

Apsáalooke Immersion Day



Building Relationships to Improve
Continuity of Maternal Health Services
for Indigenous Birth Givers & Families



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Cultural Immersion Day Program: Building Relationships to Improve Continuity of Maternal Health Services for Indigenous Birth Givers & Families.

June 26, 2024
Apsáalooke (Crow) Nation



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ABSTRACT • Billings Clinic; the University of Montana Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities (UM RIIC); Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies – the Montana Coalition (HMHB-MT); and Yarrow, LLC partnered to implement a series of Cultural Immersion Day events in collaboration with health programs serving the Fort Belknap Indian Community, Apsáalooke (Crow) Nation, and Northern Cheyenne Tribe.

The Immersion Day program invites nurses and other medical team members from urban-based health centers to travel to Tribal Nations where they spend a day developing relationships with Tribal community supports, hearing stories of Elders, and visiting local referral partners to open a dialogue with their Tribal Nation counterparts. These relationships, in turn, foster improved coordination of care for maternity patients to ensure access to advanced healthcare in urban centers as well as connection to culturally appropriate, community-based outpatient supports.

About MOMS

MOMS is a Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) funded maternal health innovations initiative aimed at elevating maternal health as a priority in Montana. MOMS is a collaboration between the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS), Billings Clinic and the University of Montana's Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities.

Montana has concerning rates of maternal mortality and severe maternal morbidity. Racial and geographic disparities create silos in maternal healthcare, negatively impacting outcomes for moms in Montana's rural and tribal communities. By improving access to quality healthcare services, MOMS strives to make "The Last Best Place" the first best place to have a baby.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The MOMS program would like to acknowledge the professional organizations whose work inspired and lent to the creation and evidence base for the immersion program.

- **Alliance for Innovation on Maternal Health (AIM)**
- **California Perinatal Quality Care Collaborative (CPQCC)**
- **Council on Patient Safety in Women's Health Care**
- **Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies - The Montana Coalition (HMHB)**
- **Montana Perinatal Quality Collaborative (MPQC)**
- **Yarrow LLC**



MOMS seeks to address Montana's unique, rural healthcare challenges by connecting local providers to obstetrical/gynecological, perinatal, mental health and substance abuse specialists.

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BACKGROUND • The Montana Perinatal Quality Collaborative (MPQC), run by the University of Montana Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities (UM RIIC), conceived of the Cultural Immersion Day program to deepen understanding among obstetric care teams of the culture, life, and programs of the Tribal Nations they serve. MPQC led development, implementation, and evaluation of the inaugural immersion event called Life’s Blessings held on the Blackfeet Reservation in Browning, MT in August 2023. In November 2023, UM RIIC and MPQC engaged Billings Clinic, Montana’s largest health system, as the clinical lead partner in organizing future Immersion Days with other Montana Tribes and communities.

The MPQC-AIM program works to enhance pregnancy safety through collaborative quality improvement by promoting evidence-based clinical practices – this includes working closely with birthing facilities across the state to improve labor and delivery practices. The MOMS program is elevating maternal health as a priority in Montana through facilitation of multidisciplinary collaboration among maternal and perinatal health provider teams and delivery of training, resources, and support to rural healthcare providers across the state. Inspired by the ‘Life Blessings’ Immersion Day held on Blackfeet Nation in August 2023, the MPQC-AIM and the MOMS program committed to facilitate an Immersion Day with the Apsáalooke Nation on June 26th, 2024.

The primary objectives of the Immersion Day program were to:

- 1 Build relationships and foster cultural exchange between staff at birthing hospitals and Tribal program staff.
- 2 Support local Tribal Nation Advocates, Ambassadors and Elders in showcasing important Tribal programs; and
- 3 Prepare staff at non-Indigenous birthing facilities to refer to Tribal programs and communicate more effectively with Tribal Nation patients, families, and staff.

IMPLEMENTATION TEAM:

- Diona Buck, BS • Aaniiih | Nakoda • MOMS Engagement Coordinator • Billings Clinic
- Margaret Anne Adams, BSN, RN • T̓silhq̓otín | Tl’etinqox̓t’in Healthy Equity Coordinator • Yarrow | Empowering Public Health
- Dr. Amy Stiffarm, PhD, MPH • Aaniiih | Chippewa Cree | Blackfeet • Native American Initiatives Program Director • Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies – the Montana Coalition

APSÁALOOKE COMMUNITY LEADERS/ADVOCATES:

- Melveen ‘Paula’ Fisher • Apsáalooke Social Services Director

APSÁALOOKE COMMUNITY ELDERS:

- Alma McCormick • Messengers for Health Executive Director

About the Apsáalooke Nation

The Apsáalooke (Crow) Nation located in south central Montana resides on the largest of Montana’s Reservation communities. “Tradition holds that the Crow (Apsáalooke) Tribe of Indians went through three transitions to become who they are. They were Awaakiwilaxpaake/ People of the Earth, then they became Biiluke/Our Side, and then they became Awashe/Earthen Lodges. Ultimately, they became Apsáalooke, meaning “children of the large-beaked bird.” White men later misinterpreted the word as ‘Crow’” (achp.gov).

Crow Nation is well-known for its language and cultural preservation. Schools located on the Reservation provide immersive schooling options. Crow Fair and Crow Native Days occur annually and celebrate Crow culture, history, and pride. The Crow Fair grounds are often referred to as the “Teepee Capital of the World”, fitting as this is the largest modern Indian encampment boasting over 1,500 teepees annually.



Indian Health Service (IHS) – Crow Service Unit

Within the valley of the Little Big Horn, below the Little Big Horn Battlefield Monument (the site of Custer’s last stand) is the Crow Service Unit. This Hospital provides health care for the Crow and the Northern Cheyenne and employs 200 plus doctors, nurses, LPN’s, lab technicians, and all service personnel necessary to adequately staff a 24-bed health facility

The mission of the Crow/Northern Cheyenne Hospital is to work in partnership with the people we serve to elevate their physical, mental, social and spiritual health to the highest level. Our vision statement is “We believe a “Healthy Population” exists through a creative and innovative health care system driven by the health care needs established cooperatively with those we serve”.

1. Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP) (2009, October). Crow Tribe of Indians, Montana. <https://www.achp.gov/preserve-america/community/crow-tribe-indians-montana>



Preparations

The Apsáalooke Immersion Day was comprehensively organized over four months by Diona Buck – MOMS Engagement Coordinator and Margaret Anne Adams MPQC-AIM Diversity & Equity Coordinator. Utilizing Appendix 1: Cultural Immersion Day: A Step-by-Step Checklist for Hosting, written by Margaret Anne Adams, as guidance. The implementation team held bi-weekly planning meetings throughout this period. During the early planning stages, three key Tribal stakeholders were respectfully consulted in separate meetings: Secretary of the Crow Tribe, Levi Black Eagle, Crow Tribal Health Director LeeAnn Bruised Head, MPH, CDR USPHS and Crow Indian Health Services CEO, Darren Crowe. These consultations were important to ensure adherence to Tribal protocol and to secure their support and approval for initiating the Immersion Day program with the Apsáalooke community.

In the next planning stages, key Tribal programs providing maternal-child health services were identified. Contact information, including email addresses and direct office phone numbers for program leaders, was gathered. Once the appropriate leaders were contacted, a virtual meeting was scheduled to discuss their support, participation, engagement efforts, and the logistics of the Immersion Day. Each program also received an introductory letter outlining the background, mission, and objectives of the initiative, along with key Indigenous birthing data relevant to their local and surrounding communities.

Key Tribal programs contacted were:

- Crow Indian Health Service Unit (IHS)
- Women’s Health Clinic
- Public Health Nursing
- Behavioral Health Department
- Apsáalooke Tribal Social Services
- Bureau of Indian Affairs Social Services
- Big Horn County Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infant, and Children (WIC)

At the outset of the planning stages, as the implementation team worked to connect with Tribal stakeholders and identify potential Apsáalooke community advocates for the Immersion Day, Melveen ‘Paula’ Fisher, Director of Apsáalooke Social Services, was approached and invited to serve as the community advocate. Melveen graciously accepted this role, committing to support the initiative and help with the planning of the day.

A key aspect of the Immersion Day planning was identifying an Apsáalooke Elder to participate in the event. Including an elder was essential, as they hold a position of profound importance within the Tribal community, serving as knowledge holders who pass down traditions, language, and customs. During meetings with Tribal stakeholders and program leaders, Alma McCormick was highly recommended. Following traditional protocol, Alma was approached with an offering to request her involvement in the Apsáalooke Immersion Day. She kindly accepted the invitation. Alma’s role was to provide cultural insight, guidance and share historical and contemporary context related to Apsáalooke maternal and child health. Alma’s involvement ensured that the Immersion Day planning was organized with respect and authenticity, honoring the Apsáalooke community and their traditions.

Participating Non-Indigenous Healthcare Organizations

The nearest birthing facilities to the Apsáalooke Nation are:

- Billings Clinic
- Intermountain Healthcare (*formerly known as Saint Vincents*)

Both birthing facilities are in Billings, MT approximately **60 miles west** of Crow Agency, MT.

Between 2022-2023, Billings Clinic Population Health estimates that approximately 80 birthing people who identify as American Indian/Alaskan Native gave birth at Billings Clinic Labor & Delivery, with a residency zip code within Tribal lands.

Between 2022-2024, Intermountain Healthcare/Saint Vincents estimates that approximately 150 birthing people who identify as American Indian/Alaskan Native gave birth at Intermountain Healthcare/Saint Vincent’s Labor & Delivery, with a residency zip code on or near Tribal lands.

Each health system’s leadership met virtually with the implementation team to discuss participation expectations for birthing facility staff. To secure their participation in the Immersion Day, participants completed an application process where they detailed their interest in participating and outlined their personal learning objectives.

Prior to the Immersion Day, healthcare staff participated in a comprehensive Cultural Safety Training created and facilitated by Dr. Amy Stiffarm. The training is meant to help non-Indigenous healthcare professionals who serve pregnant and postpartum patients enhance their critical consciousness in caring for Indigenous patients and build their capacity to provide culturally safe care, respecting the preferences of patients and communities.



Dr. Amy Stiffarm provides Cultural Safety Training at Billings Clinic

Healthcare staff from the outpatient OB/GYN; labor and delivery; and Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) departments at Billings Clinic and Intermountain Healthcare/Saint Vincents were invited to spend the day with Tribal program providers, program managers, and cultural leaders in Crow. Visiting healthcare providers were asked to bring a small gift as a reciprocal blessing for one of the programs they visited. These gifts, which could include coffee, cookies, mugs, and other miscellaneous food items were included, honoring the Traditional practice of gift-giving and reciprocity within Indigenous culture.

As part of their participation in the Immersion Day, participating healthcare staff were required to complete entrance and exit surveys. These surveys were designed to assess their knowledge and understanding about Apsáalooke Community resources and culture before and after the event. Additionally, participating healthcare staff were asked to collaborate with their colleagues/ employers to prepare data about the services their birthing facility provides to the Apsáalooke people. This included statistics on the number of deliveries involving Apsáalooke women and babies in the previous two years, and the number of Apsáalooke infants admitted to the NICU during the same period. Participants were also asked to explain their hospital's external referral process for mother and infant discharge care when returning to their home community.

Immersion Day Experience

The Apsáalooke Immersion Day was held on Wednesday June 26th, 2024. Early in the morning, eight labor and delivery, NICU, and flight nurses from Billings Clinic and Intermountain Healthcare gathered in the Billings Clinic parking lot. They traveled together by bus to Crow Agency, home of the Apsáalooke people. The purpose of their trip was to connect with their Tribal counterparts who provide support services to the maternal and child health population. This collaborative journey aimed to foster relationships, deepen their understanding of Apsáalooke culture, and enhance the coordination of care provided to the Tribal community.



Upon arriving at Crow Agency, the birthing facility staff were welcomed at Little Big Horn Community College by Apsáalooke Elder Alma McCormick. Alma led the opening circle with a beautiful prayer in the Apsáalooke language to start the Immersion Day in a good way. She also shared her personal and professional background, including her role as the Executive Director of Messengers for Health, an Indigenous nonprofit organization on the Apsáalooke nation that enhances community access to resources, support, and information about cancer and chronic diseases. (Mission Statement).

After the opening circle, the visiting birthing facility staff boarded the bus and headed to Crow Indian Health Service (IHS) Unit. Upon arrival, they were welcomed by Louella Garnette, the Quality Insurance Nurse. The staff were then guided to the Women's Health Clinic, where they had the opportunity to learn about the clinic's services, as well as Behavioral Health and Public Health Nursing programs.



Apsáalooke Elder Alma McCormick

During the visit, Big Horn County Public Health Director and Riverstone Health Center's joined to discuss their collaboration with Crow's IHS Unit. The visiting staff gained a comprehensive understanding of the various IHS department services and eligibility criteria. IHS staff also shared the challenges they face in delivering services and explored collaborative solutions with the visiting healthcare teams, aiming to enhance communication and coordination of care for Tribal birthing people.



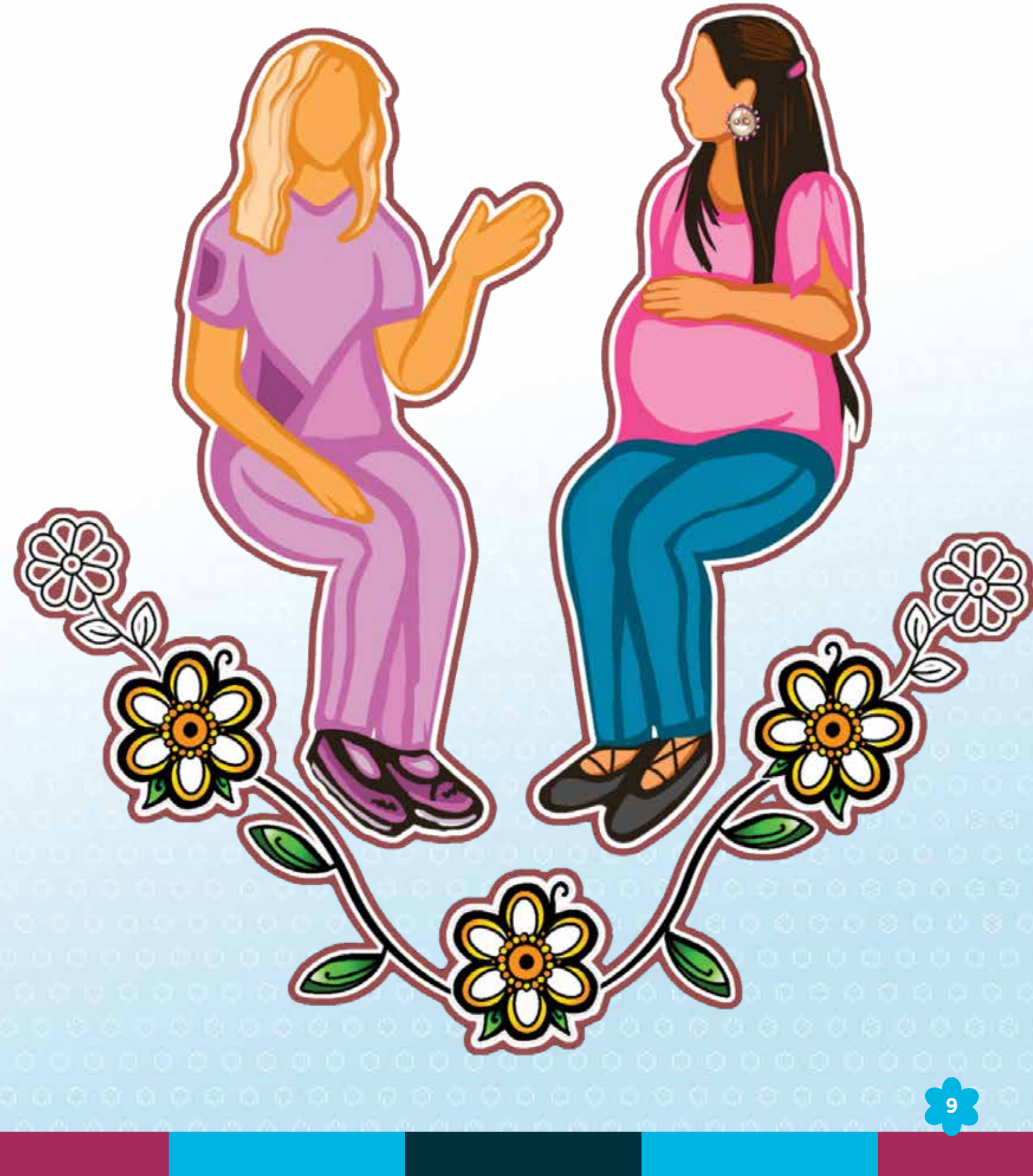
Crow Service Unit Women's Health Clinic



The birthing facility staff then returned to the bus and headed back to Little Big Horn community college, where they gathered in the Cultural Building. There, they were welcomed by Apsáalooke Knowledge Holder Jim Real Bird. Elder Alma McCormick had invited Jim to join in the day and share the history of the Battle of the Little Bighorn with the visiting staff as the 148th anniversary had occurred just the day before the Immersion Day.

As Jim spoke about the Battle of the Little Bighorn, members of Crow's IHS Patient and Family Advisory Council (PFAC) joined the group. After the PFAC members introduced themselves, Louella Garnett explained that the PFAC consists of patients, people who support them in their care, and healthcare team members working together to improve care. The council focuses on incorporating patient values, preferences, and needs into healthcare practices. PFAC also plays a key role in supporting the facility's Patient-Centered Medical Home accreditation.

A luncheon, prepared by local Indigenous caterer Nellie Bear Cloud, was held in the Cultural building. Before the meal was served, a local Apsáalooke Elder offered a blessing over the food, honoring the community's traditional practice. Sharing a meal created a space for continued dialogue, knowledge exchange, and a deeper understanding of collaborative partnerships.



After lunch, the nurses continued the Immersion Day with a visit to the local WIC office, where they were greeted by representatives from the Lodge Grass, Crow Agency, and Big Horn Country WIC offices. This was followed by visits to Apsáalooke Social Services and the Bureau of Indian Affairs Social Services. At each stop, nurses gained a comprehensive understanding of the services offered, eligibility criteria, and the challenges in delivering those services. They also discussed potential collaborative solutions and exchanged contact information to foster future partnerships.

The nurses returned to the Cultural Building at Little Big Horn College to conclude the Immersion Day with a closing circle, led by Apsáalooke Elder Alma McCormick. Each participant had the opportunity to share their reflections and thoughts of the day. It was a meaningful time for exchanging insights and expressing gratitude for the opportunity to learn about the Apsáalooke Culture and community.



Outcomes

After the Apsáalooke Immersion Day, exit surveys were emailed to healthcare staff to gather reflections on their overall experience. The feedback emphasized the day's impact on their awareness of Tribal community resources and appreciation for Apsáalooke culture. Participants reported a greater understanding of contemporary Apsáalooke culture and history.

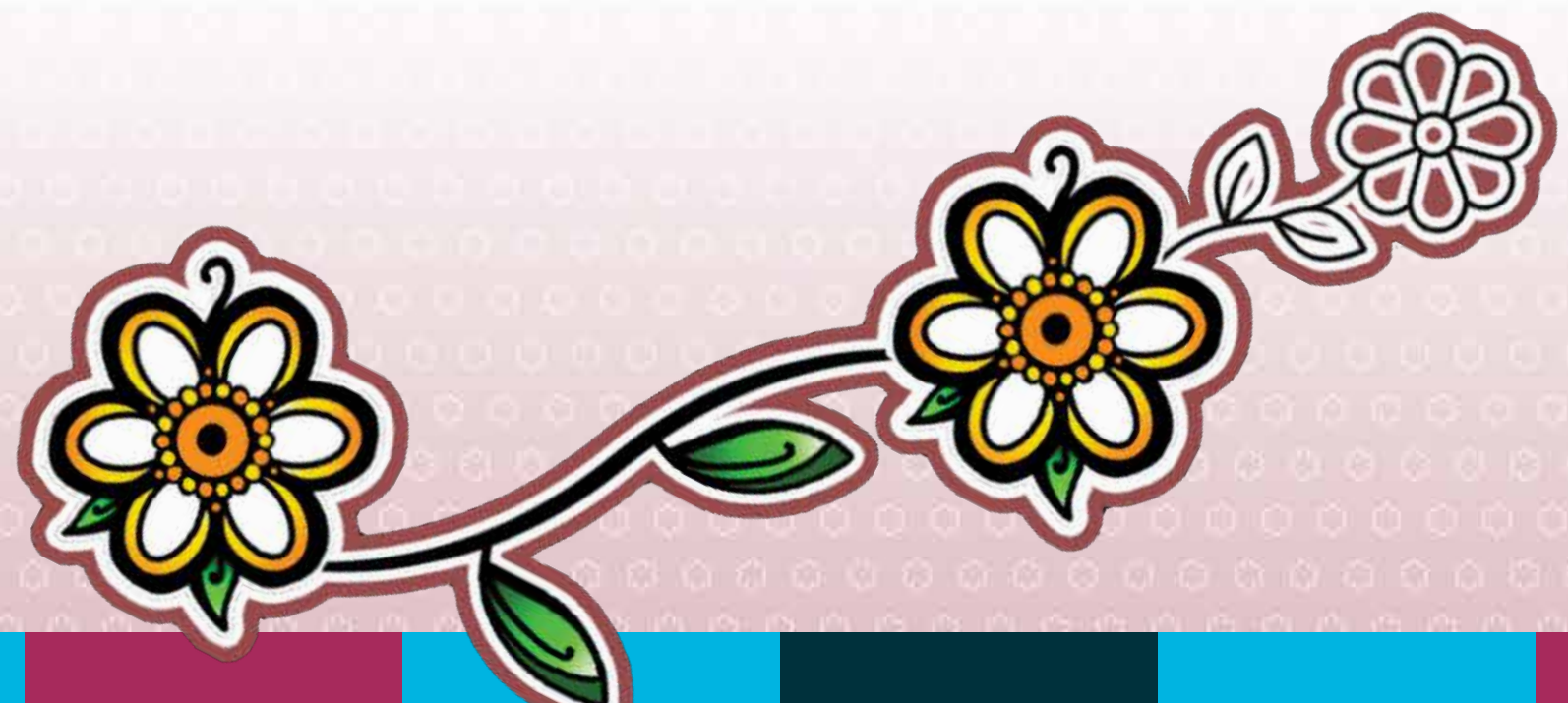
"It was a very eye opening experience! Indigenous people are very spiritual people and family is very important to them. I believe involving spiritual programs in the birthing process or even for birthing people that are in our unit for observation can improve their health mentally and spiritually and help connect with their infants. I am very glad I get to know all the services that Apsáalooke Tribal Nation provides for its people so that if a birthing mom and family needs anything, I could contact them or have care managers contact the right person in the program so that the family is taken care of once they leave the hospital."

"This was a terrific experience. I learned so much about the Apsáalooke community and have had my eyes opened to the resources that we can connect our patients with. Being able to have names of contacts in the community to connect with will help strengthen our ability to care for these patients upon discharge. We will share this info with our teams and I have made a plan to incorporate the culture of safety training into all of our providers onboarding experience."

Participants also expressed that the Cultural Safety Training prior to the Immersion Day was invaluable, providing them with essential background information about the tribe and cultural insights that helped them feel better prepared for the experience.

"It helped me learn about different worldviews, inclusive language, and lots of important background information and history, which were all vital to having the correct mindset and knowledge prior to the Immersion Day."

"It helped a lot in preparing myself for the immersion day. I was able to know the history and the services that the Tribal Nation provides for their birthing people and family. It was important to see them in person and ask questions based on the presentation that was provided."



After visiting the Crow IHS unit and Tribal programs, nearly all participants remarked that their most memorable experience was witnessing the community's passionate dedication and commitment to supporting Apsáalooke birth givers.

"The two woman who have been involved in this service also have such significant value because they are familiar with so many families and understand the processes and procedures of the courts, etc. It is neat that there are many younger people who are working there, learning also how to support their community. I appreciate having their information now so that we can call them directly if we need to report a family that may find their services useful."

"I am so impressed by the dedication and resourcefulness that the Public Health Nursing Department demonstrates in addition to their care and compassion."

"I will never forget hearing that the team members there had been hoping for something like this for 30 years. I also appreciated how much care the caregivers have for their patients."

The Fort Belknap Immersion Day also provided participants with clearer perspective on the limited resources available to Tribal communities. It deepened their understanding of the challenges faced by these communities and increased their awareness of the capacity and constraints within the Tribal healthcare system.

"The most memorable time at the hospital was seeing how limited resources there truly are and how much we take for granted in our facility that we have just at our fingertips."

"The fact that there is only one person to get women enrolled in WIC for the entire reservation was eye-opening. It goes to show how dedicated she is to helping her people."

"The number of families that they serve was mind-blowing. Such a small office serves such a large community."

Nearly all participants noted this experience significantly impacted their perspectives, and they plan to share their newfound knowledge with their colleagues and within their healthcare system.

"This has opened my eyes and it has been an honor. I have learned the last 8 years as a nurse but I cannot learn if others wont teach. You took eager nurses and opened the world to them. I will forever be grateful and share all my knowledge and experience with nurses coming into the clinic. I would like to do this yearly and send others to learn."

"For one I think this experience has taught me to start the conversation of asking birthing peoples if they recognize a tribe, or consider themselves to be apart of a tribe, what cultural aspects would they like honored for their birth or for their child. Starting those conversations will allow me to connect these individuals to the best available resources. I want to share that conversation knowledge with my coworkers as well as the amazing resources available beyond CPS/DFS, and help get our families connected to those resources."

"Being aware of cultural safety and also having cultural humility. It is easy as a novice nurse to do tasks and take care of my patients but actually caring for a person as a whole is the experience level of an experienced nurse. I plan to put together a skills day for staff that educates them about cultural safety."

Nearly all participants noted this experience significantly impacted their perspectives, and they plan to share their newfound knowledge with their colleagues and within their healthcare system.

"Everything about this experience has been so valuable - from the Cultural Safety Training to the little details shared with us on the Immersion Day. I think my perspective has shifted because I have more background information as to the "why" behind things and see the strengths of the Apsáalooke culture and people. I have gained knowledge about resources and programs that are vital to connecting our patients with who and what they need upon discharge. I will share at every opportunity and encourage everyone to learn more about the Apsáalooke community. I will definitely recommend they attend an Immersion Day if they get the chance."

"It was very life changing..I think I need more of these cultural awareness and immersion days in the future! I do believe everyone should participate in these types of programs! I was actually able to provide information regarding who to contact to my colleague the other day to her Birthing Person. It's been very beneficial!"

The Apsáalooke Immersion Day event provided an invaluable opportunity for the non-Indigenous birthing staff to connect with their Tribal counterparts, fostering meaningful dialogue and laying the foundation for strong, collaborative relationships. Through visits with programs within the Tribal community serving maternal and child health, the nurses gained a deeper understanding of Apsáalooke culture and healthcare needs. This day of cultural exchange not only strengthened bonds but also set the stage for enhanced coordination of care and improved healthcare access for Tribal birthing people, ensuring more culturally responsive and effective support moving forward.



Scan this QR code to view our appendices for this event, including "Cultural Immersion Day: A Step-by-Step Checklist for Hosting"

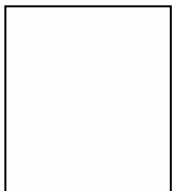


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