



Aging Elders Among the Native American Population

Native American Indian elderly come from at least 569 federally recognized tribes. Each tribe has its own unique culture, language, beliefs and customs. Despite these differences, there is general agreement that Native Indian elders are honored and respected by their families and communities, and they are considered to be the keepers of their tribes' language and heritage.

The social and health risk profile of older Native Indians predisposes their susceptibility to needing long-term care. Native Indians have shorter life expectancies, poorer health, lower socio-economic status, and greater disability than elders in other ethnic groups. They are more likely to underutilize some services, such as in-home supportive services for personal care, respite and adult day care.

When compared to the general American elderly, Native elders age 65 and over, are more likely to have high blood pressure, arthritis and diabetes. They are also likely to have two or more of these and other chronic conditions, which can cause difficulties in living life on their own.

Many of our cultures focus on providing options to elders so they may remain in the home with support from their family. For the Native Indian population, taking care of an elder is a continuation of an ancient custom of extended family and lifelong care for family, attributed to their strong cultural preferences and to their disadvantaged social structure resulting from years of centuries of discrimination. However, eligibility criteria for long-term care services are often couched in language that is not culturally sensitive.

There are many Native Indian elders today who lack the support from their family. This is usually due to having no available family members, or those family members who are available having outside home job responsibilities, hence, a need for someone else, outside of their family, to be caretakers for Native Indian elders.

American Indian elders, being valued members of their communities, prefer to remain in their own home and community settings, that is, they prefer to "age in place". We need to be especially critical in establishing a relationship with Native American elders who have been living on reservations their entire lives, and thus have been isolated from mainstream society. Never before have so many Indian people lived for so long. The need for long-term care has

never been so important for all elderly, yet the experience of long-term care is often dreadful. At the same time, Native people have great respect for elders and want them to be happy with their long life. Can the delivery of care be done in a way that gives elders the respect they deserve? This is a question for all of the elderly population and to recognize the need to be sensitive to each person's cultural background in the process.

NY Connects Niagara County can provide information about available long term services in our community. Individuals in need of information regarding NY Connects Niagara County or long term care are encouraged to call (716) 438-3030 for assistance.

Cynthia Printup-Harms is the Director of Native American Independent Living Services (NAILS). NAILS is a non-profit organization, and a part of the Western New York Independent Living Project, Inc. The purpose of our organization is to empower Native Americans with disabilities, to promote awareness of Native American's mental health and disability issues and to foster and strengthen collaborations between service providers, agencies and NAILS. Additional information about NAILS is available by calling (716) 836-0822, ext. 111. The NY Connects column appears in the Union-Sun & Journal the last Saturday of each month. Submissions for topics or agency spotlights for future articles are welcome. To recommend a topic or make a suggestion, call 438-3030 or email nyconnects@niagaracounty.com.