

Anishinaabek leaders facilitate virtual workshops and share care baskets with their community

Virtual workshops were held, and care baskets distributed to care for Anishinaabek community during COVID-19 crisis.

Loretta Castaneda, Linzee Ritter, and Camie Castaneda came together to facilitate important conversations in their Anishinaabek community and started the Anishinaabek Essential Care Package Taskforce to distribute care baskets to those suffering the repercussions of COVID-19.

“Originally it was going to be a whole day with classes, food, a sacred fire, etc., but then COVID happened. So, we had to cancel the event and we brainstormed and were given the option from the Neighborhood Match Fund to change the project. We knew there’s a lot of tribal households in the community deeply impacted by COVID-19,” said Castaneda.

They held a workshop for youth around self-care and recognizing and finding help for traumas, both personal and historical. And for adults in the community, they facilitated a conversation around suicide awareness and prevention. They also gathered materials for care baskets to share with vulnerable populations in their community.

Castaneda said the Zoom webinar on May 11 with the teens went even better than they hoped. “There were fifteen tribal youth and all of their feedback was positive. They enjoyed it and enjoyed interaction with friends and family they hadn’t been able to see in months. It went really well.”

The webinar was facilitated by Jonathan Rinehart LLMSW, ADS, an enrolled member of the Little Traverse Bay Band of Ottawa Indians. He is a Behavioral Health Case Manager at the Nottawaseppi Huron Band of the Potawatomi (NHBP) Health Department in Grand Rapid and has worked with Native youth for 20 years.

The webinar was called the Natural Human Response: Individual Journey to Healing & Achieving Their Full Human Potential. “The webinar discussed ACES (adverse childhood experiences), the impact of ACES into the future, intergenerational trauma, historical trauma response, and medicine wheel teachings. Jonathan also stressed the importance of self-care with the youth as well as the healing process, giving back through examples of belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity,” said Castaneda. “There was a total of 11 youth that participated in this webinar and those youth represented six of our 12 Federally Recognized Michigan Tribes.”

The task force also held a webinar on May 18, 2020, that focused on suicide awareness and prevention. It was facilitated by Madalene Bigbear, an enrolled member of the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi. Her family retained American Indian family structures, arts, and political activism. She has facilitated previous suicide awareness workshops in Grand Rapids last year, and this was a continuation of that series.

The response to the workshops, even virtually, has been very enthusiastic. Castaneda said many asked if they could do this again and the project leaders are thinking of doing so. Both because of the great response and need. "Community members would like it again, they'd like more mental health talking circles, not just suicide awareness and prevention, but to talk through other feelings and thoughts within the community; to host more community talking circles virtually."

"We have family households that have contracted the virus and were in quarantine, so we decided to fulfill that need. We focused on tribal households that often fall through the gap of tribal governments. There were tribal members who don't live in the service area or are descendants and can't be enrolled in their tribe, so they received no help at all. We really focused on households with children, elders, and income difficulties.

"In addition to our webinars we have reached out to Anishinaabek community members to make masks that will be included in our essential needs care packages that will be distributed to local Native households. By asking Anishinaabek community members to make masks is a way to support local Natives who have been economically impacted by COVID-19," said Castaneda. "We are seeking high quality face masks in exchange for zhoonya (\$) to support them financially during this pandemic. Each sewer has been assigned 45 masks and sent a pattern. We have also received support from our local non-Native allies who have donated homemade face masks. We are encouraging masks with Native designed materials but that is not required. Instructions on how to handle them to avoid cross contamination will be provided to ensure individuals know how and why to wear them, while also showing their Native pride. We plan to give four per household so they can wash and wear while the others dry."

Native households are receiving the care baskets which include nonperishable food items like rice, pinto beans, pasta, canned goods, virus supplies like disinfectant, paper towels and toilet paper. "We also personalized care packages with diapers, wipes, baby formula as needed. We also share resources for Native families on information like food distribution sites, GRPS Native American Education Program 506 Forms and return envelopes, Traditional medicines (Tobacco ties, sweet grass, and sage)." For the households with children they also added family games, art supplies, and beads for beading. There was also something fun or a little extra like candles or journals, blankets, and fresh new towels, "anything to try to lift people's spirits during this time.

"We've also been given many donations from our own community members like towels and our four medicines. All of the four medicines have been donated by community members, which are cedar, sweetgrass, sage, and tobacco," said Castaneda.

"We were prepared to purchase them because of COVID, but we didn't have to because the community came through." Thirty care baskets have been given out so far.

Lastly, they plan to provide a stipend to five volunteer delivery drivers that are willing to deliver essential care packages in their assigned Grand Rapids Neighborhoods. This is another effort to support Native households who have been impacted financially due to COVID-19.

The project has had a lot of support. “We received not only Neighborhood Match Funds, but funds from Family Outreach Center, Meijer, and Gathering Thunder Foundations, and the Nottawaseppi Huron Band of the Potawatomi Tribe. The Anishinaabe Circle was generous enough to be our fiduciary and the board was very supportive. Because our community members invested time and resources, because of all this support, we’re able to follow up with our youth.”

Castaneda says they couldn’t have organized the essential care packages without this support and they’re grateful to everyone for it.

“The great thing about the Anishinaabek community, we really support when it’s needed. It’s been great to be surrounded by so much positivity,” said Castaneda.