

YHDP Spotlight on Partnering with Tribes: Partnership Between Wambli Ska and South Dakota Balance of State Projects

In 2021, HUD awarded South Dakota Balance of State with a Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP) designation, which included over \$3 million in 2021. The YHDP is designed to drastically reduce the number of youth experiencing homelessness in communities across the country. South Dakota has nine Federally recognized Tribes and the South Dakota Balance of State community partners recognized the importance of collaborating with Tribal organizations to address the needs of unhoused Indigenous youth in the state. This product highlights the partnership between Wambli Ska, a Native-led organization, and other projects within the Balance of State, and is intended to provide insight into how to authentically partner with Tribes in the community to address youth homelessness and other housing-related projects.

As a state, South Dakota has an extensive history of institutional racism and discrimination - spanning from the colonization of the Black Hills, a sacred land to many Native American tribes, to the Wounded Knee Massacre where nearly 300 Lakota people were murdered by the United States Army, and the attempted erasure of Indigenous culture through boarding schools. This culture and climate produced a variety of systemic barriers for the Native community and for Wambli Ska specifically as a Native-led organization.

The Executive Director of Wambli Ska, Chris White Eagle, identified many instances of the organization experiencing the direct effects of this – from being labeled as “terrorists” for their participation in a political march to having police officers regularly attempt to intimidate them during outreach runs where they provide food and clothes to unsheltered people in Rapid City. This is reflected in data, as well - in statewide offender court admissions, both white and Native American races are equally represented, despite Native American people comprising only 9% of the population and white people comprising 84%. ¹ Despite this reality and these barriers, Chris and the rest of the staff at Wambli Ska continue to provide a variety of culturally specific activities and unwavering support to Native youth in Rapid City. Some culturally specific activities include sewing regalia, singing and dancing groups, teaching the Lakotan language, and more.

Wambli Ska

Wambli Ska is a Native-led nonprofit in Rapid City, SD whose mission is to provide structure, stability, and love to Native American youth and their families.

¹ South Dakota Department of Corrections' 2023 Statistical Report:
https://doc.sd.gov/documents/SDDOC_2023_Statistical_Report.pdf

Their programs and services include operating a teen center, facilitating a juvenile and young adult diversion and restorative justice program, offering emergency shelter and transitional housing services, conducting cultural and street outreach, and working on violence prevention efforts. These programs have been in operation since 2021 at the Woyatan Church.

As an organization, Wambli Ska has successfully paved the way for innovative programs in the community and established collaborations with other stakeholders. Wambli Ska stands out for its specific programming for Native youth and its dedication to working alongside its community with shared identities and experiences.

Wambli Ska has a few Youtube videos to provide a visual of their services and their youth engagement:

Wambli Ska Community Center and Partnership with the Woyatan Lutheran Church:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OnJHuaBc-vA>

News Segment on Wambli Ska:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W7RHOQwuI98>

YHDP Project Description

Since 2021, Wambli Ska has operated a teen drop-in center. This drop-in center provides street outreach activities to engage unsheltered populations with community resources for housing, employment, education, and other services as needed. With YHDP Supportive Services Only (SSO) funds, Wambli Ska enhanced its efforts in street outreach, developed shelter diversions, used coordinated entry processes to tailor needs based on client choice, and connected youth to permanent housing options.

Below is the description of Wambli Ska's YHDP project activities, as described in their original application.

"Our project, Oonagazi lapi kta po ("get/come to the stronghold") is named as such to bring forth the historical relevance and significance of the stronghold in Lakota History. Stronghold Table is an isolated area of little-known beauty in the south unit of Badlands National Park. It's also a sacred place to the Oglala Tribe and other Lakota people.

During the 1890 Ghost Dance, Lakota people hid there and stood their ground in battle. The Stronghold is the safe haven our ancestors told us to run to for safety. People knew that the Stronghold was a place in which to attain food, shelter, community, help, protection, and safety. Wambli Ska's Drop-in center epitomizes just that... it is a place for YYA to attain all these resources, and most importantly it is a safe place where nothing

bad can get you, and you are safe from harm. We believe that our Native youth are integral in leading change in our community and are a critical part of community healing.

Our programs empower Native youth with the skills to revive their communities through connecting to their history, culture, and traditions. Resources for mental and behavioral health, addiction recovery, and food and housing insecurity set the course for a stable and successful life. Life skills and work force development opportunities give Native youth the foundations to be leaders and healers in their CommUNITY.

But how can this be accomplished when youth are struggling with having their basic needs being met? A majority of the youth we have been serving don't know where they will sleep each night or where their next meal will come from. Out of the 105 YYA we served in 2021 (just at the center, this doesn't include the YYA our Street Outreach Team has engaged with), 65% of them are couch surfing, meeting the HUD definition of Imminent Risk of homelessness and 12% meet the HUD definition of Literally Homeless.

Many of our "couch surfers" are fleeing violence or an unstable home life (alcoholic or drug addicted parents), and many struggle with their own addictions, disabilities, and mental and behavioral health issues. Needs assessments have demonstrated that we need to be open/accessible more hours each day as well as weekends and holidays. We are a small organization and operate with few staff and a handful of volunteers. We anticipate utilizing funding to hire and train more staff to build our capacity to expand hours to meet YYA needs and to reach a larger audience.

Our project elevates youth leadership; expands cross-agency coordination; and seeks systems-alignment between child welfare, education, juvenile justice, and social services with the goal of decreasing YYA homelessness."

Partnering with South Dakota Balance of State Agencies

Wambli Ska became involved in the South Dakota Balance of State YHDP to develop the Coordinated Community Plan (CCP). Wambli Ska was also an important partner in providing data on people living in unsheltered areas of Rapid City and recruiting youth and young adults for YAB membership throughout this process.

Wambli Ska shared that the Executive Director of Family Connections Center (FCC), Joe Barb, has been the strongest partner throughout their involvement in YHDP. Joe identified that he prioritized an authentic partnership with Wambli Ska from the outset after learning the need and importance of having a cultural component and connection. FCC leadership expressed that they would be doing the youth a disservice by not incorporating and prioritizing this cultural component. Family Connections Center (FCC) is a youth-focused agency dedicated to strengthening and empowering youth and young adults to overcome obstacles. Due to the pre-existing relationship between these agencies, Wambli Ska staff identified an element of trust from the beginning of this partnership when FCC reached out to them. FCC named their shared

goal of serving youth as a cornerstone of their strong partnership, as it provided a foundation to build upon.

From there, the community partners wrote a proposal for an informal collaboration between Wambli Ska, FCC, and Journey On (another street outreach agency in the community) to provide street outreach to unsheltered youth and young adults in Rapid City. This partnership allowed youth to access the services of all three agencies after interacting with one of the agencies first. These staff members remain in frequent communication with each other, whether texting to coordinate sharing resources or jumping on a quick call to check in about the next YAB meeting.

FCC also identified this partnership with Wambli Ska as a key factor in achieving a YAB that more accurately represented the percentage of Native youth in their community.

“In the beginning of YAB [meetings held by YAB members and local housing providers], we didn’t have [a community agency] that was Native American led or staffed attending YAB meetings on a regular basis, and our demographics of diverse mentors was limited. Without surveys on demographics, I would say that I believed we had a smaller percentage overall of youth who identified as Native American in the beginning, because we didn’t have representation from mentors who identify as Native American. The more we expanded our diversity within mentors, the more we see diversity within YAB members.”

The older adult partners noted they did not track youth demographics at the beginning of the meetings with YAB members; however, there was a visible change in the diversity of the YAB after Wambli Ska staff started attending YAB meetings as older adult partners.

Challenges

Wambli Ska staff anticipated that bureaucracy would be a challenge throughout their involvement in the YHDP initiative. As an organization, they experienced the effects of gentrification and structural barriers. These barriers, such as city permits requiring Wambli Ska to apply to provide necessities such as food, have complicated Wambli Ska’s ability to provide shelter and other resources to their community.

Despite these challenges, Wambli Ska remained committed to meeting youth and young adults where they were and continued finding creative ways to provide services without pushback from the city e.g. The city shutting down Wambli Ska operations because they did not submit permitting paperwork and police officers arriving wherever Wambli Ska outreach teams go and questioning people receiving food and clothes from the team. A few of these creative solutions include distributing water bottles and granola bars, operating a warm-up bus that consistently traveled to new places when city regulations conflicted with their location and services, and partnering with a local church to provide services to the community without city interference.

Successes

Wambli Ska staff expressed humility and did not want to brag about their services. The staff seemed proud of their patience with the youth and young adults they serve the most. They highlighted their willingness to sit and wait until youth feel ready to talk about what they are experiencing and what support would benefit their housing stability. Staff said, “Try to make them laugh. Try to brighten their day with a meal and a smile.”

Timeline of Authentic Collaboration with Tribes

Before Reaching Out to Tribes

There are certain elements that non-Native partners and staff members should consider before reaching out to Tribes for potential partnerships. Staff members must educate themselves and commit to the equity work for effective partnerships.

Trainings for Staff

- Conservation with Native Americans on Race
 - <https://libguides.unthsc.edu/dei/native-indigenous>
- Everything you wanted to know about Indians but were afraid to ask
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ekykTaWkLo>
- Cultural Humility
 - <https://www.caltrin.org/training-archive/direct-service-delivery-skills/cultural-humility-working-in-and-with-tribal-communities/>
 - <https://ready.web.unc.edu/section-1-foundations/module-8/>
- Equity
 - https://learn.truecolorsunited.org/s/?language=en_US
- Unlearning White Dominant Culture
 - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lzcLYONE_7Q
- Tribal Sovereignty
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uc9FhZX9Mvk>
- [HUD Exchange: CoC Program Resources for Tribal Communities](#)

It is crucial to involve a broad spectrum of participants who can benefit from these training sessions, including non-Native staff and board members, non-Native members of YABs, and all other non-Native stakeholders within the YHDP community.

Unlearning Stereotypes

Wambli Ska specifically emphasized the importance of respect and avoiding harmful stereotypes. For example, one Native consultant reported a non-Native partner asking if

sleeping in teepees counted as experiencing homelessness. The Native consultant said they had to educate the person that they do not know anyone who sleeps in teepees.

Avoiding Othering Language

Wambli Ska staff noted that some individuals would use exclusionary and othering language when referring to Native youth and their organization as a whole.

When partnering with a Native-led organization or Tribe, it is important that the language used reflects their role as equal partners, such as utilizing collaborative language like “we” and “our” when applicable.

Challenging White Dominant Culture

- Avoid making requests from Native-led organizations and Tribes and then disengaging
- Partner with Native-led organizations and Tribes throughout the entire process - include them in decision-making processes and respond to their concerns and feedback with actionable change
- Embrace an ongoing practice of (un)learning and recognize that mistakes may occur, which can provide an opportunity for accountability
- Rethink how you approach these organizations - building partnership and trust before “business” begins
- Follow through with actions on your promises to Native-led organizations and Tribes

After Reaching Out and Beginning to Establish Partnerships with Tribes

It will be important to ask yourself, “What does an authentic partnership look like and is my agency successfully incorporating the following elements?”

One important element of authentic partnership is power sharing - this can be achieved in partnerships by sharing the power of making decisions related to grant writing, service delivery, marketing, outreach to community partners, and other decisions that impact the community.

Whenever an agency partners with a Tribe or a Tribal program, agencies must respond to any concerns and feedback that Tribes and Tribal programs provide. While agencies may not have the resources and tools to provide the best solution possible, agencies should make significant efforts to address these challenges. If there are concrete actions Tribes suggest agencies take, partner with your staff to determine what steps are appropriate and create a plan for addressing these.

Many Native American staff mentioned how many times agencies would reach out to them to ask for data on the number of Native Americans in their community. Once the agencies provided data, the partners stopped reaching out. When you are in an authentic partnership, your relationships with Tribal programs and staff should be based less on transactions and more on

community. Avoid tokenism when reaching out to Tribal programs by engaging with your Tribal programs and Native American partners to determine how they might want to participate in community work with you.

When reaching out to Tribal programs, discuss how much time, resources, and staff members it could take to complete the work. Tribal programs may need time to assess if and how they can contribute to the work.

Mentorship

For Native-led organizations and Tribes beginning their work in federally-funded projects, a common challenge is the associated administrative requirements. Some of these requirements include:

- Documentation requirements
- Financial reporting requirements
- Performance reporting requirements

Wambli Ska identified that a mentorship between their agency and FCC helped to facilitate their journey toward self-sufficiency and provided them with more experience to pursue future federal funding opportunities.

What Has Worked for Other Tribes/Native-led Organizations Interested in Applying for Federal Funding

In conversations with Wambli Ska staff and consultants who identify as Native American/Indian, they identified the following elements as important considerations to advise Tribal/Native-led organizations when applying for federal funding. This section provides examples of what has worked for various Wambli Ska staff and Native consultants involved in this product.

Communication

Communication may be one of the most challenging aspects of partnering with non-Native organizations and federal agencies. To address this, Tribes and Native-led organizations may find it beneficial to let their partners know their preferred communication method and offer alternative methods of communication for greater accessibility.

For example, Wambli Ska staff generally communicate fastest with their community partners by texting and calling each other. A few Wambli Ska staff work primarily in-person with clients and partners, away from emails and computers for most of the day.

Creativity

Recognizing the various barriers caused by bureaucracy and stigma, Wambli Ska staff identified a need to think outside the box when providing services essential to their mission. While providing services to address basic needs is one of the core pillars of Wambli Ska, they identified that arts and culture services are another priority.

Each room of Wambli Ska is intentionally designed based on what the youth desired. When youth and young adults told Wambli Ska staff that they wanted a recording studio to begin podcasts and record original music, Wambli Ska converted one of their rooms into a recording studio. Another room is dedicated to artists who use the room to spray paint shirts and posters, create ceramic art, and engage in other creative outlets. There is a room for decorating regalia and accessories. Each room at Wambli Ska was creatively designed for youth and young adults to express themselves.

Collaboration with Other Tribes

Wambli Ska staff expressed hesitancy when partnering with non-Native organizations and partners due to historical inequity, stigma, and the experience of being othered. Wambli Ska noted that it can be preferable to collaborate with other Tribes or Native-led organizations when possible. This could benefit some Tribes and Native-led organizations in tackling challenges such as unconscious community biases, federal regulations and requirements, administrative requirements, and general bureaucracy.

The NDN Collective is an indigenous-led organization that aims to create sustainable solutions on Indian terms. The NDN Collective focuses on activism, grant writing, organizing, and philanthropy to promote equity for indigenous people. This Collective is a significant example of indigenous people of various backgrounds and cultures working together to address challenges that impact their communities such as climate change, the fight for indigenous lands, and racial equity.

Through more coalition building, Tribal programs may be able to apply for federal funding and funding through other bureaucratic financial institutions to provide additional resources for their communities and address barriers as a team.

Future Visioning

Wambli Ska staff participated in various interviews in the hopes that this information would encourage more Tribes and Native-led organizations to be involved in YHDP work and other federal housing services to end homelessness in their communities. Throughout our conversations, Wambli Ska emphasized the importance of non-Native partners being willing to “walk the talk” and engaging in equitable practices and partnerships.

Wambli Ska continues to be involved in YHDP work alongside the South Dakota Balance of State. Despite all the challenges, the Wambli Ska staff expressed gratitude for their work and community partnerships.

