



**Honoring the Past  
to Empower the Future  
Trauma-Informed and Healing-  
Centered Approaches to Caring for  
Youth in the Criminal Justice System**

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## In Brief

Native communities have developed innovative approaches to support young people who become involved with the criminal justice system—incorporating holistic, inclusive and spiritual ideas into healing-centered care. Incorporating medicinal practices and cultural values, focusing on the healing power of empathy, drawing on the wisdom of elders and spiritual leaders, and embracing the rehabilitative potential of community engagement results in a powerful, trauma-informed, and healing-centered approach to care.

## What is Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered Care?

In recent years there has been broad acknowledgment of the impacts trauma can have on youth involved in the criminal legal system. This recognition has sparked increased interest in trauma-informed and healing-centered care among justice and healthcare professionals. According to U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA, 2014):

*“A program, organization, or system that is trauma-informed **realizes** the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; **recognizes** the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system; and **responds** by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices, and seeks to actively **resist re-traumatization**. A trauma-informed approach reflects adherence to six key principles... 1. **Safety**; 2. **Trustworthiness and Transparency**; 3. **Peer Support**; 4. **Collaboration and Mutuality**; 5. **Empowerment, Voice and Choice**; and 6. **Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues**.”*

In sum, trauma-informed and healing-centered approaches prioritize holistic understanding of an individual's life experiences to shape effective care and promote an environment of healing, recovery and growth.

### ABOUT PROMISING JUSTICE PRACTICES

The *Promising Justice Practices in Native Communities* project invites representatives from Native communities to come together to share learnings about promising practices for youth involved in, or vulnerable to involvement with, the criminal justice system. Participants exchange knowledge on implementing culturally responsive practices, highlighting positive outcomes for participating youth, and considering how promising practices can be adapted and applied in their own communities. By sharing our learnings, we hope to grow our individual and collective capacities to support and nurture Native youth.

### ABOUT FHI 360

[FHI 360](#) is a global organization that mobilizes research, resources and relationships so that people everywhere can access the opportunities they need to lead full, healthy lives. We listen to, learn from and work with communities to expand social and economic equity, improve health and well-being, and strengthen resilience. By bringing together deep expertise and diverse perspectives, we collaborate with partner communities and peer organizations to build enduring networks and expand our collective impact. In everything we do, we advocate for access and equity for people everywhere, enabling them to create their own paths forward.

## The Lasting Effects of Trauma

According to the National Native Children’s Trauma Center (n.d.), “Approximately 1 in 4 U.S. children will experience a significant traumatic event by the age of 16. Research suggests that Native American youth are at increased risk of trauma, depression, and PTSD as a result of grief and exposure to violence.” Trauma is an experience that causes overwhelming stress because of violence, neglect, loss, disaster, war, abuse and/or other emotional turmoil. When exposure to traumatic events is frequent or when trauma is not addressed, individuals become vulnerable to health or behavioral problems. For youth, criminalization of traumatic responses can lead to involvement in juvenile delinquency system (Rolnick & Sekaquaptewa, 2022). In Indigenous communities, “colonization and historical trauma are commonly associated with adverse childhood events” (Rides At The Door & Shaw, 2023). These impacts echo across generations, creating a wide range of negative health and social outcomes.

## Trauma-informed and Healing-centered Care for Justice-Involved Native Youth

In the U.S., Native people are incarcerated in state and federal prisons at a rate of 763 per 100,000 people—**double the national rate** of 350 per 100,000 and **four times higher** than the incarceration rate of **white people** (Prison Policy Initiative, 2021). Similarly, as of 2021, **tribal youth were 3.7 times** as likely to be detained or committed in juvenile facilities as their white peers (Rovner, 2023). Research has shown that tribal youth involvement with the criminal legal system is frequently in response to traumatic events. According to Rolnick and Sekaquaptewa (2022), “Compared to other groups, Native youth are especially likely to enter the system for status offenses and offenses associated with family conflict and alcohol and substance abuse—offenses that do not harm others and can be easily characterized as survival behaviors.”

Inside the justice system, Native youth enter a “jurisdictional web, a dysfunctional state system and a federal system that has no proper place for them” (Schlabach, Castañeda Perez, Hendley & Dowdall, 2020). Trauma-informed care acknowledges Native people’s emotional burdens as well as the subconscious triggers resulting from decades of negative experiences with authority figures or institutions (Crowe, 2024).

## Trauma-Informed Solutions

Today, many tribal justice systems emphasize trauma-informed and healing-centered approaches in which youth experience care that is holistic, inclusive, and respectful of the balance between the spiritual, emotional, physical and social realms of life (Manitoba Trauma Information and Education Centre, 2025). When working with Native youth within the criminal legal system, treatment interventions must honor the past to empower a young person's future, restoring hope and focusing on healing.



Weaving Western methods with culturally tailored interventions, **Healing to Wellness Courts** serve not just youth but also their families. If implemented successfully, this model brings treatment into the system versus referring youth to providers outside of the delinquency system (Rolnick & Sekaquaptewa, 2022). The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2021) highlighted that youth who participated in healing to wellness courts showed improvements in prosocial behavior, job skills, and employment status. Likewise, the National Drug Court Resource Center (2023) found that many participants saw their cases dismissed or sentences suspended.

**Wellness Court** programs incorporate cultural components into restorative practices. The **Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin's Meni<sup>ˆ</sup>paniw (Wellness Courts)** program, for example, requires youth to participate in seasonal cultural activities (e.g., sugar camp, sturgeon feast, ricing, winter round house) to bolster knowledge of and connection to their culture, awareness of themselves, and self-esteem (Rolnick and Sekaquaptewa, 2022). Likewise, the **Yavapai-Apache Family Health Court** implements language classes

and spiritual counseling. The **Yurok Tribe Wellness Court’s “Cultural Division”** offers youth education, mentoring, skill-building, and ceremonial training including food gathering, construction of traditional equipment and tools, hunting and fishing, music, and dance (Rolnick & Sekaquaptewa, 2022). Program completion ceremonies showcasing a participant’s journey encourage participants to celebrate their accomplishment while also acknowledging their success to the wider community.

Through interviews with eight district court judges, a 2024 National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges study identified several judicial practices that contribute to a **trauma-informed court room**. Judges should aim to level power differentials, be mindful of language and tone, implement calming exercises, encourage input from all players, implement motivational interviewing techniques, discuss less restrictive options with juveniles, create a sense of mutual respect, recognize broader societal circumstances, and practicing patience and understanding. (McKinsey et al., 2024).

In the same study, judges suggested that **“rehabilitation and healing”** be added to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) framework for trauma-informed approaches (see p. 1) as a core principle. A rehabilitative approach acknowledges that trauma informs both the risk factors for crime and the response to treatment. Those who have endured trauma may face challenges complying with treatment orders because trauma is associated with addiction relapse and treatment nonadherence. Healing is thus a “continuous, nonlinear process” (McKinsey et al., 2024).

Native justice systems also tap the **wisdom of ancestors and spiritual advisors** to support youth (Rolnick & Sekaquaptewa, 2023). In the **Navajo Nation’s D.A.N.A. (Dine Adil Nidliigo A’nal neeh) program**, spiritual advisors and spiritual counselors guide participants through sweat lodges and traditional ceremonies. **The Little Traverse Bay Band of Odawa Indians’ Waabshki-Miigwan (White Feather) program** draws on the [\*Seven Grandfather Teachings\*](#) of Anishinaabe peoples—wisdom, love, respect, bravery, honesty, humility, and truth—to teach values to youth in the community.



Photo Credit: Diego “Hawk” Harico. *Representatives from tribal communities meet in Oklahoma to share promising practices for justice-involved youth.*

## Palone and Durham's Stories



Every time I would start getting into that depressed state, I would sing [tribal] songs and felt like I was at peace."

-Isaac Palone, Kids Imprisoned Project



Isaac Palone, a member of the Fort Yuma Quechan Indian Tribe, became involved with the criminal legal system at the age of 12 after experiences with drugs, alcohol and burglary.

Isaac Durham, a member of the Hopi Tribe, was charged with underage consumption of alcohol at 12. He spent five years in and out of juvenile detention before hitting "rock bottom" at the age of 19.

Palone and Durham live nearly 200 miles from one another, yet they share strikingly similar stories and experiences of trauma that are sadly too common among Native youth, who are three times more likely to be imprisoned than their white peers. Boarding schools and other policies meant to assimilate Native youth into white culture resulted in historical trauma that still has repercussions today.

Restorative and rehabilitative approaches long practiced in tribal justice systems are now gaining traction in Western courts. One popular approach, [Gathering of Native Americans \(GONA\)](#), developed in 1992, utilizes cultural values, tradition and spiritual practices to help address the issues that affect Indigenous communities across the country. Engaging in cultural traditions and connecting with one's community help youth stay grounded and tethered to their roots.

Both Palone and Durham are now sober and employed. Palone lives on the reservation, and Durham plans to return and mentor the next generation of youth.

"The work I do is just a constant reminder of where I came from, and I feel an obligation to do good," said Durham.

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## Funding Opportunities to Support Trauma-Informed Care

The federal agencies and foundations listed below have offered grant opportunities in recent years that supported trauma-informed and healing-centered care programs in Native communities. As the new presidential administration sets policy priorities, budget allocations and grant opportunities from federal agencies are likely to shift but some grant programs may continue. Some of the funding sources listed here may not be accepting current grant applications but typically open new opportunities periodically, meaning interested parties should check sites regularly for new announcements of open application periods.

### 1. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) – Tribal Youth Programs and Services

OJJDP provides grants to Tribes aiming to enhance their juvenile justice systems. These grants support prevention, intervention, and treatment strategies that benefit Native youth. The funding is designed to be flexible, accommodating the unique cultural and systemic needs of each Tribe.

Url: <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/programs/tribal-youth-programs-and-services>

### 2. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) – Native Connections Grant

The Native Connections program is a five-year grant initiative assisting American Indian and Alaska Native communities in identifying and addressing the behavioral health needs of Native youth. It focuses on reducing substance misuse and suicide risk among youth up to age 24 by supporting the development of culturally relevant prevention and treatment strategies.

Url: <https://www.samhsa.gov/communities/tribal-affairs/funding-opportunities/native-connections>

### 3. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) – Circles of Care Grant Program

Circles of Care supports the planning and development of community-based systems of care for children with mental health challenges and their families. While the grant does not fund direct services, it aids in building local capacity and infrastructure to improve mental health, substance abuse prevention, and wellness services for Native youth.

Url: <https://www.samhsa.gov/communities/tribal-affairs/funding-opportunities/circles-care>

#### **4. Department of Justice (DOJ) – Tribal Grants**

The Department of Justice offers various grants to support Tribes in enhancing their justice systems, including programs focused on crime prevention, youth violence interventions, and substance abuse treatment. These grants aim to address the comprehensive needs of justice-involved youth and adults within tribal communities.

Url: <https://www.justice.gov/tribal>

#### **5. National Native Children's Trauma Center (NNCTC) – Training and Technical Assistance**

While not a direct funding source, NNCTC provides training and technical assistance to tribal agencies on preventing and mitigating childhood traumatic stress. Engaging with NNCTC can enhance a program's capacity to deliver trauma-informed care, which may strengthen applications for funding.

Url: <https://www.nnctc.org/tta-offerings>

#### **6. The Scattergood Foundation**

The Scattergood Foundation funds organizations and projects that disrupt the current behavioral health space and create impact at individual, organizational, and societal levels. They support initiatives incorporating principles of diversity, equity, inclusion, and trauma-informed practice. They hope to bring about authentic partnership, collaboration, and systems change to improve emotional health and wellbeing for all. The foundation prioritizes supporting organizations that serve and are led by Black, Indigenous, and people of color.

Url: <https://www.scattergoodfoundation.org/support/grant-making/>

#### **7. The Kresge Foundation**

Health and well-being are influenced by factors, including housing, education, economic stability, transportation and other services, along with community contexts like civic participation and interaction with the criminal justice system. The Kresge Foundation's Human Services Program seeks to advance the social and economic mobility of people with low income. They support community-based, nonprofit organizations that serve the needs of disadvantaged populations, including Native American communities.

Url: <https://kresge.org/grants-social-investments/current-funding-opportunities/>