

IX. Native Americans

As discussed in the preceding chapters on SUA and AAA operations and elsewhere, there are special needs of older persons in disasters which require unique strategies to assure that older persons are effectively served. Sensitivity to Native American elders' needs is particularly important during disasters due to cultural, access, outreach and coordination issues. This chapter addresses special disasters due to cultural, access, outreach and coordination issues. This chapter addresses special disaster preparedness, response and recovery issues for Tribal organizations and State and Area Agencies on Aging that have Native American Tribes within their geographical areas.

A. Disaster Preparedness

- 1. Special Needs of Native American Elders** -- As previously stated, special concerns about older persons and disasters may include sensory impairments, physical limitations and prescription drug use, etc. While all of these are important issues in working with any older population there are some additional considerations in assisting Native American elders in disasters. In working with Native American elders it is important to know that there are approximately 550 Federally recognized tribal organizations in the United States, each with rights as sovereign governments. This unique legal relationship between the U. S. government and tribal governments has been established in the Constitution of the United States, treaties, statutes and court decisions. Thus, all activities undertaken which affect tribal rights should be implemented in a knowledgeable, sensitive manner respectful of tribal sovereignty.

Sensitivity to individual needs is particularly important during the stressful times created by a disaster. Due to the complexities of differing tribal cultures and traditions, Federal, State and Tribal legal and jurisdictional issues, isolated geographical location of some tribes, and the issues of transportation, telephone service, and availability of radio, television and other media, we must give particular and ample attention to issues of access, outreach and coordination in our efforts to meet the needs of Native American elders.

A major issue involves the reluctance of some tribes to seek out government programs, especially if the program is administered through the states. In the aftermath of a recent hurricane, a tribe refused to allow state disaster workers onto the reservation to assess damages, due to ongoing conflicts between the tribal government and the state government. Without this assessment, the tribe was not able to access federal programs and so turned to other tribes for assistance.

It is important to remember that each tribe is unique in its culture and traditions. Although much of the information included in this manual on preparedness, response and recovery applies to Tribal Organizations, it is important to know about and respect the individuality of each Tribe in order for disaster responses to be tailored to the unique needs of elders within that particular Tribal government structure and cultural framework. It is vital that the general information provided in the various chapters of this manual be adapted to fit your specific needs. For example, Tribal Organizations and States that have Tribes within the state should each add the following to the **Disaster Checklist** on page 1 of the State Unit on Aging:

ADDITION FOR STATES:

I. Alert your Staff

F. Contact all Tribal Organizations within the State.

- 1. Each Tribal Organization should have a Disaster Plan.**
- 2. Don't limit communication to Tribal Organizations directly affected by the disaster. Other Tribal Organizations need to be called upon to lend assistance.**
- 3. Provide technical assistance necessary to assure that the special needs of older persons are adequately met.**

ADDITION FOR TRIBAL ORGANIZATIONS: Tribal organizations with more than one program site, particularly those in which the sites are several miles apart, ought delete part I.D. of the Disaster Checklist and substitute the following:

I. Alert your Staff

D. Contact all program sites.

- 1. The disaster plan should include plans for each program site.**
- 2. Don't limit communications to the sites directly affected by the disaster.**

2. **The Written Disaster Response Plan** -- In order to be prepared, the Title VI Program must prepare a written disaster response plan. Such a plan must be practical and simple; at the same time it must be so crafted that the plan is comprehensive, covering the entire range of disasters which may affect the Tribe, such as hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, fires, and the like. Developing a disaster response plan requires a significant amount of time for discussions and preparation. The Title VI Director should take the responsibility for developing the plan and can use the planning process discussed elsewhere in this manual as a guide. However, before beginning to develop a plan it is important to find out about the Tribe's overall disaster plan and disaster planning committee, if they exist.

Access to disaster related services can oftentimes be limited by the lack of transportation and phones. Many Indian reservations are geographically isolated and road conditions can be challenging. Many older Native Americans do not have access to transportation on a regular basis so that transportation must be arranged for evacuation or to disaster assistance centers. The common absence of phones in their homes also contributes to elders' isolation and inability to access toll-free teleregistration numbers. On some reservations, it was particularly helpful renting or purchasing cellular phones so that the Project Director could make phone calls from the elder's home. Lap-top computers also facilitated being able to take applications in people's homes so they didn't have to be transported to the Disaster Assistance Centers.

3. **Tribal Contact Person**--It is important to have a designated person for each Tribe who can be the contact person for State and local disaster officials. For the Native American elders, the Title VI Project Director or Community Health Representatives (CHR's) may serve as the point of contact for assessment and follow-up. Contact lists need to be updated annually with current names and phone numbers.
4. **Training**--Tribal organizations can contact the State Emergency Management Agencies for training in developing comprehensive emergency management programs as well as the Regional Office of FEMA. Another resource for Tribes is the Emergency Preparedness Coordinator who has been designated in each of the twelve Indian Health Service Areas.

5. **Coordination with State and Area Agencies**--It is important for Tribal Organizations to coordinate with State and Area Agencies on Aging (and vice versa) so that the maximum disaster relief services can be achieved for Native American elders. On one reservation in South Dakota, the Title VI nutrition site was flooded, but a Title III nutrition site in a nearby town was able to expand services to the Indian elders so that there was no disruption in a critically needed service. Disaster plans at the State, Area and Tribal levels should address the coordination among the geographic jurisdictions.

B. Disaster Response

1. **Special Needs of Native American Elders** -- Within the cultural context, special attention should be paid to language, access to media and reluctance to seek out government programs.

A fundamental cultural element is the language or languages spoken by members of the tribe with which one might work. In some instances, the tribe has lost its tongue and everyone speaks English or Spanish; at the other end of the spectrum are tribes where elders speak and understand only the ancestral tongue. And there are those in the middle, where some speak some english but primarily speak the language of the tribe. It is important to remember that in any circumstance where English is acquired as a second language, stressful situations decrease the ability to understand instructions or questions in English. Although not always necessary to have a translator, the disaster plan should include the names and phone numbers of persons who have agreed to interpret.

Literacy can also be an issue, and elders might need assistance in competing forms.

Oftentimes on reservations there is limited access to the media (including radio, TV and newspapers) so information about disaster alerts and assistance may require another approach such as door-to-door contact. In times of disaster, outreach programs have found a reluctance among Native American elders to seek out governmental assistance or to go to disaster assistance centers. In some instances, Native American elders have experienced a lifetime of severe hardship and perceive that a disaster is just one more thing to endure. On one reservation where there was a flood many elders' basements were flooded. The Title VI Project Director said, "Their personal property became ruined. There was mildew smell in every basement and yet they did not complain to anyone of their misfortune.

On another reservation there was a widespread feeling that too many questions were being asked so no one went to the Disaster Assistance Center. In this situation, the forms were reviewed with the Tribal leadership and the Title VI Director went door-to-door to take initial applications.

Because of the reluctance to access government programs, it is important to conduct specialized and personalized outreach to Native American elders. One of the most effective strategies is to recruit Native Americans to do the door-to-door outreach and help with applying for assistance because elders are more likely to trust them. Also, this reluctance to seek assistance necessitated keeping DAC's open longer; due to the initial apprehension about what questions were asked and what documentation would have to be provided, many elders delayed their visits to the centers.

Another problem frequently encountered which limited tribal elders in their access to disaster related services is the lack of transportation. Many Indian reservations are geographically isolated, road conditions can be challenging, and there is no public transportation, including taxis. Additionally, many Tribal elders do not have access to provide transportation on a regular basis. This means that arrangements for transportation must be made during evacuations, including additional transportation to get people to and from Disaster Assistance Centers. Following Hurricane Iniki, efforts to reach Native Hawaiian elders' remote locations were hampered by gasoline shortages and rationing. Plans need to be developed for rationing items in short supply, such as gasoline, in order to get services to isolated areas. Access to disaster related services can often be limited by the lack of telephones. The common absence of phones in their homes also contributes to elders' isolation and inability to access toll-free teleregistration numbers. On some reservations it was particularly helpful to rent or purchase cellular phones so that the Project Director could make phone calls from the elder's home. Laptop computers also facilitated being able to take applications in people's homes so they didn't have to be transported to the Disaster Assistance Centers.

2. **Location and Identification** -- Title VI Directors should maintain an actual listing of all elders. Immediately after any disaster the Title VI Director will be called upon to estimate the numbers of elderly affected by the disaster.

C. **Disaster Recovery**

1. **Disaster Assistance Centers**

- a. One common problem experienced by FEMA in processing assistance to Native Americans on reservations is the lack of documentation proving ownership and occupancy of residences. For want of title, property tax collections, bill of sale, etc., processing is sometimes delayed waiting for affidavits, HUD documentation, or other proof.

- b.** It was recommended that when Tribal Organizations are impacted by disaster, a Native American desk (preferably staffed by Native Americans) be established at the Disaster Assistance Center so that there is someone with the same language and cultural value system to personally assist Native Americans. This resource person could also serve as a liaison to State Disaster Officials and FEMA.
- c.** The majority of Native American elders receive health care through the Indian Health Service. If emergency health care is provided to a Native American, the Indian Health Service on that reservation should be notified within 72 hours for possible reimbursement.

2. Application to AoA

Tribal Organizations may now make applications for Disaster Relief Reimbursements to the Administration on Aging following the guidelines identified in the appendices. The Title VI Director should contact their AoA Regional Office for specialized assistance in submitting the grant application forms.