

NATIVE VETERAN

MENTAL HEALTH



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TRIBAL CIVIL AND CRIMINAL LEGAL ASSISTANCE

The Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), through Montana Legal Services Association in partnership with National American Indian Court Judges Association (NAICJA) offers Training and Technical Assistance (TTA) to Tribal Civil and Criminal Legal Assistance (TCCLA) grantees and subgrantees.

The TCCLA program seeks to increase and improve access to legal assistance for Native Americans and Alaska Natives by providing TTA for the development and enhancement of Tribal justice systems.

Further, TCCLA will assist in strengthening the capacity and the quality of indigent criminal defense services and defense strategies for Tribal justice systems.



NAICJA AND TLPI PARTNERSHIP

The National American Indian Court Judges Association (NAICJA) also partners with the Tribal Law and Policy Institute to offer training and technical assistance to Tribes who offer services for Native justice-involved veterans through Tribal Healing to Wellness Courts or through specialized services.

DISCLAIMER: This partnership work is supported by Grant No. 15PBJA-23-GK-05390-DGCT awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA). BJA is a component of the Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the SMART Office. Points of view or opinions in this presentation are those of the presenter and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.



ABOUT THIS SESSION

Objective:

- Highlight Mental Health (MH)/Behavioral Health (BH) issues among Native veterans & their justice system involvement.
- Acknowledging the Warrior Role
 - Indigenous traditions of warrior service
 - Military service as cultural duty
 - Importance of honoring this identity

Audience: Court personnel and legal professionals



WHY NATIVE VETERAN MENTAL HEALTH?

High service rates

“American Indians and Alaska Natives serve in the Armed Forces **at five times the national average** and have served with distinction in every major conflict for over 200 years.”

[NICOA, 2019](#)

Increased risk of mental illness, Substance Use Disorder (SUD), and suicide

“In 2021, the suicide rate was **4.6 %** for American Indian or Alaska Native veterans, compared to **3.6 %** for White veterans.”

[Mission Roll Call, 2024](#)

Increased risk of homelessness

“Studies show that approximately **30% of incarcerated veterans** have a history of homelessness.

[CCJ, 2023](#)

Legal advocacy, identification and referral are key to ensuring access to care.



NATIVE VETERANS AND JUSTICE INVOLVEMENT



- High rate of service among Native populations



- Link between trauma, unmet needs, and legal issues



- Effect on justice systems involvement

“Combat exposure and its associated physical and mental health problems (e.g., PTSD, TBI, mood disorders, and substance use disorders) are significantly associated with a greater likelihood of criminal justice system involvement among veterans. For example, TBI is associated with a 59% increase in the odds of justice involvement among veterans.”

CCJ, 2023



MOVING FROM WHAT WE KNOW TO WHAT WE CAN DO

Native Americans:

- ❑ have the highest risk for health complications.
- ❑ are the most impoverished ethnic group in the U.S.
- ❑ are frequently victims of violence, especially Native American women.

We can find opportunities for:

- behavioral health (BH) and mental health(MH) screening
- interception and referral to community MH/BH services
- trauma-informed practices



BARRIERS TO ACCESSING SERVICES

Historical Trauma

- Boarding schools, forced service
- Veterans Administration (VA) and Indian Health Service (IHS) care limitations
- Intergenerational trauma and mistrust

Cultural Barriers

- Stigma within communities
- Mistrust of institutions
- Lack of culturally competent providers



SUICIDE RISK

- Sudden withdrawal from services
- Expressions of guilt or being a burden
- Giving away belongings
- Giving up on life

PTSD

- Jumpiness
- Difficulty concentrating
- Sudden anger or withdrawal
- Panic
- Seeming emotionally “shut down”

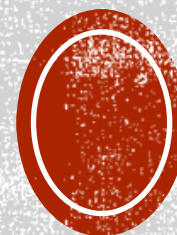
DEPRESSION

- Slowness
- Fatigue
- Emotional numbness
- Feelings of worthlessness
- Hopelessness

SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER

- Repeated violations
- Erratic behavior
- Poor decision-making
- Legal issues associated with Alcohol and Other Drugs (AOD) use/possession

COMMON MH/BH CONDITIONS





“Native American Veterans are overrepresented in the homeless population relative to their percentages in the Veteran population overall, with Native American female Veterans having the highest rates of housing instability”

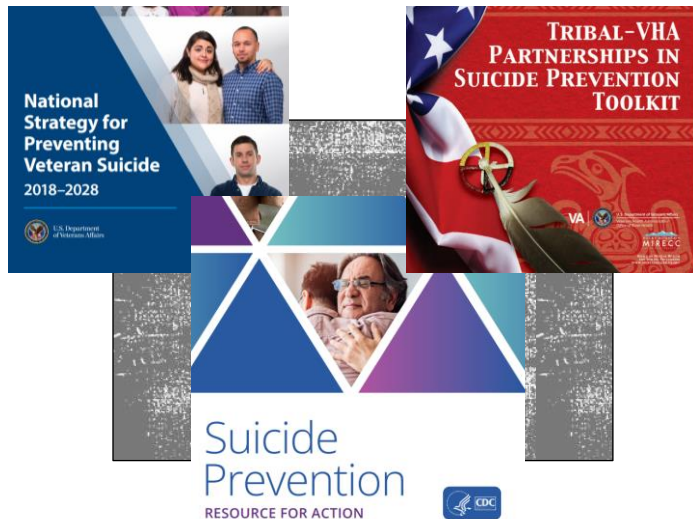
COMPOUNDED RISK FACTORS



SUICIDE PREVENTION FOR NATIVE VETERANS

Native veterans at elevated suicide risk

Prevention requires cultural connection and community-based strategies



“In 2022, non-Hispanic AI/AN people had a suicide rate **91% greater** than the general population.”

[CDC, 2024](#)

“Over **67% of AIAN veterans** don't use the Veterans Affairs mental health services.”

[Televeda, 2023](#)



MISSION
DAYBREAK

Hero's Story Project

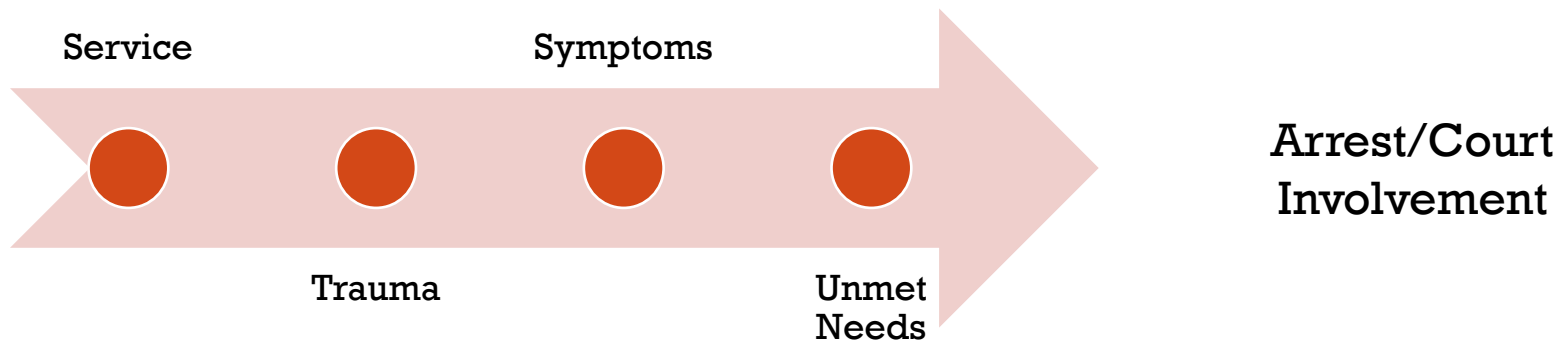
televeda

Roger That

*Notable efforts toward culturally informed suicide prevention for AIAN veterans. (source: [Military Times, 2024](#))



FROM SERVICE TO SYSTEM CONTACT



Additional Barriers Along the Way

Transportation

Lack of diagnosis

No access to benefits

Cultural disconnect





**WHAT
WORKS?**

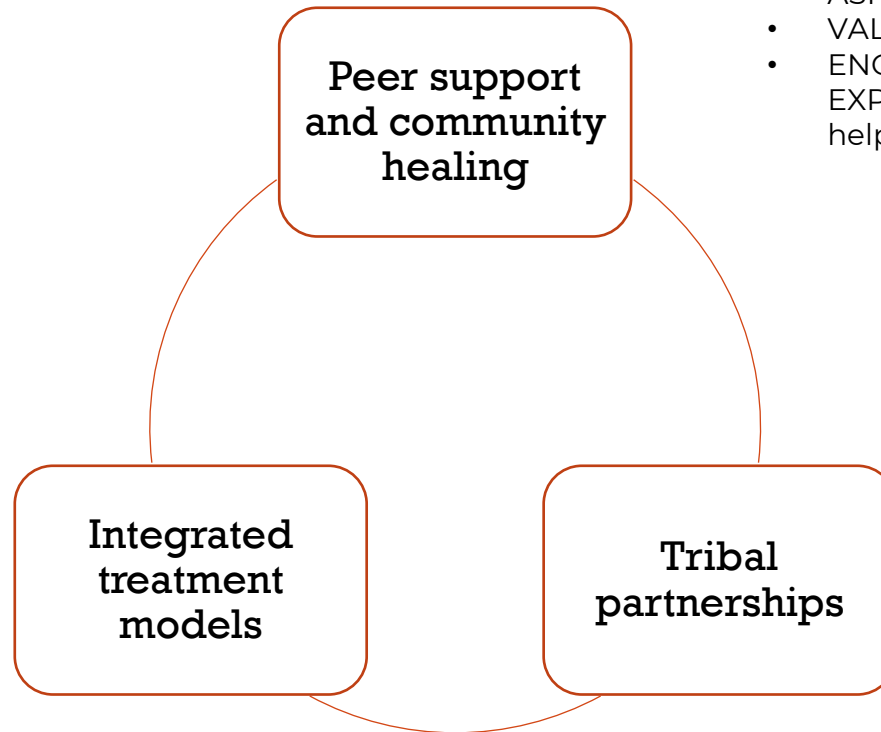


PROMISING PRACTICES

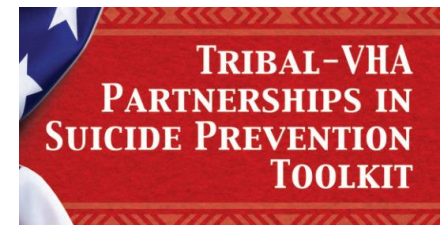
VA S.A.V.E. TRAINING

The S.A.V.E. Conversation

- Know the SIGNS
- ASK the question
- VALIDATE
- ENCOURAGE and EXPEDITE getting help



Source: Tribal VHA Partnerships in Suicide Prevention Toolkit



BRIDGE TO SERVICES

Veterans Treatment Courts & Wellness Courts

- Tailored for veterans
- Can incorporate cultural practices
- Support recovery over punishment

Advocacy Beyond the Case

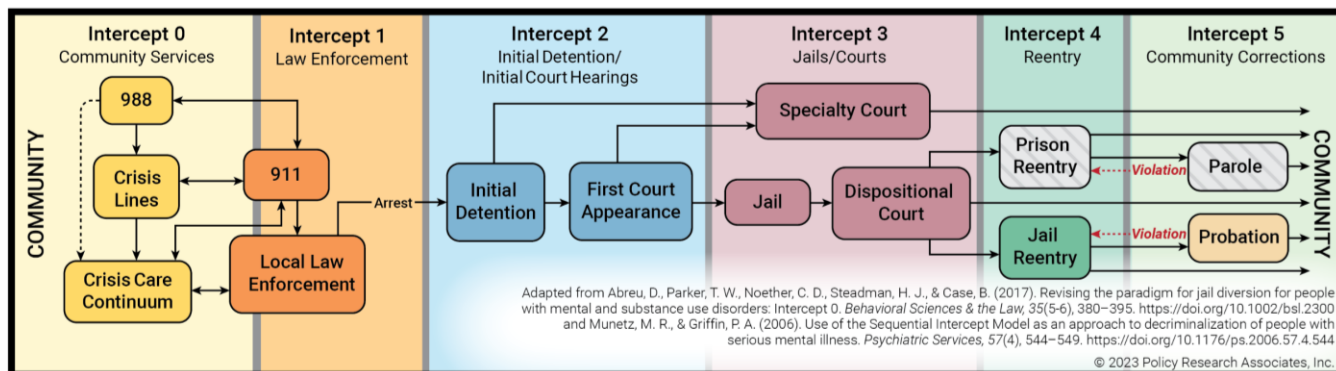
- Connect clients to care
- Screen for MH/BH needs
- Educate courts about cultural and clinical context

Legal touchpoints can connect individuals to MH/BH services

Early intervention shifts outcomes



THE SIM



Intercept 0	Intercept 1	Intercept 2	Intercept 3	Intercept 4	Intercept 5
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tribal Health Departments VA– Outreach and Prevention Programs IHS Behavioral Health Urban Indian Health Programs TVSOs Traditional healers and cultural practitioners Community mental health centers Housing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tribal PD /LEOs Law Enforcement Liaisons Crisis Intervention Teams (CITs) Mobile Crisis Response Teams 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline with Tribal extensions VA Homeless Outreach Teams Veteran Peer Support Specialists embedded with law enforcement Sobering centers or wellness drop-in centers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tribal Court Clinicians / BH Screens VJO Specialists Public Defenders trained in MH/BH and veteran needs County Veterans Service Offices BH Assessment Teams (Tribal or county) Cultural liaisons for Tribal members Diversion programs coordinated with Tribal justice services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> VTCs Tribal Healing to Wellness Courts Jail-based MH and reentry services VA Reentry Coordinators Peer support inside jails SUD treatment providers familiar with Native traditions Reentry planning teams that include Tribal reps and housing agencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> VA Health Care for Reentry Veterans (HCRV) Program Reentry navigators Housing assistance (Tribal or HUD-VASH) Tribal TANF or employment services case managers/ Family reunification services Peers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> POs trained in Veteran-specific parole/probation caseloads Community treatment providers Tribal supervision alternatives / restorative justice panels Faith-based or cultural programs Traditional ceremonies Ongoing contact peers

SYSTEMWIDE trauma-informed and culturally competent training



RESOURCES

- VA Native Programs
 - [Native American Veterans Association](#)
 - [VA's Office of Tribal Government Relations](#)
 - [VA Native American Direct Loan Program](#)
- SAMHSA Tribal TA Centers
 - [SMVF TA Center](#)
 - [Tribal Training and TA Center](#)
- Legal & court-related MH resources
 - [National American Indian Court Judges Association](#)
 - [The Justice for Vets curriculum and toolkits](#)
 - [Tribal Law and Policy Institute](#)





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