

Effective Reentry Practices in Tribal Communities

This handout serves as a resource for Tribal communities in the planning and implementation stages of developing a reentry program and non-Tribal reentry organizations/programs that serve Tribal communities. This document highlights effective services and approaches that can foster and sustain reentry partnerships with local jails and State and Federal prisons, strengthen Tribal–State partnerships, and give voice and opportunity to the experiences and knowledge of Tribal members who are formerly incarcerated.

American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) people are overrepresented in prisons,¹ and incarceration has a disproportionate effect on Native families and communities. Data from Alaska show that Native children were 4.4 times more likely than White children to have ever had an incarcerated parent; in Oklahoma, Native children were 2.3 times as likely as White children to experience this developmental risk factor (Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.).² Individuals returning to Indian Country from prisons or jails are likely to reenter under-resourced communities with high poverty and unemployment and challenges accessing sparse social services, including provider shortages and distances to obtain services.

The need for culturally specific programming for AI/AN populations has become clear in recent years. All States require that providers use evidence-based health, behavioral health, and social services, but such services that are not grounded in Native worldviews may harm AI/AN people (Dixon et al., 2007; Stanley et al., 2020) while cultural connection can promote resilience (Hansen, 2018). The science behind evidence-based reentry and other programs is rooted in a Western worldview that may not recognize traditional indigenous knowledge and may be carried out by institutions or groups that have harmed Native people in the past. In addition, the process of adapting evidence-based programs so that they are relevant to life in Native communities may affect the fidelity and possibly the effectiveness of the program.

Successful reentry in AI/AN communities requires programs that are designed by or with Tribes that address the needs of returning individuals within the community's own worldview. It is important to recognize that Tribes are not all alike—they vary in cultural practices, beliefs, and behavior. It is important to both attend to the specific needs of individual Tribes as well as identify common factors that may be helpful across multiple AI/AN groups. For example, many indigenous communities have a strengths-focused perspective that recognizes and builds on resilience and is grounded in the family, community, and Tribal nation.

Four past and currently funded Bureau of Justice Assistance Second Chance Act Tribal grantees have responded to the needs of justice-involved tribal members:

1. Muscogee Creek Nation Reintegration Program

¹ AI/AN people compose 1.3 percent of the U.S. population and 2.5 percent of Federal inmates (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2022). Note that AI/AN people are *not* overrepresented in jails. In 2019, they composed 1.4 percent of jail inmates; in 2020, that rate was 1.2 percent (Minton & Zeng, 2021).

² Alaska and Oklahoma were the only States to report data for AI/AN people.

2. Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribe Welcome Home Reentry Program
3. St. Croix Tribal Offender Reintegration Program
4. Pascua Yaqui Tribe Reentry Program

These grantees have developed and implemented reentry programs specifically designed for Native people returning from incarceration. Common features of their programs are described below.

Common Approaches to Reentry for Tribal Members

1. **Foster and sustain reentry partnerships** with local jails and State and Federal prisons. For example, the Muscogee Creek Nation Reintegration Program planned and coordinated a meeting at the Oklahoma State Capitol with elected state government officials and the Oklahoma Department of Corrections legislative liaison to discuss the needs for improved policies to identify Native people’s tribal affiliation upon intake to track outcomes and needs of Tribal members. The Pasqua Yaqui Tribe deals with incarceration and reentry at the Federal, State, county, and Tribal levels. One goal for its task force is to improve information exchange, coordination, and communication across these levels.
2. **Promote the restoration of client, family, and community relationships** through healing and strength-based approaches. The St. Croix Tribal Offender Reintegration Program held healing ceremonies for formerly incarcerated Tribal members. The Port Gamble S’Klallam Welcome Home Program uses restorative justice circles to allow the person who has committed a crime to make amends to the people they have harmed, including the victim of the crime and the person’s family members.
3. **Provide culture-based services** for Tribal members while incarcerated and postrelease. Prerelease, the Muscogee Creek Nation facilitates cleansing ceremonies to help the individual who is incarcerated prepare spiritually for reentry into society. Reintegration program staff work with prison chapels to provide rocks for sweats, offer blessings, and coordinate sponsors. Postrelease, clients may use the program’s sweat lodge or engage in cultural programs in the roundhouse. The Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribe’s Welcome Home Reentry Program uses a Wheel of Wellness to organize the individualized service plan around physical, spiritual, emotional, and mental needs. A cultural coach on staff offers classes on traditional ways, spiritual teachings, and family and community values. The cultural coach instructs clients on designing and making drums and drumsticks and using traditional beading techniques to make earrings. Clients can also learn to harvest cedar and gather and prepare traditional foods and plants for ceremonies.
4. **Give voice and opportunity to formerly incarcerated Tribal members** by participating in reentry task force meetings, reentry case management/services trainings, volunteering, and being hired within the Tribal reentry program as demonstrated by Pascua Yaqui Tribe. The Pascua Yaqui Tribe provides professional development opportunities on public speaking, computer literacy, and reentry case management planning for formerly incarcerated Tribal members.

Factors to Consider When Developing Tribal Reentry Programming

Tribal, State, and Federal Partnerships

- Tribal members who return to their communities after a period of incarceration often cross jurisdictional boundaries when they are released from county, State, or Federal custody. Intergovernmental collaboration between Tribal and State governments is critical to help connect Tribal members with reentry resources before they are released.
- Securing prerelease contact and services with incarcerated Tribal citizens can build relationships, foster trust, and increase the likelihood of the client working with the reentry program when released.

Culturally Responsive and Healing-Informed Practices

- Culturally responsive programs can improve reentry by recognizing and strengthening Native identity as a protective factor in the reentry process.
- Given the high levels of trauma exposure among Tribal communities, reentry programs and organizations should ensure their services are trauma-informed and staff are trained in a “trauma-healing” manner.

Strengths-Based Approaches

- Effective reentry practices recognize the importance of including justice-involved Tribal members in the planning and implementation of reentry services.
- Justice-involved AI/AN women benefit from gender-responsive programs and practices, such as addressing mental health, trauma, childcare, and parenting.

“. . . generosity is measured in the ways of respect and honor, not pity or looking at somebody as being lower. We care, we respect, we honor. Somebody who needs help is helped out of respect for another human being.”

—Albert White Hat Sr., from *Life's Journey—Zuya: Oral Teachings from Rosebud*, Prevention Solutions@EDC, 2018, p. 5

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Resource

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For more information, please contact

Simon Gonsoulin • sgonsoulin@air.org

Michelle Perry • mperry@air.org

or visit us at: <https://www.air.org>

