



BRIDGES
FOR WOMEN SOCIETY

ANNUAL REPORT

2023-2024

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A MESSAGE FROM OUR BOARD

To serve as Interim Chair during such a dynamic time for Bridges has been both challenging and rewarding, as well as an opportunity to continue our organizational transformation into a new phase and allow us to reflect and learn from it all.

Bridges is on a path of significant change and with this brings the promise of growth and expansion on many levels, and ultimately the increased delivery of solid progressive programming for all the women we serve.

It has been an active year with key areas of concern identified and addressed. A year that recognized the importance of building strong communication, plans that are inclusive and wide reaching, that recognized the need for reinforcing our strategic goals and, more importantly, recognized the need to increase our ability to work more closely than ever before with all our community partners and with each other.

It was also a year of healing, a need created by uncertainties around day-to-day functions that had been built up over the COVID years and coupled with assessing and adapting to program delivery in this new environment. It also became a year to acknowledge that creativity and building trust are a direct result of collaboration and teamwork. The strength and deep commitment shown during this time by all the staff, board members, participants, donors and volunteers, both past and present, cannot be underestimated.

It is with this in mind, that I extend my personal thanks to every participant of Bridges, every staff person and every Board member that worked so hard over the past year to ensure programs continued without disruption despite these shifting sands.

It will be very exciting to focus on new directions which includes the honouring of all those women that came before and those yet to come. I am pleased and humbled to continue to be a part of this renewal.

Thank you to our previous chair, Katie Nickerson. We express our gratitude to all the efforts and support you brought the Bridges team.

Also, to Bonnie Lewis (Co-Chair) Debra Nawosad (Treasurer), Kelly Favro (Member at Large) and Keara Doyle (Member at Large). The collaborative and supportive energy of this group was nothing short of remarkable. Debra and Keara have completed their terms. Kelly continues to support Bridges as time allows, and Bonnie will continue to serve as a Board Member this coming year.

We also thank staff members, particularly Gwen Davies, who after 16 years has retired – as well as all the staff who dedicated time and energy to Bridges and have since found other avenues to pursue. Each of your contributions was essential to maintaining consistent programming and we wish you the best in your future.

Carolyn Mandrusiak

Carolyn Mandrusiak
Interim Board Chair



**Nothing is impossible, the word itself says -
*I'm possible!***

Audrey Hepburn

MESSAGE FROM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

BRIDGES FOR WOMEN SOCIETY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR ANNE HODGE

I am honored and excited to join Bridges for Women as the new Executive Director at this pivotal time. The world around us is rapidly evolving, and as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, we find ourselves presented with opportunities for renewal, growth, and connection.

Bridges for Women has shown remarkable resilience and adaptability over the past few years. Now, as we look ahead, we embrace the opportunity to expand our impact. Our commitment remains to provide essential support for women experiencing trauma, abuse, and other life challenges. This period of renewal gives us the chance to re-imagine our services and explore innovative programming that will enhance our reach.



Anne Hodge

An exciting development for Bridges is our upcoming move to a new location, which will include dedicated spaces for counselling, classrooms, and offices, with room for future growth. This move represents more than a physical shift; it symbolizes our commitment to growth and creating a safe, empowering space for every woman we serve.

As we look forward, we also honor the rich history that has brought Bridges to where it is today. For over three decades, our organization has been a beacon of hope and healing for countless women. This history, passed down from our Founding Mothers, staff, clients, and community partners, forms the foundation upon which we build our future. We are dedicated to carrying this legacy forward while remaining open to new perspectives that will guide us forward.

Our Commitment to Reconciliation

At Bridges, we understand that true healing and growth require a deep, ongoing commitment to reconciliation with Indigenous communities. We acknowledge the traditional lands of the Lekwungen-speaking peoples, the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations, on which we work. We aim to embed reconciliation at the heart of our efforts, through listening, learning, and acting in ways that honor Indigenous voices and experiences. By building relationships with Indigenous organizations, we strive to create a more inclusive and equitable future for all.

MESSAGE FROM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR CONTINUED

Alongside our move, we are also developing a strategic plan to guide our work, rooted in the values of empowerment, inclusivity, and healing. This plan will provide a road map for growth, innovation, and community engagement, ensuring that Bridges for Women remains a vital source of support for the women we serve.

Strengthening relationships within our community remains a priority. The success of Bridges is tied to the partnerships and collaborations we build with local organizations, businesses, and individuals. In turn, these relationships deepen our impact and expand the support networks available to the women we serve. We will also continue enhancing our trauma-informed counseling, employment programs, and personal development opportunities, helping women reclaim their potential and rebuild their lives.

To our incredible team—staff, volunteers, and supporters—thank you. Your dedication to our mission has guided Bridges through challenging times. I also want to extend my heartfelt gratitude to our former Executive Director, Brenda, whose leadership and vision shaped the organization into what it is today. Her legacy will continue to inspire us as we embark on this new chapter.

As we move forward, I am filled with hope for the future. Together, we will continue creating pathways for healing, empowerment, and success for women across our community. Thank you for your ongoing support of Bridges for Women. Together, we are making a difference.

With gratitude and excitement,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Anne Hodge". The script is elegant and cursive.

Anne Hodge
Executive Director

OPERATIONAL HIGHLIGHTS

FROM OFFICE COORDINATOR, EVA ARRIAGA

This year, we have focused on enhancing financial and operational processes to strengthen Bridges for Women's infrastructure and ensure greater efficiency. Key initiatives include implementing secure and efficient financial procedures, with updated systems for managing transactions, reporting, and budgeting. These improvements enhance our financial integrity and enable more data-driven decision-making.

Additionally, we have initiated updates to Payworks, an essential tool for managing payroll, time tracking, and employee benefits. This update allows for smoother, more transparent access to information, empowering our team to manage their personal and professional needs more effectively.

Employee Access to Policies and Training

We are working towards providing online access to organizational policies and training materials, ensuring all employees have the necessary resources to perform their roles effectively. This initiative supports continuous learning, keeps staff aligned with current best practices, and reduces administrative overhead, fostering a culture of growth and knowledge sharing.

Data Management & IT System Updates

In recognition of the importance of data security and compliance with industry standards, we have undertaken a project to securely archive old files and data. This includes moving legacy files to secure, organized systems that are easily accessible when needed but protected from unauthorized access. These updates streamline operations, enabling us to focus more on current and future initiatives.

The past year has seen significant advancements in the operational, financial, and cultural health of Bridges for Women. By focusing on team development, operational efficiency, and a welcoming work environment, we are poised for continued success. The updates to our IT systems and office space, along with the improvements in financial management and employee resources, will lay the foundation for a strong, secure, and resilient organization moving forward.

Together, we are building an even more supportive and empowered workplace, and I am excited for the next chapter of growth and collaboration ahead.

COUNSELLING HIGHLIGHTS

FROM THERPEUTIC SERVICES COORDINATOR, LINDA DUARTE

Counselling Services: Supporting Healing and Empowerment

Bridges for Women provides trauma-informed counselling to women (transgender and cisgender), non-binary, and two-spirit individuals who identify as part of the women's community. Our counselling services are available to those impacted by violence, abuse, or trauma at any point in their lives. Support is accessed through self-referral, WorkBC, or as part of the Bridges Employment Program (BEP). **In our 2023-2024 year, we were able to provide 1183 individual counselling sessions, with 133 sessions for crisis and advocacy.**

In 2024, we continued operating under a hybrid model, with approximately 50% of our sessions conducted virtually. This approach ensures accessibility and flexibility for our clients, reflecting our commitment to meeting diverse needs.

Team Expansion and Leadership:

This year brought significant growth and development to our Counselling Services team:

Linda Duarte joined as Therapeutic Services Coordinator in July, bringing over 25 years of counselling experience and 10 years of supervision and leadership. Linda's background includes working in post-secondary settings, supporting Indigenous, LGBTQIA2S+, and cisgender women. She has embraced her role with enthusiasm, fostering excellence in service delivery and team collaboration.

Polly Chin (she/her) as a Counsellor. Polly holds a Master of Arts in Counselling Psychology (MACP) from Yorkville University and is a Canadian Certified Counsellor (CCC). Her strength-based, trauma-informed approach integrates somatic therapy and mindfulness, tailored to clients' individual goals. Polly also provides multilingual counselling in English, Cantonese, and Mandarin.

Lauriann Keane joined as our Intake and Service Navigation Coordinator in September. Lauriann brings expertise in intake assessment, crisis intervention, and service coordination. Her previous roles include working at the Battered Womens Resource Centre and Safe Steps Family Violence and Resource Centre, where she held supervisory and case management positions.

The success of our counselling services is a testament to the dedication of our team: Briana Mikkelson, Cerasela Toba, and Charlene LeSage continue to uphold Bridges' legacy of trauma-informed expertise and professional excellence. Together, they have ensured continuity in service delivery during a year of transition and growth.

Looking Ahead

As we close the year, the counselling program remains at the heart of our mission to support healing and recovery. With a strengthened team, expanded expertise, and a hybrid service model, we are poised to further enhance accessibility and impact in the coming year. Bridges for Women is committed to fostering resilience and empowerment for every client we serve.

CLIENT HEALING STORIES

All stories have been shared with the explicit consent of the individuals.

I have not found support systems out there to address trauma as Bridges does. This program is essential to overcoming the impact of trauma and its residual effects. I found personally trauma has an overwhelming impact and was impossible for me to overcome without the proper help, support, skilled therapy and guidance of Bridges to learn how to process, face, deal, heal, learn skills and learn in-depth self-care to step forward in healing. When all systems and support failed, I received a referral to Bridges.

The positive impact on my journey to healing has no words to explain the enormous benefits of being within Bridges program and skilled therapist and professionals.

My mental health, and emotional well-being is in the process of healing as I face the areas needed to, to heal. The support and guidance to overcoming trauma is very possible for me as I journey through with the Bridges counselor who is closely working with me.

I had an in-depth intake with an intake worker of Bridges. I then was paired perfectly to my therapist that is deeply working with me as I work through the delicate process of being a survivor of incomprehensible abuse. The journey to a safe place is made possible because of the very skilled therapy and counseling through Bridges.



PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

FROM PROGRAM COORDINATOR, WENDY SCHULTZ

Bridges Employment Program: A Year of Resilience and Transformation

2024 was a year marked by change, challenges, and triumphs at Bridges for Women. Despite significant obstacles, the dedication of our team and the resilience of our participants enabled us to graduate two full cohorts from the Bridges Employment Program (BEP). This achievement reflects the strength of our community and the commitment of both staff and participants.

Program Team Updates

This year, Wendy Schultz transitioned into the Program Coordinator role after 13 years with Bridges, bringing a wealth of experience across multiple programs. We also welcomed two new facilitators: Mariana Londono, with expertise in Human Resources and adult learning, and Sheri Sadowick, who brings energy and compassion to her work. Additionally, Barbara, our student counselor, stepped into a co-facilitator role, enriching the program with her teaching and counseling experience.

Challenges and Opportunities

2024 brought challenges, including increased participant trauma symptoms due to economic uncertainty. In response, we integrated additional counseling support, ensuring participants' holistic needs were met.

Looking ahead, BEP is focused on expanding employer partnerships, enhancing the program curriculum, and introducing mentorship opportunities to support graduates in their career transitions. .

Our Vision for 2025

In 2025, BEP aims to diversify its programming to include hybrid and in-person classroom sessions, strengthen partnerships with local employers, and implement a Job Club.

These efforts will ensure Bridges continues to empower women through education, healing, and employment, creating pathways to lasting economic security



PROMISING PRACTICE + SISTER STORIES HIGHLIGHTS

FROM ENGAGEMENT AND PARTNERSHIP COORDINATOR, LISA CROSSMAN

With the end of the 5-year pilot project of the Indigenous Women's Bridging Program (IWBP) in March 2024, the Promising Practice / Sisters Stories Project also closed off their 5-year evaluation of the program. We have been humbled and very grateful for the way participants in the IWBP have taken the time to give incredibly heartfelt, thoughtful, constructive, and honest feedback in sharing the important ways the IWBP has impacted their personal healing journeys, lives, families, and pathways going forward. This program evaluation project worked in direct partnership and collaboration with IWBP staff members and Advisory Council Members to evaluate the work of the program through community-based research with program participants. The vision and goal of this pilot evaluation project was to directly connect with program participants in real time to better understand the strengths, impacts, and recommendations for wise practices for ongoing IWBP service delivery, and to open space for participants to share their experiences with healing, growth, change, and cultural connections as a method for informing ongoing Indigenous programs development.

In January 2024, a Healing Cards Event was planned by the Sisters' Stories evaluation team in partnership and collaboration with IWBP staff. This event was open to all participants of the IWBP between 2019 and 2024 and was a full day workshop with program participants, supported by Bridges' staff team members and Elder Audrey Lundquist.

The event was graciously hosted by the Songhees Wellness Center, located in the Traditional Territories of the lə k'wəḡə n Peoples of Songhees Nation of Victoria, BC. This was a day of reflection on the work of the Sisters' Stories Project, as informed by IWBP participants, and included a facilitated art project led by Jennifer Johnson, local Kwagwiltz First Nation mixed-media artist.



Jennifer led the group through the collaborative creation of a program logo and the creation of healing cards, (visual mixed-media representations of messages and experiences that program participants wanted to share with future Indigenous program participants). These representations were later transformed into a beautiful deck of healing cards that was shared with all program participants and Bridges' staff team members. The vision for the use of the Healing Cards going forward is that they will be a part of Indigenous Programs' participant welcoming packages in future years.

To close off the project and the work of the 5-year evaluation, a final report on the comprehensive findings, achievements, challenges, and recommendations of the work of the IWBP was created and presented to the Bridges' staff team in March 2024.

PROGRAM TESTIMONIAL

Bridges gave me a group of women who I could engage with. This group of women helped me feel less alone, less strange and less devalued. The facilitators showed me that I was someone who deserves respect. Through their compassion, empathy and respect I learned some tools that helped validate my situation and my feelings. I realized that I was able to make some boundaries and that my emotions mattered. Speaking to the amazing trauma informed counsellor was invaluable to me.

I was in the middle of my mediation and divorce, during this time, and I don't think I could have dealt with it with strength and resiliency without being in the Bridges program at the same time.

-Bridges Employment Program Participant



IN GRATITUDE

Bridges for Women Society is deeply grateful for our wide network of supporters, partners, and friends. Thank you to everyone who contributed to our collective vision of a world where all women impacted by trauma have the choice to break free from the cycles of violence, poverty and isolation, and the opportunity to achieve safety, health, and personal control in their lives.

