



Prevention Collaboration in Action

Grantee
Success Stories

For United Indian Health Services, Community and Culture is Prevention

Three new traditional structures welcome visitors to United Indian Health Services' (UIHS) Potawot Health Village in Arcata, California. Each is dug approximately four feet into the earth. Long redwood planks form the sides and roofs of the buildings, which only rise a few feet above ground level. Taken together, these three buildings—a sweat house, a family house, and a dance house—form a small village that recalls the traditional building style of generations of American Indian people from northwestern California.



UIHS' Potawot Health Village family house and sweat house

UIHS serves American Indian and Alaska Native people in northern California, and these structures are not just ceremonial. They were built to support substance use prevention, treatment, recovery, and wellness among UIHS clients. The idea is that the community that is fostered by engaging Native cultures of the Pacific Coast with their cultural heritages—and with each other—can be a protective factor against substance use disorder.

“One of the things that you see with substance use disorders is the need for peer support,” says Rob England, Tribal Public Health Director for UIHS. “I think it's really difficult for the Native people we serve to find their spirituality and support behind the door of just a Western method of recovery.”



Family house used for traditional ceremonies

American Indian and Alaska Native populations misuse substances at higher rates than other populationsⁱ. However, community and culture have both been shown to be protective factors against substance misuse. England believes that hosting traditional activities, such as sweat ceremonies, will create personal and cultural bonds that can create a healthy community.

“There is no doubt in my mind that once these buildings in our small village are fully utilized, whether it be the men's sweat house or the family house for a women's steam, that they will aid in peoples' recovery,” says England.

The building of the village has showcased the importance of collaboration, too, in creating substance misuse prevention programs. Here are four lessons from UIHS' experience.

ALLOW TIME FOR CONVERSATION

England is a member of the Yurok Tribe, but UIHS' Potawot Health Village sits on the ancestral territory of the Wiyot Tribe. Though the Yurok and Wiyot are neighbors, they each have their own distinct cultures. UIHS wanted to ensure that the building structures reflected the Wiyot people, as this was their ancestral land.

To foster dialogue about how the buildings should be constructed, leaders from UIHS convened a cultural advisory committee in early 2022. The group met monthly and helped facilitate conversations about big decisions that would need to be made, including what the structures would look like, where they would be placed, how they would be built, and how the structures could support people in recovery. The group of 20 included many members of the community who held cultural knowledge and expertise. It also included tribal leaders, such as the chairman of the Wiyot Tribe, a Yurok master builder, and the chief executive officer of UIHS.

The committee met for nearly a year, offering members ample time to do research, share their knowledge, and have conversations that ultimately helped shape the project. They examined records at local libraries; they also scoured Facebook for photos and recollections online about old Wiyot buildings.

“We were methodical and made sure that we did it the right way. I think if we had rushed it, then that would have opened ourselves up to potential error. We wanted to make sure that we did this right and with full support of the Wiyot Tribe,” says England.

He adds that the rich dialogue also helped identify certain building traditions that they wanted to respect, such as the direction the door needed to face.

“We wouldn't have had to have all those discussions and dialogue if we were just going to build a Yurok plank house, we needed to hear and listen from our Wiyot relatives,” continues England.

BE OPEN TO NEW APPROACHES

England says that the push for cultural approaches for him began in 2015, when health officials became concerned about a cluster of suicides in the tiny town of Weitchpec. Over the course of 17 months, seven people had died by suicide. Six of them were Native.

When England traveled to Weitchpec to meet with community members, he learned that none of the young men who had died were actively engaged with UIHS for their health care. And while his immediate concern was preventing suicide, he began to think more broadly about how to engage young Native men more directly with UIHS to address their behavioral health and substance misuse needs.

UIHS had used Native sweat lodge ceremonies as a way to build connections. However, those ceremonies took place in structures that were not culturally relevant to all the local Tribal people served by UIHS.

A conversation with a UIHS substance use disorder counselor was key to moving the idea for the village forward. She wondered, “Why don't we have our own local Tribal structures here at UIHS?” The question made England reflect on the power of integrating cultural approaches to health and wellness more directly into UIHS's programming. Building local traditional structures could provide more inclusivity and engagement to more clients of UIHS and could be a step towards reaching more people in need.



Kuwa Dance House

TAP INTO ESTABLISHED CULTURAL NORMS

Right from the start, UIHS wanted to engage community members in the building of the three structures. So, they recruited adults who had previously participated in UIHS' substance use disorder program. UIHS also encouraged their local Tribes to reach out to their people, especially those who had not previously engaged with UIHS services.

England estimates that about 20 different people from the community volunteered to build the structures over the last two years. Many were in recovery and did not hold the knowledge of how to build these traditional structures. They were guided by Walt Lara Sr., a Yurok Master Builder and community leader. UIHS provided a small stipend to adults from a variety of grants, including SAMHSA Tribal Opioid Response grants, to honor the time that community members gave for the creation of the village.

Coming to the job site every day had a positive impact. The volunteers learned basic building and work readiness skills. They connected with and supported each other. Cultural norms around the connection between self and work also emphasized sobriety and recovery.



UIHS used traditional building materials and methods, such as plank walls

“It’s a known value in Native communities—whether you're beading or building or doing something cultural, you have to come in a good way, and you have to leave your bad feelings behind, because you're actually putting your living spirit into that item,” says England.

England believes that coming to the building site regularly has served as a support for people who are in recovery. In the future, he is hopeful to do more cultural activities that specifically appeal to Native men, such as building a dugout canoe.

“I think that these types of activities increase our engagement with a lot of our Native men more so than just offering behavioral health services and speaking to a counselor,” he says. “Offering something that speaks to our culture in addition to those services is important.”

LEAN ON EXPERTISE

Though the project was a community effort, it would not have been possible without Lara, the 89-year-old Master Builder.

Lara is a respected elder in the Tribal community with deep expertise about traditional building methods. Though he lives an hour away from the Arcata clinic, Lara would show up every day to guide and supervise the construction. Teaching volunteers how to build was just part of what he contributed.



Walt Lara, Sr. and Rob England outside the sweat house

“He’s sharing cultural teachings that go beyond the construction project” says England. “There’s so much more. There’s language. There’s stories. There’s the nuances of deep ancestral knowledge that has been passed on for generations. What truly sets UIHS apart from non-Native healthcare services is our vision, which is healthy mind, body, and spirit, rather than thinking of our health in just physical terms.”

Lara’s stories and cultural teachings were pivotal in making the construction of the Native village a meaningful experience for the volunteers. Every day they showed up to work, the volunteers were learning more about their cultural heritage and identity, their ancestors, their land, and their traditions. They were building structures that were meant to support UIHS’ vision for health and wellness. But they were building a community that could support them in their sobriety and recovery, too.

“In prevention, sometimes you do some things and maybe it’s hard to see a real tangible result,” says England. “But when you see our structures out there—it’s unbelievable.”

¹ Soto, C., West, A. E., Ramos, G. G., & 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://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19052974>