

# Gathering of Native Americans Fact Sheet

This fact sheet, developed for American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) audiences and organizations serving Indian Country, provides an overview of the Gathering of Native Americans (GONA) curriculum. For Alaska Native villages, this curriculum is called a Gathering of Alaska Natives (GOAN).

## What is a GONA?

A GONA is a culture-based planning process where community members gather to address community-identified issues. It uses an interactive approach that empowers and supports AI/AN tribes. The GONA approach reflects AI/AN cultural values, traditions, and spiritual practices.

The GONA focuses on the following four themes:

- **Belonging**—the GONA ensures that everyone feels welcomed in an inclusive, open, safe, and trusting environment
- **Mastery**—the GONA allows participants to take stock of how historical trauma impacts their communities and what fosters their resilience and holds them together
- **Interdependence**—the GONA initiates the planning process to assess resources and relationships, and to experience and strengthen interconnectedness
- **Generosity**—the GONA exercise of creating gifts to share with other participants symbolizes each participant's larger gift to their families and communities in helping to address and prevent mental and substance use disorders, prevent suicide, and promote mental health

The Tribal Training and Technical Assistance Center (Tribal TTA Center) conducts the GONA as an integral component of the TTA it provides. The GONA is designed to be adaptable so communities can tackle a variety of important issues. While envisioned as a 4-day event, amazing things can happen within a 2- or 3-day GONA. There have even been 1-day GONAs. The structure is designed as a 4-part process, rather than a 4-day process. The number of days a GONA is held varies based on community availability. The timeframe allows for maximum participation across multiple segments of the community.



Community members participate in a GONA team-building activity.

Since it was developed in 1992, the GONA has been recognized as an effective culture-based intervention. The GONA starts the discussion on important issues identified by the community. In the time following the GONA, the real work begins—to develop, implement, and sustain strategic prevention activities and interventions that address the issues identified during the GONA.

The GONA is a journey of healing and transformation. It is as much about healing the past as it is about building the future. The GONA is a road map for the journey. The journey itself will need to be traveled by all members of the community. Ultimately, this journey is about reestablishing a safe, supportive, and nurturing community so AI/AN youth can thrive and grow up in balance.

## Indigenous Theoretical Framework

Our technical approach is built upon the indigenous theoretical framework of:

- **Vision**—acknowledging the effects of historical trauma, honoring cultural values, and developing a vision of success
- **Circles of Relationships**—building quality and authentic relationships for effective work
- **Sense of Hope**—focusing on interconnectedness, the sacredness of the inner spirit, balance, and the responsibility to be life-long learners<sup>1</sup>

The GONA provides important pathways for this framework to unfold.



The use of traditional songs, drumming, prayers, and stories is highly encouraged during the GONA.

## How Does a GONA Work

Community-based AI/AN trainers (adults, youth, and elders) and expert consultants facilitate the GONA by following its guiding principles. Skilled facilitators can safely and effectively lead a group through each day of the GONA by working to understand the community's issues and concerns in terms of their strengths. This process involves examining skills, abilities, knowledge, resources, and desires that can be used in some way to help meet the community's overall vision and goals for prevention.

### Feedback from Communities

#### What I liked best about the GONA was...

“Hearing, creating, and sharing the conversation about suicide, prevention, and substance abuse”

“Working on community building and healing”

“We are addressing very important issues that needed to be addressed a long time ago”

“Developing a vision and working towards a common goal”

“Planning for the future”

“Use of our culture and cultural ways”

“Feeling connected with peers”

“I now can understand and help my friend”

“Laughing and working together”

“I will include it in my work and will keep the voice loud for the social causes and concerns”

<sup>1</sup> PrettyPaint, I. (2008). *Miracle survivors: A grounded theory on educational persistence for tribal college students*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota.

## Who Should Participate?

A community-based GONA planning committee helps plan, prepare, conduct, and follow up on the action plans following the GONA. It is recommended that the committee include five to seven community members representing individuals, agencies, and programs from different categories, including:

- AI/AN youth and elders
- Health
- Education
- Law enforcement
- Faith-based or traditional practices
- Tribal departments
- Economic sector

Committee members work closely with GONA facilitators to identify and include culturally appropriate values, traditions, and spiritual practices throughout the GONA. The committee develops recruitment plans and materials to invite AI/AN families, tribal leaders, social service staff, health care providers, law enforcement, school personnel, AI/AN youth and elders, traditional and faith-based organizations, and other prevention partners to attend the GONA. The committee also helps develop and monitor a budget for the GONA to cover costs, such as those for the meeting facility, materials and supplies, door prizes, and honoraria.



Community members present their GONA team banner.

## About the Tribal TTA Center

The Tribal TTA Center is funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The Tribal TTA Center uses a culturally relevant, holistic approach to deliver TTA on mental and substance use disorders, suicide prevention, and mental health promotion. TTA is offered to a broad audience of all tribal communities, a focused audience of SAMHSA tribal grantees, and an intensive audience of selected AI/AN tribes per year.

## For More Information

Please visit the Tribal TTA Center's website to access past webinar recordings pertaining to the GONA and other helpful resources at <http://www.samhsa.gov/tribal-ttac/resources/webinars>.

To request more information about the Tribal TTA Center, the GONA curriculum, and consultants, or to submit a technical assistance request, call (301) 257-2967 or visit <http://www.samhsa.gov/tribal-ttac>.