

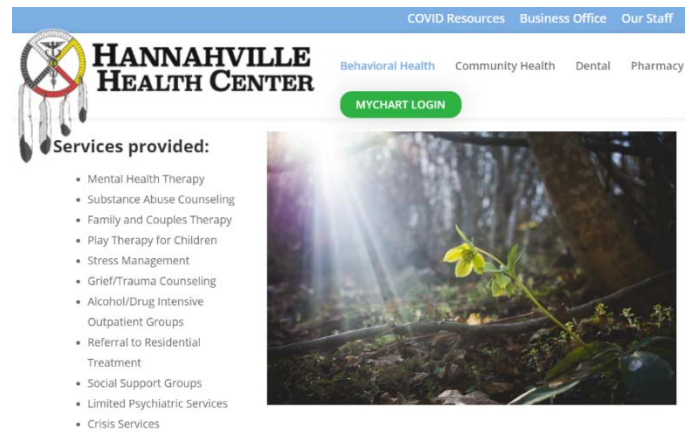
Peer Recovery Support Services (PRSS) in Tribal Communities: Lessons Learned From the Field

Catching Up With COSSAP, October 2021

Native American populations face disproportionately high rates of poverty, trauma, substance use, and suicide in the United States.¹ They are also overrepresented in the criminal justice system and experience vast disparities when compared to the general population. For example, Native Americans are incarcerated at more than four times the rate of white Americans. In states with large Native American populations, this disparity is even wider.²

While disparities in substance use and criminal justice involvement continue to impact Native American populations, peer recovery support service (PRSS) programs across the nation are using the power of lived experience of addiction and recovery to provide opportunities for healing individuals, families, and communities. PRSS programs are building upon the work of early and enduring recovery movements in Native American communities and are helping to foster cultural renewal to heal intergenerational, historical trauma as well as contemporary trauma. A few programs—including those profiled below—are spearheading these efforts. Their experiences offer important lessons for other organizations looking to follow suit.

The **Hannahville Health Center**, an outpatient treatment program for substance abuse and mental health services located in the Hannahville Indian Community in Michigan, is one such program. The Hannahville Indian Community is a federally recognized Potawatomi tribe. Located in the state's Upper Peninsula, the tribe is home to just under 1,000 enrolled members, who live on an approximately nine square-mile reservation. The center uses peer recovery coaches as part of its substance abuse program. They facilitate group and community-based meetings, conduct home visits, provide outreach, and transport clients to treatment, probation meetings, or job interviews, which can be up to 100 miles away. They also incorporate Potawatomi cultural practices into their work through traditional healing, pipe ceremonies, and sweat lodges.



Considered a model peer program for Native American populations, Hannahville has learned crucial lessons along the way. Ms. Erin Cretens, behavioral health manager at Hannahville, conveys the importance of having the right person for the job. “I think really finding the right person [who] meshes with a wide variety of personalities [is essential], because when your job is connecting with people, you’ve got to have that right person, I think,” she said. “Fortunately, it’s been a really easy lesson for us to learn because our recovery coaches have done that so well.”

Ms. Cretens also stresses the importance of adequate supervision and guidance. “When you’re doing peer recovery, learning about HIPAA [the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act] and confidentiality and boundaries and dual relationships and all those things—I think it’s really important to make sure that our peer recovery coaches get educated on that, and guidance, because especially if you’re from the community [and deal with] dual relationships and family member things, that can get a little tricky sometimes.”

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Another program paving the way is the **White Buffalo Recovery Center**, located on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming. Located in the central-western part of the state, the Wind River Reservation is home to more than 25,000 residents (per the 2010 census) and covers approximately 2 million acres and 3,500 square miles. The White Buffalo Recovery Center provides outpatient treatment services to Northern Arapaho tribal members as well as members from other tribes. The center's work incorporates many Northern Arapaho cultural components, including resources, sweat lodges, and smudging, as well as language, arts, and crafts classes. The center also utilizes the 12-Step, Medicine Wheel, and Mending Broken Hearts approaches to address substance abuse within the context of historical trauma.

Among its many lessons learned, the White Buffalo Recovery Center stresses the importance of embracing tribal, cultural, and natural resources and tailoring approaches to the individual needs of specific tribes. Director Sunny Goggles reports, "I really believe that our peer specialists are our direct connection to our culture. We really believe that our identity, knowing who we are, is going to help our recovery."

As PRSS programs continue to evolve to meet the needs of Native American populations, they can look to programs such as those at Hannahville Behavioral Center and the White Buffalo Recovery Center for best practices and lessons learned. At the same time, those programs want others to know that it is just as important that organizations make their peer recovery programs their own. As Ms. Cretens remarked, "Don't be afraid to kind

of wade into the shallow end of this and figure it out as you go because I think that's doable. We've made that work here."

Endnotes

1. Sarche, M., & Spicer, P. (2008). Poverty and health disparities for American Indian and Alaska native children: current knowledge and future prospects. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1136, 126. <https://nyaspubs.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1196/annals.1425.017>
2. Hartney, C., & Vuong, L. (2009). *Created equal: racial and ethnic disparities in the US justice system*. National Council on Crime and Delinquency. <https://www.hivlawandpolicy.org/sites/default/files/CREATED%20EQUAL-racial%20dispar%20in%20crl%20justice%20system-2.pdf>