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# Aboriginal Cultural Room opens today at local hospital

*Patients now have a dedicated space for prayer, traditional ceremonies*

WETASKIWIN – A newly dedicated space in the Wetaskiwin Hospital and Care Centre will provide a place of spiritual healing for Aboriginal patients and their families.

Opened today with a traditional Aboriginal pipe ceremony, the Aboriginal Cultural Room provides a quiet, comfortable space on the hospital's third floor where patients and families can gather with an Elder for prayer and traditional ceremonies, such as smudging.

"Thanks to everyone involved in making this Aboriginal Cultural Room a reality," says Health Minister Stephen Mandel. "It means around-the-clock access will be available to a peaceful, culturally respectful space that promotes holistic healing. I am confident this room will make a positive difference to many in their care journey."

Tracy Lee, Aboriginal Health Lead with the Alberta Health Services' Aboriginal Health Program in AHS Central Zone, says Aboriginal populations believe health is holistic and comprised of emotional, mental, physical and spiritual well-being.

"It can be a bit of a culture shock to Aboriginal patients when they walk into a hospital, so having this room here also helps us in creating a culturally safe home away from home," Lee says. "This room is a place that can help provide a balance between the highly clinical world of a hospital and spiritual well-being for patients."

"Aboriginal families are large and cultural adoptions between families can make the family even larger. This room will allow those families to provide support in a culturally meaningful way."

The room is the second of its kind in the Central Zone. The first opened at the Red Deer Regional Hospital Centre in January 2014. Decorated with artwork donated by Maskwacis Health Services, the space provides a home-like environment for patients, families and their Elders.

Planning for the space in Wetaskiwin began in the summer, following collaborative efforts between the hospital, the Aboriginal Health Program's Central Zone team and the federally funded Maskwacis Health Services.

It will be accessible 24 hours a day through nursing staff, as well as through Aboriginal Health co-ordinator Claudette Yellowbird.

"Having a place like this was a major request from the First Nations clients, families and staff," says Yellowbird. "Before staff would try to provide an available space for smudging and meditation, and give families a place to have quiet debriefing time with their loved ones."

"With representatives and voices from both worlds, we came together to come up with a solution to this request for an Aboriginal Cultural Room here at the hospital. This is a historic moment for us here at the hospital, especially for our First Nations people."

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Yellowbird is one of three Aboriginal Health co-ordinators in Central Zone. The co-ordinators are available to all Aboriginal people who access health care, including Status and Non-Status First Nations, Métis and Inuit. The co-ordinators address a wide range of challenges while working with clients, including language barriers, cultural differences, transportation issues and system navigation.

In addition to complementing the Aboriginal Health Program's work, the room's presence will encourage cultural awareness, says Brenda Zilkie, manager at the Wetaskiwin Hospital and Care Centre.

"We are very pleased to be able to show our support and respect for the health and traditions of our surrounding Aboriginal communities through the dedication of this space," says Zilkie.

"It is exciting to see that the Aboriginal people we serve will have a safe space, where traditional cultural values and beliefs can be practised."

The Wetaskiwin Hospital and Care Centre serves an area with 35,000 residents, including the community of Maskwacis to the south, and provides health care for its Four Band membership: Samson, Ermineskin, Louis Bull and Montana First Nations.

Alberta Health Services is the provincial health authority responsible for planning and delivering health supports and services for more than four million adults and children living in Alberta. Its mission is to provide a patient-focused, quality health system that is accessible and sustainable for all Albertans.

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