

# HEALTH & WELLNESS COMMUNITY BRIEF ON: Native American Young Children and their Families in Alameda County

## OUR CHILDREN ARE SACRED

### Introduction

The Native American Community Brief highlights the history, culture, need and strengths of American Indians and Alaska Natives in Alameda County, California. Our purpose and collective goal is to document, share and increase awareness about the Native American community's wellness practices specifically around raising young children and the role that community and family plays. We hope the highlights are used to educate providers, policymakers and general public regarding the Native American community, an integral part of Alameda County's diversity.



### Who We Are

There are 566 federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native tribes in the United States with 104 in California. (1,2) There are 5.2 million American Indians and Alaska Natives alone or in combination with other race(s) living in America, in California there are 723,225. (3) California is home to more Native Americans than any other state in the Country. (4) According to the 2010 Census there are 26,089 (1.7%) Native Americans residing in Alameda County. (5) The original county indigenous population are the Ohlone Tribe, which are made up of several distinct groups. Their original homelands are from the San Francisco Bay through Monterey Bay and to the lower Salinas Valley. (6) Alameda County has no federally recognized tribes, the vast majority of Native Americans reside in an urban environment.



## Our History

Native American families were being separated from their children at an alarming rate due to public and private agencies placing them with non-Indian families. In response the Indian Child Welfare Act was passed by Congress in 1978. This federal law protects the best interest of Native American children and promote stability and security of tribes and families. (7) In the 1970's, 92% of adopted Native American children in California were placed in non-Native American families, a rate six times greater than any other minority. (8) Much of the county Native American population arrived in the 1950's through 1970's due to the federal mandated Indian Relocation Act. This policy encouraged tribal members from American Indian reservations and rural areas in and outside the state to relocate and assimilate into large urban environments. (9) The San Francisco Bay Area was a major relocation site. Many young children in the county are likely to be third and fourth generation descendants as a result of this policy.



Victoria's Story

## Historical Trauma

Native Americans have experienced Historical Trauma for over 500 years, from enduring physical, emotional, social, and spiritual genocide from American historical and contemporary policies. (10) Federal, regional, and local government policy to eradicate or assimilate Native Americans deeply impacted the health and wellness of families and especially children. Most notable was the federal Indian boarding school system which was implemented in the late 1800's with the philosophy of "killing the Indian to save the man." Native children were forcibly removed from their homes to attend these schools. (10) Because of this intergenerational trauma and other traumas, Native Americans face a myriad of maladies and unhealthy behaviors known as Historical Trauma Response. For example, substance abuse to numb the pain associated with the trauma is a form of Historical



Trauma Response. (11) It is clear Native American history is wrought with trauma, many community members continue to bear the emotional scars that reach across generations. However, many Native Americans are seeking out wellness to heal from this suffering through community-defined best practices. (12) Native American children are an important factor in the recovery and wellness of parents.

## Economic Disparity

In Alameda County 21% of Native Americans live below the poverty level which is three times as much as non-Hispanic Whites (7%). (13) It is important to understand that our Native American population face economic disparity as well as other hardships within the county. Native American providers and parents within the community have voiced the overwhelming inequality due to low socioeconomic status. The difficulty of low or no employment and other economic challenges for parents add more stress on the wellness of young children.

## Racial Misclassification

Reasons for racial misclassification are complex and vary at health system and individual levels. A provider may fail in collecting Native American identity or assume a different race. Further complications can include stereotyping by having a Spanish surname therefore being classified as Hispanic. Also, some Native Americans may not identify with a particular ethnic or racial identity and may be forced to pick only one race on forms. (14) Ultimately many factors contribute to the under-reporting of Native Americans in health data records and other forms collecting race information. This under reporting can impact needed funding for services specific to Native Americans.

**“Financial stress and proper shelter are the primary concern for parents over child wellness as their wellbeing becomes secondary if they do not have enough food or other basic needs.”**

- Native American community parent

**“When I first moved to Oakland from out-of-state everyone assumed I and my young children were Mexican.”**

- Native American community parent

## Multiethnic Native Americans

Many Native American families are multiethnic and identify with more than one racial group. Through intermarriage it is not uncommon for Native Americans to have children of multiple ethnicities. Multiethnic parents may identify as Native American and feel strongly about their cultural connection, however they may also feel strongly connected to other ethnicities and racial groups. As Alameda County is mostly urban with a diverse population, Native Americans may experience many cultures and adopt their surroundings when raising their young children.

## Building a Supportive Community

There was an unexpected consequence from the federal mandated Indian Relocation Act. In the Government attempt to assimilate Native Americans into general society it actually brought Native Americans from different tribes together. In the isolation of relocatees in a large urban environment along with economic difficulty Native Americans sought out each other to build support. Parents gathering at Native American organizations and events help build trust by interacting with other community members with young children. The Intertribal Friendship House in Oakland was established, and for the first time the community had a center for activities. Native American groups and social clubs joined together for a common goal of fostering support to community members. (15) To this day Native American organizations in the county are an integral part of delivering wellness programs to families and children while continuing to build trust among the community.



**“It is important for my young daughter to learn our tribal traditions... she dances in traditional regalia at Pow Wows. I can see that it makes her happy to have cultural pride.”**

- Native American community parent

## Spirituality and Wellness

Spirituality is very important to the wellness of family and community. A combination of traditions, traditional spiritual practices, and/or mainstream faiths coexist. Spirituality is usually community-oriented rather than individual-oriented and vary depending upon tribal tradition or western belief. (16) Wellness activities for families and children are wide ranging, some include parenting classes, talking circles, and youth traditional dance practices. Native American community organizations often facilitate and host activities that are based on Native spirituality and wellness. Community organizations bring traditional spiritual healers and cultural healers to the county for healing ceremonies. Faith-based spirituality and churches are also important to many Native American community members.

## The Role of Community Events

Native Americans in the densely occupied county are an invisible population, however, community events bring the population together throughout the year. Community events build on the restoration of cultural practices, tribal traditions and values which restore and sustain wellness and balance in families and youth. (12) Native American events in the county include Pow Wows, wellness gatherings, cultural/traditional activities, and other social gatherings. At community events parents often watch and care for each other's children. The role of events and gatherings provide a strong sense of community for Native American families and their young children. It gives opportunity for children to build trusting relationships with the Native American community. Community events create a strong sense of cultural pride and sense of belonging that is important for Native American children and their families.

**“First and foremost is for children to be in a safe environment, happy, and learning what they need to as they go on the next path of their education.”**

- Native American childcare provider

## What is our vision of a healthy child?

Children are often considered our most important resource in the Native American community. They will carry forward our Native American beliefs, culture and traditions to future generations. There are a myriad of factors that make up a healthy Native American child. Parents often cite healthy children be energetic, have humor and happiness, be curious about their surroundings and worldview, have normal development physically and behaviorally, and be empathetic. Native parents are also concerned children be in a safe environment where they can thrive. Parents would like to see their children have overall wellness and health to grow and succeed into the future. If children need assistance, their families will often seek out Native American specific organizations they trust.

## What role do community members play?

Traditionally in Native American culture it is the tribe/community that help raise children, not just individually by parents. Community members often become extended family, similar to aunts and uncles to children and other youth become cousins. Parents that have experience raising their own young children may notice behaviors of concern and can share knowledge and parenting skills with new parents. This form of community support is important for role modeling and passing along cultural knowledge as well as good parenting advice.

## How can providers better serve us?

Providers unfamiliar with our Native American community should be mindful of not assuming we are all the same. Many Native American families are multicultural and adapt to surrounding culture. However, community

**“[Non- Native American health providers] need to build trust within the community first... without trust from our people, your job would be very difficult.”**

- Native American childcare provider

members are likely to be strongly identified with Native American traditions and culture. It is often said Native Americans “walk in two worlds” by having both Native American identity and belief as well as being a part of contemporary society. Providers should be aware of contemporary and historical traumas Native American families have endured, which may contribute to the distrust of healthcare systems. It is encouraged that providers make an effort to consult with local cultural advisors for questions. (16) It is important providers understand Native Americans have a strong sense of community built on the restoration (and continuation) of cultural practices, tribal traditions and values that restore wellness and balance to families and youth. (12) It is also important for providers to make efforts to inform community members of available services that can improve their healthcare as well as livelihood (e.g. housing, food banks, etc.).

### What are good examples of programs currently in practice?

To better understand the Native American community in Alameda County, it is helpful to be familiar with current projects that engage parents and their young children aged 0 to 5. The Strong Family Home Visiting project at the Native American Health Center in Oakland is a home visiting program that provides services to pregnant and parenting families with Native children under the age of three. The project utilizes the evidence-based Family Spirit Program that is culturally-tailored for providers and parents for wellness of physical, cognitive, social-emotional, language learning and self-help of pre-school aged children. (17) The Fatherhood Is Sacred program offers classes at the Intertribal Friendship House in Oakland. The program strengthens families by responsibly involving Native fathers in their lives of their children. (18) It is important for Native fathers to be “present” in the lives of their children as well as teach their children culture, language, and traditional values. (19) Positive Indian Parenting is a nationally accepted curriculum for





parents that provides a structured format to develop and incorporate traditional Native American practices and values into modern-day childrearing. (7) Although there are only three programs mentioned here, there are others in practice that address directly or in-directly the health and wellness of young children within the county. Most programs targeting Native American families and children are contingent upon funding with defined timelines.

## Holistic System of Care for Native Americans in an Urban Environment

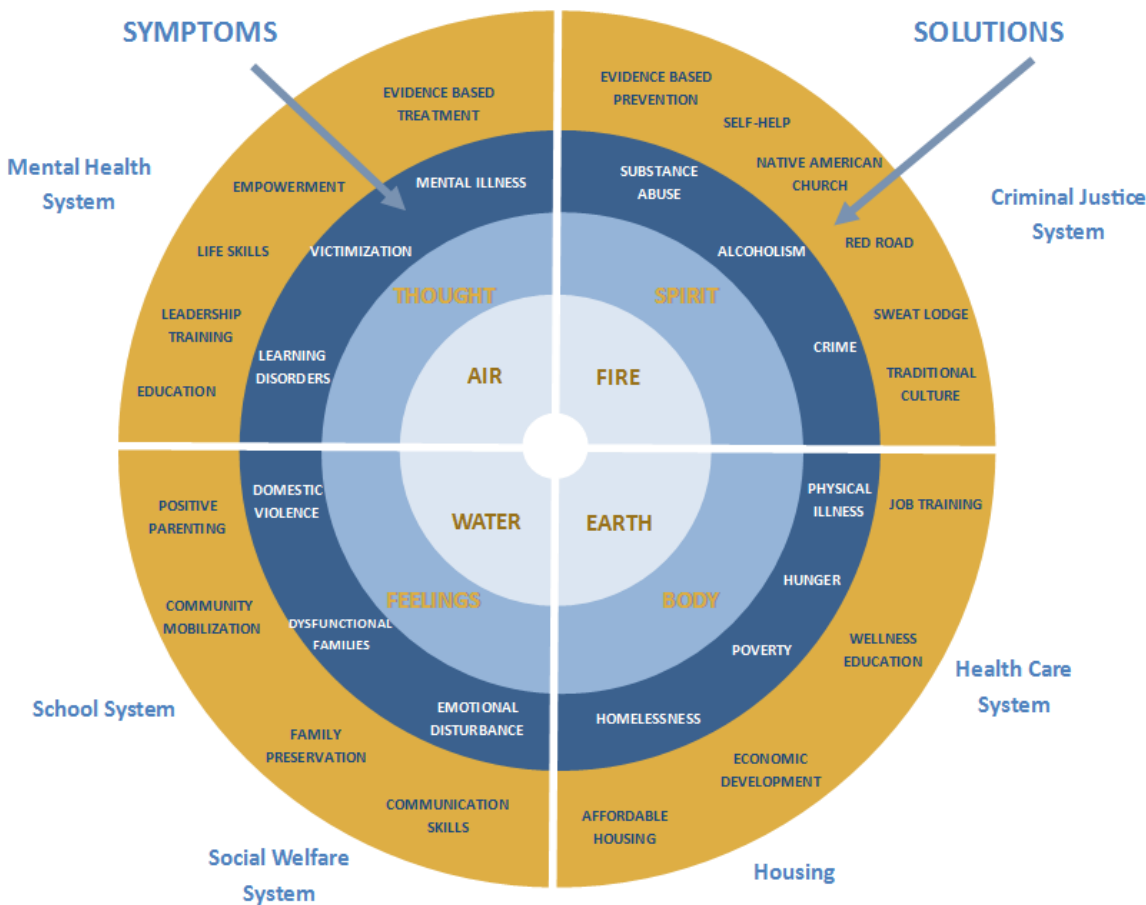
The best evidence of success for the system of care model for the Native American population are programs that utilize services that embody a unique blend of western and indigenous traditions. (20) Providers to Native American young children in Alameda County need to understand community wellness is linked across generations from young children to elders. It is also linked at the treatment and prevention levels. The model contains several principles including support for advocacy efforts of parent groups and the well-being of young children. The Holistic Model was developed by the Community Wellness Department (CWD) at the Native American Health Center and adopted by the Native American community in the San Francisco Bay Area. (21) CWD provides outpatient mental health and substance abuse counseling for Native Americans in San Francisco and Oakland. Services include individual, group and family/youth counseling, positive parenting, cultural activities, and Native American specific traditional healing. The Holistic Model focuses on solutions rather than problems. (Figure 1) The inner circle shows the basic elements and core value of indigenous belief followed by symptoms and solutions. (22)





Figure 1

Holistic System of Care for Native Americans in an Urban Environment (22)



With the welfare of young children strongly taken into account in the Holistic Model, family members are actively involved in all aspects of planning, carrying out, and evaluating the system of care and individualized care plans. (22) The Holistic Model allows supportive resources for child care, improved provider-family communication, educating providers about the history and structure of Native American culture, and integration of western and Native American traditional healing. In a Holistic Model ten-year perspective CWD found a decrease of aggressive behavior, depressive and anxious feelings in severely emotionally disturbed Native American children. (23)

## Community Organizations Offering Wellness

It is important for providers, policymakers, and community members to know about Native American organizations within the county that provide health and wellness services to Native American families and their young children. The American Indian Child Resource Center [www.aicrc.org](http://www.aicrc.org) offers youth and family support services that provide culturally appropriate activities and programs. Services include cultural arts for youth and Foster Care home certification and assistance. Hintil Kuu Ca (510) 531-8400 is a Native American childcare program that enhances academic skills and incorporates American Indian culture and values. Established in 1955 the Intertribal Friendship House [www.ifurbanrez.org](http://www.ifurbanrez.org) is the Native American community cultural center that also offers social services. They offer culture and traditions through hosting Pow Wows, drumming and traditional dance practice, native language classes, and many other ceremonial and social gatherings. The Native American Health Center [www.nativehealth.org](http://www.nativehealth.org) offers culturally-based holistic care with out-patient medical, dental, and behavioral wellness services. They also offer youth services and community based wellness events. Their media center creates digital stories of local Native American community members [www.nativehealth.org/gallery/video/view/93](http://www.nativehealth.org/gallery/video/view/93). All of the above mentioned Native American agencies are located in the City of Oakland.

**“Support can come  
in the form of  
organizations that  
our community  
members trust.”**

- Native American community parent

## Conclusion

It is the intention of this community brief to serve as a general information guide of the Native American population with regard to the health and wellness of our young children and their parents living in Alameda County. We would like to especially thank the 6 Native American community members in Alameda County that took part in key-informant interviews or document review, for making this report possible. It is our hope this information will be useful to educate and inform about our Native American community.

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