work with (a human service agency), I’ve been there for almost twelve years. I’ve been working with...pretty much in the child protection field for I guess, twenty-four years. (My current agency) is the first really non-Aboriginal environment that I’ve ever worked in.”*

✚ *“My background, my first degree is in Native Studies and that led me on a journey working with homeless youth and I ended up working with a lot of Aboriginal homeless youth, a youth shelter downtown, and I went from there into foster care at (my current agency).”*

- ✚ *"I work specifically in early intervention...programs for parents and children, and also we are in the process to offer a program in the reserve that is still in process right now."*
- ✚ *"My role is as a planning consultant...Our branch's role, what we have been doing is going around the province and engaging Aboriginal communities and partners as well as stakeholders. So the question we would ask is how do we address the over-representation of Aboriginal children and we've pulled together partners from all walks of life to answer that question. So we've been doing that for about 18 months. I've been with the Ministry for 7 years, and doing the work with the community engagement for 18 months. And it's been a big learning curve, so this has just been part of it."*
- ✚ *"When I took the training, I was a foster care supervisor of a fairly large program with about 90 clients, 7 staff, 6 of whom were front line workers."*
- ✚ *"I've been (with my agency) for about ten years...I supervise our outreach program...Before that I was at (another agency) and I supervised foster families."*
- ✚ *"I'm from (my agency) and I've been there for twenty years. My education, my post-secondary education is based in early childhood development and I've worked out-of-school care and infant care for many years...I now work in the outreach program...I also am able to be the facilitator for the parenting program."*
- ✚ *"I am currently involved with the OBSD project and before that...I did accreditation and then for many years was involved in a non-profit so...including (another agency) many years ago so there's this long history. My background is a social worker."*

### **Why did they participate in the four-day experiential learning opportunity?**

Participants engaged in the four-day experiential learning opportunity for a variety of reasons. Most importantly, they chose to participate. A key message to emerge from their feedback was that they had chosen the experience willingly, seeking a deeper level of understanding and connectedness. Participants expressed a desire to learn more about the history and culture of Indigenous people, and a curiosity and interest in experiencing, and learning more about, the ceremonies that were very much integrated with how the program was delivered.

- ✚ *"Part of what interested me was the doing it in ceremony, doing it in circles, for me personally and for (my organization). It was valuable to make connections with the people that were there because they are also our stakeholders and partners."*
- ✚ *"My interest in taking the training was particularly to gain some more understanding of the heritage of the majority of the children in our care, in our foster homes."*
- ✚ *"I was challenged with, what are the big problems? ... Why we were facing such systemic problems. And how many children and youth who were in care were from the Aboriginal community... trying to tackle it and get as much understanding as I could..."*

## Impact

### What, if any, difference did the experience make for participants? To what extent did the experience impact participants mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and/or physically?

Feedback from participants was clear. The experience made a difference. To what extent did the experience impact participants mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and/or physically? To more fully illustrate the extent of this impact, examples of changes will be shared in the participants' own words.

First, it must be emphasized that it is challenging and somewhat artificial to separate the reported changes into distinct categories. The interconnected realms of the Indigenous medicine wheel are just that: interconnected. The mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical aspects of human beings are not separate. Reported changes in one realm (e.g., mental, spiritual) often led to or supported changes in another realm (e.g., physical or intended behaviour change).

### Mentally: What did participants learn during the four-day experiential learning opportunity?

Participants described many examples of learning and achieving a deeper understanding of concepts they may have heard before but in some cases didn't fully understand. The key difference was that the learning occurred experientially and in ceremony. Many participants indicated that they had heard much of the information before, but not in the way it was delivered over the four days. The sharing of information was integrated in ceremony, in a gentle way, and with great respect. This helped to create an open space for learning and dialogue.

One participant, upon reflecting on why the experience was so valuable to her despite having heard much of the information before, provided the following explanation:

✚ *"I think so many of us, we have so many hours of training in Aboriginal history, or Aboriginal Awareness is what it's typically called through our own accreditation bodies, that each year we have to have eight hours of Aboriginal training, and that often begins with an understanding of the residential school system and the impact of that. And depending on the organization we participate in different ways around learning about Aboriginal culture. But this has been a far more valuable experience than my thirteen years of doing that every year. Just having the time and participating in the way that it was delivered. I definitely got more out of that than all of the years of training I've done...And I would think that many other people felt the same way."*

This example is illustrative of what other participants shared during the evaluation, and it also illustrates the challenges of categorizing the data into "mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical change". Everything was connected. The way that the program was delivered, the mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical components of the program, made a difference in what participants learned and what they took away from the experience.

Examples of new learning and increased understanding were provided in the following areas:

- the historical context and current circumstances of Indigenous peoples (including the process and impact of colonization, and the cross-generational impact of residential schools);
- traditional Indigenous practices and ceremonies;
- Indigenous culture, teachings, and worldview;
- the use of language (influenced shift in using new language such as “being an ally”, “ambassadors of knowledge”, and “Indigenous”); and
- trauma, attachment, brain development, addictions, and traditional healing practices.

For each identified area of learning, illustrative participant quotations and stories are presented next.

### Learning about the historical context and current circumstances of Indigenous peoples

- ✚ *“The way in which the discussion happened around colonization, I went ‘oh, now I really see this’, and it was very graphic and I think there were the pieces between the intellectual parts and the stuff that was very, very concrete... and I do think that there is a synchronicity that is happening and an openness or different way of being able to see or experience things that is very, very different now than it has been historically...(and) some of those issues became much clearer in my mind.”*
- ✚ *“The learning that I did around colonization really sort of made that pop out for me.”*
- ✚ *“(The) section on colonization is paramount. It’s broken down into such easy to understand pieces, and again, having it as sort of that initial in-the-door piece, I think that’s essential.”*
- ✚ *“Overall it was a great learning experience and gave me a new understanding. I grew up on reserve myself. To actually put it in a different perspective, it was eye-opening. Growing up on the reserve, nobody talked about it. All of this stuff about residential schools that’s coming out, nobody talked about it. I’m the next generation to come out of it. My dad went through residential school...It gave me a whole new perspective. So for example, why some of my family members are alcoholics, how they were taken away from family, and didn’t have the supports. The trauma of that...I see my whole family in a different light. It would be amazing to bring some of this to my community. To show them they aren’t alone. They do have a story to share. It was an absolutely amazing workshop and I loved it.”*

### Learning about traditional Indigenous practices and ceremonies

Participants developed an increased understanding and comfort with traditional Indigenous practices and ceremonies through *experiencing them* and asking questions along the way. Participants had the opportunity to experience and learn more about the process of smudging, pipe ceremonies, feast teachings, Elder protocols, sweat lodge, and circle process.

- ✚ *“Spiritually... I love the fact that the training opened with a pipe ceremony. And I really respected Leona’s idea that things begin and end in ceremony. And I think regardless of what your spiritual beliefs are, it was centering, and asking for guidance was really key, and for*

people being willing to open themselves up a little bit. And I particularly liked it because there was no sense of having or being forced to do anything. I didn't actually smoke from the pipe because I don't smoke and I have a real problem with tobacco, but I wasn't made to feel that I was being the bad participant. I really felt that I wanted to open myself up to that understanding. From the spiritual perspective of the training I really liked when Leona spoke the prayers in English as well as Cree. Because, not understanding Cree, it's really hard to know what's being said. I think that removed some of the mystery. And probably a lot of people would be surprised at how similar prayers from different practices can be. Focusing on a Creator which is somebody else's version of God, to me, was very equalizing... So that, I think, on the spiritual side, I just think it gave me more understanding of, how do I say it, more understanding of the ceremonial practices. What we practiced was explained very well, what the pipe ceremony was, the smudging, which always made me feel very uncomfortable whenever it came up because I was sure I was doing it the wrong way, feeling on stage. Even the first day or two, nobody had their eyes closed necessarily. I was trying to make sure I didn't do something wrong. And I witnessed so many people doing it a different way. That was comforting. There seemed to be no right way or wrong way. What I liked was it was explained what you're doing. Some people chose not to do it. And again it wasn't anything that was disregarded. There were people that were Indigenous that didn't do it. So again, that was also comforting. I think that's part of that 'othering'. And you get a better understanding that people can choose to practice regardless. Just because you're Indigenous, or not, doesn't mean you have to practice your spiritual beliefs in any one way. That was really great."

- ✚ "The thing that stood out the most was really that experiential learning, sitting and doing a pipe ceremony, smudging with one another, participating in a feast, and having Ralph and Leona and Amber walk through those protocols as we went along, because I think many of us have been trained around residential schools, and certainly hearing the experience of Leona and Amber was helpful, but that was more similar to other trainings so to speak that we had participated in before. But going through protocol and ceremony with them was a far different experience than I'd had before. So that was the most valuable to me."

### Learning about Indigenous culture, teachings, and worldview

- ✚ "I think professionally it has certainly supported me in terms of my learning around the Indigenous culture."
- ✚ "There were a lot of people in the course with Indigenous backgrounds who didn't know either, so that was kind of freeing."
- ✚ "It's really conceptually in my mind getting a sense of there are really distinct worldviews...how it plays out is often not even necessarily conscious."
- ✚ "With some (clients), when I would talk about them raising children, asking who is in charge of this, who is in charge of that...so many families, they raise their children by grandparents... These families are very open to their children with others, so when we suggest activities for them, we don't only talk about what mom and dad can do, we always try to go to other families

as well. (Is that something before the training you would focus more on the role of mom and dad in parenting, and it kind of opened it up to the role of extended families?) Yeah, in the program it's mom and dad. When I have Aboriginal clients, I'm trying to understand that...mom and dad have a specific role...and it's okay when we have another family member, like grandma or grandpa come to help us out as parents."

- ✚ "Being (one of) the only two men, there were lots of roles for men. And especially...if you're talking about services for children and families...So that was kind of interesting to be one of the only two men there. It was very dependent on the men helping, and it's a good humbling lesson, which was good."

### Learning about the use of language (and influenced shift in using new language)

- ✚ "There was a lot of language use around the use of the word 'ally' which I think resonated for me, thinking about, although I'm not an Indigenous person myself, what is my role in supporting these youth, and being in a management role it's not as direct certainly as it would be if I were front line, but how do I support my front line staff and my supervisors to be allies in their practice?"
- ✚ "I think it changed the language I use on an every day basis about the work I do. I think one of the messages I took out of this was humbling...I no longer consider myself to be a helping person, or I'm providing a service, because that is so incredibly pompous. Who the hell am I to be assuming that I've got the knowledge or the right to be able to help any of these kids? But being able to change the language and say, I want to be an ally with your community. I want our entire organization to be able to align ourselves with your community, based on what your community needs. We're not going to try to tell you, or try to sell you something. You tell us. And we'll tell you if there's something we can do that fits that."
- ✚ "It was easier for me to be able to articulate the words that I needed to use, or to change the words in our (agency) training, using words like 'ambassadors of knowledge', moving towards doing something in the present, move towards the future, getting rid of that shame and changing the words for my peers and my co-workers."
- ✚ "One of the big pieces too is there's that whole piece around language and how important it is and so I try to be congruent and very aware that I'm not so I try to kind of use Indigenous versus Aboriginal and I'm maybe at sixty/forty at this point."
- ✚ "It helped give some language. (My colleague) and I often refer to me as a white person, that we need to have a voice, and to be an ally."

## Trauma, Attachment, Brain Development, Addictions, and Traditional Healing Practices

- ✚ *"It gives me an excellent background to the trauma, the inter-generational trauma, and the lateral violence. I think that was really, really helpful, I think, particularly the lateral violence, the lateral trauma, which I didn't really understand."*
- ✚ *"The trauma part, addictions, was excellent."*
- ✚ *"The training incorporated trauma, the neurological impact on people, and the effects."*
- ✚ *"Having a (clinical social worker) come in and talk about trauma and the effects of trauma and addictions was powerful too."*
- ✚ *"There were things that I learned that I can relate to now that I wouldn't have known before, so brain science, and that was pretty interesting actually."*
- ✚ *"The movie...They were at Blue Quills, and they were talking about the impacts, and some of the healing that's taking place. It was very powerful."*

### **Spiritually: What impact did the experience have on a spiritual level? What did participants experience during the spiritual and ceremonial elements of the program?**

Participants were given the opportunity to experience ceremonial and spiritual practices with the freedom to choose whether or not to participate, and an open, respectful space for asking questions.

The spiritual component was very much integrated in the delivery of the four-day experiential learning opportunity. On one level, participants were able to learn about Indigenous spiritual beliefs by participating in the ceremonies. Many examples of this learning have already been quoted in this report, particularly those related to what participants learned about Indigenous ceremonies and spirituality. In some cases, participants also described profound, personal spiritual experiences, a deeper connection to their own spirit, and an appreciation for the healing power of ceremony. For example, participants provided the following comments about the spiritual experience and the impact of that experience:

- ✚ *"I think the thing I remember, and it's still in my brain, is that Leona talked about working with our Aboriginal people, is that you need to focus on language and ceremony. And so I think we've tried to have, in particular, do some teaching around the ceremony. The cool thing was to do all of that training in ceremony. I mean that just kind of sticks with you, and so I think it was really valuable...it really helped support the passion that was there... And I think the training, because it was done in ceremony, touched me at a spiritual level, and...any time you can do training that touches you at a personal level, a professional level, and at the core of your being, wow, like what more can you say? So that's what that training meant for me."*

- ✚ *"I think there was great importance to the ceremony part of the training that we took. And I give great credence to that. To the prayers and the spirituality that surrounded it. And feel quite strongly that that affected me in a way that I can't explain, but it had a great impact on me. And to the point where I went back and did lots of things in my program, and then to the point where I knew I had to change my job, and work in a new way of working with Aboriginal Services. So the whole thing had a profound effect on me... I think what happened in the workshop is something that cannot necessarily be quantified in words. I do believe that the prayers and the spiritual aspects had a profound effect, and one can talk about it in some way, but really I don't really understand. I don't have to understand, but I know it had a profound impact on me."*
  
- ✚ *"It made me homesick. I think that was my overall experience and because I'm, you know there's two other Aboriginal people in the organization but their experiences of...their life experiences have not been Aboriginal so they don't know a lot about it and so I feel that I teach them all the time too about being Aboriginal, about what it's like and so being there for those four days and being with other Aboriginal people and being a part of ceremonies made me very homesick and one of the thoughts that I had after that time was, I wish that we had almost like an organization where we...an organization or a group for people like me who work in non-Aboriginal organizations where we could get together and do things like sweats or meet together and talk and just talk about what it's like or just to see each other."*
  
- ✚ *"I think for me, the overriding piece that came out of it is that I have been, over the years, involved in many places where there's discussions around (similar topics), and this was probably the first time where there were a large group of people coming from different places who really didn't know each other very well, where there was no, either anger or defensiveness, and I'm very aware that that is because the experience happened within ceremony and there's a part of me that kind of intellectually hears that and I go, 'okay, there's no question in my mind I saw it, I experienced it' and I'm kind of going, 'hmm, isn't that interesting' because I'm not quite sure how to internalize that yet but I'm working on that but it was real."*

### **Emotionally: What impact did the experience have on an emotional level? How did participants feel during the four-day experience, and how do they feel now?**

Emotionally, participants experienced a range of feelings as they listened to and shared stories about colonization, residential schools, trauma, inter-generational trauma, addictions, and lateral violence. Participants were encouraged to reflect on how they were feeling about the information and stories being shared. Every morning began with a ceremony and a sharing circle. This provided the space for each participant to share and process their thoughts and emotions. As a result, feelings of hope and connectedness were commonly expressed at the end of the four day experience.

- ✚ *"I recall the very first day of the training, I'm pretty sure it was the first day, when Ralph had done all of the work around colonization. The email to my boss basically said I think I need to quit. I don't feel qualified to do my job. I'm way too white. I can't. She said, okay, well let's do the next three days, and see if you change your mind... I think I had to have that feeling. I had*

to kind of go through that process to be able to really absorb the rest of the teachings. I would question if there were any Caucasian people in that training if they didn't feel that humility on the first day, if they could really be open to absorbing the things that Ralph and Leona were talking about over the next (three) days. Because those boundaries had to be torn down to really start at a grassroots level."

- ✚ "I suppose emotionally, it was, it was a difficult four days, but I'm typically drained when I'm with a group of people, but I wasn't in this one. So it was, I wouldn't go as far as recharging, but it wasn't one that really drained me out, because it was such a good, the energy was really good, due to doing it in the circles, due to the ceremony."
- ✚ "Emotionally – very cathartic, I felt at peace, as weird as that sounds. It was very peaceful to know that it wasn't up to me or others like me, who are do-gooders, to fix things. This isn't a fixable problem. It's something we approach as an ally. Not that I felt patriarchal but it's something that's part of our culture. Whether we felt we were, we were. To realize I'm not the parent in this endeavour, but to realize that I'm a brother or sister. It took the burden off my shoulders. Not that I carried the burden of the province but just trying to figure things out. I've had many, many in-depth conversations with people in the sector, just trying to figure things out. It's daunting. To understand it, and also to realize it's not something that needs fixing. It's about relationships. And stopping the othering. And stopping looking at things like a parent. So that was very freeing. That would I guess be the emotional."
- ✚ "When (my colleague) was speaking, it reminded me of some of the discussions that we had during that training. And kind of moving from that shame-based place, as an ally, and I think the training was particularly helpful in helping me understand that I have a role, and if I stay kind of in that shame-based place I'm, that's not the role that I want to be in, and that to move forward, so I think the training gave me hope that we're on a different path... I mean I kind of knew it at a head level, but I think in my heart, and I think when you do this work from your heart it has a different impact."
- ✚ "I think taking that course at that time with (my colleague) was more re-affirming for me what I had already been thinking for years, but wasn't able to get the message across as an individual.. but affirming that more of a mass was thinking the same way as I'd already been thinking, and that more of the mainstream was moving that way, so it was easier for me to be able to articulate the words that I needed to use, or to change the words in our training, using words like "ambassadors of knowledge"... We're all ambassadors trying to make a difference, a better world for the clients we serve, the people we work with, and for the next generation, and hopefully they think the way we do, and do even better than what we do. We can only do what we do now... I think that training kind of reaffirmed all that for me. That I was not alone, and that there were many others working with me in the same thought and manner, the same processes, and it was more empowering knowing that."
- ✚ "I felt very empowered after coming back from this program."
- ✚ "This felt like coming home to me and so it really meant a great deal to me and I wish that more people could take it and understand it because I do a lot of cross cultural teaching, I teach

*a lot of foster parents, I come across a lot of defensiveness, people who think that we should just man up and get over our issues and I think that if people were to experience what we experienced in that room, that perhaps they could let go of some of the anger towards what we've gone through."*

Many participants reported strong emotional impacts as a result of viewing the documentary film, *Gently Whispering the Circle Back*. The film included three main themes: Confronting the Historical Trauma, Understanding the Trauma, and Transcending the Trauma. In many ways, the four-day experiential learning opportunity, "Allying with Indigenous peoples: the practice of omanitew" paralleled these themes. The result was a very powerful experience that began with confronting historical trauma (acknowledging the history of colonization and residential schools), understanding the trauma (how trauma affects us mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and physically), and ultimately transcending the trauma (through a spiritual journey of healing and ceremony).

✚ Regarding the impact of the film, *Gently Whispering the Circle Back*: *"When you watch somebody in pain, and see the impacts. The one particular story about his face being brought into the urine, and the treatment of people. Leona's story. I've repeated it many, many, many times about the posters that were on the walls of little native children with feathers falling down to hell, while in heaven was the little blondies. How impactful, and what does that do to your psyche and who you are as a person? That to me was an incredibly powerful thing to witness. I think very few human beings can turn away from that and not be impacted at a more root level."*

One of the fundamental aspects of the way the film was presented during the omanitew experience was the opportunity to reflect on and share thoughts and feelings after viewing the film. Relationships were built over the four days, and a safe space was created for sharing personal reflections. The potential for change was enhanced by the opportunity to collectively share feedback and to discuss implications for practice.

### **Physically: What are participants doing differently now, if anything, as a result of the experience?**

For the purpose of this analysis, the term "physical" refers to reported behaviour change – things that participants are physically doing differently in their personal or professional lives as a result of the experience. Participants emerged with either a renewed sense of commitment or transformative realization about the need to do things differently in their work with Indigenous children and families. Reported changes in practice included increased sharing of information, changes in overall approach and language (more emphasis on working collaboratively as allies), use of new tools and methods of engagement, and increased efforts to connect Indigenous children and families with their culture and family histories.

#### Increased sharing of information

✚ *"Sharing as much information as I can with other people. What stops the process moving forward is lack of education and awareness. We are very uncomfortable with change. People*

*can get very uncomfortable and very sure of the way things are. They may have biases they're unaware of. From a mental place it's just having some more knowledge. I don't claim to have even a sliver of it, but I know I have more than I had before. And I feel it's important to share that information."*

-  *"It helped me to kind of realize that where I've been, I have to share that information with these kids and these foster parents and I think I forget that I walk in two worlds...I'm comfortable in the two worlds...and how I need to share my knowledge with other people."*
-  *"I have a bulletin board now with all the Aboriginal activities that I'm learning about in this community."*

### Changed overall approach and language

-  *"The whole four days had a tremendous impact on me. The allies, or the theme of allies, impacted me a lot and it changed a lot about how I teach the cross cultural training...In fact I developed a whole course on becoming an ally for a cross cultural diversity training to teach foster parents about how to become an ally because you can't be Aboriginal but you can become an ally to your children, to the families that you're working with right, because I don't want that 'us' and 'them' kind of language that we hear so much of."*
-  *"A story would be just working with a youth who has small children and has struggles with her family of origin...now I open that kettle of fish. Before I just, you know, that's where you came from, let's get this form filled in. Now I'm more open to the, let's talk about what your relationship with your mother is like, and where was your mother from? The biggest change is just acknowledging that their family of origin...and though I think I always did have empathy for them, just showing that more to my clients."*
-  *"It helped me wrap up how I was going to present our 8-hour training. There were pieces I was stuck on. I knew what I was presenting, but there was a message I wanted to get everybody to walk away more empowered, and walk away thinking okay I'm gonna do this now, I'm gonna follow through with what she's asked of us to be ambassadors, now I have the knowledge and the tools. Prior to that, people were not getting it. They were not feeling it. They had to feel empowered. They had to feel like they had a tool to pass on, or feel confident in being able to use those tools...It wasn't until after that thought process, after taking that workshop, and experiencing and hearing some of those words, I think helped me put it together, to get people to carry it with a certain drive, and they do. The responses I receive now is more like a sponge. They want more information. Where we would have the history section, would be god I didn't want to hear anymore. There was a lot of burden to bear, where now it's empowering, it's knowledge, it's about history, it's about our history. Not just Aboriginals. It's about Canadian culture. Canadian society. And now they want more of that section which we don't have time for! Yeah, it was a great experience, it helped me find words. And I also agree with (my colleague). I think more should experience the four days."*

## Use of tools

During the four-day learning opportunity, participants were provided with potential new tools for supporting their work with Indigenous children and families. Two of these tools (“Identity and Social Inclusion” and “Social Inclusion for Indigenous Clients” handouts) included a series of questions and measures for assessing social inclusion from an Indigenous perspective, and questions to help reflect on the extent to which culturally relevant opportunities are available to children and families.

Participants were asked to indicate whether or not they were using these tools in practice, and if so, what difference it had made. A common response was that participants thought the tools weren’t quite ready to be circulated yet, as they believed the tools were still in draft form. Among those participants that reported using the tools, the questions were used as a helpful starting point to guide discussion within their organization/agency. A few agencies planned to incorporate the tools into their annual evaluations and outcome surveys.

- ✚ *“It was something that Ralph had developed and shared. It was a draft. He sort of asked that we go back to our agencies and take a look at this... Aboriginal Identity Framework. It had been broken down into team, into agency, and then into individual clients. So it’s really allowed us to take a look at some questions around, you know, is there exposure to written language? Is there exposure to spoken language for the youth that we serve? Is there exposure to Aboriginal teachings? Is there exposure to Aboriginal history? Are there anti-oppressive hiring practices? Those sorts of things. And that’s what we looked at as a leadership team in that sharing circle that myself and the other participant who’d attended provided to our agency, right from our supervisory team to our management team to our executive director, and we all participated in that, and took a look at some of those questions.”*
- ✚ *Regarding using the tools with clients: “Talking about their experience. Were you exposed to your language? Were you exposed to your Elders? Were you exposed to opportunities to practice your specific ceremonial practices, and not a melting pot of different environments? Were you exposed to experiences that represented your cultural background? I know they’re not getting the exposure that they need, and I’m trying to collect that and show them that it’s possible, to say, hey look, kids aren’t getting what they need and what their families think they need.”*
- ✚ *“I’m going to put it a little differently. I had to apply it. I had to apply it on myself. Exclusion, inclusion...It had to mean something for me in order to do what I do right now. That’s why the difference is out in the community. I had, I felt the need to have my foot in the door in every community perspective to let people know we have this many of your clients, this many of your kids, and I always say your kids, our kids, our children, because we’re raising these kids, that was the inclusion piece, was pulling everybody outside in, and it’s made a difference in what I do, because I don’t just have the agency support, now I have the community helping us with these children.”*
- ✚ *“I think, oh gosh, there’s multiple things that I do differently...One of the things, because I know that at the end of the day that I still work in a large agency that, you’re still at the end of the day a business. You’ve got to be able to not just propose ideas or thoughts or concepts, you have to be able to come with information, data, and things to support it. So I had fabulous*

*conversations with Leona and Ralph regarding outcomes. Outcome measures. Outcome pillars. And was able to bring that back...On one hand I could share this with my director and say, we're missing things here. This is profound what we're missing. I was able to bring it back to our research department and propose to do satisfaction surveys. I was able to say you need to incorporate A, B, C, and D from these outcomes, because we're missing something for our Indigenous clients, and I was able to take it as a blueprint back to my own individual program and say this is what we need to do differently here."*

### Hosted sharing circles

- ✚ *"We ran a session based on the information that we had learned and some of the sharing that we had during our time in Edmonton, and facilitated a sharing circle here amongst our leadership team based on that, and I think that was really well received as well. We looked at some of those questions around 'how do we serve our Indigenous populations here in our organization? What are some of the things we're doing really well, and what are some areas that maybe need further development in our own programming?'"*
- ✚ *"I've had two talking circles for our staff and our foster parents, not a huge turnout though. What's meant to be is meant to be, the people who came were very open to it and...from what I learned in training which is making it an open, safe environment where I went around the room and I asked them if they knew any mother or father who really honestly didn't love their kids and not one person could say they actually met someone like that and then I went around the room asking people what culture they were from and who taught it to them and why they were proud of where they're from. So just kind of breaking it down to a more personal level for these foster parents was not a scary thing."*

### More attention to the importance of connecting Indigenous children and families with cultural and spiritual practices, and more efforts to provide these opportunities

- ✚ *"We just recently did some teaching around the colours, and what they mean, and all of that kind of stuff, with that story-telling that we kind of have missed. So those are some things that we've done differently. Me on a day-to-day basis I think recognizing and needing to respect all people, kind of understanding that some of our kids come without much information, and sometimes our response from children and families is, 'oh I'm not interested, I don't care', and some of that is because they don't have the information, and so we, my job is supporting managers and supervisors to kind of go around that, right, because I think a kid who has grown up in the city, grown up in care, is disconnected from his people, he needs some support, and some practice of experiencing what that's like to kind of be interested, and that's part of what our job is. I don't know if that answers your question, but that's kind of every-day, is how can we make this real and practical for our kids, but for that to happen we also have to make it real and practical for our staff. I think just on Saturday our first annual, because we hope it will be an annual, Aboriginal celebration for our agency, to kind of recognize Aboriginal week. We had never done that before. And so we were able to successfully do that...For me it was really about celebrating our Aboriginal kids and those that we serve...It wasn't the fact that we had a great day. I mean we did have a great day, but really it was about teaching and to see our kids paying so much attention to the fellow that we had there doing some teaching, to be part of a*

*smudging, and the food, and really kind of attending. We have kids that have lots and lots of behavioural stuff going on, and that they were sooo keen and interested in learning, and that's really what the day was about. Why is it we did the day? We did it to celebrate and honour our Aboriginals, and so, do we still have work to do in our organization, I think so, and I think the training has given me the confidence to be able to say, this is why we're doing that, and we can call it whatever, but this is what our goal was, and we need to help bring people along as our allies."*

- ✚ *"This is an important piece to the 80% of the kids that we serve in this agency that are Aboriginal. So I think it helped reshape our vision. So I just think that we work together, but it's kind of like, it's not an option whether or not to participate or not, or to create these opportunities for kids. It really, in order to serve them well, which is what we're about, we need to do this piece, and so I think the training really, it really helped me to solidify that vision, and I think we have pretty significant support for that within (the agency)."*
- ✚ *"Absolutely. My team, as part of this, we have connected with an Elder and a resource specialist and we've brought them into our programming, and we hadn't done that before. We've posted language, we've posted a medicine wheel, we've done some sessions around that, and we hadn't done that before. And as I spoke to earlier, our evaluation tools look very different than they did previously. And the connection to the community. There's been a significant increase at a front-line level in terms of connecting with the Indigenous community and the comfort around doing that... That hadn't been there before."*
- ✚ *"I think what we're doing differently, and I've been a supervisor in group care, and I've done Aboriginal programming, and kinship, and I've done the front line stuff doing home assessments, I think, is getting to know people personally. Everybody has a story to tell. And those stories are wonderful. No matter how horrific some of those histories are, those histories are a piece of us that bring us to today, and help us to get to where we're going next. Without some of our horrific histories, or the pieces that have been embedded in our heads, good or bad, they kind of dictate how we treat others, and how we are as human beings, and how we treat our brothers and sisters, and how we respond to situations, and our kids are so resilient. What we hadn't done, we'd tried, we hadn't done it really well, was connect our kids that have no family, that have those horrific histories, and we've been cushioning them for years... Trying not to give them all the pieces. Not even sugar coating, but they're aware, they lived through their horrific histories and they've lost connections, either their parents are in jail or there's been a lot of cross generational trauma, and we don't talk about those things. We're talking about those things now. I get calls from the houses to find out information from bands, band designates and stuff, to find out the kids' histories. Some of our kids have been raised with our agency, or have come from other providers, and don't know how to connect with those bands, or to find out that family's history or origin. Those are important pieces, horrific or not. They are important pieces of our kids' grounding, or an individual's grounding. So that's what we're doing differently. It's how we present it and how we word it is what makes a difference. They become learning lessons of part of you, of who you are. And that's from the feedback I'm getting, that's made a difference in some of our kids."*

- ✚ *“At the Aboriginal event day we saw a great difference in the kids, where they’d be all over the place. You wouldn’t know if you were a stranger coming in that they had behavioural concerns. They were so calm, and enthralled with what was going on around them, in awe.”*
- ✚ *“Within the position I had, I made some small changes, but important changes. So the first thing I did when I got back was to do a survey for our Indigenous, First Nations children, and to see how much of their culture was being honoured in the foster home, and whether or not Children’s Services had asked that that happen, that an Elder be connected, or that they be connected with some aspect of their culture. And so the survey was following that up, and looking at those statistics... Well I found out that we were not nearly doing enough. Unfortunately I don’t have it in front of me right now. Really, I looked at what everybody was doing within the homes, and what percentage of the families were doing something, and what percentage were doing nothing. And, yeah, I felt it was quite a good eye-opener, particularly at that point in time when I did that, we had 65% of our clients were First Nations, you know, had some First Nations background, some cultural background, and I think what I came away with was we certainly weren’t doing enough. And I think it just opened my team’s eyes as well as, mostly I think it opened my team’s eyes into what more we could do. Really wanted to accept the fact that enough wasn’t being done and I think that really came across. I worked hard to ensure that they were following up, doing a monthly follow-up in this regard, and recording it on the files.”*
- ✚ *“So it’s really made me focus to really show kids, you know, that being Aboriginal is not a negative thing, it’s a good thing, it’s made me really make that program something really worth coming to, something that’s really sharp and focused.”*
- ✚ *“I had a very heated discussion with my ED...because I want my kids, our Aboriginal kids, to really have their rights recognized and I really am fighting very hard to make sure that they have that Indigenous atmosphere.”*
- ✚ *“There was an emphasis on walking in two worlds. And I went back and I consulted with the Elders and the senior staff that I have...How we’re trying to get our young people to a place where they can be in two worlds, without it being a tug-of-war or a struggle. How do we give them the resources, the training, the opportunity, and the teaching? Because a lot of our kids, some of them live in small, isolated communities, but some of them don’t. Some of them live off the reserve in city centres, and how do we get that balance out for them?”*

## Similarities and Differences

### How did participants characterize the differences and similarities between “Allying with Indigenous Peoples: the practice of omanitew” and other types of training/learning opportunities?

When the question was first posed, the word “training” was part of the interview guide. We asked participants to describe the differences and similarities between “the omanitew training” and other types of training programs. It became clear early on that the word “training” did not quite describe participants’ experiences.

- ✚ *“It’s hard to talk about it as training. It really has a completely different feel to it, and a life altering impact.”*
- ✚ *“I think it’s hard to call it a ‘training’ when you come to the overall impression because it becomes something that changes fundamental...a fundamental shift instead of really a training, a ‘training’ says something different to me. To me it was more of a foundation shift.”*
- ✚ *“I’ve actually been very careful not to describe this as training, to probably be much clearer about it being an experiential opportunity because I think the word ‘training’ creates certain images...and it was very much an experiential opportunity to look and see things differently.”*
- ✚ *“Having it over those days, really providing agencies, giving their staff that time to really immerse themselves. It’s not just a one day, where you’re thinking of everything else, you’re texting during the day. You’re really away and you’re just immersed in doing that for that entire week. That’s helpful. It allows you to free your mind to be fully present. (That’s hard to do...) Yeah, it really is, it’s hard to do when you’re just showing up for a training for a day. There’s just not as much of an investment as I experienced with this... It didn’t feel like a training. It felt like an experience, and I think that was the intention. And I certainly came away with that. I didn’t feel like I was trained. I felt like I had an experience. It was a very different thing. It resonates. It’s more of an internal piece, versus an external piece. I didn’t feel like I was just provided information.”*
- ✚ *“It didn’t feel like training. It felt like an experience. We started the week in ceremony, and we ended the week in ceremony, and even with the sweat, there was that opportunity...We felt free to ask questions, and to be given guidance, and if you did something that wasn’t in ceremony, if there was another way to do it, you were able to ask that. So to have that, I don’t even know that I would use the word training. It’s kind of an Aboriginal experience, where we come together, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal come together...And if you haven’t experienced anything in ceremony before, I think what a great way to learn. And I know that with some of the pieces going forward, that it’s not Aboriginal training per se, it’s an Aboriginal experience. And so I think that that’s good stuff.”*

## Differences

The four-day experiential learning opportunity was characterized as significantly different from other types of training and learning opportunities.

Examples of key differences included the following:

- Course delivery methods (ceremony, circle process, personal stories, experiential);
- Diversity and number of facilitators;
- Lack of hierarchy among facilitators and participants (everyone had something to contribute and something to learn from each other);
- Diversity and breadth of teaching methods (stories, video, PowerPoint, sharing circles);
- Participant characteristics (openness, willingness to share, no anger, blame or defensiveness);
- Opportunity for sharing every day; and
- Level of respectfulness (no speaking over each other or interrupting).

A few quotes to illustrate key differences:

- ✚ *“I guess for me,...what was different about this training than other trainings I’ve gone to is this one was...you didn’t build walls and it brought understanding and I think past trainings that I’ve gone to and other staff have gone to, they came away feeling that was a blaming training and there was defensiveness and so I think the difference is that this was...there was no blame, it was...this is some information and this is an opportunity to experience things and I think that’s how allies are built.”*
- ✚ *“I have had a little training also with an Elder, around the cultural piece. So nothing was really new of the ceremony, that personally I was involved in. I’ve been involved in all those things previously, the pipe ceremony, the feast, the drumming, the singing, listening to it, being part of it, being there, involved in it. But I’ve never been in a workshop where that was so very much part of the whole workshop, and the workshop was not complete without it. I’ve done it separately. But to have it, and then be given the information that we were given as well, together, was really impressive...And the other thing that was wonderful really, although I’ve been part of some of those ceremonies before, I really appreciated Dr. Leona speaking and explaining it to us in ways that helped us understand it more. So that was very valuable.”*
- ✚ *“The one thing I really enjoyed about this training, and it’s different from other things I’ve been to, is that everyone was comfortable enough to share a little bit of them and everyone talked. I don’t think that’s something that you actually get to participate in very often. For me it’s a few people who are very open with sharing who they are and their stories and stuff or who just like to hear themselves talk in training and everyone else will just sit there and listen...to hear people’s personal stories on a different level even...everyone felt comfortable sharing in a different kind of environment.”*

- ✚ *"The set up was in a different way, not like a school. We were in circles. We pray every day. We share how we're feeling after we left the day before. They were very careful to ask how you feel every day, more than if your homework was done, or how did you, I don't know...it was different. They were more interested in how you feel, how it was different for you as a person, what are you taking from this workshop to your agency. Very mystic. They were going, more than what you are learning or memorize something, but how you change as a person."*
  
- ✚ *"It was the interactivity. Even if some other ones aren't full lecture, this one was clearly not. Everyone was sitting at the same level. And the circle itself lends to that interactivity. And the way that Ralph and Leona speak, it's not kind of 'I know it and I'm telling you', it's 'we all know these things, together we'll share things, and I'll learn from you and you'll learn from me.' Their method was effective I thought for that, for getting a message across that may not be well known, but not in a classroom sort of way."*
  
- ✚ *"...(the facilitators) spoke. And then everybody spoke. Instead of, oh we're moving on, any questions. And if you didn't want to speak, you didn't have to speak. But you got your opportunity. And even if you wanted to sit quietly for a minute, nobody spoke. That was a circle rule. And that would never happen in a normal course. Speaking over each other and interrupting. Just respectful. It was so respectful."*
  
- ✚ *"The biggest thing was really having to go through, and walk the walk. It was a very level playing field in that room, and it didn't matter whether the facilitator had a PhD or not. There was no hierarchy in the room. It was done in such a way that there was an acknowledgement that as a participant you were there as a learner. The facilitators were there as teachers. But you had a voice and you were expected to be able to use your voice and your experience. And to learn from each other as well. Being able to start in ceremony. Being able to know what we were doing and to have it explained to us in a way... Before, not having the appropriate teaching about how to interact with elders. And now, having Leona be able to say, I'm here, ask me anything. I'll absolutely teach you if there's anything you can bring back to enhance your work, that's what I'm here for."*
  
- ✚ *Oh, significantly different, I believe. First of all, I don't know how they picked the people that were there, maybe it was luck of the draw. I think it's very well designed in terms of bringing people together. The opportunity to share your own experience, and to hear others' experiences...I forget where it was in the program where I was crying. That is something I don't think I've ever done in a group. There was a freedom to do that. I wasn't the only one. It was just the ability to be vulnerable. There was a safety around that. I think probably starting in ceremony was a big part of that. This openness. This sacredness of this time together I think was really impactful. The fact that people were able to open up about experiences. The fact that Leona was there, and her niece was there, to be able to talk about their own impact and their own experience was hugely part of this. The movie was another opening to this kind of connection we have with each other. The fact that there was a combination of approaches, which I felt was really beneficial for the different learning styles that might be in the room. From verbal sharing, to PowerPoint on colonization... The ceremony pieces. Smudging. There was just so many things. The combination of approaches I think was different than pretty*

*much any other course. The reference is experiential. It was that, to me, that was very impactful."*

### Similarities

Examples of similarities with other types of learning opportunities included:

- Similarities related to some of the course content;
- PowerPoint presentation component; and
- Challenging to compare, radically different.

The following quotations illustrate comments related to similarities:

- ✚ *"I think a lot of the information, no let's say about 50% of the information I'd already heard previously in another training, or various other trainings."*
- ✚ *"I don't think you can completely get away from a workshop without having PowerPoint, and that can be awkward when you're trying to facilitate the environment and teaching that they were striving for, and I'm not saying that because I have any idea what a better answer would be, but it was a little unwieldy at times."*
- ✚ *"Well...the start time. And you had an end time. That there was a schedule. You knew what days you were coming in. Those were similar. You had instructors. That would be similar. There were people that were leading, facilitating it. Hmmm. Just the organized process. But outside of that, it was radically different."*
- ✚ *"It really was quite different from other things. It's hard to compare."*

## Key Elements and Suggested Improvements

### From the perspective of participants, what key elements of the experience should stay the same? What could be improved?

Participants recommended that the following key elements of the learning opportunity should stay the same:

- Ceremony (starting and ending in ceremony, circle process, opening and closing feast);
- The content (information, colonization, trauma, addictions, historical documents);
- Viewing the film, Gently Whispering the Circle Back;
- Group size;
- Duration and immersion experience;
- Diversity of facilitators;
- Diversity of teaching methods;
- Flexibility, ability to adapt;
- Having a colleague attend (two per agency); and
- Participant characteristics (willingness, not forced to participate, shouldn't be mandatory).

Illustrative quotations regarding aspects of the learning opportunity that should be kept the same:

- ✚ *"Beginning with, definitely beginning with protocol, and having ceremony, being able to participate in ceremony. I wouldn't want to see that changed at all. Keeping the group somewhat small. I think that the number that we had was probably a good number. I think it was about twenty... That number really seemed to work well. It wasn't too small of a group and it wasn't too large of a group. So I think keeping the size the same."*
- ✚ *"Opening and closing in ceremony for sure. Smudging. The breadth of delivery methods. From video to sharing to an expert coming in to talk about trauma. The movie. Those are all really, really impactful."*
- ✚ *"The incredible video that they show with the residential school survivors was amazing. Absolutely amazing. And, don't ever let anybody replace Leona, because she's inspiring."*
- ✚ *"They use the first half day or day to kind of get a feel for the group. And then they adjust a little bit in the coming days. I think that's part of why they do it as a pair. I think they need to continue that. It's not ever going to be a canned program. It'll need to be flexible. And I don't think you could ever do a train the trainer for this. You really need, maybe a team eventually, that Ralph and Leona could have two or three other people that they share the load with. But it's never going to be one of those things that you hire a trainer to go out and spread across the*

*province... That would be a recommendation is to keep it adaptive. Keep it flexible. See where people are and try and work from there."*

- ✚ *"I loved the fact that there were four people that were there every day. The facilitators. You got different view points. I just think that people connect with different types of personalities better than others and there were four radically different personality styles in the people there, which is I think is impactful on the listeners."*
- ✚ *"Having another person there (from the same agency) I think was extremely helpful. Not so many that it became a 'training', but enough that there was an ability to sort of share and process with each other."*

When asked to consider areas for improvement, participants provided the following suggestions:

- Language ("maybe it's not training");
- Include the opportunity to participate in the sweat lodge as part of the same week;
- Build in opportunity to come back together several months later (to share and reflect on change in practice);
- Provide access to PowerPoint slides, written materials/resources;
- Seek alternate facilities (e.g., somewhere with everything on site, including sweat lodge); and
- Provide similar experiential learning opportunities for more people (agency staff, department staff, foster parents, etc.).

Illustrative quotations related to areas for improvement/suggestions for future delivery:

- ✚ *"I can't think of anything that I would really change, except the wording, maybe it's not training." ... "I think it was very much a gathering of beings experiencing, it was a human experience. We connected with each other."*
- ✚ *"Ideally, coming all together months afterwards would be really powerful."*
- ✚ *"Some information was not given in paper. But it was only by the PowerPoint and I didn't have a pen to write. We were sitting in chairs and there was no tables, and it was uncomfortable to write when you don't have a table. Other than that I would suggest maybe find a better facility."*
- ✚ *"I hope they do it again, soon, because I know that I've spoken highly of the workshop and the entire process, and if it is offered again I would love to have the opportunity to have more participants from our agency."*
- ✚ *"I would love to have more of our staff do this or attend something like this and I think that's how we're going to build some understanding and acceptance... We just need to be spreading it out there and I agree that it would be nice if we could have had the sweat in that week, just to have that continuity."*

## Potential to Impact Change in Practice in Alberta

### To what extent does the learning opportunity have the potential to impact change in practice in Alberta?

Participants indicated that the learning opportunity had tremendous potential to impact change in practice in Alberta. Contextual factors that might facilitate or hinder change were also described. For example, supportive contextual factors included an emerging level of openness to change, elements of synchronicity, and a readiness to do things differently in organizations and across the province. Reported barriers included organizational structures and resistance to change.

Examples of participant comments:

- ✚ *"Oh I think it absolutely does. Absolutely. And I think that having the opportunity for those doing the work on the front line would be very valuable. And then certainly from a leadership perspective, reminding us of why we're doing what we're doing, and getting us to question those bigger picture pieces, and to influence programming, funding, and opportunities to provide services, I think it's exceptionally helpful for us to be a part of that. It certainly encouraged me to look in a different direction and to be more mindful and to really critique how we're providing services to our Indigenous youth."*
- ✚ *"Amazing potential. Especially with people's willingness to listen, at the workshop, to learn the context, to hear the facilitators. It was a very powerful workshop, and if they got the right people, being able to go into it with humility, being able to hear the messages. I think it's got amazing potential to affect change."*
- ✚ *"I found it very impactful, very powerful and it definitely shifted, it shifted things for me and gave me another way of bringing information to our agency and it came across as...the training was a very gentle training...It was very easy to take in and utilize I found."*
- ✚ *"The training I think was awesome. I've expressed that on a number of occasions. Those four days, it was intense. (My colleague) and I left there thinking, wow, it would be really great if all of our managers within our service could participate in something like that, I think it really would help bring us together."*
- ✚ *"I love my organization, I love my ED, I love all the people I work with and that's, you know, that's not the intent but when I'm the only person who went through this experience and...to a certain degree because once again, because I'm Aboriginal and went through this, I can be more easily dismissed I think. If it were coming from non-Aboriginal people who went through the experience, perhaps their opinion would carry more weight because...of course you're going to say that because you're Aboriginal because that means, you know, that's part of your worldview so therefore, of course you're going to say that, of course it's going to come from you but if it were from non-Aboriginal people or if it was coming from, if management had gone and it was coming from management, people who are, you know, if the ED had gone or the program manager had gone and those kinds of ideas were coming from that level then it may carry a different message so I think that having more people come from different agencies,*

*particularly when it is only one person from an agency going, that may make a big difference I think."*

- ✚ *"I'm allowed amazing amounts of autonomy in my program itself. So if I want to switch up programming.....It's a little bit harder when I try to push up the chain a little more in terms of our board of directors, there's a little more resistance I think in that general area and across the agency too...There's a lot of times you're waving the banner, and people go oh that's just (her) and that's her agenda, and I go, yep. I do, I very loudly push the agenda for all of our First Nations, their families, communities. (The agency) says it's multicultural. My argument has always been, and this was specifically around the time that I took the workshop, that ... with our intensive treatment programs... We have a higher Indigenous representation on our campus than across the province of Indigenous kids in care. We have over-representation, and so why are we looking at multicultural? Why aren't we just looking at what is staring at us in the face?"*
- ✚ *"I've used the word before and I know it sounds strong, but it was transformational, I believe, for me. A positive transformation. I think for the first time I understood the systemic problems that were facing Indigenous people within Alberta, because of federal policy, that it was a long-standing generational challenge. The fact that the training incorporated trauma, the neurological impact on people, and the effects. Othering. The video that got shared. Being able to hear from another side. I think one of the big things for me that was very eye opening, and also very encouraging, was to understand that Indigenous people themselves had the same lack of awareness. That we all kind of had some blind spots because of lack of information. And the fact was pretty clear that there was some real opening up within Alberta at least for this information to be shared which is really exciting."*

## Summary and Implications

The four-day experiential learning opportunity, “Allying with Indigenous peoples: the practice of omanitew”, made a difference for participants, both personally and professionally. Impacts were reported at all levels: mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and physically.

The following table includes a summary of key findings and implications for future learning opportunities:

Summary of Findings	Implications for Future Learning Opportunities
<p><b>Participant characteristics</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Participants learned from each other as well as learning from the facilitators, and were open to share their stories and experiences. The course would not work as well if participants were coerced to be there (i.e., participation should remain voluntary).</li> <li>▪ A commonality between many of the participants was the extent of their experience as human service professionals working with Indigenous children and families.</li> <li>▪ Regardless of participants’ level of experience, there was still much to learn, and an openness to this learning and understanding. The opportunity should continue to be available to individuals with a range of experience, including recent graduates and those with many years in the field, as well as to individuals with a range of decision-making roles including front-line, supervisory, management, and executive.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Personal and professional impact among participants: Mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical (behaviour) change.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ There are profound implications related to the reported impacts for individuals, both personally and professionally, and strong support to continue to offer the experience.</li> <li>▪ <u>Mentally</u>: Participants reported increased understanding regarding the historical context and current circumstances of Indigenous peoples (including the process and impact of colonization, and the cross-generational impact of residential schools); increased understanding of traditional Indigenous practices, ceremonies, culture, teachings, and worldview; increased understanding regarding the use of language (and the adoption of new language such as “ally”, “ambassador”, and “Indigenous”); and increased understanding of trauma, attachment, brain development, addictions, and traditional healing practices.</li> <li>▪ <u>Spiritually</u>: Participants learned about Indigenous spiritual beliefs by participating in the ceremonies that were integrated in the delivery of the learning opportunity. In some cases, participants also described profound, personal spiritual experiences, a deeper connection to their own spirit, and an appreciation for the healing power of ceremony.</li> <li>▪ <u>Emotionally</u>: Participants experienced a range of feelings as they listened to and shared stories about colonization, residential schools, trauma, inter-generational trauma, addictions, and lateral violence. Each day, participants were encouraged to share and process their thoughts</li> </ul>

Summary of Findings	Implications for Future Learning Opportunities
	<p>and emotions. Feelings of hope and connectedness were commonly expressed at the end of the four-day experience.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <u>Physically</u>: Many examples of physical/behaviour changes were attributed to the experiential learning opportunity. Participants emerged from the experience with either a renewed sense of commitment or transformative realization about the need to do things differently in their work with Indigenous children and families. Reported changes in practice included: increased sharing of information; changes in overall approach and language (more emphasis on working collaboratively as allies); use of new tools and methods of engagement; and increased efforts to connect Indigenous children and families with their culture and family histories.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Impact of the film: Gently Whispering the Circle Back</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Many participants reported mental, spiritual, emotional, and/or physical impact as a result of viewing the documentary film, Gently Whispering the Circle Back.</li> <li>▪ The film included three main themes: Confronting the Historical Trauma, Understanding the Trauma, and Transcending the Trauma. In many ways, the four-day experiential learning opportunity, “Allying with Indigenous peoples: the practice of omanitew” paralleled these themes. The result was a very powerful experience that began with confronting historical trauma (acknowledging the history of colonization and residential schools), understanding the trauma (how trauma affects us mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and physically), and ultimately transcending the trauma (through a spiritual journey of healing and ceremony).</li> <li>▪ The film, and accompanying Facilitator Guide, should be made available to as wide an audience as possible, with opportunity for supportive discussion and reflection following the film.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Similarities and differences with other learning opportunities</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ There were more reported differences than similarities when comparing the four-day learning opportunity with other types of learning opportunities. It was the differences that made a difference; participants appreciated the uniqueness of the learning opportunity and the way it was delivered.</li> <li>▪ Differences included the course delivery methods (ceremony, circle process, personal stories, experiential); diversity and number of facilitators; lack of hierarchy among facilitators and participants; diversity and breadth of teaching methods (stories, video, PowerPoint, sharing circles); participant characteristics (openness, willingness to share, no anger, blame or defensiveness); opportunity for sharing every day; and level of respectfulness (no speaking over each other or interrupting).</li> <li>▪ Reported similarities included some of the course content (e.g., history of residential schools) and the use of PowerPoint presentation slides as one of the teaching methods.</li> </ul>

Summary of Findings	Implications for Future Learning Opportunities
<b>Key elements</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Participants reported that the following key elements should be kept the same: the ceremonial aspects (starting and ending in ceremony, circle process, opening and closing feast); the content (information, colonization, trauma, addictions, historical documents); viewing the film, Gently Whispering the Circle Back; group size (approximately 22 people); duration and immersion experience; diversity of facilitators; diversity of teaching methods; flexibility/ adaptability; having a colleague attend (two per agency); and participant characteristics (willingness, not forced to participate, shouldn't be mandatory).</li> </ul>
<b>Suggested improvements</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Participants offered the following suggested improvements: use of language to describe the experience ("maybe it's not training", it's an experiential learning opportunity); include the opportunity to participate in the sweat lodge as part of the same week; build in opportunity to come back together several months later (to share and reflect on change in practice); provide access to PowerPoint slides and written materials/resources; seek alternate facilities (e.g., somewhere with everything on site, including sweat lodge); and provide similar experiential learning opportunities for more people (agency staff, department staff, foster parents, and others).</li> <li>▪ It would be beneficial to provide an opportunity for participants to reconnect several months after the experience to nurture relationships as well as to reflect on changes in practice.</li> </ul>
<b>Potential to impact change in practice</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Participants indicated that the learning opportunity had tremendous potential to impact change in practice in Alberta.</li> <li>▪ Contextual factors that might facilitate or hinder change were also described. For example, supportive contextual factors included an emerging level of openness to change, elements of synchronicity, and a readiness to do things differently in organizations and across the province.</li> <li>▪ Reported barriers included organizational structures and resistance to change.</li> </ul>

## Closing Comments

Feedback from participants strongly supports the conclusion that the learning opportunity was successful and should continue to be offered as widely as possible. Participants expressed hopefulness that the opportunity would be available to their colleagues, other agency and department staff, foster parents, and other individuals who work with Indigenous children and families. The experience was quite unique, unlike other “training programs” participants had undertaken. Participants walked away feeling empowered, reaffirmed, and in some cases, transformed. They were equipped with new knowledge, greater understanding, and tools to support how to do things differently back in their agencies and in their interactions with Indigenous children and families.

What was it about the learning opportunity that made such a difference for those involved? It was delivered in ceremony, by diverse facilitators, and with a broad range of teaching methods. There was a respectful, open atmosphere. The experience touched people at a spiritual and emotional level, and because of this there was readiness and openness to learning new information.

Why was this experience so different from other experiences or other training programs? It was different because of how it was delivered (in ceremony, circle process, range of teaching methods) and by whom (combination of facilitators, more than one facilitator, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, male and female, and the credibility of those facilitators). The unique contributions made by the team of facilitators were critical to the successful implementation of the experiential learning opportunity.

Above all, it was different because it came from a different world view. And it allowed people to experience the world from the perspective of this world view, without asking them to give up their own world view but to be aware that other view points exist and are very real. It helped to reinforce the importance of connecting children and families with their culture, identity and language, by walking the walk, and experiencing the value of looking at the world from a different perspective. Not just reading about it, but experiencing it mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and physically, and creating in the process, stronger allies on the human journey.