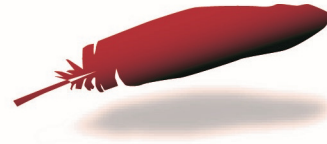


# National Indian Health Board



## **Answering the Cry of our Warriors: Programming to Support Native Americans Re-entering the Community**

### **Native Americans and Incarceration**

In 2010, 3,331 American Indians or Alaska Native (AI/AN) people were incarcerated in a federal prison as sentenced by federal court.<sup>i</sup> While AI/AN people comprised only 3% of the total people incarcerated in federal prison, this number represents a 5.1% increase since 2001 – the largest percent increase of any race or ethnicity (tied with Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders).<sup>ii</sup> The same report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics states that 38.7% of AI/AN people who are released from a federal prison return within three years.<sup>iii</sup> While this may allude to the need for reform within the federal justice system, it more clearly speaks to a need to support the growing number of American Indian and Alaska Native men and women who are struggling upon their return to the community after a mandated removal.

### **What is Warrior Down?**

There are few Native-specific re-entry programs that are in place and supported to fill this need. However, White Bison, Inc., a Native American, non-profit organization headquartered in Colorado Springs, CO, has created and is actively diffusing a program that supports re-entry for Native Americans using a multi-faceted and traditional approach. The program is called Warrior Down. “Warrior down” is a cry used to signify that a warrior has been wounded or incapacitated in some way and needs help. The Warrior Down program seeks to provide resources, programming, and a supportive team comprised of trained peers that provide recovery support, recidivism prevention, and community referrals for those re-entering the community from treatment or various forms of incarceration.

Warrior Down was launched in 2005 as a pilot project and quickly spread to twelve new sites in five states. Initial implementation witnessed 80% of participants successfully maintaining sobriety and avoiding further, additional or new judicial or criminal activity. And while the program was originally created to support incarcerated and returning men, the program now works with women returning to the community as well.

### **Components of Warrior Down**

The Warrior Down program has many different components and is highly adaptable to different communities, resources, levels of incarceration, and length of incarceration. However, there are three primary areas of intervention and support:

*Support in the Prison Setting.* People in prison are invited to attend two separate (yet related), structured programs developed by White Bison, Inc. titled *The Medicine Wheel and 12 Steps for Men/Women and Fathers/Mothers of Tradition*. *The Medicine Wheel*

and *12 Steps for Men/Women* helps men discuss their road to recovery by utilizing the lessons and direction provided by the medicine wheel, while *Fathers/Mothers of Tradition* addresses issues of Native American identity, what it means to be a Native American man/woman and the role of fathering and mothering in Native American culture. As social support is a critical component in behavior change and relapse prevention programs, participants will also be trained to create a network of social, emotional, and spiritual support that they can tap into upon release to help maintain sobriety and prevent recidivism. All participants will take new found knowledge to understand and construct a Wellbriety Plan that they can implement during their time in prison, during and after release.

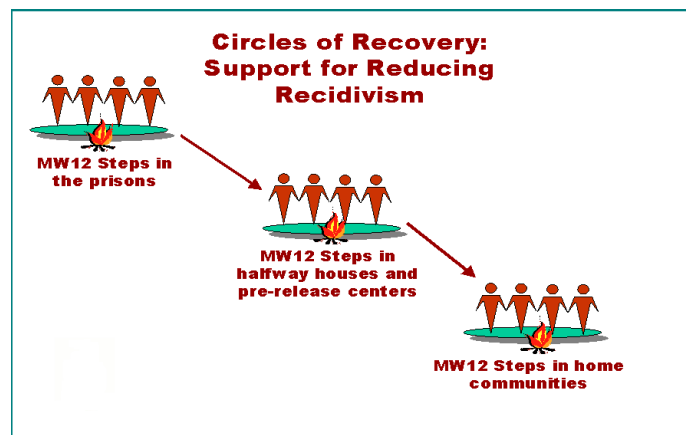
As men and women are going through these programmatic components inside of prison, programming is created for families as well. This support helps families to cope with incarceration, deal with the absence of a loved one, and prepare for their return. Families in the community (whether urban or reservation-based) are offered a variety of programs that directly compliment what people are learning inside of prison (including *The Medicine Wheel and 12 Steps*), which may be tailored to women, men, daughters, or sons.

*Pre-release Support.* Should a release program include a mandatory stay in halfway houses or pre-release centers, Warrior Down supports programming at this phase of re-entry as well. This becomes an environment where newly released can begin to practice their new found skills, explore the efficacy of their planned support network, and continue to participate in *The Medicine Wheel and 12 Steps* meetings.

*Returning to the Home Community.* As returning to the community is a very challenging step for recently released individuals, their families, friends and communities, there is a lot of activity to support reconnecting with families, cultural traditions, and communities.

*Medicine Wheel and 12 Steps* meetings are held, as are meetings for family members. Wellbriety plans are implemented, and men

and women enter the supportive tutelage of Recovery Coaches that can provide daily support and guidance. Family members also create a Wellbriety Plan in this phase of the programming that will help them readjust to the father returning to the family. Referrals are provided for all participants to assist with community re-acclimation (e.g., social services, employment services, assistance with applying for a driver's license, finding appropriate housing, locating spiritual support). And support is also provided to help all family members reconnect with each other.



## Outcomes

The Warrior Down program has structured impact and behavioral outcomes that can assist with program planning, grant writing, and aligning programmatic components to community need. Warrior Down seeks to achieve the following immediate outcomes (the following represent a few of the outcomes that can be achieved by Warrior Down, and is not a complete list):

- Develop skills and values that support recovery and prevent relapse
- Increase knowledge of how to avoid relapse and recidivism
- Create social support networks to encourage recovery journey
- Increase connections to cultural and spiritual practices that support healing
- Increase participation in culturally appropriate 12 Step meetings
- Create structured environments that help ease a recently released person into making their own decisions

Achievement of the immediate outcomes leads to the fulfilment of the intended intermediate outcomes, including: development of social skills, life skills and leadership skills; and the creation of a community-based, system-wide culturally relevant network to support recovery, wellness and re-entry. Ultimately, Warrior Down seeks to realize a larger, broader impact – to reduce recidivism and relapse rates by at least 80% for participants.

### **What Makes Warrior Down Successful?**

As the most widely diffused and supported, Native-specific re-entry program, Warrior Down has many features that make it not just innovative, but also promote cultural specificity and support effectiveness.

*Peer to Peer Programming.* One of the hallmarks of the Warrior Down program is the use of peers as recovery and support coaches. These are people that have been in prison or in treatment and are now in the process of rebuilding their own lives.



*Use of Traditional Healing.* Communities are encourage to invite Elders and spiritual advisors to participate in support and relapse prevention processes. Spiritual and traditional practices and ceremonies (e.g., pipe ceremonies, re-naming ceremonies, sweat lodges, drumming, dancing) can be important components in individual and family Wellbriety Plans.

*Continuous Support from Prison to Release.* Warrior Down provides supportive and similar programming for men during incarceration and all the way through reconnecting with their families and communities. This continuous support system grows and adapts as the needs of the men change with their changing environments. The program itself becomes a very important and consistent source of support.

*Complimentary Programming for Family Members.* Family members also experience anxiety and distress when a loved one is incarcerated, and reconnecting after a

prolonged absence can be equally difficult and confusing for family members. Therefore, supportive services are offered to families in order to help re-examine roles and relationships during post release phase and ultimately create a vision for a healthy family.

### **Conclusion**

The Warrior Down program is a step-by-step supportive program that aligns to community resources and traditional practices, while still implementing evidence-based components of re-entry programming. Its adaptability, coupled with the support and technical assistance provided by White Bison, Inc. and its network of trained coaches make it accessible. It is an example of what can be created at the individual and community level to meet the needs of American Indian and Alaska Native people re-entering our communities, and can be taken as a model for other communities to explore.

*The National Indian Health Board would like to thank Don Coyhis and Kateri Coyhis with White Bison, Inc. for participating in an interview and supplying all of the materials necessary to write this article on the Warrior Down program. For more information on the program and to receive training on Warrior Down, please visit [www.whitebison.org](http://www.whitebison.org).*

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<sup>i</sup> Motivans, M. (January, 2014). *Federal Justice Statistics, 2010*. Retrieved from <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/fjs10.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*