



Native Aging Visions

A Resource for Native Elders

In This Issue

Title VI Spotlight: Fairbanks Native Association 1

Karen Eddy, the Title VI director of Fairbanks Native Association (FNA), shares how FNA responds to the needs of many tribes in Alaska.

Housing Crisis and Homelessness.....5

Elders are experiencing homelessness due to the housing crisis, nationally.

Culture Camps7

Elders are sharing their knowledge and passing on traditions to youth at culture camps.

Stand Down Event Helps Veterans Stand on Their Own9

The 2nd Annual Stand Down Event helps native veterans, spouses, and caregivers find resources to assist with healing, benefits, health resources, and more.

Title VI Spotlight: Fairbanks Native Association

By [Cole Ward, MA](#)

On an early Tuesday morning at the end of February, in Interior Alaska, a day begins with no typical start and end time. Karen Eddy, the Title VI director, starts her mornings at [Fairbanks Native Association](#) (FNA) with staff meetings to cover tasks for the day. The time also allows her to make sure staff knows the importance of their work by drilling home the word “compliance,” so that everyone is held accountable and a part of the success.

Working at FNA brings challenges that make no two days the same. Karen's journey to FNA has been long, but it has allowed her to pick up skills and life lessons that guide her and make what she does even more meaningful. Her passion for the work drives everyone involved to meet the unique encounters each day brings.

In a typical week, Karen manages 14 grants, works with her team to improve the lives of Elders, and problem-solves with numerous partners to address immediate problems and plan for short- and long-term solutions. Most nights end the way the day started, with Karen making sure the Elders she works with are okay. Sometimes this includes checking on homeless populations to make sure that the elderly are not among them or on the streets.

A Diverse Population

Alaska is home to around 229 federally recognized tribes. As Karen mentions, “Fairbanks is a hub,” with many Native Elders in Fairbanks displaced. On any given day, staff at FNA may work with Native Elders from Nome, Sitka, Kodiak, Dot Lake, or Mentasta, to name a few. As a result, she works with Native people from all over the state, which creates unique challenges, but also rare opportunities.



FAIRBANKS NATIVE
ASSOCIATION



Each place has its own culture, language, and customs, allowing Elders to share language, foods, and knowledge with other people. Yet, with a diverse population being displaced, some Elders may need more than a warm meal. For instance, they may need to take part in classes from one of FNA's partners that educate Elders about their health and financial well-being, a place to socialize, or one of the many other events/programs that FNA offers each week.

No Single Response

With diversity, there is no one right response. Instead, Karen relies on honest, and sometimes, tough conversations with Elders. For example, over the past year, Elders were having trouble paying their rent. In some cases, they were eight months behind and facing eviction, in the middle of winter. As a result, Karen had to have very open and honest conversations with her Elders and everyone involved. While this situation could have resulted in hurt feelings, Karen makes it well-known to everyone that she is open, honest, and transparent, which leads to trust and positive outcomes.

Other times, conversations go a little easier when people are placed in talking circles and asked to share their thoughts. For example, an Elder who had not spoken in over eight years spoke in a talking circle because she felt heard and respected. Still, Karen is an Elder too and “stands proud of that.” It allows her to relate to Elders at FNA because they know she is listening to them and it gives her words more meaning as she may have gone through similar experiences.

COVID-19

Although COVID-19 is in the rearview mirror for most, at FNA, it continues to be tough to reflect on. Many Elders did not believe in immunization. As a result, Karen and her staff had to help bury over 200 Elders. In addition, while COVID-19 was ongoing, Elders experienced family violence, bullying, identity theft, and financial exploitation, among other hardships.

In worst-case situations, Elders experienced, “failure to thrive” – they had given up on life and lost the will to continue. This led to Karen and one of her partners, Linda Thai, a key figure who has partnered with Karen from the very beginning, to conduct five days of conversation with Elders in talking circles. These rich conversations helped FNA gain a deeper understanding of what

Elders were experiencing daily. For example, many Elders did not understand what stress meant or even the type of victimization they were experiencing.

As a result of these conversations, Karen was able to partner with the [National Crime Justice Training Center](#) for three days of trainings and come together, work on concerns, and move forward in a good way while addressing the additional needs identified.

Partnerships, Collaborations, and “Other Duties as Assigned”

For Karen and FNA, much of the success starts and ends with people working together for the best outcome. Karen's staff have skill sets from many backgrounds, including cooking to social work to gardening to case management, which she utilizes with the tag line on the application, “other duties as assigned.” Other skill sets that enter FNA come from volunteers or their 31 partners.

This winter, some Elders were in danger of being displaced, but with the help of partners, they were able to resolve legal, accounting, and financial issues so that Elders would not be without a place in the middle of winter. Additionally, much of the health knowledge that Elders seek to learn comes from partnerships with the community and universities. For example, Dr. Ellen Lopez comes on most Saturdays to work with Elders by having natural conversations with them, as the Elders bead and sew. In addition, Dr. Lopez has been key to evaluating FNA's Title VI Program. In addition, Dr. Mary McManus works with FNA on public health issues and occasionally gets her students involved for hands on learning and additional assistance.

In the spring, FNA collaborates with more partners to plant gardens to make sure that food insecurity – one of the major concerns for Elders in Alaska – does not affect Elders in Fairbanks. One of these gardens is in the back of FNA and provides a spot for Elders to plant a garden and socialize with youth and volunteers that want to help throughout the year. Additionally, year-round local green houses will bring hundreds of pounds of vegetables for FNA to cook and feed Elders, but there is also enough for Elders to receive bags of food as well once they leave. In addition, Karen works with the state to distribute farmers market coupons to Elders, so they can seek other fresh foods.



Data Driven

FNA has been one of the Title VI programs at the forefront of collaborations and partnerships, which has led to success in many aspects. However, all of the collaborations and success are the result of Karen's programs taking a data driven approach to guide their responses. Some of the data she receives is quantitative, from surveys such as the [Title VI Needs Assessment Survey](#) distributed by the [National Resource Center on Native American Aging](#) (NRCNAA). Other times, it is gathered in qualitative form through talking circles at the end of the month when Elders are given the opportunity to voice their thoughts about the programs and what else they would like to see provided.



Based on this feedback, Karen creates a month of activities for her Elders, which includes popular events like crocheting circles and mentoring young children through activities like reading, playing music, and culture camp where Elders help kids take part in seasonal events like dog mushing.

In April, for Child Abuse Prevention Month, Elders are involved in singing, dancing, preparing traditional foods, and march through downtown Fairbanks to raise child abuse awareness in the community. During this event, Elders come from all over Alaska to take part in the event with their grandkids. On the next day, families take part in the Spring Fling in Fairbanks, which allows Elders to socialize with the community and/or be with their families.

Everyday Passion

In the fall of 2018, the NRCNAA visited FNA and Karen after attending a conference in Fairbanks. After that visit, everyone was struck by the number of programs and work that FNA did with Native Elders. While the work is challenging, it is often rewarding, and it takes a special person to take on this type of work.

When asked about what drives her to do this type of work, Karen replies, "One of the most rewarding things is making a difference in people's lives every day. When you are transparent, honest, and open – everybody blooms."

Housing Crisis and Homelessness

By [Cole Ward](#)

Across the country, housing among Elders has become a growing concern. American Indian and Alaska Natives experience a rate of homelessness at a higher rate than most populations. For example, in the northern Midwest, over one-third of American Indians have experienced homelessness during their lifetime (Willie, Kemp, Greenfield, & Walls, 2017).

Unaffordable Housing

Meanwhile, in Alaska, housing is the number one priority for the state as the cost of living has increased by 25% in the past few years. It is not a reach to assume that some Elders may have been displaced since they were children being taken away to boarding schools. Not surprisingly, homelessness and the lack of housing is a growing concern for Native Elders as they are some of the most vulnerable people in society.

At [Fairbanks Native Association](#) (FNA) in Fairbanks, Alaska, after Karen Eddy, Title VI director, leaves work, she checks to make sure the Elders are not in the homeless camps because she knows that it can lead to additional consequences such as food insecurity, lack of healthcare, or other social challenges like mental health issues. The consequences of homelessness can be even more severe in the winter as temperatures can stay below zero for long periods of time.



Money Management Assistance

As a result, Karen makes it a priority to ask the Elders she works with about their living situations and how they plan to afford rent. In addition, she makes sure they are prioritizing their money to pay for their basic needs and housing. Yet, Elders often ask for additional resources or classes that highlight how to manage their money, which is often on a set budget. Luckily, some of FNA's partners are able to provide assistance.

However, some Elders need additional assistance. For example, much like the general population, some Elders may spend too much money on outside activities and lose track of paying their rent. These situations sometimes require Karen or her staff to ask tough questions to help get the Elder back on

track. Other situations may require help from medical personnel or other professionals to help Elders overcome addictions.

These examples from FNA highlight that there is no single solution or quick fix for Elders without places to call home. In other words, some may need a warm meal and a place to sleep for the night, while others may need extensive help.

Unmet Needs

Karen also mentions that the data provided from the [National Resource Center on Native American Aging](#) (NRCNAA) through the [Title VI Needs Assessment Survey](#) has aided her in narrowing FNA's focus on unmet needs. For example, the survey revealed that Elders needed help with finances and home modifications.

With this updated information, Karen and her staff continue to focus on programs to help Elders with managing their money. The survey also underscored the need for mental health resources for Elders, which has been compounded by events from the past like historical trauma and by stresses such as homelessness.

Outside of FNA, tribes or villages may try to offset these same concerns by providing tribal housing, stipends, meals, transportation to health appointments, as well as other benefits to further the well-being of Elders. For one of the most vulnerable populations in society, tribes prioritize their Elders and the needs of Elders. Similarly to FNA, each tribe experiences different concerns from Elders and adapt their approach to meet these challenges.

Culture Camps

By [Cole Ward](#)

Past literature has described American Indian and Alaska Native Elders as keepers of knowledge communicating their wisdom, creating the foundation for future generations (Kahn, Reinschmidt, Teufel-Shone, Ore, Henson, & Attakai, 2018). Unfortunately, existing literature has also documented a trend of disconnect between Native generations, which has caused tribal nations to invest in programs that reconnect Elders with youth (Goodkind, Hess, Gorman, & Parker, 2012; Tyer, 2015).

Yet, the experiences and life stories from Elders, which hold lessons for all generations, can be key to the development of rich American Indian or Alaska Native cultural identity and life skills.

Over the years, tribes and Native people have looked for ways to keep their culture alive and pass it on to the next generation. For many Elders, culture is defined as knowledge and values centered around knowing their tribal roots, history, and engaging in cultural activities (Kahn et al, 2018).

Transfer of Knowledge

Recently, tribal programs, such as Title VI programs, have turned to “culture camps” as a way for Elders to stay engaged and active in their daily lives. Culture camps, which can last one or more days, allow Native Elders and youth to participate in traditional events. In a sense, the event is a transfer of knowledge from teacher to student. However, for Native people who participate, it is a preservation of culture, language, stories, songs, and life skills.

Yet, the process is two-fold, as Elders are able to stay involved in their communities and have their value undiminished, maybe even increased. During culture camps, Elders introduce themselves by their traditional names and continue conversations in their native language, which may be the first time children have heard it.

Teaching Traditions

In Fairbanks, Alaska, at [Fairbanks Native Association](#) (FNA), Karen Eddy, Title VI director, highlighted how youngsters looked at Elders with awe and soaked in all the knowledge presented while learning where their ancestors came from. Elders would speak to them in their native language, read books together, and



show them where their traditional homelands were. And, equally as important, Elders enjoyed sharing their knowledge with the children.



In addition to language, song, and dance, Elders teach younger generations how their ancestors lived and survived before present day circumstances. For instance, Elders possess the knowledge of hunting or catching wild game, gathering fruits and vegetables, and preparing meals. This knowledge is so great and revered that some tribes and villages have elicited the help of Elders during hunting season to have them teach younger generations how to harvest and clean the animals they catch.

Similar to language, activities such as these promote a sense of belonging and connection with one's tribal community, heritage, and traditional lifestyle. For example, traditional activities help generations of Natives understand their roles in life and that there is a connection between them and nature (Kahn et al, 2018). Put differently, Native youth are able to understand that their place in society is one of many working together.

Exploring History

Yet, and perhaps most importantly, the teachings Elders provide give Native youth an understanding of the history of their tribe or village and the historical trauma Natives before them experienced. By sharing stories, Elders communicate the racism and discrimination they experienced while instilling pride and personal strength to overcome modern challenges. In other words, Elders are passing on resiliency strategies.



By sharing stories of survival through the boarding schools and assimilation, Elders are passing on their resiliency and self-determination to Native youth. Overall, the teachings Elders provide to younger generations underscore the importance of positive character traits such as responsibility, good work ethic, and standing up for yourself while respecting those around you (Kahn et al, 2018).

Stand Down Event Helps Veterans Stand on Their Own

By [Cole Ward, MA](#)

For two days in June, Belcourt, North Dakota and the [Sky Dancer Casino and Hotel](#) hosted the [2nd Annual Stand Down Event for veterans](#). Veterans, spouses, and caregivers from all backgrounds were invited to come together to network, listen, and learn about resources available to them, and be recognized for their sacrifices.

The event opened up with posting of the colors from the local American Legion and with the drum group inviting keynote speaker Evangelo “Vann” Morris to take part in the beating of the drums. Afterwards, opening remarks were given by the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians Tribal Chairman Jamie Azure.

Healing Ceremony

During one of the most powerful moments of the gathering, local Native women and the drum group led the “Wiping of the Tears Ceremony.” The ceremony began with the drum group carrying a rhythm and singing while the Native women dipped tree branches into water. At the same time, attendees, Elders, and veterans, first formed a line.

Once the branches were dipped in water, one-by-one, each person stepped forward and the wet branches were brushed up and down the person – wiping away the tears and healing those grieving.

Resources and Assistance

Presentations came from the [Veterans Health Administration](#) about eligibility, enrollment, and travel, and from the [Veterans Benefits Administration](#) addressing compensation and pension. Additional topics from a wide range of groups covered caregiver support programs for elderly veterans, care in the community for veterans, mental health, suicide prevention or veterans’ crisis line, Native American direct loan programs, and telehealth. During breaks, Elders were able to take part in the resource fair and ask more personal questions to presenters.

In addition to seeking more information from presenters during breaks, veterans were able to enroll for benefits, obtain their Veterans Administration IDs, receive health check-ups if they wanted from the two medical teams



outside the venue on buses, or learn about what their officials are doing for veterans. These activities, as well as the resource fair, were made available for both days of the conference.

Honoring Veterans Sacrifices

Later on, the Tribal Veteran Service Officer for Turtle Mountain, Richard Marcellais, made a few remarks and updated veterans on programs available, what the local tribe is doing for veterans, and provided an update about the honor flight – a trip provided, at no cost to veterans, to Washington, D.C.



After a full day of presentations and discussions, attendees were invited to eat, interact, and listen to the keynote speaker at dinner. As a U.S. Navy retired surface warfare officer and Afghanistan deployed combat veteran, Vann Morris spoke to attendees about his background, their sacrifices, the importance of veterans, and recited two passionate poems that he wrote about veterans and the U.S. flag.

The National Resource Center on Native American Aging is supported by a cooperative agreement with the Administration for Community Living (ACL) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Any information, content, or conclusions on this website are those of the authors and should not be construed as the official position or policy of, nor should any endorsements be inferred by the ACL, HHS, or the U.S. Government.