



# INDIAN COUNTRY SNAPSHOT:

## Gila River Indian Community

In 2012, GRIC became the first Tribal Nation in the U.S. to receive a DOL Career Pathways (CP) grant. GRIC used the grant as a springboard to develop a nationally acclaimed workforce development system customized to the distinct needs and priorities of the Community, its employers, and workforce, with a particular focus on five industry sectors: Government (e.g., training tribal firefighters), Construction, Medical, Small Business, and Hospitality (with a focus on Culinary).<sup>1</sup> Eager to maximize a return on the Community's workforce investments, in 2011 the GRIC Council instituted a human resources policy granting automatic hiring priority to GRIC's WIOA participants who complete training and then excel in their work experience placements.<sup>2</sup> When GRIC launched CP a year later, the policy covered CP participants (who also are WIOA participants). Those who meet the policy's criteria bypass GRIC's standard screening process for hiring, providing them a bright-line path from their work experience placements to permanent employment working for GRIC.<sup>3</sup> For example, CP Construction sector participants are assigned to GRIC's Building and Maintenance Department and when a participant performs well in their work experience placement, the Department's director issues a request to GRIC's Human Resources Department to do a direct hire. Once approved, the participant's work experience placement essentially "becomes de facto on-the-job training."<sup>4</sup> This strategy benefits not only those hired through the policy, but also tribal employers who save the cost of advertising job openings and expending staff time to review applications, conduct interviews, and select the top candidate for each position.<sup>5</sup> In addition, hiring WIOA participants enables GRIC to use WIOA dollars for work experience wages, saving its participating departments money they otherwise would have to spend from their own budgets.<sup>6</sup> After several years of successful placements, the GRIC Council expanded the policy in 2021 to extend to participants across *all* of GRIC's Employment & Training programs.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, Gila River's enterprises have adopted the same preferential hiring practice for Community members who complete successful work experience placements within their operations.

**CONNECT:** Lana Chanda, Director, Employment & Training Department, Gila River Indian Community,  
[lane.chanda@gric.nsn.us](mailto:lane.chanda@gric.nsn.us)

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[WorkforceGPS: GRIC Career Pathways Evaluation](#)

[Lana Chanda: Workforce Development: Gila River Indian Community \(video\)](#)

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[NCAI: Workforce Development Innovation: Success Stories from Indian Country \(video\)](#)

[Gila River Health Care Summer Scrubs Program Flyer](#)



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<sup>1</sup> Lana Chanda, Director, Employment & Training (E&T) Department, Gila River Indian Community (GRIC), Conversation with NCAI, April 23, 2024. For a detailed overview of GRIC’s Career Pathways approach as of 2017, please see NCAI Partnership for Tribal Governance, *Workforce Development: Building the Human Capacity to Rebuild Tribal Nations: Gila River Indian Community*, National Congress of American Indians, 2017 (<https://www.issuelab.org/resources/33211/33211.pdf?download=true>, accessed July 19, 2024). For example, CP’s Medical sector trainees are channeled post-training into jobs such as certified nursing assistants and phlebotomists at Gila River’s Caring House and Hu Hu Kam Memorial Hospital. In its Culinary sector, trainees often take jobs in GRIC’s casino and hotel restaurants. Meanwhile, a decade ago, GRIC’s Police Cadet Career Pathways program expanded to feature the youth-focused First Responders Program, a groundbreaking year-round program in partnership with GRIC’s Fire, Police, and EMT Departments where GRIC youth aged 16 and older gain basic skills and career exposure for three types of first-responder occupations. Additionally, the GRIC E&T Department created a second youth-focused program titled “Summer Scrubs,” offered in partnership with Gila River Health Care. In terms of its future plans, the E&T Department is preparing to resurrect its Small Business Career Pathways program (which was one of its original CP sector focus areas) and add new CP programs in manufacturing, education, and IT, as well as an apprenticeship program for ironworkers (Lana Chanda, “Career Pathways Update,” July 29, 2024, p. 4).

<sup>2</sup> GRIC, *Employee Policies and Procedures Reference Guide: Revised November 2011*, Gila River Indian Community, November 2011, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Elisia Manuel, Former WIOA Outreach Coordinator, Gila River Employment & Training Department, Interview with NCAI, June 13, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> NCAI Partnership for Tribal Governance, *Workforce Development: Building the Human Capacity to Rebuild Tribal Nations: Gila River Indian Community*, 2017, p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Each three-month work experience assignment costs the WIOA program nearly \$7,000, “which is money that each department is saving from their tribal budgets by not paying the participant while they get a chance to see the participant in action and decide whether or not they would fit into their department. All the while, WIOA is paying the participant wages, and also any training expenses such as certifications, finishing a degree, completing externships/internships, etc., at WIOA’s expense” (Lana Chanda, “Career Pathways Update,” July 29, 2024, p. 6).

<sup>7</sup> As GRIC’s Employee Policies and Procedures Reference Guide explains regarding Employment & Training Department Trainees, “A Department Director may consider a trainee to fill a vacancy without posting the position if the trainee meets the minimum qualifications of the position and has successfully completed the requirements of the training program; i.e., College Interns, Workforce Investment Programs (WIOA), Native Employment Works (NEW), AmeriCorps Members, Tribal Employment Rights Office (TERO Trainees), etc. Trainees who do not meet the minimum work experience requirements may be put on a ‘Conditional Hire’ until the required experience level has been met. The department director must work with Human Resources to verify qualifications” (GRIC, *Employee Policies and Procedures Reference Guide: Revised August 2021*, Gila River Indian Community, November 2021, p. 8). According to data provided by GRIC, 57% of work experience participants placed in GRIC departments are eventually hired for open positions utilizing the HR policy; meanwhile, 39% of *all* hires across GRIC’s departments, enterprises, and participating off-site employers are work experience placements hired utilizing the HR policy (Lana Chanda, “Career Pathways Update,” July 29, 2024, p. 1).