

A SYSTEMS THINKING APPROACH FOR INCREASING WELLNESS IN URBAN INDIGENOUS AMERICA



FACING THE FUTURE
A LEADER'S VIEW OF
URBAN INDIAN ORGANIZATIONS
2016



FIRST NATIONS
DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE

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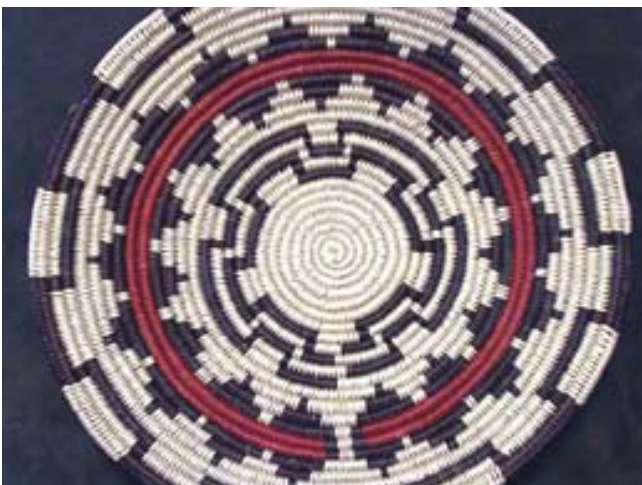
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INTRODUCTION



In July 2016, 30 leaders and workers of Urban Indigenous Organizations (UIO) from across the United States gathered together in Denver, Colorado. This meeting was an innovative collaborative event where attendees discussed the priorities and barriers of advancing the work in their respective arenas. The gathering was hosted and made possible by First Nations Development Institute, with further support from the National Urban Indian Family Coalition, the Kresge Foundation and the Comcast Foundation. After two days the attendees had identified shared themes and trends and where the most powerful leverage points for positive change may be.

The cohort represented organizations making substantial contributions to the lives of Native people across the country, including housing advocacy and education, direct health services and equity work, children and family welfare, economic innovation and education, development and philanthropy, and support and advocacy for people dealing with homelessness. The breadth and depth of insight from these leaders produced the context and outline of national work they believe will bring meaningful and transformative change for urban Indigenous populations. As an added outcome, the cohort developed a shared sense of camaraderie through which an active network for future collaboration and support was created.

Throughout the gathering, a consistent theme emerged: the tension between acknowledging the challenges Native people face economically, institutionally and physically, and not contributing to the systemic consequences of framing the urban Native experience as being negative.

A tension exists between facing the difficult reality of urban Indigenous life and operating without a scarcity mindset.

THE STATE OF THE URBAN INDIGENOUS ORGANIZATIONS

THE MAJORITY OF NATIVE PEOPLE LIVE OFF OF RESERVATIONS.

Even though 72% of all American Indian/Alaska Natives (AI/AN), and 78% of all AI/AN children live off of reservations, the National Urban Indian Family Coalition (NUIFC) argues that Native people residing in urban areas are among the most hidden populations in the nation. This invisibility has created and perpetuates extreme disparities across all the major sectors of life and community for tribal citizens living in cities, including children and family services, housing and homelessness, economic development and employment, and health wellness (including the justice system)¹.

INSTITUTIONALIZED MACHINATIONS HAVE HAD TREMENDOUS IMPACT ON THE WELL-BEING OF URBAN NATIVE COMMUNITIES.

U.S. government efforts such as the Indian Relocation Act of 1956 and the Indian Education Act of 1972 compounded the failure of economic and education policy regarding Indigenous people (as evidenced by the impetus for the legislation) and established the conditions for the predictable levels for performance for Indigenous communities.

¹ *Making the Invisible Visible* Policy Blueprint from Urban Indian America, pg. 7. National Urban Indian Family Coalition.

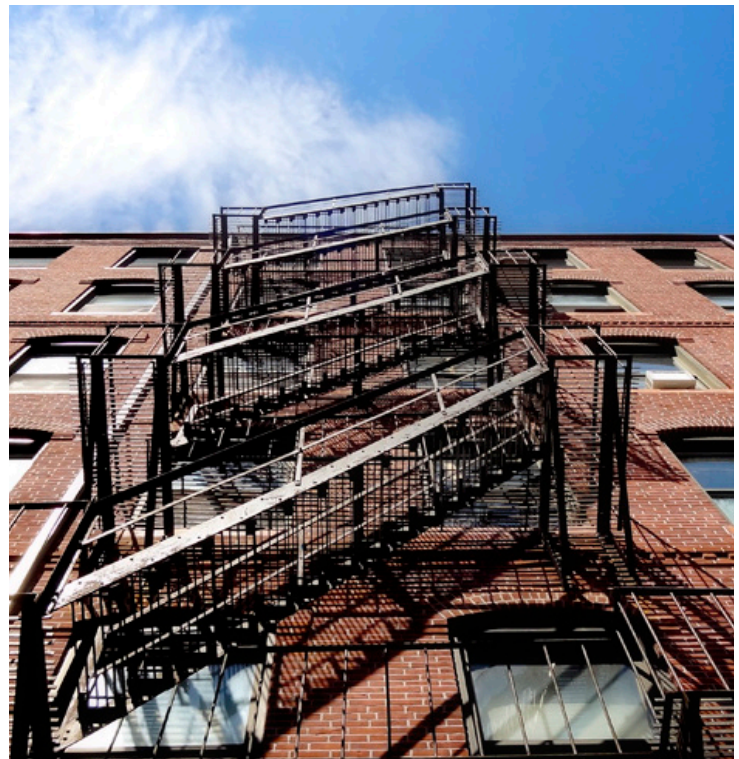


72%

of all
American
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Native people
live in cities

URBAN COMMUNITIES REPRESENT MANY NATIONS AND CULTURES.

Urban areas are often the home of Indigenous people representing tribes and traditional homelands numbering in the hundreds. There are 566 officially recognized tribes and many other distinct tribes and indigenous peoples, including the Kanaka Maoli (Hawaiians), with unique cultures, languages and histories. Unlike tribal contexts, where a central government or agreed-upon customs and leadership can coordinate efforts for the whole community, urban centers have the additional challenge (and potential strength) of meeting the shared needs of a diverse population.



THE STATE OF URBAN INDIGENOUS ORGANIZATIONS CONTINUED

CONNECTING WITH “HOME” AND IDENTITY OF PLACE IS A CHALLENGE.

While resiliency is a character trait shared by every surviving Indigenous community in the U.S., the relationships between urban Indigenous people and their “home communities” can be incredibly complex and often challenging. Sources of cultural identity are usually connected to tribal lands and communities, and the experience of being grounded in the norms, ceremony, language and symbols of one’s tribe can depend on the ability to travel to, spend time, and have the personal connections with the people back “home.” For people living in cities at great geographical or generational distance from their tribal centers, these can be significant barriers.

INNOVATION AND TRANSFORMATIVE SERVICE ARE HAPPENING IN URBAN AREAS.

The challenges of the urban community such as displacement, no central administration, limitations of funding opportunities and ambiguous relationships with public servants, are clear and the negative effects are felt. However, those conditions have also produced dynamic and groundbreaking work in housing, education, healthcare and more. The American Indian Opportunities Industrialization Center in Minneapolis is demonstrating how to successfully address the academic achievement gap between Native learners and their non-Native peers. The Chief Seattle Club in Seattle is building bridges between the Pike Place Market and Club members to show how Indigenous entrepreneurship can be a vehicle out of homelessness. Hawaiian Community Assets, Inc. works to assist Native Hawaiians to secure sustainable housing in one of the most challenging real estate contexts in the world.





The National Urban Indian Family Coalition has just released a comprehensive report, bringing to light the current conditions of American Indians and Alaska Natives living in cities across the country. Presenting qualitative and quantifiable data, this research and publishing project is a first-of-its-kind work.

Each UIO represented at the Denver gathering, without exception, is doing incredible things with limited resources. The accomplishments of the previous generation of urban leaders are being embraced and built upon, and given the tremendous structural opposition to their work, the energy, creativity and heart is incredibly inspiring.



RECOMMENDATIONS FROM LEADERS OF URBAN INDIGENOUS ORGANIZATIONS

Following a shared reflection of the larger urban systems of economy, culture and government in which UIOs are embedded, the impacts on UIOs and predictable outcomes were discussed. In order to reverse the trends that do not promote the flourishing of Indigenous people and to encourage the trends that are helping Indigenous people to do well, the gathered leaders presented recommendations to move forward. A total of five recommendations were presented, however a few developed very similar ideas. The following four recommendations describe four distinct calls for action.

01

BUILD A NEW INDIGENOUS FRAMEWORK FOR THE TRANSFER OF KNOWLEDGE AND THE STEWARDSHIP OF RESOURCES

The first recommendation called for the time and resources for building a new Indigenous framework for transferring knowledge and for resources and capacity. Operating under the same assumptions and principles as other organizations within the dominant culture can limit and, in some cases, work against the goals of Indigenous organizations. For Indigenous groups to thrive, especially in urban contexts away from traditional cultural centers, a framework built upon Indigenous values and actualized in ways that affirms Indigenous identity is necessary.

Time did not allow for this recommendation to include a working model for this framework. However, several key aspects to be included were discussed:



The framework must be wholly *Indigenous*, based on Indigenous values. Attempts of Indigenous organizations to align within the framework of the dominant culture have had mixed results. While acknowledging the challenge of interfacing with partners and agencies *cross-culturally*, this recommendation comes with the resolve to affirm the power and wisdom of Indigenous spirit and insight. The Indigenous identity is more than a cultural accoutrement. It has the essence to not only predicate Native communities, it also contains powerful solutions to the seminal challenges facing Indigenous urban organizations (and the larger society) today.

The framework must be flexible. Urban Indigenous organizations are constantly at the intersection of the actions of the local Indigenous community, the funding environment, local government, economic systems, staff and leadership. These variables are consistently evolving and changing in reaction to the systems that surrounds them. An effective framework needs to be adaptive and always embracing of additional learning, to stay responsive in a context where disorder is predictable.



The framework must have a worldview grounded in natural ecosystems. This aspect recognizes the depth of organizational wisdom that can be learned from the natural world and how those insights have deep resonance with Indigenous values. Additionally, exercising a framework that incorporates a devotion to the environmental concerns harnesses the energies of Indigenous peoples where they are currently engaged already.

The framework must include processes to restore trust within and outside of the Indigenous community. The traumatic history of Indigenous people in the urban context is well documented. The often dysfunctional relationship between tribal people and federal and local government agencies, education systems, industry, housing opportunities and medical infrastructures may be legacies of past policies, but they do still have consequences and vestiges in the present context. Understanding that trust is essential, but not automatic, and solutions must be designed into any successful framework.



The framework must disavow the scarcity mindset. There is little doubt that having a disposition of defensiveness and survival has been natural if not utilitarian for Indigenous people living in the U.S. throughout history. However, at this point in time, because of the tremendous strides Indigenous people have been making, a strengths-based mindset can offer significant advantages where thinking in terms of scarcity cannot. The importance of working within the Indigenous community from a position of pride in the Indigenous identity, what opportunities Indigenous people can create for themselves, and what Indigenous people may contribute to the world cannot be understated.

In practice, the framework may look similar to the structure of the Denver gathering. One possibility is for a consistent group of leaders to meet regularly to build strong relationships and develop partnerships for shared prosperity.

02

PROMOTE AN INDIGENOUS –VALUES AGENDA THROUGH A COORDINATED NATIONAL CAMPAIGN

The second recommendation is to promote an Indigenous-values agenda to address Indigenous concerns through a coordinated national campaign. A sustained, intentional messaging organization that provides a unified voice for the universally relevant issues of Indigenous people throughout the country can leverage the potency of the political, economic and cultural power of tribal and urban Indigenous communities. A resonating message can generate social momentum and translate into understanding and recognition of important issues, building partnerships, and the leverage for political change.

This recommendation envisions a campaign vehicle rooted in policy work as well as media messaging. The coordination between the two are vital.

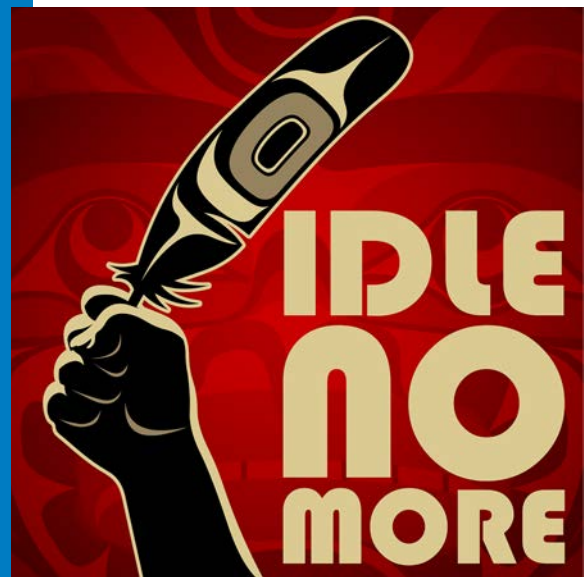
Similar movements, namely *Black Lives Matter*, are currently making significant impact and creating tremendous energy nationwide. The general public has already been exposed to these movements and are “primed” to respond to similar campaigns. An Indigenous movement, launched in this environment, has the potential to capitalize on the energy created by other movements.



A primary driver for technical media campaigns are students and others within the university systems. This population continues to serve as the cradle for social movements and an Indigenous movement should look to universities to leverage what may be already happening there and to take advantage of the capacity of change.

The opportunity for tribes and Urban Indigenous Organizations to work together in concert is a powerful one. The priorities of Indigenous communities in tribal centers are often distinct from their relatives in urban areas, however core issues continue to affect Indigenous people throughout the nation, and combining the efforts in both contexts has the potential to generate tremendous momentum.

The vision of a coordinated campaign network and messaging includes the possibility of utilizing tools such as intentional agitation and unapologetic conveying of the Indigenous experience in the country, to improve the lives and prospects for Indigenous people in the U.S. Additionally, themes of food and the environment were listed as primary areas to start.



03

TAKE INTO DEEP CONSIDERATION THE ADVANTAGES.....MORE HOLISTICALLY

A third recommendation takes into deep consideration the advantages of perceiving the distinct members of an Indigenous urban community more holistically, including partners and allies such as public agencies. Develop an organized structure to gather and distribute resources that meet the needs of Indigenous community agencies in a particular urban area. The needs Urban Indigenous Organizations currently are working to meet demand their full capacity individually. Coordinating ways to resource shared needs or vision for the future goes beyond what any organization is prepared to do sustainably, although it's that kind of coordination that promises to facilitate urban Indigenous communities to thrive.

In order to address the needs of the whole community, a model that is built upon the values of having capacity for compassion, sustainable commitment and collaboration is key. Understanding the felt needs of the community and taking into account the diversity among members is complex work, and paramount to success. Initially the work would not be to respond to everything concerning the community, instead the primary goal would be to learn to understand what irreducible set of objectives must be prioritized for systemic change.

A robust systems view of urban Indigenous communities is required to discover these priorities and to understand the relationships between those priorities and how they affect Indigenous people. As these priorities are identified, resourced and engaged in, the processes for doing so must involve community members at every step.

Champions for change and leaders who can communicate with Indigenous community members, as well as with partners and stakeholders, need to be recognized and supported. Given the competing values of needing unified direction and honoring the diversity within urban communities, the difficulty of these roles are significant, and intentionally supporting and encouraging these people is critical.

One suggested area to prioritize is to find ways to promote healthier environments of work where many or all of staff may be dealing with varying degrees of historical trauma. This is of particular relevance to organizations with Indigenous staff, who experience the consequences of historical trauma at a higher rate than other groups and whose work may often be triggering.

04

CALL FOR A FOCUS ON ELDERS WITHIN THE URBAN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY

The final recommendation called for a focus on elders within the urban Indigenous community. As the knowledge keepers of the community, elders need to be identified, protected and made space for their presence to be significant and honored.

Spending time with local elders is often the only opportunity for community members to learn traditional teachings. Traveling to tribal home areas may be unfeasible, or the relationships to facilitate learning may not be available (many people have been separated from their tribal communities for generations). Finding ways to foster meaningful and generative connections with elders that are available to them is vital.

Connecting with elders, and for elders to likewise connect with youth, is not always easy and should not be taken for granted. Systems to provide support to make introductions and to help with any cultural, generational or communication barriers would be very helpful and may be necessary.

Discerning which individuals may be in the position to best serve as elders is a complex first step. Age alone does not qualify someone as an elder, and instances where people may advocate for their own recognition without community support are common. Additionally, in the urban context, hundreds of distinct tribes may be represented and all of them have unique cultural qualities. For a Native person living in a city, looking to affirm his or her identity by building relationships with someone has “gone before them,” the question of *which tribe?* may be pertinent. These are very surmountable challenges, but it is important to consider them in the design phase.

Beyond providing knowledge, wisdom and meaningful relationships for individuals, elders can also provide counsel for urban Indigenous organizations’ leaders and serve as liaisons to the community. The Native American Community Services of Erie and Niagara Counties Inc., (NACS) has created a Council of Elders that serves in that exact capacity. Members of the NACS Council of Elders are recognized as being people who have traditional knowledge, history in the community, are role models of high character, represent the diversity of the community, and whose standing as an elder in the community is self-evident.

Special attention to the particular synergy that often occurs in the relationships between youth and elders. Innovative ideas and crucial commitments often emerge out of those connections and nurturing those relationships and discovering new ways to connect more young people with elders is a powerful opportunity.





CONCLUSION

All of these recommendations revolve around a few core themes: the coordination of resources, holding a strengths-based approach, and understanding the structural and societal forces that have created the situation.

It is profound to consider just how far UIOs have come since the Relocation Act. Despite the difficulties, these organizations are providing a way forward, not only for the Indigenous people they are serving directly, but for their non-Native neighbors as well.

Finally, the benefits of face-to-face connection with peers for these leaders is clearly evident. The pressures facing executive directors in these organizations are immense, and performing their duties effectively is often at odds with personal sustainability. The kind of support they offered each other at the gathering was immediately empathetic and visibly encouraging. The time together may have been as valuable for the leaders personally as it was for the work they produced at this event.



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