



Culturally Responsive Approaches to Anti-Human Trafficking Programming in Native Communities

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Introduction

The Administration for Children and Families' (ACF's) Office on Trafficking in Persons (OTIP) established the Demonstration Grants to Strengthen the Response to Victims of Human Trafficking in Native Communities (VHT-NC) Program to address the significant need for supports to respond to human trafficking in Native communities. In September 2020, six projects received 3-year awards to build, expand, and sustain organizational and community capacity to deliver services to Native Americans (i.e., American Indians, Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians, and/or Pacific Islanders) who have experienced human trafficking. RTI International and American Indian Development Associates conducted a formative evaluation of the VHT-NC Program, overseen by ACF's Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), in collaboration with OTIP.

This brief describes how the six VHT-NC projects used ***culture as a resource***, which we define as using or integrating cultural values, beliefs, traditions, and activities into various project strategies and services offered.

The VHT-NC Program broadly focuses on three components:

- ◆ Participant outreach and identification
- ◆ Comprehensive case management and service provision
- ◆ Community training

We explore how the projects incorporated culture within four programming areas: (1) project staffing, (2), education and training, (3) outreach, and (4) case management and supportive services (see **Exhibit 1**).

This brief is informed by self-reported data from award recipients' performance progress reports submitted quarterly to ACF and by virtual and in-person interviews conducted between March 2022 and August 2023 with VHT-NC project leadership, advocates,¹ partners, and participants.²

The VHT-NC Projects

The VHT-NC projects integrated cultural and Tribal-based strategies into programming to ensure their services were culturally responsive³ to the needs of Native⁴ people served through their award. Differences in participant and community need and project implementation were influenced by the projects' structure (i.e., lead entity and Tribal affiliations), range of Native communities served, service area, and geographic type (i.e., urban or rural). These characteristics (shown in **Table 1**) could facilitate or hinder the projects' ability to integrate culturally responsive approaches to the extent they had planned.

Exhibit 1. Incorporating Culture into Program Areas



Table 1. VHT-NC Project Characteristics

| Site | Project Structure | Native Communities | Service Area | Geographic Type |
|------|---|---------------------------------|--|---------------------|
| 1 | Non-profit organization with a Tribal partner | Served all Tribes in the state | Statewide; one regional partner | Urban and rural |
| 2 | Non-profit organization with no direct Tribal government partners | Focused on one Native community | Several towns in one region | Urban and rural |
| 3 | Non-profit organization with no direct Tribal government partners | Served many Tribes | Three counties within a metropolitan area | Predominately urban |
| 4 | State government with state recognized Tribal partners | Focused on four Tribes | Five counties | Predominantly rural |
| 5 | Federally recognized Tribe | Focused on one Tribe | Tribal reservation and three adjacent counties | Urban and rural |
| 6 | Federally recognized Tribe | Focused on one Tribe | Tribal reservation | Predominantly rural |

¹ We use the term "advocate" to refer to VHT-NC project staff who provided direct services (e.g., case management, supportive services) to participants.

² We use the term "participant" to refer to people who have been enrolled into and assisted by one of the VHT-NC projects.

³ The Fiscal Year 2020 VHT-NC Program Notice of Funding Opportunity defines "culturally responsive" as the ability to learn from and relate respectfully with people of diverse cultures in order to effectively, equitably, and respectfully provide services that are responsive to diverse cultural beliefs and practices of the community being served.

⁴ We use the term "Native" to refer to people who are Native American, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, and/or Pacific Islander.

Culturally Responsive Approaches to VHT-NC Project Implementation

In this section, we provide examples of the culturally responsive approaches the VHT-NC projects took with regard to (1) project staffing, (2) education and training, (3) outreach, and (4) case management and supportive services. Within these four programming components, we describe the culturally responsive approaches used, identify the challenges the projects encountered and potential suggestions to address them, and highlight the potential benefits and strengths of these culturally responsive approaches.

Culturally Responsive Project Staffing Approaches

VHT-NC project staffing structures typically included leadership (e.g., project directors and coordinators) and one to four advocates. In general, project leadership oversaw project implementation, and advocates provided outreach, case management, and service delivery; however, staff were often involved in all or most programming components, which also included education, training, and partnership development.

The **challenges** presented in this brief were identified by VHT-NC project staff and partners during interviews or in the projects' performance progress reports. **Potential suggestions** are based largely on the projects' experiences; however, some are based on Indigenous values and knowledge and recommendations shared in peer-reviewed literature.^a



What Did Culturally Responsive Approaches to Project Staffing Look Like?

Native staff: hiring Native staff who are from the community being served and connected to culture and Native resources

Cultural humility: recognizing the community knows best what its needs are (e.g., eliciting input about staffing through a community survey); staff reflecting on their cultural knowledge gaps and biases and proactively and continually learning to address them

Cultural knowledge: building staff knowledge through culturally specific education/training opportunities for both Native and non-Native staff, including the following topics:

- ◆ Cultural skill-building (e.g., Improving Outcomes Training and Technical Assistance: Working with Tribal Populations 101 & Intervention Skill Building)
- ◆ Culturally specific response to human trafficking (e.g., the [National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Assistance Center's](#) SOAR [Stop, Observe, Ask, Respond] for Indigenous Communities)
- ◆ Cultural or Tribal-based issues (e.g., Navigating Positive Identity Development and Cultural Diversity, Tribal Justice Systems: Culturally Rooted Traditions in Healing and Resistance)
- ◆ Gender or race/ethnicity (e.g., A Silent Epidemic: The Impact of Human Trafficking and Sexual Violence Against Men and Boys, Racial Equity Training)



What Challenges Did Projects Encounter and How Can They Be Addressed?

Challenge: Secondary trauma and burnout among staff was a challenge across projects and was described as particularly acute for Native-identifying staff. Project staff described the heaviness of bearing witness to victimization among their own community and related difficulties establishing and maintaining boundaries related to their time and availability to participants.

Potential suggestions: Incorporate practices to prevent and mitigate secondary trauma, burnout, and staff turnover, including building a supportive team and workplace culture, practicing mindful and proactive supervision (e.g., debriefing after challenging situations), and offering benefits packages for staff that include resources allowing for leave or time-off, wellness stipends, in-house wellness resources, and/or individual self-care practices.

Challenge: Recruitment and retention of staff representing the communities served was a challenge in some sites, particularly those serving multiple Tribes or those administered by non-Tribal organizations. This challenge was exacerbated by a broader pattern of staff attrition from social service organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Potential suggestions: Provide a competitive living wage and benefits package, develop job descriptions that require less experience, and plan to provide robust professional development opportunities. Support staff wellness and self-care by incorporating or providing access to cultural supports (e.g., smudging, traditional medicines, massage therapy).



What Are the Potential Benefits of Taking a Culturally Responsive Approach to Project Staffing?

- ◆ Native community members' knowledge and wisdom is valued and uplifted.
- ◆ Cultural knowledge is shared with other staff and participants.
- ◆ Cultural knowledge within the project increases.
- ◆ Participants' access to cultural resources improves.
- ◆ The project's cultural relevance and legitimacy increases.



Celebrating Strengths in Culturally Responsive Project Staffing

“We like to hire people who are [Native]. We like to hire people who are from the community that they are providing the service in. We think that that is helpful. We’ve done different surveys...[to] ask our different communities those questions and they say that they would rather have someone that looks like them providing the services and someone from their community. It would make them feel more comfortable [to have] someone that understands those nuances. Because our [Native communities] are all different. We have a lot of similarities, but still a lot of differences as well.”—*Project director*

“Our staff being majority Native American, it’s an accepting environment for clients who come in for services. The artwork that we have, the beadwork that we share with them, how to do cultural activities, a lot of them give a sigh of relief. Like ‘I feel so comfortable here; you’re not judging me like I’m from somewhere else.’ It’s really hard to explain the environment when Native American clients come in and see Native American employees helping them.”—*Project director*

Culturally Responsive Education and Training Approaches

The VHT-NC Program required projects to provide training to local service providers and community partners to increase understanding of and appropriate response to the issues facing Native community members who have experienced human trafficking. Examples of training audiences included Tribal or Native programs, housing providers, behavioral health providers, law enforcement, and domestic violence or sexual assault organizations.



What Did Culturally Responsive Approaches to Education and Training Look Like?

Native-focused and culturally specific content: ensuring content is specific to Native communities (e.g., vulnerabilities to human trafficking in Native communities, historical trauma); tailoring education/training material content to the local Native community; promoting cultural competency among service providers for working with Native communities; making Native-specific resources available in the community

Culturally relevant materials: co-developing materials with Tribal or Native community members or partners to ensure cultural appropriateness; including images and language relevant to the Native community

Cultural activities and traditional practices: integrating education/training into cultural activities; incorporating traditional practices (e.g., smudging, blessings, prayer) into education/training events

Tribal or Native partner engagement: co-facilitating training events with Tribal or Native partners; forming a relationship with a Tribal casino to develop training protocols for staff



What Challenges Did Projects Encounter and How Can They Be Addressed?

Challenge: Mainstream trainings on human trafficking may not include important and localized trends for Native communities, the impact of historical and intergenerational trauma, or Native-specific guidance and resources.

Potential suggestions: Develop partnerships with Tribal or Native programs or leaders to create tailored training materials that include foundational knowledge, skills, and resources to assist Native people who have experienced human trafficking. Seek Native-specific training and technical assistance opportunities (e.g., the [National Training and Technical Assistance Project on Sex Trafficking in Indian Country and Alaska](#)).

Challenge: Some sites faced **resistance from community agencies or organizations** (particularly those that are non-Tribal or Native) to engage in training activities, which may stem from distrust, unfamiliarity with the project or issue, or competing priorities.

Potential suggestions: Learn about the needs and perspectives of prospective organizations and seek to develop mutually beneficial and reciprocal partnerships. Conduct continual outreach to establish legitimacy within the community, which may support efforts to provide and facilitate trainings. Approach human trafficking education/training in combination with adjacent issues (e.g., domestic violence, sexual assault, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Peoples [MMIP]) that organizations may be working on, familiar with, or more comfortable discussing. Offer to embed human trafficking education/training into an organization's existing training opportunities to ease burden and minimize competition with other priorities.



What Are the Potential Benefits of Taking a Culturally Responsive Approach to Education and Training?

- ◆ Materials and education/training resonate with community members.
- ◆ Awareness and understanding of human trafficking in Native communities increases.
- ◆ Community relationships and partnerships are developed.
- ◆ Cultural responsiveness among the broader service provider network increases.



Celebrating Strengths in Culturally Responsive Outreach

“[We incorporate culture in] our trainings that are tailored to our culturally specific communities and talk about our vulnerabilities to trafficking in [State]’s Tribal communities... A part of that training is also talking to people about how they can help, what they can do to provide support to the Tribal community that they’re in, because whether you think it or know it or not, you’re in a Tribal community. We all are.”—*Project director*

Culturally Responsive Outreach Approaches

Outreach efforts were required to increase identification of Native people who have experienced human trafficking. Outreach activities included direct outreach to potential participants (e.g., at partner locations, encampments for people who are unhoused, community events), screening to identify experiences of human trafficking, raising community awareness about the project, and identifying referral sources.



What Did Culturally Responsive Approaches to Outreach Look Like?

Culturally relevant materials: including images and language in outreach materials that are relevant to the Native community; collaborating with Tribal partners to modify screening tools to improve cultural relevance

Consultation with cultural or Tribal advisors: including community members with lived experience of human trafficking in outreach activities, such as accompanying project staff to do street outreach, sharing their experiences receiving services, and referring potential participants

Cultural immersion activities: participating in or organizing cultural or traditional activities (e.g., Healing or Talking Circles, beading, berry picking, powwows), which allowed VHT-NC project staff to be in relationship with the community, listen to community needs, create opportunities to safely introduce sensitive topics such as human trafficking, and raise project awareness

Traditional medicine: carrying and offering traditional medicine (e.g., smudge kits) during community outreach efforts



What Challenges Did Projects Encounter and How Can They Be Addressed?

Challenge: Historical trauma permeates Native communities and often results in community members being reluctant to discuss human trafficking broadly, much less disclose or even recognize they have experienced it. Some projects were in communities where silence about various kinds of victimization exists. This is often mistakenly referenced as *a culture of silence* rather than *a culture coerced to be silent* by a legacy of unaddressed, unacknowledged, and unreconciled injustices, historical trauma, and ongoing negative experiences with criminal legal and service systems.

Potential suggestions: Initiate discussion around human trafficking sensitively through other related issues (e.g., MMIP, historical trauma) or while engaged in cultural activities (e.g., crafts). Engage in continual efforts to build relationships in the community, thereby building trust.

Challenge: Lack of knowledge about the Native community left some projects unsure of the Native communities' needs, strengths, or culture, which is essential to developing culturally responsive approaches.

Potential suggestions: Hire Native staff with knowledge about the community. Proactively learn through available resources, literature, and trainings. Develop partnerships with Tribal or Native community members or organizations with established community relationships.

Challenge: Limited staffing capacity constricted time for building meaningful relationships in the community, which hampers outreach efforts and referral partnerships.

Potential suggestions: Plan for and prioritize time for projects to build and sustain these essential relationships. Reciprocity, relationship building, and gifting are important values in many Native communities. Mutually beneficial relationships are facilitated by consistent communication, presence in the community, and shared goals and values.



What Are the Potential Benefits of Taking a Culturally Responsive Approach to Outreach?

- ◆ Materials and activities resonate with community members.
- ◆ Trust within the community increases.
- ◆ Community relationships improve.
- ◆ The strengths and abilities of people impacted by human trafficking are respectfully applied.
- ◆ Community members' comfort talking about human trafficking improves.



Celebrating Strengths in Culturally Responsive Outreach

“We like to carry our traditional medicines with us to be able to hand out those medicines. Medicines are not always easy to come by for some people and we want to make sure that they have them too and offer them.”—*Advocate*

“One of the most recent ones was the beading traditional craft course... I think that was pretty effective in just getting...an image of our program and creating a space where it doesn’t start off as we work with victims of human trafficking and sexual exploitation. It was, ‘Hey, here’s a flyer to come be in this space with us and talk about culture-specific things. And this is what else we do.’” —*Advocate*

Culturally Responsive Case Management and Supportive Services Approaches

VHT-NC projects were required to provide comprehensive case management to participants, incorporating culturally responsive and trauma-informed approaches. Provision of supportive services, through project staff directly or through referral, was also required. Service examples included cultural and traditional supports, housing assistance, behavioral health care, victim advocacy, basic needs assistance, and public benefits assistance.





What Did Culturally Responsive Approaches to Case Management and Supportive Services Look Like?

Person- and culture-centered case management: building trust and recognizing participants' innate cultural strengths that staff can tap into, as guided and directed by participants; honoring participants' core values and belief systems by integrating culturally responsive services tailored to Native participants

Native-centered environment: incorporating Native cultural statements, imagery, symbols, art, and crafts into project spaces; dedicating space to a Healing Room

Culturally specific tools and measures: using a wellness medicine wheel, Native-specific social determinants of health, and Native-specific motivational interviewing, including Indigenous stages of change, to support case management; including culturally relevant measures (e.g., cultural immersion activities, traditional healing) in data collection tools; adding Two-Spirit as an option for gender identity questions

Culturally specific services:

- ◆ Offering traditional medicine (e.g., tobacco, cedar, sage, sweetgrass), including smudge kits (the types of medicine and smudging practices vary across Native communities)
- ◆ Conducting cultural immersion activities (e.g., beading, regalia making, nature-based subsistence activities)
- ◆ Connecting participants to cultural healing resources for sweat lodges, drumming circles, ceremony, art therapy, massage therapy, and traditional and spiritual healing
- ◆ Providing access to cultural and traditional healers aligned with a participant's Tribe or belief system

Culturally safe relocation: supporting and arranging the physical relocation of a participant leaving a trafficking situation, including accounting for their safety along the journey and in their new location, which can be a time-intensive process and may utilize community safety nets (e.g., elders, aunties, grandmas) outside of formalized social services, particularly in areas with limited service capacity

Culturally responsive partners: working with internal partners (e.g., Tribal culture departments) and external partners, such as through culture camps, youth summits, shelters, and community service; connecting with Native healers, cultural experts, and knowledge holders, which enhanced services or filled service gaps; emphasizing referrals to Native-specific services (e.g., housing, shelters, behavioral health services)



What Challenges Did Projects Encounter and How Can They Be Addressed?

Challenge: **Lack of knowledge about the Native community** left some projects unsure of the Native communities' needs, strengths, or culture, which is essential to developing culturally responsive approaches.

Potential suggestions: Hire Native staff with knowledge about the community; proactively learn through available resources, literature, trainings; develop partnerships with Native community members or organizations.

Challenge: Most project areas experienced **limited service capacity or availability** (i.e., housing, shelter, substance use treatment, behavioral health services), some had access to fewer services that were trauma-informed and/or Native-specific. This is especially pronounced in rural or remote areas.

Potential suggestions: Continue efforts to develop partnerships, including outside of formal social service structures (e.g., elders, aunties, grandmas), to meet participants' needs. Advocate for systems-level changes to address gaps in housing and other services.

Challenge: Projects led by mainstream non-profit organizations experienced **difficulty identifying and establishing partnerships with Tribal or Native providers**.

Potential suggestions: Approach culturally specific service partnerships with intentionality and cultural humility. Spend time learning about the local Native communities, their cultural values, and Native champions who work on human trafficking or adjacent issues (e.g., MMIP, domestic violence). Dedicate time to progressively and intentionally develop mutually beneficial and respectful partnerships with Tribal or Native providers. Explore appropriate forms of compensation with potential partners (e.g., funding through a formal subcontract, traditional medicines or other cultural gifts). Note that some administrative compensation processes impose a burden on small organizations or individual community members—be prepared to assist partners through these processes or provide alternatives.



What Are the Potential Benefits of Taking a Culturally Responsive Approach to Case Management and Supportive Services?

- ◆ Participants' cultural values and belief system are honored and respected.
- ◆ A holistic, trauma-informed approach is provided that accounts for and supports the whole person (mind, body, spirit, and community).
- ◆ Connection to culture is restorative, healing, and grounding for many participants in context of cultural erasure experienced by Native Tribes through colonization.
- ◆ Culturally responsive service capacity and capabilities improve.



Celebrating Strengths in Culturally Responsive Case Management and Supportive Services

“It really helps to center and ground someone when you allow them the opportunity to reach deep into their spirituality. It helps them to step outside of their chaos for a while and to breathe. It allows them to breathe. Because sometimes they’re so wound up that they look like a ticking time bomb. They’re either going to explode with tears or they’re angry, they have no control of what’s going on around them, and this will help them to re-center.”—*Advocate*

“I think [cultural responsiveness is] anywhere from thinking about what it feels like for someone to walk through that front door, right, that we’re showing our medicines there, that we’re purposefully trying to be inclusive of cultural symbols, cultural statements, whether it’s on a poster, anywhere from the art to the fact that you might walk in the door any given time and smell sage, right? Not every workplace is going to have that.”—*Advocate*

“A lot of our population, especially being urban Natives, they don’t have the same resources and access to traditional knowledge that some of our relatives on the reserve do. So, bringing that aspect to them, making sure that they do have access to those teachings and that knowledge.”—*Advocate*

Culture is an essential resource to building and sustaining culturally responsive programs. Connection to culture is also an important healing strategy for Native people who have experienced human trafficking. The VHT-NC projects took various approaches to incorporating the cultural values, beliefs, and traditions of the Native communities they served. They demonstrated commitment to providing VHT-NC participants with access to cultural supports through project staffing, training, outreach, and case management approaches. It is our hope that their efforts may provide helpful insights or inspiration to other Native, Tribal, and mainstream programs that are implementing or considering implementing anti-human trafficking programming for Native communities.

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This brief was developed as part of the formative evaluation of the VHT-NC Program. Broadly, the goals of the evaluation are to understand the context in which the VHT-NC projects are implemented, the projects' goals, and the paths they take to achieve their goals, using a participatory and culturally responsive approach.

The VHT-NC formative evaluation is part of the [Human Trafficking Policy and Research Analyses Project](#), which aims to advance the scope of knowledge and data around human trafficking by identifying priority areas for learning, and conducting a series of studies that can immediately impact practice. All studies are overseen by the ACF Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) in collaboration with OTIP, and conducted by RTI International. The VHT-NC formative evaluation is also conducted in partnership with American Indian Development Associates, LLC.

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