



A'tukwaqni

news and stories from Tajikeimik

Let's Get Started - Building Culturally Safe Palliative Care for Mi'kmaw Communities

Coral Paul, Communications Specialist

As Mi'kmaw people, we have long advocated for a healthcare system that honours our traditions, values our knowledge, and meets our needs. While change takes time, true progress happens when we come together, share our experiences, and take action.

With this in mind, Tajikeimik partnered with Nova Scotia Health (NSH) to host a Palliative Care Gathering on March 4 and 5, 2025. This event brought together Mi'kmaq cancer survivors, community health staff, Health Directors, and healthcare workers across the province to discuss the future of palliative care in Mi'kmaw communities. The gathering was an important step in addressing unique healthcare needs, building stronger relationships with the provincial health system, and ensuring that future care respects Mi'kmaw identity and values.

A key initiative presented at the event was the Mi'kmaw Cancer Care Strategy. The strategy aims to raise awareness, promoting screening and early detection, improve survivorship and enhance palliative and end-of-life care. To ensure Mi'kmaw voices lead these efforts, Tajikeimik hired Erin Holmes from Membertou First Nation, as the Mi'kmaw Cancer Care Lead to bring this strategy to life.

Beyond policies and strategies, the gathering also emphasized the values that have guided Mi'kmaw people and communities for generations. Jane Meader from Membertou First Nation led a powerful discussion on the importance of community in end-of-life care.

"As Mi'kmaw, we know that no one should be alone in their final days. Our loved ones, our friends - even those who may not know them personally - gather to offer support. We take care of one another, in life and in passing."



Attendees of the gathering listening to the opening remarks on Day 1

Community members also reflected on practices like hosting a salite (an auction to raise money for funeral expenses), sacred fires (to honour and guide the spirit of the deceased into the spirit world), and community closures (to respect and mourn the loss of a community member). These traditions show that grief and healing in Mi'kmaw culture are shared experiences that strengthen family and community bonds.

The gathering also gave Mi'kmaq cancer survivors and caregivers the change to share their experiences navigating the healthcare system and offer recommendations for improvement. Many expressed challenges but also expressed gratitude for being heard.

Clara Gehue, a cancer survivor from Sipekne'katik First Nation shared "There are a lot of resources available, but it's not always easy to find them. I recommend reaching out to your health centre or Tajikeimik - they're there to help, connect you with supports, and lend a helping hand when you need it."

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A common theme from survivors and community health staff was the importance of dignity and respect in healthcare. They urged providers to honour Mi'kmaq traditions, emphasizing that cultural safety requires more than just awareness - it requires meaningful action and a commitment to understanding and making change.

Dr. Margot Latimer, Indigenous Health Research Chair in Nursing and Professor at Dalhousie University summed it up with a powerful statement: "Cultural safety is what the patient says it is, not what the health system says it is."

Looking ahead, Mi'kmaq health leaders and NSH must continue to work together to ensure Mi'kmaq voices shape the future of palliative and cancer care. Some next steps include raising awareness about existing supports, such as the Mi'kmaq Indigenous Patient Navigators with NSH, and the Nuji-Apoqnmuet team at Tajikeimik, as well as focusing on pain and comfort management. Other important steps include improving discharge services and developing more resources - not just materials but also financial and support resources.

The palliative care gathering was a powerful reminder that change may not always be easy, but it is a journey that we must take together. Collaboration, respect, and advocacy are key to shaping the future of healthcare in Mi'kmaq communities. The insights and shared experiences from this gathering will guide us in pushing for the changes needed to ensure that every Mi'kmaq person receives care that honours their identity, culture, and values.

The work does not stop here. Mi'kmaq community members who want to share their experiences or provide feedback on improving palliative care are encouraged to reach out to their community health centres, Health Directors, or Tajikeimik.

Every voice matters in this ongoing effort to make meaningful changes. Together, we can create a healthcare system that truly meets our needs and respects our traditions.



Palliative Care Gathering Committee

Front Row (L to R): Dr. Margot Latimer, Dalhousie University; Sharon (Paul) Rudderham, Tajikeimik; Leslie Hill, NSH; Erin Holmes, Tajikeimik

Back Row (L to R): Sarah Manley, NSH; Shannon Ryan Carson, NSH; Jenny Morgan, Tajikeimik; Fran Bowden, NSH; Marianne Arab, NSH

About Us

Tajikeimik is the new and developing health and wellness organization being created to lead health transformation on behalf of Mi'kmaq communities in Nova Scotia. In collaboration with Chiefs, Grand Council, and Health Directors, Tajikeimik will build on and evolve the health and wellness services and programs used by Mi'kmaq people in Nova Scotia; improve health service delivery; and strengthen coordination with Federal and Provincial health system partners—with the goal of improving overall health for Mi'kmaq and communities.

Tajikeimik Means: To be healthy

Vision: A healthy, vibrant Mi'kmaq Nation

Mission: Elukuti'kw wjit naji-wlo'ltinenew utanminal. We are working toward better health for all in our communities

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