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Sincerely,

Judy Strother Taylor
Project Director



U.S. Department of Education Mentoring Resource Center

Case Study

By Michael Garringer

Delivering Quality Mentoring Services in Rural and Tribal Settings: A Case Study of the North Dakota Tribal Rural Mentoring Partnership

Introduction

Rural and tribal communities in the United States have traditionally found both successes and challenges in delivering services to young people, and youth mentoring programs are no exception. While youth mentoring is a concept that resonates historically and culturally with many rural and tribal communities, programs operating in these areas today often face many barriers to developing and maintaining effective services. Issues that rural programs must address if they are to succeed include the following:

- **Geographic isolation**, which curbs the ability of program staff to recruit volunteers, network in the community, and partner with other agencies. This isolation can also make it difficult for mentors and mentees to regularly meet.
- **Limited population bases**, which can hamper recruitment, marketing, and fundraising efforts.
- **Limited community infrastructure and resources** (both public and private), which can make it difficult to partner with other service providers and hinder long-term program sustainability. It can also lessen the number of activities available to mentors and mentees.

- **Limited or no public transportation**, which exacerbates the problems caused by geographic isolation.
- **A distrust of services that originate from “outside” the community.** Many rural and tribal communities are reluctant to adopt services designed to fix problems defined and recognized by community outsiders.¹
- **Issues related to alcohol and substance abuse, youth violence, housing, poverty, and fractured family structures**, which means youth mentoring programs in these communities will address particularly complicated and difficult issues as compared to programs in other settings.

Tribal programs, specifically, face additional barriers. These include:

- Difficulty capitalizing on existing strengths due to a long history of oppression and exploitation.
- A poor record of success for youth services, and new efforts greeted with distrust or apathy.

¹Texas Workforce Commission. (2003). *Youth investment in rural areas*. Boston, MA: School & Main Institute.

- Cultural nuances that must be addressed when designing mentoring services and activities.

Despite these challenges, mentoring programs hold great promise for rural and tribal populations. Youth mentoring is a strategy that can bring these communities together, rekindle cultural values and traditions, and help address many serious youth issues, such as gang violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and teen pregnancy. Research indicates that rural youth services thrive when they adopt these strategies:

- Integrating their services and partnering with others.
- Minimizing geographic isolation by delivering services in-person, and being physically present in the communities they serve.
- Building local capacity so there is permanence and a lasting impact.
- Using technology and creative marketing to connect clients to their services.²

Tribal youth services must adopt these principles while also addressing tribal culture. There is widespread agreement that “the most successful intervention and prevention programs build upon local tribal values and traditions.”³ Research indicates that strong cultural identification decreases vulnerability to risk factors and increases the benefits of protective factors.⁴

While offering youth mentoring in tribal and rural settings may be difficult, there exists a

framework of best practices for overcoming barriers and achieving success. The North Dakota Tribal-Rural Mentoring Partnership (NDTRMP) offers an excellent example of these best practices in action. Since its inception in 1999, the NDTRMP has carefully crafted its services to meet rural and tribal challenges and implement high-quality mentoring programs in a variety of communities throughout the state.

Program Description

In 1999, the state of North Dakota identified mentoring as one of six core suicide prevention strategies. A 2002 mentoring grant from the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools (OSDFS) allowed several existing mentoring programs in the state to come together under the administrative and fiscal authority of the North Dakota Mental Health Association. This funding allowed the NDTRMP to expand its services to multiple sites throughout the state (see sidebar) and to dramatically increase the number of youth served. A subsequent \$200,000 OSDFS school-based mentoring grant in 2004 created partnerships with 19 school districts and doubled the number of matches around the state.

Today, the NDTRMP serves almost 500 youth, with 350 of those matches being one-to-one and the remaining being group mentoring relationships. The mentoring offered varies in style (community, cultural, faith, school, etc.), but all matches strive for four meetings a month for at least 12 months. Additionally, all mentoring programs under NDTRMP aim to reduce at least two risk factors (e.g., substance abuse, gang involvement, school failure, etc.) while also increasing two protective factors (such as self esteem or positive peer relationships). The overarching goals of the NDTRMP are to improve school connectedness and attendance, increase academic performance, strengthen relationships with adults and peers, enhance decision making and problem solving, and increase resiliency factors such as family support, spirituality, healthy activities, and access to mental

² Texas Workforce Commission. (2003).

³ American Indian Development Associates. (2000). *Promising practices and strategies to reduce alcohol and substance abuse among American Indians and Alaska Natives*. Washington, DC: Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice.

⁴ Such as: Zickler, P. 1999. *Ethnic identification and cultural ties may help prevent drug use*. NIDA NOTES 14(3):7-9. and Nelson, A. 1999. *Storytelling for Empowerment: Decreasing At Risk Youth's Alcohol and Marijuana Use*. Evergreen, CO: The Wheel Council, Inc.

health and medical services for all youth served.

The NDTRMP has been quite successful in achieving its goals and in bringing mentoring to underserved communities, as demonstrated by evaluations of mentoring sites.

- Matches average over 5 hours of contact a month and 40% of their current matches are beyond 12 months in duration.
- Almost half of the mentors are Native American, allowing NDTRMP to effectively build on tribal culture and connectedness.
- Mentees report improved feelings regarding depression, suicide, family relations, and running away from home.
- 97% of parents approved of their child's match, 71% felt that their child's relationships with adults had improved, 63% felt the program had reduced delinquent behavior, and 58% said it had improved issues of drug and alcohol abuse with their child.
- The programs are growing future generations of mentors and are weaving mentoring back into the fabric of the community: **32 of the program's former mentees have now become high school mentors themselves.**

NDTRMP Sites

- Trenton Indian Health District
- Three Affiliated Tribes (through and partnership with the Boys and Girls Club of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation)
- Turtle Mountain Nation/Rolette County
- Wells County
- Standing Rock Nation
- United Tribes (located in Bismark)

Best Practices and Strategies

There are several key strategies that the NDTRMP has used in starting, maintaining, and enhancing mentoring services throughout the state and in addressing the barriers to working in rural and tribal settings.

#1 Secure Community Buy-In for the Program

This is critical for overcoming distrust and tapping into existing resources when implementing a new rural/tribal mentoring program. To promote community ownership and engagement, the NDTRMP employs several specific strategies:

- Connect mentoring to tribal kinship histories and concepts. This creates a sense of mentoring as something inherent in the history of the community, and not as something new.
- Conduct an inventory of past and current youth services in the community. What has been implemented before? What worked and what did not? Having an honest discussion about both successful and unsuccessful efforts to serve youth can build trust initially and help identify potential barriers in a particular community.
- Create a local advisory committee comprised of tribal elders and key community leaders. The involvement of tribal elders is especially critical, as they can identify individuals in the community that could serve as mentors or assist the program in other ways. They are also vital in mapping community assets and in infusing cultural traditions, ceremonies, and values into the mentoring activities and goals. These advisory committees promote mentoring in the community, actively recruit and recognize mentors, facilitate new partnerships, assist with marketing of program services, and coordinate fundraising efforts. This is the mechanism by which the community, not an

outside service provider, takes ownership of the effort.

In addition to those on the advisory committee, NDTRMP programs also use tribal elders to identify **community “champions”**--well-respected members of the community who can help mobilize people and resources.

#2 Maintain a Commitment to High-Quality Services

Given many of the difficulties in garnering support for new youth services in rural areas, it is critical that NDTRMP programs are professional, well-organized, and culturally appropriate for the community they serve. Specific strategies that achieve this goal include the following:

- Select and support highly qualified and motivated site coordinators. *“The communities we are in tend to respond directly to the mentoring coordinator, not the existence of the program itself,”* says NDTRMP Project Director Mark LoMurray. *“The line between program and person, between services and individuals, fades as the coordinator engages the community.”*

It is critical that site coordinators live in the communities they are serving, have excellent interpersonal and communication skills, and are well versed in the tribal or community values, history, cultural dynamics, and kinship systems. The advisory committee and tribal elders are often instrumental in identifying this person. *“Above all else,”* says LoMurray, *“they have to be willing to roll up their sleeves, put themselves out there and promote mentoring anytime, anywhere.”* Coordinators receive ongoing professional development and training and participate in monthly meetings (most often via the web or teleconference) to exchange ideas, discuss new strategies and partnerships, and offer support to one another.

- Map existing community assets, strengths, and resources to build upon.

No matter what issues a rural community faces, there are always positive resources to draw from, as well. NDTRMP programs initially investigate who is already “stepping up” for youth in the community. Schools, churches, businesses, cultural groups, government agencies (especially tribal government), healthcare providers, and other youth development and prevention specialists are all logical starting points. 4-H, Future Farmers of America, and Scout troops may also serve as potential partners or sources of volunteers. *“The point,”* says LoMurray, *“is not to try and solve all the community’s issues at once with just your program, but to see how you can build strategically on what is already working well.”*

- Offer many varieties of mentoring to boost recruitment, partnerships, and funding possibilities. All NDTRMP sites operate under a core set of principles, regardless of the varieties of mentoring they offer (see sidebar). These principles ensure quality and effective outcomes. But to facilitate community involvement the sites offer a wide variety of models, such as school-, faith-, and work-based, tribal/cultural, group, and peer mentoring.

Core NDTRMP Principles

- Comprehensive community involvement
- Targeted recruitment
- Thorough screening
- Appropriate matching and pre-service training
- Rigorous supervision of matches
- Monthly group activities
- Marketing of program services

- Facilitate accessible match meeting times and locations. Geographic distances make mentoring activities in rural areas a challenge. NDTRMP programs encourage matches to meet weekly for the first month, and at the same time and location for the first six months so as to build consistency into the meetings and give the match structure from the start. Some of the sites also encourage matches to initially meet in groups, especially if several mentors have a prior friendship. Says LoMurray, *“65 percent of our mentors also have a friend who is mentoring, and so we try and encourage them to recruit others and to even work in groups, initially. We actively recruit entire groups, such as student groups, clans, work groups, and clubs. Starting with group activities really helps get the ball rolling in a community and takes some of the pressure off when matches first start.”*
- Partner with other youth-serving agencies and community groups to overcome rural issues. This is perhaps the most critical piece in delivering quality mentoring services in rural settings. NDTRMP programs develop creative partnerships to solve transportation issues, share technology and infrastructure, and provide access to wrap-around health and prevention services. Partnerships are created with both resource-rich agencies (such as Boys and Girls Clubs) and smaller community entities (such as a local church that can provide a van for transporting youth).

This comprehensive approach maximizes what are often limited resources and provides practical solutions to problems. Partnering with other social and health services helps matches survive “crisis moments,” such as family difficulties or substance abuse problems, which can subvert mentoring relationships. However, a special consideration when working with other agencies and youth services in rural areas is ensuring confidentiality. Referrals to other services often need to be discrete and mentors need pre-match and ongoing training on keeping private the details of their

relationships and other services the mentee receives,.

#3 sustain the Program Over Time

As explained, many rural and tribal communities have seen countless public and private youth services come and go with varying degrees of success. The NDTRMP is committed to leaving a lasting impact and sustainable programming, which makes marketing, resource development, and strategic planning critical program features.

- Market effectively. NDTRMP programs use both common and innovative methods of promoting their services and creating community awareness.
 - Advertising/promoting on tribal radio
 - Issuing press releases and editorials in community newspapers
 - Attending and marketing at local events, such as powwows, fairs, health fairs, and tribal gatherings
 - Providing information updates in school, business, church, and government agency newsletters
 - Sending weekly email updates from site coordinators
 - Creating and showing multimedia presentations (slideshows, videos, scrapbooks, etc.) that show the fun and meaningful impact of mentoring.
- Partner creatively to increase funding opportunities. NDTRMP is strategic and opportunistic when creating partnerships at both the local and state level. Local programs frequently partner with health agencies, extension services, prevention programs, tribal schools, and local foundations to tap into dollars not usually available to mentoring programs. The seven local sites in turn partner at the state level, forming coalitions with state agencies, higher education institutions, and other large scale youth service providers to pursue significant funding sources. The state level partnerships also allow the NDTRMP to implement

common technology solutions (such as databases) and conduct joint multi-site evaluations. These creative partnerships have resulted in 15 separate government or foundation grants since 2000, accounting for over 90% of NDTRMP's revenue.

In addition to these creative partnerships, NDTRMP is further diversifying their funding base. *"We are attempting to transition from being grant-based to an individual donor base,"* says LoMurray, *"and we are also trying to get the state legislature to set aside some dedicated mentoring funds. We're not there yet, but as we continue to find success, those avenues should open up."*

Program Replicability

Many of the tactics discussed here for providing mentoring to rural and tribal communities are simply sound best practices that apply to all mentoring programs: community ownership and involvement, strategic partnering to tap into resources, and skilled local coordinators who make it happen at the individual level. What separates good rural programming from bad is the level of cultural understanding and how that culture is infused into the program. Rural and tribal mentoring programs need to be connected to "place"—to the strengths and people of a community—in a way that other programs are not. Successful replication in other programs can result from taking these strategies and infusing them with local talent, values, traditions, and resources.

Rural and tribal mentoring programs can adapt and implement the successful strategies employed by the NDTRMP if they follow these guidelines:

- Be creative in forming partnerships, especially partnerships that can address transportation and resource shortages and that can mitigate

specific community problems, such as substance abuse or domestic violence, which can impact mentoring relationships.

- Consider adding different varieties of mentoring to expand the program's possibilities, while maintaining high-quality services with set standards. It should be noted that adding additional types of mentoring, such as peer mentoring, can increase the amount of work that goes into recruiting, training, and supervising participants—so carefully consider whether adding new models is more important than improving existing ones.
- Embrace the local culture/history/strengths. The program must fit the personality and values of the community and it must be locally grown and owned.

"Bringing mentoring into often fragmented communities is a lot of work," says LoMurray, *"but the rewards are more than worth it. Done well, rural and tribal mentoring can be a tool for community change and community healing."*

The following definitions were used for the current case study:

- **Rural:** refers to programs operating outside of a city or large town, often over a wide or remote geographic area.
- **Tribal:** relating to or characteristic of a tribe; refers to mentoring programs coordinated by Native American tribes or that are serving large numbers of tribal youth.
- **Local Capacity Building:** the ability of a community to coordinate and provide appropriate services and resources to meet youth needs.

Additional Resources

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Mentoring Resource Center

Case Study Series

The Mentoring Resource Center (MRC) has been created to provide United States Department of Education Mentoring Program grantees with training, technical assistance, publications, research, and consultation, all in an effort to help their program staff design and implement the highest quality mentoring programs. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, the MRC is a collaborative effort between EMT Associates, located in Folsom, CA, and the National Mentoring Center, located in Portland, OR.

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