

The Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe and Quality Health Care: Between Two Worlds

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The Lakota Indian population of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe (CRST) is located in La Plant, South Dakota (SD) in Dewey County. The majority of the small population of 171 people resides in rental housing provided by the Housing of Urban Development (HUD) with little opportunity to own their own house due to the abject poverty in the area (City-Data, 2016). There is no corner store, gas station or health center in La Plant, SD (La Plant). The closest amenities and nearest acute care hospital, which meet only the most basic emergency needs, are located 30 miles away from the reservation in Eagle Butte, SD. For more specialized healthcare needs, residents must travel 90 miles to Pierre or Sioux Falls, SD. La Plant has one school that serves Kindergarten through the 12th grade and the only other organization in La Plant is Simply Smiles, a non-profit, holistic organization that is struggling with the realities of a population unable to self-sustain in the face of isolation and the lack of basic resources. The Lakota are figuratively and literally caught between two worlds where the technology and infrastructure to support their needs surrounds them, but the physical and emotional barriers that separate them from accessing these necessary services are worlds apart.

Simply Smiles

The non-profit organization, Simply Smiles, began operating in La Plant, SD in 2009 when Founder and President, Bryan Nurnberger, immediately recognized the hopelessness, desperation, and need of the community. The community was in great need of physical and emotional support which led Nurnberger to create a safe, trusting place for the community to gather, grow and learn from one another. Since 2009, the CRST division of Simply Smiles has slowly grown to where Nurnberger has been able to add expert staff and look outside of the organization toward farther reaching, community goals that will increase healthcare initiatives. Simply Smiles preserves the interests of the Lakota as their main focus and, in keeping with that

mission, the recommendations for Simply Smiles honors five of the seven core values that embody the “beliefs and behavior in Lakota society” that will lead to the enterprise, sustainability and honor of the community (Leas, 2009, para. 5).

Recommendation One: “Wacante Oganake, ‘To help, to share, to give, to be generous”
(Kills Straight, n.d., para. 5).

Generosity, the first Lakota value, aligns with the Simply Smiles vision as it is integral to the sustainability of the organization through trust building. Simply Smiles displays their generosity to the Lakota by working to decrease “suffering in the moment” (B. Nurnberger, personal communication, July 21, 2016). Currently, Simply Smiles decreases suffering by providing shelter and food and, through these efforts, creates a solid foundation of trust. By building trust through consistency, Simply Smiles is now in a distinct position to assist with the promotion of healthcare needs as the Lakota have confidence and faith in Simply Smiles. “Rapport is critical for building patient loyalty and deserves attention at all levels of customer service...patients have the same basic needs: they want to be heard, they want to be cared about, they want to collaborate, and they want respect” (Barkley, 2016, para. 14). The current lack of access to care on the Reservation is a barrier for the population; however, with trust and respect as their foundation, Simply Smiles has the potential to institute a telemedicine clinic through their facility.

Telemedicine, in the form of portable mobile communications or “mHealth,” can be used as an initial first step in healthcare delivery on the Reservation. Telemedicine is “the use of medical information exchanged from one site to another via electronic communications to improve a patient’s clinical health status...using two-way video, smart phones, wireless tools and other forms of telecommunications technology” (Telligen Health Information Technology and Great Plains Telehealth Resource and Assistance Center [Telligen and gpTRAC], 2014, p. 4).

mHealth is ideal in areas with poor infrastructure and lack of resources, such as the CRST, because it is “relatively inexpensive, faster and simpler than fixed phone platform to set-up” (Akter & Ray, 2010, p. 76). mHealth can increase real-time, quality access to healthcare by eliminating the barriers of time, distance, and location and allowing patients to utilize their own phones in a private setting (Akter & Ray, 2010). “Telehealth technologies can help achieve health care's "triple aim"...of improved patient outcomes and access to care, and cost savings to the health care system” (Telligon and gpTRAC, 2014, p. 6).

To mitigate mHealth in a private, secure location, Simply Smiles requires an additional private and secure room off of, or adjacent to their community center. Simply Smiles is currently discussing plans for an additional space as they recognize the need for a quiet area for residents to consult with staff and volunteers. The added room should be large enough to facilitate care or conversation for up to four people and have appropriate lighting and wall color to enhance mobile video production. The room requires appropriate technological up-fitting including a committed telephone landline where residents can call the local rape, domestic abuse and suicide hotlines, secure internet access, and multiple electrical outlets for computer and mobile phone plug-ins.

In the initial phase, the room can be used for private conversations with those who are in crisis or for small group facilitation. Eventually, the area can be shared for mHealth mobile phone purposes. There is a local resident who has a Medical Technician degree who may be interested in utilizing her services closer to home and would be ideal for assisting patients in the use of the mHealth technology. The mHealth service would connect via personal smartphones to the Public Health Services (PHS) Indian Hospital in Eagle Butte, SD where a health professional can assist the patient with their health concerns. “Mobile phones are also much easy [sic] to use

than the Internet for those who are unfamiliar with complex technology” (Akter & Ray, 2010, p. 76). There are three hospitals in Sioux Falls, SD currently utilizing the Avera systems mHealth service known as “eEmergency” (Telligen and gpTRAC, 2014, p. 6). The Avera organization can be employed for their knowledge of systems, preparedness to provide existing services and ease of access continuity in the state of SD (Telligen and gpTRAC, 2014, p. 6).

Recommendation Two: “Wowaunsila, ‘Pity, Compassion.”
(Kills Straight, n.d., para. 5)

The second Lakota principle refers to pity and compassion which is a “feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for another who is stricken by misfortune, accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the suffering” (“Compassion,” 2016, para. 1). Linking the Lakota with all available resources in the surrounding areas to help with physical, mental, emotional and financial needs will help to alleviate community-wide suffering. Prior research revealed that the Northeastern South Dakota Area Health Education Center (NESD AHEC), located two hours away in Aberdeen, SD, is not involved in educational or medical resources for the La Plant community. NESD AHEC must be accountable to the community as they are charged with caring and supplying resources for the La Plant community despite the distance and isolation.

Sacred Heart University (SHU) faculty have recently contacted the University of South Dakota at Vermillion (USD) to discuss their role in linking health education students to the Reservation. Traditionally, AHEC’s are linked to Universities for access to their diverse healthcare consortium. AHEC’s provide the resources necessary for the university to stream allied health students into underserved areas in the hopes that they will continue to serve in these areas after graduation. It is important for SHU and Simply Smiles to foster the relationship with USD to recruit healthcare students who will eventually serve and practice in the underserved area. The goal is to expand healthcare and holistic services in La Plant through the NESD

AHEC. As students and faculty witness the desperation and lack of services on the CRST, their motivation, drive and desire may be the push that is needed to get AHEC truly invested in the health and welfare of the CRST. There are several grants and opportunities for the NESD AHEC and USD to provide services to La Plant as the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) has authorized "... 'capacity building' grants to medical schools to establish, maintain or improve academic units or programs that improve clinical teaching and research..." (Association of American Medical Colleges [AAMC], 2010, p. 2). Most importantly, awarded grant priority will go to those who "... Provide training in the care of vulnerable populations...Establish formal relationships and submit joint applications with federally qualified health centers, rural health clinics, AHECs, or clinics located in underserved areas or serve underserved populations..." (AAMC, 2010, p. 3). If the University and NESD AHEC collaborate effectively, they may qualify for additional grant monies which will allow them to increase services to the Lakota.

Recommendation Three: "Wowauonihan, 'To Respect, to Honor"
(Kills Straight, n.d., para. 5)

The concept of respect and honor appear to be straightforward concepts, but to the Lakota who have lived through generations of deceit, land theft and desecration of their people, these words are full of weight and meaning. The ongoing frustrations with Indian Health Services (IHS) and the mismanagement of care that the Lakota receive only perpetuate feelings of dishonor and disrespect. There are long-standing IHS issues with the general mismanagement of funds and the lack of educational training of their healthcare employees. While abuse of the system is of great concern, Lakota are also beleaguered with local concerns such as extended wait times for appointments and the lack of appropriate communication during medical appointments. "...up to 10 percent of IHS physicians report that cultural barriers are commonly

present during clinical encounters...” (Sequist et al., 2011, para. 22). Likewise, healthcare literature is not often tailored to the educational level or cultural beliefs and attitudes of the average American Indian, which continue to create communication barriers (Sequist et al., 2011).

The IHS mission is to “raise the physical, mental, social and spiritual health of the American Indians and the Alaska Natives to the highest level” (Indian Health Services [IHS], n.d., para. 1). The mission is not being fulfilled, and the organization that was charged with caring for the Native peoples has lost their respect and honor by failing to provide safe quality care. In response to recent violations of the Pine Ridge IHS hospital and dangerous conditions at the Rosebud Emergency Department that resulted in deaths, Congress is beginning to take notice (“Senator calls for accountability,” 2016). Senators Thune (R-SD), Barrasso (R-WY), Rounds (R-SD) and Noem (R-SD), introduced bills to increase IHS accountability and transparency. These efforts are generated by people who truly can make a difference, but the momentum must not stop with them. Simply Smiles has an opportunity to “pull the curtain back” on the problems that plague the CRST by remaining current with the legislative events and by creating a pathway of communication to those Senators (B. Nurnberger, personal communication, June 22, 2016). Nurnberger is the leader and voice for Simply Smiles and, in turn, is an advocate for the ongoing respect and honor of the Lakota. It is not enough for the Senators to start a movement without having the backing of people that will ultimately force the change. Simply Smiles must remain active in current legislation and continue to lobby the committees assigned to the IHS bills and those that impact the CRST. Nurnberger and his staff are witnesses to the mistreatment and frustrations of the Lakota in regard to the lack of care. Simply Smiles can be change agents by remaining current on legislative action, advocating for the Lakota by writing to committee members, and teaching the community to advocate for themselves by documenting their daily

frustrations which will continue to put faces on the all too frequent injustices. Remaining present and involved in government issues can initiate change that will eventually lead to reform.

Recommendation Four: “Woohitike, ‘... Principles, Discipline, Bravery and Courage”
(Kills Straight, n.d., para. 5).

One of the primary concentrations for the Simply Smiles staff is to enhance the lives of the children on the CRST by supporting, mentoring and teaching the children to have hope and aspirations that will eventually transfer into action. To begin this process of inspiration, there must be discipline and structure so that the Lakota children can develop a positive self-concept to believe that they can achieve goals. “The goals of effective discipline are to...develop self-confidence...develop self-discipline...develop a healthy conscience... develop an internal sense of responsibility and control... (The foundation of effective discipline is respect)” (Innes, 2011, p. 8). When discipline and structure are consistent, self-esteem rises and goals can be achieved. Simply Smiles has laid a positive foundation to help the children understand the importance of a secondary education, future professions and returning their educational investments back into their community. It is now time to shift their focus to teaching positive social and behavioral skills that will increase their interpersonal competence and enhance their ability to survive in the world.

Many Lakota children come from large, multi-generational homes where depression, violence, poverty, and drug abuse are pervasive. The Lakota children transfer these negative influences into negative behaviors as a method of self-coping. “Indigenous adolescents are unlikely to confront problems with volition, owing to feelings of helplessness and hopelessness associated with historical trauma” (LaFromboise & Fatemi, 2011, p. 310). Simply Smiles can help the children take control of their environment by creating a structured environment with appropriate behavioral interventions. The organization is already instituting several measures to

increase rules and structure, but the program should be consistent in their actions and delivery. Collaborating with the Tiospaye Topa school can aid with behavioral interventions that will enhance structure and consistency in the community. The South Dakota Department of Education (2016) implements the “Multi-tiered system of supports” or “MTSS” program in numerous schools across the state which provides systematic, progressive interventions for students who are in need of academic or behavioral supports (para 1). Utilizing the same, structured program will help unify behavioral expectations and reduce anxiety and confusion among the children. It is important to remain consistent as “Receiving the same messages from multiple sources reinforces the information, so it will ‘stick’ and be used” (Centers for Disease Control: Violence Prevention [CDC: Violence Prevention], 2014, p. 29). The MTSS program is designed for schools, but behavior interventions, including utilizing the same language and redirection, can be followed through with in the home and the community for further reinforcement. Children should be held accountable when rules are breached. It is important for the children to respect themselves, each other, and the staff at the day camp.

Recommendation Five: “Woksape, ‘Understanding and Wisdom’
(Kills Straight, n.d., para. 5)

Perhaps the richest resource that Simply Smiles has is the wisdom of the Elder population. Several of the Elders visit the community center weekly and engage with the younger Lakota generation. It is through these interactions that many of the children learn how to act and interact with their fellow tribal members. The Elders in the tribe are wise historians of the past who hold the key to the future. “...for it is by the way they live that elders teach younger tribe members about the tribe’s culture and traditional ways of life...Essentially, elders are libraries of Indian knowledge, history and tradition” (Clark & Sherman, 2011, p. 15)

One way that Simply Smiles can foster the important relationship between the Elders and the youth at the camp is to hold monthly storytelling events where the Elders pass on their stories, as is the tradition in most Native American cultures. Currently, Simply Smiles has very little interaction with the parents of the children who frequent the day camp as they are largely absent and disenfranchised from the community due to chronic drug and alcohol abuse. “Indians start drinking at a younger age and, with no job, promise of promotion and few external cultural controls to cause them to moderate, continue to drink heavily until age 35 to 40 when drinking declines dramatically...” (Clawson, 2011, para. 31). Likewise, the parents do not engage with their children, leaving the children without positive role modeling on which to base their actions. This is evident and consistent with the negative social skills and behaviors displayed by the children. By re-telling stories of the past and how the Elders overcame adversity, they can help the younger generation reconnect with their heritage and increase their self-worth as an individual, a student, a community member, and a tribal member. The program, “Cultural Enhancement Through Storytelling,” was developed for the O’odham culture but can be adapted for the Lakota (Yellow Horse & Yellow Horse-Brave Heart, n.d., p. 68). “The Program’s philosophy is that stories teach respect for the self, school, teachers, community, family and tribe...Stories can strengthen and empower youth...help build a strong personal identity which can motivate youth toward future goals” (Yellow Horse & Yellow Horse-Brave Heart, n.d., p. 68). This program has the potential to further unite the community, help the youth better understand their heritage and provide them with the cultural tools that can enhance their ability to persevere and survive in the modern world. Continuing to foster the important relationships between the Elders and the youth will solidify the trusting relationships that will enhance Lakota identity and preserve tribal heritage.

Conclusion

Simply Smiles is a holistic organization dedicated to enhancing the lives of the community moment by moment, but they are much more than that for the CRST as the organization is their lifeline to a better future. Simply Smiles has the ability to bring two worlds together by linking the CRST to appropriate services through their diverse knowledge, expertise, and connections. By utilizing the Lakota values of generosity, compassion, respect, discipline and wisdom, Simply Smiles can continue to strive to provide the Lakota with the highest level of service (Kills Straight, n.d., para. 5). These core values will help guide them to maintain their mission to serve the Lakota and enhance their lives in a manner that is culturally and ethically sound. Simply Smiles is an expert at working directly with the Lakota population and now is the time for them to branch out to health and education experts who can assist with responsible, appropriate, enhanced delivery of care so the Lakota can be witness to innovations taking place on their behalf. Once the momentum starts, it is hoped that the Lakota will internalize the Simply Smiles mission as their own, which will eventually lead to a vibrant, self-sustaining community. Sitting Bull once stated, “The warrior, for us, is one who sacrifices himself for the good of others. His task is to take care of the elderly, the defenseless, those who cannot provide for themselves, and above all, the children, the future of humanity” (Robinson, 2014, p. 1). By caring for and investing in the Lakota, Simply Smiles will have achieved their goal of teaching self-reliance, self-worth, and independence and will have become the true warriors of change.

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