

# Culturally-Based Abusive Partner Intervention in Native American Communities

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by Jeremy NeVilles-Sorell

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## Acknowledgments

This publication was supported by Grant No. 2017-TA-AX-K040 awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the speakers and do not necessarily reflect the view of the Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.

Special thanks to men's program facilitators Greg Grey Cloud (Rosebud, SD), Olivia Gray (Osage, OK), and Gene Red Hail (Oneida, WI) for taking the time to be interviewed about their work and efforts to make change in their communities.

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July 2020

# Introduction

Abusive partner intervention is challenging but potentially rewarding work, especially when cultural principles are utilized to facilitate individual, family, and community healing. This article addresses abusive partner intervention programming in Native American communities in regards to three areas: 1) institutional response, 2) programmatic response, and 3) community response, using both evidence-based and practice-based responses. An evidence-based practice relies on scientific evidence, practitioner expertise, and client values to guide decision-making. Practice-based evidence is a range of approaches and supports that are derived from, and supportive of, the positive cultural norms and traditions of the local society. The institutional and programmatic responses detailed below use evidence-based and practice-based responses to integrate cultural principles into the program structure, curriculum and outcomes.

## Abusive Partner Intervention as Part of a Coordinated Community Response

What makes an abusive partner intervention program (APIP) effective is a decades-old question that many people still ask today. Studies usually focus on the content of the curriculum and the program's efficacy in reducing recidivism. However, abusive partner intervention approaches that engage multidisciplinary teams to create a "coordinated community response" create opportunities for accountability across multiple spheres of influence, from personal to intimate partner relationships, to family, community, and larger systems.

The coordinated community response (CCR) model engages community and system-based victim advocates, multiple community-based service providers from APIPS and substance abuse to workforce development, law enforcement, educators, faith leaders, attorneys, prosecutors, courts, probation, and judges in a single jurisdiction to continuously evaluate and strengthen their response to intimate partner violence from the initial incident through programming. For example, one frequent concern is offenders being mandated to participate in the APIP yet they don't show up or complete the program. The CCR can explore the question, "What is creating this gap in compliance?" In reviewing current practice, they may discover that there is no mechanism for tracking referrals to ensure the program staff know when offenders have been mandated, or they may find that the program's reports regarding offenders not completing the program are not getting back to the court. They may find that the participant can't pay and provide free or sliding scale services or connect them with job training. The CCR team can then research best practices to identify policies and procedures that can be implemented as solutions to the identified gaps. Once some time has passed, the APIP can evaluate the effectiveness of the changes in collaboration with the CCR team.

High functioning APIPs are part of collaborative teams that engage the participant in active and relational accountability. In other words, accountability that is "creating systemic and relational pathways for abusive partners to develop responsibility, healing, and hope for themselves, their families, and their communities." If the referral is from a criminal or civil court or probation, the APIP providers staff domestic violence court hearings so that they can provide their reports directly, and can make contact with the

defendant/respondent immediately after they are ordered to participate in the program. APIP providers may also collaborate closely with victim advocacy programs to establish safe ways to connect with victim/survivors to share information about the program and connect them with confidential advocates. These relationships are crucial in maintaining a consistent systems response to abusive partners.

Although the CCR model was designed for single jurisdictions, it can still be a challenge to implement a CCR in non-Native communities. However, when it comes to Native American communities' tribes, pueblos, and Native villages, the jurisdictions become plural and the CCR must involve tribal, federal, and state systems. It is also fairly common to have tribal lands span at least two different counties and intersect with city municipalities, so tribes are collaborating with multiple court systems, law enforcement departments, and service providers. In addition, a major obstacle to enhancing the response to intimate partner violence is that tribes often lack the authority and/or influence over state and federal courts, prosecutors, and law enforcement on local or regional levels to make policy change. While laws like the Tribal Law and Order Act, passed in 2010 to help address crime in tribal communities, place a strong emphasis on decreasing violence against American Indian and Alaska Native women by giving tribes the ability to prosecute non-Native offenders,<sup>1</sup> there are still the many complications to shifting polices on a local level that non-Native communities do not have to contend with. The limitations that tribes have over State and Federal courts seriously hinder tribes' ability to

1. U.S. Dept. of Justice, [justice.gov/tribal/tribal-law-and-order-act](https://justice.gov/tribal/tribal-law-and-order-act)

hold offenders who go through those court systems accountable, and to hold those systems accountable when they fail to comply with best practice guidelines.

## Overview of Abusive Partner Intervention Programs

The mission of most APIPs is to hold abusive partners accountable, teach nonviolent behavior, and promote safety for victims. Additionally, APIPs seek to aid in the elimination of intimate partner violence by changing social norms, promoting safety and justice for survivors, and upholding cultural values that promote strong and healthy relationships. Programs also recognize that abusive partners often need additional services like mental health and/or drug and alcohol treatment, parenting education, or other supports, and that these treatments should be in addition to, not in lieu of, participation in an APIP.

When implementing an abusive partner intervention program, there are many different approaches due to differing statewide standards, needs of the community, and program modality. However, most programs use a group process to encourage peer to peer accountability and learning and build a supportive community among participants. The majority of programs and statewide standards agree that couples counseling, family counseling, pastoral counseling, and mediation should not be utilized until the abuse and violence have stopped, the abusive partner can recognize their use of violence and acknowledge the impact they had on their partner and children, and the survivor feels it is safe to engage in those services.

The Center for Court Innovation, together with Wica Agli and a diverse group of national expert practitioners and advocates, created guiding principles to support the program design and implementation, as well as the day-to-day functioning of the program. These guiding principles for abusive partner intervention and engagement are:

- Accountability is active and relational
- Survivor voices are centered
- Dignity and hope are restored
- Culture and community are reflected and valued
- Interventions and engagement strategies respond to the needs and strengths of abusive partners

## **Integrating Native Culture and Values into Abusive Partner Intervention**

Tribal APIPs use the same standards of practice in their work, consistent with this overall approach to addressing intimate partner violence. Where tribal programs differ is in their programmatic content. While there is no national Native American APIP curriculum, each program infuses culture-based approaches by adapting non-Native curricula for their specific cultural and community context. While the search for evidence-based approaches in curricula continues in non-Native communities, Native programs are using practice-based evidence to build and strengthen their educational tools.

Prior to colonization, Native communities did not have high levels of violence and abuse because we had teachings, social structure, and protective factors in place that limited

much of the violence. If violence did occur, victims were believed and protected and swift and serious consequences were imposed, because the health of the community was a higher value—if one person was acting out and disrupting the balance of the family, it disrupted the balance of the community. Our traditional teachings included structures around child-rearing and family and those life ways and teachings produce healthy adults and keep violence to a minimum. Every age group has value and contributes to the community, and adults did not wield power over children, adolescents, and elders. In order to have strong healthy elders, lessons about how children are raised and treated with respect had to be instilled, and those children grew into adults who respected others and the environment, and then became elders who taught those lessons to the following generations.

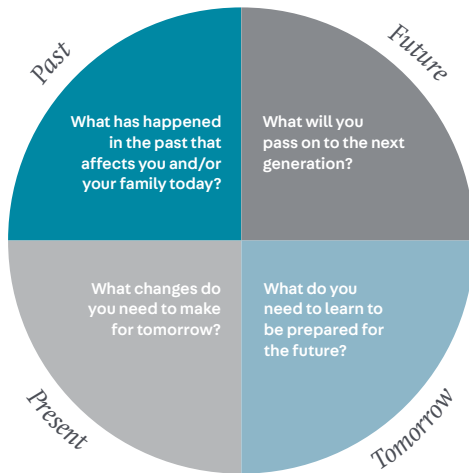
While specific teachings vary from one Native community to the next, there are many common principles. Basic values around balance, reciprocity, and family are very similar across the United States. Balance is often depicted in the form of a Medicine Wheel. It has four different colors representing the four cardinal directions of East, South, West, and North, and those correspond to the four seasons and the four stages of life: infancy, adolescence, adulthood, and elder. The representations continue on for medicines, animals, etc., and become very detailed. The style, design, and order of Medicine Wheels vary from region to region but generally the order is not as important—since it is a circle, they all intersect and connect with one another. The Medicine Wheel can be used with abusive partners to detail their connections to self, family, community, and society, and what the corresponding obligations are to each.



The ‘balance with self’ quadrant can be used to encourage reflection when one is out of balance, often described by group participants as a time when they were “out of control,” and then work to identify ways to return to balance. This then carries into obligation and

responsibility to the immediate and extended family. Being violent, abusive, and controlling is creating disruption to the family in the immediate home and with relatives. Then the teachings are applied to discuss the impacts within the community (using up resources like law enforcement, social services, problems for children at school, etc.) and our obligations to society. Native APIPs help abusive partners walk in balance and become part of a supportive community once they leave the program. In addition, the programs that have been most effective not only address the individual but also the community and society that helped shape them into being abusive, and try to change that as well.

Reciprocity is a value that is connected to maintaining balance but also teaches respect. Before asking for something—be it advice, help, a good hunt, or fishing trip—there was always an offering given such as tobacco, maize, or another type



depending on local custom. The basic teaching was to always give something before you take. When working with abusive partners, their mindset is one of entitlement and that they are owed something. They feel their position of authority is one that should be followed, and when their partners or children do not do as they are told, they feel that they have been disrespected. This belief is the opposite of Native values because only one person is the beneficiary and oftentimes the partner and children are not able to say 'no.' The abusive partner takes everything first and rarely gives anything. Teaching reciprocity engenders respectfulness and humility because they will have to approach people in a respectful way. Sometimes they won't get what they asked for but should be humble about that as opposed to reacting with violence.

Traditionally, familial obligations were first to the immediate family, then the extended family, and then according to the clan structure. Much of the traditional clan role system has been lost due to colonization, yet the role of Native men is still primarily as protectors and providers. When they are being abusive, they are not living up to those obligations and are not being "real men." A traditional value was that as a parent, the bond with the child was never to be broken and the parent should provide unconditional love. In the extended family, the role of an uncle was to discipline nieces and nephews. This support ensured that the parents always showed love while uncles did the correcting and redirecting, but also created strong bonds for children who had other caring adults around them. When transitioning into manhood, ceremonies like fasting or vision quests help youth realize what is important and needed in life. When youth are first alone without food and water, their first feelings are about hunger and thirst. The realization of

being able to nurture your body becomes important. Next comes loneliness and perceiving the vulnerability of the environment around them. Missing family and friends teaches the importance of having the support and protection of a community.

Native American communities desire to create a new community response to intimate partner violence. So many of the legal and jurisdictional issues are beyond the control of tribal programs and other tribal justice system agencies, given that public policy reform is not as swift or as high of a priority as it is in singular non-Native jurisdictions. However, Native APIPs are adapting best practice measures despite having more infrastructure issues to deal with in coordinating with multiple courts, non-native domestic violence programs, law enforcement agencies, and other human services to ensure systems are being accountable to victims by holding offenders accountable for their violence. Native communities are designing programs that reclaim their cultural values and teachings and incorporate them into their services with the vision of having safe and healthy communities. The most successful programs create a group culture where offenders are challenged as well as supported throughout their change process, and once they complete the program, there is a support network in place around them so they can continue on their personal healing journey.

## About the Author

**Jeremy NeVilles-Sorell** has worked in the field of domestic violence since 1994 on issues affecting children who have experienced domestic violence, supervised visitation, batterer's intervention, and providing training and education. He worked as a program coordinator at the Duluth Family Visitation Center serving families with a history of domestic violence and also as the Children's Program Coordinator at Women's Transitional Housing Coalition in Duluth, Minnesota, providing activities and groups for children who have witnessed violence. He started working with Mending the Sacred Hoop Technical Assistance Project in 1998, a national program to assist American Indian Tribes and Alaskan Native Villages to develop responses to violence against Indian women. With Mending the Sacred Hoop, he held various titles from team leader, program coordinator, co-director, and Training and Resources Director. In 2015, he began working with Wica Agli and in March of 2019 assumed the position of Director of the National Native Coalition of Men's Programs.

**Wica Agli** started in 2011 as a regional project focused on the Lakota Nations and the name Wica Agli translates to mean “Bringing Men Back.” The intent was to rekindle an alliance of Lakota Men to reclaim their responsibilities as providers for the Lakota nation’s women and children by resuming their roles as traditional leaders. Now we are extending that effort nationally and are working with men from diverse tribes, pueblos, and native villages. Our mission is to reclaim traditional understandings of masculinity and share them with the men and boys in the communities we serve. In sharing the cultural traditions left to us, we can again begin to create communities free of domestic and sexual violence.





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