



Navajo Nation

INDIGENOUS PROJECT LAUNCH



ABOUT THE SERIES: SAMHSA funds three grant programs that promote the mental health and well-being of young children and their families: Project LAUNCH (Linking Actions for Unmet Needs in Children’s Health), Indigenous Project LAUNCH,¹ and the Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) grant program. All three programs share a mission of ensuring the healthy development of young children through building comprehensive systems of care inclusive of evidence-based mental health promotion, prevention, early intervention, and treatment services and supports. Grantees recognize the importance of strong caregiving relationships and nurturing environments and invest in building early childhood workforce capacity and activities that strengthen parenting practices, families, and cultural identity. **This grantee profile is one in a series that highlights innovative approaches and accomplishments among grantees.**

About the Navajo Nation

The Navajo Nation is a federally recognized sovereign tribe located in the states of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. The reservation covers 27,000 square miles, much of which is rural and remote, including rugged high desert regions. The Navajo People, also known as Diné (meaning “The People”), reside within the four sacred mountains in the four cardinal directions of Diné Bikéyah, or Navajoland. The Navajo Nation was awarded a 5-year Project Indigenous LAUNCH (I-LAUNCH) grant from 2018–2023, with an overarching goal of ensuring that all Diné children grow into beautiful adults. To support this goal, the Navajo Project I-LAUNCH team sought to implement the five core strategies of Project I-LAUNCH,² as well as systems integration, workforce development, and community strengthening activities.

Originally, Navajo I-LAUNCH was focused on two remote communities in the New Mexico portion of the Navajo Nation that have historically struggled economically and with limited infrastructure. However, as they progressed through the grant, the team realized that it was important to the well-being of children and families, and in line with the goal of creating more integrated and coordinated systems of care, that they expand to serve families across the entire Navajo Nation. The I-LAUNCH team recognized that the mobility of Navajo families, and the sparsity yet complexity of early childhood services that vary across states, meant that service providers needed to be connected, communicating, and culturally aware in order to best meet the needs of families. Two major accomplishments of the grant were the result of this realization: the work of the Navajo Nation Early Childhood Collaborative, and multiple efforts to ensure that programming for families was provided in a culturally respectful and responsive way.

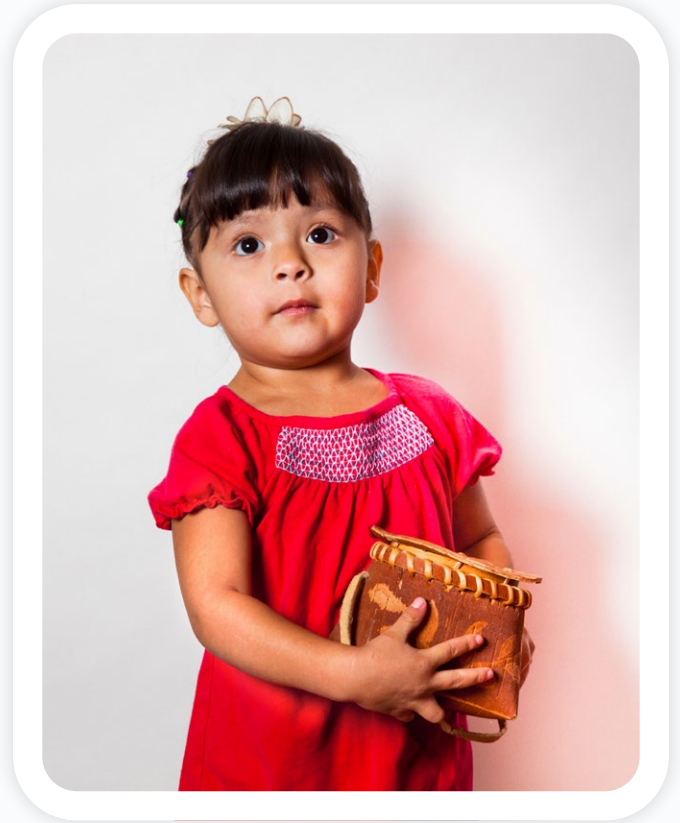
“ There are state-funded projects in Arizona and New Mexico, and they come with their rules and their regulations, like ‘You can only serve families living in Arizona.’ With LAUNCH we now say, ‘No, things have to be flexible.’ We can’t have Arizona Early Intervention guidelines and New Mexico Early Intervention guidelines and they don’t match for the Navajo Nation, because that is not good for kids and families, especially families that move across the Nation into different states. That perspective that I-LAUNCH brought — that we need to think about things nationwide, and we need to bring together this collaboration nationwide — that has had a really big impact.”

— Navajo Nation I-LAUNCH Evaluator

Navajo Nation Early Childhood Collaborative

Every Project LAUNCH grantee is required to develop a Young Child Wellness Council to help guide their grant work. For the Navajo Nation I-LAUNCH team, the Navajo Nation Early Childhood Collaborative (EC Collaborative) served that purpose, and gained momentum in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic as families were struggling to get access to essential supplies like diapers, formula, and food. The Navajo Nation I-LAUNCH team and other partners came together to apply for a grant and used those grant funds to deliver supplies to families in their homes. The group began meeting every week and grew in numbers. In June 2021, the I-LAUNCH team led the EC Collaborative in a strategic planning process. Through persistent work to incorporate the voices of all partners, and to ensure a culturally grounded vision, the process resulted in a logic model in the form of a Navajo basket that serves as a guide to the group in creating, and monitoring progress in achieving, their collective goals.

One of the major outcomes of the EC Collaborative's strategic planning process was the creation of the Navajo Nation Early Childhood Resource Map, which is a critical tool to help families connect to services. **THE MAP** identifies early childhood and family-serving programs across the Nation, such as Head Start sites, child care centers, home visiting programs, and preschools, as well as nutrition resources, cultural services, and police and fire departments. The map includes not only descriptions of services, website URLs, and contact information but also latitudinal and longitudinal locations, which is critical because many parts of the Navajo Nation do not have street markings or numbers that help to identify building locations. Providing updated information on hours of operation is also important, because families often travel for hours to get to a service and may discover it is closed. Having all of this information in one place, and updated frequently, is an important way to increase access to services for families.



The EC Collaborative has continued to grow in numbers and today includes representation from more than 100 programs. The group holds monthly virtual meetings and quarterly in-person gatherings. They use this time to share resources, engage in professional development, and plan events such as the Week of the Young Child and the Navajo Nation Outreach Series, which is a series of resource fairs held at sites across the Navajo Nation that offer developmental and behavioral screening, parenting information, and community resources for families. In 2023, the EC Collaborative successfully secured a two-year W. K. Kellogg Foundation grant to support continued strategic planning and implementation. This allowed for the creation of a Coordinator position to lead the EC Collaborative, which has been instrumental in sustaining the connections between programs, and the collective efforts to improve access to services for families with young children.

Facilitating Culturally Respectful and Responsive Programming

One of the efforts that resulted from the EC Collaborative discussions was the development of cultural competency training to help non-Navajo service providers learn more about Navajo culture and be better equipped to serve families in a culturally appropriate way. As Kim Kee, the Navajo Nation Project I-LAUNCH Program Coordinator, explains: "This is something we've been wanting to do for years. We had some fear in starting it, but we just went with 'Okay, we just have to do it – we can be the guinea pigs.'" One of the reasons the team had trepidation is the importance of being culturally sensitive and aware about what information is shared, when, and by whom. For example, some information can only be shared during particular seasons, and tribal elders are the ones who hold the teachings and the role of sharing with younger generations.

Moving forward with all of this in mind, the team established a partnership with the Navajo Nation Division of Behavioral and Mental Health Services. The Division helped the I-LAUNCH team connect with

medicine persons and traditional practitioners in the community who provided important information about Diné practices, mannerisms, and the roles of clan and kinship in Diné culture that were incorporated into the training. This effort to tackle something challenging, but much needed, seems to have paid off. The I-LAUNCH team has received numerous requests for the training, both within the Navajo Nation and from across the country, and they are currently working to create a shortened version of the training based on feedback received to date. The I-LAUNCH team is also working on a possible two-hour recording of the training for wider dissemination while proceeding cautiously concerning cultural information that can be respectfully shared.

Another significant way that the Navajo Nation I-LAUNCH team has worked to make culturally grounded programming available to Diné families is through their adaptation and implementation of the Positive Indian Parenting (PIP) curriculum. PIP is an eight-session parenting support curriculum focused on



Native American culture, traditions, and child-rearing practices that was developed by the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) in consultation with tribal elders, Native American professionals, and parents. While the Navajo Nation I-LAUNCH team had all been trained to deliver PIP, they wanted to adapt it to center on Diné culture. As Kim Kee, Project Coordinator, describes it: “We changed the lessons a bit but kept the bones and the structure to ensure fidelity.” The result of this effort was Positive Diné Parenting (PDP). PDP sessions include the lessons of the cradleboard and the lessons of the storyteller. In addition, the I-LAUNCH team invites guest speakers to participate in almost every session of PDP so that the learning comes from within the community. For example, for the lessons of the cradleboard, it is the male’s responsibility to build or provide a cradleboard for their child(ren), so the project invited a father to share both his story of making a cradleboard for his child and some of the cultural teachings that came along with it.

The I-LAUNCH team has offered virtual cohorts of PDP (no more than 15–20 parents in each group), which have included Diné parents as far away as Canada and the East and West coasts. Most recently they have begun offering PDP in person and have been focused on sustainability. The team partnered with NICWA to train an additional 25 individuals within the Navajo Nation in PIP, including Navajo Nation Head Start and Division of Behavioral and Mental Health Services staff. The I-LAUNCH team supported these individuals through a community of practice as they began implementing the curriculum in their programs. The Navajo Nation Division of Social Services is exploring the potential to include PDP as a reimbursable Title IV-E service, as well as identifying a staff member who can offer PDP to families in their program. These developments provide the team with a lot of hope for sustaining their efforts to offer cultural programming to families with young children across the Navajo Nation.

LESSONS LEARNED

from the Navajo Nation Indigenous Project LAUNCH team

Be Open to New Ideas, Especially When You Get Stuck

“There’s no one way to do things. Sometimes it takes getting creative. If there’s something we don’t know how to do, we are up for learning. Sometimes we’d get stuck and get stuck in that mindset of only seeing the challenges and barriers against us — then we would meet with others and they’d give us suggestions and another perspective. And we’d think about it and come together again and try something new.”

Tie Everything Back to Culture

“One of our GPOs [SAMHSA Government Project Officers] who worked with a lot of native communities reminded us to stay culturally relevant in the work. A lot of programs are lacking that and trying to implement that now, but it takes creativity because there are not a lot of materials out there that have those pieces. It was helpful to be reminded that it can always be tied back to culture.”

Effective Collaboration Takes Persistence and Patience

“This team just constantly shows up; they are constantly kind and giving and available. Like when they got the feedback about having the strategic plan be more cultural. They would ask meeting after meeting, and it was just crickets. But they kept asking. They were just so determined and stuck with it. There was so much work that went into building it.”



Conclusion

The Navajo Nation was awarded a five-year SAMHSA Indigenous Project LAUNCH grant in 2018. Although many challenges were encountered in the first half of the grant, including staff turnover and the onset of the pandemic, the I-LAUNCH team worked diligently and creatively to build a large coalition of partners across three states to serve the families of the Navajo Nation. The Navajo Nation EC Collaborative has made major efforts to provide families with access to more holistic and culturally centered care, and the I-LAUNCH team has mindfully focused on sustainability so that these efforts can continue long after the grant ends.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Funding for Indigenous Project LAUNCH has ended.
- 2 The five core strategies include screening and assessment, enhanced home visiting, infant and early childhood mental health consultation, integration of behavioral health in primary care, and family strengthening.



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF GRANT SUPPORT AND DISCLAIMER

This publication was made possible by Grant Number 1H79SM082070-01 from SAMHSA. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of SAMHSA.

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