



THE HARVARD PROJECT ON AMERICAN INDIAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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ASH CENTER FOR DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE AND INNOVATION

ONE FIRE

Cherokee Nation

Domestic violence and sexual assault are hidden epidemics with heartbreaking consequences. Survivors are often isolated and have nowhere to turn in a crisis. To meet the need for respectful care and advocacy, the Cherokee Nation coordinated wraparound services into a “one-stop shop.” The ONE FIRE program offers culturally grounded support to help survivors recover and rebuild their lives while also advocating to end cycles of violence.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SURVIVORS

The Cherokee Nation is the largest tribe by population in the United States, with more than 440,000 citizens. The Nation’s 14-county, 7,000 square mile reservation in northeast Oklahoma encompasses the cities of Muskogee, Owasso, Bartlesville, Tahlequah, portions of Tulsa, and has a non-Native resident majority. Communities across the reservation experience persistently high rates of domestic violence, and Native women are particularly vulnerable victims of crime. In a revealing and distressing series of statistics, the Violence Policy Center consistently finds that the state of Oklahoma is among the top 10 states nationally for the rate at which women are murdered by men. Nationwide, a 2016 National Institute of Justice study found that more than four in five Native women will experience sexual assault. The same study also found that Native women are two and a half times more likely than non-Native women to lack access to domestic violence and sexual assault prevention and response services, making it that much harder to leave abusers, find recourse in the justice system, and locate culturally sensitive support services to help with recovery.

Survivors face many barriers to leaving abusers. Some may lack supportive contacts in the community or find the idea of leaving impossible. An individual who wants to leave an unsafe living situation may need transportation, a place to stay, or money for groceries. Within Cherokee Nation’s 7,000-square-mile reservation, the jurisdictional context of a dispute can also be complicated when violent situations involve both tribal citizens and non-Native individuals.

Ten years ago, there were few places specifically dedicated to domestic violence and sexual assault survivors in northeast Oklahoma. A small program in the Nation’s Attorney General’s Office provided court advocacy for victims of crimes. It shared information about tribal programs,

but survivors needed more support. Local non-tribal organizations had a limited understanding of Cherokee culture and were unequipped to deal with the legacy of intergenerational trauma.

The Cherokee Nation has significant government program expertise and offers a wide variety of services to tribal citizens, including childcare, housing assistance, and cultural programming. Victims of domestic violence, however, found it hard to identify programs that could be helpful. Services were spread across different tribal departments, and bureaucratic requirements made them difficult to access during a crisis. In many cases, survivors also needed a broader range of programs tailored to their unique situations.

A TRIBAL VICTIM SERVICE AGENCY

The late Cherokee Nation Secretary of State Charles L. Head proposed streamlining aid for survivors of domestic abuse, sexual assault, and dating violence. In 2013, the Nation launched ONE FIRE. The acronym stands for “Our Nation Ending Fear, Intimidation, Rape, and Endangerment.” ONE FIRE serves as a single point of contact for *all* survivors (all genders and all races, regardless of tribal citizenship status) living in the Cherokee Nation Reservation and as a referral service for Cherokee citizens located elsewhere in the United States. ONE FIRE is structured so that it is eligible for federal domestic violence grants, such as those available under the Violence Against Women Act. Tribal general funds supplement federal dollars, allowing the program to offer services beyond those covered under federal guidelines.

ONE FIRE employs an Executive Director and four advocates who create a problem-solving support system for victims. Clients initiate contact by walking into the office or calling a 24-hour crisis helpline. The Cherokee Nation Marshal Service also notifies ONE FIRE when responding to domestic violence calls. ONE FIRE advocates collaborate with each client to formulate an individualized safety plan. Staff can arrange access to services such as temporary shelter, emergency grocery aid, transportation, hospital accompaniment, and legal representation. They also coordinate with tribal and state officials if survivors want to pursue restraining orders, custody hearings, or criminal charges.

Over time, ONE FIRE has expanded its focus beyond immediate crisis assistance to offer services that support longer-term recovery. Wellness programming includes therapy sessions, life skills classes, and job search assistance. Cultural healing is a cornerstone of ONE FIRE’s offerings. Cherokee artists provide traditional pottery, basket weaving, and jewelry-making classes to provide clients with a creative outlet. Survivors also can work with certified art therapists who

use culturally grounded and scientifically based techniques to aid in recovery from trauma. Equine therapy, one of the most popular ONE FIRE offerings, helps transform many survivors' conceptions of self-worth through meaningful interactions with horses.

In the past eight years, ONE FIRE has served over 1,800 victims. Approximately two-thirds of the program's clients are tribal citizens, and over half are children. ONE FIRE has experienced growth in demand every year, with an increase of over 25 percent when the COVID-19 pandemic forced people to spend more time at home. In 2020, the program moved from the tribal administration building to a dedicated stand-alone facility, allowing greater privacy for client counseling and additional programming space. In 2021, using federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funding, the Cherokee Nation began the work to open a 12-unit transitional housing center for individuals and families in need of emergency or other victimization-related short-term accommodation.

Beyond the statistics and programmatic growth, each survivor's story is a testament to ONE FIRE's importance in transforming individual lives. In the grateful words of one victim, "The advocate listened to me, let me cry, and showed me what compassion was."

LIFE-CHANGING SUPPORT

Cherokee tradition holds that its citizens originate from "one fire," a belief that they are one people with a duty to care for each other. As a tribal victim service organization, ONE FIRE's approach is based on the power of mentoring relationships, which is a familiar Cherokee learning model. In contrast to standard procedures elsewhere, survivors are not required to press charges nor commit to specific steps to receive assistance. It may even take multiple interventions before a client is ready to make significant changes. ONE FIRE supports this journey. ONE FIRE also targets intergenerational trauma. Safety plans and healing programs include children and families, providing support as these victims jointly address the damaging situations they have experienced. In ONE FIRE's service provision mission and model, community connection and trust-building are paramount.

At its core, the idea behind ONE FIRE is simple: prioritizing clients and breaking down silos between government departments help individuals in crisis receive timely and targeted care. This cost-effective approach brings together piecemeal resources and helps identify gaps in services. For example, through experience supporting survivors, the staff knew they needed more services targeting domestic instability. ONE FIRE now focuses on comprehensive programming that

addresses complex trauma and equips survivors to break the intergenerational cycle of violence. ONE FIRE also can scale its services up or down depending on demand and funding availability—although the hope is to eventually eliminate the need for domestic violence services.

ONE FIRE’s integration with departments and agencies across the Cherokee Nation is a model of what can be done with a commitment to victim services at the highest levels of government. The program has an especially noteworthy partnership with Cherokee Nation law enforcement. Marshals invite ONE FIRE advocates to accompany them to domestic altercations. Law enforcement officers can then focus effectively on the job they are trained to do while survivors, who typically feel more at ease speaking with an advocate, have ONE FIRE to help with their specialized needs. Similarly, ONE FIRE helps the tribal judicial process work more efficiently by supporting survivors through proceedings that can be intimidating, overwhelming, and emotional. If a client must go to court, ONE FIRE helps them navigate the requirements. Advocates explain various options, gather relevant documents, and prepare survivors for court appearances. With the support of the program, survivors’ interests no longer get lost in the shuffle.

Through ONE FIRE, the Cherokee Nation has taken a leadership role in responding to domestic violence. By offering victim services to all residents regardless of tribal citizenship, the Nation affirms its governmental authority within its jurisdictional area. ONE FIRE proactively cooperates with state officials and other domestic violence organizations to manage the complicated jurisdictional status within its territory. In 2020, the *McGirt vs. Oklahoma* decision affirmed tribal jurisdiction in eastern Oklahoma, resulting in a significant increase in Cherokee Nation tribal court cases. This has made the availability of an effective tribal victim services agency even more crucial. With its strong track record, the ONE FIRE program is well-positioned to continue its unwavering support for survivors throughout the Cherokee Nation Reservation.

Breaking the cycle of abusive relationships is critical to the future of the Cherokee Nation. With a dedicated, tribally-managed victim service program, the Nation is sending a strong signal that domestic violence must be eradicated on its territory. ONE FIRE stands out for its client-focused approach, which restores dignity to survivors who have been through intense suffering. In addition to ensuring safety during a crisis, ONE FIRE helps connect survivors to services and cultural resources to support them as they rebuild their lives in a healthy way.

LESSONS

1. Serving all people—Native and non-Native, women and men—within their community helps governments bolster tribal sovereignty and achieve greater community wellness.
2. Wraparound, comprehensive services that cross departmental boundaries enable clients to access timely and targeted care while also decreasing costly redundancies.
3. Providing trauma-informed care that is both culturally relevant and wellness-focused offers clients tools that support longer-term recovery.