



Allyson Kelley and Associates PLLC

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# The Forest of Resilience: Indigenous Elder Perspectives on Grandfamilies, Culture, and Wellbeing

**Abstract:** This review explores American Indian Elders' experiences and perspectives related to Grandfamilies and presents factors contributing to maternal mortality in Montana. We interviewed 12 Elders from reservation and urban locations in Montana who shared stories about being an Elder, stories about Grandfamilies, and stories about premature causes of death in their communities. Elders discussed gaps in existing resources, silos in programs, pervasive drug and alcohol abuse, limited housing, poverty, transportation barriers, and the need for greater education. These challenges were balanced by solutions like historical resilience, traditional parenting practices, cultural traditions and ceremonies, grief and loss support, support for grandparents raising grandchildren, kinship systems, and Indigenous values and teachings. Our findings underscore the concept of a Healing, Resilient Forest. They may interest Tribal communities, governmental agencies, prevention programs, culture-based programs, parenting programs, K-12 schools, colleges, economic and policy organizations, and others working to address premature death in American Indian communities. We begin this paper by reviewing relevant literature, what happened to the forest, and why we are exploring maternal mortality and Grandfamilies. Next, we present our methodological approach, results, recommendations, and implications for future work with Tribes, Tribal organizations, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and communities.

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# FOREST OF RESILIENCE

Indigenous  
Elder Perspectives  
on Grandfamilies,  
Culture, and  
Wellbeing

JULY 2024









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**Note:** *The contents of the report are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of RMTLC, CDC, or Tribal nations. In this document, the underlined text represents a hyperlink. You will be taken to a website, document, or report referenced if you click the link. Brackets within quotes represent a word added to the Elder interview to clarify meaning.*

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July 2, 2024

Dear Reader,

Allyson asked me to write this letter with the goal of introducing our accomplishments to date and sharing what these efforts mean as we go forward. First, I would like to thank all the people who contributed to Allyson Kelley and Associate's review of the MMRC in Montana and Wyoming.

Thanks to all the individuals who contributed to this project directly and indirectly, especially the staff members who worked with us through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Your contributions were monumental and are too numerous to list. Through our joint efforts, we developed a working model of resilience that highlights community perspectives on Grandfamilies and fosters a greater understanding of the diversity in Native culture. We remain committed to our goal: improving the future well-being and survival of American Indian mothers and their infants.

Throughout this project, we gained and employed insight and wisdom from interviews with American Indian Elders. These discussions were modeled after traditional sources of wisdom and understanding that have existed among American Indian people for centuries. We listened to Elders and made every attempt to honor their opinions and lived experiences.

Our next step is to continue to employ this model and collect additional feedback from Elders and others who are working to improve maternal and infant mortality. American Indian people have survived in the Americas for several centuries by adapting and learning to be flexible. Most important, they have survived by sharing and adapting to changing situations.

When asked, Elders shared how this adaptive process occurred. They viewed culture as a dynamic process which shifted and changed. Some of these changes were positive and others were highly traumatic. Balancing these opposites developed into a goal for future generations to follow.

Our future task is to utilize and balance this information in positive ways. The long-term goal is that "these people may live."

**Dewey Ertz, ED.D – Cheyenne River Sioux**  
Elder Consultant  
AKA PLLC



## SUMMARY

This review explores American Indian Elders' experiences and perspectives related to Grandfamilies and presents factors contributing to maternal mortality in Montana. We interviewed 12 Elders from reservation and urban locations in Montana who shared stories about being an Elder, stories about Grandfamilies, and stories about premature causes of death in their communities. Elders discussed gaps in existing resources, silos in programs, pervasive drug and alcohol abuse, limited housing, poverty, transportation barriers, and the need for greater education. These challenges were balanced by solutions like historical resilience, traditional parenting practices, cultural traditions and ceremonies, grief and loss support, support for grandparents raising grandchildren, kinship systems, and Indigenous values and teachings. Our findings underscore the concept of a Healing, Resilient Forest and may interest Tribal communities, governmental agencies, prevention programs, culture-based programs, parenting programs, K-12 schools, colleges, economic and policy organizations, and others working to address premature death in American Indian communities. We begin this paper with a review of relevant literature, what happened to the forest, and the reasons why we are exploring maternal mortality and Grandfamilies. Next, we present our methodological approach, results, recommendations, and implications for future work with Tribes, Tribal organizations, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and communities.

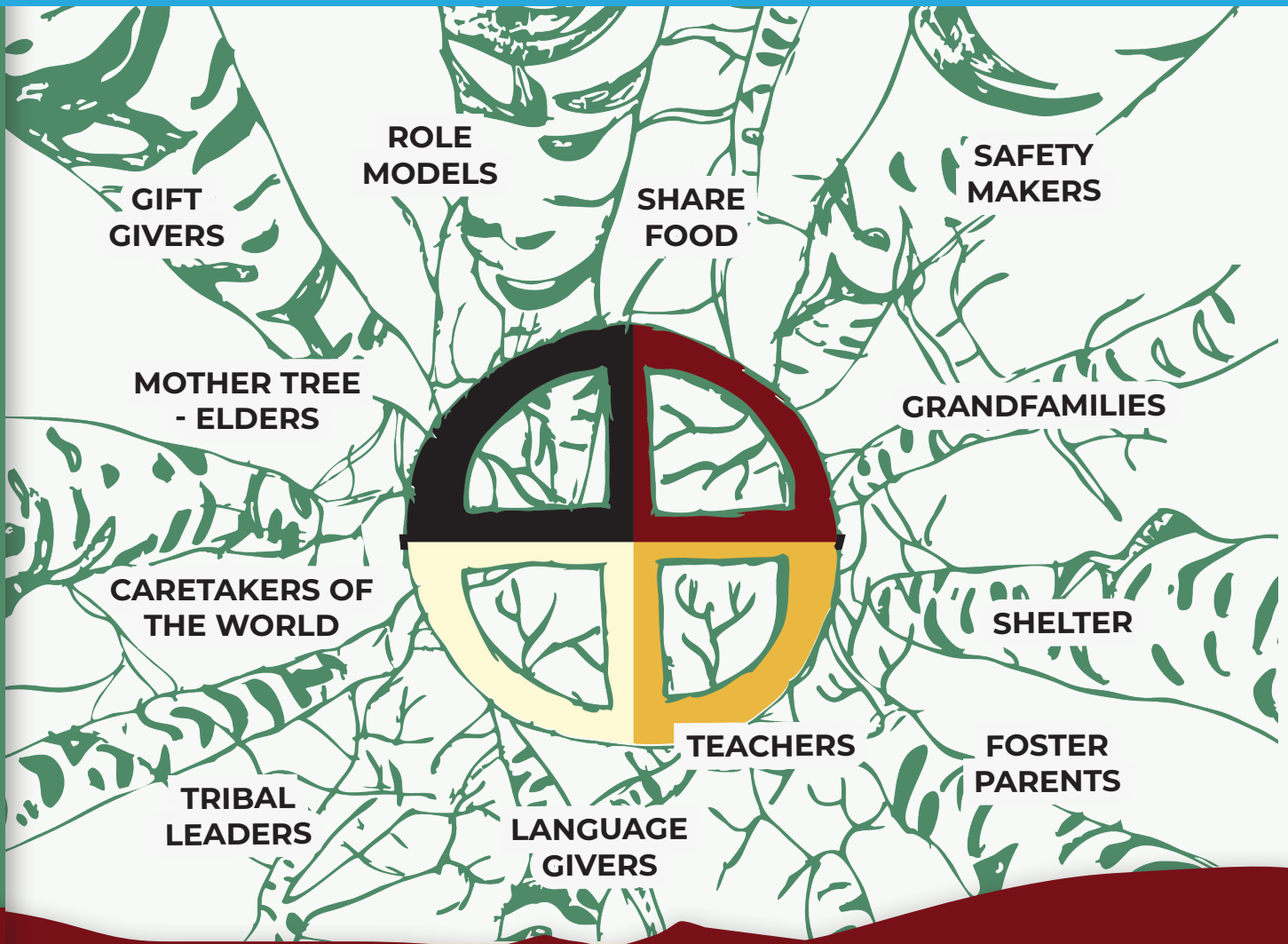
**“It goes back to the ancestors. We were caretakers of the world.”**

*—Little Shell Elder,  
2024*



Figure 1: Forest of Resilience Model

Elder Roles - Healing Forest



Soil

Culture      Housing      Safety      Transportation

Education      Specialty Care

Economic Stability

Healthcare

Roots/Networks

Respect Culture

7 Grandfathers Teachings

Grief and Loss Support

Access to Traditional Teachings

MMRCS

Tribal Sovereignty



# BEGINNING THE JOURNEY

## A REVIEW OF PUBLISHED LITERATURE

### Colonization and Disruptions to Family

The impact of colonization on traditional parenting practices, kinship systems, and intergenerational traumas has been widely documented (Masse, 2006; Akee, 2018; O'Neill et al., 2018). Prior to colonization, American Indian<sup>1</sup> families saw themselves as functioning units and did not live in heteronormative, nuclear families (Masse, 2006). They lived as extended family units—as Grandfamilies with aunts, uncles, cousins, and extended relatives (Generations United, n.d.). Child-rearing and other parental responsibilities were shared as a collective effort within the Grandfamily (Masse, 2006; Masse et al., 2021). Children were, and are, viewed as gifts from the Creator to be cared for with love and respect (Bigfoot & Funderburk, 2011). Men and women were equal, both respected for their roles and leadership (Sneve, 2016). The U.S. government's forced removal of American Indian children from their homes and reservations devastated connections between children, parents, grandparents, extended families, kinship systems, and their culture. The practice

of forced removal has been documented since the beginning of the Civil War. Up until 1985, the U.S. government was removing American Indian children from their homes (Mannes, 1995). While policies like the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) are designed to protect American Indian children and honor Tribal governments as sovereign nations, continued advocacy and protection are necessary to reunite children with their families.

In the United States, 8% of children under 18 live in households headed by their grandparents (Anderson et al., 2024). In American Indian populations, the US Census reports that just 6.5% of grandchildren live with their grandparents (Anderson et al., 2024). However, this rate is likely much higher because of the cultural and traditional norms associated with Grandfamilies,<sup>2</sup> where children may not be formally adopted by grandparents or in their custodial care based on legal standards. While there has been some research on Grandfamilies and the role of American Indian Elder and parenting practices (Cross & Day, 2008; Cross et al., 2010), none has been done in Montana and Wyoming.

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<sup>1</sup> In this review, we use American Indian to refer to the Tribal groups and elders we interviewed in the Great Plains Region. We use the term Indigenous to refer to people living in the United States before colonization and settler contact

<sup>2</sup> Grandfamilies refers to a family where one or more children live with and are cared for by their grandparent(s).



## AMERICAN INDIAN MATERNAL MORTALITY

Disparities in American Indian maternal mortality exist despite significant national, state, and local level efforts to address them. Maternal mortality has increased in the United States but decreased in nearly every country in the world; researchers estimated 38% between 2000 and 2017 (Heck et al., 2020). American Indian women are two to three times more likely to die of pregnancy or birth complications than non-Hispanic White women (National Indian Health Board, n.d.). Structural inequities that contribute to increased maternal mortality include adverse childhood experiences, poor mental health, unresolved grief, rural location and isolation, lack of prenatal care, lack of access to healthcare, inadequate access to emergency obstetric care, cardiomyopathies, hypertensive disorders, and hemorrhage (Kelley et al., 2023). Postpartum visits and support for maternal mental health are inadequate; 54% of Montana and 22% of Wyoming are considered maternity care deserts (RMTEC, 2022). Perinatal depression and risk factors associated with depression, such as low socioeconomic status, being a single parent, limited social support, and stress, likely contribute to higher maternal mortality rates in Montana and Wyoming. Other contributing factors include limited data collection systems and limited documentation of Maternal Child Health (MCH) processes, programs, surveillance, and reporting. Limited capacity to respond to ongoing grief, trauma, loss, and socio-cultural-political conditions also negatively impact the well-being of American Indian people.

Current research, however, offers an incomplete picture of the root causes of American Indian and Alaska Native maternal mortality. A scoping review conducted by Heck and colleagues reported that the three leading causes of American Indian and Alaska Native pregnancy-related maternal mortality were hemorrhage, cardiomyopathies, and hypertensive disorders of pregnancy (2021). Further, they found that American Indian and Alaska Native maternal mortality data for homicide and suicide consistently included small samples and often miscategorized American Indian and Alaska Native maternal deaths in an “Other” race/ethnicity. Without proper categorization or sample sizes, the root causes of American Indian and Alaska Native maternal mortality will continue to be underreported and primarily ignored (Heck et al., 2021).

MMRCs, also known as Maternal Mortality Review Committees, have existed since 1915 to prevent future maternal deaths in the US population (Marmol et al., 1969). In 1935, American Indian mothers were 1.6 times more likely to die than White mothers. The primary causes of American Indian maternal mortality in 1940–1945 were sepsis, toxemia, and hemorrhage. Researchers of this review blamed the Indian Health Service for their failures to provide preventive care to American Indian mothers and recommended MMRCs be created to monitor American Indian mortality rates, educate people, and develop MCH programs emphasizing preventive services, health education, and the use of paramedical personnel (1977). Unfortunately, progress to reduce maternal mortality in American Indian populations has been limited, even with the establishment of MMRCs.

## GRIEF AND LOSS

There are 574 federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native Tribes in the United States (NCAI, 2020). Each Tribe has a cultural response and ritual when a loss occurs. Many Tribes believe that death is part of the cycle of nature and life and that individuals pass on to the next camp or go to the world beyond (Walker, 2009).<sup>3</sup> For example, the Dineh (Navajo) participate in a four-day ceremony that allows families to mourn and get rid of the deceased person's belongings. Clements, Vigil, Manno, and Wilks (2003) describe how "The deceased's hair is tied with an eagle's feather to symbolize their return home . . . and the deceased was buried in the family's hogan" (p.23). Relatives cleanse themselves on the fourth day to avoid the need for further mourning. Mourners do not speak the name of the deceased because they fear it will summon back the person's soul (Cacciatore, 2009). The Sioux Indians bury a traditional hatchet in the casket to ward off demons (Cacciatore, 2009). Some Tribes participate in the Wiping of the Tears Ceremony to mourn the loss of loved ones (Brave Heart et.al, 2012). This ceremony is related to a give-away where the deceased person's possessions are given to family members and significant others after a year of mourning. It signifies the end of the mourning process and beginning of celebration or remembrance of their life's accomplishments. The ceremony often uses cedar, tobacco, sage, and prayers to mourn and heal.<sup>4</sup> Other Tribes use dances, medicines, and symbolism. For example, the butterfly represents everlasting life, and the Wilik-wilik Waashaashut (Butterfly Dance) represents the caterpillar transforming into a butterfly.

Colonization, missionary movements, and residential schools impacted how Tribal communities grieve – their specific medicine and practices to transition from death into the spirit world (Muzyka, 2020). Tribal people also live off-reservation, away from their communities, and may not have access to traditional grieving practices and support. The ways that American Indian people die today are vastly different than they were prior to colonization. High rates of suicide, car accidents, drug overdose, and social determinants result in deaths of despair, lower life expectancy, and ongoing grief and loss (Parker & Kelley, 2023). Tribal groups often experience disenfranchised grief, meaning grief that people experience when a loss cannot be acknowledged or publicly mourned (Heart & DeBruyn, 1998). Western culture often views grief as only appropriate if the loss was a direct family member. This contrasts with Tribal kinship systems and traditions that recognize grief as a collective loss. Without proper rituals and funeral rites that allow individuals to bereave and adjust to death, individuals may feel helpless, powerless, inferior, and disconnected. Understanding the grief, loss, and healing practices of Tribal groups is essential for preventing future maternal deaths and unresolved trauma.

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<sup>3</sup> Note these examples do not cover all grief practices and are included to illustrate varying practices around grief and loss.

<sup>4</sup> Note that Wiping of the Tears Ceremony varies by Tribe and family. Some use drums, specific prayers, and other practices.

## VALUES

Fundamental differences exist in how health and well-being are defined and operationalized in American Indian and Western communities. Much of this stems from discrepancies between American Indian and Western societal values. For example, the Great Indian Values of the Lakota are bravery, individual freedom, generosity and sharing, adjustment to nature, and good advice from American Indian wisdom (Bryde, 1971). Additional concepts from other sources are embedded in these values.

## SOCIAL AND STRUCTURAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH

Increased American Indian morbidity and mortality are associated with the Social and Structural Determinants of Health (SDOH).<sup>5</sup> Social determinants and their impacts on American Indian maternal mortality include food instability, lower education, lower income, unsafe neighborhoods, poor quality housing, limited access to care, high rates of incarceration, disproportionate rates of foster care placements, and lack of quality homes and substance abuse. Structural determinants and their impacts on American Indian mortality include inadequate funding of the Indian Health Service, systemic discrimination, lack of resources, limited educational and employment opportunities, transportation, and healthcare (Brown et al., 2019).

<sup>5</sup> The conditions (Social Determinants of Health) in which people are born, live, grow, work, and age impact morbidity and mortality. The root causes of health inequities (Structural Determinants of Health) include laws, systems, histories, racism, discrimination, and power.

- **Children and females are sacred and protected.**
- **Seven directions - four compass points, Mother Earth, Father Sky are within you.**
- **Live in balance.**
- **Trauma disrupts balance for everyone: victim, offender, their families, and the community.**
- **Learn to manage your desire to numb or run from trauma.**

# METHODS



## KNOWLEDGE AND POSITIONALITY

Knowledge is relational; it is not owned by one person (Reid, 2020). We use the concept of Etuaptmumk (Two-Eyed Seeing). This Mi'kmaw concept encourages using Indigenous and mainstream science, where knowledge is co-created and responsive to cultural contexts. [The Seven Grandfathers' Teachings \(Munroe & Hernandez, 2022\)](#) of humility, courage,

honesty, wisdom, respect, truth, and love guided this work. A Little Shell Elder shared these teachings and a handout with us during an interview.



Our methods also honor Indigenous data sovereignty (Kukutai & Taylor, 2016); data collected honors the inherent rights and interests of Indigenous Nations and peoples at all levels. Data are protected, owned, and applied by Indigenous peoples over Western colonial systems. Our methods embrace Indigenous methodologies (Wilson, 2008) based on Indigenous worldviews, value systems, and lived experiences where practice and research are ceremony.

- **Allyson (AK)** is a white female, Western-trained researcher who has worked in and with Tribal communities for two decades. Her purpose is to create resources and studies that lead to transformational healing while bringing people and communities into the sacred circle of this work. Allyson leads the AKA team and supported the overall project, analysis, writing, and meaning-making process.
- **Dewey (DE)** is an enrolled member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe and a retired psychologist. He is an Elder, grandparent, and healer. Dewey conducted Elder interviews and supported the meaning-making process.
- **Brighten (BCM)** is an enrolled member of the Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes and an evaluation associate at AKA. Brighten supported the analysis and data-cleaning process.
- **Christie (CF)** is an enrolled member of the Blackfeet Nation of Montana. She interviewed Blackfeet Elders, reviewed data, and connected data to the Healing Forest concept drawing. She is a mother, partner, and an auntie raising her 16-year-old niece,
- **Jaylea Younger (JY)** is the Native artist who drew the Forest of Resilience concept for this work.



When possible, we use a dialogical approach (Carter et al., 2014) to present topics and Elder responses or reflections in this paper. This method and review encourage self-reflection, engagement, and action to create a Healing, Resilient Forest.

A one-size-fits-all approach to addressing health disparities or maternal mortality in Tribal communities does not exist. Within each Tribe, clans, districts, communities, and protocols dictate how a community responds to the passing of a loved one or views about grandparents raising Grandfamilies. The present review contributes to the knowledge and understanding of what happens when a maternal or child death occurs in a community and the essential role of Grandfamilies in keeping families together, culture alive, and the future generation whole. It does not represent all Tribes, families, or experiences. Responses to these questions cannot be generalized or found on the Internet as one Elder reminded us during an interview. The wisdom and teachings of Elders have been passed down from generation to generation.



## The primary questions explored through Elder interviews were:

1. What happens when a mother or child dies in a community?
2. What are the roles of Elders in raising children and being grand families?
3. What are some areas where change is possible to improve conditions and reduce deaths?

## DESIGN

We followed principles of Two-Eyed Seeing, the Seven Grandfathers' Teachings (Munroe & Hernandez, 2022), the Mycorrhizal Networks of Forests (Simard, 2018), the Healing Forest of Wellbriety and Multigenerational Recovery (Moore & Coyhis, 2010), Indigenous Research Methodologies (Wilson, 2008), and descriptive qualitative research (Patton, 2014). These principles and methods were preferred because we sought to understand and describe the phenomena of what happens in a Tribal community when an American Indian mother or child passes away, the role of MMRCs, the roles of Grandfamilies, and solutions from Elder perspectives.

## PARTICIPANTS

The consortium provided a list of Elders for interviews. We reached out to Elders via phone and email to set up interviews (n = 5). Not all consortium Elders Council members responded to requests for interviews. We talked to Elders Councils and programs in reservation communities (Blackfeet and Northern Cheyenne) to recruit additional Elders (n = 7) to interview. Twelve Elders from five Tribes in the Great Plains Region, four reservations, and one urban location participated in interviews. Elders were selected by a Tribal consortium in the region based on their membership in the consortium Elders Council and Elder status in communities. We used purposeful sampling methods to ensure a balanced representation from different tribes, genders, ages and lived experiences.

## ETHICS AND CONSENT

We followed Tribal guidelines for research involving Tribal peoples. Although this review was not research, we followed Tribal consortium protocols when conducting the interviews. Before each interview, Elders signed a consent form that outlined the purposes of the interviews and how the information would be used. All interviews were conducted in English, and no translation was required.

## DATA COLLECTION

Interviews served as the primary data source for this review. We used Zoom and Adobe transcription software to transcribe interviews. Interviews were conducted between April 1 and April 30, 2024, and included 12 Elders. Most interviews lasted 1 hour. A culturally tailored, semi-structured approach was used to conduct interviews. Interview guides were co-created by authors and reviewed by the Tribal consortium. Two Indigenous Elders, DE and CF, conducted interviews in person and via Zoom. Interview guides included ten questions, background information (1), defining MMRC needs and gaps (3), Elder roles and Grandfamilies (5), and other topics (1) (see Appendix A). Elders were offered a \$100 gift card for their time.



## DATA ANALYSIS

All authors (AK, DE, CF, BMC) listened to recorded interviews with Elders and reviewed transcripts. Listening and reflecting on Elders' stories was done individually and then as a group. Data were first auto-coded using NVivo. This resulted in two visual thematic frames that outlined the sentiment of codes and the frequency of textual data within the transcripts. BC listened to transcripts and coded them using hand-coding techniques focusing on the roles and needs of MMRCs. AK and BC discussed these themes and their meaning. Next, AK relistened to data, and AK reviewed the visual depictions of codes in their entirety. Feeling something was missing, AK traveled to a shed in the forest and listened to all audio transcripts again. She used white sheets of paper and color-coded themes by Tribal affiliation. Broad categories of themes and subthemes, such as Elder roles, trauma resources, MMRCs, solutions and SDOH (see Supplemental files), were organized using post-it notes. A final level of coding involved listening to the audio files again, comparing audio files with transcripts, and exploring data from the frame of a Healing Forest (Simard, 2018). This metaphor came to AK while she was walking in the forest, driving in the forest, and thinking about DE's suggestions to balance our findings and recommendations with hope and opportunities. Familiar with Susan Simard's work, AK began researching forest-based networks and the resiliency of forests (2018). From this lens, the data started to make sense. Mother trees represent grandmothers and mothers. Mother trees are hub trees that keep other trees healthy. They represent grandmothers and mothers who keep

their community healthy. The trees in a forest are connected based on mycorrhizal networks. Similarly, human neural networks in our minds, spirits, and bodies facilitate learning, memory, perception, and survival and connect communities. Mother trees in the forest talk to other trees. They seek out stressed trees and help them by passing information, nutrients, carbon, water, and phosphorus. It does not matter if the hurting trees are their offspring or even the same species of tree; mother trees help all trees. Mother trees send chemical signals to other trees using fungi to warn them of danger. The roots and soil determine a forest's health and resilience. When the death of a mother tree occurs through deforestation, clearcutting, disease, external forces, or system collapse, their offspring live on in the seeds that they planted—like individuals living in communities. Other trees step in as mother trees or hub trees to take care of the forest. A revised codebook was developed using the overarching theme of a healing, resilient forest, and the corresponding categories ([see Table 1](#)).

We copied text from recorded transcripts from MS Word into Excel by Elder name, Tribal affiliation, theme, and subtheme. Healing Forest themes were shared with all authors. BCM cleaned transcripts and quotes, then added brackets to represent DE's responses or to clarify meaning within the context of the interview and theme. All authors reviewed coded data and visual depictions of data. When there were differences in perspective on how something was coded versus what it meant, the team discussed these discrepancies and agreed on the actual text and themes that should be used.

JY reviewed the concepts and listened to some of Susan Simard's work. She also listened to the Healing Forest concepts by Don Coyhis (2010). She was inspired to sketch 12 rooted aspen trees with the Medicine Wheel in the center. The drawing and supporting write-up became the thought concept for our model titled, the Forest of Resilience. The Forest of Resilience is a symbolic and physical representation that connects maternal health, the role of grandparents, and the intergenerational support within communities. We apply the metaphor of trees to honor mothers and Elders, focusing on how they sustain and nurture future generations, especially in the face of challenges such as maternal mortality and addiction.



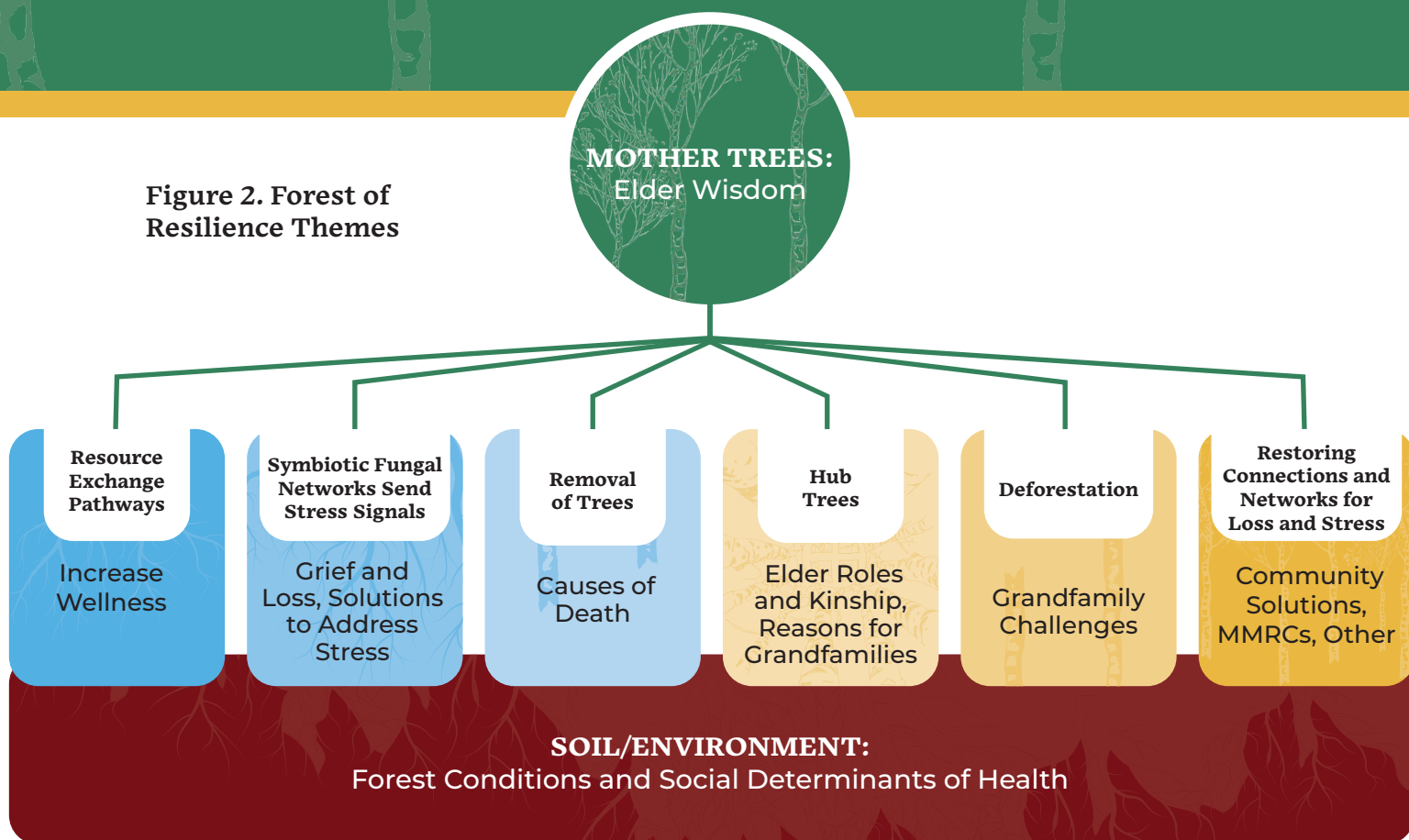


# UNCOVERING WISDOM:

## RESULTS AND THEMES FROM ELDER INTERVIEWS

We identified eight themes and multiple subthemes from Elders interviews about maternal mortality and Grandfamilies. These themes (listed in Table 1) represent the resilience of American Indian communities and the opportunities to support Grandfamilies and restore sacred connections. Themes also provide recommendations for MMRCs and may be of interest to other organizations collaborating with Tribes in the areas of Grandfamilies, cultural programming, recovery, social determinants of health, public health, and health equity. Honoring Indigenous methodologies, we explored themes using the words of Elders. When appropriate, we explicated responses from Elders using Western perspectives and definitions. We provide an additional interpretation using Two-Eyed Seeing principles in the discussion section.

Figure 2. Forest of Resilience Themes




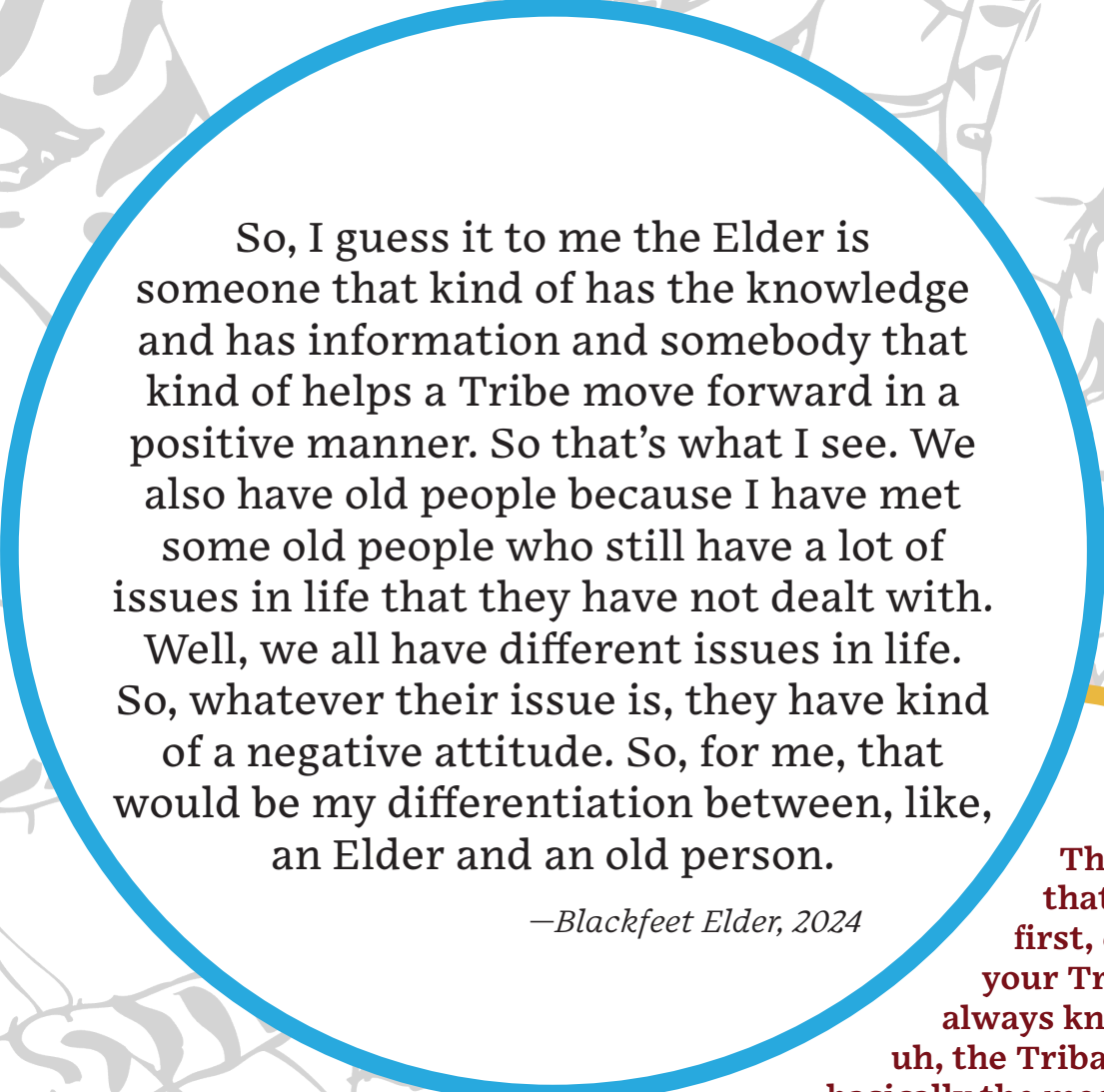


**Table 1. Healing Forest Themes and Subthemes Related to American Indian Maternal Mortality**

<b>Healing Forest Representation</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>
<b>Soil/Environment</b>	Forest Conditions and Social Determinants of Health	Education, housing, drugs and alcohol
<b>Mother Trees</b>	Elder Wisdom	Culture-based parenting, identity, caretakers, education, spirituality, roles
<b>Resource Exchange Pathways – Fungal Threads</b>	Increase Wellness Resources	Mental health outreach, support large families, basic needs, group home center, safety for kids year around, address systemic SDOH issues, prevent drug impacted babies
<b>Symbiotic Fungal Networks– Send Chemical Stress Signals to Trees</b>	Grief and Loss	Infant deaths, beliefs and practices related to death, limited support
	Solutions to Address Stress	Education around trauma and culture, MCH clinics and care in communities, homes for children, traditional roles of men and women, positive mental health, bringing back culture/spiritual practices, teaching young people traditions, way of life as religion, language and communication, functional programs and leadership, address learned helplessness, community connections, life is sacred, Elders Council, restore culture, traditional parenting values
<b>Removal of Hub Trees/Mother Trees</b>	Causes of Death	Drugs, alcohol, pills, fear, mental health, hopelessness, loneliness, young mothers, complicit behaviors, deaths of despair, lack of proper MCH care, loss of cultural teachings
<b>Hub Trees</b>	Elder Roles and Kinship	Safety through traditions, reasons for raising grandchildren, raising foster children, keeping family together, generational teachings and legacies, values, and balance in a White world
	Reasons for Grandfamilies	Limited education, loss of culture, poor role models, absent parents, parental dysfunction DV, dysfunction drugs, and alcohol, courts related reasons, unsafe environments, traditional reasons
<b>Deforestation</b>	Community Solutions	Treatment support, Seven Grandfathers’ Teachings, Traditional and Christian Teachings
<b>Restoring Connections and Networks for Trees Experiencing Loss and Stress</b>	MMRCs	Roles of MMRCs, honor Tribal sovereignty and respect for culture, educate, respect
	Other	Urban and reservation differences, within reservation differences, appreciation, teachings from generations

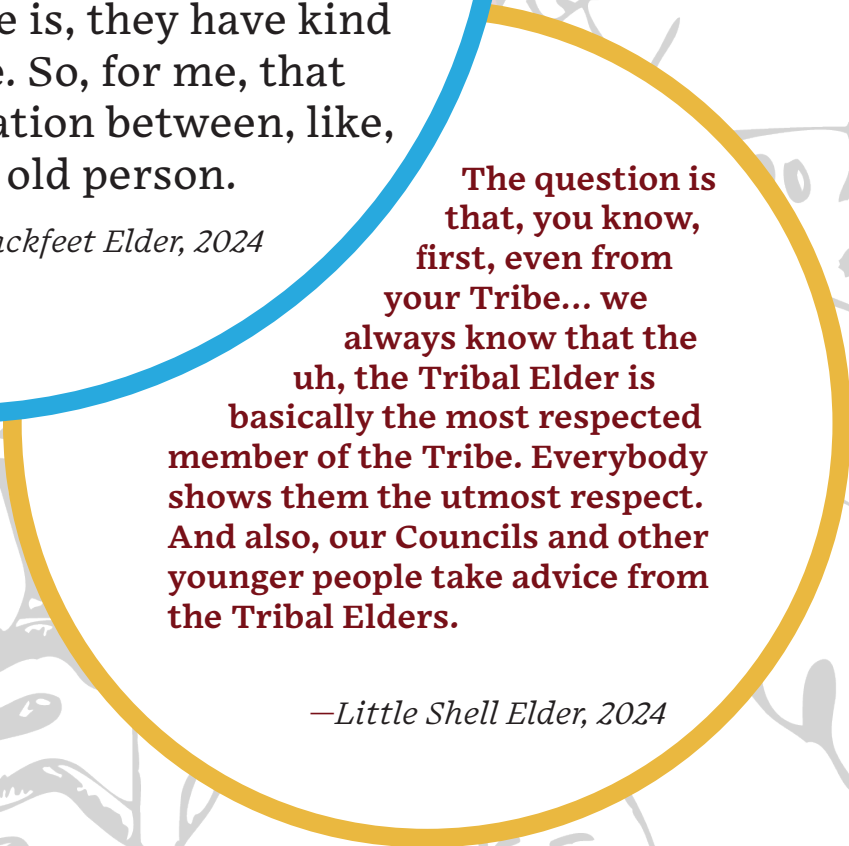
# WHO ARE THE MOTHER TREES? WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE AN ELDER?

Elders reflected on what it means to be an Elder.



So, I guess it to me the Elder is someone that kind of has the knowledge and has information and somebody that kind of helps a Tribe move forward in a positive manner. So that's what I see. We also have old people because I have met some old people who still have a lot of issues in life that they have not dealt with. Well, we all have different issues in life. So, whatever their issue is, they have kind of a negative attitude. So, for me, that would be my differentiation between, like, an Elder and an old person.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024



**The question is that, you know, first, even from your Tribe... we always know that the uh, the Tribal Elder is basically the most respected member of the Tribe. Everybody shows them the utmost respect. And also, our Councils and other younger people take advice from the Tribal Elders.**

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

# MOTHER TREES: ELDER ROLES

Positions and roles of Elders varied, including great-grandmother, grandma, grandfather, foster parent, Elder, uncle, Tribal leader, auntie, uncle, educator, Tribal historian, Tribal language speaker, caretakers of the children and community, safety makers, and others. All Elders were involved in some way in raising a child(ren) that was not their own.

My role right now as an Elder in my Tribal Community is on the Elders Council. [Okay.] So, we interact with the Tribal Council on how the Tribe functions.

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

My role in my family is to provide for what I have. For children.

—Crow Elder, 2024

My role as an Elder... to basically stay healthy. Stay fit. Like I said, my grandkids, they're just, they're just everything.

—Northern Cheyenne Elder, 2024

I've been around kids all my life and in the Crow way. My sister's children are my children, and their grandkids are my grandkids, and so on, and even more, great-grandkids.

—Crow Elder, 2024

My role as an Elder in the community basically comes from the guidelines of my upbringing. **And, at one time, we all lived as a village. All the relatives were close. We helped each other.** If somebody was broke, another one of the persons would want family members to come around and ask for money so we can help that person get their car fixed or, you know, buy clothes for the kids or whatever it was. We all shared our food. You know, I remember as a little girl, they'd go hunting, be gone on four days, come back with elk and deer. Most one time and they'd be all chopped up and passed out. So, I really gravitated to that gift-giving.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

Well, first of all, I was the mother, I guess, and I had a boy and a girl, okay? And I lost my girl in 09. She has six children. And then my boy, um, had, you know, the wife decided she was done playing a role, I guess, and she he left. She left, she left. The three of them. Girl, and now, I'm a great-grandmother. And then the older I get, the better I am. But, you know, I have enjoyed my life. You know, I have a disability...I know my limit. And so, I think I lived my life to the fullest to my ...Even though I had limitations, I enjoyed my life.

—Northern Cheyenne Elder, 2024



# SOIL AND ENVIRONMENT: CONDITIONS AND THE SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH

The experiences shared by Elders underscore the need for healthy environments for children and families to thrive. Issues like generational poverty, unemployment, limited education, poor housing, and increasing drug use and exposure create challenges.

## Poverty

And the lack of money. You know, generational poverty.

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

Yeah, it's, it's a lot of things. Especially with no jobs, you know? Right when they get their money, they get their alcohol and drugs. But yeah, I think, I think they put a lot of, these families put themselves there. They don't realize, you know, the kids are the priority. You shouldn't be drinking with kids around. That's what the bars for. Go over there and drink. That's what causes all this (...) Kids getting taken away, whatnot.

—Northern Cheyenne Elder, 2024

## Education

**My grandmother taught me that education is the key to everything.** Once you get your degree, nobody can take it from you. [Sure.] And having that degree is, you have all these opportunities. For out there for you, you know, you don't have to stay in one place, you can get different jobs everywhere. She was like, you'll be the first one, they look at because you have that degree. [Sure.] And so there was a difference between so when I went to live with my paternal, grandparents it was like I just stayed home. Didn't go to school. And so, then my grandma would find out and she would come after me and take me to school.

—Crow Elder, 2024

So, we went to school. And, you know, ever since I can remember we've lived in an extended family setting. I don't know any different. **So, my father had sixth grade education, my mother got married right before she graduated. So, education was always really paramount for both my parents. So, we've come from education. It's first and foremost.** And um, work ethic is definitely an absolute. So, everybody in my family, we've grown to 86 now and we have only had two dropouts out of all of them. A lot of my nieces and nephews and a lot of them they're in the doctor's levels, master's levels. All of us basically gained some kind of education, we own all of our own homes. Uh, none of our children were raised in foster care.

—Fort Peck Elder, 2024

## Housing

Grandfamilies raising grandchildren often struggle with quality housing and drug-impacted family members.

**It bothers me too as an Elder, as I watch a lot of these elderly homes are given to the Elders. That's why they say elderly homes. But you drive by there they have all their grandchildren in there. They have meth heads in there. They're selling drugs out of the homes. You go to housing to complain. They just say, 'Oh, write it up.' That's it. There's no action.**

—*Blackfeet Elder, 2024*

Another mentioned generational living in homes and the impacts of untreated addictions on other family members.

**And she's got a mobile home in the valley. And her mother and her grandmother are living with her in her trailer. So, you see, you have four generations living in the same home. [Right] And you'd think that's a good thing you bring in all of that, but part of them have baggage as it probably isn't a good one. My sister-in-law was suffering from gambling addiction. So, she lost just about everything she had to the poker machines. Her daughter discovered meth and ended up in the women's prison.**

—*Little Shell Elder, 2024*

## Drugs and Alcohol

Another described multiple conditions in communities that lead to children being removed from their homes and the influence of drugs and alcohol. The pervasive nature of drugs and alcohol on the reservations and the increasing poor mental health status of parents and young people place a significant burden on Grandfamilies and systems.

**Epidemic is the word I would say, with folks on this reservation. It's rampant. People are overdosing, people found a new way to kill themselves, commit suicide. Lose their brains. And I think there's more of it. I would definitely say there's more of our children being abandoned. Basically, uh, the increase due to these newer types of drugs that are out there. And so, of course, the adults are on the drugs. Their brains are fried. They have no idea what they're doing. They don't care about their children. Where they're going? What they're doing? They don't feed them, change them, bathe them, whatever. Uh, the grandparents step in, but I think it's more prevalent than it's ever been. [That's what we keep hearing, and...]<sup>6</sup>**

—*Little Shell Elder, 2024*

<sup>6</sup> Brackets [ ] represent words added to the interview transcript to clarify responses given by Elders.

# MOTHER TREES AND HUB TREES: ELDER WISDOM

## Culture-based Parenting and Programs

Elders shared deep wisdom about traditional parenting and the importance of family planning, families staying intact, and caring for one another

Back in the day, back in the dog days [before colonization and the introduction of the horse to Native cultures], our people, they had it together. Since the Europeans have come over, we're very confused now. We knew that the mother and father were where the children [were] in the dog days... we didn't have aunts and uncles then, we had other mothers and fathers. They were all part of raising these children up. **But now we tell the mother that they have to raise this child by themselves, and it can be an overwhelmed main task, especially if you have 5 or 6 kids. But sometimes it's by a different father with each kid and that's, you know, that is such insane behavior. So we need to educate our people on like having kids, having that relationship, staying together, wait and tell your older to have the child.**

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

So, it seems harsh but it's a truth and reality. But, we have traditionally your elders helped raise your grandchildren. We used to think White people were uncivilized because they beat their children. [Right.] Traditionally, Natives never raise their voice to their children. Parents never did. And it would be the role of the grandparents and the aunts and uncles to step in to be that authoritarian and to teach that children a lot of things because the parents were sometimes too involved with making a living to be able to do these things. And you've seen it immensely in the urban circumstance.

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

Elders shared the importance of culture-based programs and education and called attention to the loss of culture and traditional gatherings.

**There's no Elder programs, no dances, no social gatherings.**

Years back when I was growing up, they used to have social gathering dances in Hart (...) They used to have star school. They used to have ceremonies all over here. Even though a lot of people were Catholics, they still went, yeah, you know, and it was a lot of fun.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

**In their schools they need to teach the culture.** It's not, I mean, you see in reservation schools and stuff they teach the language and stuff but teach the foundation, at least.

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

## Cultural Identity

Cultural identity and connection to kinship systems were other themes from the Elders. Elders stressed the importance of knowing family history and clans and of returning to the traditional values of helping one another.

I always ask my students, what clan do you come from? Or, you know, who's your people? Or tell me something about your history? And in all the years I've been here, I think that I may have had, I'm going to say maybe five that have known who they are in the pic-on-ee way. They knew who they were, what their society was. They knew the history of their people. We're so lost today that we don't, we don't know if we're coming or going. So my hope will be that we can come together and work together as a community here, as a town. Let's get together and help each other.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

## Caretakers of the World

Elders perceived being caretakers of the world and the challenges of what this looks like in the modern world.

It goes back to our ancestry. You know. We were caretakers of the world. 500 years ago... we took care of the world, and the world provided life to us. And as we age, we go back to that more. I'm not saying that other cultures don't have that. I mean, I went to the Catholic College. Well, Carol College University of Providence in Great Falls, both Catholic schools. And I had to take Catholic theology classes and stuff, and, in the Bible, it says you're supposed to take care of the Earth. But you look at society as a whole, do they?

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

So, when you look at that great need for that whole family to raise them, children [right] it's a Native thing. It's not one of these things that come out of the White House where it says it takes, a village to raise a child [Right.] It always has been that way in North America. [Right.] They just don't realize. **There were people here living and doing well, when they arrived. And that's because Indians had respect and they took care of their environment. They never took more than what their environment could handle. White history didn't start until they got here.** And it's, you know, their version of history. I hate to think about it.

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

**I guess I was always, a caretaker. I guess. Because growing up, I was raised in a big family.** I had seven brothers and one sister. It was hard back then. It was really hard. So, when I had kids, my first daughter was born in 1977. And so, I can't say I had a horrible childhood, but it wasn't a good one. So, when I became a parent first, I said that I wasn't going to live in my past, but I would use my past to help my children and so I tried, you know, made a lot of mistakes, but I've tried and I'm still going. Still taking care of grandkids.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

...doing stuff to take care of people. It's who we are, as a race, as far as my Tribe goes. It's in our genetics. [And it's probably been there for 20,000 years.]

—Little Shell Elder, 2024



## Spirituality

Elders stressed the importance of spirituality and practices.

Not try and drag each other down or talk about each other or, you know, where's that love that our people talked about back in the day? **That spirituality that made us so strong. Back in the days, the Blackfeet were the lords of the Plains. Today, we're the lords of drugs and alcohol and abuse.** You know?

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

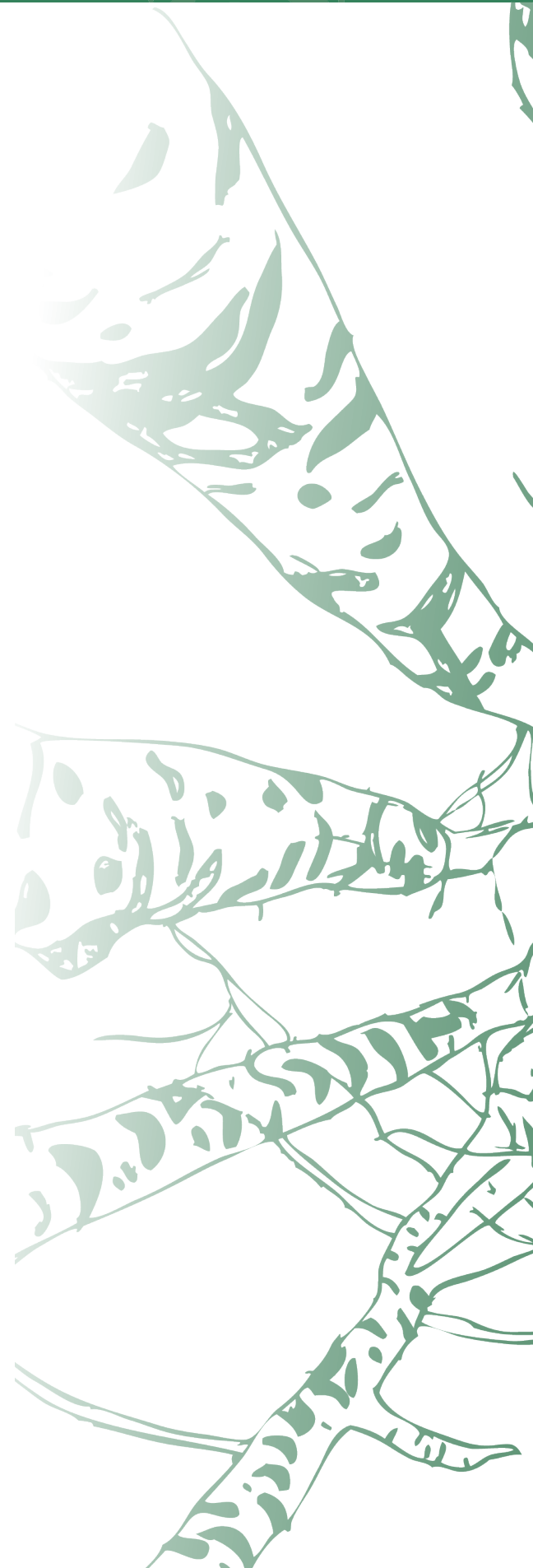
Another Elder shared,

Only God can help me. And people, we all have our own traumas. They don't need to live mine. So, if I can be encouraging to somebody with a smile, a hello, I will, and God help me with this other part, you know.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

It was teaching our children who they are in the type of fundamentals that we use to encourage them to stay on the right road.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024



# RESOURCE EXCHANGE PATHWAYS: INCREASING WELLNESS RESOURCES

All the Elders shared their perspectives about how to increase wellness resources in their communities. Their recommendations varied from offering more general mental health outreach to changing how communities view children as a gift from God or the Creator.

## Mental Health and Outreach

I think they just need to have more outreach programs; you know; they need more. Because not everybody comes up here to find out about this. You know, that's how I found out because I work here. But just more outreach programs, that's all, you know, and some are not going to come to you. It would be good if someone could, you know, not dig into your personal. But, you know, **I'm going to go visit this lady right here. She's got grandkids and, you know, is there any way we could help because if they know someone is on their side, I think it would be better for children, parents, and grandchildren because, you know, like, even this, behavioral health up here.**

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

...child psychiatry hospital, [okay] they're the largest recipients of Medicaid funds in the state of Montana. And they just did a great big expansion and built a new hospital. When, the day they redid it 17% of their population were Natives. And they come in, and those kids are there and they're, they're self-harm. That's the biggest reason they're there, and it's because they're living in so much mental pain, that they self-harm themselves to relieve that pain. They're sexually assaulted, they're beat. And that's because their parents have lost them teachings. And you see how traumatic that is for them, and [my wife] was there for seven years, and it was at the time when the kids aged out at 18 within six months, they were in the care of the Montana State Department of Correction because there's no help for them.

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

**There are services, there are resources, but I don't think they actually know what they're doing.** They need to reach out to the community instead of just sitting behind the desk, you know? [Okay]. Because they get nothing done by just sitting there reading about it.

—Northern Cheyenne Elder, 2024



## Support for Large Families

**I mean you take care of your family, no matter what.** Now I've been blessed where my children have not gotten into to the social ills that affect number one is generally Native males have a lot of children. So, on the reservation, you have people that have five or six kids, pretty common. Out of those five or six kids chances are half of them are going to get involved in alcohol or drugs. [Right.] And when they have kids and they end up going to jail or whatever, well Grandpa and Grandma got to take care of the kids. [Okay.] So that's probably the biggest factor and in any Indian culture that I know of and then lived all over the Western United States [okay] and worked with Tribe all over. You are not going to give up your family, right? You're going to take care of your family no matter what.

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

## Basic needs

So, with my Tribe there's not much services at all, because my Tribe just got federal recognition a couple years ago. [Yeah, that's what I understand.] So, they're trying to create everything. I mean they now have a clinic; they now have mental health services. It doesn't have huge programs in the, and we don't have a huge amount of money, like the Flathead Rez does or anything. And there isn't even a reservation [That's what I understand, yeah.] So, when there's not even a central plot of land, where most of us live, I mean the large portion of us are scattered all over the world. [okay] Really. So, everything like that, is in development.

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

## Group Home Center

That there's a huge caseload on ICW for children just being neglected and abandoned. I would like to see that boarding school opened up and used like a group home center.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

## Safety and Support Year-Round

And then accepting children that maybe are not enrolled, because yeah, some of our children are not meeting the enrollment, you know?

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

## Address Systemic SDOH Issues

I can remember when one of my friends, their family lost their whole house because, this section 8 vouchers said, it would be that gal and her mother's and her son as a caregiver that could live in that house. And there were three generations in that house, seven people. They evicted them all, put them on the street. That was the Native family here. Then I think the grandmother ended up in the nursing home, and she didn't survive well there.

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

**Then they can be incarcerated or sent to treatment until they give birth. Okay, so that they hide their pregnancy, a lot of it.** [The hiding of the pregnancy is so they don't go through that separation or loneliness?] Well, no, they don't want to be incarcerated. They don't want to end the withdrawals depending on their addiction. It's all self-centered, their unwillingness to create any harm for themselves. They want to continue with their addiction because they need it.

—Fort Peck Elder, 2024

## Prevent Drug-Impacted Babies

Well, for one, is that my concern is the number of ladies that are giving birth to babies that are drug and alcohol-affected or some type of trauma or abuse. So, I do have a concern about that. And as a Tribe, as a community, how do we help to alleviate that or deal with that? Because we know that what they call women are the bringers of life, right? **We have we have rules and stories in our own, the Blackfeet Tribe that say how to treat children and babies when they are born. So, from my way of thinking, we're pretty far from where we should be with our children. There is so much abuse, all different types of abuse of our children. And that is not what the Creator wanted us to do. They wanted us to bring them. They're considered; our babies are considered a gift of God from God, or Creator, or however you want to say that. So that's what, back in the dog days. That's what it was. They're a gift. Today, we don't really see them as a gift.**

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

Okay, it starts at conception. Alcohol and drug abuse is rampant in the Native Community. And it set stuff back immensely.

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

Yeah, 50% of our children, born on the reservation are in utero drugs, methamphetamine amphetamine and THC. Okay, so they, they have kind of hidden problems that you have to learn about and share with each other. Yes. And we're not, we're not getting that from a professional as much as we're getting that from each other and then people don't even know about the testing that you can take.

—Fort Peck Elder, 2024

Well, it all relates back to the use of drugs, alcohol, car wrecks, suicides, or it was a mistake that the person was pregnant.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

And so that's where they were since my Aunt Tanya died. It's horrible. I mean, there's every acronym behind these children's names: fetal alcohol, PTST, (...), (...). I mean, there are all kinds of acronyms behind them. I got them both. In special ed, finally. They have a therapist. Every two weeks, we go down without going to the therapists, and they talk about whatever issues they think they have to talk about. And I just sit still unless I'm asked to just listen.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

# SYMBIOTIC FUNGAL NETWORKS: GRIEF AND LOSS

The Forest of Resilience concept stresses the importance of reconnecting networks, roots, and resources to support the bereavement process.

## Infant Deaths

**You know, because no matter what kind of death it is, whether it's a newborn, you know, passing away or my oldest daughter was 38.** It's traumatizing no matter what. She's been, this is going on nine years, and it's everyday grief. It doesn't just end. And when I first lost her. I went, I had to go to the hospital, go to behavioral health. But the first thing they did was give me antidepressants. And I wasn't going to. This is this was my thought was, okay, I'm going through this, Lord, with my eyes wide open. And it's been painful. And still, every day, I wake up, and my girl's not here, and it hurts. But then I still go on. And the end of the day when I'm winding down, it hits again.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

Pregnancy-related death is like losing. Because everybody gets so excited about a new life coming, no matter what their economic situation is. And then when the mother dies, taking the baby with them that's two. And it's another traumatic event. And it is very devastating.

—Crow Elder, 2024

I lost a baby way back in, uh, 70, well, I think about 73 or 74. I can't remember it was so long ago. And they took my baby and just put it in the ground. That was quite dumb. I so devastated. I didn't even know what day it was. That's how devastated I was, because she was born at home, and she passed away. So, after that happened, the only traditional, really traditional-traditional relative we had was my Uncle Rainey. And he wanted me to go with them that time. And he brought me to a holy smoke. A holy smoke. And they prayed over me, and everything. And he went into detail in Blackfeet. What happened with that baby didn't even get a chance. It just went up. You know, I could read (...) and stuff and so I just sat there quiet, and I felt better.

Because none of my family, my Christian family did anything. They just took the baby, put it in a small box, and they put it in the ground. There was probably about six of us there and that's it.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

...somebody might be murdered or a child has died. Uh, of course, anywhere in the world, but in Native American society, children are protected and the worst thing you can do is harm a child.

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

[You're familiar with]? It's, um, devastating. It's just, um, you know, the baby is inside your womb, and they're like one with them. And I thankfully never had to experience that. But I know some people that did, and it just was, they went into like a depression. Um, because we're Natives, we are Crows, we are family-oriented. And so, like a third cousin is just like, a brother or a sister. Um, that's how closely knitted we are and when someone loses baby, or a grandchild is just like they mourn just like, going to like depression. And they don't participate in nothing like dances or anything, gatherings, basketball or a game or something where a lot of Natives are, like they just stay at home and stay more isolate.

—Crow Elder, 2024

## Beliefs and Practices Related to Death

It all depends on what side they were raised. I've been to many, many [funerals] and I've spoked at many funerals. I've been somewhere where they use the Native culture with our drum songs, and sometimes they cover their face with the scarf, other Native American things around and on top and stuff. And then, our side of the family we hold open caskets and everybody's invited to the funeral — all the relatives and friends, everybody comes. And after the funeral is done, of course, during this time, you're going through the line, shaking the hands or passing condolences on to the members that are still alive, that part of that family. And then after that, there's two things they do they either have a gathering where everybody is together and sits down and eats and visits and people talk. Well, you know, uh, get together. And, you know, try to move on.

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

Well, when it comes to that, it would be up to the individuals in the individual families. I know they do offer the Community Center to have gatherings when somebody passes away. But that's still pretty much all family related. **It's not like everybody in the Tribe shows up because somebody passed away, it's whoever you have come to the Community Center for the, you know, funeral, or whatever you want to call it, the service.**

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

This morning I was asked to go to a funeral for a Cree lady. When we would go out and drum and do that service, because they want that Native part to go into that going away ceremony. But I told him I couldn't look because I made a commitment already. [Spending time with me.] You know, you find that in urban circumstances where people are torn about them two worlds they live in and how they can do that.

—Little Shell Elder, 2024



This community probably respond really negative. They'd probably blame the mother in the surroundings, you know, with the husband, or there is no husbands here, like boyfriends. [Yeah]. But I haven't really seen that lately, so I'm not sure.

—Northern Cheyenne Elder, 2024

I worked as a patient transporter for nine years for (...) health, and I got used to that. I got close to the dialysis patients that I drove or people with appointments and stuff. And it was really hard. Don't, you know, they're gone. I even went to a grief, you know, for a grief, um, they sent me to a grief workshop, I guess, but it wasn't what I expected. And, but you know, I think it's up to the individual of how you think. There are some people that need help, a lot of help. But me, I've always tried to figure out, you know, what's best for me even, like, if I get I sick, I always trying to help myself first before I go to the clinic.

—Northern Cheyenne Elder, 2024

**Uh, loss and death are significant grief. We still feel all those emotions and separation, but we understand death more. We understand that this isn't the end.** That's what we understand more, but it doesn't mean that our hearts don't break, it doesn't mean that we don't have that human disconnect, we have all of that, but we, um, participate in death more than probably any other community.

—Fort Peck Elder, 2024

Well, you know, all kinds of things happen emotionally with families, any kind of death with families. I really love how the Crows see death as it's a continuum. Um, we don't talk about death as death. We talk about death as, the other, going to the other side camp. And that's really the phraseology that that we use, you know? Oh, they've gone to the other side camp. Yeah. So, we so, I love that concept because, you know, it's, it's really biblical when I think about that. Um, because going to the other side camp your body isn't there, but you know, your spirit is already moved on. Um, this is see, something different than that, but it's similar, you know, going to the other side. Yeah. I think they use different phraseology. **But of course, it's, I mean death is like everybody deals with death it's pretty much the same way emotionally.** Um, what we have probably more than other communities on reservations among this reservation, like most, uh, is that trauma that people have and dealt with a lot of their lives. So, there is a course that we have taken on trauma informed.

—Crow Elder, 2024



## Limited support

There is not enough of it [resources for grief and loss]... **No matter what kind of death it is, whether it is a newborn passing away or my oldest daughter was 38, it is traumatizing no matter what... it is everyday grief, it does not end. When I first lost her I had to go to the hospital... they gave me antidepressants.** I thought Lord I am going through this with my eyes wide-open, its been painful. Everyday... I still go on. At the end of the day when I am winding down, it hits again. I have my time, pray and go to bed. I start again the next day.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

So, traditionally here, and I don't, remember how it is at Pine Ridge, but here that when somebody dies, you don't participate in anything, in any of the ceremonies or anything. I think that there is a period of time that you have to mourn. [Yeah.] If you don't take that mourning period then, going through to the other side of that morning, it doesn't bring you out whole, you have to work through that.

—Crow Elder, 2024

A lot of times people say, oh, my child passed away or my son passed away, and they'll name what happened, how it happened. But there is no service offered to our people going through that. And even older people like me, there's no services.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

# SYMBIOTIC FUNGAL NETWORKS: SOLUTIONS TO ADDRESS STRESS

While Elders felt there were several challenges related to grief, loss, unresolved trauma, and limited resources and support, they shared potential solutions to address unmet needs.

## Education Around Trauma

**I believe that trauma training is really needed, not only for the workers, but also for the individuals here.** If we put on a really open wide workshop and brought in the best, of the best, and everybody who signed up, everybody who can come in, would be more or less a conference so many days you go. Everybody has breakout rooms and address different traumas.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

My youngest son is 17 now, but when he was a little tiny kid, I came outside, and he was stomping on nails. Little boys do that, right? Stomp on that stuff, you know? I told him to stop that. There's the purpose that nail exists. Everything in the world has its place. And you respect everything, and you coexist with everything. And in this society, that's tough. It's very hard to exist in the traditional Native world, in modern society.

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

That Indian and that buffalo are two things the U.S government tried to drive to extinction, but we are still here. When you've seen that what I talked about was they took their children. And tens of thousands of children that went to boarding schools, never made it home. One of the things that did is it destroyed the family. If you hid your children, they cut off your rations. So, you had to starve to keep your children and that didn't happen. And some of them boarding schools were much better than others but it destroyed that family unit and how we raise them children and it put trauma into people. When I was down there I had to see 80-year old people break into tears when they started talking about their experiences in boarding school. **You see that grief and trauma that they have been carrying for decades and decades and there's no way that you can live with that kind of grief and trauma without actually, passing it on the offsprings. So, you have a nagging thing under the surface somewhere and just a little thing just trying to remember it brings out and festers back to the surface.**

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

And I think that [culture] would be something that we can create simply and build on. Because we have a lot of stakes in the pot here and there and everywhere. And people know the Blackfeet. They know how they dug themselves out of the hole, and they're standing straight, and they protect this territory.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

## MCH Clinics and Care in Communities

I'd like to see a clinic built.... And I think when the person first gets pregnant and somebody learns about it, that right away we should send a CHR to go check to see if this news is true. And if it's true at that time, I believe that they get to bring that person in and say, we're going to help you. Don't be afraid and offer her whatever it takes to carry that baby nine months without using drinking.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

Well, kind of from what I was listening to you say, it sounds like a lot of our, **young women do not go to prenatal counseling, and, I don't know, maybe they don't know how to take care of themselves, you know, to be happy and to be, have, great expectations with the life that they are bringing forward.**

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

## Home for Children

As an Elder, if the Tribe ever gave me, and it was always my number one goal, a home, a huge home, a home, like, not a shelter, home like where they would have a kitchen, they would have a living room. They would have places they could play with their toys and for, you know, adult care also where these young mothers can take their children and go live there, instead of bouncing from couch to couch to couch to couch because they can't get around.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

## Traditional Roles of Women and Men

Because we know that, what they call women are the bringers of life, right? We have we have rules and stories in our own, the Blackfeet Tribe that say how to treat children and babies when they are born. **So, from my way of thinking, we're pretty far from where we should be with our children.**

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

[Well, if it wasn't for the grandmothers, we would have much different perspective, they kept things working, you know.] My great-grandmother was married out of Saint Peter's mission. North of here, between here and Great Falls. When she was the rightful age of 13 [Right.] You know, that's almost human trafficking, [Well yes] you know, when you look at it now. When she told stories about when she was a young wife. Getting her husband off and out of the house in the morning and then getting her dolls out playing for a little while every morning. [Yeah] Just don't be a little kid.

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

And also teach them, like I said, you know, right from wrong and we should be able to teach them. Like, my mom has always told her grandsons or my boy and stuff, “Value your life, don't have kids everywhere.” So, I thought we told my boys that, I've always told them that. And to me, a lot of them it's because they miss that connection with the parents, that you know they needed the hugs or being showed that they're loved. Even as big as my boys are, I always hug them, make sure that they're loved, make sure that they feel good about themselves, but I do.

—Northern Cheyenne Elder, 2024

Making sure that you have family who are willing to be mentors. Family who will take a kid under their wings and walk them through life. Somebody that cares. It starts there. If it doesn't start there, then we're still, we're in trouble. And part of the reason that it's not starting there is because somewhere that adult lost its way.

—Crow Elder, 2024

## Positive Mental Health

**Good mind thought. Good feelings. Good in our bodies. Just brought it and given our babies something really positive.** But when we are in dysfunction, we really can't provide that to the to the baby in utero. So, just helping our babies, our women to be happy for these events. Not to be distraught over there or mean and angry.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

We've started a policy that you will live and behave by the Seven Grandfathers Teaching. You, so if you go to the Travel Powwow, you know, start fights. You know, sure you behave right, you know, treat each other with respect and stuff. So that's one of the biggest things that we're trying because our Tribe has been ripped apart so much and we're trying to put it back together. A lot of people don't know the culture. So just like we're building services and stuff, we're rebuilding the culture. [That's what sounds like] because it's been torn to the ground completely.

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

## Bring Back Culture/Spiritual Practices

So, we kind of lost our way, our culture.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

And yeah, I believe that all has to do with your upbringing. What's in your heart?

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024



...there's like no services or anything like that for trauma like that. [In a lot of the more traditional services. That in years, back may have been something that took place. That's not something that is currently available.] Nope. Well, there is like the sweat lodges and stuff, and I know people still go in those, but I think that they would have to have like family members or know someone, um, but most people don't really go into or don't have that opportunity to go do a sweat lodge or to a Sundance or, um, bundle ceremonies or whatever, they're, they're very limited.

—Crow Elder, 2024

## Teaching Young People Traditions

**Our biggest goal is to maintain our heritage for our children. And doing it through the teachings of the Seven Grandfathers. And when we incorporated that into Tribal code, that teaching to the Seven Grandfathers, it became the Tribal code for the Tribe, and they had to follow that too. So that you don't shy away from them early teachings and stuff like that.** And when you look at our games or even like a powwow, when a young girl is doing a jingle dance, that's probably one of the prettiest dances you can dance. [Right] There are 365 bells on that dress and each one of them as a prayer. And when they dance, they always move forward because every step they take is a prayer for somebody that can't dance and to back up you would have to take a prayer back, so you only move forward, and you learn these things. Then, you know, and people just think, you know, I mean, just like those Indians just like to dance. There's a lot of meaning and stuff that are done in them and there's a lot of dedication from them young youth to dance. [Yeah] And if you don't think it's tough, try carrying a flag in at the grand entry. It'll just damn near (...). You know, so it takes a lot of dedication and stuff like that. And, you know when we've introduced, in the urban circumstance, Tribal games, they held them in Great Falls this fall. And I sit in on the Magpie Drum. And we raise money all year for this powwow. And we're drumming at that funeral this morning and the last time we drummed as a group we attended the state capital last Friday, drumming for a welcoming home for the Vietnam vets and we have done that, the first one was in 2015, and I think we've been there, maybe not the first year, but every year since and we do the openings and the closing for them.

—Little Shell Elder, 2024



Personal opinion is that we really need that [resources for young people to learn traditions] around here especially for some of our young people. I've heard of very young girls having babies, which they're little girls themselves. They're not ready to be a mother, you know? So, can we do some training of our young girls? We know that they're probably looking for love and affection, and we really don't know what that is anymore. So, we have to teach our girls that to have respect for themselves, to understand that to have a baby when you are ready, not, you know, so have somebody in there that is very much aware of like probably our traditional way of doing things plus, our present day of dealing with these issues. But our young ladies seem to be, probably lost, you know, so if we could bring that back to them and show them, help them to understand their role in life and what it is that they do. So that would be a very, very important part for somebody to put in that position where they can help and guide these young ladies.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

With my children and stuff, I just try to teach them the proper way to live. You know, live with honor, be truthful, love, respect, and stuff. The Seven Grandfathers' Teachings. I engrained that pretty hard into my children. And hopefully they're passing it on to theirs.

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

## Way of Life as Religion

So, whatever we did in life back in the dog days, it was because of love. We didn't have a special religion out there. Our way of life was our religion. That's what it was. We prayed to the Creator all the time. We asked for guidance and direction. Today, we're so confused about religion. Religion is good. We all need that. I don't care what kind of religion a person follows; it is good to have that tactic to keep us on track. But for my way of thinking, we need to go back to our traditional way of doing things that love and that respect for each other and that helping each other. But we don't do that today.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

**It's a state of being. [okay] In White Society there's all of these different religions and each Tribe has their own culture, but we don't have a real religion. We just have a way of life. I just call it a state of being. It's just who you are and how you exist...** Like I said, it's just, it's just how you exist. So, I'm not really sure how to put it into words.

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

I can only speak. We, you know, um, our lifestyle is more, um, our lifestyle, our culture in our spirituality is in our day-to-day living, in my family. Some dance, some don't, nobody plays drum stuff, but ours is in our relationships.

—Crow Elder, 2024

## Language and Communication

**Today we have such mean, negative words to say to these young people and to say to each other. And it's not helping anybody. Let's get back to our traditional way of thinking and feeling and doing.** Let's get back to our language. In our language there is really nothing negative in our language. You can't cuss another person out or anything like that. I heard about this one old lady who was hurt, and her husband got into a spat. And she was wanting to say something really mean to him so, she said, you have stink feet. So that was the closest she could come to say.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

## Create Functional Programs/ Leadership

And then it goes back, in my opinion, it goes back to the director of the program. Their ego gets in the way of helping people. And if your ego gets in the way, kind of step back and let somebody else run the program that is going to help our people. We still have suicide. We still have deaths. We still have drugs on the rise, alcohol, and different abuses. I mean, what? this makes no sense to me. I cannot, I just cannot make any sense out of it.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

## Community Connections

And so, we have slipped so much. But how do we get back to that? I truly believe that we can. But it's going to take this whole community working together. I hate to see our little children suffer like that, thinking they need to commit suicide or get into a relationship and get beat up or have a baby at 10, 12, 14 years old, you know? They got a life to live. Let's give them a chance to live life, to do something.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

## All Life is Sacred

Uh, you know, when we can make a change save the life or so you know it's all a good deal, you know.

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

I kind of look at that, like we have a child, you know, you're supposed to bond with them. And also teach them. Like I said, you know, right from wrong and we should be able to teach them. Like, my mom has always told her grandsons or my boy and stuff. Don't have kids everywhere. So, I thought we told my boys that I've always told them that and, a lot of them. Because then, that connection with the parents that you know they are being showed that they loved. Even as my boys are, I always make sure that they're loved. To make sure that they know they feel good about themselves, but I do, and I wish I will give them hope because I think that's important. Um, you know, for the parents to show that they're loved.

—Northern Cheyenne Elder, 2024

## Address Learned Helplessness

The only thing I can really think is that, and my one question has always been, how do we fight ignorance? You know? How do we deal with that? What do we do with it? We have everything that we need here. We have a school... college. We have the school district, we have, probably in the majority of senses, we have a lot of very capable people of doing the right thing. Why, in my personal opinion, is that we have lost our way, our traditional way of being. So, we don't have that anymore. We have our stories that tell us how to be in different situations. How to be in a relationship, in a marriage. We have stories that tell us, but we don't know those stories anymore.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

But one thing that always seems to be missing to me, in all of these situations good and bad, but mostly bad, is accountability. Nobody is held accountable for their actions. We're talking about adults. Children, we can go ahead and say, hey we'll give a new pass on this. Don't ever do that again. Adults, 16 17 years old, taking drugs, getting pregnant, turning into drunks, and wanting their handouts constantly. And there's no accountability. Why should I continue to give you \$200 a month, for whatever it is, when you go out and drink it up? Why, when you drink it up? Why should we give you your grocery bill when you go out and you sell the food, and you don't use it? I mean, somewhere there has to be accountability and a checkpoint for these people. It can't be a revolving door. They've got to be helped or stop. You're gonna say, hey man, this is coming to an end. We can't no longer do this for you, or the programs are going to fold. Accountability, why can't they look them in the face or take him before a Council or whatever and give them a lecture and say here's what's happening, grow up. You know, don't be so stupid, you know? **It's just accountability, it just makes me mad when, these people, so-called adults won't stand on their own two feet. It doesn't make you a man because you go out and make a baby; it makes you stupid if you're not responsible. You know, it just common sense of hey man, take responsibility for your own actions.**

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

## Elders Council

Okay, so I've actually only been on the Council for a couple months, [That's good.] but essentially from what I've seen so far, what we do is if somebody has a complaint they can write it up, the Elders Council reviews it, see if it's something that should be addressed or not. And then, if it's something that should be addressed. So, so, say you had a complaint against her, [Okay.] so you write up the complaint. We read it, say is this a legitimate complaint? And if we feel it's a legitimate complaint, then we send the complaint to her to give her a chance to respond [Okay.] and then we try to work out a solution. [Okay.] We also work with the Tribal Council as far as Tribal Council says well, "we want to spend...", and my Tribe doesn't have this kind of money, but say, "we want to spend 100 million dollars building this new casino". And we look it over and say well you know; we don't think this is a good idea and this is why, and stuff and we advise the Tribal Council. We don't have any authority; they do what they want regardless. But we advise them on what we think they should do or should consider. So, it's kind of a team collaboration.

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

## Restore Culture

**As sad as it is to say a large portion of us are very acculturated. I mean out of the people that I know in the Tribe and stuff, almost all of us have college degrees.** [Okay.] For the most part we've been living in White Society. We don't have a reservation, so our Tribe doesn't have a lot of the social wheels that you find on the reservations. [Okay.] So, as far as losing babies because of drug and alcohol use, or that like you do see on the reservations and stuff it may happen, but it'd be very little. There's no data on that because we don't have that unit where we all live. You know, maybe a Tribal member in Texas drank too much so they lost their baby or did drugs and lost their baby or whatever, but we wouldn't know that.

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

## Traditional Parenting Values

**Culturally, with, with us, you know, that layer of multi-family homes, where the parent followed the direction of their parent, um, and got that guidance. And then taught that second generation and then those taught the third generation.**

[Right.] I've got a young associate over in (...). Whose dad always told him boys don't cry. Don't cry. He said when he had started having boys he told them, it's okay to cry. He talks about how he was never hugged by his dad. He said he hugs his boys every day. So, it gives them something to hold on to, somebody they can trust and [tells them] it's okay for me to fall apart. Right now, kids don't know they can fall apart.

—Crow Elder, 2024



# REMOVAL OF HUB TREES/MOTHER TREES: CAUSES OF DEATHS

Elders discussed the causes of maternal deaths and other deaths in their communities. Some had not heard of maternal deaths happening.

## Drugs, Alcohol, Pills

I don't hear too much about it. I can't say. The only thing I am hearing is that as the teenagers grow up, very few if any, that I have heard of known of (...) it is because of alcohol and drugs. I don't remember too much of babies dying.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

There is so much abuse, all different types of abuse of our children. And that is not what the Creator wanted us to do. They're considered, **our babies are considered a gift of God from God, or Creator or however you want to say that. So that's what, back in the dog days. That's what it was. They're a gift. Today we don't really see them as a gift.**

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

If you want to reduce the mortality, you got to address the social ills. [Okay.] You have start getting the people to quit drinking and doing drugs, you know? You gotta get them back to living a proper life. Because there's never been any standard set for drug and alcohol use in the Indian world it's really become part of the Culture. So, revamping that culture is what you're gonna have to do to address most of it.

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

That's the ultimate, Oh my God, disbelief having a woman that died near pregnancy or while she's pregnant. But there are different things, uh, that has happened, and I've seen it, people become extremely upset upon which way this person has passed. Was she murdered, was she killed, raped, or the most common thing- did she drink herself to death with alcohol? Which is very prevalent. Now you're talking to like old timer here. I don't know much about drugs, but I know it is very, very prevalent in this day and age, but in my time, ladies and women did that and they drank themselves to death. It was kind of a scorn, you know, why did you have to do this? Why are you letting your folks take care of the remaining children? Why did you do this? Uh, so it's just a (...) question that would run through anybody's mind.

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

**Well, for one, my concern is the number of ladies that are giving birth to babies that are drug and alcohol-affected or some type of trauma or abuse.** So, I do have a concern about that. And as a Tribe, as a community, what how do we help to alleviate that or deal with that?

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

## Fear

They are afraid to get help. They are going to take my baby away. Let them know we are not here to break up your little family.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

## Poor Mental Health

They get depressed. They smoke, smoke, smoke. If they're not smoking, they're drinking.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

## Hopelessness

For older communities or older ones, it's just basically giving up and letting go. Giving up. Letting go. I heard a good statement yesterday. This man was asked how he was, and he said, well I'm okay, I'm here. And he my cousin says, well, you want to come by, and we'll take and visit awhile.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

## Loneliness

And I think that's what's killing our older people. When they start feeling lonely, no one cares. No one checks on them. And he told us yesterday, he said, yeah, I just get up put a log in and stove and sit back down.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

## Young Mothers' Deaths

There should be more outreach programs. We have younger girls getting pregnant... From my generation to my kids' generation, to the ones now, it doesn't seem like there is too much help for them. Younger people are not educated enough.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

**So, you end up with a lot of Native women, very young girls, they find themselves pregnant and not many places to turn.** And if they turned to the Native side of their family, they're welcomed and the child's embraced. But if you're that Christian thing, you know, you've sinned, you know? We just went through Easter, a without the resurrection Jesus was just another Jew bastard. Well, they don't think back [Right] to things like that, you know.

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

## Complicit Behaviors

We're so we're so disorganized. I don't, if my next-door neighbor is, you know, beating his wife or whatever. I'm going to close the curtains and not look at what's happening. We shouldn't do that. Let's help them. Let's do something.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

## Deaths of Despair

That's the biggest factor but she also, also looks at the life expectancy. **Life expectancy is very low. [Right.] Compared to other cultures, that's because of drinking and driving and dying. And things like that.** So, my sister. One of her daughters wasn't drinking but got in a car wreck and died. Her kids, [Right.] but that seems to happen. [Yeah.] So you, [Yeah.] you have your natural deaths. [Yes.] No matter what. But with the Western culture, because drugs and alcohol are so rampant. And so destructive. It's way higher. Okay, so everything's going to be higher. Just like there are more Natives in prison.

—*Little Shell Elder, 2024*

It's like nobody's happy anymore. Yeah. Like I said, we need these things for the kids. I got two grandkids, uh, two grandkids that are good. Grandkids are good medicine bringing to all their friends out there. Yeah, you know? They need that. They need that. To be away from mom and dad drinking first of all and doing drugs. you know? (...) Healthy and safe. But yeah. So whatever you guys are trynna figure out here, I hope you guys, you know, find out what we really need.

—*Northern Cheyenne Elder, 2024*

## Lack of Proper MCH Care

But you know, we've always figured that children are the biggest gift the Creator ever gave to us [Right] and we should do everything we can for them. So, you have these women that they don't get proper care to start with, medical care, and a lot of it is because of unavailability in urban and rural — especially rural circumstances — and you don't have the expertise, the doctors, you don't have an inviting hospital when you do travel to one.

—*Little Shell Elder, 2024*

## Loss of Cultural Teachings

The Teaching of the Seven Grandfathers. You know, the respect is the one that jumps off most for me. They forget to respect themselves and to show respect. So, you lose all of them when you lose one of them. [Right] You're not being honest with yourself. When you can say uh (...), You know destructive behavior and there's never ever one. [Okay] There's always a pattern of, you know, you're walking into a casino, you're going to see a guy, gambling, drinking the beer, and smoking a cigarette. [Okay] This is all destructive things, and they just go hand in hand. So, they keep building and building, and they get easier. And you forget that last one, you forget to love yourself and you just start thinking you're that person that everybody says you are. [Right] And then you forget to love your children, then you forget how big of a gift those children are. You hear much in our society where children are a burden? Yeah, they cost. They never show you the value that you get by being a parent or an aunt or an uncle. You know, they show you a lot more loving a little puppy than they do in a scream, the little baby on an airplane.

—*Little Shell Elder, 2024*

# HUB TREES: REASON FOR GRANDFAMILIES

Elders cited multiple reasons for grandparents raising grandchildren. While most of the subthemes present a negative sentiment, some reinforce traditional parenting and extending family units that were in place prior to colonization.

## Limited Education

Low education. I should say formal education. No formal education.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

## Loss of Cultural Identity

Losing their culture, identity, mocking the generation before them.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

## Poor Role Models

Poor role models in the community and not enough of the fathers not taking responsibility. A lot of our kids are going by their surname, The mother's name. And when I was growing up, you never heard that, right? You know, you went by the dad's name, whoever it was.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

## Absent Parents

Their dad walked out on us. My boy was 7 or 8 years old. It was really hard. I knew this one lady, she called it, let me go shopping in her kitchen, there was always something sweet for the kids.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

So, they're always going to need this help. We gotta whole generation right now of absent parents, ghost parents and they don't have the ability to do it. They don't have the ability to nurture this next generation. So, that's why the grandparents have to do it. There is no choice. [And that's mainly because the parents can't do that?] Exactly.

—Fort Peck Elder, 2024

**Once again, the family sticks together. A young lady gets pregnant, or her husband leaves. Parents families step in and takes care of it. A lot of this stuff, you know, has changed lately because people are starting to frown on this.** I mean, uh, Tribal members, I mean...

Why did you do this to yourself? Why did you take drugs and get wasted? Why did you get yourself pregnant, when there is birth control available? Why did you do this to yourself? It creates issues and problems for everybody. And people take a hard look at that because, you know, times are hard, times have always been hard on Indian Reservations, you bring another child into the world without a father it's difficult on everybody.

—Little Shell Elder, 2024



## Parental Dysfunction Domestic Violence

So, I had our twins here for a while out because their mother is out. Still out, lost in that world out there. But it was difficult, you know, I knew they needed that time and that attention, but I just wanted to go sit on my couch and watch TV.

—*Blackfeet Elder, 2024*

[A lot of aggression]? Yeah, a lot aggression. [Yeah. Physical harming and domestic], Yeah. Yup. Domestic and I think that's why your grandparents were stepping in.

—*Northern Cheyenne Elder, 2024*

## Court-Related Reasons

Um, myself, I can say either court-ordered. You know, the mom is fighting with the dad. They don't wanna go stay with mom and dad, you know? And I think it's family. [Okay.] So it starts with the immediate family, [Okay.] Then you know grandma. I'm the, I'm only involved because my kids are gone and that's the only reason I'm involved. But I do love them though. That's kind of like, you know, you get this age, you know, you gotta slow down, can't do what, what you used to do. But I can tell you in general there's lots of love at home. That's for sure.

—*Northern Cheyenne Elder, 2024*

## Dysfunction, Drugs, Alcohol

That's the problem with the rez. There is too much alcoholism. That is why grandparents are stepping in, raising the kids. Because they want, uh, mom and dad fighting all the time. And I mean it's just fortunate, yeah to have my grandkids. Otherwise, I'd be right there with them drinking and doing drugs. But I am doing good right now.

—*Northern Cheyenne Elder, 2024*

[So many of these parents have substance, use mental health problems are absent in some way.] Yeah, they're very disconnected. Their priorities don't align, their purpose doesn't align, their identity as a Tribal family doesn't align. But they do well as a drug community. See, in a drug community if your role is to basically be um, a mule, so to speak, you'll always be that mule. You'll never be in the top echelon. They don't have, um, upper mobilization in this drug community. You are what you are. So, when you come out of that state um, I guess what I'm saying, and this was only my observation, but when these parents come out, and they're basically back to their family they just stay exactly what they are. You know, even if they are clean or whatever they're not using but they don't take on any roles of authority and responsibility. [So they never grow into an elder?] Yeah, because the formative years have been an adult, um, they've already been conditioned. That's what I see.

—*Fort Peck Elder, 2024*

## Unsafe Environments

All of them are. I'd just say all of them. Most of them. I'd say at least 70% of all the grandparents, raising their grandchildren. Yeah. It's all grandma and grandpa's which is good. Because the kids don't need to see that. Kids don't need to be in that environment. Yeah. Yeah.

—Northern Cheyenne Elder, 2024

## Traditional Reasons

I don't think it's an issue. I think it's more like, um, we need to utilize it more. It will keep the grandparents, you know, happy first of all and then the kids happy too. Yeah. But, yeah, it goes both ways; (...) You know, mom and dad but I think, you know, the resources we have it could um, they could, um, the parents could use some of the resources. [That's what it sounds like. There's a pretty limited amount of resources]. Not limited. But more like, they're not connecting with the community.

—Northern Cheyenne Elder, 2024

And I was, too; **I had my dad after my mom passed, but he was dealing with it, grieving. And he wasn't there. And so, I was raised by my grandparents.**

Um, going back and forth between my paternal and maternal grandparents.

—Crow Elder, 2024

# DEFORESTATION: GRANDFAMILY CHALLENGES

Elders spoke about the limited resources available in their communities and the challenges they experience or see.

## Afraid of Kids

A lot of them say, I can't take those kids, even though they're my children, because they are so wild, disrespectful. And they said they steal from me, they fight me, they are against me. So, I say, well, where do they stay? Well, they just come and go, come and go, come and go. You know, the open-door thing. So, they're not being taught, but it's basically what I'm hearing is Elders are afraid of them.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

## Drugs

Alcohol first it was alcohol, then the drugs got in there.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

Drug-infested sellers, and men and women who that domestic violence is really bad here, and then our jailhouse can't hold that many people, and treatment centers, they can't hold that many.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

Because we can't be healthy if we don't try to tackle all of these, underlying things that drives you to drinks and drugs and stuff like that. But when we did that head count for grandparents that was in the height of meth it was just like making its head up. Waking up now that you have Fentanyl. It's, you know, the only safe place to buy pot anymore. Is that at a dispensary?

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

## Money - Support/Payments/Basic Needs

**This one lady is raising her grandkids. Her kids had kids, had kids. Let her take care of them. Jerk them back, I am good now, take them back. That's not good at all (...)** Needs a lot of help, clothes, extra food, a bigger house, because she takes care of her grandkids. There are so many of them. When I needed help, I told myself, pride is not going to get in my way. If I need to borrow some money to get something to eat, I am going to. Shame is not going to feed my kids. This one-time CHRs, she helped me with toilet papers, and out of the blue, she would bring things to my house. She's retired now, but she will always be a blessing. I was never ashamed if I had to stand in line if it had to do with my kids.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

Maybe they don't have the custody papers, but their grandchildren gravitate to them. They live in their household. They provide for their college education, they provide their cars, they are the absolute source of everything for their grandchildren and sometimes mostly their parents too. But the parents receive minimal, they'll get a roof over their head and maybe some clothes on their back, they'll get to eat, but as far as, something greater out there in the community, that's on them. You got a free college, you got free treatment, you got participate without, all my efforts are with my grandchild.

—Fort Peck Elder, 2024

One of the things that they get frustrated with is that a lot of the Blackfeet who have Blackfeet enrolled children, it seems like they never got no payment. They were watching their kids and stuff, and one of them said, I took in nine kids, never got a dime. Another lady up there at the works, at the laundry place. She was telling me at a birthday party, and she was telling me she raises six of her grandchildren and she doesn't get no help, and she's on Social Security like me. I lucked out because I told her. She said, who do you go to? Who do you see? I said, I didn't see anybody. Great falls grabbed these kids and ran with them, and I had to get them on this side because they were in 14 different foster homes the last five years.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

Okay. I know some ladies, elderly ladies that they, really have a hard time because, I know this one lady's raising her grandkids, and, then her kids, they, they had kids, had kids. Give them to her to take care of them, take care of them. But yet try to jerk'em back just at any time. 'Oh, I'm, good now. So, I'm taking my kids.' And that's not good at all. She needs a lot of help with old clothes and extra food and a bigger house, probably, you know, and because she does really take care of her grandkids. But there's so many of them.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

## ADHD, DD

We have a granddaughter my sister raises her but we're all grandparents. She's 10. We took her from the mother when she was six months old. And as a result, uh, when she's started getting into like two or three years old, we definitely knew that something was wrong, she was always crying, always unsatisfied, all that. So, we start the medical, my sister went through all of it, long story short, she's diagnosed with separation anxiety, bipolar ADHD... What else? She has no impulse control. She looks absolutely normal. And she's medicated but we shared the information that we've learned with other families because they're having the same experiences nobody in our communities is able to help diagnose that special needs.

—Fort Peck Elder, 2024

## Court Systems/Legal

**It takes forever in the court system or Blackfeet court system. I can't say is notorious. I have known many cases where these people have raised their children or their grandparents have raised, she calls them her children.** And then just one day, out of the blue, the mother says, well, I want my kids back now and they were getting ready for Christmas. I want my kids back. And I don't know who the decision maker is down there at the court down there, and they sign off on their papers, and kids are right back at their parents, lost again a week later.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024



So, you kind of just muddle your way through and try and figure it out yourself. And we've even called lawyers and other places, that my daughter had friends that were lawyers, so we talked to them. We talked to the state. I mean, it is a hassle of they're trying to get that done. It's a frickin' nightmare.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

We had the No Child Left Behind then we gave it to United States government and of course, they screwed that up royally. So, the Elders' role is very, very important here. And we know that more grandparents are raising their children, which is not right, like the grandparents are in their age where they should be kind of kicking back and just being there as teachers and leaders and loving their grandkids. But today, as grandparents, we have to raise our kids because the mothers and fathers are out in dysfunction doing whatever their thing is. So, we through losing our culture, we're kind of lost at this point.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

## Quality Healthcare

**The frustration, and the medical frustration. Trying to get them into, you know, the medical support part. Dental, eyes and ears, just general checkups, physicals. I mean, it's really frustrating** because they make us go stand up there and they say, you have to go to urgent care, do this, do that. And treated, I felt disrespectful there. Because I thought, well, this is a hospital. You're supposed to come in and relax and not feel so nervous. And doctors trying to hurry, hurry, hurry. Because he probably has a code going on out there, you know, run you in and run you out.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

## Physical Strength

Like my brother, I don't want to go off track but, he comes out of IHS like he's shopping at Walmart and that's all medicine, his medicine. Um, diabetes, high blood pressure, things like that. But like I said, you gotta stay healthy. I do a lot of walking. I do a lot of things with the grandkids. [Tell me about things with the grandkids?] They're nine and ten (...), uh, there is, they keep me going. [Okay.] Right now, it's kind of hard to find jobs on the rez. Especially at my age, "We don't want that old guy." The kids keep me young, keep me going.

—Northern Cheyenne Elder, 2024

I know that my brother always said that grandparents shouldn't raise their grandchildren. And that is because for a child to be raised in a good and effective way, they need a young person that is energetic and can run them to the basketball games, can buy them this, can take them here, can take them there. As an Elder, I'd like to just sit home and do nothing.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

## Transportation

Oh, they're scattered all over the reservation. And like I say, if you don't have a car, that's very difficult. And now I heard that the transit it costs every time you ride. It costs three bucks or something like that. Who's got that kind of money? Every time you get on the transit to pay three bucks, we don't have that kind of money here.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

## Mental Health

And then, other people, they have, like, mental health issues or something like that. **I mean, imagine how difficult it is for them, you know, to kind of go through the system and figure these things out? I'm educated, my daughters educate, and we had a freaking difficult time.**

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024



## Limited General Resources

There's a lot of young grandparents in the 50s on the way up. And, um, rummage sales are always a big thing in the reservation community because we don't have stores. So, they're always buying. It's a way of bartering, making sure that your grandchildren have, um, you have these, um, markets on, definitely on, um, on you know Facebook. Everybody has an iPhone, grandparents always looking for something.

—Fort Peck Elder, 2024

Apply for welfare, assistance for living, and maybe you go and try to get assistance and help to pay power bills cause Tribal people, they could go to some of the Tribal programs for clothing. There's a lot of outlets when it comes to taking care of the children. So, there's a lot of outlets and pretty good programs that say, well, we'll give you your clothes, we're going to pay for this, and they're always there to try to help. **The problem is that there's never enough funds to go around.**

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

More outreach programs. They need more. Not everyone comes up to eat to find out about this. I found out about this [MMRC] because I work here. Some are not going to come to you. It would be good if someone could, not dig into their personal (...) but you know, I am going to go visit this lady, she's got grandkids. If they know someone is on their side. It would be better for children and parents, grandchildren.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

# RESTORING CONNECTIONS AND NETWORKS FOR TREES EXPERIENCING LOSS AND STRESS: COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS

Elders shared the importance of reconnecting people to networks, resources, culture, and community-driven solutions.

## Treatment Support

And the best that we have of ours is to send their people elsewhere for treatment and the abusers also, there is a place for people who are domestic violence survivors, or they can send you the training or something. If you get caught, they should say, well you gotta take this class for six weeks or however it may be.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

## Traditional and Christian Teachings

Also, the Tribe is set in Christianity. Not because we thought it was better or anything, but we thought that might be the medicine that made White people stronger. **So, we thought we could gain from their religion. But we didn't give ours up, we just dovetailed them together.** And I have the privileges of serving with the (...) society here in Helena. You do a church service that incorporates Episcopal beliefs in with the Native beliefs. We'll start with the drum. And then we will smudge. And then we'll do stories and will follow their things in your confession and stuff like that.

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

## Seven Grandfathers' Teachings

So, but those teachings, you know, go a long ways to help. Even if you don't embrace them every day, but if you know them, you can fall back on them when you're having problems and stuff. And when you look at things like addiction.

**You know, if you're taking drugs, it had a lot to do with no respect for yourself. But it has more to do with not being truthful with yourself. You're telling you these things won't hurt you. They won't hurt your friends. And then we find when you're codependent you're not being truthful right to anybody when you're defending this person, so you have to look at them a little harder and when you look at them animals, you know and you see them out, and you start looking at some of the characteristics of animals, you know, the Buffalo didn't think less than humans. He just loved humans so much that he would give himself for them, their wellbeing.**

And for us to show respect for him, we didn't waste any of his body and stuff. We tried to use every bit we could. So, when you use that kind of thoughts and stuff, and you try to impel that into young people.

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

# RESTORING CONNECTIONS AND NETWORKS FOR TREES EXPERIENCING LOSS AND STRESS: MATERNAL MORTALITY REVIEW COMMITTEES

## Roles of MMRCs

Like, they need more support system. And they need to educate young parents, what they're doing to their body is to also do that to the child.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

So yeah, it's I mean, like I didn't know about anything until you talked about it. Yeah. [And so, providing more information to the community at large, especially key members of the community, yeah, would be a very positive thing.] Yep. It would be.

—Crow Elder, 2024

Well, MMRC is like that secret society. We think so. No, we think it's there. We don't know for sure. [Okay.] You know, So, in a nutshell if I had to give an illustration and I'm 64.

—Fort Peck Elder, 2024

[There would be some potential action that comes from the community and from the Tribal Council. To look at this, as well as the MMRC that group of people against together and reviews the death...] both of those things would take place.

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

What CDC is having us do is talk about each of these deaths, are they pregnancy related? Are they a result of a pregnancy? Are they pregnancy related, uh, pregnancy associated? Is there any connection between the death and the pregnancy? (...) so we look at these from a perspective of uh, people that live in this community. As a Native, in some cases, **I think as a Native American, um, women, uh, my position is to help educate my, my committee members, why something might have happened.** I remember one case that we talked about where this girl, one of her maladies was depression, but so many things happened to her that resulted in her death. Everybody was fixed on all those other things. I said, wait a minute, this girl, I think the underlying cause is, is that she had no parental support, she was extremely depressed, and those two, that combination did more for her demise than what everybody else is talking about, um, and I tried to explain to them that this is what it's like in the Indian Community.

—Crow Elder, 2024



## Honor Tribal Sovereignty and Respect for Culture

Well, normally, like if there's somebody that I see like on this committee, uh, it's a Tribal member. Uh, hypothetically to the Blackfeet or to the Rocky Boy Tribe or whatever it is, if it's a committee member. Usually, the way I see that process working is that committee member takes that back to the Tribal Council and says here's what happened, this is the situation, here are the circumstances. What are we going to do about this? And usually during that time a Council resolution or a Council action will be taken and added upon the other parts of the guidelines that to try to prevent this. **So usually the Tribal Councils have so much power that they can assert these things or make changes to them to bring an end to some of this stuff.**

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

But I know I mean, the biggest thing is, if they are really to help the Native people. They got to get the Native people to go back to their culture. Go back to being Native.

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

# RESTORING CONNECTIONS AND NETWORKS FOR TREES EXPERIENCING LOSS AND STRESS: OTHER

Elders reflected on differences between urban and reservation areas. They also shared their appreciation for this work and reminded us that knowledge comes from listening and experience.

## Urban and Rez Differences

...and a lot of times the Tribe looks differently on Natives that are born off reservation. You know, like you're born on the reservation, you're enrolled. You have a bad pregnancy up in Browning and you go to Great Falls, you have to enroll even though your siblings didn't have that problem. So, you're penalized on both sides.

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

## Appreciation

Right, I mean it's, I mean yeah. I think this is awesome. You know, you guys coming in finding out what's really going around here and how you can help. I see a lot of that, yeah. We do need some help. (...) keep busy anyway. Kids are kids are awesome. [Yeah.] Mortality thing, eh, that's more room. Like when kids will hang themselves, yeah, I could understand what the parents were going through. But grandparents, I don't know. But yeah, we are, there's a lot of us raising grandkids.

—Northern Cheyenne Elder, 2024

## Within Reservation Differences

They isolate themselves. And um, like I said, Lame Deer we get along with (...) don't get along with (...) and don't get along. So, it's all, it's just crazy. Yeah. But that's why I'm on the North side here.

—Northern Cheyenne Elder, 2024

## Teachings from Generations

Well, myself? No, I don't seek anything out there, you know, I just kind of more or less figure out what was best for me and figure it out. Because a lot of them, a lot of the things, I know came from my mom and dad from their teachings. And **I've always told my grandbabies, my mom would talk to her grandchildren. I've always told them to listen, just listen to her. You don't have to answer, listen to her. One goes down the road, you're gonna use her knowledge.** I did, I did. And today I always think, this is what she means. This is what and that helps me a lot. I was just happy that you know, my parents were my parents because uh, today, you know, I now have grandchildren, great-grandchildren they look up to me, you know? A lot of times. I mean, I don't know everything, but I've always told them that we work things out together.

—Northern Cheyenne Elder, 2024



# ELDER AND TRIBAL MMRC PERSPECTIVES ON PREGNANCY-RELATED DEATHS AND GRANDFAMILIES

In this section of the review, we focus on specific recommendations from Elders and Tribal MMRC members regarding pregnancy-related deaths and the role of Grandfamilies. Because the funding for this review focused on American Indian MMRCs, it is important to summarize these findings in this section.

## Honor Sovereignty and Promote Education About MMRCs

Organizations like the CDC and State MMRCs should engage Tribes, Elders, and programs when a maternal or child death is investigated and reviewed. Previous guidance from the National Center for Fatality Review and Prevention (2020) calls for engaging Tribal members, Elders, Tribal Councils, and programs before a death investigation occurs.

They need more. Not everyone comes up to eat to find out about this. I found out about this [MMRC] because I work here. Some are not going to come to you. It would be good if someone could not dig into their personal (...) but I am going to visit this lady; she's got grandkids. If they know someone is on their side. It would be better for children and, parents, grandchildren.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

I didn't know it anything until you. Talked about it. [MMRC?] Yeah. [And so providing more information to the community at large, especially key members of the community.] Yeah, would be a very positive thing.

—Crow Elder, 2024

Well, normally, like if there's somebody that I see like this on this committee, Uh, it's a Tribal member. Uh, hypothetically to the Blackfeet or to the Rocky Boy Tribe or whatever it is if there's a committee event, or usually the way I see that process working is that committee member takes that back to the Tribal Council... here's what happened, this is the situation, here are the circumstances, what are we going to do about this... And usually during that time a Council resolution or a Council action will be taken. And added upon the other parts of the guideline to try to prevent this. So, usually, the Tribal Councils have so much power. They can assert these things or make changes to them to bring an end to some of this stuff.

—Little Shell Elder, 2024

Tribal MMRCs could honor the values of Tribal self-determination and sovereignty by involving Tribal leaders and community members in the decision-making process and respecting their cultural beliefs and practices.

—Tribal MMRC Member Montana, 2024

## Targeted Outreach and Resources

State and federal resources could be expanded to invest in Tribal communities more. This includes MCH care, quality health care, early intervention care, specialty doctors and therapists to address drug and alcohol-impacted children, foster care resources and supports, assistance with navigating court systems and custody, and other programs. When the death of a mother or child occurs in a Tribal community, MMRCs could work with Tribal members to provide resources, support, referrals, and follow-up.

**The resources. Um, I don't think they actually know what they're doing. They need to reach out to the community instead of just sitting behind the desk, you know. Because they get nothing down by just sitting there.**

*—Northern Cheyenne Elder, 2024*

## Tribal MMRCs

Considerations around Tribally led MMRCs must take into account external conditions, systems, and communities that contribute to maternal deaths.

**I do not know how a Tribal MMRC would make more of an impact within the Tribal communities. We also need the support of our neighboring communities to continue with substantial change. We can begin the impact within our community, but it must continue outside as well.**

*—Tribal MMRC Member Montana, 2024*

## Grief and Loss Support

Increase funding, outreach, counseling, and education around grief and loss support resources. Work with K-12 schools, social service programs, and treatment centers to create networks of support so that individuals and families receive the care they need. Tribes have teachings and protocols about how to address the loss of a loved one through MMRCs and other methods. These could be shared with other Tribes and communities. At the same time, CDC and other agencies could share their resources, capacity, and practices regarding grief and loss.

**Even this behavioral health up here. When I went, I had to when I lost my girl... let's say one of the counselors or whatever they were there... then they are working at a different position. Heck, I spilled my heart out to that person, no more.**

*—Blackfeet Elder, 2024*

**Having a cultural component to how our American Indian and Alaska Native people process grief. Also, how the community comes together when a relative passes [are topics that should be covered in State MMRC meetings.]**

*—Tribal MMRC Member Montana, 2024*

**People need to be more involved in MMRC work and development. That's what we're trying to do is to with the, uh, suicide prevention really bring the cultural aspects that the Crow had... having those Prayer times, looking at the good traditional cultural things that are looking for herbs, you know, the Crows have traditionally been a very spiritual people... But again, "we've lost the ... disconnection". I mean we've got that this connection going because of these students.**

*—Crow Elder, 2024*



## Engaging and Supporting Elders

Elders play an important role as caretakers of the world, keepers of culture, and protectors of their communities. When a maternal death occurs, Elders and Grandfamilies often step in to raise the children left behind. Elders are tasked with navigating complex court systems, insurance coverage, and housing requirements yet are not fully supported. Meeting their basic needs (food, shelter, housing, transportation) must be a focus and a priority of MMRC efforts.

**There's no Elder programs, no dances, no social gatherings. Years back, when I was growing up, they used to have social gathering dances in Hart (...) They used to have Star School. They used to have ceremonies all over here. Even though a lot of people were Catholics, they still went, yeah, you know, and it was a lot of fun.**

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

## Education

Outreach, education, and prevention efforts are necessary to prevent pregnancy-related deaths. Education could include outreach to young people, families, and Grandfamilies about resources available in their communities. Education for providers, agencies, and programs must also address implicit bias and discrimination against Native people.

**There should be more outreach programs. We have younger girls getting pregnant... From my generation to my kids' generation, to the ones now, it doesn't seem like there is too much help for them. Younger people are not educated enough.**

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

**Biases can impact the quality of care that Native mothers receive and can contribute to maternal health disparities.**

—Tribal MMRC Member Montana, 2024

## Culturally Tailored Outreach

Efforts to address maternal mortality must be culturally specific and acknowledge intergenerational traumas caused by colonial practices that removed children from their homes. At the same time, any outreach that is provided must be done to honor the Seven Grandfather Teachings and Tribal values of respect and humility.

**They are afraid to get help. They are going to take my baby away. Let them know we are not here to break up your little family.**

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

**Being a blessing. I never make people feel I am up here, and they are down here. Learning my grief and letdowns, if I can be a blessing, that is good.**

—Blackfeet Elder 2024

## Reconceptualizing Terms

Elder responses to the term pregnancy-related death varied. Many Elders did not differentiate between a pregnancy-related death, the death of their own child, or the death of another family member such as a son, daughter, or sibling. Death in a Tribal community has a significant impact on everyone—preventive measures should address all contributing factors.

**Death happens on both sides of the fence. The hope is that examining the events leading up to the death of the mother would expand healthcare provider knowledge of how cultural issues played a part in the American Indian and Alaska Native mother's death. It's hoped that that knowledge would help providers put preventative measures in place, so these deaths don't occur as much.**

—Tribal MMRC Member Montana, 2024



# GRANDFAMILIES

We presented a list of potential reasons for Grandfamilies to Elders. Most agreed that all of these responses were the reasons why there are more Grandfamilies in the American Indian and Alaska Native population than other ethnic groups. Quotes from Elders below illustrate different reasons for Grandfamilies and the needs they have.

- I have no grandchildren, and I am unsure of the reasons this happens.
- My grandchildren's parent(s) are deceased.
- The father is unknown or absent from the family.
- One or both parents are in jail or prison.
- The parents have substance use problems that prevent them from parenting.
- A parent or both parents have mental health problems.
- The parent or parents have physical health problems.
- Parent(s) are living in another area, and the children reside with me.
- I have routine contact with my grandchildren and see them frequently.

I took on the role of taking care of her [my granddaughter]... I wanted to be there to help them so that they could get out there and do things for themselves. I worked all the time.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

This one lady is raising her grandkids. Her kids had kids, had kids. Let her take care of them. Jerk them back, and I am good now. Take them back. That's not good at all (...) Needs a lot of help, clothes, extra food, and a bigger house. Because she takes care of her grandkids. There are so many of them. When I needed help, I told myself that pride was not going to get in my way. If I need to borrow money to get something to eat, I will. Shame is not going to feed my kids. This one-time CHR helped me with toilet paper, and out of the blue, she would bring things to my house. She's retired now, but she will always be a blessing. I was never ashamed if I had to stand in line if it had to do with my kids.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

Taking care of fourth-generation foster children. Your hours go fast. They really, really go fast and stuff. And then you focus on the kids, their games, or, you know, whatever it is that they need. And, you know, sometimes just sitting there talking with them or taking a ride with them, that's really important to the boys I have. They don't ask for much at all. But they like to take a ride. They like to see people come in and go in. You know, they like to say, well, our house is clean; we don't have drugs in it. We don't have people come in drunk. My auntie just tells them, 'Leave, you got to go. You can't stay.' She's protecting us. That's why she's like that, you know, things like that.

—Blackfeet Elder, 2024

## WHY GRANDFAMILIES?

There are multiple reasons why Grandfamilies exist, and not all are negative. Grandparents raising grandchildren has been a traditional value and practice followed for generations. Drugs and alcohol, loss of parents, courts, and disconnection contribute to the increase in Grandfamilies.

Alcohol first... it was alcohol, then the drugs got in there.

—*Blackfeet Elder, 2024*

Their dad walked out on us. My boy was 7 or 8 years old. It was really hard. I knew this one lady, she called it, let me go shopping in her kitchen; there was always something sweet for the kids.

—*Blackfeet Elder, 2024*

The lady would have to go to court. I did not know the outcome of all of it; the next thing I knew, she would have her grandkids again. It's a battle for a lot of parents, even parents. Let's say one of the parents is trying their best. The court system isn't too good here. Maybe just one parent wasn't doing good, and yet they get that kids removed.

—*Blackfeet Elder, 2024*





# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE WORK

In this project, Elders and MMRC members told us what the future could look like and what is needed to support wellness in Native communities and families. The themes and stories presented in this paper show different perspectives and priorities. The summary below presents recommendations supporting Grandfamilies, MMRCs, and the CDC.

## Recommendations with Grandfamilies

**Safety first.** Many Elders have homes with extended families. Some have individuals using drugs or alcohol. They are not safe. Policies that address safety issues and drug use within Tribal housing must be enforced and followed.

**Elder wisdom.** Incorporate traditional teachings, spirituality, ceremonies, and positive Native identity into Tribal programs, outreach efforts, and oversight. For example, wellness, treatment, and recovery centers could include an Elder advisory board. Elders could gather monthly to review program efforts, provide recommendations, and connect the community to available resources.

**Strengthen families.** Strengthen existing grandparent programs and create new resource pathways and hubs to access to financial, physical, emotional, and mental support. This could include outreach, support for large families, violence prevention, support for basic needs, a group home center/safe place for kids, and addressing systemic issues related to the social determinants of health.

**Create opportunities.** Foster opportunities for grandparents to connect with one another, share their experiences, and provide positive kinship connections for raising children.

**Reduce barriers.** Multiple barriers within systems prevent grandparents from fully caring for their grandchildren. Examples include limited access to medical care and insurance, custody issues, lack of payments from the state to offset the costs of raising them, reliable transportation, expanded housing, mental health and wellness supports for grandparents, respite care, and mental health support.

**Increase specialized resources.** Identify and link grandchildren to specialized resources in the communities for fetal substance exposures. These children often require additional behavioral support, specialized instruction in the classroom, medications, and therapies.

**Reconnect parents.** Identify recovery and healing pathways to reintegrate parents into their children's lives. These include traditional parenting programs, housing, education, and employment opportunities. As one Elder said, being sober does not mean parenting. Another set of skills is required to be a good parent and present in their children's lives.

**Remember.** Traditionally, American Indian people often raised their grandchildren. It was considered an honor, and it was not always done out of necessity but out of deep respect for the culture and traditional ways. Elders have always taken care of the sacred. They will continue to do so, but they will not always be here. The coming generation of Elders has been deeply impacted by drugs and alcohol. Planning is necessary to take care of the grandchildren who are coming and those who are left behind.



## Recommendations with MMRCs

**Education.** Create opportunities to educate non-Native MMRC members in culture, kinship systems, values, and balanced wellness. Native MMRC members could also educate non-Native MMRC members on the impact of colonization on communities and advocate for decolonized methods.

**Available resources.** Ask people and communities what they need. Find resources to meet those needs. Do not recommend resources that are not available. For example, specialty MCH care for high-risk pregnancies is not available in most reservations and rural communities.

**Culture.** Promote culture-based solutions, reviews, discussions, resources, and recommendations for addressing American Indian and Alaska Native maternal mortality deaths. Start with what is already in communities and elevate Elder wisdom and parenting practices.

**Respect for sovereignty.** Work with Tribal leaders and Elders to develop protocols and processes to review deaths of American Indian and Alaska Native members. If asked to review the passing of a Tribal member, the MMRC should contact the Tribe first. Adhere to the process of contacting the Tribe that the individual is enrolled in first. Work with the Tribe and family to explore causes of death and how to prevent future deaths. Identify those individuals who are left behind because of the death. Support Tribes as they determine where the children are, who is taking care of them, and if they have the necessary resources and support.

**Holistic approach.** Reconceptualize and redefine maternal mortality within the context of American Indian and Alaska Native communities. It is not just one death; it is the death of a mother tree and a hub network. Native MMRC members and

RMTLC could provide a list of grief and loss resources in communities specific to each Tribe. Tribes could provide culturally based practices and teachings that address death. Ensure these are accessible to all families and individuals who are in need.

## Recommendations with the Centers for Disease Control

**Decolonize.** The MMRC process is a colonized approach to counting and investigating deaths. It fails to balance indigenous views about grief and loss with Western perspectives.

**Fund Tribes.** Allocate Tribal funding to address maternal mortality through mini-grant mechanisms or cooperative agreements. Allow Tribes flexibility in developing solutions to address conditions that contribute to increased deaths.

**Educate people about MMRCs.** Work with Tribal partners to create Native-specific MMRC resources and webpages. Cross-list this information on CDC, IHS, NIHB, NCAI, RMTLC, and other websites. Balance the concept of maternal mortality with life and resilience in all educational materials and outreach.

**Listen to Tribes and Elders.** Take these teachings and apply them to the knowledge base of what is needed to address maternal mortality in American Indian and Alaska Native populations.

**Redesign and reconceptualize the role of federal, state, and Tribal partners.** Promote and advocate for the continued use of Tribal values, protocols, and knowledge in MMRC spaces. Ask Tribal partners to develop resources to educate on cultural humility, follow Tribal values, and create balance within partnerships and capacity sharing.

## Recommendations With Everyone and Everything

**Culture.** Use culturally grounded interventions or those that come from the community and are based on Indigenous knowledge systems and cultural practices. Elders are calling for this. Going back to the dog days... going back to our traditional ways... being kind to one another... not getting lost in the world... listening...loving... taking care of the earth and everyone in it. This is what culture can do that Western interventions cannot.

### **Look for signs of wellness and healing.**

Colonial systems focus on what is wrong and who is to blame. This deficit-based model ignores the ways people heal and the evidence of it. Western systems emphasize abstinence, education, employment, and housing as signs that people are healing. The signs of healing in Indigenous communities may differ, for example, a return to cultural practices, reclaiming their sacred roles as Tribal members, contributing time and care to their family, or having an existential experience. Elders told us that their way of life is their religion.

**Address spiritual wounds—grief, loss, and trauma.** Indigenous people today are carrying intergenerational traumas. These often show up as drugs, alcohol, addiction, violence, and child neglect.

**Their spirit remembers, ... You see that grief and trauma that they have been carrying for decades and decades and there's no way that you can live with that kind of grief and trauma without actually, passing it on the offsprings. So, you have a nagging thing under the surface somewhere and just a little thing just trying to remember it brings out and festers back to the surface.**

—*Little Shell Elder, 2024*

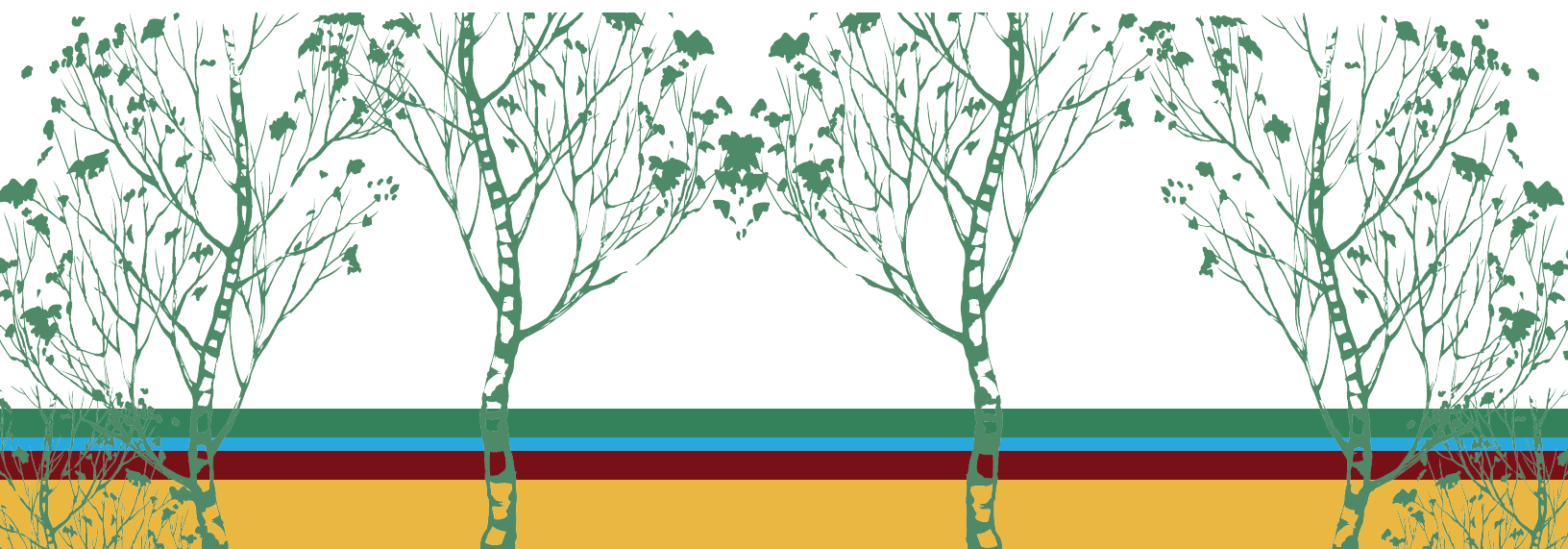
**Find balance.** Preventable deaths, such as the death of a mother or a child, show us that something is out of balance. The Elders reminded us that there is deep wisdom in their traditional ways and stressed the importance of living in balance. Indigenous people have historical resilience.

### **It goes back to our ancestry.**

**You know. We were caretakers of the world. 500 years ago... we took care of the world, and the world provided life to us.**

—*Blackfeet Elder, 2024*

## Heal the forest.



# CONTINUING THE JOURNEY: PERSPECTIVES ON THE FOREST OF RESILIENCE



This paper presents the first-ever review of Elder perspectives on maternal mortality and Grandfamilies in the Great Plains Region. Elders have varying perspectives based on their lived experience, community position, and cultural connections. Although

Elders have lived different lives, their message was clear. Reconnecting youth, families, mothers, and communities to their culture, traditional values, and kinship systems is necessary to Heal the Forest.

Factors contributing to American Indian maternal mortality are intersectional, complex, and deeply rooted in colonial systems and structures. Western scientific methods and research strategies have failed to uncover the actual causes of American Indian maternal mortality (and likely all racial/ethnic groupings of maternal mortality) and prevent them. A key issue is that published research to date has found limited to no association between substance use, trauma, and maternal mortality in American Indian communities. This conflicts with the views of Elders interviewed for this review. A strength of this review is that we used multiple methodological approaches to explore a Healing Forest concept, Grandfamilies, and maternal mortality. Mortality is never what it seems, and conditions go beyond a medical record listing the causes of death.

## Two-Eyed Seeing

Throughout this review, there were different perspectives about what something meant—the process of analyzing and thematically coding data represents our subjective experiences and biases. Because MMRCs in Tribal communities blend two different ways of knowing and being, it is essential to acknowledge these differences and reflect on what they mean for future work.

**Elder definitions.** What defines an elder in Tribal communities is different from how Western society may typically define and see an Elder. An Elder here is someone who has knowledge and who is a helper of the community. Age is not what makes someone an Elder.

**Safety vs. vulnerability.** Grandparents keep children and their communities safe. They are foster parents, teachers, caretakers, and watchers of the community. They are providers. This contrasts with Western perspectives, where grandparents are not often the sole providers of their grandchildren. Often in Western culture, Elders may be viewed as vulnerable, frail, and limited in their capacities to care for others.

**Death.** Elders view all deaths as equally important to address, whereas MMRCs focus solely on maternal-related deaths. They were not separate, and there were no instances of Elders mentioning an actual pregnancy-related death that happened in their communities based on the CDC definitions and a subsequent MMRC review.

**Generosity of the spirit.** When communities and families are resource-poor, practicing generosity to meet basic needs is difficult. However, the greatest generosity in Tribal communities is not monetary resources. It is the strength and value of being part of a family and extended kinship system. Many Tribes believe that poverty is when you don't have any relatives or family. In Western cultures, poverty is based on a numeric income value.

**To reduce American Indian mortality and uplift the Forest of Resilience, we recommend these specific actions:**

- Reconnect to Everyone and Everything to Culture**
- Find Solutions in the Community and Culture**
- Address Learned Helplessness**
- Increase Resources and Funding**
- Increase Support for Grief, Loss, and Trauma**
- Increase Access to Proper Rituals and Funeral Rites**
- Address Social and Structural Determinants of Health**
- Increase Support for Grandfamilies and Parents**
- Address Generational Impacts of Drugs, Alcohol, and Death**
- Utilize Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Two-Eyed Seeing**



## Elders' Ask for Help

Elders interviewed for this review asked us to address the conditions, disconnections, limited resource pathways, death of mother/hub trees, and environments or systems that fail to promote a healthy, healing forest. We recommend the following considerations for future work:

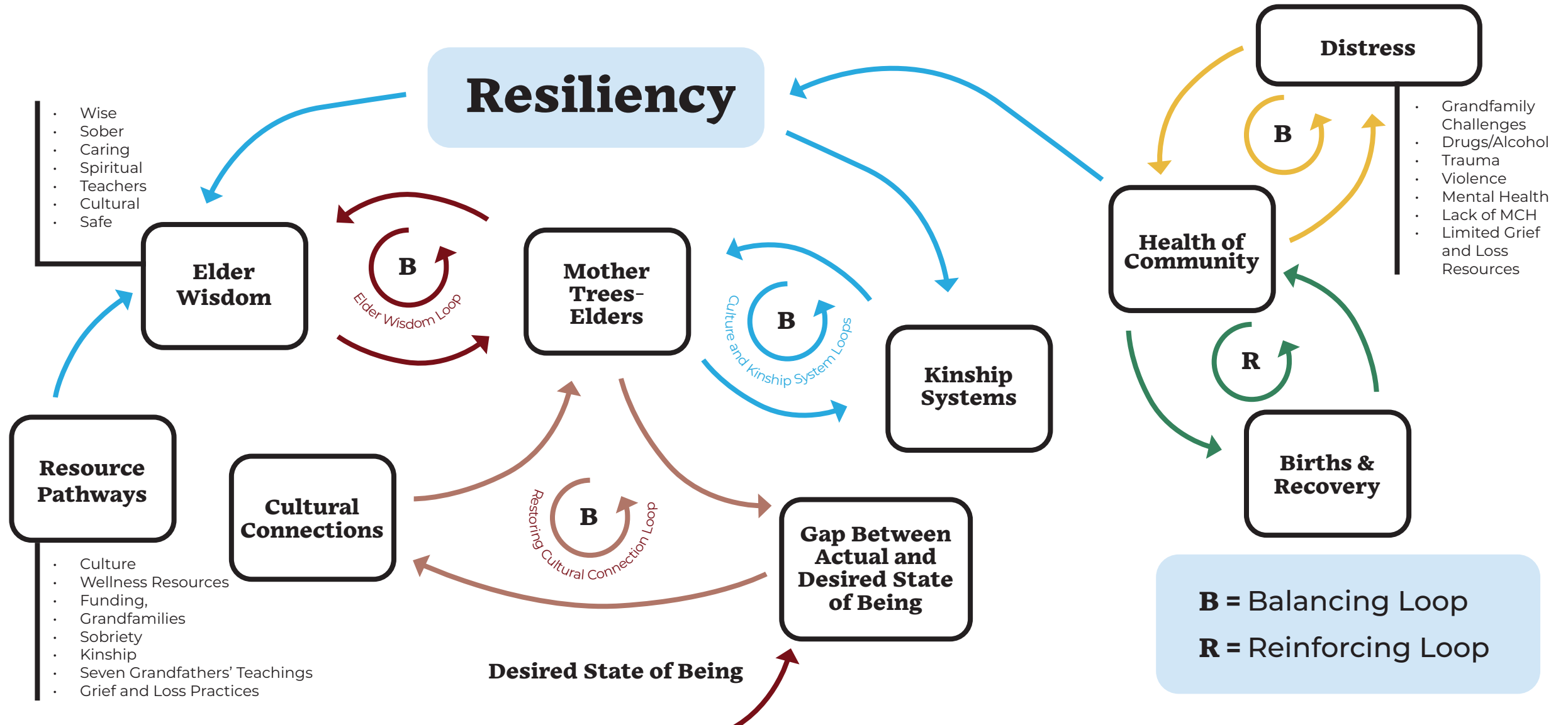
- The Centers for Disease Control views MMRCs as a solution to preventing maternal mortality in all populations, including American Indians. However, MMRCs are not fully addressing the underlying root causes of American Indian and Alaska Native maternal mortality, Grandfamilies, and disconnection. While American Indian MMRC members felt that MMRCs were critical in addressing maternal mortality, more could be done.
- Addressing the social and structural determinants of health and uncovering the root causes of maternal deaths are key first steps. Many American Indian mothers experience racism, discrimination, and poor conditions that limit their abilities to parent, access resources and services, and thrive. These structural conditions are passed on from one generation to the next and should be properly addressed to prevent American Indian and Alaska Native deaths.

- A Two-Eyed Seeing approach honors and validates the lived experiences and deaths of all Indigenous people, including American Indian mothers. Using Western approaches to quantify, pathologize, and diagnose is a colonial approach that has not been effective in reducing American Indian and Alaska Native maternal mortality. The use of Indigenous perspectives, culture, traditional practices, language, traditional parenting practices, and community-grown and based resources is the approach that is desperately needed. Indigenous approaches value balance, the Seven Grandfathers' Teachings, Tribal values like those of the Lakota, and the sacredness of children and all in the circle life.

The RMTLC, RMTEC, CDC, Elders, and Tribal Leaders can use Elder perspectives for good, restoring connections, growing the Resilient Forest, and healing their own.



Figure 3. Elders as Mother Trees to Heal the Forest: A Systems Approach



**Soil**

**The Conditions that Determine Health:**

Culture, Education, Housing, Employment, Urban, Reservation, Colonization, Policies, Power

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# APPENDIX A:

## ELDER INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

### ELDER INTERVIEW PROTOCOL GUIDE

February 2024

Introduce the Project and Protocol.

You have been contacted to participate in an interview with me about your experience and knowledge of the roles a Maternal Mortality Review Committee (MMRC) has in Native communities. These committees review deaths that occur within a year of pregnancy, including both children and adults. 93% of American Indian/Alaskan Native pregnancy-related deaths are preventable. The goal is to reduce deaths by identifying, reviewing, and characterizing pregnancy-related deaths and to identify future prevention opportunities.

At the end of this interview, you will also be asked questions regarding your experiences as an American Indian Elder/grandparent in the role of a primary caregiver in your family and community. These questions will allow us to gain more information about how many American Indians/Alaskan Native grandparents and other family members are the primary care providers for children or other family members.

An initial feasibility study completed through Allyson Kelley & Associates, PLLC, provided documentation to form a baseline regarding the use of MMRCs among American Indian/Alaskan Native people in Montana and Wyoming. We are now collecting follow-up data to expand these initial results to additional areas.

Two sources of information have been identified as appropriate targets for this purpose. One is to develop an interview guide for use in collecting information from Tribal Elders regarding the topic of maternal and infant mortality, and the other is to expand data collection with Native people who are currently engaged in MMRC efforts in Montana.

This is not a research study. If you agree to participate, you will be asked several questions about your knowledge and experience of these topics. You may discontinue your participation at any time. No one will be told by me or anyone working on this project that you were a participant. You do not have to answer every question asked, especially if the question is upsetting to you in any way. Please ask me any questions you have during this interview and share experiences that may be triggered by questions asked to you.

You don't need to share personal experiences about these topics, although we appreciate information you are comfortable with sharing. If you want to have someone you trust during the interview, please let me know, and that can be arranged. No personally identifiable information will be requested during the interview.

There are no Tribal-led MMRCs, and very few state MMRCs include Tribal representatives. Our long-term goal is to develop additional methods to prevent the occurrence of these deaths



**Name of Person Being Interviewed:**

**In Person:**

**Teleconference:**

**Tribal Affiliation:**

**Start Time:**

**End Time:**

**Date:**

**Notes:**

**Interviewer:**

## **Background:**

1. Tell me a little about your role as an Elder in your family/community.


## **Defining MMRC Needs and Gaps:**

2. How would you describe what happens when a pregnancy-related death occurs in your community? (prompts grief/loss support, trauma treatment, healing, kinship systems, and ceremonies)
3. What are your thoughts on what causes pregnancy-related deaths in your community?
4. What are your thoughts about MMRCs and addressing pregnancy-related deaths in your community? (prompts: is an MMRC needed, who would lead this, how, when, where why)

## **Your role as an Elder:**

My last area of question is to ask you about your role of being a grandparent/Elder in your family today. We know that American Indian/Alaskan Native grandparents are the primary parents of their grandchildren and other young members of their families more often than any other ethnic group in the United States. These arrangements are also referred to as Grandfamilies.

5. What do you think is/are the reason(s) that this occurs? Note all answers that apply.
  - I have no grandchildren, and I am unsure of the reasons this happens.
  - My grandchildren's parent(s) are deceased.
  - The father is unknown or absent from the family.
  - One or both parents are in jail or prison.
  - The parents have substance use problems that prevent them from parenting.
  - A parent or both parents have mental health problems.
  - The parent or parents have physical health problems.
  - Parent(s) are living in another area, and the children reside with me.
  - I have routine contact with my grandchildren and see them frequently.

- 
6. Tell me what you know about other grandparents who are raising their grandchildren.
  7. What circumstances do you feel caused this to happen?
  8. Have these grandparents' shared challenges that they face being primary caregivers with you?
  9. Were any of these areas' legal challenges, such as custody and financial support?

**This Concludes the Interview:**

10. Are there any other topics you wish to address or additional information you wish to share about these topics? Thank you for participating in this interview. Your responses will be very helpful to us in the future.



**FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

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