

INTERVIEW WITH

Sherry Parsons, St. Mary's Veterans Memorial Health Centre

Spokesperson for the Radiant Spirits Breast Cancer Project, recipient of the 2025 CCRA Award for Excellence in a First Nations, Inuit, or Métis Community Project



The Radiant Spirits Breast Cancer Project initiative was launched in October 2024 to improve breast cancer screening access for Indigenous women in the Sitansisk Wolastoqey (St. Mary's First Nation) community. Sherry Parsons, the Community Health Coordinator, played a central role in organizing the initiative, including a culturally grounded Lunch and Learn and Pink Party on October 3, 2024. This event provided education on early detection and breast health. Dedicated mammogram screening days followed at Oromocto Public Hospital, supporting over 23 Indigenous women, with transportation offered via the St. Mary's van. The initiative was supported by key partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous health care stakeholders and aligned with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action. It included community-driven planning, trauma-informed education, and culturally safe outreach strategies. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with growing interest from other First Nations communities. Outcomes include increased screening rates, strengthened trust in health services, and momentum for annual replication. An evaluation and community survey is planned to identify future improvements and sustainability strategies.

In your opinion, how can the lessons learned through the Radiant Spirits initiative be applied to other community initiatives?

The Radiant Spirits Breast Cancer Project initiative represents a significant step forward in reducing health disparities among Indigenous women with the potential to prevent late-stage breast cancer diagnosis and improve long-term health outcomes. As cancer

instances are expected to rise in communities in the coming decades, ensuring equitable access to screening, diagnosis, and treatment is crucial.

This initiative not only addresses immediate needs but also sets the stage for continued collaborations in the future, contributing to the ongoing goal of creating culturally safe and accessible care pathways for Indigenous communities.

Please describe the key elements that made the Radiant Spirits initiative so successful.

The success of the Radiant Spirits initiative came from strong teamwork. We collaborated closely with Horizon Health Authority. This event was able to run smoothly, engage community, and make meaningful impact of raising breast cancer awareness.

What are your insights on how to develop and strengthen community capacity?

One key insight is the importance of relationship building. Before any initiative takes root, there needs to be trust, mutual respect, and cultural humility.

What can non-Indigenous organizations do to help with the development of First Nations, Inuit and Métis community initiatives?

Non-Indigenous organizations can help by prioritizing partnerships, equality and cultural respect. An example would be by supporting community-led initiatives by focusing on supporting and not leading. Ensure initiatives are community-driven and not externally imposed.

Why is trauma-informed care so essential to building trust in cancer services?

I feel trauma-informed care is essential to build trust in cancer services because it recognizes that many patients carry emotional, psychological, and cultural wounds that can deeply affect how they experience health care. Without understanding and addressing these past or ongoing traumas, cancer care can unintentionally cause distress, harm, or disconnection, making it harder to seek access or continue with treatment.