

Zuya Yuha O'mani

Evaluation Brief



The Oglala Lakota Children's Justice Center (OLCJC), formerly known as Oglala Lakota Court Appointed Special Advocate (OLCASA), leads the *Zuya Yuha O'mani* Program, which focuses on supporting the healing of Lakota children who have experienced physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. *Zuya Yuha O'mani* means "Walking Everywhere in Spiritual Strength/Defense of the Children." The program serves **Wakanyeja** (sacred little ones¹) and their **Tiospaye** (extended family) in the nine districts of the Pine Ridge Reservation.

OLCJC was founded as a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization with the mission of protecting and advocating for the best interests of Lakota children who have experienced sexual and physical abuse while their cases were being adjudicated in the court system. Advocating on behalf of children who have been traumatized by abuse and supporting healing and wellness through tradition and culture are core to OLCJC services. OLCJC staff believe in the importance of combining the lessons from the historical past, cultural traditions, and contemporary methods of treatment to bring healing to the children and people of the community. Cultural teachings and ceremony are critical components of the program and are used to support children and families in healing and building cultural resilience to prevent future abuse. The role of the program in the lives of families and the community includes increasing awareness and education on the issues of child abuse, providing a holistic approach to supporting children who have experienced abuse or neglect, and serving as advocates for children. The program receives referrals from organizations

ABOUT THE CENTER

The Children's Bureau (CB) funded the Center for Native Child and Family Resilience (the Center) to gather and disseminate information about Tribally relevant practice models, interventions, and services that contribute substantially to child maltreatment prevention efforts and family resilience developed by and for American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) populations. The Center partnered with five project sites for four years (2019–2022) to design or refine, implement, and evaluate their child maltreatment prevention/intervention programs for AI/AN children and families. This brief summarizes lessons and findings from the project-driven evaluation conducted with OLCJC in support of building evidence for Tribally led child welfare initiatives.

and the Court, but families often seek out the OLCJC team for assistance on their own accord.

About the Program

The *Zuya Yuha O'mani* Program uses lessons from the history of the Oglala Lakota people and contemporary methods combined with traditional customs, language, and ceremonies to provide comprehensive and holistic advocacy for every Wakanyeja and their Tiospaye. The program provides a range

¹ For the Lakota people, children are sacred. "Children" or "sacred little ones" are common Western translations of Wakanyeja. The word is essentially two parts: **Wakan** (holy or sacred) and **yeja** (to mix one's blood to create the child). To be sacred is to be treated as a gift from spirit, as precious ones who are our future.



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of services—including forensic interviews, counseling, culturally appropriate case management and advocacy, and cultural teachings—that heal and protect children who have been traumatized by physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. The *Zuya Yuha O'mani* Program employs traditional Lakota customs, language, and ceremony to provide comprehensive and holistic advocacy for children. The goal is to create a better way of life for the Wakanyeja and **Tiwahe** (families) in crisis by helping them reclaim their heritage, identity, and self-esteem by emphasizing the development of cultural competence and identity to promote child and family well-being. The program's cultural teachings are an antidote to forced assimilation and failed efforts to extinguish Lakota culture, using the medicine of the Lakota culture to heal injuries from forced assimilation and ongoing manifestations of trauma. One community knowledge bearer described how the Pine Ridge Reservation has undergone a cultural renaissance in the past four decades, such that ceremony and culture have gained positive recognition and schools have incorporated Lakota traditions, such as beginning the day with a prayer and song. This revival has generated hope for the promising role of culture in prevention and healing.

At the core of the *Zuya Yuha O'mani* Program is the Lakota creation story and cosmology: In the beginning, the Creator gave the people assignments, rights, and ways for living on the land and with each other. People's primary responsibility was caring for the community, especially for the children and elders. The community and the prayers of the Lakota develop relationships beyond the traditional Western nuclear family, including extended family and bringing in other teachers, other helpers, and other caregivers, as the child's needs dictate. The Lakota people believe that, in the spirit world, children choose parents that they see as a resource for them to grow. When a family is gifted with a child, the family



is given the great responsibility of caring for them, helping the child to develop their special skills and blessings.

As an organization, OLCJC champions the 2007 Wakanyeja Na Tiwahe Ta Woose² (Child and Families Code of the Oglala Sioux Tribe/Lakota Nation, or “the Code”).³ In support of the Nation's distinctive identity, culture, and values, the Code defines Lakota kinship and interaction as well as using Lakota ways to care for and protect children. Part of OLCJC's current mission is to provide education on the Code to people who operate within federal, state, and Tribal child welfare jurisdictions, describing the Code's history, development, and components. This continued education promotes increased understanding and compliance with the Tribal Code and the Seven Traditional Laws, as the community faces turnover among officials. The Code is comprehensive and, like the Lakota Creation Story, provides guiding principles for the work of OLCJC. For example, children removed from the home are placed in accordance with the Indian Child Welfare Act and Tribal law—that is, placed in Indian homes and with all possible efforts made to reunify children with their

² “Woose means ‘law,’ though it does not have the same connotations that the term ‘law’ has in the Anglo-American tradition; it is not ‘just’ Laws. It represents that Women come from Wo Ope and as such are responsible for carrying the laws of Creation within the Universe, the World, their Nation, and most importantly in their homes. Without woman, there could be no life. So, women are instructed to uphold the laws without gossip or favoritism, and men are instructed to honor and provide protection to the family through diligence in prayer. Thus, men provide and initiate ceremony for their loved ones for the rest of their lives as a responsibility” (Larry Swalley, via email, November 2, 2023).

³ As with many federally recognized Tribes, the Oglala Sioux Tribe has developed its own Tribal Court and law and code. Tribal codes help to legally maintain cultural practices and beliefs and “ensure the preservation of Tribal sovereignty and the right of Natives to be judged within their own systems, not subject to the biases and prejudices of Western thought” (Thurman, P.J. (1995). Native American Community Alcohol Prevention Research. In P.A. Langton (Ed.), *The Challenge of participatory research: Preventing alcohol-related problems in ethnic communities* (CSAP Cultural Competence Series 3). Rockville, MD: Center for Substance Abuse Prevention. 245-258.). As a part of law and code development, Tribes determine standards for rights based on beliefs and priorities, including rights of the individual and kin group. Research within Indigenous communities is improved when efforts are made to understand the nature and intent of Tribal codes.

families. The Code also provides guidance to the community with specific information on the traditional laws governing decisions affecting children (Oyate Ta Woose). The traditional laws are intended to support the retention of traditional practices, rooted in the history of the people, the language, and the belief in living harmoniously with the natural world. Working in alignment with Lakota values, the OLCJC team members use the Traditional Laws, as communicated in the Code, as the foundation of and guide for services provided.

Traditional Laws to Govern Decisions Affecting Children (Oyate Ta Woose)⁴

TRADITIONAL LAW	MEANING
Wocekiye "faithfulness"	To believe in and pray to Tunkasila, or Wakan Tanka (the Great Spirit), as the supreme being and power and as the creator of all that is. Wakan Tanka gave the people seven sacred ceremonies as means of cleansing themselves and seeking guidance and direction from the Great Spirit.
Wowacinksape "wisdom"	To be sound in mind and to acquire the knowledge necessary to make proper and effective decisions for the well-being of the people.
Wonagiksape "spirituality"	To be sound in spirit and to live according to the laws, direction, and guidance of Tunkasila.
Wowacintanka "fortitude"	To exercise self-control and discipline, and to have the strength of mind to endure pain and adversity.
Wowaunsila "generosity"	To look after the well-being of others, and to share one's knowledge and materials so that others may prosper.
Wawoyuonihan "respect"	To respect oneself and the rights, beliefs, and decisions of others.
Wowahokunkiye "guidance and counseling"	To advise, counsel, and guide others in the proper ways and beliefs of the people, especially the youth.

How We Served the Community

The CNCFR team provided programmatic support to OLCJC, which aimed to systematically document existing services and service delivery pathways. Functioning as a community-based entity, OLCJC addresses a spectrum of service needs in the community, providing both formal and informal services. Through the creation of practice maps, the CNCFR team aided the OLCJC team in developing visual aids showcasing the Lakol Wicohan (Lakota Way of Life) as well as outlining the workflow practices of OLCJC team members, which include intake, case management, and traditional service delivery. Collaborating closely with OLCJC partners, the team contributed to the formulation of a comprehensive program manual that delineates the operational aspects of the program. This manual is intended to serve as a resource for other Tribes, facilitating potential replication of the program in the future. To support further dissemination, the team worked in concert with the OLCJC leadership to develop a [video](#) of the story of the program to assist the community in sharing the message about their program and vision for change for the Lakota people.

4 Oglala Sioux Child and Family Code

Children and Families—A Glimpse Along the Path

At the center of the story of this evaluation are the experiences of the children, families, and caregivers that embarked upon the path of healing with the help and support of OLCJC. As the Center team sought advice from OLCJC’s director on how best to frame our findings and the indicators of healing experienced by children and families during the evaluation, she expressed that they should be viewed with a strength-based lens and used the phrase “positive possibilities” to describe how she viewed positive change in children that have experienced unimaginable traumas. These positive possibilities are snapshots in time that highlight an ever-evolving journey toward healing.

Ultimately, four families participated in the evaluation interviews, for a total of six child interviews, two caretaker interviews, and two observations. Families with two children were provided the opportunity for the siblings to be interviewed together. The ages of the children at the time of interviews ranged between 7 and 16. All interviews were conducted over Zoom due to COVID-19 precautions and community constraints on contact at the time the information was gathered. Children were asked to discuss activities they enjoy, people they like to spend time with, and their feelings about Lakota teachings and ceremonies as well as their experiences with services provided by OLCJC team members. Caregivers were asked similar questions about their experiences with OLCJC services.

[The children] were more antsy and I think Zoom had a lot to do with it, too, because it was during COVID and Pine Ridge was shut down. We had no gatherings. We weren’t allowed to be in-person. Families didn’t even want us to come in the homes and do the interview I think Zoom affected it a lot.

— OLCJC Interviewer

All of the children that participated in the evaluation experienced severe trauma, including emotional, spiritual, sexual, and physical abuse. Children were exposed to violence, including the

murder of a parent by the other parent in one case; experienced neglect that was associated with parental substance use issues and poverty; and had been traumatized by being removed from their homes and parents. Children were most often referred to the program by local courts and associated victim services and child protection agencies.

Despite very difficult circumstances and experiences, the children demonstrated **Wowacintanka** (fortitude) as they showed great strength of mind, body, and spirit in enduring great pain and adversity. Children reported they were involved in positive developmental activities, including sports, recreational outdoor activities (e.g., swimming, sledding), and video games. Similarly, caregivers sought to keep the children active in their educational work and sports. When children had free time, they played and connected with extended family and animals they cherished. One child reported making bracelets for friends. While seemingly mundane, connecting with a friend or engaging in educational

THE CENTER’S APPROACH TO EVALUATION

Planning and implementing evaluations involved a collaborative and participatory process governed by the Tribal projects, their participants, and communities, with support from the Center team. This included developing culturally grounded and Tribally driven research questions, methodologies, and instruments. Evaluation work was grounded in Indigenous Ways of Knowing (IWOK) and sought to honor Indigenous ways of communication, incorporate cultural values, and integrate traditional knowledge gathering passed down through generations. To this end, the project team engaged with community members; sought the wisdom of Elders; participated in the oral tradition, storytelling, and ceremonies; and committed to keeping community values and context at the center of the work.



or physical pursuits embodies Lakota traditions and demonstrates important healing after deep traumas. They show the presence of **Wowacinksape** (wisdom) and **Wowausnila** (generosity) as they venture onto the path of healing. After working with a child and family, the presence of positive possibilities as termed by the OLCJC Executive Director reflect children’s ability to heal and she sees Lakota virtues in those possibilities:

I think it’s like nurturance, being able to nurture their education. They’re giving back, giving back, modeling those teachings . . . and then the virtues, like bravery, fortitude, wisdom, generosity.

OLCJC views these attributes in the emergence of children’s interest in participating in everyday activities as strong indicators that exposure to the program and its focus on ceremony and Lakota tradition is working to heal acute and intergenerational wounds.

Children living their traditions and having the self-esteem to persist despite deep trauma exemplifies the promise of the program; going to school, engaging in kinship, being physically active, and showing interest in connecting to one’s identity and community are powerful examples of positive change. The lead Case Manager/Cultural Provider, shared what he looks for in healing:

So, when you see them and they look like, or they speak as if they have a sense of self-esteem, that’s a really good, good thing.

Moreover, child protective factors like cultural teachings emerged as important themes in the interviews with children after engaging

with program services. Children learned the importance of **Wonagiksape** (spirituality) and the power of Lakota tradition in healing from trauma. Children enjoyed learning about their Lakota identity and traditions through song and ceremony. Some of the children interviewed had been in the process of grieving and healing for several years, while others had more recent experiences. For those that experienced trauma more recently, the COVID restrictions for OLCJC prevented the team from offering the ceremonies in the manner previously done.

Even so, children and families were exposed to some Lakota ceremony and song, and caregivers helped extend teachings about the Lakota ways at home. In talking about their children’s exposure to Lakota lifeways, one caregiver noted that due to having learned:

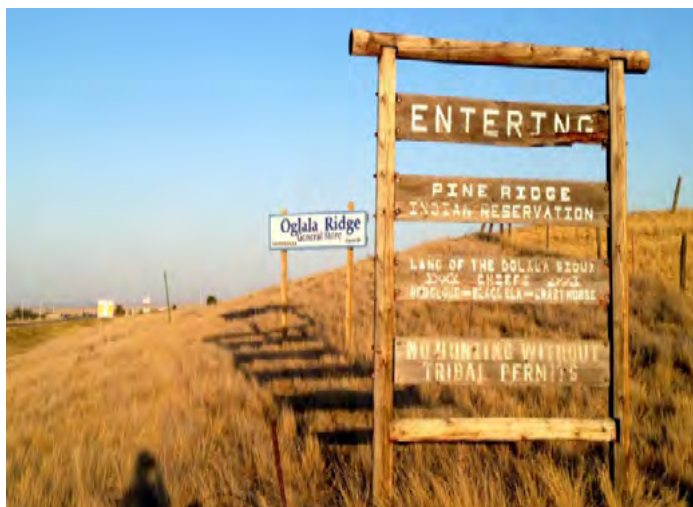
Lakota teachings [the children] know how to smudge, and the youngest is in a half emergent program. [The OLCJC Director] introduced them to a sweat lodge, they’re interested, and they want to do it, COVID has just stopped it.

While the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted OLCJC’s capacity to provide more encompassing in person exposure to language, culture, song, and ceremony, even in a limited capacity it resonated with children and caretakers. One child exemplifies this important point and the promise of culture as healing medicine when speaking about their newfound ethnic pride and self-esteem, “I learned to love being Indigenous, like to love that part.”

While the community was in isolation, OLCJC provided cultural teachings by other means, including gifting to the children and families and providing online opportunities for interaction. Ceremonies held virtually or at a distance still had positive effects; one caregiver shared that what they appreciated was:

the whole ceremony; I loved the singing, the dancing, the words said, the wisdom—there was so much wisdom in that hour or two or whatever it was. The things he said it was really good. I really liked it and I talked about it a lot.

To keep families connected during the pandemic the OLCJC team also engaged in other activities through Zoom, including offering an option for online yoga classes—which like Lakota traditions seeks to foster the connection between mind, body, and spirit for





children. Children and caregivers spoke highly of their experiences doing yoga online and the benefits of being exposed to yoga, including one child who said, “Yoga makes me feel good,” and another child who said, “Yoga helped me release energy.” One caregiver said the following of the yoga sessions:

I love the yoga sessions. They think it is the funniest thing—I would have never thought that about them. [The kids] love it; they laugh and giggle and when it’s over we turn the zoom off they have to do it themselves and they giggle . . . I was surprised. I didn’t think they were going to like it.

When the children were asked about changes in themselves since they started working with the OLCJC team, they often described the things they liked to do and the people they are connected to. For example, one child said, “I talk more with my caregiver.” Children reported they were optimistic, happy, and enjoyed their grandparents’ cooking—even just laughing with friends. The children consistently reported positive aspects of their life, including those focused on relationships with family, siblings, and animals.

Caregivers echoed the statements of the children, adding that as the children healed, they were more willing and better able to connect with friends and relatives as well. Caregivers described activities that children engaged in, which primarily centered around family being together and doing chores or work together as a family. They also described positive experiences with the children when they have friends over and when they can have one-on-one conversations. Caregiver responses, further demonstrate the promise of the program as kids learn and exemplify Lakota values like **Wawayuonihan** (respect) by engaging in kinship and learning and acting upon their responsibilities within the context of their families and community. In speaking about the impact of the program on the siblings she cares for, one caregiver said, that the:

one thing it did for the boys is [the OLCJC staff] coming into their life when their dad was taken from them and their mom was taken from them and there wasn’t just a lot of happy going on in their life because they were having to talk to FBI Agents, trauma counselors, and they were having to adjust to a new home. OLCJC staff had called me one day and she asked do the boys need backpacks, and I was like sure. She said bring them in and I said OK and took them in. She

just made them feel like kids again. At that time, she made me realize that yeah these are kids, not that I didn’t know we were just so like this with FBI trauma counselors, that I think we were slipping away from making sure they were ok. OLCJC staff treated them like they were normal little kids coming in to get backpacks.

Caregivers talked about the kind nature of the staff and what they bring to the community and program. Arlana and the program provide **Wawahokunkiye** (guidance and counseling) to children and families in need; she shows them through her actions proper Lakota ways and beliefs. They describe her as being patient, supportive and caring. The OLCJC Director provides a consistent reminder for caregivers to find patience in the children they care for, reminding the caregivers that they are working children who, at times, are facing overwhelming and adult situations like court appearances and law enforcement involvement. One caregiver said the following about the Director’s approach:

Pay attention to her and her teachings because she has a different way of teaching, she has a conversational way of teaching. That’s important: she puts people at ease, she puts me at ease. She was the first person I turned to during the tragedy without even a thought process, and I don’t really trust anybody. I trust her and I trust what she tells me. I’ve had over 30 years of exposure with her and kids.

What We Learned

In our many site visits, calls, and project gatherings, we learned about OLCJC, its services, and what it means to the community. We had countless informal opportunities to hear stories and engage with Elders and staff about the history of the program and its impact on children, families, and the community. We want to highlight some of these stories here, as an illustration of the program’s legacy and standing in the community and to show how they act as shepherds along the Red Road for intergenerational healing. This kind of healing takes time, more time than an evaluation could encapsulate; OLCJC’s work has stood the test of time and it is best demonstrated through their words and the words of their staff and the Elders that have shaped the program over the years.



In our culture, we don't close cases, we see them through. In two weeks, I will tie the eagle feather for someone I work with, and I will in effect become her father. Child protection services won't be involved anymore. But I will be.

— Lead Case Manager/Cultural Provider

As a nonprofit organization, OLCJC is not contracted by federal, state, or Tribal government; its mission of advocating for children is distinct and offers the program autonomy in responding to the needs of traumatized children. For example, local social service agency staff experience turnover, Tribal administrations transition, partners show reluctance to collaborate, and community circumstances otherwise evolve. Yet, OLCJC staff are in some ways the “glue” in the community and forge relationships with cultural competency, trust, and respect. For example, one family said that OLCJC staff had continued to work with them through eight different case workers from the child welfare system. OLCJC works in Lakota ways, establishing a relational bond through ceremony that creates an ongoing responsibility. Once a case is opened, OLCJC supports the child and non-offending family members throughout their lives as needed. Often, the relationship between OLCJC staff and families evolves from a professional relationship into a personal relationship, and this seals a lifetime connection.

An Elder and active board member who has had a deep connection to the program since its inception, visited with the CNCFR team during a recent trip to Pine Ridge. We were fortunate enough to enjoy a meal together and spent several hours together sharing stories about the program, his family, his history, and the power of ceremony and Lakota traditions. He said the following about the program:

I'm really glad that we have a place [like OLCJC] that provides for the children, looks out for children, and watches over them. And I think we need about 20 of these places on the reservation, 20 of these programs on the reservation, but we've only got this one. I try to provide at least what I can to assist in the development. It's really been a good journey.

The Elder shared the vision for the program and how the Cultural Provider carries out that vision, helping to contribute to a child's journey of healing through ceremony:

I really like [the Cultural Provider] being there because [he] knows how to do the ceremonies. That's kind of what we envisioned about this program is the way that a person can assist the family through ceremony It's something you can feel it. You go into different places like the sweat lodge and you go there to honor the people who were Especially whenever they call on the spirits in these calling songs, they come in and assist you and help you out with whatever issue that you have.

We, the CNCFR team, hoped to hear more healing stories directly from children and families; to some extent we did. However, what we gathered formally and within the evaluation period is a mere slice of the deep work that OLCJC does to sustain and improve the fabric of the community. The program, like Lakota cosmology, honors the interconnection of all things; it does not stop when leadership leaves the OLCJC office at the end of the day. It is a way of life, not a job. Center staff witnessed this type of attention to relationality and interconnectedness during our visits in person and virtually. We saw one OLCJC staff get up early and provide education to a school on the creation story, and another staff spending a long weekend out in the fields harvesting medicine for ceremonies meant to heal children and families. We heard about staff intervening among youth involved in an altercation, using Lakota ways to ease tensions and bring parents and children together in a loving way. We witnessed a Lakota naming ceremony; another sacred ceremony and tradition being revitalized by the OLCJC leadership. These are the intangible, sometimes informal experiences that demonstrate the effectiveness of the OLCJC's program. It's an effectiveness beyond intervening upon child maltreatment. It's the effectiveness of being role models to the community, of being advocates, champions, and caretakers of Lakota lifeways for the community. The positive effect ripples out to others, and moment by moment, experience by experience, OLCJC staff are working to decolonize and empower children, families, and the community. It is the embodiment of resilience, of showing up for one's community despite difficult circumstances, histories, and experiences.



Commitment of the Program Leadership

OLCJC creates connection or as the Director stated, “positive possibilities.” The program creates opportunities for people to connect to their ways and addresses trauma in a way that is congruent with their traditions. Within the context of seemingly endless challenges, showing children and families a path forward provides hope, and their goal remains a steadfast commitment to creating a thriving community by using Lakota teachings to get upstream of trauma. Arlana supported this premise when she said:

We don't want to have to keep being resilient. We want to be thriving. We want to be thriving. We hope to teach and provide those teachings and stableness to the child victims that you don't carry that abuse with you. That abuse does not define who you are . . . This is who you are. And we're helping that by yes, this healing, from the point of trauma throughout healing. We're also helping this by having these discoveries of us people as who we are . . . to provide that nurturing, safe environment and bring you to this healing so you don't have to go through some of those things that we went through. And so, that's how we're doing it.



Acknowledgements

The [Center for Native Child and Family Resilience](#) (CNCFR) includes staff from [JBS International, Inc.](#) (JBS), the [Tribal Law and Policy Institute](#) (TLPI), [Mathematica](#), and [L&M Policy Research](#) (L&M). The Center partnered with five project sites to design or refine, implement, and evaluate their child maltreatment prevention or intervention programs for AI/AN children and families. This document summarizes the Evaluation Report, which was the work of:

Zuya Yuha O’mani Program

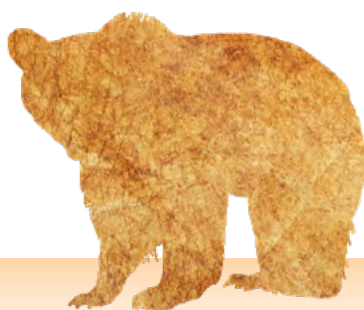
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Resources

The following products about the program were developed through the Center/[OLCJC](#) partnership:

- [The Zuya Yuha O’mani Program Implementation Guide](#)
- [The Zuya Yuha O’mani Program Manual](#)
- The Zuya Yuha O’mani Program Evaluation Report