CultureCard

A Guide to Build Cultural Awareness

American Indian and Alaska Native
Myth: AI/AN people are spiritual and live in harmony with nature.
Fact: The concept of harmony does not exist in all AI/AN cultures. In fact, many AI/AN cultures view harmony as a positive harmonious relationship with nature.

Myth: Training should be provided by a member of the AI/AN community.
Fact: Training should be provided by a member of the AI/AN community who has the necessary knowledge and skills to provide the training.

Myth: The idea of AI/AN communities having a mystical spirituality is a broad generalization.
Fact: AI/AN communities do have a mystical spirituality, and it can be just as damaging as other more recent stereotypes. This includes the ability to provide services to AI/AN communities in need.

Myth: AI/AN people have distinct cultural characteristics, and you can tell them apart by how they look.
Fact: There is a unique local and political relationship between AI/AN, government and Indian Country. This relationship should be approached with a cultural lens.

Myth: There are as many as 350 federally recognized tribes.
Fact: There are about 562 tribes, including 73 tribes distributed directly to individual Tribes members.

Myth: The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and the Indian Health Service (IHS) are the only agencies responsible for working with tribes.
Fact: The U.S. Constitution, Executive Order, and Presidents monetary policy requiring that all exec. departments have the responsibility to consult with and respect Tribal Nations.

The purpose of this guide is to provide basic information for Federal disaster responders and other service providers who may be deployed or otherwise assigned to provide or coordinate services in American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities. This guide is intended to serve as a general briefing to enhance cultural competence while providing services to the AI/AN community. (This is defined as the ability to function effectively in cross-cultural situations.) Antispecification training or leadership should be provided by a member of the particular AI/AN community.

Service providers should use this guide to ensure the following: The purpose of this guide is to provide basic information for Federal disaster responders and other service providers who may be deployed or otherwise assigned to provide or coordinate services in American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities.

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AI/AN people may talk about themselves or others with a sense of humor or joke about situations that have been difficult or awkward. It is important to learn and use humor to relate to AI/AN people.

This guide was developed by an ad hoc group of U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Officers, American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) professionals, and staff advocates working together from 2005-2007. The abbreviation AI/AN is used for American Indian/Alaska Native in the interest of space and brevity.

The authors of this guide wish to thank the many AI/AN professionals and community members from across the country who contributed their thoughts and comments to this guide. The challenge in developing a basic guide for an incredibly diverse group of people is immense. The authors hope the result is accurate, respectful, and helpful to the users.
Establishing trust with members of an AI/AN community may be difficult. Many Tribal communities were destroyed due to the introduction of European infectious diseases, and many Tribes were forced to move from their traditional homelands to reservations. This trauma and the resulting loss of culture continue to have long-lasting effects on community health and wellness.

The Federal "Relocation Policy" in the 1930s and 1940s mandated schooling far from families to attend a Federally sponsored educational program, where children were forced to leave their homes and learn to speak the language and practice the beliefs of the United States government. Many children were physically and emotionally abused and were subjected to the introduction of European infectious diseases, and in many schools run by the government, the term "tribal" referred to a child who was part of a different race or nation. Boarding schools were notorious for their harsh treatment, and many students never returned to their homes. The children who did return were often asked to speak to the students who did not speak English, and those who did not were punished.

Many AI/AN communities are multicultural and adapt to their surrounding culture. For example, the Navajo Nation, which has the largest reservation in the United States, is home to a diverse population of people from different cultural backgrounds. The Navajo Nation is located in the western part of the country and is home to a large number of Native American tribes, including the Navajo, Hopi, Zuni, and Apache. The Navajo Nation is a diverse community, and there are a wide range of cultural traditions and practices that are practiced within the community. It is important to remember that the Navajo Nation does not consider itself a "tribe," and that the Navajo people are a diverse and complex community with a long history of cultural and political traditions.

It is customary in many Tribal communities to show respect by allowing elders to speak first, not interrupting, and allowing time for opinions and thoughts to be expressed. In many communities, it is often asked whether the speaker will speak to an elder to ask a question. Elders often offer their teaching or advice in a way that is indirect, such as through storytelling.

In a social setting in which food is served in a circular fashion, the food is often passed around, and in some traditional Native American cultures, the food is passed to the elderly first. Elders are respected for their knowledge and wisdom, and their role in the community is often respected.

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AI/AN communities historically have high rates of involvement in the military service. Often, the community and the veteran display pride for military service. Veterans are also given special respect similar to that of elders, and they may be considered protectors of the community and the tribe. Elders often offer their teaching or advice in a way that is indirect, such as through storytelling.

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