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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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 (UAII) 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

For more information on the programs profiled here...

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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”
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-ups, 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.

In Arizona, 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 therapy treatment 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.

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 Unsim, Tucson, Arizona, reports that their program uses 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, liking 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 hauling 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 truthul 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.

In Montana, the staff tries to create a family event at the ranch each month as weather permits, including week-long camps. 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

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.

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 L.A. 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.

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 traveled to the state 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.

Effectiveness

“The idea is to orient a kid 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 knock 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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Photos are courtesy of Dori and the Pascua Yaqui Tribe.