

Supporting California's Tribal Communities in Combatting Homelessness

Q&A with Change Well Project's Whitney Lawrence

Across California, there are more than 150 diverse Indigenous nations—including 110 federally recognized tribes and more than 40 other tribal communities—each with their own distinct identity and governing structures. As California continues to grapple with the homelessness crisis, tribal nations face unique challenges in developing and implementing housing programs that meet their community needs. To support their efforts, over the last year the Change Well Project has worked to provide intensive technical assistance to over 20 tribal communities. And according to Senior Consultant Whitney Lawrence, an enrolled member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, Change Well's work to support tribal communities is just beginning. Whitney brings extensive housing expertise from her time working with Los Angeles County's Department of Health Services. She is now dedicated to sharing her knowledge of homeless services and system design with tribal communities across the state.

So far, what has Change Well Project's role been in supporting tribal communities in California?

In many ways, I feel like our work with tribal communities is just beginning. Last year our focus was really in two key areas: helping the few California tribes that already have CDSS funding to get started creating housing programs, and to help other tribal communities strategize on how to access the \$17.5 million the state set aside to establish housing and homelessness assistance through the Bringing Families Home (BFH) Program, the Home Safe Program, and the Housing and Disability Advocacy Program (HDAP).

To access that funding, tribal communities—which includes federally recognized Tribes, tribal organizations and consortiums, and tribally-led nonprofits in California—needed to submit a formal Program Funding Request. Our team reached out to as many communities as possible to provide pre-funding technical assistance to help tribal leaders determine what program models could align with their specific needs, as well as to support them in completing the request for funding. Once the funds are awarded, we're excited to assist them to take in the funds and build high-impact housing and homelessness programs.

When it comes to creating housing programs, what are some of the unique challenges facing California tribal communities? What are the opportunities?

Many California tribal communities are quite small—and so unlike larger Indigenous nations that are based on large reservations, some don't have their own land base, or housing specifically designated for tribal community members. Being smaller also results in staffing and infrastructure challenges. Not having enough staff members is a challenge everywhere, but in many tribal communities, leaders and administrators are already wearing 27 hats and juggling so much—and now they need to determine how to take on creating and implementing another complex service system.

Many Tribes in California and across the Country administer Federal housing dollars, but the federal housing funding dedicated to Indian Country are not enough to meet the full housing needs of the community, particularly for members of the community who are homeless. The CDSS funds are geared towards community members who are currently homeless or who are at-risk of homelessness. But the CDSS funds rely heavily on complimentary infrastructure – Bringing Families Home is designed to partner with child welfare resources, Home Safe is designed to partner with adult protection resources, and HDAP relies heavily on medical care coordination and social security advocacy capacity. The Social Services safety net is historically underfunded in Indian Country, so there isn't the same existing program infrastructure to work from that Counties who administer these funds are able to leverage. And because this is one-time funding, it poses even more complexity—because these communities are having to create programs from the ground-up to serve participants with deeper and ongoing needs, without being able to rely on the same level of funding in the future. In those ways, I think many tribal communities have a much steeper hill to climb and need more resources to lift up the same kind of services that a larger county can offer. But that said, there is such a deep commitment to community that is evident across Indian Country. And I've met so many amazing leaders—including many incredible Native women—working across these communities to improve social service systems. Most are not steeped in this kind of housing work but have been leading social service programs in their communities, including coordinating Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) work to protect and support children and families.

These leaders absolutely have the knowledge and skills to create dynamic housing programs, but they need more support and resources to get it done. Our goal is to provide as much technical support as we can—and to advocate for more resources to ensure tribal communities have what they need to create and implement critical programming.

What has Change Well Project's tribal community work looked like so far?

Our focus was on offering as much technical assistance as possible, so that more tribal communities could access support in requesting set-aside funding. We've worked with 23 tribal communities in all and facilitated 36 working sessions, providing varying degrees of support and guidance. We worked more deeply with four tribes, including the Yurok Tribe—the largest in California.

It was wonderful to be able to build trust and develop some closer relationships with tribal leaders through this work. And it feels like a victory to know that many tribes were able to request funding—in this case, far more was requested than is actually available. There are times when not enough communities request funding, because they don't have the capacity and support, and money gets left on the table. We wish every community that submitted a request could access this round of funding. But the demand will send a message to the state that all this funding, and more, is needed across tribal communities.

What are your next steps in this work? What are you excited about?

Once some tribal communities receive set-aside funding, our goal is to continue to provide technical assistance to help them effectively use it. There are several ways we can offer support. Our training and workforce development programming includes in-depth webinars that cut across programs and focus on the infrastructure that will help us become nimble in moving resources out to the community in a more equitable manner, as well as self-paced learning specifically designed to support program managers and direct service staff. And we'll continue to offer intensive technical assistance to individual communities to help with program strategy and development as well as implementation.

I'm excited to be able to provide more group-based, peer-to-peer learning through our training platforms. Those spaces open opportunities for dialogue between tribal leaders and I think that kind of collaboration could be powerful—in terms of understanding what's working, and what's not, across different communities.

I'm also excited to continue to build trust with tribal leaders and program staff, and to tap into their deep knowledge of how to serve their communities effectively. For example, we've helped several tribal communities imagine providing housing supports through Bringing Families Home by connecting to their ICWA infrastructure to serve families in the child welfare system.

Above all, my goal is to continue to work alongside these incredible tribal leaders—to deepen their trust in our team, and to strengthen the government-to-government relationship between the state and tribal communities. We want to make sure that the state is providing critical resources to tribal nations, and that those communities have every opportunity to put it to work for individuals and families experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness.