

So'oh-Shinálí Sister Project

Decolonizing Data

TO SUPPORT INDIGENOUS ELDERS



Background

This project emerged as a significant need identified by intergenerational Indigenous community members in Los Angeles County that participated in five mental wellness focus groups held in 2021. Participants noted that through the pandemic, elders have been socially isolated as many are immunocompromised or high-risk. In addition, elders often do not have access to technology or familiarity with online meeting platforms needed to join virtual community-based programming. Participants also shared there are very few cultural resources and community programs dedicated specifically to elders within Los Angeles County. Finally, participants raised that mental wellness is rarely discussed by elders despite their experiences with boarding schools, relocation and direct trauma due to stigma associated with mental health and distrust for non-Indigenous structures.

Project Description

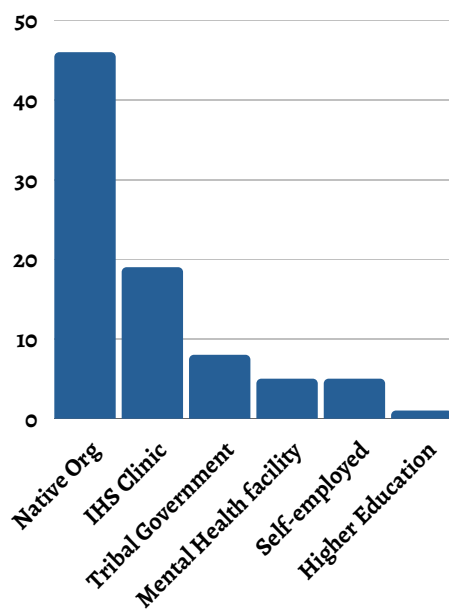
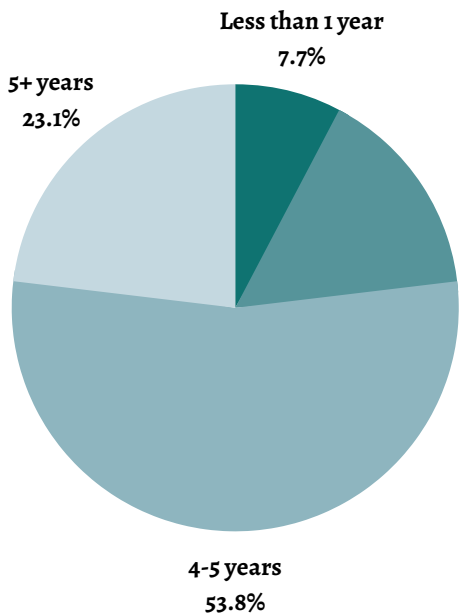
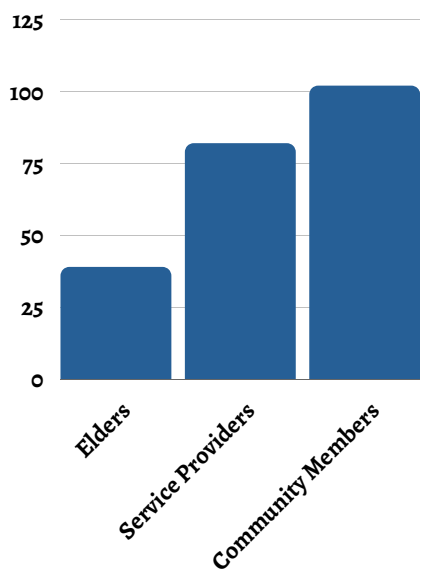
Decolonizing Data to Support Indigenous Elders in Los Angeles County utilized strengths-based data collection and analysis to identify specific priorities shared by community members for community members. Following this initial phase, So'oh-Shinálí Sister Project (SSSP) held two Elder's Circles to focus on dissemination of data woven with culture and creative expression. SSSP utilized this approach to acknowledge harmful data practices while simultaneously empowering and engaging community to define and strengthen data capacity in their own terms. Elder's Circles coupled arts with discussion to unpack findings, focus on reflection, determination, community connection and healing through restoration of cultural and spiritual practices. These practices include connections to the Spirit World, land, and animal relatives as well as animate and inanimate objects. Elders raised the importance of continued responsibility to sustaining Indigenous knowledge systems for the next generations. Community members determined specific data to share publicly and also identified findings to maintain locally as we look to shape future services.



Survey Responses

Three community surveys were developed and designed for: (1) Indigenous elders, (2) for tribal and community organization staff and mental health professionals, and (3) for general community members. Surveys included questions tailored specifically to reflect the diversity and unique nuances of the Los Angeles Indigenous community. Surveys integrated culturally-responsive questions and approaches, including imagery, likert scales, yes/no questions as well as open- and close-ended questions. Surveys integrated questions on four primary areas: (1) local mental health services, (2) cultural approaches to wellness, (3) resource priorities and (4) best outreach and engagement practices. Surveys were distributed as electronic surveys and submissions were also accepted over the phone to ensure access in forms that were conducive for our intergenerational participants.

- SSSP received a total of 223 individual responses representing all 8 service areas of Los Angeles County:
 - 39 responses from elders
 - 82 responses from tribal/community organization staff and mental health professionals
 - 102 responses from community members
- Majority of services providers have had extensive experience working in our local community with elders and extended family members; they also represented various social service and educational organizations.



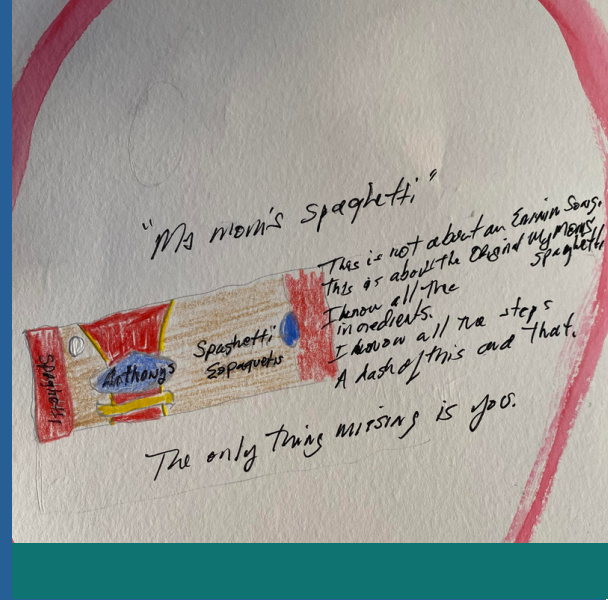
REPRESENTATION FROM OVER 60 COMMUNITIES

- | | | |
|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Akimel Ootham - Gila River Indian Community • Apache • Arapaho • Assiniboine • Caddo • Cahto • Cherokee • Cheyenne • Cheyenne River Sioux • Chickasaw • Chippewa • Choctaw • Chumash • Colville • Diné • Fernandeño Tataviam Band of Mission Indians • Fort Sill Chiricahua Warm Springs Apache • Gabrieleño • Gabrieleno Band of Mission Indians • Gabrielino Tongva • Gros Ventre • Hopi • Huichol | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hunkpapa Lakota Sioux • Hupa • Iroquois • Kanaka Maoli • Kickapoo • Kiowa • Kizh • Koyukon • Kumeyaay • Laguna Pueblo • Menominee • Mexika • Miwok • Mohican • Mvskoke Creek/Muskogee Creek • Nahua • Nanticoke • Navajo • Northern Paiute • Odawa • Oglala Lakota • Oglala Sioux | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paiute • Patawomeck • Quechan • Pima Gila River • Potawatomi • Pueblo • Sac & Fox • San Felipe Pueblo • Santa Clara Pueblo—Tewa • Seneca • Sioux • Standing Rock Sioux Tribe • Taos Pueblo • Tataviam • Tenochca-Nahuatlaca • Tohono O'odham • Tongva • Yaqui • Quechan • Yup'ik • Yurok • Zapotec |
|--|--|---|

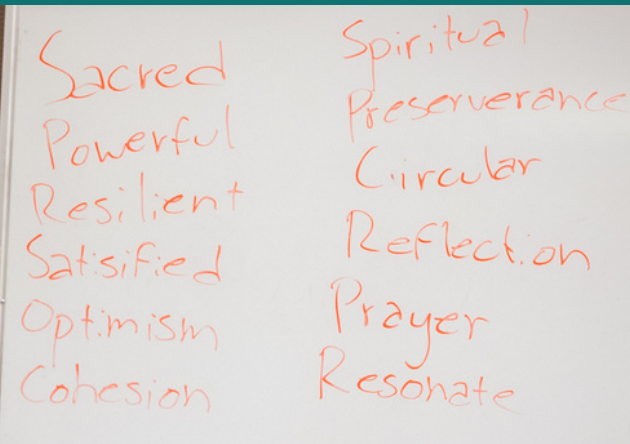


Indigenous Elders Paint Night October 2022

SSSP team members shared about the data collection process, findings, details and overall themes with 22 local Indigenous Elders. Licensed Clinical Social Worker, Carlos LaMadrid (Yaqui/Chiricahua Apache/Mexican) led our talking circle to discuss data reflections and recommendations based on the survey results. Deon Mitchell (Diné/Black) led our step-by-step paint session to process how the data impacted elders through creative expression. Many elders reflected on their own elders and loved ones in addition to the resilience of our collection peoples. Elders also expressed hope for younger generations to continue cultural practices and strengthen community.



Poem by elder, Greg S.
(Tohono O'odham/Diné)

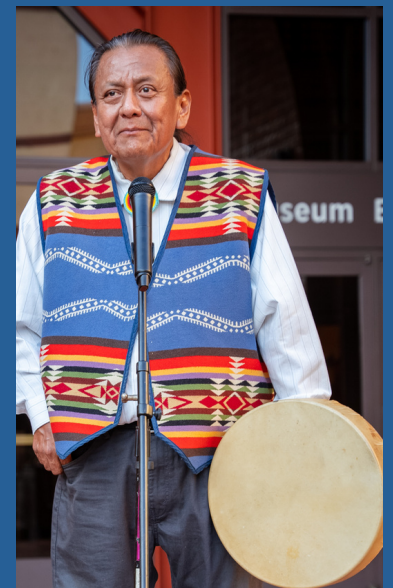
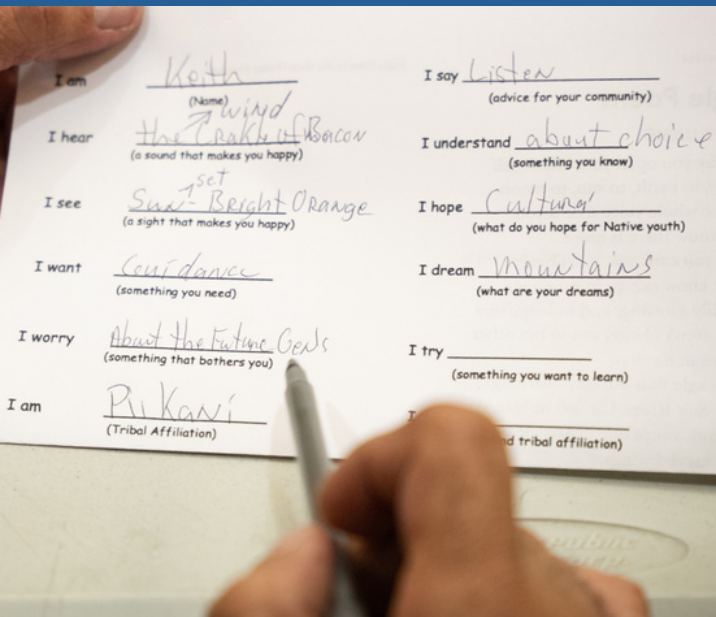


Above: Elders' Reflections on Data

Below: Poem by Keith V. (Blackfeet)

Celebrating our Indigenous Elders November 2022

During this gathering, Indigenous elders were honored with songs, a nourishing dinner and intentional focus on joy in community connection. Community leader, Avril Cordova (Lakota/Taos Pueblo) of AC & Associates served as MC while SSSP team members shared data findings and reviewed input from the first Elder's Circle. Licensed Clinical Social Worker, Robyn Gomez (Huichol/Xicana) provided wellness support and perspective as data was shared. Local teacher, Della Mendivil (Tohono O'odham) led a poem workshop to integrate creative reflection through words and storytelling. Emphasis was made on input from elders as a total of 67 Indigenous Elders and their relatives joined.



"We need to need to teach younger generations our stories and [share our] positive childhood memories."

"This was positive [and] uplifting and let me know I am not alone on my journey."

"The event was so refreshing. It gave me a sense of belonging."

"[I want a group focused on] how to cope with the aging process, how to take care of health issues and help with everyday issues. Please continue to contact me about this program. I would like to learn more. Thank you for remembering me."



Post-Circle Survey Results

Electronic and paper surveys were also distributed to assess impact following the two Elder's Circles and discussion on data. Elders and their relatives expressed that these gatherings gave space for them to connect and/or reconnect in meaningful ways with friends they had not seen through isolation caused by the pandemic. Community members also noted that Elder's Circles brought them joy and contributed to their sense of belonging which had a positive influence on their mental health. Elders also shared many examples of offerings they would like to see in community, such as: arts and storytelling gatherings, healing circles, traditional medicines, foods and cooking classes, and many others. Elders also noted specific culturally-grounded educational topics they would like to see offered for them and their loved ones, including: learning about Alzheimers Disease, Dementia, Diabetes prevention and management as well as ways to support their mental health and that of their caretaker/family members. Elders' relatives also requested support with navigating mental health discussions.

Recommendations

We recommend very intentional approaches to defining what it means to be an Indigenous Elder. We received varied input related to traditional language, ceremonial practices and involvement in tribal nation governance or leadership. We also recognize the need to define a "grant funder" to help focus on relationship building with philanthropy and contribute to representation of our community's strengths and needs. We also recommend giving space for elders to share their gifts with community, including stepping back to support with Elder's Talking Circles, *"led by an Elder for Elders"* as one community member also noted that, *"Elder peer-led spaces [help] support [elders'] strengths, gifts and teachings. They have so much to share but rarely the space or support to share."* Many elders also reflected on this stage of life, and the importance of *"learning to love and accept yourself,"* especially as *"life roles and changes associated with age influence mental health; [just] as physical illness or decreased mobility also influence mental health; [in addition to] the challenge of establishing social networks for elders."* In addition, we recommend integrating practical steps such as including a variety of sugar-free snacks and drinks at events. We also recommend hosting events early in the day when the weather is warm and incorporating guided mobility breaks for elders to stretch together to minimize any aches or pains.

This visual reflects the knowledge shared by community based on data from surveys and gatherings. We will utilize this visual to guide future offerings as we continue to center community, uplift ancestral knowledge, cultural teachings and spiritual practices. We will also continue to focus on supporting Elder peer-led spaces to assist with mental health stigma reduction and contribute to the resiliency of our community.



Change Stories

“I thought the event was very nice. We started with an opening prayer which is always good. We covered a lot of really different topics from the data and it was interesting to hear what people had to say through the poetry. It was beautiful. A lot of the ideas were very good, like involving elders in arts classes along with students, something like an *adopt a grandchild program* or an *adopt a grandparent program*. We had good conversations and got to meet a lot of new community members. There were different generations sharing and my niece shared too. She loved the event and the cause that we were all there for – she even cried – it was that powerful for her. She also shared how much there was to learn in community moving forward.

It would be nice to see more senior groups offered across the county, including more events in different service areas such as South Los Angeles, the South Bay area and East Los Angeles. It can be really hard for elders to drive far to join events that are held in downtown.

This event had a positive impact because it brought families together. It helped us reunite as families. I was able to see relatives that came from really far distances. It was also nice to see some families that had four generations there - whole families connecting in community. There is just so much to learn and do.”

Iva Maes
Assinoboine/Gros Ventre/San Felipe Pueblo
Community Member



Change Stories

"I am thankful for the opportunity to help organize and host two Indigenous Elders' talking circles for our Los Angeles Urban Indigenous community members. It was a beautiful experience from beginning to end as our team thoughtfully tailored the events to our elders and then saw how much elders appreciated us thinking about their wants and needs. When sharing the data findings, we held space to acknowledge harmful Western data practices and had a licensed Indigenous therapist in both talking circles. With this acknowledgment, the move to change our practice around data became even more impactful because we could focus on the healing that comes from data sovereignty. In discussion with elders, we collectively decided how we want our data utilized and what tangible resources we want to come out of it. Practicing strength-based data collection of this kind will positively impact our community because when we take ownership of our data, we can create services and resources by us and for us. For example, we used findings from our data to inform our planning for these two talking circles. The community voiced the need for engagement around mental wellness and culture for elders. Therefore we provided workshops that utilized art and storytelling as a way to support our elders' mental wellness. It was heartwarming to see elders participate in art activities, like painting and writing poetry, and even more beautiful when they shared the stories behind their art. Both events truly captured the resilience of our community and Indigenous Joy."

**Wildflower Ontiveros
Gabrieleño**

Community Relations Manager
So'oh-Shinálí Sister Project

