

FIELD TRAINING OFFICER (FTO) IN TRIBAL LAW ENFORCEMENT

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

■ THE FIELD TRAINING OFFICER PROGRAM IN TRIBAL DEPARTMENTS

The Field Training Officer (FTO) program is the bridge between academy training and independent patrol. It is the most formative period of a new officer's career — shaping their values, habits, decision-making, and relationship to the community they serve. In tribal law enforcement, the FTO role carries additional responsibility: experienced officers must transmit not only technical skills but cultural competency, trauma-informed practice, and the relational values unique to tribal public safety.

🎓 New officers retain far more from their FTO than from any academy instructor. The FTO defines what policing actually looks like.

⚠️ A poor FTO experience produces officers who are less safe, less effective, and more likely to generate complaints and use-of-force incidents.

👉 The best tribal FTO programs intentionally transmit cultural values, community relationships, and trauma-informed practice alongside technical skills.

📁 Structured, documented FTO programs produce better officers, reduce liability, and create defensible training records.

■ CORE FTO PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS

FTO Selection Standards

- FTOs must be experienced officers with exemplary performance, strong community relationships, and demonstrated cultural competency.
- FTOs should volunteer or be nominated — never assigned as punishment or default. Motivation to train matters significantly.
- All FTOs must complete a formal FTO certification program before assuming training responsibilities.
- Regularly evaluate and rotate FTOs to prevent bad habits becoming embedded in department culture.

Program Structure

- Standard FTO phases: observation (trainee watches), guided performance (trainee performs with coaching), and solo performance (trainee operates independently with documented oversight).
- Use a standardized Daily Observation Report (DOR) to document trainee performance on specific competencies after every shift.
- Establish written remediation procedures for trainees who fail to meet standards — document everything before making any termination decision.
- Conduct formal mid-program and end-program evaluations with written feedback and trainee signature.

Tribal-Specific FTO Content

- Criminal jurisdiction in Indian Country — practical application, not just classroom knowledge.
- Community relationship skills: how to engage with elders, approach cultural settings, and build trust with historically marginalized families.
- Trauma-informed patrol skills: recognizing and responding to trauma responses in the field.
- Major Crimes Act notification procedures and documentation requirements specific to the tribe's jurisdiction.

■ TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE FTO PROGRAMS

- **Model the Culture You Want to Build** — Everything a trainee sees their FTO do becomes normal. Model cultural respect, de-escalation, thorough documentation, and genuine community care every shift.
- **Debrief Every Shift** — Formal end-of-shift debriefs — discussing what went well and what could improve — accelerate learning more than any other FTO activity.
- **Separate Evaluation from Coaching** — Create psychological safety for trainees to make mistakes by keeping coaching conversations separate from formal evaluation records.
- **Include Community Elders in FTO Orientation** — Having new officers formally introduced to tribal leadership and elders during FTO orientation establishes foundational community legitimacy.
- **Document Performance Objectively** — DOR entries must be specific and behavioral, not subjective. "Failed to establish perimeter before approaching scene", not "bad judgment."
- **Protect Your Department with Good Records** — Well-documented FTO files are your best defense in personnel disputes, civil litigation, and accreditation review. Every day must be documented.

RESOURCES, GRANTS & SUPPORT

Funding, Training, and Support Resources — Tribal FTO Program Development | www.nativejustice.us

■ FEDERAL GRANT RESOURCES

Training & Capacity Funding

- **COPS Tribal Resources Grant (TRG)** – Funds tribal law enforcement training programs including FTO development. cops.usdoj.gov/tribalresources
- **BJA Tribal Justice Programs** – Supports tribal law enforcement capacity building and training infrastructure. bja.ojp.gov/program/tribal-justice
- **CTAS – Coordinated Tribal Assistance Solicitation** – DOJ consolidated tribal funding for law enforcement training and administration. justice.gov/tribal
- **BIA Law Enforcement Training Programs** – Federal training resources for tribal law enforcement including FTO curriculum. bia.gov/bia/ojs

Technical Assistance

- **International Association of Directors of Law Enforcement Standards & Training (IADLEST)** – National FTO standards and resources. iadlest.org
- **NNTC – National Native American Training Center** – Training resources specific to tribal law enforcement. bia.gov

■ 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 FTO Policy & Program Manual A formal, written FTO program manual establishes standards, protects the department legally, and ensures program consistency across FTO assignments.	Certify All FTOs Before They Train Uncertified FTO training creates liability and produces inconsistent results. Require formal FTO certification and document it in every officer's personnel file.
Review DOR Completion Weekly Supervisors should review Daily Observation Reports weekly to identify patterns, flag concerns early, and ensure FTO documentation quality.	Conduct Annual FTO Program Evaluations Formally evaluate the FTO program annually using graduate performance data, community feedback, and FTO self-assessment to drive continuous improvement.

■ 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
IADLEST – Law Enforcement Standards	iadlest.org
CTAS – DOJ Tribal Assistance	justice.gov/tribal
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