



# Learning Walks

## Wind River

**T**he Native Youth Project (NYP) was a national learning collaborative facilitated by the National Network of Public Health Institutes (NNPHI), Healthy Teen Network, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that engaged seven community-based organizations serving American Indian youth in efforts to reduce teen pregnancies. These seven community-based organizations—Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, Indigenous Peoples Task Force, Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Center for Prevention & Wellness Salish Kootenai College, The Boys and Girls Club of the Northern Cheyenne Nation, Wind River Tribal Youth of Northern Arapaho Tribe, and First Nations Community HealthSource—worked with community leaders, including youth, to select, adapt, and implement an evidence-based teen pregnancy prevention program to address community priorities with cultural relevance. Additionally, these community-based organizations worked with the other funded agencies to share lessons learned and best practices. However, the project results only told a part

of the story and do not fully illuminate the processes grantees engaged in to make the Native Youth Project a reality in their specific communities.

To uncover and share the invisible work behind the concrete and measurable deliverables, Healthy Teen Network conducted Learning Walks with three agencies. Learning Walk is a popular strategy used in the education field by which an external observer visits a community to document lessons learned, provide input to guide decision-making for future project funding, and gain understanding of the impact that a particular project might have had in a community. The Learning Walks completed by Healthy Teen Network provided the opportunity to learn about the process of engaging stakeholders, the unique geographical context that shaped the implementation of the project, and the social impact the Native Youth Project has had in these three communities. This report from the field highlights lessons learned and successes from the initiative.

# Context

Our Learning Walk on the Wind River Reservation began in Riverton, Wyoming the closest town to the reservation. We were met by Telano, the project coordinator of the Wind River Tribal Youth Project (WRTY). Leading us away from the town, Telano took us on a tour of one of the largest reservations in the country, housing 10,000 members of the Northern Arapaho tribe, 4,000 of whom are youth. The reservation borders land owned by the Shoshoni tribe, and WRTY serves both groups. Telano provided commentary on the physical features of the land and the history of the structures that had been built upon it by various groups in the past. Telano pointed out several missions with boarding schools that had been formerly operated by Catholics and Baptists and are now being converted for use by the community. He shared that several of the current elders in his community had attended these schools, and had repeatedly run away due to the harsh conditions they experienced.

Telano showed us the location of his project in one of these former missions, within a collection of buildings located adjacent to a housing development known for high rates of substance abuse

and gang violence. He also pointed out that the project is also in close proximity to a middle school and a high school, the next stops on our tour.

As Telano showed us the middle and high schools, his strong connections with the youth were apparent from the number of greetings he received as we walked the hallways. We met with the middle school health teacher, who had warmly welcomed Telano into the classroom to implement the selected evidence-based program, Sexual Health and Adolescent Risk Prevention (SHARP), as part of a three-year long health education program offered at the school.

At the high school, Telano showed us the large gymnasium, a prominent and well-equipped facility that serves as a focal point for the community during basketball games. He shared that his community is well-known for the strength of its basketball team, and he said that the desire to play basketball has motivated many students to achieve and remain in school.

Telano also showed us the location of the Indian Health Service, one of the two health facilities available on the reservation. This prompted us to ask about where youth access HIV prevention services. He explained while some youth make use of the clinics on the reservation, others visit low-cost clinics in town to avoid being seen by adults who know them. WRTY

also provides condoms at various community events along with their project headquarters (located near two schools). When asked about the number of youth that obtain condoms through his project, he shared that students often send one representative who will ask for a large quantity of condoms for the group.

After our tour of the reservation, we sat down with Telano and other staff members of the WRTY to learn more about the project. We learned that WRTY got its start as an initiative of the Northern Arapaho Business Council (NABC). The project currently provides a variety of services, including youth probation and re-entry, HIV education and testing, general risk assessment, prevention of truancy and suicide, and trauma intervention. WRTY also includes culturally-specific components, such as sweat lodges, and a substance abuse program called Reservation Against Meth.



# Working with Stakeholders



To learn more about how WRTY worked with stakeholders, we talked with Telano individually and also met with a group of elders. Telano shared that prior to deciding which program to implement, he was careful to follow the reservation protocols by obtaining the blessing of the Council of Elders and by consulting with the Tribal Advisory Council (TAC). Together, these groups expressed strong support for the initiative. They determined that SHARP was a good fit for the community, noting the community's significant substance abuse problem (in spite of the fact that no alcohol is legally allowed on the reservation). Telano also mentioned that the short length of the curriculum was a positive feature, as it enabled integration into existing programming.



Telano provided regular updates about the project to these groups, which served as a means for allowing more open discussions about this sensitive topic. He shared that, through these discussions, a sense of pride about these efforts grew among community members. “[The SHARP curriculum] is like a badge for the community,” he said. That sentiment was evident among the elders with whom we met.

**“The SHARP curriculum is like a badge for the community.”**

**-Telano, WRTY project coordinator**



By drawing on existing partnerships, WRTY was able to implement SHARP in a wide variety of settings. To implement the program in the schools, Telano first gained the support of the health teacher, and then asked one of the members of the TAC—who also happened to be a school board member—to secure approval for implementation. Drawing upon existing partnerships, WRTY was able to secure approval to provide the program in juvenile detention facilities, in a group for first time teen mothers in the Eastern Shoshoni community, and the WRTY program's own talking circle for at-risk youth. He also implemented the program in group homes, which he felt was a particularly relevant setting as many of the youth in these homes had run away from home because they had been involved romantically with someone of whom the family did not approve.

# Implementation of SHARP



**W**hen implementing SHARP in community settings, WRTY made several adaptations. In one culturally-specific adaptation, he incorporated smudging at the beginning of each session, to build a safe environment for sharing. In addition, while participants viewed videos, Telano used smudging to help participants manage their reactions to the material. The facilitators pulled participants aside when it became evident that they were having an emotional reaction to the video, and offered additional smudging, assisted by an elder so the facilitators could focus on attending to the needs of the group as a whole. WRTY also adapted the way that he conducted the condom practice by asking participants to wear swim goggles which were smeared with petroleum jelly while he turned the lights off, to simulate the impairment that one faces when using alcohol and trying to use condoms.

Telano felt that youth reaction to SHARP was uniformly positive. He believes that this success is partially due to the fact that he had already built a rapport with some of the youth through his education efforts on other topics. He also believes that success is attributed to facilitation skills. He explained that the facilitator needs to be “clear, and on point,” and to “set the tempo and keep it lively,” especially as many of the youth have learning disabilities and require special efforts to stay engaged. Telano also used a gentle process for drawing youth into group discussions, by starting with small, non-threatening questions and

avoiding a focus on youth who were not participating. He also allowed for periods of silence, placing himself firmly in the role of listener rather than talker. He shared that by using this technique, “at the end of the program the quiet ones were the ones talking the most.” Telano also believes that it is very important to be “flexible and open-minded” to allow for richer discussion when needed.

Our visit ended with an opportunity to talk with some of the young women attending WRTY’s weekly talking circle, most of whom had participated in the SHARP program. Several of the girls expressed that they thought the program was relevant to their community, and that it accurately reflected many of the issues they face. The girls also alluded to the difficulty of changing attitudes about condoms and other HIV prevention techniques, which they said are not commonly practiced among the people they know.

Telano is not daunted by these challenges. He has used his experience in the NYP project to inform the implementation of SHARP through their SAMHSA project, and he plans to continue implementing SHARP to the extent that these funds will allow.

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