

# REMOVING OBSTACLES

## FRAMING THE DISCUSSION

Several years ago, one Tribal Nation in the Southwest launched a new approach to developing its workforce in several fields where its labor needs are greatest. Its excitement was soon tempered, however, by a high dropout rate among its initial training program participants. Its analysis revealed that 68 percent of them did not possess the baseline academic competencies their training programs require. In response, the Nation initiated “Coaching,” an intensive approach to case management in which program staff work one-on-one with participants to develop and implement individualized plans to raise them to the proficiency levels necessary to tackle the programs’ academic demands. It also added tutoring to help participants learn how to study and master the course content. It then took another, extraordinary step: it assigned staff to take the same courses as its clients to “get a bird’s eye view of what is going on,” specifically what caused their failure and contributed to their success.<sup>1</sup>

This story is indicative of what NCAI has observed among effective workforce development approaches across Indian Country: Tribal Nations and other Native workforce development entities doing whatever it takes to help the Native people they serve overcome the obstacles (see “Challenges” at the bottom of page 5) that hamper their ability to complete training, secure employment, and build a career. But designing such “outside the box” strategies requires that Tribal Nations do their due diligence to understand exactly how pervasive these obstacles are among those they serve, how they manifest themselves in each individual’s life, and how programming can be precisely crafted to attack them.

It also demands that Tribal Nations not get distracted by the symptoms these obstacles produce but instead target their root causes. For example, if program participants are routinely late for training or work, it may not be because they have a poor work ethic. It may instead be due to a lack of access to reliable transportation or childcare, or any number of other factors. Each person’s story and set of challenges is different, requiring a customized solution that empowers that person to overcome them. Consequently, Tribal Nations must develop flexible workforce development approaches that provide their people multiple pathways to reach their chosen career destinations at a pace they can handle. These approaches must acknowledge that for many, the challenge is not just learning how to do a specific job, but *how to work* – and *how to live*. As one workforce development practitioner explains, ultimately it’s “helping people get healthy to deal with opportunity.”<sup>2</sup>

For example, years ago one Tribal Nation in the Great Plains, struggling with a 70 percent turnover rate among its tribal member-employees,

**“We try to reach to the root of what’s causing people to be unsuccessful in their life and we take our time... We want to [provide] a tool that they can put in their toolbox and use every day of their life.”**

**– JOYCE COUNTRY, FORMER EMPLOYEE SERVICES SOCIAL WORKER, SISSETON-WAHPETON OYATE<sup>3</sup>**

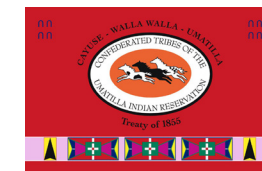
established its “Developing Productive Employees” training program to equip tribal members who had lost or were in danger of losing tribal government and enterprise jobs with a “toolbox” of healthy coping and **soft skills** they can use to thrive in the workplace, including “emotional intelligence,” managing stress, and “communicating for success.”<sup>4</sup> The award-winning program not only reduced the employment turnover rate among participants, it also decreased their reliance on tribal social service programs like TANF.<sup>5</sup>

As Tribal Nations design innovative solutions to help their citizens neutralize the root causes of the specific education, training, employment, and career advancement obstacles they face, they must be strategic, selective, and inquisitive. They simply can’t tackle all of these obstacles all at once on their own, given the typically limited financial resources available to them. Over and above channeling as many tribal, federal, and state dollars as they can to support new and expanded obstacle-removing strategies, they need to systematically identify and build relationships with other Tribal Nations, philanthropic organizations, employers, Native non-profit organizations, and others to secure additional dollars and gain access to in-kind contributions of various types to support the cause. Tribal Nations also need to actively seek out and learn from other Nations who have devised effective solutions for reducing the prevalence of certain common obstacles (housing inaccessibility, lack of transportation and childcare, alcohol and drug abuse, poor credit, etc.) confronting their workforces. Finally, they need to make a concerted effort to publicly share how their strategies are transforming the lives of Native workers to attract additional resources from philanthropy and other funders to grow those successes.

## ASK YOURSELF

- ▶ Thinking about “Data” (pages 26-27), is our Nation gauging how particular workforce challenges impact our people? Do we collect data to track how these challenges impact specific subsets of our population (single mothers, justice-involved citizens, etc.)?
- ▶ How severely is a lack of reliable transportation and quality childcare impeding the ability of tribal citizens to train and work? Have we developed programmatic solutions to address these issues and are they effective?
- ▶ What types of supports do our program participants need to succeed at training and work? Do they include coaching? Mentoring? Supplemental tutoring? Soft skills training? Other types? Do these need to be *ongoing* supports?
- ▶ How are financial challenges (poor credit, no savings, predatory payday and car loans, etc.) negatively impacting the ability of our people to train and work, and what targeted strategies can we deploy to help them overcome these challenges?
- ▶ Do our workforce development programs work closely with our social service programs (e.g., through a 477 program) to triage each individual and develop a customized plan of support in partnership with them? If not, what must we develop to ensure they do?
- ▶ For newly employed citizens, are we assessing how they are adjusting to work life? What supports are available to them as they navigate new workplace stresses and adversity?

## INDIAN COUNTRY SNAPSHOTS



### Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR)

Located in rural northeastern Oregon, CTUIR long struggled with a lack of transportation options that prevented its members from accessing local and regional training and employment opportunities and made it difficult for reservation-based businesses to attract employees and customers. As one CTUIR official described the situation, “In some cases, it was harder for tribal members to get to the job site than to get a job or even housing.”<sup>1</sup> In response, in 2001 CTUIR launched the award-winning transit system Kayak Public Transit, which provides free bus rides to CTUIR members and the general public across 19 reservation and neighboring communities in northeastern Oregon and southeastern Washington, an area spanning more 7,000 square miles.<sup>2</sup> Enacting CTUIR’s vision for regional mobility for tribal members throughout its historic lands<sup>3</sup>, Kayak has systematically grown the geographic reach of its operations over the past 25 years through a creative pooling of U.S. Federal Transition Administration, Oregon Department of Transportation, and Washington Department of Transportation grants and contracts, supplemented by CTUIR general funds “to fill gaps as needed.”<sup>4</sup> A “testament to regional collaboration, dedication and determination, and finding robust solutions to common challenges”<sup>5</sup>, Kayak has proven instrumental in increasing CTUIR members’ and other area residents’ access to training and employment, as well as creating jobs of its own.<sup>6</sup> Logging nearly 68,000 rides in 2023 alone, Kayak provides “a significant cost savings” by providing no-cost, reliable transportation to job commuters and other riders who otherwise would have to pay for it.<sup>7</sup> In 2024, Kayak launched an EV shuttle service to provide safe transportation to CTUIR employees and tribal members between key locations within its sprawling and busy tribal campus.<sup>8</sup> Building on its partnerships with nearby counties and towns, Kayak plans new routes in the near future, which will enable CTUIR members to affordably commute even longer distances to work and train while still residing in and around the Umatilla reservation.<sup>9</sup>

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

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### Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI)

A decade ago, EBCI confronted an epidemic of overdose-caused fatalities among its members.<sup>1</sup> In response, in 2015 EBCI’s Cherokee Indian Health Authority (CIHA) commenced universal screening of its patients to determine the prevalence of substance misuse and launched Analenisgi (an integrated behavioral health program) and Kanvwotiyi (a residential substance abuse treatment center) to treat them.<sup>2</sup> In tandem, EBCI TERO established the Mother Town Healing Program (MTHP), a groundbreaking, “recovery-centered” workforce development program to “assist EBCI enrolled members in recovery by providing a safe and supportive working environment, training for necessary job skills, and discipline to re-enter the workforce in a positive manner.”<sup>3</sup> MTHP recognizes job readiness and steady employment as essential to *sustained recovery*<sup>4</sup>, accepting individuals who are 90 days sober and enrolled in Analenisgi’s therapeutic services.<sup>5</sup> For the first 5-9 months, participants are paid to work five days per week on community projects such as landscaping, home improvement projects for EBCI members, and tending to MTHP’s community garden; time not working is spent in recovery classes, learning life and job skills, developing adaptive behaviors, and goal setting.<sup>6</sup> Those who demonstrate “progress and readiness” are then placed in three-month paid internships with EBCI programs and other MTHP partner entities.<sup>7</sup> Successful interns are often hired by their internship sites; some also become Peer Mentors to incoming MTHP cohorts.<sup>8</sup> MTHP provides participants with modest financial assistance to initially help them make ends meet, work clothes and boots (through a partnership with Cherokee Tribal Vocational Rehabilitation Services), and two nutritious meals each day (through a partnership with CIHA); it also helps them remove common employment barriers.<sup>9</sup> MTHP boasts a 74 percent program completion rate, with 86 percent of program graduates still working and in recovery, building on the firm foundation of job skills, healthy life skills, community/cultural reconnection, and sense of purpose that MTHP instilled in them.<sup>10</sup> To strengthen MTHP clients’ odds of success, EBCI TERO is spearheading Project Phoenix, an initiative to amend the EBCI Code of Ordinances to expunge clients’ non-violent and drug-related convictions so they can more easily obtain tribal employment.<sup>11</sup>

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

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## POLICY TIPS

- ▶ Design/invest in culturally grounded healthy coping and soft skills trainings to complement the hard skills education and training you provide; build partnerships with TCUs, online training providers, and others to reduce the cost of these trainings to the Nation.
- ▶ Build training cohorts of citizens facing similar challenges to create peer-based systems of support. Enlist successful former program participants serve as role models for – and mentors to – current ones.
- ▶ Build a “coalition partnership” (see page 36) to provide a public transportation system to your citizens for work/training commuting. Engage partners such as community colleges to relocate or expand key education/training programs to your community.
- ▶ Ensure your workforce development programs coordinate with your childcare and other social services to address the specific challenges impacting program participants; expand your childcare services beyond center-based care to increase their options.
- ▶ Build mechanisms and partnerships to help tribal citizens address their financial hardships (court fines, past due bills, etc.) and grow their personal assets, which is proven to strengthen their employment prospects. If possible, create a low-interest loan program to insulate them against predatory lenders.
- ▶ Co-design support mechanisms with tribal and area non-tribal employers to address tribal citizen-employees’ specific challenges.