

Honoring Innovations Report

"A Newsletter for System of Care Communities in Indian Country" Issue #9, January 2013

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 system 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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Strengthening the youth-guided approach to systems change

Through the systems of care (SOC) work, NICWA partners with SAMHSA to strengthen the youth-guided approach to systems change. Throughout Indian Country, this work creates effective, community-based services and supports for children and youth (and their families) with, or at risk for, mental health and related challenges. NICWA has expanded the youth-guided approach in its work with other partners in various systems. This newsletter highlights successful

youth-guided approaches of tribal system of care communities, and gives examples of how the youth-guided systems change approach has been successfully implemented in the child welfare system and integrated into research methods. The newsletter also reviews the exciting new initiative honoring Native youth leaders called Champions for Change, a program offered by the Center for Native American Youth in Washington, DC.

How to engage youth to develop successful services

Tribal system of care communities have long employed diverse engagement strategies in working with Native youth. Often the success of these strategies is a result of approaching this work creatively to develop services that are both relevant and appealing to youth. Tribal system of care communities provide many examples of effective youth engagement strategies. Using their strategies as models, here are some helpful tips on how to engage Native youth effectively.

Engage youth through hands-on, experiential learning

Mental health professionals and educators alike recognize that American Indian youth often possess learning styles that respond well

to hands-on, experiential methods of acquiring information, skills, and knowledge. Successful youth engagement often occurs when Native youth leave the classroom and participate in lessons based on doing rather than listening.

Pascua Yaqui's equine therapy program is a good example of this. According to Project Director Dennis Noonan, the program is effective because it allows youth to engage at two levels, within the group process and individually with their horses.

Noonan noted that youth participants seem to respond positively to working outside of a classroom setting, stating, "They are definitely not in a school

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What does "youth-guided" mean?

"Youth-guided" means that youth are engaged as equal partners in creating systems change in policies and procedures at the individual, community, state, and national levels (Source: Technical Assistance Partnership website <http://www.tapartnership.org/SOC/SOCvaluesTopics.php?id=topic2>).

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environment. Our program is also not offered in the normal therapeutic milieu. Instead, it's possible for youth to engage more on a one-to-one basis. It's a different place."

Youth have also assumed leadership roles within the program, having fun designing activities for other children in the community, such as demonstrations of their work with the horses. Noonan explains they are very involved in planning future programming.

"As they progress, they get to evaluate different parts of the equine program," he states. "They are given the opportunity to decide what kinds of exercises should be used based on what they think younger kids would like. It's great to see the 15 year-olds put together a curriculum they believe will work best with 8 year-old children. These activities gave a great sense of belonging for youth in the group."

In addition to promoting experiential learning and leadership development, Noonan also attributes his program's success to the experience and



The Mescalero Apache System of Care Program promotes hands-on, experiential learning.



San Felipe Pueblo youth participate in the "I Am Resilient" walk.

perspective that participants bring to the program themselves.

"Youth already possess strong ties to the world around them," he explains. "Native youth especially have grown up in tune with their environment, believing in one world where every being is connected. Because of that, this is a very comfortable place for them to be. They know these things intuitively. We don't have to teach it. It's already there."

Use technology to impart cultural knowledge

Like it or not, we live in a time where technology is revered in the eyes of our youth. From social media to smart phones, digital filmmaking to the near universal use of text messaging as the primary means of communication, today's youth aspire to remain on the cutting edge of new advancements in technology.

System of care youth engagement strategies should embrace the opportunity to use technology to not only draw youth into participating in programs, but also to help shape the programming it offers.

For example, the Mescalero Apache System of Care Program has

incorporated technology into their cultural preservation activities with great success.

Recently, youth traveled with elders to various sites in Arizona and New Mexico, documenting their journeys through digital film and photography. Because the trips were scheduled during harvest time, elders were able to teach participants about their traditional foods and traditional harvesting techniques.

Similar trips to visit ancient petroglyphs also included elders, who were able to provide historical context to their very attentive and interested audience. For some youth, this was the first time they had the opportunity to learn their Apache history.

"Our youth seem to be visual learners," said Janice Merino, Mescalero System of Care Program youth coordinator. "Their generation really likes seeing and hearing the things they learn. Our use of technology in the program has really appealed to them. And letting them create something through technology has really given them a sense of pride in their work and who they are."

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Youth Profile: Shilo Valle, Youth Advocate



Shilo Valle is a foster youth advocate.

Shilo Valle, 23, is a foster care youth advocate of Tlingit and Chippewa descent. He lives in Juneau, Alaska. We spoke with Shilo about his involvement and advocacy with youth voice as part of the Facing Foster Care in Alaska (FFCA) organization. FFCA is a group of foster youth and alumni that has formed to make improvements to the foster care system in Alaska.

NICWA is currently involved in a four-year project in Alaska to reduce the disproportionate out-of-home placement of Alaska Native and American Indian children in the state child welfare system. With a strong youth-guided approach, NICWA provides training and technical assistance through the Western and Pacific Implementation Center (WPIC) in partnership with the Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska, 15 other tribal partners, FFCA, and others.

In July 2012, Shilo was chosen to present alongside NICWA's Executive Director Terry Cross at the Georgetown Training Institutes in Orlando, Florida. During his presentation, Shilo discussed his experience as a Native foster youth advocate in Alaska and how that experience allowed him to create changes in the Alaska foster care system.

Has using your voice and advocating for other youth influenced any of your study, career, and/or personal goals?

Yes, and in many ways I've become a greater public speaker because of it. In the past I have been a lot shyer, but I have always had the passion to speak on behalf of other youth. It has given me confidence and raised my level of self-esteem. It has helped me want to grow as I realized that I have wanted to express things that needed to be voiced. I want to continue to improve on my skills in public relations and how to interact with professional people.

In what ways do you feel like you have been able to make a difference?

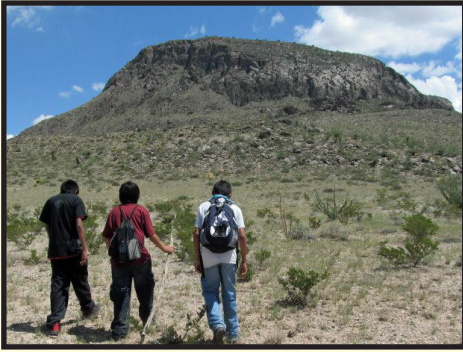
I work with a group called Facing Foster Care in Alaska and we as a whole group of youth have accomplished many things; from increasing the number of foster high school graduates and post-secondary students in education; we even brought a court case against the State of Alaska so that they would correct mistakes that were being made in the foster care system. I've spoken in front of the Alaska State Legislature, Office of Children's Services Directors, and the Casey Family Services Board of Directors to advocate for increased funding for things that can help our foster youth and alumni. When we speak it's clear that our voice make a difference and there are reasons that stories are still told today about positive things that our youth organization has accomplished over the years and I am grateful to be a part of that.

What was it like to travel far from home and to present alongside NICWA's Executive Director Terry Cross?

Alaska is a big state, two and half times as big as Texas. To travel across the country and to speak and present along with Terry is a great honor that I will never forget. I made a lot of great connections and had the opportunity to learn what other people across our nation are doing to help make a difference. It's good that I'm able to bring that insight home to share with my state. I feel really honored to work with NICWA and the WPIC Project. We are part of an effort that will make a positive change not only for my state but for our nation and the world.

Shilo's presentation at the Georgetown Training Institutes provides a good example of the collaboration that is needed across systems. SOC communities that hope to engage foster care youth can contact NICWA for assistance on cross-system youth engagement.

(Engagement, continued from page 2)



Mescalero Apache youth requested field trips to sacred sites to learn about their history and culture.

Currently, youth are working to edit this footage into three short films about the history of the tribe that they hope to share with their community and others.

Digital storytelling is just the most recent addition to Mescalero's use of technology in its youth engagement activities. The program has a Facebook page, its own website, and has posted youth-produced videos on YouTube.

"I've noticed [the youth] getting excited to do more things. I see them more involved, more talkative," says Merino. Ultimately, the hope is that by using technology to foster greater pride in their community and their culture, youth will be inspired to make positive life choices for themselves.

Involve youth in planning, implementing, and evaluating programs

At San Felipe Pueblo in New Mexico, system of care youth programs have experienced great success with engaging their youth. Like many youth programs in the tribal SOC network, San Felipe knows that involving youth in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of programming gives them a vested interest in the program's success.

According to San Felipe's youth coordinator Bernice Chavez, "Our youth are involved in every aspect of [programming]. The planning stages

have been based on their wants and needs. We have been able to find out what works for the youth through their guidance and feedback." Chavez cites youth participation in the program's original community needs assessment and focus groups as prime examples of youth engagement.

Chavez makes a concerted effort to find out what interests the youth have in order to incorporate teambuilding lessons or leadership skills into their favorite games or activities. Youth input is similarly sought when evaluating programs. Chavez elaborates, "They are able to not only give us the feedback on the programming but they also assist us in handing out the evaluations to others. The youth are our feelers out in the community."

The results have been remarkable. Youth are fully engaged and Chavez relishes the opportunity to work with them. She explains, "They are such a wonderful group of youth who are committed to helping us make this program a success."

Tie incentives to youth participation

Youth, like the rest of us, respond to incentives. No one knows this better than Bridget Williams, clinical supervisor of the Systems of Care program at Sinte Gleska University (SGU) in South Dakota.

SGU's youth leadership program clearly defines high expectations for all participants. Youth are expected to meet weekly to share a meal, plan events, and participate in leadership training and activities. In addition, they are required to complete work and volunteer commitments every week. During the school year, this entails working 10 hours a week for the program and donating two hours of their time as volunteers to the community.

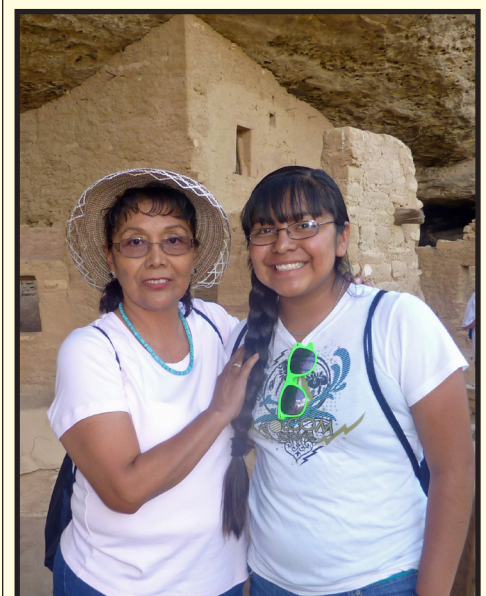
In turn, youth earn minimum wage for the hours they work. For most participants, this represents the first time they will earn income on their own.

The program turned providing incentives into an opportunity to teach youth leaders. "We didn't just hand it over and say 'here it is'," explains Williams. Instead, they used students' income as the basis for an initiative aimed at building financial literacy in youth. Basic concepts like saving and budgeting were taught, and youth participated in trips to financial institutions to learn about responsible money management.

Originally, some of the youth would spend their paychecks immediately after receiving them, according to Williams. "But over months, they figured out how to stretch their income over several weeks."

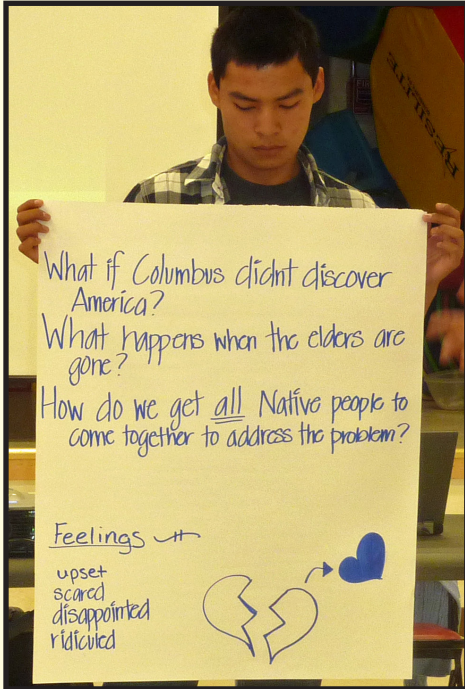
Youth leaders have not only responded well to the program's incentives, but they are also deeply committed to the program itself. "We have a really good bunch of kids," Williams states. "Even if we ever did run out of funding, I think at this point there's enough buy-in where they'd stay on and try to figure out how grants work to fund the program."

She continues, "I've been really impressed. Some of these youth had experienced pretty serious mental health challenges. Today, they have



Elders from San Felipe Pueblo are actively involved with youth programming, such as in this trip to Chaco Canyon.

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At San Felipe, Maria Braveheart facilitated and discussion on historical trauma at which youth presented.

really blossomed. They have done really well, and a lot of them are now involved in other activities in the community.”

Choose dynamic talent to lead youth programs

Effectively engaging with Native youth takes a special kind of professional. Crystal Marich, youth coordinator at the Native American Health Center in San Francisco, is largely recognized as one of the most dynamic and effective youth engagement specialists in the entire system of care network.

“Having [someone who has a] good understanding of the issues youth are facing in your community, as well as their ambitions and goals, will help you know when you’ve found the right match,” Marich says of the skills and qualities an effective youth coordinator should exhibit.

Direct experience working with youth is an essential qualification, according to Marich. So, too, is experience in community organizing and advocacy. Intangible traits such as the ability to provide unconditional love and support, positivity, and independent drive are also important. Marich also emphasizes the necessity of youth engagement coordinators to understand youth issues, to respect youth culture, and to empower youth to develop their voice as integral to

success.

Marich advises other youth coordinators to, “reach out to other youth workers in the field. It can be tough and feel isolating but you are never alone. Read up on youth development frameworks, practices, and strategies. Go to community events, actions, rallies, and meetings. Do everything and anything you can to educate and empower yourself as a youth coordinator. Use the resources around you to up your game to provide the best quality service and care for your youth and community.”



Mescalero Apache youth learned about traditional foods during a trip with elders to Alamo Mountain.

NICWA launches Photovoice project at NAYA

This fall, NICWA and its local partners, the Native American Youth and Family Center (NAYA) and Portland State University (PSU), adhered to youth-guided, systems-level engagement for a Photovoice project. Photovoice is a research method that utilizes digital photography to identify the strengths, supports, and challenges in a community and can be used to start a conversation about creating positive policy changes. It is an excellent strategy for structuring youth engagement in SOC communities. Ten youth, ages 14–19, who receive services at NAYA, became co-researchers to address the following questions: How does NAYA support you? What challenges do you face in your community? Are there ways NAYA can help you improve your community?

Using digital photography as a medium, the youth shared how NAYA has helped develop their sense of cultural identity, provided them with basic resources, and created a safe space for the practice of cultural and physical activities. In addition to engaging youth to talk about day-to-day challenges they face and how NAYA's programs can help, this project taught youth how to be expressive through a new artistic medium and, in turn, provided participants with a new confidence. Some youth participants have expressed an interest in pursuing photography as a means of creative expression, or even as a career path.

In February of 2013, under the guidance of NICWA's Youth Engagement Specialist Rudy Soto, the second phase of the project will focus on teaching youth how to share their stories about the challenges they face and their ideas for change with local policymakers. Ultimately, youth will become advocates that make changes within service provision systems and make services more effective for youth. SOC communities interested in learning how to engage youth in a Photovoice project can contact Rudy Soto (Rudy@nicwa.org) at NICWA for technical assistance.

CNAY announces Champions of Change Program

On Monday, November 19, 2012, the Center for Native American Youth (CNAY) held a panel discussion to honor November's National Native American Heritage Month and introduce a new initiative called Champions for Change.

The panel discussion, *Celebrating Native Voices: Native Youth—Our Future, Our Inspiration*, was moderated by former U.S. Senator Byron Dorgan and featured three individuals who have demonstrated resiliency and perseverance, qualities that make them good examples for tribal youth. Teresa Baldwin is a college student from Kotzebue, Alaska, who founded Hope4Alaska, a campaign dedicated to raising awareness and increasing suicide prevention across the state. WhiteSun Yazzie serves as the student council president at the Pine Hill High School on the Ramah Navajo Reservation. Patty Talahonga of the

Hopi Nation produces TV newscasts, documentaries, and special projects for television; writes for various national newspapers and magazines; and contributes to the national radio talk show *Native America Calling*. The panel discussed their experiences, talked about how they were able to accomplish their goals, and offered advice for youth that aspire to do similar work in their communities.

The Center's new Champions for Change program was announced at the event. Champions for Change will recognize and encourage inspirational Native American youth working in their tribal or urban Indian communities to promote hope and make a positive impact. These efforts encourage young, positive role models who are trying to create positive change in their communities.



Champions of Change Accepting Applications

Native youth are invited to apply for the Champions of Change program. Five finalists will be selected to serve on a new youth advisory board at the CNAY. The new Champions will be recognized by the Center at a spring 2013 recognition event in Washington, DC.

For more information about the Champions for Change program, please visit http://www.cnay.org/Champions_for_Change.html.

The deadline is January 31, 2013.