

# 2025 Learning Report

*Love Letters to Our Relatives*





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# Biindigen

Mewinzha Ondaadiziike Wiigaming, "Long Ago Women Birthing in Lodge, Home or Hospital," is an Anishinaabe-led non-profit in Bemidji, Minnesota, dedicated to community-centered, holistic care. Our work is grounded in lived experience, clinical expertise, and traditional Anishinaabe medicines that honors the spiritual and physical well-being of women, children, and families.

Mewinzha Ondaadiziike Wiigaming's Bundle of Care is a holistic, Anishinaabe-grounded model that braids together cultural, physical, emotional, and spiritual supports for families and Two-Spirit Relatives. Guided by ceremony, language, and relationship, it includes offerings such as prenatal and postpartum group care, traditional medicine, Healing Touch, yoga, and meal delivery. Each strand of the bundle reflects Mewinzha's commitment to meaningful, choice-based care that strengthens wellbeing and community connection.

By placing our Bundle of Care into action, Mewinzha is scaling deep. In systems transformation, scaling deep is understood as approaches to nurturing change that focus on fostering deep relationships. Mewinzha does deep relationship driven work through the restoration of cultural practices and by strengthening community-defined pathways of care built on Anishinaabe ways of knowing, being, and doing.

We know our model is working. We know because we hear the stories. And we know because we witness the impact – in the trust Relatives – the community members we serve, a word that reflects how we understand our relationships with the people in our care – place in us, in the laughter that fills our circles, in the families who return, and in the practices being restored within our community. The evidence is real.





This year, as we thought about how to share the spirit of 2025 in this learning report, we were inspired by an activity we completed during our December evaluation visit: Love Letters to our Relatives.

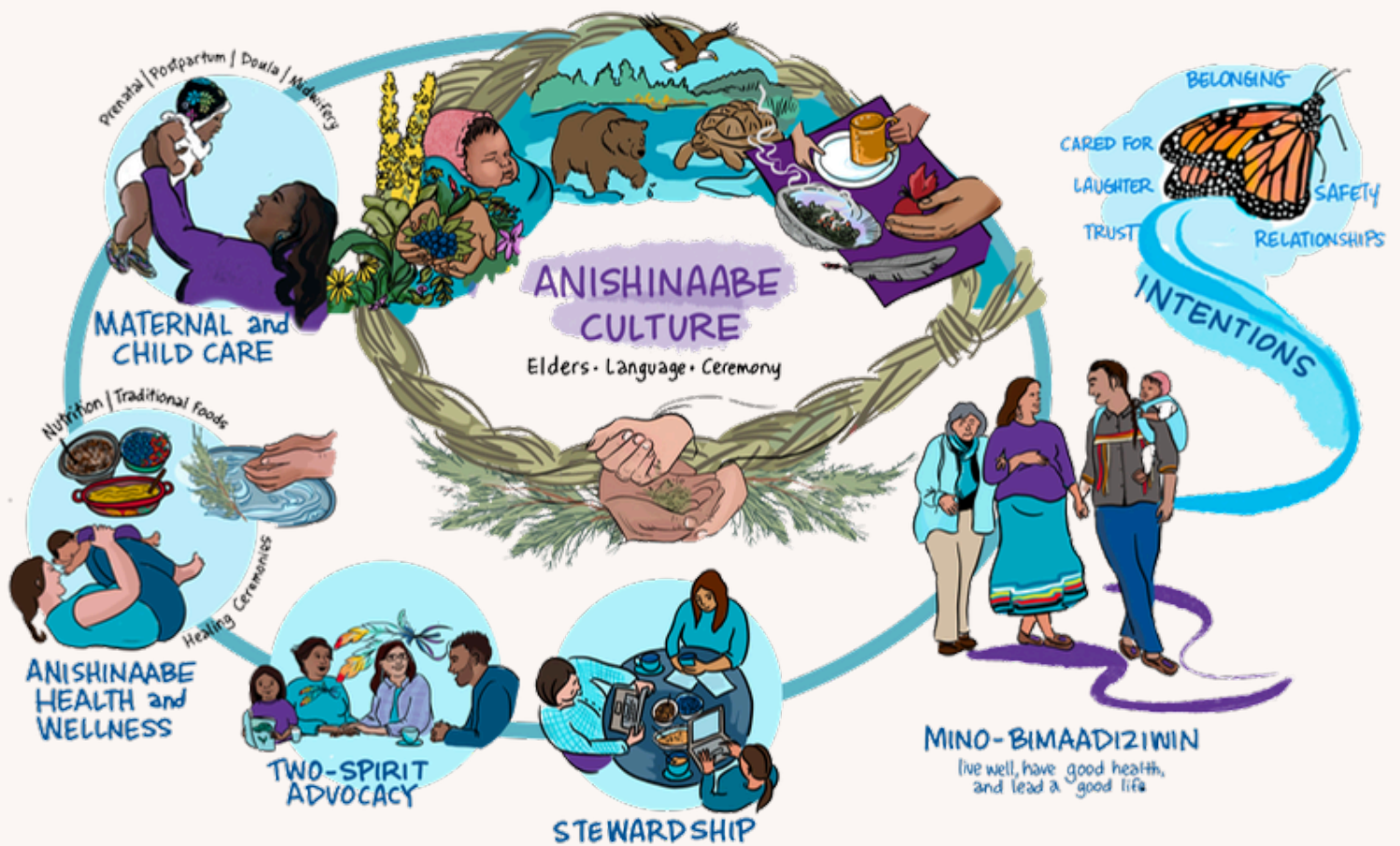
These letters are written by Mewinzha staff directly to our Relatives – to the women, families, and Two-Spirit Relatives who have trusted us through some of the most significant moments of their lives. They reflect what staff have witnessed and what has been transformed: vulnerability met with safety, isolation met with belonging, uncertainty met with care. They are, themselves, an expression of Mewinzha's impact – and we share them here as an invitation for you to witness what trust, relationship, and love-grounded care make possible.

Throughout this report, in each section, we share these love letters with you, alongside learnings, celebrations, and visions for our future work which are offered with deep gratitude for the Relatives who have trusted Mewinzha with their stories, their care, and their journeys. We invite you to sit with the experiences and the relationships that make Mewinzha's work possible and to gently hold this question in mind: *What does it mean to witness care that is grounded in love, relationship, and responsibility and what becomes possible when this kind of care is allowed to grow?*



# Bundle of Care

The Bundle of Care is the heart of our theory of change, a living framework that braids together physical, emotional, spiritual, and cultural supports to uphold the wellbeing of Relatives, families, and communities. Beginning with ceremony and the offering of asemaa, care is activated through trust, respect, and love. Each Relative enters a circle of support that includes prenatal and postpartum group care, plant medicine teachings, yoga and bodywork, meal delivery, Two-Spirit advocacy and care, and connection to Elders and Knowledge Keepers. As staff and Relatives walk together through the program, they share, connect, grow, co-create knowledge and strengthen relational accountability. In this way, Mewinza's approach transforms standard maternal health care and community wellness into an expression of Anishinaabe Nationhood—restoring ancestral practices of birthing, healing, parenting, wellness, and community belonging within contemporary systems.



# How We Learn: Guided by Story

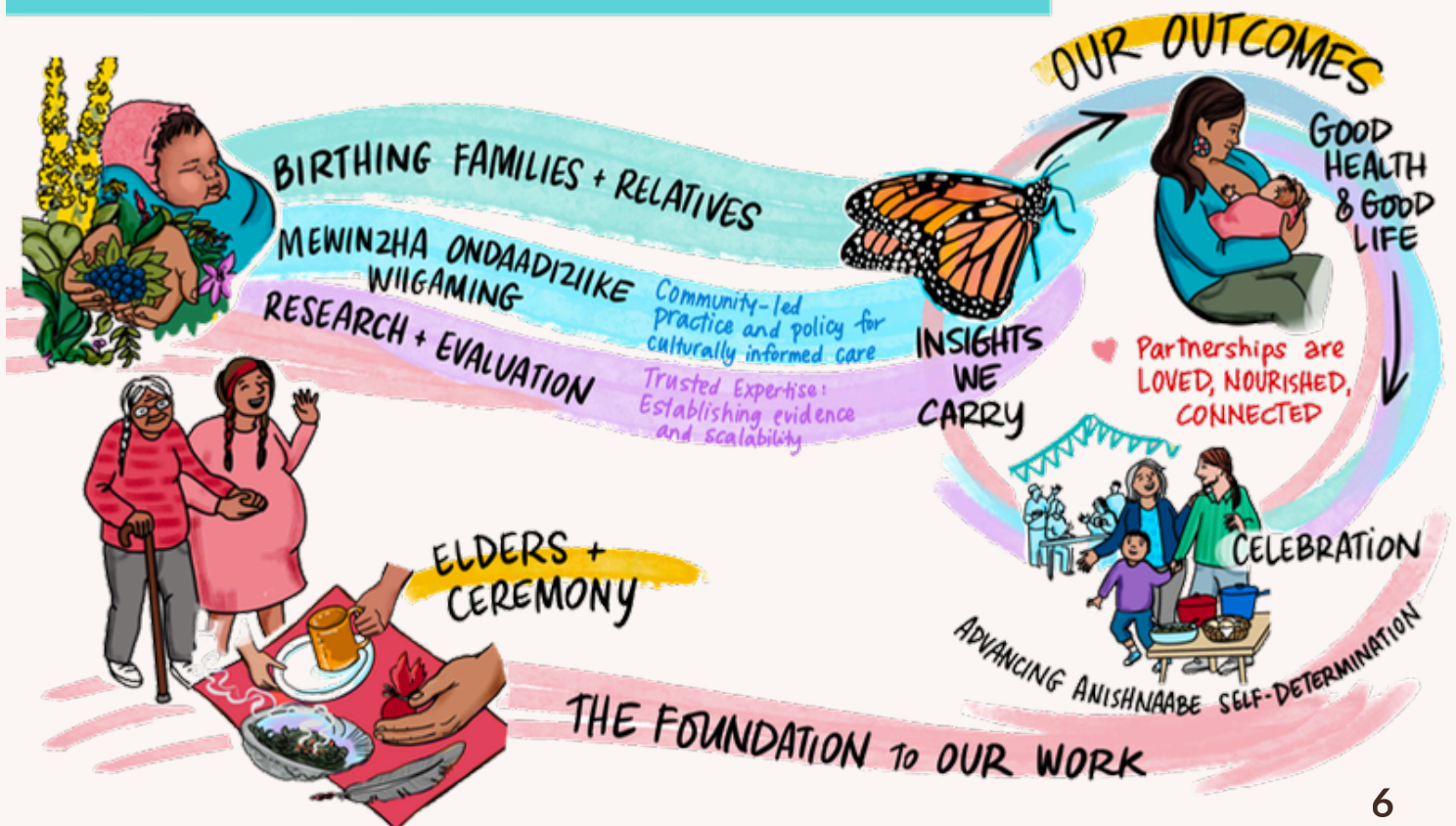
Our commitment to ensuring Relatives receive meaningful care means we prioritize learning about how care is designed, delivered, received, and experienced through our Bundle of Care. Each year we use a variety of methods and processes to observe, to listen, and to gather stories that allow us to integrate what we learn into program decision making and remain responsive.

We use tools to track markers of success such as love, trust, and cultural nourishment. By engaging in story-based reflection and creative practices like "Love Letters to Relatives," we ensure our data remains grounded in the profound reciprocity that defines our community partnerships. Our evaluation tools look different because we are reaching for different types of impact.

Staff Reflection Circles  
 Conversation Circles with Relatives  
 Surveys  
 Closing Stories Tool  
 Visiting  
 Community Engagement Session

Arts based tools for seasonal sensemaking  
 Love Letters to Relatives  
 Zine Making  
 Collage Making

## Partnerships and relationships are interdependent





# 2025 Celebrations

This was a year worth celebrating! We mark our year through the quality of relationships built, the integrity of care delivered, and the degree to which our community continued to shape and guide the work.

## Relatives Felt Loved and Nourished

The clearest celebration of this year was trust. Families consistently reported feeling a profound sense of safety, belonging, and comfort within our spaces – and trust was gifted back to us. Relatives brought eagle feathers and traditional foods, acts of cultural reciprocity that carry deep and lasting meaning.

Across our programs, Relatives described feeling cared for in all aspects, medically, emotionally, spiritually, and culturally. Inside spaces like Gaa-giigishkaakaawasowaad, people felt safe, supported, and genuinely held – not simply as recipients of a service, but as people within a relationship.

## Connected to our Bundles

One of the most profound celebrations of 2025 was the deepening of our own roots as an organization. This year, we built our organizational drum. Our staff made their pipes, received their clan identities, spirit names, and colors. We were accompanied by helpers who guided this sacred work with us and into our future. Attending to our bundles is the very foundation of the Bundle of Care. To witness this collective rooting was a gift.

We also looked at how our bundles can work more cohesively together – sharing our work in a good way, and prioritizing time in ceremony. This is how we strengthen the infrastructure of Mewinzha, from the inside out.

That same spirit showed up in our organizational growth as well. We expanded our physical space to better support Relative offerings, launched a new website, and strengthened our financial systems – stewarding the gifts we have received in a good way, while preparing with intention for what lies ahead.

## Deepening, and Sustained Partnerships

In 2025, the rigor and integrity of our approach drew meaningful external recognition – and we celebrate that too. We secured major funding, advanced successful publications, and received active collaboration requests from partners including the Indian Health Service, local hospitals, and a range of coalitions. We share this as joyful evidence that a relational, culturally grounded model of care is being seen – and that this path is one others are ready to walk alongside.

This recognition reinforces Mewinzha's model as a regional leader, filling a critical gap in Indigenous-led spaces for maternal health.



A year of deepening impact was celebrated across each of the Bundles of Care, which consistently fostered relational safety, cultural connection, and belonging.



The **Group Care model** (Gaa-giigishkaakaawasowaad) provided comfort, safety, and belonging filling prenatal and postpartum care gaps. Even after completing their postpartum journey, relatives wanted to stay connected and in relationship with Mewinzha. In 2025 we launched our alumni group.



The **Meal Delivery program** eased mental load and financial strain for families, supporting healthier routines and diabetes prevention efforts.

**Health & Wellness** activities including traditional medicine clinics and healing work deepened Mewinzha's cultural roots. A significant celebration included the collective creation of the organizational drum.

Success in **Two-Spirit Advocacy** created essential relational networks, fostering safety and visibility for queer and trans Relatives. Celebrations included the formation of a strong place of belonging in various group offerings, a successful Traveling Art Gallery, and Arnold Dahl-Wooley receiving Minnesota BIPOC Leader of the Year.

The **Nanaankoopinesiik Traditional Midwifery Education Program** celebrated foundational strengthening and successfully held its first in-person midwifery skills assessment weekend.

**Partnerships and Collaborative Relationships** confirmed external validation for Mewinzha's culturally grounded model. Celebrations included navigating multi-year agreements with Red Lake and IHS, securing invitations to present at national conferences, and achieving publication in a peer-reviewed journal.



In **Doula and Lactation Support**, the team celebrated the affirmation of their relational care model in bridging medical gaps, completing lactation training, and advancing toward IBCLC credentialing.



# By the Numbers

The past year brought many moments of joy, recognition, and community affirmation. Our celebrations reflect the love, time, and intention poured into every aspect of our care.

## Two-Spirit Advocacy Community Connections

- 16 Queer Tea Sessions
- 7 Queer Family Ties Sessions
- 7 Other Two-Spirit Advocacy Events

5 Traditional Wellness Clinic Events

15 Morning Meditation Sessions

15 Community Yoga Sessions

10 Open Sewing Events

2 Seasonal Giveaways

16 Presentations by Mewinzha Staff for  
community, programs, and organizations

1 Midwifery Outreach Day

51 Clinics hosted for Relatives

8 Prenatal Group Care Sessions

10 Postpartum Group Care Sessions

2 Alumni Group Care Sessions

6054 Meals Distributed to Relatives  
through the Meal Delivery Program  
from July to December



# Nurturing Our Bundles

Throughout 2025, staff members focused on strengthening their individual bundles, which include the gifts, teachings, expertise, and spiritual practices they carry to ensure they can show up fully for Relatives. Staff reflected that they are "diligent... to learning and growing and being culturally grounded." Further, staff observed that "People that know Mewinzha have a great respect for them."

The team actively sought ways to manage stress, noting the importance of slowing down and paying attention to their own needs. One staff person reflected on the need to protect their energy, stating, "I really need to slow down just for my own presence, so I'm not going to be good for anybody else if I'm not taking care of myself too." The year was marked by lessons on being gentle with oneself, particularly when recognizing patterns of being "too busy" and doing "too much."

The team building focused on growing and caring for the sacred bundles through activities such as planning sessions, receiving the bundles, being taught how to use them, participating in a retreat that centred ceremony and time on the land and collaboratively making the organizational drum.

The team's development was also defined by a shared drive for growth, authentic collaboration, and resilience. One staff member used the metaphor of a bonsai tree to describe the organization's growth, symbolizing grace, power, and resilience, but with the freedom to "keep growing in any angle."

The collective journey fostered a sense of shared reliance, where team members felt they could truly count on one another. Professional growth often involved expanding beyond the comfort zone to embrace new challenges, like giving presentations across diverse settings and writing articles. Ultimately, this inner work reaffirmed the Mewinzha values of quality and relational care.

**“Quality over quantity is important for anything that we do.”**



# Bundle Focus: Gaa-giigishkaakaawasowaad Model

Mewinza's Gaa-giigishkaakaawasowaad ("A Place where Pregnant Women Gather") Model of Care continued to deepen its impact in 2025, integrating group prenatal and postpartum services with vital supports like doula care, nutrition, and traditional practices.

Key findings from a December 2025 Closing Circle with group alumni reinforced that the model is successfully received as intended: it is a holistic, culturally grounded, and relational approach that extends far beyond clinical care. Relatives consistently reflected on experiences of feeling safety, belonging, nourishment, cultural connection, and empowerment, which were often experienced as a stark contrast to previous impersonal healthcare settings. This success is not measured by the number of participants, but by the transformative results of intentional, relationship-based care that fosters a profound sense of security and cultural rootedness. The group care is consistently described by participants using words like "comfortable," "safe," "sacred," "relaxed," and "joy."

According to care providers, one family who changed care to Mewinza "attended all sessions, shared their labor and delivery experience in real time and opened up more and participated more in groups." This unfolding of trust is typical of the model's success, which is rooted in its focus on the whole person—emotional, spiritual, cultural, and relational needs are addressed alongside physical health. This holistic orientation is reinforced through the intentional use of ceremony, smudging, medicines, teachings, food, and time, creating a space of dignity and collective support. The group format itself fosters connection, serving as a powerful source of peer support that eases isolation and builds relationships that extend beyond the sessions. The staff's commitment to continuous care means that even when birth plans change, families report feeling prepared, supported, and respected throughout the process, reducing fear and increasing confidence.

**“From the very beginning, you walk in here and you feel the culture... just good feelings being accepted and cared for.” – Relative**



The power of relational care and continuity is a hallmark of the Gaa-giigishkaakaawasowaad model. Relatives consistently shared that seeing the same staff across visits—including a trusted provider like Pearl coming to the hospital for breastfeeding help—significantly increased trust during vulnerable moments. Another Relative noted that Natalie regularly called to check in while she was hospitalized, which 'reassured her that she and her child were in the team's thoughts.' This commitment to personalized, continuous support is deeply valued by postpartum families.

**“You've become community role models and leaders by giving your time, energy and good words for Mewinzha to continue providing the best care we can for today and future generations.” – Natalie (Binesiikwe), Love Letter to Our Relatives**

Program engagement patterns suggest that adjusting to family needs improves access. Evening offerings consistently led to higher attendance for postpartum and alumni groups, indicating that these times may better accommodate returning-to-work families and address the strong interest Relatives expressed in a continuing bi-monthly alumni group.



## Key Themes from 2025 Reflections

“I didn’t want the group to end. It was something I looked forward to every month. And at one point that early-on stage was life-saving in a way. To me, I really felt isolated.” –

Relative



“I watched you try new foods... After your birth experience, I could see your glow and happiness to be a new mom. We connected as mothers and shared our joys and struggles.” – Roxanne

**Relational Safety and Trust:** Relatives felt immediately welcomed, respected, and heard, with no time limits on questions, which reinforced group care as a collective experience for the whole family.

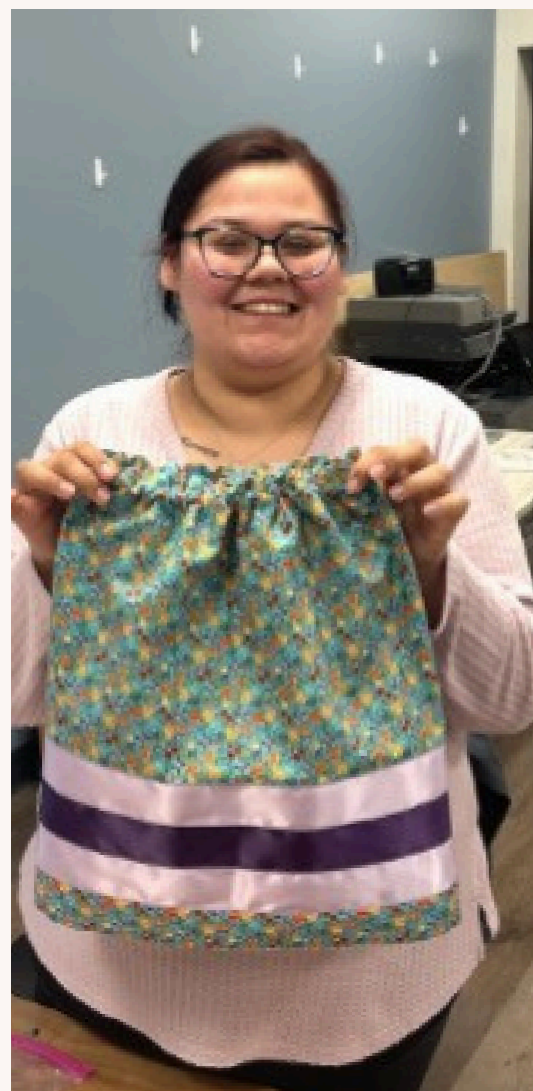
**Holistic Care:** The model attends to the full person, with physical, emotional, spiritual, and cultural needs named as equally important to wellbeing.

**Cultural Connection:** Ceremony and teachings were integrated in ways that felt inclusive and adaptable, supporting families in creating their own traditions and pathways to cultural knowledge without shame.

**Empowerment and Choice:** Information sharing was empowering, ensuring Relatives felt prepared and respected to make informed decisions throughout pregnancy and birth.

**Community and Peer Support:** The group setting reduced isolation, allowing Relatives to normalize experiences, share stories, and form connections that lifted spirits.

**Continuity of Care:** The seamless transition from prenatal to postpartum group care, along with meal delivery and home visits, ensured families remained connected to trusted providers during the vulnerable postpartum period.



# Bundle Focus: Nutrition

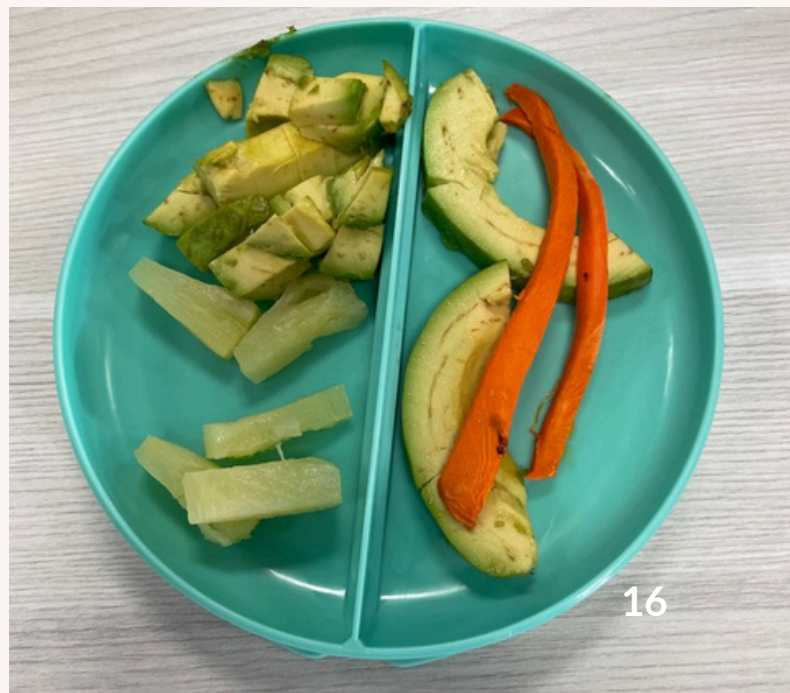
Mewinzha's Meal Delivery program continues to be a vital strand in the Bundle of Care, providing prenatal and postpartum families with high-quality, nutrient-dense, and culturally-tailored meals. In 2025, the program focused on deepening the quality of support, integrating education on healthy choices, and providing the tools necessary for families to build confidence in their own kitchens. The program is sustained by strong relationships that Roxanne has built with local food contractors and grocers, ensuring that the food provided is both fresh and culturally resonant.

For many families, the meal delivery program transformed the "mental load" of daily survival into an opportunity for connection. The introduction of traditional foods and new recipes served as a bridge, connecting families to cultural nourishment while easing the stress of "what's for dinner?" on busy weeknights. Relatives consistently expressed deep gratitude for the program's holistic support.

**“The dedication of our meal delivery staff and partners is so meaningful. We learned we need to identify those allies, maintain those relationships, and always provide positive feedback.”**  
– Roxanne, Love Letter to Our Relatives

## 2025 Impact at a Glance

- **Sustained Support:** Successfully graduated multiple cohorts of families throughout the year, including a group of 5–6 families in May 2025 and another group of 7 in early 2026.
- **Confidence Building:** Families reported increased confidence in using kitchen equipment and preparing whole foods.
- **Financial Relief:** Significant support for families who do not qualify for other food assistance programs (WIC/EBT), helping to bridge the gap during the postpartum period.



## Key Themes from 2025 Reflections

**Menu Variety & Quality:** Families highly valued the diverse menu, specifically praising items like bison lasagna, roasts, smoothies, and breakfast sandwiches. The "ready-made" and "throw-in-the-oven" options were noted as essential for postpartum recovery.

**Ease of Preparation:** The provision of kitchen equipment (air fryers, crockpots, blenders) and pre-prepped ingredients (chopped vegetables, seasoning mixes) made healthy cooking accessible.

**Holistic Impact:** Beyond nutrition, families highlighted the financial relief during tight budget periods and the emotional support of feeling "seen and held."

“One of the things that helps me to continue to do this work is hearing how you've been able to integrate teachings into your day to day. This takes courage, bravery, and a drive that only a mom like you has!” – Michelle, Love Letter to Our Relatives

“It is preventing us from eating fast food... We are learning new recipes that connect us to traditional foods.” – Relative



# Bundle Focus: Health & Wellness



In 2025, Mewinzha significantly expanded its community wellness and education offerings, reflecting a deepened commitment to holistic, culturally-grounded care. The commitment to wellness was reflected in the personal and professional growth of the staff. The growing coherence of this bundle, guided by cultural teachings and the power of listening to families, underscored the organizational belief that "when care is rooted in relationship, culture, and trust, families feel seen, nourished, and held."



## Yoga Expansion and Philosophy:

Pearl expanded wellness programming to include "yoga off the mat" which provided Relatives with tools for nervous system regulation and daily mindfulness. This expansion included new youth-focused programming that reached over 30 students in local schools that is building strong momentum. Pearl has noted these offerings create moments of pause and connection, recalling a positive opportunity for "Teaching yoga outside with gentle rain and wind, with our feet on the ground for meditation and intention setting."

**“I’m so proud of you for continuing to participate, because by simply being in my class, I become the student learning from you.”**

**– Pearl ("the yoga lady"), Love Letter to Our Relatives**

## Relational Healing:

Cedar baths and energy work like Dynamic Body Balancing provided essential spiritual and emotional restoration, with many Relatives requesting repeat sessions. In 2025, Millicent led cedar bath sessions, including one for eight women, and one family specifically requested a cedar bath and postpartum care following a birth. The clinic model successfully integrated traditional healing, with one Relative who was experiencing postpartum mental health struggles able to receive care from Kathy and Carl through a drop-in visit.



### **Vitality of Traditional Medicine:**

Traditional medicine clinics, led by Bernadette alongside visiting healers like Kathy and Carl Bird, saw high participation and served primarily new Relatives. These clinics are a strategic investment in cultural resilience; by building internal staff capacity to lead these sessions independently, Mewinzha ensures that the knowledge and practice of traditional healing is sustained within the organization. These clinics provided essential plant knowledge and healing, with staff actively gathering seasonal medicines like cedar, swamp tea, and bearberry, and preparing items like asemaa (tobacco). An intentional focus was placed on ensuring Relatives had access to traditional healing, with staff members delivering mashkiki (medicine) refills and providing referrals for services like house smudging. The team's connection to the land is a core renewal practice.

**“My key learning from working with our traditional clinic providers and helpers is the absolute importance of good communication, respectful listening, follow-up, and maintaining confidentiality in all things.” – Bernadette, Love Letter to Our Relatives**





# Bundle Focus: Doula and Lactation Support



In 2025, Mewinzha expanded its specialized care to include a more robust focus on doula and lactation services. This work is reinforced by the collective investment in healing and support, ensuring families have access to culturally-grounded feeding and birth support.

**“Each breastfeeding journey is different... tending to the roots may require more water and support to flourish” – Pearl, Love Letter to Our Relatives**

## **Postpartum Connection Improvement:**

The team identified a need to improve on "offering/connecting more closely and more often postpartum" to families who chose the group care, including offering a "one-on-one consultation to check on them." Based on this identification the team was able to adjust their approach to meet Relatives' experience.

## **Culturally-Rooted Lactation Support:**

Specialized one-on-one and drop-in lactation support became a critical lifeline for families dealing with complex issues such as low weight gain, grief and loss related to weaning, and tongue ties. This intentional shift toward one-on-one support represents an investment in the depth of clinical skill and quality of care over the volume of referrals.

This depth of expertise addresses the fact that Relatives rely heavily on the team during transitions such as weaning, feeding, and grief, requiring care that integrates emotional and spiritual support alongside clinical guidance.

Pearl's dedication to this area was evident through her completion of all required education hours for the IBCLC (International Board Certified Lactation Consultant ) credential in 2025, with a goal to sit for the exam in Fall 2026. Support was provided through home visits, phone consultations, and educational outreach to partners like Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe Women Infants and Children Program. Furthermore, the team worked to connect families with resources for essential supplies, such as breast pumps through Milk Moms, addressing the gaps in continuity for feeding and weaning.

# Bundle Focus: Midwifery Care

In 2025, Elder Midwife Millicent Simenson's practice served as a vital cornerstone of Mewinza's community outreach and direct clinical support, operating alongside her role in the Traditional Midwifery Education Program. She focused on expanding community awareness and access to midwifery services by hosting educational days at Leech Lake Tribal College and holding open houses for interested families. Throughout the year, Millicent conducted direct care including a homebirth and home/office visits with families. Her care extended beyond clinical services to include spiritual and emotional restoration through multiple cedar bath sessions and provided essential postpartum support. In this role, Millicent acts as a witness to the family's journey, serving as a primary source of relational spiritual healing that centers the family's spirit throughout the birth and postpartum process.

**“All I need is my bundle, water bottle, and phone, and that my bundle has grown.”**  
– Staff Member



# Bundle Focus: Nanaankoopinesiik Traditional Midwifery Education Program

The Nanaankoopinesiik (“Original Grandmother”) Traditional Midwifery Education Program focused on deepening the student cohort’s knowledge and expanding clinical support throughout 2025. The program, which compresses a six-year apprenticeship into a 2.5-year traditional midwifery-centered model, focused on functional midwives and grassroots advocates, and successfully progressed through comprehensive curriculum units.

**“This is a spiritual journey... it connects the dots between apprenticeship and formal learning” – Student**

While the cohort stabilized at four actively enrolled students, staff reflected that this smaller group became a "stronger, more maneuverable and flexible" learning community, allowing for a deeper focus on individual student needs and intensive mentorship. A significant achievement was the four-day skills lab in October, where students applied their learning in a dedicated hands-on setting, validating applied competencies in palpation, red-flag recognition, consult inquiry, and case analysis. The students described this Skills Weekend as grounding, confidence-building, and essential for translating classroom learning into real-world midwifery practice. This commitment to growing the next generation of Indigenous providers reinforced the team’s organizational resilience.

**“My role has not only been about delivering babies, but also about preserving our culture practices, offering comfort and passing down knowledge to the next generation” – Elder Midwife Millicent Simenson, Love Letter to Our Relatives**



# Key Themes from 2025 Reflections

**Early Applied Learning:** 75% of the students are already applying their training in community contexts by attending births, providing prenatal and postpartum education, and advocating within birth centers, demonstrating early movement toward post-graduation goals.

**Skill Competency and Hands-on Learning:** The October Skills Lab proved essential for translating learning into practice and validated applied competencies in palpation and red-flag recognition.



# Bundle Focus: Two-Spirit Advocacy

In 2025, Two-Spirit (2S) Advocacy, a vital hub for cultural connection, safety, and resource access for the 2SLGBTQIAA+ members of the Bemidji community, officially partnered with Mewinzha, expanding the bundle of care.

Focused on advocacy, visibility, and education, Arnold created a welcoming physical space and enhanced resource dissemination for the American Indian community. A core strategy was the establishment of ongoing culturally-grounded gatherings, including traditional Talking Circles (supported by Elder Midwife Millicent) and regular social groups like Queer Tea and Queer Family Ties.

These consistent gatherings quickly proved essential, drawing over 60 people to the space since January 1, 2025, for cultural support, outreach connections, and community building.

The community sees Two-Spirit Advocacy as a relational anchor for Two-Spirit and LGBTQ+ Relatives, reinforcing that consistent gatherings provide essential relational care for those who may lack biological family support and for those who seek belonging and community have found a vital "surrogate family" through these groups. The team maintains an intentional focus on cultivating deep safety and belonging over high attendance numbers. Small, intimate gatherings are valued for allowing profound personal connection and the ability for members to show up in their full authenticity. The groups grew so consistently that by May, the Advocacy space was running out of room, underscoring the deep community need and the success of the consistent social engagement.

Feedback for the Queer Family Ties group is overwhelmingly positive, highlighting the creation of a vital, safe, and nurturing environment for families. Participants consistently describe the space as "warm," "safe," and "welcoming," allowing both adults and children to feel "unafraid" and "understood."

**“To create a space for us to be our true authentic self, to connect, share, love, and to thrive... We will keep providing space for you to be you, and we will always look forward to seeing you” – Two-Spirit Advocacy Team, Love Letter to Our Relatives**





## Key Themes from 2025 Reflections

**Growing Community Need and Consistent Engagement:** The consistent and expanding attendance at regular gatherings demonstrated a significant, unmet community need for safe, culturally-grounded Two-Spirit spaces, quickly leading to the physical space running out of room.

**Cultural Safety and Trust:** All events consistently began with cultural practices like smudging, prayer, and talking circles, ensuring that attendees felt safe and culturally included. Building genuine connection and trust is prioritized.

**External Recognition:** The project leader, Arnold, was named BIPOC Person of the Year for the state of Minnesota, providing crucial external validation for the project's impact and visibility.

**Advocacy, Visibility, and Diverse Programming:** Beyond recurring social groups, the team hosted over 30 events, including specialized cultural and recreational activities and a Two-Spirit and MMIW (Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women) awareness photo shoot and gallery release intended to educate leaders about the importance of 2S advocacy and the impacts of erasure.

**Critical Resource Access:** The Advocacy served as a vital, vetted resource hub, providing direct access to essential health items and facilitating connections to culturally-safe counselors and support for families.

**“Feels like home!”  
– Relative**



# Bundle Focus: Partnerships and Collaborative Relationships

Mewinzha's work is sustained by a constellation of values-aligned partnerships rooted in reciprocity, cultural care, and shared vision, which extend across health systems, tribal nations, funding organizations, and the local community. These relationships are not merely transactional; they are relational and restorative, woven into our bundle of care and embodying a shared commitment to wellness and self-determination. The team recognized that partnership-building requires intentionality, with a staff member noting that "The most successful partnerships grow from authenticity, shared purpose, and time."

## Expanding Our Network of Care:

A key marker of 2025 was the formalization and expansion of relationships across health, tribal, and education sectors. This included the historic signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Bemidji Indian Health Service (IHS) area office, alongside the successful navigation of multi-year agreements with Red Lake and IHS. Increased external recognition also led local institutions to seek Mewinzha for collaboration. While we successfully engaged with these partners, staff reflections acknowledged the need for improving relationships with both the Leech Lake Head Start and Leech Lake Elder program.

**“It feels good to share the Mewinzha model with other agencies. When we are authentic, it inspires others to look at their own work and make meaningful changes.” –  
Natalie**



## Alignment in Learning and Funding:

Our evaluation and funding partnerships provided crucial external validation and support for our relational model. We secured major grants from the Perigee Fund and the Good Relatives Collaborative, and actively engaged with other key funders. Our learning priorities continued to be supported by trusted evaluators and consultants. However, staff reflections acknowledged the ongoing tension of working "ahead of the field," when partners and funders still prioritize quantitative measures, highlighting a continued need to advocate for funding approaches that value qualitative and cultural impacts.

**“The consistency and visibility of allies like the Arts Council is what’s truly important. It helps us raise awareness and identify who we can trust as partners.” – Arnold**

**Local and Cultural Collaborations:**

Locally, Mewinzha relies on reliable partnerships to deliver its bundle of care. The Meal Delivery Program is sustained by relationships with food contractors and local grocers. Traditional healing is strengthened through trusted relationships with helpers and plant knowledge carriers. Furthermore, our commitment to the Two-Spirit Advocacy project saw strong growth in partnerships including the Arts Council and Sanford Health.



**Future Partnership Hopes:**

The team identified key areas for developing new partnerships that align with Mewinzha’s long-term vision of scaling deep and strengthening cultural infrastructure. These prospective collaborations are centered on organizational sustainability, cultural deepening, and expanded community reach.

**“The most successful funder relationships are long-term ones. They’re built on years of work, and require us to be our most authentic selves when describing the impact.” – Michelle**



# Looking Ahead: Priorities and Long-Term Vision

Mewinzha enters this next season with a clear pathway defined by the relational insights of 2025. Our forward movement is an exercise in stewardship, ensuring that our growth remains accountable to the Relatives we serve today and the generations to come. We will continue to scale deep, ensuring that our presence in the community is a testament to the enduring power of Anishinaabe care.



## Long-Term Vision (The Next Five Years)

Mewinzha's five-year vision or "The Big Dream" centers on creating permanent cultural infrastructure and building collective capacity to ensure the enduring health of the community.

### Land-Based Infrastructure:

The highest priority is establishing a permanent, natural, and harmonious land-based home for ceremony, healing, and learning. This space will include a teaching lodge, a midwifery cottage, outdoor gathering areas, and gardens, ensuring accessible cultural infrastructure for the community. Staff shared this vision is "place-making that is rooted in Anishinaabe values of balance, connection, and care". As staff built on this vision they note that it requires that "We start by building relationship with the land first, not disrupting other Relatives already there." "Building a teaching lodge full of Relatives, doing this with balance, harmony, and care for all Relatives... This is how medicines, songs, and teachings stay alive."

### Field-Building and Integrated Holistic Care:

The long-term vision involves deepening the seamless and culturally-grounded full spectrum of care. This requires a shift from individual leadership to collective capacity-building by mentoring future Indigenous providers, including midwives, doulas, lactation consultants, nurses, and nutritionists, to expand care and "take the baton." Mewinzha also sees itself evolving into a hub for community learning and intergenerational knowledge, where knowledge remains alive and teachings are passed on through relationship and shared creation like sewing, beading, and songs.

### Enduring Two-Spirit Advocacy:

Two-Spirit advocacy remains a central and enduring commitment to visibility and education. This work will continue to strengthen culturally specific offerings, school and youth outreach, and shared leadership, recognizing the deep connection between cultural identity, safety, belonging, and suicide prevention. For Mewinzha, visibility is intentional, as Arnold notes: "Visibility, for us, is not symbolic; it is geographic, linguistic, spiritual, and relational".



# Closing

Miigwech for walking with us through this reflection of our 2025 journey. We remain deeply committed to scaling deep through relational care and honoring the trust our community places in us. As we look toward our long-term vision of creating permanent cultural infrastructure, we carry forward the spirit of collective healing and the pursuit of mino-bimaadiziwin for all our Relatives.



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