

Technical Assistance on Native American Culture: Improving BPAO Services to Native American SSA Beneficiaries with Disabilities

Issues Brief #2

January 2006

Strategies for Reaching Out to and Connecting with Native American Communities

As with most things in life, there is no cookie cutter approach that is guaranteed to be the one right way for BPAO providers to form relationships with American Indians, Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians in order to better serve them. This is very understandable given that there are 562 federally recognized tribes, an additional number of state recognized tribal groups, and nearly 300,000 Native Hawaiians in the Hawaiian Islands. Each American Indian tribe and Alaskan Native village has its own government, language and customs. Native Hawaiians also have their own language and customs. In addition to the communities mentioned above, American Indians, Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians can be found in nearly every urban, rural and frontier area. This issues brief will provide some strategies that have worked for us as we have provided assistance to Native American communities across the country. These strategies may also prove useful when reaching out to and connecting with intertribal groups in urban Indian centers or in small rural settlement areas.

Making an initial contact facilitated by available partners

BPAO providers may be anxious to reach out to Native American people in their states but may not know where to start. The good news is there are some options readily available to help you make that first contact, and begin to establish a connection.

- First locate a **Native American community program** with a natural connection to people with disabilities. For example, when providing outreach to American Indians with disabilities, you may contact programs such as a Tribal Rehabilitation Program (if there is one), a Tribal health program or the Indian Health Service (IHS), a Tribal community health representative, the Tribal employment program, or a comparable human services department. Similarly, you may locate community programs within Alaska Native villages or Native Hawaiian communities. Urban Indian centers are another possibility, as they also serve people with disabilities.
- If there is not a Native American community program such as an urban Indian center in your service area, you might make your first contact with a general population **community/disability organization** already serving the Tribe, Alaska Native Village, urban Indian center, or Native Hawaiian community. Possibilities might include a local Center for Independent Living, a branch office of the state rehabilitation agency, the local SSA office, or local Workforce Investment Act One Stop. Since these types programs specifically serve people with disabilities, they are much more likely to understand about

Benefits Planning Assistance and Outreach efforts and the importance of Supplemental Security Income and Social Security Disability Insurance benefits. And, if they have already worked hard to develop a good working relationship with a Native American community, they can be a good resource to help you do the same.

- If you participate on boards for **local or state disability groups**, or task forces, or other representative groups like the State Independent Living Council (SILC), Rehabilitation Advisory Council (RAC), an Olmstead task force, etc., then you may already have met a representative from one or more of your state's Tribal or urban Indian communities. If this is the case, then it is a natural place to start.
- **Tribal and local weekly newspapers** may be one of the most effective outreach tools that you can use to promote outreach activities in rural communities for a number of reasons. Small community papers are always looking for news and are great places to get out the word about open community events. Newspapers as outreach tools will be discussed later in this issues brief.
- If the above methods are not sufficient, feel free to call or email **us**. We have contacts in many American Indian communities, Alaska Native villages, and Native Hawaiian communities, and would be happy to refer you. Contact: Alan Fugleberg, Tel.: (406) 243-4758 or Email: alan@NativeAmericanBPAO.org, or Marsha Katz, Tel.: (406) 243-2821 or Email: marsha@NativeAmericanBPAO.org. You may also call us Toll Free at (866) 424-3822

What to do once you have a liaison within a Native American community

Once you have a liaison within a Native American community, you can ask this person to help arrange a gathering of community members so you can begin to meet the community and describe BPAO services. If your contact is another service provider (like a state VR Counselor or SSA staff) who regularly visits the community and has already developed a good relationship with people in the community, you can ask to go along on one of the regular visits and have the contact begin to introduce you.

In addition to a gathering for you to share information about BPAO services, there is another gathering known as a "Talking Circle" that can be very helpful as you begin to connect with a Tribal community or urban Indian center. This will not be a gathering where your information is the focus. Instead it will offer you an opportunity to hear concerns and suggestions about SSA and SSA programs from community members. Listening to these concerns and suggestions will give you insights into ways you should and shouldn't conduct yourself as you seek to provide good service, and insights about what SSA might be able to do to continue to improve its services to American Indians, Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians.

A future publication with more detailed information on how to organize and hold a Talking Circle will be available on the www.NativeAmericanBPAO.org website.

The usage of weekly newspapers as outreach tools in Native American communities in rural areas

Tribal and local weekly newspapers may be one of the most effective outreach tools that you can use to promote outreach activities in rural communities for a number of reasons. Tribal and local weekly newspapers—sometimes twice-monthly—are the life-blood of their communities; in part, because they report the news and events important to community life. In doing so, Tribal and local newspapers provide the community a sense of pride and stability. For example, the *Lake County Leader* and the *Char Koosta News* are weekly newspapers that provide news coverage for the Flathead Indian Reservation of western Montana. The *Navajo/Hopi Observer* is a weekly newspaper that covers the Navajo and Hopi Nations and Flagstaff, Arizona. The *Lakota Journal* is a Native American-owned weekly newspaper published in Rapid City, South Dakota, that reports the news in the Northern Plains area. Many publications have online editions, and some, such as the *Red Lake Net News* published by the Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians, are only online. You will find examples of online Tribal and local newspapers and Internet addresses later in this issues brief.

Tribal or local newspapers are often interested in covering many events of importance that are often overlooked by larger daily newspapers. For example, you may find a Tribal or local newspaper reporter covering a barn-fire, the opening day of big game season, a Pow Wow or other cultural event, Tribal and local court news, the high school basketball tournament, a local spelling bee, and chicken dinner type social activities. Tribal and local newspapers also provide public service announcements regarding other important social services events. For example, if the Red Cross will be holding a blood drawing at the local senior citizens center, or the area veterans' service officer will be making a monthly visit to a Reservation community, chances are these visits will be announced in the community calendar section of the local newspaper. And if there is a new outreach effort—such as a BPAO benefits specialist—coming to town, chances are the local newspaper will not only be interested in printing a public service announcement, a reporter from the newspaper may want to write a feature article about the program, oftentimes with a photograph. Tribal and local newspapers are in business to report the news and publicize events in their communities. We suggest that you capitalize on these opportunities to have stories or news releases about outreach activities published in the weekly newspapers in your service area. Once the readers are acquainted with your program, and become accustomed to seeing announcements published regularly, the word will spread around the community and people will begin to watch for the announcement of your next visit.

One of the best ways you can begin outreach efforts in Native American communities is to contact the Tribal or local newspaper reporter or editor and make an appointment to stop by to visit about the BPAO program. Newspapers receive tremendous numbers of news releases from wide-ranging organizations and not all news releases are published due to space limitations. Commonly the editor will look for those news releases that he or she believes is of greatest interest to the newspaper's readers. It is therefore important to make the extra effort to ensure that your organization stands out among competing organizations. Taking the time to meet with a Tribal or local newspaper reporter or editor may help you provide better media outreach to SSA beneficiaries with disabilities in a particular community.

Where to learn more about Tribal and local newspapers in a particular community

The *National Newspaper Association*, located at the University of Missouri—Columbia, is a good place to start to learn about your state’s newspaper or press association. Your state’s newspaper or press association is a good place to learn about the Tribal and local newspapers serving the communities in your service area. For more information contact:

**National Newspaper Association
P.O. Box 7540
Columbia, MO 65205-7540
Tel. (800) 829-4NNA (4662)
Tel. (573) 882-5800
Fax: (573) 884-5490
Internet: <http://www.nna.org>**

Native Web, an organization whose purpose is dedicated to using telecommunications including computer technology and the Internet to disseminate information from and about indigenous nations, peoples, and organizations around the world, maintains a web page with contact information for a number of Native American and Tribal publications. For more information on the Internet go to:

http://www.nativeweb.org/resources/newspapers_-_native_indigenous

The *Native American Journalists Association* and its members form an important network of Native American journalists, media partners and friends that seek to improve the coverage of Native Americans. To learn more about NAJA and media coverage in Native American communities contact:

**Native American Journalists Association
555 Dakota Street
Al Neuharth Media Center
Vermillion, SD 57069
Tel. (605) 677-5282
Fax (866) 694-4264
Internet: <http://www.naja.org>**

Some general tips on outreach to Native American communities

Perhaps the most important advice we can give you boils down to two general principles.

First, ask the experts. Native American people are the best experts on themselves and their culture. Let them know you need their help to act appropriately and respectfully in their community. Ask them to please be patient with you and teach you. In the beginning, listen more than you talk. Hear people out and give them time to work up to the issues that are the hardest to talk about.

Secondly, don't give up. If at first you feel like you've failed or not accomplished what you thought you wanted to accomplish . . . don't stop. Keep coming back to the community, ideally on a regular basis. People need to know that your first visit isn't your only one. They may need time to experience your commitment, and to get to know and trust you. A person who receives helpful BPAO services will tell others, and before you know it you will have people waiting to see you every time you visit, and calling you regularly on the phone.

A few other practical considerations

- Have a toll-free number available, so people outside the local calling area can afford to contact you.
- In advance of your visits to the community, don't hesitate to send a notice to the Tribal and local papers, and a Tribal or local radio or TV station. Include information about BPAO services along with the time and place of your meeting, or where beneficiaries and their families or friends can meet with you in person.
- Developing a relationship with a community and establishing your credibility as a BPAO resource will be easier if you maintain a presence in the community. Get to know people over time and attend (maybe even have a booth or table at) community events like Pow Wows, basketball games, health fairs, etc.
- In many Tribal communities there is someone in the health/IHS program who assists people to apply for Medicaid. These are people you want to go out of your way to meet and partner with, as they also, often end up helping people with SSI/SSDI issues. They will be glad to make your acquaintance and have the benefit of your expertise and assistance.
- Before your first gathering, ask your contact person if he/she or an elder might talk with you about etiquette or protocol common in that community and what do's and don'ts you should know and practice. They can also explain any ceremonies or rituals that typically occur before or during community meetings.
- In many Tribal communities or urban Indian centers, at the beginning of a meeting or community gathering it is customary to have a respected person offer a welcome and blessing. Your contact or another community member will arrange this.
- Don't plan on only those registering for a gathering to show up. Sometimes more people will show up, sometimes less. Additionally, sometimes people will come and go throughout the day as their schedules and transportation allow.
- If at all possible, make sure refreshments are provided.

- If you plan to do a Power Point presentation, take along your own LCD projector, a power strip, extension cord, and a screen or white paper and tape. Even in Native American communities where there are newer buildings, there may not be adequate electrical outlets conveniently located. Also take along newsprint pads, markers and any other materials you think you'll need.
- Don't expect most people to have Internet access and email capability. It is common in Native American communities for one third of the population to not have phones, let alone computers. Even where people have phones, there may not be the infrastructure to support a multitude of computers and Internet access. If you have a laptop with wireless capability, definitely take it along, but don't be surprised if you aren't able to get reception.

For reference and further reading:

Below is a list of Tribal and local weekly (or twice-monthly) newspapers that report the news in Native American communities and maintain Internet web pages. Remember to contact the newspaper or press association in your state, or the National Newspaper Association for information about newspapers in your service area. Many state newspaper or press associations have Internet websites that list member newspapers.

Alaska Star (Eagle River, AK) at <http://www.alaskastar.com>

The Nome Nugget (Nome, AK) at <http://www.nomenugget.com>

Chickasaw Times (Ada, OK) at http://www.chickasaw.net/about/261_1297.htm

Charkoosta News (Pablo, MT) at <http://www.charkoosta.com>

Hawai'i Island Journal (Honolulu, HI) at <http://hawaiiislandjournal.com>

Lake County Leader (Polson, MT) at <http://www.leaderadvertiser.com>

Lakota Journal (Rapid City, SD) at <http://www.lakotajournal.com>

Navajo Times (Window Rock, AZ) at <http://www.navajotimes.com>

Navajo/Hopi Observer (Flagstaff, AZ) at <http://www.navajohopiobserver.com>

OCB Tracker (Glendora, CA) at <http://www.ocbtracker.com>

Red Lake Net News (Red Lake, MN) at <http://www.rlenn.com>

Sho-Ban News Online (Fort Hall, ID) at <http://www.shobannews.com>

The Seminole Tribune (Hollywood, FL) at <http://www.seminoletribe.com/tribune>

Other Internet resources for reference and further reading:

The American Indian Disability Technical Assistance Center's *Storyteller, Dream Maker, Goal Setter: Disability and Employment Resources for Enhancing the Quality of Life for American Indians and Alaska Natives with Disabilities* is a two-volume resource book that provides contact information for many important programs. The *National Organizations* section provides information that may be useful to BPAO benefits specialists across the country. For more information go to <http://aidtac.ruralinstitute.umn.edu/NationalOrgs.htm>.

Indian Country Today is a national Native American publication that can provide useful information on Native American communities throughout the country. For more information go to <http://www.indiancountrytoday.com>.

The Indian Health Service maintains an online list of *Community Health Representatives* who serve Native American communities throughout the country. This list is available at <http://www.ihs.gov/NonMedicalPrograms/chr/peer.cfm>.

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AIDTAC

American Indian Disability Technical Assistance Center

Technical Assistance on Native American Culture

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Reader Survey: Issues Brief 2

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