



CanWaCH
Canadian Partnership for
Women and Children's Health

SCORING BIG IN PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT: Lessons from the CanWaCH-WickFest partnership

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----------|
| PRE-GAME WARM-UP: THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIP | 2 |
| FIRST PERIOD: WICKFEST CALGARY | 3 |
| <i>Exhibit space</i> | <i>3</i> |
| <i>The CanWaCH-WickFest Gamechanger certificate and passport program</i> | <i>3</i> |
| <i>Workshops</i> | <i>4</i> |
| <i>Ukrainian girls' hockey team</i> | <i>4</i> |
| <i>Media relations</i> | <i>4</i> |
| SECOND PERIOD: LESSONS FROM WICKFEST CALGARY | 5 |
| STRONG PARTNERSHIPS | 5 |
| <i>WickFest</i> | <i>5</i> |
| <i>CARE Canada</i> | <i>5</i> |
| <i>Calgary Canucks</i> | <i>5</i> |
| <i>Ukrainian Canadian Congress - Calgary Chapter</i> | <i>5</i> |
| HOSTING AND ORGANIZING WORKSHOPS: | 6 |
| HOSTING AN INTERNATIONAL SPORTS TEAM: | 6 |
| <i>The visa process</i> | <i>7</i> |
| <i>Lead point of contact</i> | <i>7</i> |
| <i>Language interpretation</i> | <i>7</i> |
| THIRD PERIOD: THE SURREY PIVOT | 7 |
| <i>CanWaCH exhibit and activity room</i> | <i>7</i> |
| <i>Refining the passport program</i> | <i>8</i> |
| <i>Plan International Canada's "Confident Me" workshop</i> | <i>8</i> |
| <i>The True Athlete Project workshop</i> | <i>8</i> |
| <i>FuelHER</i> | <i>9</i> |
| GOING FOR GOLD: RESULTS AND NEXT STEPS | 9 |

PRE-GAME WARM-UP: The power of partnership

The partnership between the Canadian Partnership for Women and Children's Health (CanWaCH) and the Wickenheiser Female Hockey Festival (WickFest) marked a groundbreaking approach to engaging Canadians in conversations about global health and international development. WickFest's unique tournament platform, including both a hockey tournament and workshop offerings, enabled us to connect with a diverse audience of youth athletes, their parents, coaches and other members of the Canadian public, while reinforcing our mission to advance the health and rights of girls around the world.

Through this initiative, CanWaCH engaged with a wide range of unique communities and audiences that are not traditionally aware of global health, nutrition and international development work in Canada. This often prompted the question, "Who is CanWaCH?" — an ideal conversation starter to introduce a new audience to the role Canadian organizations play in delivering women and children's health and rights programming worldwide.

In recent years, CanWaCH, together with its members and partners, has explored new and innovative ways to raise awareness and engage Canadians in global health and international development. As the landscape continues to evolve, traditional public engagement strategies are increasingly falling short in reaching and resonating with audiences amid compounding global crises and rising digital noise. Recognizing the universal appeal of sport — especially hockey — in Canada, CanWaCH saw WickFest as a prime opportunity to engage directly with Canadians and connect local and global narratives. This partnership provided a powerful platform to bridge the gap between public understanding of international development and the sector's critical work. By leveraging WickFest's dynamic format and its focus on empowering girls and women through hockey, CanWaCH made global health, nutrition and development issues more accessible and relatable. The festival's emphasis on female empowerment directly aligns with CanWaCH's mission, creating an ideal space for conversations about women's and children's health.

A strong partnership is what turns a good initiative into a great one. The CanWaCH-WickFest collaboration was built on a shared belief in the power of sport to spark meaningful conversations about global health and nutrition. But the impact of this initiative went far beyond these two organizations. It was shaped by the contributions of diverse partners who brought expertise in leadership, public engagement, gender equality and global health, as well as those who offered invaluable lived experience. Among them, a Ukrainian U13 girls' hockey team and a Ugandan girls' field hockey team. Their integration into CanWaCH's WickFest programming added a deeply personal and emotional dimension, reinforcing sport's ability to build empathy, resilience and connection across borders.

The driving force behind this success was WickFest founder Hayley Wickenheiser. Hayley is not only a legend in women's hockey, she is a leader, a physician and a powerful advocate for women and girls.



Her credibility and influence helped attract key partners, amplify CanWaCH's message and engage media in ways that would not have been possible otherwise. Her leadership also strengthened the contributions of organizations like CARE Canada, Plan International Canada, Not in My City and The True Athlete Project, all of whom played a crucial role in shaping the experience. These partnerships, and others, will be outlined in further detail in this report.

FIRST PERIOD: WickFest Calgary

Building on past experiences and the established WickFest model, CanWaCH approached the 2024/2025 WickFest tournaments with a mix of strategic activations, interactive exhibits and high-impact programming. With less than 12 weeks from ideation to execution of the Calgary tournament, the project evolved rapidly, requiring adaptable planning and a “do what we know” approach. Below is a list of the key elements that CanWaCH included at the Calgary tournament.

Exhibit space

A key part of CanWaCH's engagement strategy in Calgary was the exhibit booth, designed as a first point of contact for participants, parents and coaches in the lobby of the tournament's main arena. The exhibit space connected attendees with CanWaCH's global health messaging through interactive elements tailored to the tournament setting. Highlights included a short video introducing the participation of the Ukrainian girls' hockey team, documentary-style clips featuring the personal stories of two young Ugandan field hockey players, and CanWaCH winter gloves for exhibit visitors — complementing the CanWaCH Think Beyond the Rink hats provided to all tournament players. The gloves, suited for chilly arenas, proved to be the perfect ice breaker to spark conversations, creating a natural entry point for engagement.

The CanWaCH-WickFest Gamechanger certificate and passport program

To boost participation in off-ice activities and deepen engagement on local and global issues, CanWaCH introduced a 'passport' and certificate program at WickFest. Participants earned passport stamps by participating in global health workshops (CanWaCH, CARE Canada) and an online course on human trafficking (Not in My City). Upon submission of their completed passports, participants received a Gamechanger certificate signed by Hayley Wickenheiser along with an entry to receive prizes. Significant refinements were made to the Gamechanger passport program after Calgary to better align with players' schedules and remove barriers to completion.



Workshops

Both CanWaCH and CARE Canada developed and delivered one-hour workshops with content focused on global health. While CanWaCH aligned its workshop content with themes relevant to youth athletes, such as mental health, body image and nutrition, CARE delivered their SHE SOARS workshop fostering conversations about confidence, self-advocacy and communication.

Ukrainian girls' hockey team

One high-profile element that engaged both tournament participants and the broader public at WickFest Calgary was the participation of the Ukrainian Wings — a U13 Ukrainian girls' hockey team whose players persevered through bombed arenas and the upheaval of war-induced displacement to continue playing their sport. Inviting the team to participate in Calgary highlighted the power of sport in fostering cross-cultural connections and building empathy. The Ukrainian team's presence had a profound effect on Canadian players and the broader community, with the emotional impact extending beyond the tournament itself.

Extensive media coverage amplified the story, and a video message from Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to the team further elevated the initiative's profile, reinforcing the importance of global solidarity. Former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper also attended one of the Ukrainian team's games, where he spoke to the players and dropped the puck. This experience served as a powerful reminder that personal connections, rooted in sport, can effectively convey global development narratives.

Media relations

The participation of the Ukrainian girls' hockey team attracted significant local, national and international media attention, generating widespread community and public support. Sport proved to be a powerful and relatable way to connect people across borders and the media coverage resonated with Canadians. This universal connection, made possible through sport, created a level of empathy and engagement that would have been difficult to achieve through traditional storytelling alone.

Hayley's profile and reputation played a significant role in amplifying media coverage. Her strong presence captured public imagination, drawing greater attention to the story and inspiring community engagement. This added visibility not only expanded the reach of our message but also encouraged meaningful action from supporters.

The story of the Ukrainian Wings' journey to WickFest was covered extensively by media including: the Globe and Mail, the Canadian Press (re-published in newspapers across Canada), CTV News (TV and online), CBC News (TV and online), Radio Canada (TV and online), Global News (TV and online), The Kyiv Post, Rogers TV, as well as several community news outlets in Alberta and BC. Leveraging the momentum and impact of the Ukrainian team's participation in WickFest Calgary, Hayley and Julia



Anderson co-wrote an [Op-Ed](#) about the power of sport to drive global change. This article was published by the Calgary Herald and re-published by the Edmonton Journal and the Vancouver Province.

SECOND PERIOD: Lessons from WickFest Calgary

STRONG PARTNERSHIPS

WickFest

The immense scale of WickFest required a highly organized team to manage both on- and off-ice activities. Under Hayley's leadership, the WickFest team was responsive, available and consistently proactive in proposing creative solutions and adaptations. The CanWaCH and WickFest teams met often to confirm key details, logistics and to explore solutions when needed. This required a high level of candor and trust which was instrumental in the success of WickFest Calgary in meeting CanWaCH's objectives (and later elevating that success at WickFest Surrey).

CARE Canada

CARE demonstrated a strong dedication to engaging young Canadians in unique spaces. CARE was the first member to partner with CanWaCH on this initiative, and their activities proved highly engaging. With a vibrant exhibit, a spinning wheel game and prizes, they successfully drew in many players to start conversations. This approach inspired CanWaCH to adopt similar interactive elements for the Surrey activations, recognizing that engaging and fun activities are key to connecting with this age group.

Calgary Canucks

The Calgary Canucks (Calgary's Junior A hockey club) hosted and practiced with the Ukrainian team during their visit. They honoured them at a pre-game ceremony at a Canucks game with the Canadian and Ukrainian national anthems and the Ukrainian Wings Girls' team participating in a flag ceremony. The event also included a white hat ceremony — a Calgary tradition that welcomes and honors special guests to the city — led by Hayley Wickenheiser, alongside CanWaCH's CEO, Julia Anderson, and the Honorable Lois Mitchell, an accomplished business leader and community advocate from Calgary.

Ukrainian Canadian Congress - Calgary Chapter

In preparation for the Ukrainian team's visit, CanWaCH partnered with the Ukrainian Canadian Congress, Calgary Chapter, to mobilize the diaspora community in welcoming and supporting the team. The Congress and members of the local Ukrainian community greeted the team at the airport and



hosted a lunch featuring traditional Ukrainian cuisine. Throughout the week, Congress representatives stayed connected with the team, helping to create a warm and familiar environment.

HOSTING AND ORGANIZING WORKSHOPS:

CanWaCH's workshops in Calgary were originally structured as one-hour sessions in boardroom-style meeting rooms. However, this format clashed with players' packed schedules, which included games, tournament activities and travel between arenas. As a result, attendance at CanWaCH and CARE Canada workshops was lower than anticipated, highlighting the need for a more flexible and accessible approach.

In response, a "choose-your-own-adventure" model was introduced at the Surrey tournament, allowing participants to engage in activities that fit within their available time — whether that was 10 minutes or a full hour. This shift replaced traditional discussions with tactile, interactive and gamified global health content that resonated with young attendees and significantly increased both participation and depth of engagement.

Additionally, insights from CARE Canada's workshop in Calgary reinforced the importance of age-appropriate content for the broader range of participants (ages 8-17). By adapting to the realities of a fast-paced tournament environment, CanWaCH ensured that learning opportunities remained accessible, relevant and impactful.

HOSTING AN INTERNATIONAL SPORTS TEAM:

In the week leading up to the Calgary tournament, the Ukrainian team had the opportunity to experience a touch of Canadiana, visiting national parks and popular Calgary tourist attractions. The local Ukrainian community warmly welcomed the team as well, greeting them at the airport and hosting a traditional Ukrainian lunch for a taste of home.

In CanWaCH's ongoing efforts to engage the public on global issues, hosting an international team was both heartening and reassuring. In the past, we've faced challenges in raising awareness of key development issues and bridging gaps in public understanding. But the presence of the Ukrainian team struck a chord with WickFest players, families, coaches and media alike. Witnessing firsthand the impact of global leadership in supporting those facing conflict, limited access to health care, and food insecurity brought these issues to life in a powerful way.

The support Canadians showed the Ukrainian team was an important reminder that, when faced with the reality of those in need, Canadians are willing to step up with compassion and generosity. This experience has reinforced the value of storytelling in our public engagement efforts. By sharing real, human-centered narratives that connect international issues to individual experiences, we can better inspire empathy and action. Moving forward, CanWaCH is committed to weaving these impactful



stories into every aspect of our engagement strategy whether through workshops, activations or digital content to ensure Canadians see themselves as active participants in Canada's global leadership and humanitarian efforts.

The visa process

Beginning the international visa application process as early as possible is key. While the services of an immigration lawyer and firm were helpful in navigating the application process, tight timelines created pressure on other important planning. For example, flights and hotels couldn't be booked until the visas were issued.

Lead point of contact

Identifying a dedicated lead contact from the international team was crucial in managing the many moving parts of hosting a group of this size and age range. It was equally important to align with this point-person early on, ensuring they understood the significant time and effort required to support the team effectively.

Language interpretation

The presence of a translator created a smoother, more inclusive experience for everyone. Depending on how comfortable the visiting team is with the local language, hiring a translator can ensure clear communication and enhance the overall experience by the team. A translator can also support engagement with VIPs and media representatives.

THIRD PERIOD: The Surrey pivot

CanWaCH's shift in approach for the Surrey tournament marked a turning point in our public engagement success. Recognizing the challenge of delivering deep educational content in a fast-paced tournament setting, CanWaCH reimagined its programming to prioritize soft-touch, relatable interactions that met participants 'where they were' and focused on what resonated with them.

CanWaCH exhibit and activity room

Building on insights from Calgary, CanWaCH maintained a high-visibility exhibit space in the main arena lobby, where players, parents and coaches passed through frequently. The booth offered CanWaCH gloves and WickFest-CanWaCH Gamechanger passports as conversation starters, encouraging attendees to visit the nearby CanWaCH activity room. To further boost visibility, signage and branded floor decals guided participants to the activation space.



Inside the CanWaCH activity room:

- Refreshments (water and fresh fruit) to draw attendees in and create a welcoming atmosphere.
- Phone charging stations and comfortable seating near a CanWaCH video viewing area to encourage participants and parents to stay a while.
- Global health-themed games designed for various time commitments, group sizes and ages, allowing for both quick and extended engagement.
- A friendship bracelet station where players and families could create bracelets and messages for athletes in Ukraine and Uganda, fostering a sense of global connection and solidarity.
- Videos and posters showcasing the Ukrainian hockey team from Calgary and the Ugandan field hockey team, reinforcing international ties.

Refining the passport program

To better accommodate busy schedules, CanWaCH adjusted the WickFest-CanWaCH Gamechanger passport requirements. Instead of multiple mandatory activities, participants were required to complete the Not in My City online course plus one additional activity of their choice in the CanWaCH room, with bonus entries for extra participation including the Plan Canada workshop. This streamlined approach kept the challenge meaningful while making it more accessible and achievable.

These refinements led to a notable surge in engagement, demonstrating that an inviting, interactive space can foster meaningful connections, even when longer, issue-specific discussions aren't immediately possible. By shifting the approach to "planting seeds" to introduce global health themes in small, memorable ways, CanWaCH ensured that key messages resonated with participants in an engaging and approachable format.

Plan International Canada's "Confident Me" workshop

CanWaCH member Plan Canada delivered their highly successful "Confident Me" workshop at Surrey WickFest in Surrey. Registration uptake for the original two session offerings was so strong that another time slot was added. The workshop was designed to be suitable for all ages, which addressed a key learning from Calgary. The impact of Confident Me was amplified by the presence of parents — not as active participants, but as attentive listeners. Feedback on the workshop was overwhelmingly positive. As one parent said, "This was so great! I keep telling my daughter the same messages, but hearing it from a different source made it much more impactful."

The True Athlete Project workshop

The True Athlete Project workshop focused on mental health in sport, exploring a critical and often overlooked aspect of an athlete's experience. Recognizing that tournament pressures can take a toll on mental well-being, the workshop explored themes such as managing stress, maintaining focus and building resilience. This workshop's success stemmed from its ability to connect with both athletes and



their parents. By addressing common mental health challenges faced in competitive sports, the session empowered participants with practical tools they could apply immediately. The workshop's emphasis on open dialogue allowed parents and coaches to gain insight into the pressures young athletes face, building greater empathy and support within the broader hockey community.

FuelHER

During WickFest Surrey, CanWaCH launched its new initiative: FuelHER. This program was created to leverage audiences and players across multiple sports to highlight the intersection between girls' health, leadership and global perspectives. FuelHER aligns with CanWaCH's core messages but takes a non-traditional approach to bring greater public awareness to the importance of girls' health and nutrition globally. This strategic initiative allows FuelHer to serve as a unique extension of CanWaCH, enhancing engagement and expanding its impact in new and innovative ways.

High-level athletes will act as ambassadors, amplifying key messages and inspiring youth advocacy. FuelHER's key objectives include activating influential voices to support girls' health and leadership, diversifying the advocacy ecosystem by engaging new audiences and creating dynamic engagement moments with decision-makers. The initiative will also expand female sports festivals, amplify the voice of Hayley Wickenheiser and involve high-influence athletes in advocacy efforts

Moving forward FuelHER will serve as a new avenue for engaging Canadians beyond the hockey rink, connecting excellence in athletics with women's leadership and healthy communities. By leveraging the influence of sport, FuelHER will advocate for comprehensive health and nutrition interventions that empower girls to thrive and participate in sports. The initiative will bring together athletes, decision-makers and communities to drive policy and investment changes, ultimately supporting women and girls globally.

GOING FOR GOLD: Results and next steps

CanWaCH will build on the success of WickFest Calgary and Surrey, expanding FuelHer at WickFest tournaments in Milton, Calgary and Surrey for the 2025-26 season. Lessons learned will continue to shape how activation spaces are designed to maximize engagement within different venue layouts.

Beyond hockey, CanWaCH will explore FuelHer activations at other sporting events, such as rugby, soccer and rowing events, adapting content to fit each sport's unique environment. Resources and activities will also continue to evolve, ensuring meaningful engagement with Canadians on global health and nutrition.



Partnerships remain central to CanWaCH's approach. Through FuelHer, CanWaCH will strengthen collaborations with sport organizers like WickFest, content partners such as CARE Canada, Plan International Canada, Not in My City and The True Athlete Project, and respected athletes like Hayley Wickenheiser.

The CanWaCH-WickFest partnership has been one of CanWaCH's most effective public engagement initiatives, blending sport, community and advocacy to inspire action both locally and internationally. WickFest provided a unique platform to engage over 10,000 Canadians and introduce young athletes to global health issues, connecting their experiences on the ice with the realities faced by girls around the world.

Key takeaways include the importance of engaging in unconventional spaces, meeting audiences where they are, and using sport as a bridge to deeper understanding. CanWaCH and WickFest successfully navigated logistical challenges, designed creative engagement strategies, and delivered lasting impact. Feedback from participants and families reinforced how meaningful it was to see the intersection of sport and social issues, inspiring a greater commitment to gender equality and global health.

In a world where challenges facing women and girls can feel overwhelming, this partnership proves that collective action drives real change. It is a call for Canadians to move beyond awareness to active participation in empowering women and girls globally. CanWaCH CEO Julia Anderson said it best: "Sport makes girls healthy, and healthy girls will change the world."

Engaging Canadians: A trajectory to success

| KPI | CALGARY PARTICIPANTS ENGAGED | SURREY PARTICIPANTS ENGAGED |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| CanWaCH Lobby Exhibit | 300 | 300 |
| CanWaCH Workshop/Activity Room | 10 | 430 |
| CARE Canada Workshop | 9 | n/a |
| CARE Canada Lobby Exhibit | 250 | n/a |
| Plan Canada Workshop | n/a | 80 athletes, 15 parents |
| The True Athlete Project Workshop | n/a | 25 athletes, 8 parents |
| Passports | 9 | 50 |



Social media interactions*:

| Post highlights | Engagements (The number of times users engage with a post.) | Impressions (The number of times a post is displayed to users.) |
|--|---|---|
| <u>U13 Ukrainian Wings arrive in Calgary and are welcomed by members of the Ukrainian community and a local girls hockey team</u> | 692 | 5,748 |
| <u>Right Honourable Stephen Harper, former Prime Minister of Canada, and Canadian hockey legend Hayley Wickenheiser puck drop before the U13 Ukrainian Wings played the Northwest District</u> | 363 | 8,346 |
| <u>CanWaCH joins WickFest, blending the worlds of hockey and global awareness</u> | 155 | 564 |
| <u>International Women's Day spotlight: Connecting with the next generation of gamechangers in Surrey</u> | 56 | 56 |
| <u>CanWaCH partners with WickFest and the Calgary Canucks for an inspiring hockey game celebrating the unifying power of sport, leadership and community</u> | 44 | 2,737 |

Social media posts through the tournaments were seen by thousands of people across the country, drawing in new and prevailing audiences. Over 65,000 impressions were recorded on posts shared across Calgary and Surrey, with strong engagement on Instagram and Facebook. Posts grounded in narratives of connection, solidarity and empowerment were especially resonant, highlighting an enthusiasm from the next generation and beyond to deepen their action as global citizens.

**Of note: these numbers do not include the number of CanWaCH focus posts that were shared on and interacted with through the WickFest social media channel or Hayley's official personal social media account. WickFest social media accounts have followers in excess of 5,000. Hayley has over 40,000 followers on Instagram alone. Both accounts shared CanWaCH posts across both tournaments.*



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