



Tsis tsis'tas Immersion Day



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

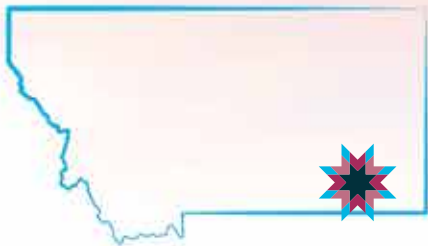


Tsis tsis'tas Immersion Day

Cultural Immersion Day Program: Building Relationships to Improve Continuity of Maternal Health Services for Indigenous Birth Givers & Families.

July 10th, 2024

Tsis tsis'tas (Northern Cheyenne) Nation



AUTHORS • **Diona Buck, BS** • **Stephanie Fitch, MHA, MS, PCLC, LAC, PMH-C**
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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, Apsáalooke (Crow) Nation, and Northern Cheyenne Tribe.

The Immersion Day program invites nurses and other medical 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.

- **Alliance for Innovation on Maternal Health (AIM)**
- **California Perinatal Quality Care Collaborative (CPQCC)**
- **Council on Patient Safety in Women's Health Care**
- **Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies - The Montana Coalition (HMHB)**
- **Montana Perinatal Quality Collaborative (MPQC)**
- **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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Tsétsehéstahese Só'tao'o Immersion Day

BACKGROUND • The Montana Perinatal Quality Collaborative (MPQC), 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 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 engaged Billings Clinic, Montana's largest health system, as the clinical lead partner in organizing future Immersion Days with other Montana Tribes and communities.

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 facilitate an Immersion Day with the Tis Nation on July 10th, 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.

IMPLEMENTATION TEAM:

- Diona Buck, BS • Aaniiih | Nakoda • MOMS Engagement Coordinator • Billings Clinic
- Margaret Anne Adams, BSN, RN • Tsilhqotin | 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

TSÉTSÉHÉSTAHESE SÓ'TAO'O COMMUNITY LEADERS/ADVOCATES:

- Gina Littlewolf- Millegan RN, BSN, CLC • Northern Cheyenne Acting Tribal Health Director
- Kim Dahl BS • Northern Cheyenne Tribal Health Deputy Director

TSÉTSÉHÉSTAHESE SÓ'TAO'O COMMUNITY ELDERS:

- Adeline Fox

About the Northern Cheyenne Nation

The Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation is located in present-day southeastern Montana and is approximately 444,000 acres in size with 99% tribal ownership. It is bounded on the east by the Tongue River and on the west by the Crow Reservation. The Northern Cheyenne Tribe has approximately 11,266 enrolled tribal members with about 5,012 residing on the reservation. Lame Deer is the tribal and government agency headquarters. There are four other districts that comprise the whole reservation. The Cheyenne Nation is comprised of ten bands, spread all over the Great Plains, from southern Colorado to the Black Hills in South Dakota. The tribe call themselves "Tsis tsis'tas" (Tse-TSES-tas) which means "the beautiful people". (<https://tribalnations.mt.gov/Directory/NorthernCheyenneTribe>)



Indian Health Service (IHS) – Northern Cheyenne Unit

Indian Health Service has provided health care at the Northern Cheyenne Reservation since 1955. Initially services were shared by both the Crow and Northern Cheyenne. The Northern Cheyenne Service Unit is a beautiful, modern ambulatory care facility in Southeastern Montana that offers outpatient care as well as 24-hour urgent care to approximately 6300 enrolled patients. In addition to outpatient and urgent care, Optometry, Dental, Physical Therapy and Behavioral Health are also provided.

The Northern Cheyenne Service Unit, in partnership with the Northern Cheyenne Community, strives to raise their physical, mental, social and spiritual health to the highest level using the principles of "the patient comes first" with a focus on health care and health promotion, in a culturally sensitive manner while empowering the individual. (<https://www.ihs.gov/billings/healthcarefacilities/ncheyenne/>)

Preparations

The Tsis tsis'tas Immersion Day was meticulously organized over four 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 as guidance preparations included identifying a Cultural Community Advocates, Acting Tribal Health Director, Gina Little Wolf-Milligan RN, BSN, CLC and Kim Dahl BS to assist in the planning and hosting the Immersion event. The implementation team held bi-weekly planning meetings throughout this period.

Immersion Day planning meetings were held bi-weekly by the implementation team and community advocate over the course of 10 weeks. In the early planning stages, the Northern Cheyenne Tribe's Board of 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 Tsis tsis'tas people of the Northern Cheyenne 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:

- Northern Cheyenne Indian Health Service Unit
- Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infant, and Children (WIC)
- Public Health Nursing
- Behavioral Health
- Bureau of Indian Affairs Social Services
- Lame Deer Recovery Support Office
- Local Indigenous Doulas
- Sacred Birth Midwifery Services

A key aspect of the Immersion Day planning was identifying a community Tribal Elder to participate in the event. Including an elder was essential, as they hold a position of profound importance within the Tribal community, serving as knowledge keepers who pass down traditions, language, and customs. A highly recommended community tribal elder, Adeline Fox, was respectfully asked by the implementation planning team to participate in the Immersion Day event to share their guidance and insight into traditional birthing practices as well as contemporary context related to Tsis tsis'tas culture. By sharing these traditions, Adeline will help foster a deeper understanding of cultural exchange to the birthing facility staff.

Participating Non-Indigenous Healthcare Organizations

The nearest birthing facilities to the Tsis tsis'tas Nation are:

- Billings Clinic
- Intermountain Healthcare (formerly known as Saint Vincents)

Both birthing facilities are in Billings, MT approximately **102 miles west** of Lame Deer, MT.

Between 2022-2023, Billings Clinic estimates that approximately 30 birthing people who identify as American Indian/Alaskan Native gave birth at Billings Clinic Labor & Delivery, with a residency zip code within Tribal lands.

Between 2022-2024, Intermountain Healthcare/St. Vincents estimates that approximately 105 birthing people who identify as American Indian/Alaskan Native gave birth at Intermountain Healthcare/St. Vincents, with a residency zip code within Tribal lands.

Each health system's 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 created and 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.



Dr. Amy Stiffarm provides Cultural Safety Training at Billings Clinic

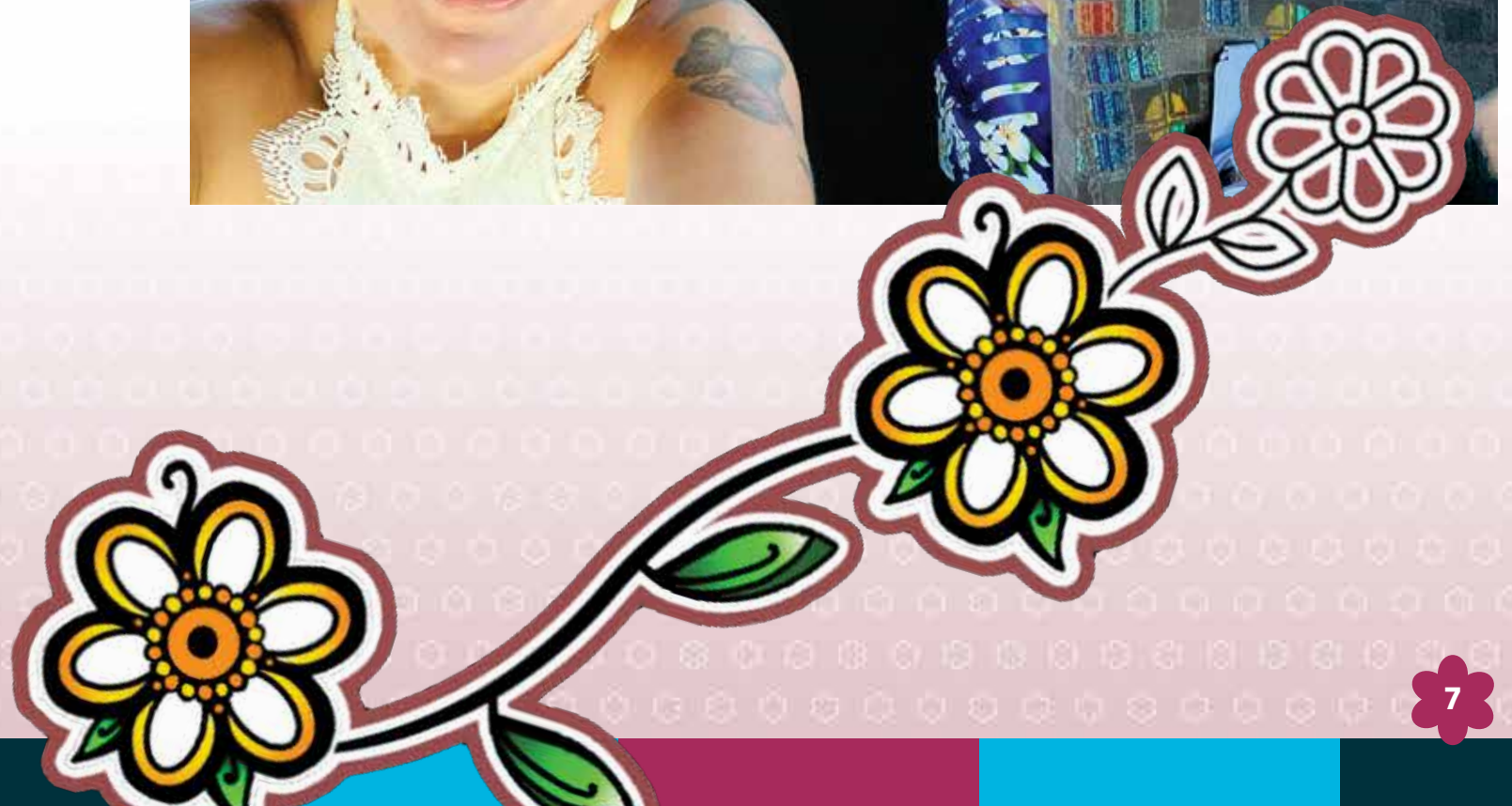
Healthcare staff from the outpatient OB/GYN; labor and delivery; and Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) departments at Billings Clinic and Intermountain Healthcare were invited to spend the day with Tribal program providers, program managers, and cultural leaders in Lamé Deer. Visiting healthcare providers 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.

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 Tsis tsis'tas people. This included statistics on the number of deliveries involving Tsis tsis'tas women and babies in the previous two years, and the number of 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.



Immersion Day Experience

Early in the morning, on Wednesday, July 10th, 2024, the Immersion Day took place with five labor and delivery, NICU staff, and a Care manager from Billings Clinic and Intermountain Healthcare gathering in Billings, MT. The group traveled by bus to the Northern Cheyenne Tribal community, home of the Tsis tsis'tas Nation, with the goal of connecting with Indian Health Service Unit and Tribal programs that support maternal and child health. This collaborative effort sought to build stronger relationships, deepen the birthing facility staff's understanding of the Tsis tsis'tas culture, and enhance the coordination of care for the Tribal Community.

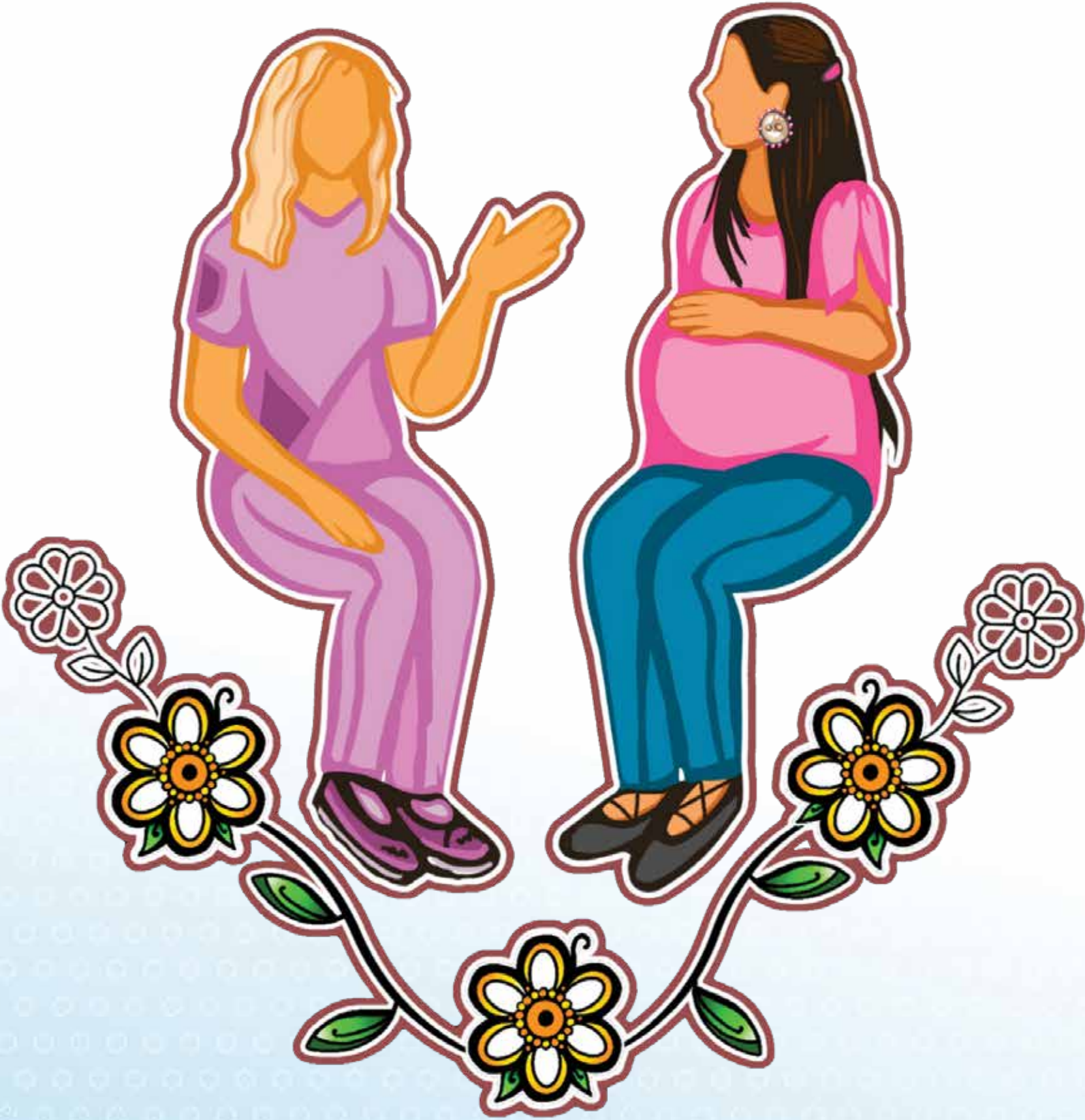


Upon arriving in Lame Deer, MT, the birthing facility staff were warmly welcomed at the Northern Cheyenne Tribal Chambers by Tsis tsis'tas Elder Adeline Fox, Community Advocates Gina Littlewolf-Millegan RN,BSN, CLC and Kim Dahl BS, Indigenous Doula and Lactation Consultant Misty White, and the Public Health Nursing team. The visit began with introductions, followed by Adeline sharing insights into Tsis tsis'tas culture and traditional birthing practices. She then led the group in a blessing and prayer in her native language, offering a heartfelt welcome to the community.

Following the opening circle, the visiting healthcare staff guided by Indigenous Doula Misty White, boarded the bus to tour the Lame Deer Indian Health Service Unit. The group also visited several Tribal programs including Tribal Behavioral Health, Tribal Public Health Nursing, WIC, BIA Social Services, and Lame Deer Recovery and Support Office. During these visits, healthcare staff learned and gained insight into program services, eligibility criteria, and the challenges Tribal program staff face, fostering discussions on improving communication and coordination of care for Tsis tsis'tas birthing people.



Tsis tsis'tas Elder Adeline Fox during the opening circle





Healthcare Staff at Northern Cheyenne Indian Health Service Unit

The birthing facility staff returned to the Northern Cheyenne Tribal Chambers, where they participated in a virtual presentation by Lacy Mansfield, owner and operator of Sacred Birth Midwifery Services. Lacey, an enrolled member of the Northern Cheyenne Tribe, shared her insights into her birth work and how she integrates Indigenous culture into her midwifery care. Her presentation offered a unique perspective on the importance of honoring Indigenous traditions in maternal health. Following the presentation, a luncheon was held on the lawn of the Tribal Chambers, catered by the local Fork and Spoon restaurant. This gathering provided an opportunity for the birthing facility staff, IHS staff, Tribal program representatives, community Elders, and Indigenous Doulas to continue their conversations, engage in cultural exchange, and strengthen their relationships. It fostered a collaborative environment for sharing insights and building connections.



Healthcare staff with Elders at the Chief Dull Knife Cultural Building

After lunch, the birthing facility staff visited the Chief Dull Knife Cultural Building, where they explored the museum and sat with Elders that are in charge of the Culture and Language Preservation Program. During this visit the group had the opportunity to witness storytelling from youth that are currently learning and receiving mentorship from the Elders. This visit highlighted the strengths of the Northern Cheyenne People and their continued efforts to transfer Traditional Knowledge to the next generations. This exchange provided a deeper connection to the rich history and resilience of the community. Immersing birthing facility staff into the culture of the Tribal community they serve is crucial to providing culturally responsive and respectful care for maternal and child health. Through these visits with Tribal programs and engaging directly with community members, the birthing facility staff gain broader understanding of the cultural values, traditions, and practices that shape healthcare experiences for Indigenous Families.

The birthing facility staff returned to the Northern Cheyenne Tribal Chambers to conclude the day with a closing circle facilitated by Tsis tsis'tas Elder Adeline Fox. Joining the circle were community advocates Gina Littlewolf-Millegan and Kim Dahl, local Indigenous Doulas and Tribal program staff. During this time, each participant had the opportunity to share their reflections and insights from the day's Immersion experience.

Outcomes

Reflections from the exit surveys echoed the sentiments shared by the birthing facility staff in the closing circle, highlighting several key themes:

- Cultural Understanding: Staff highlighted a deepened understanding and appreciation of Northern Cheyenne traditions and practices, recognizing their significance in shaping maternal and child health.
"Every stop of the day gave me knowledge to share with my team, I really wish this is something everyone could experience!"
"I loved hearing about some cultural traditions that I hope to pass on to other nurses. I also appreciated the platform to be able to learn and ask questions in a judgment free environment. I really hope this is something that can continue and I would love to go back."
"This experience has encouraged me because it gave me a new perspective of where this population is coming from. I really enjoyed learning about the "belly button and the turtle/lizard."
- Strengthened relationships: There was a strong emphasis on the value of building respectful and trusting relationships with the Tribal community and its members.
"Getting some direct contact info to serve as a resource, especially important in the uptick of syphilis cases, this will be critical to contact them to ensure appropriate follow up"
"We now have better knowledge of all of the resources that are available, it is a matter of finding and connecting the patients with the right group so that it is something that helps with the after care, not make it more difficult for the families."
- Commitment to Collaboration: The connections formed between the birthing facility staff and Tribal community staff revealed a shared desire for ongoing communication to ensure better coordination of care for Tribal birth givers in need of continued services during the perinatal period.
"I think it has really helped to open my eyes to meet patients where they are at and to learn about what healthcare, follow up and resources looks like in the Lame Deer community after discharge."
"How they really want to reconnect and become more collaborative with the organizations in Billings that help serve their members."
"We are starting a monthly meeting to better refer PT's home to Northern Cheyenne."



The Tsis tsis'tas Immersion Day event provided a unique and valuable opportunity for Billings Clinic and Intermountain Healthcare staff to connect with their Tribal counterparts, fostering meaningful relationships and initiating open dialogue. Through visits with Tribal programs, the IHS unit, Tribal Elders, Indigenous Doulas, the visiting healthcare staff gained deeper insights into the Cultural practices and strengths of the tribal community. These connections lay the foundation for improved communication and collaboration, ultimately enhancing the coordination of care and improving healthcare access for Tsis tsis'tas birthing people. The event was a significant step toward building trust and creating partnerships that will support culturally safe and supportive care.

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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