

QUALITY IMPROVEMENT CENTER
ON ENGAGING YOUTH IN
FINDING PERMANENCY

Program Implementation Primer

Our Shared Legacy: Connecting Tribal Youth With Kin, Community and Culture

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The Quality Improvement Center on Engaging Youth in Finding Permanency (QIC-EY) Program Implementation Primer introduces *Our Shared Legacy: Connecting Tribal Youth with Kin, Community and Culture* as a comprehensive guide for tribal child welfare programs considering its implementation. Designed for agencies ready to make a meaningful impact, this guide goes beyond a simple overview. It shares the insights and tools needed to assess interest, to ensure infrastructure readiness and to navigate implementation with confidence. It includes the following:

- **Logic Model:** a framework that illustrates how program resources and activities lead to intended outcomes
- **Core Components:** the essential functions and practices that need to be delivered consistently and with fidelity to ensure effectiveness
- **Program Delivery:** the amount and intensity of participant engagement necessary for achieving program success
- **Implementation Supports:** foundational resources that enable high-quality delivery (such as staffing, training, policies, supervision, partnerships and data systems)
- **Evaluation:** systematic measurement of fidelity in program delivery and of outcomes, performed to monitor progress and to demonstrate program impact
- **Implementation Lessons Learned and Tips:** common barriers to implementation and practical strategies for overcoming them
- **Additional Program Materials:** practical aids — program manuals, logic models, fidelity checklists, scripts and other resources — that support consistent and effective delivery

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1. Program Overview

Youth engagement in permanency planning is a critical factor in achieving meaningful and lasting permanency outcomes. When youth engage in these discussions, they gain decision-making skills, develop a sense of agency and become more likely to share information about their relationships and preferences that can support achieving permanency (Augsberger, 2014). However, many youths initially resist participating in permanency planning due to lack of meaningful relationships and trust, prior disappointments, low self-confidence, unclear self-identity and lack of understanding of their permanency options.

The *Our Shared Legacy* program provides an integrated, holistic and culture-driven approach to engaging authentically with youths ages 14 through 23 in their relational, cultural and legal permanency planning. The program includes four interconnected components:

1. Oak Tree Culture Lessons
2. Cultural Connection Camps
3. Mentorship by Cultural Leaders
4. *Tribal Youth Cultural Connections Binder*

Together, these components combine lessons about culture with opportunities for participating youths to build meaningful relationships with cultural knowledge keepers, healers and community-based mentors. The Oak Tree Culture lessons use the phases of an oak tree's growth as a metaphor for exploring cultural identity, a sense of belonging, relationships and community connections. Activities at Cultural Connection Camps reinforce these lessons. In these camps, youths are introduced to cultural leaders and other supportive adults who can become ongoing sources of connection and mentorship. The program helps each youth to identify and to strengthen the cultural and relational connections that support the young person's permanency goals.

Our Shared Legacy is grounded in the *My Two Aunties (M2A)* (Center for Native Child and Family Resilience, 2022) project, a research-informed framework funded by the Children's Bureau in the Administration for Children and Families of the United States Department of Health and Human Services. The *M2A* framework uses an integrated, holistic and culture-driven approach to permanency planning. It emphasizes strengthening family functioning, parenting and life skills, cultural identity, a sense of belonging to a community with a cultural heritage, resilience, coping skills, ethnic pride and connections with cultural resources and support persons. The Oak Tree Culture lessons were adapted from the *M2A* model and modified to incorporate participation in Cultural Connection Camps and ongoing relationships with cultural mentors. *Our Shared Legacy* also draws on FosterClub's *FYI Binder*, a tool designed to help youth become more informed, involved and independent by organizing important information related to court, education and transition planning. Together, these foundations support a model that connects cultural identity, meaningful relationships and youth voice to permanency planning.

2. Program Goals

Our Shared Legacy aims to promote the development of each youth's relational and cultural permanency by generating cultural awareness, engagement in cultural activities and ongoing support through mentorships. Youth engagement in permanency planning is a critical factor in achieving meaningful and lasting relational, cultural and legal permanency outcomes. When youth engage authentically in their own permanency planning through these connections, they develop a relational worldview that prompts them to share information that can support achieving permanency. *Our Shared Legacy* supports intentional, authentic engagement by providing a safe space for youths in transition, ages 14 through 23, to explore and to deepen their understanding of their connections with kin, culture and community.

This program aims to accomplish all of the following goals:

- Create consistent structures within tribal child welfare practice that support authentic engagement with youth (such as the activities described in the Tribal Youth Cultural Connections Binder and participation with peers in cultural events and meetings focused on promoting youth engagement).
- Elevate the voices of youth with their families, tribal staff and caregivers by providing support and opportunities to plan for permanency and other life transitions through structured discussions about culture and relational connections.
- Embrace cultural and relational permanency by engaging community service providers, caregivers, cultural knowledge keepers and tribal elders in guiding tribal youths to establish cultural identities and lifelong connections.
- Provide opportunities for youths to establish connections with cultural resources and support persons while enhancing life skills.
- Equip youths with the knowledge and the self-confidence to participate in their own relational, cultural and legal permanency planning.
- Strengthen the relationship between each youth and the youth's caseworker or other designated support person through intentional preparation and follow-up.
- Promote youth-driven decision-making by elevating youth voice and preferences in permanency planning.

> ***"I got to experience some of my own culture that I've never been a part of."***
>
> *- Youth Participant*

SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES

As a result of their participation in the program, youths will have achieved

- increased satisfaction with their engagement with the child welfare workers assigned to them; and
- increased numbers of children and youth participating in relational, cultural and other permanency planning activities.

LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

Our Shared Legacy also aims to contribute over time to establishing lifelong connections for young people and supportive relationships with their kin, cultures and communities while they are in the care of child welfare systems. This program seeks to have tribal child welfare agencies achieve and sustain systemic change and the practice of authentic engagement with youth. Indications that it will have accomplished these objectives include increased legal, relational and cultural permanency, including reunification, adoption, guardianship and enduring connections that honor each young person's identity and community.

> ***"I just feel like it builds relationships, and does want to make you stay, and participate because you have relationships with those people."***
>
> *- Youth Participant*

3. Logic Model

A logic model illustrates how expected outputs and outcomes of a program can be achieved through implementation of its core components and activities. A logic model needs to explain clearly how specific activities and services are expected to produce or to influence their associated short- and long-term outcomes.

Agency resources, goals and other factors will impact the logic model. An example of a logic model for this program is in the Additional Program Materials section of this primer.



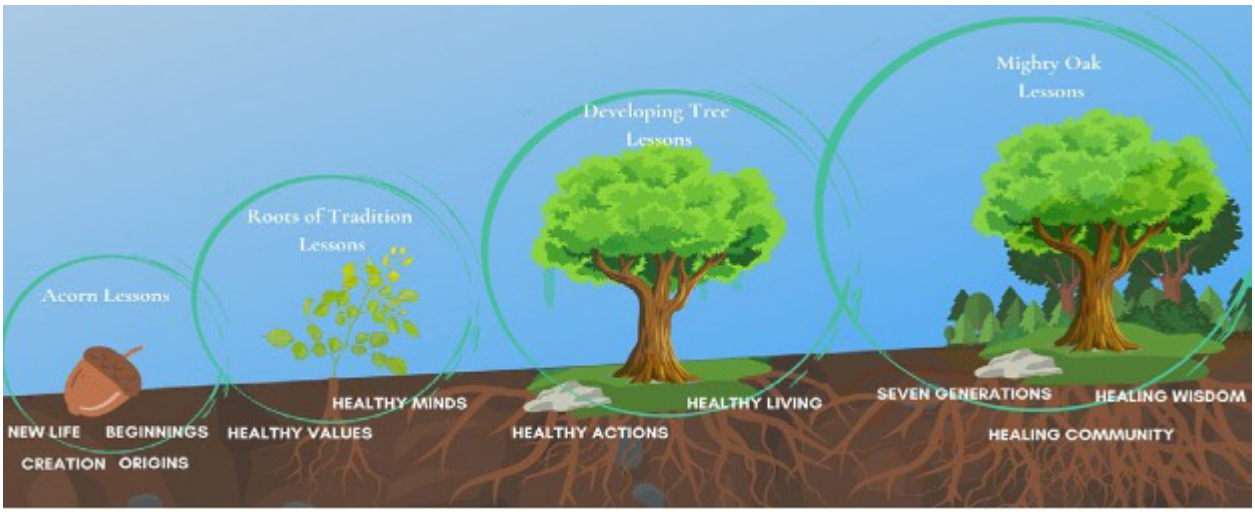
4. Core Components

The elements composing programs can vary widely. However, core components are critical to the identity and the aim of each program. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) (Education Development Center, 2018), "Core components are the most essential and indispensable components of an intervention practice or program."

The four core components of the *Our Shared Legacy* program include Oak Tree Culture Lessons, the Cultural Connection Camps, the Mentorship by Cultural Leaders and the *Tribal Youth Cultural Connections Binder.*

Oak Tree Culture Lessons

These are designed to engage and to expose youths to cultural lessons foundational to building life skills involving self-identity, family and community.



Credit: Center for Native Child and Family Resilience. (2022). My Two Aunties implementation guide

Using the metaphor of the growth cycle of an oak tree, the lessons progress sequentially from the Acorn phase to the Roots of Tradition, the Developing Tree and, eventually, the Mighty Oak. Together, the four phases emphasize that knowledge of one's culture and cultural values develop over time; that they are shared across generations; and that they contribute to individual, family and community wellness.

The Oak Tree Culture lessons described in *M2A* include the following phases:

THE ACORN:

Classified as the fruit of an oak tree, the acorn symbolizes the beginning stage of life and the creation of a community forest of families. In this phase, families form within communities, thereby bringing new life to the forest. The acorn lessons engage tribal youths in discussions about new beginnings and about building trust among important people in the young persons' lives.

ROOTS OF TRADITION:

Tribal children and youth need nurturing in their cultures and of their spirits. With proper pollination and fertilization of the acorn, an oak seedling begins to establish roots in the earth. Like an acorn that seeks nutrients and good medicine from the earth to build strong roots and to grow, children and youth learn how to build healthy minds and to become rooted in healthy values. The Roots of Tradition lessons ground tribal youths through an understanding and acceptance of their cultural connections and through support from their ongoing relationships.

THE DEVELOPING TREE:

As the oak sapling matures, it builds a trunk strong enough to withstand the elements, even a fire, a flood, a storm or an earthquake. In the same way, families become strong and resilient through healthy choices, healthy actions and healthy lifestyles. The Developing Tree lessons provide opportunities for youths to build their capacities for establishing ongoing, positive relationships with supportive people. This lessons also prepare youths to express their voices in decision-making about their legal permanency and about youth-centered, systemic change in child welfare systems.

THE MIGHTY OAK:

Standing tall in the community forest, the mighty oak has borne generations of acorns. It looks over all of the other oak trees in the forest. It represents who each maturing youth is meant to become. Within the mighty oak lies the timeless wisdom of tribal ancestors who have taught succeeding generations how to become a flourishing community forest. The Mighty Oak lessons help youths to establish resiliency through ongoing connections with their local tribal communities, tribal elders, cultural knowledge keepers and other relatives.

The *M2A* model includes 45 lessons, each aligning with one of the four phases of the oak tree growth cycle . The lessons employ the storytelling method, an oral tradition of passing forward to future generations the origins, history, ways of life, humor and knowledge of a tribal culture. The lessons of the oak tree facilitate discussions to help youths establish supportive connections and learn basic life skills involving their relationships and well-being. Each of the 45 *M2A* lessons has commonalities among all Indigenous communities, such as prayer, storytelling, social activities and seasonal ceremonies. When implementing the program, each tribal nation can choose to use the lessons that resonate with its own community. In addition, each tribal nation needs to adapt the elements of each lesson to its own localized, customary practices and beliefs.

Developers of Our Shared Legacy reviewed the content of the *M2A* model and incorporated the concept of Oak Tree Culture as they produced a program consisting of five lessons. The lessons include the following:

LESSON 1: BUILDING LOVING TRUST

This Acorn lesson introduces youths to the concept of trust and its foundational role in building healthy, loving relationships. It covers the five components of trust and explores the idea of constructing a personal "house of trust." The lesson guides youths to identify safe, trusted people in their lives and to recognize the connections that support their well-being. Throughout this lesson, the theme of trust is infused with a focus on cultural connections within Indigenous family and tribal community relationships.

LESSON 2: EXPLORING CONNECTIONS AND ACCEPTANCE

This Roots of Tradition lesson guides youths as they explore their cultural roots and the traditions that give them a sense of self-identity, belonging and positive self-concept. Through this lesson, youths examine how cultural practices, tribal values and community connections serve as a foundation for acceptance of their tribal heritage and as factors that can contribute to their resilience and well-being. This lesson introduces positive self-talk and affirmations as tools for reinforcing cultural identity and personal strengths.

LESSON 3: EXPRESSING EMOTIONS RESPECTFULLY

This Developing Tree lesson focuses on building each youth's capacity to identify, to express and to manage emotions in healthy ways. This lesson helps youths learn how to distinguish between positive and negative feelings, to explore strategies for handling frustration constructively and to understand how regulation of emotions supports overall well-being.

LESSON 4: RESPECTING FAMILY TRADITIONS

This Mighty Oak lesson helps youths to explore and to compare their family traditions: those that are their own, those that belong to others and those that they share with others. This lesson introduces the concept of respecting diverse, cultural practices within and across tribal nations and families. Through this lesson, youths examine how cultural traditions pass from one generation to another and how they connect individuals with the broader identities of their communities.

LESSON 5: UNDERSTANDING SPIRITUAL

Practices, Tribal Knowledge and Ceremonies. This Mighty Oak lesson engages youths in exploring their cultural identities by participating in cultural practices. This lesson supports the development of cultural competency by inviting youths to connect with traditional forms of expression, such as music, dance and ceremony. It reinforces the idea that participation in the traditional practices of one's culture is a source of strength and a way of belonging to a tribal community. This lesson also encourages youths to view themselves as active carriers of their cultural heritage.

After each lesson, every participating youth completes a personal reflection, using a tree diagram with deep roots and strong branches surrounded by "feeling" words such as "stressed," "confused," "happy," "renewed," "strong," "overwhelmed" and "supported." The youth circles the words that best reflect the young person's experience, indicating feelings ranging from isolation to support and gratitude. After the final lesson, the youth personalizes a drawing of a towering oak tree surrounded by a forest that represents sources of support and interconnectedness. On the branches of the tree, the young person shows the strengths of different supportive connections by indicating which limbs are strong and which ones need additional nourishment to grow.

The Oak Tree Culture lessons can be taught either one-on-one or in a group setting. They originally were designed for caseworkers to deliver one-on-one in the home of each youth. However, this proved not a feasible method because many caseworkers lacked the knowledge of tribal culture to teach the lessons. Even after an orientation and instructions about how to deliver the lessons, caseworkers still were not comfortable or interested in teaching them. In addition, the cadence of caseworker visits with youths did not fit the timelines in the design for the lesson plans. As a result, the developers of Our Shared Legacy integrated the lessons into Cultural Connection Camps.

Cultural Connection Camps

The majority of placements for tribal youth do not offer opportunities to promote cultural permanency. Cultural Connection Camps fill this gap by exposing youths to various tribal cultures. Each camp includes an Oak Tree Culture lesson and a cultural activity that supports the lesson, using the tree metaphor. It also includes a meal intended to immerse the youths in traditional foods harvested and passed down through generations in a tribal community. The meal provides an opportunity for youths to experience spiritual as well as physical nourishment by expressing thankfulness through prayer and participating in a communal, social gathering. The length of the day camps varies, based on the lesson and its associated activity; each one typically lasts 2 to 3 hours. Setting a formal agenda for each camp session is important; participants need to receive the agenda in advance. Camp sessions held on tribal land or in an urban Indian center have the greatest impact. They have the best results when they do not conflict with participating youths' school schedules.

Community participation is key to fulfilling the Cultural Connection Camp's mission of immersing youths in tribal culture and building their community connections. Knowledge keepers and other bearers of tribal culture play important roles in supporting the delivery of camp programming and connecting with the youth participants. Invited knowledge keepers and teachers of tribal culture need to be treated with respect and presented with thank-you gifts, as appropriate.

Each person responsible for transporting a youth to a camp session needs to plan on participating in the event. This is especially important if that person is a caseworker or a caregiver. Attending the event will give these individuals the information they need to support the lessons outside of the camp environment.

The number of attendees is limited only by the capacity of a camp's venue. However, an important factor to consider is how many youths can be effectively supervised and participate in and complete the cultural activity and Oak Tree Culture lesson within the time frame allotted.

Recommendations and examples of activities that support aligning cultural connections with the content of each lesson include the following:

Oak Tree Culture Lesson	Cultural Activity	Connection to Lesson	Youth Engagement / Outcome
1. Building Loving Trust	**Teepee Demonstration:** Tangibly promotes shared culture through demonstration of an ancestral dwelling for family units and communities. Each teepee pole can represent a specific, traditional virtue as well as teamwork to build a covering for protection against the elements of nature.	Reinforces trust, community and positive cultural connection by allowing youths to experience these concepts through a shared cultural practice.	Youths participate together and experience culture as a source of connection, belonging and community.

Oak Tree Culture Lesson	Cultural Activity	Connection to Lesson	Youth Engagement / Outcome
2. Exploring Connections and Acceptance	**Powwow and Regalia Demonstration:** A teacher of culture demonstrates and discusses powwow protocols, the cultural significance of social events and different types of regalia worn by tribal members.	Helps youths to explore cultural identity and to understand how traditions and cultural expression may differ across tribal communities.	Youths gain understanding of cultural protocols, regalia and the diversity of tribal traditions while exploring their own cultural identities.
3. Expressing Emotions Respectfully	**Flute and Relaxation:** A teacher of culture incorporates flute music or other calming, traditional music into the lesson.	Provides an opportunity to practice relaxation techniques introduced during an Oak Tree Culture lesson and to experience how cultural practices can support emotional well-being.	Youths practice using music and cultural practices for relaxation, reflection and emotional regulation.
4. Respecting Family Traditions	**Traditional Dressmaking:** A teacher of culture demonstrates the history and creation of traditional, tribal-style dresses and vests, including fabric selection, cutting and sewing. Comanche and Caddo styles are shared and compared.	Provides a tangible way to explore the "yours, mine, ours" concepts by helping youths to recognize both distinct and shared elements of cultural traditions.	Youths create dresses or vests they can wear at future ceremonies and dances, providing a lasting connection to the lesson and opportunities for continued participation in cultural activities.
5. Understanding Spiritual Practices, Tribal Knowledge and Ceremonies	**Drum and Dance:** A drum- and-dance exhibition introduces youths to traditional songs, drumming and dance, with opportunities for youths to participate.	Reinforces the cultural lesson through active participation and provides opportunities for youths to learn from and with one another.	Youths participate in drumming and dancing, with some taking on peer teaching roles by sharing songs or dances. This provides an opportunity to share spiritual and cultural knowledge to strengthen connections.

Mentorship by Cultural Leaders

Tribal youth need opportunities to establish relational and cultural connections with their own tribal communities as well as with others nearby. Cultural leaders from tribal communities can provide these connections by attending the Cultural Connection Camps and participating in or leading cultural activities. Applying a broad definition of "community" can help with enlisting members of a community to serve as mentors. Mentors can include tribal leaders, youth program leaders, cultural guides, knowledge keepers and traditional healers. They also can be key people from external groups, such as state child welfare services, mental health programs, educational institutions, courts, substance use treatment programs and others.

Cultural leaders can share opportunities for mentorship and connection outside of the Cultural Connection Camps. For example, one leader in the *Our Shared Legacy* pilot program invited participants to attend a weekly drum session. With the right structure and support, mentoring of youth participants can extend beyond the camp sessions to become a more significant part of the program. For example, allowing cultural leaders to share their contact information with youths or connecting young people with leaders in the community can lead to meaningful relationships and ongoing mentoring. A formal, substantial mentorship program needs to include training and guidelines for persons volunteering to serve as mentors.

Tribal Youth Cultural Connections Binder

After each Oak Tree Culture lesson, every youth participant is encouraged to keep a journal by entering reflections about the lesson into a tribally adapted version of the FosterClub *FYI Binder*, renamed the *Tribal Youth Cultural Connections Binder*. Adaptations of the FosterClub binder include additional sections for exploring cultural and relational connections and Oak Tree Culture lessons. The tribal version of the binder also has a section that explains case planning and legal processes to prepare youths for actively engaging in discussions about their own legal permanency.



5. Program Delivery (Intensity and Duration)

Our Shared Legacy is designed for delivery over 10 months to provide the opportunity for young people to build connections and an understanding of their tribal cultures. Delivering the lessons in chronological sequence conveys the intended message of growth over time. A youth completes the *Our Shared Legacy* program after participating in all five Oak Tree Culture lessons. To promote connection and continuity, program facilitators can conduct *Our Shared Legacy* in cohorts — groups of youths who begin the program together — with each cohort starting and completing the program as a group. Depending on capacity, a tribal nation could choose to run multiple cohorts concurrently.

To meet the needs of a particular tribal community, a more flexible, less structured option than the cohort arrangement is possible. This involves a program registration protocol that allows a youth to join the program at any point during the five-lesson cycle and then to continue attending Cultural Connection Camps until the young person has received all five lessons. However, the downside of a young person receiving the lessons out of order could outweigh the benefits of flexibility. The less structured option also poses logistical challenges to overcome. Program facilitators will need to know who is attending each camp as well as which Oak Tree Culture lessons each youth participant still needs to receive. The program organizer will need to ensure the availability of a teacher for each lesson to be taught. When forming small groups of participants, the organizer will have to ensure that everyone in a group needs the same lesson.

Although *Our Shared Legacy* has no prescribed registration process, each tribal community will need to designate a point person to take charge of registration. Details of the registration process include making decisions about which demographic information to collect for planning Cultural Connection Camp sessions. The enlistment process includes deciding who may refer a youth to the program (e.g., caseworker, caregiver, tribal elder, self-referral).

ESTIMATED TOTAL CONTACT TIME:

As noted above, it is recommended that the program be delivered over a 10-month period but delivery can be flexible to meet the needs of the community. Participation in the program represents a 10-to-15-hour commitment for a participant over the10-month period.

Stage	Activity	Estimated Duration (2 to 3 hours for each camp)	Frequency	Typical Timing
1	**Lesson 1 Camp Session 1**	40 minutes for lesson, plus cultural activity and traditional meal	One time	Month 2
2	**Lesson 2 Camp Session 2**	38 minutes for lesson, plus cultural activity and traditional meal	One time	Month 4
3	**Lesson 3 Camp Session 3**	30 minutes for lesson, plus cultural activity and traditional meal	One time	Month 6
4	**Lesson 4 Camp Session 4**	35 minutes for lesson, plus cultural activity and traditional meal	One time	Month 8
5	**Lesson 5 Camp Session 5**	30 minutes for lesson, plus cultural activity and traditional meal	One time	Month 10

VI. Implementation Supports

Staffing

Effective delivery of *Our Shared Legacy* requires qualified administrative and program staff to coordinate implementation and facilitate the Cultural Connection Camps. Staffing should include a designated program lead to oversee implementation, coordinate staff and partners, and ensure that program activities are delivered as intended. Administrative and program staff will manage camp registration and attendance, coordinate locations and logistics, oversee outreach and marketing, arrange supplies and food, and schedule elders and knowledge keepers who serve as activity facilitators and teachers of the Oak Tree Culture lessons. Staff will also coordinate with caseworkers to support youth participation and, when possible, facilitate caseworker attendance and transportation to camp sessions.

The program also requires a staff member who is deeply grounded in Tribal culture and has the knowledge and credibility to support the cultural integrity of the program. This individual would help orient elders and knowledge keepers to their roles as activity facilitators and teachers, including how their activities and teachings connect to the goals and structure of *Our Shared Legacy*. They would also orient caseworkers and supervisors to their roles in supporting youth participation and reinforcing cultural learning through ongoing casework. This role is particularly important for helping ensure that staff and program partners understand the cultural foundations of *Our Shared Legacy* and can carry out their responsibilities in ways that are consistent with the program's cultural teachings.

Together, these staffing functions provide the administrative coordination, program oversight, cultural expertise, and cross-role support needed to implement *Our Shared Legacy* effectively.



Training and Coaching

Effective implementation of a program requires both training and coaching to ensure program fidelity and optimal quality. Plans for training need to describe the program's curriculum and to detail who will be trained, who will conduct the training, the length of the initial training and any booster sessions, plus certification requirements that may apply. Coaching and supervision provide support for staff members as they apply the model in practice; they also maintain adherence to program standards. Coaching may include individual or group sessions scheduled at regular intervals. These sessions need clearly defined start and end times. Agency leaders need to determine the structure and frequency of coaching sessions to ensure that their staff members receive support consistently while delivering the program as intended.

Implementation of *Our Shared Legacy* requires role-specific training and orientation for the people responsible for referring youth to the program, facilitating the Cultural Connection Camps, teaching the Oak Tree Culture lessons, supporting youth participation, and reinforcing cultural learning beyond the camp. Although each group has different responsibilities, all participants need a shared understanding of the program's purpose, structure, cultural foundations, and intended outcomes. This shared foundation helps ensure that youth receive consistent support before, during, and after their participation in the program.

Caseworkers and supervisors need training that prepares them to support youth engagement and integrate *Our Shared Legacy* into their ongoing work with youth. Caseworkers need to understand how to identify and refer youth to the program, support youth in participating fully in the camps, use youth engagement strategies that promote youth voice and choice, and reinforce the Oak Tree Culture lessons in their ongoing work with youth. When possible, caseworkers should attend camp sessions with the youth they serve so they can better understand the cultural experiences and teachings and draw on them in subsequent conversations and casework. Supervisors need to understand these expectations as well so they can support caseworkers' participation, reinforce the use of youth engagement strategies, and create opportunities for staff to incorporate cultural learning into permanency planning and decision-making. Ongoing reinforcement helps youth draw on their cultural connections and learning as they work with professionals to pursue cultural, relational, and legal permanency.

Necessary training for caseworkers and supervisors is conducted in two stages:

1. **Transforming Engagement: Keeping Children and Youth at the Center of Our Work** (QIC-EY, 2025) equips caseworkers and other staff members with strategies for supporting meaningful youth participation in permanency planning and decision-making. This training provides the foundation for engaging youth in ways that center their voice, perspectives, and choices.
2. **Orientation to *Our Shared Legacy*** provides role-specific information about the program and can be conducted in a group or one-on-one using the facilitator manual (see the Additional Program Materials section of this primer). The orientation should introduce the program's purpose, structure, core components, cultural foundations, and expectations for implementation. For caseworkers and supervisors, the orientation should clarify how their roles connect to the Cultural Connection Camps and how they can reinforce the Oak Tree Culture lessons through their ongoing work with youth. A formal group orientation may have enhanced impact when it includes an adult speaker with lived experience who is prepared to share their journey through foster or adoptive care, helping participants understand the importance of cultural connection, relationships, and youth voice from a lived-experience perspective.

Elders, knowledge keepers, and other cultural leaders who facilitate camp activities or teach the Oak Tree Culture lessons need to participate in the *Our Shared Legacy* orientation. Their orientation should provide a clear understanding of the program's purpose and structure, the role of the Cultural Connection Camps, and how their teachings and activities contribute to the overall program experience. They should understand how the Oak Tree Culture lessons fit within the broader goals of *Our Shared Legacy*, expectations for working with youth and other facilitators, and the importance of creating culturally grounded, engaging, and supportive learning experiences. The orientation should also clarify their role in maintaining the cultural integrity, consistency, and quality of the program while recognizing and honoring their expertise and knowledge.

Program and administrative staff also need orientation to the program and their responsibilities. In addition to understanding the program model and cultural foundations, staff need to understand the logistics and processes required to support implementation, including participant registration, attendance, communication with families and caseworkers, camp scheduling, coordination with elders and knowledge keepers, supplies, food, transportation, and other site-specific arrangements. Staff should also understand how the different roles fit together so that youth experience the camps as a coordinated program rather than as a series of disconnected activities.

Across all groups, orientation should establish shared expectations while recognizing that different participants bring different expertise and responsibilities. The goal is not for everyone to receive identical training, but for each group to understand what it needs to know and do to support youth and contribute to a cohesive, culturally grounded implementation of *Our Shared Legacy*.

Policies and Procedures

Clear policies and procedures are essential to support implementation of the program and to ensure fidelity in its delivery. This includes documentation of any adaptations required to integrate the model into existing agency practices. It also includes identification of potential barriers that could hinder implementation. Establishing formal guidance helps staff members to understand expectations, promotes consistency across the intervention group and supports successful delivery of the selected model.

Existing policies and procedures may need adjustment to support delivery of the *Our Shared Legacy* program. For instance, new policies can define caseworker roles and outline expectations for participation in the program. Additional considerations for tribal child welfare agencies include the age range of the youth participants, their custody status (state or tribal nation) and placement proximity. Invitations to cultural leaders need to take into account policies and procedures regarding protecting confidentiality, ensuring a basic understanding of the child welfare system, plus conducting formal and informal background checks.

Written procedures need to define how youths will be enrolled in the program and to describe how information gathered through youth engagement will be documented and integrated into case planning.

Fidelity

To ensure implementation of this program as intended, fidelity measurements and protocols are used to assess whether practitioners are delivering the core components of the model. Fidelity tracking needs to include forms to capture key details about each session and meeting, such as start and end times, who delivered the program, the delivery format (in person, virtual, hybrid) and the time spent preparing for and following up after the session.

The *Our Shared Legacy* developers prepared a facilitator guide to provide an orientation into the program and to support delivery of the five Oak Tree Culture lessons. This guide includes a checklist for tracking and documenting the delivery of each lesson as intended. Feedback from focus groups with persons delivering the program can yield information for assessing fidelity as well.

Data Systems

Data systems are necessary to support program implementation and to ensure accurate monitoring of fidelity and outcomes. Effective data systems require clear processes for collecting and managing information about the delivery of core components as well as indicators of program impact and satisfaction. Necessary modifications to hardware, software and data format should be identified early, along with potential barriers to timely implementation (e.g., limitations of system flexibility or competing priorities of information technology staff). Well-defined expectations and technological tools promote consistent data collection, strengthen accountability and support continuous evaluation of the selected model.



To the extent feasible, long-term outcomes related to permanency may be tracked by reviewing child welfare data previously collected by administrators or by using structured tools for case review. Such data may include indicators of progress toward legal permanency and stability. This type of data typically is collected in collaboration with caseworkers and other program staff. Data can be used not only to monitor fidelity and outcomes but also to support continuous quality improvement, supervision and program refinement.

Program implementers can use a simple spreadsheet to track registration for and participation in the Cultural Connection Camps.

Program Experts

Each program expert brings specialized knowledge, experience or both in the design, implementation and ongoing delivery of the program. Experts may include the model developer, the model purveyor and other individuals who can provide guidance regarding program fidelity, best practices and effective strategies for implementation. Experts also may support adaptation of the program to fit local contexts, including cultural considerations and relational permanency practices. Experts help to ensure that the program is delivered as intended and that the needs of youth and their families are met.

For more information about implementation of the *Our Shared Legacy* program, please contact Sandra Mithlo, MSW, Director, Social Services, Comanche Nation, at sandra.mithlo@comanchenation.com or Rita Hart, MSW, Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) Consultant and Trainer, Apelasv Consultant Services, LLC (Jicarilla Apache / Choctaw Nation), at **rita.hart013@apelasV.com**.

Partner Systems and Community Linkages

Successful implementation of a program by child welfare agencies relies on strong partnerships with external systems and collaborators, such as mental health providers, educational institutions, courts, substance use treatment providers and other relevant organizations. Child welfare agencies need to identify partners already engaged with them as well as those to be brought on board. Agency staff also need to determine the strategies, resources and support necessary to engage effectively with these partners. Strong collaboration ensures coordinated services, expands program reach and supports positive outcomes for youth and their families.

Tribal child welfare agencies implementing this program need to rely on strong partnerships with a range of community members, such as tribal leaders, youth program leaders, cultural guides, knowledge keepers and traditional healers. Agencies will need to partner as well with external groups, including state child welfare services and others listed in the preceding paragraph. These partnerships can support mentorships and delivery of lessons and cultural activities. Recognizing existing partners and those who could be invited to join in implementation efforts can facilitate the program's success.

Program leaders need to prepare a communication plan for keeping partners and caseworkers of youth participants informed about the program. This plan can include shared updates, informational events and brief summaries of program goals and activities. Regularly scheduled briefings can help to keep partners engaged and to entice new partners to come to the table.

Other Resources (Meeting Space, Materials, etc.)

Implementation of a program requires access to tangible resources, including space for training, orientation sessions and other meetings, materials and supplies for activities, plus technology for virtual or hybrid delivery. Additional considerations may include travel expenses, meals or snacks for participants and help with logistics that contribute to a welcoming and functional environment for staff and youth. Availability of these resources is essential for smooth program operation and participant engagement.

Tribal members, as part of their cultures, value shared meals or refreshments during meetings to infuse a welcoming atmosphere. Tokens are gifts of appreciation presented to recognize and to honor participation. Celebration of program completion also provides meaning for youths graduating from *Our Shared Legacy*. Program organizers need to budget for the costs of resources such as materials, transportation and refreshments to ensure that the program is implemented sustainably.

VII. Evaluation

This program was implemented and rigorously evaluated in the Southern Plains Consortium (SPC), based on a logic model, a theory of change and the following question:

For youth who are either exclusively supervised by one of the eight SPC tribes or under a shared jurisdiction between the state and one of the SPC tribes, does participation in case management practices and peer mentoring grounded in the "My Two Aunties" model and the FosterClub life skill development process improve their odds of reporting greater connection to their culture; having access to a greater number of permanent, caring adults in their lives; and having a greater voice in setting their legal permanency goals than youth who are being served in the Shawnee Area Native American Child Protection Team (SAN CPT) who have not yet been exposed to the "My Two Aunties" case management and FosterClub life skill development interventions?

To answer this question, a research team carried out a study with a quasi-experimental design in which an intervention group received implementation of the program model and a comparison group received services as usual. The team collected fidelity data from workers in the intervention group to measure and to understand better the delivery of the model. Baseline and follow-up surveys of youth outcomes and case review forms were collected from both groups to learn how the program impacted actual outcomes for youths when compared with expected outcomes. The research team also conducted youth focus groups to get open-ended feedback from youths about their experiences with the program. Finally, a cost evaluation was performed to understand the cost of implementing and delivering the program. Highlights of the evaluation results can be found on the QIC-EY website: **www.qic-ey.org.**

8. Implementation Lessons Learned and Tips

Successful implementation of the *Our Shared Legacy* program requires thoughtful planning, coordination and clear communication. The following guidance is organized into two parts:

1. **Program Planning and Preparation:** overarching lessons learned related to setting up the program
2. **Engagement Lessons Learned and Tips:** practical guidance for implementing each component of the program

Program Planning and Preparation

Begin by establishing a strong foundation to ensure smooth execution of the program.

FORMATION OF A PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION TEAM

Lessons Learned

- A cross-disciplinary planning team strengthens coordination and produces a sense of shared ownership among team members.
- Early relationship building with internal and external partners supports buy-in and alignment of partners with agency staff.
- Clearly defined roles for logistics, content development, youth engagement and evaluation are important.

Tips

- Determine whether to implement the program for a consortium or for a single tribal nation.
- Form a planning team that includes the following:
  - » tribal child welfare program leaders and caseworkers
  - » tribal youth program staff
  - » state child welfare caseworkers
  - » tribal elders, knowledge keepers, cultural group leaders and other community leaders
  - » others who work directly with tribal youth
- Schedule and facilitate an orientation meeting about Our Shared Legacy to increase awareness of the program and to begin discussion of strategies for collaborating in its implementation.
- Outline the roles and the responsibilities of the program leader, advisors, consultants, program champions for facilitation and data collection, and caseworkers.
- Develop a communication plan for keeping partners and caseworkers informed throughout program implementation.
- Hold regularly scheduled meetings for monitoring progress, troubleshooting challenges and supporting the alignment of team members.

IDENTIFICATION OF KEY PARTNERS

Lessons Learned

- Program success depends on collaboration with a range of child welfare partners involved with tribal youth in care.
- Individuals who have lived experience in foster care provide critical insights about meaningful engagement with youth.

Tips

- Identify and engage with stakeholders from specific tribal nations who can provide guidance, support and opportunities for cultural connection, including:
  - tribal youth program leaders
  - knowledge keepers of tribal culture
  - councils of tribal elders and individual tribal elders
  - representatives of prevention and recovery programs
  - cultural drum groups
  - practitioners of beadwork, bow making and ribbon wear
  - tribal storytellers
- When possible, involve youths currently or formerly in foster care to inform program design and implementation.

Engagement Lessons Learned and Tips

CULTURAL CONNECTION CAMPS

Lessons Learned

- Build flexibility into camp schedules. Accommodate the varied needs and times of availability among teachers, community partners and facilitators of cultural activities.
- Engage early with cultural partners. Knowledge keepers, tribal elders and other community partners are essential to providing authentic cultural programming.
- Plan to accommodate cultural protocols. Teachers of culture and knowledge keepers may have specific expectations related to their preparation, participation, compensation and the custom of gifting.
- Align activities with the Oak Tree Culture lessons. Activities that directly reinforce the lessons prove more effective than those that function as stand-alone, cultural experiences.
- Prepare materials and supplies in advance. Hands-on activities such as dressmaking, beadwork and bow making require planning and specialized materials.
- Give high priority to active involvement by youths. Youth engagement becomes stronger when young people can participate by creating, practicing or teaching rather than simply observing.
- Allot time during meetings for meals and relationship building. Shared meals and time for socializing informally provide opportunities for youths, cultural leaders and other community members to connect with each other.
- Plan for continuity after each camp session. Cultural connections strengthen when youths have opportunities to maintain relationships and to participate in cultural activities after their camp experiences.
- Because lack of transportation poses a barrier for many tribal youths, make arrangements for providing transportation to ensure attendance at camp.
- Cultural Connection Camps have the most impact when they are held on tribal land or in urban Indian centers.

Tips

- Identify and engage with cultural partners early to clarify roles, availability and expectations.
- Develop a flexible schedule that allows adequate time for cultural activities, discussions, break periods and cultural protocols.
- Discuss cultural protocols in advance. Budget for appropriate honoraria, gifts, travel expenses and other costs.
- Select activities that provide hands-on experiences for youths to apply each Oak Tree Culture lesson.
- Confirm in advance with teachers of culture their needs for materials and other supplies. Obtain and prepare the necessary items before each camp session.
- Structure demonstrations that include opportunities for youth participants to practice, to create, to perform and to teach.
- Allot time in the agenda for meals and informal socializing rather than scheduling activities back-to-back.
- Identify opportunities for youths to stay connected with cultural mentors, community events, tribal ceremonies and other cultural resources after attendance at camp.
- Encourage caseworkers to transport youths to camp and to attend camp sessions with them. Caseworker participation fosters relationships between them and the youths assigned to them.
- Plan to ensure that the location of each camp session supports the designated activity and the cultural nature of the *Our Shared Legacy* program.

OAK TREE CULTURE LESSONS

Lessons Learned

- Lessons prove most effective when connected with hands-on, cultural activities.
- Using the oak tree consistently as a metaphor helps youths to connect the lessons about tribal culture to their own growth, self-identities, relationships and communities.
- Teachers of culture and other community members strengthen the lessons by sharing cultural knowledge and examples from their own lived experience.
- Lessons can support both individual reflection and group connections.
- The sequence of the Oak Tree Culture lessons supports a framework of developmental progression. A youth participant may connect with different lessons at different developmental stages in the journey toward adulthood.
- The lessons, as designed, may not meet the developmental needs of every youth participant.
- The lessons provide opportunities for youths to identify and to strengthen their cultural and relational connections that can support permanency.
- Planning for the lessons needs to include finding out how many young people will participate in each Cultural Connection Camp in order to ensure the availability of enough teachers to cover the small-group structure.

Tips

- Pair each lesson with a cultural activity that reinforces its central theme and lets youths experience the concept by participating hands-on in the activity.
- Use the oak tree metaphor consistently while allowing youths to interpret the meaning of roots, trunk, branches and growth in ways that reflect their own experiences.
- Provide space for youths to pause for reflection through discussion, drawing, journaling and other activities that will help them to connect the lessons to their own lives.
- Invite knowledge keepers of tribal culture and other community members to participate when sharing their knowledge and experiences can deepen the impact of a lesson.
- Keep lessons interactive and flexible rather than relying primarily on lecture.
- Use examples and materials relevant to the youths participating and to the cultures of their tribal communities.
- Connect lessons with ongoing relationships and opportunities for practicing the concepts taught so that learning about tribal culture extends beyond an individual lesson or a camp experience.
- Adapt lessons, as needed, to ensure that they are targeted to meet the developmental needs of youth participants. If the attendees' developmental stages are unknown, be prepared with a strategy to help those youths who may not be at the stage addressed by a lesson's content.
- Allow time for youths to process each lesson. Avoid rushing from the lesson into its associated activity.
- Look for opportunities to reinforce previous lessons so that each one builds on the themes of earlier lessons rather than functioning as a separate, unrelated session.
- When delivered during a Cultural Connection Camp, an Oak Tree Culture lesson is presented most effectively in groups of two to six youths. Although group composition may vary, common factors to consider when forming groups include the learning needs of participants, whether the lesson is suited better to a single-sex or a coed group and whether keeping the same small group of participants intact throughout all five lessons is important.

MENTORSHIP BY CULTURAL LEADERS

Lessons Learned

- Connections with tribal elders, knowledge keepers and other community members who can integrate tribal culture throughout the *Our Shared Legacy* program are critical to ensure youth engagement and participation
- Establishing ongoing mentorships between youths, tribal elders and knowledge keepers can be difficult to orchestrate.

Tips

- Recruitment of mentors requires intentional focus and a well-delineated plan that incorporates community outreach and promotes buy-in of the Our Shared Legacy program.
- Clearly explain the expectations of mentors to adults asked to serve in that role. Expectations will vary depending on how each mentorship is designed to operate.

TRIBAL YOUTH CULTURAL CONNECTIONS BINDER

Lessons Learned

- The binder functions as a practical tool for organizing information and helping youths to take active roles in their own permanency planning.
- Activities described in the binder become most meaningful to a youth when they are connected with the young person's own goals, relationships and cultural identity.
- Youths benefit when adults use the binder as a tool to engage in meaningful conversations rather than simply as a paperwork exercise.
- The binder presents opportunities to identify people, cultural connections, resources and information that a youth may need on the journey toward permanency and adulthood.
- When youths retain ownership regarding what to include and how to organize their binders, their engagement becomes stronger.
- By making important information and connections visible, the binder can serve as a bridge between a youth and the young person's caregivers, caseworkers, mentors and other supportive adults.

Tips

- Complete a binder *with* each youth, not *for* the young person. Use the activities in the binder to encourage conversation, reflection and youth decision-making.
- Let each youth personalize a binder. Allow the youth to determine which information, relationships, cultural connections and resources the young person considers most important. Bring supplies such as markers and stickers to help with personalization.
- Connect the activities in the binder to the Oak Tree Culture lessons and to cultural activities so that the binder reinforces rather than duplicates other program components.
- Let each youth build a binder over time. Avoid trying to complete every section in one session. Add information as relationships and connections develop.
- Use the binder as a tool to identify gaps in support. Ask each youth which connections and resources the young person already has and which ones the youth would like to strengthen.
- Keep information in the binder current. Provide opportunities to review and to update con-tact information, lists of resources, each youth's goals and important documents.
- Make sure that each youth's binder is owned by and accessible to the young person. Ensure that the youth knows where it is, understands what it contains and has a say regarding who may access the information in it.
- Use the binder to support permanency conversations by helping each youth to identify the people, places, cultural connections and resources that the young person wants to keep as valued connections over time.

9. Additional Program Materials

Find program materials that support implementation here:

SCAN HERE

CLICK HERE

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This project is supported by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the United States (U.S.) Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award totaling $5,000,000 with 100 percent funded by ACF/HHS. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by ACF/HHS, or the U.S. Government. For more information, please visit the ACF website, **www.acf.hhs.gov/administrative-and-national-policy-requirements#book_content_7**.

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