

Honoring Innovations Report

"A Newsletter for Tribal Systems of Care Communities" Issue #1, February 2011

A newsletter published by the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) describing best practices in American Indian/Alaska Native systems of care for current and graduated systems of care communities

A "best practice" in the field of American Indian/Alaska Native children's mental health is a process, method, training, or event that is believed to have a direct link in providing the desired outcome.

NICWA believes that such a designated practice requires attention to seven specific criteria listed below.

- Longevity
- Replicable*
- Harmonious with Indigenous Values and Teachings
- Sustainability
- Community Acceptance
- Input of Stakeholders Across Generations
- Culturally Competent Staffing

*When/Where applicable

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Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy Practice in Indian Country

DEFINITION

Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy

(EAP): EAP incorporates a team of mental health professional, equine specialists, and horses to focus on mental health treatment goals and issues through activities designed to reflect real life issues. (Definition is from the Equine-Assisted Growth and Learning Association website at www.eagala.org.)



Currently, there are at least three American Indian/Alaska Native systems of care (SOC) communities using EAP. They are Po'ka Project of Browning, Montana; United American Indian Involvement (UAI) in Los Angeles; and Sewa Uusim of Tucson, Arizona. The program directors,

Francis Onstad, Carrie Johnson, and Dennis Noonan, respectively, spoke about their program's use of EAP.

There were some similarities and stark differences among the programs, but there

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For more information on the programs profiled here...

Po'Ka Project (Blackfeet Tribe, MT) Program Director Francis Onstad, francis_onstad@yahoo.com
United American Indian Involvement (Los Angeles), Project Director Carrie Johnson, drcjohnsn@aol.com
Pascua Yaqui's Sewa Uusim Project (Tucson, AZ) Project Director Dennis Noonan, Dennis.Noonan@pascuayaqui-nsn.gov

Welcome to Honoring Innovations Report

Hello, and welcome to the first issue of the *Honoring Innovations Report*.

The purpose of this publication is to highlight effective and outstanding practices, tools, and examples of interest for both current and graduated systems of care communities.

My name is Kristy Alberty. I am a mother, a member of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, and executive communications manager of the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA). I was raised in Tulsa, Oklahoma; a news communication graduate from the University of Oklahoma ("Go, Sooners!"); and I have spent much of my career working in journalism, writing and editing, public health initiatives, and now,

focusing on social marketing and child welfare issues.

My role for the next few years is to learn about each of the systems of care sites and eventually conduct interviews via phone and site visits to chronicle topics and examples of best practices. I look forward to meeting all of you. Please feel free to share this publication, the online resources, and contact me to suggest story ideas for future issues.

This issue will feature the therapeutic model "Equine Assisted Psychotherapy".

Sincerely,
Kristy Alberty

"Live Well. Live Native"

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was a clear message that EAP worked well, especially in combination with traditional Western therapeutic methods and that Native American children may benefit from exposure to horse culture and ranch experience.

Creation

In Montana, the EAP program was built from the ground up. Director Francis Onstad reported that developing EAP for the Blackfeet community began as part of their Circles of Care program. The tribe owned several unused ranches, and a plot of land with a barn was granted to implement EAP; the program then hired a ranch hand, purchased equipment, and after two years of planning and start-up, began doing some activities with the horses.

The project staff researched EAP programs and chose to implement two of the programs. Carrie Johnson of UAII flew from California to assist the Montana program and began teaching staff some EAP activities to be done on the ground, with no horseback riding involved.

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In California, the horse ranch used for equine therapy is in Malibu, a significant drive away from the clinic. Getting out to the country from Los Angeles County is a considerable challenge, and it has been one of the few hurdles for this program's growth and enrollment.

To give the community the equine treatment therapy option that it wanted, an EAP-certified therapist, Susan Caprios, was hired. Specializing in trauma and EAP therapy usage, Susan has helped in the EAP certification of three other therapists at the ranch in Malibu.

The ranch is owned by a nonprofit, which donates the use of the ranch to the SOC program.



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In Arizona, an Indian Health Service (IHS) grant helped stabilize the early horse programs, and later, through the SOC program. For about five years, the tribe's "equine center" has sat beside their wellness center. The reservation is located just southwest of Tucson, a growing urban area.

Dennis Noonan, project director of Sewa Uusim, Tucson, Arizona, reports that their program uses the horses and two donkeys owned by their EAP specialist Dori Tamagni, and the tribe has purchased an additional five horses that are suited for EAP sessions. Dennis says that very young children quickly see parallels to the donkey's stubbornness and their own reluctance to do things, like getting up in the morning and going to school. Dori notes that the miniature donkey, which is extremely affectionate and at-ease, is often used for children with attachment disorders or victims of sexual molestation. These children feel that the hugging of the donkey is a safe touch and less intimidating than the larger horses, paving the way to discussions around affection and building trust.

Practice and Sustainability

Dennis said that they are focusing mostly on youth therapy in the corral, with some

parent/child therapy, mostly because that type of therapy is billable. Their program is still testing different ideas in their EAP manual of tasks and activities with the horses "until we get more of a sense of how to use the situation more with families. Remember that we can orient a kid in a number of ways over a period of time to be trustful of the horse. It's not quite as easy to get everybody in the family in that pen because of everybody else's concerns and some of the children are too small, and in a family situation you don't want to exclude them."

"So we're finding our way around how to work more effectively with families. But the family stuff is great because they play out in the family dynamics when you try to lead," Dennis said.

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In Montana, the staff tries to create a family event at the ranch each month as weather permits, including week-long campouts. Other "Family Day" events during fall, such as their Halloween event, can draw as many as 150 people.

The tribal council has also granted ownership of an old campground for the program. Since then, the University of Great Falls has worked with the

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SOC to have one- or two-week summer camps, facilitated with college students experienced with child mental health issues and behavior. There is no cost to the tribal program for this assistance, and the college students get academic credit for their time.

Francis reports that the horses are used in therapy sessions and in after-school programs three times a week, plus the occasional weekend. Friday is devoted to staff training with the horses.

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In California, there are three EAP specialists available for youth who select equine-assisted psychotherapy as part of their treatment process. There are other treatment options available, and during the intake process, they can designate what seems like a good fit for them. The cultural immersion component, which includes regalia making, drumming, and dance practice, is very popular, and the two treatment programs are often presented together.

Typically in the Los Angeles program, a specialist will take a client for one or two EAP sessions, regardless of whether they designated a special interest in EAP. Group sessions are also used frequently for all clients in the program. Once a month during the summer, there will be group EAP sessions, as well as during spring break.

"Next week, we're also starting a six-week EAP program. It's called the Native Youth Horse Program. We're going to do six weeks, but we are really going to evaluate it—before, after, and during. We're going to videotape it. We're going to really assess how well it is," Carrie said. She noted that EAP has been used by this SOC program for about five years.

One important question for Los Angeles' SOC staff has been how to bill for services. Initially, the therapist's time was paid for via SOC monies, until the program worked with LA County to see how the time could be billable. Fortunately, the program has a contract with the state's department of health, so EAP time is now billed as part of a therapy session. This revenue source, with

the in-kind donation of the ranch location, has stabilized the program.

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For Montana, a client survey of over 100 families revealed that most of them had no insurance, public or private, so they have obtained a grant to staff client applications into the Medicaid and Montana's Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). The EAP therapy is billed to those public programs for reimbursement. In order to qualify for that billing status, three staff members travelled to Colorado for intensive instruction on EAP to qualify for certification as EAP therapists and the site must be investigated by the state's licensing board and be approved.

Cultural Competency

In Montana, the staff has built a dance arbor on the horse ranch, beside a creek, and drummers and singers frequently come out to special events at the ranch. Francis notes that there is a high poverty rate in the community, so the first thing the staff does whenever the children come to the ranch is feed them. Transportation is always provided because many families cannot afford to drive children to the programs, so the food and the transportation vans are critical to ensure attendance.



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In Arizona, Yaqui youth are shown how horses were used as pack animals historically, and how they were painted. In 2005, a summer activity was needed for the children ages 7 to 12, and they washed the horses and painted them with finger paints, using traditional symbols from their tribal culture.

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In Los Angeles, the program staff researches the client's tribe and the historical relationship the tribe has with horses and integrates that knowledge into the equine program. The program's cultural coordinator also works together with the equine specialist to plan special events.

Effectiveness

"You put a horse in a setting and you try to manipulate, you try to ignore, you try to do the things that superficially deal with a situation you find yourself in, and you're going to get knocked over by a horse, or you're going to get stepped on by a horse. They don't respond to MTV approaches to dealing with life," Dennis said.

Their EAP specialist Dori summed up her

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feelings, “I believe it’s probably the best model that you can use.”

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A lot of the kids who have come back for repeated EAP therapy sessions are improving, said Francis.

“Now, we have really strong rules—you have to keep going to school, you know. I guess, more or less, what we have seen with the children is they try harder in school because they want to come out here. And we also teach them discipline because we have elders out here. We don’t allow bullying and fighting. And Browning, being on a reservation, there’s really a lot of that at school. And so parents now know, kids now know, they can’t do that out here. I guess to me the highlight of our program, when you say ‘horses,’ they don’t miss. When they know it’s the boys’ night to ride, all the boys are here.”

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Susan Caprios is a highly experienced EAP therapist and currently heads the EAP program for Los Angeles’ Seven Generations SOC program. “Now that I’ve been working with the horses and with our clients, it’s difficult for me to see how it can be done any other way. It’s been remarkable,” Susan said.

“And the clients that have exposure to the horses, they’re always asking, ‘When can I go back?’ And they want to bring their

family, they want to bring their friends, and want to share these experiences with others because it’s been so powerful for them on an individual basis,” she said.

Final Example

Following many clients and years of using EAP, therapist Susan Caprios has one significant example of how EAP is useful for clients.

“I’ve had one client, he’s 11 now, I started working with him and the horses about two years ago. And he’s the survivor of severe domestic violence. His mother was severely beaten. He watched his grandfather get beaten with a baseball bat—very, very traumatic. And he, even at 9 when we started, didn’t have the words to put to his feelings. And he would get very angry, he would tantrum, and he would cry. He didn’t know how to let those feelings out. He definitely held them all inside,” Susan said.

“And when I took him to the ranch and exposed him to the big pen where we had three horses at the time, one horse, which is the most intuitive horse of the ones that we work with, walked right up to him and put his head right on this child’s chest. As if this horse knew that there was this big wound and felt for this child. And no matter where this child went, the horse followed and the horse kept putting his head right on this child’s chest. That was so powerful and moving for this individual client,” she said.

“At first, it was confusing for him, but as we were processing what the horse was doing and what the horse was giving to him and sensing from him, he broke down. The child broke down and it was amazing that he was able to finally put words to everything that he was holding inside because it was so evident that the horse could see it. So we were processing, what is the horse seeing? Why do you think this is happening? And in that moment, he got it. And he was able to put that out there. It was safe enough for him to be able to, finally, after years of holding on to these feelings, to be able to put it out there. It was a huge, huge breakthrough that actually opened up avenues where we could do more talk therapy and process his feelings a little more,” Susan said.

Editor’s Note: My thanks to the project directors Francis Onstad, Carrie Johnson, and Dennis Noonan, and the EAP therapists Susan Caprios and Dori Tamagni.

Photos are courtesy of Dori and the Pascua Yaqui Tribe.

