

LOS ANGELES COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH

ARDI DIVISION

UNDERSERVED CULTURAL COMMUNITIES (UsCC) UNIT

AI/AN UsCC Subcommittee

# 2024 The Modern Medicine Wheel: American Indian/Alaska Native Youth Graphic Novel Project



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





Figure 1: Participants

## 1. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) Youth Graphic Novel 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 with a dual purpose: to empower AI/AN Transition Age Youth (TAY) aged 16-24 and to address prevalent mental health challenges within this demographic.

The project was launched in response to identified disparities in mental health access and outcomes among AI/AN youth in Los Angeles County. Recognizing the power of artistic expression as a therapeutic and empowering tool, the initiative specifically focused on leveraging graphic novels. This medium was chosen for its ability to combine visual storytelling with narrative depth, offering participants a unique platform to explore and communicate their mental health experiences.

Central to the project's objectives was the empowerment of AI/AN TAY through artistic expression. By engaging in the creation of graphic novels, participants were encouraged to articulate their personal journeys with mental health, challenges they faced, and strategies for

resilience. This process not only provided a creative outlet but also fostered self-expression and self-awareness among the youth involved.

The project aimed to destigmatize mental health issues within the AI/AN community by encouraging open dialogue and artistic representation. Through workshops and mentorship, participants received guidance in storytelling techniques and graphic novel creation, enabling them to depict their experiences authentically and sensitively. This approach not only facilitated healing but also promoted a deeper understanding of mental health issues among participants and within their broader communities.

Beyond individual empowerment, the AI/AN Youth Graphic Novel Project sought to promote community engagement. The creation of graphic novels culminated in a public exhibit that showcased participants' artworks and narratives. This exhibition served as a catalyst for community dialogue, raising awareness about AI/AN youth mental health issues and fostering empathy and support within the community.

The project's impact extended beyond its immediate participants. By amplifying AI/AN youth voices and experiences through graphic novels, 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 Youth Graphic Novel Project exemplified the transformative potential of art in addressing mental health challenges and promoting community well-being. By empowering AI/AN TAY through artistic expression, 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's development began in December 2023 with a series of initial meetings and progressed through various phases over the next several months. The facilitator worked with our community engagement team to recruit participants for the cohort and attendees for the final showcase. Pre- and post- surveys were given and shared with the UsCC subcommittee. Each phase was designed to focus on various aspects of storytelling, totem animal exploration, and

narrative development, with a final showcase to highlight the work throughout the project. The project culminated in a showcase event held on May 25, 2024.

Through this project, WombatMHS (a) **reduced disparity and stigma, and increased and promoted mental health access/services for the AI/AN community**, and (b) *improved mental health access by identifying mental health access barriers for AI/AN Transition Age Youth (TAY 16-24) through the development of graphic novels, comic books, and other art forms which will include :*

- (i) **a mental health stigma reduction element**
- (ii) **Youth Graphic Novel Project sessions,**
- (iii) **a Community Exhibit to showcase their work.**

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.

Recruitment for American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) Youth Graphic Novel Project 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**. Additionally, we collaborated with the UsCC subcommittee group to highlight themes for our events:

1. *Prevention/Early Intervention*
2. *Community Supports Continuum*
3. *Homeless Services/Housing Resources, and*
4. *Workforce Education & Training?*

Agendas were developed by our facilitators and participants met 5 times and for 2 hours each project meeting. Food, travel, and accommodation for the event were pre-organized and provided. 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 (AI/AN) Youth Graphic Novel Project (including Cohort gatherings and the Showcase), and a summary of the pre and post-tests was provided.

## **Phases of Deliverables**

### **Phase 1: Recruitment and Preparation**

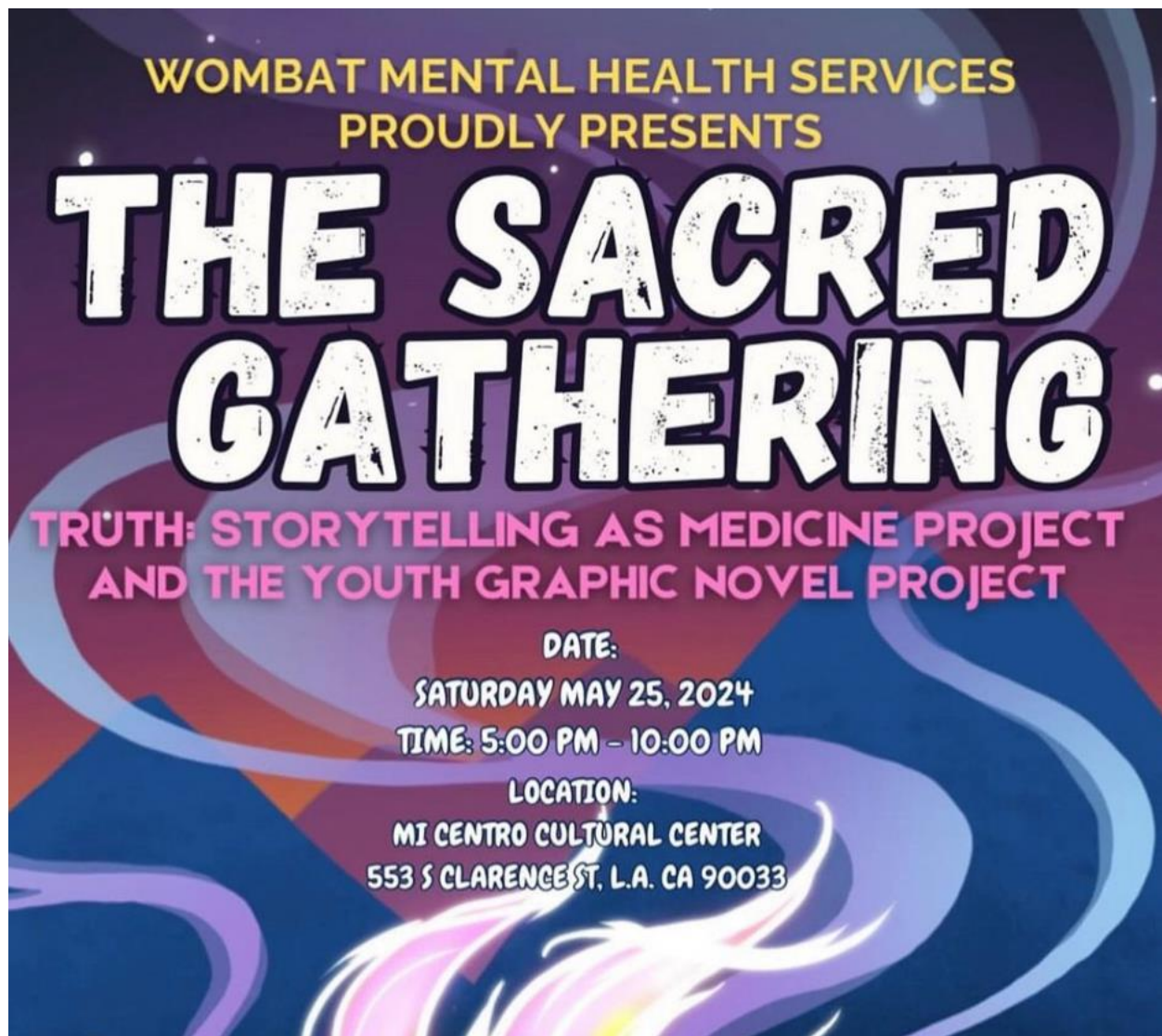
- **Promotion and Recruitment:** The project commenced with targeted outreach efforts and promotional campaigns aimed at recruiting 15 AI/AN youth participants. Priority was given to those with lived mental health experiences.
- **Planning:** Detailed planning ensured that project activities aligned with the cultural and mental health needs of AI/AN TAY. This phase laid the groundwork for a structured and supportive environment.

### **Phase 2: Workshops and Skill Development**

- **Workshops:** Participants engaged in a series of workshops integrating the Modern Medicine Wheel concept, emphasizing physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health.
- **Mentorship:** Youth received mentorship in storytelling, graphic novel creation, and artistic skills development, fostering personal growth and self-expression.

### **Phase 3: Community Exhibit and Awareness**

- **Exhibit Preparation:** Participants prepared their graphic novels for a community exhibit, consolidating their artistic and narrative achievements.
- **Showcase Event:** The community exhibit served as a platform to showcase participants' work, raising awareness about mental health issues and challenging stigmas within the AI/AN community.



### 3. PROJECT RESULTS

The AI/AN Youth Graphic Novel Project yielded significant outcomes:

- **Creative Expression:** Participants created graphic novels that reflected their personal narratives and mental health journeys, fostering empowerment and artistic growth.
- **Supportive Environment:** The project provided a supportive community where youth could connect with peers and mentors, enhancing their social and emotional well-being.
- **Community Engagement:** The exhibit successfully engaged community members, promoting dialogue and understanding of mental health issues among AI/AN youth.



## 4. OUTCOMES

The project achieved measurable impacts:

- **Empowerment and Skill Development:** Participants acquired essential graphic novel and storytelling skills, enhancing their ability to articulate and navigate their mental health experiences.
- **Peer Support and Community Building:** The project facilitated peer-to-peer support networks, promoting a sense of belonging and community resilience.
- **Awareness and Stigma Reduction:** The community exhibit raised awareness about mental health challenges and contributed to reducing stigma within the AI/AN community.
- **Access to Resources:** Participants gained knowledge about available mental health resources, empowering them to seek support and services proactively.

### Survey Descriptions and Summary

#### *Pre-Survey*

Participants were asked the following demographic information:

- **Age:** Age of the participant.
- **Heritage:** Heritage of the participant
- **Mental Health Experience:** Indicates if the participant has experience with mental health issues.
- **Zip Code:** Geographic location of the storyteller.

Based on the Likert scale below, please answer the following attitudinal questions.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

1. I have a basic understanding of graphic novel creation.
2. I have a good understanding of the four quadrants of health (physical, mental, emotional, spiritual).
3. I feel confident in expressing my experiences and perspectives through storytelling.
4. I believe that graphic novels can be a powerful tool for promoting mental well-being.

5. I am excited to participate in the Youth Graphic Novel Project and contribute to the final graphic novel.

### ***Key Pre-Survey Insights***

The following key survey insights describe some general data descriptors of our pre-survey population via a vis the attitudinal pre-survey.

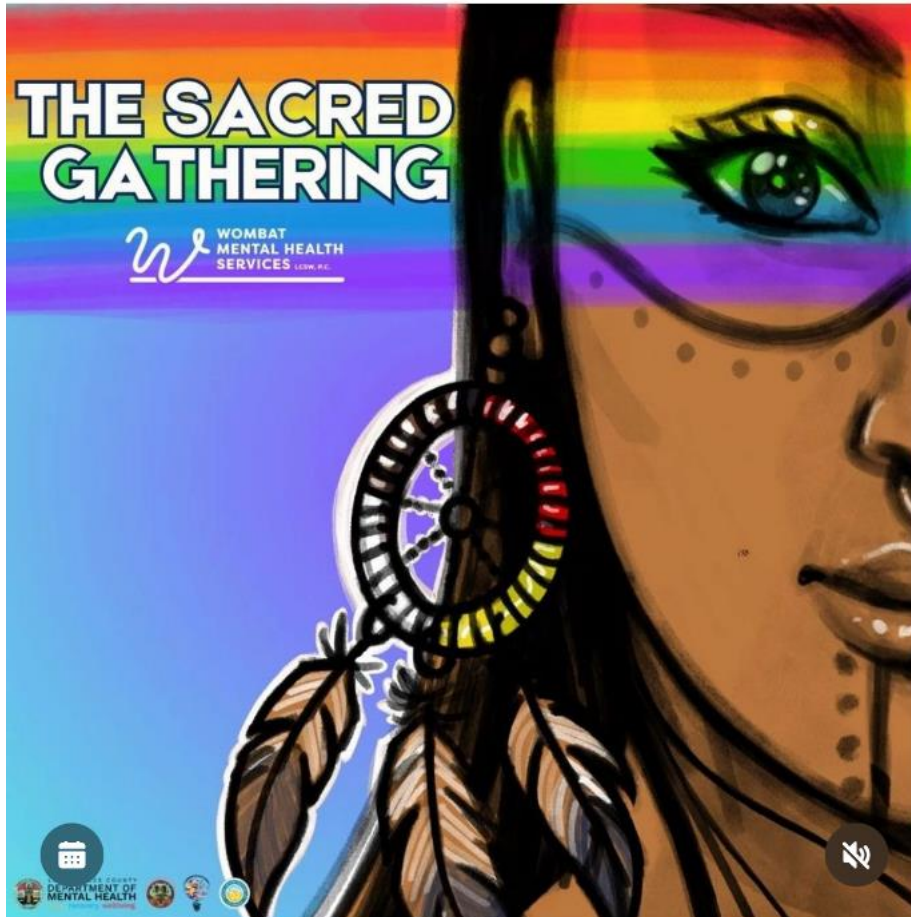
- **Population:**
  - o n = 9
  
- **Age Distribution:**
  - o The ages of storytellers range from 17-24 years old, with a mean age of approximately 20.44 years.
  
- **Heritage Diversity:**
  - o Many of the storytellers come from a variety of diverse heritages including Hopi, Creek, Ottawa, and Chocktaw.
  
- **Mental Health Experience:** All storytellers have indicated experience with mental health issues.
  
- **Geographic Distribution:**
  - o The storytellers are geographically distributed across various zip codes in Los Angeles.
  
- **Understanding Graphic Novel Creation:** Self-rated understanding (scale of 1 to 5). (Average score of 3)
- **Understanding the Four Quadrants of Health (physical, mental, emotional, spiritual):** Self-rated understanding (scale of 1 to 5). (Average score of 3.3)
- **Confidence in Expressing:** Confidence in expressing their stories (scale of 1 to 5). (Average score of 4.2)
- **Storytelling as Tool for Mental Well-being:** Agreement with using storytelling as a tool for mental well-being (scale of 1 to 5). (Average score of 4.2)
- **Excited to Participate:** Level of excitement to participate in the project (scale of 1 to 5). (Average score of 4.8)

### ***Key Post-Survey Insights***



The following key survey insights describe some general data descriptors of our post-survey population vis a vis the attitudinal survey.

6. My understanding of graphic novel creation has improved through my participation in the project. (Average score of 4.4)
7. I now have a deeper understanding of the four quadrants of health and how they relate to mental. (Average score of 5).
8. I feel more confident in expressing my experiences and perspectives through storytelling. (Average score of 5).
9. I strongly believe that graphic novels can be a powerful tool for promoting mental well-being. (Average score of 5).
10. My participation in the Youth Graphic Novel Project has been a valuable and fulfilling experience. (Average score of 5).



## 5. LESSONS LEARNED

Key lessons from the project include:

- **Cultural Relevance:** Integration of culturally relevant frameworks, like the Modern Medicine Wheel, was crucial for engaging AI/AN youth effectively.
- **Recruitment Challenges:** Targeted outreach and trust-building efforts are essential when recruiting participants with lived mental health experiences.
- **Adapting to Challenges:** Flexibility in workshop design and delivery was critical to accommodating diverse participant needs and interests.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance future projects targeting the AI/AN community:

- **Enhance Cultural Competence:** Ensure project facilitators possess cultural competence to effectively engage AI/AN youth.
- **Strengthen Partnerships:** Collaborate closely with community organizations to enhance participant recruitment and project sustainability.
- **Holistic Approaches:** Continue integrating holistic approaches, such as the Modern Medicine Wheel, to address multifaceted mental health needs.
- **Expand Outreach:** Increase outreach efforts to engage a broader and more diverse group of AI/AN youth, ensuring inclusivity and accessibility.
- **Continuous Evaluation:** Regularly evaluate project activities and outcomes to adapt strategies and improve project effectiveness over time.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The AI/AN Youth Graphic Novel Project exemplifies the power of creative expression in promoting mental health awareness and resilience among AI/AN TAY. By fostering a supportive environment and empowering youth through artistic endeavors, the project has contributed positively to the mental health landscape of the AI/AN community in Los Angeles County.