EVENT REPORT

Indigenous Histories and Futures in Healthcare
A local & relational learning opportunity for OHTs along the Grand River, *September 2026*

Indigenous Histories and Futures in Healthcare was an event that took place in September 2026 at the Woodland Cultural Centre in Brantford, Ontario. Staff and patient advisors from four Ontario Health Teams (OHTs), representatives from nearby First Nations, health leaders from organizations serving urban Indigenous communities across the region, and others gathered together to learn from each other and build deeper and stronger relationships.

INTENT

Since January 2025, the Greater Hamilton Health Network (GHHN) OHT has met regularly with the Indigenous Well Being Advisory Circle in the pursuit of a strong ally partnership. With a desire to shift Indigenous Cultural Safety Training away from a 'one-and-done' asynchronous webinars and towards more locally-grounded, relationship-based ways of advancing Reconciliation, the GHHN met with Circle to develop what became this half-day multi-OHT event.

In addition to advancing local, in-person relationships, the event intended to address the Truth & Reconciliation Commission's eighteenth Call to Action: acknowledging the role of previous health policies in the current state of Indigenous health in Canada, and to recognize and implement the inherent rights of Indigenous people under Canadian law and treaties. Participants and organizers both expressed a hope that other Calls to Action and relevant health topics can be addressed at future iterations of this gathering.

In their work of guiding the development of this event, the Indigenous Well Being Advisory Circle recommended that the GHHN invite other neighbouring Ontario Health Teams to the event to share in the learnings and to build relationships across OHT geographies. As such, the event transcended typical health system boundaries and brought together staff, executives, and patient advisors from the southernmost end of the Grand River: Greater Hamilton (GHHN-OHT), Brantford Brant Norfolk (BBN-OHT), Niagara (NOHT-ÉSON), and Kitchener-Waterloo (KW4 OHT).



SETTING

'Place' was an important and recurring theme of the event. The four OHTs who participated in this event are all situated along the southernmost end of the Grand River: an area that holds profound importance for Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe peoples. Agreements such as the Kaswentha/Two-Row Wampum, the Covenant Chain, the Nanfan Treaty, and the Haldimand Proclamation bind settler and Indigenous Nations in this location. The Grand River transcends the geographic boundaries of the four OHTs, public health units, and health service provider catchments participating in this event and reminds us of our connection to each other and to the land.

The event also took place at the Woodland Cultural Centre (WCC), the site of renewal and a milestone in building a future where Haudenosaunee people will speak their language, know and practice their culture, and share their history. As the former site of the Mohawk Institute Residential School now transformed into a space to preserve, promote and strengthen Indigenous languages, culture, art and history, the WCC provided a space for these OHTs to gather with First Nations and Indigenous health leaders to work towards reconciliation and deeper relationships.

GUIDES & TOPICS

Welcome

Joe Antone, Director of Indigenous Health with Ontario Health West and Central regions, opened in a good way with a thanksgiving address, welcoming participants and speaking to the impact of meeting at the Woodland Cultural Centre. Joe spoke about Ontario Health's Indigenous Leaders Model, including the ways that several of the strategic petals of this OH West Region Indigenous Health Strategy align closely with the heart of this half day event: taking relational approaches to advancing Indigenous health, braiding Western and Indigenous health systems, and investing in Indigenous health in Indigenous hands.

Further information:
Ontario Health West Indigenous Health Strategy

Indigenous Histories in Healthcare

As the Canada Research Chair in Colonial Histories and Indigenous Futures, Dr. Vanessa Watts (McMaster University) provided the keynote regarding the legacies and histories of Indigenous community interactions with colonial health systems, speaking in particular to her ongoing project, *Re-Neighbouring as Reconciliation: Indigenous Stories of Resistance*. Tracing a history of local institutions like the Mountain Sanatorium (Hamilton, 1906-1961), the Lady Willingdon Hospital (Oshweken, 1927-1968), and the Mohawk Institute (Brantford, 1831-1970), Dr. Watts spoke about experiences of relocation and resettlement; ownership, possession, access, and control over things like physical objects, personal narratives, and historical records; interactions between Inuit and Haudenosaunee communities; and the impacts that these institutions continue to have on Indigenous communities in our shared region today.



Further information:
Re-neighbouring as Reconciliation: Indigenous Stories of Resistance
How one research project is 're-neighbouring' two Indigenous communities

Indigenous Health in Indigenous Hands

Janet Gasparelli, Executive Director of De dwa da dehs nye>s (DAHC), spoke about that organization's approach to providing Indigenous-led, culturally-safe care to Indigenous communities in the region. As Janet spoke about the work that led up to developing DAHC's 2025-2028 strategic plan, participants were encouraged to reflect on the demands that Indigenous-led organizations face in participating in multiple OHT planning regions. The role of OHTs in shared advocacy towards funding for Indigenous-led projects that help meet health and social needs of Indigenous communities across the region was emphasized, as was the leading role that Indigenous organizations should play in work that impacts their communities.



Janet, who also holds the current chair of the Indigenous Health Network (IHN), and Jennifer Dockstader, a participant at this event today and past chair of the IHN, spoke about the need for a

continued shift from traditional consultative OHT partnerships to Indigenous-led partnerships: with shared leadership, dedicated resources, and community-defined priorities.

Further information:

De dwa da dehs nye>s Strategic Plan 2025-2028
Indigenous Health Network

Expanding What is Possible

Dr. Johanne McCarthy, Director and Lead for Indigenous Health at St. Joseph's Healthcare Hamilton (SJHH), shared many practical resources for OHTs to use in working towards a healthcare system that facilitates Indigenous leadership, two-eyed-healing, and wholistic inclusion. OHTs were encouraged to consider ways of bringing people, place, and pedagogy together to advance Indigenous inclusion. Dr. McCarthy built on previous discussions about how extractive partnerships limit the capacity of Indigenous leaders and organizations, and the role of OHTs in hiring Indigenous people to lead health system work: "Hiring more Indigenous people doesn't simply allow us to do more work; it allows us to see more of the work that needs to be done."

Further information:

SJHH: Indigenous Health Team



Upholding Indigenous Inherent Rights through self-determination

Hamilton Public Health offered an example of upholding Indigenous Inherent Rights, as Terry Ramirez, Indigenous Health Strategy Specialist, spoke about the development of the Indigenous Well Being Advisory Circle and the implementation of HPH's Indigenous Health Strategy. The Circle was highlighted as a key solution to reducing engagement burden on Indigenous communities and to provide a more cohesive approach to Indigenous consultation and guidance. Terry spoke about how the Circle has demonstrated success already, and may soon be in a stage to provide guidance to communities beyond Hamilton. Terry gave concrete recommendations about how OHTs can support Indigenous Inherent Rights as a foundational principle in their work with Indigenous communities.

Further information:

Nothing For Us, Without Us: HPH Indigenous Health Strategy



Closing

Bryan Herechuk, Director of Health & Wellbeing at Six Nations of the Grand River, offered words of closing, encouraging participants to reflect on the purpose of their engagement in this space – why this work matters – and to consider concrete steps for building on the learning today in ways that tangibly advance Indigenous health in each of the four OHT regions.

Further information:

What We Carry for Our Ancestors: Intergenerational Healing

FEEDBACK

The seventy-one attendees provided written feedback about the three overarching objectives of the event through Likert scales and open text. There was unanimous agreement that the event contributed to a deeper understanding of the historical context of Indigenous interactions with colonial health systems. 100% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the event contributed to a better understanding of the impact of previous Canadian government policies, including residential schools, on the health of Indigenous communities around the Grand River. Participants shared that the presentations were highly informative and contributed to vivid and practical understandings of truly local experiences with health systems. Feedback pointed to the value in learning more about local histories as OHTs continue the work of health system change today.

Participants overwhelmingly agreed that the event was an opportunity for knowledge mobilization, with 87% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that they had gained a richer understanding of how OHTs can partner with Indigenous communities to advance population health under a framework of self-determination. Specific projects like primary care expansion, access, attachment, recruitment, and retention; digital health; central intake; governance; and engagement were all highlighted as practical areas that would benefit from this practical understanding of 'Indigenous Health in Indigenous Hands.'

The event was also a strong network development opportunity. 92% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the event was an opportunity to build deeper relationships within and between Ontario Health Teams, First Nations, and Indigenous communities situated along the Grand River. Many shared that the event was a good opportunity for seeing old friends and strengthening the relationships. On a broader level the group discussed the importance of "polishing the chain": a reference to the Covenant Chain agreement that articulated how the Haudenosaunee and the British should come together annually to "strengthen and brighten" the silver chain that would link settlers to the Haudenosaunee Tree of Peace.

LOOKING FORWARD

The feedback shared by participants overwhelmingly supported planning for a similar event in 2027, with suggested topics for future events including specific examples of successful relationship-building between Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations; Indigenous data and digital health; and more examples of Indigenous-led healthcare initiatives. There were suggestions of expanding the event to include additional OHTs along the Grand River, such as Cambridge North-Dumfries and Guelph-Wellington OHTs.

Many thanks to the staff at the Woodland Cultural Centre for welcoming us into this important place and creating space for learning, reflection, and relationship. Sincere thanks to our caterer, Clint Atkins at CA Culinary Services, for nourishing participants throughout the gathering. Gratitude to the leaders of the participating Ontario Health Teams for their collaboration and commitment to building stronger relationships across the Grand River, and to the participants in their engagement with the speakers and willingness to learn. The Indigenous Well Being Advisory Circle guided the development of this event: a thanks to every member of the Circle, and a hope for continued collaboration and partnership in the future.