



## ENGAGING URBAN INDIAN ORGANIZATIONS AND TRIBAL NATIONS IN YOUR STAND DOWN: A QUICK GUIDE

Stand Downs serve as an effective outreach strategy to engage Veterans experiencing or at risk of homelessness and offer them a wide range of supportive services and housing opportunities. Community agencies hold these one- to-three-day events in partnership with VA. The services offered may include food, shelter, clothing, health screenings, dental services, legal services, and VA and Social Security benefits counseling. Additionally, Stand Downs allow for referrals to various other services, including permanent housing, medical services, mental health care, substance use disorder treatment, and employment resources.

Homelessness among Native Veterans is of particular focus for VA and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Service's Indian Health Service (IHS). Native Veterans have historically served in the U.S. military at higher rates than other subpopulations of Americans. However, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), in 2023, Native people continue to be overrepresented in the homeless population. While they constitute approximately 2.9% of the U.S. population, they comprise about 3.5% of the general homeless population. In addition, people who identify as Native people were nearly twice as likely to be experiencing unsheltered homelessness than sheltered homelessness.<sup>2</sup>

VA encourages you to establish and cultivate relationships with the Tribal Nations and Urban Indian Organizations (UIOs) in your community. By including your local Tribes and UIOs in the planning and execution of local Stand Downs, you can create culturally inclusive and responsive events that draw more Native Veterans, allowing us to connect them to the appropriate resources.

The following steps may be helpful to develop your next Stand Down in partnership with local Tribes and UIOs. Cultural considerations for working with Native people and Tribal organizations are also included to guide the approach.

1. U.S. Department of Defense, Honoring Native American, Alaska Native heritage, <https://www.army.mil/article/48472/honoring-native-american-alaska-native-heritage/>
2. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2023 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress Part 1: Point-In-Time Estimates of Homelessness, December 2023, p. 7.

## SIX STEPS TO INCREASE ENGAGEMENT

1. Identify the IHS Facility, UIOs, and Tribal Nations in your area. Search the [IHS Locations Directory](#), the [IHS Health Care & Resources for Native Veterans locator](#), the [UIO Directory](#), and the [Tribal Leaders Directory](#).
2. Contact your local IHS office, UIOs, and Tribal Leaders and schedule a planning meeting to discuss your upcoming Stand Down.
3. Identify ways to incorporate Native cultural themes and services at the Stand Down.
4. Develop strategies to ensure Native Veterans can participate in your Stand Down. These may include pre-notice of the event, providing transportation and food, and reviewing relevant data on demographics and trends.
5. Track the participation of Native Veterans at the Stand Down.
6. Evaluate the effectiveness of the event and partnership, then use this information to inform and improve future Stand Downs.

## CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Engaging Tribes and Tribal families is all about relationships. Begin your partnership by understanding the Tribe's history, culture, and traditions.
- Native people have rich diversity in their Tribal affiliations, cultural customs, and languages. Consider that each Tribe is unique and be willing to explore the history of the Veteran being served.
- Many Native people have traditional care preferences that can affect how they receive care. Understanding and respecting these differences helps build trust.
- Many in the Native community do not trust services provided by the federal government, as their contacts with the government have been extremely harmful and traumatic in the past.
- Even when trauma is generations in the past, it has a very real effect on the way Tribes and Tribal families relate to those outside the Tribe. Approach Native homeless Veterans from a trauma-informed care perspective.
- Be aware of your own biases, both implicit and explicit. Be open to ideas about roots and paths to well-being that may differ from yours.
- Recognize that admitting limited knowledge of Native culture is acceptable. Asking for help understanding the cultural beliefs of the Veteran shows concern for the community and culture, if requested tactfully.
- Listen and observe more than you speak. Personal history is often told in stories rather than a direct response to a question. Be willing to listen to the story unfold without interrupting to show respect for the Veteran's process.

## ADDITIONAL CULTURAL RESOURCES

**VA's Office of Tribal Health** provides VHA with leadership, guidance, strategic direction, and policy to support American Indian/Alaska Native Veteran health care, access, and Fourth Mission activities. The Office also serves as a consulting partner on the VA/IHS interagency partnership and pertinent legislation. Their website contains information about copay exemptions for Native Veterans as well as details on upcoming outreach events.

**VA's Office of Tribal Government Relations** team works to strengthen and build closer relations between VA, Tribal governments, and other critical federal, state, private, and nonprofit partners to serve Veterans across Indian Country effectively and respectfully. This work is done in the spirit of government-to-government consultation and collaboration, respecting the special relationship between the United States and Tribal governments. The team's efforts focus on three critical goals: facilitating VA's Tribal Consultation Policy, facilitating increased access to health care, and promoting economic sustainability (highlighting opportunities for Veterans to access fiscal, educational, housing, and other special programs and benefits through VA).

**IHS**, within HHS, is responsible for providing federal health services to American Indians and Alaska Natives. The provision of health services to members of federally-recognized tribes grew out of the special Nation-to-Nation relationship between the federal government and Indian tribes. Their [Find Health Care map](#) can be used to find an Indian Health Service, Tribal or Urban Indian Health Program facility.

**HUD's Office of Native American Programs** administers housing and community development programs that benefit Native Tribal governments, Tribal members, the Department of Hawaiian Home Lands, Native Hawaiians, and other Native American organizations.

**The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's** culture card was designed by public health service officers, Tribal community members, and Native behavioral health professionals to enhance cultural competence while serving Native communities. Content includes roles of Veterans and Elders, strengths in Native communities, wellness challenges, and self-awareness and etiquette.

*This guide was developed in partnership with the White House Council on Native American Affairs.*