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# Healing Indigenous Lives Native Youth Town Halls

*"Together, we can  
heal our communities."*



# Native Youth Town Hall Findings

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# Healing Indigenous Lives Initiative Town Hall Overview

## Youth to Youth Dialogue

The Healing Indigenous Lives Initiative (HILI) is a partnership between United National Indian Tribal Youth (UNITY) and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). HILI recruited a diverse group of Peer Guides, who helped design, plan, and conduct training for Native youth in critical aspects of juvenile justice and delinquency prevention.



**The Healing Indigenous Lives Initiative (HILI) supports and enhances Native youth engagement, coordination, and action related to juvenile justice and delinquency prevention in Indian country.**

### Town Halls

Four Native youth-led Town Halls held virtually provided an opportunity for young participants to share concerns about public safety and tribal juvenile justice issues. The youth reflections are vital to helping decision makers develop informed responses that improve outcomes for Native youth, enhance public safety, promote accountability and empower communities.

The Town Halls were open to Native youth ages 14-24 years old and were facilitated by Peer Guides from each of the four time zones. They included a series of questions that related to questions asked of tribal leaders in OJJDP's tribal consultation. The list of questions can be found on p. 16.

Each of the Town Halls were recorded and youth responses were transcribed. Native youth were also encouraged to submit written comments to UNITY after the event via a questionnaire. Over 155 Native youth participated live in the Town Halls, and 234 from across the country responded to an online questionnaire. Peer Guides have studied these responses and compiled them into this report that is meant to amplify Native youth voices, interests and concerns.

**UNITY's mission is to foster the spiritual, mental, physical, and social development of American Indian, Hawaiian, and Alaska Native youth.**



# The VISIONARY Peer Guides



**Angela Noah**  
*White Mountain Apache , OR*

"I guarantee that your tribal history includes some resilient, strong ancestors who fought to protect us. That history is repeating itself today."



**Collin Church**  
*Potawatomi, WI*

"It doesn't take a professional or a good speaker to lead. To be a leader, you have to have self-ignited passion."



**Sonwai Wakayuta**  
*Hualapai , KS*

"Native leaders are emotional and empathetic; learning to care for the self is crucial for caring for others."



**Savanna Rilatos**  
*Confederated Tribes of Siletz, OR*

"Just being alive is a struggle against settler colonialism because we are still here. We fight to exist and thrive."



**Josiah Lester**  
*Navajo-Dine, AZ*

"The best teachings come from failure and I believe that if I did not fail and hit rock bottom, I would not be where I am now."



**Cheyenne Kippenberger**  
*Seminole Tribe of FL*

"Our strongest leaders have had the hardest paths. Tough people are made from tough experiences."



**Vance Homegun**  
*Confederated Salish & Kootenai, MT*

"No matter your past, your family, how much money you do or don't have, you have a hidden gift to share with your people."



**Audriana Mitchell**  
*Colorado River Indian Tribes, AZ*

"I would tell youth my story, to help them realize we all struggle to find ourselves and hone our gifts. They will be a leader."



**Rory Wheeler**  
*Seneca Nation, NY*

"Our people went through struggles that we today couldn't even imagine fighting. But, they still persevered, so we can too."



**Leticia Gonzales**  
*Bishop Paiute, CA*

"We come from generations of resilience & strength. Share your story and struggles, there are always youth looking to you."



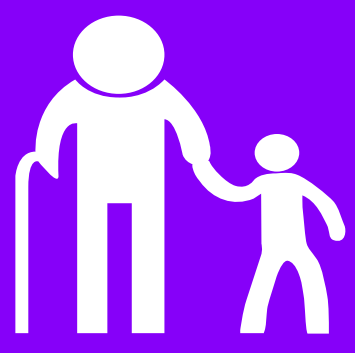
**Santana Bartholomew**  
*Pueblo of Pojoaque, NM*

"The best leaders are servers, in service to others, we find our calling as a Native person. Everyone has a role."

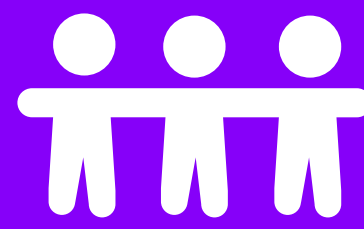


## Top Town Hall Native youth Responses:

# "What helps you feel safe in your community?"



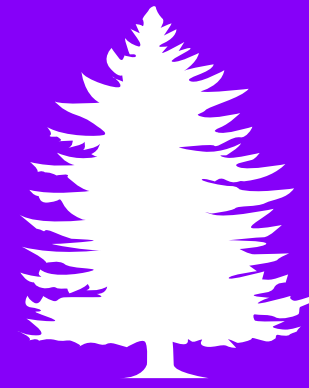
Elders make me feel safe



Belonging & connectedness to my community



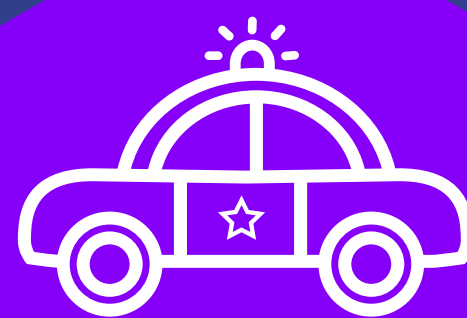
Traditional plants and medicines



Being on my ancestral homelands or reservation



Masks, vaccines & social distancing



Tribal police, first responders, or community patrols



Native humor and other Natives



Talking Circles, ceremonies, pow wows, or youth council meetings



## Belonging

The most common responses to this question nationally centered around cultural teachings, elders, trusted adults, religious beliefs, and community support systems. Native youth in every region expressed the importance of community connectedness and the traditional sense of belonging to feeling safe.

### Belonging and connectedness

One commonality among the Native youth responses in each geographical region alluded to the traditional concept of “place-based identity” and community “connectedness.” UNITY’s national network of Youth Councils is built upon the same cultural connectedness found in community mobilization, youth empowerment, and capacity-building models as a means of developing safety. Native youth expressed how their shared identity made them feel safe and connected to their tribe or urban Native communities.



# Native Community Safety

## Elders

Native youth expressed how understanding intergenerational relationships and engaging in cultural activities created safety in their communities. The Town Hall discussions show the cultural significance that elders hold in Indigenous cultures as a community asset and core of Native households. It is common for youth to be raised by their grandparents and live in extended family homes in many communities and homes. This can be representative of traditional clan systems and matriarchal societies. It also shows Native Youth may have a perspective of safety that is different than non-native youth. From a non-native perspective, the elderly are not always synonymous with community strength and protection. Elders are the ultimate protective factor.

**Research** also shows the vital role elders play in creating community safety for Native youth and tribal communities. One study examined American Indian (AI) elders’ resilience to support an intervention to build resilience among AI urban youth. The research project revealed how resilience strategies are linked to cultural teachings and values, youth activities, and education (Kahn, Carmella B, et al., 2016)

*" My elders help me feel safe, knowing what they’ve been through and seeing them be strong makes me feel safe. Also, being familiar with everyone around me helps too. My reservation is a very close community. "*  
**Swinomish Native Youth**

*"I think that incorporating more cultural teachings and practices into our communities with the help of our elders and teachers would build a better and safer environment for our future generations."*  
**Central Region Native youth**

*" I feel safe when people in my community make it a point to make sure our elders have what they need to stay safe while also doing what they can to keep them safe (i.e. dropping off goods on their doorsteps)."*  
**Eastern Region Native youth**



*a Good Relative*

*" Being a good relative makes me feel safe. Youth can create a "Look out for Elders " program where youth adopt an elder community member to check on throughout the week."*  
**Lumbee Native youth**

*"I feel safe in my community when I know that there are adults that I trust around me. I know that I can trust my elders in the Pueblo, and everyone knows everyone."*  
**Mountain Region Native youth**



# Community Safety

## COVID 19

Native youth referenced the Covid-19 pandemic in their responses. For example, in every region, multiple youths gave answers relating to public health guidelines, such as “obeying quarantine,” “social distancing,” or other tribal governmental policies, such as community “lockdowns,” to stop the spread of the pandemic. Multiple people stated that they felt safe when they saw people wearing masks in public places.

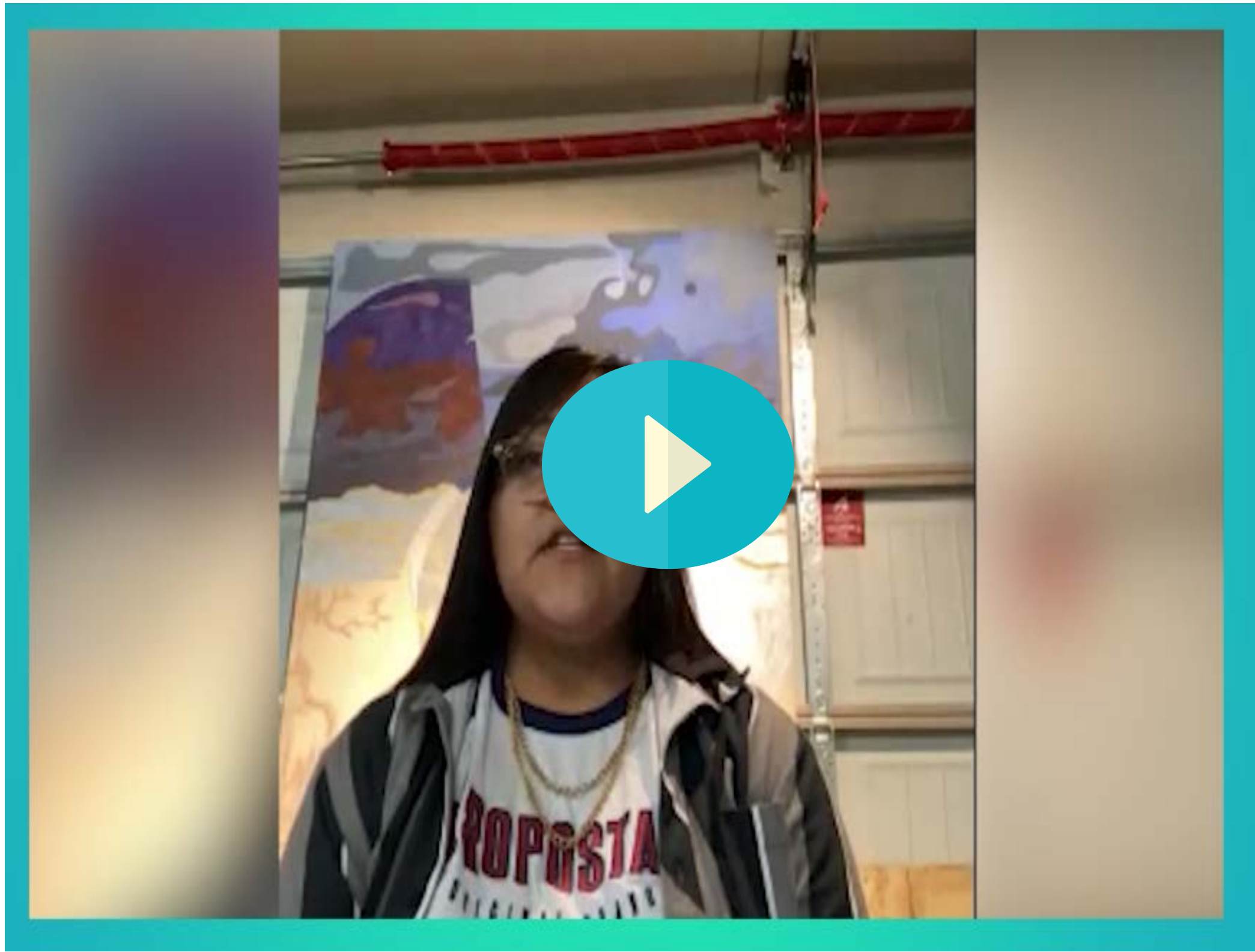
**Youth participants discussed how Native American communities had been disproportionately affected by the recent pandemic.**



Many related “feeling safe” with increased or heightened public health awareness efforts to help protect family members and community members from getting sick or having adequate access to medical and cleaning supplies. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released a new study that “specifically examines how COVID-19 is affecting American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/AN) – one of the racial and ethnic minority groups at highest risk from the disease. The CDC found that in 23 selected states, the cumulative incidence of laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 cases among AI/AN was 3.5 times that of non-Hispanic whites.”

### **Police, First Responders, Community Patrols**

While not all Native youth feel safe around police officers in their communities, there was a common theme across the different regions on how law enforcement and community support agencies made them feel secure. In the written questionnaire, 83 Native youth out of 237 (35%) answered that police (tribal or state) “law enforcement” or “community patrols” made them feel safe. Many Native youth listed the police as both a challenge and a community strength to public safety in responses submitted from all the Town Halls. Some youth listed "police violence" and "racist police" as the root cause of them feeling unsafe. Both views are important to validate and acknowledge. This reflects the diversity in tribal communities, on and off Indian reservations, and rural and urban communities.



[Click on the video](#) above to hear from Peer Guide Sonwai Wakayuta, Central region.

*“Educated police officers that are interested in knowing our community and what we are going through make me feel safe when they take time to get to know us.”*

**Pacific Region Native youth**

*“We only have one cop in my town, so I think it makes the kids feel as if they can do more things they shouldn’t be doing. We need more help.”*

**Central Region Native youth**

*“Many things make me feel safe in the community. The AIM (American Indian Movement) patrol has been moving up Lake Street. That's what makes us feel safe in our community - our people looking out for each other.”*

**Central Region Native youth, Minneapolis**



# Community Safety

*“ What helps me feel safe is that everyone knows everyone, and we are raised to be a very tight-knit community. If something bad happens, we all come together to help those in need. I know my community has my back no matter what happens. ”*

**Eastern Band of Cherokee Native youth**

*” I like knowing who I'm with and where I am in the community. If my mom or grandma doesn't know their family background, then my trust is already compromised. It takes constant effort to feel safe and mindful in my community. ”*

**Peer Guide Sonwai Wakayuta  
Central region**

*“ My primary sense of safety in my community is tied to my surroundings and knowing that I am close by family and neighbors who are concerned about me and my safety. ”*


**Peer Trainer Dr. Leslie Locklear  
Eastern Region**

*“ The fact that I have so much family and familiar relationships with my neighbors and other members of my community makes me feel safe. ”*

**Central Region Native youth**

*“ I do not feel safe in my community. I don't know when I will again. ”*

**Pacific Region Native youth**

The [Gathering Of Native Americans \(GONA\)](#) curriculum has shown effectiveness in American Indian and Alaskan Native youth's drug and alcohol prevention/intervention when youth understand the traditional teachings behind belongingness. The GONA concept of “belonging” represents infancy and childhood, when people need to know they belong, that they are safe and essential. 

*” I feel Safe at UNITY ”*



# "What are some challenges with public safety?"

## Intergenerational Substance Abuse & Cycles of Violence

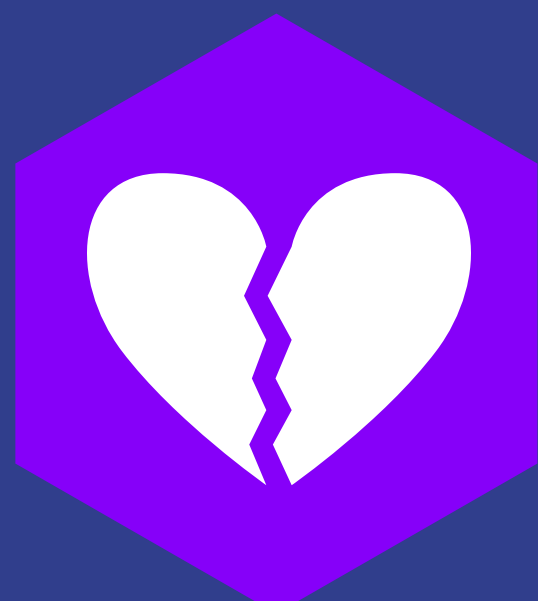
All of the UNITY Peer Guides have been impacted by substance abuse or community violence. Their courage in the face of adversity and ability to break the intergenerational cycle and overcome personal obstacles is what makes the HILI program successful in its outreach to Native youth.

The Peer Guides believe that Native youth empowerment includes redefining leadership to include those who have experiences with the criminal justice system and those impacted by substance abuse. Inclusiveness has allowed them to establish trust and work with Native youth to overcome any community challenge.

*"break the cycle"*



## Top Town Hall Native youth Responses:



Violence, trauma & substance abuse



Poverty, unemployment, & lack of resources



Suicide and self-harm



School dropouts & education disparities



Poor mental health



Police or law enforcement, police brutality and violence



Missing and murdered indigenous women & girls



Generational impacts of imprisonment & youth incarceration

Click to Learn More: [the National Unity Council's Top Ten Issues Facing Native Youth](#)





# Community Challenges

## Healing from Trauma

### Violence

Research shows an urgent need to improve Indian nations’ federal resources to address safety issues in their communities. While the Tribal Law and Order Act of 2010 (TLOA) and the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013 (VAWA 2013) were historic steps forward in restoring safety, more needs to be done to protect Native women, who experience violence at rates 2½ times higher than violence against any other group of women in the United States.



**Native youth believe that allowing a safe, culturally centered space to acknowledge past trauma is vital in healing and in preparing future leaders.**

**Native youth who share their trauma give themselves permission to be part of the solution instead of carrying crippling shame that can result in risky behaviors.**

### Native Youth Empowerment

Speaking out about past traumas can be a source of empowerment for Native youth. Native youth who have been exposed to trauma within their communities have become leaders in their communities and in helping other youth find resources for healing.

### Historical Trauma

Research shows the effects of historical trauma can be manifested in many ways. Among Native Americans, it has included:

- A breakdown of traditional Native family values
- Alcohol & other substance abuse
- Depression, anxiety, & suicidality
- Child abuse & domestic violence
- Posttraumatic stress disorder
- Internalized oppression, self-hatred, & lateral violence
- General loss of meaning & sense of hope

Historical trauma can be expressed in three ways:

1. Historical unresolved grief is the result of historical trauma that has not been sufficiently acknowledged, expressed, or otherwise addressed.
2. Disenfranchised grief is the product of historical trauma when loss cannot be voiced or is not publicly acknowledged.
3. Internalized oppression occurs when “traumatized people ... internalize the views of the oppressor and perpetuate a cycle of self-hatred that manifests itself in negative behaviors.”



# Community Challenges

*"In all honesty, I think that the lack of safety in my community is due to drug and alcohol use, leading to the neglect of children at times. This then leads to unsafe behavior by the youth, which begins the cycle anew."*

**Central Region Native youth**

*"Violence, racial injustice, stereotypes. More Peer Guiders needed! Some youth are raised in rougher environments, while some act out of anger/frustration. With support, I believe all communities can be healed."*

**Mountain Region Native youth**

*"It's simple, hurt people, hurt people. They are unwell and need help, not punishment."*

**Pacific Region Native youth**

*"My community is plagued with substance and alcohol abuse that often stems from historical trauma, & various mental health issues of which I feel should be addressed as the root cause."*

**Peer Guide, Leslie Locklear, Eastern Region**

*"There is a lot of gun violence, gang activity and, gentrification where I am located; it impacts the youth greatly especially because they are black and brown youth"*

**Central Region Native youth**

American-Indian and Alaskan Native children experience PTSD at the same rate at veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. According to a Department of Justice advisory committee report, 22% of American-Indian and Alaskan Native juveniles have PTSD—three times higher than the national rate.

*"seek out the root cause"*




# Community Challenges

## Native youth Mental Health

In July 2020, UNITY Peer Guides participated in a congressional forum led by Ruben Gallego (D-Ariz.), chair of the Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States. The subject of the hearing was [Native Youth Perspectives on Mental Health and Healing](#). [\(click to watch\)](#) Peer Guides discussed the mental health impacts facing Native youth in the United States, education and safety, and ideas on how policy can reduce trauma and promote healing.

**"Mental health is a vitally important topic, particularly now as the coronavirus pandemic is afflicting our communities, I'm proud to see our Native youth speaking before Congress, sharing their insight on what can and should be done to protect Native lives."**

**Mary Kim Titla, UNITY Executive Director**

Click Here for the written transcripts of the [Oversight Hearing- Native Youth & Mental Health](#) and watch [UNITY youth advocates](#). 



## **High Dropout Rates**

During the Town Halls, Native youth expressed many reasons why education disparities were a community concern. Some of the common concerns brought up include:

- Transportation to school is difficult in remote areas
- Lack of resources for students
- No wifi or Internet for remote schooling
- Culture Shock in education, when moving schools
- Native youth being misdiagnosed as special needs
- Language barriers if not fluent English speaker
- Educational inequity, switching from reservation schools to public schools

- Poverty, needing to work to support the family
- Housing crisis contributes to dropouts
- Unhealthy relationships in school
- Lack of Native teachers, professors, counselors
- The educational history of mistrust
- Generational Boarding school history: unaddressed trauma
- Missing school to attend ceremonies, wakes or funerals, etc.
- Bullying or teasing of Native youth
- Lack of culture being taught in education systems
- Inaccurate history being taught in schools
- Teen pregnancies or extended family responsibilities



**“Many Native youth experience Imposter Syndrome because the educational institutions are built upon the assumption that indigenous methodologies are inferior. ”**

**[Angela Noah, Pacific Peer Guide](#)** 



Top Town Hall Native youth Responses:

"How can young people contribute to creating a safe environment in your community?"



Host an open mic or town hall



Meet with your Tribal Council



Organize or attend a demonstration



Attend community organizing or advocacy trainings



Gather Native youth to do a community service project



Create or join a local UNITY youth council

Native youth are taking charge of their personal and community safety across the country. Many have embraced service and activism to confront safety issues.

"One of the most powerful words in the language of my Cherokee tradition is **gadugi**, a call to bring people together to help one another. In the Pueblos Keres language, the term **si-yudze** translates as "everybody's work," referring to communal service, where all join to plant crops, prepare for ceremonies, and so forth. The Zuni words, **yanse' lihanna**, have similar meanings. Underlying this ethic of service, which is common to Native cultures across North America, is the celebration of kinship and mutual interdependence - in the Lakota words **mitakuya owasin**, "we are all as relatives."

Mclellan Hall 

"Servant Leadership"





# Youth Creating Change

## Starting a National Conversation

UNITY Peer Guides created a call to action, by challenging youth councils to raise awareness of the top concerns in their community. They hosted several interactive virtual conversations on what it means to “be a Good Relative” and how to identify our community needs. Native youth, young leaders, and youth advocates discussed how to increase community safety using a holistic approach.



***"Young people can contribute by always speaking up and using their voice to say enough is enough. I feel that would open peoples' eyes to see that this isn't the way our youth should have to live. Also, being a positive role model and creating a bond that tells other youth that doing drugs, etc. is not cool. We can help our peers in getting any kind of help they need "***  
***Pacific Native youth***

## Leading by Example

UNITY Peer Guide Cheyenne Kippenberger, 23, of the Seminole Tribe of Florida, partnered with the Native Learning Center to host its first Healing the Circle in Our Tribal Communities Symposium in Hollywood, Florida. The symposium's focus was to stress the importance of safe and healthy environments for Native people and increase awareness about domestic violence, self-care, elder abuse, and Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. Kippenberger teamed up with the Native Learning Center to advocate for cutting-edge women's empowerment programs and services designed to help build positive healthy relationships.

## What Can Youth Do?

*"The town hall responses were quite remarkable and eye-opening. For example, one participant responded with "youth can help create youth councils," which everyone overall agreed with pointing out they are or were on a youth council and how supportive they were. Another said "positive role models" who show that drinking or narcotics doesn't bring you happiness. We all agreed that living sober is the best way to create change, as it can promote healthy living and wanting to improve yourself. Just listening to my peers helped open my eyes to what we can do as a youth."*

***Amiyah Begay, Navajo, 16***



# Youth Creating Change

*"Speaking up, volunteering, training with youth groups or tribal organizations such as UNITY to bring back to their community, & incorporating new ideas to keep peers engaged in positive ways"*

**Eastern Native Youth**

*"I think that incorporating more cultural teachings and practices into our communities with the help of our elders and teachers would build a better and safer environment for our future generations "*

**Central Native Youth**

*"Talking to their family and friends about how they feel, possibly even starting a community support group for anyone who is struggling "*

**Pacific Native youth**

*"Living a drug and alcohol-free lifestyle. Staying in school and finding spiritual guidance through God is the best way to impact your community. "*

**Peer Guide Vance Homegun  
Rocky Mountain Region**

*"We can also make sure that any LGBTQ+ teenager feels safe, welcome, and that if they're feeling disconnected, that they could reach out to us. We could have a meeting with our Tribal Council and discuss all the possible environmental changes to make sure they get enforced for the safety of the community "*

**Peer Guide Sonwai Wakayuta  
Mountain Region**

*"Change Agents"*

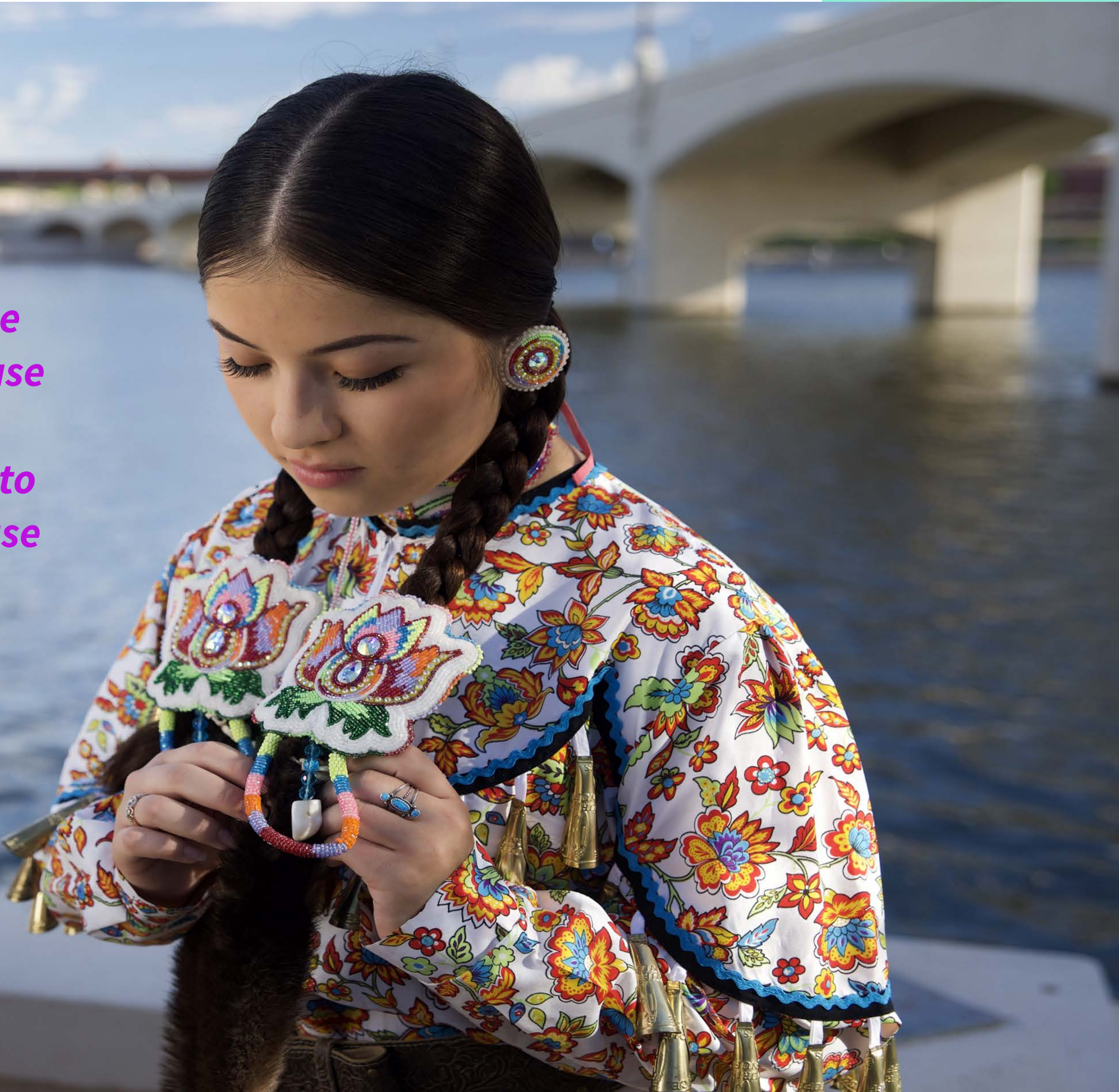


# Native Youth *Resiliency*

## What does resiliency mean?

During the Town Halls, Native youth expressed what resiliency meant to them. While exploring how youth overcome difficult or traumatic situations in their lives, one common answer centered around inherent resiliency. “To me, resiliency is a double-edged sword. While I am grateful for how our people have this innate ability to overcome the odds in so many traumatic situations, I also see first-hand the social, emotional, and mental turmoil it takes on our youth. We continue to push this idea of resiliency and overcoming but at times, I feel like we need to impart more grace” said Peer Trainer Dr. Leslie Locklear.

*" Youth can make changes because we are resilient! Youth can increase the use of our voice, UNITY and our youth councils help our young people learn to speak up. Even a small group can cause big changes, and I look forward to helping them."*  
**Eastern Native youth**



*“One thing that I like to promote is acknowledging your feelings. Youth may feel anxious, sad, or you may not feel right. It's good to acknowledge it, and it's OK not to be alright all the time. To me, resiliency is that feeling of wanting to get help or wanting to get through something. Knowing that in the future, you will get through it. It helps you persevere, and you'll come through stronger than ever. ”*  
**Mountain Region Native youth**

*“ Tupac Shakur talks about the rose that grows through the concrete. And to me, that's what resiliency is. Like, there's a lot of beautiful people out there. The petals are all kinds of damaged (but it) grew through the concrete. It's more beautiful than even the rose that has all the immaculate, perfect petals, right?"*  
**Pacific Region Native youth**  
*“I know at the heart of resilience is just being able to sit here and say we're still here, despite everything, I am going to make it.”*  
**Eastern Region Native youth**

*“ Learning that, even though you feel like you're alone, you're not alone... that's resilience. There's a lot of youth; when something traumatic happens in my community, we just brush it off, like, dang another one, or what's next? It shouldn't be that type of reaction, but it's the reaction that comes from being resilient for so long. Like Lakota say, resilience is being strong on the inside, having a courageous spirit, even when it's hard.”*  
**Central Region Native youth**





## OJJDP Specific Questions

The UNITY Peer Guides started the conversation in each Town Hall by asking Native youth if they were familiar with the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). Most attendees had never heard of the department. The Peer Guides explained the mission and purpose of OJJDP before moving into the guided discussion.

Of the 237 written Native youth responses in the Questionnaire, 70.1% of Native youth reported never hearing about OJJDP before now. 29.9% of the youth reported being familiar with OJJDP and their programs. Several OJJDP representatives and Training and Technical Assistance providers were also in attendance at each Town Hall to answer questions the UNITY Peer Guides may not have had answers to.

<https://unityinc.org/native-youth/healing-indigenous-lives-initiative-hili-native-youth-town-hall-series/>

### Town Hall Questions

- What helps you feel safe in your community?
- What do you see as the challenges with public safety in your community and how are young people impacted?
- How can young people contribute to creating a safe environment in your community?
- What does resilience mean to you and what do you think helps youth overcome difficult or traumatic situations in their lives?
- What types of programs could OJJDP support that would enhance public safety and help to ensure that juvenile offenders are held appropriately accountable to crime victims and tribal communities?
- What specific assistance can OJJDP provide to help existing programs, support innovative ideas to expand programs, and provide additional training and technical assistance?
- How can OJJDP support efforts to engage youth and build leadership skills in Native youth?



## Top Town Hall Native youth Responses:

"How can OJJDP ensure that juvenile offenders are held appropriately accountable to crime victims and tribal communities?"



Focus on  
restorative justice



Reconnecting to the  
community



Community service  
as accountability



Address the root cause of their  
mistakes to restore balance



Helping others not go  
down the same path



The creation of safe and  
respectful environments



*"Shift your  
focus"*

The most common response to this question centered around shifting the focus to helping offenders "find balance" and engage in community service. Native youth in every region expressed the importance of encouraging help seeking behaviors instead of western concepts of punishment.

*"Holding youth more accountable is not the problem, we are losing generations of our people to life in prison. We need to focus on how our community failed to help them, how did we miss that they were struggling, we need to ask how am I here? how did I make it when my family did not? We all come from the same trauma, we are the same dreamers, it has to be more than luck and bars that separates us."*

**Eastern Native youth**



# Restore, Renew & Rebuild

## Restorative Justice

Native youth voiced their concerns about the focus of punishment on juvenile offenders rather than rehabilitation or what is often referred to as a “healing journey.” Overall, healing and personal accountability are a community priority, which is seen to help restore wellness to offenders and victims, their families, and clans. UNITY Peer Guides agree that “in First Nation and Native American justice, healing, along with reintegrating individuals into their community, is paramount.”



## Wellness Courts

*“Operate more Juvenile Healing to Wellness Courts. I also think there should be more group homes where our juvenile offenders will have a place to stay instead of being held in detention centers. I think the group homes should be located on Tribal land and operated by people who have the compassion and empathy for the client but someone who can also give the client some structure in their lives.”*

**Eastern Region Native youth**

## Why so many?

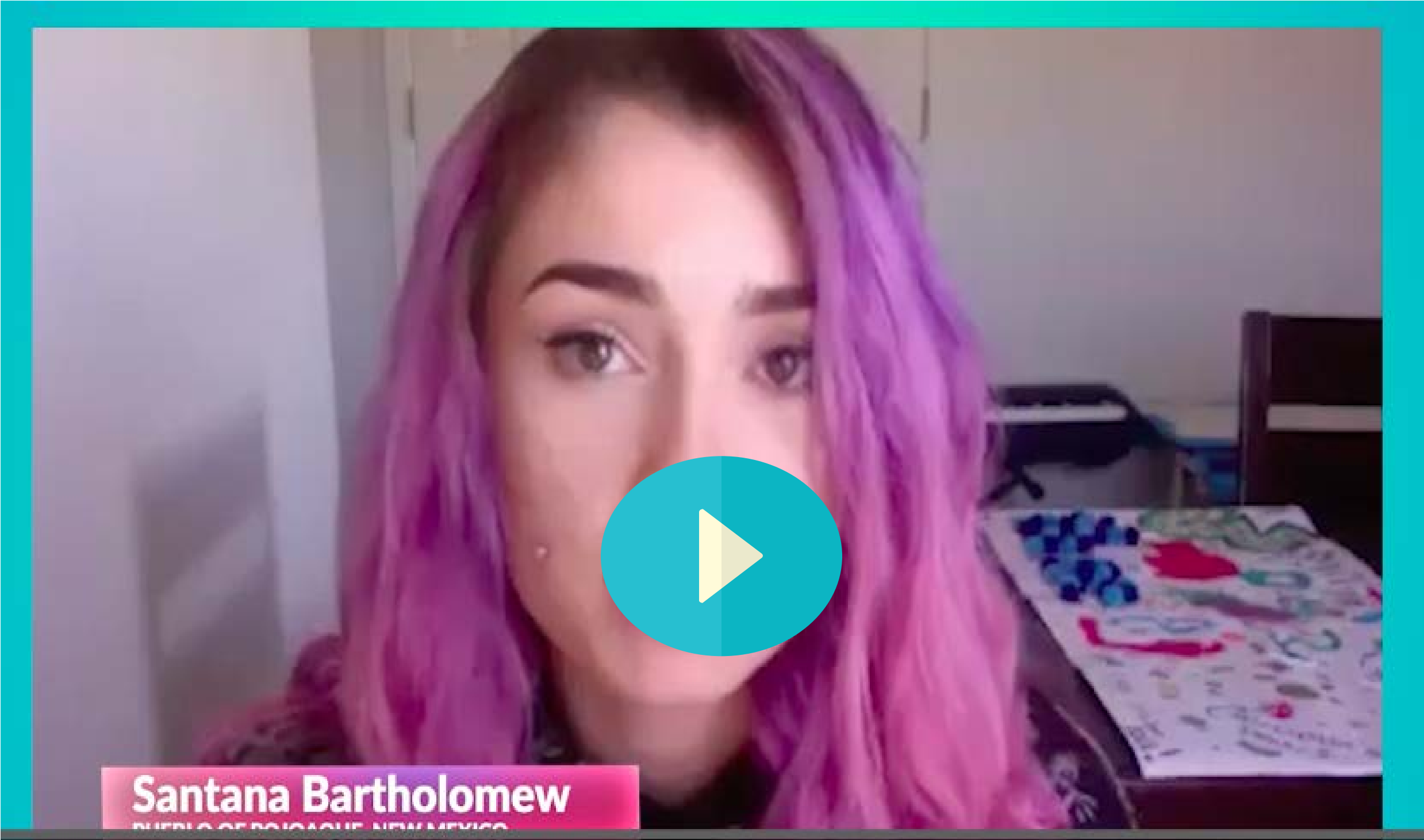
*“Native youth are incarcerated at higher rates per capita than other races... That’s a systematic fault that needs to change to work better with the community and stop the violence. This isn’t about blame. We need to focus on why there are so many offenders in the first place.”*

**Central Region Native youth**

## Holistic Approach

*“In Alaska, a lot of our communities are not concerned with ensuring offenders are being held more accountable; we are more worried about losing our youth to suicide, gang violence and drugs. It is a slippery slope when you label kids as bad; then, their self-worth goes downhill. And I’ve lost too many friends that way. I don’t want them punished harder. I want to see them get the help they need to be who I know they can be, who our villages need them to be.”*

**Pacific Region Native youth**



[Click on the video](#) above to hear from Peer Guide Santana Bartholomew, Central region. 🔗



# Restore, Renew & Rebuild

*“Native youth are the ones we should be helping; their actions that have hurt the victims are how they are crying out for help. And we need to help them get back on a better path. What are we doing to bring them back into the community, not push them farther away with shame? Who does that help?”*

**Central Region Native youth**

*“Our Navajo Peacekeeping courts focus more on restoration than making juvenile offenders pay for a mistake. It's about restoring the relationship between victims, offenders, and the community.”*

**Mountain Region Native youth**

*“We can heal from the violence and trauma by serving our community. In service to others, you can restore your place in the community. It is about understanding how your actions effect the entire tribe.”*

**Eastern Region Native youth**

*“Shame is a killer. It is important to allow the youth room to improve, otherwise they will be lost. They need hope.”*

**Pacific Region Native youth**

*“I think Natives view justice differently than non-natives. It isn't about who is wrong or making someone pay, it's about how the community can help those who are struggling.”*

**Mountain Region Native youth**

*“Inspire Hope”*



"What assistance can OJJDP provide to help existing programs, support innovative ideas to expand programs, & provide additional training?"



**Expand Peer to Peer Programming**  
One suggestion that the Peer Guides agree with Native youth is to have more Peer to Peer mentoring programs like HILI and for OJJDP to hire more Native American employees to work with Tribal Nations and government agencies.

This will ensure that programs are culturally appropriate and the community is more likely to take ownership of the shared mission. Non-native OJJDP employees who work with Tribal Nations should be required to take an introductory workshop on American Indian Studies or Cultural Sensitivity class to improve relationship building.

*"help us help ourselves"*

**Top Town Hall Native youth Responses:**

- |   |  |   |  |
|---|--|---|--|
|  | Government to government relationship                            |  | Program sustainability & recurring funding sources                             |
|  | Increase access to ceremonies in detention centers & prison      |  | Inclusion of cultural practices into funding solicitations                     |
|  | Expand peer to peer programming                                  |  | Expand efforts for restorative justice in Indian Country                       |
|  | Hire regional tribal liaisons to develop cultural best practices |  | Host Tribal youth listening sessions, more peer guide town halls, or open mics |



# Ideas to Expand Programs

## Government to Government Relationship Building

One common theme mentioned in more than two Town Halls referenced by Native youth was the lack of trust of the federal government. Historically, tribal groups in the U.S. have suffered irreparable harm due to colonization, assimilation, and integration efforts led by the federal government.

*"Earn our trust by respecting our leaders and elders."*

**Pacific Region Native youth**



***"Help us make the OJJDP system known and easily accessible to Tribes, with new innovative ways to pull our tribe together to help out youth. Ask the youth directly. Have youth partner with our tribal leaders to help inform OJJDP of best practices and what is needed to create lasting change. "***

**Pacific Region Native youth**

## Include Educators & Tribes

*"Work closely with native educators and Tribal Governments to develop programs in the community, because the tribal body can support closer progress monitoring to ensure funding's effectiveness. We know our kids better than anyone. Help us help them."*

**Central Region Native youth**



[Click on the video](#) above to hear from Peer Guide Rory Wheeler, Eastern region.





# Ideas to Expand Programs

*“I think a lot of the time these programs need more funding but also to provide passionately dedicated workers that are willing to work towards helping the kids and giving them a better future.”*

**Eastern Region Native Youth**

*“Reentry into the community is important. We need a better system to help when people return from being in rehab and jail, so they don’t go back to their old bad ways.”*

**Mountain Region Native Youth**

*“Help us by starting more Youth Councils. UNITY completely changed my life; when I came and saw that there was Native youth that wanted to make life better, it changed me. I didn’t feel alone in the despair. I never saw so many natives before. I wish all Native youth could go to UNITY to get the strength to go on.”*

**Eastern Region Native Youth**

*“Provide more training to those who work directly with youth in recreation, boys & girls clubs, youth homes, youth council, foster homes, etc. to better assist with the troubled youth who may not have guidance where it’s needed.”*

**Mountain Region Native Youth**

*“No one ever asks the youth about programs before they are defunded, it could be the best thing going for that kids life, but the funding could dry up or be moved without considering the youth. We need a program that can last.”*

**Pacific Region Native Youth**

*“Partners with us”*



# "How can OJJDP support efforts to engage youth and build leadership skills in Native youth?"

Through helping my community, in service I also help heal myself. It starts on the grassroots level of community building.

*“Growing up with a single parent and constantly battling negative peer pressure from my friends has deterred me from my path many of times. But drawing on the strength and resilience of my ancestors and those that have come before me, I have found that we have an obligation to continue working hard and helping people because the next seven generations depend on it.”*

**Peer Guide Rory Wheeler**  
**Seneca**

Grassroots



## Top Town Hall Native youth Responses:



Create safe places to share experiences



Hands on approaches and interactive learning



Focus on solution based approaches



Youth want to make a positive impact on our people



More Native youth speakers and peer mentoring



Help build more Youth Councils as community support systems



# Youth Leadership Development

## Expand Peer to Peer Programming

Key suggestions that both Peer Guides and Native youth have is for OJJDP to support more peer to peer mentoring programs like HILI and for OJJDP to hire more Native American employees to work with Tribal Nations and government agencies. This will help ensure that programs are culturally appropriate and the community is more likely to take ownership of the shared mission. Non-native OJJDP employees who work with Tribal Nations should be required to take an introductory workshop on American Indian Studies or Cultural Sensitivity class to improve relationship building.



## We are the Key

*"What we really need is prevention education for younger children from teens. Youth want to hear from youth. When it comes down to it, we are the key, we just need OJJDP to help give us the tools to help ourselves."*

**Eastern Region Native Youth**

## We Need Peer Guides

*"I think implementing a framework that doesn't only punish youth for bad behavior, because punishment leads to more bad behavior, but instead it could provide programs that could improve the lives of Indigenous youth by empowering those teens. Some of the youth come from traumatic childhoods that drive them to be labeled a "bad kid," but if they realize their potential and are given the support, they could thrive in their full potential."*

**Pacific Region Native Youth**

## Teach Self-Love

*"A good program they could add would be a self-care program, taught by other young adults, so people will know their worth and feel better about themselves. A lot of crimes stem from identity confusion. With overall help, I know people will be kinder to one another. Peers can help treat the cause instead of reacting to bad decisions."*

**Mountain Region Native Youth**

## Peer Support

*"Help fund those mentor programs that are making a difference in the native communities. Find out what each community needs by asking the youth and help in any way whether it is guidance, funding, or training."*

**Central Native Youth**



# Youth Leadership Development

*“ By starting a Youth Council. UNITY completely changed my life; when I came and saw that there was Native youth that wanted to make life better, it changed me. I didn’t feel alone. I never saw so many natives before. I wish all Native youth could go to UNITY.”*  
**Eastern Region Native youth**

*” OJJDP can support native youth leadership by providing classes on our native culture and teach valuable skills, like how to write speeches and public speaking. Our culture helps keep us safe and is the only thing we can lean on when things fall apart.”*  
**Mountain Native youth**

*“ OJJDP can support native youth by creating programs that show leadership skills in their peers. Cookie-cutter curriculums don't work for everyone. Create programs that keep our youth engaged, like UNITY. Hands on learning is way better than just listening to an adult speak. “*  
**Pacific Region Native youth**

*“Be better at recognizing some of our Native youth are trying to do better, and not all Native Americans are drunks and felons.”*  
**Pacific Region Native youth**

*"Have fun local conferences like UNITY, be real with them. Use personal experiences to help them. Bring in young adults to do fun but knowledgeable activities, be positive and encourage taking healthy risks.”*  
**Pacific Native youth**

*“Ask us for solutions”*



# Amplifying Native Youth Voices in the Tribal Consultation Process

**UNITY Peer Guide Audrianna Mitchell** was the youth facilitator for OJJDP's [June 2020 tribal consultation](#) with 288 tribal leaders and representatives. The consultation sought feedback on how OJJDP can assist tribes in implementing the Juvenile Justice Reform Act (JJRA) provisions and increase tribes' access to juvenile justice funding. Because of Audri's involvement in both events, she was able to guide her Cohort through comparisons on the two consultations. The Peer Guides firmly believe in the importance of continuing the inclusion of Native youth voices in the tribal consultation process.



 **Click to Watch:** [the OJJDP Tribal Consultation Webinar](#)

## Culture As Prevention and Intervention

The Town Halls have shown that keeping native youth involved in their culture will impact how they think and act towards the community and broadens their outlook on life. Our culture is synonymous with leadership, which can potentially inspire the way the native youth carry themselves. This is powerful and can help push them to become our future leaders. For many, these cultural programs are a get away place for them, when their home life is troubled. Culture is the key.



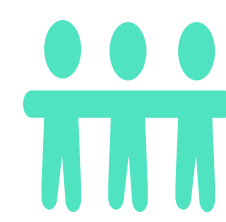
[Click on the video](#) above to hear from Peer Guide Audri Mitchell, UNITY Co-President Eastern region.



# Native Youth and Tribal Leaders Agree on Recommendations for OJJDP



The following quotes in purple are from the OJJDP Tribal Consultation Response Report. Click to read in its entirety\_



UNITY Peer Guide recommendations based on Town Hall feedback

## Next Steps

1



OJJDP: "OJJDP will examine the feasibility of incorporating language into certain solicitations that state, in lieu of the standard evidence-based programs that do not include a significant population of AI/AN youth in their studies, tribes may propose indigenous practices that have longevity within tribal communities."



Native Youth: One of the main things The Peer Guides heard in the Town Halls was the effectiveness of cultural practices in keeping Native youth from getting into trouble or when re-entering into the community. Native youth in the Town Halls repeatedly requested the inclusion of culture into OJJDP tribal prevention and intervention efforts.

2



OJJDP: "In the spirit of strengthening government-to-government relationships, OJJDP will suggest that states ask tribes to recommend individuals to serve as their tribal representatives on the State Advisory Groups (SAG) and include AI/AN youth."



Native Youth: Tribal leaders stressed that consultation and inclusion in matters involving tribal youth must be part of the federal trust responsibility. Similarly, Native youth in the Town Halls expressed the need to amplify youth voices in creating local solutions. HILI recommends SAGs consult with Peer Guides and UNITY youth councils within their states. The Peer Guides feel that the SAGs should also create a Youth Tribal Representative position.

3



OJJDP: "OJJDP will add a consultation or listening session to OJJDP's biennial Tribal Youth Conference to gather input on a variety of juvenile justice-related tribal issues."



Native Youth: The Native youth involved in the Town Halls also reaffirmed the need for more youth listening sessions. Youth feel that their lived experiences can offer vital insight, which OJJDP decision-makers could benefit from. Because the UNITY National Conference is the largest Native youth gathering in North America, HILI recommends that OJJDP host annual listening sessions in conjunction with this event to continue the Peer Guides efforts in gathering youth feedback.







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### **A Special Thank you to the HILI Support Staff & Trainers**

The Peer Guides appreciate all those who have invested their time and energy to pour into their lives. UNITY appreciates our mentors who provide training, support, prayers, resources, information, and other assistance for their peers in efforts to creatively prevent and address juvenile delinquency in Indian Country. Peer Mentors heal communities for generations to come.

