




Building Relationships: Effective Education Advocacy in American Indian Communities

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Native American Disability Law Center



Who is the Native American Disability Law Center?

- Protection and Advocacy organization for Native Americans with disabilities living in the Four Corners
- Provide free legal assistance, advocacy and education in areas such as civil rights, special education, abuse and neglect, and housing
- Provide legislative advocacy by drafting, revising, and enforcing laws on the Navajo Nation enacted to protect individuals with disabilities
- Cover a large, mostly rural geographic area, including four states (New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and Utah)

Service Area

- Four Corners area of NM, AZ, UT and CO.
- Tribes served: Navajo, Hopi, CO Ute Tribes, Havasupai, etc.
- Navajo Nation population est. 250,000.





Learning Objectives

By the end of this session, you will be able to:

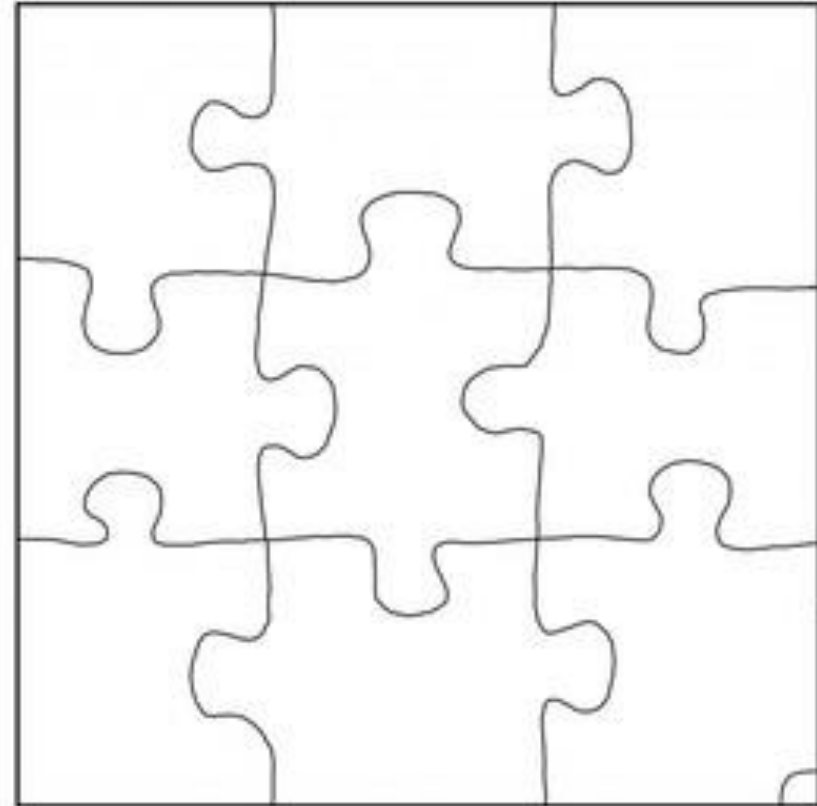
- Discuss the importance of understanding how one's identity affects our views and interaction
- Understand the importance of individual and historical trauma when working with AI communities.
- Identify 3 strategies in building working relationships w/American Indian communities
- Identify 3 unique challenges that SPED advocates face in AI communities


How does my own identity affect the lens through which I view and interact with the communities in which I am providing services?

- Race
- (Dis)ability
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Age
- Socioeconomic status
- Education

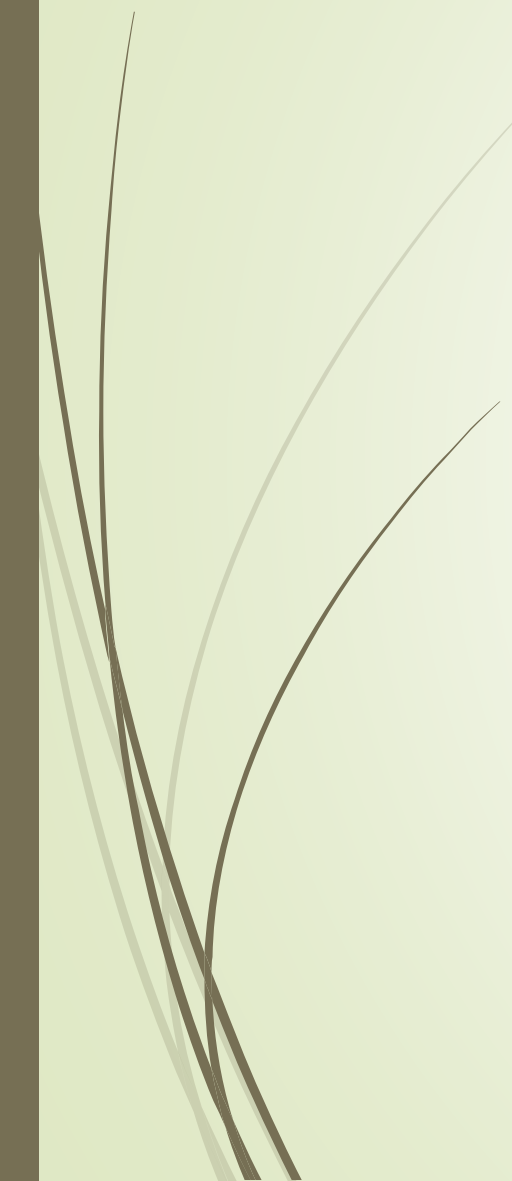
MY IDENTITY

What different pieces make up my identity?





Heather's Identity

- White
 - Heterosexual
 - Grew up in rural Georgia and attended a mostly white high school
 - Middle Class
 - Able-bodied (loves physical activity)
 - University-educated
 - Not religious
 - Prior to moving to the Southwest, had little experience with Native American communities
 - Moved to New Mexico/Colorado from Center City, Philadelphia
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Scenario

- Heather's client is an elderly Navajo man who comes to her for assistance in writing a will.
- At their first meeting, Heather wears her new owl earrings and looks forward to helping her client find some peace knowing his things will be passed on how he wishes.
- Heather insists on first talking with her client alone so she can make sure he isn't being coerced into writing a will.
- Her client will not make eye contact and doesn't say much.
- Heather assumes her client does not want a will and tells him to call her if he changes his mind.



What did Heather do wrong?

(Do a poll here.)

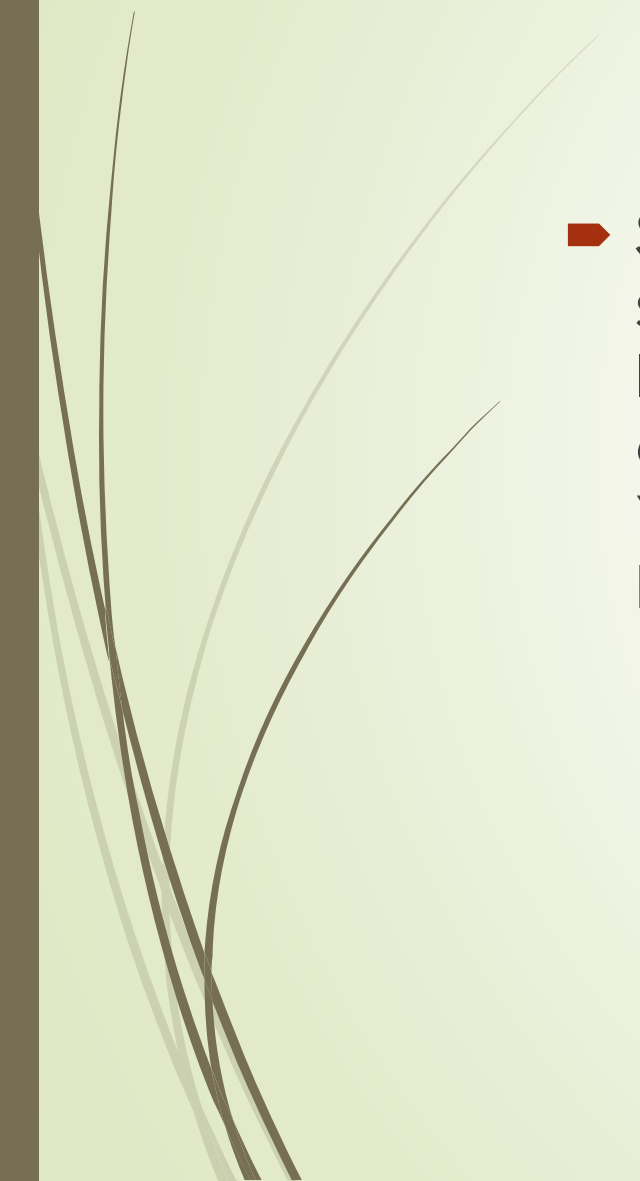


Cultural Intelligence

- The ability to **recognize** and **adapt** to cultural differences
- CQ combines knowledge and understanding with the ability to apply that knowledge and understanding and adapt to different environments and with different cultures.
 - Drive: Motivation to learn about new cultures. Are you ready and willing to begin learning about the Native American communities in your area?
 - Knowledge: Understanding how cultures influence what people say and do and how cultures are similar and different.
 - Strategy: Do you have an awareness and ability to plan for interactions with individuals from other cultures?



What is YOUR cultural intelligence??

- Scenario: You have just accepted a job as an advocate for students with disabilities on the Navajo Nation. You are from Illinois and have no experience working in Native communities and don't know much about the Navajo Nation. You have been an advocate for 10 years and are quite knowledgeable about special education law.
 - What can you do to make this transition as easy as possible?
 - Please fill in the short answer with a few possible strategies.
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Historical Trauma

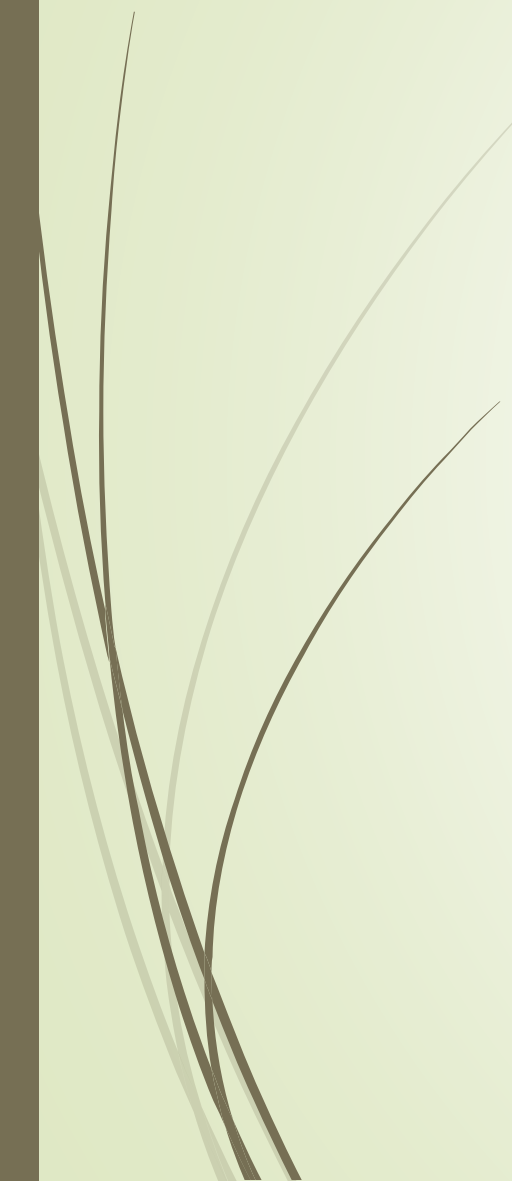
“...is the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma.”


– Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Braveheart, Lakota

- ▶ Symptoms of unresolved historical trauma in native communities: Poverty, violence, poor health, suicide, unemployment, addiction, and hopelessness.
- ▶ Important to understand how this history of genocide and trauma is impacting native communities today.
- ▶ Understanding how behavior patterns, family relationships, mental attitudes and where they come from gives us a chance to create change and help others change.



Example: Indian Boarding Schools

- “Kill the Indian. Save the man.”
 - Focus on cultural assimilation
 - Native youth sent away from families to boarding schools
 - Denied language, culture, clothing, and contact with families
 - High death rates and burials off native lands
 - Resulted in low self esteem, loss of extended family circles, loss of traditions
 - Many Native youth are raised by grandparents who experienced Indian Boarding Schools firsthand.
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Individual Trauma

Adverse Childhood Experiences

- ▶ ACES studies show that American Indians and Alaska Natives are disproportionately affected by childhood trauma, including abuse, neglect, alcohol abuse, absent parents, and family violence.
- ▶ One survey of 1,200 Native Americans in New Mexico revealed that 29% had been exposed to 4 or more adverse childhood experiences as children.
- ▶ Greater rates of ACEs has been correlated with poor physical health, depression and anxiety disorders, behavior dysregulation, difficulty in school (including expulsion and drop out rates), and contact with law enforcement




Is exposure to adverse childhood experiences or trauma a disability??

Poll the audience.

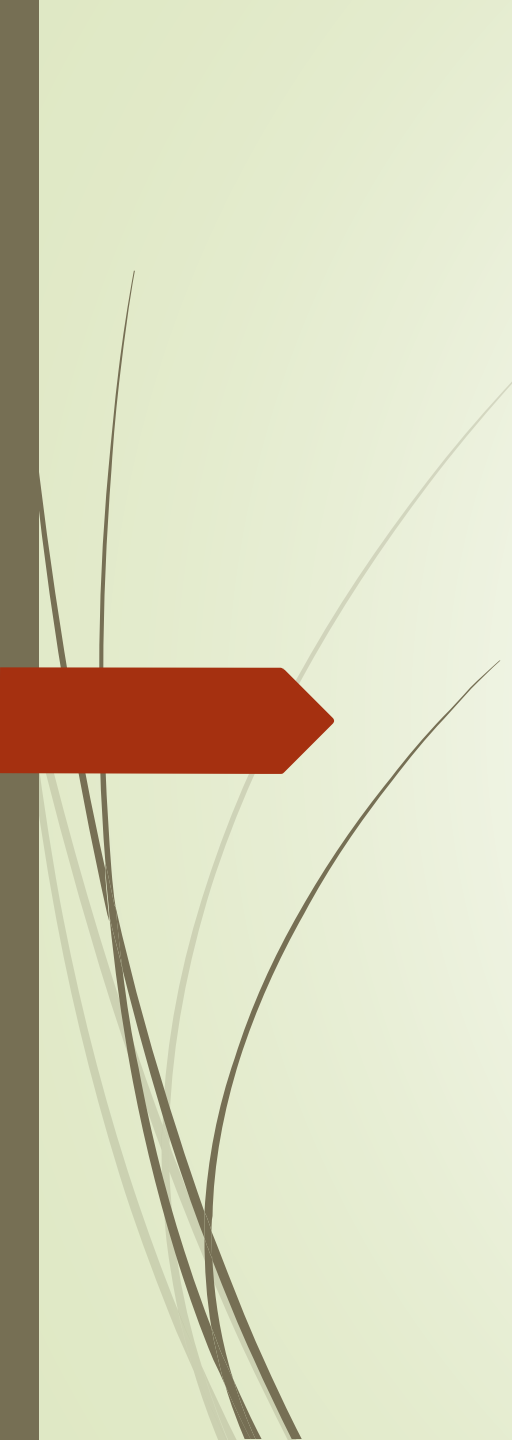


What strategies can you think of to build working relationships with native communities?



Strategies for building working relationships with native communities

- Trust – reassuring that information shared is confidential.
- Respecting cultural norms and traditions:
 - Cultural differences – language, ceremony, food, etc.
 - Mixed belief systems: Traditional, Christianity, etc.
- Be informed of resources available in the community and contact them.
- Be mindful of terminology, use people-first language.
- Focus on strengths of the community.
- Do not impose your own values and norms on others
- Find out where and how communities get information.
- Be a constant and consistent presence



What challenges can you think of that our advocates face doing Special Education advocacy in Native communities?



Challenges that SPED advocates face in American Indian communities

- Difficulty in maintaining contact with families in a way to effectively advocate for the students.
- Maintaining relationships with the schools- working with them while also maintaining position of legal advocate for students.
- Guardianship issues – grandparents raising their grandchildren, language barriers, intimidation by authority figures
- Technology barriers- lack of internet, lack of cell service
- Transportation barriers- things are very far apart
- Cultural differences between school staff and parents- and school staff with little cultural intelligence



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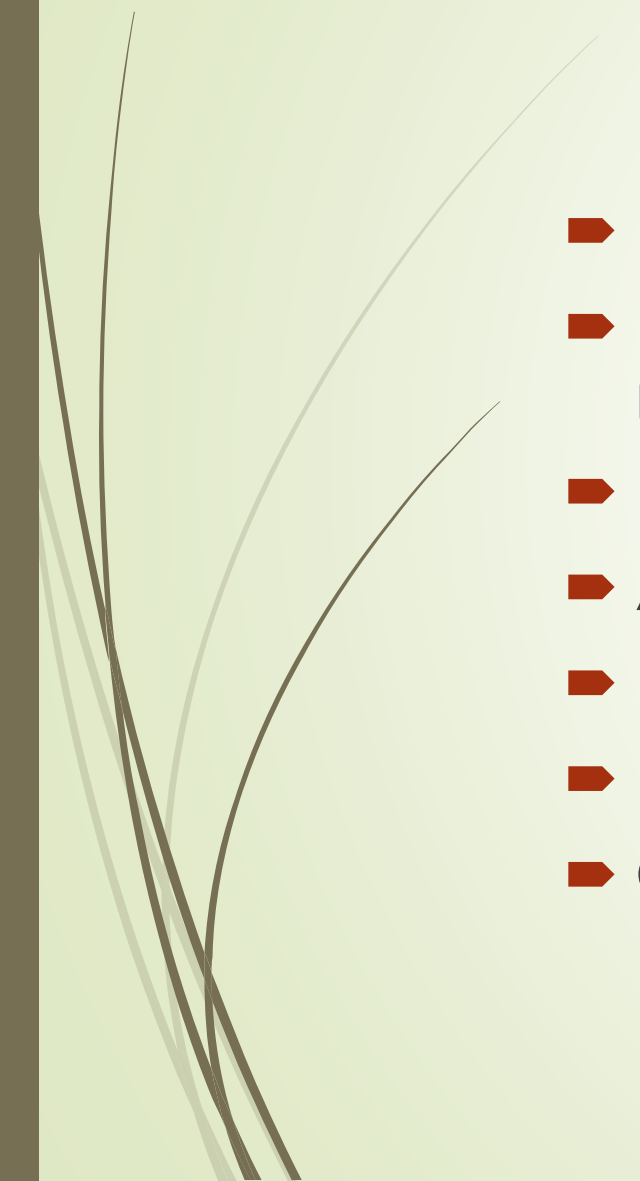
Resiliency

American Indian communities are resilient through:

- Kinship – relationship with family, community, nature
 - Language
 - Ceremonies and Tradition
 - Spirituality
 - Elders
 - Tribal Identity
 - Community-centric ways
 - Humor and food
 - Focus on ability, not disability
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Final Thoughts!

- Be open!
 - Don't be afraid to make mistakes. But, also own your mistakes and move on from them.
 - Learn a few native words and phrases
 - Ask questions! People love to talk about themselves.
 - Be consistent in your advocacy and your presence.
 - Never assume you understand.
 - Channel your inner Aretha: RESPECT!
- 



ANY QUESTIONS?

Ahe'hee – Thank you

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