

**CBC INVESTIGATES**

## **Manitoba addictions centre offers limited treatment services for \$10K monthly fee: advocates, former client**

Former workers, clients and advocates question why a family reunification centre in Brandon, Man., charges residents almost \$10,000 a month to live in a converted motel room, arguing the price exploits First Nations communities and government agencies that foot the bill.

Canada - Manitoba | 5 Hours Ago



Former workers, clients and advocates question why a family reunification centre in Brandon, Man., charges residents almost \$10,000 a month to live in a converted motel room, arguing the price exploits First Nations communities and government agencies that foot the bill.

One First Nations health group that toured the facility was so concerned, it told its members not to send anyone to the centre, saying it was not a proper facility for addictions treatment and it charged an "exorbitant amount."

The facility used to be home to the Redwood Motor Inn, a 62-room budget motel less than five kilometres south of the Trans-Canada Highway.

It was purchased by Mike Bruneau in 2023 and turned into the Aurora Reunification Village, an offshoot of Bruneau's Aurora Recovery Centre, located in Gimli, Man.

When the for-profit facility opened in June 2023, it touted itself as a safe place for parents who are transitioning out of addiction and trying to reunite with their children.

Soon it was full of residents, some paying as much as \$9,900 a month per adult to live there, according to documents obtained by CBC. As of May, over 100 adults and children were living at the facility, according to Bruneau.



Florence Halcrow, who runs Ask Auntie — an organization that helps vulnerable people access services in Brandon — says people who have relapsed or lost their funding were getting kicked out of Aurora and ending up coming to her organization for help. (Warren Kay/CBC)

For a family of three sharing one room, documents show the price was \$30,000 a month — an amount the head of a Brandon non-profit says exploits funds earmarked to help Indigenous people, in order to turn a profit.

"They're taking advantage of our Indigenous funding. That's the bottom line," said Florence Halcrow, who runs Ask Auntie, an organization that helps vulnerable people access services, including housing and training.

"They know that there's funding out there, and they're taking advantage of our people."

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When she first heard about Bruneau's plan for the Redwood, Halcrow was excited and championed the project.

But soon, people who relapsed or lost their funding were getting kicked out of Aurora and ending up at her doorstep, needing a ride to their home community or startup money for rent, Halcrow said.

"I find people crying at our door, like, 'We don't know where to go. We don't know what to do,'" she said.

- **Brandon homelessness count sees sharp increase in number**
- **Brandon drop-in centre permanently closed due to escalating violence**

The additional people moving to Brandon to live at Aurora meant more work for already strained non-profits in the city, she said.

"We're over capacity, where we are getting burnt out," she said.

### **'I didn't want to go in': resident**

Jaylene Oniske ended up at Aurora in Brandon a few months after it opened, having read about the centre online. She had been in and out of various treatment centres and was looking for somewhere she could stay with her partner and children.

Oniske was able to get approval through Jordan's Principle, a federal program that helps First Nations children access government services, for her family to go to Aurora for six months.

"We thought we got lucky," she told CBC.

"But I pulled up, and I didn't want to go in. I was like, 'What is this? We're in a little motel in Brandon.' And I was shocked."



Jaylene Oniske said Jordan's Principle paid almost \$20,000 a month for her and her partner to stay at Aurora in Brandon. (Gary Solilak/CBC)

Oniske, who is from Pimicikamak (Cross Lake First Nation), moved her family from Thompson, Man., to the Aurora Reunification Village in November 2023.

Aurora requested \$9,900 a month through Jordan's Principle for Oniske, and another \$9,900 for her partner, for a six-month stay, according to documents she showed CBC that she received from Aurora.

Aurora charged \$5,000 a month for each of her two children, and she stayed there with her family for more than five months, she said.

Documents obtained by CBC show the per child charge can fluctuate, with discounts offered to families with many children.

From the beginning, she had to fight Aurora to provide any services or activities for her children, said Oniske.

The reply was always "we need to wait for funding," she said.

She said she barely remembers the programming because it wasn't helpful — mostly PowerPoint presentations and reading about parenting.



If offered little "besides maybe a place to live and some food to eat," she said.

"You can get a lot somewhere else for a lot cheaper, and probably a lot better."

When she left Aurora in March 2024, she went to another facility and eventually, with the help of family, got sober. She started her own business in Thompson and is now back with her children.

### **Kids ran away, left unattended: incident reports**

Incident reports from Aurora obtained by CBC detail several occurrences of clients leaving the premises and coming back intoxicated. They also detailed incidents in which children went missing or left the facility and were found in various parts of the city.

Another incident report said two clients signed out of Aurora and left their two children alone in their room. Workers recommended CFS be notified.

Employees told CBC News they were afraid to speak about Aurora because they had been made to sign non-disclosure agreements, and feared Bruneau would sue them if they said anything.

Emails obtained by CBC show Aurora senior staff told employees that following negative comments made on social media about the reunification village, employees were required to sign non-disclosure agreements to ensure "we protect the integrity of our work."



CBC was invited to tour Aurora's Brandon facility on May 5. One of the rooms at Aurora is a dedicated child-minding room, where parents can drop off their children. (Gary Solilak/CBC)

CBC spoke to multiple people who went to Aurora and former workers, who said the vast majority of clients are not paying out of pocket to stay there. Taxpayer dollars were spent on their behalf through funding from their First Nation, Jordan's Principle or a Child and Family Services agency, the sources said.

An email sent from an Aurora employee to a potential client said it would cost \$44,900 to spend one month at Aurora Recovery Centre in Gimli, followed by another 30 days at the Brandon reunification village with their two kids.

"The cost of the reunification program works out to [\$]10,000 per person," the director of admissions wrote in a Dec. 15, 2024, email obtained by CBC.

Bruneau agreed to do an on-camera interview with CBC on three occasions, but each time cancelled at the last minute. After he cancelled a scheduled interview on May 22, a CBC reporter called Bruneau.

By phone, Bruneau said he couldn't discuss the fees Aurora charges because of confidentiality.

In previous statements he sent, he denied Aurora charged \$9,900 per adult and \$5,000 per child.



Mike Bruneau, shown in a 2014 file photo, says the price for staying at the Brandon facility reflects the 'significant' costs that go into providing 24/7 care. (CBC)

He wouldn't say what the fees are, but said they are based on the needs of the individual and reflect the "significant" costs that go into providing 24/7 care. The fees

cover accommodations, therapeutic programming, transportation, meals and other operational expenses, said Bruneau.

Bruneau said Aurora is proud of the work done at the facility, and said it is filling gaps where "the public system fails."

During the phone call with Bruneau, he also said getting his employees to sign a non-disclosure agreement is a good business practice.

- **Addictions centre clients ordered out of Winnipeg condo complex**
- **Whispering Pines addictions treatment centre shuts down**

Rosetta Troia, an addictions counsellor who has done consulting work with Aurora over the years, said she recently started a part-time job working with families in both the Gimli and Brandon Aurora facilities.

She said it was "devastating" to hear people are concerned Aurora is taking advantage of funding earmarked to help Indigenous people. Aurora's fees are comparable to other private treatment centres, but in Brandon people get to live with their kids, she said.

"We do this because of the gap [in the public sector]," she said in a phone interview with CBC, adding some clients are living at Aurora for free.

"If we were taking advantage of them, we would not be prioritizing the Indigenous programming, and filling the gaps specifically for them and listening to the chiefs."

### **Fired after programming complaint: worker**

Lorraine Messing, a registered social worker, quit her job in Child and Family Services to join Aurora as its CFS liaison when it first opened. Eventually her title would change, and she became the facility's director of Indigenous programming.

"I got excited because it was for Indigenous families and children, and that they were going to be reunited with their children," she said.

But she said the facility was disorganized, it was difficult to communicate with management and it was a struggle to get any Indigenous programming off the ground. She said anything she asked for came down to how much it would cost.

At least one client CBC spoke with confirmed she was required to buy her own drum for ceremonial use.



Lorraine Messing, a registered social worker, quit her job in Child and Family Services to go work for Aurora. She said she was fired after she raised too many questions about the facility. (Warren Kay/CBC)

Messing described the day-to-day programming as basic and said clients were encouraged to access outside resources in the Brandon community.

"I think our people were being taken advantage of. I think that money was not being used to provide what they said they were going to provide," she said.

Messing says when she complained to Bruneau that there wasn't enough Indigenous programming, he fired her. She worked at Aurora for about five months.

Bruneau denied that the facility lacks Indigenous programming. He said in his statements clients can access daily smudging and drumming circles, and have supplies to do beadwork and hidework and to make ribbon skirts.

When CBC was invited to tour Aurora's Brandon facility on May 5 — Red Dress Day — a drumming circle was held outside.



Bruneau said Aurora was opened quickly in response to "an urgent need" for family-centre recovery services, and "because of this rapid launch, not everything was perfect in the beginning."

"However, we've listened, adapted and grown," he wrote.

### **Report raises red flags**

Frank Turner, the executive of Cree Nation Tribal Health — an Indigenous-owned health advocacy program — toured Aurora's Brandon building in January 2024 with his staff.

They were so concerned with what they saw that one staff member wrote a report warning organizations not to send people there.

"It wasn't a proper facility for this type of an addictions centre or addictions healing," Turner told CBC.

"I will not authorize a payment of such an exorbitant amount for the kind of services that you are getting," he told his organization.



Frank Turner, the executive of Cree Nation Tribal Health — an Indigenous-owned health advocacy program — toured Aurora's Brandon building in January 2024 with his staff. One staff member wrote a report warning organizations not to send people there. (CTV/Pool)

Turner sent the report, written by a supervising case manager in January 2024, to Indigenous Services Canada and other agencies, outlining what it called "alarming information" Cree Nation Tribal Health learned about the Brandon facility.

According to the report:

- Aurora charged clients \$10,000 a month to stay at a facility that was "not providing any professional healing/treatment services."
- Daily programming consisted of cleaning, cooking and watching music videos.
- There were no nurses or physicians on site.
- Aurora offered clients "false hope" they would get their kids back after apprehension by Child and Family Services.
- Aurora was "targeting" Indigenous people who struggle with addiction and who have difficulties navigating CFS.

"I would not recommend that our Indigenous people be sent to this facility, as it is hazardous physically, mentally and it is not a conducive environment for the well-being of their clients who are attempting to recover from addiction," the manager wrote in the report.

In an emailed statement, Indigenous Services Canada confirmed there was "an allegation brought forward" about the Brandon facility. However, citing privacy concerns, the department didn't offer further details.

### **'Desperate situation'**

The willingness of organizations to pay the kind of fees Aurora charges points to a growing need for more options for families in crisis, according to the executive director of a non-profit treatment centre in Alberta.

In Manitoba, getting into a publicly funded addiction treatment space can take up to six months, and there are currently no publicly funded options that allow someone to be with their children.

- **Manitoba lacks capacity for addictions treatment, auditor general says**
- **Manitoba youth with addictions face limited services, long waitlists, geographic barriers: report**

"It is a desperate situation," said Bruce Holstead, the executive director of Fresh Start Recovery in Alberta.

"You do need to take advantage of a motel, because there is no other resource available to you at a fair cost in which you can be provided services."



There are 62 rooms at the facility in Brandon, which used to be the Redwood Motor Inn. (Gary Solilak/CBC)

But that doesn't negate the need to provide services that match the cost, said Holstead.

While he said he's not familiar with the operations of Aurora, at the cost the centre is charging, families should not be stuck in one room together, he said.

"It's one thing to go away as a family and hang out in the hotel room for the weekend and have a whole bunch of fun," said Holstead.

"But if I had an expectation and I was trying to bring a family back together ... that placement requires space for the children to have their own room."

He would also expect medical staff on-site, along with registered social workers, a Red Seal chef and certified counsellors.

Currently, there are 37 employees in total at the Brandon facility.

There are no medical staff at the Brandon location, but Bruneau said clients have access to doctors through Aurora's Gimli location, which is about 230 kilometres away. None of the Brandon staff listed on Aurora's website are registered social workers.

In a statement, Bruneau said some staff chose to not have their names published online, so the list is not reflective of their full employee list.

Bruneau also said the Brandon facility does not offer a conventional standalone addiction treatment program, but that "recovery principles are embedded throughout."

Bruneau invited CBC to tour the facility on May 5, after cancelling a scheduled interview.

He did not attend the tour. Three workers from Aurora Recovery in Gimli were sent to the Brandon centre to give the tour, and no Brandon workers were made available to do an interview.



The common area at the facility where residents eat their meals and do programming. (Gary Solilak/CBC)

Inside the facility is a busy reception area. A pool that had been part of the motel has been filled in and turned into a multipurpose room. Nearby is a child-care room, where parents can leave their children when attending programming.

Food has to be brought in because the centre doesn't have a commercial kitchen.

As a condition of the city allowing the centre to operate, the kitchen was supposed to be operational by October 2024. During the tour, workers at Aurora said it is still under construction, but would not let reporters look inside.

A schedule posted at reception showed daily programming from 9 a.m. to curfew at 10 p.m., including a sharing circle, skills group, a wellness walk, self-care classes and co-ed sweats.



## **Program helpful: resident**

During the tour, CBC met Tiffany Bouchard, who moved into Aurora with her two children in April to attend a six-week addiction treatment program. Bouchard lives in Thunder Bay, Ont., and was struggling with alcohol abuse.

She didn't know all the details of what her treatment plan would include, but said her aim was to learn to love herself.

"This place allows me to be myself, and I have my kids here. That's the main important thing," she said during an interview with CBC following the tour.

- **Addictions report calls for reduced reliance on 12-step programs, but some stand by their effectiveness**

## **CBC INVESTIGATES**

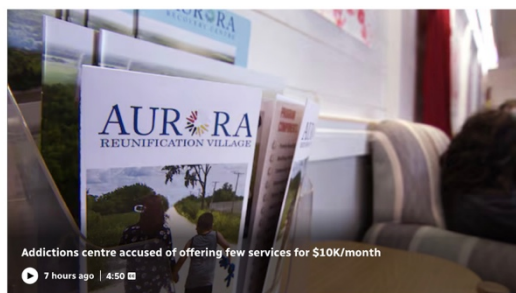
**Man who died after being turned away at Brandon hospital was 'desperate for help' with addiction: mother**

Her days were busy, filled with motivational meetings, programming and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings in the evening, she said.

Bouchard couldn't remember the name of the organization paying for her stay or the cost, but said she knew "it costs a lot of money."

An Aurora employee who was in the room told CBC they would provide the rate being charged, but Bruneau later declined to say, citing confidentiality.

***WATCH | Former workers, clients raise concerns about family reunification centre:***



Former workers, clients and advocates want to know why a family reunification centre in Brandon, Man., charges residents almost \$10,000 a month to live in a converted motel room, with few services offered. They argue the fees charged at Aurora Reunification Village exploit First Nations communities and government agencies that foot the bill.

<https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/video/9.6819324>

After sending questions to Bruneau, CBC received over a dozen testimonials from clients and workers, expressing the positive impact Aurora has had on their life and sobriety journey.

Many of the testimonials from former and current clients said Aurora helped them by giving them a stable place to live and allowing them to be with their children. In some cases, they said it was the only way Child and Family Services would allow them to all live together.

Grand Chief Walter Wastesicoot of Keewatin Tribal Council, which represents 11 First Nations in northern Manitoba, sent an email to CBC saying he has toured the facility and has no concerns. He said people from those northern communities have gone to both Aurora Recovery in Gimli and the Brandon location.

No one has raised alarms to him about the facility, and there is no wait time to get into the Brandon location, unlike in the public sector, Wastesicoot said in the email. He declined to do a followup interview.

Fern Cook, a support worker at Sandy Bay First Nation, said she has sent many families to the Brandon facility, but she declined to do an interview. Instead, she sent a letter praising the facility, stating it offers "safe, sober second-stage treatment."

Many members have been sponsored or received reduced rates to stay in Brandon, said Cook. She declined to answer any followup questions or say how much the First Nation pays for each band member's stay.

### **Owner opened other centres**

Bruneau has opened similar operations in Winnipeg, Thompson and Snow Lake, all of which have since shuttered. In Winnipeg, [tenants were ordered out](#) of a condo complex in November 2024 after Bruneau opened a reunification village there earlier in the year. Some ended up at Aurora in Brandon.

A new reunification village opened in Estevan, Sask., in June, after Bruneau purchased the Quality Inn and Motel 6, [according to media reports](#). In a May interview with the online news site SaskToday, Bruneau said his facilities don't just offer one-month or six-week programs.

"I just decided I had to think outside of the box. We're doing a lot. We have some members for a year or more ... they don't leave until they're ready and we know they can make it," Bruneau was quoted as saying in the May 22 story.

Former resident Jaylene Oniske, who said she met some great people at Aurora, said she doesn't want to see the Brandon centre shut down, but she does want it to provide the services it is promising.

- **Drug-related deaths in Manitoba surging, chief medical examiner's data says**
- **Toxic drugs blamed for 'cascade' of overdoses within 45 minutes in downtown Winnipeg**

That point is echoed by Ask Auntie's Halcrow, who says Aurora needs to lower its fees and work with the community in Brandon to help people.

"What's going to happen when all the funding runs out for our First Nations?" she said.

"We need to fix it now."

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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[Kristin Annable](#)

Reporter

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<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/aurora-brandon-reunification-village-1.7572784>

Bruneau, Aurora, and all who are in cahoots with them (Nahanni, Bernadette, Jerry Daniels?) are shameless in taking advantage of the suffering of Indigenous peoples to feather their own nests and extend the FN elite establishment. What they have done to OTTER in Carberry is reprehensible, and Wab has been too busy grinning to rein in his own people. These seem to be the only Indigenous people he is "serving." TJB