

# Culture is Medicine

**The United Katehnuaka  
Longhouse Good Mind Initiative  
as a Model of Indigenous Harm  
Reduction in Practice**

Report prepared by the  
United Katehnuaka Longhouse and Vital Strategies



Through sharing the United Katehnuaka Longhouse's model of Indigenous harm reduction programming, this report is intended to serve as a resource for other Indigenous communities looking to develop or expand harm reduction services, as well as for others interested in learning more about Indigenous harm reduction.

## Key Points

- The United Katehnuaka Longhouse Good Mind Initiative addresses the overdose crisis in Native communities in North and South Carolina through culture-based Indigenous harm reduction services including talking circles, culture classes, and community socials. Good Mind Initiative programming reaches about 1,000 people across multiple Native nations and communities.
- The Good Mind Initiative believes that culture is medicine. By strengthening cultural identity and self-worth, Indigenous communities can heal from the historical, intergenerational, and lifetime traumas that are often at the root of drug use among Indigenous people.
- One of the biggest challenges in doing this work is funding: there are very few overdose prevention and harm reduction funding opportunities that allow for Indigenous culture-based harm reduction services, even though Native people experience the highest rates of fatal overdose nationally, and despite evidence that Indigenous harm reduction is effective at reducing harm and saving lives.

Vital Strategies has been a funding supporter of this initiative; discussions between funder and grantee have helped to shape grant parameters to better incorporate and empower Indigenous health principles.



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## Introduction

For many Native communities, culture is medicine. In the face of the overdose crisis, which disproportionately impacts Native people, looking to culture can be a crucial way to promote healing among Native people who use drugs (PWUD), as well as to prevent future drug use. In recognition of this, the United Katehnuka Longhouse, Inc.—a Native-run nonprofit based in North Carolina—provides culture-based programming to Native communities in North and South Carolina to address and heal from the overdose crisis via the Good Mind Initiative. This report provides an overview of the Good Mind Initiative’s philosophy and approach, services, program evaluation methods, participant outreach and recruitment strategies, organizational and funding structure, and other considerations for Native communities considering implementing culture-based overdose prevention/harm reduction services, as well as for others who are looking to learn more about Indigenous harm reduction.



Men and boys dancing eastern woodland during a culture class, in tune with powwow culture.

## What is Indigenous Harm Reduction?

### Background on the Overdose Crisis in Native Communities

Both nationally and in North Carolina, the overdose crisis disproportionately affects Native people. Nationally, from 2019-2023, non-Hispanic Native people experienced the highest rate of fatal overdose of any racial or ethnic group, at a rate twice that of the general population in 2023.<sup>1</sup> In North Carolina, Native people experienced the highest rate of fatal overdose of any racial or ethnic group, at a rate 2.4 times higher than that of the general population, in 2021.<sup>2</sup>

This inequity is driven by the continuing impacts of centuries of ongoing genocide, colonization, and oppressive policies designed to destroy Native nations, cultures, and lives. This has reshaped the material conditions in which Native people live and caused historical, intergenerational, and lifetime trauma, which can be contributing factors to drug use. These conditions directly contribute to and exacerbate the overdose crisis in Indigenous communities.

Despite attempts to decimate Indigenous ways of life, Indigenous cultures have endured. Today, many Native communities are working to ensure that everyone has access to opportunities to participate in cultural activities and connect with culture. As the Johns Hopkins Center for Indigenous Health Tribal Principles website states, for Indigenous people, “culture is medicine, treatment, and well-being.”<sup>3</sup> Revitalizing cultures addresses the traumas that are often at the root of substance use among Native people. Being able to connect to one’s Native culture can be key both in preventing drug use, as well as in supporting people who use drugs (PWUD). Native communities know—and Western research is beginning to “show”<sup>4</sup>—that culturally specific substance use disorder (SUD) programming is effective in improving participants’ wellness and increases the likelihood of Native people accessing the programming. Improving cultural connectedness also has positive outcomes in prevention.

1 Matthew F. Garnett and Arialdi M. Miniño, “Drug Overdose Deaths in the United States, 2003–2023,” NCHS Data Brief no. 522 (National Center for Health Statistics, December 17, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.15620/cdc/170565>. [Note: Rates are age-adjusted.]

2 North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, “North Carolina Reports 22% Increase In Overdose Deaths,” North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, February 21, 2023, <https://www.ncdhhs.gov/news/press-releases/2023/02/21/north-carolina-reports-22-increase-overdose-deaths>.

3 Johns Hopkins Center for Indigenous Health, “Principle 1: Culture First: Support Cultural and Traditional Healing in Your Community,” Tribal Principles, 2024, <https://www.tribalprinciples.cih.jhu.edu/principle-1/>.

4 As a starting point, please refer to Johns Hopkins Center for Indigenous Health, “References,” Tribal Principles, 2024, <https://www.tribalprinciples.cih.jhu.edu/references/>. For additional suggested references, please reach out to Skye Hart (Vital Strategies) at [skye.hart@vitalstrategies.org](mailto:skye.hart@vitalstrategies.org).

## Indigenous Harm Reduction

Looking to culture to heal from the impacts of the overdose crisis is Indigenous harm reduction. Harm reduction incorporates practical strategies and ideas aimed at reducing negative consequences associated with drug use, while respecting the rights of people who use drugs. It encompasses numerous strategies centered around meeting people where they are in their journey. Some recognizable and common forms of harm reduction include services like access to safer use supplies, drug checking services to identify adulterants, naloxone access to reverse overdoses, and medications to help reduce risk of fatal overdose. But any practice that is aimed at a better health outcome for a person who uses drugs, without demanding or coercing abstinence, can be part of a harm reduction strategy.

For many Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and 2SLGBTQ+ communities, harm reduction practices are similar to the ways that people have kept each other safe in the face of racism, colonization, institutional negligence and discrimination, and other systems of oppression. Any action taken to address overdose must involve community members and the voices of people who use drugs. This is resistance and resilience rooted in culture and tradition.

For Indigenous communities in particular, the very act of practicing and revitalizing culture can be harm reduction. Many Indigenous communities are Indigenizing harm reduction, which the National Harm Reduction Coalition's Native Harm Reduction Toolkit defines as "creating and supporting policies, programs, and practices that are grounded in cultural traditions, Indigenous knowledge, ceremonies, land, and languages." This can look like adapting "mainstream" harm reduction approaches to the culture and needs of a Native community, as well as implementing culture-based services such as language classes or ceremony to address the overdose crisis.

### Culture-based services include, but are not limited to:

- Ceremony
- Traditional healers and traditional health care practices
- Talking circles
- Language classes
- Traditional medicines (e.g., sage, sweetgrass, cedar, tobacco)
- Culture classes and cultural activities
  - Examples: Drum circles, storytelling, cultural arts such as beading and basketmaking, traditional song and dance, traditional foods/food sovereignty programs, land and water-based activities, (youth) culture camps

Cultural genocide has resulted in many Native people feeling disconnected from their cultures and traditions, even if they have lived in their Native community their entire lives. Creating opportunities for all community members, including PWUD, to practice and learn more about their cultures provides healing from the historical and intergenerational traumas that run deep in Native communities. Healing from these traumas that are often at the root of substance use can lead to healing from substance use. It is crucial to create spaces where Native PWUD are warmly invited to engage with their cultures, especially given the frequent emphasis on sobriety as a condition for participating in cultural activities and ceremonies in many Native communities.

Taking care of “all my relations” is an important mindset across many different Native communities. It means that people living in a community should support and take care of all beings in the community. Indigenous harm reductionists remind their communities that taking care of “all my relations” includes relatives who use drugs. Further, this emphasis on taking care of “all my relations” highlights that harm reduction—a practice rooted in compassion for all community members, including those who use drugs—ineliminately aligns with a core value of many Indigenous cultures.



Program Manager Kaya Littleturtle presenting about culture-based Indigenous harm reduction at the 2025 National Native Harm Reduction Summit at the White Earth Nation, in collaboration with colleague Tony V. Locklear (not pictured).

## Overview of the United Katehnuaka Longhouse Good Mind Initiative

The United Katehnuaka Longhouse (UKL) is a Native-led nonprofit based in Robeson County, North Carolina, that provides culturally relevant harm reduction and overdose prevention services to regional Native communities in North and South Carolina via the Good Mind Initiative. The Good Mind Initiative was created by UKL as a direct response to community needs around substance use, mental health, and emotional wellness. Rooted in Indigenous values and practices, the initiative seeks to provide harm reduction services through culturally relevant methods, recognizing that healing must address historical and intergenerational trauma.

UKL believes in the philosophy that “culture is medicine”—and that medicine can be anything that contributes to physical, emotional, or spiritual wellness. UKL’s mission is to ensure that their communities have consistent and continuous access to good medicine, grounded in their traditions, identity, and values.

UKL provides three main services through the Good Mind Initiative: talking circles, culture classes, and community socials. Services are tailored to the cultures of the communities where they are provided. Many of the Good Mind Initiative’s services have intergenerational attendance, reflecting the value placed on caring for family, learning from elders, and supporting future generations.

The Good Mind Initiative collaborates with a wide network of Tribal communities and allied organizations, including:

State recognized Native nations in North Carolina:	Organizations and agencies in North Carolina:
Coharie Indian Tribe Sampson County, NC	Community Organized Relief Effort (CORE) Robeson County, NC
<b>Federally recognized Native nations in North Carolina:</b>	Hoke County Health Department Hoke County, NC
Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina Robeson, Hoke, Cumberland, and Scotland Counties, NC	Robeson County Healthcare Corporation (RCORP) Consortium Robeson County, NC
<b>Native nations seeking state recognition in North Carolina:</b>	Sacred Pathways Pembroke, NC
Tuscarora Indians of Katehnuaka Territories Southeastern NC	Sampson County Indian Education Program Sampson County, NC
<b>Federally recognized Native nations in South Carolina:</b>	The Lost Colony Outdoor Drama Manteo, NC
Catawba Nation Rock Hill, Catawba Nation (SC)	United Tribes of North Carolina Statewide in NC
<b>State recognized Native nations in South Carolina:</b>	
Waccamaw Indian People Aynor, SC	
Wassamasaw Tribe of Varnertown Indians Berkeley, Dorchester, and Charleston Counties, SC	

A combination of talking circles, culture classes, and community socials are hosted in each community, depending on community needs, engagement, and space availability.

In the future, UKL plans on offering virtual talking circles and culture classes to ensure that programming is accessible to those who may not be able to make it to in-person events, including those living in urban areas away from their home communities, people without reliable transportation, and community members with disabilities.

## Program Goals and Intended Outcomes

- Reduce harm and save lives
- Support emotional and spiritual healing
- Strengthen cultural identity and self-worth
- Provide consistent access to wellness resources
- Create culturally rooted public health models that other communities can replicate and adapt
- Break down stigma against people who use drugs

## Philosophy and Approach

- **Culture is Medicine:** Healing takes place through cultural reconnection and traditional practices.
- **Wellness is Holistic:** UKL addresses spiritual, emotional, and physical health together.
- **Community is Central:** Rural Indigenous communities often face challenges in accessing care. UKL's model meets people where they are.
- **Being a Good Relative:** Public health work is Indigenous work. Helping one another is a traditional responsibility.



Fans made by the United Katehnuaka Longhouse Good Mind Initiative, partner organization Community Organized Relief Effort (CORE), and Vital Strategies to distribute to regional Native communities to promote Indigenous harm reduction awareness and implementation. Design by Makayla Brave Heart (Littleturtle).

## Good Mind Initiative Services

### Talking Circles

A traditional method of structured dialogue, talking circles create safe, respectful, and inclusive spaces where participants speak one at a time and are fully heard. Led by trained facilitators, these circles support emotional wellness, which is a critical aspect of overall health. They are used for healing, community-building, and processing shared or individual challenges.

The Good Mind Initiative offers talking circles tailored to different target audiences. Most of the talking circles are held for people with lived and living experience of drug use, and some of these circles are also open to their invited family and friends. The Good Mind Initiative also offers talking circles aimed at preventing future drug use. Additionally, in response to identified needs in the communities where they work, the Good Mind Initiative is planning to begin hosting regular talking circles for survivors of domestic violence impacted by the overdose crisis, as well as talking circles for sex workers. UKL staff have also hosted talking circles on the topic of sexual and domestic violence for other inter-Tribal gatherings.

### Talking Circle Guidelines

**At each talking circle, the staff member facilitating the circle shares the following guidelines:**

- This is a sacred and safe space. Whatever is shared here in this talking circle is meant to be confidential.
- When you have the talking stick, it's your time to talk. When you don't have the talking stick, it is your time to listen.
- Be respectful of other people's time to share. Your words are important, but we want to make sure everyone has the time to share their views as well.
- As stated earlier, this is a sacred and safe place. Please refrain from using cuss words or derogatory language while in the talking circle.
- If a question makes you uncomfortable or you don't want to share, then you don't have to, and you may pass the stick.
- Please put all cellphones on vibrate so we don't disturb one another during this process.

At the beginning of each talking circle, the facilitator shares guidelines for participants. The facilitator then leads participants through a set of questions and topics that aim to help provide healing, community-building, and processing shared or individual challenges. Through these conversations, stigma around drug use and interconnected issues that participants may have entered the space with can be broken down. The goal of talking circles is not to push abstinence from drug use, but rather to promote other facets of well-being valued by the Indigenous cultures of participants, which can in turn lead to decreased and/or safer drug use.

The Good Mind Initiative holds 2-4 talking circles per month in different communities through UKL's various partnerships. Most talking circles typically have about 11 participants. When turnout is higher, staff may have the talking circle participants break into smaller groups with a maximum of about 20 people to ensure that everyone has time to share and to help maintain a more comfortable atmosphere for those who may not be comfortable sharing with a larger group. The Good Mind Initiative's talking circles have a high retention rate, with many talking circle participants returning to participate in future circles. When supplies are available, UKL also offers naloxone at talking circles.



Program participants listening to a flute performance during a talking circle held at partner organization Sacred Pathways.

## Culture Classes

These sessions are centered around cultural re-engagement and empowerment through:

- Traditional singing and dancing
- Craftwork and creative arts
- Language reclamation and usage

Cultural loss is often one of the earliest and most damaging traumas experienced by Indigenous communities. By reconnecting participants to their cultures, the Good Mind Initiative fosters higher self-esteem, stronger identity, and healthy, sustainable coping skills.

### Guiding Principles for Culture Classes

**The Good Mind Initiative's culture classes are designed to:**

- Rebuild connections to ancestral knowledge
- Provide safe spaces for expression, creativity, and learning
- Equip participants with healthy outlets for stress and emotion
- Encourage intergenerational learning and community building

Some Native people who use drugs (PWUD) may not feel welcome in cultural spaces due to the prevalent perceived or actual emphasis on sobriety as a condition for participating in cultural activities. Creating spaces where Native PWUD are not just welcomed, but are intentionally invited to connect with and practice their cultures can be crucial in the healing of both an individual and their community.

Topics, activities, and teachings are specific to the communities and age demographics where each culture class is held. The culture classes occasionally feature guest speakers who speak about topics such as intergenerational and historical trauma to help contextualize disparities in substance use and other inequities in Native communities. Speakers may also help break down stigma around drug use and help participants better understand how to support relatives and community members who use drugs. Some guest speakers are knowledge holders and elders, who may also share other cultural teachings.

The Good Mind Initiative tends to hold 5-7 culture classes per month in different communities through UKL's various partnerships. An average of 25 people attend each culture class, though attendance has ranged anywhere from 8 to 59 participants. When supplies are available, UKL also offers naloxone at culture classes.



Program participants learning to make cornhusk dolls during a culture class held at Sacred Pathways.

## Community Socials

Community socials are large, intergenerational gatherings that bring people together for:

- Traditional song and dance
- Food and fellowship
- Guest speakers
- Health outreach (including naloxone distribution)

Community socials are celebratory, healing spaces that also serve as strategic touchpoints for public health interventions. The high turnout allows UKL to connect with many people at once, creating opportunities for education, empowerment, and community care.

### Philosophy and Approach for Community Socials

**The Good Mind Initiative's socials aim to:**

- Foster connection and cultural celebration
- Act as entry points for health services and educational outreach
- Use traditional gathering as a means of public health engagement
- Encourage participation across all ages
- Reinforce that wellness and joy are part of resistance and survival

The community socials feature keynote speakers, who typically speak about topics related to harm reduction, prevention, intergenerational and historical trauma in Native communities, and other topics related to substance use in Native communities. Following the keynote speaker, attendees are invited to join in traditional social dances, which some attendees have learned through participating in the Good Mind Initiative's culture classes. Food is also provided at the socials because connecting over food is an important part of caring for community.

Attendance at community socials averages about 76 attendees per social, but attendance can exceed 150 people. Socials are held monthly during some seasons, and tend to slow down to once every other month in the summer. Socials for special events such as the New Years Eve social and the 2024 International Overdose Awareness Day social<sup>5</sup> tend to be especially well-attended.

<sup>5</sup> Mayo, S. (2024, August 29). Spreading awareness of the overdose crisis in Indigenous communities. ICT. <https://ictnews.org/news/spreading-awareness-of-the-overdose-crisis-in-indigenous-communities/>



Attendees engaging in learning traditional longhouse social dances at one of the Good Mind Initiative's community socials.

## Participant Outreach and Recruitment

UKL has an established presence in and trust from the communities where they work. These existing connections, relationships, and trust from being active in Native communities throughout the region have been key to participant outreach trust. UKL had previously provided Good Mind Initiative services via one-off contracts or by organizing self-funded events. Many of the people who had participated in UKL's past programming continue to attend. UKL also advertises Good Mind Initiative programming via Facebook, sharing physical flyers in the communities where they work, and word of mouth. The Native nations and organizations that UKL partners with also help with outreach and recruitment.

## Organizational and Funding Structure

As of summer 2025, the Good Mind Initiative has 6 core staff members, all of whom provide services in different capacities. Positions include:

- **Program Manager:** The Program Manager is responsible for overseeing all employees and ensuring staff are staying on track with the programs. They are also responsible for establishing relationships, developing agreements, and coordinating initial schedules of events with UKL's various Tribal and organizational partners. The Program Manager also leads the development of curriculum. In addition to these responsibilities, the Program Manager may also lead or facilitate programming.
- **Community Outreach Coordinator:** The Community Outreach Coordinator is responsible for working with the Culture Coordinators and Community Programs Facilitators to maintain proper scheduling within the partner communities and implementation of the developed curriculum. They also assist the Program Manager with identifying appropriate speakers for events, as well as developing and planning cultural arts activities within the scheduling. Additionally, they identify, apply for, and help manage grants and other funding opportunities. In addition to these responsibilities, the Community Outreach Coordinator may also lead or facilitate programming.
- **Cultural Coordinators:** The Cultural Coordinators are responsible for providing culturally sensitive services to program participants as they lead or facilitate programming. They educate about and facilitate cultural activities and teachings including traditional song, dance, cultural arts such as regalia making, and other culturally related exercises to help promote wellness. They also work with the Community Programs Facilitators and Community Outreach Coordinator to maintain the implementation of the curriculum.
- **Community Programs Facilitators:** The Community Programs Facilitators' main responsibility is overseeing and facilitating the talking circles, ensuring that they align with the curriculum and effectively promote wellness within the communities. They also assist the Cultural Coordinators and Community Outreach Coordinator with teaching different cultural arts. They are responsible for assisting the Community Outreach Coordinator and Program Manager with identifying keynote speakers to attend the community events.

In addition to the staff who facilitate and manage the Good Mind Initiative programming, UKL has a 7-person board that helps support organizational infrastructure. The board meets monthly.

Funding for the Good Mind Initiative primarily comes from grants. UKL sometimes also contracts with Tribal and organizational partners to provide services, but these partners tend to have limited funding. Prior to receiving a larger grant in 2024, UKL staff occasionally funded programming out-of-pocket out of recognition of the need for culture-based wellness services in regional Native communities, and a commitment to providing these services.

## Evaluating Program Impacts

Being able to document and evaluate program participation and impacts is important not just to internally monitor and improve services, but also to demonstrate the reach and impacts of services to potential partners, supporters, and funders. UKL tracks the number of participants at each Good Mind Initiative event, including first-time and returning participants at talking circles and culture classes. UKL also tracks doses of naloxone distributed at each event. This helps UKL better understand the reach of their programming, as well as participant engagement with their programming based on retention rates.

Under their first year of consistent funding, UKL was able to scale up the frequency of Good Mind Initiative programming and reach more community members. The table below shows program frequency and participation as of March 2025.

Service	Baseline frequency (July 2024)	Frequency as of March 2025	# of unique participants	# of new participants
Talking circles	2/month	2-4/month	184	26
Culture classes	2-3/month	5-7/month	444	29
Community socials	every other month	every other month	425	not tracked

UKL also distributed 215 doses of naloxone from July 2024–March 2025.

In addition to tracking participation metrics and naloxone distribution, UKL has also developed a survey to qualitatively evaluate the impacts of talking circles and culture classes on participants. In alignment with Indigenous evaluation methods,<sup>6</sup> the survey questions ask about metrics that are of value to the communities served and tell the story of UKL's programming. Questions focus on gauging changes in feelings of cultural connectedness, understanding the role of engaging with culture in participants' healing, and assessing whether the programming is successful at illuminating how historical and intergenerational trauma connects to substance use and healing. The survey also provides an opportunity for participants to provide feedback on the programming and identify areas for improvement. A copy of the post-talking circle survey is included in the Appendix.

<sup>6</sup> Urban Indian Health Institute, “Indigenous Evaluation,” Urban Indian Health Institute, 2018, <https://www.uihi.org/health-initiative/indigenous-evaluation/>.

Paper surveys are distributed at the end of most talking circles and culture classes. Responses are anonymous, and participation is optional. In the future, UKL will be exploring using an online survey platform in addition to paper surveys to allow more flexibility in collecting survey responses, particularly for participants who may have to leave a talking circle or culture class early.

## Considerations and Lessons Learned

- **Adaptability is key:** Each Tribal community has unique needs; materials must be flexible and open to modification.
- **Virtual options are needed:** This is especially crucial for urban Native populations who lack physical proximity to community centers.
- **Consistency builds trust:** Show up regularly and remain visible in the community.
- **Incorporate traditional values into modern systems:** This increases acceptance and effectiveness.
- **Engagement looks different in rural settings:** Face-to-face interaction and relationship building are essential.

## Funder Considerations

As demonstrated by the culturally tailored work that UKL does through the Good Mind Initiative, Indigenous communities know best what their needs are. For potential funders and other allies looking to work with Indigenous communities, supporting Native people who are already doing this work in their communities is one of the most effective ways to address the overdose crisis in Native communities.

Vital Strategies, a public health nonprofit working on overdose prevention across U.S. states, has been a key funder for UKL since 2024. Vital Strategies engaged with the Good Mind Initiative as a priority project because it was filling a critical gap in Indigenous harm reduction services for the region, but lacked sustainable funding. In shaping the parameters of awarded grant funding, Vital Strategies worked with the program to ensure that the award was structured to respect and support Indigenous practices. This meant providing funding that combined interventions like naloxone distribution, alongside cultural services that many other funding models overlook such as talking circles. Reporting metrics were also discussed between Vital Strategies and UKL to ensure that Indigenous data sovereignty principles are respected: UKL was able to decide which reporting metrics and what level of detail to share with Vital Strategies.

**When supporting Indigenous harm reduction / overdose prevention service providers, it is helpful to ensure that funding can cover:**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Culture-based services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Travel for program participants to attend programming</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Honorariums for guest speakers, including elders, knowledge holders, and other community members</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Childcare for program participants to attend programming</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supplies for cultural arts (e.g., supplies for making moccasins, regalia, drums and drumsticks, beadwork, cornhusk dolls, etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incidental basic needs for program participants (e.g., food; ID replacement costs; winter clothes; transportation to medical appointments, court dates, work, the food bank, etc.)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food for events</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Platforms for virtual options</li> </ul>

**It is also helpful for funders to design funding opportunities that are:**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low barrier to apply for</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Able to offer support with writing the application and reports</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low barrier to report on</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respectful of Indigenous data sovereignty principles by allowing funding recipients to determine what data to collect and whether to share it</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Non-competitive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Able to accept different types of reporting (e.g., providing updates via video / phone call)</li> </ul>

The collaboration between Vital Strategies and UKL has also helped to shape concepts that are now carried over into other funding opportunities, such as a request for proposals entitled “Culturally Based Harm Reduction by and for Native Communities in New Mexico,” launched by Vital Strategies in partnership with the New Mexico Tribal Behavioral Health Providers Association and Americans for Indian Opportunity in summer 2025. This grant opportunity:

- Was lower barrier by developing a shorter application and simpler budget template;
- Offered intensive support with writing the grant application;
- Is able to support programming types and community needs that many Native communities struggle to find funding for (e.g., holding ceremony, hosting talking circles, covering basic incidental needs for program participants, purchasing a program vehicle, translating harm reduction materials into Indigenous languages);
- Allows grantees to determine what data to collect and whether to share it;
- Offers the option for grantees to complete quarterly grant reporting via Zoom call; and
- Keeps reporting requirements simple.



United Katehnuaka Longhouse Good Mind Initiative and Vital Strategies staff tabling at the North Carolina American Indian Unity Conference in March 2025, distributing resources about addressing the overdose crisis.

## Nyà·wë? — Thank You!

The UKL team welcomes invitations to share their curriculum, as well as to meet with other Indigenous organizations interested in implementing their own culturally grounded community wellness initiatives.

### Contact

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## Staff Bios

### Kaya Littleturtle

Coming from a long line of cultural leaders that guided him on his walk as a traditionalist, Kaya Littleturtle is the Program Manager for the Good Mind Initiative under the United Katehnuaka Longhouse. He is also the lead singer of the championship drum group WarPaint, which travels all over Indian Country. Kaya is an active member of his community's traditional longhouse and belongs to the Snipe Clan, one of the seven traditional longhouse clans. He is an enrolled member of the Tuscarora Indians of Kahtehnuaka Territories. He believes that medicine is anything that makes you well, whether it be physical, spiritual, or emotional, and he is committed to helping people find their sources of good medicine.

### Makayla Littleturtle

Makayla Littleturtle is a multidisciplinary artist and the Community Outreach Coordinator for the Good Mind Initiative under the United Katehnuaka Longhouse, where she uses her creativity and cultural knowledge to uplift and empower others. Raised deeply in her traditions, she brings a strong connection to her Oglala Lakota heritage into every aspect of her work, both personally and professionally. With a deep commitment to cultural preservation and community healing, she takes great pride in raising her family in the way she was taught, grounded in language, ceremony, and ancestral values. Through her art and outreach, she shares teachings, creates spaces for connection, and works to ensure that the strength of her people continues for future generations.

### Kat Littleturtle

The keeper of the stories for many of our Tribal communities, Kat Littleturtle is a Community Programs Facilitator for the Good Mind Initiative under the United Katehnuaka Longhouse. An enrolled member of the Tuscarora Indians of Kahtehnuaka Territories, Kat has a lifetime of experience as a storyteller and as a committed cultural educator and community engagement specialist. She hopes to inspire everyone she meets to remember the importance of stories because we ALL have a story to tell!

## Ethan Oxendine

Ethan Oxendine is Katehnuaka Tuscarora from North Carolina (Snipe Clan) and is a resident of Pembroke, NC, where he has spent most of his life. Ethan works with the Injury and Violence Prevention Branch of the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, where he serves on the overdose prevention team as a program coordinator and tribal liaison. He is also a Community Programs Facilitator for the Good Mind Initiative under the United Katehnuaka Longhouse, specializing in culture revitalization. Through his work, he promotes the utilization of harm reduction across the state and in Tribal communities. Culturally relevant practices and the use of culture as a means of healing are a key part of Ethan's work in Tribal communities. Ethan has traveled across the U.S. and Canada participating in and conducting many different cultural events with various Tribes and organizations. Some of the organizations Ethan has organized programming with include museums in North Carolina, Indiana, and Pennsylvania; presentations with Novant Health, the Department of Defense, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C.; and he has even done cultural exchanges in Honolulu, Hawai'i.

## Cameron Bryant

Cameron Bryant is a member of the WarPaint drum group, which travels all over the U.S. and Canada spreading cultural awareness. He also helps teach the community culture and the importance of harm reduction principles through the Good Mind Initiative under the United Katehnuaka Longhouse as a Community Programs Facilitator. Cameron is an enrolled member of the Tuscarora Indians of Kahtehnuaka Territories and sits in the largest of the seven traditional longhouse clans, Bear Clan.

## Appendix: Post-Talking Circle Survey

This is a copy of the survey that the United Katehnauka Longhouse (UKL) asks talking circle participants to complete at the end of each talking circle. A similar survey is used for culture classes. UKL currently only offers printed surveys, but an online option will be available in the future.

### Post-Talking Circle Reflection

Thank you for being part of this talking circle. Your voice matters, and your experiences help strengthen our community. Please take a few moments to reflect and share your thoughts.

**1. Have you been part of a talking circle with the Good Mind Initiative before?**

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

**2. How connected did you feel to your culture before tonight's talking circle?**

- I have always felt deeply connected.
- I feel connected, but I want to learn more.
- I know some things, but I don't always feel that connection.
- I feel distant from my culture and want to reconnect.
- I don't feel connected at all.

**3. After tonight's talking circle, how do you feel about your cultural connection now?**

- I feel a deeper connection than before.
- I feel more open to learning and growing in my culture.
- I feel the same, but I appreciate the experience.
- I still feel distant but want to find ways to reconnect.

**4. What stood out to you the most from this circle?**

**5. Thinking about your own journey and what we shared tonight, do you feel like cultural practices can help in healing and recovery?**

- Absolutely—our traditions hold wisdom that strengthens us.
- Yes, but we need more access to traditional ways.
- Maybe, but I'd like to learn more about how.
- I'm not sure yet.

**6. This talking circle helped me understand how historical and intergenerational trauma connects to substance use and healing.**

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

**7. What healing practices or cultural teachings do you believe would help strengthen recovery in our community?**

**8. Would you recommend talking circles like this to others seeking healing?**

- Yes, absolutely.
- Yes, but I think they would need to feel comfortable first.
- Maybe—it depends on the person.
- No, I don't think this is for everyone.

**9. Has this circle inspired you to share your experiences with younger generations to help prevent trauma-related substance use?**

- Yes, I feel called to share and guide others.
- Yes, but I need to find the right way to do it.
- I'm not sure, but I'd like to consider it more.
- No, I don't feel ready for that.

**10. What topics should we bring into the circle in the future to support healing in our community?**

