

Suicide Prevention in Indian Country

The Tribal Training and Technical Assistance (TTA) Center is funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The TTA Center uses a culturally relevant, holistic approach to deliver training and technical assistance on mental and substance use disorders, suicide prevention, and mental health promotion. TTA is offered to a **broad** audience of all tribal communities, a **focused** audience of SAMHSA tribal grantees, and an **intensive** audience of selected American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities per year.

The Purpose of this Fact Sheet

This fact sheet, developed for tribal audiences and the agencies that work with them, contextualizes complexities of suicide prevention in Indian Country and, in light of these complexities, considers the 2012 National Strategy for Suicide Prevention as it applies to tribal communities. This fact sheet gives specific examples of prevention activities that have been successfully implemented in Indian Country and have also been aligned with the National Strategy.

Suicide Prevention in Indian Country

Resilience, empowerment, and hope fuel AI/AN communities to continue to overcome cultural suppression and historical trauma. Although they continue to face challenges and risks that are rooted in poverty, repeated trauma, and a lack of resources, some tribal communities are leading the way in community-based wellness efforts.

Suicide prevention in Indian Country must be considered in the context of the systemic and institutional realities facing Indian Country. Across AI/AN communities, health care systems, schools, courts, police, and incarceration facilities can be culturally insensitive and can involve various institutions and agencies that may be subject to various jurisdictions, according to Champagne's article in 2012. For example, tribal, state, county, and federal law enforcement agencies may have jurisdiction on tribal lands. Jurisdiction and system complexities can lead to frustration, desensitization, and hopelessness when it comes to addressing change in AI/AN communities. Indian Country faces these challenges and leads the efforts for wellness and prevention.

Suicide Prevention is a *health* issue that must be addressed at many levels by different groups working together in a coordinated and synergistic way. Federal, state, tribal, and local governments; health care systems, insurers, and clinicians; businesses; educational institutions; community-based organizations; and family members, friends, and others all have a role to play in suicide prevention.

*National Strategy for
Suicide Prevention*

The National Strategy for Suicide Prevention

The 1999 Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent Suicide introduced a blueprint for suicide prevention and guided the development of the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention. The 2012 National Strategy for Suicide Prevention recognizes four necessary conditions for suicide prevention:

1. mental and emotional well-being,
2. injury- and violence-free living,
3. drug abuse and excessive alcohol use prevention, and
4. suicidal behavior prevention.

The Strategy recommends four directions in supporting these conditions.

What Works in Indian Country

1. **Create supportive environments that promote healthy and empowered Individuals, families, and communities.**

To successfully create supportive environments in traumatized communities, there should be a focus on local empowerment, strengths, and the community's level of awareness of the issue and readiness for change. These efforts need to be on-going and collaborative while:

- supporting the local vision and solutions that come from the community;
- strengthening cultural beliefs and practices that provide a foundation for taking action, solving problems, and promoting lasting wellness; and
- promoting a sense of belonging and increasing protective factors, including strengthening cultural identities, building a sense of family and community connectedness, and increasing communication skills.

One way to create a local vision and listen to the voice of the community is to plan and host a Gathering of Native Americans/Gathering of Alaska Natives (GONA/GOAN) event. The GONA/GOAN facilitates the planning process for enhancing prevention services in the community, building on existing strengths. This event, which is tailored to the specific culture of the community, facilitates healing from historical trauma and builds community capacity in skills that increase leadership, planning, and collaboration. Cultural activities that build supportive environments include drumming, dancing, sweat lodges, and sustainability, all of which provide opportunities for skill transfer from elders to youth.

Building supportive school environments has shown to increase protective factors by:

- implementing a life skills curriculum that includes problem-solving and positive thinking;
- instituting strong anti-bullying policies and practices, including inclusive strategies for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT), Two-Spirited, and other typically marginalized student groups; and
- implementing dating violence prevention programs.

2. Enhance clinical and community preventive services.

- Understand and acknowledge the impact and effects of historical trauma and poverty, as well as the capacity of AI/AN communities to draw from factors that ordinarily protect against such issues as mental and substance use disorders and suicide.
- Identify and draw upon protective and cultural resilience factors to help restore resilience.
- Routinely train substance and clinical service providers on the prevention of suicide behaviors including culturally sensitive suicide risk assessments, management, and treatments.
- Train community prevention and clinical staff in evidence-based interventions, and match interventions to community factors and cultural adaptability.
- Assure continuity of care during high-risk transition times, such as transitioning from in-patient to out-patient treatment, following an attempt, or upon being incarcerated.

3. Promote the availability of timely treatment and support services.

Due to access and multi-jurisdictional issues in AI/AN communities, advancing the public health approach to mental health and suicide prevention is often an effective starting point. Specific activities to promote treatment and support services using a public health approach include:

- addressing shame, stigma, taboo, and silence about mental and substance use disorders and suicide in ways that allow and encourage conversations that are culturally appropriate;
- enhancing capacity in the community through collaborative efforts and grant writing or administration training;
- providing culturally-informed approaches in settings that are culturally congruent;
- focusing services on groups at increased risks of suicide, including AI/AN youth, suicide survivors, individuals who have attempted suicide, Two-spirited populations, and members of the armed forces and veterans;
- addressing multi-jurisdictional issues through building collaboration and long-range planning; and
- providing and monitoring post-intervention and aftercare.

4. Improve suicide prevention data collection, research, and evaluation.

- To be effective, local evaluation capacity may have to be built and infrastructure may need to be developed.
- Indigenous methodologies should be considered, such as practices based on knowledge creation, storytelling, and other indigenous ways of knowing.
- The complex issues of data collection, research, and evaluation are best addressed on a tribal level by tribal members where the issues of sovereignty, confidentiality, and culturally appropriate evaluation methods can be best navigated.

SAMHSA's Resources to Support These Efforts

To Live to See the Great Day That Dawns: Preventing Suicide by American Indian and Alaska Native Youth and Young Adults

http://www.sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/library/Suicide_Prevention_Guide.pdf

Suicide Prevention and Research Center (SPRC) American Indian/Alaska Native website

<http://www.sprc.org/aian>

SPRC Best Practices Registry

<http://www.sprc.org/pbr>

Preventing Suicide: A Toolkit for High Schools

<http://store.samhsa.gov/product/Preventing-Suicide-A-Toolkit-for-High-Schools/SMA12-4669>

TIP 50: Addressing Suicidal Thoughts and Behaviors in Substance Abuse Treatment

<http://store.samhsa.gov/product/SMA09-4381>

Training video: SAMHSA YouTube channel; SPRC webinar

http://www.sprc.org/traininginstitute/disc_series/disc_22.asp

Suicide Prevention Toolkit: A Guide for Rural Primary Care Practices

<http://www.sprc.org/for-providers/primary-care-tool-kit>

Tribal TTA Center Webpage:

<http://beta.samhsa.gov/tribal-ttac>

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