

## FRAMING THE DISCUSSION

Several years ago, a Native CDFI in South Dakota engaged in an information-gathering process with Native-owned and other residential construction contractors doing business on the Indian reservations across the state. Through this process, it learned that the lack of “employment-ready” Native construction workers as well as certified residential inspectors and qualified appraisers was slowing the pace of new home construction in those communities and, in turn, their ability to grow their businesses and the number of local jobs they provide.<sup>1</sup> Armed with this knowledge, the CDFI then launched a targeted project to train and place Native people in those jobs in the residential construction industry; the project features formal commitments from 10 of these contractors to hire dozens of project participants once they complete their training.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, four Tribal Nations in northern California – each too small to do so on their own – recently banded together to co-develop and launch a six-week pre-apprenticeship program for low-voltage electricians, which is designed to serve as a springboard for preferred entry into full apprenticeship programs so their tribal citizens can take full advantage of the rapidly growing number of clean energy job opportunities across the region. The program also partners with a local electrical workers’ union and tribal apprenticeship program in the Midwest to assist with delivery of the program’s curriculum.<sup>3</sup>

These examples and a growing number of others from across Indian Country are testaments to the fact that Tribal Nations and other Native workforce development entities simply can’t go it alone if they are to achieve their long-range workforce development priorities. Almost without exception, they individually don’t possess all of the capacity, expertise, strategies, and resources necessary to provide the holistic “system of support” (see infographic on page 6) that Native people need to flourish from cradle through career, which is why they must coordinate their workforce development efforts with a thoughtfully assembled constellation of both internal and external partners. Below are common partnerships they’re building and why:

- **Tribal enterprises:** to coordinate education, training, and ongoing professional development of tribal citizens to take jobs in those businesses and advance through the ranks.
- **Other Tribal Nations:** to pool resources to provide specialized education and training opportunities to their citizens; share program, labor force, and labor market data; share qualified labor for available jobs; learn programmatic best practices; and develop MOUs to consolidate service provision.
- **Other governments:** such as federal and state agencies to

*“Our ultimate goal is to build relationships with employers so when they have opportunities for hiring people or want to talk subsidized employment, we’re the first place they call.”*

– RYAN HOWARD, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, OWENS VALLEY CAREER DEVELOPMENT CENTER<sup>4</sup>

access their data, share tribal needs and data, connect citizens with support mechanisms and employers, provide them access to otherwise unavailable education and training services.

- **Colleges/universities:** to co-develop and administer post-secondary education and training programs and industry-recognized credentials customized to tribal priorities and tribal citizens’ needs; provide online learning spaces and options; and assist with tribal needs assessments and data gathering.
- **Local/regional employers:** to inform them about tribal citizens who have the qualifications they need and align education/training curricula to cultivate the skills they require for employment.
- **Native CDFIs:** to coordinate workforce education and training efforts, provide targeted training and ongoing support for tribal citizen-entrepreneurs, and strengthen financial management skills of employed tribal citizens and those seeking work.
- **K-12 schools:** to share data/assessments about tribal students and provide a quality, culturally relevant curriculum and supportive environment to ensure continued learning.
- **Non-profit organizations:** to expand internship and fellowship opportunities and labor unions to provide targeted training for in-demand fields and job placement upon graduation.
- **Coalition partnerships:** featuring multiple partners to create comprehensive support systems for citizens and holistic solutions that advance the Nation’s distinct workforce goals.

These partnerships provide Tribal Nations with greater policy and decision-making control; expand education, training, and job opportunities; better leverage limited dollars; and enhance their capacity to do self-determined workforce development.

## ASK YOURSELF

- ▶ What partnerships do we need to create an effective workforce development approach capable of achieving our long-term priorities? What do our tribal leaders, senior administrators, and program staff need to do to forge these partnerships?
- ▶ Evaluating our partners and potential partners, do we have a firm grasp on what they each can contribute and where that should fit within our workforce development approach?
- ▶ In what ways could our workforce development efforts be enhanced through formal partnerships with other Tribal Nations? What structures are required to create and maintain those partnerships?
- ▶ Is our Nation working closely with TCUs and other higher education institutions serving our people to ensure they provide the customized degree and credentialing programs they (and the Nation) need most?
- ▶ Do we have a formal working relationship with area Native CDFIs to coordinate local, Native-owned small business development?
- ▶ Are we actively engaging the Workforce Investment Board, industry associations, and unions in the area to develop/provide the training curricula and work experience opportunities our people require and then connect successful trainees with area jobs?<sup>5</sup>
- ▶ Is our Nation’s TERO office partnering with area employers to hire qualified tribal citizens? If not, why not?

## INDIAN COUNTRY SNAPSHOTS



### Inter-Tribal Ecosystem Restoration Partnership (ITERP)

Managed by the non-profit Lomakatsi Restoration Project, ITERP systematically builds the technical, managerial, and administrative capacity of participating Tribal Nations in rural Oregon, Idaho, and northern California to sustainably advance their ecosystem restoration priorities on their ancestral lands through tribal workforce training and the creation of related jobs “and tribal community business infrastructure.”<sup>1</sup> Working with Lomakatsi’s Native staff, each participating Nation customizes the workforce training curricula that its eligible citizens receive in its tribal priority areas, which include wildland firefighting, forest restoration, watershed and wetland restoration, invasive species management, and cultural resource monitoring.<sup>2</sup> Through intensive, hands-on training, participants earn nationally recognized professional certifications and learn how to use Traditional Indigenous Ecological Knowledge principles to responsibly steward the land as their ancestors once did.<sup>3</sup> A federal Indian Youth Service Corps partner, Lomakatsi’s most rigorous training option is its Tribal Ecological Forestry Training Program, in which ITERP-connected trainees become full-time, paid Lomakatsi employees for one year, during which they obtain a comprehensive suite of professional certifications and receive wrap-around support services to set them firmly on the path to career success.<sup>4</sup> Successful trainees are then channeled into ecological restoration jobs with their Tribal Nations, relevant federal agencies, and Lomakatsi itself. Through ITERP, Lomakatsi also partners with Tribal Nations to support some trainees in starting profitable businesses in the ecological restoration industry.<sup>5</sup> In addition to workforce training, participation in ITERP expands the ecological restoration funding available to Tribal Nations who often lack the capacity to successfully pursue funding themselves, as Lomakatsi applies on their behalf and then “awards back” funding to support each Nation’s priority ecological restoration projects, including the creation of critical staff positions that are typically filled with tribal citizens trained through the ITERP initiative.<sup>6</sup> For its participating Tribal Nations, ITERP provides tribal citizens with “education, experience, and a foot in the door” to the ecological restoration field on their own lands, things they otherwise would need to move away to gain.<sup>7</sup>

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

**CONNECT:** Belinda Brown, Tribal Partnerships Director, Lomakatsi Restoration Project, [belinda@lomakatsi.org](mailto:belinda@lomakatsi.org)



### Native Workforce Partners (NWP)

Like the rest of Indian Country, COVID-19 severely disrupted service delivery by Native workforce development entities across New Mexico. Determined to enhance and expand their services as Native communities recovered economically from the pandemic, these entities banded together in 2022 to form NWP.<sup>1</sup> Established through a LANL Foundation seed grant, NWP consists of 12 WIOA Section 166 programs in New Mexico and at Ysleta del Sur Pueblo in Texas and four New Mexico-based 477 programs.<sup>2</sup> Its purpose is to empower its members’ institutional capacity and know-how and leverage its collective voice to strengthen state policy and increase available resources through structured collaboration.<sup>3</sup> With funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and technical assistance from New Mexico Community Capital, in 2023 NWP developed a strategic plan with key goals, among them: (1) supporting the professional development of its members’ program staff; (2) increasing knowledge sharing between members about effective program design, administration, and evaluation; and (3) increasing members’ access to funding opportunities to enhance and expand their programs.<sup>4</sup> NWP launched its regular training series in 2024, with topics including strengths-based leadership, project management, case management, organizational-level critical thinking, and team building (future topics include understanding labor market trends and data analysis/reporting).<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, through quarterly meetings, NWP has fostered a solid partnership with the New Mexico Department of Workforce Solutions, targeting 2025 for an MOA signing to create a mechanism for regular, genuine consultation between the parties with an eye towards ensuring NWP members receive an equitable share of state workforce development dollars.<sup>6</sup> NWP also plans to develop specialized Native youth programming and produce videos and digital stories educating philanthropy about the impacts its members make and how it could grow those impacts (e.g., increased high school graduation, credential attainment, and long-term employment rates) through greater investments in them.<sup>7</sup>

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

**CONNECT:** Bernadette Panteah and Rosemary Reano, Native Workforce Partners, [hello@nativeworkforcepartners.org](mailto:hello@nativeworkforcepartners.org)

## POLICY TIPS

- ▶ Conduct a “partnership audit” to identify: (1) your informal and formal partnerships, (2) how they could be strengthened and for what reasons, and (3) where you need new ones and what people, time, and resources it will take to develop and steward them.
- ▶ Create a “resource bank” of education, training, and support services that your partners and potential partners provide that your people can rely on to prepare for, obtain, and sustain employment (be sure to include non-profits and professional associations).
- ▶ Identify what needed services are currently unavailable to your people and identify and establish partnerships with entities that can provide those services.
- ▶ Engage area non-tribal employers to determine the skills they need and design your workforce education/training curricula to build those skills. Offer them incentives (i.e. tax breaks and other subsidies) to hire tribal citizens for work experience placements or permanent employment. Have your TERO office partner with them to channel qualified citizens into available positions.
- ▶ Partner with technology providers to access the online learning infrastructure your Native students and trainees need.
- ▶ Institutionalize partnerships to ensure their sustainability through formal MOU/MOAs, regular meetings/information sharing, and ongoing education about the partnerships’ purpose.