



INDIAN COUNTRY SNAPSHOT:

Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes

In the late 1990s, CSKT confronted an unemployment rate hovering around 50 percent.¹ Its disjointed assortment of federal grant and other social service programs – run by more than 20 separate agencies, each with its own priorities – was failing to reduce that rate. In response, CSKT’s Tribal Council consolidated these programs into a single new entity: the Department of Human Resource Development (DHRD). At the outset, the DHRD faced daunting obstacles, including generating adequate funding, creating enough work experience placements for clients, and solving their transportation challenges. Finding initial success in using Tribal TANF dollars to purchase two vans to transport clients to their work experience placements, the DHRD then built a tribal transit system to meet the extensive transportation needs of its clients and the broader CSKT community. To fund this ambitious plan, in 2007 the DHRD secured Tribal Council approval for an ingenious proposal: it would become owner-operator of a local gas station to generate revenue DHRD Transit could use to provide matching dollars for the state transit grants upon which it relied. In addition to cycling its profits back into DHRD Transit, the gas station also provides work experience placements to the “unemployable class” (those with poor work histories, former felons, etc.) on the reservation, providing them starter jobs as gas attendants; others take placements as cashiers, baristas, food handlers, and laundry attendants at the DHRD Transportation Hub’s convenience store and laundromat.² Turnover is high among these positions as DHRD clients find permanent employment with the DHRD and other local employers impressed with their newfound job skills and performance. Meanwhile, DHRD Transit mitigates the considerable cost of maintaining its vehicle fleet by using its own auto repair shop, which also provides additional work experience placements and job opportunities to DHRD clients and affordable vehicle maintenance and repair services to community members. DHRD Transit and the Department’s other innovative strategies have helped to reduce CSKT’s unemployment rate to single digits as of 2024.³

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¹ This Tribal Snapshot summary is adapted and updated from NCAI’s workforce development case study of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (NCAI Partnership for Tribal Governance, *Workforce Development: Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes*, “Innovation Spotlight” Case Study, National Congress of American Indians, 2016, pp. 4, 12-15; https://archive.ncai.org/PTG_Innovation_Spotlight_-_CSKT_Workforce_Development_4-18-16.pdf, accessed July 30, 2024).

² These DHRD clients receive training in soft skills, inventory, stocking merchandise, customer service, store operations and maintenance, and supervisory skills, among others (Natalie Kenmille, Community Support Division Manager, CSKT, Correspondence with NCAI, July 29, 2024).

³ These other innovative strategies include Sylvia’s Store, a Salvation Army-type store established in 2004 “where CSKT members in financial straits who get a referral from DHRD case managers can obtain food, personal items, household items, and other necessities free of charge. The store, named after a DHRD employee, is staffed by DHRD Work Experience clients” (NCAI Partnership for Tribal Governance, *Workforce Development: Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes*, 2016, p. 15). According to the State of Montana’s Department of Labor and Industry, the Flathead reservation unemployment rate as of August 2024 was 4.4 percent (State of Montana Department of Labor and Industry, “Montana Unemployment Rate Remains Low Despite National Increase,” August 19, 2024 (<https://news.mt.gov/Department-of-Labor-and-Industry/Montana-Unemployment-Rate-Remains-Low-Despite-National-Increase>), accessed November 26, 2024).