

Final Evaluation Report for PLEA's Raising Hands Project

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Evaluation prepared by:

McCreary Centre Society
www.mcs.bc.ca



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INTRODUCTION

McCreary Centre Society carried out an independent evaluation of PLEA Community Services' Raising Hands project (April, 2017 to March 31, 2020).

Raising Hands was a component of two youth justice residential drug treatment programs at PLEA, specifically Daughters & Sisters (for female youth) and Waypoint (for male youth). The Raising Hands project involved dedicated staff ("Indigenous navigators") supporting the cultural and reintegration needs of Indigenous program participants—while at Daughters & Sisters or Waypoint, as well as when they transitioned out of the program. The initiative also intended to help build capacity at PLEA to foster cultural sensitivity and safety.

The evaluation of Raising Hands measured the following expected outcomes:

- Indigenous youth feel the services they receive through PLEA's Waypoint and Daughters & Sisters programs are culturally relevant.
- Indigenous youth are connected to cultural resources and services while in the program, as appropriate, including support from Elders, to the extent they feel ready to connect to such resources.
- Indigenous youth feel greater cultural connectedness (among those who felt ready to connect to their culture).
- Indigenous youth gain new skills and knowledge in the program which support their health and well-being.
- Non-Indigenous program participants report increased knowledge and understanding of Indigenous cultural practices and traditions because of the cultural programming offered through PLEA.
- Through training offered by PLEA, staff and caregivers connected to Daughters & Sisters and Waypoint gain a greater understanding of the history of Indigenous peoples in Canada and their diversity, and have increased awareness of culturally relevant practices they can apply in their work with Indigenous youth.
- Indigenous youth feel supported to foster healthy connections with their families and larger community (e.g., through family visits when appropriate).
- Program navigators support Indigenous youth in transitioning out of the program by connecting them to appropriate supports in their community and by helping them apply the skills and knowledge they learned at PLEA when they return home.

McCreary's deliverables have included interim evaluation reports submitted to PLEA in March 2018 and March 2019, and this final evaluation report (March 2020). This final report builds on the previous reports and includes cumulative findings from the start of the project.

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY & PARTICIPANTS

The mixed-method evaluation included two youth surveys; focus groups with Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth participants; the opportunity for Indigenous participants to take part in a follow-up interview; and interviews with PLEA staff (including navigators), managers, and caregivers connected to the Raising Hands initiative.

Youth Surveys

McCreary developed two youth surveys in collaboration with PLEA managers and staff. Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth at Daughters & Sisters and Waypoint were invited to complete a survey while in the program, at least two months after joining (Time 1). This survey included demographic questions as well as questions about youth's substance use, justice involvement, and overall health and well-being. The survey also asked youth for feedback about their experience in the program so far, including the degree to which they gained knowledge and understanding of Indigenous practices and traditions, and the extent to which they gained skills to support their health and well-being.

Indigenous youth also completed a follow-up survey (Time 2) after returning to their home community, which the navigators distributed. This survey tapped the expected outcomes, including the extent to which youth felt supported in transitioning back to their home community.

Youth who completed a Time 2 survey also had the option to complete a Contact Information Form if they might have been interested in taking part in a follow-up interview (i.e., for McCreary staff to contact them to ask if they were interested). They were informed that their survey answers would not be linked to their contact information, and that surveys were stored separately from Contact Information Forms to ensure their survey answers remained anonymous.

Interviews/Focus Groups

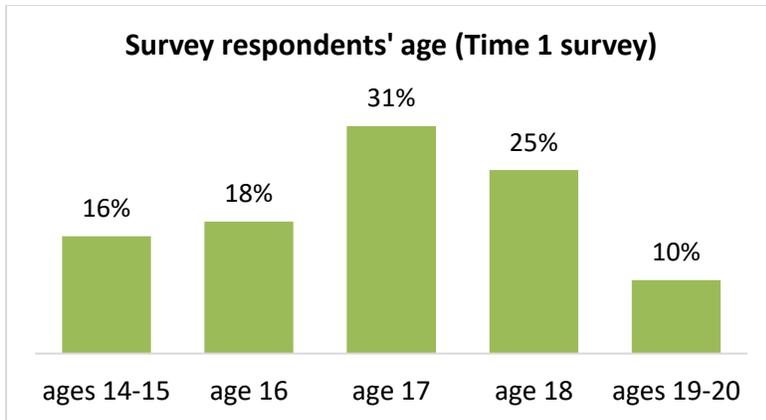
Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth participants had the opportunity to take part in a focus group while at PLEA to provide feedback about their involvement in the program.

Indigenous youth also had an opportunity to take part in a phone interview after they transitioned out of the program. They were informed that they would receive a \$20 gift card for taking part in an interview.

PLEA managers, staff, and caregivers were offered an opportunity to take part in interviews or focus groups. They were asked for their feedback on the program, the extent to which they felt the program helped build capacity within the agency, and their views on promising practices and lessons learned.

Evaluation Participants

A total of 69 program participants (52% males) completed a Time 1 survey while at PLEA, and 46% identified as Indigenous. They ranged in age from 14 to 20, with an average age of 17 years. (More information on youth's background is included in the Participants' Background section.)



Also, 13 Indigenous youth (54% females) completed a Time 2 survey. Most (69%) identified as First Nations and the rest as Métis. They ranged in age from 16 to 19 years, with an average age of 17½.

Six youth focus groups took place at PLEA (two in the fall of 2017, 2018, and 2019), with a total of 25 youth.

Two Indigenous youth indicated they may be interested in taking part in a follow-up interview, and completed a Contact Information Form. McCreary staff contacted them to ask if they were still interested in taking part, but neither responded.

A total of 10 phone interviews took place with PLEA managers, staff (including Indigenous navigators), and caregivers. In this report, they are referred to as “PLEA staff and caregivers.”

Analyses

Any reported comparisons or associations in this report were statistically significant at $p < .05$. This means there was up to a 5% likelihood the results occurred by chance.

On the Time 1 survey, differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth were not statistically significant unless otherwise noted.

When percentages represented a very small number of youth, they were reported descriptively.

Limitations

A limitation of the evaluation is that it does not include the perspectives of youth participants who disengaged early from the program and/or chose to not take part in the evaluation.

The number of Indigenous youth participants who completed a follow-up survey after leaving their PLEA program was relatively small ($n=13$). Findings from the Time 2 survey should be interpreted with this in mind. However, it is important to note that this number is reflective of the number of Indigenous youth who graduated from the program and continued to receive support from the navigator after returning to their community.

YOUTH PARTICIPANTS' BACKGROUND

The results in this section are based on data from the Time 1 survey.

Government Care and Justice Involvement

All survey respondents indicated they had been involved in the justice system. Also, most (85%) reported they had been in government care (e.g., foster home, group home), including 54% who were currently in care.

Indigenous Youth

"I want to try to find out more about my family history."

Among Indigenous youth who completed a survey, 60% were First Nations and the rest were predominantly Métis. Around half (47%) reported they had lived on a reserve at some point, and 29% sometimes spoke an Indigenous language at home (the rest never spoke an Indigenous language).

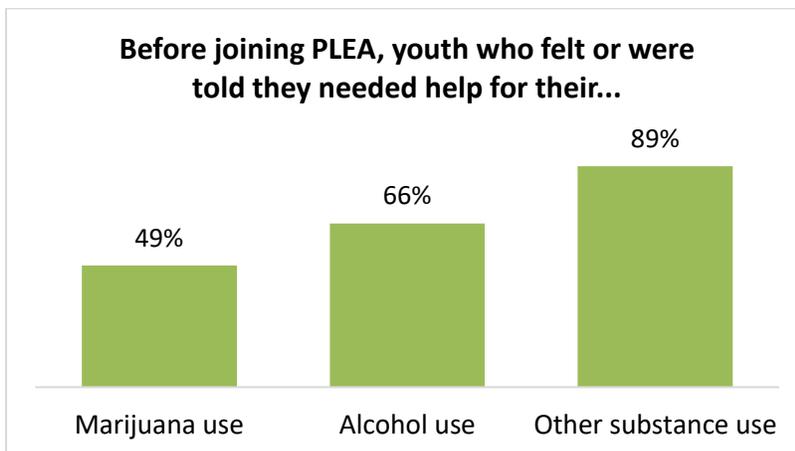
Around 4 in 10 Indigenous youth (39%) felt quite or very connected to their culture, while 55% felt a little connected. Only a couple felt not at all connected (vs. 43% of non-Indigenous youth).

Most Indigenous youth (74%) indicated they wanted to feel more connected to their culture (vs. 46% of non-Indigenous youth).

Health & Well-being

Sixty-three percent of survey respondents described their physical health as good or excellent (as opposed to fair or poor), and 55% described their mental health this way. Around 3 in 4 youth (73%) reported having a mental health condition (depression, anxiety, PTSD, etc.).

Also, the vast majority of youth indicated that before starting their PLEA program they had felt (or someone had told them) that they needed help for their substance use, including their use of alcohol, marijuana, and/or another substance. Most youth (57%) reported needing help with more than one substance.



Note. Youth could mark all responses that applied.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION & FEEDBACK

Evaluation participants explained that the Raising Hands initiative supported Indigenous youth in PLEA's Waypoint and Daughters & Sisters programs to manage their substance use and to improve their overall well-being. Staff said that between 30–40% of youth who attended Waypoint and Daughters & Sisters were Indigenous. Non-Indigenous participants also had opportunities to learn about Indigenous culture and to take part in cultural activities while at PLEA.

Youth focus group participants explained that the Indigenous navigator helped connect participants to culturally relevant supports, services, events, and activities. The navigator offered participants support while at PLEA and also supported Indigenous youth to transition to their home community after leaving their PLEA program.

Among youth who completed a survey while in Waypoint or Daughters & Sisters, 88% had accessed the navigator through PLEA. Among those who accessed the navigator, all Indigenous youth found the support helpful, as did the vast majority of non-Indigenous youth.

Staff and caregivers explained that the initiative supported participants to set meaningful goals and to engage in healthy activities as an alternative to substance use. For example, participants had access to a community centre where they could use the gym, pool and library, and had opportunities to spend time in nature (e.g., go on nature walks). They also had opportunities to take part in work placements.

Access to counselling was also important to help improve youth's overall well-being. In addition, youth were supported to gain life-skills, including communication, harm-reduction skills, and skills to find employment. Youth focus group participants said that in addition to the group activities and workshops that were offered, they received individualized support from program staff.

Staff and caregivers highlighted the importance of building a relationship with each youth and gaining an understanding of each youth's strengths and challenges. This enabled the navigator and other staff to better support youth to access needed services, to manage their substance use, and to support Indigenous youth's transition to their home community after leaving their PLEA program.

Comments from youth...

"The cultural navigator is super nice."

"PLEA and this program are making me feel very comfortable and I am enjoying the program."

"This is a super cool program."

"I am grateful for [this program]."

"All the workers are very involved and considerate. Will definitely recommend [this program] to others that are struggling."

Culturally-Relevant Supports

Staff and caregivers felt that to support Indigenous youth with substance use challenges, it was important to help them connect to their culture to the extent they felt comfortable doing so. Staff and youth who took part in the evaluation explained that the Raising Hands initiative offered participants a variety of ways to connect to their culture. These included opportunities to take part in cultural activities and workshops, such as pow wows, cedar brushing, blanket ceremonies, drum making, making moccasins, smudging, beading, looming, making medicine bags, painting a mural with an Indigenous artist, fishing, salmon smoking, going on nature hikes, and learning about edible plants.

Also, youth had opportunities to learn about Indigenous cultures by taking part in cultural events at PLEA and in the community, such as Cultural Awareness Week, Orange Shirt Day, the Changing of the Seasons feast, and events on National Indigenous Peoples Day.



Artwork co-created by youth participants at the farmer's market on National Indigenous Peoples Day.

Youth were also given opportunities to access Friendship Centres, and could connect with five Elders who were involved with the program. In addition, staff said the education curriculum covered Indigenous topics to help increase participants' knowledge of Indigenous history and culture.

Most youth who completed a survey while in their program (70%) had accessed an Elder through their program, and 94% found this support helpful. The vast majority of Indigenous youth who completed a follow-up survey had accessed an Elder through PLEA, and found the support helpful. Focus group participants noted that Elders were very involved in programming (e.g., they taught participants cedar brushing, how to make cedar bracelets, and how to make regalia).

Most youth (58%) who completed a survey while in their program reported that Indigenous cultural practices were offered through PLEA at least twice a month, including 13% who reported that cultural practices were offered once a week or more. The rest (42%) indicated these practices were offered once a month or less (none indicated these practices were never offered). The majority of youth (75%) took part in Indigenous cultural activities almost every time or every time they were offered, including 56% who took part every time they were offered. All

Indigenous youth who completed a follow-up survey had taken part in these cultural activities every time or almost every time they were offered.

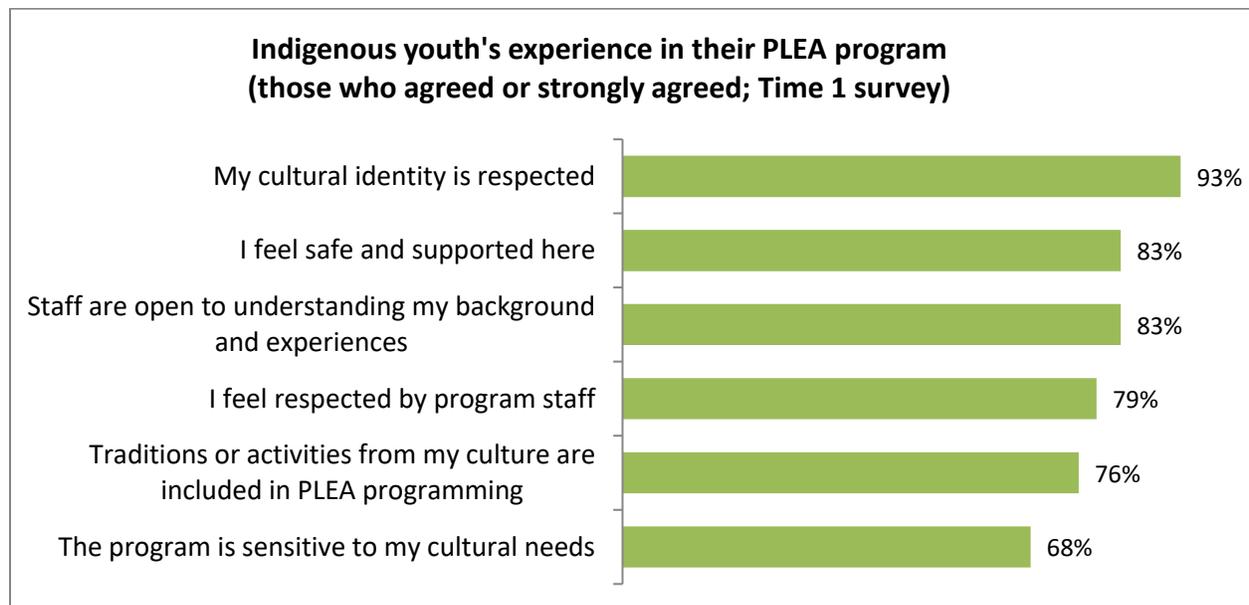
Focus groups participants said that cultural activities were offered whenever youth asked for them. Staff emphasized that it was important to be sensitive to youth's level of readiness to connect to culture. They felt that going at a pace at which youth felt comfortable (rather than introducing cultural components too quickly or intensely) helped to keep participants interested and engaged in learning about Indigenous culture.

Staff said it was important to provide an emotionally safe environment and to incorporate Indigenous culture in the physical environment, such as by having Indigenous art on the walls. They also acknowledged the territories at the start of meetings and workshops. Staff felt that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants benefitted from the cultural components of the program.

Youth in some focus groups said they appreciated that information about the Medicine Wheel was in an easily visible and accessible place in their program, and that they could use it as a tool to help them set their weekly goals.

The majority of Time 1 survey respondents felt their cultural identity was respected in their program; the program was sensitive to their cultural needs; and they felt safe and supported there. Most also felt that program staff respected them and were open to understanding their background and experiences. In addition, most Indigenous youth felt that traditions or activities from their culture were incorporated into PLEA programming (76% vs. 33% of non-Indigenous youth).

Some youth in the focus groups said that the safe and non-judgmental atmosphere at PLEA—and feeling that staff genuinely listened to them and were open to learning about their cultural background—helped them feel more comfortable in the program and with sharing their thoughts and feelings.



The vast majority of Indigenous youth who completed a follow-up survey agreed or strongly agreed with each statement pertaining to cultural safety and sensitivity at PLEA (92% for each item).

Youth's comments (surveys and focus groups)...

"I love how First Nations and many other cultures are respected and acknowledged here."

"I like that we do activities with the Elders and do things we might not have [otherwise] done."

"We got lots of cultural support from the staff."

"The navigator makes sure that youth have the right connections and supports."

"During cultural awareness week, we got to make cultural foods."

"There was a cultural potluck and we learned about other cultures during cultural awareness week."

"When [cultural activities] are available, I participate as much as I can."

Family Involvement & Community Connections

"This program helps us connect to family we haven't talked to in a while." – Youth participant

PLEA staff said that Raising Hands helped Indigenous youth to connect or reconnect with their family or larger community. In addition to youth being able to communicate with their family remotely through Skype, the program had funding for youth to visit their family, and for the family to visit the youth.

One purpose of family visits was for staff to support youth to establish or re-establish healthy relationships with family members. Youth focus group participants said that staff acted as mediators in conversations between youth and their families to facilitate safe and constructive communication. Youth felt the program was supporting them to learn how to communicate calmly and effectively with their family and others in the community. When family members visited a youth, the program covered the costs of transportation and accommodations, and youth were permitted to stay overnight at the hotel with their family.

Staff explained that a purpose of youth travelling to their home community to visit their family was to help them reconnect with their community to ensure they had supports in place (e.g., access to services, connection to an Elder) once they left their program and returned home. Staff and focus group participants said that when youth visited their family, it was typically for one night. However, the visits were sometimes longer, such as during the holiday season or if youth had to travel a far distance. The navigator accompanied the youth on these visits, and at first stayed with the youth for the entire meeting but gradually gave the youth increasingly more time on their own with their family.

Participants were supported to learn about their culture while attending their PLEA program, and could then take that knowledge back to their community during family visits and once they left the program. Staff recounted that some Indigenous youth had gifted the cultural crafts they had made in their program to family members, which helped them forge a connection between their experience in the program and their home community.

Among youth who completed a Time 1 survey, 85% indicated their family was involved with the program at least a little, including 46% who indicated quite a bit or a lot of family involvement. Most (60%) were satisfied with the amount their family was involved in the program, while 37% wanted their family to be more involved (a very small minority wanted their family to be less involved).

Among Indigenous youth who completed a Time 2 survey, the vast majority indicated their family was involved in the program at least a little, including 46% who reported quite a bit or a lot of family involvement. The majority were satisfied with their family's level of involvement.

Youth focus group participants felt that visiting their family while still in the program—and having supports in place for their family members to visit them— was instrumental in preparing them for their transition back to their home community.

In Year 2, staff had reported there was ample funding for family visits but there had been few requests from youth and their families to access this funding. In Year 3, staff said that while youth and their families had been supported to access this funding over the past year, it had not been accessed to the extent they had anticipated. Those funds were mostly used for Elders to travel from their community to PLEA, and for the navigator to travel to the youth's community to foster connections and to support the youth's reintegration after they left the program.

Supports after Leaving

“Culture and family relationships go a long way in providing structure.” –Program staff

Staff explained that before leaving the program, staff supported youth to develop a transition plan to ensure they had structure and goals in place when they left. For example, staff might help youth with setting up appointments to see a therapist or family counsellor in their community; with securing a gym pass; accessing employment, volunteer opportunities, or training programs (e.g., FoodSafe, first-aid); learning an Indigenous language; and/or pursuing their education.

Further, after Indigenous youth left their PLEA program, the navigator maintained contact with them and supported them to reintegrate into their community, if they were interested in receiving this support. Youth were assisted in accessing culturally relevant activities, services and supports (e.g., friendship centre), as well as other supports to help them feel connected to the community and to promote their health and well-being.

Indigenous youth who completed a follow-up survey were asked an open-ended question about which community supports or services (if any) their PLEA navigator had helped them access. They identified receiving help to access a status card, drug and alcohol counselling, Indigenous friendship centres, healing circles, supportive adults in the Indigenous community (including Elders), and support to return to school.

Staff Training

“The training has helped in understanding the cultures, celebrations, and territories, and not lumping everyone together.” –Program staff

Staff who took part in the evaluation said that all new staff were provided with training on cultural sensitivity, in addition to topics such as substance use, trauma-informed care, and FASD. Also, cultural sensitivity and cultural awareness workshops were offered through PLEA on a yearly basis. In addition, all caregivers were involved in training about Orange Shirt Day and National Indigenous Peoples Day.

Staff and caregivers said the training they attended through PLEA helped them become more aware of Indigenous history (e.g., residential schools) and intergenerational trauma. They also learned about different cultural practices and traditions among different Indigenous bands and regions. They felt the training helped them gain a better understanding of the youth they worked with. The training also gave them ideas for cultural practices they could incorporate into programming. For example, while smudging was often practiced in their program, the training sessions introduced cedar brushing to them, which they then added to youth’s programming. The training sessions also enhanced staff’s understanding of how to open cultural ceremonies and how to acknowledge the territories.

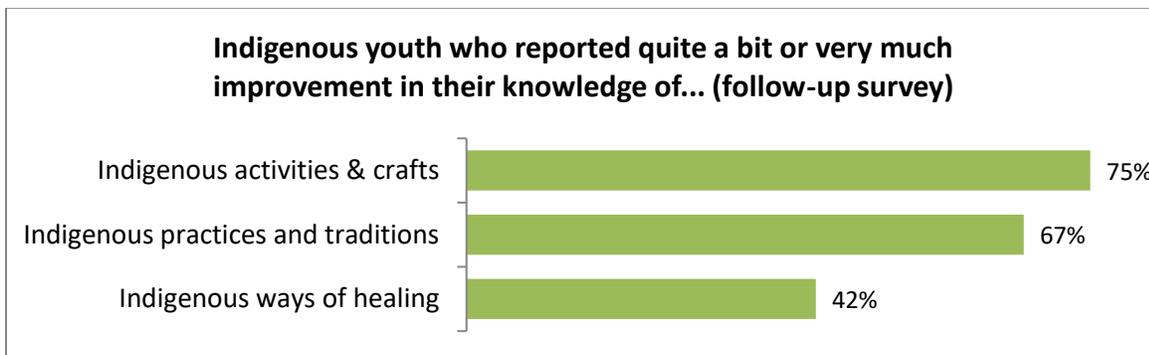
OUTCOMES

Culture-Related

Enhanced knowledge & understanding

Most youth who completed a survey while at PLEA (74%) felt their involvement in the program helped quite a bit or very much to improve their knowledge of Indigenous activities and crafts. Just over half (54%) felt their involvement helped to improve their understanding of Indigenous traditions, and 50% felt they gained a better understanding of Indigenous ways of healing.

All Indigenous youth who completed a follow-up survey felt their involvement in their PLEA program had helped, at least a little, to increase their knowledge in these areas. Also, in response to an open-ended question, some indicated they had gained a deeper understanding of their culture and identity.



Indigenous focus group participants said that taking part in cultural programming through PLEA helped them gain a better understanding of their families. For example, they had attended a workshop on residential schools which gave them insight into some of their family members' experiences. Also, Indigenous story books were made available in the program, and youth appreciated reading these stories because they learned about Indigenous perspectives, including on topics such as the death of loved ones. They added that learning more about Indigenous culture helped them to relate to others, and particularly their Indigenous family members.

Staff said the cultural activities and workshops had a positive impact on both Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth participants. For example, non-Indigenous youth benefitted from learning about Indigenous history and cultures, and demonstrated more understanding and sensitivity toward their Indigenous peers. Similarly, non-Indigenous youth who took part in focus groups said that learning about Indigenous culture had increased their awareness of different cultures, and that learning about residential schools had a profound impact on them and had expanded their perspective on history and discrimination.

"I learned more about my culture and myself and what it means to be Aboriginal" –Time 2 survey respondent

"My [sibling] is starting to take part in her culture and I get to help. It's really cool to learn together." –Focus group participant

Increased participation in cultural activities

In addition to enhanced knowledge and understanding, most youth felt their involvement in the program contributed to greater participation in cultural activities. For example, 63% of those who completed a Time 1 survey reported quite a bit or very much improvement in this area.

Youth in the focus groups said they had been introduced to cultural activities at PLEA which they had never previously taken part in, and some commented they would continue taking part in these activities after they left PLEA (e.g. smudging). Similarly, staff who were interviewed noted that many participants had expressed interest in continuing to take part in cultural activities after they left their PLEA program.

All Indigenous youth who completed a follow-up survey reported that their involvement with PLEA helped to improve their participation in cultural activities at least a little, including 92% who felt it helped quite a bit or very much.

Connection to culture

Staff felt that Indigenous youth's connection to their culture increased because of their involvement in Raising Hands, due to learning more about their history, language, traditions, and cultural identity. Staff had observed a shift in some Indigenous youth, from feeling disconnected from their culture to gradually embracing it, as a result of the cultural activities and supports offered through PLEA.

Staff said some youth also developed positive relationships with Elders affiliated with the program, which helped to further enhance their connection to their culture.

In line with staff's observations, most youth who completed a survey at PLEA felt their involvement in the program contributed, at least a little, to a greater connection to their culture (83% of Indigenous youth vs. 57% of non-Indigenous youth).

At follow-up, most Indigenous youth (62%) felt quite a bit or very much connected to their culture, compared to a minority who felt this way at Time 1. Also, 69% wanted to feel even more connected to their culture.

Staff's comments...

"[Connecting to their culture] has provided youth with a sense of inclusion in being a part of something that they have not known before."

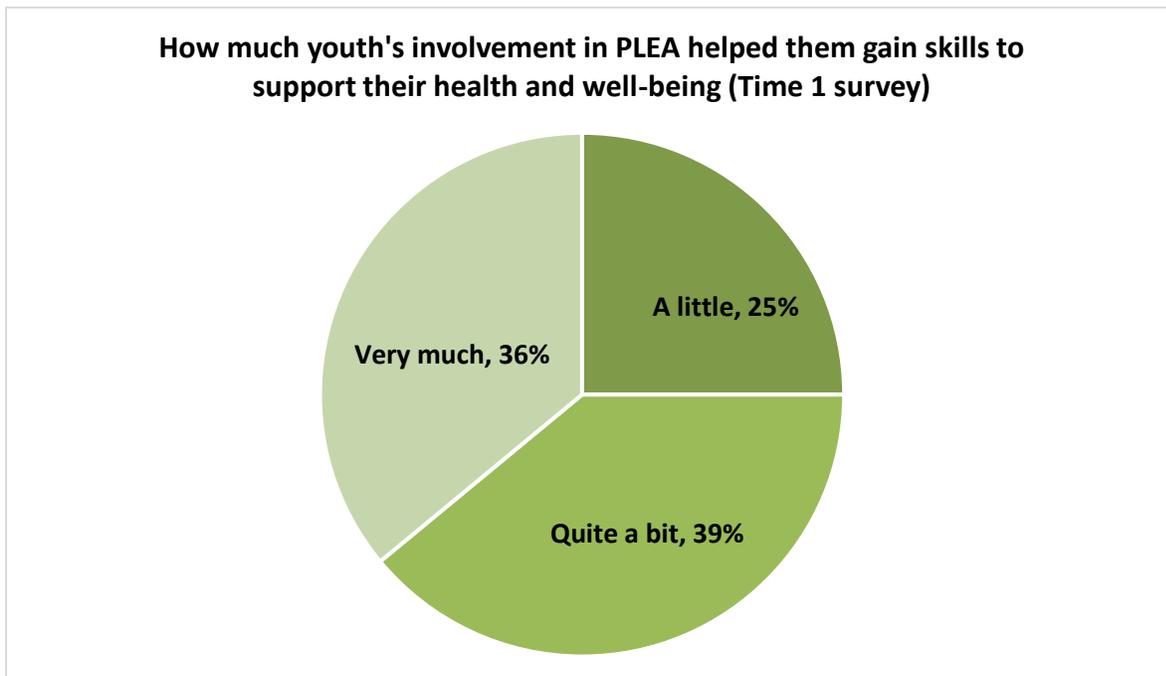
"The youth have been able to gain a greater understanding of where they came from.... It's like finding the missing puzzle piece."

"Connecting to their culture has caused major growth and self-awareness and is something they can carry with them for the rest of their life."

Health & Well-Being

Staff said the Raising Hands initiative helped Indigenous youth to feel proud of their cultural identity, such as by introducing positive role models including Elders. This process helped to improve youth's sense of self-worth and self-confidence. Staff also said the harm-reduction supports were helping youth to manage their substance use and improve their well-being.

All youth who completed a Time 1 survey felt their experience in their PLEA program was helping them, at least a little, to gain skills to support their health and well-being, including 75% who felt the program was helping them quite a bit or very much in this area. Similarly, most Indigenous youth who completed a follow-up survey (82%) felt this way.



When asked to explain, survey respondents indicated they received a range of supports through the program which fostered their health and well-being. These included learning skills to reduce their substance use and improve their healthy coping skills; support to develop a range of other skills (e.g., communication and stress management); access to counselling; access to physical activities which provided them with healthy alternatives to substance use; access to needed services in the community; and supports around education, employment, and housing.

How youth's involvement in their PLEA program helped them gain skills to support their health & well-being (Time 1 and Time 2 surveys)...

Health-related supports

"The program is helping me by showing me ways to improve my mental and physical health."

"The practices I learned helped because I felt more connected with my self and really helped with my emotional well-being."

"They do self-care weeks and lessons on it."

Support around substance use

"Helped me find ways to deal with triggers, helped my decision making, harm reduction."

"Helps gain skills to not use substances."

"It has helped me be sober, off of all substances."

"I'm sober now, and want to stay sober."

"We explore drug use and reasons why we might have used + counselling."

Development of skills & coping strategies

"I'm learning healthy ways to cope with anger and stress, and also how to overcome triggers."

"Helped me find solutions to my problems, other than drugs and fighting."

"Learning lots of strategies and new ways to cope and express myself through communication."

"Helps prepare us for the real world / confidence."

"I learned how to read and do crafts."

"Stress management."

"Beading helps me be calm and helps build patience."

Education & employment supports

"Reintegrating me back into my schooling, and finding structure in my day-to-day life."

"I got to learn new skills and did some school."

"They are helping me look for a better path in life. They are also helping me with finding a job."

Access to services & activities

"Staff helped me access a youth clinic."

"Access to ID and things."

"Going to the rec center and doing P.E. keeps me active."

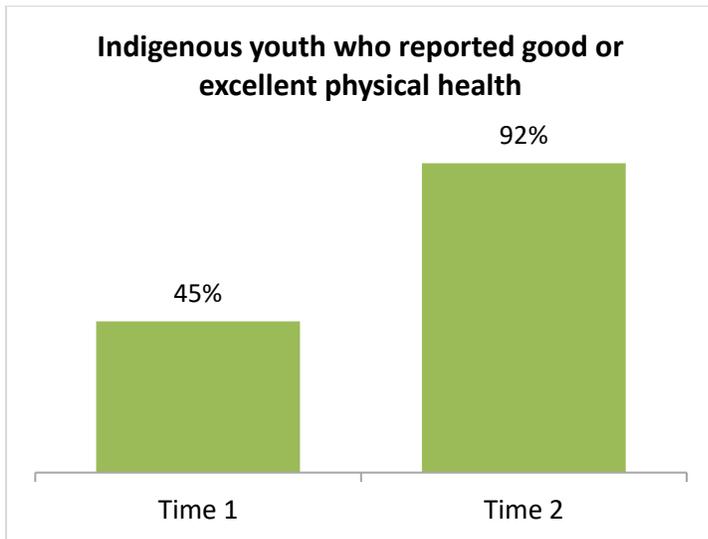
"I'm doing yoga, and I'm able to go to the gym."

Other supports offered through PLEA

"Helping with housing, CSW hrs, letter that needs to be done."

Most Indigenous youth (62%) reported good or excellent mental health at Time 2, compared to a minority at Time 1. Further, at Time 2, 73% felt their involvement with PLEA contributed to their improved mental health quite a bit or very much.

Also, there were improvements over time in Indigenous youth's ratings of their physical health, and most youth at Time 2 (82%) attributed these improvements to their involvement with PLEA.



Some of what Indigenous youth had learned through their involvement with PLEA (Time 2 survey)...

“How to manage cravings & triggers.”

“Learned ways to deal with anger, stress, anxiety and others, learned healthy lifestyles, and learned how to be independent.”

“I learned that my actions have consequences, and I need to change my ways of life to live in this world.”

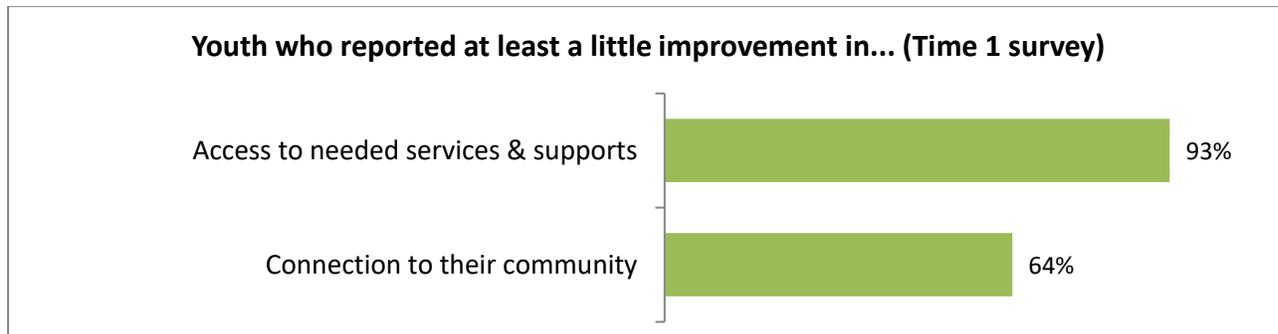
“Lots of tools, such as life skills and harm reduction.”

“I learned how to succeed in life without substances.”

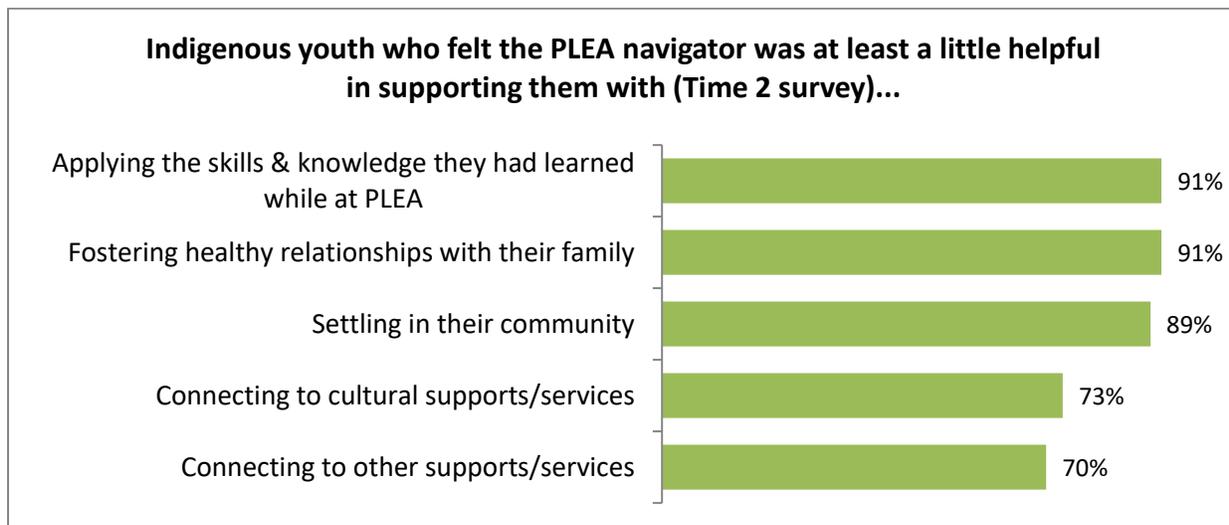
Community Supports & Connections

Most youth who completed a survey while in the program reported that their program supported them to build healthy connections with their family and community, including 71% of Indigenous youth who felt this way. Similarly, 83% of Indigenous youth who completed a Time 2 survey felt the program supported them to build healthy connections with their family and community. Some focus group participants explained that their PLEA program helped them develop stronger relationships with their family by providing, or helping them find, family counselling and by supporting visits to their home community.

Youth who completed a Time 1 survey also reported greater access to needed supports and services in the community, as well as a greater sense of connection to their community, because of their involvement with PLEA.



Indigenous youth were asked on the follow-up survey how helpful the PLEA navigator was in helping them reintegrate into their community after leaving Daughters & Sisters or Waypoint. Most reported the navigator was at least a little helpful in supporting them to settle in their community; in helping them apply the skills and knowledge they had learned while in their PLEA program; supporting healthy relationships between them and their family; connecting them to cultural supports; and in connecting them to other supports or services in the community.



At Time 2, Indigenous youth were asked if there were any supports they had not accessed but would have liked to access with help from the navigator. They all indicated there were no additional supports they would have wanted to access, and some added that they were satisfied with all the supports they had received.

Outcomes for Staff

“I’ve learned about smudging, pow wows, and the significance of celebrations and other activities.” –Program staff

Staff who took part in the evaluation said they had learned a lot about Indigenous culture and history through their involvement with Raising Hands and the training they took part in. Their

increased knowledge in turn helped them connect with Indigenous program participants in a more authentic way, and helped them understand how to better support Indigenous youth and their families. They added that there was always more to learn and understand.

A comment from an Indigenous navigator who took part in the evaluation was that creating a bond with youth through culture was a positive experience for them. They also enjoyed sharing parts of Indigenous culture with non-Indigenous program participants.

Broader Outcomes for PLEA

Staff felt Raising Hands helped build capacity within PLEA. For example, they identified the initiative's connections with Elders and other Indigenous partners as very beneficial to not only program participants but also to the agency as a whole. Staff said the Elders who got involved with Raising Hands were now also involved in other PLEA programs and advisory committees, which strengthened the agency as a whole. The agency also adopted the practice of acknowledging territories at events and having a Chief or Elder open the events. PLEA received calls from other agencies asking for guidance on working with Indigenous youth.

Staff felt the Raising Hands initiative was viewed favourably in Indigenous communities, and they noted an increase in referrals for Indigenous youth which they attributed to the initiative's culturally sensitive practices and framework. They added that having an Indigenous support system embedded within Waypoint and Daughters & Sisters contributed to families and youth feeling more comfortable accessing these PLEA programs.

In addition, staff said their experience with Raising Hands contributed to the broader agency becoming more mindful about reaching out and connecting with Elders; integrating cultural activities into programming; and incorporating cultural supports into youth's transition plans.

Staff's comments...

"Connecting with Elders has been a huge help."

"[We] have been able to reach out to other programs at PLEA and share cultural aspects with them – like smudging."

"Having an Aboriginal support system helps make families and youth feel more comfortable [attending the PLEA program]."

Other Outcomes

Some staff said that youth's experience in the program had a positive "ripple effect" when they returned to their community. They spoke specifically about youth finding employment after leaving PLEA, and some taking jobs that focused on helping others who experienced similar challenges to those the program participants had faced.

SUCCESSSES, CHALLENGES & LESSONS LEARNED

Evaluation participants discussed the successes and challenges associated with Raising Hands, and the lessons they had learned through their involvement.

Navigator Role

Staff and youth recognized that the Indigenous navigator role was pivotal to the initiative's success. Staff said that at the start, it had been a challenge to find Indigenous candidates who were an appropriate fit for the role, and this role had not been filled by individuals who identified as Indigenous. However, in the second and third years of the initiative, the navigator position was filled and maintained by Indigenous staff.

Staff acknowledged that non-Indigenous people filling Indigenous roles was problematic and had led to some resistance among youth participants. This experience highlighted the importance of Indigenous staff working with Indigenous youth, and particularly in the role of navigator.

Youth's comments...

"I feel that an Aboriginal support worker is very important and I am very glad [they are] available."

"The navigator is...someone we can get along with... Having people you can relate to is important in programs like this."

Relationship-Focused

Staff and caregivers emphasized the importance of developing a trusting relationship with each youth participant. They added it was important to exercise patience when trying to develop these relationships, because building trust can take time.

Indigenous youth who completed a Time 2 survey identified the relationships they had with staff, and particularly the navigator, as what they liked most about the program. Staff explained that feeling connected to staff while attending Waypoint or Daughters & Sisters increased youth's likelihood of experiencing successful outcomes.

Youth's comments...

"What I like most are the bonds and relationships."

"It's a safe place to talk and have someone listen to you."

"I liked the support staff."

"I liked the one-to-ones."

Trauma-Informed

While staff underscored the importance of developing a trusting relationship with youth participants, they recognized that these relationships can take time to develop in part because of youth's past trauma and loss.

Staff felt a strength of the program was its trauma-informed approach, including an understanding that youth's behaviour may stem from traumatic experiences and the impacts of intergenerational trauma. Staff valued the trauma-informed training they took part in, and felt it was important for substance use treatment programs and agencies to invest in such training to support the well-being of youth participants.

Youth focus group participants appreciated that staff were open to understanding their family histories, including their family members' traumas and substance use challenges stemming from the impacts of colonization. Youth highlighted the importance of staff in substance use treatment programs understanding the effects that loss and trauma can have on young people's well-being, and that some youth might use substances as a way to cope. They felt this understanding helped support program participants to improve their overall health.

Holistic & Strengths-Based

"It's a program that plays to youth's strengths." –Program staff

Staff felt that Raising Hands allowed Daughters & Sisters and Waypoint to expand the supports that could be offered to program participants. This expansion contributed to addressing youth wellness in a more holistic way (e.g., inclusion of culture), which they saw as a strength of the initiative. Staff and caregivers felt the holistic approach, as well as a focus on youth's strengths, were optimal to successfully support Indigenous youth.

Cultural Activities

The opportunity for program participants to take part in cultural activities and to connect with culture was seen as a strength of the program. Staff felt that Indigenous youth were able to gain a better understanding of their background and of themselves through this process.

They pointed out that not all Indigenous youth wanted to be involved in cultural activities or to connect to their culture, and it was important to "not push culture" onto youth and to be respectful of their goals and wishes. Focus group participants appreciated that taking part in cultural activities was an optional part of their program, and felt that cultural activities should never be imposed on anyone. Participants also appreciated that when they requested a cultural activity, their requests were listened to and acted upon.

Involvement of Elders and other Partners

Staff underscored the importance of reaching out to Elders and others in Indigenous communities to build partnerships and work collaboratively to best support Indigenous program participants.

Staff said they initially had challenges with recruiting Elders who were an appropriate fit for the program, and particularly healthy Elders who knew how to work with youth. They were grateful

for the Elders who ultimately partnered with the program, and recognized the importance of compensating Elders (offering honoraria) as a demonstration of their gratitude and respect.

Staff identified the involvement of Elders and other Indigenous partners as a strength of the initiative. Staff felt their involvement introduced cultural vibrancy and authenticity, which benefited the youth, staff, and agency as a whole.

Alternatives to Substance Use

“It’s important to provide youth with a safe environment away from triggers, an entertaining environment, and a friendly environment.” –Program staff

Staff felt the program was successful in helping youth reduce their substance use, in part by offering them healthy alternatives to using substances. Staff said these alternatives should be meaningful and enjoyable to youth, and should be activities that help reduce their boredom. Examples they provided included access to recreational activities, connecting to nature (e.g., through nature walks, finding edible plants, fishing), work placements, and volunteer opportunities.

Youth focus group participants also discussed the importance of keeping busy by taking part in activities which they found personally meaningful and fun (e.g., cultural practices, art, yoga).

Reintegration

Staff said that the ability to support youth after leaving Waypoint or Daughters & Sisters, when they returned to their home community, was a strength of the program and something that PLEA had little capacity to do before the existence of Raising Hands.

However, an unexpected challenge was that not all communities were supportive of the reintegration process. Staff came to realize that some communities were struggling with their own challenges and it was unrealistic to expect those communities to have the capacity to support youth’s reintegration. They added that it took time to build relationships in the community to support youth’s reintegration, and it was an ongoing process.

In addition, while outreach support was available to youth participants who wanted it—including in Northern BC and other remote locations across the province—not all Indigenous youth requested this support after leaving their PLEA program. Staff noted that youth who were more engaged and felt connected to staff while in the program were more likely to access the navigator’s support after they left the program. This in turn contributed to youth maintaining successful outcomes in their home community (e.g., reduced substance use, improved overall well-being).

EVALUATION PARTICIPANTS' SUGGESTIONS

Throughout the three years of the project, evaluation participants were asked if they had suggestions for Raising Hands, including anything else the initiative could do to support Indigenous youth to connect to their culture. Many indicated they had no suggestions because they were very satisfied with how the initiative was carried out.

Others offered suggestions for the initiative. For example, in Year 2, staff and caregivers suggested that more could be done to increase collaborations and partnerships outside of PLEA (including with more Elders across the province). In Year 3, staff said the program had developed more of these collaborations over the past year, including with Elders from various communities and with partner agencies. For example, PLEA collaborated with a local school district, community partners, Elders, and other Indigenous supports to deliver an agency-wide event on Orange Shirt Day.

Earlier in the Raising Hands initiative, there was a suggestion that more field trips could be offered to program participants, and that participants could be taken to a greater number of community events and activities to support their involvement in the community, if they so desired. In Year 3, staff reported that youth were offered additional opportunities to take part in community events and activities. For example, on National Indigenous Peoples Day, PLEA had a booth at the farmer's market where youth could take part in an art project and other cultural activities.

Also, some youth had suggested earlier in the initiative that there should be an option for participants to visit a sweat lodge. In Year 3, staff explained that the program responded to youth's feedback by partnering with an Elder and Knowledge Keeper to build a frame for a sweat lodge. Staff took the time to ensure that Indigenous cultural protocol was followed in building the frame, and said that a sweat would take place in the near future.

Youth participants appreciated that cultural activities were offered to them if they asked. However, they suggested that staff should provide more information on the cultural activities that were available. They explained that Indigenous youth may have gaps in their knowledge of cultural activities and practices, and would therefore be unaware of their options and what to ask for.

Some Indigenous youth said that while they appreciated that Indigenous cultural activities were offered through PLEA, none of those activities reflected traditions from their specific band. They wished they could see their specific cultural traditions and teachings incorporated into PLEA programming.

Staff appreciated the cultural sensitivity training they had taken part in. They suggested that future training could offer more in-depth information to provide them with an even greater understanding of the issues.

In the Year 2 evaluation, staff suggested that Raising Hands should receive core funding and continue to operate beyond the three years it had been funded for, given its benefits to Indigenous youth. However, PLEA was unable to secure additional funding to support the full initiative moving forward. Staff said they would carry out a modified version of the initiative, with the limited funds that were available.

SUMMARY & CONCLUSION

Findings in this final evaluation report for Raising Hands indicated that the initiative targeted the intended group of youth. All had been involved in the justice system and the vast majority identified having challenges with substance use before joining their PLEA program.

This report built on results from the first two interim evaluation reports (from March 2018 and 2019). Youth participants continued to have opportunities to take part in cultural activities and events, and to be connected to cultural supports and services if they so desired. Further, in response to suggestions in the interim evaluation reports, PLEA expanded those opportunities for youth over the course of the initiative. PLEA also identified areas that needed strengthening, such as broadening their partnerships and collaborations, and made improvements in those areas to best support youth participants.

Most Indigenous youth who took part in the evaluation felt the services and supports they received through PLEA were culturally relevant and sensitive to their needs, and felt safe and supported in their program. Further, most reported improved knowledge and understanding of Indigenous activities and traditions; increased engagement in cultural activities; and greater connection to their culture because of the supports and activities they accessed through Raising Hands. Evaluation participants explained that feeling a sense of connection to their culture contributed to improved overall well-being.

Indigenous youth not only reported improved mental health which they attributed to their involvement in PLEA, but there were also improvements over time in their physical health ratings. Findings suggested that enhanced health and well-being among youth was facilitated through PLEA's holistic approach which emphasized the importance of offering participants supports in a range of areas, based on their individual needs and strengths. These included learning life-skills and skills to reduce their substance use; access to counselling and other services; support with their education and employment; and access to physical activities.

Most youth who completed a survey felt that program staff supported them to build healthy connections with their family and larger community. The family visits that youth participated in through PLEA contributed to developing healthier relationships with their family and to a smoother transition to their community when they left the program. These family visits also likely contributed to the greater sense of community connectedness which youth reported, as did the navigator's efforts to connect youth to cultural supports in the community.

Indigenous youth who completed a follow-up survey felt the navigator was helpful in supporting them to reintegrate into the community after leaving their PLEA program. Staff explained that youth who chose to access outreach support from the navigator after leaving PLEA were those who felt connected to staff and the program while attending Waypoint or Daughters & Sisters. They also noted that feeling connected to staff while attending PLEA increased youth's likelihood of experiencing successful outcomes. These findings underscore the importance of PLEA's approach to taking the time to develop trusting relationships with youth participants, because of the positive impact these relationships can have.

Evaluation participants identified positive outcomes beyond youth participants, such as enhanced understanding, among staff and caregivers, of Indigenous history and practices. Moreover, staff felt Raising Hands was beneficial to the agency as a whole. They said the initiative contributed to PLEA becoming more mindful and intentional about making connections

with Elders and other Indigenous supports; integrating cultural activities into programming; and incorporating cultural supports into youth's transition plans.

A limitation of the evaluation was that no Indigenous youth were interested in taking part in a follow-up interview after leaving their PLEA program. Also, only youth who were still connected with the navigator completed a follow-up survey, and therefore feedback was not captured from youth who chose to not access outreach support from the navigator after returning to their home community. However, the mixed-method approach of youth surveys (baseline and follow-up), youth focus groups at PLEA, and interviews with staff, managers, and caregivers helped to identify the initiative's strengths and successes, as well as its challenges and lessons learned.

The evaluation findings indicated that Raising Hands was successful in meeting the expected outcomes. PLEA staff were responsive to evaluation feedback throughout the initiative, which undoubtedly contributed to the initiative's success.

PLEA will continue to carry out a modified version of Raising Hands with the limited funds that are available, given the positive impacts of the initiative. However, receiving additional funding would allow PLEA to offer Indigenous youth the level of cultural supports they need to increase their likelihood of experiencing sustained benefits.