

# Six Nations Band Council rejects methadone clinic in Village Plaza

By Donna Duric  
Writer

OHSWEKEN, ONT—Two months after a local woman announced she wanted to open a medical centre at the Ohsweken plaza, complete with a methadone clinic, Six Nations Elected Council has said no, not in the plaza.

Gail Whitlow had planned to open the clinic but Six Nations Band Council announced it will not support the offering of methadone or Suboxone treatments at the plaza.

"After much consideration and deliberation, Six Nations Elected Council has decided it will not be supporting the availability of methadone and Suboxone treatments through Ancestral Voices Healing Centre in the Ohsweken Iroquois Village Plaza," band council said in a statement sent out Wednesday afternoon.

Whitlow, owner of Ancestral Voices, had planned to open a medical centre complete with a walk-in clinic, pharmacy, and methadone maintenance treatment (MMT) program. She received push back from elected council and some community members concerned over the location of the proposed methadone clinic. Methadone is a synthetic opioid drug used to help stave off withdrawal symptoms in those seeking to kick an addiction to opiates like heroin, morphine and prescription painkillers.

Band Council said she would not be evicted after she made renovations to her business to accommodate a pharmacy and family health practice behind Ancestral Voices without getting permission for the extensive renovations from the band council. Whitlow rents the space

from band council.

In rejecting the expansion band council said it was taking into consideration concerns raised by community members and plaza tenants.

The Six Nations Band Council's statement said it was "dedicated to ensuring the health, well-being, and safety of Six Nations community members. Addictions are an ever-growing concern, and Six Nations Elected Council is diligently working to expand services to meet the current needs of those within the community."

However Six Nations Band Council made its decision behind closed doors and that has at least one councillor concerned.

"I told council they needed to have these discussions in the open and the decision in the open. Gail (Whitlow) should have been invited. This whole thing should have been in open council so the community could hear everything," said District Four Councillor Helen Miller. She said council refused to hold an open meeting.

She said "We're (Six Nations Band Council) not supporting any kind of expansion to Ancestral Voices."

Whitlow had renovated the space in Ancestral Voices to make room for a medical centre, family practice, after-hours clinic, pharmacy and even held a grand opening ceremony in late January for what Whitlow had called the "Six Nations Medical Centre."

Miller said a big reason why council turned down support for the clinic was because of negative feedback from tenants in the plaza and the community. "A lot of the feedback we



**Gail Whitlow hoped to open a medical clinic, pharmacy and methadone clinic in the Village Plaza with her partner Shaab Syed, the majority owner of the pharmacy. Both partners have not returned Turtle Island News calls for comments.**

got in the community was they didn't want a methadone clinic there," said Miller. "The tenants didn't want a methadone clinic there. We have to listen to the tenants; they're all paying rent."

Miller said Whitlow has to honour council's decision since she is leasing the space from them.

"She has to listen to the landlords. She never even asked the landlord if she could make renovations. She just went ahead and did everything. She should've asked but she didn't."

Another drawback, said Miller, is that Whitlow's business partner - Shaab Syed - is the majority owner of the pharmacy and he's not a band member.

"According to the Drug and Pharmacy Act, the pharmacist has to be the majority owner of the pharmacy so he's the majority owner and you can't be the majority owner on a reserve (if you're non-native)," said Miller. "She (Whitlow) made it sound like it was going to be her clinic. She never did explain it well to the community."

Miller said Whitlow can open a methadone clinic elsewhere, on private prop-

erty, "she just can't have it there."

Whitlow has not responded to Turtle Island News requests for comment but posted a statement on her Facebook page saying that she was disappointed in the "blindness" of band council and some plaza business owners.

She said the decision is "not a setback" and she criticized Coun. Helen Miller for using Facebook, "as a way to sway the thoughts of many without looking a bit deeper at the pros of supporting a much-needed clinic in our community. Should she be able to do that? Councillor Helen Miller is known to stir the pot," wrote Whitlow. Whitlow questioned questioned band council's ability to reject the clinic.

"How many who sit on council are doctors or pharmacists and can adequately and professionally make a decision that affects their countless years and experience. I may not be this type of doctor or this type of pharmacist but I certainly have experience, lots of it, and education to make a decision based on knowledge and insight I have gained in the field. The

clinic would cost no money to council and would actually save money.

"Sorry Helen but I am simply making a point," Whitlow continued. "I have seen so many great ideas slashed by a council who is part of the government body whose only mandate has always been to squash the spirit of the original owners of the land.

"A little bump in the road is not the end of the dream, only an obstacle that needs to be overcome. We as a community are our worst enemy when we should be promoting the very teachings that our ancestors lived by. Respect means what? A medicine man helped me to look for the beauty in everything and maybe this could work for everyone. What is the beauty in helping those seeking a better life away from addiction? A chance for our children to grow healthy and strong instead of scared and abused. Our community can be so much more if we were to think about what we could do to help and support instead of crushing. By the way, I'm not crushed."

Band Council's statement went on to say "Six Nations Health Services has conducted research exploring the link between pain and addictions (physical and/or emotional). Recommendations from this "Connections Project" included an expansion of services to the community that range from traditional to medical based interventions, alternative therapies, counselling for addictions and mental health issues, as well as options for methadone and/or Suboxone treatments."

The statement said the health department is currently developing plans to

expand addictions services and mental health to address the recommendations arising from the Connections Project. In collaboration with local services, businesses, practitioners, partners, and the families that they serve, Health Services is working towards creating a basket of services that harmonize Indigenous and Western medicine and health practices, the statement read.

The statement did not explain what was in its "basket of services."

The statement said safety of both patients and neighbours is paramount along with maximizing the accessibility of addictions services.

The statement also said health services will "explore resources to minimize the impact of transportation barriers."

The statement said health services will focus on "those actively seeking interventions, treatments, and ongoing counselling and support with the goal of achieving a substance-free life."

In an e-mail, Director of Six Nations Health Services Lori Davis-Hill said they plan to hold community meetings to implement a solution to painkiller addictions.

"Meetings are scheduled for planning," said Davis-Hill. "Funding is an issue, but adjustments will be made to service delivery to respond as quickly as possible. We encourage community members to come forward to indicate their individual needs to our services so that we can incorporate that into setting priorities."

Neither Whitlow or her partner Shaab Syed have returned Turtle Island News calls.