

Inspire

WAYPOINT RESEARCH INSTITUTE ANNUAL CONFERENCE
2025 POST-CONFERENCE REPORT

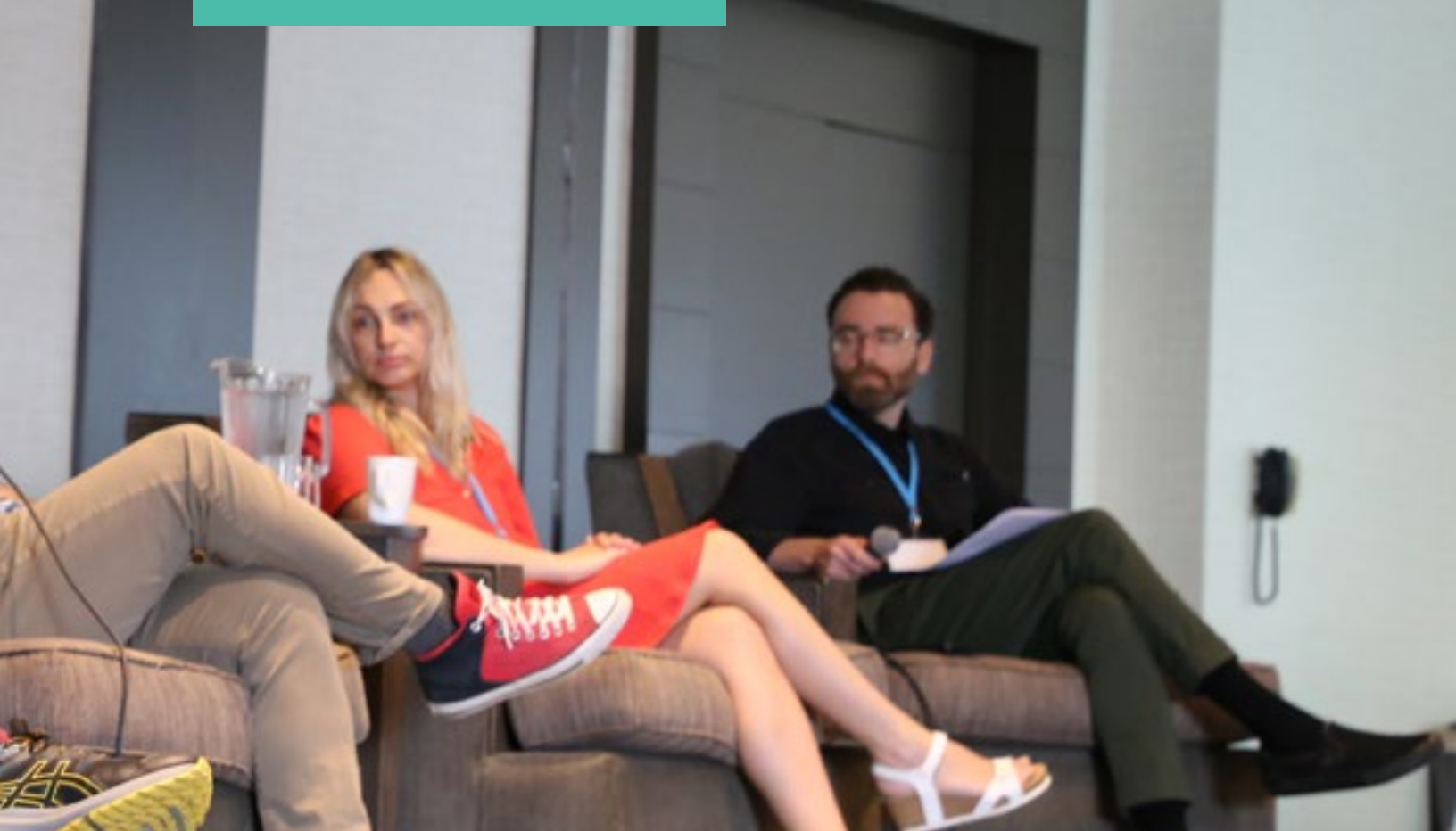




InSPIRE 2025

Integrating Science, Practice, Innovation, Research and Experience

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Thank you

We extend our heartfelt thanks to all those who made InSPIRE 2025 possible:

- Our presenters, who shared their experiences and insights
- Our panelists and keynote speaker, for inspiring meaningful reflection and dialogue
- Our attendees, for showing up with curiosity and a spirit of collaboration
- Our dedicated volunteers and Conference Committee, whose energy and behind-the-scenes work brought the entire event to life

This event was a success because of your commitment to learning, connecting, and creating change.



About InSPIRE 2025

From June 2-4, 2025, the Waypoint Research Institute hosted the 8th Annual Waypoint Research Institute Conference in Blue Mountain, Ontario. More than 140 attendees gathered for this event focused on Integrating Science, Practice, Innovation, Research and Experience (InSPIRE) in mental health and substance use health fields.

This marked the return of the event to an in-person format for the first time since 2019, bringing together researchers, clinicians, students, policymakers, people with lived and living experience (PWLLE), and community partners. InSPIRE 2025 focused on bridging research and real-world impact in the mental health and substance use fields, particularly in rural and equity-denied communities.

On day one, keynote speaker Jesse Thistle, a Métis-Cree author, scholar, and advocate delivered a deeply moving keynote titled “Connection: How We Make Wahkootahwin” - a vision of community as a supportive web wrapped around the individual.

A discussion panel on day two explored the theme, “Advancing social change through research in mental health and substance use settings.” It featured:

- **Shauna Cronin (Stepped Care Solutions) on structural change and the ethics of engagement with PWLLE**
- **Shawn Fisk (CAPSA) on compassion and challenging the medical model in substance use health**
- **Dr. Benedikt Fischer (University of Toronto/Waypoint Research Institute) on the politics of knowledge and harm reduction policy**

Together, these contributions, along with dozens of innovative sessions and wellness offerings, created a vibrant environment for reflection and recommitment to the work of mental health transformation. Whether through policy, practice, research, or advocacy, InSPIRE 2025 reaffirmed that real change is possible when evidence and empathy come together.

By the Numbers

- 140 participants from across Ontario and beyond
- 60 presentations including paper presentations, workshops, lightning talks, and panel discussions

Sponsorship Highlights

The organizers would like to gratefully acknowledge the generous support of funders, sponsors, and exhibitors, whose contributions made InSPIRE 2025 possible.

This year's event was supported through funding from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). These grants enabled us to deliver a high-quality, accessible, and equity-informed conference that brought together diverse voices to advance mental health and substance use research and care in Canada.

We were also honoured to welcome seven sponsors and exhibitors, each of whom played an important role in enriching the conference experience. Their presence helped build meaningful connections across sectors, share emerging tools and practices, and connect attendees with valuable resources across research, frontline care, and advocacy.

2025 Sponsors and Exhibitors

- Waypoint Frontline Wellness
- Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA)
- Better Together
- Atlas Institute for Veterans and Families
- The Centre for Psychology + Emotion Regulation
- A4i (Access 4 Infants and Families Initiative)
- Ontario Structured Psychotherapy Program (OSP)

To our funders and supporters: thank you for investing in opportunities to promote knowledge exchange opportunities that aim to support the transformation of our mental health systems toward a more just, connected, and community-led future.



Keynote Speaker Jesse Thistle

The 2025 InSPIRE Conference opened with a moving and unforgettable keynote from Jesse Thistle, Métis-Cree author of the bestselling memoir *From the Ashes* and assistant professor at York University.

His talk, titled “Connection: How We Make Wahkootahwin,” explored the Indigenous concept of Wahkootahwin: a worldview grounded in deep, reciprocal relationships with people, land, spirit, and all of creation. Jesse shared his own story of childhood abandonment, addiction, homelessness, incarceration, and recovery, offering a rare window into what it means to find healing through reconnection.

Jesse challenged audiences to understand that his suffering stemmed not from being Indigenous, but from being severed from his Indigeneity, and how rebuilding “webs of reconnection” helped him find healing and purpose. Guided by the teachings of his late grandmother and the principle that “you get what you give,” Jesse committed to living with selflessness, purpose, and relational accountability. Today, he uses his voice to lift others, honouring a promise to help rather than harm.

“Humans need love and support. We are not in this world alone. We must help one another.”

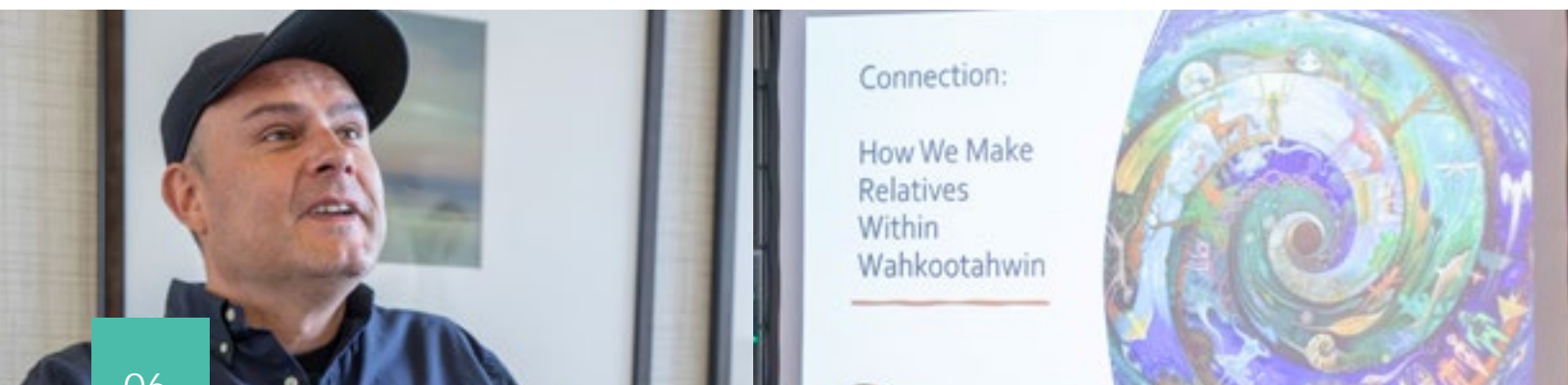
In closing, Jesse issued a call to action: to treat those who are suffering as kin, and to recognize that recovery and belonging are possible when people are held in webs of care. He asked us as friends, family, co-workers, or institutional partners, to extend our hands, our resources, and our hearts, so that others too can aspire to the lives they deserve.

His presence and storytelling resonated deeply with the audience, sparking emotional responses and meaningful conversations throughout the event.

“Jesse Thistle was the best part of the conference and best speaker at any conference I’ve attended. What a powerful story.”

Jesse’s keynote set the tone for the conference: one of courage, truth-telling, and the reminder that research and systems change must be grounded in compassion and human connection.

“His story was not only touching but so educational on the impacts of creating more supportive systems and the power of kindness.”



Panel Discussion

The panel at InSPIRE 2025 built directly on the themes introduced by Jesse Thistle, expanding the conversation into a dynamic and thought-provoking exploration of how research can drive social change in mental health and substance use care. Moderated by Dr. Christopher Canning, the panel featured three dynamic speakers: Shauna Cronin (Stepped Care Solutions), Shawn Fiske (CAPSA), and Dr. Benedikt Fischer (University of Toronto/Waypoint Research Institute). Each offered compelling insights grounded in their experiential expertise and system-level practice. Together, they tackled questions at the heart of inclusive, equity-informed research:

- Who sets research agendas and whose knowledge is valued?
- Can systems be designed to feel less like systems and more like natural, human care?
- How do we reconcile the roles of scientists, advocates, and community members in a space where neutrality is often assumed?

Highlights from the Panel:

Shauna Cronin emphasized that systems are fluid and shaped by culture, power, and perspective. She called on researchers and practitioners to reimagine research structures through humility and trust-building with historically excluded communities.

"Even in research, advocacy, and action, there is no us and them. There's just we."

Shawn Fisk urged participants to consider the many perspectives people bring into their work collectively as both professionals and humans, advocating for a shared space where lived experience is recognized as legitimate and essential expertise.

"The perfect system would never feel like a system to the person accessing services."

Dr. Benedikt Fischer challenged the notion of scientific neutrality, encouraging researchers to engage in the politics of their work and use knowledge as capital for change, even when it is uncomfortable or contested.

"Knowledge and evidence are our capital. It takes effort, discomfort, and responsibility to put them to work."

Participant Reflections

The panel struck a chord with attendees, who valued the honesty and critical reflection on display:

"I appreciated that presenters engaged with uncertainty, complexity, and unresolved questions. Nice diversity of perspectives."

This discussion exemplified what InSPIRE is all about: challenging assumptions, centering lived expertise and equity, and bringing research into conversation with humility and courage.





Session and Presentation Highlights

In addition to keynote and panel sessions, InSPIRE 2025 offered a vibrant program of workshops, wellness activities, and presentations that showcased innovation and practical learning in mental health and substance use care. Attendees praised the variety of topics and presentation styles, noting that many sessions provided actionable tools, fresh insights, and opportunities for cross-sector collaboration.

Wellness & Networking

To support connection and self-care, the conference included:

- Chair yoga and meditation sessions
- A networking social to build relationships across disciplines

These moments of rest and reflection were highly valued, contributing to a warm atmosphere that encouraged engagement and community building.

VR simulation workshop

Delivered by Dr. Petal Abdool from the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), this interactive workshop used virtual reality headsets to simulate psychiatric emergencies such as suicide risk assessments and opioid overdose interventions. Participants were guided through complex, dynamic scenarios that adapted to their choices in real time.

Attendees shared: ***"This was such an innovative and hands-on way to build clinical confidence in high-risk situations."***

The session sparked critical conversations about the role of VR and simulation in the future of mental health education and care.



How to talk about horrible things

Led by Rebekkah Williams, this compelling and highly personal workshop explored the power of language in responding to sex-trafficked and exploited individuals. Drawing from her own lived experience and decades of clinical practice, Rebekkah encouraged attendees to challenge assumptions and use words and tools more intentionally to create safer, more empathetic spaces for healing.

Participants reflected that: ***“Rebekkah challenged us to re-think our assumptions and really consider how words can heal... or harm.”***

Lightning talk sessions

Short, sharp, and impactful, the lightning talk session featured 10 emerging projects from across Canada. Highlights included:

- Digital literacy for mental health - Addressing the digital divide in access to care
- Equitable recognition models - Rethinking how we credit contributors in KMb work
- Care transitions at Waypoint - Improving continuity between hospital and home
- Consultation models for clinicians - Strengthening team-based mental health care
- New PTSD research - Patient perspectives on trauma-informed support
- Quality improvement in forensic settings - Enhancing nursing assessments and incident reporting
- Simulation-based physician training - Using practice to build empathy and skill

These presentations offered attendees a glimpse into the future of mental health innovation, where compassion, clinical expertise, the wisdom of PWLLE, and system-level thinking come together to create meaningful change.





Pre-Event Survey Highlights

In the lead-up to the conference, attendees were invited to complete a pre-conference survey to share their backgrounds and learning goals. This helped the InSPIRE 2025 team shape sessions that were relevant and aligned with community priorities.

Who attended?

Of the 40 respondents:

50% came from hospitals or community-based service organizations

38% were researchers or academics

18% identified as PWLLE

Others included students, project managers, policy leaders, and public health professionals.

This wide range of participants reflects InSPIRE's commitment to cross-sector collaboration, bridging research, practice, and personal experiences to drive change in mental health and substance use systems.

What did attendees want to learn?

Participants shared diverse and purposeful learning goals:

60% wanted to better use research to inform policy, practice, and social justice

53% were interested in collaborating with PWLLE

53% aimed to build knowledge in community-engaged or patient-oriented research

55% wanted to deepen their understanding of applied research methods

45% were focused on learning about clinical research approaches

These priorities highlight a growing demand for inclusive, impact-driven research that goes beyond academic settings and into real-world care - values at the heart of InSPIRE's mission.



Post-Event Survey Highlights

Following the close of InSPIRE 2025, participants were invited to reflect on their experience and share what they learned. The responses confirmed that the event had a strong and lasting impact, with attendees highlighting opportunities for connection and personal growth.

Overall experience

79% of respondents rated their experience as “Excellent” or “Good”

0 respondents rated their experience as “Poor”

Feedback consistently highlighted the value of real-time connection, meaningful dialogue, and inclusive representation

“This was one of the most inspiring and thought-provoking events I’ve attended in a long time.”

Top takeaways

When asked what knowledge or skills they were leaving with, respondents highlighted:

71% Collaborating with PWLLE

57% Using research to inform policy, practice, and social justice

46% Understanding community-engaged or patient-oriented research

43% Communicating research to diverse audiences

Others cited growth in both clinical and applied research approaches

“The range of voices, from lived experience to research and systems, was so refreshing and essential.”

These outcomes demonstrate a clear alignment between the conference content and participant goals, particularly in the areas of equity and research-to-practice translation.



Voices from InSPIRE

One of the defining features of InSPIRE 2025 was the sense of community and authenticity it fostered. We asked participants:

"What would you tell someone who's thinking about attending InSPIRE in the future?"

Here's what they shared:

"Great atmosphere and experience; awesome networking opportunities; and fantastic learning."

"The conference is focused, human, and can fill your cup. It is well-organized with good food. It includes personal touches that make it feel extra unique. It is not exhausting in the same way other conferences might be."

"I liked the size of the conference, it felt like you could meet people and recognize them/connect again."



"Welcoming and friendly atmosphere. Great for trainees and early-career practitioners."

"Lived experience and alternative, non-traditional research highlighted. Diverse perspectives shared."



"It is a supportive community of people who are caring and doing impactful work."

"These reflections speak to what makes InSPIRE both a research conference and a space for relationship-building and collective impact."



"If they are in the field of mental health, or just patient support and navigation in general, this conference will fill them with inspiration and motivation to get connected, build relationships, and get their voice heard within the community and sector."



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What's next

The InSPIRE conference will return in 2027 and we are excited to welcome both new and returning participants. We are committed to growing this community of practice and building on the momentum and relationships sparked this year.

Stay tuned for updates as we plan the next chapter of InSPIRE.

Stay connected

To connect with our team or learn more about future events, please contact: researchevents@waypointcentre.ca

Thank you for being part of a growing community working to make mental health and substance use systems more inclusive, innovative, and human.



Watch our conference video!