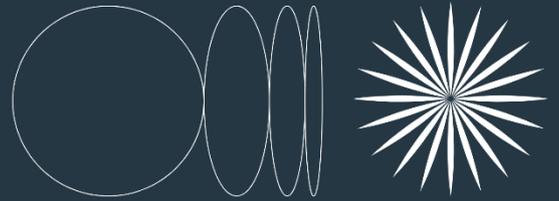


April 2025



Toolkit for Implementing Culturally and Spiritually Responsive Best Practices

A Guide for the Housing and
Homelessness Serving Sector



WOMEN'S NATIONAL
HOUSING & HOMELESSNESS
NETWORK

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Contents

Introduction	4
1. Capacity Building for Implementation	6
1.1 Asset Mapping Organizational Capacities	6
How to get started?	6
Asset Mapping Domains	6
Asset Summary Table	8
1.2 Developing Capacity Through Training and Peer-Learning	9
Why This Resource Matters	9
Key Training Focus Areas	9
Training Planning Tips	11
Summary Table: Training Planning Overview	12
Spotlight: Understanding Gender-Based Violence in Immigrant and Refugee Communities	12
Roadmap for Leveraging Peer Learning & Support Networks: Integrating Lived Experience to Advance Spiritually and Culturally Responsive Housing Services	14
Why Peer Support Matters in Culturally & Spiritually Responsive Care	14
Phase 1: Laying the Groundwork – Foundations for Integration	14
Phase 2: Integration Across Services	14
Phase 3: Growing a Peer Learning Culture	15
Reflection & Evaluation	16
2. Organizational Readiness & Involvement	17
2.1 Key Strategies to Engage at All Levels of the Organization in Incorporating Spiritually and Culturally Responsive Care	17
3. Monitoring Progress and Measuring Success	20
3.1. Define Success Indicators	20
3.2 Strategies to Monitor Progress	21
3.3 Use a Living Dashboard or Success Tracker	22
4. Key Takeaways	23

Introduction

How did we get here?

In Winter 2025, the Women's National Housing and Homelessness Network, hosted 4 Community of Practices (CoPs) along with members from across the housing and homelessness services sector to reflect on culturally and spiritually responsive care in housing services. Our goal was to engage sector leadership, frontline staff and individuals with lived experience to better understand barriers and opportunities in incorporating culturally and spiritually responsive care in the housing and homelessness sector.

Our work on the CoPs emerges from our collaborative research with Nisa Foundation, an organization operating shelters and programs across Canada primarily for Muslim, migrant and refugee women and children fleeing gender-based violence and systemic marginalization. Focused primarily on housing experiences of Muslim and racialized women, our collaborative research with Nisa Foundation identifies unique strengths and challenges in the Foundation's model, documenting intersectional experiences of Muslim and racialized women navigating housing income assistance and immigration systems.

Recognizing the value of spiritual and culturally responsive care in Nisa Foundation's model, we were interested in mobilizing and scaling research findings through better understanding a) what barriers were experienced by service providers when it comes to incorporating spiritual and culturally responsive care in their services and b) what best practices can address these challenges and lead to a more holistic practice model.

Conversations, dialogues and knowledge sharing facilitated through the CoPs were foundational to the development of the [*Best Practices on Incorporating Spiritual and Culturally Responsive Care in Housing and Homelessness Services*](#). This toolkit has been developed as a guide to accompany the best practices, with hopes that service providers can be equipped with tangible tools and information that could make housing and homelessness services more grounded in spiritual and culturally responsive care.

How to Use this Toolkit?

The goal of this toolkit to create pathways, resources and tools for service providers to incorporate spiritual and culturally responsive care in their work. It presents examples and templates for creating capacity and awareness in service provision teams, it provides information on how and where different levels of staff can be involved in implementing best practices, and most importantly it presents a roadmap to monitor and evaluate progress.

This toolkit can be used as a handbook, or a reference guide, that can make service providers across the housing and homelessness sector more aware of how spiritual and culturally responsive care can be incorporated into practice and improve experiences for service users.

1. Capacity Building for Implementation

1.1 Asset Mapping Organizational Capacities

A great place to start when incorporating spiritually and culturally responsive care in your practice can be conducting an asset mapping exercise in your organization that involves taking a note of existing key competencies, knowledge and training, language capabilities and tools to measure impact.

Recognizing that many service providers are functioning at capacity and overwhelmed with service user responsibilities, an asset map can create an awareness in your teams on what resources already exist when trying to incorporate spiritually and culturally responsive care in your service infrastructure.

The resource template and guide below provide a roadmap on how an asset mapping exercise can be conducted.



How to get started?

- **Assign a small working group** of staff with different roles and perspectives (e.g., frontline, management, intake, community engagement) as leads on the asset mapping exercise to check-in with staff members across the organisation.
- **Work through each domain below**, identifying what currently exists and where there is interest or opportunity.
- **Use the guiding questions** to reflect and document assets and opportunities.
- Summarize your findings into an **Asset Summary Table** at the end for easy reference and planning.



Asset Mapping Domains

1. Cultural & Spiritual Competency

Ongoing staff training, co-learning with clients

- **Guiding Questions**
 - What training or workshops have staff completed related to ensuring cultural or spiritual safety and meeting cultural or spiritual needs of service users?
 - Are there internal learning initiatives, book clubs, or peer discussion spaces?

- What training or workshops have staff completed on understanding migration systems, precarious migration status or spousal sponsorship in Canada?
- Are there current partnerships, existing relationships with cultural or spiritual organizations or groups that staff are aware of/ or make referrals to?
- **Current Assets**
- **Opportunities or Interests**

2. Trauma-Informed Practice

Understanding the intersection of trauma, culture, and faith

- **Guiding Questions**
 - How is trauma-informed care implemented with an understanding of cultural and spiritual contexts?
 - Are staff equipped to recognize trauma responses that may be informed by spiritual beliefs or displacement?
 - Are spiritually or culturally specific healing practices or frameworks (alternative modalities, land-based healing etc.) currently in use? If yes, which ones?
- **Current Assets**
- **Opportunities or Interests**

3. Language Accessibility

Internal interpreter lists, gender-sensitive options

- **Guiding Questions**
 - What languages are spoken by staff? Is there an internal language skills directory?
 - Are gender-sensitive interpreter options available (e.g., for survivors of violence)?
 - Are key service documents translated? What languages are prioritized?
- **Current Assets**
- **Opportunities or Interests**

4. Client-Centred Service Design

Co-creation of services with affected communities

- **Guiding Questions**
 - Are community members or clients involved in shaping programs and services?
 - Are there mechanisms for clients to give ongoing feedback?
 - Do any current programs reflect community or spiritual values?

- **Current Assets**
- **Opportunities or Interests**

5. Data & Impact Measurement

Tracking progress, gathering client feedback

- **Guiding Questions**
 - How does your organization track culturally or spiritually responsive service outcomes?
 - Are there strategic goals or objectives focused on incorporating culturally or spiritually responsive care?
 - Do you gather client feedback about spiritual or cultural safety or needs?
 - Are there existing tools or systems to track progress in this area?
- **Current Assets**
- **Opportunities or Interests**



Asset Summary Table

Domain	Existing Strengths	Opportunities
Cultural & Spiritual Competency		
Trauma-Informed Practice		
Language Accessibility		
Client-Centred Service Design		
Data & Impact Measurement		

1.2 Developing Capacity Through Training and Peer-Learning

The asset mapping exercise is a great way to understand gaps and opportunities in your services when incorporating spiritual and culturally responsive care. As you gain a better understanding of opportunities to incorporate and implement best practices in your work, training and peer learning can be important ways to increase capacity in your team.

The resources below provide a roadmap and guiding questions on how targeted training and peer-learning can grow your team's capacity to incorporate spiritual and culturally responsive care in your services.



Why This Resource Matters

Training isn't just about information—it's about transformation. Spiritually and culturally responsive service provision often demands deep reflection, a shift in institutional practices, and skill-building across teams. Meaningful training helps staff offer safer, more holistic, and more equitable services to those facing systemic marginalization, displacement, or faith-based discrimination.

This resource helps service providers:

- Understand the purpose and impact of training in specific focus areas
- Ask the right questions before planning or selecting training
- Use scenarios to connect training with real-life practice challenges
- Reflect on how training links to organizational values and goals



Key Training Focus Areas

1. Spiritually and Culturally responsive Service Provision

Building knowledge and humility to meet diverse spiritual, racial, and cultural needs.

Guiding Questions:

- Do staff understand how faith, cultural identity, and lived experience shape client needs and expectations?
- Are existing services inclusive of diverse cultural or spiritual practices (e.g., prayer spaces, culturally appropriate food, ways of expressing grief or healing, non-Western healing and counselling practices)?
- What assumptions might staff be making about “neutral” service delivery?

Scenario:

A racialized newcomer woman accessing transitional housing is experiencing intense distress, insomnia, and frequent panic attacks. Staff offer a referral to a therapist through the local health unit. She declines, explaining that in her community going to a therapist for mental health struggles is not a norm and mental health struggles are best kept private. Staff inquire if she'd be interested in participating in a women's healing circle that traditional practices and meditation. She agrees to part

Without training in culturally responsive care, staff may interpret her refusal to assume she is not ready for support. However, a culturally responsive approach would recognize the validity of non-Western modalities and work with the client to co-create a support plan that may include traditional healing, community care, or spiritual guidance alongside or instead of Western mental health services.

2. Trauma-Informed and Gender-Sensitive Interpretation

Ensuring language services support rather than harm.

Guiding Questions:

- Are staff trained to assess when and how to request/use interpretation in trauma-sensitive ways?
- Are gender-appropriate interpreters available for survivors of violence?
- Do staff understand the potential emotional burden or re-traumatization that can occur through translation?

Scenario:

A client who fled gender-based violence is assigned a male interpreter over the phone. She becomes visibly distressed and ends the session. A trauma-informed approach would ensure client comfort and safety in all language supports, including offering same-gender interpreters or alternatives like visual aids and in-language handouts when needed.

3. Navigating Immigration/Refugee Policies in Service Delivery

Understanding systemic precarity to offer appropriate support.

Guiding Questions:

- Do frontline staff understand how immigration status affects access to housing, income supports, or healthcare?
- Is there training on how to support clients with precarious or undocumented status?

- Do staff know where to refer clients for legal or immigration advocacy?

Scenario:

A refugee claimant is at risk of eviction but cannot access subsidized housing due to their immigration status. Staff unfamiliar with refugee policy may unknowingly turn them away. Training in immigration/refugee systems ensures service providers can advocate appropriately and refer effectively.

4. Ethical Considerations in Faith-Based Service Models

Balancing faith-informed service delivery with client autonomy and rights.

Guiding Questions:

- How is spiritual care offered in a non-coercive, respectful, and client-centered way?
- Are boundaries clear between spiritual and cultural support focused on client agency and needs and faith-based proselytization?
- Do staff reflect on their own biases or faith backgrounds and how those shapes interactions?

Scenario:

A Christian faith-based housing provider includes prayer sessions as part of their community model. An Indigenous client expresses discomfort but fears being asked to leave. Ethical training helps organizations ensure spiritual care is opt-in, inclusive, and always rooted in client consent.



Training Planning Tips

- Co-design training with people with lived/living experience and spiritual/cultural leaders.
- Consider layered learning: intro sessions for all staff, followed by deep dives for key roles (e.g., housing workers, intake staff, supervisors).
- Use case studies and role plays to help staff build confidence in real situations.
- Offer refreshers regularly and tie them to onboarding for new hires.
- Pair training with policy or practice changes to embed learning in daily work.
- Track impact: Include client feedback or service audits to evaluate effectiveness.



Summary Table: Training Planning Overview

Training Area	Who Needs It	Key Takeaways	Resources Needed
Spiritually and Culturally responsive Service Provision	All staff	Understanding cultural/spiritual safety, self-awareness, client-centered flexibility	Trainers with lived experience, community leaders, toolkits, partnerships with existing cultural and spiritual services.
Trauma-Informed & Gender-Sensitive Interpretation	Frontline staff, intake, program leads	Avoiding harm, informed language access	Language providers, trauma-sensitive interpretation frameworks
Immigration/Refugee Policy Navigation	Housing workers, legal advocates, intake	Supporting clients with precarious status	Partnerships with legal clinics and immigration consultants, policy guides
Ethical Faith-Based Service Models	Management, program design staff	Clear boundaries, client consent, inclusive approaches	Faith-based orgs, ethics consultants, client surveys

Spotlight: Understanding Gender-Based Violence in Immigrant and Refugee Communities

Although domestic violence occurs across all communities at comparable rates, immigrant and refugee women often encounter unique and compounding barriers that make accessing support especially challenging. Some of the specific challenges include:

Social Isolation: Immigrant and refugee women frequently lack access to culturally relevant, community-based supports. Many are unaware of available services, particularly those tailored to survivors of violence, leaving them more isolated and unsupported.

Threat of Deportation: Abusers may manipulate immigration processes to maintain control—such as withholding immigration papers or threatening to take away any children they have in common. Victims of intimate-partner violence might also be restricted to their abusive relationship since their spousal sponsorship or refugee status is tied to their abuser. Temporary foreign workers face further vulnerability, as their legal status is dependent on their employer, making it difficult to report workplace abuse. Women without legal status are especially at risk, as fear of removal from Canada discourages them from seeking help, and few organizations have the mandate or funding to support them.

Distrust or Fear of Police: Due to information sharing between police and immigration enforcement, many women fear contacting the authorities, worrying that it could expose their immigration status. Past experiences with law enforcement in their home countries or here in Canada can also contribute to this hesitation, particularly if those interactions were traumatic or discriminatory.

Economic Barriers: Many immigrant and refugee women face economic hardship due to non-recognition of foreign credentials and limited access to stable employment. This can lead to “deskilling,” where individuals are forced into low-paying or precarious jobs. Financial dependence on an abusive partner often makes it harder to leave the relationship.

Language Accessibility: A lack of services in multiple languages and limited access to interpretation support can prevent women from fully understanding or navigating systems meant to help them.

Racism and Discrimination: Some women experience racism or xenophobia when seeking services, which can include being stereotyped, blamed for the violence due to cultural or religious factors, or turned away altogether. Many shelters and front-line services are still working to build more inclusive and culturally responsive environments.

It is critical to recognize that violence against racialized, migrant or refugee “is not a single-issue struggle. Colonialism, anti-Black racism, xenophobia, racism, Islamophobia, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism impact how women experience violence and the extent to which they can access support.”

This spotlight was adapted from [Neighbours, Friends and Families \(NFF\) campaign’s work focused on immigrant and refugee communities.](#)

Roadmap for Leveraging Peer Learning & Support Networks: Integrating Lived Experience to Advance Spiritually and Culturally Responsive Housing Services

Why Peer Support Matters in Culturally & Spiritually Responsive Care

Peer support workers play a vital role in bridging the gap between housing systems and the lived experiences of communities navigating cultural, spiritual, and systemic barriers. Their presence helps foster trust, disrupt power imbalances, and center practices in community-informed wisdom. When peer support and peer learning are meaningfully integrated, organizations can move beyond performative inclusion toward a truly grounded, equitable model of service delivery.

Phase 1: Laying the Groundwork – Foundations for Integration

1. Establish Organizational Commitment

- Leadership buy-in is critical to integrate peer support as a core component of service delivery.
- Reaffirm commitment to culturally and spiritually responsive care through policies and funding priorities.

2. Define Peer Support Roles and Responsibilities

- Co-develop clear role descriptions with existing peer support workers.
- Outline contributions across intake, case management, program design, and spiritual and cultural care planning.
- Recognize spiritual/cultural navigators, elders, or traditional wellness workers as peer contributors.

3. Allocate Sustainable Resources

- Fund peer roles equitably and ensure positions are permanent or long-term.
- Offer fair compensation, benefits, and access to wellness supports.
- Build in time and budget for peer-led training and community engagement.

Phase 2: Integration Across Services

1. Embed Peer Workers Throughout Service Areas

- Include peer support workers in:

- **Intake and orientation:** Normalize cultural and spiritual conversations early during the intake process to better understand and anticipate service-user needs.
- **Service planning:** Co-create care plans that include diverse healing and counselling modalities. Incorporate referrals to culturally- and/or spiritually focused services where appropriate.
- **Advocacy and crisis response:** Peer workers often de-escalate in ways that feel safer to clients. Provide culturally responsive de-escalation training and conflict resolution training to your peer workers to equip them with the skills to be involved in crisis response. Engage spiritual elders and individuals from diverse communities in the peer support model.

2. Create Spaces for Peer-Led Collaboration & Learning

- Schedule regular case consultations, co-reflection circles, or peer-teacher learning sessions.
- Use storytelling and wisdom-sharing as learning tools.
- Ensure non-peer staff participate in peer-led learning to shift power dynamics.
- Invite Elders and spiritual leaders to lead learning for peer support and staff.

3. Elevate Peer Voices in Policy and Decision-Making

- Include peer support workers in program evaluations and strategic planning.
- Collect and act on peer worker feedback on service gaps and cultural harms.
- Allow peer workers to flag culturally unsafe practices without fear of retaliation.



Phase 3: Growing a Peer Learning Culture

1. Formalize Peer Learning Structures

- Launch **Peer Learning Hubs** or **Communities of Practice (CoPs)** on themes like:
 - *Faith and healing in housing services*
 - *Supporting refugees through trauma-informed spirituality*
 - *Navigating mental health stigma across cultures*
- Encourage all staff to participate, listen, and reflect.

2. Co-Design and Facilitate Trainings with Peer Support Workers

- Peer workers can co-lead sessions on:
 - Cultural humility
 - Working with spiritual leaders and elders
 - Language and interpretation experiences from a client lens
- Use real case examples, role plays, and storytelling.

3. Build Career Pathways and Leadership Opportunities

- Create mentorship programs for peer workers to build leadership skills.
- Provide funding or leave for educational opportunities (e.g., mediation, spiritual care, housing navigation).
- Promote peer workers to senior advisory roles on spiritual/cultural responsiveness.

Reflection & Evaluation

Use these questions to monitor impact over time:

- Are peer support workers actively contributing to spiritual and cultural care decisions?
- Are staff perceptions of cultural/spiritual care shifting as a result of peer learning?
- Do clients report feeling more culturally and spiritually safe in the service environment?
- Are peer workers retained, supported, and advancing in the organization?

2. Organizational Readiness & Involvement

2.1 Key Strategies to Engage at All Levels of the Organization in Incorporating Spiritually and Culturally Responsive Care

For spiritually and culturally responsive care to be embedded in a housing or homelessness service organization, it must be **championed and practiced across all levels**—from leadership to frontline staff, administration, and external partners. This table below provides a template and a guide that can help organizations outline specific actions, roles, responsibilities, and resources tailored to different organizational levels to build readiness and accountability.

The table below provides examples and can be adapted as a template to create a planning tool for incorporating

Organizational Level	Key Practices Being Implemented	Who Is Involved	Resources Required
Leadership & Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embedding cultural/spiritual responsiveness into strategic plans, policies, and funding applications • Implementing oversight mechanisms and evaluation frameworks • Setting up feedback channels and restorative justice processes 	Executive Director Board Members Senior Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff time for policy review & strategy planning • Strategic planning facilitation • Consultant or peer supports • Budget for restorative processes (honoraria, facilitation)
Frontline Staff & Service Providers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participating in interactive training (case studies, sharing circles, simulation) 	Case Managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training modules & facilitation • Time for team debriefs and mentorship

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrating cultural/spiritual considerations in case management and planning • Participating in peer-led learning • Applying respectful communication and safety check-ins 	<p>Housing Support Staff</p> <p>Peer Support Workers</p> <p>Frontline Staff</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culturally safe supervision tools and guides • Reference resources (e.g., FAQ sheets, cultural competency guides)
Administration & Operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hiring for cultural knowledge, lived experience, and multilingualism • Adapting job descriptions, onboarding practices, and HR protocols to prioritize lived experience and diversity • Managing budgets for training and community partnership engagement • Supporting accessible internal infrastructure (e.g. prayer and meditation spaces) 	<p>HR Department</p> <p>Program Coordinators</p> <p>Finance/Admin Teams</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equitable hiring tools (scoring rubrics, bias training for hiring panel) • Funding for inclusive workplace adaptations • Community-based job posting platforms • Staff wellness resources
Supervision & Middle Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting staff in applying training to practice • Providing reflective supervision with 	<p>Program Managers</p> <p>Team Leads</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training on cultural/spiritual responsiveness for supervisors and middle management

	<p>a culturally safe lens</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tailoring support to different staff roles and identities • Facilitating regular check-ins with frontline staff to offer support and guidance and monitor progress 	Clinical Supervisors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sample reflection questions/check-in tools • Feedback collection systems • Time allocated for coaching and follow-ups
Community Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishing relationships for client referrals and co-development of programming • Providing guest speaking, training, or cultural consultation • Participating in advisory or working groups 	<p>Elders & Knowledge Keepers</p> <p>Community Leaders</p> <p>Cultural and Faith-based Organizations</p> <p>Grassroots Networks</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compensation and travel supports • Space for meetings, circles or ceremonies • Long-term partnership agreements or MOUs • Community engagement budget

3. Monitoring Progress and Measuring Success

To ensure that best practices become standard and sustainable, organizations need to monitor progress, identify barriers to implementation and identify measures of success.

Below we have provided some strategies on how progress can be monitored based on success indicators developed by your organization. These strategies hope to offer a starting point, recognizing that they can be supplemented to existing organizational mechanisms around monitoring and measuring of success.

3.1. Define Success Indicators

Start by working with staff, clients, and community partners to define what success looks like. Some sample indicators might include:

- Increased staff confidence in incorporating spiritual and culturally responsive practices into their work
- Clients report feeling spiritually and culturally safe
- Organizational policies reflect commitment to culturally grounded approaches
- Uptake of training across all levels of the organization
- Increased engagement with diverse community partners
- Improvements in conflict resolution and restorative justice processes

3.2 Strategies to Monitor Progress

The table below hopes to introduce some monitoring strategies that could play a valuable role in ensuring commitment to spiritual and culturally responsive practices through various facets of the organization.

Monitoring Strategy	Purpose	Sample Tools/Approaches
Staff Self-Assessments	Assess confidence, application, and challenges post-training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflection forms • Post-training surveys • Peer-led debrief circles
Client Feedback Loops	Capture lived experiences of clients on cultural/spiritual safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anonymous surveys • Focus groups or community forums • Ongoing feedback through peer learning networks
Team Debriefs / Learning Circles	Reflect on successes, emerging issues, and blind spots	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bi-monthly or quarterly staff sessions • Integration of real-time challenges for group discussion
Training Participation Logs	Track training uptake and relevance across roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tracking by role and department • Follow-up assessments after 3-6 months
Organizational Policy Reviews	Identify gaps and strengths in policy alignment with goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual reviews with staff input • Comparison of existing internal protocols to best practice guidelines
Partnership Health Checks	Evaluate relationships with community partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular check-ins or discussions with partners

3.3 Use a Living Dashboard or Success Tracker

Another tool to map progress across various program and operational areas could be creating a simple internal dashboard or success tracker that highlights successes achieved and next steps planned.

The template below hopes to provide an example of how progress monitoring and success measurement can be carried out over time.

Area of Practice	Current Status	Progress Made	Next Steps	Lead Person/Team
Intake & Assessment Practices	Piloted in 2 programs	Positive client feedback	Scale to all programs	Program Manager
Training Uptake	80% of frontline staff trained	Mid-level staff training next	Tailor training by role	HR & Supervisor
Community Partnership Engagement	2 new MOUs signed	High satisfaction reported	Formalize advisory group	ED & Outreach Lead

4. Key Takeaways

This toolkit was developed to accompany [*Sacred Spaces & Safe Places: Best Practices on Incorporating Spiritually and Culturally Responsive Care for Equity Deserving Groups Navigating Housing Precarity*](#). Our goal with this resource is to equip service providers with tools and roadmaps to implement best practices into their work, and create tangible progress towards offering spiritually and culturally responsive care in their work.

As we present these resources, we recognize that service provision environments are often overburdened and underfunded with very few resources to create elaborate programs or changes. The toolkit and best practices have been designed keeping that challenge in mind and hopes to provide solutions that can be incorporated in existing service environments through making adaptations, introducing a new method or way of doing, or through commitment and incentives at senior leadership level.

As you commit and progress in this area of work, we hope that you can carry the following key takeaways forward into your practice.

Learning is Relational, Not Just Technical

- Deep learning happens through dialogue and relationship, not just content delivery.
- Allow time and space for unstructured, organic conversations—staff are more likely to ask questions in informal or smaller settings where vulnerability feels safe.
- Peer learning and storytelling can be more effective than rigid modules.

Curiosity and Care Must Coexist

- Curiosity about cultural and spiritual differences should be welcomed and scaffolded, not suppressed.
- Create non-judgmental learning environments where staff feel safe admitting what they don't know and are supported in learning more.

Shared Ownership is Critical

- Embedding culturally and spiritually responsive care is not the work of one role or department—it requires buy-in and participation across all levels: leadership, supervisors, frontline staff, admin, and community partners.
- Training should be designed for each role, not just frontline staff.

Make It Measurable and Sustainable

- Progress should be tracked over time through staff reflections, client feedback, and policy audits.
- Build this into organizational accountability systems (e.g., monitoring, reports to the board, hiring practices).
- Ensure feedback is looped back into learning and practice—monitoring is not just about tracking but about improving.