

Keeping Our Fires

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Circles of Practice: Highlights

After four months of hard work in their communities, the four participating organizations of the Keeping Our Fires 2023-2024 Project gathered together one last time before wrapping up our fiscal year. Our partners at the Canadian AIDS Society co-hosted the gathering with CAAN Communities, Alliances & Networks virtually on February 5th. CAAN's Promising Practices Coordinator hosted a sharing circle for participants to highlight their actions in their communities, share their learned lessons, case scenarios, and showcase their co-created resources.

The Canadian AIDS Society provided a presentation sharing the history of their organization, and their past projects that contributed to addressing the rising rates of HIV in Canada. They discussed past toolkits and other resources that they've created (a few in partnership with our organization). Our partners and participants discussed the importance of remembering the past to move forward in the future with new initiatives addressing HIV, HCV, and STBBIs.

Undetectable = Untransmittable

At our gathering, the CAS's Communications Coordinator was wearing a shirt they've personally designed which displayed U=U with the 2018 redesigned pride flag that includes the representation of BIPOC and trans communities. The shirt was so powerful, that it sparked a long, deep discussion around the U=U campaign. U=U represents "Undetectable equals Untransmittable" meaning people living with HIV who take antiretroviral therapy (ART) and achieve and maintain an undetectable viral load cannot transmit HIV sexually.

Our project team and participants have been focusing on addressing stigma and discrimination around STBBIs, mainly HIV as the rates continue to rise at a disproportionate rate amongst Indigenous communities. Misconceptions and myths around HIV transmission are still prominent, fueling stigma and creating barriers to HIV services. Education on local statistics, prevention methods, myths around transmission, and treatment have been key in our participant's work strategies to address stigma. Many community members reported not knowing about the benefits of ART, pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), and post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP). Participants have been utilizing community cultural events, workshops, or advocating to their health authorities to raise awareness around HIV, prevention, service accessibility, and reaching those who are undiagnosed in aims to get them undetectable.

As we are finalizing our co-create knowledge bundles, we are hearing the voices of community members by increasing knowledge, harm reduction efforts, health care navigation supports, and cultural care. CAAN and our participants aim to have our developed materials and resources spark conversation around HIV, HCV, and STBBIs like the U=U shirt in our sharing circle.

Learned Lessons

Based on community feedback, here are three major lesson learned throughout the Keeping Our Fires Project:

1) Updated and Engaging Resources

Based on the feedback from the environmental scans performed in all four regions, communities have been demanding more updated and engaging resources around the basics of HIV, HCV, and STBBIs. Indigenous people with lived/living experiences are aware of HIV, HCV, and STBBIs occurring locally, and have basic knowledge about transmission, symptoms, testing, treatment, and prevention. However, community members without lived/living experiences reported not knowing about the growing rates in their region or basic knowledge which fuels their biases and misconceptions. Our findings revealed that community members do not feel compelled to take a moment to read standard printed resources (e.g. brochures, pamphlets, fact sheets, posters, etc.) that contain jargon. Recommendations, such as including

art, storytelling, animations, workshops, community events, and free local conferences are more engaging. It should also appropriately reflect their communities.

2) Partnership and Collaboration with Health Professionals

Community members still fear a breach of confidentiality, mistreatment, and refusal of casual contact/care outside of our participating organizations. A few of our participants have been advocating for service accessibility in their region and/or implementing partnerships to ensure Indigenous community members have access to stigma-free and culturally safe care. Although our participants are implementing bridging the gap through partnerships, there needs to be a collective movement across the country for **all** healthcare professionals to partner and collaborate with Indigenous community members, organizations, and stakeholders. They also need to implement efforts on their end to ensure they are providing culturally safe and stigma-free services. This includes routine training on cultural competency, trauma-informed care, addressing stigma and discrimination in their settings, meaningful engagement, and implementing stricter standards around privacy and confidentiality.

3) Leadership Involvement

In all regions, community members reported seeing the concern around HIV, HCV, and STBBIs in their communities and are looking to leadership to take action. Our findings show only a few leaders (e.g. Elders, local nurses, and community-based organization staff) are either attempting to make efforts to address the issue or are passively supportive. There is a need for more community leaders to make room in their mandate to address rising rates and develop, implement, and evaluate strategies that protect the health and well-being of their communities. There is also a need for leaders to allocate funds to support existing and developing efforts. Leadership is key in the response to addressing rising rates, stigma, and can encourage community members to start engaging in conversations around HIV, HCV, and STBBIs.

Invitation to Join Keeping Our Fires 2024-2025

Does your organization want to strengthen your capacity to provide STBBI services?

Does your organization want to co-create a resource with CAAN Communities, Alliances, and Networks?

If you answered yes to both of these questions, we want to work with you in 2024. Please contact CAAN's Promising Practices Coordinator, Tash Dingwell at tashd@caan.ca.

