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Weekend Wellness Retreats

Programming Connection

Case Study



Organization: Positive Women's Network (PWN)

Region: British Columbia

Prepared: 2011

Quick Facts

Goal (immediate)	Provide a comfortable setting for women living with HIV to: connect with and support one another, learn more about HIV and its effect on their lives, and become engaged with PWN
Goal (ultimate)	Improve the mental, emotional and physical health of women living with HIV by facilitating a break from social stigma and isolation and creating a peer support network
Population	People living with HIV, Women
Participants	Any woman living with HIV who is able to commit to a weekend away and abide by retreat guidelines
Type of Program	Retreat
Setting	A small resort located in a rural or forested area away from participants' homes
Required Resources	A retreat coordinator At least one other on-site support person One nurse A variety of other workshops facilitators Workshop materials An appropriate retreat location
Scope and Duration	Two retreats per year, hosted from Friday to Sunday
Date Started	1993

Region	British Columbia
Recruitment	Participants are recruited through letters mailed to women living with HIV and HIV support agencies; interested women participate in a mandatory screening interview and application process.
Challenges	Women's fears about HIV disclosure and travel from home Health-related issues Childcare issues
Evaluation	Questionnaires filled out by participants, facilitators and staff; independent evaluation of retreats to date completed in 2006.

What is the program?

The Weekend Wellness Retreats are a way for women living with HIV from across British Columbia to come together over three days in a safe and confidential environment to recharge, learn more about HIV, form friendships, talk about struggles and celebrate successes with others. The goal of the program is to improve the mental, emotional and physical health of women living with HIV by facilitating a break from social stigma and isolation and creating a peer support network.

By offering an opportunity to leave home and participate in workshops on health and wellness, which are often facilitated by experts from various disciplines (massage therapists, HIV specialists, Aboriginal elders and others), outdoor activities and informal conversations, the retreats serve as a vibrant and empowering break from the isolation commonly faced by many women living with HIV.

Why Was the Program Developed?

Since the start of the epidemic, stigma and discrimination attached to HIV have served to isolate HIV-positive women from friends, family and society, making it difficult for these women to disclose their status and seek support.

To help overcome social stigma and the related exclusion of women living with HIV, Positive Women's Network (PWN) responded to this need by establishing its first wellness retreats in 1993. The ability of the project to continuously draw participants to retreats till this day demonstrates what a key social support mechanism they have become, providing the conditions for all women living with HIV throughout the province to comfortably connect with one another in an informal and supportive context.

How Does the Program Work?

For more detailed information on how the Weekend Retreats work, including sample forms and agendas, please see the Wellness Retreat Manual in the [Program Materials](#) section.

Location

The PWN Weekend Wellness Retreats take place at lodges in various sites throughout British Columbia.

Retreat lodges and locations are always chosen on the basis of their relaxed, comfortable and informal character, and their proximity to both a central, easily reached hub (such as Vancouver) and a natural environment. This provides women with an experience that differs from their regular everyday environment while remaining accessible.

Engagement and Recruitment

Participants

Any woman over the age of 18 living with HIV in British Columbia is encouraged to apply to participate in a retreat.

Priority is given to those women who have never before attended a retreat.

There is no typical participant; in fact, the diversity of participants contributes significantly to the unique experiences and relationships developed by the women during each retreat. As the retreats are designed to accommodate women from all across the province, PWN provides free subsidies for transportation and childcare services to enable those who are geographically isolated and/or responsible for caring for children to attend. These expenses are reimbursed on the final day of the retreat as some participants are unable to front these expenses for reimbursement at a later date.

Given that Aboriginal women are disproportionately affected by HIV and make up a large percentage of PWN membership, PWN strives to hold a retreat specifically for Aboriginal women living with HIV in BC every other year, which feature a variety of Aboriginal-focused activities and workshops.

To promote the retreats, PWN sends an information package to its members (women already supported by PWN). An example of the retreat information package can be found in the [Program Materials](#) section. The package includes the retreat announcement, registration form, medical form, a sample agenda (upon request) and a frequently asked questions sheet

Women who have demonstrated an interest in experiencing a retreat but who have trouble scheduling time with a doctor or have other challenges in filling out required paperwork may request support from PWN staff for help scheduling appointments and completing forms. This is very important for reducing barriers to participation for some women. It is also important to note that many doctors will not allow their patients to have methadone “carries” for the duration of a weekend, making it impossible for those women who require them to participate.

Additionally, to reach out to individuals who are not PWN members, information about the retreat is sent to a variety of other agencies that support women living with HIV in the province. PWN has formed partnerships with these organizations and sometimes individual case managers who work within them, which serves to expand the capacity of PWN to support women living with HIV throughout the province.

Information session and screening interview

Women interested in attending a retreat based on their review of the retreat information package are invited to attend a group pre-retreat information session at PWN designed to ensure readiness and encourage attendance. This session, facilitated by the retreat coordinator and/or PWN support staff, addresses common fears and concerns faced by potential participants, walks them through the retreat experience and addresses their questions. Whenever possible, a woman who has already attended a retreat will describe her experience to give other women an idea of how enriching the experience can be. Women from out of town can attend the meeting via teleconference. Women do not need to attend the information session to apply for the retreat but it is encouraged.

All women interested in attending the retreat who have not previously attended one are required to complete a brief screening interview with a PWN support staff member over the phone before they may be accepted. The purpose of the interview is to identify if any of the women have a physical, mental or emotional health situation that could be an issue in the retreat environment. The retreats are accessible to women with all mobility capacities, but the environment is not equipped to support other serious health-related concerns. In addition, the interview is designed to assess whether a woman is able to abide by all of the retreat rules, including not using drugs or alcohol while at the retreat, and to ensure that she is comfortable interacting with other women from a diversity of backgrounds and experiences. Drugs and alcohol are not allowed at the retreat, given that some women attending may be in recovery. Doctor-prescribed medicinal marijuana is allowed to be used in a designated area.

A woman is not able to attend the retreat if the PWN staff member identifies sufficient concerns about her ability to follow retreat guidelines. Women who are unable to attend for this reason are encouraged to apply again the following year.

Notification

After all the applicants' files have been reviewed, the PWN support team meets to decide which applicants will be accepted and which will be waitlisted. To help them make these decisions, they prioritize women who have never been on a retreat, who are newly diagnosed and who are from outside the Lower Mainland area. Typically, while

approximately 25 women attend each retreat, the team selects around 35 applicants to account for cancellations. PWN sends letters to the applicants indicating that they have either been accepted, waitlisted or not accepted.

Participants who are accepted receive information about the date and time of departure and return, in addition to details about transportation and personal items to bring. They are asked to confirm their attendance by phoning PWN. The retreat coordinator follows up with each participant who is accepted to confirm her attendance, arrange transportation and discuss any questions or concerns. She also reviews participants' medical forms and food requests and does case-by-case troubleshooting to help accommodate each woman's participation. Typically, the retreat coordinator is in touch with each participant via telephone or email several times before a retreat.

Approved participants are also sent a retreat participant-led workshop application form. This form explains that at the retreat, in addition to workshops led by outside professionals, women are encouraged to facilitate their own activity. By leading workshops, retreat participants not only have the opportunity to build self-confidence and leadership skills, but they may also serve as role models to fellow participants.

The retreat coordinator determines which workshop applications are feasible; if a participant's idea is not feasible (for example, due to budget constraints), the retreat coordinator will support the applicant in coming up with an idea that will work. She works with each participant-led workshop applicant to help her make her workshop idea a reality. Successful applicants are reimbursed for any supplies purchased for their workshop and awarded a modest honorarium for their contribution. Examples of past participant-led workshops include: dance, arts & crafts and storytelling workshops; facilitation of a Narcotics Anonymous meeting; leading nature walks; body mapping; and other skills-building workshops such as time management, public speaking and community activism.

Professionals

The retreat coordinator seeks and hires professional facilitators and practitioners to provide teaching around both traditional and complementary therapies. Each Wellness Retreat is facilitated by 10 to 20 different facilitators and practitioners including massage and bodywork practitioners, hair stylists, dance instructors, yoga instructors, acupuncturists, doctors, nurses, dieticians, art and music therapists, Aboriginal elders, and service providers from various organizations (e.g., the BC Compassion Club Society, Women Against Violence Against Women, Healing Our Spirit BC Aboriginal HIV/AIDS Society, BC Civil Liberties Association). The retreat coordinator utilizes several modes to identify professionals, including volunteer websites, professional schools, referrals from past retreat professionals and word of mouth.

The retreat coordinator provides each facilitator with a values statement and a contract and confidentiality policy, which need to be signed by the facilitator. Depending on the facilitator's level of awareness about HIV, the retreat coordinator may provide education related to HIV/AIDS. All professionals hired are self-identified women and receive an honorarium for their contribution, which averages about \$150 for a 90 minute workshop and \$50 for a 50-minute session with a massage therapist. Facilitators are asked to cover their own cost of travel to site. Often PWN will put facilitators into contact with each other before a retreat so those who do not have a car are able to carpool with those who do.

To ensure that the retreat site is suitable for the event, the retreat coordinator reviews the confidentiality policy and PWN's values statement with the retreat site manager, who agrees to share this information with staff members at the retreat site.

Please see the Wellness Retreat Manual in the [Program Materials](#) section for more information and sample forms.

Retreat

The Wellness Retreats begin on Friday afternoon and run through Sunday. All first-time attendees are paired with a veteran buddy who has been on at least one prior retreat in order to ensure comfortable assimilation into the group dynamic and minimize feelings of unease and isolation.

Transportation

Most participants meet at the downtown PWN office and travel to the retreat location together as a large group on a chartered bus. There may be a few participants who choose to drive themselves or arrange their own ride to the

retreat site rather than meet at PWN; these participants are told a specific time to arrive at the retreat site to ensure that all participants arrive at approximately the same time. To ensure the inclusion of all women regardless of where they reside, PWN makes travel arrangements for participants, including flights, buses, shuttles and taxis. Whenever possible, PWN arranges for participants to carpool with other participants to foster relationship building.

Workshops and Activities

Each retreat consists of a mix of structured circles and workshops with frequent opportunities for independent free time. At the beginning of each retreat, the women are given an agenda including a welcome letter, schedule and guidelines to help guide them through all the activities taking place over the weekend. They are also given a “goodie bag”, which includes healthy snacks, bottled water and fun gifts like soap, make-up, slippers and a journal. This helps some of the women feel comfortable in their new environment.

During the weekend, from early in the morning until late at night there is always a workshop or activity taking place. This is done to alleviate any anxiety that women—particularly those attending a retreat for the first time—might experience if they are not sure what to do.

At the same time, women are completely free to choose how they would like to spend time. The only mandatory expectation is that everyone attends the opening circle on Friday and the closing circle on Sunday. The purpose of opening circle is to bring women together to meet each other, go over the agenda and retreat agreements, discuss house rules and answer any questions. The purpose of closing circle is to bring women together to debrief about the weekend, share what their experience at the retreat was like and take a group photo for those who feel comfortable being photographed.

For some women, participation in this retreat provides the first opportunity they have had in a long while to relax in a peaceful environment, so it is not uncommon for some participants to spend much of the weekend off by themselves. Most of the women, however, are eager to participate in the workshops and activities once they are on site and have become acquainted with other participants.

The workshops and activities at each retreat are designed to be informal and relaxed. They also vary according to the availability of professional facilitators. While each activity lasts one to two hours, given that some women are unaccustomed to workshops and others may take medication that makes it difficult to focus for long periods of time, women are invited to participate in each activity for as long as it holds their attention.

There are a few activities that are offered at every wellness retreat. During each retreat, all participants are offered one 50-minute massage in a modality of their choice with a bodywork practitioner (bodywork practitioners who practice various modalities are invited to the retreat; typically, five practitioners visit the retreat on Saturday and conduct five sessions each). In addition, an information session on HIV and women, which is led by an HIV specialist, is offered. This can be particularly valuable for rural women who may not have access to such information in the communities where they reside. Lastly, a craft table is set up for the weekend and women are invited to do arts and crafts projects at their leisure.

Other possible workshops and activities:

- Focused arts and crafts workshops (e.g., “how to make” dream catchers, baskets, candles, medicine bags, etc.)
- Hair cutting
- Acupuncture
- Sweat lodge teachings
- Art therapy
- Self-care workshops
- Filmmaking workshop
- Performance by a drum group
- Yoga
- Body mapping
- Canoeing or kayaking
- Hiking and nature walks

- Journaling
- Rock climbing
- Camp fires
- Storytelling
- Drumming
- Cooking
- Self-defence
- Belly dancing

All workshops and activities are spaced out from each other as much as possible to allow participants time to linger and share between sessions. To avoid overburdening participants with the presence of additional people from outside the retreat community, all professionals are asked to leave the site after they have finished their workshop or activity.

Meals

It is important that all women receive the nutrients they need to remain energized and healthy at the retreat. Many retreat participants take HIV medications that have multiple side effects, including allergies and irritability toward certain foods. In addition, participants may have dietary restrictions due to religious beliefs, cultural traditions or personal preference.

Follow-up

After each retreat, the retreat coordinator calls each woman to talk about how she is readjusting to her daily routine. It can be difficult for a woman to return from such a positive experience to a situation in which she may feel isolated and alone. Many participants continue to stay in touch with the women they befriended during the retreats, and it is not uncommon for them to ask the coordinator for each others' contact information. The retreat coordinator can help facilitate these connections by letting the various women know who would like to contact them and requesting permission to offer contact information.

Required Resources

Human resources

Four women staff the retreat for the duration of the weekend: one retreat coordinator, two PWN support workers and one retreat nurse. A PWN practicum student may also come on the retreat as a volunteer.

Key characteristics of all staff members and professional facilitators that contribute to program success include:

- Comfortable communicating with a diverse group of women
- Sensitive and non-judgmental in their approach to all participants
- Relaxed and informal, allowing women to participate in the retreat as they wish
- Able to balance connecting with women and allowing them to interact with each other
- Demonstrated awareness of issues of poverty, violence against women, drug and alcohol use and mental health issues
- Knowledge and experience with HIV/AIDS

Retreat Coordinator and Support Workers

The role of the retreat coordinator is to plan, organize and coordinate retreats for women living with HIV/AIDS from across the province. This person oversees the entire event.

The role of the support worker at the retreat is to provide support, advocacy, information and referral services to retreat participants. The support worker assists the retreat coordinator in a variety of ways, depending on what needs to be done.

Key characteristics of both the retreat coordinator and support worker include (aside from those listed above):

- Ability to work with a diverse team
- Experience working within women's organizations and services
- Experience planning special events
- Flexible working style
- Driver's license and car an asset

In addition, the retreat coordinator should have:

- Excellent organizational, multitasking and facilitation skills
- Familiarity with other community resources and organizations

In addition, the support workers should have:

- Strong group facilitation skills
- Ability to provide lay counselling

Retreat Nurse

A nurse who is familiar with the medical needs of HIV-positive women is required on-site for the entire event. This person administers prescription and non-prescription medication as well as nutritional supplements as needed. She also treats minor ailments and provides health education, reassurance and emotional support.

Material resources

- Promotional pamphlets and flyers
- Registration materials (forms, information sheets, etc.)
- Professional facilitator contracts
- First aid kit
- Supplies for workshops and activities

Financial resources

The costs for printed materials are almost negligible. The expense of one retreat, however, has ranged from \$14,000 to \$16,000, not including the salaries of the retreat coordinator and support workers. This amount could be more or less, depending on the number of participants, their transportation requirements, the location of the retreat, etc.

The main costs associated with a retreat are related to:

- Food and snacks, including meal supplements
- Lodging
- Transportation
- Childcare subsidies
- Supplies for first aid and crafts
- Honoraria for volunteers and facilitators, including retreat nurse

Barriers to Implementation

- Women's fears about disclosing their HIV status—particularly among those who have recently learned of their status—may prevent them from applying to attend a retreat or may cause them to cancel their attendance at the last minute.
- Anxiety about leaving their homes and routines to travel may prevent women from attending even if they have applied and been accepted to a retreat.
- Health issues, both physical and mental, may prevent women from attending a retreat to which they have already been accepted.
- Alcohol and drugs are not permitted; for some women, not using these substances for a weekend is not possible.
- Women with children may find it logistically and emotionally challenging to be away from their children for the

duration of the retreat.

- Despite the fact that a childcare subsidy is provided, women may not be able to find childcare providers whom they can trust.
- Many doctors will not allow their patients to have methadone “carries” for the weekend, making it impossible for those women who need them to participate.
- Even with support, filling out the necessary forms can be a challenge for many women, particularly the form that requires visiting a physician.
- Identifying and engaging professional service providers who agree with and adhere to the retreat values requires time and careful planning.

Evaluation

PWN considers evaluation to be a foundational part of the retreat planning process. They evaluate many parts of the retreat to determine whether or not it is meeting its intended goals. At the conclusion of each retreat, participants, professionals and PWN staff are asked to complete a retreat evaluation and this feedback is used to inform future retreat planning. Templates of the retreat evaluation forms can be viewed in the [Program Materials](#) section.

In 2006, to continue improving programming, the Wellness Retreats underwent an evaluation process by independent reviewers. These reviewers examined documentation from previous retreats, conducted interviews with staff, and held two focus groups with retreat participants.

The feedback from this evaluation was remarkably positive. As one participant said when referring to the supportive setting that was created to allow each woman to talk openly and deal with personal feelings, “magic happens.” The magic was described as “life altering” by another woman who simply loved the opportunity to finally be herself in a safe and supportive setting. The evaluators identified recommendations for future retreats. Please see the [Program Materials](#) section to review the evaluation report.

PWN has mailed the Wellness Retreat Manual to several AIDS service organizations in Canada who have carried out retreats based on the PWN model. In 2010, the PWN support team presented a poster on the retreats at the 6th Canadian HIV/AIDS Skills Building Symposium in Montreal and at the 19th Annual Canadian Conference on HIV/AIDS Research in Saskatoon. They also presented orally at the CATIE/Pacific AIDS Network 2009 Regional Educational Conference.

Learned and Confirmed

- Women living with HIV can benefit from an opportunity to be themselves and interact with one another absent of HIV stigma.
- A retreat should be participant-centred, facilitated with an emphasis on confidentiality and offer a mixed agenda of structured circles, workshops and free time.
- A supportive and relaxing environment helps women focus on learning about HIV and its effects on their lives.
- Collaboration with other organizations helps to generate awareness of the event and a diversity of participants.
- The process of retreat recruitment and post-retreat debriefing offers opportunities for women to become engaged in the broader services offered by the host organization.
- To support the participation of women from a variety of experiences, the application process must be flexible and supportive.

Program Materials

- [PWN Wellness Retreat Planning Toolkit](https://www.catie.ca/sites/default/files/PWN_Wellness_Retreat_Planning_Toolkit.pdf) (https://www.catie.ca/sites/default/files/PWN_Wellness_Retreat_Planning_Toolkit.pdf)
- [Women's Wellness Retreat Evaluation Report](https://www.catie.ca/sites/default/files/PWN_Retreat_Evaluation_Report_2006.pdf) (https://www.catie.ca/sites/default/files/PWN_Retreat_Evaluation_Report_2006.pdf)

Other Useful Materials

Resources

Women and HIV

2011, The Body

Client resources

English

[More information](#)

(<https://www.catie.ca/en/resources/women-and-hiv>)

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To learn more about the Weekend Wellness Retreats, please contact:

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Disclaimer

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CATIE provides information resources to help people living with HIV and/or hepatitis C who wish to manage their own health care in partnership with their care providers. Information accessed through or published or provided by CATIE, however, is not to be considered medical advice. We do not recommend or advocate particular treatments and we urge users to consult as broad a range of sources as possible. We strongly urge users to consult with a qualified medical practitioner prior to undertaking any decision, use or action of a medical nature.

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