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Call Auntie a shining example of community-led, equitable health care

Faculty & Staff, Giving, Inclusion & Diversity



Temerty Medicine Department of Family and Community Medicine

Suzanne Shoush is the Indigenous Health Faculty Lead with the department of family and community medicine at Temerty Medicine.

By Emma Jones

Call Auntie, a sexual and reproductive health service based in Toronto, is blazing a trail for Indigenous-led health care.

The initiative runs weekly clinics at the Toronto Birth Centre as well as leads ad hoc clinics elsewhere in Toronto. It offers patients wrap-around health support — from mental health to primary care, to connecting with specialists and social support programs — all grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

“When a community member comes to us, we look at their immediate needs and then work with them to determine what could work in the future and get them to that place, whether it’s a referral to a specialist or housing or anything else,” says **Cherylee Bourgeois**, Exemption Métis Midwife at Call Auntie and Seventh Generation Midwives Toronto.

“A lot of the Indigenous community does not feel welcome in the healthcare system, so we’ve created an environment where they can feel safe and culturally understood, and then they can bridge into more ongoing care when they are ready.”

“We’re serious about being there for people as they need us,” says **Suzanne Shoush**, Indigenous Health Faculty Lead with the department of family and community medicine at Temerty Medicine. “The people in the client group go above and beyond to provide that support.”



Temerty Medicine Department of Family and Community Medicine

Suzanne Shoush (left) and Cheryllee Bourgeois (right)

Call Auntie grew out of longstanding work midwives and birth workers have done in the Toronto Indigenous community. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, a team of health care providers had been conducting the Baby Bundle Project: a multi-year family support research effort, launched in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action that sought to improve services and service pathways for Indigenous families and help improve maternal and child outcomes.

When the pandemic began, the team realized that the trust they had already established within Toronto's Indigenous community put them in a unique position to connect community members to health care resources.

Initially, Call Auntie began by helping people access testing, treatment and COVID shelters, as well as handle concerns like dealing with isolation, pandemic-related layoffs and barriers to inclusion.

“We got an \$11.00-a-month phone number and we just started answering calls,” Bourgeois explains. “That's why it's called Call Auntie, because it was this idea of, ‘we might not have the answer, but we're really good at problem solving and we're really good at figuring out where things are and what maybe you need.’

“Community members could call us and we would just help figure out a solution to the problem, like you would call an auntie to help you figure something out.”

As the pandemic progressed, questions turned increasingly to primary care and sexual/reproductive health. Soon, Call Auntie expanded into a clinic: providing pre- and post-natal care, primary medical care, mental health support and activities to support social and cultural health. The latter included initiatives like providing lunch at each clinic so community members can drop in with their families to connect with the aunties and their community. The aunties also continue to run the Baby Bundle Program as a wrap-around pre-natal support service for Indigenous families who are pregnant and post-partum.



Temerty Medicine, Department of Family and Community Medicine

Cheryllee Bourgeois is an Exemption Métis Midwife at Call Auntie and Seventh Generation Midwives Toronto.

Recently, Call Auntie's work has been amplified by a generous gift from the Vohra Miller Foundation.

“Call Auntie provides not just equitable access to care in Canada, but also dignified access to care,” says **Sabina Vohra-Miller**, co-founder of the Vohra Miller Foundation and founder of *Unambiguous Science*. “We've seen over and over again that a one-size-fits-all model does not work. If we want to make sure we're providing good care to people in a space where they are trusting of the care, it has to be done in the community-led way. Call Auntie provides that.”

The gift will support a new community mental health worker as well as provide funds for client care — for example, being able to provide gift cards for groceries to community members in need or pay for their over-the-counter medication if they don't have coverage.

“Supporting Indigenous organizations who work directly with the community and are accountable directly to the community is the key way we will see health outcomes improve,” Shoush says. “Knowing that the Vohra Miller Foundation has complete trust in us as an organization and in the work that we do is enormously helpful. It really lets us focus on the community.”

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