



Resource Sharing Project Rural Training & Technical Assistance

Building Meaningful Partnerships: Supporting Native Survivors in Rural Communities

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Advocates consistently tell us their favorite part of working in a rural community is the diverse array of people they get to work with every day. Rural areas are made up of a mixture of distinct and dynamic communities that make a whole and unique community. Native people are a vital part of our rural communities. As service providers we explore the best ways to get all survivors, including Native survivors, the healing services they need. Native women experience higher rates of sexual violence than any other race (Perry, 2004). To support Native survivors in our rural communities we need to work in close partnership with tribal communities. Only when we work in collaboration with tribal communities are we able to find the most culturally appropriate ways to serve Native survivors.

According to the 2010 census there are 5.2 million American Indian and Alaska Natives in the United States. From 2000 to 2010 the American Indian and Alaska Native population increased almost twice as fast as the overall U.S. population (Hoeffel, E., Norris, T., & Vines, P., 2012). A 2004 report shows that American Indian and Alaska Natives are more than 2.5 times more likely to be raped or sexually assaulted than the general U.S. population (Perry, S.). According to the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, over half of Native women have experienced some form of sexual violence in their lifetime (2011).



In order to build the strong partnerships necessary to support these survivors, it is important to study the historical roots of violence in Native communities and the barriers Native survivors face, research the laws and resources that affect Native people, and learn about the tribes represented in our communities. To strengthen these important partnerships, we must create meaningful relationships with tribes and Native people and practice allyship in our rural communities. Solid partnerships will create culturally relevant services for survivors of sexual violence and assist Native communities in creating strong sexual violence services for themselves.

For this paper, we will use the term Native survivor to refer to all sexual violence survivors that identify as Native American, First Peoples, American Indian, Alaska Native, or member of a specific tribe or nation. However, when we work with Native survivors there are several reasons we should ask how they identify. First, Native survivors may more closely identify with another race. According to the 2010 census, almost half of American Indian and Alaska Native respondents also identified with at least one other race (Hoeffel, E., Norris, T., & Vines, P., 2012). Secondly, survivors have personal definitions and these are influenced by personal, cultural, and societal factors. Native people do not have a universal preference for the language that is used to describe them and it is important to use the language that each survivor prefers. Thirdly, Native survivors may also identify with their tribe or nation, such as Diné, Lakota, or Yupik.

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There are currently 567 Native tribes across the country legally recognized by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (Office of the Assistant Secretary, Indian Affairs, 2015). For a list of federally recognized and non-recognized tribes:

http://500nations.com/tribes/Tribes_State-by-State.asp. There are Native tribes across the country that are not recognized by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The lengthy and

complex process to become federally-recognized creates barriers to legitimization, among other things, particularly for small and impoverished tribes. Among tribes there is an enormous amount of diversity in language, culture, food, dress, lifestyle, religion, and tribal structure. Native American tribes are not one homogenous group, and much like other nations, have different traditional beliefs, practices, and languages. The culture of each tribe is influenced, in part, by the unique environment and geographic landscape in which the tribe has historically lived. This environment often determined if the tribe would be nomadic or live in small villages, the tribe's relationship to the land, and hunting practices. Diversity also exists in the size of the tribe and ranges from large tribes who number more than 150,000, to small tribes of less than 100 members.

Unfortunately, all Native communities experienced historical abuse, oppression, and violence at horrific rates. Revisiting the historical violence and oppression that Native Americans have experienced gives us perspective in the current context for Native survivor's healing. The history we were taught in school is sparse and only tells a portion the abuse Native Americans have endured.

Since first contact with Western Europeans colonizers in the 15th century, Native tribes have experienced centuries of mass murder, sexual violence, deliberate exposure to disease and starvation, and forcible removal from their lands. In the early 15th century, Native American tribes existed in every area in the United States. As European settlers arrived on Eastern shores, tribes were continuously pushed west. Through the forced removal from ancestral lands and the creation of reservations, tribes were largely eradicated from the eastern portion of the country.

One of the most devastating aspects of colonization has been the systematic cultural genocide that has continued in to this century. From first contact, European colonizers refused to speak or make treaties with Native women. This caused disruption to many tribes who had women in leadership or who had traditionally used group decision making to reach a consensus. The threat of sexual violence by colonizers restricted the movement of Native women, many of whom were responsible for gathering food for their families and the tribe. The combination of enforced European gender roles and constant fear of sexual violence ultimately impacted tribal cultures for the centuries that followed (Harper & Entekin, 2006).

Starting in the 1800s, mass genocide turned to forced cultural assimilation. The United States government focused its efforts on dissolving tribes by forcing Native people to assimilate to European culture. The forced assimilation of Native people occurred by placing Native children in boarding schools, criminalizing Native spirituality, and

removing Natives from their communities, among other atrocities. Many cultures have assimilated into the dominant white culture of the United States, but rarely with such systematic force as with Native peoples.

In the 1860s, the Bureau of Indian Affairs started forcibly removing young children from their homes and enrolling them in federally funded boarding schools. Often the first round of children taken were the offspring of tribal leaders who were taken hundreds of miles away from their tribe. Once at the boarding schools, the children were stripped of their Native culture. The children were forbidden to speak their native language, practice their native religion, or wear their native dress, and were renamed with traditional European names. They were taught European ideals such as the importance of personal property as well as how to read and write English. The boarding school officials were known to be physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually abusive to the children and it was common for children to die of malnutrition and disease.

According to the American Indian Relief Council, “It was not until 1978 with the passing of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) that Native American parents gained the legal right to deny their children’s placement in off-reservation schools” (AIRC, n.d.). ICWA also enacted measures that prevent Native children’s placement into non-Native homes for adoption and foster care. Even today, placement is an issue for Native communities and many children are still placed in non-Native homes. For more information on the history of Native boarding schools:

http://www.nrcprograms.org/site/PageServer?pagename=airc_hist_boardingschools



All Native people were uniformly granted U.S. citizenship in 1924. This small sentence comes with huge meaning for Native people who populated this country long before the colonizers violently ripped them from their lands. However, citizenship did not stop the abuse Native people endured. In the 1970s, Indian Health Service physicians forcibly sterilized Native women without their consent or under duress. Due to inaccurate record keeping, the total number of women sterilized is unknown, but independent research estimates somewhere between 25-50% of Native women were sterilized prior to 1976 (Rutecki, 2010). Abuses like this send a message to Native women that their bodies are not their own.

The Indian Relocation Act of 1956 encouraged Native people to leave their reservations and assimilate in to the general population. This act broke up Native families and caused a profound disconnection with the land and their culture. The results of this act are still felt today. According to the 2010 Census, 78% of Native people live outside of tribal lands. Today, the largest proportion of the Native population lives in the west, followed closely by the south. The states with the highest proportion of American Indian and Alaska Natives are Arizona, California, Florida, Michigan, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Texas, and Washington (Hoeffel, Norris, & Vines, 2012).

The American Indian Religious Freedom Act (AIRFA), passed in 1978, finally preserved the right of Native people to practice their religious and cultural traditions. Prior to the passing of AIRFA, Native people were forced to assimilate to the dominant religion and were unable to practice their spirituality for centuries. To this day, pow wows are often held around federal holidays like the 4th of July instead of traditional Native holidays because that is the only time Native communities were allowed to congregate. AIRFA includes the right to access sacred sites, use and possess sacred objects for worship, and returned these sacred objects which had previously been held in museums. This was the first time since colonization that Native people had full legal autonomy when it came to their religious and spiritual practices. However, even after the passing of AIRFA, some Native people are still fighting for access to their sacred lands and for the return of sacred objects.

Acting as an ally to Native communities is an important step in building partnerships. Being an ally means you support the social equality of a marginalized group you are not a part of. A good ally seeks out education, practices cultural humility, and uses their privilege to help. First, seek education about the historical and present-day discrimination against Native people. Next, remember that no matter how much education you or your agency receives, it is important to recognize the limitations of this

education. Learning cultural humility means being willing to listen and trust those who experience discrimination and oppression. Lastly, use your privilege as a non-Native person to educate others in your community. This will create safe and competent resources in your community and will strengthen existing partnerships. Acting as an ally shows Native survivors that your agency is a safe space and models allyship for other members of your community.

Practicing allyship is an ongoing process that will last as long as your agency does. Assessing the current knowledge of your staff, volunteers, and board of directors is a great first step. However we need to periodically evaluate our programs for cultural accessibility and humility. Staff turnover, changes in board members, and shifting cultural attitudes in our rural communities necessitates that we continue to evaluate and address how we are serving Native survivors.

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As you move forward in your allyship, your agency can start by taking simple but powerful actions. Include Native people in your work with sexual violence survivors by hiring Native staff members as paid staff as well as seeking out Native volunteers and board members. It’s important to be aware that Native people, like many people from marginalized communities, are frequently asked to donate their time and expertise for free. Assess your policies and procedures with tribal leaders to ensure your workplace is supportive of the spiritual and cultural practices of the nearby tribe(s). Create the infrastructure and organizational culture that is necessary to support Native people in leadership. In community meetings, don’t rely on Native people to be the only ones bringing up Native issues and oppression. Learn about Native-specific supportive services survivors could access and when appropriate be sure to refer survivors there.

Native survivors face all the same barriers other rural sexual assault survivors face. Oppression, racism, and poverty create additional barriers to safety, justice, and healing for Native survivors. Many of these barriers are in criminal or civil legal systems, medical services, and community service providers like mental health services or child welfare services. These barriers exist when systems are unwilling to examine their underlying belief structures and the culture that surrounds them. When we don’t examine our own

organizational culture, these barriers also exist in our own sexual assault advocacy services.

One of the biggest barriers for Native survivors is the fear of accessing systems that are racist, judgmental, or simply believe many of the stereotypes that exist about Native people. Native people are often confronted with assumptions about their family life, relationship with drugs and alcohol, and employment history, among others. Before we work with Native survivors, we must reflect on the subconscious beliefs we may hold about tribal communities.

We can use cultural humility to break down barriers and ensure that our services are a good experience for all survivors. Cultural humility teaches us that there isn't a specific way to interact with an entire population of people. We can and should learn as much as we can about the culture of tribes that exist in our service area, but we will never be able to learn or understand everything. We must remain humble and flexible and to think critically about our own assumptions, culture, and experiences. Only survivors can direct the services they utilize and the resources we help them find. As advocates, we have knowledge about systems and resources, and the survivor has knowledge about their life, experiences, and needs. We must collaborate and learn from each other to meet the goals of the survivor.

In some of the more isolated areas of the country, language may be a barrier. When a survivor speaks a Native language as their primary language, it can be difficult to find appropriate interpretation services in a rural community. However, it is essential to the survivor's healing that they are able to communicate in the language they find most comfortable. When finding appropriate interpretation services for Native survivors, try reaching out to the tribal community or tribal coalition in your area to ask if they have interpreters. Build relationships with these groups so you have access to appropriate interpretation services before you need them.

Advocates are not always given the necessary tools and training to provide helpful services. When this happens, advocates may start to use survivors as a way to gather the information they were never taught. This is never acceptable. Instead, reach out to tribal technical assistance providers (see list in resources) or tribal member you have a relationship with to seek training and expertise on the cultural practices in which you are unfamiliar.

When working with survivors, try asking open ended questions. For example, "what are some supports from your community or cultural practices that would be helpful to you

right now?” Asking an open-ended question assists the survivor in identify potentially helpful resources while not requiring the survivor to explain cultural practices. In the moment, do not be overly preoccupied with not having a comprehensive understanding of a survivor’s culture. Being present and available with a survivor is the best way you can serve them. After meeting with a survivor, you are then able to search out resources and training to fill in the gaps in your knowledge.

Statewide sexual assault coalitions can help by ensuring that all training for advocates incorporates information on privilege, oppression, and cultural humility. When this information is provided as an optional portion of training, it increases the invisibility of people of color and models for advocates that this information isn’t important. Ensuring all trainings have a mandatory anti-oppression and anti-racism component that addresses issues related to Native people, ensures all advocates receive this vital information. Statewide sexual assault coalitions can also help both Native and non-Native programs by forming supportive relationships with tribal coalitions.

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Reservations and tribal lands exist almost exclusively in rural and isolated parts of the United States. However even if your service area does not include or border tribal land, it is still likely there are Native people living in your rural community. Take the time to learn about the Native tribes that are represented in your rural community. Each tribe has a unique approach to religion, cultural practices and customs, language, dress, food, and how they raise their children. Each tribe also has their own unique history and relationship with the violence they endured for centuries. Taking the time to learn about their tribe will show respect for their culture and build trust.

When reaching out to a tribal community in your area it is helpful to learn about laws and resources that impact Native survivors. Tribal communities are sovereign nations, which mean they govern independently of the United States and have their own laws. However, tribal communities are also subject to federal and state laws, which adds to the confusion for advocacy programs. The level of authority a tribal community has depends upon the type of crime, the state it occurs in, and whether the victim or perpetrator is Native or non-native. Each tribal community has their own structure regarding law enforcement, courts, and community resources.

An example of the complex relationship between state, federal, and tribal law is Public Law 280 (PL280), which was enacted in 1953. PL280 transferred legal authority over tribes in six states from the federal government to state governments. The original states were Alaska, California, Minnesota, Nebraska, Oregon, and Wisconsin. However, since 1953 other states, such as Washington and Florida, have also adopted PL280. PL280 essentially gives these state governments, not the federal government, the authority to prosecute most crimes that occur on tribal lands. This complex law has created a series of obstacles to tribal governments and created confusion among prosecutors. For more information on PL280: <http://www.tribal-institute.org/lists/pl280.htm> and <http://www.tribal-institute.org/download/Final%20280%20FG%20Report.pdf>.

For more information on tribal law:

- VAWA Tribal Provisions: http://www.tribal-institute.org/lists/title_ix.htm
- National Indian Child Welfare Association: <http://nicwa.org/>
- A Practical Guide to the Indian Child Welfare Act:
<http://www.narf.org/nill/documents/icwa/>
- Southwest Center for Law and Policy <http://www.swclap.org/>
- National Indian Country Clearinghouse on Sexual Assault <http://www.niccsa.org/>
- Institute for Native Justice <http://www.institutefornativejustice.org/>
- Tribal Court Clearinghouse: <http://www.tribal-institute.org/>

When building meaningful partnerships with Native communities, first we need to form relationships. Showing up with an agenda, a Memorandum of Understanding, or specific items you wish to accomplish will rarely be a fruitful start to a new relationship. Visit the

Native community in your area several times with the intention of simply having an organic conversation and learning about their community. Take a tour of the tribal lands and meet some of the Native people who live there. Learn about the kind of services the tribe offers so you can discuss how your organization could best support resources that are already in place. Ask if there is anything you can do to help or support the tribe. Speaking with community members without a list of items to accomplish helps build trust between the tribe and your organization.



When building new partnerships with Native communities in your area, it is necessary to learn about the history of the area from the tribe’s perspective. First, learn about the tribe’s unique experiences with colonization and its relationship with leaders in the past. Then, learn about the tribe’s relationship to your agency and other social services providers in the area in recent years. Taking the time to understand the tribe’s perspective can help you know how to move forward. Doing this work might feel uninteresting or unemotional to us, but it is still very present for the tribe today. Take a look at how your community talks about and celebrates their heritage and origin stories on this continent. Particularly in the Midwest and West regions of the United States, we often celebrate this history while failing to address the racism and colonization that facilitated our westward expansion.

The Directory of Tribal Leaders for federally recognized tribes:

<http://www.bia.gov/cs/groups/xois/documents/document/idc1-028053.pdf>

For a lot of rural advocacy agencies, supporting Native sexual violence survivors means helping to strengthen the Native advocacy program near them. If there is no Native advocacy program, your advocacy agency or sexual assault coalition can assist the tribe in creating their own services. Helping to build up Native advocacy programs helps Native survivors in your community gain access to healing culturally specific resources. When agencies work together to support sexual violence survivors, it shows survivors how many community members and institutions care about their healing and recovery. It also shows each community that sexual violence will not be tolerated.

While helping to build or support tribal advocacy services, we should also remember there are still Native survivors in our communities that need help from our mainstream agencies. Not all Native survivors have access to tribal programs, particularly if they do not live on the reservation or tribal land. These survivors may need assistance in finding culturally relevant services. Other survivors, who do live on tribal land or who have access to tribal services, intentionally seek services outside of their tribal community for confidentiality reasons. Your center can help by emotionally supporting the survivor, providing transportation or financial assistance to travel to the reservation or tribal land, or providing spaces for the survivor to meet with a tribal advocate.

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Native sexual violence survivors won’t inherently know about your agency services or how your center can help them. We can’t assume survivors will come to us, so we must provide targeted outreach to Native survivors. When providing outreach to rural Native sexual violence survivors, living on tribal lands or not, be thoughtful in how and where you advertise your agency’s services. Providing outreach means connecting with our rural community in a wide variety of settings. As we connect with service providers, community members, and students, we don’t know how survivors identify so be clear about who your agency serves. Ask tribal members with whom you have created

meaningful relationships about specific cultural events or spaces that would be good to be present at or attend.

Doing outreach doesn't just mean sitting at a table and handing out brochures, especially when we are trying to gain the trust of a new community. Showing up to community events, health fairs, and pow-wows wearing a nametag or agency shirt and engaging in the event can go a long way in creating relationships. Before you hand out brochures and let people know about your services, try volunteering and consistently assisting the tribe in the work they are doing. This will help you better understand the people and culture of the tribe while building trust in these new relationships.

When creating outreach materials make sure to be inclusive of Native survivors. Look back at the information you have gathered about Native communities near you and consider including symbols or images representing the tribes. Put the contact information of your agency and highlight that your agency is a safe space that provides services for all sexual violence survivors. Around the office, display Native literature and resources as well as the contact information of Native specific programs for sexual violence survivors in your community. Reach out to tribal members who have offered support or guidance and ask them to review your agency materials for inclusiveness, provide healing objects or materials to have on hand, and other changes to the office that would be culturally appropriate and respectful. Be careful not to display or use objects from Native communities (smudge sticks, dreamcatchers, etc.) without fully understanding their history and cultural or spiritual significance. Using such objects outside of their cultural context can be seen as disrespectful or even harmful.

For communities that do not have a tribal advocacy program, consider working with Native communities to provide cross training in your rural community. While Native leadership is able to assist in providing training to your agency or other types of assistance, your agency can provide introductory training on trauma and starting an advocacy program. Your agency can also provide Native programs with information and support in order to create their own sexual assault services. Tribes have their own solutions to addressing sexual assault and traditional methods of healing. Having an established agency assist by providing experience and resources can be a great start in creating services. For coalitions looking to support Native services, consider incubating a new program or helping a tribal program access funding sources. State and tribal coalitions can help incubate culturally specific programs by providing guidance, resources, office space, and support in financial planning.



Conclusion

When we work with the entire range of survivors in our rural area we are able to heal our communities from sexual violence. Including Native survivors in this work continues our mission to end oppression and violence. By working in close partnership with tribal communities we can support survivors in culturally relevant ways, practice allyship, and ultimately help Native communities in creating services for their community.

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Resources

Sexual Assault in Indian Country: Confronting Sexual Violence

http://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/Publications_NSVRC_Booklets_Sexual-Assault-in-Indian-Country_Confronting-Sexual-Violence.pdf

Futures Without Violence: The Facts on Violence Against American Indian/Alaskan Native Women

<https://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/userfiles/file/Violence%20Against%20AI%20AN%20Women%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf>

Documentary: Rape on the Reservation

http://www.miwsac.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=73&Itemid=175

Sexual Victimization in Indian Country: Barriers and Resources for Native Women Seeking Help

http://vawnet.org/Assoc_Files_VAWnet/AR_SVIndianCountry.pdf

Maze of Injustice: The failure to protect Indigenous women from sexual violence in the USA

http://instituteformativejustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Maze_of_Injustice.pdf

Maze of Injustice: The failure to protect Indigenous women from sexual violence in the USA, One Year Update Spring 2008

http://instituteformativejustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Maze_of_Injustice_One_Year_Update.pdf

List of Nationwide Tribal Coalitions

http://www.miwsac.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=69&Itemid=171

The Principals of Advocacy: A Guide for Sexual Assault Advocates

<http://mshoop.org/manual-pdf/Sexual%20Assault%20Advocacy%20Guide.pdf>

Creating Sister Space: A Guide for Developing Tribal Shelter and Transitional Housing Programs (Red Wind Consulting, Inc.)

<http://www.red-wind.net/resources/Transitional-Housing/Creating-Sister-Space.pdf>

Reclaiming What Is Sacred: Addressing Harm to Indigenous Elders and Developing and Tribal Response to Abuse in Later Life

<http://www.ncall.us/sites/ncall.us/files/TLS-FINAL.pdf>

Resource Guide for the Development of a Sexual Assault Response Team (SART) in Tribal Communities

http://www.tribal-institute.org/download/SART_Manual_09_08.pdf

Connections Volume XV: Building Relationships and Resources with Tribal Communities

<http://www.wcsap.org/building-relationships-resources-tribal-communities>

Violence Against Native Women: A Guide for Practitioner Action

http://instituteformativejustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Violence_Against_Native_Women.pdf

Violence Against American Indian and Alaska Native Women and the Criminal Justice Response: What is Known

http://www.instituteformativejustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/What_Is_Known1.pdf

National Congress of American Indians Regional Profiles

<http://www.ncai.org/about-tribes/regional-profiles>

The Rural Training and Technical Assistance Project, a program of the Resource Sharing Project, is available to OVW Rural Grantees that are dual/ multi-service advocacy agencies or sexual assault coalitions. The rural team provides webinars, publications, tools, national conferences, training and technical assistance for dual and multi-service agencies seeking to enhance services to all sexual violence survivors. For more information and resources, visit <http://www.resourcesharingproject.org>

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