

Case Study: A Native American Young Women's Mentoring Program Created by Minneapolis Police Officers

Minneapolis Police Department Community Resource Officers created the “*Oshki-ikwewag Mino-Bimaadizii*” mentoring program, which translates in the Ojibwe language to “Young women leading a good life” in Little Earth, Minneapolis

Goals

- Provide culturally competent engagement between police and the Native American community
- Increase trust in police in among the Native American community
- Support youth in making healthy choices

Key considerations for culturally-specific youth mentoring programs

- Create ongoing engagement with a group of young people, so that trust can be built over time
- Officers from a community are best-positioned to build culturally-based relationships with youth
- Officers should not wear uniforms or clothing with police logos during most mentoring activities
- Allowing youth to get to know officers as people before they identify themselves as police can make it easier to form relationships
- Once trust is established, it can be easier for officers to speak frankly with youth about their experience as both an officer and member of a group with low trust in police
- A mentoring program can cater to the needs that youth identify for themselves
 - Sports and hobbies in which they have interest
 - Group discussion topics they identify as important in their lives
- Create opportunities for engagement within their community, like volunteer work
- Create opportunities for youth to explore the history of their shared cultural group together

Overview

The Minneapolis Police Department (MPD) is one of six pilot cities participating in the [National Initiative for Building Community Trust and Justice](#) (National Initiative), a US Department of Justice project which aims to improve relationships between police and communities. The National Initiative recommends that police departments focus on three pillars—enhancing procedural justice, reducing the impact of implicit bias, and fostering reconciliation; with special considerations for focus communities that may be uniquely marginalized along lines of race, ethnicity, religion, language barriers, and/or immigration status. MPD and the National Initiative team identified a need for trust building with Minneapolis' Native American community.

The Young Women's Mentoring Program, started in 2017 by MPD Officers Colleen Saunby and Cheryl-Leigh Goodman, exemplifies community-based policing. The officers initially sought to provide culturally-competent engagement with their Native American community, which was largely concentrated in an urban subsidized housing complex called Little Earth of the United Tribes, known locally as Little Earth. What began as ad hoc coaching and after school activities has expanded into a robust mentoring program that supports 25 young Native women and 10 older women serving as volunteers, many of whom are also from Little Earth.

The program's goals are to support the young women in making healthy choices, through activities that help maintain and establish a connection to their Native culture and community. The program focuses on the needs that the young women identify for themselves, and the activities are always grounded in an understanding of historical and intergenerational trauma. A core group meets multiple times a week, sometimes for structured workshops on wellness and cultural identity. Oftentimes, trust and relationships are built through simply sharing food together.

Officers Saunby and Goodman dedicate countless hours of their personal time to support these young women. In doing so, they have contributed to building a new narrative in the community—one that, according to residents themselves, praises the present-day relationship between Little Earth and the Minneapolis Police Department as the strongest it has ever been. This is particularly significant because

Little Earth has historically had fraught relationships with local police, and has experienced some of the highest rates of crime in the wider Minneapolis area, ranging from gang violence to sex trafficking.

However, these new relationships have resulted in such change that some young women are even considering a career in policing. For example, Leticia Leon, an 18-year-old Native woman from Little Earth, started interning with the MPD's community policing unit and aspires to one day join the force.

Developing Relationships

Leticia's path to the mentorship program began, unbeknownst to her, when she learned from her best friend, Officer Goodman's niece, that a sports league existed for Little Earth. The prospect of playing basketball, coupled with encouragement from her mom, convinced Leticia to join the program. For a long time, Leticia only knew her coaches, Officers Saunby and Goodman, as Cheryl and Colleen. Later, she discovered they were also MPD officers. Now, as Leticia reflects on the entire mentorship program, her time playing basketball stands out among the experiences she remembers most fondly due to the relationship building it fostered between the MPD and young Native American women.

In addition, Officers Goodman and Saunby's commitment to young women like Leticia extended beyond the scheduled activities. They serve as active parts of the young women's lives, from attending significant occasions to speaking with them about their day-to-day lives. For example, Officer Saunby traveled with Leticia to the department store to help her overcome stress related to buying clothes for her interview for the police department internship. Officer Saunby's willingness to help strengthened their relationship in Leticia's eyes.

Other actions similar to Officer Saunby's have resulted in effective educational, issue-centered programming, as the young women have learned to function more cohesively as a group. When confronted with difficult subjects or experiences, they speak more honestly because they have established trust amongst themselves. Similarly, for Officers Saunby and Goodman, a strong relationship with the young women makes them more cognizant of the most effective ways to work with them as law enforcement.

Culturally-Appropriate Mentoring

The more formal programming ranges from community service to health and wellness activities to educational trips, all of which are centered around the Little Earth community and Native American culture. The young women have the opportunity to meet and engage with a range of members in their community, providing them with perspectives to which they may not have been previously exposed.

Some of the experiences are more deliberate in regards to their cultural focus. One that Leticia recalls in particular was the trip to South Dakota, where the young women spent a week visiting national monuments and Native historical sites. Throughout the trip, they engaged in conversations about the history of Native communities and considered the implication of that history on their lives. Leticia and the other young women were struck by the emotion they shared at the Wounded Knee Memorial, the site where in 1890, U.S. soldiers killed 300 Sitanka people. Leticia also found it powerful to witness the memorial with other young Native women, for whom the memorial conveyed similar meaning. This solidarity, Leticia shared, extended beyond the trip to Wounded Knee to become a broader element of the entire mentorship program.

Shared backgrounds are also an important component of Officers Goodman and Saunby's success with the young women. Both officers are from Minneapolis, and Officer Goodman lived in Little Earth when she was younger. As a result, she can draw upon the challenges she faced in her own youth in a way that resonates with the young women. Officers Goodman and Saunby also serve as mentors to many of these women, who may not have female mentors in their lives.

Aside from her mother, Leticia did not have many other older female mentors. She found herself often turning to the two officers for advice during her internship, and appreciated their assistance in building her

confidence. Initially, she felt nervous about being the only female and only Native intern, but after having conversations with Officers Goodman and Saunby, she realized the value of her identity within the department. The officers' collective ability to relate to and support the young women, the solidarity within the group, and ultimately the effectiveness of programming is possible in large part because the mentorship is very specific about the population it works with to address this community's needs.

Personal Growth

Leticia started the mentorship as a quiet observer, but soon found her voice and a boost in self-esteem, thanks to activities with the other girls and the two officers. Her maturation prompted her to refocus on school and to enjoy success at her police department internship. Her family, her friends, and Officers Goodman and Saunby all noticed this dramatic change that took place over a short period of time. "It helped my family because they didn't have to worry about me anymore," Leticia said. Officer Goodman described Leticia as having transformed "from participant to role model." Leticia addressed city council on behalf of the mentorship program, and encouraged the other young women to take initiative and advocate for the continuation of the mentorship. "She came in very reserved, very hesitant, and in a very short amount of time just grew up and blossomed very fast," Goodman reflected.

While Leticia has aged out of the mentorship program, she plans to continue the relationship by serving as a basketball coaching assistant with Officers Saunby and Goodman. Leticia intends to pursue a career in criminal justice, as either a community service officer for the MPD or as a member of the tribal police. She is now even considering law school. In the eyes of Officers Goodman and Saunby, Leticia always possessed the promise of becoming a confident and ambitious leader. "She just needed that little push and it didn't take long at all," Officer Goodman said.

Reframing Understanding of Police

Prior to the mentorship program, Leticia's experience with the criminal justice system was minimal. However, the exposure that she did have was negative. Members of her family and community have been or are currently incarcerated. As a young child, police came into her home with dogs and held her uncle at gunpoint. Before the mentorship, Leticia felt uncomfortable around police officers. Soon after her participation in mentorship program began, she observed officers watching the young women play their weekly basketball games. Leticia assumed they were watching because they anticipated she and the other young women were "going to do something." She reflected on how the mere fact they were wearing their uniform, to her at the time, was meant to send a message conveying authority and power.

Leticia's experience is not uncommon in the Little Earth community. As a result, many people there view the police with a level of distrust. Moreover, the way police uniforms are perceived is grounded in the community's fraught relationship with the police. Therefore, Officers Goodman and Saunby intentionally do not wear anything that identifies them as police officers when doing activities with the young women, and dress in police t-shirts rather than uniforms when going on trips with the young women. With this small change, the officers expand their relationship with the young women beyond their role as police officers helps them develop a more sympathetic understanding of police in general. For Leticia, it has helped her understand that not all officers could be characterized by her earlier negative experiences.

Thanks to the openness of Officers Goodman and Saunby, Leticia and her fellow mentoring participants received a different view of the police that challenged their preconceived notions. They developed team-building skills and personal confidence in ways that will improve their lives and aid in repairing relationships and building trust between their community, long skeptical of police, and law enforcement. One day in the near future, Leticia, as either an officer with MPD or the tribal police, will play a major role in this reconciliation thanks to the lessons she learned in the mentoring program.

This project was supported by Grant #2014-MU-MU-K051 awarded by the Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication/program/exhibition are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.