



Photo credit: Native American Youth and Family Center

Groundbreaking for Kah San Chako Haws multifamily affordable housing development in Portland, Oregon

Making the Invisible Visible: *Urban Indian Community Development*

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“Instead of waiting for Washington, many of our cities have already become their own laboratories for change, some leading the world in coming up with innovative new ways to solve the problems of our time.”

—President Barack Obama¹

Contrary to common perceptions, the vast majority of American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/AN) live in cities, not on reservations. To meet their urgent needs, organizations serving AI/ANs in metropolitan areas are working to exemplify the pursuit noted in President Obama’s statement by developing innovative and holistic models for solving the current challenges that AI/AN peoples face in urban areas despite a significant lack of resources. These groups put

considerable heart, persistence and ingenuity into developing programs that have measurable positive impacts on their constituencies’ quality of life. This article provides some background and context on the particular challenges faced by AI/AN peoples in urban areas, and presents four key areas for support and community development in urban Indian communities: education, housing, health and wellness, and economic development and employment. We conclude with a profile of a community that has developed a remarkable model for tackling these issues that may be replicable in other communities.

Urban American Indians and Alaska Natives: An Overview

In 2010, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 5.2

million people in the United States identified as American Indian and Alaska Native, either alone or in combination with one or more other races. Within the AI/AN population, there are essentially two subcategories: the on-reservation population, governed by tribal governments; and the off-reservation population, serviced by off reservation or “urban Indian” organizations. Fully 78 percent of all AI/ANs live off-reservation, and the majority of these AI/ANs live in cities.² This group is often very migratory, moving back and forth between the city and reservation. As we define it, the urban AI/AN community encompasses any and all self-identified or Tribally-enrolled American Indian or Alaskan Native people who are residents of a local metropolitan community and do not live on a reservation. In many urban centers the AI/AN population can represent hundreds of federally recognized Tribes and Bands. These factors make it difficult for urban Indians to have a collective national voice and as such, they are often invisible to policy makers focused on urban communities.

An important point to note is that many resources and services available to Native families living on reservations or tribal territories are not accessible to Native peoples in urban areas. In place of those resources, urban Indian social service organizations provide essential cultural and social services to Native people living in the cities. Many of the urban Indian organizations currently in operation were established to support families brought to urban areas by the Federal Relocation Program of the 1950s, and provide the means for Native American families to adjust to a new way of life in a much different environment than reservations and tribal homelands. Many urban Indian centers are located in key geographies that were once thriving homelands for tribal communities, and many communities are acknowledging and drawing strength from this fact. Most importantly, since their inception, urban Indian centers have proven a bastion of cultural life for many urban Indians, and have been the focal point for Native families in maintaining their values, traditions, and communal ties to one another. In essence, the centers have provided a place for this geographically disparate population to gather and call “home.”

Understanding the Unique Circumstances of Urban American Indians and Alaska Natives

The circumstances of AI/ANs bear some resemblance to other urban communities of color and on-reservation populations, but also carry some unique characteristics and challenges. AI/AN populations, including those who now live in urban communities, have a specific socio-historical relationship and status in the United States unlike any other group, and struggle to maintain their unique cultural traditions and values, especially in off-reservation

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contexts. Urban Indian populations must deal with the effects of significant inter-generational trauma and poverty, and those who find themselves at the bottom of the economic ladder often struggle in isolation. This is because unlike many other minority populations in the U.S., urban American Indians are rarely found residentially clustered. Instead, AI/ANs are widely dispersed throughout metropolitan areas, and are often quite mobile. This lack of geographic connectivity intensifies urban AI/ANs’ invisibility. Because AI/ANs are both a small minority of the population and geographically dispersed, larger institutions serving low-income populations often do not prioritize the development of appropriate and effective services for Native peoples, leaving small and often-underfunded AI/AN organizations to meet diverse needs across very large geographic areas. This is a serious challenge, as population dispersion can make outreach and service provision prohibitively expensive for community-based organizations. By the same token, the lack of widespread community infrastructure for Native populations means that AI/AN populations often have to travel great distances to obtain culturally relevant services, increasing the costs and stressors of urban life.

Targeted public and private investments will be required to build the capacity of Native-serving organizations and to holistically improve conditions for urban Indians. In addition, efforts to improve outcomes will need to be strategic and multi-dimensional. The National Urban Indian Family Coalition has identified four core dimensions of community development around which urban Indian organizations should focus to address critical needs in urban Native communities. Below, we discuss these areas of concern in greater detail.

Education

In 2010, 39 percent of Native children under the age of 5 lived in poverty, nearly twice the rate for U.S. children on the whole. It is widely recognized that poverty poses a serious challenge to children’s access to quality learning opportunities and their potential to succeed in school. The urban AI/AN community’s experience reflects a growing body of research indicating that parents of very young children who live below the poverty line often do

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not have the tools and resources needed to support cognitive growth and school readiness. As a result, children in these families start well behind their peers even in the earliest grades, and suffer from underachievement as this disparity continues to widen with each additional school year. The effects of these disparities are not just limited to schoolgrounds, as statistics show that less than half of the Native students in the public school system graduate from high school, thus limiting economic opportunity across the lifespan.²

Housing

The lack of affordable housing is a significant hardship for low income households preventing them from meeting their other basic needs such as nutrition and healthcare, or saving for their future and that of their families. While this holds true for all disadvantaged communities in the United States, it is particularly glaring for American Indian and Alaska Native communities, considering the federal government's legal and trust responsibility to provide adequate housing for Native people.

Some of the housing-related statistics are particularly striking. In AI/AN communities, 8.1 percent of homes are overcrowded, compared to 3.1 percent of homes among the general U.S. population. In 2012, AI/ANs had a denial rate for conventional home purchase loans of 36 percent, compared with a rate of 15 percent for Caucasians.⁴ Additionally, nearly every city represented in the National Urban Indian Family Coalition reports a disproportionate number of Natives in shelter care but very few transitional housing projects serving the Native community.

These statistics paint a clear picture of the need for expansion of housing programs specifically oriented to AI/AN households. This situation also reflects a need for capacity building in the Native non-profit sector, and for tribal governments to participate in the development of collaborative national strategies to address housing policies and practices targeted for urban AI/AN populations.

Health & Wellness

AI/ANs face disproportionately high risks and rates of disease across many conditions. For instance, American Indian/Native Alaskan children aged two to five years old

show the highest rates of childhood obesity among young Americans, and the disease is twice as common in AI/AN children as it is in non-Hispanic white or Asian children.⁵ To help reverse these health challenges, urban Indian organizations can and should spur action in the areas of health, wellness, nutrition and physical activity.

Economic Development and Employment

Already grappling with historically high rates of unemployment, American Indians living on and off reservations are seeing even higher rates due to the country's recent economic downturn. According to a new survey⁶, in the last half of 2007, just before the economy began its downward spiral, unemployment averaged 7.8 percent for Native Americans. In the first half of 2009, it had climbed to 13.6 percent, well above the national rate. That average that masks even sharper differences in various regions of the country; the western region, encompassing Hawaii, California, Oregon and Washington, went from lowest to highest unemployment among American Indians, soaring from 6.4 percent to 18.7 percent in the same time period. Many factors stemming from inter-generational poverty create artificial ceilings on community members' potential career advancement, or may even impede individuals' ability to work at all. These issues, which include locating and paying providers for child and/or elder care; securing a stable housing situation; and addressing health, including mental health and substance abuse; must be addressed for any education or job training program to be successful.

Despite these stark statistics, many urban Indian organizations are developing effective initiatives to help improve conditions for AI/AN households in their cities. We describe one organization's successful efforts below.

A Successful Example: The Native American Youth and Family Center (NAYA), Portland, Oregon

NAYA Family Center in Portland, Oregon works to enrich the lives of Native youth and families through education, community involvement, and culturally specific programming. Since its founding nearly 40 years ago, it has grown from a small-scale social service agency to a comprehensive community development organization, with an \$8 million annual operating budget and over 100 full time staff members. NAYA's main areas of focus are youth services (cultural, arts, recreation), youth development (education), family services (domestic violence prevention, child welfare, and Elder care), housing (stability, homeownership, and rent assistance), finance (individual development accounts), and economic development (micro-lending, social enterprise and housing and commercial community development).

Assets: Strategic Relations and Partnerships

NAYA has developed a multi-tiered network of relations and partnerships, significantly improving their ability to develop effective and sustainable programs and services. NAYA has a healthy funding portfolio, and has established important relationships with grant-making institutions, local government, and other community-based organizations. In addition, they are closely connected to other communities of color, forming two collaborative networking groups that work across Portland: the Housing Organizations of Color Coalition and the Coalition of Communities of Color. The development of strategic and respectful relationships across the broad range of sectors in urban centers has been central to NAYA's success.

Notable NAYA Accomplishments

- **Community and Economic Development:** NAYA has worked with more than 100 first-time homebuyers as well as homeowners in need of refinancing. Since 2008, the organization has created 53 units of housing, and worked with HUD's Sustainable Communities program on building green housing. NAYA planned, financed, and constructed Kah San Chako Haws (meaning "East House" in Chinook), a LEED Gold-certified modular housing site that was recently named the Building of the Week by the Modular Building Institute. The multifamily, affordable housing units were constructed in five months and installed in just three days. Over the last three fiscal years, NAYA has offered nearly 20,000 hours of service in programs such as Rent Well, small business classes, direct assistance for utilities, microlending, and individual development accounts, among other CED efforts.
- **Social enterprise:** NAYA Construction is a work experience and training program which introduces participants to the construction trades, then puts them to work maintaining NAYA properties. The program is currently developing an in-house general contractor service. NAYA Kitchen and Nawitka Catering is a com-

mercial-grade kitchen that provides nutritious meals to students, Elders, staff and community members, and provides contract catering services for events.

- **Education:** In response to disastrous graduation rates, NAYA runs a private, state-accredited high school, and offers youth advocacy programming to guide students to better educational outcomes, along with summer school programming for younger children. NAYA has worked with the public schools to co-develop an Early Learning Center.
- **Community Investment:** NAYA's ten acre campus acts as an educational center, community hub, and gathering place for the Portland Native American community. NAYA is one of the largest employers in the neighborhood and to date has invested more than \$70 million in programming and assets back into the community.
- **Cultural Development:** Portland Youth and Elders Council serves to unite the generations with cultural programming, providing education in traditional culture and values.

Conclusion

As exemplified here, NAYA has achieved key accomplishments in the four core community development areas discussed earlier in this article. Their remarkable progress demonstrates that with appropriate and strategic investments in these core areas, significant progress can be made to assist and elevate urban AI/AN communities. In a wide variety of cities, urban Indian service organizations like these often serve as "tribal embassies," providing not just transformative social and economic services, but also a sense of home and cultural identity for the millions of Native people living in urban areas across the United States. Despite scarce resources, these organizations bring together AI/AN communities that might otherwise be lost in urban communities, enriching their lives through community connection and empowerment. **CI**