

Tribal Engagement Toolkit



Introduction



Words that are bolded and in teal have a definition in the glossary at the end.

Purpose

Engaging with Tribal Nations and families is a specialized practice that takes time to hone. In partnership with the Oregon Department of Human Services (ODHS) Office of Tribal Affairs, Self-Sufficiency Programs has created a Tribal Engagement Toolkit that offers insight and practice knowledge to strengthen engagement with **American Indian/Alaska Native** Tribes and families.

Engagement with Tribal communities is needed to understand and co-create solutions around common issues, as we aim to better serve Tribal members and families. Sharing space to engage, listen and co-create solutions creates invaluable opportunities for transformation of the system through the power of relationship.

When Tribal input is acknowledged and integrated, it is a source of strength and a wellspring of creative problem-solving. This ensures Self-Sufficiency staff have better tools to help the people we serve heal from the trauma they have experienced and overcome the challenges that brought them to the system's attention. The [ODHS Equity North Star](#) and [RiSE principles](#) fold into this work of delivering holistic services within the context of Tribal cultures.

Because engagement is a dynamic relationship process impacted by the people, systems and contexts involved, this toolkit is not an instruction manual on how staff should build meaningful and active engagement with Tribes. Instead, it shares lessons, resources and possible approaches to help you establish rapport with Tribal families, strengthen relationships with Tribal Nations, and understand historical challenges still affecting Tribal members today.

Remember that not everyone uses the same words to identify with their culture and heritage. Some may prefer Native, Indigenous, or the name of their specific Tribe. It is good practice to ask how someone identifies, rather than assuming.


Intended audience

The Tribal Engagement Toolkit was created for any Self-Sufficiency employee to use when engaging with American Indian/Alaska Native Tribes, families, or Tribal members/citizens. Whether you're new to Tribal engagement or you have some experience, this toolkit offers useful tips, teachings, values and program anecdotes on how to build or add to your foundational skills in Tribal engagement.

Guiding Values/Principles

When engaging with Tribal Nations and communities, there are unwritten rules, norms and values that usually govern the behavior of the Tribal community. Below are a few guiding values to help understand Tribal culture and assist in better connecting with American Indian/Alaska Native Tribes and families.

- **Relationship** – In Tribal culture, relationships with each other and the natural world are incredibly valuable. How we relate to each other matters as it requires energy, attention and balance.
- **Reciprocity** – Life is about what we give back. In a healthy relationship, actions are not one sided but balanced through equal distribution of giving back.
- **Interconnectedness** – whether we are aware or not, everything in the universe is connected. Each decision, action or inaction impacts our relationship with all things.
- **Strengths-based** – Tribal perspective often emphasizes a “cup half full” mentality where abundance is valued over deficiencies and optimism is valued over pessimism.



The Office of Tribal Affairs would like to acknowledge the National Indian Child Welfare Act Association (NICWA) for influencing and informing this toolkit. The foundation of this toolkit is based on the culturally responsive teachings of NICWA and Tribal culture.

Background



American Indian/Alaska Native Tribes have a unique relationship with the U.S. federal and state governments where Tribes have political status and are recognized as **sovereign** governments.



Establish yourself as a helper – providing hands-on resources and support and knowing when to step aside.

This government-to-government relationship with Tribal Nations sets Tribal members apart from other communities of color. As part of a state government entity, it is the responsibility of ODHS to establish, partner and consult with Oregon Tribal Nations. In becoming an anti-racist organization that fosters equity, ODHS must respect, uphold and protect Tribal sovereignty to honor the government-to-government relationship.

In Tribal engagement, one the best ways to begin is to establish yourself as a **helper** – providing hands-on resources and support and knowing when to step aside. Engaging with Tribes is not a transactional relationship, and ODHS staff are not saviors or a **paternalistic** authority that knows best. Some Tribal members will be more comfortable in receiving Tribal services, others may prefer receiving ODHS services. In our work, we should be flexible and open to how they want to connect and be served.

ODHS' Partnerships with Tribal Nations

The State of Oregon has Nine Federally Recognized Tribes. These Nine Tribes are sovereign nations with their own separate governments and territories. The Tribes have the power to protect the health and safety of their members and govern their land. Each Tribe has its own distinct culture and history. Talking with one Tribe does not mean you have engaged with all Tribes, or that their opinions and beliefs represent any other Tribe.

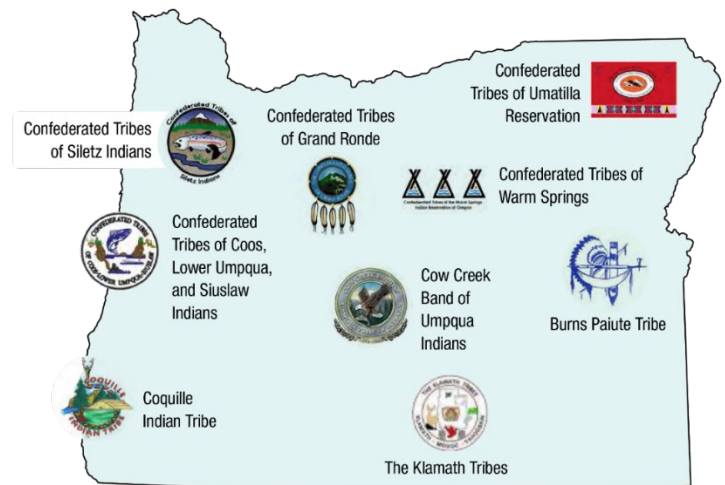
Oregon's Nine Federally Recognized Tribes

- [The Burns Paiute Tribe](#)
- [Confederated Tribes of Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians](#)
- [Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde](#)
- [Confederated Tribes of Siletz](#)
- [Confederated Tribes of Umatilla Indian Reservation](#)
- [Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs](#)
- [Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians](#)
- [Coquille Indian Tribe](#)
- [The Klamath Tribes](#)

ODHS partners with the Nine Tribes to ensure access to services for Tribal members. In addition, our local offices may interact with members from any one of the 574+ federally recognized Tribes across the country as well as Tribes not federally recognized.

The current location for the Nine Tribes only represents a small fraction of their traditional homelands. When treaties were signed, reservations and territories were decided by the U.S. government which forcibly moved Tribes to designated areas.

The Nine Federally Recognized Tribes of Oregon



Confederated denotes that there are multiple Tribes represented within this group. For example, the Confederated Tribes of Umatilla Indian Reservation includes members of the Cayuse, Umatilla and Walla Walla Tribes.

Importance of Engaging with Tribes

There are rules governing how we treat and uphold the sovereignty of Tribal Nations in Oregon. In 1996, Governor Kitzhaber signed an Executive Order (1996-30) recognizing the government-to-government relationship between the State of Oregon and Oregon Tribal Nations. In 2001, Senate Bill 770 was passed by the Oregon State Legislature that outlined the Tribal consultation framework and required all state agencies to establish policy and work with Tribes.

However, engaging with Tribal Nations is **not only** a legal requirement – engagement is equally important for establishing partnerships with the Tribal community and informing ODHS policy, programing, implementation, and evaluation. Tribes and Tribal members have cultural knowledge and wisdom that U.S. state and federal systems have neither traditionally nor intentionally sought, valued or incorporated into human service efforts. Because of this, many of our services are not built to support Tribal members. When we build relationships with the Tribes, we can strengthen our supports for all the people we serve.

What is Tribal engagement?

At minimum, Tribal engagement means intentionally reaching out and making a connection with a Tribal Nation and/or family. A connection means you have

established communication and both parties understand the purpose of the interaction. Sending a single email, leaving a voice message or communicating through a third party is not considered effective engagement.

The ODHS Tribal Affairs Office is currently working on a Tribal Consultation Policy that will add further guidance to engaging with Oregon Tribal Nations. Consultation is an enhanced form of communication that emphasizes trust, respect and shared responsibility.ⁱ It is an open and free exchange of information and opinion among parties, which leads to mutual understanding and comprehension.

History of Tribal Engagement

Tribal Nations have long prioritized passing down their culture, languages and traditions to the next generation. Throughout history, state and federal governments have intentionally disrupted this practice. As recently as the 1950s and 60s, the goal of U.S. government policy toward American Indian/Alaska Native Tribes was forced assimilation into American society, to erase Tribal history and culture and eliminate the trust responsibility the U.S. government had with Tribes. Public Law 588, signed by President Eisenhower in August 1954, terminated trust relations between the U.S. government and sixty Native American bands in western Oregon. The federal government no longer took responsibility to protect Tribal rights under treaty agreements such as protection of natural resources and access to education and health services through the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Indian Health Service.ⁱⁱ



Despite the challenges Tribal Nations have faced across the U.S. and in Oregon, Tribes are reviving their languages and cultural practices, advancing Tribal laws, growing economically, and continuing to heal from historical wounds.

Oregon's Tribes – and Tribal Nations across the U.S. – have experienced these and other traumatic events including devastating foreign disease, genocide, forced relocation, mass assimilation through boarding schools, and Tribal termination.

In many cases, U.S. and state government authorities and policies still maintain a paternalistic and harmful relationship toward Tribes. The effects of these oppressive and traumatic events are passed down through **cultural and historical trauma**, which can be seen through Tribal family behaviors and interactions with state agencies.

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Truths to understand when serving Tribal Nations and families



Historical trauma caused by federal and state governments has created mistrust of government services.

Tribes have not forgotten the history of traumatic events. Acknowledging and recognizing this history will help to understand feelings and attitudes Tribal families and communities still hold toward federal and state governments.

What might mistrust look like?

Some examples include:

- Resistance to services
- Avoiding contact or communication with government officials of any kind
- Defensiveness
- Vague answers
- Verbal or personal attacks

Holding space for what happened to Tribes is an important part of those building relationships.

State government practices and structures often conflict with Tribal culture and values.

Oregon's government was established based on European culture, values, morals, priorities and social structure. Though it has changed over time, power dynamics and authority are steeped in white supremacy culture.

Examples of practices and structures that go against Tribal priorities and values include:

- Rigid government timelines
- A need to write everything down
- Holding all meetings in ODHS office settings
- Top-down decision making

Biases and stereotypes intentionally and unintentionally affect our relationships.

Stereotypes about Native people are everywhere – in movies, television, music, politics and more. It is important to have awareness of these stereotypes and how they might affect your **implicit biases** when interacting with Tribal members.

Checking your bias

- Avoid basing your decision-making on what you've heard, learned in school, seen in media or even on norms in your community. Even if a certain belief or approach is considered normal or okay in the dominant culture it might still be hurtful.
- Don't allow preconceived notions about Tribal people and culture to affect your perspective.
- Consider that your demeanor, subtle behaviors and insinuations could become **microaggressions** (or overt aggression) to the people we are meant to support and serve.
- Words have power. When you seek to use someone's preferred terminology you can minimize harm. If you use language that is called out or identified as hurtful, own up to the mistake and learn from it.

You probably know there are stereotypes about government workers too. You may have felt distrust from community members simply because they know you are part of "the system." While you may not have directly contributed to the negative experience that confirmed their bias, your thoughtful, active and humble approach to interactions with Tribal members can avoid perpetuating stereotypes and build relationships.

We need to be mindful of power dynamics between state government and the Tribes.

The relationship between state and federal government has been **paternalistic** toward Tribes and Tribal members, with authoritative power being leveraged against Tribes. This has created a power imbalance in favor of state and federal government.

Paternalism has restricted freedom and Tribal voice reminiscent of a ward/prisoner relationship, where surveillance rather than collaboration is used. Gestures like asking permission to enter someone's home or asking permission to take notes during a conversation are two ways we can demonstrate respect and acknowledge agency.

One example of how historical power dynamics are still at play is [Public Law 280](#). This law was passed by Congress in 1953, establishing a state-tribal relationship in Oregon

(except on the Warm Springs Reservation, Burns Paiute Tribe and partially Confederated Tribes of Umatilla Indian Reservation) that enabled the state to have criminal and civil jurisdiction over the reservation.ⁱⁱⁱ This law can be interpreted as overlooking the sovereignty of a Tribe that was put in place by treaties signed between the U.S. and Tribal nations long ago. This means the state can make decisions on behalf of the Tribe, even though the Tribe is a sovereign nation. This paternalistic approach complicates law enforcement and public safety thus creating tension and an imbalanced relationship between the state and Tribes.

What might Tribal partnership look like?



Partnership with Tribal Nations and families requires early engagement

– meaning you're not contacting the Tribe only when there's a fire, storm or conflict. Good partnerships are not forged as an afterthought but are intentional. Consistent, ongoing engagement with Tribal families will help maintain a good relationship and ensure we provide the best supports to those receiving services.

Partnership could look like...

- A rapport or a relationship between Tribes and the state
- Shared understanding of issues and values
- Established working relationships that guide how you'll work together
- Deciding together what the partnership will look like

Commit to cultural humility

Cultural humility is a humble and respectful attitude toward people of other cultures that requires the individual to go on a lifelong journey of self-reflection, personal critique and acknowledgement of implicit biases. Cultural humility involves working to better understand ourselves, why we think in certain ways and believe certain facts. In the process, we are better equipped to recognize power dynamics and imbalances, fix those imbalances, and develop stronger partnerships. With cultural humility, we become learners, rather than experts.

Be mindful of how you show up

Being intentional about the number of ODHS staff present in an interaction, coming to the conversation with a small and respectful gift when appropriate, and approaching the interaction with a genuine and sincere attitude can help convey mindfulness and positive intent in your effort to connect. This is not a situation where you can "fake it until you make it."

Practice inclusivity

If a Tribal member or family wants to include extended family or community members, we should honor this request. While the dominant culture in the U.S. considers the nuclear family (two parents and a child or children) to be the most important, many Tribal communities place a higher value on extended family involvement and community connection. Extended family could also mean non-blood kin/relatives.

Have transparent conversations

Explain why you are meeting and what role ODHS is there for. Be honest and upfront about potential outcomes or difficult news so no one feels surprised or misled.

Remember to continue establishing yourself as a helper as families might have other ideas about why you're there.

Avoid making promises that can't be followed through on

Historically, Tribes have been promised so much by the government and unfortunately many of those promises have gone unfulfilled. This has contributed to past and ongoing mistrust of government. Instead of making promises, set realistic goals and timelines.

Be flexible in your arrangements

Whenever possible, we need to be working with the Tribal member or family's timeline and availability, not prioritizing what works best for staff or creating our own timelines. In Tribal culture there is a belief that things will happen or unfold when they are ready to. This might mean change or decisions may not align with ODHS timelines.

Practice reciprocity

Reciprocity is a Tribal practice where exchanging things with others benefits the relationship or community. While ODHS' mission is to serve people living in Oregon, this is not a one-way street. There are many ways our services and staff benefit from engagement with Tribes and Tribal members. Have a conversation to identify where we can be helpful for families and Tribal partners such as technical assistance or connecting them to additional services. Make room to hear their voice and acknowledge the value of their involvement.

Get comfortable with being uncomfortable

Engaging with Tribal members in this way may be a new experience for many staff, or at least a new approach. It can also take time to build relationships, so connecting may feel awkward or uncomfortable at first. Mistakes will likely be made, and that is okay if you make a meaningful attempt to repair any harm caused. What matters is you're putting yourself out there to better engage with Tribal families.

Communication patterns



As you get to know a Tribal partner, member, or family, consider their preferences in communication style. While communication patterns will vary between Tribes and individuals, the recommendations below are a good place to start.

Rapport

Building rapport means building a relationship characterized by mutual understanding, connection, or empathy. It is not a transactional relationship. Rapport makes communication possible or more relaxed. Humor is a good sign that rapport is being built. To build this kind of relationship, ODHS staff should listen, and try visiting just to connect, without an agenda.

“Valuable Lessons” from the National Indian Child Welfare Association mention when speaking with a family look for reoccurring patterns in topics and to reply “Tell me more” to probe in a healthy way.

For example: “I notice you’ve been talking a lot about this uncle of yours. Can you tell me more about him and his role in the family?”

Speech

Be mindful of the pace of speech, the vernacular we use and the way we respond all impact how well we connect with one another. When connecting with a Tribal member, be sure to pause after your questions, give them space to process and respond thoughtfully. Get comfortable with pauses in the conversation and practice patience. Check in and ask if they need you to speak more slowly, rephrase what you are asking and affirm that these conversations can be complicated and confusing. Avoid using acronyms so everyone is on the same page.

Nonverbal cues

Tune into nonverbal (physical) cues but don’t overthink it. Understand that nonverbal cues often differ by culture and community. Blinking, eye contact, handshake firmness and smiling are all examples of nonverbal cues. Not everyone shakes firmly and although eye contact is very important in our mainstream culture, it isn’t always so for Tribal communities.

Face-to-face interaction

As good as technology has gotten, face-to-face interaction is still the most effective and valuable way to connect with Tribal members/partners. While virtual meetings provide access, your physical presence will be noticed by Tribes. Try to prioritize in-person invitations—the time you take to travel demonstrates your commitment and is appreciated.

Giving and receiving gifts

Small tokens, food and offers to attend a meal or event are very valuable gestures and should be accepted when possible. In Tribal culture, gifting items that are handmade is a sign of respect and appreciation.

Oregon law prohibits all public officials and employees from receiving any gift or gifts valued at more than \$50 in a calendar year from any single source. There are exceptions for:

- Unsolicited tokens of minimal value (less than \$25) and
- The cost of food and beverage and admission to a reception, meal or meeting where the public official or public employee is attending in his/her official capacity on behalf of his/her state or local government body.

Speak with your manager about what is appropriate and see [OAR 199-005-0001](#) for more details.

Strategies to get you started



There is no doubt that building relationships with Tribal members can and will be challenging at times.

Past negative experiences and power imbalances will need to be acknowledged and reckoned with before progress can be made. Patience and humility can help—don't approach the relationship by immediately asking for something from them. Keep in mind that decision-making may be prolonged because obtaining consensus among a collective takes time. Below are a few more strategies to get you started.

Try to make a connection through a mutual relationship

Relationships are especially difficult to start cold. If you can connect through a mutual contact, this helps the relationship start off with some trust and understanding.

Find out the history of the relationship

Get curious about how interactions have gone in the past. Has there been previous engagement? What was it like? Get the inside scoop on how your district is perceived by the community. Speak with your co-workers, predecessors, and other community partners so you can be informed. However, take other's opinions with a grain of salt, and don't let negative information discourage you.

Learn the culture and customs

Get educated on your local Tribe(s). Make sure you know the Tribe's proper name and how they like to be referred to. Find out what the preferred style of greeting is, for example, a firm handshake might not be culturally appropriate. Keep in mind individual Tribal members may have different preferences. If you're not sure, ask. Attend public Tribal events, explore their website(s), visit museums, and investigate historical and educational resources online and locally. If there is a fundraiser for a special need, see if funding is available and ask if you can contribute in some way.

Integrate food

Potlucks are great opportunities to enhance relationships. Consider integrating food sharing opportunities at existing meetings, keeping in mind allergens, health and safety.

Take the time that is needed

Trying to take shortcuts or do too much too quickly can cause burnout or overwhelm. When starting with engagement, the relationship should be prioritized over the workload and meaningful relationships are built on intentional interaction.

Conclusion

The guidance in this document is not a formula for guaranteed success. It's possible these strategies will only take you so far, especially if the past relationship has been very tense. The idea is approaching Tribal engagement with passion and a sense of optimism will increase your chances of establishing a rapport and relationship. As an ODHS employee we have the opportunity serve the First People of Oregon and honor a long-standing relationship.

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Resources



More learning

Project Implicit

<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/research/>

Non-profit organization committed to advancing scientific knowledge about stereotypes, prejudice and other group-based biases. You can take a test on their site to test your **implicit bias** about American Indians and Alaska Natives.

Cultural Humility: People, Principles & Practices

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=16dSeyLSOKw>

Tribal Affairs OWL page

<https://dhsoha.sharepoint.com/teams/Hub-ODHS-Tribal-Affairs>

Glossary

American Indian/Alaska Native

A person with origins in any of the original peoples of North, South or Central America and who maintains Tribal affiliation or community attachment.

Confederated

Confederated means joined in or forming an alliance. Confederated Tribes are an alliance of multiple Tribes. For example, The Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs include members of the Wasco, Warm Springs, and Paiute bands.

Cultural trauma

Cultural trauma is an attack on the fabric of a society, affecting the essence of the community and its members. Attacks on American Indian/Alaska Native communities have included prohibiting the use of traditional languages, banning spiritual/healing practices, removing or relocating individuals or whole communities, and restricting access to public or sacred spaces. ^{iv}

Helper

Any person who serves the community or greater good through their actions, commitment or sacrifices.

Historical trauma

Historical trauma is the cumulative exposure of traumatic events that affect an individual and continues to affect subsequent generations. ^v

Implicit bias

A type of bias that happens without our conscious knowledge, causing us to have certain attitudes towards people or associate them with stereotypes. Implicit bias affects our judgements, decisions and behaviors.

Microaggression

A comment or action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group. ^{vi}

Paternalistic

Relating to or characterized by the restriction of the freedom and responsibilities of subordinates or dependents in their supposed interest.

Sovereign

Tribal sovereignty refers to the rights of American Indians and Alaska Natives to govern themselves. The U.S. Constitution recognizes Indian Tribes as distinct governments and they have, with a few exceptions, the same powers as federal and state governments to regulate their internal affairs.

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ⁱ OHA Tribal Consultation Policy

ⁱⁱ https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/termination_and_restoration/

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/termination_and_restoration/

^{iv} <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.582.3908&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

^v <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.582.3908&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

^{vi} <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/microaggression>