

# Aaniiih Nakoda Immersion Day



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



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

May 1st, 2024  
Fort Belknap, Montana



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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, Apsaalooke (Crow) Nation, and Northern Cheyenne Tribe.

The Immersion Day program invites healthcare 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.

- **Montana Perinatal Quality Collaborative - Alliance for Innovation on Maternal Health (MPQC-AIM)**
- **California Perinatal Quality Care Collaborative (CPQCC)**
- **Council on Patient Safety in Women’s Health Care**
- **Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies - The Montana Coalition (HMHB)**
- **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 – Alliance for Innovation on Maternal Health (MPQC-AIM) initiative, 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-AIM 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-AIM engaged Billings Clinic, Montana's largest health system, to assume responsibility for organizing future Immersion Days with other Montana Tribes and communities as part of the Montana Obstetrics and Maternal Support (MOMS) demonstration project.

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 hosting an Immersion Day with the Aaniiih Nakoda Nations on May 1st, 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.

# About the Fort Belknap Indian Community

The Fort Belknap Indian Community, established in 1888, is home to Aaniiih (White Clay) and Nakoda Nations and is the ancestral home of the Nakoda (Assiniboine) and Aaniiih people. Located in north central Montana, the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation is what remains of the two nations' ancestral territories that spanned all of central and eastern Montana and part of western North Dakota ([fortbelknap.org/history](http://fortbelknap.org/history)).

The Aaniiih and Nakoda people were “nomadic hunters and warriors. They followed the buffalo which provided them with all the necessities of life” ([fortbelknap.org/history](http://fortbelknap.org/history)). Both tribes have longstanding traditions of “dependency-to-self determination and tribal sovereignty” and “today, the two tribes are united as one government called the Fort Belknap Indian Community. Together, the tribes have formed and maintained a community that has deep respect for its land, its culture, and its heritage” ([fortbelknap.org/history](http://fortbelknap.org/history)).



## Implementation Team:

- Diona Buck, BS • Aaniiih | Nakoda  
MOMS Engagement Coordinator • Billings Clinic
- Margaret Anne Adams, BSN, RN • T̓silhqotin | Tl'etinqox't'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

## Fort Belknap Community Leaders/Advocates:

- Erica Johnson, RN • Ft. Belknap WIC Director
- Kathleen Adams, RN • Tribal Public Health Nursing Supervisor

## Fort Belknap Community Elders:

- Renita Longknife





# Preparations

The Aaniiih Nakoda Immersion Day was meticulously planned over the course of several 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 as guidance, preparations included identifying Cultural Community Advocates Erica Johnson and Kathleen Adams to assist in planning and hosting the immersion event.

Immersion Day planning meetings were held bi-weekly by the implementation team and community advocates over the course of 10 weeks. In the early planning stages, the Fort Belknap Health Committee was respectfully consulted to ensure adherence to Tribal protocol. The goal was to obtain the committee's support and approval to initiate the Immersion Day program with the Aaniiih Nakoda people of the Fort Belknap Indian Community.

The next planning stage involved identifying key Tribal programs that provide maternal-child health services. This process sought and obtained contact information such as email addresses and direct office phone numbers for Tribal program leaders. Once the appropriate program leaders were contacted, a virtual meeting was scheduled to discuss their support, participation, engagement efforts, and logistics of the Immersion Day. Each Tribal program also received an introductory letter about the Immersion Day, which included background information, initiative purpose/mission, objectives of the initiative, and key Indigenous birthing data for their local and surrounding communities.

## Key Tribal programs contacted were:

- Fort Belknap Tribal Integrated Behavioral Health
- Fort Belknap Public Health Nursing
- Fort Belknap Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infant, and Children (WIC)
- Tiwahe Project
- Aaniiih Nakoda Family Healing Center
- Aaniiih Nakoda College – Nursing Program
- Local Indigenous Doulas
- Fort Belknap Indian Health Service (IHS) Unit

Identifying and including a Tribal Community Elder in the planning and hosting of a Cultural Immersion Day is vital. Elders hold a position of profound importance in Tribal communities as the keepers of knowledge, traditions, language and wisdom. Following Aaniiih and Nakoda traditional protocol, Nakoda Knowledge Keeper Renita Longknife was approached with tobacco and a gift to request her participation in the Immersion Day planning and implementation process. Her role was to provide cultural insight, guidance and share historical and contemporary context related to Aaniiih Nakoda maternal and child health. Renita's involvement ensured that the event was respectful and authentic, providing birthing hospital staff with an understanding of Aaniiih and Nakoda Tribal traditions and values.

# Participating Non-Indigenous Healthcare Organizations

MPQC-AIM estimates that approximately 323 patients who identify as American Indian/Alaskan Native with a residency zip code close to or within Fort Belknap's Tribal lands gave birth off-reservation between 2017 and 2022. Most of these births occurred at Northern Montana Hospital in Havre, MT.

## The nearest birthing facilities to the Aaniiih Nakoda Nation are:

- Northern Montana Health Care (NMHC), located in Havre, MT approximately **47 miles west** of the Fort Belknap Reservation.
- Benefis Health System, located in Great Falls, MT approximately **159 miles southwest** of the Fort Belknap Reservation.

Both health system's nursing 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 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.

Healthcare staff from the outpatient OB/GYN; labor and delivery; and Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) departments at Northern Montana Hospital and Benefis Health System were invited to spend the day with Tribal program providers, program managers, and cultural leaders at Fort Belknap. 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.



Dr. Amy Stiffarm provides Cultural Safety Training

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 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 Aaniiih Nakoda people. This included statistics on the number of deliveries involving Aaniiih Nakoda women and babies in the previous two years, and the number of Aaniiih Nakoda 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.



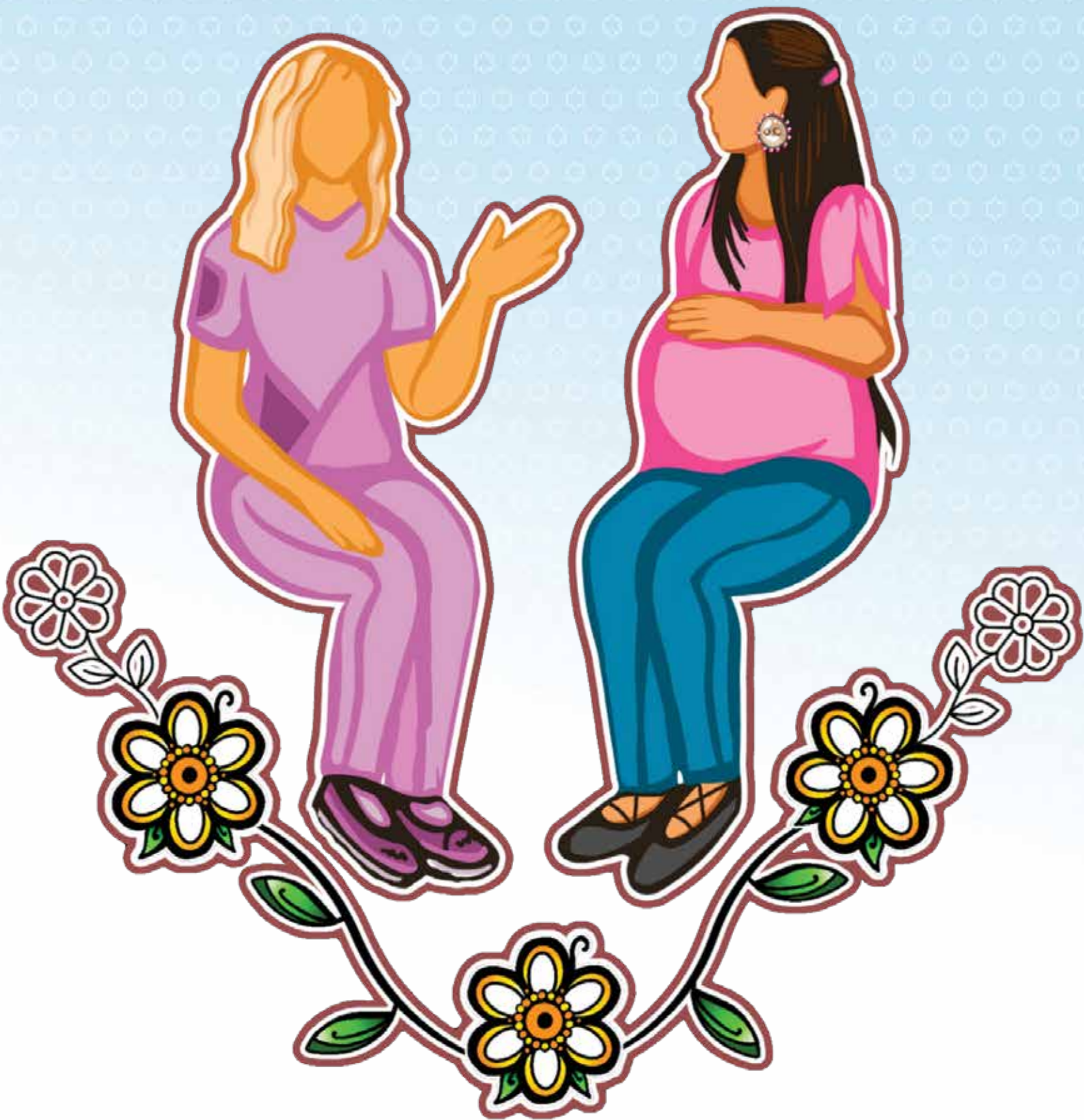
# Event Description

The Aaniiih Nakoda Immersion Day was held on Wednesday May 1st, 2024. Early in the morning, ten labor and delivery, NICU, and flight nurses from Northern Montana Hospital and Benefis Health System gathered in Havre, MT. They traveled on the Tiwahe Bus from Havre to the Fort Belknap Indian Community, home of the Aaniiih and Nakoda Nations. The purpose of their trip was to make a connection with the Indian Health Service Outpatient Service Unit and Tribal programs that serve the maternal and child health population. This collaborative journey aimed to foster relationships, enhance the understanding of Aaniiih and Nakoda culture, and improve the coordination of care provided to the Tribal community.



The Immersion Day began with an opening circle facilitated by Nakoda Knowledge Keeper Renita Longknife in the Sitting High Room at Aaniiih Nakoda College. Elders and Knowledge Keepers are invaluable to Indigenous communities, serving as the heart of cultural transmission and preservation. Renita began the opening circle with a blessing of smudge and a prayer. She shared insights into Nakoda culture, explaining the significance of smudging to Indigenous people. Renita also provided context on Nakoda Traditional birthing practices, highlighting how these practices are still honored and adapted in contemporary times.

As part of the opening circle, Brigit Hemmer, Program Director of Aaniiih Nakoda College's nursing program, explained the program's philosophy of "Grow Our Own", which aims to empower student nurses to attain their registered nursing (RN) certification. The program emphasizes training Aaniiih Nakoda nurses to deliver healthcare in a holistic and culturally sensitive manner that reflects the community's "Life Ways".







*Opening Circle to begin the day*

After the opening circle, visiting healthcare staff – guided by Nakoda Knowledge Keeper Renita Longknife – traveled on the Tiwahe bus to visit the Indian Health Service (IHS) outpatient service unit where they received a facility tour and brief presentation on the IHS service model. They then visited various Tribal programs, including Tribal Integrated Behavioral Health, Tribal Public Health Nursing, WIC, and Aaniiih Nakoda Family Healing Center (formerly known as Social Services). The visiting healthcare staff also met with the Tiwahe initiative to learn about its programs and how Tiwahe collaborates with various Tribal programs and off-reservation entities. At each location, participants gained a comprehensive understanding of program services and eligibility criteria. Tribal program staff shared the challenges they encountered in service provision and explored opportunities for collaborative solutions with the visiting healthcare teams with the hope of improving communication and coordination of care for Tribal birthing people.

Fort Belknap's Tiwahe Initiative provides a comprehensive and integrated approach to address the interrelated problems of poverty, violence, and substance abuse in American Indian communities. Through this initiative, social services, and job training programs are integrated and expanded to address child and family welfare, job training and incarceration issues, with the goal of promoting family stability and strengthening tribal communities. The Tiwahe Project played a crucial role in collaborating with the implementation team in planning the Immersion Day. Tiwahe assisted in securing transportation for the traveling nurses, generously paid for the local caterer for the Immersion Day luncheon and covered the costs of Aaniiih and Nakoda traditional baby items.

A luncheon, prepared by local Indigenous caterer Lorraine Brockie, was held in the Sitting High Room at Aaniiih Nakoda College. Before lunch was served, local Nakoda Knowledge Keeper Buster Moore provided a blessing over the food, honoring the Traditional practices of the community. The meal was shared between the visiting hospital staff, Tribal program staff, IHS outpatient services, and local Indigenous Doulas. Sharing a meal provided a valuable opportunity for open dialogue, knowledge exchange and deepening our collaborative partnerships. Witnessing the cultural protocol of blessing the food before a meal gave a deeper meaning to the luncheon and a deeper understanding of culture for the visiting hospital staff.

Local Indigenous Doulas were invited to participate in the day to make a connection with the visiting healthcare staff. Doulas are a critical resource in supporting birth givers and their families during pregnancy and postpartum care. Unlike obstetric providers and midwives who are focused on clinical care, doulas offer non-medical physical, emotional and spiritual support. Indigenous doulas play an especially important role by providing holistic guidance and incorporating Indigenous knowledge into the birthing experience, helping to ensure that birthing individuals feel empowered and respected throughout their birthing journey.



*Thae Main, Indigenous Doula, sharing a meal w/nursing staff*





After lunch, visiting healthcare staff were provided the opportunity to tour one of the two Fort Belknap buffalo pastures. Mike Fox (Aaniiih), former Fish & Wildlife Director, discussed the historical significance of reintroducing buffalo to the reservation and shared insights into the reintroduction of other native wildlife, such as the black-footed ferret and the swift fox. He explained how these animals, along with the buffalo, play a vital role in sustaining the Tribal lands' ecosystem and how their presence is interconnected with the land. Local Nakoda Knowledge Keeper Buster Moore further elaborated on the buffalo's significance in Tribal traditions, spiritual practices, and way of life. Participants gained a deeper understanding of the buffalo's role in shaping and sustaining the Tribal community's culture, recognizing the buffalo as a symbol of strength and resilience.

At the conclusion of the Immersion Day, the visiting healthcare staff traveled back to the Aaniiih Nakoda College (ANC) for the closing circle facilitated by Nakoda Knowledge Keeper Renita Longknife. This closing circle provided visiting participants an opportunity to reflect on their experience and share their insights from the day. Following the closing circle, Renita and Tiwahe Director Amy Stewart presented a plaque and various Traditional infant care items on behalf of the Tiwahe initiative and the Aaniiih Nakoda community. These items included an infant-sized star quilt, baby moccasins, a moss bag, and a belly button pouch. Each hospital received a plaque reiterating the importance of these items and the significance of the Immersion Day. The healthcare teams were encouraged to display the plaque and infant care items in their facility to symbolize and honor the connection and collaboration between the hospitals and the Aaniiih Nakoda Tribal community.



*End of the day gift exchange that commemorates the Immersion Day, Aaniiih & Nakoda members and Benefis staff.*





# Outcomes

Following the Aaniiih Nakoda Immersion Day, exit surveys were emailed to participating healthcare staff to gather reflections on their overall experience and the most memorable moments of each program stop. The respondents' reflections highlighted the profound impact of the day on their understanding and appreciation of the Tribal community and culture. Participants reported a greater understanding of contemporary Aaniiih Nakoda culture and history. They also noted that connecting mothers and babies to Tribal support services upon discharge became easier as a result of their experience.

*"After this Immersion Day I know that there are many options for helping tribal families. If the needs of the patient entail mental health services, I could coordinate care with the Integrated Behavioral Health Clinic. The Public Health Office and Tiwahe Project are also vital resources to making sure that birthing people and their families are supported."*

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.

*"I feel like the history and way that Dr. Stiffarm presented it gave me many key points to think about prior to the immersion day. I felt more aware and prepared for my time spent on the Aaniiih Nakoda Tribal Nation."*

After visiting the Indian Health Service Unit and Tribal programs, nearly all participants noted that their most memorable experience was the community's warm welcome and passionate commitment to supporting birth givers in their community.

*"I love that the [Indian Health Service] hospital is full of reminders of the culture. Everywhere you turn there is evidence of the pride of their nation. I loved how the culture is present in pictures, displays, and even in the little things like lanyards and jewelry. There was a kind and welcoming environment and a true desire to work together to promote a greater care."*

*"How much they each loved their work. That some of the birthing peoples refer to them as momma \_\_\_\_\_, I thought that really showed the amount of love and dedication that they pour into their work."*

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."*

The opening and closing circle were described as impactful, providing valuable opportunities to learn about the Tribes' cultural traditions and customs.

*"What an honor I have never smudged before. There was so much information on beliefs and deliveries that were so good to learn. And I started thinking what other tribes do or believe. I also was curious about baby showers and Renita, the elder was great answering questions. It felt so personal and beautiful to know we did this sit down and shared the culture."*

*"I really enjoyed the prayers and smudging that was openly offered to all of us. At closing, I thought having everyone voice their thoughts on the day as a whole was an amazing reflection time!"*

*"I enjoyed the discussions about what was learned throughout the day at the culmination of the day together. It was very impactful and eye opening."*

*"I loved the willingness to share the culture and customs of the tribe. I enjoyed seeing the faith and love of culture in the circles. I love how there was time for the entire circle to express their thoughts and greater deepen the kinship and to hear from each person their experience and thoughts of the day."*

The Aaniiih Nakoda Immersion Day demonstrated Montana's commitment to improving maternal health outcomes. The day highlighted the meaningful connections established, which will foster relationship-building and enhance the coordination of care for birth givers from the Aaniiih Nakoda Nations. This collaboration will facilitate a more integrated approach to care, ensuring that birth givers receive comprehensive support and resources as they transition back to their community. By bridging gaps between birthing hospitals and Tribal support services, the Immersion Day lays the groundwork for continued partnership and mutual understanding, leading to culturally safe care for birth givers.

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

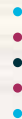






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