Enabling Primary Health Care in the North Through Traditional Knowledge

National Envelope

Lead and Partner Organization(s)
Government of Nunavut, Department of Health and Social Services; with Government of Yukon, Department of Health and Social Services; Government of Northwest Territories, Department of Health and Social Services

Background and Goals
To be effective in restoring and maintaining health, services need to reflect the culture of the people they are intended to assist. This is particularly true in northern and remote communities where there is a strong Aboriginal culture and diverse health needs. Health and social service (HSS) providers need to consult with communities and involve them in identifying the needs and priorities of the population. The goal of this pan-territorial initiative was to give HSS providers a greater knowledge of traditional northern Aboriginal history, culture, health and healing practices so that they are better able to demonstrate cultural competence when providing services to people in Yukon, Northwest Territories (NWT) and Nunavut.

Activities
The initiative was conducted between 2005 and 2006. The primary activity was the production and dissemination of a DVD for use in the orientation and continuing development of HSS providers. This was accomplished by:

- Establishing an initiative task force group with representation from all three governments and Aboriginal advisors within each territory.
- Holding a face-to-face workshop in July 2005 to discuss the development and production of the DVD. Five broad categories of knowledge were identified as needing to be addressed: appreciating a different way of living; valuing community; being holistic; respecting traditional knowledge and Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit; and communicating with respect.
- Establishing local advisory groups in each territory to coordinate and oversee local community and individual involvement with the project.
- Producing the DVD. Information on northern Aboriginal history, culture and traditional health and healing practices was gathered from the perspective of the Aboriginal community. This was done through filmed interviews with identified individuals, including Elders from several communities in each territory. The information was used to illustrate each territory’s geography, Aboriginal groups and cultural practice, and the environments in which health and social services are delivered.
- Launching the DVD and promoting its use in orientation and continuing development of HSS providers.

An internal evaluation of the DVD was conducted and involved focus groups in each territory and review by each territorial task force group.
Resources

- A Different Way of Living DVD with an introduction, conclusion and three separate sections, each highlighting the culture and tradition of each respective territory. The DVD covers areas such as how to understand the northern Aboriginal perspective on health; how to approach community leaders and Elders; how to ask questions of an Aboriginal person about traditional healing; and the importance of culture to health and healing practices.

Key Learnings

The initiative was carried out in a way that demonstrated respect for the traditional knowledge and experiences of Aboriginal people and communities across Yukon, NWT and Nunavut. Feedback received by the initiative suggested that the DVD is considered to be a valuable resource that should be used when orienting new HSS providers. Those consulted deemed the content to be appropriate and liked the use of subtitles, as opposed to voice-overs, because they give new employees a chance to hear an Aboriginal language.

The initiative was able to overcome several process challenges. Working across three territories presented some difficulties; the establishment of one lead jurisdiction was important and prevented the process from becoming stalled at critical decision points.

Although every community in the North has its own unique culture and traditions, it was not possible to highlight every community due to geographic and logistical constraints. The face-to-face meeting proved to be invaluable to the shared understanding of each territory’s unique perspective. The use of Local Advisory Groups was instrumental in providing support and advice throughout the initiative.

Prior to the onset of this initiative, few tools existed to help prepare HSS providers to work in northern and remote regions. The DVD produced by this initiative is such a tool. It will enhance the cultural competence of those providing primary health care services to the populations of the three territories and will be particularly useful to new and potential HSS employees.

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