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DEPARTMENT OF  
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LOS ANGELES COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH  
American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) Underserved Cultural Communities (UsCC)

# Traditional Wellness Gatherings

## 2023 Project Summary

### Project Description

The American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) Traditional Wellness Gathering Project aimed to reduce mental health access barriers by engaging community members in discussions about the role of cultural traditions and language in healing and mental health. The Traditional Wellness Gatherings promoted AI/AN cultural methods of healing for the purpose of building connections, reclaiming traditions and improving overall health outcomes. The project aimed to reduce stigma, promote mental health services throughout Los Angeles (LA) County, increase capacity of the public mental health system in LA County and increase AI/AN community member engagement in the LA County Department of Mental Health (LACDMH) stakeholder process. The Traditional Wellness Gatherings were authored by the AI/AN UsCC Subcommittee and brought to community by So'oh-Shinálí Sister Project (SSSP).

The series of five gatherings were a combination of virtual and in-person workshops held once per month throughout June to October 2023. The two virtual gatherings were hosted on Zoom. The three in-person gatherings were located in different Service Planning Areas (SPA) within LA County; the second gathering was in SPA 7 - East LA, the fourth gathering was in SPA 3 - San Gabriel Valley and the fifth gathering was in SPA 2 - San Fernando Valley.

The first gathering, **Skoden: Strengths and Self-efficacy**, was hosted on Saturday, June 10, 2023 from 10:00am to 2:00pm via Zoom. The purpose of this gathering was to introduce mental health concepts by engaging community in dialogue and experiential learning of culturally adaptive grounding techniques. We worked towards bridging the gap from western mental health ideologies/concepts by presenting traditional coping strategies and grounding skills. This included the role of ancestral grounding techniques, movement and physical wellness in overall health outcomes. The intention was to establish and build a safe foundation for continued mental health discussions in subsequent gatherings. Local community advocate, Phil Hale (Diné), facilitated the opening/closing song and prayer to encourage participant engagement of

traditional cultural practices. Remarks included grounding in gratitude, mindfulness and collective healing. Phil also led the land acknowledgement to honor and uplift visibility of Tribal peoples Indigenous to LA County. Our workshop was led by Native Wellness Activists, Chelsey Luger (Anishinaabe & Lakota) and Thosh Collins (O'odham, Osage, & Seneca-Cayuga), founders of Indigenous wellness initiative, Well for Culture. Chelsey and Thosh presented on *The Seven Circles Indigenous Teachings for Living Well*. Facilitators taught community coping skills and grounding techniques through traditional wellness activities. The workshop was split into a morning and afternoon session, including a lunch break. During the morning portion of the workshop, Thosh Collins presented on the *7 Circles of Wellness*. This included mental, emotional, physical and spiritual wellness through several components: food, movement, sleep, ceremony, sacred space, land and community. In the afternoon session, Chelsey Luger led our community in a one-hour guided mindfulness meditation movement activity to teach grounding techniques. Chelsey provided inclusive movement activities via seated chair positions to increase accessibility for all participants (i.e. limited mobility levels, age ranges and disabilities). Both facilitators worked towards creating safety by sharing the option for participants to turn off cameras based upon each individual's comfortability and vulnerability levels when engaging in the inclusive movement exercise. SSSP presented a two-page Resource Guide as the Zoom screen background throughout the lunch break and also followed-up with an electronic file via email. The current AI/AN UsCC Subcommittee Co-Chair, Farrah Ferris, was present throughout the gathering and encouraged community member engagement in the LACDMH stakeholder process.

The second gathering, **Being a Good Relative: Kinship and Connection**, was hosted on Saturday, July 29, 2023 from 10:00am to 2:00pm at Huntington Park Library (6518 Miles Ave, Huntington Park, CA 90255). This venue space was identified to increase access to a local community resource, the American Indian Resource Center, which is located on the second floor. Indigenous Activist and Cultural Educator, Virginia Carmelo (Tongva/Kumeyaay), led our place-based, traditional language and relational talking circle for youth and families. Indigenous Entrepreneur and Owner/Operator of AC & Associates, Avril Cordova (Taos Pueblo & Oglala Lakota), co-facilitated the community space with Virginia. The gathering was centered around connection to culture, community and land. Eva Powless, Director of Community Relations at SSSP, worked towards creating safety within the talking circle by establishing ground rules such as mutual respect, openness and engagement. Eva discussed the purpose and intentions for this particular gathering was to increase/strengthen engagement, interconnection and belonging within the Los Angeles AI/AN community. She highlighted community resilience and strengths through emphasizing diversity within LA Indigenous community while also finding commonalities by discussing shared histories combating colonization and assimilation. The gathering was separated into a morning and afternoon session to create an interactive and engaging environment for our community members. In the morning, Avril Cordova facilitated an "NDN Bingo" icebreaker activity to prompt interactive engagement and communication within the group. After the icebreaker, the workshop transitioned into Virginia Carmelo presenting about traditional storytelling of Tongva Creation Stories, family stories and plant medicine teachings Indigenous to LA county. Avril facilitated a second icebreaker activity in the afternoon that focused on teamwork and communication. Virginia facilitated an interactive family activity, in which she led participants through developing a map of five Tongva villages in LA for purposes of cultural revitalization and increasing visibility. This activity helped combat cultural erasure through contemporary representation that defies ongoing colonization/assimilation. In teaching



community how to identify five Tongva villages, Virginia discussed how participants are connected to the land by reflecting on participants' contributions to honoring/caring for themselves, community and the environment. Virginia elaborated on how all humans are tied to the land, which in turn extends our interconnection and interdependence within community. Virginia discussed the ongoing implications of historical trauma throughout Los Angeles and tribal communities. Both Virginia and Avril utilized traditional languages when storytelling to focus on cultural revitalization and help uplift tribal diversity, traditional communications and Indigenous worldview. Our facilitators explained to community members that learning, practicing and sharing traditional languages is an action of resilience and empowerment due to historical U.S. laws prohibiting AI/AN tribes from exercising religions, ceremonies, culture and languages. SSSP provided participants with a tote bag, which included the Resource Guide and COVID-19 tests. We also provided breakfast snacks, a catered lunch and created a welcoming environment through music and active communication with community members. The current AI/AN UsCC Subcommittee Co-Chair, Farrah Ferris, was present throughout the gathering and discussed/encouraged community member engagement in the LACDMH stakeholder process.

The third gathering, **Intergen Resilience: Plant Medicines**, was hosted on Saturday, August 26, 2023 from 10:00am to 2:00pm via Zoom. This gathering focused on providing psychoeducation about trauma, intergenerational trauma and utilizing traditional forms of healing as coping strategies. Local community advocate, Phil Hale (Diné), facilitated the opening/closing song and prayer to encourage participant engagement of traditional cultural practices. Remarks included grounding in gratitude, mindfulness and collective healing. Phil also led the land acknowledgement to honor and uplift visibility of Tribal peoples Indigenous to LA County. Family Medicine/Integrative Medicine/Addiction Medicine Herbalist and Owner of Serrano Natural Health, Dr. Katya Adachi Serrano, MD (Hocak/Ojibwe), led our virtual plant medicine workshop. Licensed Clinical Social Worker and Mental Health Therapist with Indigenous Circle of Wellness, Kylee Jones, supported in co-facilitating our community mental wellness discussion. Dr. Adachi-Serrano presented on four plants Indigenous to California, including: *Artemisia vulgaris* (Mugwort), *Rhodiola rosea* (Rhodiola), *Eschscholzia californica* (California Poppy) and *Achillea Millefolium* (Yarrow). During the morning portion of the workshop, Dr. Adachi-Serrano educated participants on: harvesting medicine, preparing medicine, medicinal properties of each plant, ways of consuming medicine and herbal medicine resources. Participants were mailed plant medicine kits as a hands-on activity to engage in during the workshop. During the lunch break, participants were encouraged to review the Resource Guide and nourish their bodies with supplies gifted by our team in the form of a grocery gift card and plant medicine kit. SSSP presented the Resource Guide as the Zoom screen background throughout the break and also followed-up with electronic files via email. After the break, Dr. Adachi-Serrano opened with discussion and worked towards creating a safe space for community members to share about their experiences with plant medicines. Dr. Adachi-Serrano transitioned into presenting on historical trauma, intergenerational trauma and epigenetics. Dr. Adachi-Serrano then discussed intergenerational healing through several real world examples such as diagrams of expecting mothers and discussion on the neural pathways developed during pregnancy and throughout life. This helped empower participants to consider ways that we have the ability to create new neural pathways that contribute to our own resiliency. Dr. Adachi-Serrano provided participants with a copy of the powerpoint presentation for future reference and as a resource. The current AI/AN UsCC Subcommittee Co-Chair,

Farrah Ferris, was present throughout the gathering and discussed/encouraged community member engagement in the LACDMH stakeholder process.

The fourth gathering, **Modern NDN: Beading and Belonging**, was hosted on Saturday, September 23, 2023 from 10:00am to 2:00pm at South El Monte Community Center (1530 Central Ave, South El Monte, CA 91733). Indigenous Artist and the Creator of June Beach Designs, Brigid “Birdie” Pulskamp (Diné), led our beading circle and was supported by Nora Pulskamp (Diné). Licensed Clinical Social Worker, Stephanie Mushrush (Washoe Tribe of NV & CA and Filipina), supported community in mental wellness discussion centered around intergenerational trauma, healing and traditional coping strategies. Local community advocate, Phil Hale (Diné), facilitated the opening/closing song and prayer to encourage participant engagement of traditional cultural practices. Remarks included grounding in gratitude, mindfulness and collective healing. Phil also led the land acknowledgement to honor and uplift visibility of Tribal peoples Indigenous to LA County. The AI/AN & LGBTQIA2-S UsCC Liaison, Kelly Wilkerson, briefly presented to promote community member engagement in the LACDMH stakeholder process. Stephanie Mushrush, LCSW, led community in a culturally guided mindfulness and grounding exercise at the beginning of the gathering. Stephanie also supported community in discussion about the mental health impacts of trauma, intergenerational trauma and symptoms of post traumatic stress, anxiety and depression. Stephanie identified the benefits of practicing traditional wellness activities as coping strategies (i.e. beading) to manage mental health symptoms. Birdie and Nora Pulskamp then engaged community in a hands-on session grounded in understanding of how beading sustains traditional teachings and supports belonging within community. They described how beading supports reflective practices and slowing pace, which each contribute to positive mental health outcomes. During the afternoon session, Stephanie worked towards creating a safe space for community members to share individual testimonials regarding experiences with mental health services. SSSP provided participants with a printed Resource Guide in a tote bag with COVID-19 tests. We also provided breakfast snacks, a catered lunch and created a welcoming environment through music and active communication with community members.

The final gathering, **Now What: Release for Healing**, was hosted on Saturday, October 14, 2023 from 10:00am to 2:00pm at Tía Chucha’s Centro Cultural and Bookstore (12677 Glenoaks Blvd, Sylmar, CA 91342). The final gathering focused on teaching community about the mental health benefits of utilizing mindfulness as a traditional mental wellness practice. The workshop presented different forms of practicing mindfulness and meditation techniques such as reflection, visualization, prayer and artwork. Singer, Song Writer, Poet, Published Author, and Climate Justice Director at Sacred Places Institute for Indigenous Peoples, Jessa Calderon (Tongva/Chumash), opened our session with land acknowledgement, prayer and song. Licensed Psychologist and Veteran of the United States (U.S.) Air Force, Dr. Melanie Cain (Santa Clara Pueblo & Jicarilla Apache), facilitated our mental wellness discussion throughout the workshop. Dr. Cain provided psychoeducation, worked towards destigmatizing mental health concepts and identified local supportive services. Dr. Cain also provided participants with printed cultural activity handouts for future reference as a self-reflective wellness tool. Jessa Calderon then guided participants in a seated one-hour mindfulness and meditation session, centered in exploring how our mind, body and spirit are interconnected. Jessa worked towards creating safety and taught tangible mindfulness tools that were accessible for all participants (i.e. limited mobility levels, age ranges and disabilities). During the afternoon session, Dr. Cain

co-facilitated a cultural mindfulness art activity with local Chicana Artist, Cherine Mendoza. This art activity allowed participants to creatively engage in self-expression through canvas painting focused on loved ones and strengthening intergenerational relations. SSSP provided participants with a printed Resource Guide in a tote bag with COVID-19 tests. We also provided breakfast snacks, a catered lunch and created a welcoming environment through music and active communication with community members.

### **Outreach and Engagement**

To support our outreach and engagement for the gatherings, we contracted local Indigenous artists that specialize in videography, photography and graphic design. Our videographer, Dria Yellowhair (Diné) created our highlight reels for all three in-person gatherings. Dria researched social media algorithms and trends when developing the videos for purposes of expanding our reach and recruiting attendees. Photographer, Anderson Gould Jr. (Navajo), is a Veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps and a visual media creator. Anderson captured community members at our three in-person gatherings for the purpose of promoting the gatherings by showcasing Indigenous belonging, connection, community and joy. Graphic Designer, Raymond (Ray) Rivera (Yaqui, Pima, Ventureño Chumash), worked with us in developing flyers and promotional materials to recruit attendees.

We promoted each gathering on our social media accounts for a duration of 5-6 weeks prior to the event dates. We utilized Google Forms in tracking participant registration for each gathering. Eva actively outreached participants via emails and phone calls. Eva emailed weekly and bi-weekly registration confirmation emails, notifying and reminding folks when registration opened for each gathering. We outreached AI/AN organizations throughout LA county, mailed promotional flyers to various offices and tabled at AI/AN community events to engage and recruit attendees for our gatherings; the events we tabled at were: San Manuel's Annual MMIP 5k Run/Walk, American Indian Counseling Center's Renewal and Wellness Mental Health Fair and United American Indian Involvement's 22nd Annual American Indian Day.

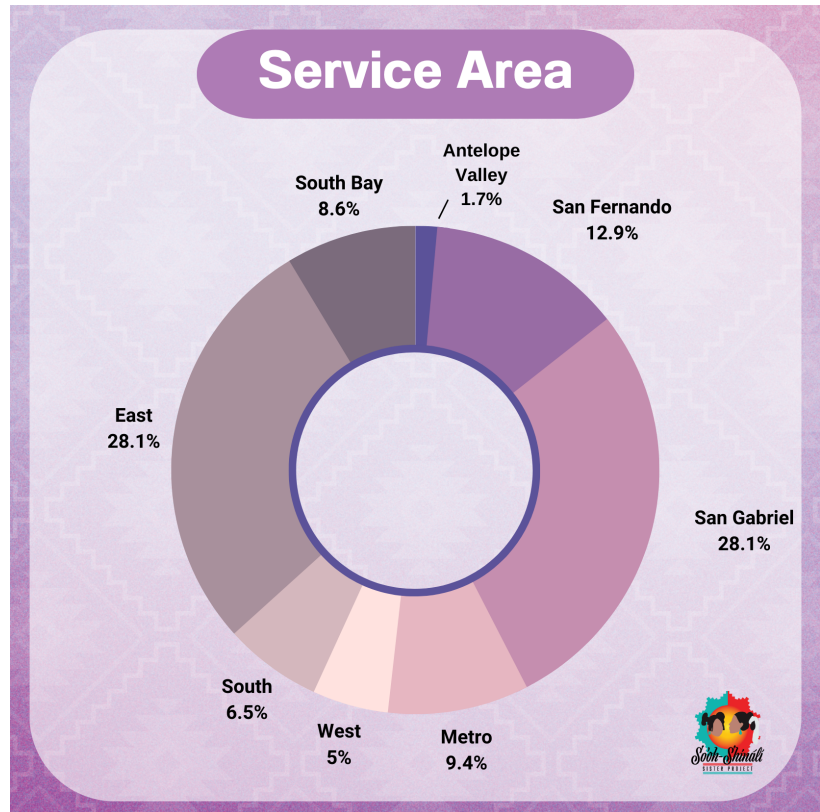
### **Project Results/Outcomes**

There were a total of 284 participants that registered to the Traditional Wellness Gatherings over the span of 5 workshops. We had a total of 187 attendees at our events. The participant breakdown per event is as follows: 37 attended June's "Skoden: Strengths and Self-efficacy", 33 attended July's "Being a Good Relative: Kinship and Connection", 38 attended "Intergen Resilience: Plant Medicines", 47 attended "Modern NDN: Beading and Belonging" and 32 attended "Now What: Release for Healing".

A total of 235 surveys were collected with a total of 143 pre-surveys and 92 post surveys. With guidance of UsCC Co-Chairs, we updated the surveys in the middle of August's open registration. We also noted that including pre-survey questions at time of registration, for gathering 3-5, increased participant likelihood of completing pre-surveys and improved time management during our events. Further, we note that not all of the participants that completed the pre-surveys followed-through with completing the post-surveys, which skewed the final data analysis. Surveys included an assortment of questionnaire formatting, such as: likert scales, multiple choice and short answer questions. The following results were calculated by taking the overall average score of each gathering.

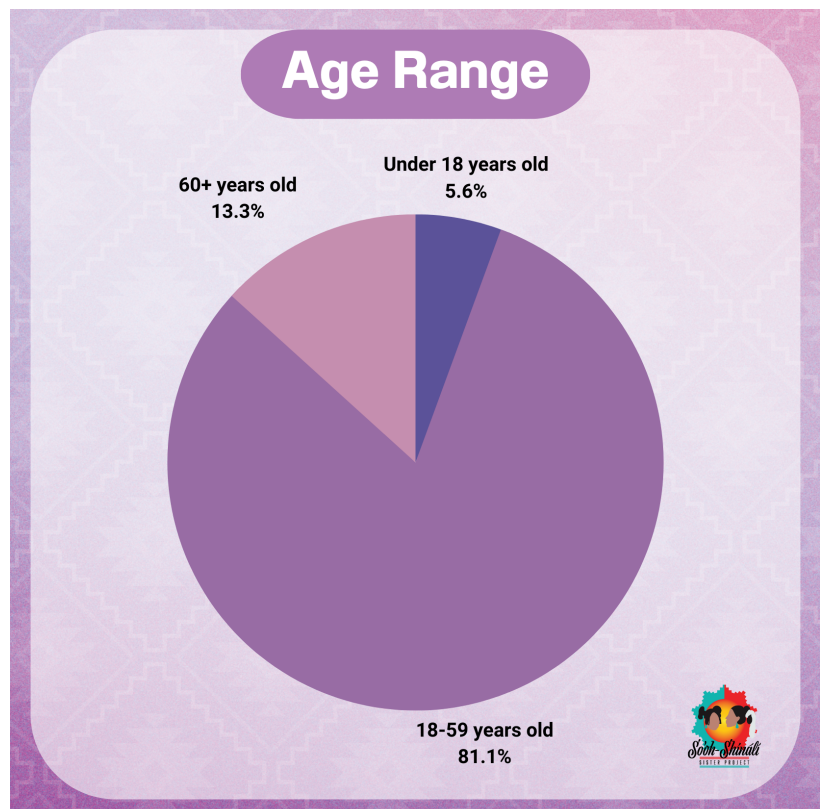
### Service Areas

This graph shows that majority of our attendees reside in SPA 3 (San Gabriel) and SPA 7 (East) within LA county. This graph indicates we engaged less attendees from SPA 1 (Antelope Valley), SPA 5 (West) and SPA 6 (South).



### Age Ranges

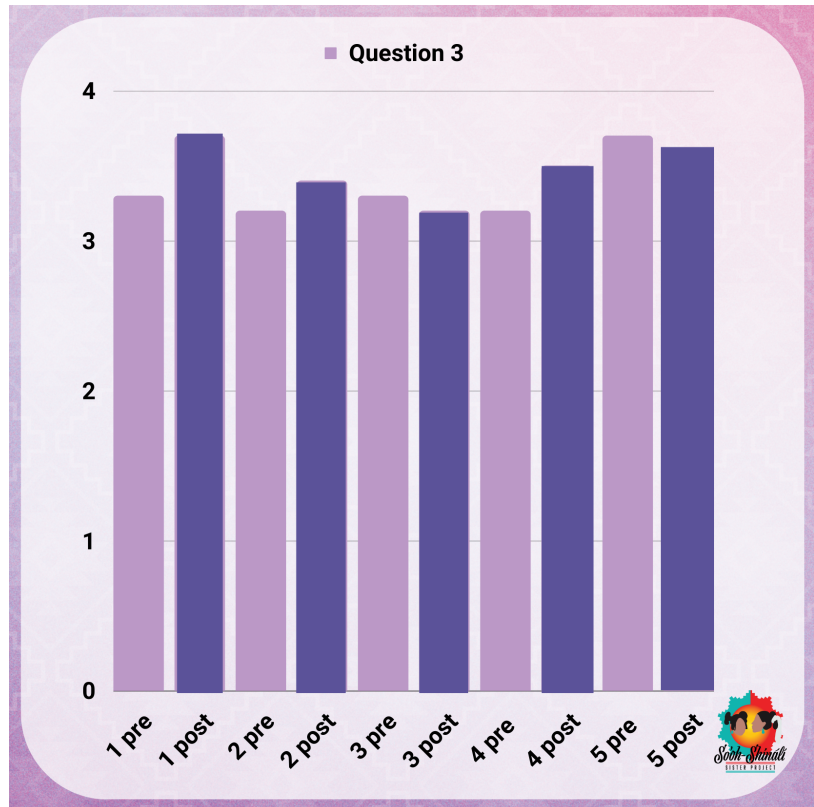
This graph shows majority of attendees were between the ages of 18-59 years old. The graph indicates we engaged less youth and elders in comparison to adults 18-59 years old.



### Question 3

How much knowledge do you have of the AI/AN and/or Indigenous community in Los Angeles? *(circle one on a scale of 1-5, 1 being none at all and 5 being a great deal of knowledge)*

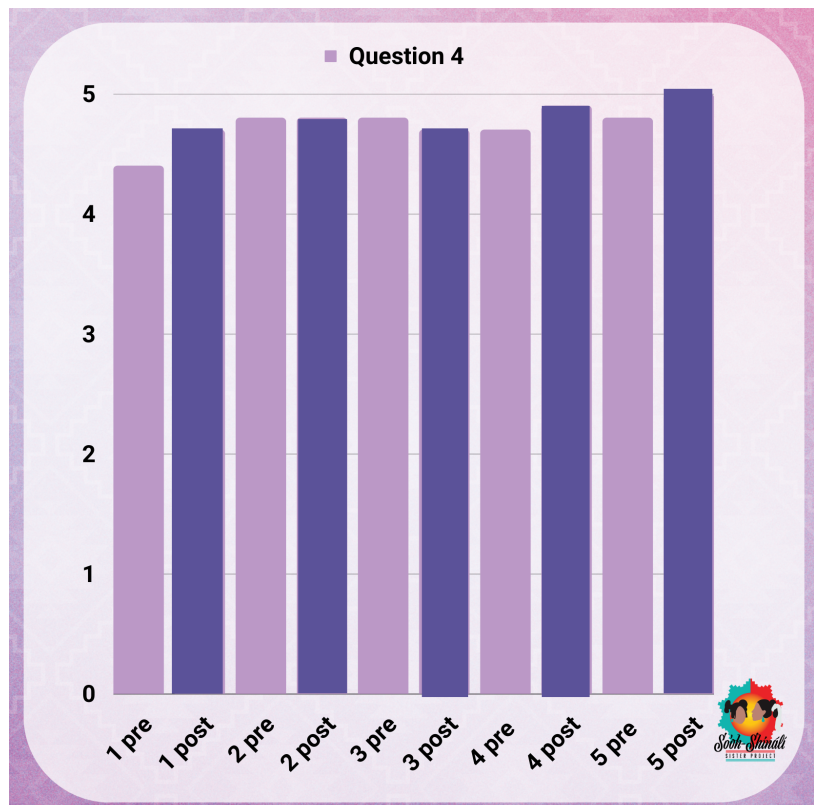
This graph shows that on average, attendees rated their knowledge of the AI/AN and/or Indigenous community in LA between 3-4.



### Question 4

To what extent do you think it is helpful for AI/ANs and/or Indigenous people to engage in cultural practices when experiencing mental health challenges (i.e. traditional medicines, traditional ceremony, drumming, etc.)? *(circle one on a scale of 1-5, 1 being not at all helpful and 5 being very helpful)*

This graph shows that community members think engaging in cultural practices when experiencing mental health challenges is helpful to very helpful. This graph also shows an increase in participants agreeing with the statement after attending the gatherings, as evidenced by the post-survey data.

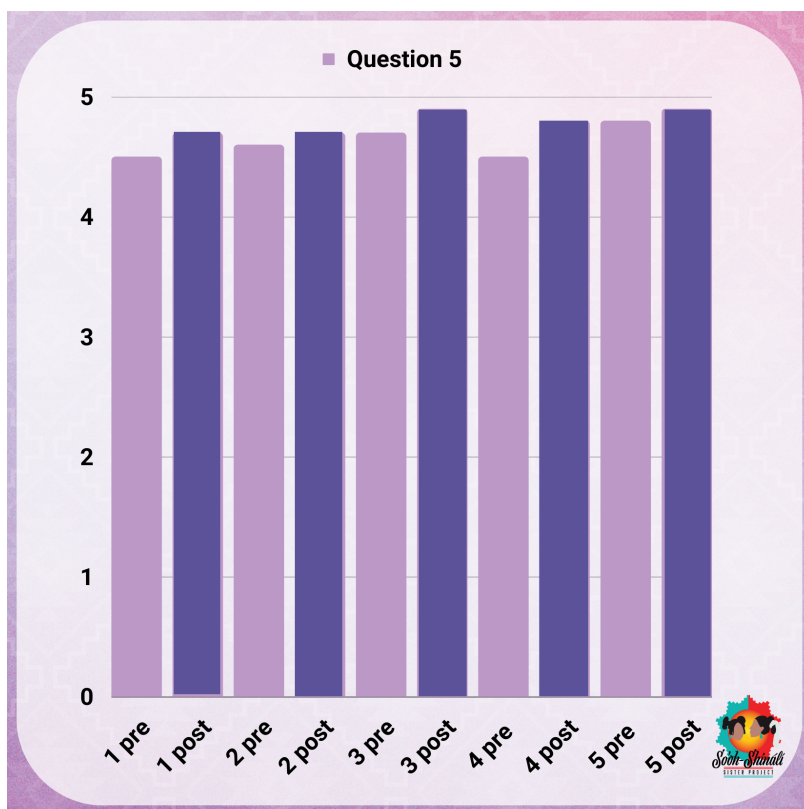




### Question 5

How helpful do you think talking circles are for AI/AN and/or Indigenous peoples' mental health? (circle one on a scale of 1-5, 1 being not at all helpful and 5 being very helpful)

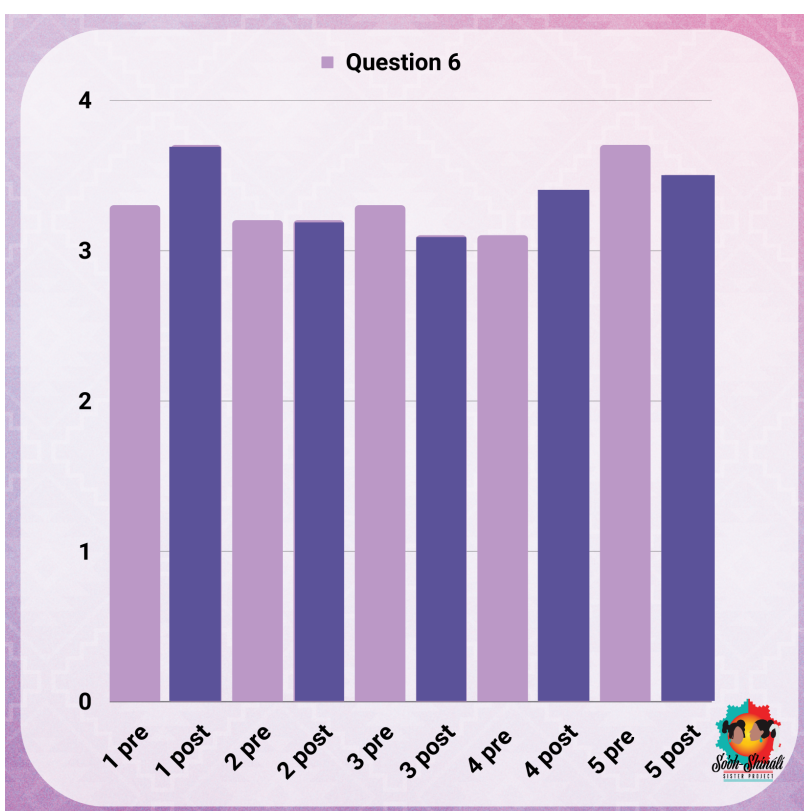
This graph shows community members think talking circles are helpful to very helpful for AI/AN and/or Indigenous peoples' mental health. This graph also shows an increase in participants agreeing with the statement after attending the gatherings, as evidenced by the post-survey data.



### Question 6

How much knowledge do you have of traditional forms of healing? (circle one below) (circle one on a scale of 1-5, 1 being none at all and 5 being a great deal of knowledge)

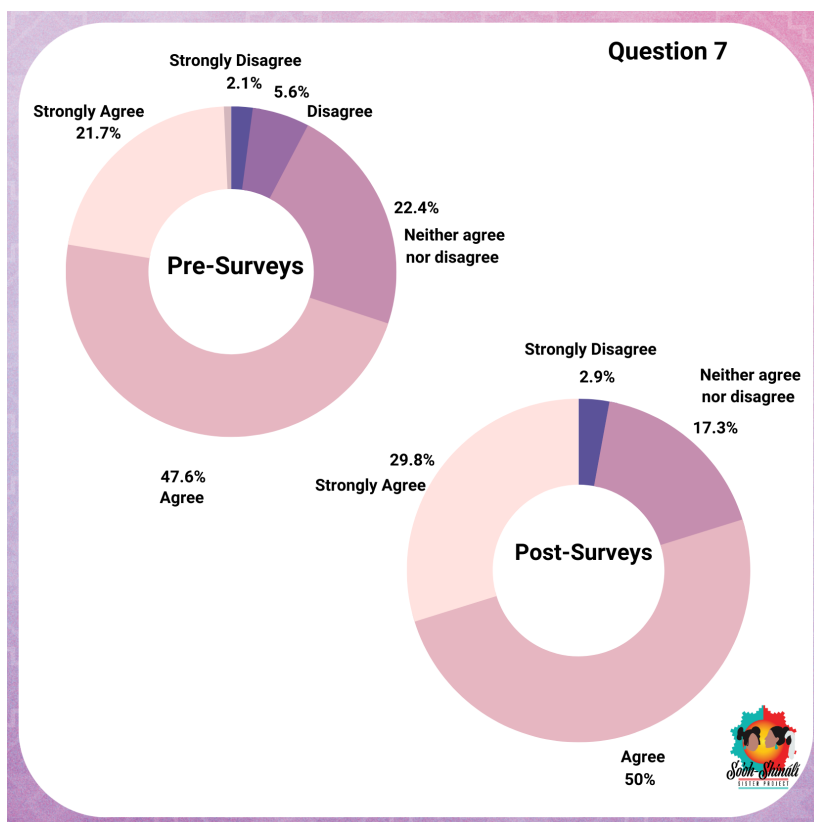
This graph shows that on average, attendees rated their knowledge of traditional forms of healing between 3-4. This graph also shows an overall increase in knowledge after attending the gatherings, as evidenced by the post-survey data.



### Question 7

To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I am confident I have access to mental health resources in Los Angeles County.

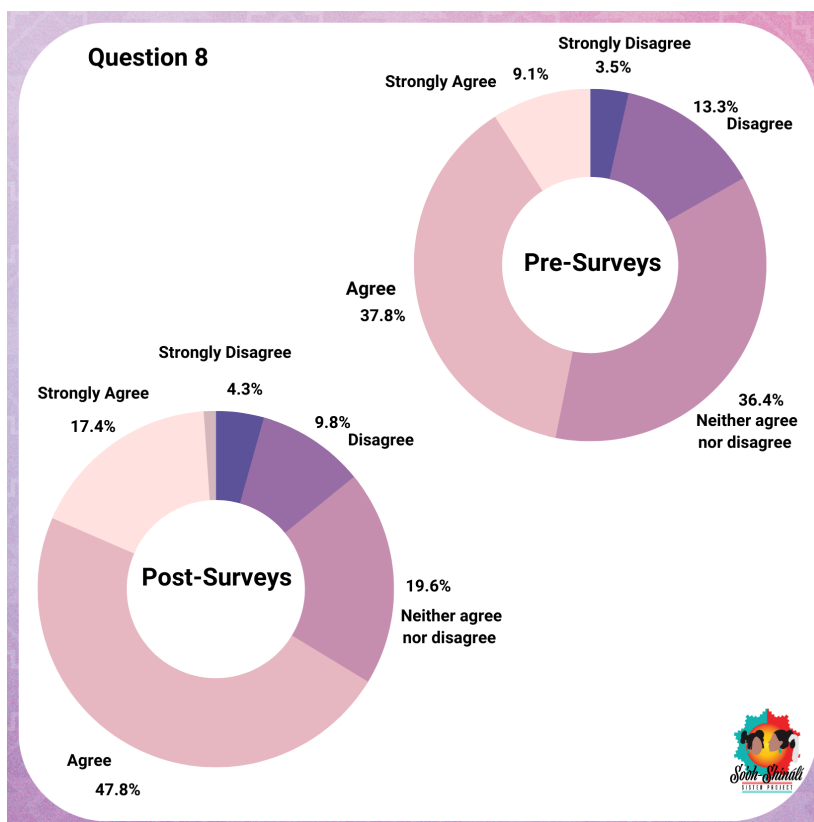
This graph shows an increase in participants feeling confident accessing mental health resources in LA county after attending the gatherings, as evidenced by the post-survey data.



### Question 8

To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I am confident I have access to mental health services that are culturally sensitive to AI/AN and Indigenous peoples.

This graph shows an increase in participants feeling confident they have access to culturally sensitive mental health resources in LA county after attending the gatherings, as evidenced by the post-survey data.

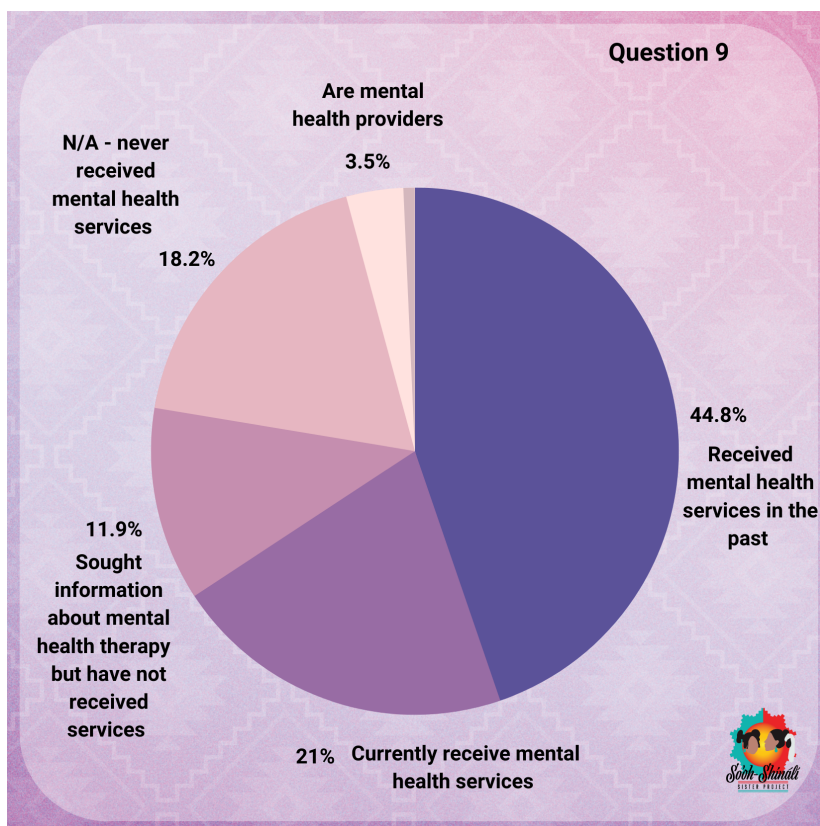




**Question 9**

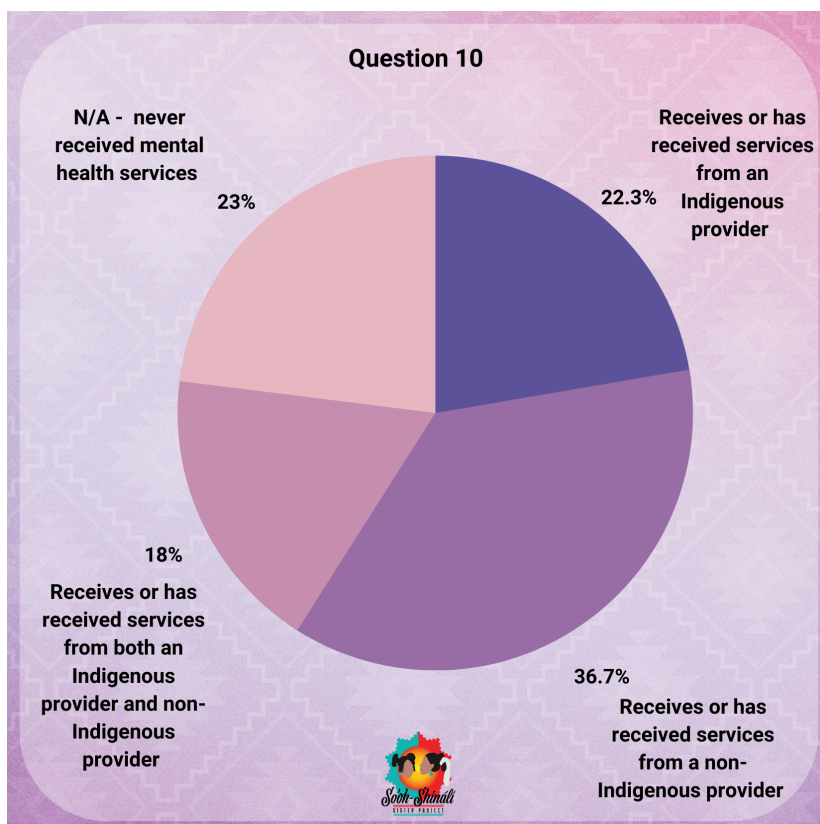
Which describes your experience receiving mental health service?

This graph shows majority of attendees currently receive or have received mental health therapy services in the past.

**Question 10**

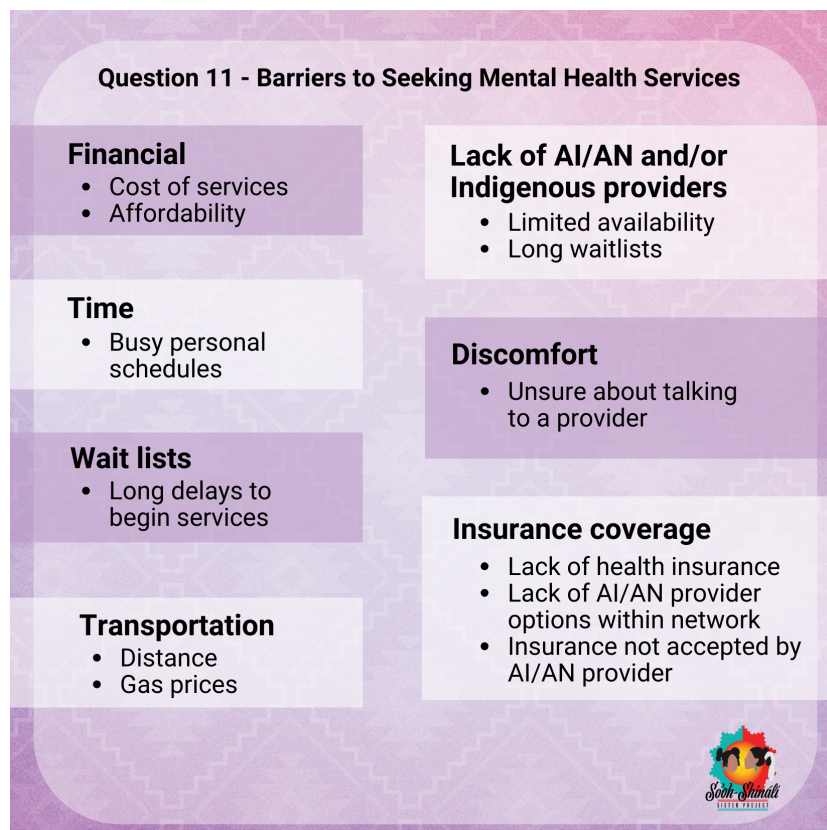
If you have received mental health services in the past, please select the option that best describes your experience:

This graph shows that majority of attendees receive or have received services from a non-Indigenous mental health provider. This graph demonstrates a need to increase access to AI/AN and/or Indigenous providers.



### Question 11

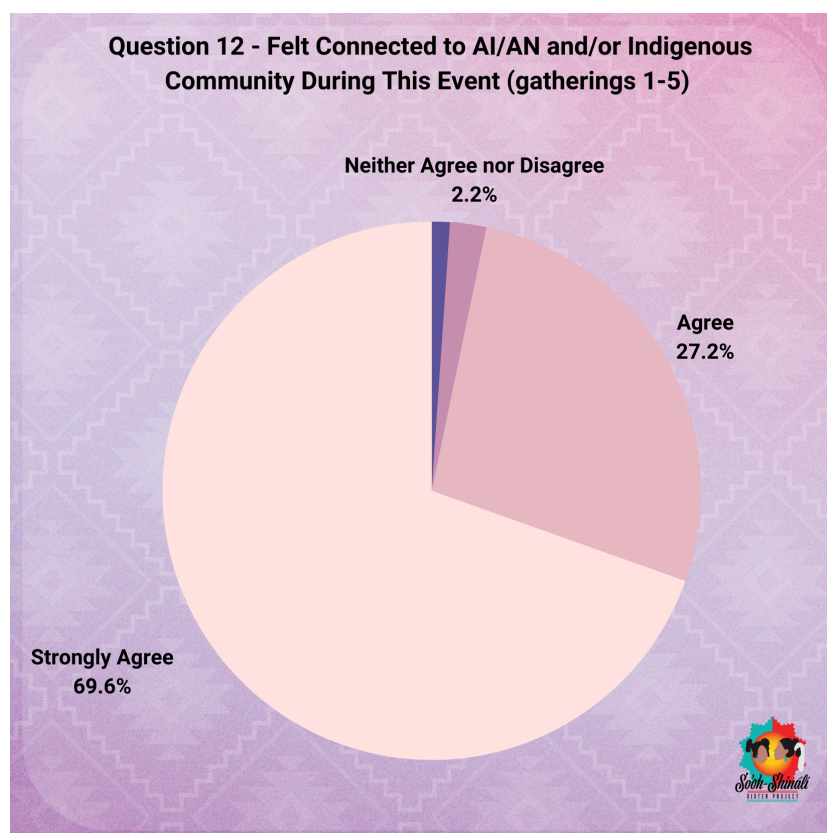
Please share any barriers to seeking mental health support:



### Question 12

To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I felt connected to the AI/AN and/or Indigenous community during this event.

This graph shows most attendees felt connected to AI/AN and/or Indigenous community during the series of gatherings.

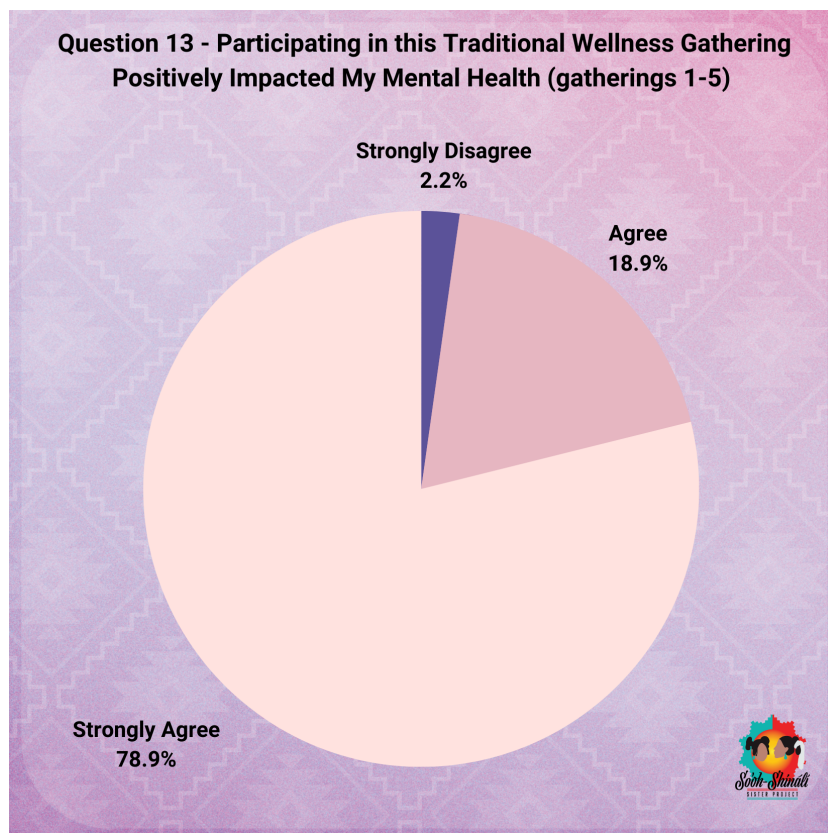




### Question 13

To what extent do you agree with the following statement:  
Participating in this Traditional Wellness Gathering positively impacted my mental health.

This graph shows most attendees felt that participating in the series of gatherings positively impacted their mental health.



### Lessons Learned

We are honored to share our valuable lessons learned throughout this project. First, the process of collecting data via surveys can be improved in future projects. When there is an expectation for all participants to complete the pre- and post-surveys, this approach may not be suitable for children/youth under the age of 12 as there were attendees younger than those at a sixth grade comprehension level. Further, the amount of survey questions can deter attendees from following-through and completing the post-surveys. As we can see from the 143 pre-surveys and 92 post-surveys collected, the 51 survey difference shows us that many participants did not follow-through with completing post-surveys. Participants may also experience discomfort with sharing information on paper for record-keeping. We prompted participants to fill out the surveys by making multiple announcements and setting time aside throughout each event, yet many participants did not engage in the process. We also noticed that some participants did not follow the written instructions in answering identifiers or age-related questions. When distributing surveys, we must consider historical trauma and distrust with U.S. national, state and county systems. Paper surveys can be viewed as western record-keeping and the opposite of oral traditions. Collecting data via paper surveys can create unnecessary challenges. At times, penmanship was illegible and difficult to read when analyzing the survey results. The process of translating paper surveys to technology platforms is time consuming; whereas, there are more modern ways to gather information from participants. The timeframe for the Final Summary Report may need to be extended to account for extensive data analysis. Further, changing pre-survey questions after the series began skewed data collection and created additional challenges when evaluating which surveys to include/exclude from our final data analysis. With guidance of UsCC Co-Chairs, we added four additional questions specific to participant identity:

do you identify as AI/AN, if so, which nation; and do you identify as Indigenous, which community and/or which country of origin? Asking community members specific questions related to tribal identity and affiliation is a sensitive topic due to the history of colonization and assimilation – which resulted in the loss of cultural identities and knowledge of tribal lineage within many AI/AN families, an example being the relocation of AI/AN families to urban communities. This practice may also deter participation in survey submission and programmatic engagement as this may be viewed as an extension of divisive colonial practices related to tribal enrollment and blood quantum.

Hosting virtual events created more accessibility and extended our reach. Virtual gatherings can increase accessibility by removing the requirement to have a means of transportation. Zoom allows for attendees to turn on closed captioning, adjust the volume depending on need and participate based on individual comfort levels. Participants are able to engage with the ability to keep their camera off. Several participants expressed feeling empowered due to anonymity. Virtual events can support individuals that struggle with being in crowds or in-person gatherings, for reasons ranging from mental health symptoms, to disabilities impacting physical functioning or immunocompromisation. Virtual events decrease the transmission of COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted our attendance for Modern NDN: Beading and Belonging gathering on September 23rd. Multiple community members reported testing positive, needing to quarantine and cancel their registration the week of our event. Although several community members could not attend due to unforeseen circumstances, our beading circle had the highest attendance of all five gatherings – which demonstrates how much our community loves beading! Additionally, community members love connecting and learning with local Gabrieleno/Tongva as well as persons from other diverse tribal nations.

Adding pre-surveys to the online event registration form after the series started was a helpful strategy for increasing survey completion and creating more space for programming during the events. However, online event registration can limit access/outreach to adults with limited technology use, persons with disabilities, or Elders that experience difficulty navigating technology/internet. An example: Eva assisted an elder community member with registering for an event over the phone as the elder reported difficulty navigating the Google registration form. However, collecting accurate information via phone call was challenging due to communication barriers, as the participant presented with slurred speech as result of a health condition. This scenario is an example of a barrier to Elders accessing services. This further impacts outreach to effectively engage and register their participation, which affects service delivery and accurate data collection.

Throughout this project, we received powerful feedback and data from our community. The graph for Question 5 showed that community members feel talking circles benefit their mental health. The graph for Question 12 showed that most attendees felt connected to AI/AN and/or Indigenous community during the series of gatherings. The graph for Question 13 showed most attendees felt that participating in the series of gatherings positively impacted their mental health. Please see community testimonials below:

### Positive Comments/Community Feedback

"Thank you for providing this space for healing and practice. I feel like my day has started in a healthy way (Mental, Physical, and Social). I will put into my daily practice what I have learned today."

"I genuinely see this as access to culturally relevant mental health services. Thank you so much for hosting this and I look forward to future gatherings."

"Thank you, the gathering was mind/heart opening. Absolutely enjoy the energy and vulnerability."

"These are very impactful events. Thank you for the care and opportunity for us to gather."

"This wellness gave so many ways to heal. Thank You so much"



### Recommendations

1. Increase and improve access to AI/AN and Indigenous mental health providers and talking circles/support groups. As evidenced by our data collected, we note the disproportionate rate of non-Indigenous mental health providers in comparison to Indigenous providers. Cultural differences can impact service delivery, rapport building and relationality within therapeutic relationships.
2. Transportation assistance for attendees for the purpose of decreasing barriers to accessing events.
3. More programming specific to AI/AN youth as evidenced by the low number of attendees under the age of 18.
4. More programming specific to Elders as evidenced by the low number of attendees over the age of 60.
5. We should be more inclusive of gathering Indigenous LGBTQIA2S+ data on pre- and post-surveys due to lack of access, support and services geared towards the diverse complexities of experiences within our Indigenous LGBTQIA2S+ community. Including questions about unmet needs and service gaps specific to our LGBTQIA2S+ community is helpful for designing future programming.
6. More support for full families by adding a licensed childcare provider at each in-person event. Child care assistance for caregivers during events can increase attendance and decrease barriers to accessing services.

7. More collaboration, promotion and networking of AI/AN events within AI/AN organizations throughout LA County.
8. More time to secure venue spaces for in-person events. Securing venue spaces was challenging due to time frame constraints and deliverable timeframes. Venue spaces often book a year in advance. Additionally, there is a lack of and/or very limited AI/AN venue spaces throughout LA County.
9. Transition to electronic pre- and post- surveys. An alternative to paper surveys could be to facilitate polls at each event, by incorporating a poll in the beginning/end of each event for immediate feedback and to present results to community.
10. Continue to include pre-survey questions in participant registration as this creates space for additional programming/more time during the event and improves the overall flow of the gathering.
11. Gatherings could have better incentives for survey completion. An incentive idea is to provide participants with food cards if they complete both the pre- and post- surveys.