

SUMMARY OF FEBRUARY 23, 2005
CONVERSATION WITH NATIVE AMERICAN
COMMUNITY ON NEEDS

HCDC COMMISSIONERS PRESENT: Roserria Roberts, co-chair; Janet Byrd, co-chair; Tony Jones, Linda Kaeser, Jim McConnell, Irma Valdez

HCDC STAFF PRESENT: Beth Kaye. Amina Anderson, the consultant who organized the outreach event, was also present.

BHCD STAFF PRESENT: No BHCD staff were present at this meeting, but Trel Anderson and Daniel Ledezma had recently attended a similar focus group.

This conversation with the staff at the Native American Youth Association (NAYA) with people who belong to and/or work with Multnomah County's Native American community took place over two hours. There were 23 people present from NAYA, and we formed a large circle that encompassed most of the room at NAYA's headquarters. The group was diverse, and included people of many tribal affiliations, including Umatilla, Walla Walla Cayuse, Nez Perce, Osage, Shoshone, Choktaw, Klamath Modoc, and Ute. The group included teachers, therapists, tutors, education advocates, housing specialists, social workers, foster care support staff, youth leadership staff, and legal advocates. The group also included Americorps and Vista volunteers. Some of the people in the group had been raised on reservations.

We began with introductions. Our facilitator was Rey Espana, High School Program Manager at NAYA. Prior to the meeting, Rey had furnished HCDC staff with a thick stack of written materials documenting the extent of poverty and need in the Native Community. The materials also challenged the reliability of Census data with respect to the Native population because of:

- (1) historic Federal abuse of Native rights has resulted in animosity towards all federal activities within the Native community;
- (2) Native mobility;
- (3) Native extended-family housing traditions;
- (4) a common practice of not identifying oneself as Native American in order to avoid discrimination; and
- (5) definitional issues about tribal enrollment.

The materials offered alternate data sources to measure the Native American community and document its needs. (*N.B.: These materials were considered in the Needs Assessment.*) Some important points to note are that Native American families tend to be quite large, with 8-13 member households not uncommon; that Native Americans have the lowest homeownership rates of all races in the City of Portland; and that Native Americans have the highest school drop out rates of all racial groups in the County.

Beth Kaye described HCDC, and the Consolidated Plan process of listening to communities about their needs. She expressed the hope that this would be the start of many close relationships.

NAYA was formed about 30 years ago by families who were looking for cultural, educational, and recreational activities for Native American youth. It grew over time to address the need for culturally-specific services for Native youth in Multnomah County and in the Portland metropolitan area. NAYA's programs now address educational retention, domestic violence, foster care support, young adult programs, parenting programs, and education programs for middle school and high school youth.

One of NAYA's strengths is offering educational options for Native students who are not well served in school, to try to address the extraordinarily high drop-out rate among Native youth. Another is support for youth who are in informal foster care arrangements. Federal efforts to "re-educate" Native children by removing them from their families and enrolling them in boarding schools were destructive of Native families and communities. A legacy of this tragedy is an extreme distrust of the child welfare system. There are very few Native foster homes. Children are often taken in by relatives or neighbors, without government involvement, and without public financial support. Another legacy of this time is the practice of not seeking help for mental health issues or other disabilities for fear of having their children taken away.

The passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978 provided some protection to Indian youth against being adopted outside of the tribe. By reducing this threat, one outgrowth of the Act has been a somewhat greater willingness among young Native people to seek help from mainstream systems.

NAYA fills a need within the Native Community for services provided by a Native program that respects Native values, and has Native cultural identification and cultural pride. Many in the Native community will not seek or accept assistance from the "official" safety net systems, and will only accept service provided by Native people in a Native community context. They regard formal government systems with distrust and animosity, based on a history of betrayal and abuse of the Native community by the government at every level. The Native community has suffered generational trauma, and this continues to affect how willing Native people are to cooperate with government.

NAYA is working to reconnect with mainstream systems to achieve equity for the Native community. Two immediate goals are assisting the Native Community to access resources and having an impact on public policy.

Housing is on everyone's job description at NAYA. Clients may seek eviction prevention assistance, or shelter to escape domestic violence. If one Native family is evicted and moves in with another, the entire extended families may wind up needing to move. There is a ripple effect of housing instability on school stability, contributing to the extremely high drop-out rate.

Most available affordable housing is not Native-specific. Focus group participants identified a number of barriers to housing:

- Housing projects are large and frightening. Complexes with more than 25 apartments are too big.
- There are not enough units big enough to accommodate large Native American families (7-13 people).
- There is not enough rent assistance, and a growing need.
- It is hard to know where to apply.
- NAYA must go through Cascadia to access A/D Free housing. (Cascadia has been responsive.)
- The doors face in, contrary to Native tradition.
- Some housing options are drug-free or alcohol free housing, which are not appropriate for people who are not yet in recovery.
- Because Portland was a Federal relocation site for Native Americans since the 1950s, Native families developed a pattern of living in the cities during the school year but returning to the reservation in the summer. It remains part of Native culture to stay connected with extended family on the reservations. Accordingly, some Native families will vacate their housing during the summer, and require new housing in the fall.
- Economic gentrification has displaced Native people from N/NE Portland neighborhoods. 60% of Oregon's native community still resides in Portland.
- Eligibility for RASP is very restrictive.
- Rent subsidy programs do not consider the number of children in the household.
- Some landlords do not provide safe, decent housing. Landlords often fail to do background checks, exposing families to intimidation, abuse, and violence from their neighbors.

Native people also face barriers to obtaining services, including:

- The federal government uses a blood quantum system to determine tribal membership. For this and other reasons, many Native people are not registered with tribes and therefore are not eligible for certain Federally funded services.
- Mainstream social service providers and the school districts assume that Native people are getting plenty of money and services from the tribes and do not require assistance.
- Many programs for Native people are designed for residents of Reservations. Most of Oregon's Native people live in urban areas. 60% live in Portland. They have different needs, but are sometimes looked down upon as not being "real" Indians.

- Some Native children are assumed to be Latino or Asian and do not receive appropriate services.
- Many people have lost the records they would use to substantiate their tribal enrollment.
- Increasing efforts have been made around adults with mental health and treatment needs, but fewer resources are available to address the needs of families with children.
- There are not enough culturally-specific alcohol and drug treatment programs.
- There is often a communication issue, if service intake workers and/or providers are not familiar with Native culture. The result of this is that the average length of a shelter stay for a Native woman leaving domestic violence is 3 days, while the average for a non-Native woman is several months.
- Some family shelters require families to leave at 6 a.m., even if they do not have a safe, warm place to go.
- If families seek financial assistance from DHS, DHS will go after other family members to recoup the money.

Poverty is a key barrier for Native people.

- Native families typically spend 50% or more of their income on rent, leaving little money for food, medical care, or other necessities.
- Many subsidies require that a household have some type of income.
- Child support is often not paid.
- There is no supplemental income for families that take in children outside of the formal foster care system.
- There is no income program for youth leaving foster care. Many teens couch surf, and use the community college system.

The NAYA staff had several comments about current issues.

- NAYA staff asked HCDC to evaluate any new short-term rent assistance proposal to ascertain:
 1. How does it increase access to the Native community?
 2. Who is shouldering the administrative burden and how are they compensated?
- NAYA staff asked HCDC to review all programs to see if they fostered fairness and equity. Are programs designed to open and increase access for the Native community?
- The Clearinghouse partnership in Sun Schools does make rent assistance somewhat more available, but families with children enrolled in smaller alternative schools or families with small children not of school age cannot access these resources. Also, School staff are not trained to work with Native families.