

Building a Tribal Legacy

by Ann Adams

If you're looking for an early monitoring indicator of societal health, one canary is children's health and well-being. Like the canary in the mine, children are more sensitive than adults, to the subtle and not so subtle nuisances of family and societal paucity or dysfunction.

In our efforts to improve the overall health of our society, we have added laws and agencies to protect, educate, and help our youth. But, often times the structure of these systems have actually hampered our ability to serve this population and the families and communities that are part of those children's lives.

The Colville Confederated Tribe in Washington State had become increasingly sensitive to this conundrum over the past several years. However, in the fall of 2001, with the persistent efforts of several tribal members, they decided they needed to do something to address the situation.

The Scope of the Problem

To give you some perspective of the need, the Colville Tribe's legal office saw 110 children through the Minor-In-Need-of-Care (MINOC), which is approximately one third of the 390-520 children that are the victims of violence on the Colville Reservation.

Moreover, 27 percent of the Colville Tribe lives below the federal poverty guideline, a critical factor for families providing properly for their children. Add to this dire statistic the issues of low high school graduation percentages, increasing delinquency in schools, and a growing problem of substance abuse, and the likelihood of a downward spiral in a family's ability to provide opportunities for the next generation increases.

Perhaps the most somber statistic of all is that national trends for the past 20 years indicate that the number of suicide attempts among Indian adolescents has risen by 100 percent. For the past 15 years, suicide has been the second leading cause of death for 15-24 year-old Indians.

As one tribal member noted, "We may have become numb to these numbers; they have

very real meaning for the children, and particularly the youngest, whose families have limited resources with which to nurture and care for them at critical stages in their development."

Those working with children daily knew all these statistics kept pointing to the same conclusion: The Tribe wasn't adequately addressing the needs of the children through the current system. Agencies had to work together to make the system more effective.



The Colville Tribe has approximately 2,622 children. The Tribal Council, and tribal agencies and members, recently made great progress toward creating a better life for those children, so they can in turn become respected tribal elders.

A Call to Collaboration

Jolene Marchand, who completed the Savory Center's Certified Educator Training Program and works in the Legal Services Program, was a key player in getting the Tribal Council involved in mandating a change in the Colville Tribe's children's advocacy system. She knew that the Tribe's holistic goal could help them forge a new advocacy approach to address the needs of the Colville children.

At one Tribal Council meeting late in 2001, Jolene presented the statistics that demonstrated the need for a better tribal advocacy system and asked for the Council's authority to make it happen. In an emotional meeting, the Council responded to Jolene's request by acknowledging the tribal responsibility to address this issue and agreeing to support departments in an effort to combine resources and work together as a whole to address these issues more efficiently.

The first step was to develop a Juvenile

Task Force that would work with the involved agencies to address the needs of tribal youth. That task force could use the tribe's holistic goal (a document that many tribal members have used since 1995 to make decisions and create policy) to guide their actions. They committed money to fund an interagency workshop and tasked each department to contribute to a unified solution. This meant that Children & Family Services, attendance, schools, Indian Health, and MINOC all had to work together.

Shifting Perspective

When one agency begins to demand changes from another and everyone isn't on board there can be a lot of territory protecting. With the Tribal Council's mandate for all those agencies involved with children to develop a system or program that addressed their needs, regardless of current territories or systems, the focus finally was on the children and not departmental turf. One small example of how this type of change was needed was the way school attendance and MINOC cases dealing with abuse and neglect were handled. In the past, such cases were addressed solely in court, rather than in a social service setting that dealt first with the needs of the child. Such a system focused more on the legal concerns for the adults involved, and the children's needs were secondary.

With such a system, the children were getting short-changed.

To maximize creativity, the Juvenile Task Force began work on the "Then I Came Back: Juvenile Workshop I" in the spring of 2002. All departments directly involved with children's services were to participate in finding new ways to help "our children and families who are at risk; to improve the services we provide through our programs; to rejuvenate our vision for our future; and to protect and strengthen our community and culture."

Randy Tonasket and Lois Trevino, also trained in the Savory Center's Certified Educator Training Program, were given relief time from their work in other departments to help in the facilitation and preparation for the conference. Using their knowledge of the Holistic Management® decision-making process and consensus building, they worked with agency workers to lay aside differences and work toward the common focus of providing excellent support for tribal youth.

A Tribal Responsibility

The list of objectives developed from that workshop would have been daunting for any government body already overwhelmed by other duties, but the Colville Tribe began taking action. One step the Juvenile Task Force took to meet one of the stated objectives of the workshop was to look at what untapped resources the Tribe already had that could address unmet needs.

Again using Census figures, they realized that there were approximately 2,700 households on the Reservation, and 44 percent were households with a married couple living alone. The tribe realized that these households were an untapped resource for foster care providers necessary to address the needs of some of these children and their families through times of transition. Likewise, the extended family nature of tribal culture could be integrated into custody situations.

Another immediate action after the workshop was meetings with the Law & Justice department to determine how tribal code would need to be redrafted to implement the ideas that had been developed in the workshop. The Juvenile Task Force also began work on selecting the core team to lead the work on renovating the children's advocacy program and develop a comprehensive juvenile services program. Lastly, they began developing a peacemaking/family conferencing circle as part of their active advocacy work.

The core team's many duties were to work on creating a model where the new department of Comprehensive Juvenile Services would track all children within the system from birth to adulthood based on a medical model of development rather than a legal model. Likewise, they would act as a central referral and coordinator for children and families in need of service rather than the current patchwork of service providers.

The emphasis of their programs would be on prevention, early intervention, and rehabilitation rather than a more punitive approach. Given that central engagement, this team would be better able to assess children at risk and make recommendations to the Children's Court as an informed advocate. Obviously, some of these steps would mean that tribal jurisdiction would be broadened with the children's best interests as the standard.

The suggested staffing for this tribal department would be two full-time positions

of core team coordinators with one full-time clerk/support staff. They would coordinate the efforts of other social service professionals who are currently working in other departments to address these issues. That list would include a medical provider and a public health nurse at Indian Health Services, a law enforcement officer, a legal services representative, a behavioral health program director/representative, and a case worker. This core team would meet with the core team coordinators twice a month to discuss new and ongoing cases. Additionally, they would have supplemental members such as tribal elders, housing staff, Birth To Three Program staff,



Lois Trevino with her grandson, Nathban.

spiritual leaders, and school staff, who would be asked to contribute to various cases as needed.

Besides providing effective and comprehensive services for children and their families by eliminating gaps and redundancies in existing programs, Comprehensive Juvenile Services would reinforce culture and sovereignty (a key component of the Colville Tribe's holistic goal). Moreover, with greater efficiency in handling cases, there will be less multiple court cases which means less court and tribal costs for caseworkers, attorney, experts, and judges.

Likewise, a focus on family conferencing and the peacemaking circle would be an integral part of the plan to use a more traditional approach to conflict and justice by providing a less adversarial environment for children's cases, resulting in fewer court cases. In increasing family and community involvement within a structured environment that nurtures positive communication and decision-making, the Colville Tribe's culture and sovereignty are reinforced and children and families learn and develop critical skills for

ongoing success.

While the Colville Tribe is still in the process of integrating these changes, they have a road map for where they want to go with their Comprehensive Juvenile Services, a road map that was created by all those involved in those services. "It was a challenge to take all this information, simplify and summarize it quickly, make the connections to other information and keep things flowing," says Lois Trevino. "Having the Tribe's holistic goal to use as a common language and focus on, and using the consensus-building process to really listen, helped us keep the momentum going in the planning for the workshop, during the workshop, and outlining action steps and those responsible for them after the workshop."

This new road toward protecting the Colville Tribe's legacy of their youth and those yet unborn began with one woman's courage, passion, and conviction that the Colville Tribe had an obligation to better serve their youth through the services it provided. In turn, the tribal community rose to the challenge and found they already had many of the means and the resources to accomplish the task, by focusing on the quality of life described in their holistic goal. As the Task Force stated in their proceedings:

"Caring for children is the responsibility of our community, our extended families, and not the isolated task of one or two people, or solely of our institutions. Our culture provides us with guidance. A newborn brings new strength to the community and assures preservation of tribal and community heritage. Community involvement in pregnancy ensures that there is, and will be, support for the pregnant woman regardless of her status, that the birth is received with joy, and that the newborn is lovingly nurtured.

Pregnancy in this kind of supportive environment is a healthy experience and produces healthy babies. We must work to ensure that this is our children's experience and also that the environment our children find as they grow continues to provide and care for them, to protect them, to teach them what they need to learn, and to love and sustain them. Each of us can contribute to improving the lives of our children and theirs to come." ❖

To learn more about the Colville Tribe's Comprehensive Juvenile Services, contact Lois Trevino at: lois.trevino@colvilletribes.com.