

Potential clients of reunification centre can't get funding

By: Michele McDougall

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CARBERRY — A 16-bed addictions treatment facility with 24-hour support is fully staffed and ready to operate in Carberry, but funding challenges prevent it from opening and helping clients heal, says Catherine Arnold, co-owner and co-founder of the holistic healing OTTER Centre.

“We have about nine families right now that are on the referral list and waiting,” Arnold said. “They’re detoxing themselves and getting themselves ready, and then they end up going back into use because the funding isn’t available.

“So, it’s actually hurting our people that are at the stage of readiness where they could completely benefit and change their lives,” Arnold said.



Tessa McPhee, registered psychiatric nurse (left) and Catherine Arnold, social worker — are co-owners and founders of OTTER Centre addictions treatment facility in Carberry. OTTER stands for overcoming trauma through everlasting relationships and is a 16-bed facility set up to reunite and support mothers and families who have been caught up in the child and family service system. (Photos by Michele McDougall/The Brandon Sun)

OTTER stands for overcoming trauma through everlasting relationships. It was founded by Arnold — a social worker, and her partner, Tessa McPhee a registered psychiatric nurse.

Combined, McPhee and Arnold have more than 20 years of experience working with clients in addiction and social services.

They met while working for the Addictions Foundation of Manitoba, but for the past five years, McPhee and Arnold have been in private practice together. McPhee credits their success to the blend of her scientific principles of Western medicine and Arnold's spiritual practices of Indigenous healing as a Métis woman.

And it was while sharing stories at the end of the day, said McPhee, that they noticed how often they talked about the gaps they saw in the child welfare system, in particular the separation of children from their mother.

“We’ve seen how the separation leads to that increased trauma response, and it really affects that healing process for both the mother and the child,” McPhee said.

“If they were separated from their kids, they would get into this cycle of guilt and shame, and it would be so hard for them to do what they needed to do — get better and be healthy, because they didn’t have their kids with them.

“And so, we wanted to create a place where they can really heal together in a supervised and safe environment, for two months,” she said.

That’s when McPhee and Arnold came up with the idea of the OTTER Centre, and they found a readymade facility in a northwest neighbourhood in Carberry in March.

It was originally built for Daughter on Call but was left vacant in June 2022. The building has 16 rooms with an east and west wing. Each wing has six single bedrooms, two couple suites with bathrooms, large community bathrooms equipped with laundry facilities, a large kitchen and dining area and a backyard.

The staff that’s been hired includes psychiatric nurses, social workers, teachers, mentors, an executive leader, and participant coordinator.

“We’ll have a dedicated teacher on site to do assessments for each child, determine their educational level and create a learning plan for them,” said McPhee.



One of the bedroom suites for a family of four at OTTER Centre in Carberry.

“So, while the school-aged kids will be doing their classes, the younger kids will be with early childhood educators, and the moms will be in groups with their programming.

“And in the evening the mothers and children will be together, just to learn how to connect and learn how to play, because they have had so much stress and trauma, they don’t really know how to just sit and play,” McPhee said.

Those who are interested in OTTER must be referred by an external source, including a professional from mental health, addictions, Child and Family Services, social services, or the National Native Alcohol and Drug Abuse Program (NNADAP).

Before being approved, participants must commit to half a dozen criteria, including attendance of all programming, and if substance-use is listed, that person must have completed a detox/treatment program immediately before being admitted.

Additionally, the applicant must secure funding before enrolling, but according to both Arnold and McPhee, that’s the only barrier in people’s way.

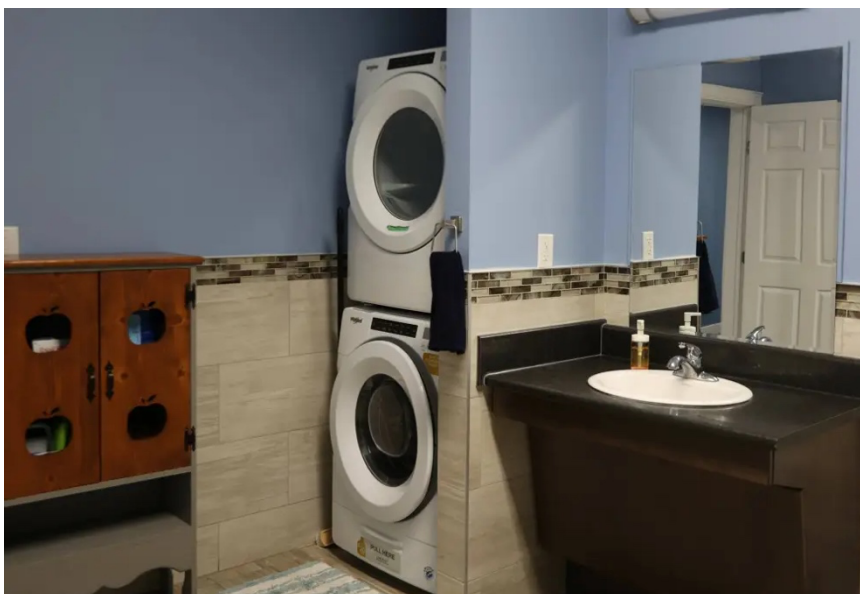
“We’re ready, the programming is ready, moms and children are waiting to come but they cannot access funding. It’s sad that we’ve hit this roadblock. So, we’re just trying to figure out how we can advocate for each person,” McPhee said.

The two business partners said they are not looking for operational funding, just support for their clients and have written letters to Premier Wab Kinew, Bernadette Smith, Minister of Housing, Addictions and Homelessness, Manitoba Métis Federation Housing Minister Will Goodon and the Progressive Conservative MLA for Agassiz, Jodie Byram.

Byram took a tour of the facility earlier this month and told the Sun she was impressed when she learned about programming and wrap-around services. “I know that funding has been a problem,” Byram said, “and they have reached out to the current government on a couple different occasions, from what I understand.

“So, I’ll be going back and talking to the government about potential funding for a project like this that can help with addiction, recovery, family reunification and reconciliation,” she said.

The Sun emailed three questions to Bernadette Smith, Minister of Housing, Addictions and Homelessness, asking if OTTER was something she would support, if she would consider advocating to First Nation leaders on the centre’s behalf and if there is alternative funding stream that might help them.



One of the bathrooms equipped with a washer and drier.

A spokesperson from Smith's office responded and said, "Our government commends the great work that OTTER Home is doing to help Manitoba families and reached out to OTTER to inform them of the types of supports and funding sources they are eligible for."

McPhee confirmed that Smith's team sent her information about a potential grant that could support women and children in their program that aligns with the government's needs, adding it is just a potential opportunity, "but we remain hopeful."

McPhee said they'll keep advocating on their clients' behalf, because she believes that the programming will lead to reunification.

"We know it can work because we have been in it for a couple decades, and this is what we do every day," she said.

"As long as people are feeling supported, loved and valued, have a healthy environment, and they have their kids with them, it will work."

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<https://www.brandonsun.com/local/2024/10/24/potential-clients-of-reunification-centre-cant-get-funding>