



# CONNECTING TO CULTURE: SUSTAINING OUR WELLNESS

THE CREATIVITY AND PERSEVERANCE OF FIRST NATIONS IN  
BC DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

*Bridal Veil Falls,  
Popkum First Nation Traditional Territory*

## FRASER SALISH REGION

July 2024



First Nations Health Authority  
Health through wellness



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The First Nations Health Authority (FNHA) recognizes the profound and numerous ways the COVID-19 pandemic has affected First Nations in British Columbia (BC), collectively and individually. The well-being and safety of First Nations during the pandemic was made possible by the valuable contributions, innovations and leadership of community leaders, health professionals and staff whose unfaltering work provided support and care to ensure the protection and preservation of their communities.

This report was prepared by the FNHA Evaluation Team with input from First Nations in BC. The learnings, perspectives and experiences shared in this summary report came from engagement with the Fraser Salish Region in February and March 2024, and stories shared by community leads in selected online news articles.

The FNHA wishes to honour the time and expertise of community representatives who contributed.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## FINDINGS

Communities across the Fraser Salish region came together to support members through collaborative and innovative solutions to promote connectivity and wellness. Neighbouring communities sought to share information and resources, and community and health care staff worked together to ensure everyone was informed and supported. This included delivering groceries and food hampers, and calling households to provide up-to-date information about changes in stay-at-home orders and opportunities for connection.

Communities took action to keep members well-informed about pandemic developments, social distancing, and strategies for preventing viral spread. For some communities, this included implementing checkpoints at entrances and providing regular updates on social media and through newsletters. Many communities adopted innovative approaches to engage with their members, including through creative contests and campaigns aimed at engaging youth.

To ensure members were well informed about the latest developments and address uncertainty and misinformation, communities used a range of innovative and collaborative engagement approaches. New information was shared through social media channels, newsletters, posters, and pathways that allowed for meaningful and supportive conversations with members. Health services delivered health-related messages online to achieve a wider reach.

Many communities restricted movements in and out of their land to reduce the risk of viral spread. Communities also developed a range of innovative solutions to support continued accessibility and engagement in community education and health services, collaborating to support members both living in community and away from home. Many communities transferred Council and community meetings online, and in one instance, a temporary school was established at a central location in-community.

Promoting health and wellness was an important focus for many communities during stay-at-home orders. Aiming to bridge the gap while in-person activities were on hold, Nations across the Fraser Salish region connected community members through a range of programs, such as family challenges, cooking sessions, and fitness activities. Several communities organized interactive and innovative programs for youth, with a strong focus on cultural healing and connection to the land.

Communities were often unable to hold funerals and celebrations of life for those who were lost during COVID-19 restrictions, resulting in a lack of closure and space for

processing grief collectively. Some communities took to facilitating online adaptations of events to honour those who were lost and support collective healing in a time of isolation.

Cultural traditions and land-based practices were critical for maintaining community wellbeing for individuals and families, particularly during the ongoing lockdowns and social distancing measures. Communities developed innovative ways to come together to take part in cultural practices such as music, ceremonies and honouring those who had passed. When restrictions allowed, communities encouraged members to come together in-person while respecting social distancing and supporting those most vulnerable.

## **CONCLUSION**

First Nations communities across the Fraser Salish region achieved significant collaboration and coordination to support their members in response to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Community response efforts showed a remarkable commitment to centring community engagement and connection in the face of ongoing hardships and isolation. Communities utilized a range of innovative and creative methods for promoting information sharing, food sharing, and service continuity. Health services and community leaders recognized the importance of maintaining culture and tradition, ensuring that such practices could continue safely. The collective strength and resilience of these communities, and learnings from the community response to the pandemic, demonstrate the capability of communities across Fraser Salish to respond to and overcome future challenges.

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# INTRODUCTION

Between November 2022 and April 2023, the FNHA undertook a strengths-based review of the experiences of First Nations community leadership, health leads, and staff during the COVID-19 pandemic response. The review sought to complement other COVID-related after action reviews and research studies, and ensure that the perspectives and voices of First Nations communities are highlighted in the pandemic learnings. The Fraser Salish region review was postponed due to competing strategic priorities and was undertaken between February and March 2024.

This review aims to uplift the voices of First Nations communities to acknowledge achievements in adaptation, innovation and wisdom gained, and support ongoing learning, planning, community wellness, and healing.

This review draws primarily from an environmental scan of local media and publications, and an online survey.

## **Trigger Warning**

*Some content in this review may be sensitive content and could be triggering. For crisis support please contact the KUU-US Crisis Line at 1-800-588-8717 or visit the FNHA's website for [additional support services](#).*

# FINDINGS

The following sections offer learnings and experiences gathered from an environmental scan of local news and community publications in the Fraser Salish region, stories highlighted by the FNHA Fraser Salish regional team, and input shared by community contributors via an online survey, organized into themes.

## SUPPORTING ONE ANOTHER

**Communities across the Fraser Salish region came together to support members through collaborative and innovative solutions to promote connectivity and wellness. Neighbouring communities sought to share information and resources, and community and health care staff worked together to ensure everyone was informed and supported. This included delivering groceries and food hampers, and calling households to provide up-to-date information about changes in stay-at-home orders and opportunities for connection.**

Community representatives reflected on the importance of maintaining strong relationships with health services to ensure members were able to feel safe, supported and

informed. In particular, community health staff worked in collaboration with their community to support social connection and ongoing access to services.

*“When the lockdown was declared, everyone stayed in their own bubble. People were feeling isolated and alone. The health department and band staff stayed in contact with members by phone. Food was distributed to the members by the Soowahlie Band, as going out was prohibited... Soowahlie Band and the health department take pride in offering the community many activities and events... staff keep very busy with daily activities. We all enjoy our work and dedicate ourselves in everything we do for our community.”*

Lauren Backman, Soowahlie First Nation

Many communities coordinated and delivered hampers to members to ensure they had continued access to necessities whilst keeping their communities safe. For example, Seabird Island Band and the local Health Promotion Team delivered over 240 food hampers and cleaning supplies to every household in the community. Additional care kits were delivered to those who were self-isolating<sup>1</sup>.



Sumas First Nation provided a bi-weekly drive through food collection for members living in the community, reducing the need to travel for groceries<sup>2</sup>. In partnership with a humanitarian outreach organization, Soowahlie First Nation distributed care packages of food, face masks and school supplies to over 200 members in their community<sup>3</sup>.

*“During the lockdown, staff connected by Zoom and telephone calls from home. We desperately tried to have some connection with community members [by] dropping off food and delivering rapid response kits to families that needed them.”*

Lauren Backman, Soowahlie First Nation

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.seabirdisland.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Seabird-Island-Annual-Report-2020-2021\\_Web.pdf](https://www.seabirdisland.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Seabird-Island-Annual-Report-2020-2021_Web.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.sumasfirstnation.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/4-30-2020-Corona-Virus-Bulletin-8.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://iglesianicristo.net/intl-church-organization-extends-helping-hand-to-soowahlie-first-nation-in-canada/>

Some communities, such as Tsawwassen First Nation, were able to offer additional COVID-19 support payments to impacted community members who were experiencing hardship due to social isolation requirements<sup>4</sup>.



When activities could safely resume in-person, Sts'ailes Nation focused on the social-emotional wellbeing of their younger members. After a significant period of time away from the classroom, the Sts'ailes First Nation sought to strengthen connections with students through weekly sessions with a counselling team. These sessions introduced students to the medicine wheel, emotional regulation, and stress reduction.

*"Getting the kiddos outside, observing the natural world is one of my biggest passions. The kids enjoyed hugging trees and smelling and listening to the wind. All of the classes have been learning about edible, poisonous and medicinal plants. When [the kids were asked] how they feel when we are out in the trees, the universal answer was 'calm'".*

Counselling Department, Sts'ailes Education

## PREVENTING VIRAL SPREAD

**Communities took action to keep members well-informed about pandemic developments, social distancing, and strategies for preventing viral spread. For some communities, this included implementing checkpoints at entrances and providing regular updates on social media and through newsletters. Many communities adopted innovative approaches to engage with their members, including through creative contests and campaigns aimed at engaging youth.**

<sup>4</sup> [https://tsawwassenfirstnation.com/pdfs/TFN-About/Information-Centre/Annual-Reports/2021-2022 Annual Report FINAL.pdf](https://tsawwassenfirstnation.com/pdfs/TFN-About/Information-Centre/Annual-Reports/2021-2022%20Annual%20Report%20FINAL.pdf)



Communities across the Fraser Salish region kept their members well informed regarding pandemic developments, frequently turning to social media and virtual methods to deliver information in an easily accessible manner. For some Nations, this was the first time that they were creating and actively utilizing a social media page to connect with their members online.

Many communities used this as an opportunity to bring members on board as active participants in awareness raising. The Stó:lō Service Agency led a creative approach to their COVID-19 marketing campaign through a series of 'Stay Home' posters. Featuring both youth and Elders from communities across the region, the posters encouraged members to share their reasons for staying home during the pandemic<sup>5</sup>.



*"We believed that the best way to motivate young people was to engage them and keep them accountable to one another. Furthermore, we wanted some of our Knowledge Keepers and Elders, whom are the most vulnerable population at this time, to encourage young people to stay home and protect our Elders. [The young people] see the impact that others are making by using their voice, and they proudly want to be a part of making a difference at this time."*

Breanna Miller, Youth Services Manager, Stó:lō Service Agency

In addition to providing important safety messaging, the campaign was an avenue for youth to actively connect with their respective communities, families, and peers.

Another popular campaign organized in the region invited local First Nations children and youth to participate in an art and video contest. Organized by Xyólheméylh, the Fraser Valley Aboriginal Children and Family Services Society, the competition encouraged young people to use art to describe their feelings about social distancing and COVID-19. Contest

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.missioncityrecord.com/news/stay-home-campaign-is-focused-on-stolo-caring-for-one-another-during-the-pandemic-2146019>

winners were selected by a panel of Xyólheméylh Board of Directors and Elders, and were awarded cash prizes<sup>6</sup>.

*“We organized the contest to connect with children and youth who may be feeling a myriad of emotions during this strange time and to provide them with an outlet to express their feelings.*

*The entries showed a lot of creativity, heart and talent.”*

Kyla Darby, Executive Directors of Programs, Xyólheméylh

Eleven-year-old Emma-Lee Kelly from the Soowahlie First Nation won the video category with her song called “Six Feet Away”<sup>7</sup>, while 19-year-old Myka Friesen won the poster category.



Some communities, such as Tsawwassen First Nation, implemented check-points to control movement in and out, reducing the likelihood of transmission. Tsawwassen First Nation introduced additional measures to reduce spread within their community, such as creating pedestrian right of way on residential streets to support members to get outdoors while allowing room for physical distancing<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.fvacfss.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Xy%C3%B3lhem%C3%A9ylh-Social-Distancing-Contest-News-Release-May-7.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G8y5cakHG04&feature=youtu.be>

<sup>8</sup> [https://tsawwassenfirstnation.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Land-Facing-the-Sea\\_SpecialEdition\\_web2.pdf](https://tsawwassenfirstnation.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Land-Facing-the-Sea_SpecialEdition_web2.pdf)

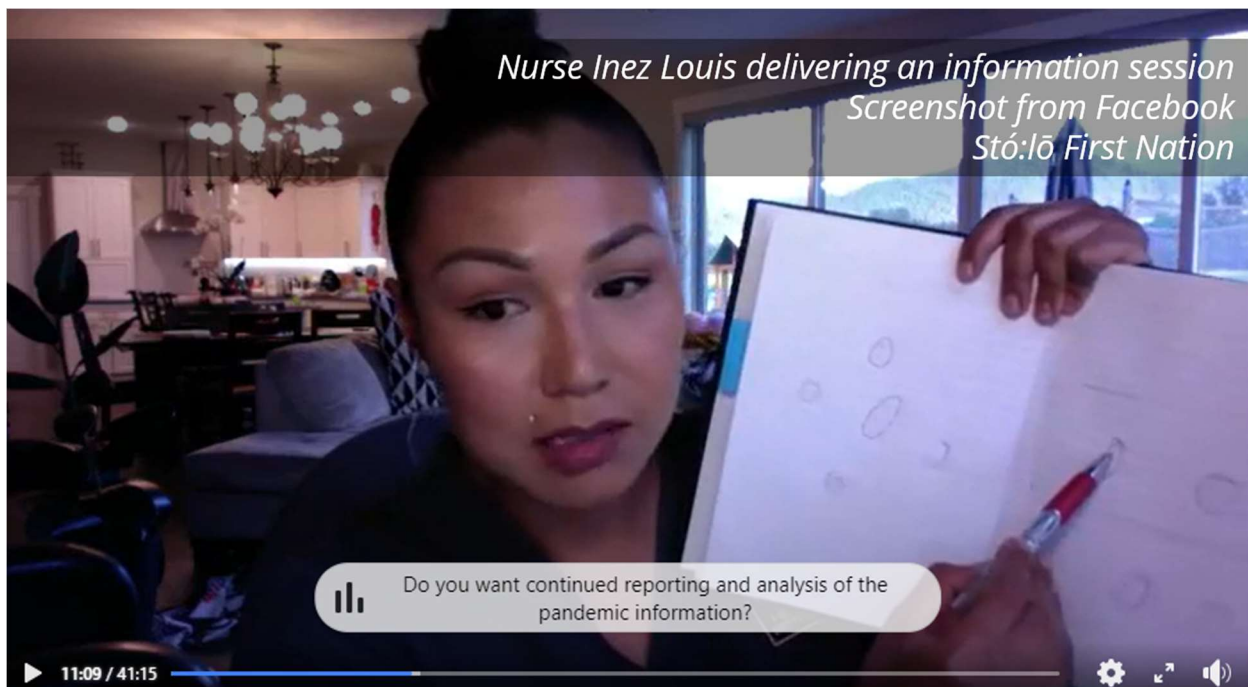
## ADDRESSING MISINFORMATION AND UNCERTAINTY

**To ensure members were well informed about the latest developments and address uncertainty and misinformation, communities used a range of innovative and collaborative engagement approaches. New information was shared through social media channels, newsletters, posters, and pathways that allowed for meaningful and supportive conversations with members. Health services delivered health-related messages online to achieve a wider reach.**

Many communities delivered regular safety messaging on social media, sharing updates regarding current mandates, keeping safe, and addressing uncertainty. Stó:lō Nation established a series of Facebook Live videos that allowed community members to ask questions and clarify information in real time with local nurse Inez Louis. Recognizing that there was a wealth of information available to community members, Louis spent time myth-busting and addressing misinformation, in addition to engaging with community in a collaborative, culturally-relevant and supportive manner to address uncertainty<sup>9</sup>.

*"I started doing live videos in response to all the questions and misinformation circulating on Facebook... our role as community health nurses is to take that information and help clients decide what it means for them."*

Inez Louis, Stó:lō Service Agency



<sup>9</sup> <https://www.abbynews.com/news/helping-folks-navigate-the-fear-filled-pandemic-with-panache-1802267>

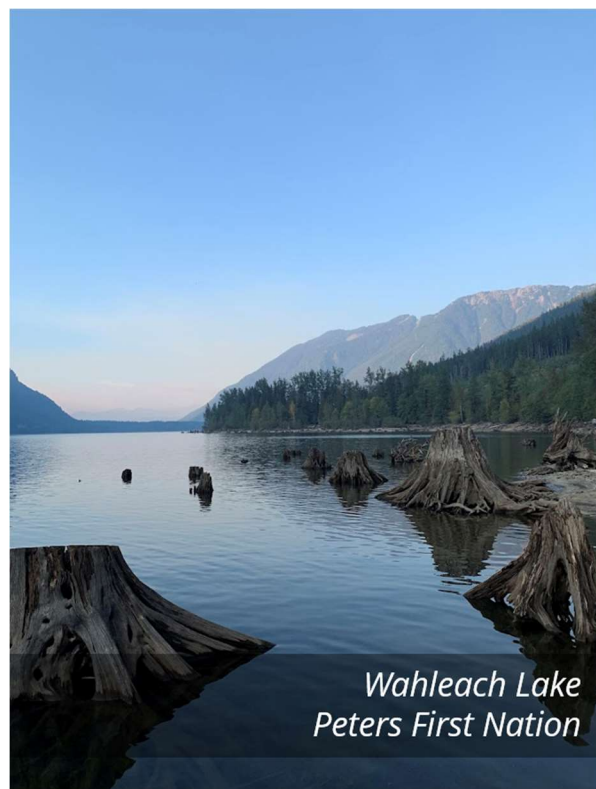
Sumas First Nation developed a regular COVID-19 bulletin and distributed to community, complementing regular updates on their social media pages. In addition to providing information regarding supports available in the community, the bulletin included mental health tips and how to access additional support if required<sup>10</sup>.

Tsawwassen First Nation offered regular online video updates from their Chief, ensuring community members were aware of the latest regulations, check point procedures, and viral spread within the community<sup>11</sup>. When vaccines became available, many communities established vaccine clinics to provide localized access to, and information on, the COVID-19 vaccines<sup>12</sup>. For example, across the broader Fraser Salish region Stó:lō Service Agency partnered with the FNHA and Fraser Health Authority to deliver community COVID-19 clinics to provide health education and vaccine administration. Community leaders worked together to coordinate members wishing to receive vaccines, ensuring equitable access across the region regardless of physical location. Information from the FNHA and regional health authorities was adapted with communities to reflect local needs and concerns.

## SUPPORTING SERVICE CONTINUITY

**Many communities restricted movements in and out of their land to reduce the risk of viral spread. Communities also developed a range of innovative solutions to support continued accessibility and engagement in community education and health services, collaborating to support members both living in community and away from home. Many communities transferred Council and community meetings online, and in one instance, a temporary school was established at a central location in-community.**

Many communities across Fraser Salish adapted their delivery of health and wellness and other services to ensure all community members were able to continue accessing care. Communities developed innovative



<sup>10</sup> <https://www.sumasfirstnation.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/4-30-2020-Corona-Virus-Bulletin-8.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <https://tsawwassenfirstnation.com/tfn-chief-ken-baird-message-for-may-27-2020/>

<sup>12</sup> [https://tsawwassenfirstnation.com/pdfs/TFN-About/Information-Centre/Annual-Reports/2021-2022 Annual Report FINAL.pdf](https://tsawwassenfirstnation.com/pdfs/TFN-About/Information-Centre/Annual-Reports/2021-2022%20Annual%20Report%20FINAL.pdf)

solutions to service delivery, moving away from in-person to offer online or telephone options, and offering contactless delivery of supplies where appropriate.

Katzie First Nation elected to bring schooling in-house, reducing the risk of viral spread while also ensuring that children were able to access ongoing schooling. In collaboration with the local health service and school district, Katzie First Nation was able to support 38 students to attend school at their local gym and youth centre. Whilst there were some challenges in establishing a functional classroom, the in-house school provided an opportunity for students to connect with family and reduced the need to travel outside of the community<sup>13</sup>.

*“There was extensive policy and procedure training involved... it is an interesting experience that [the children] will remember as adults, as it will be the only opportunity to attend school daily in the same classroom with their family members.”*

Chief Grace George, Katzie First Nation



Seabird Island Band moved council and community meetings online to ensure accessibility for all members, including those living away from Seabird, which resulted in the highest attendance the meetings have had. Having regular council meetings online allowed for the continued passing of laws and policies that supported the safe delivery of services within

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.mapleridgenews.com/community/katzie-first-nation-staying-strong-at-first-anniversary-of-pandemic-2652487>

the community. Medical and counselling services were able to continue online, ensuring community members were able to access support even from home<sup>14</sup>.

For smaller communities across the Fraser Salish region, such as Yale First Nation, moving council activities online and closing office doors initially presented a challenge. However, the collective need to stay home to prevent viral spread resulted in increased collaboration between towns and communities across the region<sup>15</sup>.

*"I must acknowledge the town of Hope and surrounding communities for the effort of really pulling together during this hard time and finding support, where they may have not seen it before. We have experienced a very humbling amount of challenges over the last few months and we are proud to be a part of the collective."*

Chief Ken Hansen, Yale First Nation

Despite the successes of alternative means of service delivery across the Fraser Salish region, community representatives acknowledged that COVID-19 had presented a significant challenge. However, this was seen as providing a valuable learning opportunity about preparing for emergencies and service continuity in the future.

*"COVID was a drastic learning opportunity for us, it taught us how unprepared we are in the event for a major disaster or global pandemic. We had to react versus plan and quickly [work] to put together a pandemic plan and provide vaccination opportunities for our community... there is definitely room to grow for us."*

Community representative, Ch'íyáqtel First Nation

Sts'ailes First Nation delivered a suite of virtual programs through their Yeqwethet Sayem service, aimed at taking care of mental health within community. In addition to providing up-to-date information regarding staying safe in the pandemic, the service offered a range of online programs targeting stress management. This included sessions on coping with anxiety and depression, wellness, and a journaling group<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> [https://www.seabirdisland.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Seabird-Island-Annual-Report-2020-2021\\_Web.pdf](https://www.seabirdisland.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Seabird-Island-Annual-Report-2020-2021_Web.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.hopestandard.com/news/closed-to-the-public-hope-area-first-nations-brace-for-covid-19-2056577>

<sup>16</sup>

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55d3a02de4b070510b27c3e7/t/5fb4511c5d859013e76fc5ad/1605652810055/2020+Annual+Report+WEB.pdf>

## MAINTAINING COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

**Promoting health and wellness was an important focus for many communities during stay-at-home orders. Aiming to bridge the gap while in-person activities were on hold, Nations across the Fraser Salish region connected community members through a range of programs, such as family challenges, cooking sessions, and fitness activities. Several communities organized interactive and innovative programs for youth, with a strong focus on cultural healing and connection to the land.**

Across the Fraser Salish region, communities shared a diverse array of innovative and engaging opportunities for members to participate in gatherings, ceremonies and activities, with a focus on connection and wellbeing.

The Sts'ailes First Nation engaged members in a broad spectrum of online activities, such as yoga, cooking challenges, bingo, and parenting sessions delivered through their social media pages. This included the popular Aylexw COVID-19 Outdoor Challenge in mid 2020, which encouraged families to participate in an outdoor activity and submit a picture to a Facebook page. A prize draw was held twice a week during the challenge, and over the course of the three-month campaign they received a total of 3,483 entries<sup>17</sup>.

Tsawwassen First Nation provided iPads to all Elders and students across the community to facilitate online learning and social connection. Youth programming was adapted for an online environment, and the community took to their Youtube channel to deliver an online book club for members<sup>18</sup>.

Yeqwethet Sayem, the Sts'ailes Mental Health service, facilitated a scavenger hunt challenge to support youth in connecting with the land through cultural healing activities. Weekly activities were posted online to encourage youth to get outside with their families. Activities included finding plants, visiting



*Scavenger hunt challenge  
Sts'ailes First Nation*

<sup>17</sup>

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55d3a02de4b070510b27c3e7/t/66355f0872c7411bfbb550a1/1714773791305/Web-2020-21.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> [https://tsawwassenfirstnation.com/pdfs/TFN-About/Information-Centre/Annual-Reports/2020-2021 Annual Report FINAL.pdf](https://tsawwassenfirstnation.com/pdfs/TFN-About/Information-Centre/Annual-Reports/2020-2021%20Annual%20Report%20FINAL.pdf)

cultural locations of significance, and painting river rocks to be displayed around the community<sup>19</sup>.

*"[The scavenger hunt is] uplifting at a dark time when we are forced into stay-away mode. [We are] fortunate to have the luxury of being outdoors while practicing social distancing."*

Janice George, Yeqwethet Director, Sts'ailes First Nation

In another youth-focused program, Stó:lō Service Agency partnered with United Way to support youth from the Mémiyelhtel youth program to participate in a trail-building and mentorship program at a local mountain-biking trail in Chilliwack. The Stó:lō youth participated in constructing new trails across the park with the Chilliwack Park Society, learning new skills in trail maintenance and mountain-biking<sup>20</sup>.

*"We have had to be creative in finding ways to engage with our youth in-person, while respecting physical distancing. [Now] we are able to have yet another opportunity to safely spend time together, give back to our community, and further the biking component for youth in our program. We hope there will also be opportunities to incorporate cultural and land-based teachings."*

Breanna Miller, Youth Services Manager, Stó:lō Service Agency



*Local youth from Mémiyelhtel program  
Chilliwack Community Forest  
Sto:lo First Nations*

Once communities could begin to gather safely in-person again, there were some residual fears and concerns about returning to social gatherings. Community contributors reflected

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.fnha.ca/about/news-and-events/news/good-medicine-online-scavenger-hunts-and-activities-raise-spirits-in-stsailes>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.firstnationsdrum.com/2020/08/indigenous-youth-in-stolo-territory-prove-theres-more-to-building-trails-than-moving-rocks-and-dirt/>



on the importance of working together to support everyone to feel safe and able to rejoin community activities.

*“Once lockdown was lifted, people were hesitant to gather in big groups and some felt social anxiety. This took a little time for people to feel safe together; some still wore masks. Once the initial fear disappeared, people began gathering and visiting with family once again. Life had meaning again... Watching the community come together was very uplifting.”*

Laureen Backman, Soowhalie First Nation

## HONOURING LOSSES AND ACKNOWLEDGING SACRIFICES

**Communities were often unable to hold funerals and celebrations of life for those who were lost during COVID-19 restrictions, resulting in a lack of closure and space for processing grief collectively. Some communities took to facilitating online adaptations of events to honour those who were lost and support collective healing in a time of isolation.**

While many Nations followed public recommendations on limiting large gatherings during the pandemic, communities expressed the challenge of being unable to hold funerals, memorials and other ceremonies aimed at honouring those who were lost. Some communities pivoted to facilitating virtual engagements for members to process loss in a collaborative setting. For example, Sts’ailes First Nation delivered a number of online workshops on grief and loss through their Yeqwethet Sayem mental health service<sup>21</sup>.

In Seabird Island First Nation, they were unable to hold their annual Celebration of Life event in-person. The yearly event, typically held at the end of the calendar year, is designed to bring together the community in providing a safe, healing space for families who have lost loved ones. Seabird Island Band delivered an online edition of the event instead, livestreaming the celebration delivered by community drummers, singers and facilitators on their Facebook page<sup>22</sup>. Seabird Island Health provided additional support through the distribution of 150 DVD’s with recordings of the ceremony, which were distributed to impacted community members alongside gift baskets<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup>

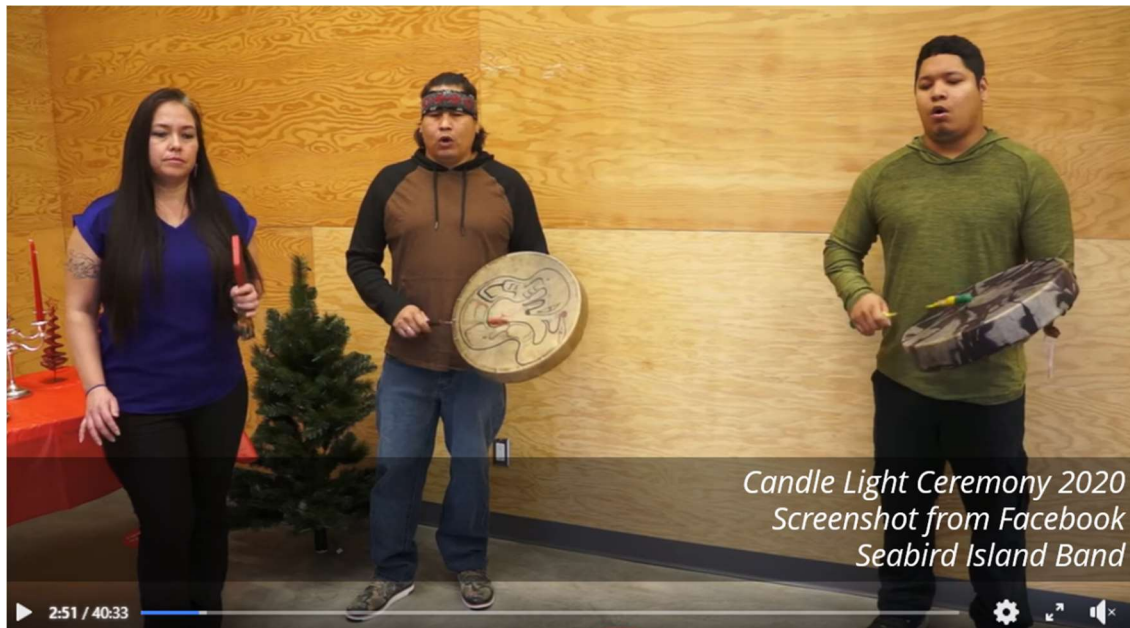
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55d3a02de4b070510b27c3e7/t/66355f0872c7411bfbb550a1/1714773791305/Web-2020-21.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/SeabirdIslandBand/videos/candle-light-ceremony-2020/233028401515982/>

<sup>23</sup> [https://www.seabirdisland.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Seabird-Island-Annual-Report-2020-2021\\_Web.pdf](https://www.seabirdisland.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Seabird-Island-Annual-Report-2020-2021_Web.pdf)

*“United, we gather as a community to remember and honour those loved ones who are no longer with us. This year, gathering was impossible. However, the ‘need’ to gather was even greater this year. Loneliness, anxiety, fear and confusion has come knocking to every door. Whatever the response, whatever the situation, each individual knew they were not facing life alone.”*

Community representative, Seabird Island Band



## MAINTAINING TRADITIONAL AND CULTURAL PRACTICES

**Cultural traditions and land-based practices were critical for maintaining community wellbeing for individuals and families, particularly during the ongoing lockdowns and social distancing measures. Communities developed innovative ways to come together to take part in cultural practices such as music, ceremonies and honouring those who had passed. When restrictions allowed, communities encouraged members to come together in-person while respecting social distancing and supporting those most vulnerable.**

Community members described the importance of online engagement as a means of encouraging and maintaining cultural practices that would typically be held in-person, serving to uphold tradition while also supporting social and emotional wellbeing amongst members. For example, the Stó:lō Service Agency held the Virtual Coastal Hand Drum Special contest for youth, adults and Elders, in addition to facilitating outdoor drumming events at the Stó:lō Elders Lodge<sup>24</sup>. Tsawwassen First Nation encouraged members to

<sup>24</sup> [https://www.stolonation.bc.ca/files/File/Annual\\_Reports/ANNUAL%20REPORT%202020-21.pdf](https://www.stolonation.bc.ca/files/File/Annual_Reports/ANNUAL%20REPORT%202020-21.pdf)

engage in cultural and creative activities from their own home by distributing cedar kits to all members and establishing a 'Love for Language' Facebook group to share language and drumming videos<sup>25</sup>.

Communities demonstrated interest in teaching and learning new skills, such as First Nations languages, art, and cultural practices. Developed with the impacts of the pandemic in mind, Sts'ailes First Nation launched a language program to support the revitalisation of the Halq'méylem language in their community. Delivered as an online learning program,



community members can access introductory and continuing levels in a flexible environment adapted to COVID-19 regulations<sup>26</sup>.

*“One of the most important factors when learning a language is human presence, therefore our aim was to reach community members in a safe and controlled way by encouraging online learning. We developed the program to teach children, parents and Elders in the community. A great way to get all ages excited to learn the language is by making it as flexible and accessible for everyone. Revitalization is key to our cultural identity and embracing our ancestor’s teachings. Since our first class in September 2020, more than 80 Sts’ailes members have participated in the program including members living on- and off-reserve. Language packages, prayer booklets and work sheets have been made available for anyone interested in learning on their own.”*

Shawnee Kruger, Halq'méylem Coordinator, Stsailes First Nation

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<sup>25</sup> [https://tsawwassenfirstnation.com/pdfs/TFN-About/Information-Centre/Annual-Reports/2020-2021 Annual Report FINAL.pdf](https://tsawwassenfirstnation.com/pdfs/TFN-About/Information-Centre/Annual-Reports/2020-2021%20Annual%20Report%20FINAL.pdf)

<sup>26</sup>

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55d3a02de4b070510b27c3e7/t/66355f0872c7411bfbb550a1/1714773791305/Web-2020-21.pdf>

# CONCLUSION

First Nations communities across the Fraser Salish region achieved significant collaboration and coordination to support their members in response to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Community response efforts showed a remarkable commitment to centring community engagement and connection in the face of ongoing hardships and isolation. Communities utilized a range of innovative and creative methods for promoting information sharing, food sharing, and service continuity. Health services and community leaders recognized the importance of maintaining culture and tradition, ensuring that such practices could continue safely. The collective strength and resilience of these communities, and learnings from the community response to the pandemic, demonstrate the capability of communities across Fraser Salish to respond to and overcome future challenges.

# APPENDIX

## METHODOLOGY

The FNHA Evaluation Team collected feedback from community members from an online survey. The survey asked four long-answer qualitative questions:

1. In the spirit of recognizing the good work and honouring what has been learned, is there anything you wish to share about your community's experiences responding to the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. In what ways have community members practiced culture and supporting wellbeing and healing during the pandemic?
3. How do you think lessons learned and wise practices from your community's response can help others with emergency preparedness and planning?
4. Is there anything else you would like to share?

A total of 10 responses were received, however only 2 were fully completed responses.

The FNHA Evaluation Team also conducted a media scan of stories and articles published online using names of the Families and Nations alongside "COVID-19" and "pandemic" as search terms. Summaries, images and quotations from the selected articles were incorporated into the report with citations and links to original publications provided in the footnotes.