

TRAUMA-INFORMED POLICING IN TRIBAL COMMUNITIES

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

■ TRAUMA-INFORMED POLICING IN INDIAN COUNTRY

Trauma-informed policing is an approach that integrates knowledge about the impacts of trauma into every aspect of law enforcement practice — from initial contact through investigation, arrest, and community engagement. In tribal communities, where historical trauma, PTSD, substance use, and adverse childhood experiences are prevalent, trauma-informed approaches are not optional — they are operationally necessary for effective, constitutional, and culturally appropriate law enforcement.

🧠 An estimated 70% of adults in the U.S. have experienced at least one traumatic event — rates are significantly higher in tribal communities.

⚠️ Officers who misinterpret trauma responses as defiance or intoxication make more use-of-force errors, generate more complaints, and solve fewer cases.

❤️ Trauma-informed officers build trust, de-escalate more effectively, and produce better witness statements and cooperation.

🇺🇸 Departments that implement trauma-informed training report reductions in use of force, complaints, and officer injury.

■ UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA & ITS EFFECTS

Types of Trauma Commonly Encountered

- Historical/Intergenerational Trauma: Wounds passed across generations from boarding schools, forced removal, and cultural destruction.
- Complex Developmental Trauma: Repeated childhood abuse, neglect, or household dysfunction (Adverse Childhood Experiences — ACEs).
- PTSD from Violence: Domestic violence, sexual assault, violent crime, accidents, or community tragedies.
- Secondary Traumatic Stress: Officers and caregivers absorbing trauma from repeated exposure to victims' suffering.

Trauma Responses Officers Must Recognize

- Fight Response: Verbal aggression, physical resistance, confrontational behavior — often misread as willful defiance.
- Flight Response: Running, fleeing, attempts to leave — may reflect panic, not guilt.
- Freeze Response: Silence, inability to respond, apparent uncooperativeness — often misread as obstruction or intoxication.
- Fawn Response: Excessive compliance, people-pleasing, difficulty stating boundaries — may indicate victim status.

■ TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICES FOR TRIBAL OFFICERS

- **Regulate Your Own Nervous System First** — Your calm is contagious. Slow breathing, lowered voice, and relaxed posture signal safety to a trauma-activated person and reduce escalation.
- **Ask, Don't Assume** — Before interpreting behavior as defiance, ask: Has this person experienced trauma? What might they be responding to right now?
- **Reduce Perceived Threats** — Minimize the number of officers, reduce badge/weapon visibility when safe, and speak at eye level rather than standing over someone.
- **Offer Choices When Possible** — Trauma removes a person's sense of control. Offering small choices ("Would you like to sit here or over there?") restores agency and reduces resistance.
- **Avoid Re-traumatization** — Do not require repeated retelling of traumatic events unnecessarily. Coordinate with victim advocates to conduct trauma-informed interviews.
- **Recognize Traumatic Memory Limitations** — Trauma disrupts memory consolidation. Fragmented, inconsistent, or emotionally flat accounts from victims are normal — not signs of deception.
- **Know Your Referral Resources** — Be prepared to connect individuals with tribal behavioral health, victim services, and crisis support as part of every trauma-related call.

RESOURCES, GRANTS & SUPPORT

Funding, Training, and Support Resources — Tribal Trauma-Informed Law Enforcement Programs | www.nativejustice.us

■ FEDERAL GRANT RESOURCES

Training & Behavioral Health

- **SAMHSA Tribal Behavioral Health Grants** – Funds trauma-informed programs including co-responder models. samhsa.gov/tribal-ttac
- **OVW Tribal Governments Program** – Supports trauma-informed victim response and officer training. justice.gov/ovw/tribal-governments
- **IHS Behavioral Health Programs** – Tribal behavioral health services and co-responder support. ihs.gov/behavioralhealth

Law Enforcement Capacity

- **COPS Tribal Resources Grant (TRG)** – Funds tribal law enforcement training including trauma-informed approaches. cops.usdoj.gov
- **BJA Tribal Justice Programs** – Supports tribal law enforcement capacity including training programs. bja.ojp.gov/program/tribal-justice
- **CTAS – Coordinated Tribal Assistance Solicitation** – Consolidated DOJ funding for tribal public safety programs. justice.gov/tribal

■ 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

Integrate Trauma Training into Academy Curriculum Trauma-informed policing should be standard content in tribal law enforcement academies and annual in-service training.	Establish Co-Responder Protocols Formal co-responder agreements with tribal behavioral health for crisis calls reduce use of force and improve outcomes.
Support Officer Wellness Programs Officers cannot deliver trauma-informed service while personally overwhelmed. Peer support and counseling access are operational priorities.	Measure Trauma-Informed Practice Outcomes Track use of force, complaints, and crisis call outcomes. Data demonstrates program value and supports grant applications.

■ KEY WEBLINKS

National Native Justice Institute	www.nativejustice.us
BJA Tribal Justice Programs	bja.ojp.gov/program/tribal-justice
COPS Tribal Resources	cops.usdoj.gov/tribalresources
BIA Law Enforcement Services	bia.gov/bia/ojs
SAMHSA Tribal Behavioral Health	samhsa.gov/tribal-ttac
IHS Behavioral Health	ihs.gov/behavioralhealth
OVW Tribal Governments	justice.gov/ovw/tribal-governments
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