Indigenous Mental Health

Indigenous communities experience disproportionately high rates of mental health challenges but are often unable to access care due to numerous systemic barriers to accessing timely, affordable, and culturally responsive care. Greater investment in culturally appropriate mental healthcare is essential, including through federal grants, increased staffing at Indian Health Services (IHS) and more comprehensive healthcare reforms.

Background

For centuries, Indigenous communities have endured systemic oppression, discrimination, and state-sanctioned violence. The lasting effects of these historical injustices, compounded by ongoing discrimination, continue to impact Indigenous communities across generations.

"Native American and Alaskan Natives experience significantly higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance use challenges, and elevated suicide rates—especially among youth—compared to the general U.S. population."[1] Underfunded health systems, poverty and a lack of culturally competent providers are ongoing barriers to care. [2]

Intersection with Counseling

Despite its promises and significant community need, the U.S. continually underfunds the IHS causing staffing shortages and reducing access to care. While IHS can refer people out, "each year, it rejects tens of thousands of requests to fund those appointments, forcing patients to go without treatment or pay daunting medical bills out of their own pockets."[3] This creates a significant barrier to indigenous communities accessing counseling and additional mental healthcare.

Additionally, for many years indigenous knowledge was shunned, exploited or misunderstood by academia and healthcare systems. While the counseling profession is working to provide more culturally appropriate care, this is an ongoing process, and we

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[1] https://www.weitzmaninstitute.org/indigenous-mental-health-barriers-programs-and-policies/
[2] The U.S. has a legal obligation to provide healthcare to indigenous communities, but Indian Health Services is notoriously underfunded and understaffed.
[3] https://kffhealthnews.org/race-and-health/indian-health-service-patients-out-of-network-purchased-referred-care-program/

must acknowledge and confront the harm done by health professionals to indigenous communities. Furthermore, available data indicates the indigenous community is underrepresented in mental health professions.[4] This can make it difficult for indigenous clients to find providers from their community and means less indigenous providers shaping mental healthcare.

Policy Response

Greater investment in culturally appropriate mental healthcare is essential. The federal government should:

- Substantially increase funding and staffing for the HIS to strengthen healthcare infrastructure, address workforce shortages and expand access to comprehensive, culturally responsive and equitable behavioral health services for Indigenous communities.
- Increase Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and Health & Human Services tribal investments, including Tribal 988, tribal opioid response and Tribal Behavioral Health and Suicide Prevention
- Expand loan forgiveness and scholarship programs for indigenous mental healthcare professionals and students
- Passing bills that support mental healthcare access in indigenous communities like
    - Native Behavioral Health Access Improvement Act (S.2226) which would have allocated $200,000,000 in grants for mental health treatment and prevention for indigenous communities
    - American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans Mental Health Act (H.R. 912) which would have require VA medical center to have a mental health and suicide prevention outreach plan for local tribes and urban Indian health organizations.

Universities can support indigenous communities by ensuring clinicians are learning culturally appropriate care, while associations and policy leaders can work to elevate the voice of indigenous providers.

[4] https://www.apa.org/workforce/data-tools/demographics

Take Action

Contact your lawmakers and share why investing in indigenous mental healthcare is essential and should be a priority for their office.

> **Suggested message:**
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> "As a counselor and constituent, I am contacting you about increasing mental healthcare access for indigenous communities. This matters because indigenous communities experience high rates of PTSD, substance use challenges and suicide but have limited access to appropriate mental healthcare. In my work, I see [brief example]. I urge you to [specific action, like increase funding for IHS or reintroduce Native Behavioral Health Access Improvement Act]."

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Questions? Email us at advocacy@counseling.org