



Art as Medicine

Art-Based Programming

Promising Justice Practices in Native Communities Issue Brief 5

September 2025 • Marcio Vargas Sejas and Amy Detgen

In Brief: What is Art-Based Programming?

*Art-based programs use art activities as a primary component of interventions to bring about positive changes in behavior, or they deliberately use art for this purpose. These programs can range from standalone arts-based interventions to those that integrate arts with other approaches, such as mentoring. A fundamental assumption is that **engaging with art is therapeutic in itself**, focusing on both the creative process and the resulting product to broadly promote positive change (Development Services Group, 2021).*

Art-based programs offer transformative potential for youth, particularly those who are at-risk of justice involvement or have experienced trauma. Through the creative process, these programs provide a non-threatening avenue for emotional expression and healing (Development Services Group, 2021). Many young people struggle to verbalize painful experiences, and art allows them to process emotions, manage behavioral issues, and develop healthier responses to stress (Shiv, 2022). This type of expressive outlet supports both emotional resilience and self-understanding.

Beyond emotional healing, art-based programs foster the development of critical life skills. Participants build problem-solving abilities, strengthen interpersonal communication, and learn emotional regulation (Brown et al, 2018; Pepic et al, 2022). These programs also enhance cognitive functions and promote self-awareness, team building, and reflection. For many youths, these skills can translate into better outcomes in school, relationships, and future employment.

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'S NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR WORK AND LEARNING

[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.

Behaviorally, art-based interventions are associated with positive changes, including reduced disciplinary issues, lower rates of substance use, and decreased participation in risky behaviors (Hunter et al, 2022). Involvement in these programs can also mitigate anger, aggression, and recidivism rates among youth with prior justice involvement (Shiv, 2022). These programs are thus not only therapeutic but preventive—helping to break cycles of harm before they deepen.

A key strength of art programs lies in their capacity to build community and social connection. Youth who participate often report a greater sense of belonging and acceptance (Pepic et al, 2022). Programs like *Native Spirit*, for example, recruit local community members as facilitators, creating safe spaces for culturally affirming mentorship and interaction (Hunter, 2022). These relationships strengthen social networks and provide essential support systems.

The process of creating art—whether visual, musical, or performance-based—gives youth a tangible sense of accomplishment (Development Services Group, 2021). The final product is not just an artistic expression but a symbol of their growth, commitment, and healing journey.

Art-based programs for Native youth foster a wide range of benefits that extend beyond

Art-Based Programs for Native Youth

Programs that are culturally grounded—particularly those tailored for American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) youth—offer additional benefits. For many Native communities, art is not only a form of expression but also a vital part of cultural continuity and spirituality. Art-based programs help young people reconnect with traditional practices and teachings, enhancing self-esteem and fostering healthy identity development (Hunter et al, 2022). In this way, art serves as both a tool for individual growth and a bridge to cultural heritage that has too often been marginalized or erased.

Importantly, arts programming has been linked to improved mental health and overall wellness (Pepic et al, 2022). Studies show that creative engagement can reduce perceived stress, improve mood, raise self-esteem, and lower rates of depression and anxiety (Pepic et al, 2022). Youth who have experienced trauma often gain a renewed sense of identity and resilience, reframing themselves not as victims but as survivors on a path toward healing (Development Services Group, 2021).

Moreover, these programs offer a cost-effective and accessible alternative to more punitive juvenile justice interventions. They are often delivered through after-school programs, which already have the infrastructure and resources to support youth engagement. For young people who are wary of authority or struggle to open up in traditional therapy, the interactive and non-verbal nature of art makes it especially appealing and effective.

creative expression. They promote **emotional healing** and a boost to **mental health**, while also encouraging **positive behaviors** that support personal growth. These programs help youth build essential **skills**, affirm **cultural identity**, and strengthen **community connections**. Importantly, they also cultivate a strong **sense of accomplishment**, reinforcing resilience and self-confidence. In sum, art-based programs offer a holistic, culturally resonant, and developmentally grounded approach to supporting Native youth and others facing significant life challenges.



Figure 1, Benefits of Art-Based Programs for Native Youth. Art-based programs can strengthen the wellbeing, skills, and cultural identity of Native youth.

Art-Based Programs



The **Indigenous Arts Alliance (IAA) Youth Leadership Program** provides a holistic, culturally grounded approach to supporting Indigenous and Native American youth. Through a combination of mentorship, education, and enrichment activities, the program nurtures leadership skills, cultural identity, and community engagement. A key element of the program is its enrichment component, which includes workshops focused on intergenerational creative expression. Through these workshops, elders share knowledge with youth as they collaborate on art projects and traditional crafts. Traditional arts workshops include **beadwork, quillwork, and storytelling**, while traditional craft workshops include **basket weaving, drum making, and regalia creation** (Indigenous Arts Alliance, n.d.). These intergenerational activities not only preserve cultural practices, historical perspectives and pride, but also promote mental, physical, and emotional well-being. By honoring ancestral knowledge and encouraging self-expression through traditional arts and language revitalization, the IAA program empowers youth to become culturally grounded leaders and advocates for their communities.

The **Native Youth Arts Collective (NYAC)** is an Indigenous-led arts initiative based in the Little Earth and East Phillips neighborhoods of Minneapolis. It brings together Native teens and young adults to create **public art**, including **paintings, murals, and installations that amplify Indigenous visibility and voice** in their local community (Little Earth of United Tribes, n.d.). NYAC has collaborated with major local institutions, such as the Minneapolis College of Art and Design and the Walker Art Center, on community murals, artistic installations, and art galleries. Central to NYAC's mission is the use of art to foster community representation and empowerment. Through these art projects NYAC amplifies Native stories and strengthens cultural visibility in Minneapolis.



It not only connects you with your history and your culture, but it also gives you pride in who you are.”

- Four Horns

The **Cheyenne River Youth Project (CYRP)** website states that “for Lakota people, art is culture.” While colonization damaged Lakota people’s connection to self and their artistic expression, CYRP believes that rebuilding that connection is “essential for healing.” (Cheyenne River Youth Project, n.d.). The CYRP offers contemporary art instruction to help

Lakota youth communicate through art. At the Waniyetu Wowapi Lakota Youth Arts and Culture Institute, CYRP provides classes and workshops in **drawing, graffiti lettering, collaborative murals, hide painting, traditional jewelry and video production**. These types of art encourage self-expression at the same time as they strengthen connection to culture. In addition, these classes connect young people to information about and experience with potential sustainable careers in the arts. The institute also offers a **teen art internship program** and nine-month Lakota Art Fellowships.

The **Native Music Coalition (NMC)** was a Native-led former organization that offered culturally rooted wellness and addiction recovery services. Grounded in Indigenous traditions, NMC provided youth programs, **music** and **art workshops**, traditional ceremonies, and **talking circles**. Based in Tucson, AZ, NMC emphasized spiritual healing alongside professional accountability, with most staff being peer support specialists from local tribes. The organization also hired from within the communities it served to create jobs and ensure culturally responsive, empathetic support for families (Duarte, 2022).

Project Venture, from the **National Indian Youth Leadership Program (NIYLP)** is a culturally grounded, adventure-based program for Indigenous youth that fosters resilience and leadership through outdoor activities, cultural connection, and positive peer support. “Arts-based” in this context is used in a broad sense to refer to **a range of creative and intellectual activities**, not just the traditional fine arts (Buller, 2024). Founded by Cherokee educator McLellan Hall, it operates across the U.S. and Canada, using experiential learning to prevent substance abuse and justice system involvement. The program adapts to local cultures and emphasizes healing from historical trauma, offering youth a break from systemic challenges and promoting hope and self-worth (Buller, 2024).

The **Lightning Boy Foundation**, based in the Tewa Pueblos of Northern New Mexico, honors the legacy of young dancer Valentino Rivera by providing Native youth with access to **traditional hoop dancing and other visual and performance arts**. Founded after his passing, the organization fosters healing, cultural pride, and artistic expression. The foundation celebrates the resilience and creativity of Native youth through dance and community engagement (Lightning Boy Foundation, n.d.).



When we start dancing, we try to pick up our hoops with our feet and not with our hands, to give respect to Mother Earth. Each hoop tells a different story, and everybody tells their story differently.”

-Josiah Enriquez, 2025 World Hoop Champion (Beitmen, 2025)

The FHI 360 evaluation team visited the Three Creek reservation in June 2025 as part of the *Promising Justice Practices in Native Communities* grant program. The team spent three days observing a retreat supporting Bishop Paiute youth. All photos in this section were taken by the FHI 360 team. This section also incorporates information from "In California, Tribal Members are Reclaiming the Land of Flowing Water," accessed at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/16/us/california-native-american-tribes.html>

Spotlight

Three Creeks Collective

In in a landmark land return in California’s Owens Valley, the Owens Valley Indian Water Commission reclaimed the Three Creeks property in 2023, supported by donors and tribal calls for justice. The former owners chose to sell the land below market value to honor Native connections. The site is now being developed as a **sanctuary** and **cultural learning** space, offering a place for **healing** and **education** about Indigenous history and practices—part of a larger movement to restore land in a region long affected by Los Angeles’s early water diversion efforts.

We Are Living Arts (WALA) is a program dedicated to empowering Indigenous and Alaska Native youth through cultural connection, peer mentoring, and creative expression. Facilitated by Jeri Bruno, WALA’s three-part approach—Rise Up, Environment, and Art Inspired—builds leadership, community awareness, and personal identity. Youth participate in activities grounded in **Native traditions and the arts**, including visual, performing, and literary forms, fostering healing and self-discovery through cultural and contemporary lenses.

Through the WALA program, the **Bishop Paiute Tribe** hosts Native youth at Three Creeks for healing, cultural connection, and creative expression. In activities led by professional artists Sage Romero, Bobby Gonz, Bobby Pipper, Naomi Johnson, and Santeena Pugliese, youth explore forms such as animation, songwriting, storytelling, music, and traditional arts. The multi-day art-focused retreat blends peer mentoring, nature-based reflection, and elder teachings to support wellness and identity. The retreat then culminates in a youth-led showcase that celebrates personal growth, community, and the power of letting go.



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Funding Opportunities for Art-Based Programs

The federal agencies and foundations listed below have offered grant opportunities in recent years that supported 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.

1. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) – Arts-Based Programs and Art Therapies

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

Url: <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/funding/fy2024/O-OJJDP-2024-172072>

2. First Nations – Native Arts Initiative

First Nations awarded Native Arts grants and mini-grants to Native-led nonprofits and tribal programs in the Upper Midwest, Southwest, and Pacific Northwest.

These funds supported artist instruction, business skill development, arts workshops, and professional training in areas like fundraising, museum practices, and financial management, all within donor-defined geographic areas.

Url: <https://www.firstnations.org/projects/native-arts-initiative-nai/>

3. Minnesota State Arts Board

The Minnesota State Arts Board is a state agency dedicated to promoting the creation, performance, and appreciation of the arts across Minnesota. The board oversees statewide and regional arts development through competitive grant programs—such as Accessible Arts, Arts Education, Arts Experiences, Cultural Expression, Creative Individuals, and Operating Support.

Url: <https://www.arts.state.mn.us/><https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/programs/youth-healing-to-wellness-court-program>

4. Institute of Museum and Library Services – Native American/Native Hawaiian Museum Services (NANH)

The NANH program provides competitive grants ranging from \$5,000 to \$250,000 to federally recognized tribes and Native-led organizations. These grants are designed to bolster initiatives such as cultural preservation, collections

stewardship, community engagement, workforce training, and educational programs that support Indigenous heritage and museum capacity building.

Url: <https://www.imls.gov/find-funding/funding-opportunities/grant-programs/native-american-native-hawaiian-museum-services>

5. Lannan Foundation – Art Grants

The Lannan Foundation, a family foundation dedicated to promoting cultural freedom, diversity, and creativity, supports contemporary art through its Art Grants, which fund nonprofit organizations for exhibitions, monographic catalogs, residency programs, and special projects showcasing mid- to senior-career contemporary artists.

Url: <https://lannan.org/programs/art/grants>

6. Native American in Philanthropy

Native Americans in Philanthropy (NAP) is a Native-led nonprofit organization that works to Indigenize philanthropy by applying Indigenous values like reciprocity and intergenerational support to reshape philanthropic practices. They operate a national network including tribal communities, Native-led nonprofits, funders, and allied organizations across initiatives such as Grantwatch, Native Youth Grantmakers, Tribal Nations, Public-Private Partnerships, and Bison & Grasslands.

Url: <https://nativephilanthropy.org/>

7. Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies – Arts & Culture

Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies—managing both the Margaret A. Cargill Foundation and the Anne Ray Foundation—allocates its grantmaking across seven strategic domains, including Arts & Cultures, which integrates Native and folk arts as well as music education. The Arts & Cultures domain fosters human creativity through support for folk arts, Native American art, tactile art, and culturally significant crafts, emphasizing intergenerational transmission of artistic skills and cultural knowledge.

Url: <https://www.macphilanthropies.org/domains/arts-cultures/>

8. Santa Fe Natural Tobacco Company Foundation

The Santa Fe Natural Tobacco Company Foundation supports Native-led arts and culture initiatives that strengthen community and preserve cultural heritage. Its grants, typically ranging from \$10,000 to \$20,000, fund Native-driven programs and events that foster cultural wealth, build community connections, and support language and historic preservation. Arts-focused proposals must align with the foundation's broader mission to promote American Indian self-sufficiency and

cultural advancement in the U.S. Only projects—not general operating expenses—are considered.

Url: <https://www.reynoldsamerican.com/santa-fe-foundation/>