Engaging Indigenous Community Partners in American Samoa

988 READINESS AND CRISIS SERVICES

Behavioral health services in American Samoa admirably promote the healing strengths of indigenous culture and practices. These services will continue to honor the various interpretations of mental health found across American Samoa, which are often influenced by the complex intersections of faith and religion, language, cultural practices, migration history, societal stigmas and beliefs, and complex historical trauma. Thus, behavioral health officials in American Samoa will continue to seek feedback, guidance, and collaboration from all facets of their Indigenous communities, including community leaders and Elders, individuals who use mental health services, their family members, and providers. This collaboration will enhance behavioral health services and programs to reflect the traditions, values, and beliefs of those being served. Before scaling up services available to Indigenous communities, it is essential to verify the effectiveness of interventions and ensure that they are rooted in the strengths, not the deficits, of a community.¹

American Samoa’s most recent TTI efforts demonstrate their commitment to and inclusion of people with lived

¹ https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26769974/
experience in recovery embodies the phrase “nothing about us without us.” Much of their work, such as hiring and training a crisis response workforce with peer support specialists, underscores the significance of collaboration, empowerment, and inclusion of populations of focus when designing and implementing culturally relevant and adaptive behavioral health services. As American Samoan behavioral health agencies continue to collaborate with local Samoan communities in planning for 9-8-8 rollout and implementation, these efforts will ensure that the expertise of Indigenous natural helpers, knowledge, and traditions are infused in the behavioral health approach.

While enhancing behavioral health services for residents of American Samoa, the office of behavioral health will continue to consult with various communities representing the ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural diversity found in the territory. These efforts will celebrate the many facets of the Indigenous Samoan culture as a protective factor for resilience and a pillar of behavioral health wellness. These ties to traditional cultural values, community involvement, education, and culturally rooted services and supports can all be fostered as protective assets in Indigenous-driven services. When programs and interventions are culturally anchored and developed with local input and partnerships, they can foster supportive communities, strengthen families, and empower individuals with tools and skills to manage their behavioral health needs.

It is crucial to engage natural leaders, Indigenous community partners, and people with lived experiences (peers) to identify gaps in service provision and gain feedback on how the medicalized Western model of behavioral health may not meet their specific needs.

UNDERSTANDING INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA

It was only in 2000 that the U.S. Census made the Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI) group into a distinct category from Asian Americans.

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2 p6 Partnering with Tribal Governments to Meet the Mental Health Needs of American Indian/Alaska Native Consumers  
4 https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma16-4959.pdf
When developing services for the diverse ethnic groups living on American Samoa, it is paramount to provide services through a lens of trauma-informed care, decolonization, and celebration of the myriad of Indigenous cultural values found in any given region.

There is no universal approach or service that will resonate with every individual in American Samoa, so it is essential to seek feedback from various groups about which mental health services, religious values, and cultural practices will be most powerful when integrated with the behavioral health system. Behavioral health officials continue to see culture as a cornerstone of resilience and wellbeing and actively avoid the “international bias that neglects the diversity of ethnic population compositions outside of Western sovereign states.”

A decolonizing approach to behavioral health means that colonialism is seen at the center of the historical trauma and pain of the oppressed, and cultural and community strength is at the heart of healing.

U.S. colonialism has radically altered the social, economic, ecological, and political living conditions of NHPI populations, not unlike the AI/AN population. Indigenous Samoan communities faced profound trauma, uniquely characterized as multi-generational and historical, directly as a result of the legacy of repeated colonization, without the cultural safety nets of traditional healers and community support.

After decades of European missionary influence, shared control by Germany and the U.S., and 50 years as a strategic U.S. naval base with minimal local administrative power, full control of American Samoa was transferred to the U.S. Department of the Interior in 1951. Though the U.S. government appointed a governor and political advisers to control the territory, Indigenous Samoans fought for control of their country’s affairs and have elected their own Fono (legislature) since 1977. American Samoa has had a delegate in the House of Representatives since 1981; however, they hold no voting power, and today, residents of American Samoa are considered “non-citizen nationals.” Half a century of martial rule, under the premise of ‘protection’ for Samoan people and their culture, along with forced economic dependence on the U.S.
and other colonial powers, has left behind generations of traumatized soldiers, citizens, and communities on American Samoa. Even today, the pressure on Samoan people to assimilate into the mainstream culture is an ongoing biproduct of the historic colonization.

Following centuries of foreign influence, most American Samoans are fluent in the Samoan language as well as English, and the vast majority of the population is Christian. This intersection of pre-colonial cultural ties and post-colonial impact require a unique approach to providing services that align with the modern-day values and beliefs of Indigenous communities on American Samoa. These often reflect holistic, community-based Samoan models of health, as well as deficit-based, medicalized Western perspectives and Christian ideals.\(^8\) Behavioral health services are often culturally inappropriate; they may overlook the effects of colonial violence on generational mental health and fail to affirm Indigenous culture and community as resilience factors.

At a healthcare level, behavioral health officials in American Samoa will lead efforts to collaborate with Samoan communities to create strengths-based culturally driven services that honor Indigenous Samoan values, beliefs, and strong community support structures while acknowledging the effects of colonialism, identity erosion, and socio-demographic status on the mental health of Indigenous communities.

The launch of 9-8-8 presents an unprecedented opportunity to build relationships with local Indigenous communities and other populations that have historically been underrepresented in and excluded from the behavioral healthcare system.

Enhanced collaboration and learning with Samoans in developing these services will improve accessibility, comprehensiveness, and cultural appropriateness of resources available to individuals in crisis or seeking behavioral healthcare.

\(^8\) https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7992925/#R44
Resources

Recommendations for Treatment of Asian-American/Pacific Islander Populations

Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander Self-Care and Healing

17 Mental Health Resources for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders

Advancing Best Practices in Behavioral Health Care for Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander Boys and Men

Pacific Southwest Mental Health Technology Transfer Center (MHTTC)

Transformation Transfer Initiative (TTI) 2022 Resource Guide