counselling connect

COUNSELLING CONNECT

# CASE STUDY

The Initiative: A Community-based collaboration to increase access to preventative mental health, substance health and addictions support

## Challenges

- Needed a plan to go from crisis response to long-term vision
- No formal structure for collaboration
- Equity-Led, but needed support to stay that way
- Old organizational boundaries resurfaced, threatening collaboration and unity

## C2K's Role

### Clarity In Complexity

Brought clarity to purpose, potential, and system role.

### A Trusted Centre of Gravity

Led collaboration, managing tensions to support aligned, forward momentum.

### Equity, Embedded & Protected

Kept equity at the forefront, embedding it in structure, service design, and partnerships.

### Leading Boldly With Confidence

Empowered leaders to make bold decisions by managing strategy, facilitation, and coordination.

## Executive Summary

Counselling Connect began as an urgent response in the early days of the pandemic — a bold, cross-sector initiative to ensure people could access timely mental health and substance use support. What started as a rapid pivot quickly evolved into a collaborative platform that expanded access, connected organizations, and reimagined how care could be delivered.

Connect2Knowledge (C2K) joined as the initiative was gaining momentum. Our role was clear: hold the centre while visionary leaders pushed the boundaries of what was possible. As project managers, we clarified purpose amid complexity.

From strategy to implementation, our project leadership helped transform Counselling Connect from a reactive launch into a recognized model of equity-centred innovation. While the platform's long-term sustainability remains uncertain, what this collaboration proved is that when not-for-profit leaders are backed by strategic, equity-focused support, they can deliver game-changing results.

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> Connect2Knowledge brings thoughtful intention and expertise to every step.

## Key Outcomes

- **Built Trust Across Agencies:** Facilitated strong, enduring relationships that supported true cross-sector collaboration.
- **Enabled Faster, Aligned Growth:** Streamlined decision-making and coordination, helping partners expand services rapidly without losing focus.
- **Navigated Complexity with Clarity:** Provided project leadership that kept work moving forward through change, uncertainty, and competing priorities.
- **Embedded Equity into Every Step:** Ensured equity stayed central in structure, service design, and partnerships as the platform scaled.
- **Leadership Ready for What's Next:** Equipped leaders to sustain and drive bold, equity-driven innovation.

## Background

When COVID-19 forced Ottawa's counselling agencies to close their doors in March 2020, four visionary leaders recognized the urgent need for accessible mental health and substance use support. In just six weeks, they pooled clinical staff, secured a shared online booking platform, and launched Counselling Connect — the region's first one-stop website offering free, same-day virtual counselling.

From day one, the platform broke through traditional barriers:

- Mental health and substance use services offered side-by-side.
- Children, youth, and adults served through a unified schedule, despite being funded by different ministries.
- Bilingual access (English and French) built in at launch, with plans for additional languages underway.
- A single shared calendar, eliminating the need for clients to call multiple agencies to find an opening.

Clients praised the simplicity and dignity of the model — booking appointments without the need to arrange childcare, take time off work, or navigate complex intake systems. Demand surged almost immediately.

> Growth was fast but had to stay values-driven

**Recognizing the need to move from emergency response to sustainable growth, the founders invited Connect2Knowledge to join as project managers in July 2020.**

Our role was to build on their bold foundation, bringing structure, strategy, and capacity to a groundbreaking vision for accessible care.

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## Key Objectives

**Align on purpose and direction**
Supported leaders in defining what they were building, why it mattered, and how to move forward together.

**Protect equity through practical design**
Turned values into shared standards, principles, and practices across the platform.

**Create lasting conditions for collaboration**
Introduced systems and habits that supported accountability, trust, and collective leadership.

**Enable confident, equity-driven scale**
Helped leaders expand services quickly while keeping core values front and centre.

> *Working with Natalie Duchesne and the team at Connect2Knowledge is always a pleasure and it's always productive.*
>
> *Whether developing strategic actions for organizations, facilitating a virtual meeting or leading in-person workshops, the Connect2Knowledge team brings expertise and thoughtful intention to every aspect of the work.*
>
> *As a facilitator, Natalie creates inclusive, creative spaces for all people to come together, learn from each other and find effective solutions. The work they have done to support our partners has a direct impact on the mental health professionals and communities we serve.*

Michelle James, Coordinator of the Ottawa Black Mental Health Coalition and Counselling Connect Partner

## Implementation

**Turned bold ambition into structured collaboration**
Transformed intensive early meetings into a disciplined Coordination Committee with structured agendas and ongoing accountability.

**Protected equity and client choice at every level**
Helped leaders name and protect their non-negotiables, embedding equity and autonomy into every layer of decision-making and design.

**Held space for real collaboration**
Facilitated trust-building conversations, navigated tensions, and created the conditions for shared leadership to thrive.

**Built on early wins to accelerate equity-focused growth**
Built on Indigenous-led session success and helped co-design by-and-for services for 2SLGBTQ+ and African, Caribbean & Black communities.

**Balanced urgency with long-term thinking**
Managed the pace and complexity of rapid growth while guiding conversations about future mergers, sustainability, and systems change.

Aligned 20+ partners around shared principles through 18+ months of rapid growth.

*I have had the pleasure of working with the Connect2Knowledge team on a number of initiatives.*

*As a service provider, we have benefited from their* ***skilled, comprehensive and effective*** *coordination in a multi-service partnership, that struck the essential balance of being collaborative, values-driven, efficient and effective.*

*I have also attended network meetings and seen the superb in-person facilitation skills of this team, again bringing to life the values of equity, diversity, inclusion, accessibility and anti-racism in the room when engaging in meaningful and practical discussions yielding concrete outcomes.*

*Finally, our organization has engaged with the training this group provides in Serving Trans and Nonbinary Clients.*

***This training was a powerhouse of relevant and accessible content delivered in a way that leaves participants confident in their knowledge and ability to integrate critical information into practice.***

*The theme is clear - this is a group that balances best practice values and knowledge with pragmatic, concrete and reliable outcomes.*

*They understand the sector, what is important, and can be relied on to get the job done excellently.*

Carole Sinclair, BSW, MSW, RSW, Director of Addictions and Mental Health, Rideauwood Addiction and Family Services and Counselling Connect Partner

## What Made This Work

This collaboration held together because of a shared commitment to doing things differently — centring equity, choosing transparency, and staying aligned even when the work got hard.

There was no single lead agency. No pre-existing structure. Just shared urgency, shared values, and a desire to build something that worked better for clients.

Connect2Knowledge helped make that possible by creating the space, structure, and strategy for partners to align, grow, and stay true to what mattered most.

## Closing Reflection

At Connect2Knowledge, our role is to bring clarity, coordination, and care to complex, equity-driven work.

In this collaboration, that meant holding space, managing pace, and protecting what mattered — so partners could lead boldly and serve their communities well.

## The Work's Progression

Counselling Connect began as a rapid response — a bold solution to an urgent need. Over time, it became a platform for rethinking how care is accessed and delivered.

As C2K stepped back, the platform faced new questions about structure, sustainability, and direction. Whatever comes next, the collaboration proved what's possible when equity stays central and leadership is supported to act boldly and in alignment.