

ETHICS & CONDUCT IN TRIBAL LAW ENFORCEMENT

A Law Enforcement Professional Standards Toolkit — National Native Justice Institute | www.nativejustice.us

■ ETHICS & PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT IN TRIBAL LAW ENFORCEMENT

Ethical conduct is the foundation of legitimate law enforcement. In tribal communities — where historical experiences with authority have created deep-seated trust deficits — every officer's personal integrity either builds or erodes the community's confidence in public safety. Ethical lapses in tribal law enforcement do not just harm individuals: they harm the entire community and the legitimacy of tribal sovereignty.

 Law enforcement officers operate under a higher standard of conduct than most professions because they exercise extraordinary authority over other people's lives and liberty.

 Civil rights violations, use-of-force abuses, and corruption are the most common sources of litigation, federal oversight, and consent decrees in law enforcement.

 Ethical officers build community trust that makes every investigation more effective, every patrol safer, and every prosecution more successful.

 Officers who fail to report misconduct become complicit in it. A culture of silence is a culture of corruption.

■ CORE ETHICAL PRINCIPLES FOR TRIBAL OFFICERS

Integrity & Honesty

- Never falsify reports, evidence, or testimony. A single dishonest act can end your career, destroy prosecutions, and undermine your department.
- Report mistakes immediately and accurately. Cover-up is almost always worse than the original error.
- Maintain the same standard of truth in informal communications — conversations with supervisors, community members, and colleagues — as in formal reports.

Impartiality & Equal Treatment

- Apply laws and department policies consistently regardless of personal relationships, family ties, or community standing.
- Tribal officers may be uniquely vulnerable to pressure from family or community members. Establish clear personal boundaries before a conflict arises.
- Document decisions that might appear to be influenced by personal relationships — transparency protects you and demonstrates impartiality.

Use of Authority

- Use only the authority granted by law, policy, and the Constitution — never exceed it, even with good intentions.
- Use force only when legally justified and proportional to the threat. Every use-of-force decision must be documented completely and honestly.
- Never use your badge, weapons, or authority for personal gain, personal relationships, or harassment.

Duty to Report Misconduct

- You have a legal and ethical duty to report observed misconduct, regardless of the rank or relationship of the officer involved.
- Know your department's complaint intake and investigation procedures. Failure to report known misconduct exposes you to discipline and liability.
- Document what you observed, when, where, and who was present before making a report.

■ TIPS FOR MAINTAINING ETHICAL PRACTICE

- **Know Your Policies Before You Need Them** – Read and understand your department's use-of-force policy, search and seizure rules, and complaint procedures before a situation arises.
- **Use the Newspaper Test** – Before any decision, ask: would I be comfortable if this action appeared on the front page of the tribal newspaper? If not, reconsider.
- **Create Personal Ethical Boundaries Early** – Decide in advance how you will handle requests from family, friends, and community members before you are in a compromised situation.
- **Speak Up — The Blue Wall Harms Everyone** – Silence in the face of misconduct protects bad actors and destroys community trust. Ethical officers report what they see.
- **Seek Supervision When Uncertain** – When you are unsure whether an action is appropriate, ask your supervisor before acting. Document that you sought guidance.
- **Protect Your Reputation as a Career Asset** – Your reputation for integrity is your most valuable professional asset. Protect it deliberately and consistently, every day.

RESOURCES, GRANTS & SUPPORT

Funding, Training, and Support Resources — Tribal Law Enforcement Professional Standards | www.nativejustice.us

■ FEDERAL GRANT RESOURCES

Professional Standards & Oversight

- **DOJ Office of Community Oriented Policing Services – Ethical Policing** – Resources and training on ethical law enforcement practice. cops.usdoj.gov
- **BJA Tribal Justice Programs** – Supports tribal law enforcement policy development and professional standards. bjaj.ojp.gov
- **CTAS – Coordinated Tribal Assistance Solicitation** – DOJ tribal funding for law enforcement operations and training. justice.gov/tribal

Training & Technical Assistance

- **IADLEST – Law Enforcement Standards & Training** – National standards for law enforcement ethics training. iadlest.org
- **Police Executive Research Forum (PERF)** – Research and training resources on use of force, ethics, and police reform. policeforum.org
- **BIA Law Enforcement Training Academy** – Federal training resources including ethics curriculum for tribal officers. bia.gov/bia/ojs

■ STATE & ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **State Homeland Security Grants (SHSGP)** – Tribal law enforcement may be eligible for state-administered FEMA homeland security funding.
- **Tribal Law & Order Act (TLOA) Resources** – Expanded tribal criminal authority and DOJ technical assistance for implementation.
- **Grants.gov Tribal Search Tool** – Search all federal grants available to tribal entities. grants.gov (filter: Tribal Government eligibility)

■ HELPFUL TIPS FOR TRIBAL PROGRAMS & LEADERS

Adopt a Written Code of Ethics Every tribal law enforcement department should have a formally adopted, signed, and regularly reviewed code of ethics incorporated into every officer's employment agreement.	Implement Early Intervention Systems Track use-of-force, complaints, and supervisor referrals to identify officers showing patterns of concern before a major incident occurs.
Establish a Clear Misconduct Reporting Process Community members and officers must have a clear, confidential, and trusted process for reporting misconduct. Publish it widely.	Train on Ethics Annually — With Real Scenarios Annual ethics training using realistic tribal-context scenarios is far more effective than policy review alone.

■ KEY WEBLINKS

National Native Justice Institute	www.nativejustice.us
BJA Tribal Justice Programs	bjaj.ojp.gov/program/tribal-justice
COPS Tribal Resources	cops.usdoj.gov/tribalresources
BIA Law Enforcement Services	bia.gov/bia/ojs
DOJ COPS Ethical Policing	cops.usdoj.gov
PERF – Police Research Forum	policeforum.org
IADLEST Standards	iadlest.org
Grants.gov (Tribal Search)	grants.gov

■ PARTNER WITH NNJI — WE ARE READY TO SUPPORT YOUR COMMUNITY

TAKE ACTION TODAY — Contact NNJI at www.nativejustice.us to schedule training, consultation, or access resources.

Strengthening Tribal Justice — One Community at a Time