



INDIAN COUNTRY SNAPSHOT: Tohono O'odham Nation

For decades, O'odham elders needing skilled nursing care, long-term assisted living support, or related services had to travel long distances to facilities outside of TON's vast reservation, where they received care isolated from loved ones and the O'odham culture that sustained them physically and spiritually.¹ In response, TON established the Tohono O'odham Nursing Care Authority (TONCA), which in 2002 launched the award-winning Archie Hendricks, Sr. Skilled Nursing Facility, which is centrally located on the reservation and easily accessible to tribal residents.² In 2013, TONCA opened an assisted living residence next door. Both facilities enact TONCA's mission to provide tribal elders with "dignified living in an environment that preserves our traditional Himdag"³ – defined as the culture, way of life, and values "uniquely held" by the O'odham people.⁴ Committed to developing a culturally competent workforce "from within the community"⁵ capable of providing culturally responsive care, TONCA gives preference in hiring to TON members and prioritizes them in awarding financial assistance "to help defray tuition costs and other related educational expenses" to employees seeking professional development and career advancement.⁶ It also requires all new employees – O'odham and non-Native – to complete a two-hour "O'odham Culture Inservice" orientation introducing the O'odham language, traditional foods and medicines, and cultural perspectives on death and dying.⁷ To ensure the staff's ability to converse with its O'odham-speaking patients and residents, TONCA provides a basic O'odham language training to the non-speakers it employs, and it recently established a compensation program to incentivize employees to take free Tohono O'odham Community College courses to deepen their O'odham language fluency.⁸ It also conducts a quarterly cleansing ceremony for staff, patients, and residents, and hosts an O'odham medicine person weekly who is available to staff upon request to support their wellbeing.⁹ Growing its capacity to provide care "in accordance with our traditions,"¹⁰ TONCA will soon launch a program to train medical translators, who will be dispatched to area hospitals to interpret for TON members with limited English language fluency to ensure they receive proper care in those facilities as well.¹¹

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[Frances Stout: Archie Hendricks, Sr. Skilled Nursing Facility and Tohono O'odham Hospice](#) (video)

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¹ According to the Tohono O’odham Nursing Care Authority (TONCA), although O’odham elders “received basic healthcare services elsewhere, the care they received was not specific to the O’odham Himdag. As a result, the quality of life suffered” (TONCA, “Our Story” webpage (<https://toltc.org/our-story/>), accessed September 5, 2024)).

² To attract and retain key staff and also not displace other local residents, TONCA – with financial support from the TON government – built a 32-unit housing development adjacent to the two facilities to provide them with on-site, affordable residences instead of having to reside in off-reservation towns and cities located at least a 45-minute drive away (Judith Dworkin and Frances Stout, “Tohono O’odham Nursing Care Authority: Archie Hendricks, Sr. Skilled Nursing Facility, Tohono O’odham Hospice, & Other Projects” (Tohono O’odham Nation), Honoring Nations 2013 All-Stars Profile, Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, 2014, p. 6 (https://hwpi.harvard.edu/files/hpaied/files/to_profile.pdf?m=1639579274), accessed June 27, 2024). The development is a cost-neutral proposition for TONCA, as the revenue generated from rental of the units funds their ongoing maintenance. The development has a waiting list, with direct care and overnight workers receiving priority for units as they become available. TONCA recently received funding to expand the development to feature 34-46 new units (both single-family and apartment-style residences) (TONCA, Conversation with NCAI, August 15, 2024).

³ TONCA, “About Us” webpage (<https://toltc.org/about/>), accessed September 5, 2024).

⁴ Tohono O’odham Community College, “Himdag at TOCC,” webpage (<https://tocc.edu/himdag/>), accessed September 5, 2024).

⁵ Ross Wilkoff, Administrator, Archie Hendricks Sr. Skilled Nursing Facility, Conversation with NCAI, August 15, 2024.

⁶ TONCA, *Tohono O’odham Nursing Care Authority Board of Directors Resolution dated 5/7/2022*, Approving Amendment of the Educational Assistance Policy Originally Adopted Effective September 11, 2008 and Previously Amended on April 5, 2014, p. 1. As TONCA explains in its Education Assistance Program (EAP) Policy, “As a tribally chartered enterprise of the Tohono O’odham Nation, TONCA provides Education Assistance first to members of the Tohono O’odham Nation and local Indians (any member of a federally recognized tribe who resides within the boundaries of the Tohono O’odham Nation or near the Nation for at least 60 days) (‘First Preference’), second to Indians generally (‘Second Preference’), and third to non-Indians, similar to its hiring policy in compliance with the Nation’s Tribal Employment Rights Ordinance” (Ibid., p. 4). Designed to build capacity in “areas of continual need for us” – including the positions of Certified Nursing Assistant, Certified Care Giver, Licensed Practical Nurse, Certified Wound Nurse, and Certified Dietary Manager – the EAP covers the cost of “college credit courses, continuing education unit courses, seminars and certification tests that are job-related” (Wilkoff, Conversation with NCAI, August 15, 2024; TONCA, *Tohono O’odham Nursing Care Authority Board of Directors Resolution dated 5/7/2022*, p. 1). Employees who receive EAP assistance must work for TONCA after completion of the course or program for a period of two years or they will be required to repay all or a portion of the assistance they received (Ibid., p. 3). In addition to EAP, in 2023 TONCA created its O’odham Angel/Companion Intern Program, which provides one-year, entry-level positions to young TON members to expose them careers in the healthcare field. Program graduates are then eligible to pursue training and employment opportunities that grow TONCA’s capacity for critical-need positions such as Certified Nursing Assistants (TONCA, *New Program Proposal*, August 30, 2023, p. 1).

⁷ TONCA, *O’odham Culture Inservice for Employees Topics of Discussion*, 2024, p. 1. TONCA also gives residents at its assisted living facility a direct role in the training of its workforce by providing them a forum where they instruct staff on the appropriate ways to behave “in their homes,” how they want their medicine administered, and how to properly harvest and prepare traditional O’odham foods they can eat (TONCA, Conversation with NCAI, August 15, 2024).

⁸ Ibid. The compensation program provides a pay increase of five percent to employees who become O’odham language fluent. TONCA also deepens the basic O’odham language proficiency of its staff by featuring a regular O’odham language section in its monthly newsletter that teaches the pronunciation of letters and phrases; in addition, it practices an O’odham phrase or set of phrases each day at its daily managers’ meetings (Ross Wilkoff, Correspondence with NCAI, September 6, 2024). TONCA employs a Cultural Coordinator, who supports the administration of ongoing language training for its employees.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Isidro Lopez, Community Liaison, TONCA, Conversation with NCAI, August 15, 2024.

¹¹ TONCA, Conversation with NCAI, August 15, 2024.