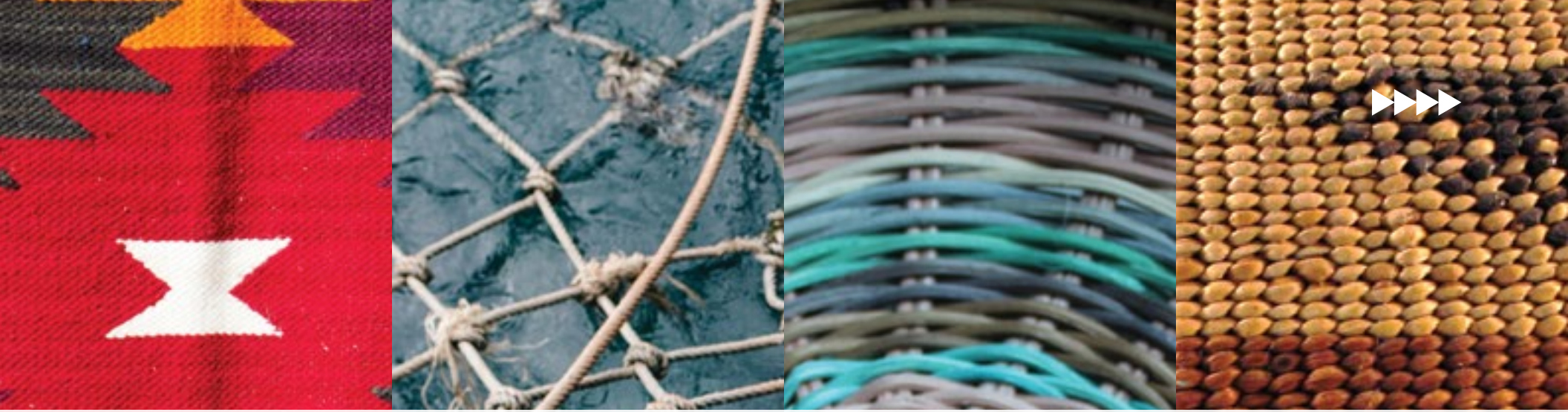

CULTURE FORWARD

A Strengths and Culture Based Tool to Protect Our Native Youth from Suicide

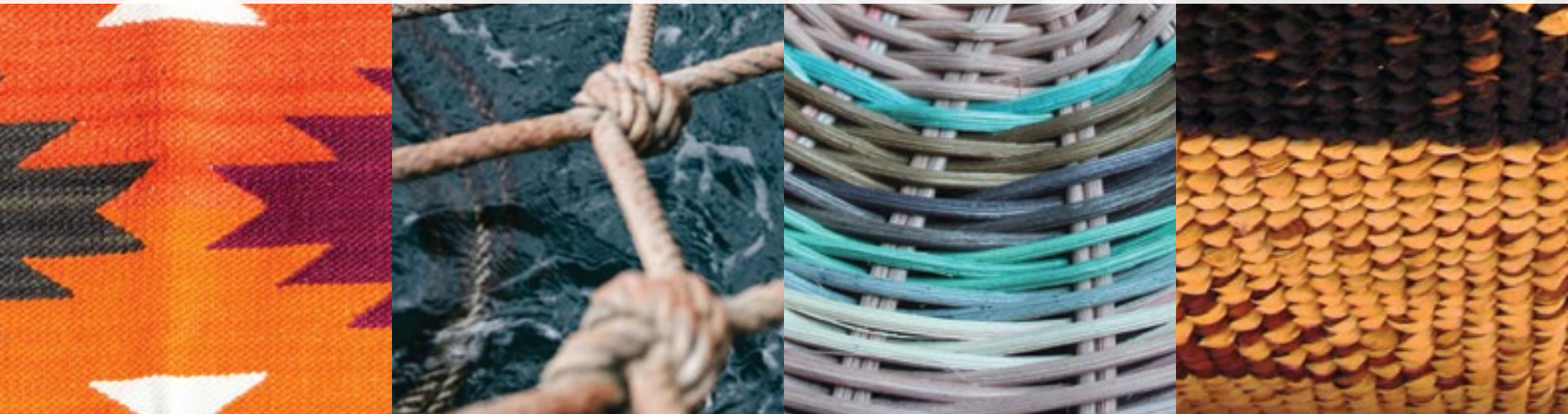

Photo Credit: Kiliii Yuyan (Nanai/Chinese American)

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Guw'aadzi!

While each of our sovereign nations, cultures, beliefs and ways of being differ from one another, we carry the legacy of our ancestors. We are the vision they had when they fought famine, drought and harmful assimilation policies. Each of us has an important role to carry our culture and traditions and reclaim our health and well-being.

Our communities are losing bright young people with all the potential to make the world a better place. We must address the disproportionate rate of Native youth suicide. Our communities are resilient. We hold the power to reclaim our stories—past, present and future. Together, we can weave ourselves a safety net strong enough to endure the threats of our world today so our young people know that they are loved, needed and have a reason to live.

The CULTURE FORWARD guide is an opportunity to start a movement that uplifts our young people as valued and vital to our future. Indeed, their future path is an essential thread of a greater tapestry of well-being for all Native communities.

CULTURE FORWARD focuses on harnessing the intrinsic strengths rooted in Native cultures and communities. It is intended to bind the voices of thought leaders from across Indian Country to prevent suicide and propel our youth and future generations toward shared well-being.

This CULTURE FORWARD resource was developed with input from dozens of tribal leaders, Native youth, grassroots leaders, traditional healers, two-spirit leaders, Elders and Native military service members and veterans. This guide starts by situating suicide in our post-colonial histories, economies, and environmental contexts. The recent phenomena of higher rates of suicide among our young people emerged in varied ways across our tribal regions, oftentimes coinciding with losses of culture, language and traditional knowledge over the preceding generations.

CULTURE FORWARD promotes integrating our traditional knowledge to help navigate our contemporary world. Our continued collective work to empower communities to address suicide with culturally relevant resources, including those detailed in CULTURE FORWARD, can and will make a difference.

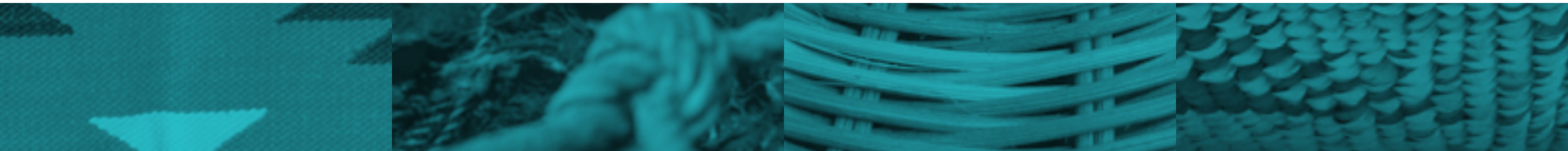
I want to thank you for your commitment to curb suicide among Native youth. We share a sacred responsibility to our ancestors to build healthy futures for our young people today and for generations to come.

Dawaa'e.

With my sincere gratitude,

Deb Haaland (Pueblo of Laguna)
U.S. Congresswoman, New Mexico

II. INTRODUCTION



Core traditional, cultural and spiritual values support health and well-being for our Native communities. Informed by traditional knowledge and beliefs, our communities' wisdom keepers have always known that cultural and spiritual protective factors are the essence of tribal identity and the best medicine against suicide. In today's modern society, culture is moving forward and adapting to our world. Emerging from traditional practices, culture includes community, people, place, customs and language—with new forms emerging over time. Together the expression of culture creates resiliency in tribal communities for generations and is the key factor in our continued regeneration as Native peoples.

The celebrated and well-known Standing Rock Sioux scholar, Dr. Vine Deloria Jr., discussed "old-timers" who said we need to think with our hearts instead of our heads to solve the issue of suicide. To find our way back to "thinking with our hearts," we need to reclaim our identities, traditions, tribal values and cultural practices. In so doing, we can prevent suicide—a result of colonization and cultural losses—and promote deep community healing.

More than 20 years ago, Dr. Iris Borowsky published a landmark study documenting that promotion of protective factors was more effective at reducing suicide attempts than reducing risks for Native youth. In this case, Western scientific research explained what has been inherent in our traditional knowledge since the beginning of time. Western scientific and Indigenous research continues to endorse the importance of tribal identity, values and participation in cultural activities to reduce and prevent Native youth suicide.

This study has gained increasing attention over the past two decades. It offers a vibrant opportunity apart from the numerous studies that have "bean-counted" and logged our suicidal health disparities, risk factors and community deficits.

Echoing Dr. Borowsky's work, this guide aims to find strength in our communities—to think from the heart. From this perspective, the goal is to flip the dominant narrative regarding Native American suicide risk factors and instead herald individual, family, community, tribal and cross-tribal protective factors that define the unique strengths and values of Native peoples.

The goal of CULTURE FORWARD and forthcoming ancillary materials is to elevate Indigenous knowledge, findings and practical, proven resources that represent strengths- and culture-based approaches proven effective in Native communities to prevent and reduce suicide.

In 2018, the Center for Native American Youth held roundtables with youth from more than 260 tribes in twenty-five states. In most of the roundtables, Native youth expressed concern about hearing about suicidal thoughts, engaging in self-harm and losing their peers to suicide. It is time for us to weave our collective knowledge to prevent suicide among our youth and communities.

The information contained in this guide represents the dozens of voices we have listened to across Indian Country through

community roundtables/interviews, and systematic review of peer-reviewed publications, and reports and guides considered part of the "grey literature."[1] Further, we observe and honor that we embark on this work at a critical inflection point in history. For there is an ongoing movement of tribal nations calling for Indigenous knowledge to be at the center of health research and program development. Simultaneously, Native youth are providing critical leadership to elevate community health, wellness and thriving through reclamation of tribal traditions and culture. And, countless tribal nations are currently exerting self-determination to advance community-based suicide prevention.

"Our relations to each other, our prayers whispered across generations to our relatives, are what bind our cultures together. The protection, teachings and gifts of our relatives have for generations preserved our families."

—Winona LaDuke (Anishinaabe)

The above photo has been approved for use by the Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board's suicide prevention project, THRIVE. For more information please visit www.npaihb.org/thrive

Photo Credit: Ed Cunicelli

[1] Grey literature includes a number of types of information (e.g., fact sheets, research summaries, reports on a given topic) that can be produced by various types and levels of organizations (e.g., government, academic, business, industry).

CULTURE FORWARD is guided by Native voices and relies on community awareness, engagement and intervention to elevate resources that strengthen wellness. The research, resources and recommendations in the following pages are meant to stimulate action in Native communities to prevent youth suicide. No matter where your community is geographically or in relation to traditional homelands, there is something in this guide for each community.

CULTURE FORWARD will fortify communal resilience, honor the sacrifices of our ancestors for whom Native communities live today, and pave the way for thriving generations of Native youth, adult and Elder leaders.

DEVELOPMENT OF CULTURE FORWARD

A Community Process

In its entirety, CULTURE FORWARD is a reflection of Native voices and visions. It represents groups within Native communities directly impacted by suicide, those who are actively working to end suicide, and tribal leaders and stakeholders who care deeply about the future of their youth and seek healing, strength and well-being for their tribal nations.

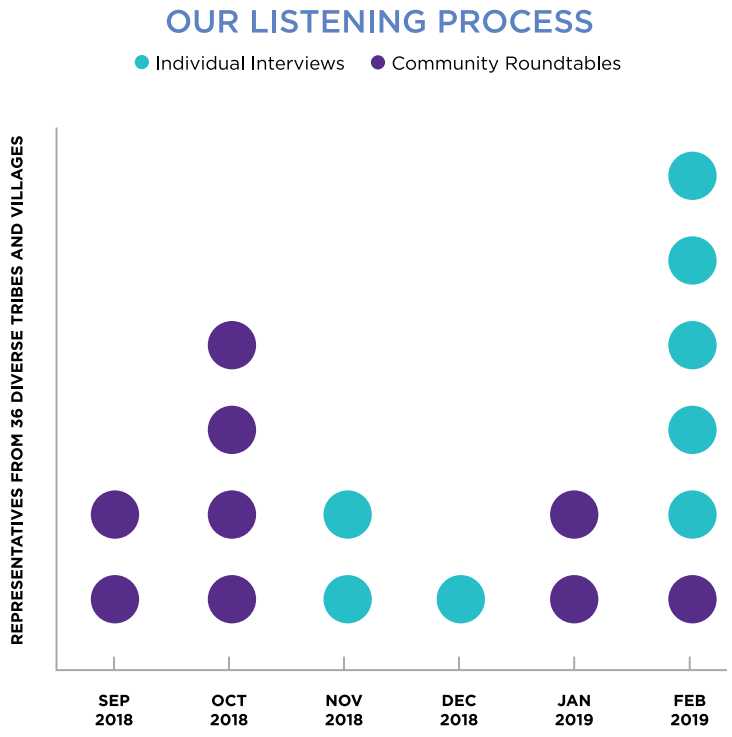
Production Process

Before putting any words to paper for CULTURE FORWARD, the Johns Hopkins Center for American Indian Health spent six months from fall 2018 to winter 2019 traveling throughout Indian Country to conduct listening sessions. These sessions included nine community roundtables and eight individual interviews to inform the guide.

* Permission to include their quotes in this guide was obtained from all individuals participating in interviews and community roundtables.

Through the roundtables and interviews, more than 60 Native stakeholders participated including:

- Tribal leaders (including Chiefs/Chairpersons/Council Members/ Tribal Health Board Directors)
- Grassroots leaders working with Native youth on suicide prevention in their respective communities
- Native youth leaders
- Two-spirit leaders who work with two-spirit youth
- Elders and traditional healers
- Veterans/military service members



These stakeholders represent 36 diverse tribal communities and come from every region in the U.S.[2] The stakeholders also represent segments of tribal communities impacted by suicide at higher rates than others (e.g., Native youth; LGBTQ2S youth; Native military service members and veterans).

The diversity of stakeholders in terms of geographic, cultural and personal variances is important for two reasons,

- First, suicide rates differ by geographic region, tribal community and personal experiences, such as traumas.
- Second, the ultimate needs and desired resources for prevention may vary across tribal nations, regions and sectors of our populations.

Finally, developing and delivering this resource tool as a shared community rather than one individual, consultant or academic center is meaningful and reflective of Native processes of creating and sharing knowledge. The process itself is integral to our prevention and healing journey together.

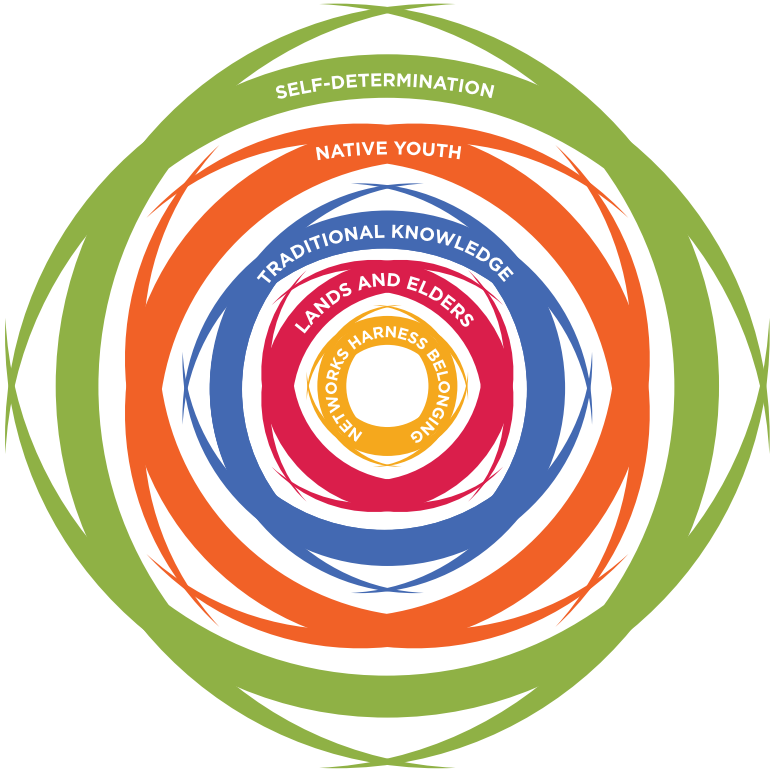
"The Peacemaker taught us about the Seven Generations. He said, when you sit in council for the welfare of the people, you must not think of yourself or of your family, not even of your generation. He said, make your decisions on behalf of the seven generations coming, so that they may enjoy what you have today."

—Oren Lyons (Seneca) Faithkeeper, Onondaga Nation

CULTURE FORWARD FIVE CORE THEMES

- **Our networks harness belonging and help keep us safe.**
- **Connections to our lands and Elders allow us to thrive.**
- **Traditional knowledge holds the keys to health and healing.**
- **Native youth lead us to reclaim our autonomy and well-being.**
- **Self-determination empowers us to fight.**

Knowledge gained from the listening sessions about how stakeholders knew to protect youth from suicide were coded by themes. Five core themes emerged and became chapters for this guide.



[2] According to the National Congress of American Indians Regional Profiles.

Simultaneous to our listening process, we did a deep reading of published research and grey literature produced since 1980 to collect findings about suicide prevention defined by Indigenous participatory and strength-based approaches. We also reviewed epidemiological studies published in the 1960s and 1970s, when Native youth suicide was first recognized on a national level (see Section III. Background). In each chapter, key findings from our literature review are highlighted as "digestible" stories and sorted by theme.

To produce the final content and format for CULTURE FORWARD, we convened a National Advisory Editorial Board (NAEB). The NAEB includes Native youth, tribal and health and human service leaders, and community members with lived experience. We envision CULTURE FORWARD as a collective resource tool "for the good of the people" in line with Native worldviews of community.[3]

CULTURE FORWARD IS CENTERED UPON WEAVING TRADITIONS

Early in our process, the concept of weaving emerged as a conceptual loom for this work. We envision that the strands of strength-based knowledge, stories and insights gathered for CULTURE FORWARD are giving form to a larger tapestry illuminating how life is sacred.

On February 11, 2019, newly elected Congresswoman Deb Haaland (Pueblo of Laguna) provided the Congressional Response to the National Congress of American Indians 2019 State of Indian Nations address. She described the importance of weaving as a shared tradition across Indian Country.

Fifth-generation Diné rug weavers Lynda Teller Pete and Barbara Teller Ornelas wrote, "We were gifted the art of weaving to keep our families from starving, to be kept in good comfort, and to keep our families together."[4] Cherokee Nation woven baskets have

Photo Credit: Victoria O'Keefe, PhD (Cherokee/Seminole Nations)

"Collectively Indigenous people share the gift of weaving as a practice that has provided us the skills that aided our survival and brought beauty into our communities. Weaving teaches us discipline, self-control, and patience in the process of creating a larger product to share that is also utilitarian. The stories that are told to us as children are woven into our baskets, rugs, and blankets and exchanged across space and time. These weavings explain where we came from and who we are, our secrets are preserved in the practice handed down to each successive generation. We have the privilege of knowing our past, and so our children can continue to create patterns of their own. Although our weavings tell stories that are not written, they are authored by us and illustrate a story that tells us that our people are survivors and that we are resilient."

—Congresswoman Haaland, NCAI 2019 State of Indian Nations Address

[3] Cajete, G. A. (2015). *Indigenous Community: Rekindling the Teachings of the Seventh Fire.* St. Paul, MN: Living Justice Press.
[4] Pete, L. T., & Ornelas, B. T. (2018). *Spider Woman's Children: Navajo Weavers Today*. Loveland, CO: Thrums Books.

also been used for numerous purposes from storage of household goods to carrying food from hunting, fishing and gathering retreats to contemporary pieces of art. Coast Salish Tribes in the Pacific Northwest weave robes, hats and baskets that serve multiple purposes for carrying out important traditions and ways of life. These are just a few examples of tribal communities who continue to use and value weaving in cultural practices.

The purpose of weaving for physical survival, for health and wellness and for everyday practical uses mirrors how we aim to convey the information contained in CULTURE FORWARD. Through weaving individual threads or reeds of information, powerful quotes and resources, we aim to create a tangible tool for:

- Tribal leaders and policymakers needing to leverage funding and resources for their communities to build suicide prevention programming and to know what is working in other communities
- Health, behavioral health and educational leaders working to ensure Native youth and entire communities are healthy, balanced and have positive futures
- Grassroots leaders working with Native youth to create functional tools and helpful information regarding strength-based approaches to suicide prevention
- Native youth leaders to exchange information about prevention best practices from their peers and garner interest from their larger tribal community to implement
- Elders, traditional healers and two-spirit leaders who provide guidance about when it is appropriate to share traditional knowledge and how we move forward to protect our youth in a rapidly changing world while holding on to cultural values and worldviews
- Allies working on behalf of Native youth suicide prevention who desire additional information and resources

NATIONAL ADVISORY EDITORIAL BOARD

To ensure the CULTURE FORWARD publication was fully guided by Native communities, the Johns Hopkins Center for American Indian Health engaged a National Advisory Editorial Board (NAEB) who reviewed, edited and provided valuable feedback to the CULTURE FORWARD guide you see here. Thank you to all of our NAEB members for their contributions to this project including:

Mikah Carlos (*Onk Akimel O'Odham, Xalychidom Piipaash, Tohono O'Odham*), GOYFF Project Coordinator, Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community

Colbie Caughlan, MPH, Project Director at the Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board's Tribal Epidemiology Center

Francys Crevier (*Algonquin*), Executive Director, National Council of Urban Indian Health

Pamela End of Horn (*Oglala Lakota*), MSW, LICSW, Federal Agency Representative, National Suicide Prevention Consultant, Indian Health Service

Ashleigh N. Fixico (*Muscogee (Creek) Nation*), Native Youth Representative

Robert Flying Hawk (*Yankton Sioux*), Chairman, Yankton Sioux Tribe

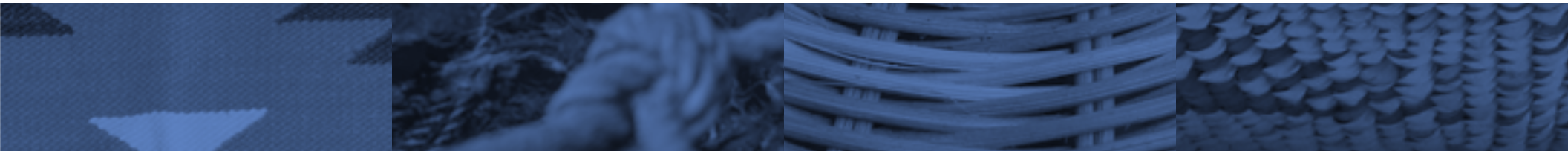
Johnnie Jae (*Otoe-Missouria/Choctaw*), Founder, A Tribe Called Geek & #Indigenerds4Hope

Josie Raphaelito (*Diné*), Health Planner, Seneca Nation Health System

Rory C. Wheeler (*Seneca Nation*), Youth Commission Co-President, National Congress of American Indians

Photo Credit: Ed Cunicelli

III. BACKGROUND: WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT NATIVE YOUTH SUICIDE



BACKGROUND

Many sources support the idea that suicide is a relatively new phenomenon across Indian Country. This is also true of the disproportionately higher rates among our Native youth that have received greater attention in recent decades. Ever since academia started tracking and writing about suicide rates in our communities, the patterns and trends have been distinct from other racial and ethnic groups. Research documented increases in suicide rates among Native communities starting around 1967. For many tribal nations, suicide is often described as a rare or even unheard of event prior to the 1960s. Some of the people with whom we spoke with in listening sessions to inform CULTURE FORWARD echoed these sentiments.

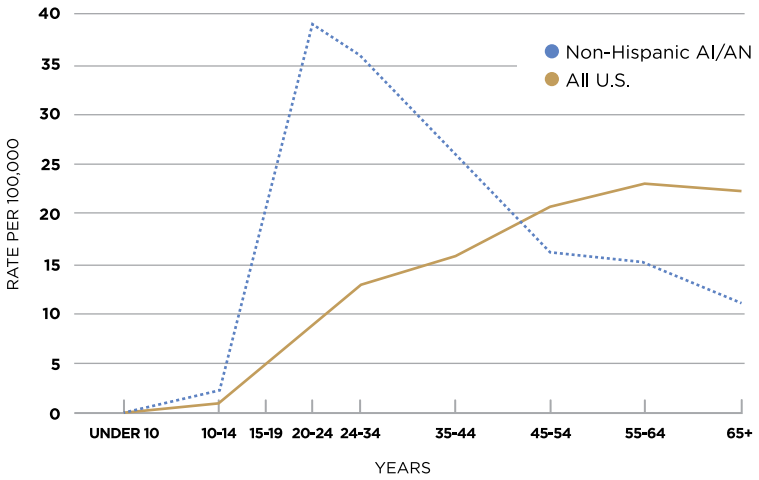
> ***"[Suicide] wasn't a part of us. I maintain personally that it's a behavior that's learned and we don't realize that we're mimicking or we've picked up this type of behavior."***
>
> —Tribal Leader & Elder

In general, stories embedded within our cultures and communities do not discuss or describe suicide, as such cultural conceptualizations of suicide likely did not exist to inform behavior or views of suicide as a socially viable option. Attention around suicide happening in Native communities by the U.S. federal government and mass media proliferated in 1968 when Senator Robert Kennedy, leading a Senate Subcommittee on Indian Education, visited a tribal community and learned of their concerns about losing their young ones to suicide. Calls for research on the subject were answered quickly, and soon the press was reporting stories about high rates of suicide among Native Americans — falsely generalizing across all communities. Preliminary studies focused on individual communities, some of which were experiencing high rates of suicide, although many were not. This led to erroneous stereotyping of suicide and perpetuated the failure to recognize the vast diversity of tribal nations across Indian Country.

Photo Credit: Ed Cunicelli

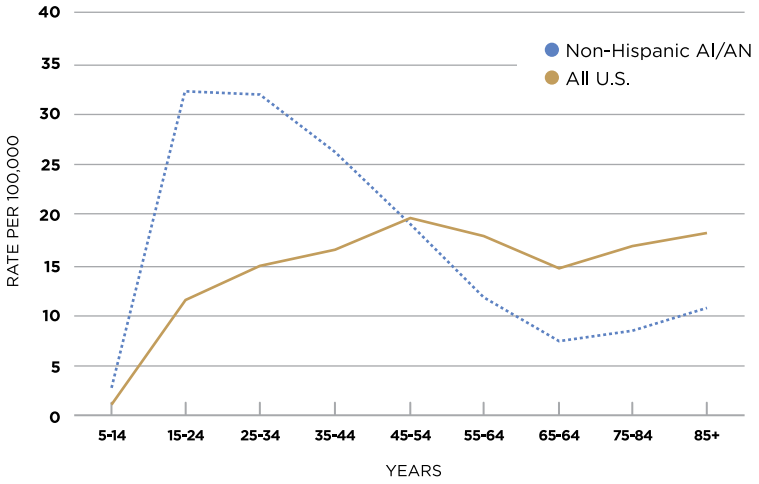
Despite the limitations and lack of available data for suicide rates across tribal nations in the 20th century, some important historical

Suicide Rate by Age for American Indians/Alaska Natives Compared to U.S. (Average 1965-1967)



SOURCE: Ogden, M., Spector, M. I., & Hill, C. A. (1970). Suicides and homicides among Indians. *Public Health Reports, 85*(1), 75-80.

Suicide Rate by Age for American Indians/Alaska Natives Compared to U.S. (Average 2008-2017)



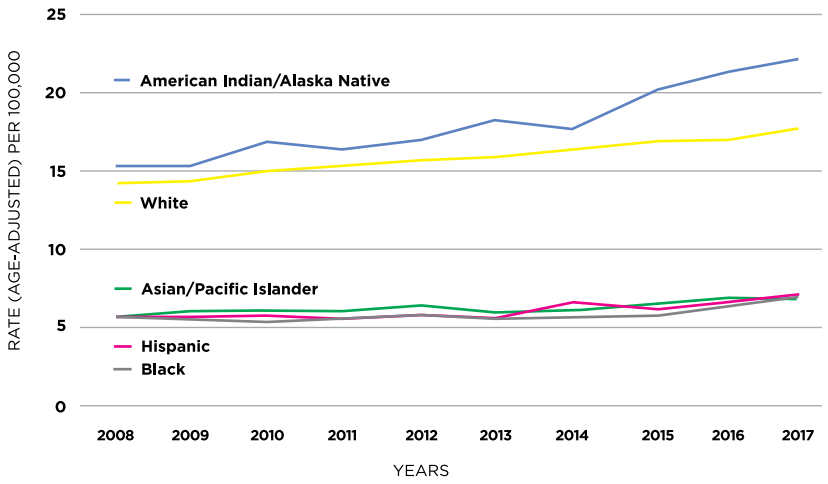
SOURCE: CDC, 2017

trends can be traced which mirror patterns we see today. Research from the 1960s to today shows that suicide in Native communities occurs mostly among youth, a pattern which stands in sharp contrast to suicide rates among the general U.S. population that experiences higher rates of suicide in middle and later life. In this same time period, Native suicide rates were significantly lower among older age groups. See comparative graphs on this page for suicide rates in the 1960s to today.

Important to keep in mind are the variations in suicide rates across tribes, regions (e.g., Northwest versus Southeast), geographies (e.g., urban versus rural) and time. These differences are masked by common presentations of overall rates of suicide in the U.S., which show that Native populations experience the highest rates of suicide.

It is essential for each community to understand its own rates and patterns and not rely exclusively on national data.

Rate of Suicide by Race/Ethnicity, U.S. 2008-2017



SOURCE: CDC, 2017

RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

To better understand why suicide may occur, it is useful to consider risk and protective factors. Risk factors are associated with a higher chance of suicidal thoughts, attempts or deaths. Protective factors provide protection against suicide. Risk and protective factors can help a community identify program targets or help a provider consider if a person may be at higher risk. However, risk and protective factors do not affect everyone the same way, and must be understood in the contexts of individual lives. Suicidal thoughts and behaviors are complex, and risk and protective factors do not occur in isolation. Within Native communities, there are historical, social, cultural and political contexts to consider; and for every human being, individual, family and community level factors must be understood and addressed through comprehensive suicide prevention programming. Below are a list of suicide risk and protective factors that have been identified through community-based research in diverse Native American settings.

SUMMARY

The data presented in this section demonstrate that suicides in our Native communities occur in ways that are distinct from the general U.S. population. These differences underscore the need for unique approaches to preventing suicide. Tribal nations must leverage our inherent strengths to prevent suicide and utilize in-depth and holistic approaches that move beyond the numerical and superficial descriptions of our communities often imposed by Western science. The remainder of CULTURE FORWARD focuses on the intrinsic strengths rooted in Native cultures and communities to weave a new pathway for suicide prevention and beyond—toward a movement where our youth reclaim wellness for our communities and future generations.

Prevention of Native Suicide: Considering Risk and Protective Factors

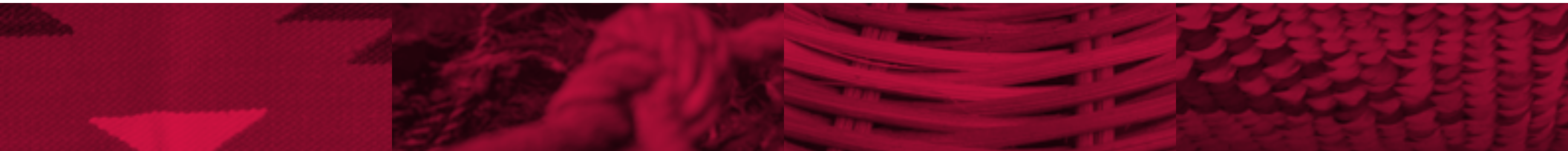
Risk Factors:

- Historical trauma
- Mental health issues
- Substance use problems
- Hopelessness
- Poverty
- Geographic isolation
- Cultural loss
- Chronic pain
- Adverse childhood experiences
- Family or friend suicide attempt or death
- Difficulty coping with emotions and impulsivity
- Relationship and/or family problems
- Experiencing abuse and/or assault

Protective Factors:

- Hope
- Self-efficacy
- Connectedness to family
- Community belongingness
- Identity and participation in tribal culture
- Family living a traditional lifestyle
- Self-determination
- Support from tribal leaders
- Tribal spirituality
- Connectedness to community and lands
- A culture of collective wellness within communities
- Talking to family and friends about problems

IV. OUR NETWORKS HARNESS BELONGING AND HELP KEEP US SAFE



SECTION OVERVIEW

- **Extended families create community connection.**
- **Community networks keep Native youth safe.**
- **Belongingness is a critical protective factor.**
- **Programs that create, support or extend networks build belongingness and reduce risks.**

INTRODUCTION

Our communities have distinct group-level social, cultural and interpersonal assets. Indigenous cultures and traditions favor "family" and "community" above other domains as the nexus of individual strength and as a foundation for resiliency and coping skills development. It is not uncommon for our children to have a caring network that includes several grandmothers and grandfathers, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters and cousins who may or may not be blood relatives, but are treated as members of the family. Our clan systems, various ceremonies and cultural practices also support the importance of additional spiritual kin, encouraging connectedness as "goddaughters," "aunts," "uncles" and "grandparents," regardless of bloodlines and marriage. Reflecting this value system, Indigenous words for relationships are more detailed and precise than in English.

This network of blood and traditional relationships can help keep our children safe and promote their development with a large extended family watching over them and ensuring their connectedness into the kinship group and larger community. Indigenous healing and puberty ceremonies involve our extended family members in key roles that represent stabilizing or restorative forces. Embedded in Indigenous values, traditions and teachings are also structures for communal problem-solving. Communal thinking promotes a sense of belongingness, shared purpose and security that helps our youth to thrive.

The above photo has been approved for use by the Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board's suicide prevention project, THRIVE. For more information please visit www.npaihb.org/thrive

Our military service members and veterans are cornerstones in tribal communities. They protect our youth and communities and honor traditional values and beliefs that lead them to serve in the military. They are often a source of strength for our youth and communities, exhibiting family and tribal traditions and upholding tribal gender and cultural roles. Together military service members and veterans cast a net of protection and strengthen our families and communities.

HOW DO CONNECTEDNESS AND BELONGING TO NETWORKS PROTECT NATIVE YOUTH FROM SUICIDE?

Connectedness and belonging have been found to help protect against suicide and substance use in research with our communities. Our youth experience connectedness on many important levels—including to their self, peers, family, community and the natural environment. This next section will focus on how connectedness to caring adults helps protect against suicide, an idea that a number of studies support. We will also highlight growing research on the importance of connectedness to school, peers and communities for our youth at risk of suicide.

Our close family networks help protect youth from suicide by providing important sources of strength. Connectedness to caring adults increases the likelihood that negative thoughts, feelings and behaviors, including warning signs of suicide, are noticed and addressed before young people think about suicide, make a suicide attempt or die from suicide. Caring adults can also help to connect our youth to community resources. Our youth can be additionally buffered against suicide risk because connectedness has cognitive and physiological benefits through believing one is of value, cared for and belongs. Our youth will be better able to handle upsetting emotions through belongingness and attachment with caring adults (Native or non-Native). Since we know that cultures and societies evolve over time, it is important that our youth have a continuous sense of belonging to help navigate our changing world.

> ***"Communication over food and water in the home was where prevention was planted, with words of encouragement and affection. That was home-based prevention. There was pure love by our parents and grandmothers as they prepared food and they put that into the food. With that, you left your home with no intention to harm yourself knowing that your parents and grandparents armored you with love and the education that people may throw stones at you or downgrade you but that should not matter in whatever you are doing in your life."***
>
> —Traditional Healer

In one study, Southwestern Native adolescents who made suicide attempts voiced the importance of connectedness to caring adults—these youth indicated that they turned to immediate and extended family when help or support was needed. These Native youth also described their cousins as being "really more like sisters or brothers," because they were often raised together in the same home. They emphasized the importance of family talking to each other as a way to deal with their problems. Connectedness to adults and Elders was found to protect Yup'ik adolescents against suicide by strengthening family-based factors—specifically family cohesion, expressiveness, passing on of values, affection and praise in a study looking at their social networks. This study also showed the importance of connectedness to community. Community level support, opportunities and role models contributed to the reduction of suicide.

For our youth, school and peer connectedness are also linked to less suicide among students through strengthening feelings of closeness, sense of belonging and meaningful interactions with teachers and peers. Our students' sense of connectedness may also lower suicide risk through increased hope, mastery and self-control.

Lastly, a heritage of strong, culturally based positive social networks within our families and communities are important to decrease a specific type of suicidal behavior called contagion or clusters. Suicide contagion is when suicide or suicidal behaviors among someone's family, peers, community or in the news is related to suicide and suicidal behaviors in others or increases suicide rates locally. Connectedness and network-based approaches to preventing contagion resonate with our natural understanding that mental, physical and spiritual wellness are protected by positive family– and community-level forces.

STORIES ABOUT HOW OUR NETWORKS HARNESS BELONGING AND HELP KEEP US SAFE

Building a Community of Caretakers

The White Mountain Apache Tribe, who reside on the Fort Apache reservation in Arizona, implemented a two-day community gatekeeper training (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training: ASIST) as part of their comprehensive public health approach to suicide prevention. Tribal stakeholders thought this intervention would help their youth because it trains caring adults in the community to recognize the warning signs of suicide, become more comfortable asking about suicide directly and better understand resources to which they can refer youth. They gathered data from 84 community members over six ASIST trainings between March 2008 and June 2010. Most trainees reported they were satisfied and reported increased knowledge, confidence and intent to use their skills. Younger trainees reported increased understanding of why it is important to ask about suicide directly and how this does not increase suicide risk (a commonly believed myth). Participants also advocated for adding local culture into the existing training. Today Apache stakeholders teach the culturally adapted training and have changed the name from "gatekeeper" to "caretaker" training.

Promoting Community Conversations About Research to End Suicide (PC Cares)

PC CARES takes an innovative and decolonizing approach in rural Alaska by building a "community of practice (COP)" of village health and human service providers, law enforcement, school personnel, religious leaders, respected Elders, parents, aunts, uncles and others who come together for three hours nine times a year. PC CARES works to strengthen individual and communal learning about suicide prevention with the purpose of inspiring and supporting each other to take practical action on multiple levels to promote holistic health and by doing so, to ultimately prevent suicide. This approach empowers individuals and the community by focusing on their ability to analyze and interpret research findings, to make the best-informed decisions for themselves and to work together toward a shared goal.

The format for the monthly meetings, which are facilitated by local and primarily Indigenous group leaders, includes a brief presentation of research findings and time for reflecting on how their lived experience and the research is relevant to their community through storytelling. Storytelling is an important teaching and empowerment tool that Indigenous peoples have used for generations. Further, meetings include discussions of how they might apply this information individually and collectively using community resources that are aligned with cultural and spiritual preferences.

Photo Credit: Ed Cunicelli

Elders Pass on Language, Values and Culture to Youth in Schools

White Mountain Apache Elders drew community attention to the importance of culture and language to prevent youth suicide. The Elders feel that language provides youth with a strong sense of self, identity and being connected to the community. The Elders began to teach Apache language and culture in schools on their reservation with a standardized curriculum. Members of the Elders' Council have been visiting the local schools to teach youth about Apache culture, language and ways of life with this curriculum since February 2014, reaching over 1,000 youth. The importance of respect emerged as a theme that was encompassed across all the lessons. The content of the lessons corresponds with seasonal teachings, and include Apache words and stories. Lastly, lessons change to include monthly responsibilities, such as taking part in cultural activities during that season. Students reported enjoying the program and demonstrated increased knowledge of Apache language and culture. Local teachers have reported that students' experiences with Apache Elders resulted in improved school behavior as well as increased respect, consideration and empathy toward one another.

WHAT CAN OUR COMMUNITIES DO NOW?

- Support programs that strengthen our youths' connectedness and belongingness to their family, school, community and tribe.
- Strengthen family networks to be better able to talk to one another openly about their problems, to express their feelings, pass on values and provide affection and praise.
- Promote closeness, sense of belonging and meaningful interactions with teachers and peers in your schools.
- Host events that promote open dialogue and communal problem solving around suicide prevention. Engage grassroots leaders, those with lived experience and loss survivors to build community-level support, opportunities and role models.
- Conduct trainings that connect and build networks of helpers.
- Put together and disseminate a guide of formal and informal community resources.
- Integrate the strengths of Native networks in your community's response to a suicide death, clusters of suicides or attempts and suicide contagion.

LEARN MORE HERE:

Serna, P. (2011). Adolescent Suicide Prevention Program Manual: A Public Health Model For Native American Communities. Suicide Prevention Resource Center website: Retrieved from: https://www.sprc.org/resources-programs/adolescent-suicide-prevention-program-manual

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V. CONNECTIONS TO OUR LANDS AND ELDERS ALLOW US TO THRIVE

SECTION OVERVIEW

- **Indigenous ways of knowing and interacting with the world are grounded in relationships to place, land, family and community.**
- **Connections to homelands and our communities inform our sense of identity and purpose.**
- **Elders are vital to transmit cultural knowledge.**
- **Programs that promote these factors through emphasizing traditional wisdom in connection to lands and communities are successful at preventing suicide and promoting resilience.**

"We are the land ... that is the fundamental idea embedded in Native American life ... the Earth is the mind of the people as we are the mind of the Earth. The land is not really the place (separate from ourselves) ... It is rather a part of our being, dynamic, significant, real. It is our self... It is a matter of fact, one known equably from infancy, remembered and honoured at levels of awareness that go beyond consciousness, and that extend long roots into primary levels of mind, language, perception and all the basic aspects of being."

—Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna Pueblo)

INTRODUCTION

Our communities share a deep relationship with environment, land and place. Our peoples have always been stewards of the lands that support and nourish us. The ecosystems we are a part of not only provide physical resources, they engender spiritual connection and meaning.

Regardless of whether we live in rural, urban or reservation areas, we are always on Indigenous lands. For urban communities, adapting and creating a new community together is consistent with our worldviews and social values. No matter where home is, we have roots to that place and collectively share creation and oral histories that tie us to traditional homelands. To that end, our lands and communities are a fundamental source of purpose, wisdom and identity.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) of our peoples is also described in academic literature. TEK signifies that Native experiences of the world are spatially oriented and based on a strong connection to place and mindfulness of other individuals, plants and animals that share the spaces we inhabit. Central to this wisdom are concepts of relatedness and connectedness, which are also fundamental pillars of many Indigenous clan systems. These concepts convey the acknowledgment of all beings—people, plants, animals, land, sky, water—as relatives to be honored and respected.

Research shows that learning through interaction with the land is an important pathway to connect Native peoples with spiritual and traditional knowledge and lessons that promote rhythms of living in healthy balance with respect for nature. Cultural teachings, strengths and resilience are derived from our rich historical experiences and interactions with our lands. This robust connection to our lands, ancestors and Elders can be a profoundly powerful source of healing.

Healing exists on a continuum and is intertwined with prevention. Connection to lands and wisdom not only allows us to survive but also to thrive. Engaging with the land and living with the lessons passed down to us through generations in our daily lives keeps us strong, healthy and resilient.

Our cultures are dynamic and constantly evolving, just like our connections to lands and place, our ancestors and the knowledge our Elders share with us. Sustaining these connections conveys resilience and means we can engage the strengths of these connections wherever we may be.

HOW DO OUR LANDS AND ELDERS PROTECT NATIVE YOUTH FROM SUICIDE?

Academic research supports that connections to lands, community and traditional wisdom prevent Native youth suicide. In a study exploring well-being and healing among Inuit youth, family and cultural practices emerged as crucial ingredients for living a healthy life and preventing suicide. This study noted that it was difficult to fully distinguish the theme of family from the land and cultural activities because these things so often went hand-in-hand. Researchers in Alaska measured "awareness of connectedness" to one's family, community and environment and showed that higher levels of this awareness strengthened reasons for living.

Research also supports that a sense of belonging to community and interacting with lands can reduce depression and suicidal thoughts. Efforts to promote interconnectedness among peoples, lands and all living things will aid community-based suicide prevention strategies.

> ***"The Elders, and those things that we take for granted, the natural gatherings. Those are prevention... When we walk on the land and hunt and provide, that makes you feel good. That's spiritual."***
>
> —Grassroots Leader & Elder

Photo Credit: Ed Cunicelli

STORIES ABOUT HOW OUR CONNECTIONS TO OUR LANDS AND ELDERS ALLOW US TO THRIVE

Using Tribal Traditions to Navigate Youths' Journey Through Life

The Healing of the Canoe project is a collaboration between the Suquamish Tribe, Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe and the University of Washington.

The program was developed around the Canoe Journey, an integral cultural practice for Coast Salish tribes, as a guide to life. The canoe is a versatile vessel for travel, ceremonies, transporting food and resources and subsistence activities. The Canoe Journey as a traditional activity and a metaphor for the program's curricula synthesizes historical and contemporary connections to land, ancestral knowledge and Elders.

Curricular modules focus on four domains of a holistically healthy life: mental, emotional, physical and spiritual. The lessons are steeped in traditional tribal values, practices and knowledge that impart teachings about the importance of community, managing emotions, solving problems and communicating, among other things. The program is designed for high school students and is adaptable for use in specific tribal communities. The flexible curriculum can be delivered over any desired length of time and is inclusive of LGBTQ/two-spirit peoples.

Providing a Cultural Toolbox for Youth to Thrive

The Qungasvik intervention comes from Southwest Alaska, where a community invited researchers to collaborate to further enhance suicide and substance use prevention efforts. Community based participatory research guided the development of this toolkit, which is grounded in local culture and harnesses Indigenous and Western wisdom to promote cultural strengths to increase resilience among youth and reduce the risk of suicide and alcohol abuse. The program is designed for youth between ages 12 and 18 and focuses on bolstering protective factors through 36 cultural activities for communities, families and youth.

Qungasvik means toolbox and represents the tools that this intervention package provides youth with to help them thrive through participation and connection with their culture and community. It uses the Qasgiq, a meeting place structure, as a model to facilitate young persons' access to ancestral resilience and knowledge that has allowed Yup'ik people to thrive for centuries. One piece of the toolbox is called, "The Land Provides for Us" and, among other things, includes lessons from the land, subsistence activities and values such as respect, carefulness and awareness.

Photo Credit: Kiliii Yuyan (Nanai/Chinese American)

Photo Credit: Kiliii Yuyan (Nanai/Chinese American)

Yappalli: Choctaw Road to Health

Yappalli means “to walk slowly and softly” in the Choctaw language. It is the name of a culturally-grounded program that stems from experiences with Choctaw lands and Indigenous knowledge. Yappalli confronts historical trauma by guiding participants through re-walking a part of the Choctaw Trail of Tears. By revisiting the land where relocation once took place, participants remember and retrace traumatic events in a profound, experiential learning process. Remembering these events by engaging with the land on which they happened allows participants to grapple with personal challenges and embody a positive future.

More than just linking to land, this project is about connecting to specific places tied to significant historical events. Knowledge gleaned through interactions with such spaces is rich in cultural and spiritual teachings that can be harnessed to protect and promote health today. The Yappalli project guided participants across 254 miles of land that their ancestors had walked years before. Along the way participants spent time camping and engaging with lessons related to Choctaw language, history and cultural/health values. This experience stimulated new thoughts and insights into the participants’ understanding of health and their health behaviors, which paved the way for discussion about promoting health in their communities.

WHAT CAN OUR COMMUNITIES DO NOW?

- Work with your community to develop or adapt a strengths-based intervention to promote protective factors through activities and teachings that are relevant to your community's context and history and incorporate connection to land, ancestors and Elders.
- Engage people across the community to promote greater connection and interaction with Elders to preserve and pass on important cultural knowledge and place-based learning.
- Collaborate to develop ideas about how to spend meaningful time connecting to lands and histories.

Photo Credit: Kiliii Yuyan (Nanai/Chinese American)

LEARN MORE HERE:

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Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2009). Culture Card: A Guide to Build Cultural Awareness American Indian And Alaska Native. Retrieved from: https://store.samhsa.gov/product/American-Indian-and-Alaska-Native-Culture-Card/sma08-4354

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014). Preventing and Responding to Suicide Clusters in American Indian and Alaska Native Communities. Retrieved from: https://store.samhsa.gov/product/Preventing-and-Responding-to-Suicide-Clusters-in-American-Indian-and-Alaska-Native-Communities-Report/SMA16-4969

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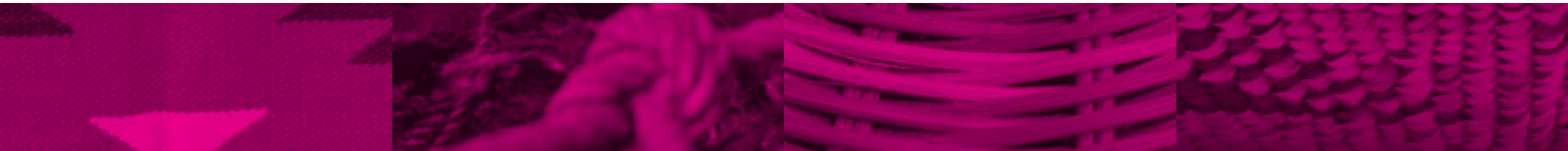
VI. TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE HOLDS THE KEYS TO HEALTH AND HEALING



SECTION OVERVIEW

- **Adolescence is a key time to develop positive cultural identities that can protect against suicide.**
- **Our traditional knowledge, cultural practices and values strengthen resilience.**
- **Tribal communities successfully incorporating culture-based learning and activities support increased resiliency.**
- **Programs that promote these factors through emphasizing traditional wisdom in connection to lands and communities are successful at preventing suicide and promoting resilience.**

"Being grounded in our cultural traditions and who we are as Indigenous people is the key to our wellness and survival. We know this through the resiliency of our ancestors, it's our obligation to carry this on to the next seven generations."

—Native Youth Leader

INTRODUCTION

What makes our communities so unique is that our ancestral knowledge provides the pathways to health and healing. We carry a sacred understanding of the way our ceremonies, medicines and traditions provide the physical, mental and spiritual well-being of our peoples.

From creation stories, to stories linked to rites of passage, to stories about the lands to stories that teach us about our morals and values, our ancestors handed down blueprints for healthy living from time immemorial to all future generations on Mother Earth. As Western science evolves, scientific evidence is confirming what we always knew—our medicines, ceremonies and traditions are essential to our health and healing as Indigenous peoples. They provide us the knowledge and methods to protect and heal our minds, bodies and spirits in the aftermath of the historical and contemporary traumas that have hurt our communities.

It is worth reviewing in this context that the recent phenomenon of suicide disparity among some of our communities coincides with losses of culture, language and traditional knowledge over the past few generations. Reclaiming, reviving and continuing our traditional practices and cultures actively works against historical trauma and its lasting impacts, including suicide.

HOW DOES CULTURE HELP PREVENT NATIVE YOUTH SUICIDE?

First, let's consider again how our Native populations are affected by suicide. Our most severe problem is among youth during the time period when they transition through puberty to young adulthood. Latent in our cultures are ceremonies and teachings that

guide our development through stages of transition from childhood to adulthood. In many communities, both girls and boys experience puberty rite of passage ceremonies that extend their knowledge of sacred practices, connect them to concepts of personal and communal responsibility and demonstrate unique personal, familial and communal relationships—bonds that guide and support them for a lifetime. In every culture, the transition through adolescence is a time for defining one's identity and value system. For our communities, the accumulated historical traumas, resulting family dysfunction, mental health and substance use struggles and cultural losses compounded by modern day stress and discrimination may leave young people vulnerable. These multiple, complex and sometimes overlapping factors can lead youth down a path of self-harm. We need to help youth feel they have a purpose and an important future ahead of them.

Second, let's consider our two-spirit relatives who are disproportionately affected by suicide. Two-spirit is a term being reclaimed by many Indigenous peoples to link the appreciation for diverse gender identities to Indigenous cultural value systems that celebrate and honor these community members. Pre-contact, two-spirit peoples were held in high regard for possessing both female and male spirits.

Due to colonization and the punitive worldviews asserted by Christians and other Euro-Americans toward non-heteronormative and non-cisgender individuals, communities' traditional beliefs about our two-spirit relatives were pushed underground. Today, within some of our own communities, the legacy and enduring beliefs rooted from Christian and colonial views unfortunately include rejection of two-spirit identity, as well as homophobia and transphobia, without conscious recognition about where those views come from. There is a growing movement to nurture and support cultural protections and safety for two-spirit Native peoples (see special section for resources at the end of this chapter).

Promoting positive youth identity through cultural and other social activities, such as pow wows, sports games, academic groups and youth councils may help prevent suicide. The next piece of this section provides stories from three different communities where engaging culture is the centerpiece of individual, family and community-based suicide prevention and healing.

STORIES ABOUT HOW OUR TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE HOLDS THE KEYS TO HEALTH AND HEALING

Culture Camps are Helping Alaska Native Youth

In Northwest Alaska, tribal leaders have been running culture camps for youth as a keystone of their suicide prevention efforts since 2010. Approximately 12 to 25 Alaska Native youth at a time attend five-day camps across rural, remote regional sites away from their villages. Youth who are experiencing challenges (e.g., foster care, recent violence in the community or grieving a death by suicide) are given top priority. At the camps, Elders and other presenters teach youth their Indigenous languages and guide them through cultural practices and wellness activities. They also share traditional stories and lead team-building exercises. Youth have free time to swim, canoe, play basketball or pick berries. In the evening, youth may participate in group saunas, beadwork or skin sewing. Camps close with a talking circle. As camps increase in popularity, results from a pilot evaluation are promising. Youth participants experienced improved mood, felt a greater sense of belongingness and endorsed greater capacity to handle life stressors. All of these outcomes have been linked to lower risk for suicide.

PHILOSOPHICAL PRINCIPLES OF BLUE BAY MENTAL HEALING CENTER CONFEDERATED SALISH AND KOOTENAI TRIBES

1. The heart of the problem lies within the reservation communities. The solution therefore must come from within our communities. Others may assist, but we, as Native people, must be subjects of the healing process and must direct that process ourselves and in our own way.

2. The future is inseparably linked to the past. We must rediscover the life-preserving, life-enhancing values of our traditional culture. We also must come to understand the debilitating historical process we have undergone as a people. We then must unite in a common vision of what human beings can become and build a new future for our children that is based solidly on the foundational values of our own culture.

3. In order for our people to become competent directors of our own healing and development, an ongoing learning process is required. This learning process systematically will educate our children from the time they are in their mother's womb until they pass out of this world.

4. The well-being of the individual is inseparable from the well-being of the community. Individual healing and the healing of the entire community must go hand in hand.

5. The spiritual and moral dimension must be central to development and come from within our own culture.

Creating a Community Vision for Protection

In the 1980s, the Confederated Tribes of Salish and Kootenai who reside on the Flathead Reservation in Northwest Montana took a bold step in self-determination: they abolished their Western alcohol program and restructured their mental health programs to reflect local cultural values and principles. What resulted was the founding of the Blue Bay Healing Center—which featured a family counseling and cultural center to guide families through healing via cultural supports. Prior to forming the Blue Bay Healing Center, tribal thought leaders produced cultural principles to form the basis of their operating philosophy. We share these principles as food for thought for developing your own community's vision for a CULTURE FORWARD approach to healing.

Working Upstream: Protection for Head Start Children and Their Parents

The Fort Peck community is designing an upstream, two-generation solution for suicide prevention called Wa' Kan ye' zah or "Little Holy One." Parents with children between ages 3 to 5 who are entering Head Start are invited to participate. Parents will receive four lessons to address their experiences of stress and trauma and four lessons focused on developing parenting skills. Parents and children will also receive four cultural components designed to increase tribal identity and communal mastery.

WHAT CAN OUR COMMUNITIES DO NOW?

- Form a council of Elders and traditional leaders to plan and participate in cultural activities with youth.
- Support your youth council to lead a "CULTURE FORWARD" media campaign with powerful messages to promote cultural values that prevent suicide.
- Rekindle and promote cultural values that embrace the special roles that your two-spirit community members hold within the tribe.
- Create safe places for our two-spirit relatives to express themselves and include them as valued community members in all aspects of community life.
- Work with your mental and behavioral health directors and tribal stakeholders to develop principles for your healing efforts that can be widely disseminated through your tribal media outlets.
- Create culture camps for youth groups, giving priority to those facing current hardships.

LEARN MORE HERE:

National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA). (2009). Ensuring The Seventh Generation: A Youth Suicide Prevention Toolkit For Tribal Child Welfare Programs. Retrieved from: https://vawnet.org/material/ensuring-seventh-generation-youth-suicide-prevention-toolkit-tribal-child-welfare-programs

National Indian Health Board. (2009). Healthy Indian Country Initiative Promising Prevention Practices Resource Guide. Retrieved from: https://www.sprc.org/resources-programs/healthy-indian-country-initiative-promising-prevention-practices-resource-guide

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SPECIFIC RESOURCES FOR PROTECTING AND SUPPORTING OUR TWO-SPIRIT COMMUNITY MEMBERS:

Hunt, S. (2016). An Introduction To The Health Of Two-Spirit People: Historical, Contemporary And Emergent Issues. Prince George, BC: National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health. Retrieved from: https://www.famillesIgbt.org/documents/pdf/HealthTwoSpirit_ENG.pdf

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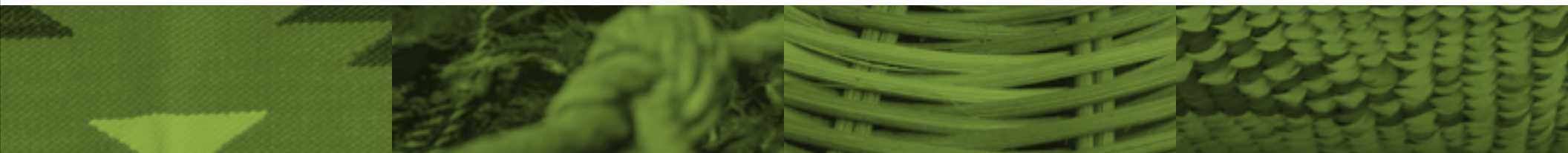
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2017, September 19). Two Spirit webinars. Retrieved from: https://www.samhsa.gov/tribal-ttac/webinars/two-spirit

Western States Center. (2019). Indigenizing Love: A Toolkit For Native Youth Building Inclusion. http://bit.ly/324mGnG

Photo Credit: Kiliii Yuyan (Nanai/Chinese American)

VII. NATIVE YOUTH LEAD US TO RECLAIM OUR AUTONOMY AND WELL-BEING



SECTION OVERVIEW

- **Children are sacred and carry an important purpose in our lives and communities.**
- **Our youth are strong, resilient and represent the future of our communities.**
- **Family-based programs that strengthen children's social and emotional development reduce suicide risk among Native youth.**
- **Programs and policies that support youth development show our children their purpose and value in life.**

> ***"As a Lakota, we think of our children, the world is 'wakhan,' wakhan is sacred, chosen, and we reintroduce that, that these children are sacred. We reintroduce that and sometimes it's not there, the cultural components that are so vital. How children see the world, how we introduce the value of those elements of culture that are vital."***
>
> —Tribal Leader

INTRODUCTION

Children are sacred to our communities. They carry forward our beliefs, cultures, strengths and traditions for future generations. It is our communities' responsibility to provide our children with a foundation for supporting their mental, emotional, social and spiritual well-being over the course of their lives. This must start in early childhood. And, as they grow and learn, it becomes increasingly important to engage them in leadership roles. This section will discuss both topics: the importance of family-based early childhood approaches that nurture well-being and promote youth leadership in designing programs to support thriving futures.

HOW DOES FOCUSING ON EARLY DEVELOPMENT AND UPLIFTING YOUTH LEADERS PREVENT NATIVE YOUTH SUICIDE?

Early childhood from pregnancy to age three is known as the most critical developmental period in human life. It is when the building blocks of our social, emotional and behavioral well-being are formed through nurturing, protective and stimulating relationships with our caregivers. On the other hand, when children experience trauma, emotional and social neglect or harsh treatment early in life, their risks increase for suicide, substance use and other related behavioral, mental and spiritual challenges in adolescence and young adulthood. Developing community approaches to promoting early childhood development through home visiting and Early Head Start programming can help to protect against suicide across the life course (see stories below).

Our youth are reclaiming their role as leaders in our communities and beyond. Native youth councils are organizing across the country on reservations and in urban Native communities.

> ***"Our children are our most valuable resource, and to me it's not just about prevention, but it's making them the best they can be. We want them to flourish. We want them to be an example to everybody else for what kids that have support can become. We want to look at the whole person, not just preventing suicide. We don't want them just to survive, we want them to thrive."***
>
> —Tribal Leader

Youth learn responsibility, grow as leaders and help others. Our communities know the importance of hearing from our youth and these councils provide our youth with a voice to make a difference. Some Native youth councils give direct input to governing bodies. For example, the Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board's (NPAIHB) Youth Delegates are appointed to one-year terms and they provide recommendations to the NPAIHB and other state and federal agencies about health programs and policies. Coupled with our obligation to teach and protect our youth is our responsibility to include their voices in leading our communities and beyond.

Family members and community stakeholders can play an important role in elevating youth voices and leadership. Specifically, engaging youth in the development and implementation of suicide prevention efforts, as well as strengths-based programming to promote protective factors, is key to success. Youth are closest to the solutions and know what will motivate their peers to live life with purpose and determination.

STORIES ABOUT HOW NATIVE YOUTH LEAD US TO RECLAIM OUR AUTONOMY AND WELL-BEING

In this section we feature three examples of family-based, culturally adapted prevention programs: Family Spirit, Thiwáhe Gluwáš'akapi Program and Native H.O.P.E. Program. These three programs support our youth through distinct approaches, but at their core they recognize that our youth are vital to the survival of our future and are sacred gifts that we must protect.

Family Spirit Early Childhood Home Visiting Program

Family Spirit is an early childhood home visiting program designed with and for Native communities to prevent mental and behavioral health problems throughout the lifespan. The Family Spirit model is distinct from many other maternal, infant, early childhood home visiting programs in the U.S. in three main ways:

1. **It leverages cultural assets and an Indigenous understanding of health;**
2. **Encourages the use of culturally embedded family health coaches to deliver the program; and**
3. **Addresses early behavioral and mental health, in addition to children's physical needs.**

The Family Spirit Home Visiting Program has been successful in increasing parenting knowledge and involvement, decreasing maternal depression, improving home safety, reducing emotional and behavioral problems of mothers and decreasing social, emotional and behavioral problems of children. All of these results predict protection or lower risk of suicide and related problems later in life. Family Spirit started with the Navajo, White Mountain Apache and San Carlos Apache communities, but has now been

adopted by more than 120 tribal communities across Indian Country. An all-Native training team teaches the curriculum and program implementation to new communities who desire to use it.

Thiwáhe Gluwáš'akapi Middle School Children and Parents Program

In response to growing concerns about suicide and substance use among youth, one large reservation in the Midwest worked to adapt an evidence-based intervention, Strengthening Families, for their community. At the heart of the program, the pathway to reducing suicide and substance use was through the family. The community selected a family-based intervention and adapted it to align with their specific cultural values, traditions and practices. Thus, Thiwáhe Gluwáš'akapi, translated as "sacred home where families are made strong," was born.

The program engages youth ages 10 to 14 along with their parents and other family members for seven weekly meetings. Each group includes eight to ten youth and their families. Families begin each weekly meeting by sharing a meal together before participating in separate youth and parent sessions, and later come together again for a family session. Weekly meetings are designed to:

1. **Build on family strengths;**
2. **Encourage appreciation for one another;**
3. **Improve family relationships;**
4. **Decrease family conflict; and**
5. **Decrease risky behavior among adolescents.**

As an example of how to engage youth in program development, local youth were heavily involved in shooting program videos to reflect community settings and were featured in the videos as actors.

Photo Credit: National Congress of American Indians

PROGRAMS WITH NATIVE YOUTH LEADERSHIP

- National Congress of American Indians Youth Commission
- The Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board (NPAIHB) Youth Delegates
- Center for Native American Youth — Champions for Change
- Urban Native Youth Association (First Nations, Canada)
- United Nations Indigenous Youth Caucus
- George Washington University's Native American Political Leadership program
- United National Indian Tribal Youth, (UNITY)
- National Council of Urban Indian Health Youth Council

Native H.O.P.E. (Helping Our People Endure)

Native H.O.P.E. is a strengths-based Native youth leadership program that creates networks of youth natural helpers to prevent suicide. Adult leaders (teachers, counselors, spiritual and traditional healers) facilitate curriculum delivery to youth and support them as they embark on a community-based approach to suicide prevention. Training involves developing prevention strategies at multiple levels (e.g., individual, family, school, community), breaking "codes of silence" about suicide among youth and providing them with skills to identify risk, provide support and referrals and other strategies that allow youth leaders to build local capacity for suicide prevention. Native H.O.P.E. has been delivered to approximately 2,000 youth in both reservation and urban settings. Several studies evaluating Native H.O.P.E. have found increased traditional culture, resilience, community attachment and intergenerational connectedness after participation.

WHAT CAN OUR COMMUNITIES DO NOW?

- Does your community have a youth council? Can one be started? Or can you think of ways that community organizations can actively support their goals?
- Consider adopting programs to promote healthy early childhood development. Some resources can be found through the Tribal Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting (Tribal-MIECHV) program.
- Identify suicide prevention resources that exist or are needed. When suicide prevention programs are being developed in a community, engage youth at all stages of planning and implementation.
- Encourage parents and community leaders to attend youth events, such as basketball games, rodeos, cultural events, council meetings and school events to bolster youths' self-esteem.
- Encourage adults to get involved in agencies and organizations that support youth—such as parent-teacher organizations, school boards, Boys and Girls Club of America, Head Start and child welfare services.

LEARN MORE HERE:

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We R Native - For Native Youth, By Native Youth. (n.d.). Retrieved from: https://www.wernative.org/

Native Youth Sexual Health Network - Home. (n.d.). Retrieved from: http://nativeyouthsexualhealth.com/

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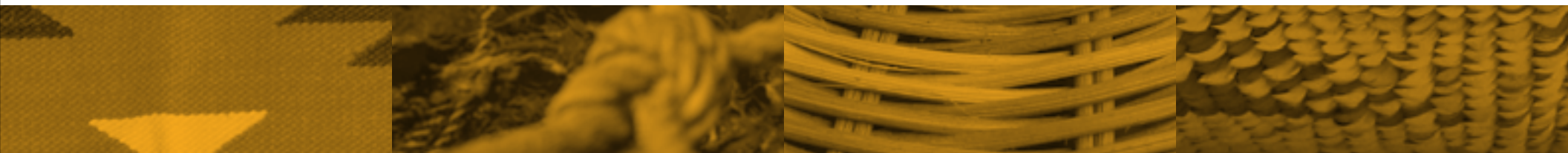
Photo Credit: Kiliii Yuyan (Nanai/Chinese American)

VIII. SELF-DETERMINATION EMPOWERS US TO FIGHT



SECTION OVERVIEW

- **Tribal sovereignty can be leveraged to address youth suicide in our communities.**
- **Research shows that self-determination can be a protective factor against youth suicide.**
- **Tribal leaders have an important role to play in addressing suicide prevention for Native youth.**

"Hundreds of treaties, along with the Supreme Court, the President and Congress, have repeatedly affirmed that tribal nations retain their inherent powers of self-government. These treaties, executive orders and laws have created a fundamental contract between tribes and the United States. Tribal nations are located within the geographic borders of the United States, while each tribal nation exercises its own sovereignty."

—National Congress of American Indians

INTRODUCTION

We are nations within a nation—sovereign tribal nations with formal relationships with the U.S. government. Tribal sovereignty means the authority to self-govern. The National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) advocates for this right as a crucial means that can be used to address youth suicide. In 2013, NCAI passed a resolution called "Building Tribal Capacity to End High Rates of Suicide" that encouraged stakeholders to engage in partnerships to continue to restore culture and community balance and secure the future for Native youth.

Tribal leaders have a responsibility to take action to prevent youth suicide in our communities. They are the leaders of our communities and should be at the forefront of suicide prevention. One of the ways tribal leaders can demonstrate self-determination and sovereignty when it comes to suicide prevention is by leading the development of suicide prevention efforts. One of the most successful community-based Native youth suicide prevention programs, the Zuni Life Skills Curriculum (now adapted by many other Native communities and called the American Indian Life Skills Curriculum), was borne out of tribal leaders' concern over rising rates of youth suicide and their disconnection from Zuni traditions.

Importantly, tribal leaders need to listen, support and show up for our Native youth, including allowing them to lead community suicide prevention efforts.

HOW DOES SELF-DETERMINATION HELP PREVENT NATIVE YOUTH FROM SUICIDE?

Empirical research shows that perceived caring from tribal leaders is protective against suicidal thoughts for Native youth. Powerful stories from our youth coupled with research show the impact tribal leaders have in protecting our Native youth. We have the power to help our youth who are struggling now and to make a difference in the lives of those yet to come.

STORIES ABOUT HOW SELF-DETERMINATION EMPOWERS US TO FIGHT AND PREVENTS SUICIDE

A Tribally Mandated Community-Based Suicide Surveillance System

Following a spike in youth suicide in 2001, the White Mountain Apache Tribal Council passed a tribal resolution that mandates anyone living or working on the reservation to report all self-harm and suicidal behavior (suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts, binge substance use, non-suicidal self-injury, suicide deaths) to a central data registry. A team of White Mountain Apache community mental health specialists, the Celebrating Life team, follows up with each report made to the system. They fill important gaps in care for community members who need support, educate schools and all community agencies about the mandate and procedures, provide suicide prevention education and outreach activities and form key partnerships to develop and sustain Apache community-based prevention and intervention solutions. This community-based public health approach, made possible by the White Mountain Apache Tribe exercising self-determination and sovereignty, has shown significant reductions in suicide attempts and deaths in the community.

Indigenous Self-Governance Promotes Suicide Prevention

Research conducted with First Nations communities in Canada has also shown that cultural connections and exercise of self-governance are connected with decreased First Nations youth suicide. Rather than focusing solely on high rates of suicide in Indigenous communities, this group of researchers took a broader look at this issue. They recognized that different communities have varying rates of suicide and asked: what strengths do communities have where suicide rates are low? Using data that were available to them, researchers looked at a variety of factors that could contribute to cultural continuity—tangible things that would project to youth that their culture and identity continues through time. Many of these factors related to self-governance, including First Nations communities' involvement in land claims negotiations, control over health, safety, education and development of community cultural facilities. Researchers found that these factors were related to decreased suicide rates (see the figure below).

Self-Determination: Impact On Youth Suicide

	Youth Suicide Rates		Youth Suicide Rates
Increased involvement in land claims negotiations	▼	Less involvement in land claims negotiations	▲
More self-governance	▼	Less self-governance	▲
More cultural facilities available	▼	Fewer cultural facilities available	▲

Collaborative Hubs to Reduce the Burden of Suicide Among American Indian and Alaska Native Youth

This initiative seeks to expand the reach of culturally relevant interventions that promote community-based solutions to prevent Native youth suicide. This work is being conducted across three hubs working with Alaska Native, Southwest and Southern Plains and Urban Native communities. The hubs engage with tribal governments and local Native health boards to use research to drive policy decisions and build capacity of Indigenous staff to lead culturally-appropriate programs that honor the sovereignty of tribal nations.

WHAT CAN OUR COMMUNITIES DO NOW?

- Tribal leadership can consider passing tribal resolutions or mandates that address Native youth suicide prevention.
- As voiced by youth, tribal leaders should meet with youth councils and attend important youth community events (e.g., basketball games, cultural events) to show their support and care for their community's youth.
- Tribal leaders can consider dedicating a division or interagency council to youth suicide prevention. Remember to include youth leaders in these efforts.

LEARN MORE HERE:

National Indian Health Board. (2009). Healthy Indian Country Initiative Promising Prevention Practices Resource Guide. Retrieved from: https://www.sprc.org/resources-programs/healthy-indian-country-initiative-promising-prevention-practices-resource-guide

National Institute of Mental Health. (2018). Collaborative Hubs to Reduce the Burden of Suicide among American Indian and Alaska Native Youth. Retrieved from: https://www.nimh.nih.gov/about/organization/od/odwd/ai-an/index.shtml

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Photo Credit: National Congress of American Indians

Photo Credit: Ed Cunicelli

The Johns Hopkins Center for American Indian Health led the development of this guide under the direction of Victoria O'Keefe, PhD (Cherokee/Seminole Nations), contributors included Allison Barlow, PhD, MPH, Mary Cwik, PhD, Jerreed Ivanich, PhD (Metlakatla Indian Community of Alaska), Rachel Chambers, MPH, Emma Waugh, MPH and Fiona Grubin, MSPH. Guide development and design was supported by NUNA Consulting Group, LLC, led by Ricki McCarroll with contributions from Shon Quannie (Pueblo of Acoma/Hopi/Mexican) and Terra Branson (Muscogee (Creek) Nation). This report was made possible in collaboration with Casey Family Programs, an operating foundation committed to supporting tribes in strengthening tribal nations' capacity to keep children healthy, safe, and connected with their families, communities and cultures.

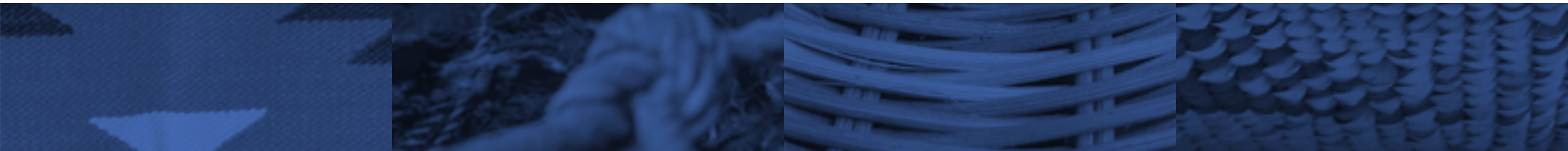
JOHNS HOPKINS CENTER FOR AMERICAN INDIAN HEALTH

casey family programs

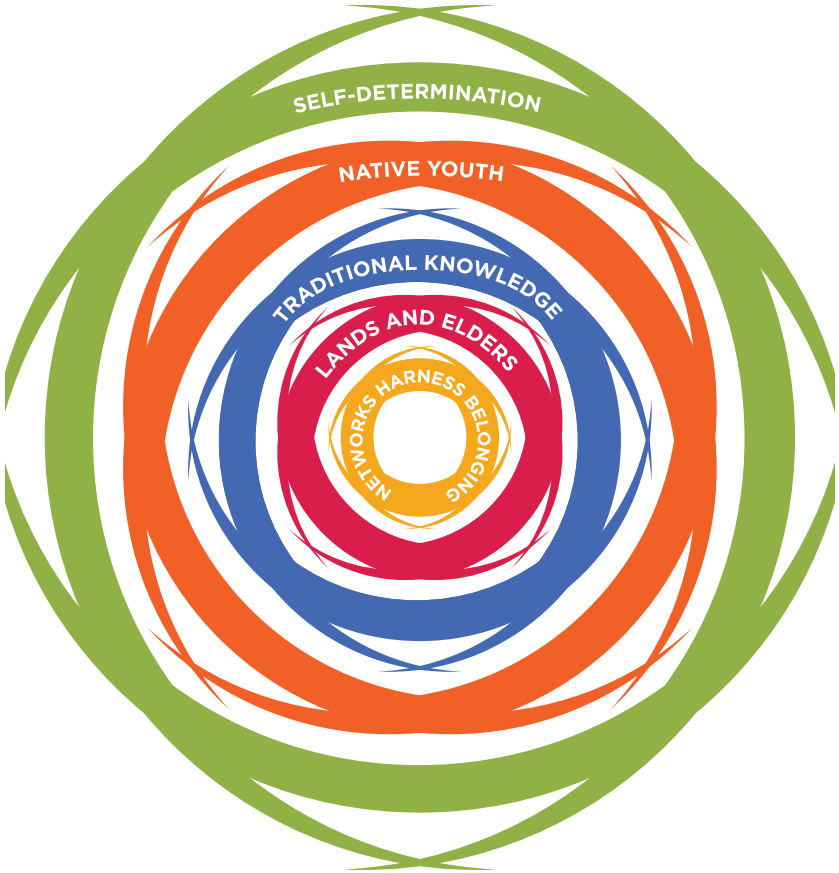
NUNA Consulting Group

Photo Credit: Ed Cunicelli

IX. HOW WE KEEP MOVING: CULTURE FORWARD



CULTURE FORWARD FIVE CORE THEMES



1. **OUR NETWORKS HARNESS BELONGING AND HELP KEEP US SAFE.**
2. **CONNECTIONS TO OUR LANDS AND ELDERS ALLOW US TO THRIVE.**
3. **TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE HOLDS THE KEYS TO HEALTH AND HEALING.**
4. **NATIVE YOUTH LEAD US TO RECLAIM OUR AUTONOMY AND WELL-BEING.**
5. **SELF-DETERMINATION EMPOWERS US TO FIGHT.**

In order to protect our Native young people, we need a unified movement with support from youth, parents, teachers, grassroots leaders, tribal leaders, traditional healers, Elders, two-spirit leaders, health and human service providers and more.

CULTURE FORWARD provides a starting place, where our Native youth thrive, pave the way for future generations of our tribal communities and continue to lead us in impactful global movements. We are committed to weaving together our collective knowledge, existing resources and diverse voices. Our goal is not just to prevent Native youth suicide, but to hold up the strengths of our communities and cultures. Please join us in this movement for a positive future for all of our communities.

We respectfully acknowledge and express our deepest gratitude for all who participated in the listening sessions and our National Advisory Editorial Board members for sharing their wisdom and guiding this project.

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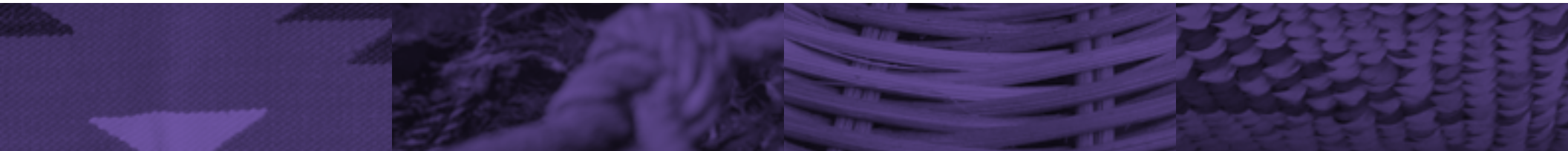
The findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the authors alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of Casey Family Programs.

X. BIBLIOGRAPHY



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CULTURE FORWARD

A Strengths and Culture Based Tool to Protect Our Native Youth from Suicide

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