

‘Nature Will Slow You Down for a Reason’: Virtual Elder-Led Support Services during COVID-19

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Abstract : In March of 2020, the world suddenly shifted with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic; in-person programs and services were unavailable and a scramble to shift to virtual service delivery began. The Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC) established virtual programming through the Resiliency Lodge model and connected with Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit, transgender, and gender-diverse people across Turtle Island and Inuit Nunangat through programs that provide a safe space to slow down and reflect on their lives, environment, and well-being. To continue to grow the virtual Resiliency Lodge model, NWAC needed to develop an understanding of three questions: how COVID-19 affects Elder-led support services, how Elder-led support services have adapted during the pandemic, and what Wise Practices need to be implemented to continue to develop, refine, and evaluate virtual Elder-led support services specifically for Indigenous women, girls, two-Spirit, transgender, and gender-diverse people. Through funding from the Canadian Institute of Health Research (CIHR), NWAC gained deeper insight into these questions and developed a series of key findings and recommendations that are outlined throughout this report. The goals of this project are to contribute to a more robust participatory analysis that reflects the complexities of Elder-led virtual cultural responses and the impacts of COVID-19 on Elder-led support services; develop culturally and contextually meaningful virtual protocols and wise practices for virtual Indigenous-led support; and develop an Evaluation Strategy to improve the capacity of the Resiliency Lodge model. Significant findings from the project include Resiliency Lodge programs, especially crafting and business sessions, have provided participants with a sense of community and contributed to healing and wellness; Elder-led support services need greater and more stable funding to offer more workshops to more Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit, transgender, and gender-diverse people; and Elder- and Indigenous-led programs play a significant role in healing and building a sense of purpose and belonging among Indigenous people. Ultimately, the findings and recommendations outlined in this research project help to guide future Elder-led virtual support services and emphasize the critical need to increase access to Elder-led programming for Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit, transgender, and gender-diverse people.

Keywords : indigenous women, traditional healing, virtual programs, covid-19

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