



Integrating Tribal Cultural Practices into Tribal Juvenile Detention Centers and Reentry Plans

Introduction

Traditional cultural ceremonies and practices are integral parts of life for youth, families and communities across Indian Country. Cultural practices and ceremonies teach values of respect, responsibility, health and wellness. These teachings can be especially important for youth who are incarcerated, and those who are preparing to reenter their communities after serving time in a juvenile detention center.

Cultural ceremonies and practices, including sweat lodges, talking circles, and storytelling can assist detained and reentering youth become reconnected with their tribal communities. They can also help youth understand how to take responsibility for past negative decisions, and identify positive pathways to overcome substance abuse and other issues that contributed to being placed in a JDC, and serve as a foundation in the transition back into their communities.

Cultural Traditions and Ceremonies as Promising Practices for TJDCs

Tribal ceremonies and sacred objects “help provide a sense of identity, purpose, and strength”¹ that can help detained youth overcome their past experiences with crime, violence, and substance abuse, and begin to heal from past trauma. Data is beginning to emerge that highlight the positive effects of integrating cultural practices into TJDCs systems. For example, since 2006, the New Mexico Children, Youth, and Families Department (NMCYFD) has funded cultural services to incarcerated AI youth in collaboration with tribal and community liaisons, program managers, mentors, and juvenile corrections officers. The program allows the incarcerated youth to address their trauma and behavior issues through culture-based approaches, values, and philosophies. The program provides:

- Mentor-based activities
- Cultural activities
- Speaking engagements, presentations, and other special events
- Trainings for NMCYFD staff

This program allows youth, especially those with limited family contact, to maintain and express their AI identity and culture. Program staff reports that youth who participate have fewer behavior problems.²

Planning and Preparation

If and when you are considering incorporating cultural ceremonies and practices into your TJDC, a few issues to consider include:

Staff: Employing staff who represent the cultures of the incarcerated youth is a first step to implementing cultural ceremonies and practices. Also consider collaborating with tribal elders and community members, such as spiritual advisors, and others who can act as cultural liaisons and lead the traditional AIAN practices with the youth. It is also highly beneficial to provide cultural competence training for all TJDC staff.

Materials: Proper ceremonial materials are essential for cultural ceremonies and practices. It will be important to consult tribal elders and spiritual advisors regarding the necessary appropriate materials and medicines for cultural ceremonies and practices in your TJDC.

Time and Space: Tribal ceremonies and practices should be scheduled on a consistent basis in a designated area. For instance, hold traditional spiritual ceremonies and practices weekly in a dedicated area as part of the overall programming of the TJDC.

Tribal Practices Appropriate for TJDC Settings

Below are some cultural ceremonies and practices that have been incorporated into justice settings. It is important to consider the specific culture and traditional practices of the tribe and youth in your TJDC to help decide which are most appropriate to your setting.

Practice	Purpose	What You'll Need	For More Information
Blessing Way Ceremonies	Blessing Way ceremonies are in honor of a specific person or issue as a means of holistic healing. The ceremony uses traditional medicines, the elements, the four Cardinal Directions, and the energies of the Spiritual Advisor and other attendees to bless and cleanse the participant.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Spiritual Advisor • Traditional medicinal herbs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Mexico Corrections Department: State-Tribal Collaboration Act
Daily Prayers or Offerings	Youth can present a daily offering to the four Cardinal directions. This may be a traditional prayer or may be a tangible item they wish to offer.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Someone who leads the prayer • Depending on culture: cornmeal, tobacco, bark offering 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crime and Justice Institute at Community Resources for Justice: Crime and Justice in Indian Country – A Summary of Talking Circle Findings and the Tribal Law and Order Act of 2010 • Multicultural Familia: Native American Spirituality in the U.S. Prison System
Healing Circles/Talking Circles	Talking Circles are a traditional way of communicating and sharing in which participants take turns discussing a problem, relaying past experiences, or speaking about any issues to better understand him or herself and begin a healing process. Talking Circles build mutual respect among incarcerated participants by allowing them to communicate and share in a respectful way with each other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Circle Keeper/Facilitator • Sage, cedar, tobacco, or sweetgrass A Talking piece for each speaker to hold while they speak. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crime and Justice Institute at Community Resources for Justice: Crime and Justice in Indian Country – A Summary of Talking Circle Findings and the Tribal Law and Order Act of 2010 • Living Justice Press: The Indigenous Origins of Circles and How Non-Natives Learned about Them • New Mexico Corrections Department: State-Tribal Collaboration Act • Center for Restorative Justice & Peacemaking: Talking Circles
Pipe ceremonies	The pipe is a symbol of balance and harmony, male and female. Pipe ceremonies are used in prayer to communicate with the Great Spirit or Creator and spirit helpers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Spiritual Advisor • Pipes • Traditional Tobacco 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Mexico Corrections Department: State-Tribal Collaboration Act • Multicultural Familia: Native American Spirituality in the U.S. Prison System
Smudging	This is a traditional practice of burning traditional medicines for cleansing and purification. It is means of cleansing oneself and preparing for a time of reflection.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sage, sweet grass, cedar, and a shell 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Mexico Corrections Department: State-Tribal Collaboration Act • Crime and Justice Institute at Community Resources for Justice: Crime and Justice in Indian Country – A Summary of Talking Circle Findings and the Tribal Law and Order Act of 2010 • Multicultural Familia: Native American Spirituality in the U.S. Prison System

<p>Storytelling, cultural arts, singing</p>	<p>AI/AN stories, cultural arts, and singing help incarcerated AI/ANs identify with their culture and strengthen their bonds to community. Stories and songs also present essential ideas and values.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A tribal elder or other representative who can tell the stories and songs, and knows tribal cultural arts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Mexico Children, Youth and Families Department: Cultural Services to Indian Youth • Multicultural Familia: Native American Spirituality in the U.S. Prison System
<p>Sweat Lodges</p>	<p>The Sweat Lodge Ceremony is a ceremony of prayer, renewal, and healing that restores holistic health and well-being to the participant inside a traditional lodge (the structure of which differs among AI/AN Nations).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A traditional healer or spiritual advisor (may be a women for women’s ceremony) A secluded area for the Sweat Lodge • Materials to build the lodge – branches, tarps, rope • Fire, water, traditional medicines, and special blessed grandfather stones 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Native American Legal Update: Prison Sweat Lodges Promote Native Spirituality • The Pluralism Project: Sweat Lodges in American Prisons • New Mexico Children, Youth and Families Department: Cultural Services to Indian Youth • Crime and Justice Institute at Community Resources for Justice: Crime and Justice in Indian Country – A Summary of Talking Circle Findings and the Tribal Law and Order Act of 2010 • Multicultural Familia: Native American Spirituality in the U.S. Prison System
<p><i>Wopakinte</i> or “wiping off” ceremony</p>	<p><i>Wopakinte</i> is a healing ceremony in which an individual goes into the Inipi, a type of sweat lodge. After visiting the Inipi, an elder wipes the individual with sage. This practice signifies wiping away the spiritual remains of intergenerational trauma as well as the youth’s own individual historical trauma.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A tribal elder • A Sweat Lodge • Sage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Navajo Corrections Project

Conclusion

Incorporating traditional AI/AN ceremonies and practices into TJDC settings may assist incarcerated tribal youth develop a stronger cultural identity, build self-esteem, and provide a strong foundation for their transition back to the communities upon release. High-risk youth who participate in cultural ceremonies and practices can begin to recover from past trauma, and will be less likely to abuse alcohol and drugs.^{3,4,5}

“The loss of my culture in my adolescent years resulted in personal devastation. Reconnecting with my culture, my identity, and my soul during my adult years has saved my life,” says Dale, a young Dakota man who found ‘life after prison’ following his 20 years, ages 10 to 30, inside a state prison.⁶

This project was supported by Grant No. 2009-TY-FX-K055 awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

References

¹Grobsmith, E.S. (1994). *Indians in prison: Incarcerated Native Americans in Nebraska*. University of Nebraska Press, p. 49.

²New Mexico Children, Youth, and Families Department. Cultural services to Indian youth. Retrieved on June 20, 2012 from <http://aidainc.net/cyfdproject.htm>.

³Oetting, E.R., & Beauvais, F. (1989). Epidemiology and correlates of alcohol use among Indian adolescents living on reservations. In *Alcohol Use Among U.S. Ethnic Minorities: Proceedings of a Conference on the Epidemiology of Alcohol Use and Abuse Among Ethnic Minority Groups, September 1985*. Research Monograph 18. Rockville, MD: National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, pp. 239-266.

⁴Zickler, P. (1999). Ethnic identification and cultural ties may help prevent drug use. *NIDA Notes*, 14, 3.

⁵Arya, N. & Rolnick, A. C. (2009). A tangled web of justice: American Indian and Alaska Native youth in federal, state, and tribal justice systems. *Campaign for Youth Justice Policy Brief, Vol. 5*.

⁶Personal correspondence, Dave Brave Heart, Tribal Juvenile Detention Resource Center Staff, 2012