

**LOS ANGELES COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH**

**ARDI DIVISION**

**UNDERSERVED CULTURAL COMMUNITIES (UsCC) UNIT**

**AI/AN UsCC Subcommittee**

# **The 2024 American Indian/Alaska Native Community Garden Project**



LOS ANGELES COUNTY  
**DEPARTMENT OF  
MENTAL HEALTH**  
hope. recovery. wellbeing.




**WOMBAT**  
**MENTAL HEALTH**  
**SERVICES** LCSW, P.C.

LINK  
- IN -  
BIO

*PRESENTS*

# THE GATHERING

- FOOD AND MUSIC - STORYTELLING - GRAPHIC NOVEL EXHIBIT - PLANT BUNDLE MAKING - COMMUNITY RESOURCES - CULTIVATING CONNECTIONS -






**SAVE THE DATE**

**TIME: 5:00 PM - 10:00 PM**  
**MI CENTRO CULTURAL CENTER, LOS ANGELES, CA**

May 25, 2024

A Product of the LACDMH AI/AN UsCC Subcommittee







Figure 1: Participants

**1. PROJECT DESCRIPTION:**

The AI/AN Community Garden Project was developed to address mental health disparities and access barriers within the American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities in Los Angeles County. The project was initiated under the leadership of the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health (LACDMH), in collaboration with its Underserved Cultural Communities (UsCC)

unit. Supported by the Mental Health Services Act (MHSA), this groundbreaking initiative was designed to integrate gardening and traditional foods as a holistic approach to mental wellbeing.

For this project, our outcomes were to ***reduce mental health issues and access barriers for AI/AN community members***. Wombat MHS ***developed culturally sensitive practices and resources to promote mental health and wellness for AI/AN community populations in Los Angeles County***, including increased awareness, understanding of, and empathy for AI/AN individuals, including how one can counter health barriers and improve health impacts.

The project's impact extended beyond its immediate participants. By amplifying AI/AN members' voices and experiences through integrating gardening and traditional foods as a holistic approach to wellbeing, the initiative contributed to broader efforts in mental health advocacy and cultural preservation. It also laid the foundation for future collaborations and initiatives aimed at enhancing mental health services and support for AI/AN communities in Los Angeles County.

The AI/AN Community Garden Project exemplified the transformative potential of gardening and traditional foods as a holistic approach to wellbeing, thereby addressing mental health challenges and promoting community well-being. By empowering AI/AN community members, the project not only fostered personal growth and resilience but also contributed to cultural revitalization and mental health advocacy within the AI/AN community.

This initiative stands as a testament to the power of creativity and community collaboration in advancing mental health equity and support for underserved cultural communities in Los Angeles County and beyond.

## **2. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT**

The project unfolded over multiple phases, incorporating Native American teachings and cultural practices. The facilitator worked with our community engagement team to recruit participants for the cohort. The UsCC subcommittee was engaged in this project and provided feedback in the early stages of the project itself.

Through this project, WombatMHS (a) ***reduced disparity and stigma, and increased and promoted mental health access/services for the AI/AN community***, and (b) ***developed culturally sensitive practices and resources to promote mental health and wellness for AI/AN community populations in Los Angeles County***, including increased awareness, understanding

of, and empathy for AI/AN individuals, including how one can counter health barriers and improve health impacts.

Co-facilitators played an essential role throughout the project's duration, providing vital support and specific recommendations based on their AI/AN identity and lived experiences. Their involvement ensured that the activities and objectives outlined in the grant were culturally sensitive and met the specific needs of the AI/AN community.

Each phase was designed to focus on various aspects of AI/AN indigenous wellness, and culminated on May 25, 2024 at The Gathering.

Development of the Project:

- **Phase 1 (Planning and Conceptualization):** This phase involved researching the diversity of native foods and medicines significant to AI/AN culture, identifying community needs, and developing a framework for the project aligned with ceremonial and lunar calendars.
  - Recruitment for 60 American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) participants took place throughout LA County and aimed for diversity in lived experience regarding tribal affiliation, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, and ability, with particular attention paid to **Service Areas 1 and 4.**
  - Priority registration was given to members of the AI/AN community with at least 75% of the participants identifying as members of the AI/AN community within the colonized border of the U.S.
  - **Planning:** Detailed planning ensured that project activities aligned with the diverse cultural and mental health needs of AI/AN populations. This phase laid the groundwork for a structured and supportive environment.
  
- **Phase 2 (Implementation):** Activities included establishing the community garden, conducting seasonal planting and harvesting ceremonies, and integrating storytelling and oral traditions to educate participants about cultural significance and seasonal practices.
  - **Organization and Application:** Agendas were developed by our facilitators and participants met 6 times and for 2 hours each project meeting. Food, travel, and accommodation for the event were pre-organized and provided.
  - **Workshops:** Information was provided during project events that included specifics related to the utilization of traditional foods and medicines (i.e. sage, herbs, sweetgrass, cedar, etc.) and their potential benefits on mental health and traditional forms of healing for the AI/AN community.

- **Phase 3 (Evaluation and Refinement):** Feedback from community members, stakeholders, and the subcommittee was crucial during this phase. Their input helped refine activities, ensure cultural appropriateness, and enhance engagement.
  - In addition to the project events, final summary reports were provided to the UsCC subcommittee which included strengths and barriers of all elements of the American Indian/Alaska Native Community Garden Party, and a summary of the pre and post-tests.

Subcommittee Involvement:

The subcommittee played a vital role throughout the project:

- **Feedback and Recommendations:** Subcommittee members provided feedback on project plans, cultural appropriateness of activities, and engagement strategies. They offered recommendations based on their expertise and community insights.
- **Timeframe:** The project was developed over 4 months, with each phase structured to allow for iterative feedback and adjustments based on community needs and cultural considerations.





Figure 2: Events and Participants



Figure 3: Events and Participants

### 3. PROJECT RESULTS:

The AI/AN Community Garden Project achieved several key outcomes:

- **Increased Community Engagement:** Participants actively engaged in seasonal activities, ceremonies, and educational sessions, fostering a sense of cultural pride and community identity.
- **Enhanced Mental Health Awareness:** Participants reported improved mental wellbeing through hands-on involvement with traditional foods and medicines, supported by culturally relevant practices.
- **Sustainability Practices:** The project promoted sustainable harvesting and gardening practices, aligning with Native American philosophies of environmental stewardship.



#### 4. OUTCOMES:

- **Community Capacity Building:** The project strengthened community resilience by empowering participants with knowledge of traditional practices and promoting self-sufficiency in mental health management.
- **Peer Support and Community Building:** The project facilitated peer-to-peer support networks, promoting a sense of belonging and community resilience.
- **Cultural Preservation:** The workshops associated with this project contributed to preserving AI/AN cultural heritage through storytelling, ceremonies, and the cultivation of traditional plants.





Figure 4: Events and Participants

## 5. LESSONS LEARNED:

Key lessons from the project include:

- **Importance of Cultural Sensitivity:** Cultural authenticity and respect were crucial to engagement and acceptance within the AI/AN community.
- **Challenges:** Initial challenges included logistical coordination of seasonal activities and ensuring accessibility for diverse community members.
- **Problem Resolution:** Regular feedback loops and adaptability helped address challenges, ensuring continuous improvement and community satisfaction.
- **Adapting to Challenges:** Flexibility in workshop design and delivery was critical to accommodating diverse participant needs and interests.
- **Better Communication Skills and Project Organization:** Practiced communication skills and improved our joint organization skills overall for community outreach.



Figure 5: Events and Participants

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS:

For future projects targeting AI/AN communities, we recommend the following:

- **Enhanced Outreach Strategies:** Utilize community networks and trusted leaders for outreach and engagement.
- **Strengthen Partnerships:** Collaborate closely with community organizations to enhance participant recruitment and project sustainability.

- **Long-Term Sustainability:** Implement measures for ongoing community involvement and project sustainability beyond initial phases.
- **Evaluation and Adaptation:** Continuously assess project impact and adapt activities based on participant feedback and evolving community needs.
- **Event Organizer:** Utilizing a specific person as the event coordinator and organizer is helpful in maintaining workflow and point person understandings.

By incorporating these recommendations, future projects can effectively promote mental health and wellness within AI/AN communities while respecting and celebrating cultural traditions.