
A look at
American Indian Families
in Hennepin County

Final Summary



American Indian *Families* Project



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2005 — Reflection and hope

"We've seen in the past 20-30 years how families have disintegrated. There's so much work we all have to do to help get the families back again.

What I envision for families and their children is hope. We need to bring back hope to our children, to our families."

—American Indian community member

Stop for a moment and think about the year 2005 – not what is today, but how our past has accumulated and is reflected in the American Indian community. 2005 reflects decades of social welfare movements, investments and institutional efforts attempting to hold American Indian families together.

Systems and institutions have consistently created tools to improve their decision making, service delivery and investment strategies. Business plans, research initiatives, quality improvement strategies, and management processes have created a multitude of services and programming for populations in poverty. The American Indian community has taken the poverty-based products of those efforts and created a pattern of programs and services to maintain family structure and well-being.

Addressing poverty in American Indian communities is important. The American Indian Families Project (AIFP) has shown that American Indians are poor — poor housing, poor health and poor education. Mainstream society and the American Indian community recognize the same problems, but it is in the approach to solving those problems that the two groups diverge in thinking. AIFP, through conversation with elders, families, and individuals, shows how cultural resiliency, developed through traditional values, beliefs, teachings and spirituality, allows families to be more effective in addressing poverty and its outgrowths.

2005 holds great promise and responsibility. We have a window of opportunity to articulate how culture is the catalyst for American Indian progress, bringing forward the knowledge, values and structure that recreate well-being, spirituality and learning as the tenets of a sufficient community. Institutions like Hennepin County need to use their knowledge and expertise to be responsible, not only for the legal and political, but moral and ethical ramifications as well. This responsibility cannot be one of control or dismissal to be effective and sustained.

The American Indian Families Project begins 2005 thankful for the progress that has been made, resolute in its determination to make changes that enrich the lives of American Indians in Hennepin County, and yet humble in the face of the challenges that lie ahead. While we celebrate the efforts and accomplishments of the project to date, we know the magnitude of the work lies ahead.

2005 also brings closure to AIFP's first phase; the formative work of AIFP was to weave together stories that illuminate American Indian place and presence in Hennepin County. The resulting collection of data, *A Look at American Indian Families in Hennepin County*, includes five reports:

Part One: Hennepin County American Indian Demographics

Part Two: An In-depth Look at the Community

Part Three: Investing in American Indian Families

Part Four: Voices of American Indian Families

Part Five: Reclaiming the Spirit

In the past year we captured the voices of the American Indian community in four community team meetings, discussion groups and individual interviews. These efforts of community engagement were an exploratory process for our leadership and community members to learn about AIFP, promote native strengths and assets, share stories of influence and development, and create a foundation of values and collectivity.

Why build this knowledge and information?

Picture a group of American Indian children. Imagine them running, laughing, dancing. Research has shown that racial and socioeconomic disparities will afflict these children, creating unnecessary hardships. Many studies show a life cycle of deficiencies diminishing the well-being of these children as they age. We have come to know this: we can, with a sense of confidence, predict what an American Indian boy and girl will experience in their lifetimes. In the dual nature of our work, do we take pride in our ability to forecast, or do we redefine the future for these children?

2005 is a year when we invest in the formation of partnerships, reflect on our systems of support, and reestablish culture into conversations, actions and investments. It is a year when the strengths of American Indian people are brought to the forefront; when our beliefs, values and teachings define well-being, redefine work, and direct investment by entities like Hennepin County.

It is 2005. Technology, theories, and policies litter the roadside of discussion and actions on how to address the "Indian" problem. Today reflects the need for transformation; let's begin by moving from authority and control to being moral and humane.

Calling upon our values for institutional and community change

“My vision for families would be to bring back our traditional ways, our traditional values, our healing ways.”

– American Indian community member

American Indian elder Jim Clairmont recently shared a story about two native men fishing one day. They found baskets floating down the river, each basket with a baby in it. As they began to retrieve the constant and growing flow of baskets, one man got out of the water and began to walk upriver. His friend yelled for him to help bring the baskets to shore and take care of the babies. He replied he was going to find out why this was happening.

Jim’s story illustrates the need to transform. There is more than accepting what is; if we are to begin to change then we need to redefine our questions from the “what” to the “why.”

The perseverance of American Indian societies is rooted in their strong belief in retaining their cultural identity, traditions and spiritual/ceremonial ways as their foundation. AIFP learned American Indians place high regard on cultural identity, traditions and spirituality, and teaching strong values through family unity and supporting family members. The strength of resiliency was articulated in the following ways:

- * Having a strong sense of self and cultural identity
- * Supporting one’s family
- * Being and having role models
- * Practicing and teaching positive values
- * Embracing spirituality and traditions
- * Using humor

Why do American Indians continue to maintain their cultural identity? How does that shape their need and efforts? Developing their cultural identity creates resiliency, which is vital in building and sustaining families, and provides the strength and resolve necessary to productively manage day-to-day issues such as family well-being, housing, employment, education, self-sufficiency, wellness and youth development.

The mythology of American Indians

What is an American Indian? The term is often over-simplified – a homogenization of many world views, cultures and languages. However, in combining those views you lose the distinctions necessary to see a family flourish, the beauty of the language, the teachings of ceremonies, and the stories that reflect time and place. An Ojibwe, Lakota, Ho-Chunk and Navajo differ in their belief systems and world views. For systems and institutions to improve American Indian well-being, we must allow multiple American Indian societies to gather and define what is culturally appropriate in institutional and community work.

We have many tools that attempt to understand and appreciate American Indians: cultural diversity events, cultural competency training, ethnic studies, work experience and political correctness. These efforts create a false sense of cultural understanding and sensitivity in efforts to serve American Indians. None of these tools can convey the understanding, guidance and wisdom the community holds or the values necessary in establishing effective relationships with the American Indian community. Relationships bring to life, give life, create space and place for American Indian knowledge. Institutions like Hennepin County need the humility to develop processes and engagement that respectfully accept American Indian knowledge and expertise as the beginning of institutional relationships.

As American Indians, we have struggled with practicing our cultural teachings, beliefs and values in today's society. In response to institutional dictates, we have adopted a different vocabulary, an institutional language, which redefined our needs and vision. At any given moment there is an American Indian speaking out that we need housing, jobs, health care, education and leisure. While these are basic family needs, institutions see them as the outcome, then use cultural aspects to create culturally specific tools to achieve those basic needs. Yet, elders and spiritual leaders would say the inverse is true – that spirituality, teaching, beliefs and values are our pursuit, and basic needs are tools.

Society and institutions have come to believe our current perspectives of American Indians as simple truths. These truths manifest themselves into a disconnection between community and institution; between public servant and public; between one person and another. We need to challenge and redefine our current knowledge, to build the necessary connection that reflects a relationship of effective communication, appropriate investment and mutual benefit.

"... I am here as an Indian person in this Indian community of ours. We need to continue to find a place to come together as a community. I think since the day I was born, every year we are getting together to figure out ways to make this world a better place for our families and ourselves. We need to learn who we are; our ways before we go to the next step, which is learning their ways."

- American Indian community member

Gathering strength and focus

"I think we need to find holistic approaches to meeting the needs of our clients and community; that we address all things of wellness in a spiritual way. We need to address bringing back more cultural ceremonies, teachings, beliefs and values..."

- American Indian community member

What makes the squirrel leave home, knowing the hawk and fox are nearby? Is it hunger? Is it survival? Whatever drives the squirrel from home must be great to overcome the present risk and possible loss. The quote above is revealing. A community member took great risk in conveying their cultural identity and beliefs to institutions and society, when, historically, both have been perceived as dismissive and unresponsive.

As American Indians, are we at a moment of loss and risk? Is the diminishing of our well-being, loss of language, and a generation of children ill-equipped to succeed, enough?

As American Indians, are we ready for the redesign of our community and efforts by reclaiming our teachings, values, beliefs and spirituality?

As American Indians, should our outcomes reflect families gathering, celebrating and being thankful?

As American Indians, how will our elders and children know the love we hold for them?

The questions can be endless; the answer is not. It is within us – it has always been there. Every Native we sit with, laugh with and walk by has a part, a contribution to what makes us a whole people. There was a time when the wisdom and teachings of the elders provided the guidance to keep our people whole and well. Today we need everyone to contribute, to find the story within all of us. We need to develop collective wisdom and maturity of thought and being if we are to reclaim our role and place.

As American Indians, we need to develop the "cultural filter" to apply our cultural thinking to all processes and promotions of change. What does it mean to be political as an American Indian? What does analysis and synthesis look like from an American Indian point of view? What is culturally appropriate policy development? Our energy and due diligence must be as endless as the questions before us.

Our work must reflect the convergence of spirituality and vision on our thinking and action as we move forward. The presence of these values in voices of young and old, stories and teachings, requires our efforts to resonate with community will. This belief is reflected throughout Native America; it is in every thought, every word, every story our elders hold. Our teachings, beliefs, ceremonies and values

Speak to what is to become, not to what is today. Today reflects the participation and practice of our culture. The next generations reflect what we have learned.

Today we celebrate the monumental change that is beginning in our communities and our institutions. Remember those children you imagined running, laughing and dancing? Their future is within our grasp.