

NRCNAA: Supporting Those Who Stand in the Gap for Native Elders

Native service providers say NRCNAA helps them secure resources, guides their interventions, and fosters collaboration.

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Intro

Title VI directors have a difficult job.

Across the country, more than 200 dedicated individuals work to meet the needs of elderly American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians (AI/AN/NH). Their programs are funded in part by a grant from the US Administration on Aging, outlined in Title VI of the Older Americans Act. This grant is available to the 573 federally recognized American Indian tribes and Alaska Native villages, as well as to Native Hawaiians. Title VI programs promote elders' access to nutritious food, while also providing a variety of programs specific to each community's needs. These include transportation, health education, and advocacy. Tribal governments often provide supplemental funding for these programs.

As they perform this challenging work, Title VI directors receive support and resources from the National Resource Center on Native American Aging (NRCNAA). In order to evaluate the efficacy and relevance of our services, we interviewed four Title VI directors from across the US in the summer of 2018 (Fig. 1).

Figure 1 - Locations of Interviewees



Standing in the Gap

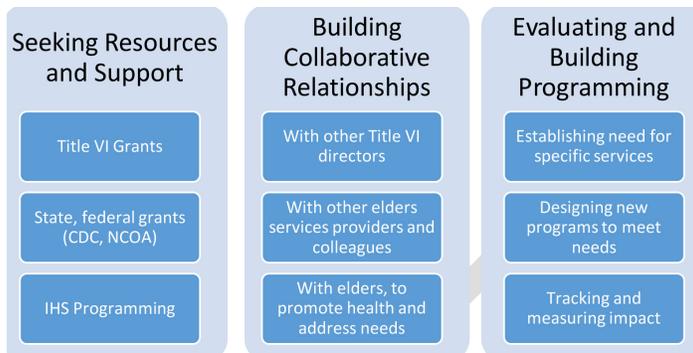
Regarding her Title VI work, Interviewee One quips, "It's ... a lot." Most directors work with just a few other staff members and a handful of volunteers to provide services to hundreds or thousands of elders. A significant proportion have no support staff of any kind. Many directors simultaneously manage other grants or administer multiple Title VI programs for separate tribes (n4a, 2017). All interviewees emphasized that funds and resources for nutrition and support services are limited, which places a considerable burden on Title VI programs.

"[Working with elders is] like being with family. You just want the best for them."

Staff retention is a challenge cited by many Title VI directors. As a result, directors find themselves "wearing many hats." Interviewee One talks about frequently cooking for elders and delivering meals due to limited staffing and resources. Along with administrative duties, 83% of directors also provide direct care to elders (n4a, 2017).

AI/AN/NH elders' unmet health needs are considerable. "You see a lot of diabetes, a lot of high blood pressure, stroke, and cancer," says Interviewee One. Yet AI/AN/NH elders have a lower average income than the majority of elders because AI/AN/NH elders often commit resources to caring for grandchildren and are less likely to have health insurance coverage (Adamsen, 2015). As "baby boomers" age, the need for services is projected to continually increase. This phenomenon is already apparent in survey results and is confirmed by Interviewee One, who has seen need for services "grow each year."

How do participants use ION needs assessment data?



Working in these circumstances requires flexibility and creativity. Interviewee One reports needing to “do everything,” which Interviewee Two describes as “just part of being a director.” Perhaps as a result, burnout and turnover is common among directors. Interviewee One jokes, “I can’t wait ‘til I retire!”

However, despite the challenges, Interviewee Two “feels blessed to be able to serve these people, my people.” Interviewee One describes her work with elders as “like being with family. You just want the best for them.” Interviewee Three says, “As long as I feel I’ve done the best I can for them, I’m satisfied.”

Always Looking for Numbers

In addition to their other responsibilities, Title VI directors must provide financial and progress reports to demonstrate responsible use of resources. Prior to receiving funds, a grantee is also required to conduct a community needs assessment to examine elders’ needed services and health status.

Title VI directors typically are not trained statisticians, nor do they have the staff that larger organizations enjoy to prepare these documents for them. As a result, this necessary paperwork can present a considerable barrier to directors.

Wearing many hats is “just part of being a [Title VI] director.”

In recognition of this need, NRCNAA developed the Identify our Needs: A Survey of Elders (ION) instrument (McDonald, 2000) in 1999. This instrument is provided free of cost to all Title VI sites and addresses a variety of dimensions of elder health, including screening, healthcare access, and social functioning. After sites complete the surveys, the results are scanned and

tabulated by NRCNAA, and summary statistics are returned to participants.

These summaries satisfy the reporting requirements for Title VI grant applications. Interviewee Two feels that the survey is well suited to the requirements of grantors, because “they’re always looking for numbers.”

However, directors are not merely using their needs assessments to “check a box” or fulfill a requirement. Our interviewees have shared with us a variety of other ways that ION results have guided and supported their work.

Is that Something I Need?

Interviewee One states she was alarmed with the prevalence of diabetes in her elder population, as revealed by her ION results. She recognized a need to educate elders on the dangers of diabetic neuropathy and on appropriate foot care for diabetics. To meet this need, she approached Indian Health Services (IHS), presenting it with diabetes prevalence data specific to her community. In response, IHS conducted a training specific to diabetic foot care on Interviewee One’s reservation.

“[Survey results] help you see the disparities, where needs exist.”

Interviewee Two learned from the survey that her elders did not get enough exercise or physical activity. She shared her ION results with a member of her staff, who responded by creating a new yoga program for elders on Interviewee Two’s reservation. This program has been well-attended. Interviewee Four has developed programs for falls prevention and health education based on her survey results.

Interviewee Two also feels that the ION results provide statistical validation that existing programs are aligned with elder needs, showing “that this isn’t just some idea that we had.” She has seen a change in her survey results from year to year and believes this reflects the positive impact that her programs are having for elders.

Interviewee One says of the survey results, “It helps you see the disparities, where needs exist.” Common themes from interview results include social isolation and uninsuredness.

Interviewee One says that a side benefit of conducting the interview has been that it provides an opportunity to discuss some of these issues with elders. For example,

if an elder discloses that he/she is not receiving an important screening, this often prompts the elder to ask, “Is that something I need?” This provides an opportunity for Interviewee One to raise awareness and to connect elders with needed health services. Interviewee Three and Interviewee Four use the surveys as an opportunity to discuss advanced directives and medical power of attorney.

Seeking Support

Several interviewees stated that their ION survey results helped them secure a variety of other grants in addition to Title VI. Interviewee Four used her results to support applications for state and tribal block funding, as well as a grant for programming related to elder abuse. ION survey results helped Interviewee Three obtain support from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s REACH program and National Council on Aging’s Stepping On falls prevention initiative, among others.

Additionally, all interviewees stated that the information provided by the survey helped them illustrate and build support for their work among tribal government officials.

Of course, financial support alone isn’t enough to ensure a successful program. Interviewee Four states that obtaining support and advice from other Title VI directors and elder services providers in surrounding communities is a crucial part of avoiding burnout. All interviewees stated that the survey results promoted connection and collaboration among themselves and colleagues. From sharing the survey results, Interviewee Three built a partnership with the Minnesota Area Agency on Aging. Interviewee Three has used the survey results to form a relationship with several providers, including a physician specializing in diabetic foot care.

Overcoming Challenges to Serve Our Native Elders

As this brief investigation shows, while AI/AN/NH elders experience considerable health disparities, they also enjoy the support of many creative and highly dedicated individuals. Across Indian Country, new programs and initiatives are being developed to improve the health and well-being of Native elders. Title VI directors may face significant challenges, but we hope and believe that with the support of the NRCNAA, that burden becomes a little more manageable.

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