

# The Context and Meaning of Family Strengthening in Indian America

A Report to the Annie E. Casey Foundation  
by The Harvard Project on  
American Indian Economic Development

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August 2004

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## Table of Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>I. Introduction</b>	<b>Appendix A</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>II. The State of Children, Families, and Communities in Indian America</b>	<b>39 Consultative Session on Family Strengthening in Indian America</b>
<b>9</b>	<b>III. Case Studies in Effective Family Strengthening in Indian America</b>	<b>Appendix B: Case Studies</b>
<b>13</b>	<b>IV. A Framework for Understanding Family Strengthening in Indian America</b>	<b>43 Fond du Lac Foster Care Licensing and Placement Agency</b>
<b>23</b>	<b>V. Observations on Effective Family Strengthening in Indian America</b>	<b>47 Whirling Thunder Wellness Program</b>
<b>31</b>	<b>VI. Recommendations to the Philanthropic Community</b>	<b>53 Menominee Community Center of Chicago</b>
		<b>59 Ya Ne Dah Ah School</b>
		<b>63 Akimel O'odham/Pee-Posh Youth Council</b>

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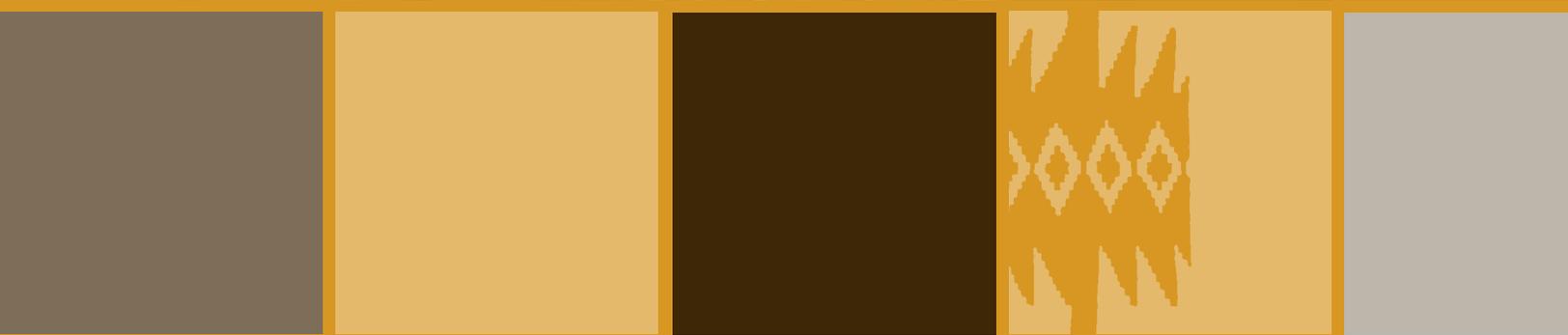
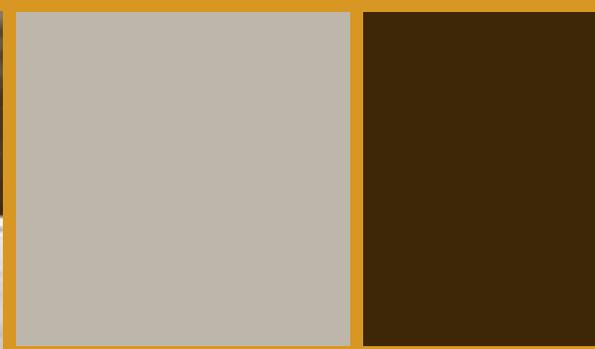
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### Special Thanks

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# I. Introduction

## “Family Strengthening” as a Frontier of Native Self-Determination



Among professionals and scholars who focus on the well-being of children, it is widely recognized that children do not do well unless families do well, and that families do not do well unless communities do well. These straightforward observations have motivated much of recent innovation in family policy and form the explicit or implicit centerpiece of the efforts of leading non-profit actors concerned about child and family well-being. As implemented by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, for example, the interconnectedness of children, families, and communities manifests itself in programs and strategic initiatives clustered under the term “Family Strengthening.”

But what does “family strengthening” mean in Indian America?<sup>1</sup> Decades, even centuries, of subjugation and disempowerment have left many Native communities poverty stricken and dependent on federal programs and federal dollars to support children and families. The absolute poorest communities documented in the 2000 US Census are Indian reservations, and certain reservations report that more than 90 percent of all dollars circulating in the community originate in federal support programs of one sort or another. Even on reservations where tribal governments are proactively addressing economic underdevelopment through much-publicized gaming operations and less-publicized, but growing, non-gaming businesses, the particular history of Indian America has left a legacy of dependence on federal and state antipoverty, education, and social “progress” programs when it comes to addressing the needs of children and families.

Many Native communities are marked by an almost complete absence of indigenous non-profit and related civil society institutions that play a vital role in addressing the challenges faced by children and families in mainstream US society. In their place are the scars left by other governments’ attempts to terminate Indian nations as self-governing polities, attempts by non-Native religious organizations to Christianize Native Americans, and attempts to eradicate Indian cultures through federal boarding schools and family relocation (e.g., to urban areas) programs. In this setting, it is all too common that a visitor’s inquiry about “family strengthening” at a tribe’s headquarters is met with a referral to go talk to the director of the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, or to the head of the federally funded housing program, or the federally funded job search program.

The picture that emerges from our examination of the question of the meaning of “family strengthening” in Indian America is *not* one in which already existing non-governmental organizations (NGOs), governmental agencies, religious associations, and concerned parents must learn to work together to improve communities so that families can do well. Nor is it the case that the very concept of coordinated, integrated programs of community and family strengthening has taken hold and all that is needed is more capacity building through technical assistance and additional funding. While technical capacity in running programs can always be improved and more funding is always a need in Indian America (and elsewhere), the investigations we report below find that the keys to real progress currently lie elsewhere.

So, what is needed to strengthen families and improve the lives of children in Indian America? Based upon the research described below, we conclude that the framework for “family strengthening” in Indian America is built around Native *self-determination* at both the personal and community level. The identifiable cases of sustained progress in addressing the problems of families and children – a number of which we highlight below – are marked by being Native-driven. With their own indigenous versions of “local control,” Native communities that are in control of design, delivery, and decision-making of programs, policies, and initiatives are setting the standards for building strong futures for Native families and communities.

Funding and technical assistance remain valuable for Native communities, but the implication of the primacy of Native self-determination is that progress on family strengthening in Indian America hinges on the building of the institutions by which Native communities, themselves, can take relevant action. The days in which outsiders, however well meaning, delivered the services they thought Native children and families needed or tried to teach the technical capacity for Native administration of programs that outsiders thought would work are in the past. Such approaches have been most remarkable in their widespread failure and their lingering legacies of poverty and social ill-being. Progress now rides on support and respect for homegrown, indigenous institutions, policies, and programs.

### Why the Emphasis on Native Self-Determination?

The critical role of Native self-determination has both political and cultural roots. Indian reservation communities are sovereign polities. Based on complicated histories of treaties, the US Constitution, Congressional legislation, executive orders, and court rulings, tribes have extensive powers of self-rule. The vast majority of the 562 federally recognized tribes in the United States operate under constitutional governments. They exercise governing authority over a broad scope of actions and functions – from law enforcement and social services, to taxation and environmental management, from business permitting and land leasing, to education and resource development.

The cumulative evidence is compelling that when tribes take control of their institutions and policies, and actually exercise their rights of sovereignty, they are far more likely to make progress against problems of unemployment, poverty, and social disarray.<sup>2</sup> Really putting tribal decision makers in the driver’s seat shortens and clarifies the lines of accountability between leaders and their constituencies, and sharply improves the prospects of designing poli-

cies and programs that resonate with the community’s beliefs and values. Even in non-reservation settings, such as urban Indian centers, these principles apply with force.

These broad lessons regarding Native communities are evident in the child and family initiatives we have explored. Self-determination is key. In each of the case studies and in the lessons brought to the table by our conference participants at the “Family Strengthening in Indian Country” consultative session in May 2003, the self-determination that works goes beyond “capacity building.” Rather, it means Native control of policies and institutions, including *control* over the very definition of “family.” Successful programs are characterized by the fact that they are almost always home grown – conceived of, implemented by, and generally, in part, funded by tribal communities.

The key role played by Native control lies in the linkages between *culture* and effective governmental and social institutions, policies and programs. The cultural distinctiveness of Native American communities, coupled with the paths of their histories, bring matters of culture and spirituality to the forefront. This is not simply a matter of a need for “cultural sensitivity.” Rather, for institutions, policies, and programs to work effectively, they must be *legitimate* in the eyes of the community. Without legitimacy, they too easily suffer from half-hearted funding, political factionalism, and lack of participation. To be legitimate, institutions, policies, and programs need to match Native communities’ individual *cultures* – in both large and myriad small ways.

Everything from the managerial structure to the hours of operation, from the priorities of service delivery to the standards of personnel review, contributes to the legitimacy of a program. Getting such things “right” is the sum of innumerable decisions that commonly flow from a community’s culture – its values and shared, often unspoken, approaches of how to get things done. As one American Indian leader has put it: “Culture is something you live, not something you talk about.” It is the need to get the large and small things “right” that puts the premium on self-determination. Those with the best chance of implementing institutions, policies, and programs that actually improve the lives of children and families in Indian America are those who are of and from the community. Additionally, since definitions of “family” are also culturally specific, it is even more important that Native communities decide for themselves what strategies to employ when it comes to conceiving of “family strengthening” in ways that are meaningful in their particular community context.

Successful programs are...almost always home grown – conceived of, implemented by, and generally, in part, funded by tribal communities.

### The Research Process

This research was commissioned by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The Foundation approached the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development with an invitation to help it define and understand the forces affecting families and children in Indian America. Specifically, the Foundation asked us to identify the primary actors and activities that are effectively addressing the needs of families and children; help the Foundation understand the context in which progress is being made and the reasons why some initiatives and programs are particularly effective; and to draw from these examples implications for the roles of the many actors who contribute to the well-being of children and families – tribal governments, non-tribal governments, Native NGOs, non-native NGOs, and philanthropic foundations.

We began this task by reviewing the data on American Indian child and family well-being and the literature on current initiatives in child and family services. The Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development's on-the-ground work with scores of tribes and other Native organizations over the last seventeen years has brought us into contact with a wide array of policies and programs aimed at Native families and children. To strengthen our knowledge in this regard, we undertook five specific, field-based case studies of successful efforts to support the well-being of Native children, with an eye toward identifying the keys to success: The Ya Ne Dah Ah School in Chickaloon Village, Alaska; the Whirling Thunder Wellness Program on the Winnebago Reservation in Nebraska; the Fond du Lac Foster Care Licensing and Placement Agency

in northern Minnesota; the Gila River Youth Council in Arizona; and the Menominee Community Center of Chicago.

Finally, we have drawn on the knowledge of experienced professionals. In addition to one-on-one interviews of such individuals, in May 2003 we convened a scoping conference of scholars and practitioners who are leaders in the field of American Indian child and family policy. Recognizing that mainstream notions of such fundamental concepts as “family” and “community” cannot simply be imposed on Native America, this session explored the context and meaning of “family strengthening” in Indian America. The extensive experience of the participants and their willingness to translate that experience into a framework of understanding has shaped the perspective on family strengthening in Indian America that is reported here. Appendix A lists those who participated in this effort.

### Study Outline

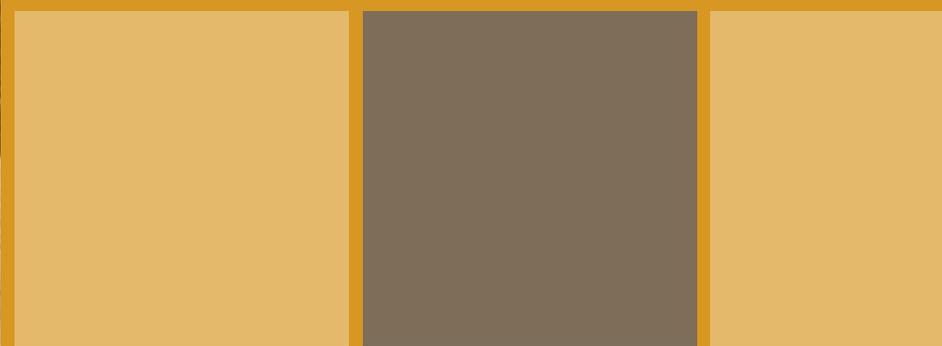
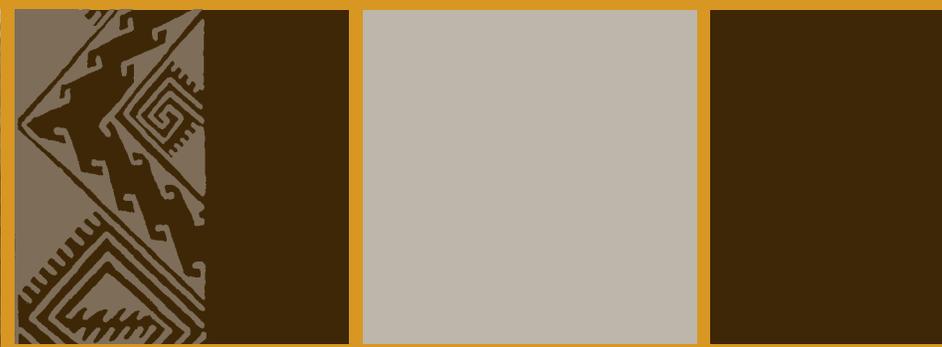
While it would be misleading to fail to point out the severe problems of poverty, ill-health, underemployment, and other social difficulties that many children and families face in Indian America, we believe a great deal can be learned by examining the increasing number of successful initiatives to improve community and family well-being in Native communities. From these case studies we hope to answer the question: How is it that successful initiatives that strengthen families take hold and survive in otherwise stressed Native communities?

Following an overview of our five selected examples of such efforts, we turn to placing the challenges of building families that do well in Indian communities into the context of the broad research on family strengthening, and address what is distinctively *Native* in family strengthening in Indian America. We then examine the implications of the elements of this question for the various actors – tribal governments, non-tribal governments, Native civil society institutions, non-Native civil society institutions – that might play positive roles in promoting the well-being of Indian children and families. Finally, we conclude with some recommendations that help address the question, “where do we go from here?”

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper we use the terms “Indian America” and “Indian Country” broadly, referring to the 562 federally recognized tribes, state recognized tribes, and off-reservation Native communities and Alaska villages. According to the 2000 US Census, there are 4.1 million self-identified American Indian/Alaska Natives living in the US.

<sup>2</sup> Cornell, Stephen and Joseph P. Kalt, “Sovereignty and Nation Building: The Development Challenge in Indian Country Today,” *American Indian and Culture and Research Journal*, February 1999.



# II. The State of Children, Families, and Communities in Indian America



## The Ecology of Growing Up Native: Summary Data on the State of Native Children and Families

In order to understand the challenges facing Indian Country today it is useful to consider some indicators of the quality of life and availability of opportunity for Native Americans. We use the US All Races Index, a standard composite index as a baseline for comparison with Native Americans. (see [www.kidscount.org](http://www.kidscount.org) <<http://www.kidscount.org>> or <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/hpaied> <<http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/hpaied>> for more information)

Native Americans are twice as likely to be in poverty as US all races. The median household income of Native Americans is 70 percent that of US all races. From comparing the *Not in workforce* rates to the *Jobless* rates, we can see that these economic differences do not result from a lack of labor force participation, but rather a lack of employment opportunities. In other words, Native Americans are seeking jobs, but not finding them.

These economic conditions have a significant impact on children. Native American children are twice as likely to be living in poverty. They are almost twice as likely to be in a home with neither parent in the labor force. More than 40 percent of Native American children are living in single parent homes. These economic conditions impact other areas of child development as well. Native American children are more likely to engage in a fight on school property, fast to lose weight, and attempt suicide. In terms of educational attainment, Native American children generally do not fall behind American children at the high school or associate degree level. Divergence in educational at-

tainment arises at the point of bachelor's completion and education beyond college.

The cumulative effect on Native Americans of the lack of economic and educational opportunities is a greater propensity towards crime. Since Native Americans make up about 1 percent of the overall population, any percentage greater than 1 percent can be interpreted as a tendency towards crime not warranted by the representation of Native Americans in the population.

The biggest killers for Native Americans are alcoholism, diabetes, and suicide. Type II diabetes is a particular problem amongst Native American youth. In light of these health concerns it is troubling that almost 40 percent of Native Americans lack health insurance. At least some of the health problems amongst Native Americans result from a lack of awareness. For instance, Native American births are more likely to receive late or no prenatal care and suffer from the consequences of alcohol use during pregnancy.

With respect to the general quality of life, Native Americans are less likely to own their own home. Native Americans are less likely to have plumbing and are more likely to live in homes with some physical problems. Native Americans are less likely to have access to virtually all communication technologies in the home. Since all BIA schools have access to the internet and most public libraries in Indian country have internet access, Native Americans are more likely to have access to these technologies primarily through these public spaces.

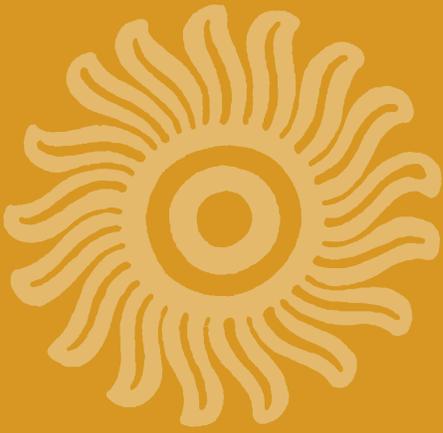


**American Indians are more likely than non-Indians to be poor and have fewer opportunities to increase income and economic assets than non-Indians.**

- One in four Native Americans lived in poverty in 2000, twice the rate of US residents as a whole. In that year, median Native household income was only 70 percent as great as that of non-Indian households.
- Low wages and a shortage of full-time employment opportunities drive this poverty. Notwithstanding the discouragement to workforce participation that accompanies low wages and poor employment opportunities, American Indians are only slightly less likely to be working or looking for work than their non-Indian counterparts.
- Nearly one in three American Indian children lives in a poor household, almost twice the rate of their non-Indian peers. They are nearly twice as likely to live in a household with no parent in the labor force.
- In general, American Indians are less likely than non-Indians to own their home. Indians on reservations are as likely as non-Indians to be homeowners, but their homes are more likely to lack plumbing or have physical problems, thus limiting their capacity to build the kinds of assets that support a family in the pursuit of such goals as education of its children and in weathering bad times.

**American Indians have larger households on average than non-Indians. This reflects high birth rates and, in many cases, overcrowded households.**

- American Indians have a birth rate one-sixth greater than that of the population as a whole, and American Indian teens have a birthrate nearly 50 percent greater than that of their non-Indian peers. One in five Indian births is a fourth or later child in the family.
- A higher share of American Indian births is to a never-married mother (58.4 percent) than is the case for non-Indians (33.2 percent for the US as a whole). Not surprisingly, American Indian children are 50 percent more likely to live in a single parent household (42.8 percent).



**American Indians have higher rates of mortality and morbidity than non-Indians.**

- American Indians have a lower life expectancy than non-Indians do. They are seven times as likely to die of alcoholism, four times as likely to die of diabetes, and twice as likely to commit suicide. They are less than half as likely to have any form of health insurance.
- American Indians are twice as likely as non-Indians to suffer from a serious mental illness.
- Pregnant American Indian women are more likely to drink alcohol and less likely to get prenatal care than their non-Indian counterparts. Their infant mortality rates are 30 percent higher than those of non-Indians, although fewer of their children are born at low birthweight.
- One in six American Indian youths has attempted suicide. One in five reports fasting to lose weight.

**American Indians, particularly American Indian youth, report engaging in more risky behavior than their non-Indian counterparts.**

- Although less likely than non-Indians to drink alcohol, American Indians who drink are more likely to be heavy drinkers (7 percent of all American Indians). They are also more likely to use drugs and smoke.
- Indian youth are 60 percent more likely to report that they engaged in a fight at school over the past year.
- A disproportionate share of arrests for all offenses is of American Indians.



# III. Case Studies in Effective Family Strengthening in Indian America



## Off-Reservation Indian Foster Care Program, Fond du Lac Lake Superior Band of Chippewa (Cloquet, Minnesota)

That there is much to be concerned about in the conditions confronting Native children and families. Yet the aggregate data should not mask the increasing number of successful efforts to improve those conditions. Consider in summary form, for example, the case studies we detail in Appendix C.

In the early 1990s, the Fond du Lac Lake Superior Band of Chippewa had large numbers of Indian children in need of foster homes. The Band's ability to place Indian foster children in Indian foster homes had come to a standstill. While the Band's Human Services Division had been successful in licensing Indian foster homes on the reservation, it lacked authority to work off-reservation. Unfortunately, the neighboring county agencies were unsuccessful in recruiting and licensing Indian foster homes - there were no Indian foster families in Saint Louis County in 1991 - despite the large number of Indian families living off-reservation (about half of the Band's 6,600 citizens live off-reservation).

The Band-initiated and funded Fond du Lac Foster Care Licensing and Placement Agency was the solution to both the jurisdictional and recruitment problems. By establishing a separate Minnesota-chartered nonprofit entity that, in turn, contracted all programmatic services to the Fond du Lac Band's Human Service Division, the Band could work toward expanding the availability of Indian foster homes in northeastern Minnesota. Almost immediately, the Agency received calls from off-reservation Indian families interested in offering foster care. The instincts of the Band had been correct - Indian families were more comfortable working with the Band's Agency, and by extension, the Band's Human Services Division, because the Agency was more sensitive than county agencies to cultural norms and needs.

The Band's innovative approach to providing services off-reservation is working. In just a few years, the Agency successfully licensed 58 off-reservation Indian foster homes, and it continues to place more than 70 Indian children in Indian foster homes each year.

## **Whirling Thunder Wellness Program, Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska**

(Winnebago, Nebraska)

Diabetes and substance abuse have long been major problems for the 2,600-citizen Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska, which is located about 60 miles north of Omaha. Nearly one third of Winnebago adults have Type 2 diabetes; 48 percent of Winnebago youth have hyperinsulinemia, a predictor of future diabetes. Like many Indian communities, the Tribe has struggled to fight pervasive substance abuse.

Since the late 1970s, the Indian Health Service had operated a model diabetes program that served the Winnebago and Omaha Tribes. The Winnebago Tribe's Health Department was convinced that it could "get in front" of these problems more effectively under self-management and with a program that recognized the inter-relatedness of diabetes and substance abuse.

In 1995, the Tribe launched the Whirling Thunder Wellness Program. The Program raises community awareness about diabetes and substance abuse, provides culturally appropriate primary and secondary prevention programs and services, and provides programs to encourage healthy lifestyles consistent with traditional Winnebago practices. Among the Program's innovations are the "Team Up" diabetes patient retreat, the "Kidz Café," which provides healthy summertime meals and snacks to community children, and after-school programs (e.g., sports programs, traditional dancing, corn harvesting, etc.) that provide safe, adult-supervised cultural and physical activities for up to 50 children during peak risk hours. Working with youth, their parents, and other concerned adults, the Whirling Thunder Program's 12-person staff is bringing issues of health and nutrition to the forefront of family and community attention, and critically, changing community behavior for generations to come.

## **Menominee Community Center of Chicago, Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin**

(Chicago, Illinois)

Located more than 250 miles from the Menominee Indian Reservation in Keshena, Wisconsin, the Menominee Community Center of Chicago was established in 1994 to enhance on-off reservation networking and to serve as a resource center for the 500 Chicago-based Menominee tribal citizens and their families. Many of these families relocated to the Chicago area following the federal government's termination of the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin in the 1950s. The Tribe was re-recognized in 1973.

While the Community Center is a volunteer-run organization that has a separate fiscal agent and no facilities of its own, it enjoys a unique partnership with the Menominee tribal government. For example, despite their location far off the reservation, the tribal government recognizes tribal citizens living in Chicago as a community of the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin. The Tribe's constitution requires the Tribal Legislature to meet twice yearly at the Center, and the Center's operations are fully funded through the Tribe's general revenue fund.

The Community Center provides a gathering place for tribal functions - ranging from official tribal government meetings to arts and crafts classes and social and cultural gatherings. The Center sponsors visits to the reservation to provide individuals with an opportunity to develop their Menominee identity and to reconnect families, clans, and kinship systems. The Center also serves as an information referral center for citizens seeking social services, employment and education - a critical function given that tribal citizens living off-reservation do not have access to many of the programs and services available to on-reservation citizens.

The Center works with the Menominee tribal government to ensure that citizens living in Chicago share a role in major issues and opportunities facing the Menominee Nation. In fact, since the Center's establishment, the rate of voter participation of Chicago-based citizens in general elections and tribal referenda has climbed steadily, and now averages 45 percent. Perhaps most importantly, the partnership between the Center and the tribal government sends an unmistakable signal: citizenship and kinship extend beyond reservation boundaries. The Menominee Community Center connects and reconnects families and children in the Chicago area with their broader relations and community.



### **Ya Ne Dah Ah School, Chickaloon Village (Chickaloon, Alaska)**

Chickaloon Village is a 250-citizen Ahtna Athabascan Indian community located 60 miles northeast of Anchorage. In 1992, it created the Ya Ne Dah Ah School in response to growing concern about the quality of education tribal youth were receiving in the public school system and to the community's desire to curb the decline of cultural practices.

The Ya Ne Dah Ah School is Alaska's only tribally owned and operated full-time primary school and day care facility. Located in a two-room schoolhouse that receives no federal or state funding, the School's 20 students learn Ahtna Athabascan history, language, music, art, and traditional practices such as potlatches, fishing, and basket-making. In addition to being taught by certified teachers, tribal foresters, environmentalists, and computer technicians teach the youth science and math. Recognizing the importance of family and community involvement in their children's education, the Ya Ne Dah Ah School enjoys nearly 100 percent parental participation.

Today, the School educates the majority of elementary school-age children in Chickaloon Village, and many Natives are returning to the area so that their children can attend the School. And with good reason. Not only is the School reviving the cultural strength and pride of the Village and teaching its children Athabascan values, practices, and traditions, but the students are excelling in the conventional topics of science, math, English, and social studies. In fact, the children's scores on standardized tests are higher than their national counterparts. With its solid academic foundation, its substantial family and community support, and its demonstrated record of success, the Ya Ne Dah Ah School serves as a model for Indian nations.

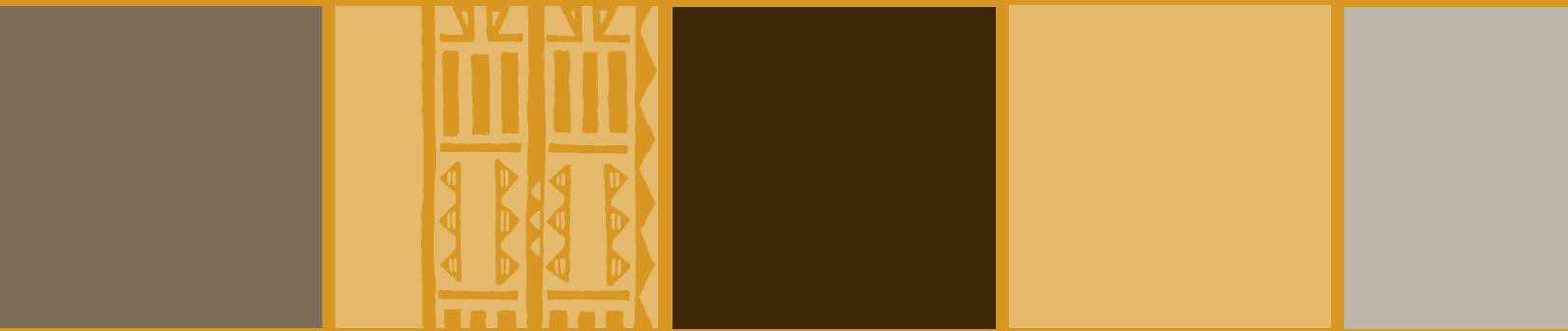
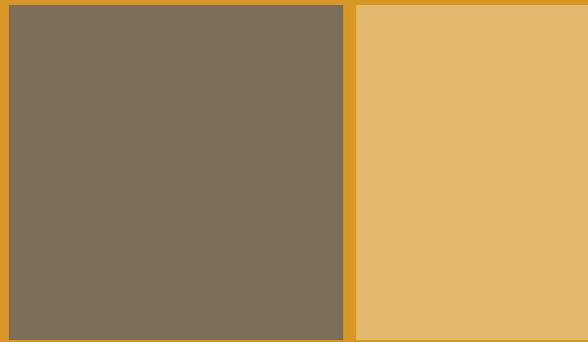
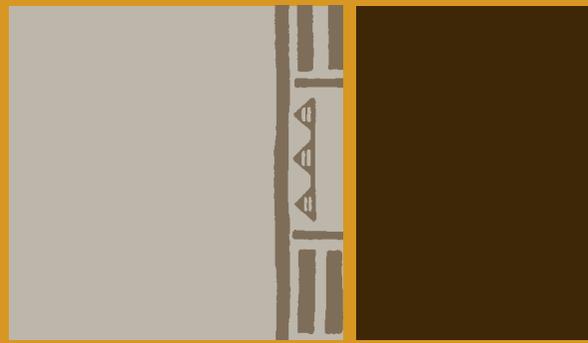
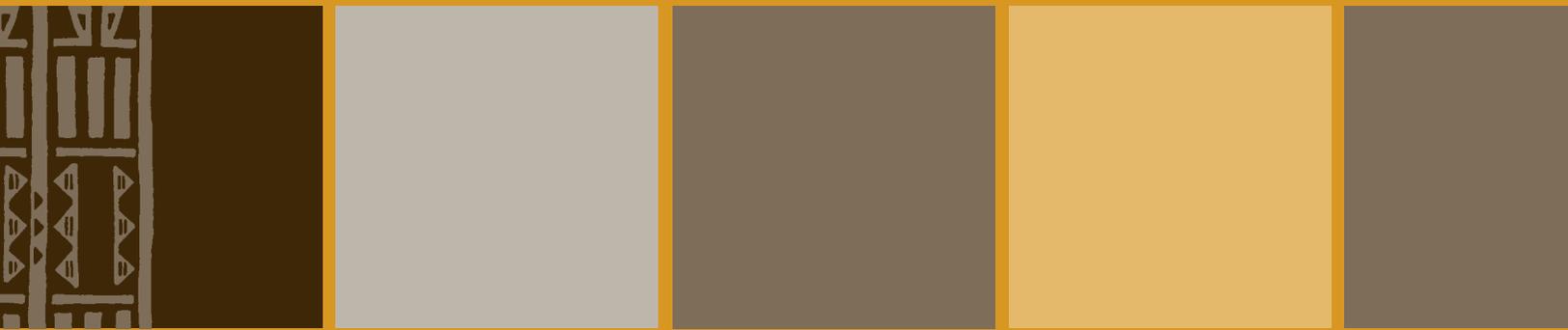


### **Akimel O'odham/Pee-Posh Council, Gila River Indian Community (Sacaton, Arizona)**

Like many other Indian nations, the Gila River Indian Community is young, with half of its 17,000 citizens under the age of 18. And like Indian youth elsewhere, Gila River youth are challenged by problems such as gang violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and teen pregnancy. Until the late 1980s, the youth had little or no say in crafting policy solutions to these and other matters affecting their population.

In 1987, several Gila River youth organized the Akimel O'odham/Pee Posh Council to establish a voice for youth in tribal government and to increase the level of communication between adults and youth. Today, the Council is comprised of 20 members, between the ages of 14 and 21, who are elected by their peers to serve staggered two-year terms. After receiving training in communications, team building, ethics, conflict resolution, and parliamentary procedures, Youth Council members present youth issues to the tribal government, oversee various community projects, and attend local, state, and national meetings.

Since its inception, over 300 youth have served on the Council, while more than 8,000 youth and Community members have been involved in program activities. The Council has coordinated 15 leadership conferences, conducted a series of youth leadership development seminars, represented youth in dozens of conferences, spearheaded highly successful voter participation initiatives, and provided substantive input on a wide range of issues to the Community's Tribal Council. The fact that nearly 90 percent of former Youth Council members return to the Community to work and live after receiving their education is one of a host of indicators that the Council serves as an effective vehicle for bringing about positive change for the entire Community.



# IV. A Framework for Understanding Family Strengthening in Indian America



Researchers and fieldworkers have known for some time that, across all kinds of communities and cultures, children who are poor, who witness domestic and community violence, whose parents are incapacitated by substance abuse or mental health problems, or who experience other serious threats to their well-being are at greater risk of undesired outcomes than their more fortunate peers. In such settings, children are at greater risk of dropping out of school and taking on parenting responsibilities early, being unemployed or working for low wages as an adult, dying prematurely, being involved in crime, and so on.<sup>3</sup>

The greater the number of risk factors in a child's life, the greater the probability that he or she will experience negative outcomes. Poverty is a particularly insidious risk factor, because it is connected not only to a large number of other risk factors, but also with limitations on opportunities and resources for alleviating the factors that put children at risk and the outcomes children experience.<sup>4</sup> As the data presented in Section II above indicate, American Indian children are at greater risk of poor outcomes than their non-Indian peers.

But social scientists also find that not all children growing up in high-risk situations do poorly. In fact, most do well. As they grow older and mature developmentally, many of their interactions with family and others in their community help mitigate the impact of risk and help them develop the capacity to flourish – despite serious obstacles.<sup>5</sup> The challenge has been to try to understand the factors and processes of both risk and resilience in order to develop more effective services and social supports for children,

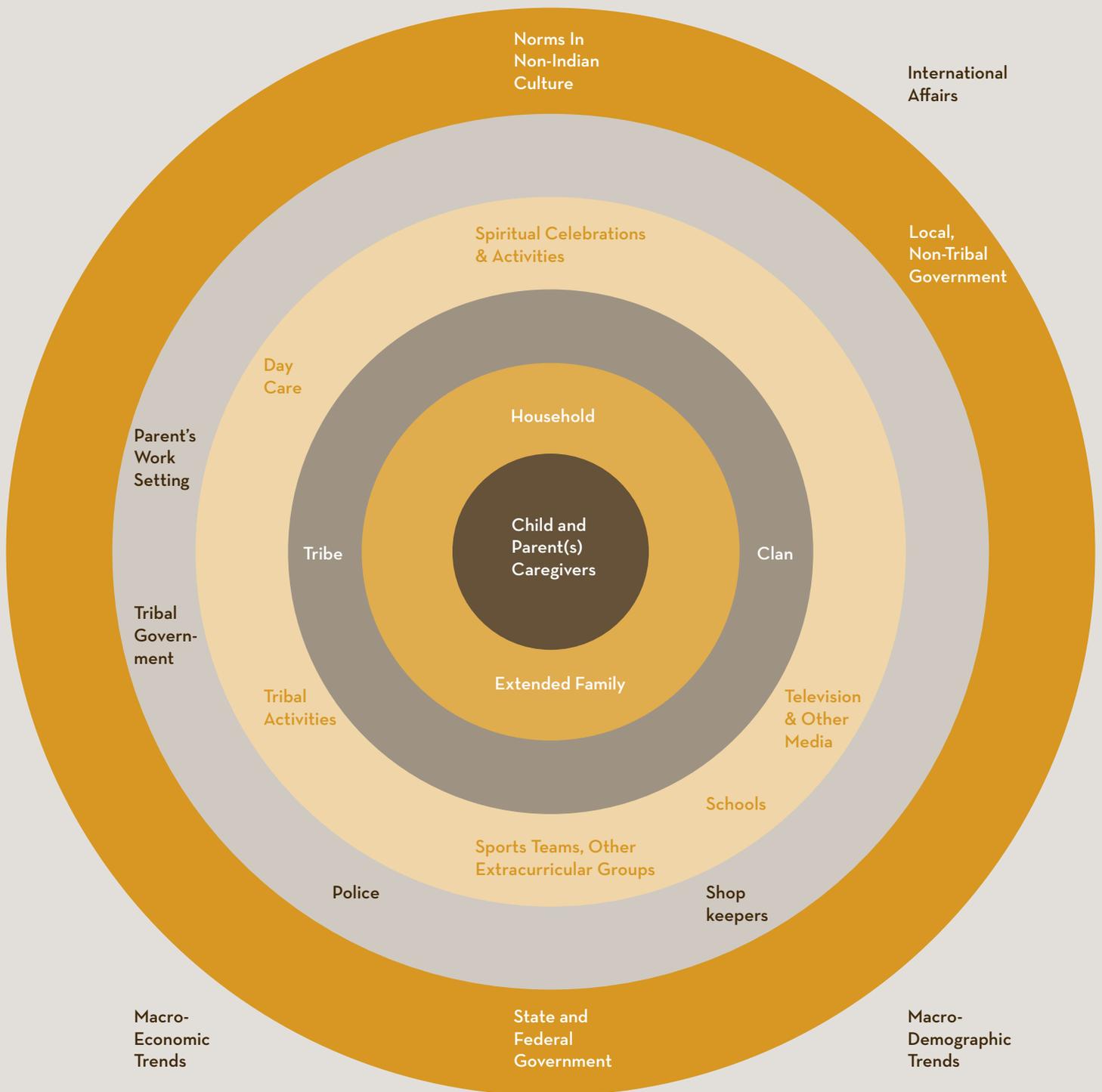
their families, and their communities. Applied to Indian America, the challenge is finding effective programs and policies that work for Native children and their families.

## The “Ecological Model”

A useful framework for beginning to think about how to assess the risks children and families face, as well as the resources and possible points of intervention is the “ecological model” or “ecological mapping.” Underlying the ecological model is the observation that children's lives are intertwined with the life of their whole community. The totality of community life affects the risk and opportunities which children and their families confront as children grow and develop. The very young interact primarily with their immediate families and caregivers. As they grow older, however, children interact with an increasing number of individuals and institutions – alone and with parents, siblings, extended family members, and peers. The emphasis in this framework is on the holistic experience of children and their interactions. This model captures the idea that children are influenced by and influence those individuals, groups, and institutions with which they interact. Likewise, other members of their families interact with a range of individuals and institutions, and these interactions have both direct and indirect influences on children and their families.

The ecological model is not a theory of this interaction. Rather, it is a way of starting to think about the environment in which children grow up and in which parents are trying to raise families; it provides a useful schema for mapping the individuals, groups, and institutions with

# The Ecology of Growing Up



which children and their parents interact. The ecological model is basically a series of concentric circles increasing in diameter, with the innermost circle representing the primary caretaker-child relationship. Each successive ring capturing individuals and institutions at greater “distance” from this with which parents and other family members interact and with which the child will interact as she or he grows.

Using this ecological framework helps motivate and structure the discussion of strengthening families. First, it stresses connectedness and interdependence. It acknowledges that families reside in a broader environment of formal and informal institutions, including extended family, which influence child and family well-being and prescribe access to resources. This gets us out of the trap of placing sole “blame” on so-called “nuclear” families, or any one factor, for the well-being of children. Second, using this framework forces us to acknowledge that not only are there bi-directional relationships among people and institutions, but also between multiple institutions. Which formal and informal institutions are present and how they relate, or fail to relate, to one another has important implications for children and families. Third, in combination with knowledge about the specific challenges children, families and communities face, the model helps identify what is available and being used by children and their families, as well as what is missing and where public policy interventions might be most effective. It enables us to analyze what additional services or programs are needed to ensure that family needs can be met.

These facets of an ecological approach to thinking about the well-being of families and children are evident in each of the five cases. For example:

- In the face of the myriad non-Native influences on Athabaskan children, Ya Ne Dah Ah School asks whether science and math, not to mention culture and language, can be better taught and more readily learned with education under stronger indigenous control.
- Winnebago’s Whirling Thunder Program recognizes the deleterious impact of television and mainstream lifestyles on children’s health habits, and asserts a self-determined intervention to educate and improve health.
- Gila River’s Youth Council asks: Are the civic leadership opportunities that Gila River youth have being built around the mainstream society’s institutions, or are they teaching our children how we work and to take pride in our systems?

- Fond du Lac’s foster care initiative asks: Are relations between the tribal government and other governments supporting or hindering the well-being of our children and families? Is the system of foster care available to Fond du Lac working with, or is at odds with, the spiritual life of our children’s community?
- In supporting the Chicago urban center, Menominee tribal members acted to counteract the non-Native influences – from mainstream culture and jobs to state and federal programs – that threaten to isolate urban Indian families and children from the key inner spheres of tribal life and culture that make someone “Menominee.”

### The Diversity of Indian America

In short, the strategy of using the ecological model to delineate the influences on children as they grow and develop is useful for compelling us to think about the whole of those influences. But the “ecological environments” of those growing up Native can hardly be expected to be the same as the “ecological environments” of their counterparts growing up in White suburbia or Hispanic inner cities. What is distinctive about the contexts in which Native children and families function? What kinds of things should someone interested in making a positive difference, whether it be a tribal government, a grassroots organization, or a philanthropic organization, be cognizant of as they approach the challenges of family strengthening in Indian America?

Answering these kinds of questions is complicated by the fact that there is hardly one Native context for Native children and families. For example, within and between Native nations there are sharp and variegated distinctions along such dimensions as urban/rural, high unemployment/low unemployment, and educational opportunity. Because the hundreds of tribes and tribal communities have always had distinct histories and cultures, variations abound along everything from governmental form to religious practices to Native language use to family structure to economic system to the role of elders to the degree of Indian/Non-Indian intermarriage.

Indeed, perhaps the first lesson about the ecological environments of those growing up Native is a lesson of diversity. Any rule will have its exceptions; any stereotype will have its counters; and any generalization will have its special cases. Cognizance of this diversity is the first step to working effectively on matters of children and families in Indian America. For every tribe that is strong in its linguistic traditions, there are many others that are completely, or almost completely, devoid of Native speakers. Alongside the tribe that is sustaining economic opportunity, numer-

ous others are mired in stark poverty. Within the very tribe that is experiencing resurgent Native religious traditions, there are those who adopt Christianity and discourage their families from participation in non-Christian ceremony. On even the most rural of reservations, children grow up where “the satellite dish is the national flower” and the American urban milieu is beamed in daily. Without passing judgment one way or another on such diversity and change, such is the reality that must be dealt with by Native children and families - and those who would address issues of children and families in Indian America.

## The Contours of Indian America

Given the diversity and dynamism of ecological environments for Indian children and families, what can be said about the shape and contours of these environments, and what do these tell us about the nurturing and threatening aspects of growing up in Indian America?

## Political Contours

**Tribes are sovereign nations.** The US Constitution recognizes three sovereigns in the US: the United States, the states, and tribes. Unlike poor urban neighborhoods or even cities or counties, Indian tribes have their own constitutions,<sup>6</sup> associated institutions, and government-to-government relationships with US, state, and municipal governments. Tribal sovereignty is manifested in powers of taxation, adjudication of civil disputes and non-major crimes, management of land and resources, policing and maintenance of civil order, and provision of basic social services and infrastructure. Although the boundaries of this sovereignty wax and wane, are contentious, and are set by basic human rights, constitutional principles, Congressional action, US executive authority, and numerous US, state, and tribal court rulings -- it is a political status that is unlikely to go away.<sup>7</sup>

Historically, the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs within the US Department of the Interior has had primary responsibility for administering affairs and attending to social conditions on reservations. For the past 50 years, health care has been the responsibility of the federal Indian Health Service. Under the federal Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 (P.L. 93-638), the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 (P.L. 95-608), and related authorities, tribes have increasingly exercised rights of self-rule by taking over programs previously administered by federal agencies. Funding for these programs continues to be provided by the federal government, through contracting arrangements (in which a tribe becomes a contractor to the federal government to perform particular functions) or through “block grants.” Importantly, from housing to timber harvesting, and from wildlife management to health

care, research on the performance indicates that tribal takeover improves the performance of governmental services.<sup>8</sup>

These results extend beyond implementing and running specific programs. When it comes to economic, social, and political development, the evidence is compelling that those tribes that have begun to break from the historic pattern of poverty and dependence on outside governments’ dollars and programs are those that assert *de facto* sovereignty and confine non-tribal decision makers to merely advisory or support roles. But assertiveness is not enough, like other developing nations, assertive tribes can encounter resistance or repeat historical mistakes. Research shows, however, that tribes that are moving themselves forward on their own, self-defined paths of development invest heavily in building institutions of self-government - from rewriting their constitutions to implementing their own civil service systems.

Finally, tribes that succeed at such institution-building invariably do so by arriving at structures, policies, and procedures that *match* their own contemporary cultural norms of authority and power in large and small ways.<sup>9</sup> Tribes, for example, whose cultures have supported the sharing of power among clans or other subdivisions have fared better under parliamentary systems; tribes with indigenously hierarchic systems have fared relatively well under single-chief executive/presidential systems; and certain tribes with relatively intact cultural and religious histories have found traditional theocratic systems to work well - and so on with immense variety.<sup>10</sup>

## Self-Determination is personal, collective, and political.

It is difficult to overemphasize the primacy of self-determination in Indian America. To a large extent, self-determination as an articulated goal is the legacy of the impact of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s on Indian people.<sup>11</sup> The Native peoples of North America have weathered as much oppression, military subjugation, and racism as perhaps any peoples in history. At the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the drive is to assert self-defined individual and collective identities, and to reject stereotypes, whether benevolent or malevolent, in order to build and assert authentic, contemporary identities that clearly say “I/we are not historical artifacts; I/we are real, vibrant, capable individuals and communities.”

Native initiation and control of family strengthening programs and policy development - from foster care at Fond du Lac to schooling at Chickaloon - are sometimes as much about self-determination as they are about narrowly defined service delivery. The force behind self-determina-

tion is frequently powerful enough to compel tribes and other Indian organizations to forgo funding and opportunities when they are not in charge. This is not a blind obstinacy: Indian America knows that self-determination has begun to reverse decades, even centuries, of economic and social impoverishment. The research supports this understanding that self-determination “works.”

Finally, our case studies drive home the point that strategies of self-determination are acts that directly strengthen families. Thus, not only did the administration of foster care improve when Fond du Lac rejected continued reliance on the programs of surrounding counties in Minnesota, but the very act of having one’s own community assert and succeed at self-rule contributes to collective identity and, hence, to families’ well-being in positive ways.

### Economic Contours

**Haves and Have Nots.** Data describing aggregate reservation economic conditions and average standards of living for both reservation citizens and off-reservation American Indians indicate continuing economic hardship. Yet, the era of self-determination that was ushered in by the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act in the 1970s has seen an increasing number of reservations with sustained economic development. Even prior to and independent of opportunities for economic development that have been realized through Indian gaming (as regulated by the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act of 1988), strategies of assertive self-determination, institution building, and cultural match have proven to be the first that have worked in more than a century to promote the creation of employment on reservations. Indeed, even Indian gaming was a tribally driven initiative, with tribal governments in Florida and California leading federal policy initiatives.

At present, the variation in economic conditions across Indian Country is extreme. For a handful of tribal governments with gaming facilities near major metropolitan markets, the economic success of gaming businesses has been remarkable. Additionally, an increasing number of tribes are sustaining economic improvement in whole or in largest part on non-gaming businesses – from the case of virtually zero unemployment among the Mississippi Band of Choctaw (with its manufacturing-based economy) to the similarly high-performing Southern Ute (and its natural resource-based economy). Notwithstanding cases to the contrary and strikingly inept reporting in the mainstream media, this business success has spelled improvements in the lives of affected tribal citizens.<sup>12</sup> The combination of above-average paying jobs (often for the first time in adult citizens’ lives) and strategic use of tribal revenues to build the community by funding education and social services

The ecological model is...a way of starting to think about the environment in which children grow up and in which parents are trying to raise families; it provides a useful schema for mapping the individuals, groups, and institutions with which children and their parents interact.

such as Head Start and basic infrastructure such as sewer systems have given a number of tribes the problems of economic growth for the first time in the experience of any of their living citizens. The self-determined choice of such tribes indicates they prefer these problems to the alternatives.

The result of sustained economic development is an unmistakable pattern of haves and have-nots. At the other extreme from tribes such as Mashantucket Pequot and Mississippi Choctaw are tribes with the highest unemployment rates and highest rates of poverty in the United States. Among citizens of the Crow and Oglala Sioux Tribes who live on the nations’ respective reservations, unemployment hovers in the 80-90 percent range (figures which account for workers who have become discouraged and no longer seeking employment). Estimates suggest that more than 90 percent of all dollars flowing through the Pine Ridge (Oglala Sioux) Reservation are the result of federal and state-supported programs. The problems faced by children and families in these situations are incomparably more severe and the resources available to address them more limited than is the case for the more successful tribes. As we discuss at length in Section V below, the challenges, opportunities, and strategies applicable to those who would address family strengthening must be adapted accordingly.

The notable distinctions of “have” and “have not” apply as well to American Indians living off-reservation. Within this group as well as among more dispersed off-reservations Indians, economic well-being spans a range from “have”

to “have not.” Regardless of tribal membership status, off-reservation Indians and Indian families remain quite poor as a group in the metropolitan areas where their populations are significant.<sup>13</sup> For off-reservation Indians, there is a second dimension of disparity. Some are members of economically successful tribes and some are not. Those in the former group often have access to tribal services and benefits (scholarships, access to tribal funding and loans for business development) that the latter group do not have access to.

Reservation ties are not without their problems. Some off-reservation Native populations have unique ties to home reservation communities that involve cyclical lifestyles of working part of a year in an urban area (such as Phoenix) and returning to the reservation for part of the year. Such lifestyles suggest that an accurate description of the individual and institutional environment of many Indian families and children cannot be captured in a single ecological map but requires an understanding of multiple environments and the bridges across them.

**Institutional Capacity.** Closely related via feedback loops of both cause and effect to the variations in economic conditions are the institutional capacities of Native communities. Native nations such as the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, the Mississippi Band of Choctaw, Fond du Lac Lake Superior Band of Chippewa, Gila River Indian Community, Southern Ute, and increasing numbers of others are known for their effective institutional capacity and performance. At the same time, many Indian nations are struggling to stabilize political conditions and put in place the capacity to run their own schools, police, housing, and the like. With long histories of imposed colonial institutions and disenfranchisement by non-Indian systems, it is not surprising that, as tribes begin to assert powers of self-determination, many are plagued by instability in tribal governmental programs and a dearth of civil society non-governmental institutions.

Where such governmental and non-governmental tribal capacity is absent or dysfunctional, the default mode of survival is dependence on federal and state programs, which is dissatisfying from the standpoint of self-determination, and often, culturally destructive. Where institutional capacity is strong and in Native hands, communities are already initiating their own family strengthening strategies (albeit, seldom under such a label) and can more than hold their own in program management and the technical aspects of program administration.

As we discuss in Section VI, the challenges for tribes’ civic leaders and other institutions pursuing family strengthen-

ing in Indian America vary in both degree and character with the institutional capacities of Native communities. We stress, in particular, that where a tribe’s governmental and other civic institutions – the tribal constitution, the tribal courts, the non-profit sector, and so on – are functioning well under tribal control, working with tribes is not unlike working with other capable communities. Things get done and, indeed, often can be done more effectively because of tribes’ abilities to minimize bureaucratic hassles. On the other hand, where a tribe’s fundamental governmental and civic institutions are in disarray, real progress on family strengthening generally must await improvements in foundational matters.<sup>14</sup>

## Socio-Cultural Contours

**Definitions of “Family.”** The English word “family” evokes powerful notions of the nuclear unit centered on parents who raise blood-related children, perhaps including links to extended (by descendancy) relations such as grandparents, aunts and uncles, and nephews and nieces. Depending on tribal history and tradition, Indian families may or may not fit this model. There is almost as much variety in the definition of “family” across Indian America as there are tribes.

Tribes such as the Navajo Nation have strong extended families within which grandparents play central rather than peripheral roles, and where “brother” and “sister” are terms that encompass both blood and clan relationships. Among the Brothertown Indians, “aunties” exert clear and secure influence on the raising of children. In fact, many tribes retain clan systems that actively support nuclear families in childrearing, through the provision of cultural education, by offering financial assistance, and so on.

In many Native communities, tribal elders play prominent roles in family life, community and cultural affairs, and political affairs. Elders are not just older members of the tribe who are respected simply for their accumulation of experience and wisdom; rather, they are carriers of specific cultural and historical knowledge and “libraries of Indian knowledge, history and tradition.”<sup>15</sup> While there is a clear pattern of recognizing and respecting elders across many, if not most, Native communities, there are a wide variety of ways in which they interact with families and children.<sup>16</sup> In some tribes, selected elders sit on distinct elders’ councils with responsibility for ensuring that the tribe continues to make culturally appropriate social and governmental decisions.<sup>17</sup> Often, this will include specific responsibility for ensuring the well-being – spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and physical – of the children of the nation. In other tribes, elders play less formal roles. In many tribes, the recovery of traditions regarding elders is a priority, and many tribes

are addressing the challenge of integrating elders into the lives of children and families. In some instances, tribes struggle with low numbers of elders relative to children.

The foregoing discussion of family and family roles should not be interpreted to mean that all tribes' contemporary cultures define "family" (or "elder") in unique or uniquely non-western ways. Many tribes define "family" thoroughly in accord with its usual English meaning. Regardless of the definition of "family," the challenge for every tribe is to strengthen its families based on community members' understanding of the word "family."

This is not an area for romanticism. The challenge for those who would address problems of family strengthening in Indian America is to expect and respect diversity in this dimension. Stereotyping or presupposing difference where there is familiarity or familiarity where there is difference can only lead to discord and ineffectiveness. This underscores the critical importance of self-determination. The nuances and deep meaning of "family" in, say, Lakota society are unlikely to be understood by the non-Indian federal official, or non-Indian foundation officer, or, even, the reservation-raised Navajo (or Cherokee or Crow or...). Lakota people are more likely to understand and feel what "family" means to Lakota. This does not, however, preclude outsiders from working with tribes and Native people effectively; it merely implies that it is necessary to continuously ask the question, "what do you mean by 'family'?"

**Spirituality and Culture.** Perhaps nothing so distinguishes the "Native" from the "non-Native" as the role of indigenous spirituality in Native community and family life. In this era of "faith-based" social welfare initiatives, other societies and communities put religious values front and center in matters relating to children and families. In most of the Western world, religious values and practices, however, are not the same as spirituality, though they have spiritual dimensions. In the case of Native communities, the concept of the spiritual grows organically from the specific histories and traditions of specific tribes. Native concepts and experiences of the spiritual arguably are more permeating across values, institutions, conduct, and worldview than is the case in most of the mainstream, pluralist US society.

As expressed indigenously:

"It is said that we are spirits on a human journey. In this journey, health and well-being are a result of the complex interplay between the physical world (i.e., our bodies), our mental processes (our thoughts and emotions), our environment (our family, culture, etc.), and the spiritual forces outside of us and the spiritual learned practices that be-

come part of us. This perspective is sometimes referred to as the relational world view."<sup>18</sup>

For many Native societies, spirituality (or "culture" more broadly) entails the largely ineffable ways of looking at the world, including systems of value, understandings of the world and human action, and one's identity within and in relationship to the world. But trying to capture and categorize such spirituality in some notion of a homogeneous Native spirituality is not credible. Part of what is at the heart of the historical and contemporary multiplicity of distinct "tribes" is the underlying multiplicity of Native cultures and spiritualities. What it means to be, say, "Ute" and not, say, "Nez Perce" is to be of the Ute culture and Ute spirituality, rather than of the Nez Perce culture and spirituality.

Key elements of family life are embedded in a tribe's culture: the definition of family and the expected role of elders, as noted, as well as attitudes toward education, tolerance of misbehavior, gender roles, expectations for children, the purpose and primacy of clans, etc. In child and family policy, spirituality and culture are manifested in a wide array of initiatives. For example, because of its central role in carrying such norms and outlooks and in storing both a tribe's self-told history, many tribes are placing great emphasis on the preservation and promotion of their respective Native languages. As the case of Ya Ne Dah Ah School illustrates, the desire and the drive to not only manage reservation schools, but to truly control school curricula, are powerful. Even the setting of athletic and extracurricular activities is subject to self-determination - from the widespread and enthusiastic community support for youth basketball at places such as the Navajo Nation, to the Cherokee Nation's youth choir, to the internationally touring Iroquois Nationals lacrosse team.<sup>19</sup> And obviously, cases such as the Gila River Youth Council are not only about teaching leadership and civics to the youth, but they are about teaching Gila River leadership and *Gila River* civics.

It is important to emphasize that Native cultures are subject to constant forces of change. Some of this change is iconic and makes trivializing video clips for the mainstream media - such as the coexistence of the slam dunk basketball and cappuccino stands alongside the rodeo, the teepees, and the pow wow at Crow Fair, or the depiction of the Indian casino executive or attorney in her business suit (so as to try to subtly convey a message that she must be losing her Indianness?). But often the cultural change at work is much more foundational - as when the Pentecostal Christian faction honestly sees itself as rightfully Native but will not participate in traditional, non-Christian ceremonies; or when change in gender roles in tribal politics

is driven by women's frustration with male-initiated family violence. Such are the realities of actual Native societies - which is to say that Native societies face contemporary challenges because they are contemporary peoples. Romanticizing tribal spirituality and culture or seeing it as solely historical is dehumanizing and a source of countless missteps in coming to a full understanding the nuances of the complicated ecological environment of Indian families and communities.

Native peoples' demand for self-determination is related both to the pervasiveness of spirituality in Native life and to the stress that Native spirituality comes under in today's world. It is as if Native people are asserting: "Yeah, we know we have cultural stresses and challenges to face. We'll work them out ourselves, thank you." Those very acts of self-determination and attention to issues of spirituality and culture are, themselves, directly supportive of family strengthening. That is, whether it is promoting a tribal cultural event, asserting control over juvenile delinquency policy, investing in young parent education, adopting effective business codes, or changing the tribe's constitution so that it will be effective and legitimate, all these acts of tribal sovereignty can contribute to improving the ecology of the setting in which families and children function.

**The Importance of Land and Place.** From the urban reservation of the Puyallup Tribe in Tacoma to the rural reservation of the Hualapai in northwestern Arizona to the homelands of the Wampanoag (Aquinnah) on Martha's Vineyard, tribal lands have special meaning and importance in American Indian societies. Having struggled so hard for so long to preserve and protect areas of sacredness, history, and sovereignty, this is not surprising. Today, the "rez" and related sacred and historical locations are powerful components of tribal identity, affecting living patterns, occupational choice, willingness to migrate, and the sense of belonging.

Strong linkages between physical place and identity manifest themselves in key ways in the arena of family and child welfare. As suggested above, problems of poor employment prospects on many reservations provide a strong impetus for tribal citizens to migrate to major metropolitan areas for work. Similar pushes arise from poor housing conditions, poor health care, poor school facilities, and other aspects of weak reservation economies. Nevertheless, the self-determined choices of innumerable individuals and families entail staying on the reservation or, as a compromise, migrating away for part-year employment and returning as often as possible - often to assist in the support of family that has stayed at home. In the same vein,

the desire to have quality services provided in reservation communities is powerful.

Particularly after unsavory experiences with what have effectively been programs of forced "relocation" and distant boarding school programs in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, tribal citizens rarely will take "going into Phoenix" or "moving to Denver" as the preferred way to meet the needs of their children and families. As self-determination and self-government have been made real by many tribes, the concomitant rebuilding of civic pride and improvements in reservation economies have often resulted in rapidly increasing populations. These are fed by returning citizens who see a hope for a better life "back home" as preferable to, perhaps, better incomes and public services in off-reservation urban areas. A number of tribes report that this return migration is overburdening the tribal government's ability to deliver needed services to families and children. Yet such return migration is warmly welcomed as an important step on the path to tribal rejuvenation.

Attachment to a notion of "place" is not limited to reservation residents or even citizens of tribes. A number of major cities sustain urban Indian centers such as the Menominee Community Center of Chicago. In addition to Chicago, cities such as Seattle, Los Angeles, Denver, Phoenix, Albuquerque, Boston and Oakland, to name a few, possess urban centers that are supported by federal, local, private, and/or tribal dollars. Around such centers are typically more or less cohesive communities of Native people, and the attachments to those communities generate identity (e.g., as in "I'm an urban Indian"), belonging, caring, and mutual support. When mobilized, these traits bolster Native families and children with services, networks of employment, and social functions. The theme of self-determination is brought to the fore by the drive and expectation that Native people will not be served simply and solely by their incorporation into programs and services aimed at other poor and/or ethnic constituents.

There is almost as much variety in the definition of “family” across Indian America as there are tribes...to be effective it is necessary to continuously ask the question, “what do you mean by ‘family’?”

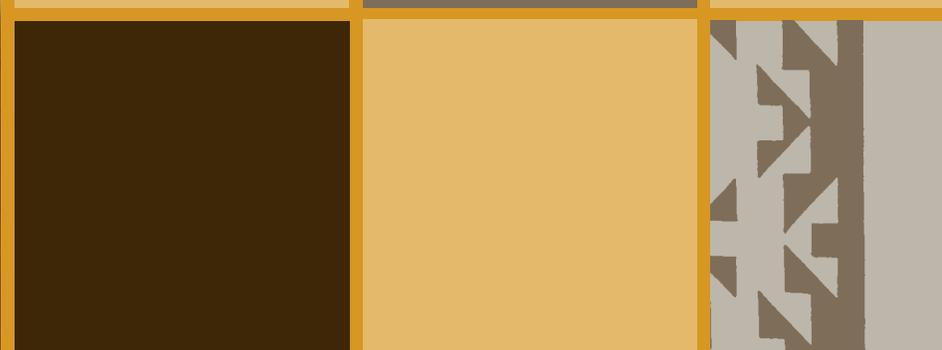
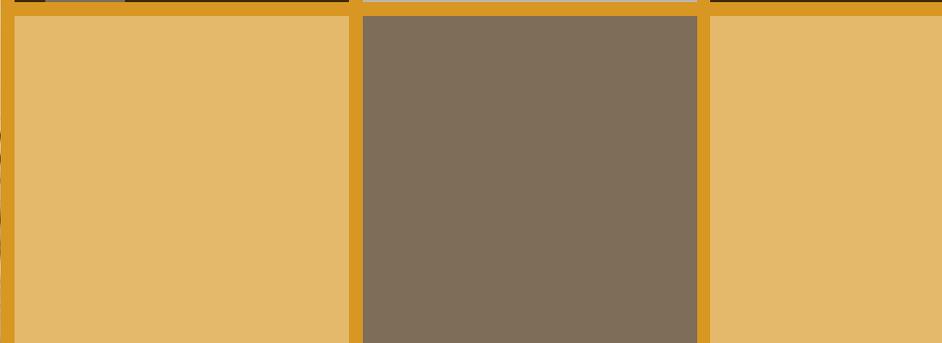
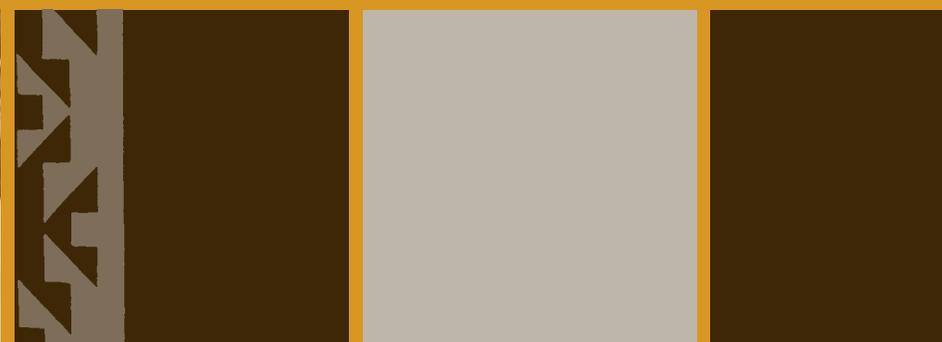


## Footnotes

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- <sup>14</sup> Cornell, Stephen and Joseph P. Kalt, “Where’s the Glue? Institutional and Cultural Foundations of American Indian Economic Development,” *The Journal of Socio-Economics*, vol. 29, 2000. This is a theme that is familiar to those who work on poverty, as well as social service and other program delivery in developing countries, where basic programs in such areas as children and families, public health, and environmental protection cannot be made to work until effective social and political systems are in place. See, for example, Rodrik, Dani, Arvind Subramanian, and Francesco Trebbi, “Institutions Rule: The Primacy of Institutions over Geography and Integration in Economic Development,” working paper, Center for International Development, Harvard University, October 2002; Davidson, Basil, *Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation State* (New York: Times Books, 1992).
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- <sup>19</sup> On the latter, see the case of the Iroquois Nationals in Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, “Iroquois Nationals Lacrosse,” *Tribal Governance Success Stories: Honoring Nations 2002*, 21-24.



# V. Observations on Effective Family Strengthening in Indian America



Where do we observe successful efforts to strengthen families and improve the lives of children in Indian America? We have asked ourselves and the participants in the consultative session whether there are common patterns and traits that effective programs and policies – such as our five case studies – share. Drawing on the case studies, the collective experience of the session participants with their own programs, the broader set of programs and policies that have been identified since 1999 by the Harvard Project’s *Honoring Contributions in the Governance of American Indian Nations* (Honoring Nations) award and recognition program, and available literature, we here lay out a set of observations on effectiveness in family strengthening in Indian America. We recognize that these are generalizations. As such, while they may not hold or be relevant to each and every issue and setting, they constitute tendencies that those who work in the field may find useful.

**Effective programs and policies are self-determined.** It almost goes without saying that American Indians have a long history of exceptionally poor and oppressive treatment by non-Indian individuals, institutions and governmental entities. This legacy is played out in the dire data presented earlier. In such situations, it can be tempting to blame others for one’s current situation and expect those others to redress past action. While placing blame in this fashion is justified, the strategy of hoping or expecting that others will redress past wrongs has tended to play into the hands of those that would have tribes remain perpetually dependent on the Bureau of Indian Affairs and other governmental entities.<sup>20</sup>

In the cases we have examined, the impetus for action and reform has been indigenous to the communities in question. In each case, tribal members have broken the mold of dependency on the US federal and state governments and their agencies. They have taken the initiative themselves to identify issues of particular concern to tribal members, developed an explanation for the problem grounded in current social and institutional dynamics, envisioned a potentially effective tribal response, and mobilized community people and other resources to build effective programs. For example:

- Ahtna Athabascan Indian children in Alaska’s Chickaloon Village have a long history of performing poorly in the local public schools. Tribal members recognized that their high dropout rate and subsequent limited opportunities contributed to high rates of substance abuse, crime and violence, and incarceration. The challenge was to increase school attendance and educational performance, but this seemed insurmountable given Ahtna Athabascan parents’ distrust of the local public schools and children’s feelings of marginalization in the classroom. The community responded by developing the Ya Ne Dah Ah School for its pre-school and elementary school- aged children.
- The Nebraska Winnebago observed an increasing incidence of Type 2 diabetes and high rates of co-morbid substance abuse, despite participating in one of the Indian Health Service’s Model Diabetes Programs. The Tribe recognized that the IHS program provided good care once an individual was diagnosed as diabetic, but

paid little attention to prevention. In response, the Winnebago developed the field-based, multi-faceted Whirling Thunder Wellness Program to elevate the health and wellness status of Winnebago community members.

- As the number of Fond du Lac children needing foster care placements increased, tribal leaders and human services staff exhausted potential foster families on the reservation and found more and more of their children being placed in non-Indian foster homes by county social services staff. They worried that these children would lose touch with tribal culture and traditions and other aspects of reservation life. They responded by identifying Indian families living off the reservation, licensing them as foster families through a new entity (the Fond du Lac Foster Care Licensing and Placement Agency) and placing Native children with them.

All tribes can identify problems facing their children and families, but not all have the perspective on their situation or the capacity to take control of their lives that effective intervention demands. Each of the case studies illustrates an example of tribal self-determination applied to social services. Key tribal members or institutions identified a disturbing set of outcomes, framed the problem and its etiology from the perspective of the tribe and potential tribal responsibility, and developed a workable response the tribe could undertake.

As will be seen below, self-determination does not mean doing everything for oneself by oneself. In each of these situations, non-tribal resources of all sorts were instrumental in the ultimate success of the venture. But we believe these case studies demonstrate that a critical component to successful efforts to support American Indian children through strengthening families and communities is tribal ownership of both problems and solutions.

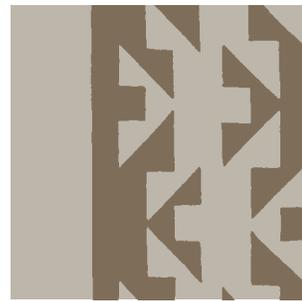
Non-tribal institutions and governments must work with tribes as equals. In addition to determining their own agenda, tribes must take responsibility for carrying it out. And the non-tribal governments and institutions with which tribes interact must accept tribal governments and institutions as capable and trustworthy partners. Even though the official policy of the federal government is one of government-to-government relations, true partnerships is a difficult challenge for both tribal and non-tribal institutional leaders, particularly given the long history of counterproductive relationships between Indian and non-Indian governments and institutions.

In each of the initiatives we examined, either program or tribal leaders negotiated with tribal, state, or US federal agencies to gain cooperation, authorization, and/or resources for the initiative. Importantly, through the process of negotiation and program development, program and tribal leaders appear to have gained increased respect for one another. In some cases, this process of trust building has taken a relatively long period of time.

- The Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 requires social services agencies to work with tribes to place Indian children with tribal members before placing them elsewhere. The Fond du Lac Tribe negotiated with state and county agencies to develop and license a foster care licensing and placement agency. It negotiated contracts with the county and three other child welfare programs in the area.
- The Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 provides the legislative framework for tribes to take over service provision from federal agencies. Administrators from the Winnebago Tribal Health Department negotiated with the Indian Health Service to take over its Model Diabetes Program and convert it from an institutionally based to a field-based initiative. In addition, the Tribe negotiated with federal government agencies for various components of the program, such as the authority to serve buffalo meat in its child lunch program.

Prior to assertions of Native control, the *status quo* often entails no or only token Native involvement in applicable programs and policies. Hence, development of relationships in which Native individuals and organizations are accorded full partnership often hinges on Native assertiveness. At times, this assertiveness may take the extreme forms of litigation and high-level political action. In fact, the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 was borne in the midst of much legal and political turmoil. Increasingly, however, tribes are finding that investment in technical capacity and institution building pays off. When the tribal child welfare specialist knows the facts better than the county representative, and when the tribe's program runs more crisply and effectively than the state's, tribes gain a "seat at the table." When the county comes to the tribe for technical assistance and institutional learning, as the talented administrators at the Fond du Lac Foster Care program have experienced, there is no question that workable partnerships and cooperation are taking hold.

Increasingly...tribes are finding that investment in technical capacity and institution building pays off. When the tribal child welfare specialist knows the facts better than the county representative, and when the tribe's program runs more crisply and effectively than the state's, tribes gain a "seat at the table."



**Leadership can emerge from many levels of tribal society.** While tribal self-determination is essential, an examination of our five case studies and the experience of the professionals represented in our consultative sessions reveal that there is no single institutional location within a tribe where problem identification, situational explanation, strategy development, or resource mobilization takes place. Moving forward on family strengthening and developing effective programs is not the exclusive territory of any identifiable group - from tribal elders to elected tribal officials. Rather, effective initiatives can clearly begin in a variety of "places."

- A lone Ahtna Athabascan elder who, through her volunteer work, became concerned about the large number of Indians in local jails provided the vision and leadership for the Ya Ne Dah Ah School.
- A small group of Chicago-area Menominee Indians who had gathered for the funeral of a tribal member subsequently formed a task force to revitalize tribal activities and social supports.
- The idea of developing the Fond du Lac Foster Care Licensing and Placement Agency originated with tribal elected leaders and the tribal human services agency.

These cases demonstrate that initial leadership of effective interventions can emerge at any one of a number of levels of tribal society, both on and off reservations, and either informally or through formal tribal institutions.

**"Buy-in" on the part of tribal communities and formal leadership is essential.** Wherever the initial leadership arises, initiatives are unlikely to be successful if tribal leadership does not commit itself to them. This commitment could take many forms, but in the cases we have examined, it has taken the form of a "buy-in" on the part of tribal officials to the vision and a commitment of tribal resources. These resources include the authority of tribal leaders, as well as of appropriate tribal agency and institution staff. They also include financial or in-kind resources, such as buildings, land, or administrative infrastructure. And, of course, the support of tribal officials is unlikely to be sustained without broader support from the community.

- The idea for the Menominee Cultural Center of Chicago emerged out of an informal group of Menominee tribal members supporting one another during times of crisis. Even though these tribal members lived in Chicago, the reservation-based Tribal Legislature provided financial and other resources to the Center and adopted an ordinance that added Chicago as a recognized community of the Menominee Nation.
- The idea for the Fond du Lac Foster Care Licensing and Placement Agency originated with tribal leaders and the tribal human services agency. In order to get the program started, the Fond du Lac tribal government provided the initial funding.
- The initial idea and early leadership for the Ya Ne Dah Ah School came from the official Clan Grandmother, but it is extremely unlikely the effort would have been successful if other tribal members had not provided or sought out the resources to fund and staff the school.

The very act of having one's own community assert and succeed at self rule contributes to collective identity and, hence, to families' well-being in positive ways.



**Effective initiatives are institutionalized.** Each of the initiatives we examined created formal structures or institutions for carrying out its activities or lodged these activities within pre-existing formal tribal institutions. The efforts did not stop with a good idea and energetic initial supporters. Rather, the formalism of creating organizations provided the framework in which to channel funds and other resources, enabled the programs to “sit at the table” with non-Indian governmental and private organizations, and signaled sustainability and seriousness.

- The Gila River Youth Council developed its own by-laws, a code of ethics, and an annual work plan to formalize itself as an institution that would not only gain the respect of the tribal council, but the youth's peers themselves.
- The Fond du Lac Band established a state-chartered non-profit organization with a board of directors comprised of one Tribal Council member, four tribal Human Services Division staff members, and two reservation community members. The Agency subcontracts to the Fond du Lac Division of Human Services for administrative support.
- The Menominee Community Center of Chicago is governed by a board of directors that reports to the Menominee Tribal Legislature.

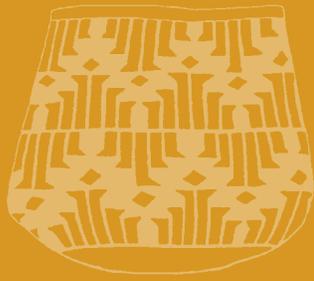
These cases suggest that formal relationships within programs and between program staff and tribal government are essential if these initiatives are to survive and prosper.

**Effective initiatives are spiritual at their core.** No matter what its primary goal, each of the programs in our case studies actively promotes the spiritual well-being of tribal members. This spirituality is evident on many levels, including the use of prayer and ceremony, the content of the curriculum, the incorporation of Native language, and the incorporation of elders.

To argue that a spiritual core and commitment to tribal members' spiritual well-being is essential to the effectiveness of these initiatives, however, raises questions about the relationship between spirituality and religion. The current debate about faith-based social service delivery has become shrill. The spirituality of the programs we have examined avoids these divisive and paralyzing arguments by functioning on at least three levels. First, one of the goals of each of these programs is the spiritual well-being of tribal members, where spiritual well-being is typically defined in terms of being at peace with oneself and the world, or being in harmony or in balance mentally, physically, and emotionally. This is very different from the explicit religious teachings of conversion programs and, in fact, implicitly acknowledges and accepts member affiliation with organized religious denominations.

Second, each of these initiatives has developed program or curriculum components to help members grow spiritually. The Fond du Lac Foster Care Licensing and Placement Agency, for example, employs a spiritual advisor who is on call to assist families and who helps plan training activities.

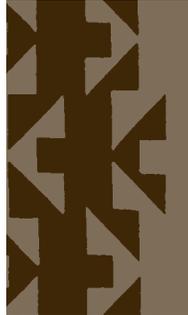
Third, each of these initiatives unites the community around its vision of spirituality. Many traditional tribal celebrations are spiritual at their core, and many of the traditional arts that tribal elders and others are passing on derive from spiritual understanding. These activities are incorporated into many of the initiatives we examined, particularly at the Ya Ne Dah Ah school and the Whirling Thunder Wellness Program.



**Effective initiatives explicitly draw on and strengthen tribal cultural practices.** One of the greatest tragedies of American Indian history is the loss of tribal languages and cultural practices, as well as the loss of knowledge of the broader tribal culture. The initiatives we examined draw heavily on tribal cultural traditions and practices for program design and operation. They also focus on helping individual tribal members, particularly children, increase their knowledge of tribal history, language, and traditions. These efforts extend beyond superficial efforts to increase the cultural appropriateness of interventions and the cultural competence of social service providers. The core focus of many of these programs is the perpetuation of the culture.

- Ya Ne Dah Ah in Athabascan means “ancient teachings.” The mission of the Ya Ne Dah Ah School is to provide children with the skills necessary for functioning in a modern world while maintaining Native knowledge and practices. It achieves this mission by developing a curriculum that integrates Athabascan cultural material into all subjects, teaches the Athabascan language, and teaches Athabascan dance, crafts, and other tribal traditions.
- Whirling Thunder Wellness Program is named after Chief Whirling Thunder, an early promoter of tribal health and wellness. One of its objectives is to encourage healthy lifestyles inside and outside the home consistent with traditional practice. These practices range from serving traditional foods, such as bison, in meal programs to teaching Native dancing and continuing the tradition of athletic activities to promote fitness.
- The Fond du Lac Foster Care Licensing and Placement Agency works with off-reservation families to increase their understanding of Ojibwe tribal culture and strengthen their contacts with reservation families. Foster children are actively engaged in traditional dancing and the Agency makes certain they have the necessary clothing to participate.

The case studies we have detailed are all committed to deepening tribal members’ cultural knowledge. First, each has developed program components to teach individuals traditional tribal skills and practices and help each participant develop a personal connection to the long history of the tribe. For all individuals, particularly those interacting with others in multiple cultural settings, knowledge of one’s own history and cultural traditions is essential to the development of a strong personal identity. Second, each of these initiatives unites the community around its cultural traditions through community activities such as pow-wows and dances, fish fries, and other celebrations. Sharing activities such as these strengthens community identity as well as individual identity. Third, each of these initiatives explicitly links their program’s cultural content to the challenges of contemporary children and families - for example, by making it clear that the message of a tribal historic figure (such as Chief Whirling Thunder) implies the appropriateness of sound diet and exercise today.



## The core focus of many of these programs is the perpetuation of the culture.

**Effective initiatives focus simultaneously on individuals and the tribal community.** Even where a program's primary mission may not be family strengthening (as with the focus on diabetes in the Winnebago's Whirling Thunder program), each of the cases we have detailed consciously pays simultaneous attention to the well-being of children, youth and their families, and to the well-being of the broader tribal community. No matter the point of origin, the initiatives we have examined are comprehensive in a way that goes beyond the traditional meaning of the term in the social services field.

Traditionally, non-tribal comprehensive social service initiatives have been based on one of two assumptions: (1) if a comprehensive array of services improves the well-being of children and families, neighborhoods will improve, or (2) if neighborhoods become safer and provide the opportunities and services children and families need, children and families will be better off. As a result, they have tended to concentrate in part or all of one ring in the nested set of circles in the "ecological model". But the tribal initiatives we have examined begin with the assumptions that children and families are nested in tribes and tribal culture, and that one cannot consciously address the concerns of one without simultaneously addressing the concerns of the other. As a result, they actively engage in programming in several "rings" simultaneously. For example:

- The Fond du Lac Foster Care Licensing and Placement Agency works with children, foster families, tribal government, and non-tribal government agencies. They select and license potential off-reservation foster families, provide them with training on the special needs of Indian foster youth, and work hard to connect them to the Band and its culture. They have improved the economic well-being of on-reservation foster families by negotiating with the county to get them reimbursed for caring for foster children. And, over time, they have gained the confidence of non-Indian child welfare agencies in the counties around the reservation. It is routine now for the Agency and non-Indian agencies to consult with each other on the needs of Indian foster children.

- The mission of the Whirling Thunder Wellness Program is to elevate the health and wellness status of Winnebago community members. The tribe works with youth through after school and summer exercise and education programs, operates two cafes offering healthy meal and snack options, screens youth and adults for diabetes and diabetes substance abuse risk factors, works intensively with diabetic individuals and their families to improve lifestyles and care, and sponsors exercise programs for tribal adults and visits tribal elders in local nursing homes. At its core, the Program strives to make it *Winnebago* to be healthy and in good physical shape.
- The Menominee Community Center of Chicago operates an emergency bereavement fund for tribal families, provides information on tribal enrollment, organizes pow-wows and fish fries, and hosts Menominee language classes. In addition, it organizes trips to the reservation for cultural events, the general council meetings and other activities, as well as hosting semi-annual Chicago Tribal Council meetings. Finally, Community Center staff gather data on the living situations and well-being of metropolitan tribal members as a basis for advocacy.

Key to the capacity of these initiatives to focus on individuals and the total community is simultaneous programmatic intervention in several of the "rings" of their tribal ecological map – all under the umbrella of a single initiative. It appears that as these initiatives have evolved, they have not so much broadened their agendas as expanded their strategies for achieving their mission and the target groups they serve.

**Effective initiatives explicitly strengthen children's and families' social networks.** Part of the challenge of tribal self-determination is developing tribal "social capital." The initiatives we have examined support stronger self-identity for the individual citizen within the tribal group and subgroups, and build relationships across groups of tribal members.

- The Fond du Lac Foster Care Licensing and Placement Agency builds formal and informal connections between off-reservation and on-reservation tribal members. The goal is to develop the capacity of Indian families to care for Indian foster children and to create a seamless web between families for foster children and the sense of belonging to the broader Band.
- In the case of the Menominee Community Center, the goal is to support off-reservation tribal members by, in large part, linking them to their Menominee home and nation. The Center provides not only resources that urban Menominee need, but also builds and strengthens links to the Menominee tribe.
- The Gila River Youth Council not only provides an alternative to youth apathy toward tribal political and social affairs; it also links Gila River Youth to a network of role models – tribal officials – who have committed their adult lives to the future of Gila River.

In contrast to many poor urban neighborhoods, within any given tribe there is a shared cultural and political history, if not a set of shared cultural traditions, language, and spirituality. These can be drawn on to build community. Leaders of the initiatives we have described consciously pursue the development of social capital. This social capital, with its ability to call forth the efforts of committed individuals in service to the community, is a key component of self-determination. Over the long run, it will be a resource for further tribal initiatives that can reach well beyond family strengthening programs.

**Effective initiatives consciously invest in the professional and educational skills of staff.** Part of the challenge of tribal self-determination is developing a skilled workforce. The initiatives we have examined train individuals, or enable or inspire them to increase their education and develop skills. As noted, a capable staff is a bedrock of effective assertions of self-determination, enabling programs to pursue Native versions of family strengthening.

- The narrow mission of the Gila River Youth Council is to foster the spiritual, mental, physical, and social development of tribal youth. The broader mission is to build a strong, unified, and self-reliant Gila River Indian Community by developing the skills and capacity of the next generation of tribal leaders, institutionalizing the capacity of tribal leadership to address issues of concern to youth and their families, and strengthening tribal institutions in ways that increase opportunities for young adults and thereby encourage today's youth to remain

on or return to the reservation when they reach young adulthood. This process has transformed the lives of many Gila River youth and their families and transformed the relationship of tribal government to youth.

- The Whirling Thunder Wellness Program had only one staff member when it took over the Diabetes Project from the federal Indian Health Services. It now has a staff of twelve and encourages them to obtain additional training and certification. It has established a relationship with Little Priest College so that program staff can take courses for continuing education credit. Increasingly, the Program's staff are looked to by non-Indian counterparts as leaders in the field of preventative health care.

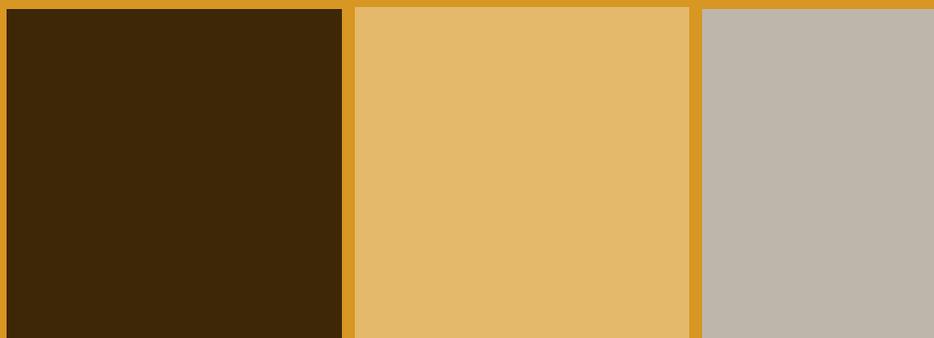
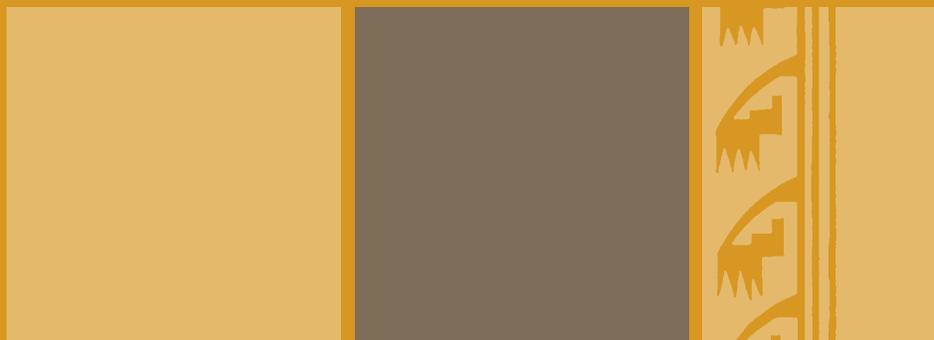
Tribes are only able to compete on a sustained basis with non-Indian providers and take effective responsibility for supporting families and children if they develop cadres of trained professional staff. The examples sketched here suggest a few strategies for accomplishing this, but they are not exclusive or definitive. We suspect an analysis of a larger number of programs would provide a more systematic set of strategies for professionalizing Native program staff and building human capital.

#### **Family strengthening efforts include:**

1. **Effective programs and policies are self-determined.**
2. **Leadership can emerge from many levels of tribal society.**
3. **“Buy-in” on the part of tribal communities and formal leadership is essential.**
4. **Effective initiatives are institutionalized.**
5. **Effective initiatives are spiritual at their core.**
6. **Effective initiatives explicitly draw on and strengthen tribal cultural practices.**
7. **Effective initiatives focus simultaneously on individuals and the tribal community.**
8. **Effective initiatives explicitly strengthen children's and families' social networks.**
9. **Effective initiatives consciously invest in the professional and educational skills of staff.**

#### **Footnotes**

<sup>20</sup> Cornell, Stephen and Joseph P. Kalt, “Sovereignty and Nation-Building: The Development Challenge in Indian Country Today,” *The American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, Vol. 22, no. 3, February 1999.



# VI. Recommendations on Supporting Native Family Strengthening



Ultimately, donors face choices about which institutions, programs, and projects are most likely to advance the programmatic goals of family strengthening. A number of important questions arise as these choices are faced in Indian America. Who are the relevant actors and what roles are they playing - or might they be playing - to improve child, family, and community welfare? What operational practices can a foundation employ in its grantmaking to help ensure that it is maximizing the relevance and positive impact of its work in Indian America?

Drawing upon previous sections of this paper and the May 2003 consultative session, this section aims to equip donors with practical guidance about how to work effectively on issues of child and family welfare in Indian America. It does *not* point foundations toward or away from any particular program or initiative, but rather it addresses some of the key grantmaking issues and questions in implementing a family strengthening initiative in Indian America. Specifically, to give donors a sense of where they “fit in” vis-à-vis other institutions working on these issues, we start with an overview of the key actors and the roles they play in improving the futures of Native children and families. We then turn to recommendations about how philanthropic foundations, in particular, can maximize the relevance and contribution of their work.

## Key Actors and Their Roles

As is the case among other communities and populations, there are many actors working on issues affecting the livelihood of Native children and families. Three sets of institutions stand out as being especially important: (1) non-Indian governments, (2) tribal governments, and (3) the nonprofit sector. Because a central challenge for donors is to identify the appropriate institutional vehicles for advancing programmatic goals, below is a brief sketch of the actors and some of the most salient considerations for grantmaking.

### Non-Indian Governments

Historically, non-Indian governments have played a critical role in delivering social services to American Indians and Alaska Natives. Prior to the 1870s, the US Department of War was the primary social service provider in Indian Country, an arrangement that stemmed from both treaties signed between the US government and individual tribes and, in some cases, the military actions of the US against tribes. In 1869, motivated by the belief that the socioeconomic conditions of Indian people would only improve if Indians became “Christianized” and “enlightened,” the federal government turned much of the responsibility for Indian people and tribes over to churches and missions. By the mid-1890s, however, it had become clear that non-Indian religious institutions were failing to improve socioeconomic conditions; so the US government, through the Bureau of Indian Affairs, resumed responsibility for social service delivery. Despite continuing and often shocking disparities in the health and socioeconomic well-being of Indians compared to non-Indians, it was not until 1954 that the federal govern-

ment transferred health care services for Indians from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) to the Indian Health Service (IHS), hoping that a specialized federal agency would fare better. By the 1970s, after more than one hundred years of failed federal attempts to improve Native Americans' health and well-being, tribes and the federal government agreed that a new approach was needed. To this end, in 1975, Congress passed the American Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (PL 93-638). This act - widely considered to be the most significant policy change of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century - provided fresh opportunities for tribal governments and organizations (e.g., intertribal collaborations) to manage services previously provided by federal agencies.

Other federal policies of self-determination followed. For example, the Indian Employment, Training and Related Services Demonstration Act of 1992 (PL 102-477) gave about two dozen tribes an opportunity to combine a designated set of employment, job training, skill and opportunity development and related programs into one program, thereby increasing tribal regulatory freedom and creating a simplified reporting scheme. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) provided tribal governments (and consortia of tribal governments) the authority to design and administer their own TANF and child support enforcement programs. This allows tribes to contract directly with the federal government, rather than requiring them to work through state governments to receive federal funding for many social programs. That same year, Congress also passed the Native American Housing Assistance and Self-Determination Act of 1996 (NAHASDA), which freed nine of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development's 14 programs for combination and assumption by tribes under block grants.

Today, the relationship between tribes and non-Indian governments on issues of children and family welfare - and social programs more generally - remains complicated. Three aspects of this relationship are especially important. First, as noted above, since the 1970s, tribal governments have increasingly taken over the administration and management of federally-funded programs and services - health services, schools, housing programs, welfare programs, etc. For example, tribes now operate more than half of the approximately 185 BIA schools, and throughout Indian Country, it has become commonplace to see *tribal* police departments, *tribal* forestry operations, *tribal* public works departments, *tribal* land management, *tribal* health departments, *tribal* natural resource management, and the like.

Second, despite increased tribal control, non-Indian governments - in particular, federal agencies - continue to play a major role in social service provision on most reservations and in most off-reservation Indian communities. Sometimes, the federal government serves merely as trustee, providing funding for programs and services that are administered by tribal departments and institutions under contracts and compacts with federal agencies. At other places, the federal government plays a more active role in service delivery - from taking responsibility for functions that tribal departments are unequipped or unwilling to handle on some reservations,<sup>21</sup> to possessing nearly complete administrative control over core governmental functions on others. Given the fact that many tribes entered into treaties with the federal government requiring federal support for such matters as education, health, and standards of living in perpetuity, federal involvement in social service delivery is unlikely to fade away.

Third, by virtue of their non-sovereign status, on-and-off-reservation American Indian individuals and off-reservation Native nonprofits have had long histories of depending upon and working closely with state and local government agencies. For example, many American Indians living off-reservation - and despite tribal governments' eligibility to administer their own TANF programs - continue to receive TANF program services from state agencies.<sup>22</sup> It is also noteworthy that about 85 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native elementary and secondary students are enrolled in public schools.

Increasingly, tribes and tribal entities are working as partners, and even replacements for, state and local governments. This phenomenon is driven by a number of factors, including devolution of federal programs to state and local agencies, as well as dissatisfaction with non-tribal provision of services. And, as suggested above, the increasing prevalence of tribes partnering and/or coordinating with sub-national governments on a full range of issues (e.g., land use, gaming compacts, taxation, land use, infrastructure development, etc.) is part of the broader Indian America's drive for tribal self-determination. There are, however, points of tension between tribal governments and US sub-national governments. For example, increased opportunities for local governments, both Indian and non-Indian, to manage programs previously administered by the federal government creates competition between these governments (i.e., between tribes and state, county, or municipal governments) for limited federal funding.

## Tribal Governments

While the phrase “family strengthening” does not immediately resonate among most tribal leaders and service delivery professionals, we are seeing a trend in which tribal governments are assuming a larger – and in some cases, primary – role in administering programs and services that address child and family welfare. For the past three decades, a growing number of tribes have embraced self-governance by seizing opportunities to take over the administration of TANF services, Head Start, foster care placement, and other state, local and federal programs.

The extent to which these tribally administered programs reflect tribal priorities and practices varies. For some tribal governments, the programs and services directly applicable to families and children have remained largely the same as they were under federal or state control – but they are implemented by tribal employees, rather than by employees of non-Indian governments. The trend, however, is clearly to strive consciously to develop and implement programs and services on tribes’ own terms and to determine their own funding priorities, service delivery methods, personnel policies, and evaluation processes. The Navajo Nation’s Division of Social Services, for example, uses a portion of its annual Indian Health Service appropriation to fund the Navajo Nation Corrections Project, which brings traditional healers to prison inmates and their relatives in an effort to curb recidivism and to restore individual and community harmony. And finally, a smaller number of tribes – particularly those with significant gaming revenues – are initiating and administering entirely tribally-funded programs and services. These programs completely replace federal, state, and local programs that are otherwise absent or judged inadequate by the tribe. In the case of the Akimel O’odham/Pee-Posh Youth Council, the origin, concept, funding, and operation of the Council are entirely indigenous to Gila River.

Of course, there are significant variations in both tribal governments’ willingness and capacity to address issues of child, family, and community welfare. Tribes such as the Mississippi Band of Choctaw, Gila River Indian Community, and Fond du Lac Lake Superior Band of Chippewa, possess both the commitment to and capacity for improving the welfare of their children and families. Characterized by a “can-do” attitude that is backed by highly skilled staff in tribal departments that can “get things done,” these tribal governments provide fertile ground for programmatic innovation and success in family strengthening. Clearly, these characteristics make these tribes likely targets for foundation support. At the other extreme, there remain tribal governments that control very few of the economic and social programs on their reservations – either because

they do not have the requisite institutional capacity to manage social service provision, or because they are unwilling to allow the federal government to shirk from its treaty obligations. While such low-capacity tribes (as in the first case) may be difficult to work with from a foundation’s perspective, they are also often the ones in the greatest need of support. But support that is effective in helping children and families may need to take forms that do not “look like” family strengthening. Frequently, the most economically desperate tribes with the most limited organizational capacity need institution building (or reform) in its most basic forms: a tribal constitution that has legitimacy among its citizens, a health center that is run by competent public servants, a grievance system that can settle boss-employee disputes, an independent means of dispute resolution, or a basic accounting system that accurately tracks grant income and expenses.

## The Nonprofit Sector

Although the non-Native nonprofit sector has had a longstanding presence in Indian Country that dates back to the early colonization period, the Native nonprofit sector is a relatively recent phenomenon. In fact, with few exceptions,<sup>23</sup> few Native nonprofits existed prior to the 1960s, when civil rights organizations and urban Indian organizations and centers began to emerge.

Today, there are about 2,000 active Native-led nonprofits representing a wide range of issues and constituencies. Based on data from the late 1990s, *Native Americans in Philanthropy* finds that these organizations are most heavily represented in the western US (61 percent of the sector), and 29 percent of the sector’s nonprofits are located on reservations or trust land. Native nonprofits are more likely than the average nonprofit in the US to be involved in economic and community development, and they are also more likely to be involved in arts, culture, environment, and natural resources areas. Native nonprofits are less likely than the average nonprofit in the US to be involved in health areas. The federal government is a major source of funding for Native nonprofits: *Native Americans in Philanthropy* found that, in 1998, 66 percent of Native nonprofits received federal funding. About 50 percent received state funding, 36 percent received funding from one or more tribal governments, and 42 percent received funding from organized philanthropy.<sup>24</sup>

The emergence of the Native nonprofit sector is driven by a number of factors. Like nonprofits in the US and elsewhere in the world, Native nonprofits frequently develop where governments or markets fail to provide services or meet citizen needs. An illustrative example comes from the off-reservation Indian community, where dozens of

urban Indian centers have emerged to meet the needs of tribal members whose off-reservation residence generally precludes them from receiving services available to their on-reservation counterparts. Not surprisingly, cities with large Native populations have well-developed urban Indian centers - among them, Los Angeles (Native population: 128,262), Tulsa (72,426), Oklahoma City (68,941), San Francisco/Oakland/San Jose (59,232), New York (58,062), and Phoenix (57,135).

Some tribal governments have encouraged Native and non-Native non-profits to locate on their reservations; and a number of tribes have begun to encourage the creation of non-profit 501(c)(3) organizations (in order to facilitate individual and corporate donations) under Native management. Similarly, intertribal non-profit organizations can be structured under Section 501 of the IRS code or under Internal Revenue Code Section 7871 to create tribal political subdivisions. In addition, and illustrative of the drive for self-determination and self-rule, a growing number of tribes are developing tribal codes under which nonprofit entities can be incorporated under tribal law, i.e., *tribal* nonprofits.

While the Native nonprofit sector is playing an increasingly important role in service delivery, advocacy, education, and other social service areas, the sector faces a number of major challenges. The sector needs to build the capacity of the staff, management, and boards of directors; and - as with non profits more generally - funding is an on-going challenge. The nonprofit sector in Indian Country is particularly plagued by institutional infancy and organizational underdevelopment. In many cases, tribal governments lack the legal and bureaucratic infrastructure necessary for tribal nonprofits to exist. Particularly on reservations plagued by governmental instability and community poverty, community and tribally-chartered nonprofit organizations are noticeably absent and/or short-lived. Under such conditions, individuals, other governments, and organizations (like foundations) are commonly left with little choice but to work with the tribal government - even on issues that might be more commonly associated with nonprofits.

## Recommendations

To begin, many foundations are well positioned to make meaningful contributions to the health and prosperity of America's 4.1 million American Indians and Alaska Natives.<sup>25</sup> Foundations with strong histories of grantmaking in the field of child and family welfare, longstanding commitments to addressing the needs of America's most underserved communities, and a demonstrated willingness to invest in their own institutional learning have a major and positive role to play in assisting American Indian families

break patterns of socioeconomic blight, and craft futures that look refreshingly different than those of the past.

While many of the programming goals and grantmaking strategies employed by donors in non-Indian contexts are relevant to American Indian-related grantmaking, working effectively in Indian Country will require foundations to take different approaches, think about success in new ways, and work through different sets of institutions than it might be accustomed to.

Section V of this paper, "Observations on Effective Family Strengthening in Indian America" provides a set of lessons that emerge from successful family strengthening endeavors. These observations can assist donors to discern which endeavors hold the most promise for family strengthening in Indian Country. So, what can be done to encourage the emergence of effective initiatives and help build strong futures for children, families, and communities throughout Indian Country? What advice and guidance is most essential as the donors move forward in their grantmaking?

Six recommendations strike us as being most important:

**Recommendation One: Embrace self-determination as the overarching theme of current and future efforts to strengthen families in Indian America.** As the ongoing research of the Harvard Project documents, the common and overriding theme that pervades the otherwise diverse views, cultures and experiences of American Indian individuals, communities, and nations today is one of self-determination. Taking "self-determination" to mean Indian tribes, communities, and individuals using their own knowledge, talents, and institutions to pursue goals and objectives of their own choosing, Native self-determination as the cornerstone of philanthropic endeavors is compelling on legal, moral, and practical grounds.

"Self-determination" has a distinct tenor in Indian Country, most often referring to the formal powers of tribal self-government, as these are grounded in treaties, legislation, executive orders, and legal decisions. Yet, the concept resonates throughout Indian Country - from the small, tribally chartered nonprofit located on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation in Montana, to Native Hawaiian groups organized into 501(c)(3)s, to the urban Indian center in Chicago serving more than 5,000 Menominee who live in or near the city. To these non-governmental actors, self-determination invokes the notion that "we are going to identify and then solve the problems we face on our own terms, using our own people, and using our own institutions."

For all individuals, particularly those interacting with others in multiple cultural settings, knowledge of one's own history and cultural traditions is essential to the development of a strong personal identity.



As the conceptual “glue” that can bind a philanthropic institution’s involvement in Indian affairs into a coherent whole, self-determination can and should serve as the foundation for donors’ grantmaking efforts in Indian America. It should be explicitly incorporated into strategies for strengthening Indian families, including the development of the notion of “family” in diverse tribal contexts. It should structure the relationships that are struck with grantees, communities, and tribal governments. And it should inform discrete grantmaking decisions, e.g., does this proposed project strengthen the group’s ability to control its own destiny? Who’s driving the decisions about policies affecting child and family welfare – the community itself, or outside agencies or organizations? Is the Native voice in the planning phase real or merely a token? Is the Native role in management and implementation meaningful?

The Annie E. Casey Foundation, for example, recognizes that when it works in non-Indian communities that: “We ask local partners to make major, and often difficult, transitions. Thus time and care must be taken to introduce our ideas, find common ground, foster local ownership, and build strong alliances.”<sup>26</sup> Self-determination in Indian Country properly begins to turn the direction of impetus back toward the foundations: “We Native communities, actors, and organizations ask foundation partners to make major, and often difficult, transitions. Thus time and care must be taken to introduce our ideas, find common ground, foster our ownership, and build strong alliances.”

**Recommendation Two: Be flexible in grantmaking, recognizing that there is great diversity of context and need throughout Indian America.** As noted in Section IV, “A Framework for Understanding Family Strengthening in Indian America,” the first lesson one draws from an examination of the ecological environments of those growing up Native is an awareness of diversity. There are political, economic, and socio-cultural contours that make Indian Country different from other populations; and even more important for foundations to understand, there are enormous differences along these dimensions *within* Indian Country.

Recognizing the futility of a “one-size-fits-all” approach to working with Indian communities is essential. Although this statement may seem obvious, a long history of federal – and philanthropic – paternalism and misguided “support” for Native Americans suggests that it is not as obvious, or perhaps not as easy to follow, as one might hope. Grantmaking strategies that work in one urban Indian context will not necessarily work in another. The best entry point for grantmaking on some reservations will be through the tribal government, while at others it may be through the Native non profit, and on still others it may have to be through a non-Native NGO or county agency bordering the reservation. The appropriate “family balance sheet” for one community might be inappropriate and foreign to the community and culture next door. A project that embraces democratic ideals and gives underrepresented groups a voice on issues of family violence may generate community excitement in one context, yet cause counterproductive community strife at another, and so on.

None of this implies that foundations should avoid working with or funding certain types of organizations or tribes. Nor does it imply that foundations should work exclusively with a particular set of organizations and tribes. Instead, foundations should craft their approaches and expectations with grantees on a case-by-case basis and with both eyes on the goal of Native self-determination. This careful approach, while time consuming, is most likely to yield the best outcomes for all parties involved.

**Recommendation Three: Work with the relevant actors and institutions, not just the easiest to fund or most well-connected.** A recent research project conducted by the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development on foundation grantmaking in support of American Indian causes and concerns found that well established, organizationally capable, and relatively large nonprofits were the typical recipients of \$10,000-plus grants from foundations over the period 1989-1998. A number of “usual suspects” accounted for the majority of these funds. Over this time period, for example, only 5.77 percent of the phil-

anthropic sector's Native American-related grants were awarded to tribal governing bodies, despite their desperate financial and organizational needs and the prominent role they play in many American Indian communities at this point in history. Equally concerning, our analysis found that certain segments of the Native population – namely, off-reservation Indians, Native Hawaiians, and Alaska Natives – were almost completely ignored by the philanthropic sector.<sup>27</sup>

Building strong futures for Indian children and families will have to involve tribal governments, non-Indian governments, and the Native and non-Native nonprofit sectors. It will also require foundations to look beyond the “usual suspects” and work with institutions that it might not be familiar working with. In Indian Country, these include urban Indian centers, religious institutions, tribal governments, state, local, and federal agencies, and the growing Native nonprofit sector.

Unusual effort is likely to be needed to understand specific Native settings and to find the appropriate venues, people, and organizations through which to work. Even more than most other identifiable groups, American Indians have been disenfranchised. Combinations of racism, false presumptions that the federal government took care of Indians, difficulties of communication across cultures, and rural-ness have left many Native Americans bereft of the knowledge and capacity needed to play the grantsmanship game with foundations, as well as wholly outside the networks over which most foundations travel.

**Recommendation Four: Foster connections within and across sectors.** This is an approach that holds great promise for application in Indian America. Through the Harvard Project's Honoring Nations best practices awards program, it has become clear that peer-to-peer learning is invaluable. Although the diversity of contexts often inhibits direct replication of innovative programs and approaches, the fact that many tribes and Indian communities share similar challenges makes cross-tribal and cross-community exchanges extremely fruitful. For example, countless urban Indian communities can benefit from the knowledge accumulated by the Menominee Community Center of Chicago about how to work effectively with tribal governments. Tribal governments struggling to increase the supply of Indian foster homes on and off-reservation can learn from Fond du Lac's success with the Fond du Lac Band's Foster Care Licensing and Placement Agency. Tribal governments confronting epidemics of diabetes can learn from the Winnebago's success in incorporating culture into service delivery. Native nonprofits incorporated under tribal law can provide technical assistance to other nonprofits and tribal governments about developing the necessary institutional

infrastructure. Sharing successes – and failures – within a single sector can be enormously productive, especially since it is a relatively new approach in Indian America.<sup>28</sup>

Cross-sector connections and collaborations are still quite rare in Indian Country. With 562 federally recognized tribes struggling to handle their own affairs, numerous other Native communities similarly engaged, and tens of thousands of Native individuals with few or weak links to home tribes, the notion that the tribes and Indian communities are all talking to each other is but a vain hope. For example, the vast majority of urban Indian centers have had little to no contact with the tribal governments from which their community members are citizens. With turnover in jobs and the press of daily exigencies, managers of tribal social service programs seldom, if ever, have time to seek out information on what's working and what's not with other tribes. To our knowledge, state and local government agencies have had few opportunities to share best practices in working with Native communities. And while tribal governments are increasingly working with sub-national, non-Indian governments on a full range of issues, there remain few opportunities for tribes or non-Indian governments to gather information about effective approaches by others to this increasingly important set of intergovernmental relations.

**Recommendation Five: Strengthen institutions, especially among tribal governments and Native nonprofits.**

As we have stressed, our research consistently finds that Native communities that are in control of design, delivery, and decision-making are the ones that are breaking long-standing cycles of poverty, dependence, and their related social ills. But taking sustained and effective collective action requires investment in institutions – governments, nonprofits, and other civil society organizations. Institutions are the vehicles by which human communities implement the shared objectives of a people. It follows that progress in building strong futures for Native children, families, and communities hinges on building the institutions by which Native communities, themselves, take culturally meaningful action.

Foundations can and should play a vital role in institution-building, both at the tribal level and among Native nonprofits. Only with capable institutions are tribes and other Native communities able to design and implement (or administer) projects aimed at strengthening families. Yet, many tribes still find themselves working under and through inherited institutions not of their own making. In the case of tribal governments, the implied need in this era of self-governance and self-determination is for policy development and constitutional, policy, and administrative (i.e., bureaucratic) reform. Native nonprofits, are a rela-

tively new phenomenon in Indian America, and the sector and the organizations that comprise it are ripe for further investment and development. Foundations can play a constructive role in this by supporting tribal efforts to develop environments that are conducive to the sector's growth, and by broadcasting alternative models for community mobilization and institutionalization that Native communities can tailor to fit their own needs.

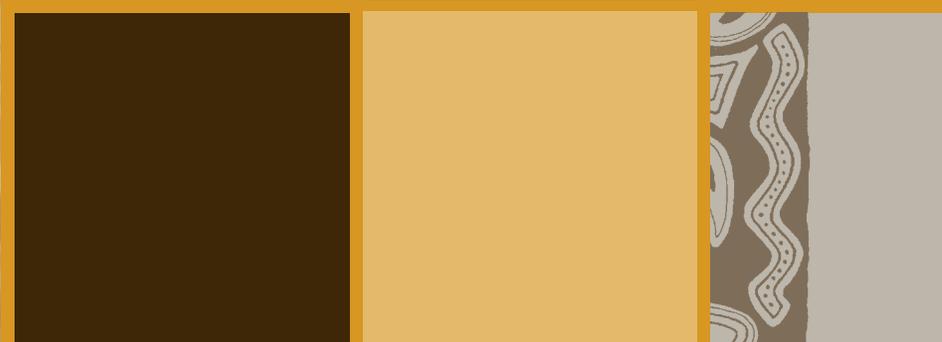
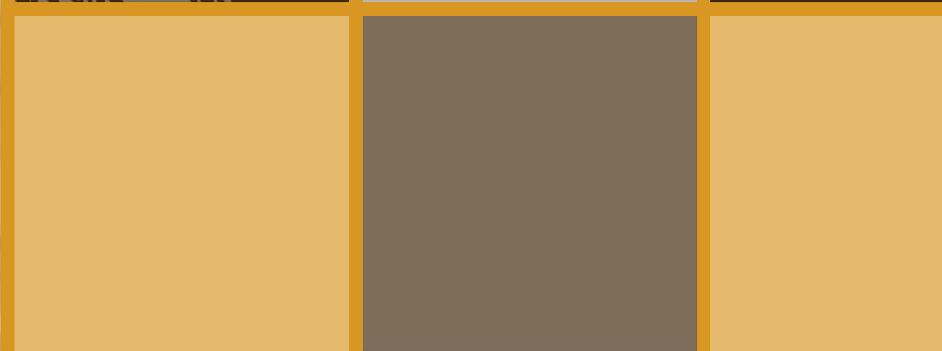
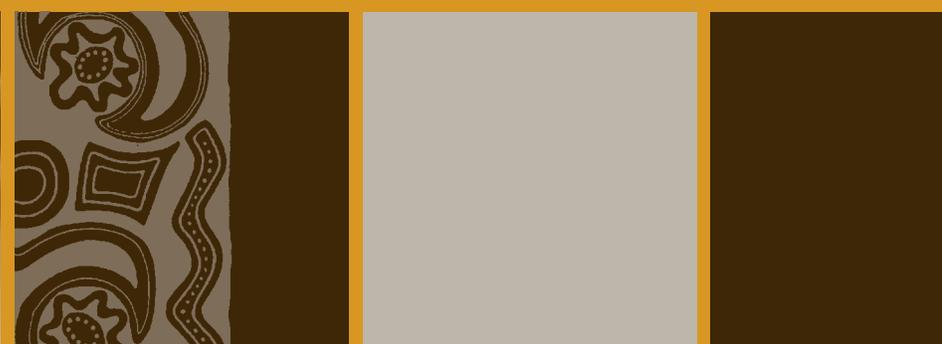
Strengthening institutions is certainly a long-term endeavor that requires foundations to make long-term investments, often without "ribbon-cutting" glory or immediate (or even measurable) indicators of success. But the payoffs of increasing tribes' and nonprofits' capacities to be self-governed and self-determined will far exceed the success of any single program or project. Needed investments may not look like family strengthening, but the effective foundation pursuing the well-being of children and families might well find itself supporting a constitutional convention, or the training of tribal court judges, or the adoption of business codes that can support economic development.

**Recommendation Six: Institutionalize American Indian-related grantmaking.** Recognizing that working effectively in Indian America requires a specialized knowledge base and, often, different grantmaking approaches, it is important for foundations to institutionalize their American Indian-related grantmaking. Some of the ways that foundations might deepen their knowledge and institutionalize their involvements in Indian America include: (1) hiring Native American staff and consultants with knowledge of the field, (2) sharing information among program staff and between Indian grantees, (3) incorporating Native grantees and leaders into all facets of the foundation's activities, (4) disseminating research findings and best practices in grantmaking within the philanthropic sector and across Indian Country, and (5) getting program officers "on the ground" in Indian Country.

This last recommendation deserves special emphasis. American Indian communities in the US are dynamic and vibrant communities in the midst of a resurgence. There is no substitute for being "on the ground" for understanding this process and its variations across hundreds of settings. Without the requisite investments of program officers' time and foundations' money in getting their organizations past stereotypes and preconceptions, the outcomes of foundations' efforts to strengthen Native families will fall far short of their potential.

## Footnotes

- <sup>21</sup> Although the majority of health centers in Indian Country are tribally controlled, most hospitals are operated by the federal Indian Health Service.
- <sup>22</sup> For example, even though PRWORA gave tribes the option to manage their own programs, tribal programs still serve fewer than half of the American Indian families receiving welfare. "There are a variety of ways that American Indians might fall under state jurisdiction. First, not all self-identified American Indians are also members of tribes, and most of these individuals would only be eligible for state services. Second, not all tribes administer TANF programs, and in cases where they don't, tribal members are served by the states in which they reside. Third, even where there is a tribal program, tribal citizens opt to receive TANF services from either the state or the tribe (but not both). Finally, tribal citizens may receive services from the state even under tribal TANF programs, if that program has contracted the state to provide certain services." Eddie Brown, E., Leslie Schueler-Whitaker, L., et al., "Welfare, Work Reform on American Indian Reservations: A Report to the National Congress of American Indians, November, 2001, accessed at [www.ksg.harvard.edu/hpaied/](http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/hpaied/).
- <sup>23</sup> The National Congress of American Indians was formed in 1944.
- <sup>24</sup> Native Americans in Philanthropy: *Down But Not Out: The Nonprofit Sector in Native America and the New Federalism*, 1999.
- <sup>25</sup> Persons who self-identified as American Indian/Alaska Native in the 2000 United States Census. Note: In 1990, the number of self-identified American Indian/Alaska Natives was 2.4 million.
- <sup>26</sup> Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Making Connections: Theory of Change*, at [www.aecf.org/initiatives/mc/theory.htm](http://www.aecf.org/initiatives/mc/theory.htm).
- <sup>27</sup> Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, *American Indian Research and Grants Assessment Project: A Report to the Committee on Indigenous Peoples*, The Ford Foundation, April 2002 (release pending).
- <sup>28</sup> For example, with the exception of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's recent convening, urban Indian organizations have had few - if any - opportunities to connect with each other.



# Appendix A: Consultative Session on Family Strengthening in Indian America



## May 15-16, 2003

Malcolm Wiener Center for  
Social Policy  
John F. Kennedy School of Government  
Harvard University  
Cambridge, Massachusetts

## Hosted by

The Annie E. Casey Foundation &  
The Harvard Project on American  
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(Continued)

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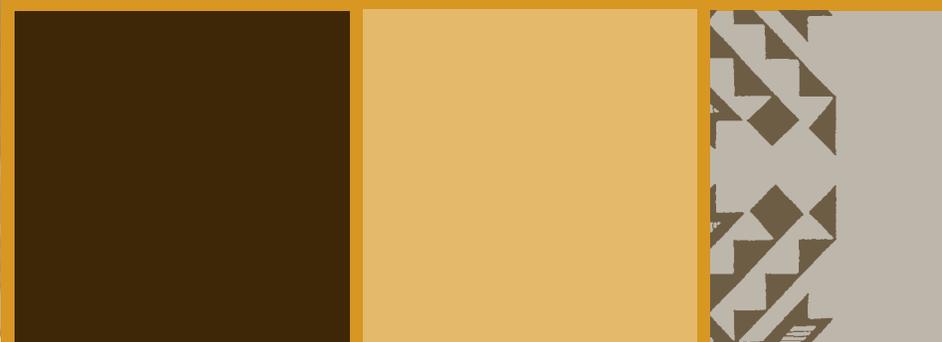
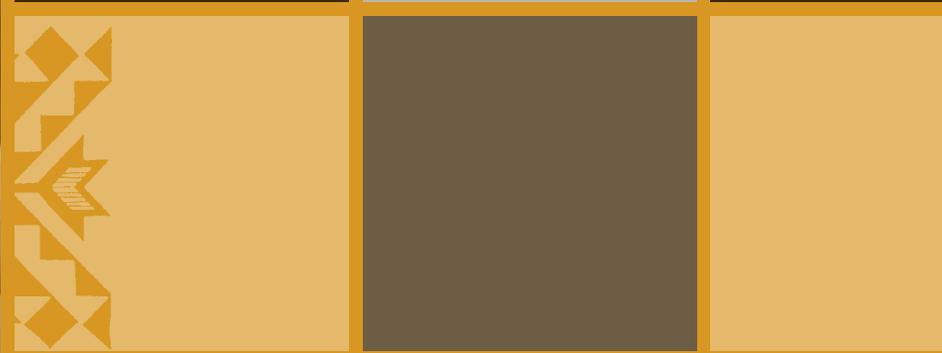
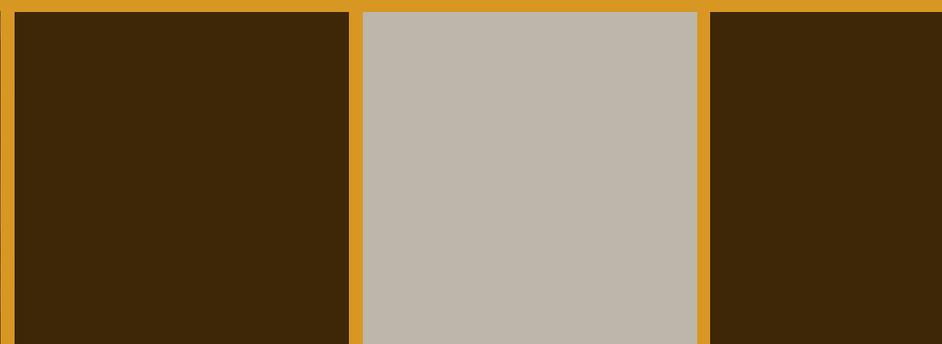
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# Appendix B: Case Studies

## Fond du Lac Foster Care Licensing and Placement Agency

Fond du Lac Human Services Division  
Fond du Lac Lake Superior Band of Chippewa  
(Cloquet, Minnesota)



### Introduction

Although the number of out-of-home placements experienced by children across the nation, and specifically by children in the state of Minnesota, is generally declining, the number of American Indian children in foster care continues to grow. For tribal leaders and citizens of the Fond du Lac Band of Ojibwe, whose 100,000-acre reservation lies primarily in northern Minnesota's Saint Louis County, statistics and stories about the number of Ojibwe children placed in foster care were more than just upsetting. They became a catalyst that generated an innovative idea, a new nonprofit organization, dozens of additional American Indian foster care providers, and a host of benefits that continue to improve the welfare of the children and the strength of the Band.

### A History of Out-of-Home Placements

Sadly, American Indians in the child welfare system today are not the first generation to experience removal from their families of origin. From the late 1800s to the mid 1900s, the US government made it a common practice to separate children from their families and nations to place them in "boarding schools." These schools, which sought to Christianize and "enlighten" Natives, resulted in whole generations of Indians being stripped of their language, religious beliefs, and familial bonds. As an administrator in the Fond du Lac Division of Social Services observes, "It is little wonder that as foster care developed into a firmly established practice of the American social welfare system later in the century, American Indian communities came to need and/or be subjected to out-of-home placement services more than members of other communities."

In an effort to address the consequences of this unfortunate history of ill-conceived policies and practices, Congress passed the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) in 1978. The Act requires all local social service agencies to work closely with tribal governments and make every attempt to place Indian children with relatives or in Indian foster families before engaging non-Indian caregivers. Still, Indian children are disproportionately subjected to out of home placement and American Indian children remain disproportionately represented in the overall population of foster children in the US.

### Seeking a Creative Solution

By the early 1990s, the Fond du Lac Band of Ojibwe's Division of Human Services was aggressively - and successfully - working to keep Indian children in Indian families on the reservation. Approximately 12 of every 1,000 adults on the reservation were a foster parent, a figure that was substantially higher than the surrounding area's average of one foster parent among every 1,000 adults. Although the Fond du Lac Human Services Division had been very successful in recruiting Indian foster parents on the reservation, still only 30 percent of Indian children in Saint Louis County were placed in Indian foster families. In other words, the Band had reached a saturation point for eligible foster homes, and if more Indian children in need of foster care were to receive the benefits of placement with cultural integrity, those placements could not occur on the reservation. It was vital for Indian children to be placed in off-reservation Indian foster homes.

As the Band's Human Services Division contemplated what it could do, it quickly discovered that more than half of the tribal members lived off the reservation and that the county had failed to recruit any of these off-reservation Indian families. Staff speculated that Indian families were not volunteering due to a lack of trust in the state government. Further, they hypothesized that Indian families were concerned that cultural misunderstanding or even racism would cause non-Indian licensing officials to miscalculate their ability to care for foster children. While Human Services staff believed they could succeed where the county had failed, one substantial problem remained - the Band lacked licensing authority outside reservation boundaries.

### **An Innovative Plan**

The Fond du Lac Foster Care Licensing and Placement Agency (the Agency) was the solution to both the Band's jurisdictional and recruitment problems. The Band established a non profit organization, chartered under state laws, with a dual mission: to increase the number of Indian homes available for children who would otherwise be placed in non-Indian homes and to reunify Indian children with their birth families as quickly as possible.

To govern the Agency, the Band's Tribal Council created a seven-member board of directors, which includes one Tribal Council member, four tribal Human Services Division staff members, and two reservation community members. Once the Board was in place, the Agency applied for licensure by the State of Minnesota for foster care recruitment, retention, and support. Next, they negotiated contracts with St. Louis County and three other county child welfare programs in the area. This allowed the Agency to receive reimbursement of program costs from the counties using the Agency-licensed homes.

Next, the Agency negotiated a sub-contract with the Fond du Lac Division of Human Services, which agreed to provide administrative support. The Division's strong positive experience with on-reservation licensing made it well-positioned to encourage, support, and process licenses off-reservation as well. To ensure the organization's legitimacy, acceptance, and success, the Division of Human Services hired highly qualified employees. This created good working relationships with county social workers and an exemplary off-reservation foster care program. With all of the institutional pieces in place, in 1991 the Band began expanding the availability of Indian foster homes in northern Minnesota.

### **"We Know Our Community Best"**

Almost immediately, the Fond du Lac Division of Human Services staff found that Indian families were more com-

fortable working with the Band and its employees rather than with county employees. Before the Agency even opened its doors, interested off-reservation parents were calling to ask how to begin the application and review process. Discussing her family's decision to foster a child and their choice to work with Fond du Lac off-reservation program, one mother said, "We don't have to explain why we live the way we do, why we smudge the house down with sage or why we go to Canada for a pow-wow." In fact, since the Agency's inception, staff has found word of mouth to be far more effective than formal outreach campaigns. Not only is the cost of wide-scale publicity avoided, but referrals from other families bring forward new resources who are appropriate and prepared. This largely eliminates the need to reject applicants.

The strength of the Agency extends beyond successful recruitment of foster families. The Agency runs a special training program for its new families that instills good parenting skills that are culturally appropriate. In addition to the usual foster parenting discussions of regulations, discipline, and children's special needs, trainers also offer information on the particular concerns of Indian children. This is especially important in cases where families have been disconnected from the reservation community and its cultural practices. Finally, the Agency foster families have access to a larger number of culturally relevant support services (i.e. public health nurses, medical clinics that deal with large numbers of Ojibwe, various other social services) because the program is so closely linked with the tribal Human Services Division.

### **Positive Results and Lessons for Other Tribes**

In the last decade, the Agency has ensured that more Indian children in Minnesota grow up in Indian homes. The Agency maintains approximately 30 off-reservation Indian foster homes and serves more than 70 children each year. Today, approximately 60 percent of the Indian children in out-of-home placement in St. Louis County are in Indian homes. This is a remarkable achievement given that as recently as 1991, there were no off-reservation Indian foster homes in Saint Louis County.

The Agency has more than simply increased the percentage of children placed in Indian homes, however. The design and cultural relevance of the Agency have strengthened children, families, and the community in at least six critical ways.

**First, the off-reservation program connects children and their foster families more closely with the Band and its Ojibwe traditions.** The Agency team includes a spiritual advisor, who arranges training and cultural events and is

on call for emergency situations. Children are exposed to activities such as traditional dancing. Ensuring the opportunity for children to participate in Ojibwe traditions is an inherent part of the off-reservation foster care program's daily work. Since the program's inception, many of the families have noted how their involvement as foster parents has brought them closer to the Band and reconnected them with their culture at the same time as connecting the children. These investments in cultural relevance are not trite. Instead, they contribute fundamentally to the program's (and Agency's) legitimacy, an attribute that is necessary for programmatic success both within and outside of Indian Country.

**Second, prior to the Agency, on-reservation foster care families were working with the county agency as relative caregivers** - and were not receiving any foster care reimbursement dollars. The off-reservation program helped the on-reservation foster care program's tribal administrators to realize that the Band could petition the State of Minnesota for reimbursement for reservation-based foster care as well. The Band did just that, and in combination, the on- and off-reservation programs channeled more than \$41.9 million to Indian foster families during its first five years of operation alone, thus improving the economic well-being of tribal citizens. In other words, the Band's exposure to governmental operations in an off-reservation setting shed light on how it could deliver services and dollars on the reservation.

**Third, the Band and the surrounding counties now enjoy strong relationships that are based on mutual trust.** The Agency spans four counties and has particularly strong connections with two of them. The staff has cultivated relationships with their county partners slowly, gaining trust in small increments. The strength of the Fond du Lac on- and off-reservation programs have made their social workers highly desirable as trainers and consultants. The Band's experience in these intergovernmental relationships highlights an important lesson for other tribes: strong and productive working relationships with other governments may take a long time to develop, but the chances of achieving them are greatly enhanced when both governments respect the talents and qualifications of each others' front-line employees.

**Fourth, the program has raised consciousness about Indian child welfare for the county workers, who now consistently consult a tribal social worker on Indian children cases.** Quarterly meetings in two of the counties help the Agency staff understand county trends, concerns, and constraints. County social workers can also bring thoughts, concerns, and questions about their cases involving Native children - even children who are not in foster care via the

off-reservation program. In fact, Fond du Lac does not limit its involvement to children from its own Band, but works with all eleven tribes in the region. Since the Band has trusting relationships with those tribes as well, they can help act as an intermediary between the tribes and the counties. For Fond du Lac, this willingness to educate their peers is likely to have pay-offs over the long-term.

**Fifth, the Agency was designed to provide children with a seamless transition from foster care to their family of origin through the cooperation of the foster and birth families.** When severe drug and alcohol problems prevent reunification, the program integrates extended family members into the planning for a child's care. Establishing connections between relatives and foster parents who are tribal members, even if off-reservation, is far easier than building connections with non-Native foster care providers.

**Finally, through the establishment of the Foster Care Licensing and Placement Agency, the Fond du Lac Band took a large step toward greater levels of self-determination and self-governance** - a step that both reinforced the Band's confidence in its governing ability and served as a source of community pride. At its core, the Agency is an Indian foster care licensing and placement agency that establishes Indian foster homes outside the reservation boundaries. On a basic legal level, this extension of jurisdiction is an important assertion of tribal sovereignty. On a more conceptual level, the Band's degree of self-governance is increased because it is better able to promote the rights and interests of all its citizens.

## Conclusions

Fond du Lac Foster Care Licensing and Placement Agency is an example of excellence in child welfare - creatively developing solutions to come to the aid of the Band's foster children while also maintaining and strengthening cultural ties. Fond du Lac children are given safe, Native homes and the opportunity to rebuild relationships with their birth parents. Indian youth are much less likely to be "lost" in the non-Indian foster care system, and are increasingly afforded the protection of the Band despite their location off of the reservation.

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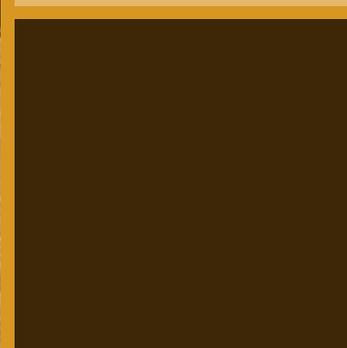
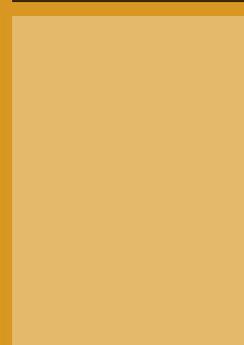
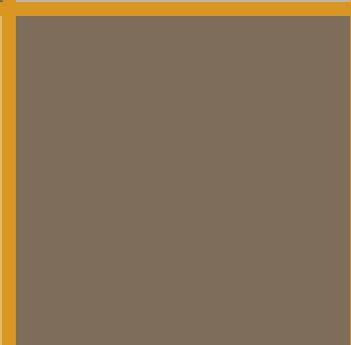
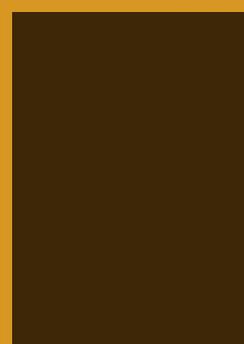
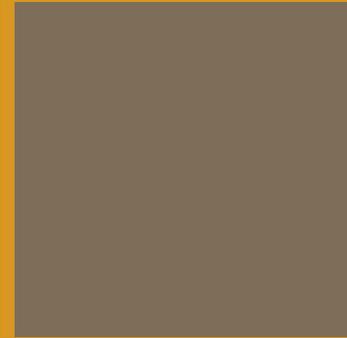
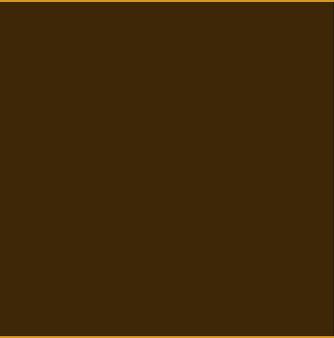
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# Whirling Thunder Wellness Program

Winnebago Tribal Health Department  
Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska  
(Winnebago, Nebraska)



## Introduction

At a cost of \$132 billion per year, diabetes is one of the leading causes of lost productivity, disability, hospitalization, and death. Of the 12 million Americans with diabetes, most have Type II, which is three times more prevalent among American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/ANs) and is the fourth leading cause of death in AI/AN communities. Fortunately, Type II diabetes is both treatable and preventable. Recent clinical trials with significant AI/AN participation have demonstrated that changes in lifestyle, primarily through diet, exercise, and medication adherence, can delay the onset of diabetes. In response, many tribes are creating community-based health promotion programs designed to prevent diabetes through education and lifestyle change.

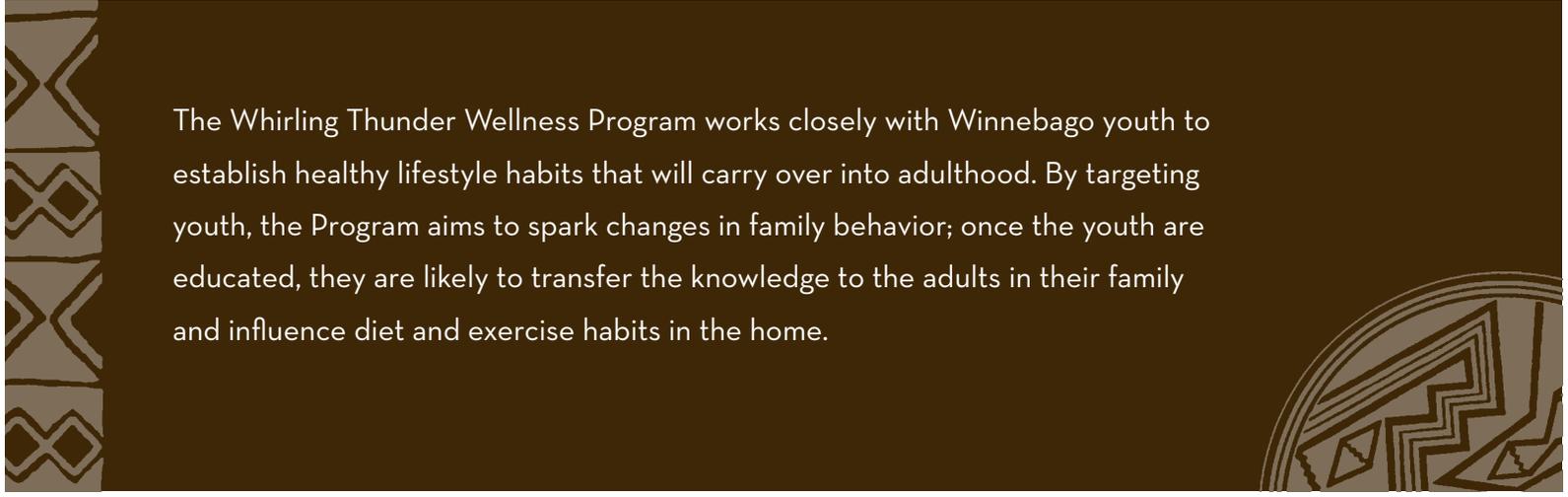
Established in 1979, and taken under Winnebago tribal management in 1995, the Whirling Thunder Wellness Program combats diabetes and substance abuse by raising community awareness, administering primary and secondary prevention services, and encouraging healthy lifestyles that are consistent with traditional practices. With its focus on prevention, this field-based program is changing individual, family, and community behavior on the reservation and helping to ensure a healthy citizenry for generations to come.

## A Heritage of Health

Community health has long been a priority for tribal leaders at the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska, which is located about 60 miles north of Omaha. Having suffered through epidemics of smallpox and measles in the 1600s that reduced the population from about 25,000 to 150, the Winnebago have a deep historical understanding of the importance of good physical health. Even as the Winnebago lost almost all of their lands to the United States in treaties signed in the 1820s and 1830s, tribal leaders insisted that health care be among the services guaranteed by the federal government for their people. Among the greatest champions of community health and wellness was Chief Whirling Thunder.

While Winnebago leaders have long recognized that tribal strength and community health are inextricably linked, Winnebago tribal citizens have struggled with serious health problems over the last half-century. Like many American Indian populations, diabetes has been a destructive force among the Winnebago Reservation's 2,600 residents. Currently, 48 percent of Winnebago youth have hyperinsulinemia, a predictor of future diabetes. One third of Winnebago adults have Type II diabetes and incidence and prevalence of diabetes are 7.7 and 8.8 percent higher in this population than in the US population at large.

In 1979, the Indian Health Service (IHS) established one of its five model diabetes programs on the Winnebago Reservation. The Winnebago/Omaha Diabetes Project operated out of the local IHS hospital and was administered by three community health nurses who served both the Win-



The Whirling Thunder Wellness Program works closely with Winnebago youth to establish healthy lifestyle habits that will carry over into adulthood. By targeting youth, the Program aims to spark changes in family behavior; once the youth are educated, they are likely to transfer the knowledge to the adults in their family and influence diet and exercise habits in the home.

Winnebago and its neighboring tribe, the Omaha. Although the project provided much-needed data collection and improved clinical treatment for tribal citizens with diabetes, by the mid-1990s tribal leaders became attracted to the idea of the Tribe running its own diabetes program. Specifically, tribal leaders envisioned a program that would focus on diabetes prevention, be field based (rather than operated out of the IHS hospital), and incorporate community values into its services. As one tribal leader proclaimed, “The Indian Health Service is good at counting up the new cases of diabetes and the bad problems of diabetes like amputations and kidney dialysis. My question is how do we get in front of this problem, to stop it for future generations?”

### Moving Forward:

#### The Whirling Thunder Wellness Program

In an act of self-determination, in 1994 the Tribe initiated the process of contracting its share of the Diabetes Project from the IHS under *The Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975* (P.L. 93-638). In 1995, the contract was approved and the Tribe launched the Whirling Thunder Wellness Program. Housed within the Winnebago Tribal Health Department, the Whirling Thunder Wellness Program’s mission is to “elevate the health and wellness status of Winnebago community members.” With a twelve-person staff comprised of four health professionals and eight para-professionals in the fields of fitness, nutrition, public health, and substance abuse prevention, the Program addresses both diabetes and substance abuse – a dual focus that has been in place since 1998 following a review that found that almost half of the diabetes sufferers have a dual diagnosis of substance abuse.

The Program possesses three core objectives: first, to increase and maintain community and family awareness and focus on the diseases of diabetes and substance abuse; second, to provide culturally appropriate primary and secondary prevention programs and services; and third, to provide programs to encourage healthy lifestyles inside and outside of the home that are consistent with traditional practices. These objectives, along with the services and programs that advance them, are reviewed annually by Whirling Thunder Wellness Program staff, the Winnebago Wellness Coalition (a group of health care professionals, representatives of institutional partners, and concerned community members), and the Winnebago Tribal Health Directors.

Because of the strong ties between diabetes, substance abuse, and lifestyle behaviors, the Whirling Thunder Wellness Program works closely with Winnebago youth to establish healthy lifestyle habits that will carry over into adulthood. By targeting youth, the Program aims to spark changes in family behavior: once the youth are educated, they are likely to transfer the knowledge to the adults in their family and influence diet and exercise habits in the home. For example, during peak “youth risk hours,” the Program administers a robust set of healthy options. From 3:00 to 5:00 p.m. Monday through Thursday, Program staff immerse children from kindergarten to eighth grade in exercise, athletic events, traditional dance classes, nutrition courses, and culture and language education. These classes are taught by adults in the community, including the parents and grandparents of the schoolchildren as well as tribal leaders. Such activities force issues of health and nutrition to be at the forefront of community and family attention. They demonstrate that healthy lifestyles support and are supported by activities that involve spending time with family and community members.

Although the Program tries to reach parents directly (in addition to reaching them through the youth) it does not expect parents to take sole responsibility for the healthy lifestyles of their children when school is not in session. During the summer months, the Program organizes a number of cultural programs – such as teaching youth how to grow and harvest Indian corn – and administers the Whirling Thunder Youth Sports Program. The Sports Program, like the after-school program, involves parents and other adults as coaches and includes activities such as swimming, basketball, soccer, bowling, golf, baseball, softball, boxing, martial arts, cross-country, and track and field. Such youth-adult interaction both encourages active lifestyles and active discussions in the home.

The Whirling Thunder Wellness Program also encourages its clients and the community at-large to use the state-of-the-art Whirling Thunder gym. Every six to eight weeks, the Program offers adult health promotion campaigns – such as “Reach for the Stars,” “Pow-Wow Trail to Fitness,” and “Health for the Holidays” – which motivate adults to keep on track with their personal wellness routines by offering creative and healthy group activities. Evening “men’s nights” and “women’s nights” encourage fathers and sons and mothers and daughters to engage together in group sports and exercise while simultaneously spending time with family and community members. The Program also works with the elderly. For example, “Seniors on the Move” provides elders with health screening, nutrition education, arts and crafts activities, as well as exercise programs twice a week. The Whirling Thunder Wellness Program staff also makes trips to the local nursing home every six

weeks. In other words, the Program incorporates every generation of the Tribe, from children to grandparents. To improve eating habits of the Winnebago, the Program employs a registered dietitian who makes regular cooking demonstrations. The Program also operates the Healthy Choice Café and the Kidz Café, which serve nutritious meals. The Kidz Café provides healthy meals and snacks to community children during the summer months. Each day at the Kidz Café, children are served skim milk, fresh fruits, and vegetables. Three days per week, they are served a low-fat, low-cholesterol bison meat entrée (for example, bison tacos and bison lasagna), an innovation that required the Tribe to negotiate – and ultimately win – approval from the US Department of Agriculture. And while most would assume that kids try to avoid nutritious meals, the Kidz Café is demonstrating that healthy meals can be quite popular. In the summer of 2001, more than nine thousand healthy lunches were served to community children. Moreover, seven hundred healthy lunches were also purchased by adults that same summer!

In addition to these after-school and summer programs, the Whirling Thunder Wellness Program administers several other critical services for Winnebago youth. For example, the Program screens for diabetes, diabetes risk factors, and substance abuse related risk behaviors. With parental consent, the Program measures children’s height, weight, blood pressure, waist/hip ratio, body composition, blood sugar levels, and undertakes Acanthosis Nigricans grading and fitness testing. Wellness Program staff visit children who are at particularly high risk for diabetes at home and appropriate dietary and lifestyle measures are discussed with the family.

Among the services that the Whirling Thunder Wellness Program is most proud of is “Team Up Winnebago...Defeat Diabetes,” an innovative diabetes treatment program that consists of a two-day intensive diabetes education conference held at an out-of-town hotel. “Team Up” brings together clients to listen to speakers and engage in “talking circle” discussions with peers and community health professionals about effective diabetes self-management. Forty-one diabetes patients have completed the “Team Up” program with remarkably positive results. In three, six, and twelve-month follow-up contacts, patients have lost weight, decreased their diabetes medication dosages, improved their lipid levels, developed healthier nutrition habits, exercised, and most importantly, maintained supportive contact with each other and Program staff. In a recent *Washington Post* article, one participant praised the “Team Up” talking circles for offering support and a sense of hope: “The best thing the circles taught me is that we don’t have to die from diabetes. Now I know my family has a chance.”

## Impact of the Whirling Thunder Wellness Program

Since assuming control of its diabetes program in 1995, the Winnebago Tribe's Whirling Thunder Wellness Program has been an extremely powerful force in motivating the community to embrace healthy behaviors and reduce diabetes risk factors. In 2001, over 1,200 Winnebago adults and youth were screened for diabetes and diabetes risk factors. The Program's after-school and summer athletic programs have attracted hundreds of hours of participation, and the Kidz Café and Healthy Choice Café have served thousands of healthy meals. Tribal leaders say that, increasingly, they are served healthy meals when they visit people's homes for dinner, a shift that is indicative of changing community norms. These efforts are not without their rewards. In 2000, organizers of a Program-sponsored foot race ran out of extra large T-shirts, a remarkable feat given that in 2001, organizers of the same event couldn't give away the extra large T-shirts. Confirming this anecdotal evidence, a recent study conducted at the University of Nebraska suggests that the Winnebago Tribe is winning its battle against diabetes by reducing risk factors such as obesity. Specifically, the study examined changes in weight among participants in physical activities sponsored by the Whirling Thunder Wellness Program and found that youth who participated in the Program had a significantly lower increase in weight than those not in the Program. Tribal leaders, citizens, community health professionals, and Program staff are thrilled with their progress and are committed to building upon their success.

## Lessons From the Experiences of the Winnebago Tribe

Both Indian and non-Indian governments and health care providers can learn a great deal from the Winnebago Tribe's Whirling Thunder Wellness Program. Four factors stand out as being especially instrumental to the Program's success.

**The first is the Program's family and community based approach to dealing with the problems of diabetes and substance abuse, chronic diseases with significant behavior components in their etiology and treatment.** Unlike many diabetes and/or substance abuse programs that concentrate solely on clinical treatment for those already diagnosed, the Whirling Thunder Wellness Program's focus on community prevention is changing individual, family, and community behavior, a transformation that recent research suggests is more effective in treating diabetes than prescription medications. Consistent with the idea that multidimensional problems require multidimensional interventions, the Program combines multiple medical programs with creative nutrition awareness and physical exercise programs. Every group within the community, from the elderly to schoolchildren, is included in the Whirling Thunder Wellness Program, both to contribute and receive benefits. The Program's inclusiveness is facilitated by the fact that it is tribally managed. The Winnebago Tribal Health Department is able to infuse culture into its services, which makes the Program distinctly Winnebago and thereby increases the relevance of the program in the eyes of its constituents.

### **A second factor that bolsters the effectiveness of the Whirling Thunder Wellness Program is its use of data.**

Indeed, the most impressive social service programs in Indian Country and elsewhere recognize that data collection and analysis can be powerful tools. At the Whirling Thunder Wellness Program, staff collect data that help them track progress and results for every Program activity and service. They monitor changes in diabetes risk factors and indicators for individual children and adults. They undertake community-wide assessments of substance abuse and diabetes prevalence. They track participation in Program-sponsored events so that they gain a better understanding of what kinds of activities are most likely to generate participation among specific target populations. And they keep count of how many meals they serve to identify and evaluate eating behaviors. Armed with such information, the Program and its advisory body (which meets each year for a Program review) are able to evaluate the Program's success in preventing and treating diabetes and substance abuse, and also to tailor services to best meet community needs. The fact that the Program recently created a "data/

management analyst” position is a testament to its commitment to continuous quality improvement.

**A third factor contributing to the Program’s success is the presence of a highly skilled staff.** Since taking over management of its diabetes services in 1995, Program staffing has grown from one physical/diabetes educator to a twelve-member, highly skilled, multidisciplinary team. The Program does not treat these staff members as simply workers. Staff members are encouraged to obtain additional training and certification as well as higher education. Through a partnership with Little Priest College, for instance, Program staff can take courses for continuing education credit. Additionally, the Program offers training for its youth and adult participants, which has in turn strengthened Program operations and provided new employment opportunities for tribal citizens. Through an array of Program-organized certification programs, tribal citizens have become and currently work as certified lifeguards, pool managers, pool operators, community cooks, and sports coaches. By linking employment, education, and program clientele, the Whirling Thunder Wellness Program ensures its own continuity and effectiveness into the next generation.

**The Whirling Thunder Wellness Program’s strategic use of partnerships, both within the Tribe and with outside entities, is a final noteworthy factor in its success.** The multidisciplinary and cross-generational nature of the Program’s work necessitates productive inter-agency relationships. Toward this end, the Program works closely with other tribal departments, the Winnebago Wellness Coalition, and the tribal health directors to coordinate services and ensure a consistent message of health promotion and diabetes prevention. The Program also maintains fruitful relationships with outside entities. For example, the Program is involved in strategic planning discussions at the local IHS agency, which now works with the Program to increase its outreach activities and to learn how to incorporate culture into treatment. A partnership with the University of Nebraska and the University of Arizona is enhancing the Program’s ability to evaluate its programmatic effectiveness. These and other partnerships with Head Start, The Winnebago Bison Program, The SEVA Foundation, and Little Priest College, among others, enable the Whirling Thunder Wellness Program to deliver and coordinate a wide range of community services.

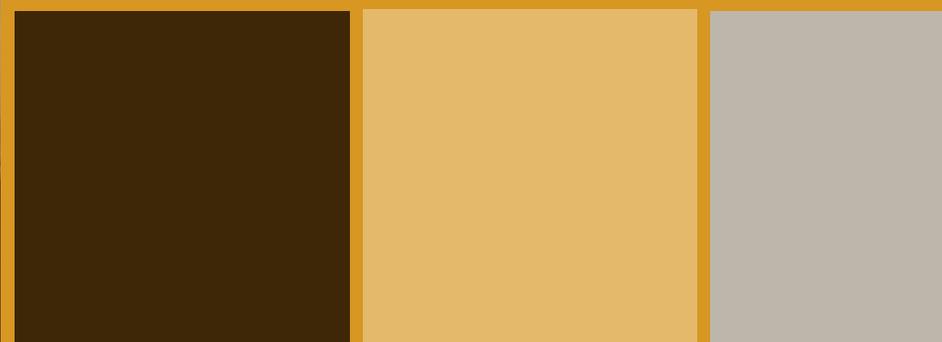
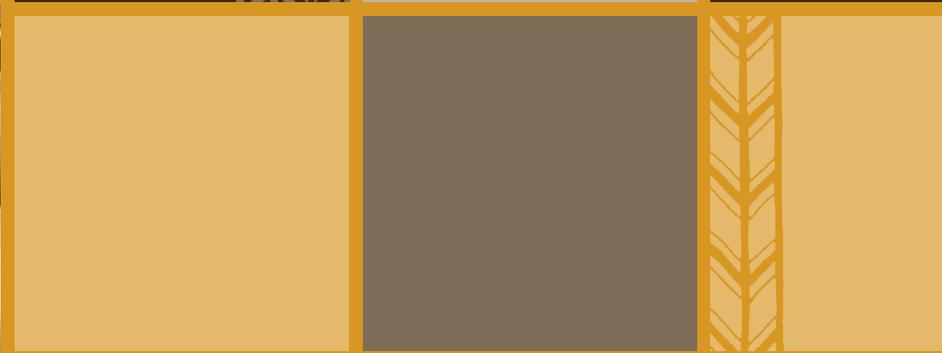
## Conclusions

The Whirling Thunder Wellness Program is combating one of the most pressing and pervasive problems in Indian Country. The Program is a shining example of how a tribe, using its sovereignty, can respond to a compelling health crisis on its own terms and successfully alter lifestyles using culturally appropriate means. Indeed, the Winnebago Tribe’s Whirling Thunder Wellness Program offers hope and inspiration to other tribes and communities addressing this epidemic.

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# Menominee Community Center of Chicago

Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin  
(Keshena, Wisconsin)



## Introduction

Like many Indian tribes, over half of the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin lives off-reservation. The ties between the Menominee's reservation and urban populations have been tenuous for decades. In 1994, however, a group of Menominee Indians in Chicago reached out to the Tribe and the Tribe reciprocated. Today, the Menominee Community Center of Chicago is an official community of the Menominee Tribe and its members are active participants in tribal culture and governance, strengthening and being strengthened by this renewed connection between families and communities.

## Urban Indians, The Forgotten Majority

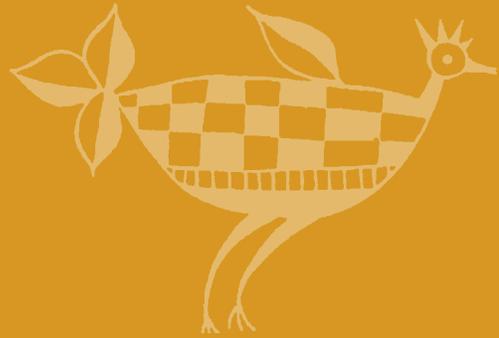
Decades of federal policies of assimilation and forced relocation as well as inadequate economic opportunities on reservations have resulted in an increasingly urban Indian population. Approximately 60 to 65 percent of American Indians and Alaska Natives live away from their reservations; roughly 50 percent of this off-reservation population lives in urban areas. The Menominee Tribe of Wisconsin is no exception. Its history of combating assimilation pressures, federal relocation, and economic challenges was further complicated in the 1950s when the federal government terminated its official tribal status. At that time, many Menominee families moved to urban areas such as Green Bay and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Chicago, Illinois. Currently, over half of the eight thousand Menominee tribal citizens live beyond their reservation boundaries, and six percent of these tribal citizens live in the Chicago metropolitan area.

In an era when over half of all American Indians live off the reservation, the ability to retain cultural and political ties is essential to the survival of Indian cultures.

Like other urban minority groups, the Chicago area Menominee Indians have suffered from economic and social hardships. They are 1.7 times as likely to lack a high school diploma, 2.4 times as likely to be unemployed, and 3.9 times as likely to live in poverty as urban Whites. In particular, the Menominee Indians of the Chicago area experience high unemployment while those who are employed work mainly in the service sector. They also experience severe medical needs but do not have access to major medical coverage because they are removed from their reservation Indian Health Services. Single women head a very high percentage of their households. As a result, 84 percent of the Menominee Indians living in greater Chicago are at or below the poverty line. Only 6 percent are homeowners.

The Menominee Indians of the Chicago area have formed part of Indian Country's "forgotten majority." Historically, tribal, state, and federal policymakers have maintained a reservation-centric view of Indian needs and priorities, despite the existence of significant off-reservation populations. As a result, urban communities struggle to address their needs alone. Most free or low-cost services available to urban Indians remain contingent upon their return to the reservation, and for many urban Indians, poverty prevents such travel. This has been especially true for a majority of the Menominee Indians of the Chicago area who reside over 250 miles from their reservation headquarters in Keshena, Wisconsin.

Policymakers' neglect has meant that urban Indians have turned with increasing frequency to nonprofit urban Indian community centers that offer employment training, health and human services, and housing programs. As supportive as these centers have become, they still struggle to meet urban Indians' needs. As non-governmental entities, they face obstacles in securing funds that are directed toward tribal governments. Further, given that most centers serve Natives from distinct - and different - cultures, their ability to meet the cultural needs of any single population are constrained. The Menominee Indians of the Chicago area have suffered from a severe sense of cultural dislocation. Many would prefer to return to their traditional lands around Keshena; many attempt to maintain a connection to their cultural roots. But distance and economic distress have made these desires almost unattainable and, within the Chicago area, Menominee Indians are often lost among the city's considerable Indian and minority populations.



### Unifying Citizens

In 1994, the Menominee Indians of the Chicago area confronted this economic and cultural marginalization by forming a center of their own. This center diverged from typical pan-Indian community centers in order to fulfill specific Menominee needs. It began, as a forum for formalizing social and familial connections. Known as the Menominee Social Club of Chicago, its members hosted cultural gatherings and offered support services for Menominee individuals and families living in the greater Chicago area. These events had generated political consciousness. Growing participation in tribal events and political activism gained the attention of the Menominee tribal government. In 1996, the Menominee Nation Tribal Council acted under the Tribal Government Plan Ordinance 95/04 to officially recognize the newly renamed Menominee Community Center of Chicago.

Today, the Menominee Community Center of Chicago (MCCC) is the institutional home of the only officially recognized off-reservation community of the Menominee Indian Tribe. The Center is recognized as a nonprofit tribal program, making it eligible for tribal funding. The MCCC is governed by a five-member Board of Directors that oversees activities and reports to the Menominee Tribal Legislature. To sustain its numerous offerings, the Center relies on a ten thousand dollar annual budget and the generous volunteer efforts of its dedicated members.

### Community Impacts

The Center has succeeded in strengthening the relationships of its Chicago area members by providing a full spectrum of cultural engagements as well as social services information. The MCCC has organized and sponsored local pow-wows, traditional fish feasts, and breakfasts for homeless Menominees. It has hosted language classes with the support of a Menominee Newberry Library Fellow and has worked with the Tribal Historic Preservation Office regarding Menominee artifacts held in the Chicago Field Museum. The MCCC has studied and continues to study urban Indian issues, collecting useful data for the Menominee Tribe as well as the general public. The Center's research on the status of urban Menominee housing conditions has allowed them to advocate for improved housing services and they have begun to develop programs for enhancing Menominee employment opportunities in the Chicago area.

In addition, the MCCC has enhanced social and political connections between the Chicago-based Menominee Indians and the Menominee Tribe. The Center has organized trips for Menominee individuals and families to go "back home" to the reservation for important cultural events such as the Sturgeon Feast and Big Drum Ceremony. It has also circulated information on tribal enrollment, the legislative election process, the tribal constitution, and tribal social services available to Chicago area citizens. It has coordinated attendance to the Menominee Nation Annual General Council Meeting. Most importantly, the Center has ensured, through the formal recognition of the Chicago-area Menominee as tribal citizens, biannual meetings of the tribal legislature in Chicago.



### Lessons to Share

Four factors contribute to the existence and effectiveness of the MCCC. **First, the Center and the Menominee tribal government have willingly worked together to redefine citizenship.** By officially recognizing Chicago-area Menominee as a bona fide community within the tribal nation, the Menominee Tribe has acknowledged the citizenship of its off-reservation citizenry. Through this decision, the Tribe has embraced a portion of their population that many Indian nations do not include in the ongoing business of governance. While other tribes offer services to their off-reservation constituents as individuals, the Menominee Tribe's recognition of an off-reservation *community* in its entirety is virtually unheard of in Indian Country. By establishing an inclusive definition of citizenship, the Tribe offers political, cultural, and economic support to tribal citizens far from the reservation center. The MCCC and the Menominee Tribe deserve acknowledgment for their role in the critical - and innovative - work of integrating urban tribal citizens into the social and political life of a reservation.

Initially, not every legislator in the Menominee tribal government was open to the idea of an active off-reservation political presence. **The second factor in the Menominee's success, however, was their realization that the Tribe itself would be strengthened by the incorporation of these citizens and families into politically active tribal citizenship.** Perhaps the Menominee Tribe first learned this lesson after it was terminated by the federal government. Tribal citizens living in Chicago played a significant role in the restoration of federal recognition. Now, the

Menominee Tribe is again welcoming the contributions of its Chicago-area citizens. In total, 45 percent of Chicago-based Menominee now vote in tribal elections and, already, tribal leaders are recognizing the benefits of drawing upon these citizens' unique perspectives. They also recognize the wealth of contacts that the Center offers. Some MCCC members hold leadership roles and advance Menominee tribal interests in the Chicago area in education, public policy, and economic development. The MCCC also offers opportunities for official interactions between the Menominee Tribe and various Illinois populations; these interactions could provide a natural springboard for interactions between tribal government and state leaders. With the increasing importance of tribal-state relations, tribes such as the Menominee do well to utilize the connections that their urban citizens provide.

**Third, the Menominee Community Center of Chicago and the Menominee Tribe have recognized the importance of cultivating a distinctly Menominee cultural identity among its urban diaspora.** Chicago is a city in which numerous pan-Indian organizations exist. Both the MCCC and the Menominee Tribe benefit from their partnerships with these organizations. However, the MCCC and the Tribe now collaborate in their efforts to meet needs specific to Menominee Indians, which are frequently overlooked by pan-Indian initiatives. For example, the Center educates Native and non-Native Chicago communities about the Menominee Tribe and its unique history. The MCCC's presentations in schools and at other organizations portray an accurate image of Menominee culture



and accomplishments. The Center's array of activities has also been an important part of enhancing the emotional health of its members. Many of these individuals were adopted out of the tribe or raised in foster care with little or no connection to their culture. Now, the MCCC offers them an avenue for establishing or reestablishing contact. Several MCCC members have been united with previously unknown family through the Center's Enrollments Office and Center-sponsored trips to the reservation. It also encourages mentoring relationships, pairing older and younger MCCC members. These relationships, built on a common culture and a shared tribal citizenship, will sustain the Center's vibrancy and ability to serve Menominee citizens and families.

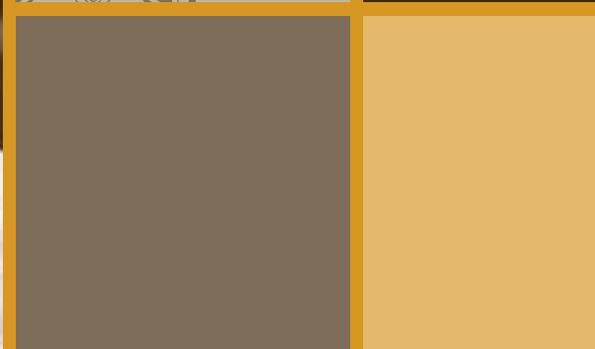
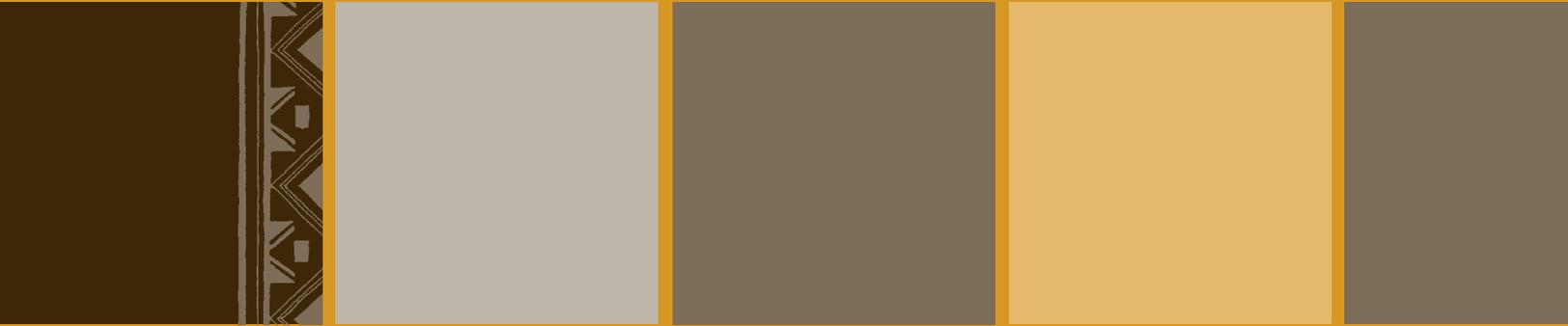
**Finally, simple actions were employed to resolve the relationship between the MCCC and the Tribe.** Together they rewrote a single line of the Menominee constitution, which brought biannual meetings of the tribal legislature to Chicago. Constituents come to know their elected leaders and stay abreast of social, cultural, and economic developments being pursued by the tribal government. Tribal legislators benefit as off-reservation citizens communicate their needs and contribute their distinct perspectives and knowledge. Similarly, the Center's trips to the Menominee Reservation are an uncomplicated way to strengthen the ties of kinship and common culture. These simple and easily replicable acts have enabled the Menominee to strengthen their entire tribal population. Other Indian nations can learn a great deal from the outstanding example the MCCC and Menominee Tribe have set.

## Conclusions

For too long, off-reservation families and communities have been forgotten by tribal governments. The Menominee Community Center of Chicago began as a social club. This basic function of community-building solidified social ties and created a new resource for urban Menominee families far from their homelands. It required simple actions and a strong partnership between the Center and the Menominee tribal government to formalize the common tribal citizenship. This relationship advanced the economic development, cultural continuity, social connection, and community support that are vital to the long-term prosperity of the Menominee people. In an era when over half of all American Indians live off the reservation, the ability to retain cultural and political ties is essential to the survival of Indian cultures.

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# Ya Ne Dah Ah School

Chickaloon Education Department  
Chickaloon Village  
(Chickaloon, Alaska)



## Introduction

The education of Native youth in the Alaskan public school system has long been a topic of deep concern to tribal leaders and Native parents. Such concern is warranted: Native youth in Alaska's public schools suffer from much lower rates of educational attainment and drop out at much higher rates than their non-Native peers at both the state and national levels. Understandably, Alaskan Natives have a long-standing distrust of "conventional" classroom methods and even of the intentions of the public education system. This distrust is fueled by the fact that most Alaskan public schools lack Native-relevant curricula despite large Native student populations.

Native leaders in Alaska also face the unwelcome reality that there is little they can do to alter the way their children are taught. Unlike what is found throughout much of Indian Country, where a growing number of tribes have successfully contracted the management of schools previously managed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), in Alaska, the state government possesses jurisdiction over most essential tribal government functions, including education. All federal money dedicated to Indian education in Alaska is channeled through the Alaska State Legislature, which does not fund tribal governments or tribal schools. Even more, some in the Alaska State Senate and House are campaigning to do away completely with the idea that Alaska Natives should have tribal status for any reason other than the receipt of federal services. Such efforts to "de-recognize" Alaska's 227 federally recognized tribes amount to the wholesale denial of indigenous rights.

These educational and jurisdictional problems have been sources of intense frustration for tribal leaders and community members at Chickaloon Village, a 250-citizen Ahtna Athabascan Indian community located in the Matanuska Valley of Alaska, sixty miles northeast of Anchorage. Of particular concern to the Chickaloon Village tribal government was that these problems constrained its ability to address a disturbing trend – the erosion of traditional practices and language. With its close proximity to Anchorage, the Village has been under particularly intense pressures of acculturation. There are few speakers of the Ahtna Athabascan language left. Many traditional practices have been lost or are in danger of extinction. Many Chickaloon youth are beset with problems characteristic of urban areas. And whereas many tribes located in the lower-48 states – which face similar cultural struggles – have used the educational system as a vehicle for protecting their Native cultures, Chickaloon Village found itself in a difficult predicament.

## A Pathbreaking Exercise of Sovereignty: A Tribal School

In the early 1990s, Katherine Wade, a Chickaloon clan grandmother resolved that *something* had to be done to curb the decline of Ahtna Athabascan cultural practices. From her volunteer work at the local prison, she learned that Native culture can be a powerful tool for breaking destructive patterns of behavior. Specifically, she saw that the problems of crime, alcoholism, drug use, and other deviant behavior among youth were correlated with poor

education and insufficient exposure to cultural practices and spirituality. The challenge was to find a way to integrate culture into education. So with the support of Village government leaders and community members, she led Chickaloon Village down a path that no other Native Village in Alaska had taken - the creation of the first and only full-time, year-round, tribally owned and operated day care and elementary school.

Opened in 1992, the Ya Ne Dah Ah, or “Ancient Teachings,” School acknowledges the crisis in Alaskan indigenous education and confronts it at a local level. Located for many years in a two-room schoolhouse, the School remains supported entirely by private donations and volunteers, and is staffed by tribal citizens who have seen the positive impact of tribally run schools in other Native communities outside of Alaska. The Ya Ne Dah School provides its students with an education that integrates Athabascan heritage and mainstream education. Each school day opens with a prayer circle, traditional drumming, and dancing. A state-certified teacher and a cultural director teach classes Monday through Friday. The curriculum they use effectively melds traditional teachings such as singing, drumming, storytelling, and cooking with modern non-Native subjects, such as social studies, and science, creating a learning environment in which Chickaloon students can identify with and feel connected to their culture and community while learning to understand and function productively in the non-Native world. Like many other tribal schools, Ya Ne Dah Ah is committed to providing its students with an education that instills respect for human dignity, diversity, and self-determination.

The Ya Ne Dah Ah School educates the majority of elementary school-aged children in Chickaloon Village. Currently, twenty children attend Ya Ne Dah Ah, most of whom are tribal members, though several students are tribal government employees’ children and other non-tribal community members. This year, the children attending the Ya Ne Dah Ah School are between the ages of one and twelve and in grades six and below.

### Positive Impacts

The students’ academic records are an important draw, and indeed the students’ achievements help form the foundation for Ya Ne Dah Ah’s strong scholastic reputation. Unlike trends at most other schools that serve Alaska Native populations, Ya Ne Dah Ah students remain in school; dropouts are not a problem. Furthermore, they score higher on standardized tests than their national counterparts. The Chickaloon Village School Board keeps a close eye on these results to ensure excellence. It reviews the Ya Ne Dah Ah School’s progress on an annual

basis, charts individual students’ achievements according to federal and state approved assessment methods, and communicates findings to parents and to the tribal government in regular progress reports.

The first graduate of the Ya Ne Dah Ah School is now the instructor of the Ya Ne Dah Ah School youth dance and drum group. One of the only young people in all of Alaska to speak the traditional Ahtna language, he is a source of pride for the entire Village and he now teaches the language to others. At a broader level, the School’s success has impacted other Native communities. Last year, Ya Ne Dah Ah School students welcomed tribal leaders from across the US to a three-day environmental health conference in Anchorage with an hour-long performance of traditional drumming and dancing. Further, the culturally relevant teachings of the Ya Ne Dah Ah School are giving rise to responsible and informed tribal citizens whose respect for Ahtna Athabascan traditions and culture are enabling them to create even more effective and appropriate village governance. The School has inspired an admirable commitment among its faculty. The cultural teacher and day care teacher are returning to the local university to receive more formal educational training.

### Factors Contributing to the School’s Success

The Ya Ne Dah Ah School’s success is the result of several distinctive factors. **First, it is an essential government function that is integrated into Chickaloon Village and local Ahtna Athabascan life.** The School is, in many senses, the hub of the Village and it binds the community together. An Alaska Daily News article reported that, “Nothing the tribe does is as important as running its school.” Especially impressive is how Ya Ne Dah Ah brings together children and their parents. The School takes great pride in the fact that parental participation is 100 percent. Parents volunteer at School events. They provide all of the School’s transportation needs. They contribute to facility maintenance. Not only is parental involvement critical to the School’s operations, but the School believes that it has a *responsibility* to connect parents and their children. Ya Ne Dah Ah’s mission statement commits the School to delivering an education that “encourages students and parents to actively participate in the learning process.” To this end, students take home worksheets with words and phrases to practice with their parents, who are required to sign them.

Other adult community members contribute to the operations and success of Ya Ne Dah Ah as well. Tribal offices are actively involved in the curriculum. For example, Chickaloon’s Health Department provides health education; its Community Oriented Policing Services program

offers safety classes; and the Department of the Environment teaches map making and assists with science classes. In addition to the support of parents, community members, and the Tribal Council, the Ya Ne Dah Ah School depends upon the support of surrounding schools and other Native villages. Area public schools provide services such as access to a swimming pool and library on a weekly basis. Members of other Athabascan villages, such as Arctic Village and Copper Center, visit regularly and even teach the Chickaloon children traditional songs and dances of the Athabascan people.

**A second factor in the Ya Ne Dah Ah School's success has been its ability to accomplish so much with so few financial resources.** In the absence of federal and state support, its extensive community support has been crucial to the School's survival. Ya Ne Dah Ah School's \$150,000 annual budget does not afford the school many of the amenities that non-Native schools enjoy. Until recently, the School operated in a donated two-room schoolhouse without running water. These dilapidated conditions finally led the Chickaloon tribal government to turn to the BIA for assistance - which promptly had the building condemned. So the tribal government moved into the old building, giving Ya Ne Dah Ah a building with water and sewer facilities. The day care facility continues to be housed in a small separate building. The School works closely with private foundations and Cook Inlet Regional, Inc. (the Native regional corporation), ultimately gaining 98 percent of its annual budget from these sources. The tribal government supplies the remaining two percent of funding through bake sales, pow-wow proceeds, and individual donations. In other words, private contributions, volunteer labor, and an education board that manages to do a great deal with scarce funds have made it possible for the Ya Ne Dah Ah School to function on a shoestring budget.

**A third success factor has been the determination to promote Athabascan culture in the School's curriculum.** As noted, "Ya Ne Dah Ah" means "Ancient Teachings," and the School has become a center for the maintenance and dissemination of Athabascan cultural practices. Although there are fewer than fifty fluent Ahtna Athabascan speakers in the world and most of them are over fifty years old, the students in the Ya Ne Dah Ah School are now learning the language. They study Ahtna Athabascan not just in "language" classes, but also through their other, more conventional subjects. The Ya Ne Dah Ah School also is piloting culturally specific units such as Songs and Dance, Potlatches, Fish Traps and Wheels, Birch Bark Basket Making, and Yenida'a Stories, all of which feature reading materials, hands-on activities, and multimedia videos. Not surprisingly, the Ya Ne Dah Ah School has become a catalyst for

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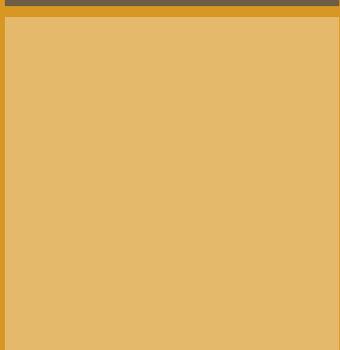
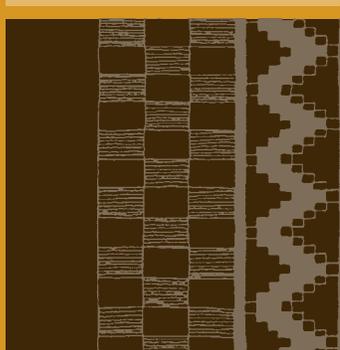
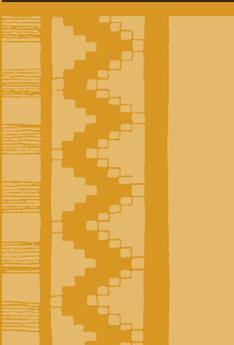
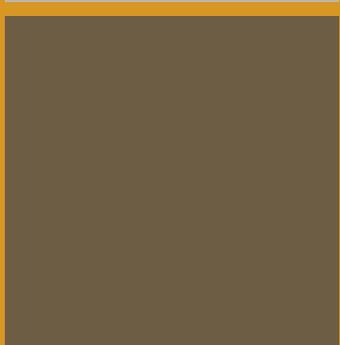
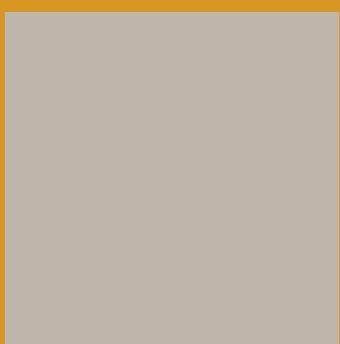
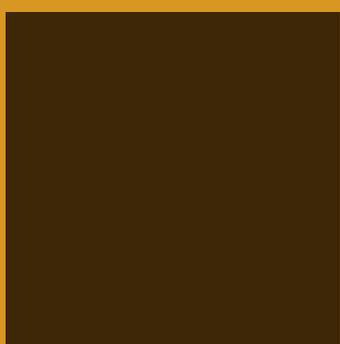
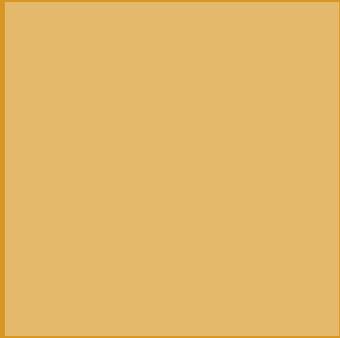
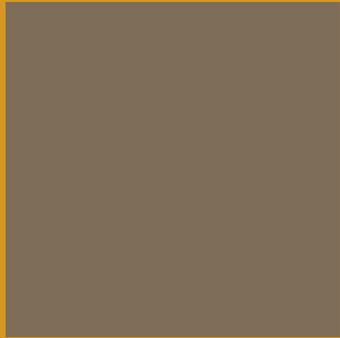
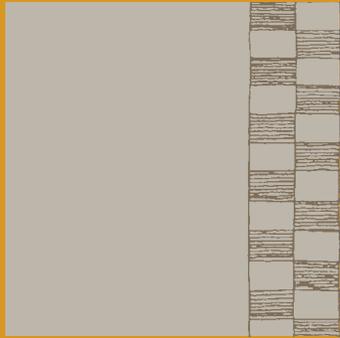
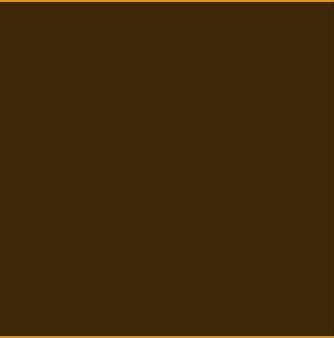
curriculum development. The Chickaloon Village's Department of Education supports a Curriculum Development Project that creates high-tech, multi-media Ahtna Athabascan cultural heritage curricula found nowhere else in Alaska. These curricular units are fully integrated into the Ya Ne Dah Ah School and have recently been integrated into the neighboring Matanuska-Susitna Borough School District that serves over five thousand students. These units are targeted for statewide and national distribution in the next two years.

### Conclusions

The Ya Ne Dah Ah School exemplifies a commitment to providing the necessary tools for Chickaloon Village children and youth to be able to make better life choices, drawing from their cultural traditions. By reclaiming the educational process in a political context that is unsympathetic to assertions of sovereignty and by successfully merging cultural and modern curricula, the School has exceeded state and national standards while reinvigorating the traditional life of the Village. With its solid academic foundation, substantial local support, partnerships with private foundations, and demonstrated record of success, the Ya Ne Dah Ah School is strengthening a community and charting new paths in indigenous education.

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# Akimel O'odham/ Pee-Posh Youth Council

Gila River Indian Community  
(Sacaton, Arizona)



## Introduction

Nineteen-year-old Myron Brown plans to be the governor of Arizona someday. He believes that he either possesses now or will possess in the future, the skills necessary to attain and be successful in such an important governmental position. Brown, a member of the Gila River Indian Community (GRIC), is currently one of 20 elected young people from his tribe on the Akimel O'odham/Pee-Posh Youth Council (Youth Council) and has good reason to be confident in his political goals. Since its inception in 1988, the Youth Council has helped develop a number of leaders: Arizona school and community board members, people within national-level American Indian advocacy organizations, and officials elected to the Gila River Tribal Council. Whether or not he becomes governor, Brown credits the Youth Council with greatly influencing his life and assisting him breathe life into his dream.

## Developed by and for Youth

The seeds of the Akimel O'odham/Pee-Posh Youth Council began to grow in 1987 when Greg Mendoza and several other young people, on break from college, gathered on their reservation, which is located in the Phoenix metropolitan area. They discussed a common frustration among the tribe's youth - that there were very few opportunities in which young tribal members could actively engage in with their community. Many of their friends grew up and chose to spend their lives, skills, education, and energy off the reservation, an exodus they understood quite well, as many of them also were considering off-reservation options for after graduation.

Mendoza and the other founders soon planned a conference for all of the reservation's young people and the idea of a youth council was born. By 1998, the Akimel O'odham/Pee-Posh Youth Council had become a fully incorporated, tribally funded, youth-serving, youth-led organization complete with a charter, by-laws, and constitution of its own. Although he no longer considers himself a "youth," 16 years later Mendoza remains the champion and facilitator of the Youth Council.

## Redefining Youth-Adult Relationships

More than half of the 17,000 enrolled members of the GRIC are under the age of 18 and similar to their Indian youth peers around the US, the young people in the Gila River community face acute social challenges. Gang violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and teen pregnancy occur at particular high rates on the reservation.

Despite the urgent need for youth development, one leader acknowledged, “The tribal government has always focused on the elders, but youth and their issues were historically overlooked.” Youth involvement was further discouraged by the fact that many of GRIC’s young people did not understand their tribe’s system of governance; those that did were disillusioned by their lack of voice in the system.

Founders of the Akimel O’odham/Pee-Posh Youth Council were convinced that the situation could be changed. They saw themselves and their peers as a resource, capable of having a positive impact on the Gila River Indian Community and its government. All they needed was an opportunity to do so. The founders began with the modest goal of increasing communication and respect between youth and adults, and began soliciting the support of tribal leaders, elected officials, and educators.

Today, youth have a formal place in the tribe’s governance. Each year, Akimel O’odham/Pee-Posh Youth Council members organize a conference for all young people in the tribe. At this gathering, anyone in the tribe ages 14 to 21 is invited to help develop a docket of high-priority youth concerns, typically encompassing cultural preservation, environmental awareness, community service, and healthy living. Conference participants are also invited to vote for Youth Council members to carry their ideas forward during the coming year.

The elected Youth Council is closely aligned with the adult Tribal Council. Members not only present annual conference results to tribal leaders, but also attend and actively participate in the regularly scheduled Tribal Council meetings, providing substantive input that has shaped the actions of tribal decision-makers on a range of issues.

Youth on the council have worked incredibly hard to earn and maintain the level of respect they receive in the community. They complete a rigorous nomination, application, and interview process prior to having their names placed on the ballot. Once elected to the Council, youth agree to abide by a strict code of ethics, which they themselves have defined. Akimel O’odham/Pee-Posh Youth Council

members do not participate in gang activity, always dress and speak respectfully, and avoid the use of drugs and alcohol. The group set its standards of excellence high and works together to ensure that its members live up to their mutual expectations.

## The Next Generation of Leaders

### Starting to Lead Today

As Akimel O’odham/Pee-Posh Youth Council members attend their monthly meetings, pursue grants to help improve the lives of youth on the reservation, and work to actively spread the Youth Council model across the country, they remain ever aware of the importance and urgency of their efforts. Council members know that Gila River youth are not the only young people who feel disconnected or disinterested in civic engagement. But they also know that as American Indians, they represent a relatively small population with limited voting power and that they stand to lose a great deal—their culture, land base, and economic power—if they choose to ignore politics. As Gila River Governor Donald Antone, Senior, notes, “We can’t afford to lose our young people to this governmental process if our tribe is to be successful in achieving self-determination.”

Thus, for the Youth Council, a stated goal is “to foster the spiritual, mental, physical, and social development of youth and to build a stronger, unified, and self-reliant Gila River Indian Community through greater youth involvement.” To achieve that goal, the Youth Council offers intensive skill-building leadership courses to all members. Training topics include public speaking, effective writing, parliamentary procedure, conflict resolution, self-esteem, team building, assertiveness, and interpersonal relationships. The courses are designed around the professional goals of civic involvement, but have far reaching benefits that impact the members’ success in educational, familial, and personal environments as well.

Youth Council members are also exposed to a variety of new activities during their two-year tenure. During the Youth Council’s monthly meetings, the group hears presentations by tribal leaders and outside experts, keeping abreast of the issues, research, and events that impact them. They represent the Council and Gila River tribe at local, state, and national meetings, developing their ability to represent youth interests and network with other adults and youth. Many get opportunities to travel new places—frequently their first trips out of state. Council members experience, often for the first time, being truly regarded as knowledgeable experts. The council’s lengthy list of speak-

ing and committee invitations include the Arizona Juvenile Justice Commission, the National Youth Town Hall with Attorney General Janet Reno, the Millenium Young People's Congress, the U.S. Department of Transportation, the National Organization for Youth Safety, the U.S. Senate, and two White House appearances.

The respect and attentive response Akimel O'odham/Pee-Posh Youth Council members receive has a notable impact on their self-esteem and identity development. In the 16 years since the start of the Youth Council, 90 percent of its more than 300 alumni have gone on to work in public service. On the Gila River reservation today, former youth council members serve as police officers, firefighters, public relations managers, school board members, health care managers, and even on the elected tribal council.

### Maintaining their History while Changing their Future

While the Akimel O'odham/Pee-Posh Youth Council members appreciate their opportunities to contribute in the state and national arena, the bulk of their efforts and accomplishments take place at home on the reservation. They engage in a constant flow of public service campaigns, promoting healthy lifestyles, raising HIV/AIDS awareness, and preventing alcohol abuse, to name a few. They take their roles as elected representatives seriously, creating formal and informal opportunities to communicate with peers about youth concerns. Members are responsible for organizing numerous community service opportunities for themselves and their fellow youth in the tribe. Planning, budgeting, and fund-raising to sustain the organization over the long-term also demands the time and attention of the council members.

As they carry out duties of governance, council members are continually conscientious of the rich cultural traditions of their ancestors. The Youth Council President calls meetings to order with a gavel made of cactus, as did historical Akimel O'odham and Pee-Posh leaders. Fourteen of the 20 Youth Council members are elected to represent their home districts, geographic areas which have cultural and historical significance. In the governmental procedure curriculum used at the youth conference, the creation stories of the two tribes and profiles of their early leaders communicate how good governance has always been an important part of their tribal history.

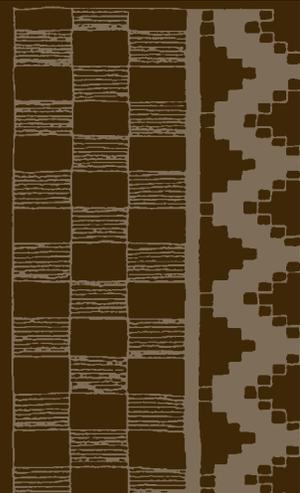
At the same time as they are conscious of the past, the Youth Council continually looks to the future:

- In 1993, the Youth Council launched a "Kids Voting" program, which located mock polls for those too young to vote at the actual polling places for adults. The curriculum was adapted from a national program, but tailored to the needs of the tribe via a partnership between educators and the Youth Council. The program not only increased youth understanding of the electoral process, it brought their parents out to vote as well. In the first year alone, 500 youth voted, and the tribe credits a seven percent increase in voter turn-out to the effort.
- In 1996, the Youth Council succeeded in establishing a Boys and Girls Club on the reservation—the first Boys and Girls Club in the state of Arizona to serve a Native American community. The project grew from the Youth Council members' concerns about a lack of positive opportunities for their younger siblings during out-of-school hours. They initiated the planning and application process, obtained a grant from the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, and used their award to open the clubhouse. To this day, the club remains focused on the Youth Council's original goals of motivating youth to continue in school, helping them gain a sense of achievement, and providing positive alternatives to delinquent behaviors.

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- In 1998, the Youth Council won a grant from the Close Up Foundation, to implement an intensive program for youth to explore the rights and responsibilities of citizens in democratic nations. The hands-on program allows participants to meet current tribal government leaders, learn the process and structure of their tribal government, and participate as members of executive, legislative, and judicial branches of a simulated government.
- In 2001, the Youth Council learned the benefits of persistence when a project for which they had advocated since the mid-1990's at last come to fruition. The Council established a Teen Court program to mediate peer disputes in a positive manner. The program is funded by a grant the Youth Council obtained from the United States Department of Justice and has set as its goal the control, reduction, and prevention of crime in the Gila River Indian Community.
- In 2002, the Youth Council developed a partnership with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to launch a "Celebrate Fitness: Tribal Youth Lead Promotion of Active Living" initiative. The youth spearheaded the development and outreach of an awareness campaign to increase physical activity and improve nutritional practices of tribal youth and their families. The Tribal Council was extremely pleased with the work, passing a resolution to formally acknowledge their support of the project.

### Conclusion: Assuring Self-Determination for Years to Come

The Akimel O'odham/Pee-Posh Youth Council recognizes the important role they play in shaping their tribe today and for the future. They are stronger personally and part of a stronger community for their efforts. Because of the Youth Council, GRIC children and teens have a broader set of opportunities and are better equipped to avoid the behaviors that lead to delinquency, teen pregnancy, and substance abuse; as a result, all GRIC youth are better prepared to become productive adults within their families and community. The record also demonstrates that these benefits will be sustained for new generations of tribal youth. Each succeeding group of Youth Council members has been committed to maintaining and expanding council activities and programs, which helps guarantee opportunities for youth development and youth involvement in the Community long after the councilors' own days as youth have passed.

The Tribal Government, for its part, continues to demonstrate a commitment to the young people through extending their respect and their financial contributions. With these dedicated investments, the Gila River Indian Community is ensuring future good government, full of capable and experienced leaders—youth and adult, alike—who have a strong commitment to their tribe. With every investment in the Youth Council, the Tribal Council members know they are promised a much larger return—securing a future of self-determination for their nation.

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