

Article 2: Cultural Reconnection and Resource Resilience in Tribal Communities

Catching Up With COSSUP, June 2024

In crafting robust and effective reentry and reintegration pathways for individuals transitioning from incarceration or inpatient treatment for substance use, the fostering of community reconnection and resilience emerges as a pivotal strategy. This article delves into the significance of this approach, dissects the profound effects of trauma, and offers potential solutions to the resource constraints confronting tribal communities. It also highlights pathways to healing and community empowerment, paving the way for sustainable recovery and improved well-being of individuals and communities. For the first article in this series, click [here](#).

Why Are Reconnection and Resilience Important When Working With Tribal Communities and Serving Those With Addiction or Those Who Are Justice-involved?

There is a worrying prevalence of substance use disorders (SUDs) among tribal communities, surpassing rates observed in other racial groups. The data reveal stark discrepancies: three times as many individuals from American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) backgrounds are diagnosed with SUDs compared to their white counterparts; twice as many AI/AN individuals require addiction treatment yet paradoxically receive treatment at a lower rate than other racial groups.¹ Tribal communities also grapple with disproportionately high rates of alcohol-related deaths and opioid mortality, eclipsing those of any other racial or ethnic group.

Moreover, when examining trauma symptoms, Native Americans display symptoms at double the frequency of any other racial or ethnic group. They exhibit a heightened susceptibility to psychological distress and suicide rates slightly more than twice the national average. Indeed, trauma and stress-related disorders stand as formidable mental health challenges confronting AI/AN populations. Regrettably, the neurological, emotional, and behavioral ramifications of trauma bear striking similarities to the impacts of addiction. Thus, individuals who have experienced trauma are more susceptible to addiction, while those battling addiction find themselves even more vulnerable to the ravages of trauma. This interplay

underscores the critical importance of supporting individuals in addressing trauma while navigating the path to recovery.

Within the realm of justice involvement, trauma emerges as a prevalent issue, with an overwhelming 80–90 percent of individuals in the criminal justice system reporting some form of trauma.² Native Americans find themselves overrepresented in incarceration statistics, with a rate 38 percent higher than the national average. In 19 states, they constitute the most overrepresented ethnic group within the prison population.³ The ripple effects of individuals' incarceration and addiction or mental health issues among their family members contribute significantly to adverse childhood experiences, perpetuating cycles of trauma with profound repercussions for families and communities alike. Thus, it becomes imperative to grasp the essence of trauma to cultivate an informed response to avoid retraumatization.

Adding to the complexity of these challenges are systemic factors, including historical discriminatory policies, resource deficiencies, and inefficiencies in federal program delivery. Such structural barriers persistently position Native Americans near the bottom of all Americans concerning health, education, and employment outcomes. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted the health and economic stability of tribal communities, exacerbating existing disparities and heightening the urgency for comprehensive and culturally responsive interventions.

The profound impacts of trauma, substance misuse, and justice involvement within tribal communities underscore the critical need for interventions that foster community reconnection and build resilience. By strengthening ties to indigenous traditions, values, and support systems, individuals can find pathways to healing while navigating recovery from addiction or reintegrating after incarceration.

What Is Trauma?

Trauma refers to the lasting effects of events or situations that someone finds deeply distressing or threatening. It can make a

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person feel helpless and overwhelmed, affecting their well-being and how their brain works. Interestingly, trauma is not always caused by significant events—it can also result from ongoing stress, seeing or hearing about others' trauma, or even experiences passed down through generations. While we often think of trauma as coming from major events like abuse or accidents, it can also come from repeated smaller stressors over time, like being in an unhealthy relationship or living in poverty. Even if we have not directly experienced trauma, hearing about others' trauma can affect our brains in similar ways. It is not the event but the way it is stored and processed in our brain and body that dictates the impact of trauma.

Stress, which is our body's response to challenges, can also become long-lasting (chronic stress) and have similar effects on the brain as trauma. In addition, trauma, as well as resilience to stress, can be passed down through generations, with one generation's experiences affecting the way the next generation processes trauma and manages stress. This historical trauma, combined with challenges like addiction, requires a caring approach that understands behavior as a way of coping rather than just a problem to be fixed.

Cultural factors add another layer of stress. In Indigenous communities, the memory of past traumas and injustices can increase stress levels and make people more likely to turn to substances for relief. This complex interplay of trauma, substance misuse, and historical factors calls for a thoughtful, culturally sensitive approach to addressing behavioral health issues in tribal communities. Developing such culturally grounded, trauma-informed interventions is particularly crucial when tackling the unique challenges faced by geographically isolated tribal communities.

Addressing Resource Issues and Remote Locations in Tribal Communities

In addressing the complex issue of economic disparities within tribal communities, it is imperative to recognize the multifaceted challenges and the incredible opportunities they face. A notable challenge exacerbating economic disparities is the remote locations of many tribal reservations and communities. Geographically isolated communities often struggle to provide adequate access to crucial services and opportunities, further perpetuating cycles of poverty and marginalization. Remoteness not only limits employment options but also impedes access to health care, education, and other resources vital for community development and individual growth. Overcoming these barriers requires culturally sensitive, evidence-based programs deeply rooted in Indigenous

knowledge, traditions, and values, alongside adequate resources to provide the services.

Strategies to Tackle Remote Locations and Minimal Resources

To effectively tackle the obstacles posed by remote locations and limited resources, tribes can implement the following strategies:

Telehealth Services: Establish telehealth services to provide remote behavioral health counseling and therapy sessions. By utilizing video conferencing platforms, community members can access mental health support from licensed professionals without needing to travel long distances.

Peer Support Networks: Create peer support networks within remote communities where individuals with lived experience of behavioral health challenges can provide support, empathy, and guidance to others facing similar issues. Peer support fosters a sense of belonging and reduces feelings of isolation. For more information about peer recovery support services within tribal communities, read "Culturally Responsive Pathways to Peer Programming in Tribal Communities": https://www.cossup.org/Content/Documents/Publications/Altarum_Culturally_Responsive_Pathways_to_Peer_Programming_in_Tribal_Communities.pdf.

Mobile Behavioral Health Clinics: Deploy mobile behavioral health clinics equipped with trained counselors and therapists to remote communities regularly. These clinics can offer counseling sessions, psychoeducation workshops, and mental health screenings to community members.

Community-based Mental Health First Aid Training: Provide mental health first aid training to community members, including tribal leaders, elders, teachers, and health care providers. Equipping individuals with basic mental health knowledge and skills enables them to recognize signs of distress and provide initial support to those in need.

Culturally Relevant Support Groups: Facilitate culturally relevant support groups, focusing on specific behavioral health issues prevalent in the community, such as trauma, substance misuse, or grief. These groups can incorporate traditional healing practices and storytelling to promote healing and resilience.

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Peer-led Wellness Activities: Organize peer-led wellness activities that promote mental well-being and stress reduction, such as meditation circles, yoga classes, or nature walks. These activities provide opportunities for relaxation, connection, and self-care within the community.

Virtual Support Networks: Create virtual support networks using social media platforms or online forums where community members can connect with others, share experiences, and offer mutual support. Virtual networks provide accessible channels for communication and peer interaction, overcoming geographical barriers.

Collaborative Partnerships With Nearby Service Providers: Forge partnerships with behavioral health organizations, clinics, or universities located in nearby urban areas to extend services to remote tribal communities. Such collaborations can involve regular visits from professionals, training exchanges, or resource sharing.

Community-based Crisis Intervention Teams: Train community members to serve as crisis intervention responders who can provide immediate support and de-escalation during behavioral health crises. These teams work in collaboration with tribal and local law enforcement and health care providers to ensure timely and culturally sensitive interventions.

Cultural Competency Training for Behavioral Health Providers: Offer cultural competency training to behavioral health providers to enhance their understanding of tribal customs, traditions, and worldviews. Culturally competent care promotes trust and improves outcomes for individuals seeking behavioral health services.

Funding Challenges and Strategies

While addressing geographic isolation is crucial, securing adequate funding is another significant hurdle for tribal communities. Tribal nations grapple with challenges in securing sufficient resources and funding to address the diverse needs of their communities effectively. Limited funding streams, bureaucratic hurdles, and competing priorities often hinder efforts to implement comprehensive solutions to economic disparities and related issues such as behavioral health support.

Strategies to Secure Funding for Behavioral Health Programs

To overcome funding constraints and support the implementation of remote service delivery models as well as other essential behavioral health initiatives, tribal communities can explore the following strategies and resources:

Federal Grant Programs: Explore grant opportunities offered by federal agencies such as the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the Indian Health Service (IHS), and the Administration for Native Americans (ANA). These agencies often provide funding specifically earmarked for tribal behavioral health initiatives. For instance, BJA offers the Fiscal Year 2024 Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Site-based Program, with a solicitation release date of May 9, 2024, and application deadlines of July 1, 2024, on Grants.gov and July 8, 2024, on JustGrants; to learn more, visit <https://bja.ojp.gov/funding/O-BJA-2024-172128.pdf>.

Tribal-specific Grant Programs: Look for grant programs specifically designed for tribal communities, which may prioritize funding for behavioral health projects. Organizations such as the National Indian Health Board (NIHB) and the Native American Rights Fund (NARF) may offer resources or information on available grants.

Foundation Grants: Identify foundations that focus on Native American issues or mental health and substance misuse prevention. Foundations such as the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation may offer grants or funding opportunities for tribal behavioral health projects.

Tribal Consortia and Partnerships: Consider forming consortia or partnerships with other tribal communities or organizations to collectively apply for grants or funding. Pooling resources and expertise can strengthen grant applications and increase the likelihood of receiving funding.

State and Local Grants: Explore grant opportunities offered by state and local governments that may support tribal behavioral health initiatives. State departments of health or human services or behavioral health agencies may administer grants relevant to tribal communities.

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Private Sector Partnerships: Explore partnerships with private sector entities such as health care providers, pharmaceutical companies, or corporations with a philanthropic focus. These partnerships may offer funding, in-kind support, or resources to support tribal behavioral health projects.

Grant-writing Assistance: Seek assistance from grant-writing professionals or organizations experienced in securing funding for tribal projects. Many tribal colleges, universities, or nonprofit organizations offer technical assistance or training on grant writing and grant management.

Online Grant Databases: Utilize online grant databases and resources to search for funding opportunities relevant to tribal behavioral health projects. Websites such as Grants.gov, Foundation Center, and GrantWatch allow users to search for grants by keyword, category, or eligibility criteria.

Networking and Conferences: Attend tribal health conferences, workshops, or networking events where grant opportunities and funding resources may be shared. Building relationships with other tribal leaders, grantors, and stakeholders can provide valuable insights and connections.

Community Engagement and Needs Assessment: Engage community members in the grant-writing process by conducting needs assessments and gathering input on behavioral health priorities and challenges. Aligning grant proposals with community needs increases the likelihood of securing funding and ensures that projects are responsive to local contexts. The National Criminal Justice Training Center of Fox Valley Technical College offers free training and technical assistance (TTA) in this area; to submit a TTA request, please visit <https://ncjtc.fvtc.edu/>.

Community-based Approaches and Partnerships

Regardless of the strategies employed to tackle remote locations, minimal resources, or funding challenges, a common thread emerges: the pivotal role of community-based approaches and partnerships. In navigating these challenges, it is essential to consider community-based approaches that empower tribal nations to develop culturally relevant responses and programs. Engaging tribal leaders, elders, and community members in the decision-making process can help ensure that interventions are rooted in Indigenous knowledge,

traditions, and values. By fostering partnerships and collaboration within the community, tribal nations can leverage their unique strengths and resources to address economic disparities and improve behavioral health outcomes.

Questions to Consider

What are some unique cultural strengths you can leverage to enhance reentry and reintegration efforts for individuals transitioning from incarceration or inpatient treatment?

What are the most significant barriers you face in providing adequate resources for reentry and reintegration, and how can these be overcome?

In what ways can addressing trauma at both individual and community levels foster more effective and sustainable recovery pathways?

How can collaboration between tribal practitioners and external agencies be optimized to improve resource allocation and support for reentry programs?

What role do traditional healing practices play in the reintegration process, and how can these be integrated with contemporary therapeutic approaches?

How can community members be more actively involved in supporting the reintegration and recovery of individuals returning from incarceration or treatment?

What measures can be taken to ensure that reentry and reintegration programs are culturally sensitive and tailored to the specific needs of tribal communities?

How can success in reentry and reintegration efforts be measured within tribal communities, and what metrics should be prioritized?

What innovative approaches have shown promise in other tribal communities, and how might these be adapted to your specific context?

How can tribal communities advocate for more resources and support from federal and state agencies to enhance their reentry and reintegration programs?

How can storytelling and the sharing of success stories be used as tools to inspire and motivate individuals in their recovery and reintegration journeys?

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Endnotes

1. Soto, C., West, A. E., Ramos, G. G., and Unger, J. B., (2022), "Substance and Behavioral Addictions Among American Indian and Alaska Native Populations," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19(5): 2974, <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/19/5/2974>.
2. Branson, C. E., Baetz, C. L., Horwitz, S. M., and Hoagwood, K. E., (2017), "Trauma-informed Juvenile Justice Systems: A Systematic Review of Definitions and Core Components," *Psychological Trauma* 9(6): 635–646, <https://psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2Ftra0000255>.
3. Fox, D. L., Hansen, C. D., and Miller, A. M., (n.d.), *Over-incarceration of Native Americans: Roots, Inequities, and Solutions*, Safety and Justice Challenge, retrieved May 17, 2024, from <https://safetyandjusticechallenge.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/OverIncarcerationOfNativeAmericans.pdf>.