



# FIRST THINGS FIRST

## **Tribal Consultation Summary Report November 16, 2021 Virtual Consultation**

FTF is committed to meaningful consultation with tribes through which elected officials and other authorized representatives of the tribal governments have the opportunity to provide meaningful and timely input regarding the development of policies or procedures that affect Arizona's tribes, Native American children and their families.

In 2020, the annual FTF Tribal Consultation was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Pursuant to the First Things First (FTF) Tribal Consultation Policy and Arizona Revised Statutes section 41-2051, FTF convened a formal consultation session on Tuesday, November 16, 2021. In consideration of the on-going impact of COVID-19 in tribal communities, the consultation was held in a virtual format.

### **Participants**

#### ***Tribal Leaders and Representatives***

Lemuel Vincent, Vice Chairman, Ak-Chin Indian Community

Cathy Quintana, Special Education Specialist, Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation

Carletta Tilousi, Councilwoman, Havasupai Tribe

Sybil Hanna, Councilwoman, Havasupai Tribe

Deannah Neswood-Gishey, Executive Director, Navajo Nation Division of Social Services

Francisco Muñoz, Councilman, Pascua Yaqui Tribe

Dr. Victoria Corlett, Interim Superintendent Salt River Schools, Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community

Ned Norris Jr., Chairman, Tohono O'odham Nation

#### ***First Things First Board and Staff***

The Honorable Judge Richard Weiss, FTF Board Member

Lela Wendell, Department of Economic Security Designee to the FTF Board

Josh Allen, Interim Chief Executive Officer

Candida Hunter, Senior Director of Tribal Affairs

Dr. Roopa Iyer, Senior Director of Research & Evaluation

In addition, FTF executive leadership, regional and program staff were in attendance to observe the consultation.

## **SUMMARY**

The purpose of the consultation was to receive feedback on 1) early childhood pandemic concerns and initiatives to inform strategic planning and 2) measuring the impact of early childhood investments. The following summary reflects comments and questions raised by Arizona's tribal leaders and their authorized representatives/designees.

### ***Early Childhood Pandemic Concerns and Initiatives to Inform Strategic Planning***

Policymakers at all levels, including the FTF Board and its regional councils throughout the state, must make decisions about where to invest resources in ways that will have the most impact. It is critical that they have the best possible information with which to make those decisions on behalf of young children and families. Information such as the impact of COVID-19 pandemic is important to inform these decisions. However, complete data on the impact of COVID-19 may take many months or even years to compile. To support FTF's strategic planning, tribal leaders and representatives were asked for their insight on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in their tribal communities, specifically:

- How young children and families are accessing programs
- Changes in approaches to service delivery
- Challenges young children and families continue to face
- How COVID-19 has changed the tribe's perspectives on the health and education needs of young children

Tribal leaders and representatives shared that the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted tribal communities throughout Arizona. Negative impacts include: decreases in the rates of children accessing programs vital to their health and education; increased lack of accessibility and availability of resources; and the trauma and disruption caused by the death of community members. In response to the pandemic, tribal communities have been implementing a variety of mitigation strategies in order to provide essential services to children and their families. Tribes are implementing mask and vaccine mandates; promoting hygiene routines and physical distancing; following guidelines and recommendations established by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC); and utilizing a drive-thru to access food, supplies and learning packets. In addition, tribes are offering health care services and educational instruction virtually or through phone calls. While most tribal communities are currently in their re-opening phase, tribes are continuing to experience unique challenges. Amending policies, increasing capacity building, and expanding services and implementing new ones for students and their families are some of the innovative solutions that tribal communities are working on to combat the on-going challenges posed by the pandemic. Specific feedback from tribal consultation participants included:

### **COVID-19 Impact in Tribal Communities**

- Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community Interim Superintendent of Salt River Schools Dr. Victoria Corlett shared that the well-child visits, developmental screening referral and immunization rates have decreased due to COVID-19. The well-child visits took longer due to sanitation [protocols implemented] for staff and examination rooms. Parents were not scheduling their children's immunizations due to the clinic being busy and their concern/anxiety about going in-person to the clinic. While families with young children were negatively impacted by the pandemic, families were able to receive [tribal] COVID relief checks, federal government stimulus checks, and Pandemic-EBT (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program).
- Ak-Chin Indian Community Vice Chairman Lemuel Vincent shared that the virtual environment was new to their community and wasn't easy to navigate. Challenges were created within the

community because some people believed COVID-19 was serious and others didn't, which impacted mitigation efforts. The impact of COVID-19 also depended on the information and resources available in the community. In 2020, the impact was more severe because there was little to no information, whereas now there's less impact because there's more information and resources available to the community. Because the Ak-Chin Community is small, the tribe was able to implement and monitor [COVID-19] protocols, which was helpful. The Vice Chairman also expressed it was very difficult to lose community members because they are a small community and mostly everyone knows each other or is related.

- Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation Special Education Specialist Cathy Quintana stated programs closed from March to August 2020 and children and families didn't have access to programs on the reservation. When [programs] reopened, families were still hesitant to go out and acquire services. The only service that was offered during the closure was meal distribution for young children by the local school district.
- Navajo Nation Division of Social Services Executive Director Deannah Neswood-Gishey said that prior to the pandemic, the Nation operated 16 child care centers for over 600 children which included infants, toddlers, preschoolers and school-aged children, children with special needs and children who are in protective services. The pandemic made a huge impact on those who needed child care services. Children in child care also experienced a disruption in routine. However, the Navajo Nation still continued to work with parents who were independent child care providers at home. The Navajo Nation relied on the child care home providers to provide services to essential workers.
- Havasupai Tribe Councilwoman Carletta Tilousi stated the tribe implemented a stringent protocol of limiting access to the community and prohibiting members from leaving the canyon. This has impacted access to prenatal care and counseling support. In addition, [pregnant women] have to travel outside their community and be away to give birth, sometimes for as long as two months.
- Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community Interim Superintendent Dr. Victoria Corlett also mentioned that families struggled with having consistent housing and finding resources for housing assistance.
- Havasupai Tribe Councilwoman Sybil Hanna agreed that having reliable housing is a need.
- Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation Special Education Specialist Cathy Quintana also mentioned that reliable technology is a major challenge within their community.

#### **COVID-19 Mitigation Measures Implemented to Support Program and Service Delivery**

- Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community Interim Superintendent Dr. Victoria Corlett stated that Salt River schools changed their approach to service delivery. Dr. Corlett shared that they moved to a virtual platform, Microsoft Teams, which allowed for parent meetings. All instruction, counseling services, telehealth visits, behavioral health support and clinic visits were offered virtually. Information was sent out via packets; lunch and breakfast were available via a drive-thru. Now that students have returned to in-person instruction, when a [COVID-19] case is identified in a classroom, the whole classroom quarantines instead of the whole school, which allows instruction to continue.
- Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation Special Education Specialist Cathy Quintana mentioned that the nation's early childhood center had to close for a brief period. Virtual services were offered in the kindergarten program and home activity packets were sent out for their preschool programs. This school year, the center and schools are open and mitigation strategies include cohort classrooms, daily temperature checks, a mask mandate, availability of hand sanitizer, promoting hand washing, suspending the use of water fountains, cessation of tooth brushing activities, daily cleaning of high touch surfaces, and deep cleaning in all classrooms during the weekend. Home

visitation services are currently not being offered to families in the home; they are only offered in the center, at local parks or online, if necessary.

- Ak-Chin Indian Community Vice Chairman Lemuel Vincent stated that the tribe is utilizing all mitigation efforts shared by others, working with their emergency management and medical teams and following all recommendations from the CDC and other health agencies. While the tribe is moving forward with re-opening protocols, the community is still cautious and taking safety precautions is a priority, especially for young children.
- Navajo Nation Division of Social Services Executive Director Deannah Neswood-Gishey stated service delivery now requires all Navajo Nation employees to either be fully vaccinated or to receive a COVID test every two weeks. In addition, personal protective equipment and physical barriers are implemented within offices to promote distancing and there is an increase of hand washing stations available in child care facilities. In the child care centers, all children would normally meet and eat together. However, the children are now eating in rotations. Executive Director Neswood-Gishey also said that the Nation is closely following CDC guidelines regarding newborn care, as well as encouraging families to ensure all children receive their recommended immunizations. The Navajo Nation Women, Infant and Children program has also waived documentation requirements such as weight, height, and hemoglobin and provides appointments by phone.

#### **Challenges Posed by the Pandemic and Innovative Solutions**

- Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community Interim Superintendent Dr. Victoria Corlett shared that there has been an increase in school absences due to grieving for family members lost to the virus, as well as parents' fear of their children contracting the virus and spreading it in the home (specifically to elders). Since the opening of child care and school, the community is finding some normalcy. However, families are still concerned about the vulnerability of being exposed to COVID. Other challenges for students include transitioning to the online platform, less student teacher interaction, and not receiving comprehensive instruction which has resulted in children falling further behind. Dr. Corlett mentioned the school is partnering with behavioral health to offer services to students and their families to help with the grieving process; providing video tours to families to show that it is safe to return to school; increasing communication by providing weekly updates on YouTube; implementing a social media campaign to increase school attendance; including support services within their truancy ordinance; and creating a hotline for families to call to request help to get their child to school.
- Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation Special Education Specialist Cathy Quintana shared that the nation had to amend its truancy ordinance to address [absences] during the pandemic. Students miss school due to quarantine and families experiencing anxiety. In the truancy ordinance, the Nation has included wrap-around services, conducting more outreach to families to understand what they're experiencing, providing resources if needed, and contracting with a counselor to work with students and their families. Ms. Quintana also stated that the center expanded the outdoor learning environment to give children a safe way to learn, including adding an outdoor garden and additional shading.
- Havasupai Tribe Councilwoman Carletta Tilousi shared that the tribe provided care packages which included food and educational materials for families. Councilwoman Tilousi also stated that community members could not leave [their homes or community], which caused families to feel cooped up. Families also didn't understand the deeper issues of the pandemic, and it created mental health issues which has increased the need for counseling services. While the community experienced these challenges, there was also increased family engagement and interaction which

created positive relationships at home, as well as increased teamwork and appreciation within the community.

### ***Measuring the Impact of Early Childhood Investments***

Early childhood education and health programs funded by FTF are implemented through government-to-government agreements between FTF and a tribal or state government agency or through grant agreements with non-profit or other entities. To ensure services are delivered appropriately, data is reported to FTF. Beginning in State Fiscal Year 2019, FTF required funded program providers to submit participant-level data on children and families accessing home visitation, parenting education and oral health programs to have a better understanding of the population being served. FTF shared the insight gained from receiving two years of participant-level data for the Parents as Teachers Home Visitation program. Data shared was provided in the aggregate and included data from tribal communities that provided prior approval. Tribal representatives were asked to share information about:

- What questions or additional information is helpful to understand how the program is impacting young children and families?
- What technical support is needed to support programs?
- What capacity building needs were identified?

Tribal leaders and representatives shared that additional time is needed to process the information received at the consultation and that it would be helpful for tribes to learn how other tribal communities are implementing the home visitation program. Tribal leaders and representatives also shared how they are supporting their workforce to address capacity building needs and additional support needed to meet program standards. Additional feedback shared included:

- Navajo Nation Division of Social Services Executive Director Deannah Neswood-Gishey stated that the tribe is working on building their workforce capacity and focusing on continuous quality improvement within their department. A hundred and sixty employees in the Department of Child Care Development program are taking a series of trauma-informed care trainings to better understand child behavior, how to recognize and address certain situations, and how to appropriately make referrals. The Nation has also invested in an electronic case management database known as TAF to improve data tracking within their child care program and to understand trends.

### **Additional Insight and Perspectives shared by Tribal Leaders and Representatives**

- Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation Special Education Specialist Cathy Quintana identified that the tribe needs to revitalize and update their outdoor play area to meet the standards for infants and toddlers.