

# Pathway to Hope: A Tribal Community-Based Empowerment Curriculum to Heal Child Sexual Abuse

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## Background

While serving as an advocate for adult victims of domestic and sexual violence, and helping Alaska Tribes develop their child abuse response systems in the 1990s, I became aware of the high number of child sexual abuse survivors in rural Alaska villages. In some communities, Native adults courageously exposed the sexual abuse of children although there was still denial and silence from others in the community. As we discussed ways to help those ready to end silence and denial, community education events were planned so that other adults would learn to believe and then support children who reported sexual abuse. Having previously used videos such as *Young Once, Indian Forever* (1996) and *Bitter Earth* (1993) in other Indian Country work, I brought these resources to rural Alaska. (These videos were produced in reservation settings and are no longer available.) However, the videos portrayed cultures and federal or tribal justice systems that were unfamiliar to Alaska Natives. As we worked to open dialog and facilitate awareness about these difficult issues, it was apparent that the voices of other Alaska Natives about the effects of child sexual abuse provided a key to ending silence and denial and finding paths for healing.

In 2004, through training and technical assistance funds, with the support of the Office for Victims of Crime Indian Country grant manager, we started to build Alaska Native-specific resources. We selected an advisory group of Alaska Native people who had been providing victim services and healing and wellness activities in different Tribal communities throughout Alaska to develop a vision for a video to end silence and denial about child sexual abuse in Alaska Native communities and families. The advisory group included elders as well as young adults and represented Alaska Tribes that had a U.S. Department of Justice Children's Justice Act Partnerships for Indian Communities grant to address child sexual abuse. During two days of facilitated discussion, core messages and key elements of the video format were selected. In laying the framework for the *Pathway to Hope* (PTH) video and video guidebook, the advisory group envisioned a time when

Alaska Native people would come together statewide and begin the process of ending silence and supporting child victims. Although the principles of "breaking silence" to heal from various forms of childhood trauma are not unique to Alaska, the mobilization of this concept into actionable, culturally relevant concepts and principles is original. No other program attempting to promote healing from child sexual abuse in Alaska, to date, has originated strictly from the core concepts, values, and beliefs of Alaska indigenous people (Payne, Olson, & Parrish, 2013).

## Pathway to Hope Is an Indigenous Approach

The PTH curriculum is adapted to work within the specific culture, community history, and traditional values and practices for the Tribal community where it is delivered. Purposely flexible, the agenda and activities are tailored through multiple planning sessions with key individuals within the Tribe; in fact, they draw from the knowledge and experience of the leaders who are taking steps to end silence about child sexual abuse and promote healing among their people.

The PTH approach is based on belief that healing requires support and information and that sustained effort contributing to healing Native survivors of child sexual abuse takes place when Native people work within their own communities. Furthermore, community ownership and empowerment to address harm and healing must be community-specific to succeed. In delivering this curriculum across five states and two countries (U.S. and Canada), we have found that a high percentage of training participants themselves have a personal history of childhood sexual abuse in addition to being vicariously exposed to trauma material in their helping roles. By providing training to Tribal community facilitators, participants use their cultural strengths and values to create their own collective circle of safety for the healing journey. Within this circle, participants share and acknowledge that topics presented may bring up triggers, past or current negative coping skills, and reminders of personal-family trauma that can make it difficult to stay present. PTH faculty facilitate the collective resilience from vicarious trauma of participants who live and work

in rural Tribal communities where they often wear multiple “professional hats” by validating the connection to one another in sometimes complex ways. While thus being more vulnerable to vicarious trauma even if they are not in a helping role, the participants often experience these complex relationships as a source of great resilience and strength.

### How PTH Works

The *Pathway to Hope: Healing Child Sexual Abuse* video, *Tribal Community Facilitator’s Video Guidebook*, and the training agenda and delivery were crafted with an understanding that safety of the participants within their families and communities is paramount if social change can be achieved. The learning environment must promote safety and trust because in close-knit villages, the pain of sexual abuse can be more complex, is felt by many, and has a greater impact because of the way that individuals relate to one another. Therefore, as pointed out in the Foreword of the original version of the *PTH Video Guidebook*, holistic healing for the survivor of sexual abuse often occurs in the larger context of the community (Evensen, 2007). The National Center for Trauma-Informed Care states that the principles of trauma-informed care include understanding trauma and its impact; promoting safety; ensuring cultural competence; supporting consumer control, choice, and autonomy; sharing power and governance; integrating care; and believing that healing happens in relationships and recovery is possible (Payne et al., 2013).

These principles are embedded into the training for PTH. Thus, the Pathway to Hope model promotes evidenced-based and trauma-informed care from a cultural perspective. The PTH program offers research-based facts about childhood sexual abuse from a national, state, and cultural-specific standpoint. It challenges old beliefs and cognitive distortions, and it requires participants to do the bulk of the work. While the trainers present facts and teach techniques, participants are asked to complete the structure and anatomy that will form a geographically specific model of culturally based community healing for each of their own communities. Because the PTH faculty members are not from any of the communities in which they train, they cannot possibly provide the answers to healing for those communities. Instead, they offer tools and information from which participants can create a number of intervention and healing possibilities for individuals, groups, and families in their own communities. Participants are taught about pacing and containment, encouraged to seek outside counseling when needed, and helped to see the painful process of looking inward as a long-term goal that can be successfully tackled only with internal resources and external support.

The PTH model helps to identify both internal resources and ways of creating and improving on external support networks

with the understanding that while cathartic disclosure can be one piece of the healing puzzle, it can also be damaging when done in a way that does not take readiness and support into account. Silencing in the form of historical trauma, continued oppression, and internal oppression reinforce trauma narratives and trauma memories, making them more difficult to process and heal from. This compromises a simple disclosure of trauma in which one experiences cathartic release, which, in isolation, has been found to be re-traumatizing, even for many who aren’t victims of historical trauma (Payne et al., 2013; Manion et al., 1996).

### PTH Video and Curriculum

The 40-minute PTH video features two 20-minute segments and represents the voices of more than 40 Native people in Alaska who were interviewed for this production. The content and format are designed to stimulate discussion and promote action steps that will strengthen Tribal community responses to child victimization and support community healing from past child abuse.

The video and guidebook contain visual content that is familiar to Alaska Natives in rural as well as urban areas because the advisors knew that Alaska landscapes, nature sounds, rural images of varied traditional activities, and Native music were needed. Recognizing the importance of language and culture in healing, the video opens with five Native elders each speaking their Alaska Native language (Inupiat, Athabascan, Yupi’k, Tlingit, and Alutiiq) and urging viewers to come together and take action to protect children and help them heal (Pewewardy, 2002). Elder speakers provide insight and guidance for ending denial and silence throughout the video as well.

Through the collective insight and wisdom of the advisory group, core principles were developed to guide the PTH curriculum and training approach. These principles also informed the development of tools and activities found in the video guidebook. The principles are as follows:



Table 1: Truths, Concepts, and Beliefs Explored by Participants Through Facilitated Dialog

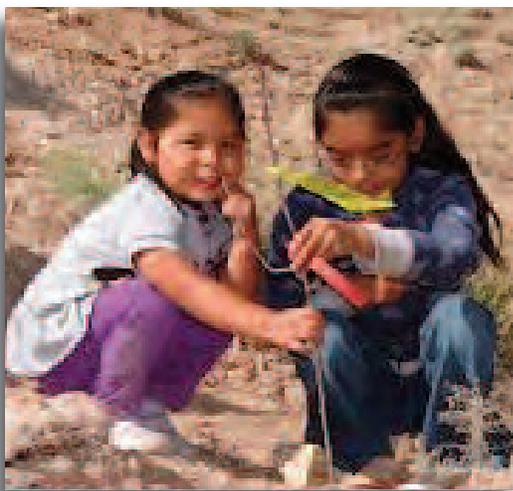
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Exploring impact of multigenerational and historical trauma on safety of children now</li><li>2. Recognizing that there are protections that prevent us from the following:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Believing that children are sexually abused</li><li>Holding abusers accountable for their behavior</li><li>Ending child sexual abuse</li></ul></li><li>3. Examining and understanding how children experience sexual abuse (vulnerability, signs of emotional impact)</li><li>4. Evaluating community readiness to end denial about child sexual abuse and begin healing by identifying knowledge about child sexual abuse, attitude of Tribal and spiritual leaders, and resources available to address child sexual abuse</li><li>5. Community-based action strategies toward community ownership to end silence about child sexual abuse and establish support for children:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Coming together to celebrate and honor our children</li><li>Teaching adults and children about personal safety</li><li>Setting community standards about children</li><li>Healing and support for children when victimized</li></ul></li><li>6. Promoting healing and support for children victimized by sexual abuse by providing culturally relevant, supportive services for child and nonoffending caregivers, extended family members, and community members who will help the child heal from acute and chronic pain.</li></ol>
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1. Indigenous people/Tribal communities must take responsibility for the safety and healing of children.
2. Indigenous people/Tribes must have ownership of social problems as well as the development of solutions to those problems.
3. Reclaiming and reviving cultural values, beliefs, and practices to heal children and those victimized as children must begin with understanding historical trauma and in multigenerational dialog.
4. Ongoing mentoring and support for indigenous couriers of community change are essential for Tribal communities to achieve long-term change in attitudes and responses toward children who were victims of sexual abuse.

Applying indigenous learning styles and utilizing experienced-based activities, two PTH faculty members lead participants carefully through examination of issues relating to child sexual abuse dynamics and victimization, healing and wellness for indigenous communities, and community empowerment strategies. During the 3-day interactive training and facilitated dialog, participants are asked to explore their truths, concepts, and beliefs (Table 1).

The depth of exploration into these areas and the stage of action toward community ownership depend primarily on the readiness of the participants individually and collectively and their perception of the readiness of larger community circles to delve into the issues. Each Training of Community Facilitators session ends with an action plan and timeframes that the participants develop through facilitated dialog. To reach this point, participants have evaluated obstacles to ending silence and support for healing, identified strengths and resources that will help address the obstacles, and determined the readiness of certain key groups such as elders, leaders, and parents to support community change.

The PTH advisors felt strongly that only those who had been taught how to measure the readiness of their community, how to present this sensitive and emotional information on child victimization, and how to provide support to survivors who viewed the video should be allowed to use the video. The advisors understood that in any Alaska Native audience, it is likely that as many as two thirds of the group would be survivors of childhood trauma with a high possibility of having painful memories triggered by the material. They felt it essential that the Tribal community facilitators who would use these tools are familiar with and committed



to responding to adult and child survivors in a safe, nurturing, and supportive manner. Thus, participation in the 3-day Tribal Community Facilitator training is the only way to get a copy of the PTH video and the 195-page step-by-step *Tribal Community Facilitator Video Guidebook*.

## PTH Demographics and Outcomes

Pathway to Hope Tribal Community Facilitator training has been provided to more than 450 individuals in the states of Alaska, Washington, Montana, Wyoming, and South Dakota as well as for Aboriginal people in the Canadian Province of Manitoba between October 2007 and May 2013. As previously mentioned, each training event is customized to the readiness and goals of the community members who assist with planning the training event. While there are core agenda topics, emphasis and outcomes depend on the participants themselves and vary considerably across these regions.

Participants have always been multigenerational; we urge local planners to include trusted elders and spiritual leaders as well as young people who have interest in community change. Most often the participant groups are predominantly female, but there have always been male participants in each group. The demographics of the trainee groups vary also. At some sessions, training is shared by up to 30 people (a PTH maximum-participant group is 35) representing several Tribes in one geographic area, and in other situations, the participants are all part of one Tribal community. Sometimes 100% of participants are Native, and other times, up to one third of the group is non-Native. The non-Natives most commonly represent law enforcement, local or state child protection workers, behavioral health clinicians, and clergy who have been invited to participate with the Tribal community.

The demographics of the participant group may be indicative of the roles that are committed to changing community attitudes and beliefs about child sexual abuse. For instance, in one session, two Tribes living in close proximity shared the Training of Community Facilitators, and many of the participants working in programs serving children and youth. It was significant that several traditional spiritual leaders attended along with federal law enforcement and prosecution agencies serving these Tribes. This community had recently witnessed a highly publicized multiple child victim case where tensions related to misunderstandings and poor communication. Perhaps the most important accomplishment of that session was the sharing and relationships that developed without focus on a particular case through the course of the 3-day training.

Among participant groups, we have found that community members have remained silent about child sexual abuse because



they are unaware that others also feel the denial and silence should end. For example, when working with a single Tribal community, PTH participants expressed surprise when they realized many others felt the same way they did about addressing child sexual abuse. In another community with several strong child advocates in leadership roles, younger members of the group found safety to express fears, anxiety, suspicions, and frustration about a recent child victim case. In this Tribal community, participants came from programs that didn't often interact with each other so the PTH approach helped them establish a greater, safer bond with each other and develop action steps that were more inclusive of all agencies.

Multi-Tribal PTH training sessions have been held in western Washington, Alaska, and South Dakota. These sessions have been attended primarily by individuals who are already involved with services to children and families, such as child advocacy center staff, child protection investigators, medical personnel, child and adult victim advocates, law enforcement, and political leaders. While many of these professionals are usually at least somewhat knowledgeable about the definition and dynamics of child sexual abuse, we have found that information and guidance on the development of community-based strategies to end silence and denial, increase ownership of the problems, and outreach to change attitudes were welcomed and needed. Furthermore, the training approach facilitates greater willingness to collaborate and support each other in shared, thus sustained, efforts. In one of the multi-Tribal groups, participants became aware that they had common challenges and various strengths; by sharing strategies and initiatives to end silence and denial between their communities, they would maximize their effectiveness and draw strength from each other.

In every unique training session, participants have been guided to acknowledge the historical trauma, identify and analyze their strengths and challenges, and design realistic steps to move their

communities and circles to the next stage of awareness; to create opportunity for improving outcomes for children who have been victimized; to hold offenders accountable; and to prevent further abuse of children. Although each host community and forum has been different, when common threads of community-based dialog and wisdom of Native elders and spiritual leaders are paired with readiness of community service providers, helpers, and leaders, true changes have emerged. In two different regions of Alaska, the PTH session was a direct predecessor to the establishment of a child advocacy center to provide multidisciplinary coordination in investigation and response to child sexual abuse. Some communities have established prevention efforts staffed by volunteers to teach children about personal safety and teach parents about protecting children. Several PTH sites have succeeded in having their Tribal governments legislate a Children's Bill of Rights, one of the activities used during the training. One region of Alaska now has an annual Protecting and Honoring Our Children conference. At all levels, this indigenous model for learning, sharing, helping, and healing brings hope for an end to denial and silence about child sexual abuse for Native people in Alaska and elsewhere.

### PTH—Future Efforts

Development and initial delivery of the Pathway to Hope curriculum was funded through a training and technical assistance grant from the U.S. Department of Justice, Office for Victims of Crime to the Tribal Law and Policy Institute. The funds were no longer available after mid-2010, and thus, expenses for all subsequent Training of Tribal Community Facilitators sessions have been covered by the Tribes and organizations that requested the training. A few other sources have also been used: three sessions were funded through the Denver region of the Administration on Children and Families; a few Tribes added the PTH training into their OVC or VAWA grant proposals addressing victim services and support.

Without dedicated funds, this community-based indigenous helping and healing curriculum will continue to be available as requested by Tribes and Tribal organizations that are ready for the community facilitator training. With the hope of securing solid support and sharing this innovative approach, presentations have been made at international forums such as the International Circumpolar Health Conference (2012) and the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (2010). Additionally, the PTH approach was shared at national conferences such as the National Indian Child Welfare Association and the San Diego International Conference on Child and Family

Maltreatment shortly after it was unveiled in 2008. As a result of these forums, child victim advocacy programs in Scotland and Zambia have requested the PTH curriculum as well.

The lead faculty, Kimber Olson (formerly Evensen), author of the video guide, and I, coordinator of the PTH video project, continue to seek funding streams that will provide the resources to build PTH work in rural Alaska and elsewhere. As more child advocacy centers are developed in rural Alaska, the need for sustained and knowledgeable community support for children also grows. The advisory group, past participants, and our PTH faculty sincerely believe that this indigenous approach to ending silence and denial is fundamental to community empowerment and healing. The inherent responsibility and right that Tribal Nations have to assure safety for their children and promote healing for those who suffered abuse as children begins with coming together and ending silence and denial.

### References

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### About the Author

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