



# UNVEILING:

*Indigenous Breastfeeding,  
Birth Traditions, and  
First Foods*

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First Nations thank all the tribes, Native organizations, and allies of Native American communities whose hard work, values, and wisdom inform the content of this report.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

First Nations Development Institute's Native Agricultural and Food Systems Investments (NAFSI) recognizes that Native food systems are crucial to the health and well-being of Native American children and families. First Nations has long supported Native communities as they fortify traditional food systems, seek to increase access to healthy and fresh foods, increase awareness of, and involvement with, where food comes from, and expand knowledge of the connections between foods and Native cultures.

Birthing practices, the diet of lactating mothers, and breast/chestfeeding have a profound influence on health outcomes for infants and children, developing taste preferences, and fostering environmental and cultural connections. By addressing obstacles to accessibility and promoting traditional first foods for young Indigenous families, we revitalize a robust Indigenous food system and reconnect with the cultural and spiritual dimensions of birth. Within this context, "first foods" are plant and animal resources that are local, seasonal, nutritious, and harmonious with the environment.<sup>1</sup>

Beginning in 2022, First Nations' Indigenous Breastfeeding, Birth Work, and First Foods Project emphasizes rejuvenating tribal customs, knowledge, and practices concerning childbirth, prenatal and infant nutrition, feeding, and community supports. By providing grants, engaging with communities, adopting collaborative methods, and honoring ancestral wisdom, these initiatives have promoted the health and well-being of Indigenous communities, strengthening their bond with their cultural infrastructures of food systems and community.

Throughout 2022-2023, 17 grants were distributed to Native-led organizations across the United States, from New York to Alaska and Hawaii, supporting lactating mothers and ensuring infants develop a taste for, and connection to, traditional foods. Grant recipients have pursued initiatives which embrace culture, maternal health, and the well-being of infants and children. They have created healing environments, reproductive justice, and respect for the traditional tribal first foods.

The Indigenous Breastfeeding, Birth Work, and First Foods Project has received generous financial support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and First Nations' Keepseagle Endowment Fund.

In 2024, through the support of W.K. Kellogg, First Nations awarded nine renewal grants ranging from \$30,000 to \$60,000.

For more details, please see: [www.firstnations.org/our-programs/nourishing-native-foods-health](http://www.firstnations.org/our-programs/nourishing-native-foods-health)

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<sup>1</sup> Swampy, S., *Diversifying MyPlate: North American Indigenous Cuisine*. Assembly of First Nations. 2022.



# BREASTFEEDING AND NUTRITION IN INDIAN COUNTRY

Prior to colonization, Indigenous communities had developed intricate systems for childbirth in which midwives, maternal figures, and kin played pivotal roles, closely linked with the preparation and consumption of traditional foods and medicines. Such practices were deeply embedded in the cultural fabric, facilitating the transfer of ancestral knowledge and traditions across generations.

The creation of reservations and the colonization of Indigenous birthing systems led to significant changes in dietary habits and birthing practices. Limitations on land, water, and game; the introduction of Western plants and foods; and colonial ideas about medicine and birth came to pervade Native life. Colonial institutions endeavored to sever tribal communities from traditional birthing and breastfeeding practices, leading to soaring rates of infectious and chronic diseases. In “Decolonizing Birth,” Sarah Sunshine Manning reflects:

*Since the late 1800s, Native American lives largely have been dictated by federal government policies designed to stamp out traditions and create dependency on white institutions. Many traditions and ceremonies were outlawed, and families were separated as Native American children were forcibly removed from their homes to be placed in Indian boarding schools where their culture and language were forbidden. Then, in 1955, the federal Indian Health Service was established to manage the health care of Native Americans. Birth became a medicalized affair and was, more often than not, directed by white male obstetricians.<sup>2</sup>*

An increasing reliance on “experts” in the “science of nutrition” steadily disempowered mothers and grandmothers from their traditional roles as providers. A “scientific approach” was practiced directly on tribal children in the boarding schools. Tribal girls and women, some as young as six, were a target audience. As recollected by Sicangu Lakota author:

*...boarding schools are a model of internal colonialism because these settler institutions prevented generations of Oceti Sakowin women from mothering their own children and sharing their knowledge of their tribe’s rich intellectual/literary traditions with future generations. Through boarding schools, the American nation displaced Oceti Sakowin women from their traditional role in tribal society as our culture keepers and cultural bearers and replaced them with the teacher, the preacher, and others who would superimpose their will.<sup>3</sup>*

It was not until 1972 that the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) emerged as a pivotal social support system. Designed to provide nutritional assistance to those

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2 Manning, S., “Decolonizing birth.” YES! Magazine, Spring 2018.

3 Hernandez, S., *We Are the Stars: Colonizing and Decolonizing the Oceti Sakowin Literary Tradition*. University of Arizona Press, 2023.

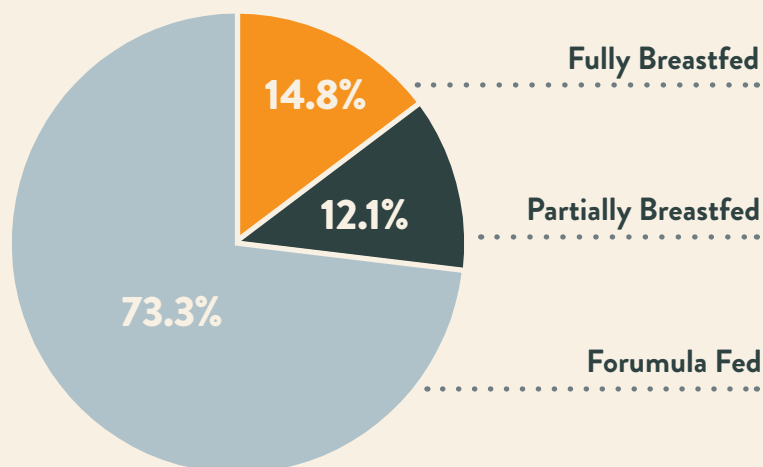
identified at nutritional risk, WIC attends to pregnant individuals, those who are breastfeeding, and children up to the age of five. This program represents an effort to address some of the nutritional challenges faced by contemporary Indigenous communities, albeit within a framework that may not fully align with traditional dietary practices and cultural preferences.<sup>4</sup>

Gestation is the critical time when the baby is nourished through the umbilical cord; during which the chemosensory systems are instrumental in shaping future preferences for flavors such as salt or bitterness. Repeated exposure to healthy foods via amniotic fluid and breast milk can enhance infants' acceptance of fruits and vegetables later in life; lack of consumption of these foods is associated with increased risk factors for chronic diseases in adulthood.<sup>5</sup>

However, American Indians/Alaska Natives (AI/Ans) participating in (WIC) still have the worst breastfeeding outcomes in comparison to all other racial groups. The rate of breastfeeding among mothers enrolled in WIC is 20% lower than mothers not participating in the program. In fact, women who are not receiving WIC benefits are more than twice as likely to report breastfeeding at the six-month mark. The range of foods permitted by the WIC program is notably restrictive for the AI/AN diet, lacking in regional specificity. It is apparent that WIC's preference is for supplying infant formula over supporting breastfeeding or providing evidenced-based peer counseling.<sup>6</sup>

**Figure 1: Fiscal Year 2018 BFDLA Tribal WIC Program Breastfeeding Measures of Fully Breastfed, Partially Breastfed and Formula Fed.<sup>7</sup>**

### Infants Seen at Tribal WIC Programs



4 USDA Food and Nutrition Service, "Special Supplemental Programs for WIC." U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2020.

5 DeCosmi, V., Scaglioni, S, Agostini, C. "Early taste experiences and later food choices." *Nutrients*, 9(2), pp.1-9. 2017.

6 Baumgartel, K. and Spatz, D. "WIC (The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children): Policy versus practice regarding Breastfeeding." *Nursing Outlook* 61(6), pp. 466-470, 2013.

7 Food and Nutrition Service, "WIC Participant and Program Characteristics-Charts," U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2020.

***In 2009, 11.6% of WIC's budget was spent on infant formula, at a cost of \$850 million. Forty-four percent of all food purchased through WIC was infant formula. WIC's evidence-based practices for breastfeeding initiatives, such as the Loving Support Peer Counselor Program, accounted for only \$34 million (0.6%) of the total budget.<sup>8</sup>***

Overlooking the nutritional and cultural value of traditional food presents obstacles to providing the best possible support for breastfeeding. There is an increasing concern among AI/AN people that the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Health and Human Services' Dietary Guidelines for Americans fail to acknowledge traditional food systems and their impact on AI/AN health and well-being. Research has shown that "disruptions to traditional subsistence activities can restrict Indigenous peoples' capacity to protect their nutrition and health. Furthermore, Indigenous peoples' overall health and cultural continuity are directly related to their ability to eat traditional foods and continue their traditional food practices."

The dietary habits and selections made by parents significantly shape the taste preferences and overall health outcomes of their infants, imprinting a lasting impact from the earliest stages of life. This intersection of dietary intake and early development accentuates the need for a reformed approach to food consumption and nutritional education, one that is cognizant of the historical and cultural contexts of Indigenous communities.

In many Native communities, there is a revitalized emphasis on ancestral memory activation, decolonization, and reindigenization. These movements seek to reestablish connections with ancestral roots and practices, particularly those lost traditions surrounding pregnancy, food, and eating, with the goal of mending the severed ties to the past and fostering healing and wellness among Indigenous populations. In AI/AN culture, breastfeeding is regarded as the

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8 Baumgartel et al, op cit.



first food and considered sacred medicine. AI/AN women and children have better health outcomes when tribal best practices promote breastfeeding programs that integrate traditional cultural foods into their programs. Recent research on the importance of breastfeeding explores the related physical and emotional benefits. These studies show consistent evidence that breastfed infants have reduced rates of allergies, asthma, obesity, and sudden infant death syndrome, as well as improved cognitive development. While the most critical impacts of breastfeeding are related to infant health, it also appears to increase I.Q. and verbal and intellectual performance in elementary-age children, and lowers the risk of infections and certain chronic diseases for children and adults, such as high blood pressure, obesity, type-2 diabetes, as well as ovarian and breast cancers. Breastfeeding is an important step toward improving AI/AN health and reducing vulnerability to disease.<sup>9</sup>

Comprehending breastfeeding within its cultural framework, and recognizing the obstacles that hinder such practices, is crucial. Addressing and surmounting these challenges may seem daunting, yet it is an essential objective. Efforts to eliminate barriers to access and to enhance the prominence of traditional first foods are critical steps in the path toward a robust Indigenous food system and rekindled familial ties to the cultural and spiritual elements of birth.

## FIRST NATIONS' WORK IN THE FIELD OF FIRST FOODS AND BREASTFEEDING

First Nations' mission is to uplift and sustain the lifeways and economies of Native communities through advocacy, financial support, and knowledge sharing.

We envision a world in which Tribal Sovereignty is upheld, and Native ingenuity and knowledge are honored and respected. First Nations believes that Native peoples have the capacity and ingenuity to ensure sustainable economic, spiritual, and cultural well-being.

In 2020, First Nations took the strategic initiative to allocate general support funding to Native-led programs supporting breastfeeding and first foods. This funding built on the interest generated from the First Nations' food systems-specific Keepseagle Endowment Fund which is focused on strengthening tribal food systems and producers. Breastfeeding mothers are foundational in any tribal food system.

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9 Woodley, E., Crowley, E., Pryck, J., Carmen, A., "Cultural indicators of Indigenous Peoples' food and agro-ecological systems," Security 104, February 2006.

10 CDC. Recommendations and Benefits, Breastfeeding. 2020.

In 2021, the First Foods and Breastfeeding project supported 10 grantees. Each community partner enhanced access to first foods and fostered culturally relevant lactation practices for Native parents, caregivers, and young children. The initiatives of these partners emphasized the significance of cultural birthing practices and education on breastfeeding and first foods beginning well before pregnancy. Notably, some of the most meaningful work in Indian Country was undertaken by grassroots birth practitioners, including midwives with strong community and cultural connections to traditional practices.

Initiated in January 2022, the Indigenous Breastfeeding, Birth Work, and First Foods project fosters Native traditional food systems and supports producers and practitioners. We provide resources promoting equitable birthing practices and endeavor to strengthen the bonds between cultural heritage, maternal health, and nutrition. The project strengthens community-based programs that enhance access to culturally congruent lactation practices for Native parents, caregivers, and children. It emphasizes the importance of early exposure to traditional dietary preferences, recognizing the foundational role that the nutritional habits of lactating mothers play in shaping the child's future diet and health.





# OVERVIEW OF PROJECT GRANTS

During 2022 to 2024, grants ranging from \$23,000 to \$60,000 were awarded to 17 Native groups serving 29 tribes and four urban AI/AN community. These community partners are in Alaska, Arizona, California, Minnesota, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, South Carolina, South Dakota, Utah Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin. The grants served to:

- Promote best breastfeeding practices
- Improve the nutrition of lactating mothers
- Increase traditional food access for infants and young children
- Foster community-led food production with a focus on youth involvement

Allowable activities for funding included, but were not limited to:

- Creating and leading workshops and services on breastfeeding and breastfeeding support groups, including personnel;
- assessing of prenatal exposure to first foods and first-food consumption during lactation;
- increasing local food access and distribution;
- training for midwives, doulas, or lactation consultants;
- and exposing young children and their caregivers to traditional foods.

Community partners' achievements included:

- Distribution of 1,639 food boxes and garden kits;
- holding 166 educational workshops;
- providing 48 individuals with breastfeeding educational materials;
- and presenting 717 tribal community events.

Community events organized by our partners came to be the heartbeat of the project, bringing to life the essence of our mission to reconnect with, and revitalize, Indigenous traditions. These events are designed to weave together cultural heritage with health and nutrition. Each event became an opportunity for community members to immerse themselves in practices that are both ancestral and healing, promoting a lifestyle that aligns with traditional values and contemporary needs. Such events have included:

- **Gardening and Plant Giveaways:** Through hands-on gardening events and the distribution of plant giveaways, participants are reintroduced to the age-old practice of growing traditional foods. These activities not only teach agricultural skills, but also reinforce the importance of self-sufficiency and environmental stewardship.
- **Powwows:** Serving as cultural celebrations, powwows are instrumental in preserving Indigenous identity. They provide a space for community members to engage in traditional dances, songs, and rituals, fostering a sense of belonging and intergenerational connections.
- **Women's Retreats:** These retreats offer a sanctuary for women to connect with one another and share knowledge about birthing practices, breastfeeding, and maternal nutrition. They are vital for empowering women, providing support, and strengthening community ties.
- **Open Spaces for Healing:** Recognizing the trauma and challenges faced by Indigenous communities, these healing spaces became essential for mental and emotional well-being. They offer a place for sharing, healing, and reconnecting with traditional healing practices.
- **Cooking Classes:** By teaching how to prepare traditional foods, these classes play a crucial role in nutritional education. They helped bridge the gap between the availability of traditional foods and the knowledge required to incorporate them into daily meals.
- **Birthing and Breastfeeding Q&As:** Dedicated sessions for discussing birthing and breastfeeding provide crucial support to expectant and new mothers. These forums allow for the exchange of knowledge, addressing concerns, and promoting traditional practices in maternal and infant care.

Each event, a thread in the fabric of community life, strengthened the weave of culture, health, and nutrition. By engaging in these activities, community members not only reclaimed their heritage, but also laid the groundwork for a healthier future for themselves and subsequent generations. The success of these events is a testament to the resilience of Indigenous traditions and the enduring strength of our communities. Through these gatherings, we witnessed the tangible outcomes of our project: empowered individuals, enriched cultural practices, and enhanced community well-being.

Each community partner consistently demonstrated passion and tenacity in safeguarding their environment and upholding age-old cultural values, especially nourishment and natural infant feeding practices like breastfeeding. Each project utilized a strengths-based approach, emphasizing traditional ecological knowledge, nutritional

wisdom, and maternal practices, like breastfeeding, to enrich community food systems. Human capacity, natural resources, youth, elders, community-based institutions, tribal sovereignty, economic opportunity, and treaty rights were pivotal elements.

In working closely with our Indigenous partners, First Nations established a network of doulas, midwives, and devoted individuals who serve as stewards of tradition and agents of change, respecting and propagating family and food cultural traditions.

These collectives passionately engage in cultivating, harvesting, preparing, and consuming foods that are intrinsic to their respective regions and profoundly linked to their birthing and maternal communities. They honor the legacy of their ancestors by embracing and perpetuating food customs integral to their cultural tapestries. The culinary practices and food choices adopted are a testament to their enduring cultural values, and they extend beyond sustenance, symbolizing a rich, shared history and a source of communal identity.

The providers involved are deeply motivated, recognizing the significance of offering Indigenous birthing services, nutrition education, and food within their communities. This motivation stems from their personal experiences of inadequate access to essential resources, foods, and knowledge. Their insight into the challenges faced by many within the community fuels their dedication to mitigating such disparities and fostering a holistic and culturally connected approach to nutrition and birthing services.



# SUMMARY OF PARTNER PROJECTS

## *Alaska Native Birthworkers Community*

**Project Name:** General Support

**Serves:** Self-identified Alaska Native and Indigenous families birthing in Alaska

**Award to Date:** \$95,000

[www.nativebirthworkers.org](http://www.nativebirthworkers.org)

The Alaska Native Birthworkers Community (ANBC) is a grassroots organization deeply committed to serving Alaska Native families across all stages, from preconception to postpartum. They aspire to champion sovereignty from the very first breath, signifying the deep connection between birth and autonomy. With the support of their grant, ANBC is poised to amplify its outreach and advocacy on behalf of the communities it represents. This commitment translates to the provision of culturally attuned care, devoid of any costs, for families navigating the journey of childbirth. ANBC is focused on creating a robust support network dedicated to nurturing and empowering emerging Indigenous birthworkers, ensuring the tradition is passed on and enriched.

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## *American Indian Family Center*

**Project Name:** “Wakanyeja Kin Wakan Pi (Our Children Are Sacred) Women’s Program”

**Serves:** Inter-Tribal, all tribal nations of Minnesota, Wisconsin, North and South Dakota

**Award to Date:** \$83,488

[www.aifcmn.org](http://www.aifcmn.org)

The American Indian Family Center in St. Paul, Minnesota, is a beacon of support for the urban Native community, offering a diverse range of services and resources tailored to Indigenous families. Wakanyeja Kin Wakan Pi supported breastfeeding awareness workshops, first-food culinary demonstrations, and monthly support sessions facilitated by a traditional lactation counselor. This initiative educates mothers about contemporary lactation practices, intertwining them with discussions on ancestral breastfeeding values, foods that nurture lactation, postpartum care, and traditional food preparation.

## *A'nowa:ra Owira Doulas*

**Project Name:** “Tewatonkáriaks  
(All of us are Hungry)”

**Serves:** Saint Regis  
Mohawk Tribe

**Award to Date:** \$85,805

[www.aodoulas.org](http://www.aodoulas.org)

The A'nowa:ra Owira Doulas cater to the needs of the Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe in Akwesasne, New York. With the aid of this funding, they hold cooking workshops catering to prenatal and postpartum families, emphasizing the value of Indigenous foods. The objective is to deepen the community's engagement with traditional foods, particularly those procured directly from local sources. The Doulas also provide lactation assistance to families and certify doulas in lactation counselor training. By joining forces with the Seven Dancers Coalition, they broadened their outreach beyond the clientele of A'nowa:ra Owira Doulas. Esteemed knowledge keepers teach planting, hunting, and fishing.

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## *Bois Forte Tribal Government*

**Project Name:** “Traditional  
First Food”

**Serves:** Minnesota Chippewa  
Tribe, Minnesota (Bois Forte  
Band; Fond du Lac Band; Grand  
Portage Band; Leech Lake  
Band; Mille Lacs Band; White  
Earth Band)

**Award to Date:** \$92,000

[boisforte.com](http://boisforte.com)

The Bois Forte Band of Chippewa in Nett Lake, Minnesota, faces the challenge of living in a food desert with no grocery store in its vicinity, and scarce access to fresh produce. The Maternal Child Health Department uses this grant to enhance fresh food accessibility for young families. It distributes Farm Bucks, allowing families to explore the offerings of the newly established Ode'imini Gizis Farmer's Market. Promotional materials, interactive demonstrations, and tasting sessions champion traditional first foods. Their efforts focus on early Head Start and WIC families, in alliance with Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program education and the State Health Insurance Assistance Program.

## Catawba Indian Nation

**Project Name:** “Supporting Breastfeeding and First Foods for Catawba Mothers and Children”

**Serves:** Catawba Indian Nation (aka Catawba Tribe of South Carolina)

**Award to Date:** \$32,000

[catawba.com](http://catawba.com)

In addressing a pronounced gap in prenatal care for its reservation residents, the Childcare Services Division of the Catawba Indian Nation (yeh is-WAH h'reh) is taking decisive action where the local clinic's provisions fall short. Drawing inspiration from the age-old Catawba tradition of storytelling, it fortifies and preserves ancestral practices. Backed by this grant, the division thoroughly assessed community needs to pinpoint challenges families face with breast/chest feeding, ensuring that future services, in collaboration with the Indian Health Service, are aligned. The department curated monthly food parcels for lactating tribal households, packed with traditional and nutritious foods; reconfigured policies to better accommodate breastfeeding employees; launched an awareness campaign around breastfeeding; and provided specialized lactation counseling.

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## Center for Indigenous Midwifery

**Project Name:** “First Breaths to First Foods; an intertribal resource guide on traditional foods and plant medicines for pregnant and parenting families”

**Serves:** Inter-Tribal

**Award to Date:** \$92,000

[www.indigenous-midwifery.org](http://www.indigenous-midwifery.org)

Located in Olympia, Washington, the Center for Indigenous Midwifery is a nexus for tribal communities nationwide, facilitating both virtual and face-to-face dialogues. A significant outcome of their Indigenous Childbirth Educator training was a traditional first-foods recipe book tailored for prenatal and postpartum well-being. Encompassing traditional wisdom, narratives, and recipes, this community-driven curriculum is a tangible and empowering asset, with a special emphasis on the childbearing phase.

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## Chickahominy Indian Tribe of Virginia

**Project Name:** “Chickahominy Indian Tribe: Healthy Breastfeeding Through First Foods Renewal and Nutritional Education”

**Serves:** Chickahominy Indian Tribe of Virginia

**Award to Date:** \$61,962

[www.chickahominytribe.org](http://www.chickahominytribe.org)

The Chickahominy Indian Tribe embarked on a pioneering project marking their initial direct interaction with new and young families within the tribe. This venture established a foundation for subsequent programs centered around maternal and childhood well-being. As part of the initiative, families received breastfeeding kits along with educational materials on breastfeeding and cultivating first foods. The community had the opportunity to participate in canning workshops and preparing baby food using first foods.



## Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council, Inc.

**Project Name:** “Breastfeeding, The Traditional Way”

**Serves:** Inter-Tribal, and Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Oneida Tribe of Indians of Wisconsin, Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin, Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Lake Superior

**Award to Date:** \$127,000

[www.glitc.org](http://www.glitc.org)

The Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council, which represents tribes across Wisconsin, is collaborating with the Native Breastfeeding Coalition of Wisconsin for its latest initiative. Leveraging the project’s grant, the council organized an Indigenous Breastfeeding Counselor Training. It rolled out virtual maternal health education sessions culturally tailored for Native families throughout Wisconsin. The council offered guidance in crafting lactation-friendly workplace policies and ensured that breastfeeding parents receive traditional local foods during Native Breastfeeding Week celebrations.

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## Indigenous Women Rising

**Project Name:** General Support

**Serves:** Native American Women in New Mexico

**Award to Date:** \$35,000

[www.iwrising.org/about-iwr](http://www.iwrising.org/about-iwr)

Indigenous Women Rising (IWR) stands as a beacon of support and advocacy, rooted in New Mexico, and dedicated to the holistic well-being of Native people. Founded on the pillars of health education, resource provision, and relentless advocacy, IWR is deeply committed to shaping an environment where care is not just equitable, but also resonates with the cultural nuances intrinsic to Native communities. Acknowledging the harsh reality that Native families often grapple with—prejudice and systemic racism during hospital births—IWR is intensifying its commitment to augmenting the midwifery fund, ensuring that Native families have access to culturally sensitive birthing experiences. Concurrently, it is bolstering its educational outreach, equipping families with the knowledge and tools they need to navigate the challenges they face.

## Mewinza Ondaadiziike Wiigaming

**Project Name:** General Support

**Serves:** Native families in Northern Minnesota

**Award to Date:** \$35,000

[www.mewinza.com](http://www.mewinza.com)

Nestled in Bemidji, Minnesota, Mewinza Ondaadiziike Wiigaming stands as a pillar of Anishinaabe-led birthing traditions and care. Fueled by the grant, it is pioneering a culturally attuned pregnancy curriculum designed to resonate with the Anishinaabe community. Concurrently, it is curating support groups, serving as communal hubs for families to exchange knowledge and receive tailored services. It is also adding an impressive 200 hours of community-driven birthing support, specifically tailored for Native families in Northern Minnesota, intertwining cultural heritage with contemporary care.

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## Navajo Breastfeeding Coalition

**Project Name:** “Hozho Healing Through Bodyfeeding”

**Serves:** Navajo Nation, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and Urban Native community

**Award to Date:** \$122,000

[www.facebook.com/people/](https://www.facebook.com/people/Navajo-Breastfeeding-Coalition/100064734728870)

[Navajo-Breastfeeding-Coalition/100064734728870](https://www.facebook.com/people/Navajo-Breastfeeding-Coalition/100064734728870)

The Navajo Breastfeeding Coalition embarked on the Hozho Healing Through Bodyfeeding project, designed to champion lactating parents by offering an array of virtual educational and support sessions. Doula and lactation counselors enhanced the support framework for families. A unique facet of the program is its collaboration with Indigenous agricultural producers. During specially organized field days, participants gained hands-on experience in crafting organic baby food and received insights into soil health and composting. To ensure the inclusivity and cultural relevance of the initiative, Navajo translators were instrumental in producing bilingual (Navajo/English) breastfeeding educational materials and public service announcements.

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## Nitamising Gimashkikinaan

**Project Name:** “Mothers are Medicine Project”

**Serves:** Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, Minnesota (Bois Forte Band; Fond du Lac Band; Grand Portage Band; Leech Lake Band; Mille Lacs Band; White Earth Band)

**Award to Date:** \$92,000

[www.facebook.com/groups/nitamising.gimashkikinaan](https://www.facebook.com/groups/nitamising.gimashkikinaan)

Nitamising Gimashkikinaan, which translates to “Our First Medicine” in Anishinaabe, is a dedicated team of Indigenous birth workers who cater to Native communities in Minnesota and beyond. Their initiative involves extending existing efforts of organizing virtual support circles dedicated to nurturing and equipping Indigenous mothers with age-old lactation practices, strengthening community bonds, and enhancing the holistic well-being of parents and their young ones. A collaboration with Dream of Wild Health provides traditional agriculture boxes to Indigenous families. The project assisted lactating parents in acquiring donor milk through the Minnesota Milk Bank.

## Onkwehon:we Midwives Collective

**Project Name:** General Support

**Serves:** Akwesasro:non and sister communities of the Onkwehon:we Nations

**Award to Date:** \$34,980

[onkwehonwemidwives.com](http://onkwehonwemidwives.com)

Positioned as a beacon of support in the Akwesasne region, the Onkwehon:we Midwives Collective (OMC) passionately dedicates itself to the full spectrum of maternal care, encompassing prenatal and midwifery services, postpartum lactation guidance, and overarching wellness initiatives tailored for mothers and infants. With support from this grant, OMC is poised to embark on a transformative journey aimed at revitalizing connections to ancestral traditions through nutrition. Their vision entails not just increasing access, but truly immersing postpartum mothers and their newborns in the richness of ancestral foods and the vital nourishment of breast milk. As part of this endeavor, OMC has committed to supplying their clientele with traditional foods, imbued with both nutrition and cultural significance. Additionally, recognizing the unparalleled benefits of breast milk for newborn health, OMC is establishing a coordinated effort to facilitate breast milk donations, ensuring that every newborn under their care begins life with the best nutritional foundation.

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## Saad K'idilyé

**Project Name:** General Support

**Serves:** Diné communities within and around the Albuquerque, New Mexico, area.

**Award to Date:** \$34,926

[saadkidilye.org](http://saadkidilye.org) Saad K'idilyé

stands as a guiding light for urban Navajo families residing in the Albuquerque metropolitan expanse. More than just a service provider, it curates a “language nest” – a nurturing space where the mellifluous cadences of ancestral Navajo speech are preserved and propagated. This environment, coupled with their communal spaces, allows families to immerse themselves in traditional cultural practices. While this organization already supports families during the prenatal and postpartum phases, the grant allows them to move into food sovereignty and the introduction of first foods. With a deep-rooted reverence for tradition, Saad K'idilyé is charting a course to organize educational workshops that delve into the richness of Diné foods and medicine. Its vision also encompasses the production of traditional Diné baby foods, ensuring that the youngest members of the community receive nourishment that's both healthful and resonant with cultural heritage.

## HeSapa Birth Circle/Wotakuye Mutual Aid

**Project Name:** HeSapa Birth Circle

**Serves:** Lakota and Dakota women in South Dakota

**Award to Date:** \$102,000

[www.facebook.com/people/Wotakuye-Mutual-Aid-Society/100069529644664/](https://www.facebook.com/people/Wotakuye-Mutual-Aid-Society/100069529644664/)

Wotakuye Mutual Aid, in its profound commitment to nurturing the cultural roots of the Oceti Sakowin community, anchors the HeSapa Birth Circle in Rapid City, South Dakota. This initiative is much more than a support group. It's a pulsating heart of traditional wisdom and practices dedicated to the Lakota and Dakota women. Central to its mission is the propagation of rich Oceti Sakowin birthing traditions, emphasizing the integral roles of nutritious food and breastfeeding in ensuring the holistic well-being of both mother and child. With the support of this grant, teaching sessions will be organized, serving as windows into ancestral wisdom, while mentoring initiatives will provide individualized guidance and support. In a nod to the profound bond between culture and cuisine, a cookbook brimming with traditional Lakota recipes will be curated, celebrating the culinary heritage of the community. The grant will also pave the way for the training of new Lakota birthworkers, ensuring that the legacy of the birth circle doesn't just persist, but flourishes.

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## Yurok Tribe

**Project Name:** "Yurok First Foods Planning Project"

**Serves:** Yurok Tribe of the Yurok Reservation, California

**Award to Date:** \$32,000

[www.yuroktribe.org](http://www.yuroktribe.org) Based in

Klamath, California, the Yurok Tribe Environmental Program's Food Sovereignty Division enhanced access to traditional first foods via an innovative pilot program. Through collaboration with external partners, the division distributed 250 pounds of traditional Yurok foods, including tan oak acorns, seaweed, and elk, to expecting and lactating parents, as well as to children aged 5 and under. This initiative fostered a deeper connection between infants, their parents, and their rich, cultural heritage.

# KEY INSIGHTS

## 1. Community Building and Collaboration

Community and collaborative efforts are crucial cornerstones of the highlighted programs. The importance of collective endeavor is evident through:

- **Community Gatherings:** They have proven to be effective in fostering relationship-building and relationality.
- **Elder Involvement:** Elders played a significant role, especially in advancing garden projects.
- **Partnerships:** Strong relationships with organizations and mutual collaborations in service delivery enhanced the impact and reach of the programs.
- **Home Visits and Communal Activities:** The incorporation of home visits and communal baby showers have piqued interest and fostered community engagement.

## 2. Reproductive and First Foods Justice

This theme emphasizes the interconnectedness of food and birthing, focusing on reclaiming regionally specific foodways and ensuring access to traditional foods from infancy:

- **Access to Traditional Foods:** Traditional food boxes, gardening projects, and food delivery services.
- **Community Education and Resources:** Creating healthy habits, sharing birth stories, and providing resources for community birthing services and new families.
- **Service Provision:** Services range from breastfeeding workshops and full-spectrum doula training to the establishment of Indigenous clinics and the provision of literature on premature and disabled infants.

## 3. Cultural Relevancy

Cultural elements are integral to the revitalization of birth work, with an emphasis on incorporating traditional wisdom and practices:

- **Cultural Gatherings and Ceremonies:** These are designed with cultural elements and wisdom, making ceremony a part of the services provided.
- **Language and Art:** Initiatives include language revitalization and the incorporation of artistry in projects.
- **Cultural Knowledge and Teachings:** Traditional ecological and birthing knowledge are vital, and talking circles have been used for sharing and learning.

## 4. Healing Spaces

Recognizing the need for healing due to past disconnects and barriers, programs under this theme focus on spiritual support and traditional healing ways:

- **Healing Methods:** These include grief circles, ceremonies like cedar baths and smudging, and decolonization efforts.
- **Community Remembrance:** The community has remembered breastfeeding and birthing practices and wants others to remember, too.
- **Provider Self-Care:** Workers/providers are also healing themselves through self-care, underscoring the importance of well-being amongst those who serve.

The accomplishments of our partners underscore the importance of several First Nations' foundational principles:

1. **Community Engagement:** Building strong communities across Indian Country reinforces our collective vision and strengthens the fabric of our shared identity.
2. **Collaborative Approach:** Partnerships and collaboration lie at the heart of our progress, ensuring our endeavors are inclusive and impactful.
3. **Ancestral Wisdom:** Rooting our efforts in tribal traditions means leveraging the rich wisdom of countless generations, which validates the initiatives derived from our shared cultures.
4. **Relationship-Building:** Establishing and nurturing relationships within the community ensures trust, mutual respect, and more sustainable outcomes.
5. **Nationwide Networks:** Creating Indian consortiums across the country fosters a wider reach and provides a platform for shared resources and knowledge.
6. **Educational Endeavors:** Community education, cooking, and nutrition are pillars of empowerment, equipping individuals with the skills and knowledge to make informed decisions.
7. **Food System Connections:** Establishing and reinforcing connections to Indigenous food systems guarantees that our approach remains holistic, integrating all facets of nutrition and wellness.

# NEXT STEPS:

From this inaugural grant pool, there were several insights and recommendations from both grantees and managers of the projects:

1. Breastfeeding, first foods, and birthing practices/justice are all fields in themselves. Understanding how each field feeds and supports the other is an important step in recognizing how colonization has impacted communities and how tribal communities are responding and building their own network of birth and breastfeeding response.
2. WIC has potential and plays an important role in financially and institutionally supporting work in tribal communities. However, WIC's inadequate budget is a hinderance to the program's effectiveness.
3. There are efforts both in federal policy and in medical practice that should be incorporated into future programming. Often, the medical community has been a barrier to Indigenous practice and culture, but there is a growing community of Indigenous medical professionals, like Valarie Blue Bird Jernigan, DrPH, MPH, who have valuable insight into the Indigenous birthing movement.
4. There was a request for an in-depth look at the role of the U.S. Indian Health Service on breastfeeding, birthing, and nutritional development in tribal communities.
5. The Land Back conversation is missing important conversations and connections about the future nutritional health of Indigenous children.
6. There is a need for consistent, long-term financial support that allows tribal programs around birthing, breastfeeding, and first foods.



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