

## **Partnership Developed to Study Equine Assisted Learning (EAL)**

On June 30, 2010 a two-year research project was launched to study the effects of equine assisted learning in the treatment of First Nations youth solvent abuse. The project began officially with an Elder ceremony and signing of a Research Partnership Agreement. The study represents a unique collaboration between the White Buffalo Youth Inhalant Treatment Center, a non-profit organization located at Sturgeon Lake First Nation and the Cartier Equine Learning Centre, a full service equine facility located north of Prince Albert Saskatchewan. Cartier provides a nationally recognized EAL Certification Program through its Academy of Equine Assisted Learning. The signing ceremony for the research partnership is symbolic of the research team's approach to knowledge building and collective understanding in this area.

The research team involves the partnering of researchers from three universities (University of Calgary, University of Saskatchewan, University of Regina) and national representation from the Youth Solvent Addiction Committee, the National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation, and the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse. The project is guided by an advisory team including an Elder and a youth treatment graduate from Saskatchewan, as well as representation from Siksika Medicine Lodge located in Southern Alberta. Principle Investigator, Dr. Colleen Dell comments that "active partnership is vital to ensuring that the study is owned and directed by the community and that the research outcomes are relevant to the partners involved".

The purpose of the study is to explore how the use of equine assisted learning in youth solvent abuse treatment may contribute to youth behavioral change and increased physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. The linkage between what is commonly termed 'horse therapy' or equine guided interventions and treating individuals who problematically use substances has gained increased attention in Canada over the past several years. Tamara Mackinnon, Program Director at Cartier Equine Learning Center describes their EAL approach as "complementary with the existing program at the White Buffalo Inhalant Treatment Centre, bringing two strong programs together to reinforce and influence positive change in young lives".

The University of Calgary, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine's co-principle investigator Dr. Cindy Adams, explains that "an important aspect of the study's partnership model also emphasizes understanding the effect of the human-equine partnership in the lives of the youth". The White Buffalo Inhalant Treatment Centre has incorporated the Cartier Equine Assisted Learning Program as a treatment adjunct for more than five years. White Buffalo Executive Director Ernest Sauve explains, "this approach is not entirely new, but is a return or reintroduction to what is already known about the horse within a cultural context". However, research on the potential benefits of including the horse within educational and life skills programs with this population is limited and highlights the importance of undertaking the research study.

Plans for a Horse Dance, a culturally significant ceremony, will bring community and research partners together again in the fall.

This project is funded by the Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research, an innovative Alberta-based resource that supports the development of research evidence and policy for child youth and family health and well being.



Left: Ernest Sauve, Executive Director White Buffalo Youth Inhalant Treatment Centre with Elder during ceremony launching research project.

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Left: Tamara MacKinnon Program Director at Cartier Equine Learning Center, Center: Ernest Sauve, and right: Dr. Colleen Dell, University of Saskatchewan Principle Investigator, sign research partnership agreement

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