



SAMHSA's Expert Panel on Homelessness among American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians

Homelessness in each of these Native populations has much in common with homelessness everywhere: behavioral health problems, disrupted families, domestic violence, and housing shortages all play their part. Their experience of homelessness has unique features as well. Examples include the challenge of acculturation, traditional values at odds with modern life, racism and stereotyping, and unresolved grief from historical trauma. Policy makers and service providers can be more effective by listening to each individual's story through a cultural lens and helping them reconnect to what is personally meaningful in their community and tradition. Panelists described helpful practices for assisting Native persons who are homeless and made recommendations for systemic improvements.

What We Heard: Practices that Work

- 1. Unconditional housing.** Because many people in Native populations who are homeless abuse substances, strategies that house them quickly, regardless of their current substance use, help keep them safe and provide a foundation for recovery.
- 2. Ensuring access to care.** Some Native people distrust public health care services and may delay seeking care until a crisis develops. Regular outreach to people living in camps or makeshift shelters reduces their use of emergency care and lessens the pressure on other services as well. Programs that offer "one stop shopping" for dental care and other services are as effective for Native populations as for other groups.
- 3. Helping Veterans access benefits.** American Indians have a disproportionately high rate of military service that may render them eligible for targeted Federal assistance. Providers should routinely inquire about military service.
- 4. Addressing the underlying issue of trauma.** For members of Native populations, historical trauma (for example, genocide, colonization, forced removal from home and family to attend boarding schools, and loss of sacred lands) must be acknowledged and grieved, in addition to personal trauma such as domestic violence.
- 5. Incorporating Native traditions.** For many members of these populations, Native principles and practices are meaningful and can help restore broken connections to community. For example, the presence of elders and access to healing ceremonies may be restorative for American Indians who live in urban areas.
- 6. Facilitating bonds with community.** For many Native people, a sense of relationship is critical to maintain harmony and balance in daily life. The opportunity to give back to community may be as vital as opportunities to receive services from others.
- 7. Preventing homelessness.** Emergency funds that can be used flexibly to help those on the verge of homelessness and programs that help them learn the skills of self-sufficiency are among the strategies that can help people avoid homelessness.
- 8. Acknowledging racism.** Providers will be more effective if they understand how "microaggression" experienced by Native populations – small slights and insults that are part of daily life – add to their vulnerability and anger.
- 9. Offering employment.** Many people who have experienced homelessness are eager to work. Paid employment fosters community connection, helps them learn the habits of employment, and restores self-worth.

In September 2012, USICH and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services sponsored an expert panel on homelessness in three Native populations: American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians. The panel shared research-based knowledge, field experience, and best practices in meeting the needs of each population. They also offered recommendations to funders, government planners, and providers to improve their ability to help members of these populations avoid homelessness or recover from it.

What We Need To Do

Panel members articulated several recommendations for federal agencies, states, local communities, and providers who serve the three populations. *These recommendations do not constitute government policy or the conclusions of any federal agency.*

Facilitate Access to Affordable Housing

- 1. Increase the supply of affordable housing.** Programs that offer rental assistance, access to public housing, and emergency funding to avoid homelessness are all critical.
- 2. Provide timely access to housing.** Long waiting lists place people at risk. For some Native Americans, hospitality is traditionally offered immediately and without condition; delays and systemic requirements may seem foreign and lead to a sense of hopelessness.
- 3. Address barriers to housing.** Native populations have a high rate of incarceration and substance use, both of which can disqualify them for public housing when they are striving to find a foundation for recovery.
- 4. Reconsider some requirements for federal housing assistance.** For example, providers who strive to teach Native families to save for emergencies suggest that the amount of savings families are allowed to have in order to qualify for public housing is too small. Also, some members of Native populations refuse housing if they cannot share it with other members of their extended family, to whom they feel obliged to offer hospitality. Terms of occupancy may prohibit this practice.

Offer Relevant Services

- 5. Offer case management and support in system navigation.** Culturally attuned case managers and peers can help people access supports and learn new skills. They should also stay attuned to cultural beliefs and practices that may affect the receipt of services.
- 6. Encourage people with lived experience of homelessness to tell their stories.** The Native American tradition of the “talking circle” gives each person space to speak and be heard respectfully.
- 7. Acknowledge the contributions and diversity of healing paths.** Include traditional approaches to healing and support as options within programs that serve Native populations, but recognize that they are not universally meaningful. Avoid making assumptions about what will be helpful to an individual based on ethnicity. Involving Native participants in program planning can help providers strike a balance that works for those they serve.
- 8. Provide support for Veterans.** Members of Native populations who served in the military need not only access to resources for behavioral health problems, but opportunities to share their unique experiences with each other. Some experience conflict related to the U.S. military’s role as adversary to their people.
- 9. Build life skills.** For many Native people, the traditional values of generosity and hospitality undermine their ability to manage resources effectively and avoid homelessness. Culturally sensitive education programs can help them honor these values while developing the skills and habits they need to support themselves and their families.
- 10. Seek partners.** Programs that serve Native peoples need to reach out to the wider community to build a strong network of services capable of meeting the population’s needs.

Other Ways to Help

- 11. Educate providers on historical trauma.** Working successfully with Native populations requires understanding not only what the individual has gone through in his or her lifetime, but also what the population has experienced, the effects of which are felt today.
- 12. Improve oversight for federally run or funded Indian schools.** Some schools may not fully respect Native traditions and values, which can result in disorientation, reduced self-worth, and even trauma. These experiences may increase the risk of homelessness.
- 13. Support research and remove barriers to participation.** Research is needed to understand in depth the causes and experience of homelessness in each population, as well as the practices that are most successful in promoting recovery. Native traditions should be honored when population members are asked to participate in research.