

RECLAIMING FUTURES

Public Health, Justice, Equity.



Practice Brief: Helping Tribal Courts Build and Sustain Culturally Resonant Screening and Brief Intervention Practices

Background

Tribal Healing to Wellness Courts have become increasingly popular in Indian Country because they represent a non-adversarial and culturally resonant alternative to traditional treatment court models and hold the promise of restoring a sense of pride in the role that the tribal community, culture and identity can play in the practice of therapeutic jurisprudence.

However, tribal communities looking to implement the Healing to Wellness Court framework have faced challenges integrating meaningful cultural elements into the screening, assessment and treatment practices that are central to the process. Few, if any tribal adaptations of mainstream evidence-based treatment practices or validated screening and assessment tools are available to native communities who often struggle to sustain non-tribal practices, lack the ability to create effective hybrid practices on their own, or to get satisfying outcomes using non-tribal models “off the rack”.

Screening, Brief Intervention & Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) in Tribal settings

Screening and effective triage into treatment are important functions played by today’s Juvenile Drug Treatment Courts and Healing to Wellness Courts because these early steps represent a critical, and often missed, window of opportunity to engage youth and their community supports as active participants in the process. Screening, Brief Intervention & Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) is uniquely well-suited for treatment court settings where both accurate triage and youth and family engagement are of critical importance to a youth’s success. SBIRT is a promising new strategy being used in a variety of youth serving systems, including juvenile justice settings, to identify signs of mental health and substance use issues and briefly intervene to clarify severity, prevent progression and motivate youth and families to follow up on treatment referrals where necessary. A multi-site longitudinal evaluation of a specialized, developmentally appropriate and family-engaged adaptation of SBIRT created by Reclaiming Futures (RF) for non-tribal juvenile justice settings found the practice to be highly effective in identifying mental health and substance use concerns, triaging youth into targeted treatment settings and in achieving significant improvements in a wide range of behavioral health and substance use symptoms (Impact Justice, 2018).

Building on the early success of Reclaiming Futures' SBIRT model, RF and the Center for Court Innovation (CCI) came together in 2016 to address the challenges faced by tribal Healing to Wellness courts by developing an innovative new strategy that involves close collaboration with tribal jurisdictions to create their own culturally resonant adaptations of SBIRT.

An Innovative, Culturally-Responsive Strategy

In the fall of 2016, using a technical assistance grant from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), Portland State University's Reclaiming Futures program partnered with CCI to develop a unique methodology for adapting the building blocks of the SBIRT model for tribal court settings.

The goal of the project was to develop a framework and process for adapting the existing RF version of SBIRT so that the resulting version retains the core building blocks of SBIRT, while producing a new model that is culturally congruent and allows tribal youth and their families to participate in the court process and to access treatment services in ways that are prideful and effective.

RF and CCI chose two tribal communities to participate in the development and piloting of this new approach: The Yurok Tribe of Northern California and the Southern Ute Tribe of Colorado. The steps we followed with each SBIRT adaptation were as follows:

- Working with each tribe to convene a committee of stakeholders to review current screening, intake and referral practices
- Discussion of the ways that cultural elements and assets play a role or not in current practices and outcomes
- A strategic discussion of the tribe's core cultural values and goals for their court program and how those might integrate into an SBIRT adaption
- Identifying a smaller cohort of stakeholders to serve as a "design team"
- Close collaborative work with the design team to develop a draft of the new SBIRT model
- Getting feedback on the SBIRT adaption from tribal elders, culture committees and youth court participants
- Training, piloting and fine tuning the model
- Working with the tribe to build a referral network and a system of wraparound supports to pick up where SBIRT leaves off.

Case Example: The Yurok Tribe and the “Path Forward” SBIRT model

The Yurok Healing to Wellness Court was the first tribe to collaborate with RF and CCI and came to the project following a very difficult year for their community during which there were more than 10 teen suicides on the reservation. The community was both traumatized but also highly motivated to build much needed capacity around behavioral health and to explore new ways of engaging their at-risk youth.

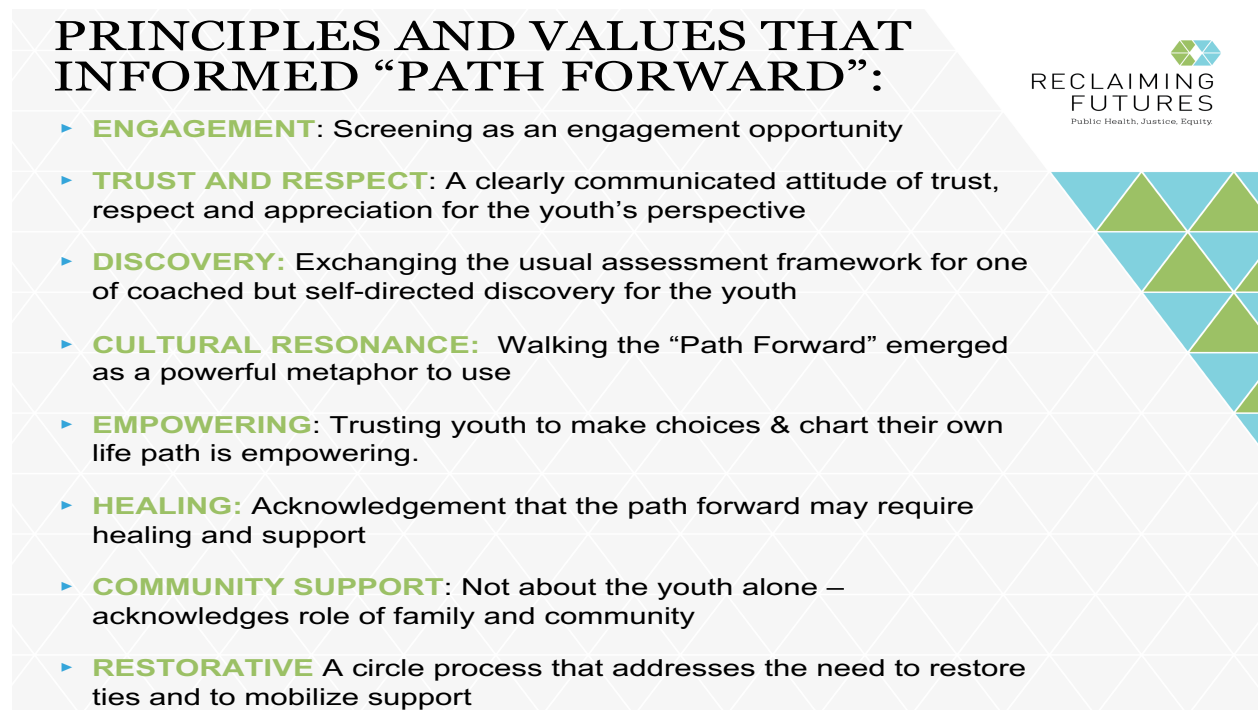
Staff from Reclaiming Futures and the Center for Court Innovation spent a total of 10 days over the course of three separate site visits to Klamath, California, where the Yurok reservation is located. The first visit began with a day of informal socializing and connecting with key staff of the Yurok Healing to Wellness Court and other community members. The visit included taking part in the Yurok’s annual Salmon Harvest Festival, attending the annual inter-tribal Stick Game competition and learning about Yurok history, culture and language by visiting with and sharing meals with a number of community members.

Significant progress was made during the initial site visit toward understanding the values of the community, the shared understanding of the challenges faced by Yurok youth, and the objectives of the Yurok Healing to Wellness Court. It was quite clear to us early on in our work with them, that the primary goal for the Yurok in building their own SBIRT model was first and foremost to create a platform to “engage and build trust with youth rather than to assess, diagnose and potentially alienate them”. We understood that what the community was looking for was an interactive experience for the youth and their supports, rather than “just a piece of paper” as they put it.

The initial 3-day site visit afforded the Yurok Justice Center and the Healing to Wellness Court a unique opportunity to convene a very diverse cohort of stakeholders, many of whom had not met with the Yurok court team before. The Stakeholder convening consisted of treatment providers from the United Indian Health Services and other private and community-based providers, school counselors and principals of the two main high schools in the community, non-tribal juvenile justice staff from neighboring counties and members of community-based youth development organizations.

The Stakeholders convening had the collateral benefit of helping the Yurok Justice Center to build new relationships and expand their circle of community-based supports and future referral partners, as well helping the design team to generate a set of shared community values that they wanted reflected in their SBIRT adaptation. Those values are illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

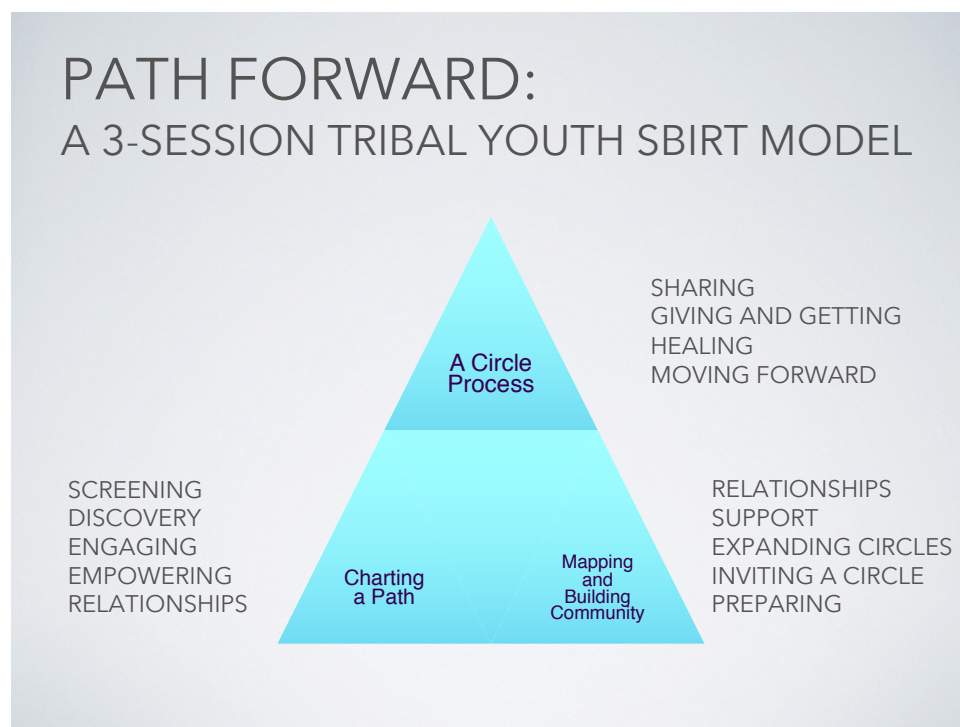


During subsequent visits, the Design team, comprised of a smaller group of Healing to Wellness court staff, worked closely with RF to draft a unique SBIRT model and to field test the approach with youth participants from the court.

The 3 session Path Forward SBIRT model

The SBIRT model that that Reclaiming Futures created with the Yurok is a brief 3-session approach they chose to call “Path Forward” and is illustrated in Figure 2 below

Figure 2

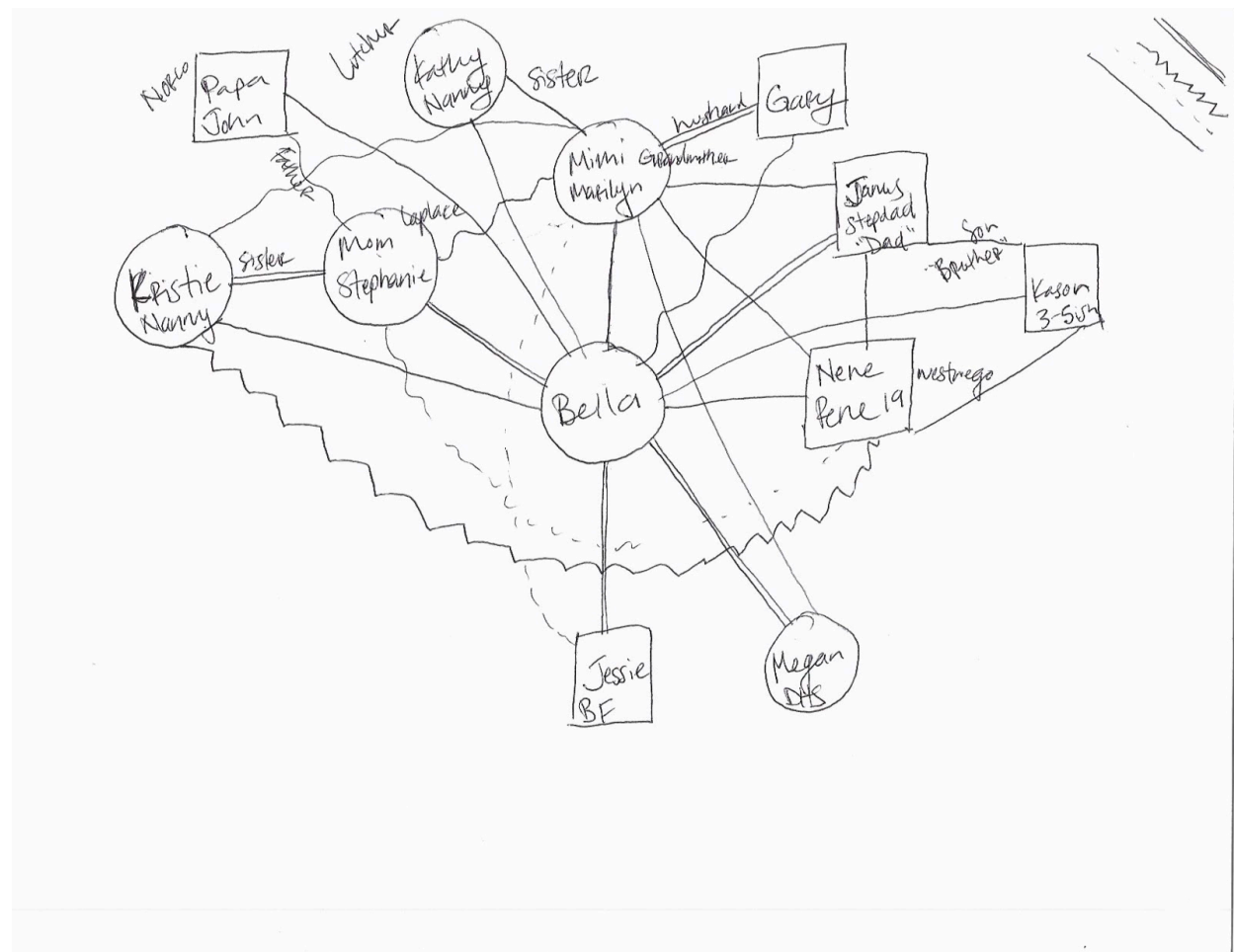


Session 1: The idea of framing the initial screening conversation with the youth as a discussion of their life path rather than as a checklist of symptoms to determine severity level of a potential behavioral health issue was a contribution from members of the Yurok design team. They felt that the metaphor of the “path” was a culturally resonant way to approach the inquiry in their community. Within this framework, the initial screening uses prompts like: Tell me about the path you’re walking? Where is it taking you? What kinds of things are getting in your way? How do you feel while walking your path? Are you taking any substances or drinking and does that seem to help or hinder your ability to make progress on that path? Have you thought of doing anything to end your journey, like hurting or killing yourself?

Clearly, this format does not preclude asking direct questions about symptoms and risk, but rather does so in the context of showing authentic interest in a young person’s life journey on their own terms and in a respectful and culturally appropriate way.

Session 2: The Yurok design team decided that the second session with the young person would be focused on mapping out the youth's social support network and making a plan to build on that support. Using prompts like, "tell me who is walking your path with you?", "Who would you like to have walking with you?", "How can that person support you in reaching your goals?" The practitioner and youth informally draw an annotated diagram, often referred to as an ecomap or genogram, to get a sense of the family and community relationships and supports that may be critical to helping advance the youth toward behavior change and wellness, as well as relationships where conflict may hinder progress if not resolved. An example of an ecomap can be seen below in figure 3. From this second session, the youth identifies a small group of family and community members who will participate in the third session together with the youth

Figure 3.



Session 3 The objective of the third session with the youth is to bring key family and community supports together for a “circle meeting” in order to solidify their ties to the youth, get their input and “buy-in” for a plan to support the youth, and to send a clear message that the process of helping the youth on their path to wellness is a community effort. During session two and between sessions two and three, the youth works with the practitioner to plan the circle meeting and issue invitations. This prepares the youth to play an active role in the meeting through communicating with the folks he or she invites.

Conclusion:

The development of this new behavioral health screening and brief intervention capacity has empowered the Yurok community and inspired them to convene providers and school-based counselors from neighboring communities to proactively engineer a responsive cross-sector continuum of care to pick up where their brief intervention leaves off. Community members have experienced an increase in their sense of self-efficacy to address the needs of the youth in their community and are highly motivated to integrate this public health function into the Tribal Court’s policy and practice landscape.