

CULTURE FORWARD



## II. INTRODUCTION

Core traditional, cultural and spiritual values support health and well-being for our Native communities. Informed by traditional knowledge and beliefs, our communities' wisdom keepers have always known that cultural and spiritual protective factors are the essence of tribal identity and the best medicine against suicide. In today's modern society, culture is moving forward and adapting to our world. Emerging from traditional practices, culture includes community, people, place, customs and language—with new forms emerging over time. Together the expression of culture creates resiliency in tribal communities for generations and is the key factor in our continued regeneration as Native peoples.

The celebrated and well-known Standing Rock Sioux scholar, Dr. Vine Deloria Jr., discussed “old-timers” who said we need to think with our hearts instead of our heads to solve the issue of suicide. To find our way back to “thinking with our hearts,” we need to reclaim our identities, traditions, tribal values and cultural practices. In so doing, we can prevent suicide—a result of colonization and cultural losses—and promote deep community healing.

More than 20 years ago, Dr. Iris Borowsky published a landmark study documenting that promotion of protective factors was more effective at reducing suicide attempts than reducing risks for Native youth. In this case, Western scientific research explained what has been inherent in our traditional knowledge since the beginning of time. Western scientific and Indigenous research continues to endorse the importance of tribal identity, values and participation in cultural activities to reduce and prevent Native youth suicide.

This study has gained increasing attention over the past two decades. It offers a vibrant opportunity apart from the numerous studies that have “bean-counted” and logged our suicidal health disparities, risk factors and community deficits.

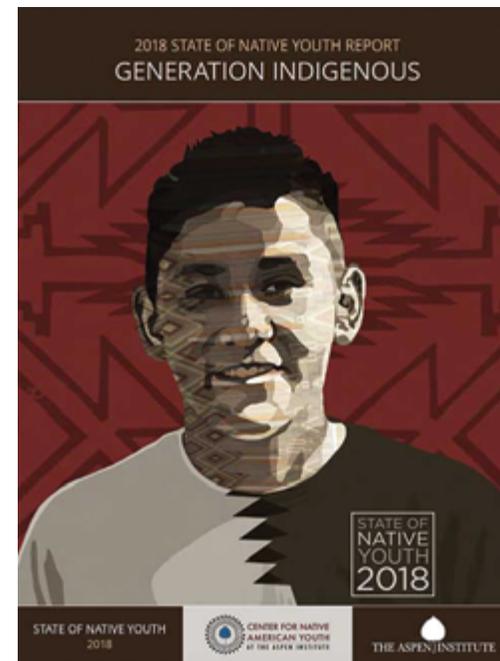
Echoing Dr. Borowsky's work, this guide aims to find strength in our communities—to think from the heart. From this perspective, the goal is to flip the dominant narrative regarding Native American suicide risk factors and instead herald individual, family, community, tribal and cross-tribal protective factors that define the unique strengths and values of Native peoples.

The goal of CULTURE FORWARD and forthcoming ancillary materials is to elevate Indigenous knowledge, findings and practical, proven resources that represent strengths- and culture-based approaches proven effective in Native communities to prevent and reduce suicide.

In 2018, the Center for Native American Youth held roundtables with youth from more than 260 tribes in twenty-five states. In most

of the roundtables, Native youth expressed concern about hearing about suicidal thoughts, engaging in self-harm and losing their peers to suicide. It is time for us to weave our collective knowledge to prevent suicide among our youth and communities.

The information contained in this guide represents the dozens of voices we have listened to across Indian Country through



community roundtables/interviews, and systematic review of peer-reviewed publications, and reports and guides considered part of the “grey literature.”<sup>1</sup> Further, we observe and honor that we embark on this work at a critical inflection point in history. For there is an ongoing movement of tribal nations calling for Indigenous knowledge to be at the center of health research and program development. Simultaneously, Native youth are providing critical leadership to elevate community health, wellness and thriving through reclamation of tribal traditions and culture. And, countless tribal nations are currently exerting self-determination to advance community-based suicide prevention.

*“Our relations to each other, our prayers whispered across generations to our relatives, are what bind our cultures together. The protection, teachings and gifts of our relatives have for generations preserved our families.”*

—Winona LaDuke (Anishinaabe)



The above photo has been approved for use by the Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board's suicide prevention project, THRIVE. For more information please visit [www.npaihb.org/thrive](http://www.npaihb.org/thrive)



Photo Credit: Ed Cunicelli

<sup>1</sup>Grey literature includes a number of types of information (e.g., fact sheets, research summaries, reports on a given topic) that can be produced by various types and levels of organizations (e.g., government, academic, business, industry).

CULTURE FORWARD is guided by Native voices and relies on community awareness, engagement and intervention to elevate resources that strengthen wellness. The research, resources and recommendations in the following pages are meant to stimulate action in Native communities to prevent youth suicide. No matter where your community is geographically or in relation to traditional homelands, there is something in this guide for each community.

**CULTURE FORWARD will fortify communal resilience, honor the sacrifices of our ancestors for whom Native communities live today, and pave the way for thriving generations of Native youth, adult and Elder leaders.**

## DEVELOPMENT OF CULTURE FORWARD

### A Community Process

In its entirety, CULTURE FORWARD is a reflection of Native voices and visions. It represents groups within Native communities directly impacted by suicide, those who are actively working to end suicide, and tribal leaders and stakeholders who care deeply about the future of their youth and seek healing, strength and well-being for their tribal nations.

### Production Process

Before putting any words to paper for CULTURE FORWARD, the Johns Hopkins Center for American Indian Health spent six months from fall 2018 to winter 2019 traveling throughout Indian Country to conduct listening sessions. These sessions included nine community roundtables and eight individual interviews to inform the guide.

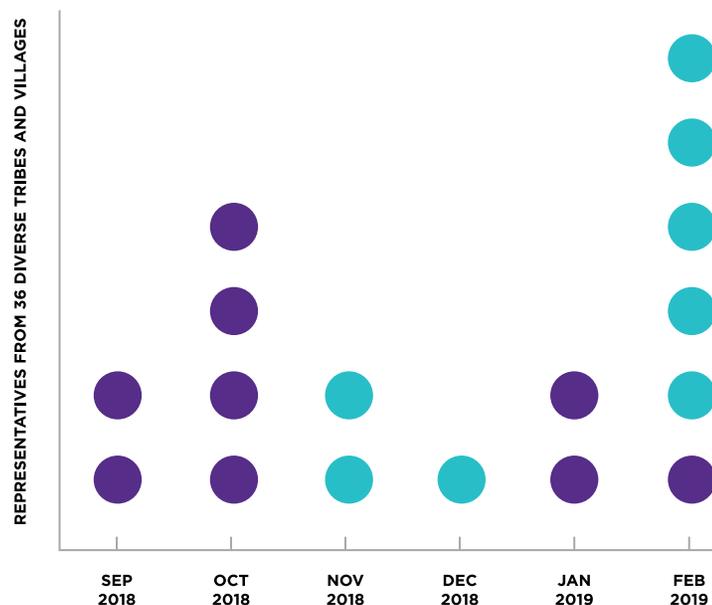
\* Permission to include their quotes in this guide was obtained from all individuals participating in interviews and community roundtables.

Through the roundtables and interviews, more than 60 Native stakeholders participated including:

- Tribal leaders (including Chiefs/Chairpersons/Council Members/Tribal Health Board Directors)
- Grassroots leaders working with Native youth on suicide prevention in their respective communities
- Native youth leaders
- Two-spirit leaders who work with two-spirit youth
- Elders and traditional healers
- Veterans/military service members

### OUR LISTENING PROCESS

● Individual Interviews ● Community Roundtables



These stakeholders represent 36 diverse tribal communities and come from every region in the U.S.<sup>2</sup> The stakeholders also represent segments of tribal communities impacted by suicide at higher rates than others (e.g., Native youth; LGBTQ2S youth; Native military service members and veterans).

The diversity of stakeholders in terms of geographic, cultural and personal variances is important for two reasons,

- ▶ First, suicide rates differ by geographic region, tribal community and personal experiences, such as traumas.
- ▶ Second, the ultimate needs and desired resources for prevention may vary across tribal nations, regions and sectors of our populations.

Finally, developing and delivering this resource tool as a shared community rather than one individual, consultant or academic center is meaningful and reflective of Native processes of creating and sharing knowledge. The process itself is integral to our prevention and healing journey together.

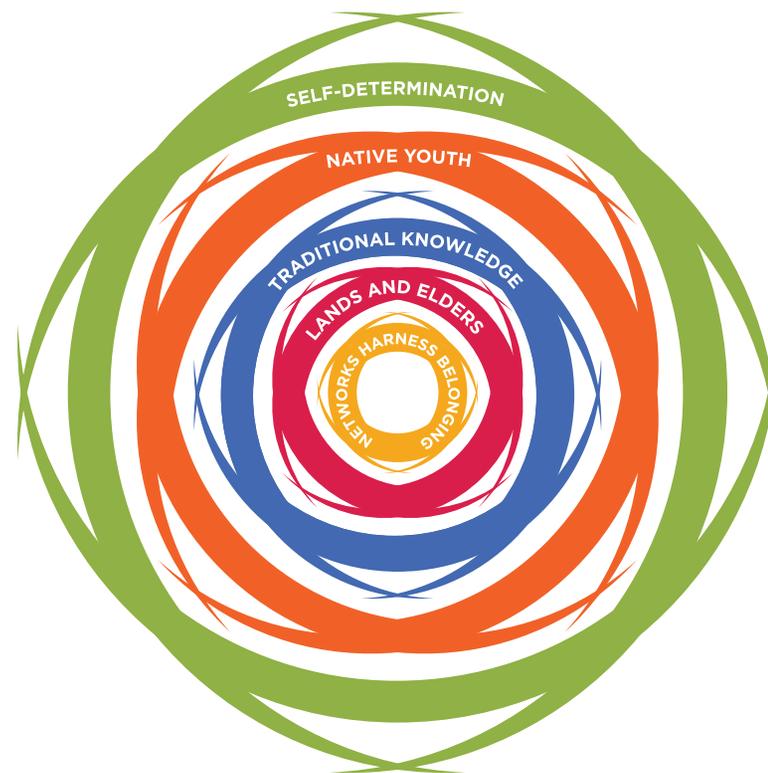
***“The Peacemaker taught us about the Seven Generations. He said, when you sit in council for the welfare of the people, you must not think of yourself or of your family, not even of your generation. He said, make your decisions on behalf of the seven generations coming, so that they may enjoy what you have today.”***

—Oren Lyons (Seneca) Faithkeeper, Onondaga Nation

## CULTURE FORWARD FIVE CORE THEMES

- ▶ **Our networks harness belonging and help keep us safe.**
- ▶ **Connections to our lands and Elders allow us to thrive.**
- ▶ **Traditional knowledge holds the keys to health and healing.**
- ▶ **Native youth lead us to reclaim our autonomy and well-being.**
- ▶ **Self-determination empowers us to fight.**

Knowledge gained from the listening sessions about how stakeholders knew to protect youth from suicide were coded by themes. Five core themes emerged and became chapters for this guide.



<sup>2</sup> According to the National Congress of American Indians Regional Profiles.

Simultaneous to our listening process, we did a deep reading of published research and grey literature produced since 1980 to collect findings about suicide prevention defined by Indigenous participatory and strength-based approaches. We also reviewed epidemiological studies published in the 1960s and 1970s, when Native youth suicide was first recognized on a national level (see Section III. Background). In each chapter, key findings from our literature review are highlighted as “digestible” stories and sorted by theme.

To produce the final content and format for CULTURE FORWARD, we convened a National Advisory Editorial Board (NAEB). The NAEB includes Native youth, tribal and health and human service leaders, and community members with lived experience. We envision CULTURE FORWARD as a collective resource tool “for the good of the people” in line with Native worldviews of community.<sup>3</sup>

## CULTURE FORWARD IS CENTERED UPON WEAVING TRADITIONS

Early in our process, the concept of weaving emerged as a conceptual loom for this work. We envision that the strands of strength-based knowledge, stories and insights gathered for CULTURE FORWARD are giving form to a larger tapestry illuminating how life is sacred.

On February 11, 2019, newly elected Congresswoman Deb Haaland (Pueblo of Laguna) provided the Congressional Response to the National Congress of American Indians 2019 State of Indian Nations address. She described the importance of weaving as a shared tradition across Indian Country.

Fifth-generation Diné rug weavers Lynda Teller Pete and Barbara Teller Ornelas wrote, “We were gifted the art of weaving to keep our families from starving, to be kept in good comfort, and to keep our families together.”<sup>4</sup> Cherokee Nation woven baskets have

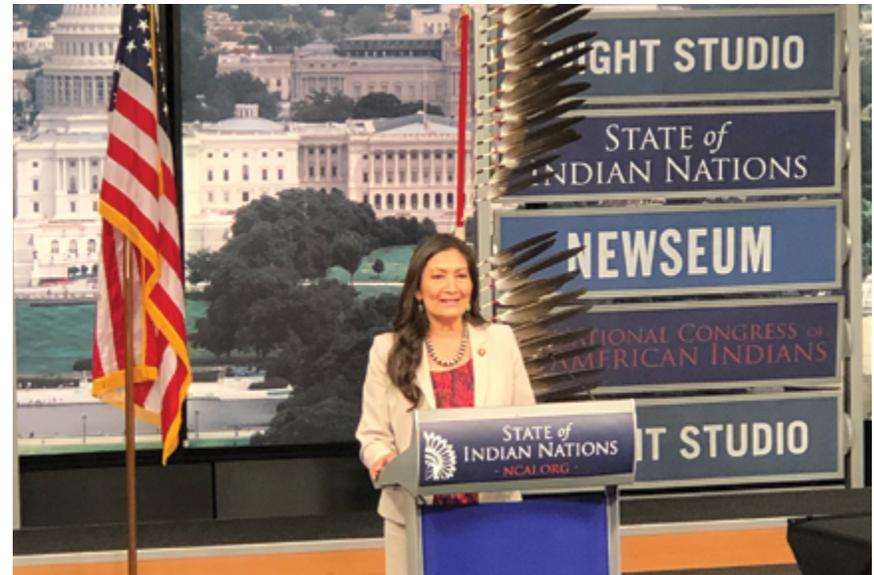


Photo Credit: Victoria O’Keefe, PhD (Cherokee/Seminole Nations)

***“Collectively Indigenous people share the gift of weaving as a practice that has provided us the skills that aided our survival and brought beauty into our communities. Weaving teaches us discipline, self-control, and patience in the process of creating a larger product to share that is also utilitarian. The stories that are told to us as children are woven into our baskets, rugs, and blankets and exchanged across space and time. These weavings explain where we came from and who we are, our secrets are preserved in the practice handed down to each successive generation. We have the privilege of knowing our past, and so our children can continue to create patterns of their own. Although our weavings tell stories that are not written, they are authored by us and illustrate a story that tells us that our people are survivors and that we are resilient.”***

—Congresswoman Haaland, NCAI 2019 State of Indian Nations Address

<sup>3</sup> Cajete, G. A. (2015). *Indigenous Community: Rekindling the Teachings of the Seventh Fire*. St. Paul, MN: Living Justice Press.

<sup>4</sup> Pete, L. T., & Ornelas, B. T. (2018). *Spider Woman’s Children: Navajo Weavers Today*. Loveland, CO: Thrums Books.

also been used for numerous purposes from storage of household goods to carrying food from hunting, fishing and gathering retreats to contemporary pieces of art. Coast Salish Tribes in the Pacific Northwest weave robes, hats and baskets that serve multiple purposes for carrying out important traditions and ways of life. These are just a few examples of tribal communities who continue to use and value weaving in cultural practices.

The purpose of weaving for physical survival, for health and wellness and for everyday practical uses mirrors how we aim to convey the information contained in CULTURE FORWARD. Through weaving individual threads or reeds of information, powerful quotes and resources, we aim to create a tangible tool for:

- Tribal leaders and policymakers needing to leverage funding and resources for their communities to build suicide prevention programming and to know what is working in other communities
- Health, behavioral health and educational leaders working to ensure Native youth and entire communities are healthy, balanced and have positive futures
- Grassroots leaders working with Native youth to create functional tools and helpful information regarding strength-based approaches to suicide prevention
- Native youth leaders to exchange information about prevention best practices from their peers and garner interest from their larger tribal community to implement
- Elders, traditional healers and two-spirit leaders who provide guidance about when it is appropriate to share traditional knowledge and how we move forward to protect our youth in a rapidly changing world while holding on to cultural values and worldviews
- Allies working on behalf of Native youth suicide prevention who desire additional information and resources

## NATIONAL ADVISORY EDITORIAL BOARD

To ensure the CULTURE FORWARD publication was fully guided by Native communities, the Johns Hopkins Center for American Indian Health engaged a National Advisory Editorial Board (NAEB) who reviewed, edited and provided valuable feedback to the CULTURE FORWARD guide you see here. Thank you to all of our NAEB members for their contributions to this project including:

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**Pamela End of Horn** (*Oglala Lakota*), MSW, LICSW, Federal Agency Representative, National Suicide Prevention Consultant, Indian Health Service

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**Robert Flying Hawk** (*Yankton Sioux*), Chairman, Yankton Sioux Tribe

**Johnnie Jae** (*Otoe-Missouria/Choctaw*), Founder, A Tribe Called Geek & #Indigeners4Hope

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