

# Department of Indian Work – Interfaith Action

## “Culture Should Lead Us On”

*Integrated Services Delivery Network  
Program Development Research Findings*



### Introduction

From 2020-2021, the Department of Indian Work – Interfaith Action (DIW) partnered with Wilder Research to conduct program development research centered on developing an Integrated Services Delivery Network (ISDN) for the American Indian community in the Twin Cities. An ISDN is a collective impact approach to helping families living on low income achieve their goals through the seamless coordination of supports from multiple human services organizations. DIW’s ISDN will be comprised of Indigenous-led and government organizations that partner with American Indian families to help them achieve their financial and employment goals through person-centered and culturally-responsive supports. The ISDN will focus on three primary areas, including:

1. Work, health, and income—to stabilize households
2. Education and career advancement—to build connections between people and job opportunities
3. Financial education and coaching—to sustain the financial and employment gains that are achieved

To provide useful insights for the purposes of developing the ISDN, Wilder conducted a literature review about decolonizing human services. We reviewed 12 articles as part of the literature review. We also conducted a focus group with American Indian people living in the Twin Cities about the kind of support that would be most beneficial to them; the focus group had 8 participants who were recruited by DIW. This approach—the literature review and focus group—allowed us to identify key recommendations from the field regarding the decolonization of human services and then determine to what degree these recommendations aligned with what DIW’s constituents said they wanted from an ISDN approach to help them achieve their goals.

### Findings

Our literature review found that human services policies and practices stem from colonialism and, in many ways, continue to disenfranchise American Indian people and other groups today. Several authors noted the importance of addressing the individualist framework that underpins U.S. human services, which conceptualizes the role of human services as helping people overcome their individual problems, rather than viewing the issues that individuals face as a symptom of our shared problems or systemic issues (Morena & Mucina, 2019; Newbury, 2010; Saraceno, 2012).

In the field of child protection services, for example, systemic injustices experienced by parents and their children are often framed as neglect (Morena & Mucina, 2019). Rather than framing the experiences of Indigenous families within U.S. social, political, and economic systems that have contributed to their

marginalization, in most mainstream child protection systems individuals are blamed and punished for their circumstances. This finding from the literature review aligned with focus group participants' perceptions of human services, with many saying that they feel penalized for circumstances outside their control. As one focus group participant said, "Indian people are expected to fit into this White system that doesn't actually work for us."

Saraceno (2012) asserts that "it is critical [for human services professionals] to adopt a praxis of solidarity and social justice to promote concepts that go beyond 'service work' or 'helper' to open up possibilities for individual healing that are grounded in a broader context of social transformation" (p. 261). Many focus group participants agreed with this insight from the literature review, and relayed negative experiences with human services workers or organizations that approach their work with a "service provision" mentality.

*"Sometimes when you're in a situation where you need help, you go downtown to the big brown building that you have to go to—to ask for emergency assistance, maybe. The workers there are so rude, like you're wasting their time. You get in there and they treat you like they're better than you. You wait in line, talk to them, and then you have to wait for them to call you back and sometimes they don't [call you back]. If you miss their phone call then that's it, that's the end of your application. ... It's hard to ask for help, and when you do ask for help and you get treated bad, it makes you not want to go. When I need help now, I almost get an anxiety attack."*  
– Focus group participant

Further, a few focus group participants highlighted the interdependence between their success and an organization's success. If they achieve their goals, for example—and the organization helped them to do that—then the organization is seen as successful as well and will likely receive more funding and recognition. This is an example of reframing human services as mutually beneficial for everyone involved—participants meet their goals and, in doing so, they help human services organizations meet theirs.

Our literature review found that the orientation of human services is not conducive for supporting American Indian people because of "orientation issues" like this. Many human services organizations are not oriented in a way that aligns with the goals, expectations, and lifeways of Indigenous people. Moreno and Mucina (2019) suggest that one way to fix these orientation issues is to increase the number of practitioners who identify as Indigenous and people of color in the human services field, but Saraceno (2012) adds more nuance to this suggested approach, quoting Laenui (2000):

*"...true decolonization is more than simply placing Indigenous people into the positions held by colonizers. Decolonization includes the re-evaluation of the political, social, economic, and judicial structures themselves and the development, if appropriate, of new structures that can hold and house the values and aspirations of the colonized people" (p. 155).*

Further, Tamburro (2013) suggests that "local communities should provide guidance and control in the development and provision of social services in partnership with social worker allies who aid in their recovery" (p. 9). Specifically, Tamburro advocates for practices that honor Indigenous worldviews, cosmologies, epistemologies, knowledge, and dialogues. He believes that local control of social services and the principles of self-governance and self-determination can contribute to the decolonization of social services.

Focus group participants shared many experiences and perceptions that align with these findings. For example, some participants mentioned positive experiences with American Indian programs or American Indian practitioners at human services organizations.

*“I got into the Native program and was working with a Native worker. Every week it was a listening session. The whole hour was just me talking—then she’d say, ‘I’ll fit this into the plan and then send it to you.’ It wasn’t a set of questions that are ridiculous that we’ve all answered a million times before. It was just visiting.”*  
– Focus group participant

That being said, other focus group participants noted negative experiences with human services organizations, even when an organization employs American Indian practitioners or otherwise states that they honor American Indian cultural values. As one focus group participant said, “They [the organization] say they have this or that, but no. There’s nothing. I am no cultural expert, but there is nothing that is Indian there.”

*“I have gone for help to different organizations. Yes, there may be Indian people working there, but there’s also people who are not and who don’t work with Indian culture. Sometimes you can get a shunned feeling from non-Indian people working at Indian organizations.”*  
– Focus group participant

In terms of how DIW might respond to these findings, one participant poignantly stated their advice to DIW and other organizations: **“I think culture is what should lead us on.”**

Focus group participants suggested that “culture should lead us on” at the systems level and at the organization level. For instance, a few participants critiqued the limited understanding of “family” within state policies and eligibility criteria for various assistance programs, saying that this understanding is misaligned with how Indigenous people think of family and community. Other participants mentioned that it would be beneficial for organizations to offer assistance and support for informal community support and cultural gatherings, such as hosting powwows or sweats, or transporting people to appointments or to visit family.

*“First of all, service providers have to be aware of and accept that Native families are grouping together to survive. There is not the nuclear family anymore. Families are putting their money together for food, for housing. They have to be open to those different family structures outside the nuclear family.”*  
– Focus group participant

*“Sometimes people will call us [speaking of herself and another person in the focus group] for a ride in an emergency—and we jump up and do that. That’s community. It’d be great if we could have support to do that—Grandma is in the hospital, can I get some support to get a ride out there or money to pay for gas out there? That’s part of our culture. There’s the basic needs, but also the being a part of the Native community—can organizations support that, too?”*  
– Focus group participant

Lastly, a few participants mentioned that American Indian people should be continually involved in whatever approach DIW or other organizations come up with for helping them meet their goals. As one participant said, “I would give more opportunity for Indian people to comment [on what DIW does]. That’s how I would go.” DIW’s plan to work closely with the local American Indian community to design its ISDN initiative aligns closely with this recommendation.

## Summary and moving forward

The literature review and focus group provided in-depth insights for DIW in regards to developing the ISDN in a way that is person-centered and honors American Indian cultural values and worldviews. Wilder recommends that DIW build on these learnings and their success so far by piloting an ISDN approach with some members of their community, perhaps including some individuals who attended the focus group. When doing so, the literature and focus group offer the following recommendations for DIW to consider:



- **Reframe “the work” as pursuing shared, interdependent goals.** The literature review and focus group highlighted individualism as a foundational issue within the human services field. Human services organizations that view their work as “helping” people with “their” issues acknowledge neither the systems that have marginalized various groups of people nor the colonial roots of human services. As a result, participants in human services programs are blamed for their circumstances and often have difficulty making progress towards their goals. Instead, organizations and the people involved in them should view their goals as interdependent—if a person in a program reaches their goal, the organization benefits as well. Rather than viewing people in their programs as participants in need of help, organizations should view people in their program as key stakeholders to realizing their organizational goals and vision.
- **Co-create the ISDN approach with all involved stakeholders.** DIW is already doing this to some degree in that they contracted with Wilder to host a focus group with people who may be pursuing their financial and employment goals via the ISDN. While this is a good start, the literature review and focus group suggest it is just that—a start. DIW should continue involving all stakeholders—especially those working toward their personal or family financial and employment goals—in all phases and levels of decision-making and evaluation with the ISDN. This strategy for developing, refining, and growing the ISDN should take multiple forms. For instance, the ISDN could have an advisory board or decision-making body that includes people working toward their goals with the ISDN. In addition, the ISDN could have a policy that all check-ins between their staff members and people in the program should include an assessment of how the ISDN is doing and could be improved.
- **Use the ISDN to model and advocate for systems change to help human services organizations honor and build on the strengths of local Indigenous culture(s).** Our literature review and focus group found that some of the issues with human services stem from organizational practices, but many are rooted in state policies that dictate what human services organizations can and cannot do. We recommend that DIW put resources and attention toward identifying how the ISDN approach is different from traditional human services approaches, and then demonstrating the success of the ISDN among American Indian individuals and families in particular. We expect such a focus on the model and its effects could be instrumental for teaching the ISDN approach to other organizations and perhaps for advocating for state policy changes so that DIW and other organizations can best do their work.



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