



Photo courtesy of Chickasaw Nation

EMBRACING CULTURE AS HEALTH

A HEALTHY BRAIN INITIATIVE ISSUE MAP

The Healthy Brain Initiative: Road Map for American Indian and Alaska Native Peoples is a guide focused on addressing dementia in American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities.

Find the HBI Road Map for AI/AN Peoples and additional tools, resources and data at: alz.org/HBIRoadMapAIAN

PUBLIC HEALTH AND CULTURE AS HEALTH

There are 574 federally recognized and sovereign American Indian tribes, nations, pueblos, bands and Alaska Native villages in the United States, as well as state recognized tribes and many other communities without federal or state recognition. All have their own history, traditions, cultures and practices.¹ It is estimated that approximately 87% of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) peoples live in urban areas, which has resulted in a mixing of practices and a coming together of communities.² These strengths, which are the foundation of the indigenous determinants of health (see table), should be incorporated when planning public health action.

Strength-based approaches emphasize the cultural knowledge, values and resilience of AI/AN communities, such as the teachings of Elders, to achieve health equity. By focusing on strengths rather than deficits, these approaches empower AI/AN communities to leverage their traditions and wisdom in health care and education, fostering culturally relevant solutions that address health disparities and promote well-being.³

Some strengths of AI/AN communities include:

- **Value of and respect for Elders:** Elders are highly revered and are often leaders in their community due to their wisdom, particularly when it comes to traditions and cultural values. They play a critical role in transmitting knowledge and practices to future generations. These cultural practices and traditions have been shown to be protective factors in AI/AN communities.
- **Importance of family and community:** Family and collective well-being is central to AI/AN culture, typically extending far beyond blood relatives.⁴ AI/AN peoples often consider their tribal community their family; many even see all other AI/AN peoples as their relatives.⁵ This overall mindset values tribal identity and community connectedness, coming together and ensuring that no one is alone.

- **Resilience:** AI/AN peoples continue to overcome historical and contemporary challenges and loss of culture through community resilience.⁶ This resilience is often driven by culture, family and social connectedness through traditional practices, and the presence of Elders in family and community.
- **Focus on holistic health:** The importance of a holistic approach to health include cultural connectedness, cultural sense of belonging and identity, connections to the earth and land, and the importance of being in community.⁷ These concepts relate directly to healthy behaviors known to lower the risk of dementia and improve brain health.

Indigenous Determinants of Health	Examples
Indigenous Knowledge	Ways to be in community, such as benefiting from prayer, mutual aid, cultural connectedness and shared experiences
Language and Identity	Speaking indigenous languages with other speakers
Land and Kinship	Recognizing and reaffirming that indigenous peoples are rooted in traditional understandings of specific places
Sovereignty	Sovereign rights of tribal governments to ensure health and safety of their people
Structural and Systemic Factors	Historical mistreatment

This table showcases examples of indigenous determinants of health that impact AI/AN communities as described by Seven Directions, a Center for Indigenous Public Health.⁸

References

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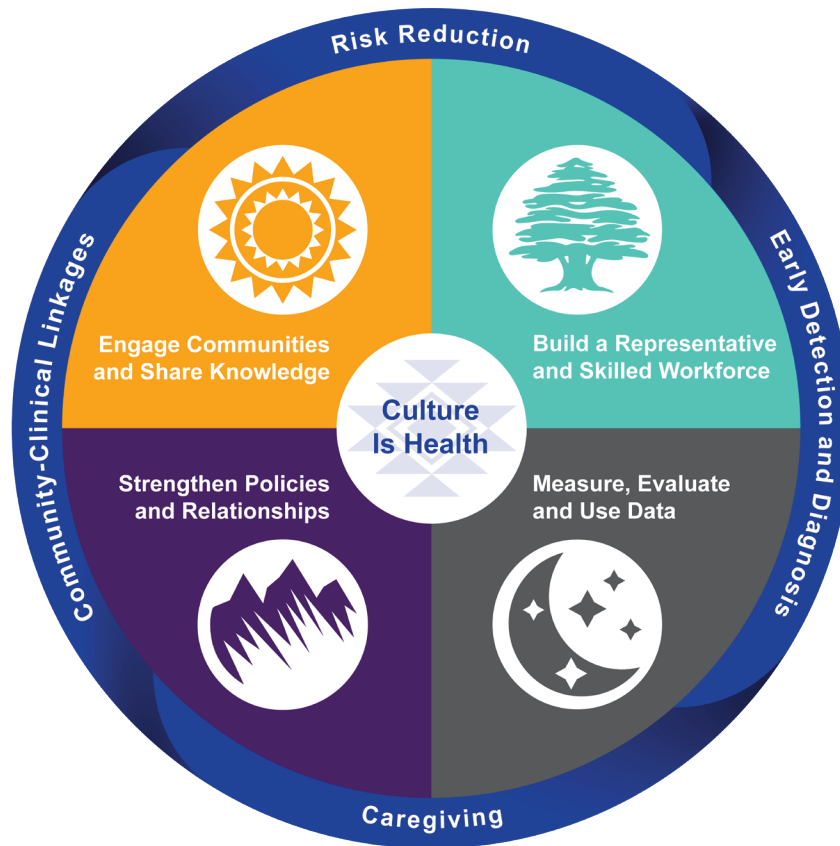
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7. United Nations Economic and Social Council. Indigenous determinants of health in the 2030 agenda for sustainable development. 2023. Available from: nihb.org/resources/IDH%20UNPFII%20Report%20-%202023.pdf

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CULTURE IS HEALTH ACTION AGENDA

The *Healthy Brain Initiative: Road Map for American Indian and Alaska Native Peoples* is organized around four domains. Culture is Health unites the four domains, emphasizing the importance of culture in the ability of AI/AN communities to achieve optimal health. The wheel depicts the interconnectedness of these elements, showing the essential nature of each in a successful strategy to improve brain health.



E DOMAIN: ENGAGE COMMUNITIES AND SHARE KNOWLEDGE



The sun icon symbolizes warmth, energy and growth as communities engage and share knowledge together.



W DOMAIN: BUILD A REPRESENTATIVE AND SKILLED WORKFORCE



The cedar tree icon represents protection and healing. The diverse uses of the tree call to mind the roles of the different members of the workforce.



P DOMAIN: STRENGTHEN POLICIES AND RELATIONSHIPS



The mountain range icon signifies strength and sacredness, representing the power of policies and relationships.



M DOMAIN: MEASURE, EVALUATE AND USE DATA



The moon icon symbolizes the moon's role as a guide and a timekeeper, signifying transformation and the importance of measurement and data.

COMMUNITIES IN ACTION: EMBRACING CULTURE AS PUBLIC HEALTH

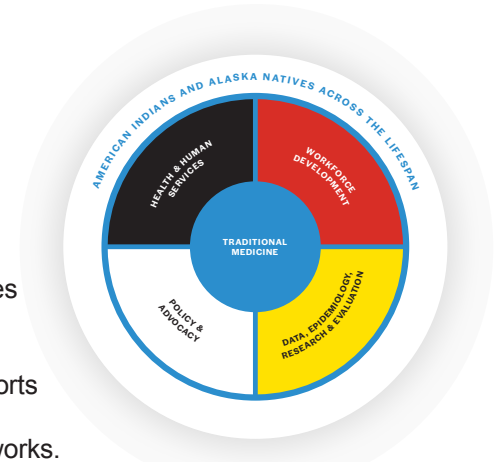
Seattle Indian Health Board, Washington

The Seattle Indian Health Board (SIHB), an Urban Indian Organization, serves nearly 6,000 relatives representing over 200 tribal nations annually. Their Indigenous Knowledge Informed System of Care (IndigiKnow) is a culturally attuned model of care that places Traditional Indian Medicine at the center of health services, workforce development, research, and advocacy. The holistic model at SIHB upholds culture as a protective factor for health, including in Elder care.

SIHB's Elders Program embeds culture in dementia risk reduction strategies through creation of safe space, community socialization, and culturally attuned activities supporting cognitive health. Activities emphasize food, financial and health education, health and human services support, and exercise. In collaboration with their Traditional Indian Medicine team, the Elders Program offers traditional activities such as talking circles, prayer, drum and medicine bundle making. Indigenous chefs also prepare traditional foods to evoke memory, uphold traditional values, and social connection fostering brain health.

To address stigma, SIHB normalizes conversations on memory loss, promotes culturally appropriate early detection messaging, and supports family caregivers with training and peer networks.

Health professionals also receive training on historical and systemic factors affecting AI/AN health, emphasizing a strength-based approach. Impactful data and stories are collected through culturally rigorous approaches, like the Indigenous Evaluation Framework, to support advocacy efforts for urban AI/AN people, including Elders. Finally, their funding strategy sustains and integrates programs across the life course, reinforcing resilience, dignity, and community support. By centering culture as health, SIHB ensures indigenous knowledge remains integral to dementia care, promoting holistic well-being.



Wabanaki Public Health and Wellness, Maine

Wabanaki Public Health and Wellness is a community-based organization serving four federally recognized tribes located in five communities in Maine. Dedicated to improving the health and well-being of Wabanaki people, the organization provides a range of services, including public health initiatives, research, healing and recovery programs, and cultural revitalization efforts. Their mission is guided by principles of inclusivity, balance, and cultural centeredness, ensuring that all programs are rooted in indigenous traditions and values.

In their research on dementia and brain health, Wabanaki Public Health and Wellness integrates culture as health, recognizing the healing power of traditions, language, and community connection. Through the Voices of Our Elders study, the organization approaches research as a sacred exchange, creating a comfortable and respectful space where Elders can share their experiences. Research visits

begin with the offering of a medicine pouch, reinforcing cultural traditions and ensuring a welcoming environment.

A key aspect of their approach is community-based participatory research, where trained community members — rather than outside professionals — conduct interviews. This ensures that Elders feel safe sharing their stories with familiar faces, strengthening both the quality of the research and the trust within the community.

Beyond data collection, Wabanaki Public Health and Wellness is committed to data sovereignty, ensuring that tribal communities maintain control over their own stories and data. By embedding indigenous knowledge into public health and research efforts, the organization advances dementia awareness, caregiver support, and holistic healing, reaffirming that culture itself is a powerful tool for health and well-being.

Sovereignty refers to the rights of tribal governments to ensure healing, health, welfare and safety of their people and ancestral lands. The practice of sovereignty includes governance practices, both current and traditional, that support wellness for individuals, families, communities and the environment around us.