



Tribal Sovereignty and Outreach to Native Families

This brief explores how Parent Centers might plan and conduct outreach to Native families within the reality of tribal sovereignty and the governing policies of individual tribal communities.

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This brief explores how Parent Centers might plan and conduct outreach to Native families within the reality of tribal sovereignty and the governing policies of individual tribal communities.

What is tribal sovereignty?

Sovereignty is the right of entities such as countries and nations to govern themselves.

Many sovereign nations make treaties with others, and those treaties are legally binding agreements. Many such treaties were made

between the newly formed U.S. government and the sovereign Native Americans tribes between 1778 and 1871, as discussed in NAPTAC's *Tribal Sovereignty and Treaty Making brief*.¹

To learn more about sovereignty, please refer to NAPTAC's **Tribal Sovereignty and Treaty Making**.

As a result of these treaties, the federal government holds land and resources in trust for American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) tribes. Tribal sovereignty, treaties, and the trust relationship that tribes have with the federal government set Indians apart from all other racial and ethnic groups.

Understanding the concept of sovereignty is critical when working with tribes. Tribal governments are distinct entities with clear authorities for their individual communities. Tribes have different language(s) and customs, and may have established independent protocols for determining many aspects of tribal members' lives, including education.

How might sovereignty impact outreach to tribal communities and parents?

Because each tribal community is distinct, it may take time to learn specific tribal protocols, individuals in key tribal governmental positions, and other cultural practices and customs.

Many, if not most, tribes are governed by a **Tribal Council**, which is required to make decisions on all matters related to programs and services. This includes economic development, land and resource management, judicial matters and court systems, health and human resources, and education. Because tribal councils have so much to consider, it may take time for them to make decisions. That is also why it may take time for your Parent Center to get on the agenda of the tribal council of a Native tribe near you.

Each tribe may have a different way of designating **the leader**: President, Chair, or Governor. Some tribes still recognize their historical chiefs as leaders as well. If given the opportunity to meet with the current leader, be sure to use the correct title.

Tribal elections take place periodically (sometimes every two years), so the council members may change. The information your Parent Center has about members of a local tribal council should be updated regularly.

Most tribes have an **Executive Director to manage programs and staff**. Meeting this administrator is a valuable first step in gaining access to other staff members.

How might Tribal Education Departments contribute to the outreach activities of Parent Centers?

Some tribes have entire education departments that compete for grants for targeted resources like vocational education or career and college preparation. Some Tribal Education Departments (TEDs) work directly with their local public, charter, and/or Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools. In the 2015 reauthorization of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), TEDs are now eligible to apply for funds to develop stronger relationships with state departments of education, so that tribes can begin to administer federal programs that had not been available to them before.

Because AI/AN tribes may have access to these additional resources, TEDs could become an excellent partner in outreach for Parent Centers. Most certainly, they have a strong connection to tribal members, especially parents.

What are some considerations for meeting and working with tribal leaders and community services staff?

- Find locations in the community to **post information** and announcements of Parent Center resources and meetings or trainings. Sometimes there is a local grocery store, post office, or tribal meeting facility that everyone frequents.
- Check with the **Tribal Education Department (TED)** to enlist assistance with announcements for the tribal community.
- Check to see if there is a **tribal newspaper or local radio station** that could be used to advertise any parent training events.
- Tribal leaders and councils are often extremely busy, but if there is a need to meet with any of them, remember that **it may take time**. Call the tribal headquarters and ask to get on their agenda/calendar.

- Check the **schedule for tribal council meetings** and plan well in advance if you are encouraged to attend.
- Create a **directory of tribal contacts** by calling or visiting the tribal offices. Some of the contacts could include: Education, Vocational Rehabilitation, Nutrition, Early Intervention, Special Education, Head Start, Early Head Start, and Youth Programs, to name a few.
- Check to see what **resources** the tribal programs have such as facilities, food, and supplies. Often the tribe may be willing to **co-sponsor an event**.
- Many tribes have **healthcare facilities** or even hospitals with a wide array of health services. These may provide valuable resources for addressing special educational needs as well as a natural place to connect with Native families whose children have disabilities or special health care needs.
- Ask if there are any **community events** where you can share information with Native parents. Often there are opportunities to set up a booth or display at a pow wow, feast, rodeo, or tribal fair.

References

¹ Butterfield, R. (2016). *Tribal sovereignty and treaty making*. Albuquerque, NM: Native American Parent Technical Assistance Center (NAPTAC). Available online at: <https://www.parentcenterhub.org/naptac-tier2-outreach/>

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