



Substance Abuse Prevention Programming

Promising Justice Practices in Native Communities Issue Brief 6

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In Brief: What is Substance Abuse Prevention Programming?

Native communities and organizations have developed programs to support youth who struggle with substance abuse and addiction.

The inclusion of Indigenous knowledge, culture, and traditions in health interventions for Native youth can promote holistic healing, connection to community, and beneficial, lasting change. Culturally grounded programs connect young people with their heritage, fostering pride and building a sense of identity—powerful protective factors against substance use (Price, 2025).

The One Sky Center, a National Resource Center for American Indian and Alaska Native Health, Education and Research, defined three types of culturally based interventions (CBIs):

- ❖ Culture is the prevention/intervention
- ❖ Interventions are developed originally and directly from customs, beliefs, practices, and other elements of the culture
- ❖ Evidence-based and practice-based interventions are adapted using beliefs, practices, and other elements of the culture (Walker, et al., 2010, p. 69).

For all three types of interventions, extensive community involvement and participation is key to ensure substance use prevention programs are culturally appropriate and effective. By including families and community members in prevention efforts, programs create a supportive environment for youth and their healing (Native American Drug & Alcohol Recovery Institute, 2023; Lawrence, et al., 2019).

Native researchers and organizations have noted that the Western methods, definitions and assumptions used to determine whether or not programs are “evidence-based” do not align with those of tribal communities. For example, many “evidence-based” programs measure health impacts on the individual, whereas traditional Indigenous programs focus on the community’s health (SAMHSA, 2018). The experimental designs required to meet Western scientific standards require establishing a control group, however, Native programs are traditionally provided to the entire community. Also, traditional Native programs often take a holistic view, combining prevention, treatment and recovery strategies, while research and federal funding require discrete interventions. For these reasons, several Native and non-Native organizations, such as White Bison, One Sky Center, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and the Centers for Disease Control, have established lists of “practice-based” cultural intervention programs as a resource for tribes to obtain information about effective programming and promising practices in Native communities (SAMHSA, 2023; Coyhis, 2019; Lawrence, et al., 2019; Walker, et al., 2010).

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.

Common elements in substance abuse programs designed for Native youth include:

Cultural activities/traditions.

Participating in traditional practices (such as ceremonies, storytelling, sweat lodges, drumming) helps young people connect to their heritage, increasing their sense of belonging and resilience (Price, 2025; Indian Reservation, 2025; Native American Drug and Alcohol Recovery Institute, 2023, Annie E. Casey, 2020).

Family and community participation.

Intergenerational involvement in substance abuse prevention programming provides young people a supportive environment. Elders and community members should be directly involved in program design (Native American Drug & Alcohol Recovery Institute, 2023; Lawrence, et al., 2019).

Trauma-informed approaches.

Programs recognize the historical trauma Native youth face and incorporate Indigenous healing practices to improve mental health (Indian Reservation, 2025).

Education and awareness. Young people can make better decisions when informed of the risks and effects of substance abuse (Native American Drug & Alcohol Recovery Institute, 2023).

Mental health support. Programs should connect young people to services and providers to help them develop emotional regulation and coping skills (SAMHSA Native Connections, 2024).

Youth empowerment. Programs often incorporate activities to increase youth empowerment, such as leadership roles and physical activity. These aim to build young people's self-confidence and self-worth (Annie E. Casey 2020; Project Venture, n.d.).

Substance Abuse Programs for Native Youth

Native American youth experience many of the same risk and protective factors as their non-Native peers, but they also face distinct cultural and contextual influences that can make them more susceptible to substance abuse. This includes factors such as historical, intergenerational trauma, poverty, lack of access to healthcare and education, and the disintegration of traditions and cultural practices. Native American youth have higher rates of substance use disorders compared to other ethnic groups. Research has shown that a strong Indigenous identity, and engagement with cultural traditions and activities promote positive mental health and a reduction in substance abuse (Price, 2025; Native American Drug & Alcohol Recovery Institute, 2023).

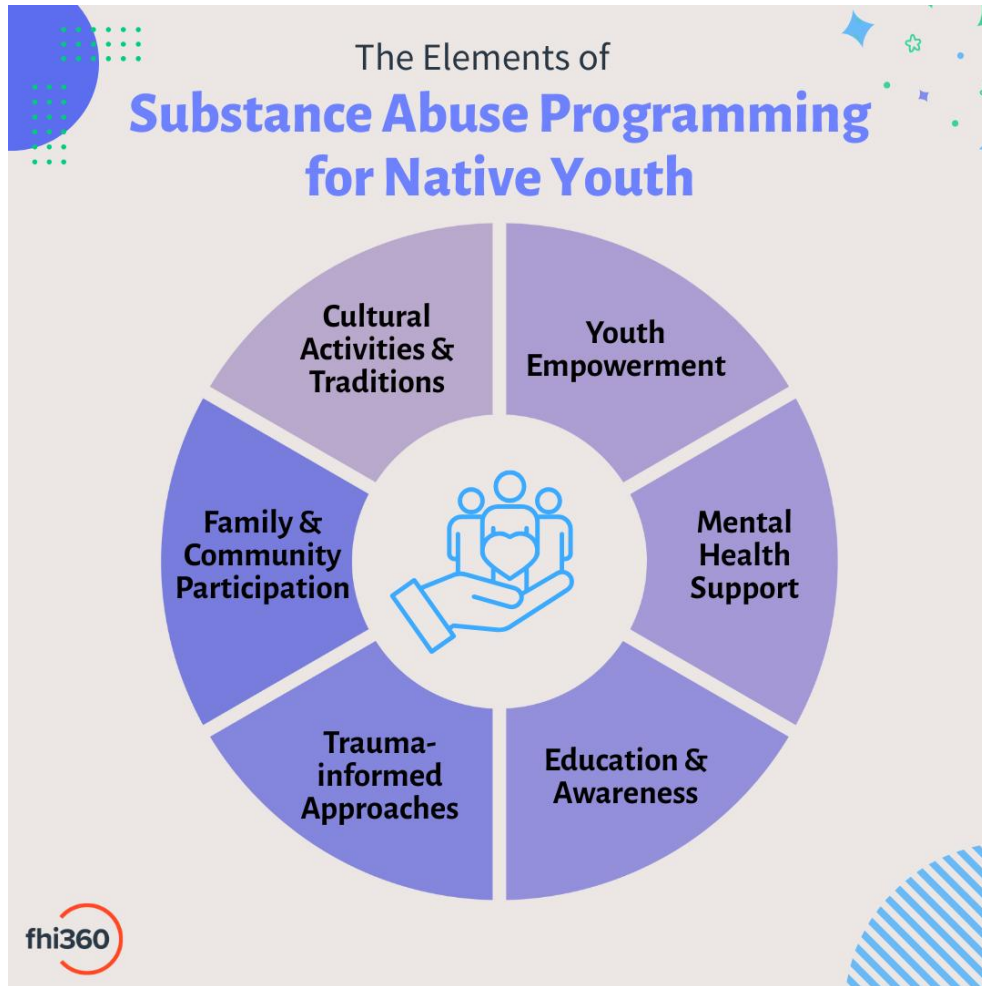


Figure 1, Elements of Substance Abuse Programming for Native Youth.



Substance Abuse Programs

The following are examples of substance abuse prevention programs designed for Native youth.

Partnership for Success: Tradition Not Addiction

The Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes received a five-year federal Partnership for Success (PFS) grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to build upon their existing *Tradition, Not Addiction* program. The program draws on Cheyenne and Arapaho traditions to prevent underage drinking and non-medical use of drugs. Classes and events feature cultural activities, such as a Shawl, Ribbon Skirt/Shirt, Moccasin class, beading classes, a gourd class, drum-making class and events with traditional foods. The program focuses on Cheyenne and Arapaho youth but is available to Native people across five counties in the Tribal Jurisdiction.

SAMHSA's Strategic Prevention Framework-Partnership for Success components include a comprehensive prevention strategy that addresses locally identified priorities, uses a data-driven process, enhances protective factors, reduces risk factors, and builds capacity to implement prevention strategies. The Cheyenne Arapaho PFS was named an Exemplary

Prevention Program in 2017, achieving national recognition for culturally appropriate prevention program serving Tribal youth (Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes, 2023).



"Our youth are not just our future; they are our present. As we pass the torch of our traditions and wisdom to them, let's also equip them with the knowledge and support they need to navigate their path."

– Native American Drug and Recovery Institute ¹

Project Venture

Project Venture is an experiential, outdoor-based program rooted in Native cultural values that strengthens youth resilience and reduces risk for substance use and delinquent behaviors. First implemented in 1990 in Albuquerque,

New Mexico, the model has since been replicated with 9,000 Indigenous youth in 25 states and internationally. Outdoor activities such as mountain biking, hiking, rappelling, and survival skills foster a deeper ancestral connection to nature while enhancing young people's self-confidence, problem-solving abilities, and leadership. The Project Venture mission is "To support Native and Indigenous youth to develop healthy lifestyles and positive relationships with the natural world, to achieve their full potential, and to become leaders in their communities." Over the past 35 years, the program has consistently shown positive reductions in substance abuse, depression, anxiety, and anger in Indigenous communities. It has been recognized as a best practice by the Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices (NREPP) (Project Venture, n.d.).

The Little Holy One Curriculum

At the Fort Peck Reservation in Montana, researchers recognized that substance abuse prevention for youth begins with building the capacity and positive mental health of parents. Dr. Teresa Brockie, a member of the White Clay Nation and researcher at Johns Hopkins Nursing stated, "We know that inter-generational approaches are an effective way to



We know that inter-generational approaches are an effective way to address risk factors that have been passed down from generation to generation"

–Dr. Teresa Brockie

address risk factors that have been passed down from generation to generation” (Annie E. Casey, 2020, p.1). Following a rise in the suicide rate in Fort Peck, Brockie and her team studied and documented the negative childhood experiences of young adults on the reservation, also discovering that a youth’s tribal identity and education correlated to a lower risk of substance use and suicide attempts. Together with the community, the team developed *The Little Holy One* curriculum to improve the mental health and parenting capacities of young adult caregivers while decreasing their children’s risk of substance use and suicide attempts. The program serves Assiniboine and Sioux caregivers and their 3- to 5-year-old children enrolled in Head Start (Annie E. Casey, 2020).

Little Holy One includes multiple aspects of positive Native American traditions, including a traditional naming ceremony, lessons on smudging, healing historical trauma through ceremony and storytelling, and activities helping participants understand their sacred relationship to others. In addition, the curriculum incorporates elements from the evidence-based programs, Family Spirit and the Common Elements Treatment Approach.

Qungasvik (Toolbox) Prevention Approach

Developed in two southwest Alaska Yup’ik communities, the *Qungasvik (Toolbox) prevention approach* aims to increase community, cultural, and historical strengths and protections against suicide and alcohol use disorder by helping young people aged 12-18 focus on culturally meaningful 'reasons for sobriety' and 'reasons for life' (University of Alaska Fairbanks, n.d.). In traditional Yup’ik culture, the qasgiq was a central structure in the community, where education, ceremony and healing took place. Today, the qasgiq is a gathering place to deliver prevention services and activities as well as a structure for leadership and decision-making. As part of the *Qungasvik* model, young people and their parents take part in culturally based activities designed to change the youth’s attitudes towards alcohol. Activities include traditional games, seal hunting, berry picking, Elder storytelling, and traditional parenting supports (Price, 2025). Youth, Elders and community members return to the qasgiq to assess progress by tracking movement in a Yup’ik cycle of healing and development. The belief that undergirds this approach is that when communities support their young people in positive ways, “there is no space for the spirit of suicide and alcohol abuse; it is shamed, and it leaves” (Rasmus, et al., 2019, p. 52).

Spotlight

Healing of the Canoe

The Healing of the Canoe curriculum is a life skills and substance abuse prevention curriculum for tribal youth, designed through a collaboration between the Suquamish Tribe and the Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribe in Washington, together with the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Institute, and University of Washington. The tribes had both recognized substance abuse prevention as a priority and that connecting youth to tribal traditions and values was necessary to address substance abuse. The curriculum uses the canoe journey as a metaphor for life—where the community pulls together to provide youth with skills to navigate life. The curriculum focuses on building life skills through the following 14 chapters, incorporating traditional stories, community voices, and cultural activities.

- ❖ Four Seasons and Canoe Journey Metaphor
- ❖ Who I am: Beginning at the Center
- ❖ How Am I Perceived?
- ❖ Community Help and Support
- ❖ Moods and Coping with Emotions
- ❖ Staying Safe: Suicide Prevention
- ❖ How Can I Help? Suicide Intervention
- ❖ Who Will I Become? Goal Setting
- ❖ Overcoming Obstacles: Solving Problems
- ❖ Listening
- ❖ Effective Communication: Expressing Thoughts and Feelings
- ❖ Safe Journey without Alcohol and Drugs
- ❖ Strengthening Our Community
- ❖ Honoring Ceremony

The curriculum is designed to be adapted for each tribal community’s needs, featuring their stories, traditions, beliefs and values.

Since 2013, the Healing of the Canoe team has disseminated the curriculum, including training more than 700 attendees from 62 tribes and 28 tribal organizations (Healing of the Canoe, n.d., Thomas, et al., 2016).



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Funding Opportunities for Substance Abuse 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 currently accepting grant applications but may open new opportunities periodically.

1. Indian Health Service: Alcohol and Substance Abuse Branch (ASAB): Community Opioid Intervention Prevention Program

The Indian Health Service has awarded \$9.5 million in Community Opioid Intervention Prevention Program (COIPP) grant funding to 19 tribes, tribal organizations, and urban Indian organizations to combat the opioid epidemic in Indian Country. The five-year project period started on February 1, 2025. Grants were awarded to implement innovative approaches to address the opioid crisis in American Indian and Alaska Native communities. [Community Opioid Intervention Prevention Program | Alcohol and Substance Abuse Branch](#)

2. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA): Native Connections

The purpose of this program is to prevent and reduce suicidal behavior and substance use/misuse, reduce the impact of trauma, and promote mental health among American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) youth, up to and including age 24, by building a healthy network of systems, services, and partnerships that impact youth. In fiscal years 2023-2025, Native Connections awarded grants of up to \$250,000 for up to five years. It is unclear if this funding will be continued. [Tribal Behavioral Health | SAMHSA](#)

3. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA): State and Tribal Opioid Response Grants

This funding provides critical resources to states and Tribal communities to address the overdose crisis through prevention, opioid overdose reversal medications, treatment (including medications for opioid use disorder, or MOUD), and recovery support. In 2025, SAMHSA allocated nearly \$63 million for Tribal Opioid Response. <https://www.samhsa.gov/newsroom/press-announcements/20250922/hhs-state-tribal-opioid-response-grants-2025>

4. Indian Health Office, Office of Urban Indian Health Programs (OUIHP): 4-in-1 Grant Program

The 4-in-1 Grant Program provides funding to eligible Urban Indian Organizations (UIOs) to ensure comprehensive, culturally acceptable personal and public health services are available and accessible to Urban Indians. The 4-in-1 grant provides funding for four health program areas: health promotion and disease prevention services, immunization services, alcohol- and substance use-related services, and mental health services. In Fiscal Year 2022, OUIHP awarded 32 grants to for the period of April 1, 2022–March 31, 2027. <https://www.ihs.gov/urban/4-in-1-grant-program/>

5. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA): Substance Use Prevention, Treatment, and Recovery Services Block Grant (SUBG)

The program’s objective is to help plan, implement, and evaluate activities that prevent and treat substance use. The program must target both the general population and sub-groups that are at high risk for substance use. The program must include, but is not limited to, the following strategies: Information Dissemination, Education, Alternatives, Problem Identification and Referral, Community-based Process, and Environmental. [Substance Abuse Prevention & Treatment Block Grant \(SABG\) | SAMHSA](#)

6. National Indian Health Board

The National Indian Health Board is committed to supporting Tribes by connecting them with funding opportunities that advance health initiatives in Indian Country. We provide resources, updates, and guidance on grants, cooperative agreements, and other funding mechanisms available to support programs in public health, behavioral health, environmental health, and more. At the time of this issue brief, there were no current funding opportunities available.

<https://www.nihb.org/approach/funding-opportunities/>

7. First Nation Development Institute

Maintains a [grantseeker resource list](#) of foundations that support Native-led initiatives, including substance abuse prevention.