

Considerations for Culturally Sensitive Response to American Indian or Alaskan Native Sexual Assault Victims¹

The following are considerations for responders to keep in mind when working with victims of sexual assault who are American Indian or Alaska Native (AI/AN).

- ❑ **Be sensitive to victims' cultural beliefs and practices.** Best practice is to always ask victims rather than assume what they need. Cultural beliefs and practices relevant to response may become clear as victims describe their needs. By listening to what victims say they need and then following their lead, responders in essence customize interventions to match victims' life experience and promote their healing.
- ❑ **Be aware of and refer to culturally specific resources.** Establish a relationship with the Native sexual assault victim advocacy program (if one exists) to become familiar with and make referrals to local culturally specific resources that AI/AN sexual assault victims may find useful and are safe/appropriate. Building these relationships with Native responders and knowledge of local resources is particularly critical for non-Native responders.
- ❑ **Be aware of the tribe's history.** Responders should become educated about the impact that cultural genocide has had on AI/AN people as it may influence victims' reactions and needs. For example, during the boarding school era, many Native children were forcibly removed from their families and lost touch with their tribes' cultural practices. As a result, tribal members who grew up in that era and their children and grandchildren may or may not be familiar with traditional practices and/or how to utilize them to heal from trauma they experience in their lives. Adequate self-education combined with training by tribal members can prepare non-Native responders to be sensitive to the continuum of assimilation that exists in many communities and avoid assumptions about AI/AN victims' cultural practices. Knowledge of the impact of forced removal of children to expedite assimilation as well as the impact of the physical and sexual abuse that occurred during the boarding school era will generally minimize assumptions and generate an understanding of why victims are reluctant to report a sexual assault.²
- ❑ **Integrate traditional healing practices into contemporary response so victims have options for spiritual healing.** Information can be provided to victims that speak to the usefulness of their tribal traditions and teachings in promoting holistic healing and refers to spiritual practices common to the tribe (e.g., traditional practices,

Christian practices or practices that integrate both traditional and Christian). Responders can explain that a sexual assault is an assault on the mind and spirit—as well as the body—and that spiritual support during this time can be helpful.

Responders will want to explain how the assault is contrary to traditional values to help them put the assault in perspective and minimize self-blame. If a victim is familiar with traditional practices, responders should understand that there may be a continuum of assimilation in terms of where they are at on their spiritual journey and their connection to traditional life-ways.

It is always up to individual victims to determine if and how they would like to address issues of spirituality during the SAFE process. If victims indicate an interest, they can be assisted in identifying healing resources and activities appropriate to their spiritual beliefs. Victims may also wish spiritual support for their family and friends and even for their offenders. Responders must let the victim take the lead and “check their own personal beliefs at the door.”

- ❑ **Recognize that AI/AN culture prioritizes protecting family honor.** There is often a belief that whatever you do in life impacts the clan/family system.³ If victims are already feeling ashamed and at fault for the sexual assault, they may not want to subject their family to the “further humiliation” of gossip and negative backlash from misconceptions about sexual assault.⁴ Responders should clarify sexual assault is a crime and the victim is *not* to blame. They should explain the purpose of community interventions is it to help victims and their families heal from the trauma of the assault and hold perpetrators accountable. At the same time, responders should recognize that perpetrators may be family or community members. Victims should not be pressured to disclose who perpetrators if they are ready.
- ❑ **Recognize that fear of retaliation by perpetrators or perpetrators’ families is common.** The vast majority of sexual assaults are committed by someone the victim knows.⁵ Perpetrators may have directly threatened their victims with further harm in order to prevent them from reporting to law enforcement.⁶ Victims’ fear and hesitancy to report may be even greater if sexual assault is part of a cycle of domestic violence and/or the perpetrator is a tribal or spiritual leader or has relatives in key positions in the tribal governing body, tribal courts, tribal law enforcement, etc.⁷ It is important to discuss these fears with victims and help them plan for safety in these situations. Safety plans can also be created with assistance from a victim advocate.
- ❑ **Be aware that sexual abuse by self-proclaimed spiritual healers does occur.** They may use threats of bad medicine, misinterpretation of dreams, retaliation by the spirits, or their status to confuse or instill fear and compliance in their victims. Victims need to know that sexual violation is not part of true spirituality and traditional practices. They need on-going

reassurance that they were deceived and that the sexual abuse was not their fault. It may take considerable time for victims to process their experience and responders must respect the fact that victims may reject any offers for support through ceremonies or spiritual healing. These victims may also need significant support to deal with community backlash to naming a spiritual healer as an abuser. Victim credibility is often challenged; many in the community believe the victim but oftentimes more believe the perpetrator/purported spiritual healer. Also see Appendix __: *What if the Sex Offender is a Purported Spiritual Healer?*

- **Recognize that victims may fear and distrust government systems.**⁸ There are many horror stories about AI/AN victims of sexual violence who were mistreated by government systems (including victim blaming and racist attitudes to removal of children from their homes to physical brutality and excessive force). When the fear and distrust of systems is combined with the unspoken rule that you don't turn in "one of your own" to these systems, there is a greater likelihood that victims will not want to report or cooperate in the legal process. Victims often believe that even if they do report, nothing will be done by the criminal justice system. This belief may be even stronger if perpetrators were non-Indian. Victims may also be concerned that they will be arrested for something they did in the past and fear that their perpetrators will disclose this fact if they report. It is important to let victims know that you understand this type of distrust, and then intervene and advocate on behalf of them to prevent mistreatment from occurring or when mistreatment occurs. Also, encourage a criminal justice focus on the serious sex crime committed against victims rather than other past incidents of the victims.
- **Don't make value judgments about victims based on their communication styles.** One victim's stoic affect may be more about distrust, humiliation and fear (e.g., of retaliation, of exposing a community or family member, and of how they will be perceived by the interviewer) than any other reasons. If victims' reactions are misinterpreted by responders, it is unlikely they will seek further help or be willing to be involved in the criminal justice system.

On a related note, avoid using technical terms, as victims may perceive use of these terms as pretentious and insincere. Instead, speak in layperson terms.

- **Recognize the importance of family support.** Having supportive family members close during difficult times is a cultural value. It is extremely important to let victims decide if a family members or support persons should be informed and allowed to be present during medical examinations, preliminary interviews, etc.
- **Be aware and work to overcome stereotypes associated with AI/AN people and Native women in particular.** For example, understand that alcohol or drug use/abuse by victims

does not cause sexual assault. Acknowledge that Native individuals are no more likely to lie about being sexually assaulted than any other ethnic group in this country (false reporting is rare). Understand that Native women are not acceptable targets of sexual violence and deserve to have violence against them taken seriously.⁹ These and other stereotypes must be replaced with facts if responders are to hold sex offenders accountable and truly help AI/AN victims and communities heal.

- **Recognize that there are multiple ways for victims to seek justice**—e.g., through criminal justice interventions; through the use of traditional practices of the tribe related to holding perpetrators accountable; and/or other victim-identified strategies. Empower victims to make their own decisions about which avenues they will use to seek justice, if any.

¹ Adapted in part from *Considerations for Cultural Sensitive Response to American Indian or Alaskan Native Victims*, Mille Lacs Band Women’s Project, Princeton, MN, 2009.

² See J. Agtuca, *Beloved Women: Life Givers, Caretakers, Teachers of Further Generations*, in S. Deer, B. Clairmont, C.A. Martell and M.L. White Eagle (Eds.), *Sharing Our Stories of Survival: Native Women Surviving Violence*, Altamira Press, 2007: 15-19 for a brief discussion of historical context of violence against Native women. In the same publication, C.A. LaPointe, *Sexual Violence: An Introduction to the Social and Legal Issues for Native women*, weaves together history of the boarding school era with her experiences of sexual abuse and its impact on her life.

³ From B. Clairmont and S. Deer, *Introduction to Advocacy for Native Women Who Have Been Raped*, in S. Deer, B. Clairmont, C.A. Martell and M.L. White Eagle (Eds.), *Sharing Our Stories of Survival: Native Women Surviving Violence*, AltaMira Press, 2008: 183.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid*, 182.

⁶ *Ibid.* 183.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Bullet drawn from B. Clairmont and S. Deer, *Introduction to Advocacy for Native Women Who Have Been Raped*, 184.

⁹ *The Principles of Advocacy: A Guide for Sexual Assault Advocates*, 8 and 22-24.