Shäwthän Näzhì Healing with the Land Society

RECOVERY SUPPORT PROGRAM EVALUATION REPORT

- April 2025 -



Prepared By Independent Evaluator

Melissa Tremblay, PhD, RPsych

Table of Contents

3	Introduction
9	Evaluation Methods
13	<u>Findings</u>
13	Program Delivery and Content
14	Program Attendance
14	Staff Debrief Forms
15	Participant Surveys
18	Participant Interviews
23	Staff Interviews
26	Direct Observation
27	Conclusions
28	Recommendations



INTRODUCTION

In 2023, the Shäwthän Näzhì: Healing With The Land Society received an Arctic Inspiration Prize to develop and implement a Recovery Support Program for Yukon First Nations peoples. In June 2024, Shäwthän Näzhì began implementing the Recovery Support Program. This document reports findings from an evaluation of the program's pilot implementation. A description of the Yukon context, Shäwthän Näzhì, and the Recovery Support Program opens this report. Next, evaluation methods are detailed, and evaluation findings are subsequently shared according to data source. Following each section of findings, a summary of data to address the evaluation questions is presented. Finally, this report closes with recommendations and concluding remarks.



Organizational Context

Yukon Territory. In January 2022, the Government of Yukon responded to a recent, drastic increase in substance use harms, including overdose-related deaths, by declaring a Substance Use Health Emergency. The Government of Yukon website states that, "This declaration was a commitment to respond and a call to action to all governments, communities, organizations, partners and Yukoners to do their part. This is an ongoing, territory-wide challenge that cannot be solved by the Yukon government alone." Part of the Substance Use Health Emergency Strategy involves expanding a range of community-tailored initiatives that aim to address substance use harms and invest in the health and wellbeing of Yukoners. The Government of Yukon has also expressed explicit recognition of the profound place of the land in facilitating the health and wellbeing of Indigenous peoples. There are currently no aftercare recovery programs available in the Yukon.

Shäwthän Näzhì. Launched as a pilot program in the fall of 2020, Shäwthän Näzhì was formed in recognition of the integral, root cause of intergenerational trauma in disrupting the health and wellbeing of families and communities. After 18 months of successful pilot programming, the Shäwthän Näzhì: Healing With The Land Society was established to facilitate investment in broader programming and training of additional team members. Shäwthän Näzhì consists of a leadership team who guide programming, board members, and a team of passionate healers, with expertise that spans counselling, energy healing, equine therapy, art and play therapy, music therapy and traditional First Nation cultural practices.



Recovery Support Program

Program background. Substance use, misuse, and abuse occur among people from all demographic backgrounds in Canada. First Nations peoples, however, experience a disproportionate burden of harms related to substance use, given the structural and systemic health disparities that exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada (Urbanoski, 2017). The causes of substance abuse among First Nations peoples are deeply rooted in historical and ongoing colonialism. In particular, experiences with residential school, having a child apprehended by the child welfare system, and cultural dispossession have all been linked to intergenerational trauma and substance abuse (Duff et al., 2014; Nutton & Fast, 2015; Shahram et al., 2017). Moreover, First Nations peoples are disproportionately impacted by barriers to service access as well as a lack of culturally safe services (Waldram et al., 2006). Thus, there is a pressing need for substance use treatment and recovery programs that better meet the needs of First Nations peoples.

Where treatment is accessible, many First Nations peoples choose to engage in formal substance abuse treatment and recovery programs, but the mechanisms by which these diverse programs promote healing have not been widely evaluated. What is known is that, despite significant adversity, First Nations peoples have resisted the impacts of colonialism by upholding connections to culture, traditional territory, family and community systems, and identity. Where these connections are honored in treatment and recovery approaches, promising pathways are forged toward healing trauma and substance use harms. Upholding cultural connections can include land-based healing. Although land-based healing has been practiced by First Nations peoples for millennia, land-based approaches are only recently being more widely recognized as integral to supporting Indigenous peoples recovering from addictions (Redvers et al., 2020). However, the potential of land-based healing approaches to support recovery is substantial (Walsh et al., 2020; Wildcat et al., 2014). Recognizing these realities, Shäwthän Näzhì began offering a land-based Recovery Support Program in June 2024.

Program description. The Shäwthän Näzhì Recovery Support Program was formed with acknowledgement that people who are on a recovery journey require ongoing, tailored supports to manage their health and wellbeing. The program was also foundationally built on recognition of the insidious nature of intergenerational trauma, which can be addressed using landbased approaches to healing.

The program values the perspectives of individuals, families and communities in facilitating their own healing, and emphasizes understanding, learning, as well as respect for different ideas and opinions. The pilot program was supported by a program manager, team leads, traditional artist, and traditional firekeeper.

The program took the form of weekly ~4-hour sessions at a meeting space in Whitehorse. Participants were also welcomed onto the land during their 10-month-long programming.

At a planning session that took place while the program was being developed, vision and mission statements were shaped for the program, as follows:

Our vision is that people and families are surrounded by connected communities with a streamlined continuum of recovery support. We envision a world where sobriety is the norm, and where Indigenous peoples have unlimited opportunities to connect to their culture, spirit, land, and wellbeing.

Our mission:

- We use land-based approaches to supporting people where they are on their recovery journey.
- We normalize and support recovery so that people feel safe being honest about where they are on their recovery journey.
- We encourage healing through genuine, transformational and compassionate relationships that foster acceptance and dignity.
- We work to decrease stigma and shame around recovery support access.
- We collaboratively engage in community-grounded supports and share knowledge to build capacity and inspire community partners.
- We build on participants' and families' strengths to promote individualized success.

Program logic model. The logic model below depicts the inputs, activities, outputs, broad outcomes, and impact of the Shäwthän Näzhì Recovery Support Program. This logic model represents a simplification of the complex processes of recovery, although it is acknowledged that the lived realities of people in recovery are multi-faceted and ever-changing, with context-dependent risk and protective factors that may be different for and specific to each individual. Therefore, this logic model provides a snapshot of the Recovery Support Program for the purpose of high-level understanding. It represents a picture of the program; however, it is expected that the program will continue to change and evolve to reflect new learning as it is implemented on an ongoing basis.

Inputs refer to the resources dedicated to running a given program. Inputs for the Recovery Support Program include Shäwthän Näzhì staff; the physical facilities where participants and staff met, and where land-based activities took place; monetary funding; community partnerships, which are intentionally developed and maintained; as well as the cultural knowledge that is critical to supporting participants.

Activities refer to what the program does with the inputs to provide services that meet program goals. Participants underwent an intake process before being welcomed into the program, and intentional recruitment took place. On-the-land activities and monthly sessions formed the core of programming, while ongoing support and program development also took place simultaneously with program implementation.

Outputs serve as immediate evidence that activities have taken place. These include a Yukon-specific recovery support program design as well as the number of program graduates.

Outcomes refer to the benefits that result from the program. Broadly, outcomes include people in recovery transitioning successfully into community while remaining committed to healthy pathways; economic resiliency resulting from participants maintaining employment; personal stability paving the way for lifelong healing; wider implementation of traditional practices; and increased knowledge, awareness, and capacity for participants and other boundary partners.

The ultimate projected impact of the program is a strengthened community fabric with a streamlined continuum of recovery support.

LOGIC MODEL

SHÄWTHÄN NÄZHÌ RECOVERY SUPPORT PROGRAM



INPUTS

- Shäwthän Näzhì staff
- Program space
- Funding
- Community partnerships
- Cultural knowledge



ACTIVITIES

- · Intake processes
- Participant recruitment
- On-the-land activities
- Group sessions
- Ongoing support
- Program development



OUTPUTS

- Yukon-specific recovery support program design
- 12 participants graduate from the Recovery Support Program



BROAD OUTCOMES

- People in recovery are transitioning successfully into community while remaining committed
- Economic resiliency as participants maintain employment

to healthy pathways

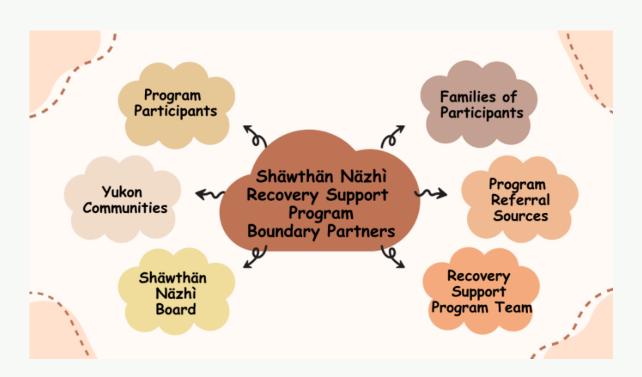
- Personal stability paves the way for lifelong healing
- Traditional practices are more widely implemented
- Increased knowledge, awareness, and capacity for participants and other boundary partners



IMPACT

 Strengthened community fabric with a streamlined continuum of recovery support Boundary partners. Below, a simplified depiction of the Shäwthän Näzhì boundary partners is provided. The term boundary partners is used as an alternative to the term stakeholders for two reasons. First, many Indigenous peoples are shifting away from the term stakeholder given its colonial roots. Second, the term boundary partners signifies that there are limits or boundaries around the influence of a given program on participants (Earl et al., 2001). In addition, the term denotes the mutual relationship between a program and its interested parties. Overall, boundary partners are those individuals, groups and organizations with whom the Recovery Support Program interacts directly to effect changes and with whom the program can anticipate some opportunities for influence.

Program participants represent a central boundary partner because they are most directly affected by the program's degree of success. In addition, families of participants have an interest in and influence on the success of participants. Yukon communities also play a role in the program's success, along with program referral sources. The Shäwthän Näzhì board is also represented as a boundary partner given their integral role in guiding the direction and accountability of the program. Finally, the Recovery Support Program team, who worked directly with participants to deliver and shape programming, represent another unique boundary partner expected to influence participants and be influenced by the program themselves.





EVALUATION METHODS

Evaluation Type and Purpose

The Shäwthän Näzhì Recovery Support Program evaluation incorporated developmental, summative, and formative elements, aligned with Indigenous worldviews. The evaluation approach was intended to support innovation within the program, acknowledge the program's continuous development and adaptation, and recognize emerging program outcomes and impacts. The purpose of the evaluation was threefold: (1) to document the model of recovery support being provided by Shäwthän Näzhì (developmental); (2) to understand the experiences of program participants and staff (formative); and (3) to understand the impact of the program on participants and other boundary partners (summative).



Evaluation Approach

In keeping with the Indigenous grounding of the Recovery Support Program evaluation, the evaluation will depart from conventional evaluation framing of "data" and "data collection" toward a more relational approach. An assumption here is that all knowledge is relational, and that participants, staff, and all of the program's interested parties have valuable wisdom and knowledge to contribute to the program's development, implementation, and evaluation. Thus, although the writer of this document is an outsider to the Yukon, Shäwthän Näzhì, and the Recovery Support Program, the evaluator's role was to facilitate decision-making and leadership from program staff in planning and implementing the evaluation. This process began with two days of meetings, as mentioned above, and continued with a collaborative approach that integrated research, action, reflection, and communication (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). In line with a collaborative approach, it was expected that program staff would learn from the knowledge co-created throughout program implementation and evaluation and begin to share this knowledge with their own networks and communities.

Evaluation Questions

- 1. What is the model of recovery support being provided by Shäwthän Näzhì? How does it align with other relevant programs?
- 2. As the program model emerges, what key learnings have occurred that can inform program evolution?
- 3. What are the impacts of the program on participants and other boundary partners?



Co-Creation of Evaluation Knowledge

Program content, delivery, and attendance. Staff kept a record of the topics covered during each session, the number of weekly evening and multi-day sessions, and the number of attendees at each session. This information is reported as a simple count.

Staff-completed debrief forms. After sessions, staff completed a debrief form to capture basic information about the session, including general themes that arose, challenges, and bright spots; these are summarized in narrative form. See Appendix A for the debrief form.

Photo documentation. In addition to gathering feedback through interviews, program experiences were documented through photos. Photos have been used as an effective program evaluation tool, both to document program events as they unfold, and to elicit detail and context when conducting interviews (Wilson et al., 2007). Photos are shared throughout this document to provide context on program implementation.

Participant surveys. Surveys were used to garner participant feedback regarding sessions. Brief surveys were administered after sessions where it was logistically convenient to do so. Initial survey items (Appendix B) asked participants to rate the extent to which (1) they felt heard, understood, and respected; (2) the session was helpful for them; (3) the program's approach is a good fit for them; and (4) the session felt right for them. Surveys also included two open-ended questions where participants could indicate their favorite part of the session and suggestions for improvement. At the end of October, surveys were expanded to include additional items that staff deemed would be helpful (Appendix C).

Participant Interviews. To gather participant feedback in a relational way, interviews with participants were conducted upon program completion, by phone. Interviews focused on the extent to which participants felt their recovery needs were met through program participation; suggestions for improvement; program-related successes and challenges; and program impacts on participants' recovery journey in such areas as engaging with their relations, successfully transitioning back to communities, reclaiming relationships with culture and land, and reconnecting with themselves. Specific participant responses and experiences guided interviews, which were conducted in a conversational style.

Staff Interviews. Interviews were also conducted with staff following the program's completion. Staff were asked to draw on their experiences and knowledge to provide feedback regarding the Recovery Support Program including program successes; conditions that supported the successful provision of services; barriers to accessing services and more general program challenges; potential areas for program evolution; and emerging learnings regarding the program model.

Direct Observation. In cases where an external evaluator is commissioned for a program evaluation, direct observation can contribute to co-creating rich insights that are not possible without such observation. Therefore, the evaluator visited the program during one of its land-based learning sessions to understand the nuances of program implementation. Also, in keeping with the developmental stage of the Recovery Support Program, the evaluator reviewed project documentation in order to understand program activities, reflections, and opportunities for program improvement. These documents included proposals, funding reports, and program summaries. To complement evaluation data, a brief integrative literature review was conducted to map the existing field of knowledge in relation to recovery support programs, with a focus on programs in Canada.

Analysis Methods

With permission, interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Qualitative information was analyzed using content analysis (Krippendorf, 2004). Information was sorted into similar groupings, coded according to similar content, and synthesized into themes. Ongoing conversations with staff allowed for learnings to be integrated into program implementation in real time, drawing conclusions regarding the evaluation questions, and generating a narrative of the program's implementation.





FINDINGS

Program Delivery and Content

Between June 2024 and April 2025, 42 weekly evening circles were held, in addition to six multi-day sessions for participants. Weekly evening circles were both conversational and experiential, with space provided for participants to share and partake together in culturally grounded activities such as medicine picking, regalia making, and beading. See Appendix D for a list of program topics by date. Topics covered were decided on by a committee of staff, both from the Recovery Support Program and from Shäwthän Näzhì more generally, who convened before the program began to make decisions. However, the plan for content was not consistently adhered to at some points during the program due to differing staff preferences.



Program Attendance

Attendance ranged between 2 and 9 participants per session. On average, 5-6 participants were present at each session. In total, 21 participants were served by the Recovery Support Program; all but two were women. Over the course of the 10-month program, 8 people discontinued participation. Reasons for discontinuation included finding a full-time job that interfered with program attendance (n = 3); experiencing relapse (n = 2); working in the addiction recovery field and finding it too difficult to maintain boundaries with participants due to dual relationships (n = 1); being required to attend a different program as part of probation conditions (n = 1); and leaving the geographical area to attend a trauma recovery program (n = 1). As a result, 13 participants completed the program, and all were women. With respect to the 13 participants remaining at the end of the program, they attended, on average, 46% of sessions.

Staff Debrief Forms

Debrief forms were completed by staff after 13 sessions. Regarding themes from the conversations during each session, there was a focus on dealing with grief, and healing through traditional medicines and ceremony. Growth, gratitude, and open conversations about triggers were also areas of focus, along with discussions about ways to keep moving forward while feeling stuck. Community building, friendships, honesty, and resources for times of difficulty were additional topics of discussion during sessions.

Staff also reported on challenges from each session. Challenges mainly related to logistics such as needing to change location last minute due to being double-booked, having no chairs at one location, the cold weather, and a lack of storage for regalia-making. Another common challenge was participants no-showing or cancelling their attendance last minute.

Staff documented highlights from sessions in several areas. A prominent highlight related to the depth of connection among participants. Progression in team building and bonding were reported through increasingly profound sharing and vulnerability. Participants also expanded their comfort zone by engaging in culturally grounded activities that they may not have had the opportunity to partake in previously. Participants' expanding their awareness of possibilities, resources, and ways to overcome barriers were also reported, along with participants learning progressively more about themselves.

Participant Surveys

As noted above, an initial survey was distributed to participants between August and October 22. Afterward, a second version of the survey was developed and distributed. Table 1 depicts average participant ratings (out of 5) for the four Likert-scale survey items included on the initial survey. Participant ratings were high, indicating strengths in participants feeling heard, finding sessions helpful, feeling as though the program approach was a good fit, and reporting that each given session felt right overall.

Session Date	How heard did you feel?	How helpful was the session?	Program approach is a good fit?	Session felt right?
14-Aug	5	5	5	5
21-Aug	5	5	5	5
27-Aug	4.8	5	4.8	3.6
03-Sep	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.5
11-Sep	4.3	4.7	5	4.7
18-Sep	4. 7	4.7	5	5
24-Sep	4.5	5	4.5	4.5
01-Oct	4.8	5	5	5
08-Oct	5	4.8	4.6	4.9
22-Oct	5	5	5	5

With respect to open-ended responses, participants were asked what they liked most about each session. Responses focused on the comfortable, safe space established during sessions, feeling grounded and comforted, and having the opportunity to check in and talk about their feelings. Participants also emphasized feeling connected. Participants also used words such as "beautiful" and "powerful" to describe the ceremonies they took part in, and described specific learnings around energy work, hyperarousal, and "healing to feel, feeling to heal." They also repeatedly mentioned their gratitude for being on the land and having the opportunity to take part in hands-on activities such as sewing.

Participants also provided feedback about what they enjoyed least in each session. Most responses indicated that participants could not think of anything they did not enjoy. Where responses were provided, participants mentioned being outside in the cold weather, disorganization from the group using the space in the time slot preceding them, and low attendance, with worry about the program not being able to continue should attendance be low. Regarding suggestions for improvement, single respondents suggested going indoors earlier, securing a larger physical space, and more group engagement.

A second version of the participant survey was distributed after 17 sessions, beginning at the end of October. Table 2 depicts average participant ratings (out of 5) for the five Likert-scale survey items on the second version of the survey. Again, participant ratings were high, indicating that participants were doing relatively well with their sobriety each week, that they felt supported in general and by the group, that they found the tools and techniques covered during sessions helpful, and that the program was helping them with their sobriety. Ratings were particularly high for the latter item.

Session Date	How are you doing with your sobriety this week?	How supported are you feeling this week?	How supported did you feel by the group this week?	Were the tools and techniques in the session helpful?	Is the program helping you with your sobriety?
29-Oct	4.7	4	3.3	3.3	5
5-Nov	4.5	4.3	4.5	4.8	5
12-Nov	4.6	4	4.6	4.1	4.6
19-Nov	3.7	3.7	4.7	4.7	5
26-Nov	3.5	4.3	5	4.8	4.3
03-Dec	4	2.5	5	4	4.5
10-Dec	4	4.4	4.6	4.2	4.4
17-Dec	4	4	5	5	5
14-Jan	5	4.5	5	5	5
04-Feb	2.5	4	4	4	4
11-Feb	3.8	4.4	4.6	4.4	4.4
18-Feb	4.3	3.3	5	5	4.7
25-Feb	4.5	3.5	5	5	5
04-Mar	4.8	4.5	4.8	5	4.8
11-Mar	5	4	5	5	4.8
18-Mar	4.3	4.8	4.8	4.6	5
25-Mar	4.5	4.5	4.8	4.5	5

In response to open-ended items, participants mentioned feeling heard, having gratitude for the group, and enjoying the activities offered during each session; ceremony and smudging were emphasized in this regard. As one participant described, "I enjoy the feeling, the smudge is grounding, I just cry I feel so lifted." Other participants noted that it had been years since they had the opportunity to participate in a sweat, and appreciated the opportunity to take part in ceremony. One participant shared that "this group helps my soul," and this sentiment was shared through other participants' reflections. The group was described as a "breath of fresh air," "an experience of a lifetime," and "what my spirit needed tonight." Another participant shared a success in that, "I called an elder, spoke for an hour, what a feeling. Thank you to the group I excelled just doing the call." Others emphasized the power of sharing in a non-judgmental space, noting relief. As one participant put it, "Depression is dark... I have more hope today." Similarly, another participant wrote that, "I had an emotional day, I was hurting, the prayers calmed that, I came home and had a meal, water and cuddled in my bed with a full night sleep. I am truly grateful for a prayer with a group." Finally, suggestions for improvement were offered, and focused on the need for childcare during sessions, wondering about support to transition away from the program, and wishing that the length of the program could be extended.



Participant Interviews

Ten participants were interviewed over the phone to provide feedback on their program experience. Participant feedback was organized into (1) the need for land-based recovery support in the Yukon; (2) a strong community among participants; (3) consistent, connected, heart-centered facilitators; (4) cultural grounding of the program; (5) closed group format; (6) next steps; and (7) suggestions for improvement.

Need for land-based recovery support in the Yukon. To begin, participants spoke about the factors that had influenced them to join the group in the first place. Several participants spoke about trying other Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)-style groups, and feeling as though AA did not meet their needs. As one participant mentioned, "I don't like AA...I just don't feel like telling strangers about my stuff that really bothers me...and in treatment, you're getting taken care of, and there's people around you supporting you, like 24/7 but like, after I got back, it just felt like I was just alone. I just felt so lonely. And so I was so happy to hear about this group." Similarly, another participant described how, "I think what helps is that we don't feel like we're in like an institution facility, like the detox center, that would feel like an institution facility or residential school, so, yeah, I get that understanding of that. I want to say facility, that feeling like AA, I'm not comfortable with AA, because that's that's another open group too." Other participants spoke about the uniqueness of the program in the Yukon, given that there were no other land-based recovery programs that they knew of. Other participants felt that recovery supports in general were lacking in the Yukon. As one participant put it, "I feel like, a lot of the times too, like they send people out to the treatment centers themselves, and then they come back and there's nothing for them when they come back, and they just end up going back to their old ways because there's no support here, right?"

A strong community among participants. Once participants began attending the program, transformative relationships with other women in the group were a large part of what kept them returning, along with feeling a sense of community that many had not experienced before. Participants spoke about engaging in activities together while they shared and laughed; for example, "I really like sewing with the group. I like laughing, because, like, it's pretty much just women. We cry and laugh, you know? So it's just really good, gaining new friends and getting to know one another, trusting

each other." Other participants spoke about how powerful it had been to walk alongside others on their own parallel journeys. As one participant shared, "I learned that I'm not the only one that's fighting, just fighting to live again. You know, instead of being depressed and doing all the other stuff that I was doing, I learned that there are people out there that care and understand me, like I can just tell them anything, and then they sit there and they listen." The genuine connections that participants shared came across strongly in their interviews, with one participant commenting how, "I first attended, and everyone was so welcoming, and they're like, I'm so glad you're here. And not only did they say, I'm so glad you're here, but it was genuine and it was real." Participants spoke about caring deeply for each other and feeling a mutual sense of support and compassion from other participants. As one participant shared, "I really cared about the other ladies...right now, I'm really working hard, but I wouldn't be working if it wasn't for this group. I wouldn't be pushing myself if it wasn't for these ladies....Women who had addiction, and see them really striving in sobriety, is encouraging." Participants also emphasized the open, non-judgmental space created by the group, noting that, "you can talk about anything, and their empathy...if they felt like they had a suggestion or advice, they would do that. That too would help me be like, oh, yeah, okay, that's something I can try." Similarly, another participant indicated how, "I know that I was feeling really alone and lost before, so I'm glad there's something there. I always feel better when I make myself go. Sometimes I don't want to go, but I do make myself, and then I'm always happy that I made myself, because I always feel better after. Yeah, still fighting stuff every day. Sometimes, like, if I talk about, like, a big thing, what's happening in my life. Like, really personal and I talk about it with everyone, I just feel like sometimes I just need a break. It's really hard to explain."

Consistent, connected, heart-centered facilitators. Along the same lines, participants praised the group facilitators, particularly those three who were consistent staff members throughout the program, for their openness, non-judgmental presence, relational approach, and powerful teachings. As one participant reflected, "I like how open they are, and it's not, it's not restricting. Or punitive. So I really, I really, really love that." Participants were also grateful for the non-hierarchical way in which facilitators approached the group noting that, "we can laugh at them like they're one of us, and they share like one of us. I don't see ego from them. Like other facilitators, you see ego and stuff like that. I don't. It's not like that." Similarly, the openness of staff was appreciated by another

participant who described how the staff were "just real with us, they share stuff on their own, personal stuff when we do check-in. You know, they show emotion to talk about their families and what they're going through and stuff like that. So it reminds us that they're one of us, and they're going through their stuff too." In this way, participants appreciated the opportunity for emotional expression. One participant shared how, "They're talking a lot about feelings, and I didn't know how to express them and stuff, because my mom was a residential school survivor, and yeah, she never talked much about her feelings. Like, she never showed feelings or anything. And so I didn't know anything about feelings and how to deal with them in a healthy way, so that was good for me in this group. Michelle was such a powerful facilitator for me in that way." Other participants similarly noted how they knew of one of the staff members prior to the group, and looked forward to learning from the staff member given that she was a respected community member: "Honestly, I have admired Brenda for a long time. I heard of her years ago, and I saw a few of her pieces that she has made. I just always admired her. I never met her. I never like I met her. I was in the store once, and I said, Oh, this is so beautiful. And then what's your name? And she said, gotten to ask. And I turned around. I was thinking, oh my gosh, this is the actual person. And then I never met her again until we were in this program."

Cultural grounding of the program. Participants also deeply appreciated the cultural activities and teachings offered by the program. They spoke about what it meant to "know the smudge would be there every time for us," with one participant describing how "the smudging helps reset my soul." Others indicated how, "I loved the whole routine of it. Vern doing the smudging, first thing, the checking in, you know, just it has a very good balance." They spoke about how "prayers, and the talk that [Vern] gives, it's really grounding." For some participants, the program represented their first grounding in traditional culture; for example, "I learned a lot of ceremony. I didn't know anything about ceremony before this group. And I like the ceremony part, because I don't know my own culture, and I got to learn a new one. I mean, because our culture is basically lost." To summarize this aspect, one participant shared how, "There was, you know, some mental wellness, some spiritual wellness, physical wellness, and just traditional and cultural knowledge. And I really like that, that there was a blend of everything." Several participants also mentioned the importance of sharing food together; as one described, "It's nice to be able to have a nice meal and share a meal with the other ladies, and not have to come home and have to cook yourself something to eat too."

Closed group format. Participants also expressed gratitude for the closed format of the group. Many noted that they would not have felt as safe to share if the group was delivered in an open format. As one participant put it, "I like that it's all females, and I feel actually more safer at that program and sharing my experiences than I do actually my own First Nation, just because I know people talk, right?" Another expressed how, "I like that it's a closed group format because we know where people are at, and we can support each other along the way. Whereas somebody coming and going and, you know, coming in one day and kind of dumping and then not showing up again, it's just different. It brings a different dynamic to the group, whereas a closed group, you're consistently, you know, aware of each other and the trust is there and we can support each other and help each other and work with each other, whereas, if somebody is just erratically coming, we don't really get to know each other at that level." Others attributed the safe, welcoming, relational environment of the program to the closed format of the group, indicating that, "I have really great relationships with these other people in the group, because it's a closed group, like we were able to go out one evening, and if it wasn't for them, I wouldn't have been able to do it. So certainly, yeah, that's what I like about the closed group." Along these lines, having a same-gender group was important for many participants. In particular, "They're just all women who have been in the same situation. They've all dealt with addiction. And, you know, women understand women. And I just feel, I feel safe, that I can go there and open up and say how I feel, you know, like I don't know if I could do that if it wasn't just a women's group. I don't know if I would say as much as I say, in this group, I think I would hold stuff back. It's a nice small group with a small amount of women." Although participants generally agreed that the group felt safe given that participants were all women, one noted how "men need recovery too, so maybe they could figure out how to do a separate men's group."

Participant impacts. Participants also shared the ways in which they had been impacted by program participation. Some participants noted improved confidence as a personal impact, with one participant noting that, "Since this program, I can say I could look people in the eyes. I've never did that before...I never thought that I would do these things, because I always block myself with self-sabotage." As another participant shared, "I'm an introvert, so it's like, it's, it's kind of helping me kind of come out of that shell, just from a lot of trauma, like I deal with a lot of trauma, so that's why I'm an introvert. I never used to be like that, right? So it's helping me kind of socialize a lot more. And I see some of these ladies out in the community, and they stop and say hello and all that. And how are you?

And, you know, it's just it's nice, and doing all these little side activities, like the horseback riding today, absolutely terrified of horses, but I'm gonna do this just because I've got to be comfortable with being uncomfortable." Other participants felt that the program had helped them to socialize in a healthy way, noting that there were not a lot of opportunities for "sober fun" around their homes. As one participant indicated, "If it wasn't for this program, I think I would still be secluded and figuring out what I need to do for myself, yeah, and not knowing where to go." Another shared with pride that, since attending the group, "my daughter has said, Mom, I know that you're doing a lot because you are so much better." Echoing this sentiment, another participant commented, "This is the most beneficial program I've ever attended." Notably, many participants felt that they would not currently be experiencing sobriety without having participated in the group. They spoke about the group being a "huge support." As one participant shared, "I was in a really dark place of depression, and I was drinking like a lot, and I feel like it helped me open up. And I always feel right after the group, I always feel better and like, especially like, with what's going on right now too in my life. And I wish it wasn't ending."

Next steps. Several participants expressed wishes that the program would continue, and how they hoped to join the group should it be offered a second time. As one indicated, "We're having a talk, everybody, like, for the last couple classes. And what am I gonna do? Because we're so used to it, you know? So I don't know." As another shared, "I just wish it would just continue. I was already asking the last two groups we've been at on like so what are we supposed to do? Can this just continue on?"

Suggestions for improvement. Participants also provided suggestions for improving the group. Several mentioned that they would prefer not to be outside in the cold for an extended period of time at the beginning of sessions. Some participants also suggested letting participants go if they missed a certain number of sessions, and expressed that it was not fair for participants who inconsistently attended to take a spot away from other people in the community who could use recovery supports. Participants also suggested bringing in Elders either as guest speakers or as a consistent presence in the program. As mentioned above, participants also wondered about what would come next for them in terms of other supports, and also suggested ways to consider holding a separate program for men.

Staff Interviews

Three staff members were interviewed over the phone to provide feedback on their program experience. All staff members expressed **gratitude** for their time with the program, and especially the relationships they had formed with one another and with participants.

Staff echoed participants' appreciation for the closed format of the group sessions, noting that the format of the program allowed for safety and predictability, as opposed to the uncertainty that often accompanies an open group format. Two intake periods were held as part of the program, since some participants discontinued partway through. Staff also indicated that having a group routine aided feelings of safety and predictability; opening with a fire and a check-in during group sessions was helpful in this regard. Staff perspectives on participant gender also reflected those of participants; they agreed that sharing and participating in the group may not have taken place so readily if not for the group of participants consisting only of women. One staff member brought up that some participants come to the group with experiences of domestic violence, which can come up during sharing sessions; since speaking about these experiences with people of a different gender can be "triggering and uncomfortable," splitting future groups by gender was a recommendation from both staff and participants.

Staff also spoke about the need for **planning group content in advance**. It was noted that, at the beginning of the program, content for each session was planned, and that partway through the program, staff decided not to adhere to the pre-planned content. It was then determined that participants and staff benefited from more structure and knowing what to expect at each session; as a result, the program returned to its original intent of adhering to pre-planned content for sessions. Staff felt that the program's rotation week-to-week between cultural activities and "deep dives" (i.e., the work of processing trauma and grief) was helpful. One staff member described deep dives as "helping participants come into their power and just find safety and just really render spirits back."

Another example of program shifts, as mentioned by staff, was **changes in staff roles**. At the outset of the program, there was a plan for the program to be supported by a Program Manager, Equine Director, Clinical Director, Recovery Male Leader, Recovery Female Leader, Art Specialist, Fire

Keeper. All staff provided feedback that the program would benefit from having clear staff roles and job descriptions (e.g., responsibilities about how many times per week to be getting in touch with participants), and from employing staff either part-time or full-time instead of on a contract basis. It was also suggested that it would be beneficial to have a counsellor on staff who would connect regularly (e.g., on a weekly or biweekly basis) with each participant, keep a record of consent with each participant, and track the number of participants attending counselling sessions. Additional Elder involvement was also suggested. Regardless of the staff makeup, it was clear from staff feedback that it should be mandatory for staff to come together before the program began in order to plan and begin working together as a team. Regular team meetings and debrief sessions were also recommended, along with the Program Manager having involvement in staff hiring.

Along the same lines, staff were clear that involving staff members who were healthy, committed, culturally grounded, and available was critical for program success. As one staff member shared regarding the Fire Keeper role, "it always has to be somebody that actually believes in the fire keeping...somebody that believes, understands and conceptualizes and participates in that kind of belief, you know, like, walk the talk. And for all staff, it don't matter what kind of certification they have. Who cares if they haven't understood to a level that is personal for them, for sobriety they're not going to grasp, you know, the real need, the real life stuff...it's necessity. You can't be only textbook educated. You have to have a personal sense of education attached to it." Similarly, another staff member commented how, "If staff are not familiar with who they are and where they come from, and they can't offer that, then it's not land-based. Yeah, that's definitely really crucial. You need to be spiritual. It doesn't matter like in your own way, like where you're from, you need to be connected and grounded, for sure." In addition to being culturally grounded, staff needed to be fully committed; as another staff member commended the Team Lead remaining at the end of the program, "She went in with her heart center, and they felt that, they knew that, like they just knew she was there with them. She wasn't there judging, she wasn't there looking down. But I walk with you. That's how she arrived. Yeah, and that really, really kept people coming back."

Staff also commented on **logistical considerations related to program space**. In particular, having access to program space with storage was seen as something that would be helpful, given that transporting and storing materials for regalia making and other traditional arts was a difficulty. Staff also hoped that, in future iterations of the program, there would be additional opportunity for participants to have on-the-land experiences.

More inclusion of families was also seen as a potential helpful addition to the program. As one staff member indicated, "I think the weekend programming, there would, would or should be more inclusion with families, if people allow that like there was in our group, there wasn't always people who had families or who wanted to be around kids, so but I think it was a barrier for those who did have kids if they couldn't bring them. Okay, yeah, and I think it's important that with sobriety, that that journey is new sometimes for parenting, and it's important they learn how to travel and move around and do things with their kids. Yeah, okay. You know, for them to be successful in their sober journey, they need to manage stress, and like packing up and going for a weekend can be stressful." On this note, funding for child care was something that staff suggested could reduce barriers to attendance for some participants.

Finally, staff hoped that future iterations of the program would see increased participant attendance. One staff member felt that increased program structure, rules, and accountability could be helpful in this regard. Although a balance between structure and flexibility was acknowledged as necessary, one staff member felt that participants needed to be increasingly accountable for consistently attending the program, which they felt could be aided by collaboratively establishing group rules and boundaries, as well as by screening participants to ensure that they were at a place in their recovery journey that would be conducive to full program commitment.

Direct Observation

To obtain a complete picture of the Recovery Support Program, the evaluator attended a full-day drum-making workshop, as well as the program's final evening session, which took the form of horseback riding. During the drum-making workshop, the program's firekeeper, Vern, opened with a smudge, after which he spoke with steadfast reverence about the importance of ceremony, learning, and cultural teachings, pausing where needed to help participants craft their drums. He spoke about the value in asking questions about ourselves, and the pursual of hope, belonging, meaning, and purpose. Vern shared the ways in which ceremony awakens us, bringing us what we need instead of what we want. He also shared how ceremony directs us to look inside of ourselves to talk to the Creator, helping us understand our connectedness and who we are; in this way, healing means going back to ceremony. He relayed wisdom around experiential learning with a reminder that we cannot teach something that we haven't done ourselves; underlying this emphasis seemed a reminder of the importance of support from peers who have experienced recovery themselves. Also relevant to recovery support, Vern provided the message that, in order to get better, we have to move through pain. He spoke about the place of spirit, explaining trauma as a lack of access to our ability to deal with emotions. As a result, according to Vern, knowing your medicines is powerful. Finally, Vern touched on the delicate balance between structure and openness or responsiveness. Too much or too little structure, he explained, will interfere with engagement.

During the program's final session, participants came together for horseback riding. The evening again began with a smudge, this time while participants huddled around a fire. Initial words from Vern and a round of check-ins opened the session. While everyone waited for all of the participants to arrive, they visited easily with one another, joking and laughing. After an hour-long guided trek through the back country, the group gathered for a meal in a cabin filled with their laughter and companionship. A closing circle ended the session with words of wisdom and a traditional song from Vern, followed by participants sharing their gratitude for the group, along with sadness over the group coming to an official close.

What stood out from the observed sessions was the welcoming demeanour of the group. Participants were at ease with one another and with the program staff. They offered words of support and encouragement when one participant decided to stay back from horseback riding due to feeling anxious. They spoke with one another about their families, laughed loudly and naturally with each other, and seemed to genuinely enjoy being in one another's presence. Participants described the experience of attending the final session as bittersweet, with a mix of pride for program completion and sadness over no longer being able to spend time together in a predictable way. At the same time, participants agreed that they would make plans to continue seeing one another outside of the program.

Conclusions

The Shäwthän Näzhì Healing with the Land Society piloted a 10-month land-based Recovery Support Program for Yukon First Nations peoples, ending in April 2025. This program evaluation report details findings regarding program attendance, staff debrief forms, participant surveys, participant and staff interviews, as well as direct observation.

All data sources converged on the deep gratitude and appreciation that both staff and participants had for the program. They were clear that recovery supports are critically needed in the Yukon. Although limited recovery supports exist (e.g., conventional AA groups), those that are available for participants do not have a land-based orientation or cultural grounding. Both participants and staff were clear that the program being grounded in traditional culture was critical for healing, the program's relational approach, and reconnecting to parts of themselves that they had not been able to access. Participants were clear that staff members played an integral role in their recovery and sobriety, describing staff as heart-centered, committed, and wise. Participants additionally credited one another for their healing, citing the strong relationships formed amongst the group in expanding their circles of support.

Given that the 10-month program represented a program pilot, staff were learning and implementing the program at the same time, and needed to be adept at innovating ahead of the evidence curve. Therefore, based on the evaluation findings, a number of recommendations are provided for future offerings of the program.

Recommendations

1 Continue Offering the Recovery Support Program

Participants and staff were clear about the need for recovery supports in the Yukon. The program also aligns strongly with the Yukon Government's Substance Use Health Emergency Strategy, and with existing literature regarding best practices for recovery supports.

2 Offer a Closed Group Format

Participants and staff reiterated the need to continue offering a closed group format to facilitate safety, and to facilitate open sharing and relationship-building over the long-term.

3 Consider Offering the Group According to Gender

Feedback emphasized the importance of groups being organized according to gender, given the sensitive nature of program topics and the differences with which men, women, and gender-diverse individuals approach recovery and healing in culturally grounded ways.

4 Emphasize Cultural Grounding and Land-Based Healing

Culture and land-based healing were at the heart of the program, and both staff and participants gave explicit feedback about the importance of continuing to emphasize these core program elements throughout implementation.

5 Consider Increased Structure and Clear Staff Roles

Increased structure could assist with participant engagement, including deciding on a program schedule beforehand and accepting participants into the program who are able to fully commit. The program can also consider separating the roles of administrative and front-line staff, holding regular meetings both at the outset of the program for planning purposes, and throughout implementation for the purposes of debriefing, addressing staff successes and challenges, and continuing to learn together. It will also be important to establish and maintain regular communication with the Shäwthän Näzhì board/executive team. In this way, clear staff roles, job descriptions, and expectations can be established (e.g., team leads are expected to contact participants a certain number of times per week), and employing part-time or full-time staff (as opposed to contract staff) can be considered. Findings also clearly point to the importance of hiring staff who have the time to commit to their roles and who take a culturally-grounded, relational approach.

Appendix A

SHÄWTHÄN NÄZHÌ RECOVERY SUPPORT PROGRAM **STAFF DEBRIEF FORM**

Date:
Number of Session Attendees:
Are there any participants who require a follow-up phone call? Explain in the space below.
What were the common themes from today's session? Where did the conversation go? What did participants tend to focus on?

Appendix A Con't

SHÄWTHÄN NÄZHÌ RECOVERY SUPPORT PROGRAM **STAFF DEBRIEF FORM** (CONTINUED)

What was challenging about today's session? Was there anything that made today's session difficult?
What were the bright spots in today's session? What are you most proud of from today's session?

Appendix B

Shawthan Nazhi Recovery Support Program

Participant Survey Name: _____ Please rate today's session by placing a dash mark on the line nearest to the description that best fits your experience. I did not feel heard. I felt heard. understood, and understood, and respected. respected. Today's session Today's session was not helpful for was helpful for me. me. This program's This program's approach is not a approach is a good good fit for me. fit for me. Something was Overall, today's session felt right missing in the session today. for me. What do you like most about today's session? Do you have any suggestions for improvement?

This survey was adapted from the Session Rating Scale (SRS V 3.0) developed by Johnson, Miller, & Duncan (2000)

Appendix C Participant Survey Version 2

Rated Out of 5

- 1. Overall, how are you doing with your sobriety this week?
- 2. Overall, how supported are you feeling this week?
- 3. What supports did you utilize this week?
- 4. How supported did you feel by the group tonight?
- 5. Anything else you'd like to share?
- 6. What tools and techniques did you use this past week?
- 7. Overall, how often are you applying various tools and techniques to help with your sobriety?
- 8. Were the tools and techniques used in tonight's session helpful?
- 9. Anything else you'd like to share?
- 10. What was most helpful about today's session?
- 11. What was least helpful about today's session?
- 12. Is there anything you need from the Team Leads and/or group this week?
- 13. Any suggestions or recommendations for improvement?
- 14. Overall, is the program helping you with your sobriety?

Appendix D Program Schedule

Date	Activities	Date	Activities	Date	Activities
Jun 4/24	Introductions	Sept 17/24	Medicine Picking	Jan 14/25	Regalia
Jun 8-9/24	Haines Junction	Sept 24/24	Video Joe Dispenza	Jan 21/25	Medicine bag, ashes
Jun 11/24	Heart Activity	Oct 1/24	Regalia making	Jan 28/25	Regalia making
Jun 18/24	Eagle Ridge for feathers	Oct 5-6/24	Cooper Caribou	Feb 2/25	Breathwork, stress
Jun 25/24	Beading feathers	Oct 8, 2024	Nervous system	Feb 8/25	CGC Sewing
Jul 2/24	Medicine wheel drawing	Oct 15/24	Sweat lodge	Feb 11/25	Processing
Jul 9/24	Vision board	Oct 22/24	Guest speaker	Feb 18/25	Chakra
Jul 16/24	Feather cases	Oct 29/24	Regalia making	Feb 25/25	Regalia making
Jul 23/24	Processing	Nov 5/24	Meditation, grounding	Mar 2/25	Regalia
Jul 30/24	Medicine picking	Nov 12/24	Guidelines, safety	Mar 11/25	Processing
Aug 6/24	Talking sticks	Nov 19/24	Triggers, regalia	Mar 16/25	Dog sledding
Aug 10-11/24	James Allen Camp	Nov 26/24	Sweat lodge	Mar 18/25	Processing
Aug 13/24	Circle of Significance	Dec 3/24	Processing	Mar 25/25	Processing
Aug 20/24	Regalia Making	Dec 10/24	Goals, shadow work	April 1/25	Processing
Aug 27/24	Guest speaker	Dec 17/24	Horse ride	Apr 4/25	Drum making
Sept 3/24	Guest speaker- cedars	Jan 3-13/25	Compassionate inquiry	Apr 8/25	Horse riding
Sept 10/24	Regalia making	Jan 7/25	Looking ahead, planning		