

Working Effectively with Tribal Populations in State Drug Courts and Tribal Healing to Wellness Courts

OKLAHOMA SPECIALTY COURT CONFERENCE
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Tribal Law and Policy Institute
Presenters:
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A Guide to Build Cultural Awareness American Indian/Alaska Native

- **Myths and Facts**
- **Tribal Sovereignty:**
 - Presently, there are 566 Federally recognized AI/AN tribes in the US.
 - There is a unique legal and political relationship between the Federal government and Indian Tribes
- **Regional and Cultural Differences:**
 - Historic rivalries, family or clan conflicts and “Tribal Politics” may present challenges for an outsider unaware of local dynamics who is trying to interact with different groups in the community.
 - Urban Indian communities can be found in most major metropolitan areas.

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• Cultural Customs:

- Specific cultural customs among AI/AN groups may vary significantly, even within a single community.
- Deeply held values, general world view, patterns of communication, and interaction are often the differences that affect the helping relationship.
- Respectful questions about cultural customs are generally welcomed, yet not always answered directly.
- Sharing food is a way to welcoming visitors, similar to offering a handshake.

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• Spirituality:

- Many AI/AN communities have strong church community and organized religion that is integrated with their culture.
- Traditional spirituality and practices are integrated into AI/AN cultures and day-to-day living.
- Specific practices such as ceremonies, prayers, and religious protocols will vary among AI/AN communities
- It is common practice to open and close meeting with a prayer or short ceremony.

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• Communication Style:

- AI/AN people communicate a great deal through non-verbal gestures.
- AI/AN people may convey truths or difficult messages through humor.
- It is often considered unacceptable for an AI/AN person to criticize another directly.
- Getting messages across through telling a story (traditional teachings and personal stories) is very common.

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• Cultural Identity:

- It is important to understand that each person has experienced their cultural connection in a unique way.
- Many AI/AN families are multicultural and adapt to their surrounding culture.
- It is important to remember that most Alaska Natives do not refer to themselves as “Indians.”

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• Role of Elders and Veterans

- Elders play a significant role in Tribal Communities.
- It is customary in many Tribal communities to show respect by allowing elders to speak first.
- In group settings, people will often ask the elder's permission to speak publicly, or will first defer to an elder to offer an answer.
- Veterans are also given special respect similar to that of elders for having accepted the role of protector and experienced personal sacrifice.

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• Health and Wellness Challenges:

- Prevention and intervention efforts must include supporting/enhancing strengths of community resources as well as individual and family clinical interventions.
- Service providers must take great care in the assessment process to consider cultural differences in symptoms and health concepts when making a specific diagnosis or drawing conclusions about the presenting problem or bio-psychological history.
- Every effort should be made to consult with local cultural advisors for questions about symptomology and treatment options.

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• Historic Distrust

- Establishing trust may be difficult due to historical events and policies.
- 1800s – 1900s: Removal to Reservations; Boarding Schools
 - ✦ Especially poignant in Oklahoma, as many of the state's 38 tribes did not originally occupy lands within present-day Oklahoma.
- 1950s – 1960s: Federal Termination Policy and Relocation Policy
- Cultural & Religious Suppression: Today, there is a diverse mix of Christian beliefs and traditional spirituality within each AI/AN community.

• Historical Trauma:

- Cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations.

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• Self Awareness and Etiquette – DO's

- Be honest and clear about your role and expectations and be willing to adapt to meet the needs of the community. Show respect by being open to other ways of thinking and behaving.
- Examine your own belief system about AI/AN people related to social issues, such as poverty, mental health stigma, teen suicide, and drug or alcohol use.
- Learn how the community refers to itself as a group of people (ex. Tribal name)
- It is acceptable to admit limited knowledge of AI/AN cultures, and invite people to educate you about specific cultural protocols in their community.

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• Self Awareness and Etiquette – DON'Ts

- Avoid stereotyping based on looks, language, dress, and other outward appearances.
- Be careful about telling stories of distant AI/AN relatives in your genealogy as an attempt to establish rapport unless you have maintained a connection with that AI/AN community.
- Do not touch sacred items such as medicine bags, other ceremonial items, hair, jewelry, and other personal or cultural things.
- NEVER use any information gained by working in the community for personal presentations, case studies, research, and so on, without the expressed written consent of the Tribal government or Alaska Native Corporation.

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How to Work with Native American Participants in State (Non-Tribal) Drug Courts

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Trust



- **Historical Trauma –**
 - Grieving process-strong connection with past
- **Present situation –**
 - Domination/Control
- **Law of Nature –**
 - Relations between things

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Language



- Communication styles
- Word meanings
- Natives pause
 - contemplating
- Story tellers

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Contrasting Values

Native American

- Group (take care of community)
- Today-is a good day!
- Time-a right time/a right place
- Age-knowledge/wisdom

Non-Native

- Self-take care of self
- Prepare for Tomorrow
- Time-use every minute
- Youth-rich, young, beautiful

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Contrasting Values cont.

Native American

- Cooperate
- Be Patient
- Listen and you'll learn
- Give and share

Non-Native

- Compete
- Learn to be Aggressive
- Speak up and be heard
- Take and save

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Contrasting Values cont.

Native American

- Harmony (live in harmony with all things)
- Great Mystery/Intuitive
- Humility
- Spirituality (a way of life)

Non-Native

- Conquer (nature)
- Skeptical/Logical
- Self (ego/attention)
- Religion (a part of life)

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How to Work with Native American Participants in State (Non-Tribal) Drug Courts

We must become aware of these conflicting values or we can become confused, angry, frustrated and unbalanced – physically, mentally and spiritually.

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How to Work with Native American Participants in State (Non-Tribal) Drug Courts

- Some Natives live in multi-family households
- Different family systems (clan systems)
- Often live in rural communities where transportation is a hardship
- Along with substance abuse, codependency is very high.

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Walking on Common Ground

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