

The growing body of research on Native nation rebuilding identifies “practical sovereignty” – the assertion of Native decision-making power – as one of the five main keys to successful, sustained economic and community development.<sup>1</sup> When it comes to workforce development – an integral part of economic and community development – sustained success depends, above all else, on tribal control: the willingness, ability, and unrelenting commitment of a Tribal Nation to seize and exercise authority over the programs and activities that develop its human capacity. More and more Tribal Nations and other Native-led workforce development entities (such as Native non-profit organizations and TCUs) are recognizing this fact – and acting on it.

Taking control is an essential first step, but taking control of what exactly? For many, achieving practical sovereignty in workforce development means taking control of federal, state, and other programs designed by outsiders for other places, populations, and purposes. These typically ignore the uniquely complex conditions in Native communities and fail to consider and address the distinct workforce development needs and priorities of Native community members. As one might expect, these uniform, top-down, and “outside-in” approaches have a poor track record of workforce development success, mainly because they are not meaningfully designed, guided by, or primarily accountable to those they are meant to serve. As one tribal workforce development practitioner explains, “Many of the grants and contracts that we have to administer are framed in what it would look like in a major urban city in America. That’s not our reality.”<sup>2</sup> These programs also define and measure success based on nationally standardized performance indicators that often aren’t relevant to the particular challenges, values, and goals of Native communities. In addition, at an institutional level, they tend to embrace the status quo and avoid taking risks, which stifles the development of new workforce development strategies to replace inefficient and ineffective ones.

As decades of Indian Country experience illustrate, simply taking over administration of these programs won’t change how, and toward what ends, they function. And it can improve their effectiveness only so much. The challenge for tribal and Native organizational leaders and key decision-makers is how to build a truly self-governed workforce development approach, either from scratch or more commonly by moving beyond simply administering programs in the same way that others did previously to *fundamentally redesigning them*. As one tribal leader frames it, “What are we doing differently in this time of self-determination, when supposedly we are in control, different from the times that we weren’t?”<sup>3</sup>

**“No right is more sacred to a nation, to a people, than the right to freely determine its social, economic, political, and culture without external interferences. The fullest expression of this right occurs when a nation freely governs itself.”**

**– JOSEPH DELACRUZ (1937-2000), FORMER PRESIDENT, QUINULT INDIAN NATION<sup>4</sup>**

This approach is empowering. As one workforce development practitioner whose nation has embraced this challenge concluded, “We are no longer victims of our history. We are now impacting and directing where we are going as a tribe.”<sup>5</sup>

It also works better, generating tangible, life-changing, positive outcomes for Native people that externally imposed approaches have proven wholly incapable of producing. Public Law 102-477 is a prime example. Created by Congress in response to decades of Indian Country advocacy to center self-determination in federally supported Native workforce development (see infographic on page 7), 477 has produced “increased job placements, much higher hourly wages, and nearly universal positive employment and education outcomes”<sup>6</sup> among participants across the 300 Tribal Nations who are taking advantage of the program.

To take true ownership of their workforce development systems, Tribal Nations and Native organizations must embrace the “grassroots” process<sup>7</sup> of “uprooting the limitations and programmatic silos that federal approaches have created. They must thoroughly assess whether their current approaches are effective and culturally appropriate, and what their findings mean for how they should change them.”<sup>8</sup> To bolster their efforts, the federal government must no longer dictate to Indian Country how it should do workforce development. It must instead support Tribal Nations and Native organizations as they invent or reinvent strategies that work best for those they serve.<sup>9</sup> According to one tribal college president, “Flexibility works – enabling tribes to do what we’re good at doing. We know our problems intimately. We also know the solutions.”<sup>10</sup>

## ASK YOURSELF

- ▶ Where do our workforce development programs come from? Who designed them and for what purposes?
- ▶ Do they reflect the values and needs of our community? Do they advance the long-range priorities of our Tribal Nation?
- ▶ How do these programs measure whether their efforts are effective? Do these performance criteria/metrics reflect our definition of what workforce development “success” looks like?
- ▶ Do other governments (federal, state, local) limit or interfere with our ability to develop our Native workforce in the ways we see fit? In what ways?
- ▶ Is our overarching workforce development approach truly self-governed? How about the individual workforce development programs we administer? Who has the final say on how we operate, who we serve, and how we serve them?
- ▶ What will it take to make them self-governed? How can we make them successful based on how we define what success looks like and how to measure it? What laws, policies, processes, and infrastructure do we need to create and implement to get there?
- ▶ Do we have the human capacity (leaders/staff with the experience and technical know-how) to claim control of, redesign, implement, and sustain a self-governed approach to workforce development?

## INDIAN COUNTRY SNAPSHOTS



### Citizen Potawatomi Nation (CPN)

Determined to “design what works for us,”<sup>1</sup> in 1996 CPN took full ownership of the federally funded workforce education, training, and related programs serving its citizens and other local Native people. By creating a 477 plan, it merged these once-siloed programs into a single, tribal approach that holistically assesses the needs of each 477 participant and their family and empowers them to achieve self-sufficiency through a seamless, integrated system of “hand-up” (versus “handout”) supports.<sup>2</sup> Utilizing a single intake system that creates an ease of access to culturally relevant services, CPN’s 477 program is reducing “dependency on public assistance programs and reducing the effects of poverty on the Tribal Service Area population” by familiarizing Native workers and future workers with rewarding careers in various fields and preparing them to successfully pursue those careers.<sup>3</sup> Prior to 477, CPN had to turn some people away because of the eligibility and funding restrictions of the individual federal programs it administered. Today, its self-determined approach flexibly leverages dollars to provide customized services to each 477 participant based on their particular challenges and career aspirations. Other benefits include reduced administrative costs (which frees up more dollars for direct services), the increased effectiveness of those services, reduced joblessness among 477 participants, and an enhanced ability to create jobs – in part through a partnership with CPN’s CDFI to help participants become small business owners.<sup>4</sup> Through cooperative agreements with four neighboring Tribal Nations, CPN has expanded its 477-based services to eligible Native people across six Oklahoma counties.<sup>5</sup> “Pushing the integration envelope,”<sup>6</sup> in recent years CPN added to its 477 program federal funds from LIHEAP, CSBG, Safe and Stable Families, and Reentry and Diversionary (which helps former felons reintegrate into the workforce and has produced a recidivism rate under two percent to date).<sup>7</sup> As CPN explains, moving its people towards self-sufficiency starts with “understanding your own tribe’s distinct needs [and] the needs of your people, which is something that a federal, uniform approach to workforce development can’t possibly account for.”<sup>8</sup>

**LEARNING LINK:** <https://www.ncai.org/workforcedevtoolkit/cpn.pdf>

**CONNECT:** Margaret Zientek, Workforce and Social Services Director, Citizen Potawatomi Nation, [mzientek@potawatomi.org](mailto:mzientek@potawatomi.org)



### Swinomish Indian Tribal Community (SITC)

For decades, Swinomish confronted an oral health crisis of epic proportions: 68 percent of its community members saw their dental problems go untreated, the rate of tooth decay among youth was four times that of white people, and SITC members who were treated received care from “traveling dentists performing painful procedures in a doublewide trailer.”<sup>1</sup> In response, SITC exercised its sovereignty and self-regulation of healthcare services to bring a solution established by Tribal Nations in Alaska to its community in the lower 48 states: dental health aid therapists (DHATs).<sup>2</sup> SITC spent two years redesigning the Swinomish Dental Program and developing the first tribal Dental Health Provider Licensing Code.<sup>3</sup> The first Swinomish DHAT started seeing patients in 2016, and a year later Washington State recognized Tribal Nations’ authority to license DHATs on tribal lands.<sup>4</sup> Over the past decade, SITC has become “a state leader in access to dental hygiene,”<sup>5</sup> with its DHATs providing roughly 50 primary dental prevention and treatment services under the supervision of a licensed dentist, dramatically increasing SITC members’ access to routine and preventative care and reducing wait times for patients from months to same-week and even same-day appointments.<sup>6</sup> To develop its DHAT workforce, SITC initially partnered with the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium<sup>7</sup> to train its DHAT providers, and in 2022 it launched the *dəxwxāyəbus* Dental Therapy Education Program, a rigorous, accredited, three-year DHAT training curriculum delivered with Skagit Valley College.<sup>8</sup> SITC also expanded its regulatory authority<sup>9</sup> to not only license everyone who works in its clinic – including its dentists, DHATs, and dental hygienists – but also those who *train* its dental therapy providers.<sup>10</sup> SITC provides regular trainings to maintain “competent provider” status for all of its licensed providers that emphasize cultural responsiveness and meet state requirements for continuing education and license renewals.<sup>11</sup> Growing a template any Tribe can follow<sup>12</sup>, SITC has drastically improved access to “high quality, culturally competent, primary oral health care,” eliminating the traumatic treatment experiences members long endured.<sup>13</sup>

**LEARNING LINK:** <https://www.ncai.org/workforcedevtoolkit/sitc.pdf>

**CONNECT:** Dr. Rachael Hogan, Dental Director, Swinomish Dental Clinic, [rhogan@swinomish.nsn.us](mailto:rhogan@swinomish.nsn.us)

## POLICY TIPS

- ▶ Build a working history of where your workforce development programs come from, how and why they were designed, and how they were meant to operate and for what purposes. Update this history as you take full ownership of these programs and redesign them to meet the specific workforce development needs of the Native community you serve.
- ▶ Conduct a comprehensive self-governance “audit” of your current workforce development programs – both individually and as a whole – to determine whether and to what degree they (1) reflect your Nation/organization’s own needs and values, and (2) advance your own priorities and criteria for success.
- ▶ Develop a self-governed plan that includes existing programs and creates new ones where clear gaps exist.
- ▶ Methodically redesign existing programs to the maximum extent possible to tailor them to your unique definition of workforce development, the current realities facing the Native community you serve, and its aspirations for the future.
- ▶ Demand that programs take calculated risks to innovate to develop strategies, initiatives, and networks capable of addressing your distinct workforce development landscape, challenges, and priorities.
- ▶ Provide these efforts with the ongoing political, programmatic, and financial support they need to forge and sustain success.