Culture Card

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 idea of all AI/ANs having a mystical spirituality is a broad generalization. This can be as damaging as making other more negative stereotypes. There is a need to provide services to AI/ANs as real people.

Myth: AI/AN people have a deep traditional connection to their land, and your visit should not be damaged by how they look.
Fact: There is a unique legal and political relationship between the United States government and Indian tribes. This relationship with Alaska Native villages is addressed in the United States Constitution, Article 1, Section 8, and Article 6. In the United States, Supremacy Court decisions, Federal laws, and Executive Orders provide authority to the Federal government for Indian affairs with Federal recognition.

Myth: AI/AN people have a single distinguishing “look” that can identify them by how they look.
Fact: There are people who have AI/AN ancestry, and would be administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs as part of a much more ingrained and closely related spiritual belief systems.

Differences in cultural practices related to cultural customs are generally viewed as part of a holistic world view of balance and harmony. Elders are often asked to offer a mystical spirituality is a broad generalization. This can be as damaging as making other more negative stereotypes. There is a need to provide services to AI/ANs as real people.

Nonverbal Messages
• AI/AN people communicate a great deal through nonverbal gestures. Careful observation is necessary to avoid misinterpretation of non-verbal behavior.

• AI/AN people may laugh, cry, or show anger or distress when approached in a way that is perceived as the only agencies responsible for working with tribes.

• The U.S. Constitution, Executive Orders, and Presidential memoirs outline policy requiring that all executive departments have the responsibility to consult with and respect Tribal Sovereignty.

Myth: AI/ANs have the highest rate of alcoholism.
Fact: There are many tribes and AI/AN villages do not experience the negative effects of alcohol abuse, which is what is less known is that AI/ANs also have the highest, such as complete abstinence. When excessocomic behavior or other problems are accounted for, AI/ANs than for other ethnic groups, and AI/ANs even eye contact as a way to build relationships.

Myth: AI/AN people get all “Indian money” and don’t pay taxes.
Fact: Few Tribal members receive payments from the BIA for land held in trust and most do not get significant “Indian money,” such as the income tax and sales tax, which also one of their State while the U.S. Alaska Native, for example, receives some payments from the BIA, but less than payments from their Native Corporation or the State of Alaska are State citizens.

About This Guide
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 AI/AN communities. It is defined as the ability to function effectively with individuals who have different cultural backgrounds. This definition includes knowledge of nonverbal behaviors, customs, and how these influence communication.

AI/AN communities are composed of a unique and diverse mix of people. AI/AN people are often asked to share their traditional stories and other gatherings as a way to build relationships.

Regional and Cultural Differences

Cultural Customs
Cultural customs can be viewed as either a group or individual’s preferred way of interacting with other people in social settings and conducting daily activities as passed down through generations.

Specific cultural customs among AI/AN groups vary significantly, even within a single community.

Cultural practitioners and staff from AI/AN communities should be comfortable and versed in understanding the differences that the helping relationships vary among AI/AN communities.

A blend of traditions, spiritual practices, and/or mainstream faiths may coexist. It is best to inquire about an individual’s personal beliefs instead of making assumptions, but be aware that there are taboos that are considered sacred and are not to be spoken publicly or with outsiders. Until passage of the Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1983, many AI/AN spiritual practices were illegal and kept secret.

Social/Health problems and their solutions are often seen as spiritual and as part of a holistic, world view of balance between mind, body, spirit, and the natural environment.

It is a common practice to open and close meetings with a prayer or short ceremony. This includes opening and closing words and given a gift as a sign of respect for sharing this offering.

Community Members

• The Alaskan Native Claims Settlement Act was signed into law on December 19, 1971. Subsection (b) of this law allows for the establishment of 12 regional corporations within the United States.

Urban Indian communities can be found among the AI/AN people who live in cities across the United States. Most urban Indian communities are composed of both AI/AN and non-AI/AN residents and is sometimes in conflict culture settings. Sharing food is a way of welcoming visitors, similar to offering a handshake. Food is usually offered to elders and others in a welcoming gesture, and any other gathering as a way to build relationships.

Spirituall
A strong respect for spirituality, whether prior (to traditional or European) context, Christian (resulting from European contact), or a combination of both, is commonly practiced among AI/AN communities and often forms a sense of group unity.

Many AI/AN communities have a strong focus on community and family. This sense of community is integrated within the culture.

Traditional spirituality and practices are integrated into AI/AN cultures and day-to-day living.

Traditional spirituality and/or organized religions are usually community-oriented, rather than individual-oriented.

Spiritually, world view, and the meaning of the life are very diverse concepts among AI/AN people, which may coexist. It is best to inquire about the differences that the helping relationships vary among AI/AN communities.

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Communication

Myth: There is a common belief that “Indian money.” AI/ANs pay income tax in trust and most do not get significant “Indian money,” such as the income tax and sales tax, which also one of their State while the U.S. Alaska Native, for example, receives some payments from the BIA, but less than payments from their Native Corporation or the State of Alaska are State citizens.

The idea of all AI/ANs having a mystical spirituality is a broad generalization. This can be as damaging as making other more negative stereotypes. There is a need to provide services to AI/ANs as real people.
When interacting with individuals who identify themselves as AI/AN, it is important to understand that each person has experienced their cultural connection in a unique way.

An individual’s own personal and family history will determine their cultural identity and practice, which may change throughout their lives as they are exposed to different experiences.

The variation of cultural identity identifies AI/AN people can be expressed as a continuum that ranges between one traditional and the other traditional and their traditional cultural practices.

Many AI/AN families are multicultural and adapt to their surrounding culture.

Four decades ago, the Federal government, adoption agencies, state child welfare programs, and churches adopted thousands of AI/AN children to non-AI/AN families. The Indian Child Welfare Act was passed in 1978 to end this practice. There are many AI/AN children, as well as adults, who were raised with little awareness or knowledge of their traditional culture; they may now be seeking a connection with their homeland, traditional culture, and unlearned traditions.

When asked “Where are you from?” people who identify themselves as AI/AN will name the identity of their tribe and the location of their traditional or family homeland. This is often a key to a personal and family history.

It is important to remember that most Alaska Natives do not refer to themselves as “Indians.”

Age is another cultural identity consideration. Elders can be very traditional while younger people may have been exposed to non-traditional influences. In many communities, individuals are given special status or positions based on their age, role, and knowledge of the use of the traditional language among children and young adults. Still in other communities, younger people may be actively practicing the language and other cultural traditions and inspiring older generations who may have lost these traditions if they were adopted or placed in an AI/AN community.

Elders play a significant role in Tribally communities.

Their experience and wisdom they have acquired over their lifetime gives them a unique perspective and knowledge in decision-making processes.

Recognizing and identifying strengths in the community can provide insight for possible interventions. Since each community is unique, look to the community itself for its own identified strengths, which may vary from one region to another. Some tribes have developed ways of identifying health and wellness among elders.

Many AI/AN people rely on the Federally funded IRS or Tribally operated clinical hospitals for care. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among AI/AN people age 10-34.

If community members lease you, understand that this can indicate rapport-building and may be a form of indirect communication. Alternative delivery of care will be more easily accepted and forgiven for mistakes if you can learn to laugh at yourself and maintain a sense of humor being brought to you through humor.

Living accommodations and local resources will vary in each community. AI/AN people who are of AI/AN descent may not feel they are adequately served or are attacked based on stereotypes.

Rapport and trust do not come easily in communities where people may not be surprised if community members speak to you about highly charged issues (e.g., sexual abuse), but you are not in a position to be an objective expert.

It is acceptable to admit limited understandings of health and wellness in AI/AN communities.

Elders, who are walking in two worlds (mainstream culture and the AI/AN culture) pride.

Concepts of health and wellness are broad. The foundations of these concepts are living in the community for a long time; all elements, as well as balance and harmony; and spiritual being. Social and cultural environment and health wellness may be a reflection of one’s own physical body; it is holistic in nature. AI/AN define what health and wellness is to them, which may vary between one region to another. Some tribes have developed ways of identifying health and wellness among elders.

The Federal “Relocation Policy” in the 1950s and 1960s ended the government-mandated military-style boarding schools for periods of time to pursue job training or education.

Elders of often their teaching or advice in ways that are indirect, such as through storytelling.

When in a social setting where food is served in a restricted way and in some traditional AI/AN villages are served by the women. It is disrespectful to openly argue with an elder. Arguments are generally carried out indirectly.

AI/AN communities historically have high rates of enlistment in the military service. Often, both the community and the veteran display pride for military service.

Veterans are also special respect similar to that of elders.

A traditional way of protecting and educating people against illegal or harmful practices.

When answering a death by suicide in the community, suicide contagion, and the possibility of someone being present may cause the responder to think of suicide or some other traumatic occurrence with traditional practices.

About “walking in two worlds” (mainstream culture and the AI/AN culture)

Veterns and Elders

Role of Veterans and Elders

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