

Practice Brief: Improving Child Advocacy Center Service Delivery by Building Relationships with Indigenous Communities

CACs attempting to serve Tribal children and families more effectively should expect to allocate significant time and energy to the development of authentic, collaborative relationships in the communities where those children and families live. The process of building relationships in Tribal communities may not be straightforward, and it may differ significantly from relationship building with non-Tribal agencies. As an outside entity attempting to intervene in the most private, sacred affairs of a community, a CAC should be aware of the historical and cultural contexts in which this intervention occurs.

Virtually all Indigenous people in what is now the U.S. experienced massive collective historical traumas (war, genocide, land theft, forced relocation) at the hands of the federal government and European Americans more generally. More recent collective traumas include decades-long policies of forced assimilation directed at Tribal children, such as the systematic removal of Tribal children to boarding schools where traditional cultural and spiritual practices were forbidden and where abuse was widespread, as well as the routine use of child protection mechanisms to remove Tribal children from their families to be raised in non-Tribal homes. These policies and practices destroyed families and communities, even as they were justified by claims that they were in the best interest of Tribal children.

Tribal people continue to live the consequences of colonial aggression today, in forms such as fractured families and communities, lost cultural traditions, and a host of disparities in the realms of physical and mental wellbeing. While non-Natives may think of colonization as an ugly chapter from a remote period of history, for many Indigenous people and communities, the losses incurred are ongoing and all too current.

Outsiders attempting to deliver child advocacy services to Tribal communities should not expect their good intentions to be taken at face value. Your good intentions are not likely to sound materially different from those of past social workers, educators, government representatives, and other outsiders whose interventions proved disastrous for Tribal children, families, and communities. As advocates, we may initially recoil at being the subject of mistrust. If we want to do our work effectively, however, we need to avoid taking this mistrust personally. Instead, we should work to build relationships that allow us to overcome any mistrust that we may encounter.

There is no template or roadmap for the kind of relationship building that will be necessary to drive a successful collaboration with Tribal partners, but some general strategies may be helpful:

- **Do not make assumptions.** Too many human services professionals approach Tribal collaborations with the feeling, based on little or no immersion in the community, that they know what is best for local families and people. You cannot know a community through academic research, media reports, office talk, grant narratives, or brief encounters with locals. Admitting your ignorance and asking for guidance is more likely to build trust than presuming to know a community that you are not a member of.

- **Learn by listening.** Every tribe has its own unique history, culture, assets, and challenges. Approach collaboration with a spirit of humility, attempting to understand the local context and to co-create solutions based on local needs.
- **Be aware of differences in communication styles.** Tribal cultures often have different norms relating to interpersonal communication than mainstream American cultures, and tribal norms often differ from one another, as well. These norms may relate to the pace of conversation, the politeness or impoliteness of volunteering opinions in certain contexts, and age- or gender-related standards of decorum, among others. You may not be able to identify all specific norms in the communities where you are working, but you can make efforts to ensure that you are not imposing your own communication style on others.
- **Seek out the approval and/or participation of elders.** Recognized elders play important roles in many Tribal communities. Often, elders are the unofficial leaders in a community, with influence rivaling or exceeding that of official government or agency leadership positions. An outside organization that gains the trust of a Tribal community's elders is much more likely to be perceived as a legitimate community partner than one that does not successfully connect with elders. Some CACs have found that enlisting the participation of a respected elder (e.g., making the elder available to meet with families, or inviting the elder to undergo training and participate in MDT meetings) greatly increases its ability to navigate cultural barriers and to increase the comfort of children and families.
- **Recruit CAC staff/leadership members from the community being served.** There are limits to any non-Native person's ability to nurture a culturally responsive, supportive environment for Indigenous children and families. One way to ensure that you are providing culturally responsive supports is by having Tribal members from the population you are serving on staff and in leadership positions. These staff/leadership may be able to provide guidance on such matters as the use of Tribal languages in interviews, the cultural norms for discussing weighty matters, and any cultural supports that may aid you in creating an environment that will promote safety and resilience. Additionally, the very presence of a Tribal member may, in unspoken ways, help overcome mistrust and create the supportive and safe environment that is necessary for the proper functioning of a CAC.
- **Embed local Tribal cultural components and perspectives in your operations and procedures.** If Tribal members are to trust that your CAC prioritizes their own best interests, they should see evidence of community ownership over your programming. As noted above, sovereignty and self-determination are key elements of Tribal conceptions of healing. Seek out official and unofficial Tribal leaders to guide the development of your programming, and include their perspectives in decision making and operations. Make cultural understanding of Tribes you serve an expectation for all staff, and create a work environment in which staff are open to receiving non-punitive feedback about culture-related oversights or missteps they may have made.
- **Show up consistently in person, even outside of required work activities.** Your partners and the general community will likely doubt the legitimacy of your concern for them if you are never seen out and about among them. Attend local gatherings or volunteer in the community if possible. As child advocates, we risk becoming associated strictly with pain and loss if we only show up in the aftermath of traumas.
- **Be intentional about embedding your relationships with Tribal partners into the day-to-day workings of your organization.** Institutionalize regular meetings beyond MDT meetings. Maintain constant communication (phone, text, email) outside of meetings for the purposes of

routine check-ins and proactive discussions to make sure that no misunderstandings arise and that you remain on the same page at all stages of your organizational workflow.

- **Take measures to ensure the consistency of your partnership in light of expected turnover in agency and leadership positions.** As we all know, workers in this field routinely burn out and leave the job. This is particularly true in remote Tribal communities, where resource challenges and disparities create additional pressures. Further, many Tribes hold elections for their governing councils every two years, guaranteeing a lack of continuity at the highest levels of your partnership.
 - One way of proactively addressing these challenges is to nurture contacts and relationships at varying levels of Tribal agencies and in the community more broadly. In many Tribal communities, unofficial leaders such as elders, spiritual leaders, and knowledge keepers have as much influence as official leaders, and their influence is more enduring.
 - Another way of ensuring continuity despite turnover is to solidify partnerships early on via the development of MOUs with agencies and/or by seeking a Tribal resolution supporting your CAC partnership.