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Indigenous-led Gambling Harm Reduction and Community Capacity Building Framework

Gambling Landscape

Canada's gambling landscape has expanded rapidly with the introduction of single-event sports betting and, notably, Ontario's 2022 legalization and deregulation of online gambling (iGaming). This shift has accelerated gambling-related harms across the country.

The deregulated market triggered a surge in national-level advertising that reaches British Columbians and has made high-frequency, smartphone-accessible gambling products more visible and accessible than ever. As a result, rates of addiction, financial loss, and mental-health impacts are rising, with harms affecting not only individuals but also families and communities.

It is important to note the historical significance of gambling harms rooted in colonization that transformed traditional Indigenous practices into commercialized high-risk activities that create disproportionate harms to communities. Given the breadth and severity of these impacts, there is growing momentum for a public-health approach to better prevent, reduce, and address gambling-related harms by acknowledging a wholistic wellness model that addresses the specific needs and experiences of Indigenous peoples. This approach includes supporting capacity building to sustain ongoing community approaches that focus on the upstream determinants of mental wellbeing and recognizes the prevalent co-occurrence of gambling, mental health and substance use issues.

Background

In addition to systemic racism, the continued effects of colonization, and the ongoing traumas of Residential Schools and Indian Hospitals, First Nations, Métis and Inuit survivors, their loved ones, and communities continue to be disproportionately affected by the opioid toxicity public health emergency. Indigenous Peoples in BC also experience disproportionately high rates of gambling-related harm. Mental Health Research Canada (2024) reports that nearly 40% of Indigenous people that participate in gambling show signs of problem or moderate-risk gambling. These impacts are often interconnected with broader wellness challenges, including mental health, substance use, intergenerational trauma, and socio-economic inequities. These are not standalone issues, with the combined impacts contributing to ongoing harms for both individuals, families and communities.

Gambling Support education plays a vital role in reducing overall harms and highlighting the impacts problem gambling can have on mental health and substance use and overall community wellness. Integrated community-based wellness programs, particularly, those that are recovery and aftercare focused, provide continuity and support for communities, individuals and families who are impacted by gambling and substance use harms. Four pillars/strategies have been identified as promising approaches to support better outcomes for individuals and communities who are struggling to respond to harms experienced by problem gambling, mental health and substance use.

They include:

1. **Preparedness** through training, knowledge, policy and procedure,
2. **Prevention** through evidenced-based practice, early intervention, education and awareness,
3. **Response** through support-based programs and counselling, and finally
4. **Recovery** through a more wholistic integration of Indigenous wellness and cultural programming.

When applied through a culture-based lens, the pillars encompass all aspects of wellness, including physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, family and community integration. However, despite their significance as a core element of wholistic, evidence-informed recovery, culture-based recovery is often overlooked when addressing the reduction of gambling and substance use harms.

Community Capacity Building Approach

To address gambling and substance use related harms, a public health approach is recommended, requiring a multifaceted strategy, comprising of initiatives enhancing health promotion, prevention and protection, harm minimization, and community capacity building. The four-pillared approach of Preparedness, Prevention, Response and Recovery provides a comprehensive framework guide for a community to action a public health approach to reducing gambling-related harms. By focusing this approach through an Indigenous-led community capacity building initiative we can then meet individuals, families and communities where they are at and respond in a timely and culturally appropriate manner.

A community capacity building approach allows communities and organizations to identify, address and solve their own challenges fostering long-term resilience, self-determining needs and sustainable response. Capacity building transforms communities by building on existing skills and resources, improving the collaborative action of those resources, ultimately reducing dependence on external assistance while enhancing the social and structural determinants of health.

The goals of community capacity building:

- **Empowerment and Ownership:** Shifts control to local people, enabling them to tackle gambling-related harms directly, leading to more relevant, long-term solutions.
- **Skill and Knowledge Development:** Enhances the competencies of individuals and community leaders, which improves the effectiveness of community response, non-profits and local organizations.
- **Strengthened Resilience:** Builds the capacity of communities to express their true potential and adapt to challenges.
- **Improved Collaboration:** Encourages partnerships among individuals, community leadership, groups, institutions, and governments, strengthening networks to address shared problems.
- **Sustainable Development:** Ensures that progress is self-sustaining rather than reliant on continuous external support.
- **Social Cohesion:** Promotes inclusion and connections, encouraging diverse members of the community to participate in decision-making and development activities

Public Health Approach Integration with Community Capacity Building

Integrating community capacity building with a four-pillared public health approach involves shifting from a service-delivery model to a community-led model, where community members and local organizations are empowered to drive health improvements. By fostering skills, leadership, and infrastructure at the local level, this integration ensures that public health initiatives—specifically in preparedness through health promotion, prevention, treatment, harm reduction and recovery—are sustainable, culturally safe, and effective.

They are as follows:

Preparedness refers to proactive, systematic measures designed to mitigate risks before they escalate into significant harm. Preparedness aims to equip individuals, communities, and external supports with the tools to reduce risk by enhancing both primary prevention and early interventions.

- **Community Awareness and Education:** Informing community staff about lower-risk gambling guidelines—similar to low-risk alcohol drinking guidelines—to foster responsible gambling habits in individuals they support.
- **Early Risk Detection:** Community feedback, surveys or community needs assessments, to identify at-risk behavior early, allowing for intervention before the community member experiences significant, irreversible harm (financial, mental, or social).
- **Player-Focused Tools (Pre-commitment):** Implementing systems that encourage community members to set limits before they start playing. This includes setting time and monetary budgets, which creates "friction" between the user and impulsive, excessive gambling.
- **Integrating tools to support intakes for medical or mental health practitioners in community** to identify gambling harm indicators and provide community members with knowledge and resources
- **Training for Staff:** Educating staff to identify and respond to multiple presenting issues (e.g. gambling, substance misuse, suicidality) and to interact with community members in a culturally safe and responsive manner.

Prevention focuses on proactive, "upstream" measures to reduce or eliminate gambling-related harm before it occurs.

- **Public Awareness and Education:** Campaigns designed to inform the community about the risks associated with gambling, including the odds, to foster responsible gambling and informed choices.
- **Comorbidity Education:** How stress, trauma and substance use increase vulnerability to gambling harm
- **Targeted Education:** Specific programs for youth, young adults, and vulnerable populations, often focusing on correcting misconceptions about gambling and building life skills.
- **Early Detection and Intervention through outreach:** Implementing measures to identify high-risk behaviors early on to prevent them from escalating into addiction.
- **Community-Based Initiatives:** Developing community programs that support healthy environments and reduce the prevalence of problem gambling.
- **Understand Nation-based Community and Cultural components of Gambling,** learning about the historical relationship between the specific Nation and gambling. Identifying the differences between healthy and traditional gambling and the more modern colonial concepts of gambling. For example, traditional Indigenous games, resource allocation vs. Bingo.

Response is to provide accessible, effective help for individuals, families and communities impacted by gambling harm.

- **Resource integration:** Training for community resources such as housing, social services, medical or mental health practitioners to identify gambling harms and provide informed support or resources to be able to respond to needs.
- **Referral:** Build cross-referral and warm-handover pathways between gambling, mental health, and substance use supports.
- **Counselling resources** to include the gambling severity index assessment, suicide assessments and depression scales for counsellors
- **Educating community practitioners and developing care plans** for supporting individuals or families impacted by gambling harms
- **Have knowledgeable staff and/or a list of resources** that address things such as homelessness, financial harms, debt consolidation, food sovereignty, mental health crisis support, relationship struggles and family violence.

Recovery wholistic Indigenous perspectives shift the focus from a purely clinical, individualistic model to one centered on the interconnectedness of the whole person—spirit, heart/emotions, mind, and physical being. These frameworks are often built on the foundational belief that wellness is a state of balance between these four elements, as well as between the individual and their family, community, and the land.

- **First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework:** This comprehensive model identifies four key outcomes that indicate a healthy, balanced life: *Hope* (identity and values), *Belonging* (connectedness to family and culture), *Meaning* (understanding one's place in history and creation), and *Purpose* (daily living and cultural roles). Understanding that wellness requires a balance of the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of life and implementing these values into long-term care plans
- **Care Planning:** Design care plans that treat gambling harm as one part of a broader healing journey.
- **Culture as Intervention:** This approach views the reclamation of language, traditional ceremonies (such as sweat lodges), and land-based activities as primary healing "medicines" rather than just supplementary activities.
- **Decolonizing Healing:** Identifying the roots of the trauma and impacts of colonization that drives gambling harms and acknowledging the comorbidities in other addictions as symptoms of these roots.
- **Strengths-based and Community-led healing** that focuses on the resilience and capacity of a community.

Reporting Requirements

Preparedness	Prevention	Response	Recovery
- Systematic measures	- Public Awareness	- Resource Integration	- Social determinants of health
- Identifying Risk through training supports	- Targeted Education	- Accessibility	- Decolonizing healing
- Community wide Early Risk Detection	- Outreach Intervention	- Counselling resources	- Whole person Integrated recovery planning
-Integrating tools for community supports	- Community Based Initiatives	- Wrap around response	-Strengths-based community-led healing
- Individual/ Player focused tools	- Nation-based, community and cultural components	- Indigenous spiritual or cultural integration	- Culture as Intervention

Grant reporting refers to the documentation and communication of information about a funded project. It involves providing detailed updates on the progress, achievements, challenges, and financial aspects of the project on an annual basis, to keep funders informed about the project’s status.

Reporting fosters transparency and accountability. Your reports should demonstrate how funds have been utilized, the progress made towards project outcomes, benefits to community and any challenges you encountered.

Project outcome measurement helps inform future needs and enables funders to identify successful strategies and areas for improvement. Additionally, reporting allows grant recipients to reflect on their progress, identify areas that require adjustment, and implement necessary changes to enhance project effectiveness.

Grant reporting serves as a valuable learning tool. Through the reporting process, best practices, lessons learned, and innovative approaches can be shared.

Game. Life. Balance.

Desired Outcomes from the Indigenous-led Gambling Harm Reduction and Recovery Community Capacity Building Grant Initiative

Domain	Outcome	Indicator	Measurement
Program Delivery	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Services are accessible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Available to community when and where they are needed • Low barrier 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity of providers • In-person or online • Knowledge of GSBC support line
Program Design	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Culturally safe and relevant 2. Builds capacity 3. Communities develop support pathways 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nation-based community driven training on knowledge and awareness of gambling • Intake pathways, policy and procedures • Identify risk of co-occurrence of gambling harms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distinct Nation relationships to gambling are identified, culturally safe and free from stigma • Community implementation of land-based, traditional or cultural alternative to gambling entertainment • Supports have knowledge and awareness of the spectrum of gambling harms and comorbidities • Allied professionals have built in intake pathways, policy and procedure
Program Participation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Increased knowledge and awareness of gambling harms and comorbidities 2. Increased ability of individuals to recognize and prevent harm 3. Prevent uptake of under-age gambling 4. Participants are satisfied with program experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program educates risk of gambling products, myth busts belief systems • Informs the prevalence and comorbidities that Indigenous communities face • Awareness of specific demographic risks • Increase ability to make informed choices that prevent and minimize harm • Decrease modeling and exposure of gambling • Decrease gambling in sport • Increase knowledge of digital health and migration of gambling to gambling in youth • Participants stay engaged in programming 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants can set limits, change mindset and acknowledge risk • Decrease in gambling related harm • Increase in knowledge through print materials • Increase in knowledge of support providers • Greater uptake in supports • Reduction of youth gambling • Knowledge of coaches and mentors • Increase in referral and participation.