

TRIBAL ENGAGEMENT

for Disaster Preparedness and Community Resilience



The Purpose of this Toolkit Booklet:

This toolkit provides guidance for engaging with Tribal Nations, Indigenous communities and other systemically excluded groups, in a respectful, ethical, and effective way. Tribal engagement is distinct from standard public participation and is grounded in sovereignty, history, and trust.

This is especially important in the realm of providing care and services to support disaster preparedness and response.

Foundational Principles



Introduction to the Engagement Resource Toolkit

This toolkit presents a curated list of resources designed to support Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters (VOAD) and National VOAD (NVOAD) members in the development of ethical, effective, and culturally responsive engagement strategies with Tribal Nations and other communities disproportionately affected by disasters. Drawing on a comprehensive assessment of peer-reviewed scholarship, practitioner guidance, and established best practices in emergency management, public health, and tribal engagement with a focus on cross-jurisdiction collaboration, this toolkit synthesizes insights and provides a foundation that VOADs can lean on in their own relationship-building efforts.

Particular attention is paid to literature addressing disaster preparedness and response in Tribal territories and with Tribal nations, including scholarship on Tribal sovereignty, jurisdictional complexity, culturally grounded emergency management, and the legacy of extractive and exclusionary disaster governance. These bodies of work consistently demonstrate that effective engagement with Tribal Nations requires approaches that differ fundamentally from those used with non-sovereign communities, and that failure to account for these distinctions can undermine response effectiveness and perpetuate inequities.

Additionally, this toolkit is informed by substantive area expertise derived from the lived experiences of disaster practitioners, emergency managers, and community-engaged researchers working across diverse geographic and institutional contexts. Rather than favoring a single mode of engagement, this toolkit pulls together myriad resources that recognize the diversity of Tribal nations, VOADs, hazard profiles, and organizational capacities. This approach aligns with the desire to provide guidance that emphasizes flexibility and relationship-building over rigid procedural compliance.



Intended Use and Application

The primary purpose of this toolkit is to provide a starting point from which NVOAD and VOAD members can identify, curate, and present engagement strategies and resources as they navigate working with Tribal nations and other populations disproportionately affected by disasters. It is not intended to serve as a comprehensive or prescriptive manual for engagement. Rather, it is designed to encourage reflection while providing NVOAD and VOAD members with access to proven strategies and insights piloted in relevant disaster response and community engagement contexts.

Recognizing that VOADs vary widely in size, mission, jurisdiction, and resource availability, it is important to note that this toolkit is intentionally non-dictatorial in design. Each VOAD operates within a specific context shaped by local hazard profiles, politics, governance structures, funding constraints, and pre-existing relationships. As such, strategies presented here are meant to be adapted, not adopted wholesale.

Accordingly, it may be used in multiple ways. Some VOADs may engage with it as a training or professional development resources guide, using selections to facilitate internal discussion and reflection on equity and organizational readiness to engage with Tribal nations. Others may use it as a resource directory to identify potential external partners, frameworks, or examples that align with their current organizational initiatives. Still, others may return to the toolkit iteratively as relationship building with Tribal nations evolves, using the resources herein to reassess engagement practices and identify opportunities for growth.



Image Credit: David Fine, FEMA

Tribal Sovereignty

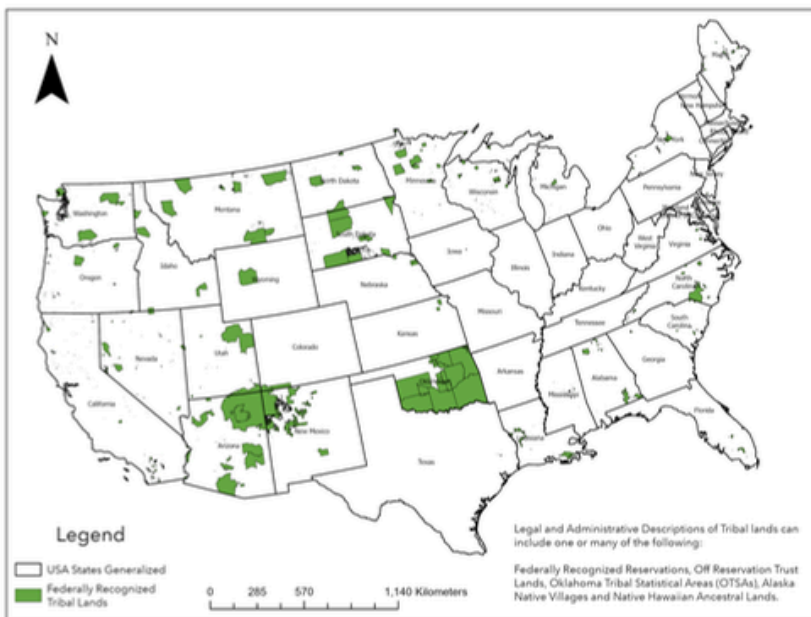
Tribal sovereignty is the inherent authority of a tribe to govern themselves. There are 574 federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native nations (US Bureau of Indian Affairs). As of 2021, there are more than 400 non-federally recognized tribes. Without federal recognition, these tribes cannot access federal funding, protections, and enter into government-to-government relationships. Whether a tribe is federally recognized or not does not diminish the value of Tribal sovereignty. Obtaining federal recognition is an arduous, lengthy process where a tribe petitions the US government to acknowledge its existence.

Tribes vary in size and membership requirements. Collaboration with both Tribal Nations and non-Tribal persons/organizations is at the discretion of each tribe. Each tribe is a government entity with its own policies, processes, and system of governance.

Proximity to the location of Tribal lands, communities, or reservations does not guarantee partnership and requires extensive connection building to support effective tribal engagement that is intentional and non-extractive.

There have been numerous legal battles determining the extent and application of Tribal sovereignty. These legal disputes put even more strain on the relationships with Tribal communities.

Spatially Designated Tribal Geographies of the United States



Effective Engagement Strategies for Target Populations

Understanding “Trust Responsibility”

Trust responsibility is a federal and legally enforceable term referring to the legal obligation of the United States to protect Tribal treaty rights, lands, assets, and resources. Trust responsibility is the result of agreements to treaties, statutes, and court decisions and represents the highest moral obligation to uphold Tribal sovereignty and their right to self-governance.

Understanding Trust Responsibility and Tribal Nations’ rights to self-determination should always guide meaningful and intentional approaches to partnerships.



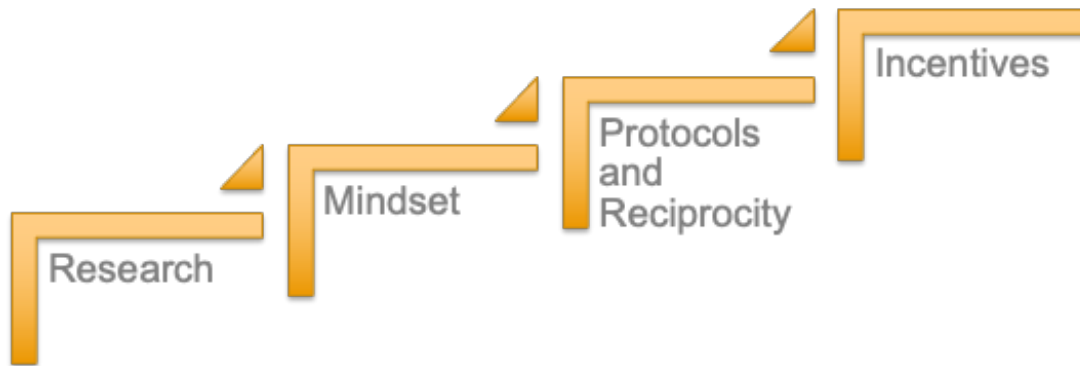
Factors to Consider:

- **Understanding Tribal Data Sovereignty**— Tribal Nations have the right to determine the collection, ownership, and application of their own data and information about their people, resources, and assets.
- **Investment in Relationship Building**— Building intentional partnerships with Tribal Nations and partners cannot be rushed or put on a specific timeline and requires a substantial time investment which may or may not result in any partnerships at all.
- **Opportunities for Collaboration**— Building meaningful partnerships with Tribal partners requires us to consider mutual interests and opportunities for organizational alignment, where each party can benefit in a meaningful way.
- **Institutional Capacity**— Consider the administrative and institutional burden of engaging with Tribal partners on initiatives. Various project and partnerships may have special conditions around reporting, funding and staffing.

Effective Engagement Strategies for Target Populations

Building Trust in Tribal Partnerships

Thoughtful preparation is critical to partnering with Tribal Nations and shows attention to detail and a commitment to building a meaningful way forward. Partnership building requires an asset-based mindset that views current or conventional challenges as opportunities.



Research

Doing the necessary research to inform your ask with Tribal Nations is incredibly important. Research can encompass anywhere from correct pronunciation of the Tribe's name to whether there is a history of harm or ineffective partnership building with your organization.

Protocols & Reciprocity

Investigating the relevant protocols for engaging with various Tribal Nations demonstrates commitment to engaging with Tribes' cultural practices and shows an understanding of cultural competence.

Mindset

Having the right mindset when approaching building partnerships with Tribal Nations requires humility and an asset based mentality to help frame solutions. Cultural competence and an appreciation of the cultural beliefs and practices of Tribal Nations will guide approaches to partnerships as well.

Incentives

Incentivized partnerships and jointly crafting and discussing mutually beneficial outcomes can help impact consideration for future long term partnerships.

Toolkit Components

This toolkit comprises four primary components, each described in detail below. These components were intentionally selected and designed to be modular, allowing NVOAD and VOAD members to engage with them sequentially or independently while deriving the same level of insight and practical value. This flexible structure recognizes the diverse contexts, capacities, and needs of VOAD organizations, and supports both targeted consultation and comprehensive exploration of the resources presented throughout.

Effective Engagement Strategies for Target Populations

This component outlines in narrative form adaptable engagement strategies for working with Tribal nations and other disproportionately affected communities in disaster contexts. Strategies emphasize flexibility, respect for local governance structures and context, and responsiveness to community-defined priorities. Tribal engagement is explicitly framed around recognition of sovereignty, jurisdictional complexity, and the need for approaches that differ from standard stakeholder models of engagement.



Training Modules

This portion of the toolkit includes a list of modular training resources that VOAD members can complete to build targeted skills related to cultural competence, Tribal engagement, and forming ethical partnerships. Modules were selected for inclusion on the basis of their flexibility and relevance, with the intent to maximize applicability across organizational roles and capacities.

Toolkit Components (Continued)

Best Practices, Guidebooks, and Related Toolkits

This component presents a curated list of best practices, guidebooks, and related toolkits that are designed to serve as points of reference and inspiration. Materials included here were selected to serve as use-inspired guides from adjacent disaster response fields.



Academic Articles

The final and, perhaps, most dense component of the toolkit includes a selection of peer-reviewed, academic research articles that serve as the conceptual foundation for this effort. Articles included were selected with the intention that they provide deeper conceptual, theoretical, and empirical illustrations of relevant factors to consider when seeking to engage with Tribal nations. This includes covering concepts such as sovereignty, trust, power, and equity and disaster governance and response. As such, these articles can be used as the basis for supporting evidence-informed reflection and practice.



Training Modules



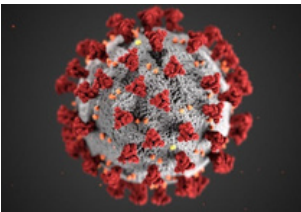
Advancing Rural Disaster Philanthropy

This report was developed by the Center for Disaster Philanthropy and focuses on addressing the barriers and opportunities in rural disaster philanthropy. The report elevates socio-cultural realities of rural areas and disaster planning to guide partnership building.



The Power of Philanthropy

This report was commissioned by the New Ventures in Philanthropy and analyzes trends in rural disaster philanthropy to help rural and underserved communities generate their own community resources and assets.



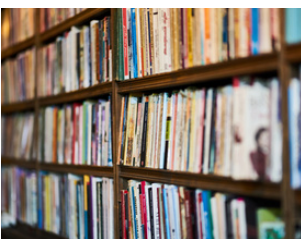
COVID-19 and Climate Change: Understanding Place, History and Indigenous Sovereignty in Emergency Response

This project includes teaching modules focused on Tribal and Indigenous communities' experiences of COVID-19 and climate change, including ethical considerations, case studies, and narratives integrated into the curricula.



Bridging Gaps: Treaties and Treaty Rights- A Tribal Leader's Perspective

This video-based presentation discusses the impact of treaties and includes the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge structures in Western Systems, centering Tribal Needs, and cultural considerations around Tribal Sovereignty.



Indigenous Sovereignty in Disasters Annotated Bibliography

This annotated bibliography was created by the Natural Hazards Center at the University of Colorado Boulder. It includes robust resources geared towards understanding Tribal Sovereignty, especially in disasters.

Best Practices, Guidebooks, and Related Toolkits

Best Practices and Guidebooks



Understanding Treaties: A Guide for Non-Native Allies

This guidance document provides a starting point for understanding and supporting Tribal Sovereignty. It covers understanding treaties and how treaties impact ongoing partnership building.



FEMA and Tribal Nations: A Pocket Guide

This mini pocket guide was developed by The Tribal Affairs Branch of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Office of External Affairs to help federally recognized tribes quickly reference information about FEMA programs and the agency's engagement with tribes.



Positionality for Ethical Research Engagement with Socially Vulnerable Groups.

This guidance checklist provides a definition of positionality, as well as tips to understand it using relevant case studies. Assessing our positionality helps us to be aware of how we engage groups from different socio-cultural backgrounds.



Community Mapping Worksheet

This worksheet was designed to facilitate community decision making and mapping of community assets, relationships, and future partnerships.



Developing Partnerships with Socially Vulnerable Populations

This checklist was designed by the Natural Hazards Center at the University of Colorado Boulder to guide persons or organizations who are considering partnerships with socially vulnerable groups or groups that have faced historical harm. The checklist summarizes key considerations when engaging with these groups.

Related Toolkits



Rural Emergency Preparedness Toolkit

This evidence-based toolkit was prepared by the Rural Health Information Hub to support organizations and jurisdictions engaged in disaster planning across rural communities in the United States.



Seeding Reconciliation on Uneven Ground: The 4Rs Approach to Cross Cultural Dialogue

This toolkit was created to enhance cross-cultural dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities by acknowledging barriers to communication and partnerships.



Toolkit for Meaningful Engagement with Indigenous Peoples in Conservation

This evidence-based toolkit was created by the Center for Collaborative Conservation. It was selected to guide partnerships built on environmental protection and ecological safeguarding, core features of Indigenous knowledge and ways of life.



Tribal Engagement Toolkit

This evidence-based toolkit was developed through the Oregon Department of Human Services. It was designed to guide partnerships to strengthen engagement with American Indian and Alaska Native tribes and families, especially around issues of community health and well being.



Toolkit: Cross-Jurisdictional Sharing Between Tribes and Counties for Emergency Management

This toolkit has been developed by the California Rural Indian Health Board to aid Tribes and counties in cross-jurisdictional sharing (CJS) for emergency management (i.e., preparedness, mitigation, response, and recovery).



Tribal Best Practices

This is an evidence-based toolkit with best practices, research, and resources developed by the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA). Specifically, the toolkit provides insight into engaging with Tribal families while being cognizant of intergenerational trauma.

Academic Articles

Engagement for Life's Sake: Reflections on Partnering and Partnership with Rural Tribal Nations

Authors: Chelsea schelly, Valoree Gagnon, Kathleen Brosemer and Kristina Arola.

This paper discusses the authors' collective engagement with Anishinabe Tribal Nation in the Great Lakes Regions in the hopes of understanding barriers to effective engagement.

Resilience in Recovery? Understanding the Extent, Structure, and Operations of Nonprofits Meant to Address Disaster Survivors' Unmet Needs

Authors: Michelle Meyer, Mason Alexander-Hawk, Carlee Purdum, Haley Yelle, Jordan Vick, Adrian Rodriguez, Saul Romero, and Kenneth Anderson Taylor.

This paper explores long term recovery groups as a means of addressing unmet disaster needs in various disaster-impacted communities.

Understaning Meaningful Engagement Practices with Tribal Nations

Authors: Carmen Clelland, Wendy Holmes and Jessica Miller

This paper discusses the engagement process of the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and identifies strategies and tactics that can better suit engagement with Tribal communities.

Bureaucratization, Professionalization, and Advocacy Engagement in Nonprofit Human Service Organizations

Authors: Jiahuan Lu & Johann Park

This paper provides insights in to non profit human service organizations and the factors that may impact effective advocacy building.

Mapping A Way Through Disaster And Emergency Issues Involving Indian Country And The Importance Of Legal Preparedness

Author: Brian Candelaria

This paper focuses on understanding disaster and emergency management issues in Indian Country using Indian jurisprudence as well as current legal regulation of emergency management in the U.S.

Tribal Engagement for Disaster Preparedness and Community Resilience

May 2026

This toolkit was prepared by the Bill Anderson Fund (BAF) with support from the National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD). Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of NVOAD or BAF.



Suggested Citation: Lennox-Morrison, Judanne; León Corwin, Maggie; and Nnenia Campbell. 2026. Tribal Engagement for Disaster Preparedness and Community Resilience. Bill Anderson Fund.