Tribal Expert Peer Cohort (TEPC): Information Sheet

This information sheet highlights key ideas from the work of the Tribal Expert Peer Cohort, including the relationship between Independent Living, interdependence, disability access, and mutually beneficial and culturally conscious partnership building with Indigenous communities.

Why This Conversation Matters

- Indigenous people with disabilities may face overlapping barriers related to geography, transportation, funding, cultural misunderstanding, and limited coordination among systems and access to independent living services.
- Centers for Independent Living and disability organizations have an opportunity to build stronger relationships with Tribal governments, Native-led organizations, and Indigenous communities.
- Respectful partnership begins with listening, learning local context, and recognizing Tribal sovereignty, cultural knowledge, and community-defined priorities.
- Building relationships and shared understanding that actively challenge and break down stereotypes about Indigenous communities. Ultimately aims to provide education and authentic dialogue to replace preconceived notions with informed, respectful perspectives.
- There are 575 federally recognized tribes, and it is estimated that there are at least a couple hundred more that are not federally recognized. Each tribe has their own language and customs and should not be homogenized. Further highlighting the importance of building understanding and relationships to offer individualized and informed services.

Key Ideas to Remember

Indigenous Interdependent Living Philosophy (IILP) created by TEPC

The practice of recognizing that all life is reciprocal and interconnected includes living in conscious and sacred relationship with people, the land, and the spirit. In Native communities, this means living in balance and harmony with all that surrounds us - upholding sovereignty, accessibility, and non-hierarchical belonging so that every community member can participate in unity, stewardship, and truth. This includes honoring people with disabilities as valued relatives whose gifts, perspectives, and strengths are essential to cultural continuity, generational wisdom, and collective healing.

The Independent Living Philosophy

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended (The Act). Title VII, chapter 1 of the Act states “a philosophy of independent living including a philosophy of consumer control, peer support, self-help, self-determination, equal access, and individual and system advocacy, in order to maximize the leadership, empowerment, independence, and productivity of individuals with disabilities, and the integration and full inclusion of individuals with disabilities into the mainstream of American society.”

Cultural humility

Effective partnership requires asking, listening, and learning rather than assuming one model, service approach, or definition of independence fits every community.

Data That Highlights the Importance of this Work

FY23 national 704/PPR data: Centers for Independent Living reported serving 253,618 consumers nationally; 3,834 consumers were reported as American Indian or Alaska Native, translating to only about 1.5% of all consumers served.

Source: FY23 Public 704/PPR Data via ACL Website, Section 3 dataset.

Reported disability types nationally: The largest disability category reported in the FY23 704/PPR dataset was physical disability, with 100,416 consumers, followed by multiple disabilities with 52,568 consumers, cognitive disabilities with 37,578 consumers, and mental/emotional disabilities with 29,451 consumers.

Source: FY23 Public 704/PPR Data via ACL Website, Section 3 dataset.

Why this matters for Indigenous communities: National disability data show that disability is more commonly reported among non-Hispanic American Indian and Alaska Native adults than many other groups, and CMS notes that American Indian/Alaska Native populations experience disability at rates higher than other groups.

Source: CDC Article titled Prevalence of Disabilities and Health Care Access by Disability Status and Type Among Adults

What this suggests for IL services: The 704/PPR data show that American Indian and Alaska Native consumers are present in the CIL service system, but minimally, despite broader public health sources pointing to elevated disability-related need in Indigenous communities. **Together, this data supports and points to a need for stronger outreach, relationship-building, and culturally grounded IL partnerships with Tribal Nations and Indigenous-led organizations.**

Promising Practices

- Learn which Tribal Nations, Native-led organizations, and Indigenous disability advocates are connected to your service area.
- Ask how your organization can support Indigenous community-defined disability access priorities rather than arriving with a pre-set agenda.
- Review outreach materials, intake processes, and service pathways for accessibility, cultural relevance, and plain language.
- Build relationships before making requests; partnership takes time, consistency, accountability, and follow-through.
- If your center needs support in any of these areas, you can submit an Independent Living Training & Technical Assistance (IL T&TA) request for individualized technical assistance at: https://ilttacenter.org/support/

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The Independent Living Training & Technical Assistance Center is on assignment with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Community Living.