



INITIATIVE SUPPORTS WELL-BEING OF NATIVE AMERICAN FAMILIES IN KANSAS



Stephanie's oldest son had a hard time when his father left. Not sure how to communicate his feelings, he began acting out in ways that Stephanie found frustrating. But when the family attended the Strengthening Families Program (SFP) as part of the Kansas Serves Native American Families (KSNAF) initiative, things began to change for the better.

Stephanie says she and her son learned how to communicate better with one another. "I learned how to be patient with him, instead of getting mad," she recounts. "I realized he was just expressing how he was feeling, so that helped me better communicate with him. He talks to me and tells me what's going on now."

Stephanie's story, shared in a video on the [KSNAF website](#), illustrates the power of this program, designed to enhance the well-being of Native American families. These are the kinds of stories that the KSNAF team hope to see more of as additional families in tribal communities have a chance to participate.

Michelle Levy, director, and Maria Fairman, project coordinator, are part of the team at the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare who is leading the implementation of this five-year initiative funded by a Regional Partnership Grant from the Children's Bureau, a federal agency focused on improving the lives of children and families.

“Our motto is, grow stronger together,” Levy concurs. “It’s really starting with the strengths and building on that.”

FOCUSED ON FAMILIES’ STRENGTHS

The overarching goal of the KSNAF program is to improve the well-being and safety of Native American children who have been affected by caregiver or community substance abuse, which is often the result of generational trauma suffered by Native American communities, Fairman points out. Families are referred to the program from tribal, state and community child welfare agencies, behavioral health treatment centers, courts, health centers, social services, and others.

The focus is on celebrating families and their strengths, supporting their culture, and honoring their community. “We don’t assume that families are weak; they are already strong,” shares Fairman, who is a descendent of the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation and the Winnebago Tribe in Nebraska. “We are here to walk alongside, to support them, to build a stronger family, a stronger connection to each other.”

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A guiding principle of KSNAF is demonstrating respect for Native families and communities. For example, Fairman says, the program embraces the kinship relationships that often exist in Native families. “To define a ‘family’ for Native American families is very different because of our kinship relationships,” she explains. “It’s not uncommon to have lots of caregivers and lots of children within one household. ‘Parent’ is used as a verb, not a noun. It’s our entire community’s responsibility to parent our children.”

PARTNERSHIPS ARE KEY TO SUCCESS

Levy and Fairman attribute the program’s success to partnerships with the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation, Sac and Fox Nation of Missouri in Kansas and Nebraska, Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska, the Kickapoo Tribe in Kansas, Kansas City Indian Center, and Haskell Indian Nations University.

“Without them, we wouldn’t be able to do anything,” Fairman says. “You just have to remember, you are coming into their sovereign Nations, and you have to ask permission and be very respectful in order for them to receive this. It has to be what they want. They have to have the buy-in. It’s crucial.”

Another important component of KSNAF’s success is that it recruits, trains, and supports Native American individuals to be SFP group leaders. “That’s a big difference with our program,” Fairman notes. “Our families will be receiving instruction from people they can identify with and connect with.”

Additional partners include Kansas Department for Children and Families, Kansas Department for Aging and Disability Services, and KVC, a child welfare and behavioral healthcare organization.

COVID OFFERS NEW OPPORTUNITIES

SFP is a 14-week family skills development program that focuses on communication, bonding, and caregiver supervision. When SFP was launched in 2018, participants gathered together for groups, which started each week with a shared family meal. Then, in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic hit and the in-person meetings were no longer possible. The KSNAF team and SFP staff worked diligently to change their delivery model so the program would not be interrupted.

“When the pandemic hit, we didn’t stop serving our families,” Fairman says. “We didn’t take a break. That next week we were already planning how we would serve them.”

SFP had never before been delivered virtually, so the team had to get buy-in from the developers to try it. Soon, they saw some unexpected benefits of switching to a virtual format. Now, family members who lived in other states could participate, no longer bound by geographical location. Meetings were no longer cancelled due to weather or challenges with transportation.



MEASURING THE SUCCESS OF THE PROGRAM

An evaluation team made up of School of Social Welfare faculty and staff are conducting a comprehensive evaluation of the process and the outcomes of the program, including its impact on children, parents, and systems that serve Native American families. The project is also part of a national cross-site study conducted by the Children’s Bureau and Mathematica.

While the data are still coming in, Levy and Fairman have already seen positive results of the program and how much it means to the families who have participated. Fairman shares that at the conclusion of one of the classes, she asked the parents how they wanted to celebrate their family’s graduation. They told her, “We just want to see each other. We just want to still be together,” she recounts. “That says a lot, that our parents wanted to connect more than anything else. They had built connections and bonds with other parents.”



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