

Building Trust and Promoting Sexual Health in Native American Communities

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Introduction

The purpose of this resource is to provide foundational knowledge for individuals and organizations working with Native American communities, particularly in the area of sexually transmitted infection (STI) prevention. By understanding the unique cultural, historical, and social contexts of Native American populations, public health professionals [can build trust](#), [improve engagement](#), and promote effective, respectful STI prevention strategies. This tip sheet aims to enhance awareness of health systems and support approaches that honor traditional knowledge and values within Native American communities.

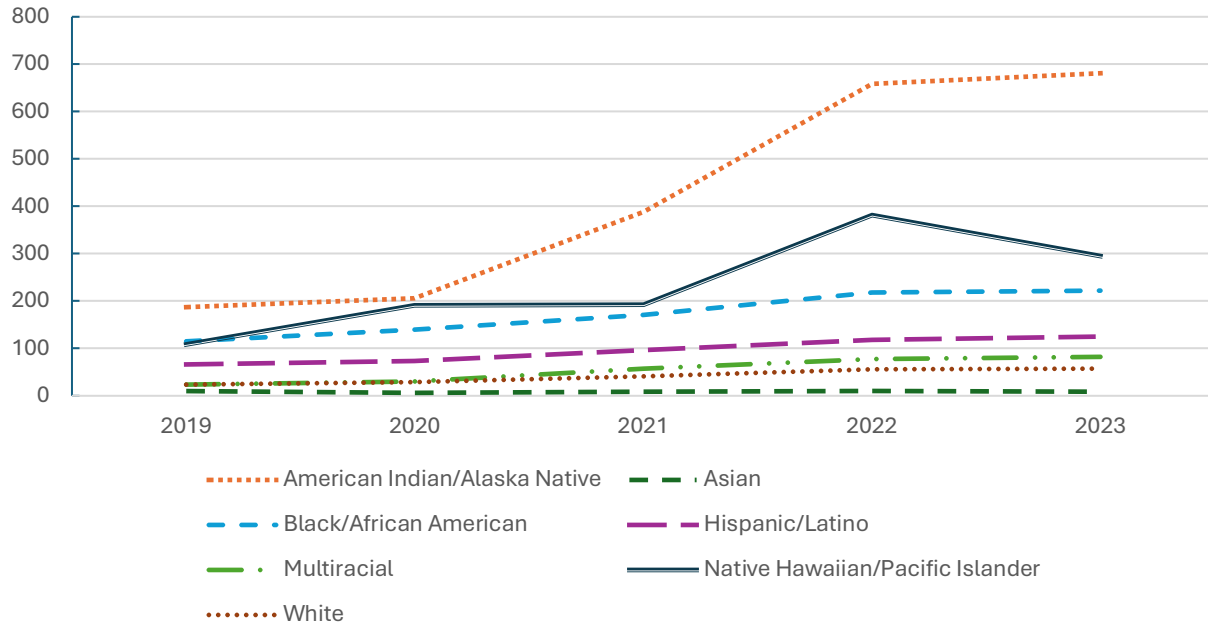
Native American is the primary population descriptor used throughout this resource because we are discussing populations native to North America; however, readers may be familiar with other terms such as Indigenous and American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN). Other terms may be used at times to align with specific sources cited.

Why This Matters

Focusing on Native American health is critical for reducing rates of STI transmission and improving birth outcomes. From 2021 to 2023, there was a [dramatic increase](#) in rates of congenital syphilis among Native Americans. Additionally, primary and secondary syphilis in this population [increased](#) from a rate of 21.1 per 100,000 in 2019 to 58.2 per 100,000 in 2023. Figure 1 shows congenital syphilis rates by race, highlighting the most significant increase among American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) populations, followed by Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (NHPI) populations.

When left untreated during pregnancy, syphilis [infection can result in stillbirth, low birth weight, and multiple adverse fetal outcomes](#). However, with adequate care, congenital syphilis is preventable. Prenatal testing can address both syphilis and congenital syphilis, as treatment is available for both parents and their children. Access to [well-resourced health care services](#) where prenatal testing can be conducted by trusted medical providers is essential to addressing this epidemic.

Figure 1. Rates of Congenital Syphilis by Race



Note: Rates are per 100,000 live births

Source: [Congenital Syphilis — Reported Cases and Rates of Reported Cases* by Year of Birth and Race/Hispanic Ethnicity of Birth Parent, United States](#)

Terminology

Understanding basic terminology related to Native American communities is the first essential step in providing respectful, well-informed care. Words hold power. And the words we use can affirm identity or cause harm. Preferences around terminology often vary by region, community, and generation, so it’s important to learn and honor the terms preferred by the communities we serve.

Table 1 offers guidance on commonly used terms. By understanding more about the common definitions and considerations for these terms, public health professionals can communicate respect for the distinct identities and histories of Native American communities—laying the foundation for trust and meaningful relationships. We know this table includes a lot of information—it’s meant to serve as a reference you can return to, not something to absorb all at once. These terms reflect complex histories, identities, and legal frameworks. We encourage you to skim for what’s most relevant to your context and come back to deepen your understanding as needed.

Table 1. Key Terminology

Term	Definition	Context and Significance
American Indian or Alaska Native (AI/AN)	Individuals descended from the original Peoples of North and South America who maintain cultural, historical, or legal ties to their Tribal affiliations or communities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Used within Federal Indian Law within the United States. • Refers to legally recognized rights, protections, and relationships between Tribes and the U.S. government. • Highlights legal and sovereign status, differentiating AI/AN individuals from other racial/ethnic groups. This label is used both in reference to a racial/ethnic category (e.g., in the Census) and in legal contexts to refer to the unique political relationship that AI/AN Peoples and governments have with the U.S. government. • Often used in contexts involving federal policies, legal matters, or Tribal rights.
Native American or Native	Individuals descended from the original Peoples of the Americas, including Central America, with Tribal affiliation or attachment to their community.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often used interchangeably with AI/AN but broader in scope. • May highlight the shared cultural/historical connections of Indigenous Peoples across the Americas. • Reflects variation within Native communities and can convey broader identity.
Indigenous	Broad term referring to descendants of original inhabitants of a region before colonization (e.g., Americas, Pacific, Asia, Africa).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Global term encompassing various cultural groups. In the U.S., includes AI/AN, Native Hawaiians, and others. • Emphasizes shared global experiences of colonization and resilience while acknowledging cultural differences. • Use carefully to respect specific identities; helpful in global or comparative contexts.

Term	Definition	Context and Significance
Tribes or Tribal Nations	Sovereign Indigenous Peoples in the U.S. with inherent rights to self-governance and a government-to-government relationship with the U.S. federal government.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refers to federally recognized Tribes (574 in the U.S.), state-recognized Tribes, or unrecognized Tribes advocating for recognition. Includes distinct cultures, languages, and governance systems. Highlights sovereignty and legal standing of Tribes; underscores their unique relationship with the U.S. government. Recognizes differences among Tribes and the history of federal recognition and its impacts.
Tribal Affiliation	An individual's association with a specific Tribe, Nation, Band, Pueblo, Community, or Native Village, reflecting lineage and cultural ties.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal and community identity within a Tribal structure. Formal membership often determines rights and eligibility for services from the Tribe. Reinforces cultural identity and bonds within a community while supporting Tribal governance. Each Tribe has unique membership rules and traditions. Be sensitive to individuals who may identify with multiple Tribes and those who self-identify and may not meet criteria for formal enrollment.
Enrolled Member/Citizen of a Federally Recognized Tribe	An individual who is formally recognized as a member or citizen of a federally recognized Tribe, Nation, Band, Pueblo, Community, or Native Village, based on the Tribe's specific enrollment criteria.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Legal and political status that affirms a person's official affiliation with a federally recognized Tribe and their rights under Tribal, federal, and sometimes state law. Provides access to Tribal rights, benefits, and services while reinforcing sovereignty, self-governance, and cultural continuity within the Tribal Nation. Each Tribe establishes its own enrollment criteria, which may include blood quantum, lineage, or proof of descent.


Term	Definition	Context and Significance
Member of a State-Recognized Tribe	An individual who is formally recognized as a member or citizen of a state-recognized Tribe based on the Tribe’s specific enrollment criteria.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal and political status that affirms a person’s official affiliation with a state-recognized Tribe, granting recognition at the state level but not at the federal level. • Provides access to certain rights, benefits, and services recognized by state governments while supporting Tribal sovereignty, cultural preservation, and community identity. • States may have their own recognition process and criteria for formally acknowledging a Tribe. Respect the variety of state-recognized Tribes and the challenges they may face regarding federal acknowledgment and access to resources.

Overview of Clinical and Prevention Services

Clinical and prevention services are vital for addressing health outcomes in Native American communities, where rates of [chronic diseases and mental health challenges](#), as well as [STIs](#), are significantly higher than in the general population. Poor health outcomes stem from [past experiences, limited health care access, socioeconomic barriers](#), and gaps in care. Providing sensitive, accessible care that integrates [traditional knowledge and practices](#) may help close gaps and support the resilience and health of Indigenous communities. Effective approaches could include increasing the use of community health workers who are embedded within their own cultures and incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing—such as [art, music, and ceremonies](#)—into healing practices.

Indian Health Service (IHS) overview

The [Indian Health Service \(IHS\)](#) plays a critical role in providing health care to American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) populations. It is a health system, not insurance, and operates health care facilities and provides services as a treaty obligation between the federal government and federally recognized Tribes. American Indians/Alaska Natives who are enrolled members of a federally recognized Tribe or can prove Tribal descent are eligible for no-cost care at Indian Health Service (IHS) facilities. This health care is provided as a federal trust responsibility, established through treaties between Tribal Nations and the U.S. government, which promised health care services in exchange for land and other agreements. IHS facilities are typically located on Tribal lands, such as reservations, and there are also Urban Indian health clinics in some locations with high Native populations. However, if individuals live far from these facilities, accessing services can be challenging.



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The role of IHS

A primary goal of IHS is to function as a comprehensive health care system designed to address the unique needs of AI/AN communities. It includes a network of clinics with various funding mechanisms, including [638 clinics](#) (Tribally operated outpatient clinics) and Urban Indian Health Centers, which are operated by Urban Indian organizations. Through these locations and mobile clinics, IHS delivers services, including primary, emergency, and preventive care, and, in some locations, specialty services. Telemedicine further expands access, especially in remote areas, improving the availability of critical services like STI screening and prenatal care. When specific services are unavailable within IHS, clients may be referred to external providers through the [Purchased/Referred Care \(PRC\) program](#). However, PRC funds are limited and prioritized for the most urgent cases, such as life-threatening conditions, which can create challenges in accessing necessary but non-emergency care.

Tips for Promoting Sexual Health in Native American Communities

Strengthening trust

Understanding the factors that have shaped health and well-being in Native American communities is important for providing effective services. By providing services through a strengths-based approach, we can:

- **Build trust through respectful, community-centered care.** Many Native American individuals have not received the care they need and may have experienced negative encounters in the health care system, such as denial of

access to traditional health practices and unethical treatment. Experiences such as forced sterilization and harmful research practices have contributed to [mistrust of medical providers](#). Trust needs to be gradually rebuilt through respectful, inclusive practices that honor Indigenous perspectives on health and healing.

- **Integrate [traditional practices and knowledge](#) into health care strategies.** Practices such as talking circles (a group communication process); sweat lodges (purification, healing, and spiritual ceremony); and smudging (the burning of sacred plants to cleanse a person, place, or object of negative energy and to promote healing, balance, and spiritual connection) have been shown to improve outcomes in mental and behavioral health. For example, in recognition of their benefits, some states now allow [Medicaid coverage](#) for [traditional healing practices](#). These practices themselves may provide a sense of belonging and commitment, and can be integrated with respect and intention by partnering with community members, complementing Western approaches.
- **Take a syndemic approach.** [Policies that take a syndemic approach](#), or one that considers multiple overlapping health crises, such as syphilis and substance use, can lead to more effective solutions. Addressing factors such as poverty, access to care, education, and housing instability is essential to improving health outcomes.
- **Create space for Native American communities to define and implement solutions for their well-being.** [Sharing power](#) by creating community advisory boards and meaningfully integrating community members into decision-making is a key component to building trust. Understanding the Native communities and organizations in your local area is an important starting point for building relationships in addition to inviting representatives from local Tribes to serve on advisory councils.

Respectfully engaging with Native communities

Native American communities are not all the same; they exhibit a rich individuality in their histories, languages, cultural practices, and governance structures.

Understanding these differences is crucial for building meaningful relationships and delivering services.

Steps to Engaging Respectfully with Native Communities



Learn about the community

- Understand the specific history, culture, and governance of the Tribe or community you are working with. Learn about the Tribes in your local community or region using [online tools](#).
- Respect Tribal languages and traditional practices, recognizing their importance to identity and health.



Build trust through understanding

- Be mindful of historical and ongoing experiences that have shaped relationships with outside organizations.
- Approach engagement with sensitivity and humility, recognizing that trust must be earned and built over time.



Engage in meaningful partnerships

- Build relationships with Tribal leaders and community members by engaging in open dialogue, actively listening, and responding to community-defined needs.
- Learn about the Native communities and organizations in your local area to build relationships and identify representatives who can be invited to participate on advisory councils.
- Respect Tribal sovereignty and self-determination in all aspects of partnership.



Promote language and cultural revitalization

- Collaborate with the community to integrate traditional healing practices and ceremonies into health programs.
- Ensure health messaging aligns with the values and perspectives of the community.



Incorporate traditional knowledge into health services

- Support initiatives that preserve and promote Native languages and traditions.
- Acknowledge the role of culture and language in fostering community resilience and health.



Commit to better futures

- Advocate for policies and programs that reduce disparities and enhance access to appropriate care.
- Provide training for staff to improve their ability to engage effectively with all communities.

Positive engagement begins with respect, understanding, and recognition of Native history, self-determination, and contemporary community strengths and needs. Taking thoughtful steps to learn and listen can help individuals and organizations build trust and foster partnerships that promote health and well-being of Native communities.

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