IPP Name: Two Feathers Native American Family Services

CDEP Name: A.C.O.R.N Youth Wellness

Priority Population: Native American

Location evaluation time period: May 2023-May 2025

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Executive Summary:

The California Reducing Disparities Project (CRDP) is a statewide initiative established to reduce longstanding mental health inequities among five priority populations: African American, Latino/x, Native American, Asian and Pacific Islander, and LGBTQ+ communities. Phase 1 of CRDP (2009–2015) focused on developing population-specific reports documenting community-identified disparities and culturally grounded solutions. These reports emphasized that Native American communities consistently identified cultural disconnection—resulting from historical trauma, assimilation policies, and structural inequities—as a primary driver of mental health challenges, and highlighted the need to restore access to ceremonies, land-based practices, and intergenerational relationships as pathways for healing.

CRDP Phase 2 (2016–present) expanded this work by investing in community-defined evidence practices (CDEPs) that operationalize cultural knowledge as mental health intervention. Two Feathers Native American Family Services was selected as a Native American Implementation Pilot Project (IPP) to develop, strengthen, and evaluate a CDEP grounded in ancestral practices from Northwest California Tribes. Funded through the Mental Health Services Act, this project represents a multi-year effort to implement and validate culturally centered programming for Native youth within local tribal communities.

CDEP Purpose and Description

The Two Feathers A.C.O.R.N Youth Wellness Program—anchored in the ancestral practices of the Stick Game and the Flower Dance—was designed as a culturally grounded early intervention and prevention program aimed at reducing mental health disparities for Native youth. The program reconnects youth to ceremony, cultural knowledge holders, and intergenerational community networks to build hope, belonging, and resilience. These practices serve as protective factors that buffer against historical trauma, foster emotional regulation, strengthen family and community relationships, and reinforce Native identity.

The program is organized around the five culturally defined domains of health and wellness developed through Community Advisory Committee collaboration:

- A – Appreciation of Our Whole Selves: physical conditioning, self-regulation, body awareness, and preparation for ceremonial roles.
- C – Connecting Community, Language, and Culture: intertribal gatherings, elder mentorship, ceremonial teaching, and community relationships.
- O – Opportunity and Access: removing logistical and socioeconomic barriers to participation, providing transportation, materials, and mentorship.

- R – Relationships with Others: structured environments for prosocial development, practicing respect, gratitude, accountability, and community belonging.
- N – Nurturing Nature and Spirit: land-based learning, gathering materials, visiting ceremonial places, language teachings related to place and ancestors.

Phase 1 to Phase 2 Growth

Across project phases, the CDEP evolved significantly:

- Expanded program dosage: Phase 1 focused on establishing program structure; Phase 2 increased the number of workshops, camps, and ceremonial preparation opportunities, including year-round Stick Game conditioning and expanded Flower Dance regalia-making gatherings.
- Strengthened cultural leadership pipeline: Phase 2 formalized mentoring relationships between elders, cultural leaders, and emerging youth mentors.
- Scaled intertribal collaboration: More Tribal communities (Wiyot, Yurok, Hupa, Karuk, Tolowa) engaged directly in programming and cultural events.
- Refined evaluation strategy: Phase 2 integrated more robust mixed-methods evaluation including longitudinal tracking, expanded thematic analysis, and enhanced youth voice in interpretation.
- Increased youth leadership opportunities: Youth began participating in community presentations, assisting in ceremonial roles, and serving as peer mentors.
- Greater community involvement: Families, extended kin networks, and cultural practitioners increasingly joined workshops, supporting community-wide healing.

Through these expansions, ACORN transformed from a developing CDEP (Phase 1) into a comprehensive, multi-component cultural wellness program capable of producing measurable mental health outcomes (Phase 2).

Evaluation Questions

- To what extent is our programming impacting Native youths' sense of hope and belonging?
- To what extent are youth engaging with culture?
- To what extent are youth engaging with programming?

Evaluation Research Design

The evaluation used a mixed-methods framework consistent with Indigenous research methodologies and CBPR principles:

Quantitative Data

- Pre- and post-surveys

- Demographic data
- Attendance and engagement tracking

Qualitative Data

- Focus groups
- Individual interviews
- Youth narrative reflections
- Thematic analysis conducted collaboratively with cultural consultants and the Cultural Programming Team
    - This design ensured that measurement tools aligned with cultural values while capturing both measurable behavior change and the deeper relational, emotional, and spiritual impacts the CDEP was designed to foster.

Key Findings

1. Cultural Connection as a Central Pathway to Healing

Youth consistently reported that participation in Stick Game, Flower Dance workshops, and Make It Stronger programming strengthened their understanding of culture, language, and community expectations. Culture was experienced not as an “add-on,” but as the foundation for wellness.

2. Increased Sense of Hope and Belonging

Survey data and interviews revealed gains in:

- Hope for the future
- Sense of identity
- Self-confidence
- Connection to peers, mentors, and cultural leaders
    - Youth explicitly named culture as the reason they continued to participate.

3. Community and Intergenerational Relationships Strengthened

Youth described developing stronger relationships with:

- Elders
- Staff mentors
- Peers
- Ceremonial leaders
    - Families reported observing positive behavioral changes including improved emotional regulation and prosocial engagement.

4. Engagement with Cultural Practice Increased Substantially

Youth participated in:

- Running, strength training, and ceremonial preparation
- Regalia making
- Material gathering (hazel, acorns, salmon, maple, etc.)
- Stick Game mentorship and tournaments
- Flower Dance dress-making, singing, and running
    - These experiences built confidence and reinforced cultural identity.

5. The Journey Toward Belongingness Was a Distinct Outcome

Themes indicated that belongingness was not instantaneous; it unfolded through repeated participation, mentorship, and relationship-building. Youth described “becoming part of something,” “finding where I fit,” and “feeling connected when I’m with community.”

6. Connection to Culture = Connection to Community

A core theme across interviews was that culture and community were inseparable. Cultural practice served as a mechanism for rebuilding community relationships disrupted by historical trauma.

Conclusions

The ACORN Youth Wellness Program demonstrates that culturally grounded prevention strategies promote measurable improvements in youth hope, belonging, wellness, and cultural identity. The CDEP successfully reestablishes intergenerational pathways for cultural transmission and strengthens community capacity to support youth mental health. Youth consistently identify Two Feathers as a trusted cultural leader and safe place to learn, grow, and reconnect. Historical trauma continues to impact Native youth, but cultural revitalization offers a powerful counterbalance that reduces isolation, increases wellness, and strengthens resilience.

Introduction/Literature Review:

Native American youth continue to experience profound and persistent disparities across nearly every indicator of health and well-being in the United States. More than one in three Native youth live in poverty—nearly double the national average (Center for Native American Youth, 2016) —and suicide remains the second leading cause of death among American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) youth and young adults ages 10–34, occurring at rates approximately 2.5 times higher than for non-Hispanic White populations (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, 2025). Violence accounts for an estimated 75% of deaths among Native youth ages 12–20 (Indian Law Resource Center, 2014). These outcomes reflect not isolated challenges, but enduring structural inequities affecting access to health care, housing, education, and culturally responsive mental health services.

The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified these long-standing disparities and magnified vulnerabilities within Native communities. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), AI/AN people experienced COVID-19 infection, hospitalization, and mortality rates significantly higher than White, non-Hispanic populations, with higher hospitalization and death rates than any other racial or ethnic group (Akee & Reber, 2021)(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). AI/AN individuals not only died at approximately twice the rate of White populations, but also at younger ages, resulting in disproportionate losses of caregivers, parents, and Elders. In 2020, CDC analyses found that mortality disparities were greatest among younger adults, with AI/AN individuals ages 20–49 experiencing COVID-19 mortality rates up to 11 times those of White individuals in the same age groups (Arrazola, Masiello, Josi, et.al., 2020).

These losses have had devastating consequences for Native youth. The National Institutes of Health estimate that nearly one in 500 children nationwide experienced COVID-19–associated orphanhood or caregiver loss, with children from racial and ethnic minority communities accounting for approximately 65% of these losses (Watson, 2021). AI/AN children experienced the highest rate of caregiver loss of any racial or ethnic group, with approximately one in every 168 Native children losing a primary caregiver due to the pandemic (Watson, 2021). Within Native communities—where Elders play critical roles as cultural knowledge holders, ceremonial leaders, and anchors of intergenerational continuity—these deaths represent not only personal loss, but collective cultural trauma. Scholars and community leaders have described this phenomenon as a “cultural crisis,” marked by the sudden removal

of individuals essential to the transmission of language, ceremony, kinship systems, and traditional teachings (Healy, 2021).

The pandemic compounded already elevated rates of mental health challenges among Native youth, including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, school disengagement, foster care involvement, and juvenile justice system contact. National estimates indicate that approximately 22% of AI/AN children experience post-traumatic stress disorder, a rate that equals or exceeds that of U.S. combat veterans (Administration for Native Americans, 2021). In December 2020, *Time Magazine* reported growing concern among public health officials and mental health providers regarding a potential pandemic-related increase in suicide among Indigenous youth, noting that youth suicide rates nationwide had nearly tripled among children ages 10–14 over the previous decade and warning that pandemic-related isolation, economic stress, and disruption of community supports could further elevate risk among Indigenous populations (Reardon, 2020).

These contemporary disparities cannot be understood outside the context of colonialism as an ongoing structure that has systematically targeted Native peoples—particularly Native children—for removal, assimilation, and cultural erasure. In California, the historical record documents a concerted campaign of genocide, enslavement, and displacement that resulted in the death of over 90% of the state's Indigenous population between 1770 and 1900 (Cook, 1976). This depopulation occurred through what scholars describe as three overlapping waves of destruction: the Spanish Mission system; the ranching and trading economy following the Mexican-American War; and the California Gold Rush, during which state-sanctioned violence, enslavement laws, and militia campaigns explicitly authorized the killing and forced labor of Native people (Johnston-Dodds, 2002). Historical records from Northern California reveal that children—particularly girls between the ages of 7 and 12—were disproportionately targeted.

Following these periods of overt violence, federal and state governments turned toward policies of surveillance and forced assimilation, including the construction of military forts on or near reservations and the establishment of the Indian boarding school system. These institutions imposed rigid controls over Native movement, labor, and family life while criminalizing cultural and spiritual practices (Nelson Jr, 1988). Boarding schools were explicitly designed to "Kill the Indian, save the man," forcibly removing Native children from their homes, prohibiting the use of Indigenous languages, cutting hair, renaming children, and severing cultural and familial ties (Hollins, 1996). Attendance was made compulsory, with federal authorities empowered to withhold rations and resources from families who resisted.

The traumatic legacy of the boarding school era persists today. Recent investigations have documented unmarked graves and widespread abuse at boarding school sites across the United States, prompting the launch of the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative in 2021 to investigate cemeteries and burial sites associated with federal Indian schools (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2021). Native survivors, educators, scholars, and healers continue to emphasize that the impacts of these policies are carried not only psychologically, but also physically and epigenetically across generations (Brennan, 2021). Indigenous researchers conceptualize this phenomenon as historical trauma—defined as the collective emotional and psychological injury resulting from cataclysmic events of genocide and cultural destruction—while also emphasizing inherited strength, resistance, resilience, and survivance (Yellow Horse Brave Heart, 1999).

Despite these realities, mainstream mental health systems continue to privilege Western, deficit-based, and individually focused "evidence-based" practices that frequently fail to reflect Indigenous values, worldviews, or pathways to healing (Linklater, 2014). Indigenous health systems long predate Western medicine and are grounded in sophisticated, land-based knowledge systems that understand health as relational—integrating mental, physical, spiritual, emotional, and community well-being. Indigenous approaches emphasize multiple interlocking causes of illness and healing, recognizing the central role of community, ceremony, and cultural continuity (Mehl-Madrona, 2007). Increasing evidence demonstrates that engagement in cultural practices, relationships with Elders and caring adults, and strong community support function as powerful protective factors for Native youth, supporting resilience and adaptive functioning even under conditions of significant adversity (Gone & Trimble, 2012) (LaFromboise, Hoyt, Oliver, & Whitbeck, 2006)

Humboldt County and Northwest California Tribes

Humboldt County, located in rural Northwest California approximately 300 miles north of San Francisco, is home to twelve federally recognized tribes, including the Yurok and Hoopa Valley Tribes—two of the largest landholding tribes in California (Pollom, 2006). While Native people comprise approximately 1.7% of California's population statewide, they represent approximately 7% of Humboldt County's population, with significantly higher concentrations in certain areas. Tribal communities in Humboldt County primarily reside in rural and geographically isolated regions and experience some of the highest levels of socioeconomic hardship in the region as reflected by the Intercity Hardship Index (Cahill, 2023).

Local data underscore the disproportionate impact of these conditions on Native youth. Native American children represent a markedly higher percentage of foster care placements and juvenile justice involvement relative to their population size. In Humboldt County, Native

American youth—although comprising approximately 7% of the population—account for approximately 20% of juvenile hall admissions (Kohler, 2018). Native children represent 37% of children in foster care while comprising only 7% of the county's youth population (Humboldt County Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). In 2017, the Yurok community experienced a devastating suicide cluster in which fourteen individuals died by suicide over a fifteen-month period—driving suicide rates to approximately fourteen times the national average and leaving lasting impacts on youth, families, schools, and surrounding communities (Mozingo, 2017).

Rationale for Culturally Based Prevention Programming

Within this historical and contemporary context, Native mental health practitioners, Elders, and community leaders consistently emphasize that effective prevention and intervention must be culturally grounded, community-driven, and rooted in ancestral knowledge systems. This position aligns directly with the California Reducing Disparities Project (CRDP) Strategic Plan, which recognizes that current mental health disparities among Native American communities are the direct result of historical and contemporary policies that disallowed cultural practices, forced assimilation, separated families, and enacted genocide. CRDP identifies cultural disconnection from land, language, spirituality, family, and community as a primary driver of adverse mental health outcomes and calls for culturally defined evidence practices (CDEPs) that support reconnection as a central pathway to healing.

Western treatment models frequently fail to incorporate Native American values or recognize culture as a core protective factor, instead emphasizing pathology and deficits that can inadvertently reinforce negative self-perceptions, community disengagement, and mistrust of systems. In contrast, CRDP explicitly centers community-designed approaches that recognize culture itself as prevention, promote self-determination, and elevate Indigenous knowledge as evidence. These approaches shift the focus from individual pathology to collective healing, identity restoration, and the rebuilding of community cohesion.

The Two Feathers Native American Family Services Stick Game and Flower Dance program—implemented through the California Reducing Disparities Project—represents a culturally defined evidence practice designed to strengthen mental health by fostering reconnection to culture, community, and intergenerational relationships. These ceremonial practices have existed since time immemorial and were traditionally used by Tribal communities of the region to promote balance, identity development, relational accountability, and wellness. Approached by local Elders, Cultural Leaders, and community members as significant to health

and well-being, these practices were disrupted by colonial policies that criminalized culture and ceremony.

Consistent with CRDP's emphasis on reversing the harms of historical disconnection, the Stick Game and Flower Dance program intentionally centers ancestral cultural practices as protective factors that support Native youth in rebuilding hope, belonging, and cultural identity. By restoring access to ceremony, kinship networks, and intergenerational teachings, this program reframes mental health not solely as symptom reduction, but as the restoration of cultural continuity, relational well-being, and community resilience.

CDEP Purpose

The Two Feathers Native American Family Services Stick Game & Flower Dance project is an early intervention and prevention program designed to reduce mental health disparities among Native American youth by reconnecting young people to ancestral cultural practices that promote wellness, resilience, and community belonging. This culturally defined evidence practice (CDEP) strengthens youth mental health by fostering hope for the future; mitigating historical loss and grief; improving family relationships; and reinforcing individual, familial, and community connections. Through culturally grounded mentorship, intergenerational engagement, and ceremonial practice, the project supports mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional well-being.

The project serves Tribal communities in Humboldt and Del Norte counties and was designed to address the need for culturally based and culturally oriented practices that integrate early engagement, prevention, mentorship, community support, and traditional healing. Both the Stick Game and the Flower Dance are longstanding ancestral practices of Tribal communities in Northwest California and were endorsed by local Elders, Cultural Leaders, and community members as significant in promoting mental health and wellness. These practices have existed since time immemorial and continue to function as protective factors for Native youth and communities.

Stick Game

The Stick Game is a regional, inter-Tribal ancestral cultural event that brings community members together and primarily engages Native American boys as direct participants, while also involving a broad multigenerational network of men, women, Elders, mentors, and families. In some Tribal regions within Northwest California, including Tolowa territory, girls also participate as players. The Stick Game is traditionally played as a three-on-three team event in which players work collaboratively to move a tassel across the opposing team's goal line using

handcrafted wooden sticks with hooked ends. Physical contact, including wrestling, is part of the game and requires discipline, respect, and the ability to regulate one's behavior.

Stick Game tournaments are often held as part of larger community gatherings and are widely attended by families, Elders, and community members who provide encouragement, mentorship, and guidance to young players. While the game shares surface similarities with modern sports such as lacrosse or wrestling, it holds deep cultural, historical, and spiritual significance. In local Tribal creation stories, the Stick Game is associated with the First People (Immortals), who are understood not only as the creators of the game, but as participants who continue to play in the spiritual world. These stories connect the Stick Game to the shaping of the land, the settling of disputes, seasonal change, and the maintenance of balance.

Elders, coaches, and mentors play a central role in teaching youth how to prepare for and participate in the Stick Game. Youth learn not only athletic skills, but also how to conduct themselves "in a good way" before they are permitted to play. Community members actively observe how players behave, and cultural teachings are offered when youth need redirection. Through preparation, practice, and tournament play, the Stick Game functions as a powerful socialization tool, teaching respect, discipline, sportsmanship, emotional regulation, and accountability to community values. Participation reinforces health in mind, body, and spirit while fostering positive relationships between youth and caring adult mentors.

Although English is the primary language used during gameplay, Stick Game gatherings provide organic opportunities for Native language exposure, storytelling, and intergenerational relationship-building. Traditionally held after major ceremonies such as the Brush Dance, the Stick Game now also occurs as a standalone event or in conjunction with large community celebrations, including the Yurok Tribe's Annual Salmon Festival. Games are hosted in rotation by Tribal communities throughout the region, typically between June and August, and are held on Tribal lands with Elder consent.

Flower Dance

The Flower Dance is a coming-of-age ceremony that honors the onset of menstruation and marks a young person's transition into a new phase of life. As a public celebration, the Flower Dance invites the full community to participate in supporting and uplifting the young person and their family. The ceremony is deeply embedded in local Tribal cultures and creation stories associated with the First People and reflects Indigenous understandings of femininity, responsibility, and the sacredness of life-giving power.

The Flower Dance was outlawed by the United States government for over 100 years and was revitalized approximately 20 years ago through the leadership and commitment of

community Elders. Preparation for the ceremony typically occurs over one to two years and culminates in a multi-day event lasting between two and ten days, depending on family resources and participant availability. Youth who participate are generally between the ages of 12 and 16. Although the ceremony centers on one young person, the Flower Dance is a CDEP that promotes healing and connection for the entire community.

Throughout the ceremony, family members, Elders, Medicine People, and community participants support the young person through fasting, running, prayer, and nights of singing. Preparation includes learning songs in Native languages; gathering materials; creating ceremonial dresses from bark and deer hide; and preparing traditional foods such as acorns, pine nuts, and salmon under expert guidance. These activities foster intergenerational learning, strengthen family bonds, and reinforce cultural responsibility and pride.

The Flower Dance affirms the young person's changing role within the community, supports self-esteem, academic engagement, and identity development, and reinforces the importance of representing oneself, one's family, and one's Tribe with dignity and respect. The ceremony typically takes place on Tribal lands, often in a traditional house, and community participation may include staying up all night to support singers and Medicine People, assisting with food preparation, or accompanying youth during daily runs. While demanding in time and resources, the Flower Dance is intentionally communal, with extended family and community members sharing labor, knowledge, and care.

Cultural Practices as Prevention

Cultural practices such as the Stick Game and Flower Dance are consistent with research and community knowledge demonstrating that strengthening cultural identity, restoring ancestral practices, and reinforcing community connection are key protective factors that promote resilience and positive mental health outcomes for Native youth. These ancestral practices existed long prior to European contact and continue to serve as sources of strength, balance, and continuity. By centering these practices as prevention, the project affirms an American Indian cultural worldview that understands health as relational and holistic, emphasizing balance, responsibility, belonging, and well-being across generations.

CDRP Description and Implementation Process

The implementation of the ACORN Youth Wellness Program is grounded in community-based and tribal participatory research (CBPR/TPR), consistent with the California Reducing Disparities Project (CRDP) framework. CRDP emphasizes that reclamation of traditional foods, medicines, and ceremonial healing is central to empowering Tribal communities to trust their own teachings and restore cultural strengths (Native American Health

Center, 2012). In alignment with this vision, the ACORN program was developed only after extensive engagement with local Elders, cultural practitioners, and Indigenous scholars to ensure that the intervention reflected community priorities and cultural protocols.

Relevant or Significant Changes to CDEP Components or Delivery

No substantive changes were made to the core ACORN CDEP components during the Phase 2 Extension period. Minor adaptations focused on strengthening delivery and expanding access, including adjustments to scheduling and increased opportunities for youth to re-engage across activities, while preserving the cultural foundations and intended outcomes of the program.

Foundational Approach and Phase 1 Activities

During Phase 1, the project focused heavily on relationship building, curriculum development, and establishing deep trust with Tribal communities in Humboldt and Del Norte Counties. Staff, Cultural Consultants, and Advisory Committee members were all local Tribal people, many of whom are Elders and Medicine People with longstanding relationships and cultural authority. Their guidance ensured that program design honored cultural variation across Yurok, Hoopa, Tolowa, Wiyot, and other regional Tribes.

Phase 1 accomplishments included:

- Establishing the Community Advisory Committee (CAC), which met regularly to co-develop the intervention, review evaluation methods, and approve all cultural content.
- Implementing talking circle methodologies to guide program values and build a shared epistemological foundation rooted in balance, relationality, and cultural responsibility.
- Developing culturally grounded definitions of mental health, wellness, belonging, community-self-worth, and resilience.
- Designing the first full version of the ACORN Wellness Framework, which organizes all program components under five culturally defined domains.
- These meetings helped articulate the community “paradigm of change”—emphasizing meeting youth where they are, bringing generations together, and re-establishing balance between individuals, families, spirituality, and the natural world.

Transition From Phase 1 to Phase 2: Key Enhancements and Program Evolution

As the project moved from Phase 1 (planning and early implementation) into Phase 2 (expansion, stabilization, and refinement), several major developments strengthened the program’s cultural depth, reach, and effectiveness.

Enhancements Implemented in Phase 2

Phase 2 represented a significant expansion of both scope and depth, informed by

lessons learned during Phase 1 and guided by ongoing Community Advisory Committee feedback. The program shifted from initial curriculum development and relationship-building into a fully implemented, regionally coordinated cultural wellness model. Key developments included:

- Expanded Program Reach: Additional Make It Stronger cohorts, Stick Game training, and Flower Dance workshops were added across Humboldt and Del Norte Counties, increasing participation among youth ages 7–17.
- Deeper Cultural Integration: Elders and Medicine People contributed to refining curriculum; teachings incorporated creation stories, ceremonial laws, and historical protocols with stronger attention to tribal specificity.
- Year-Round Engagement: Unlike Phase 1's seasonal programming, Phase 2 implemented continuous weekly workshops, year-long Flower Dance preparation cycles, and regular Stick Game practices.
- Enhanced Intergenerational Participation: More parents, aunties/uncles, and grandparents attended workshops; youth were paired with consistent mentors.
- Increased Material Sovereignty: Phase 2 emphasized gathering and preparing traditional materials, including hazel, mock orange, maple, and acorns. Youth created regalia, Stick Game equipment, and community-use Flower Dance dresses.
- Evaluation Improvements: Survey tools were culturally adapted; qualitative interviews were added; youth were engaged as co-researchers; CAC reviewed every evaluation cycle.
- Stronger Multi-Tribal Collaboration: Multiple Tribes co-hosted workshops, shared ceremonial knowledge, and offered land access for camps.
- Integration of Food Sovereignty Practices: Youth participated in acorn processing, salmon preparation, and traditional foods education, reinforcing teachings mentioned in the CRDP Phase 1 report.
- Trauma-Informed Cultural Support: Training incorporated historical trauma education, emphasizing resilience, belonging, and healing.
- Deepened Cultural Immersion: Program activities expanded to include year-long Flower Dance preparation cycles, regional Stick Game mentorship networks, and more land-based workshops.
- Expanded Access: Additional sites were added on the Coast and in Hoopa to address transportation barriers and increase accessibility for more youth.
- More Youth-Led Opportunities: Youth began taking leadership roles in running practice

sessions, supporting ceremony preparation, and serving as peer mentors.

- Integrated Evaluation Enhancements: Mixed-method tools were refined based on CAC feedback, leading to clearer measures of cultural connection, wellness, and hope.
- Substantially Increased Participation: Phase 2 saw wider community engagement, with higher youth enrollment, family involvement, and regional partnerships.
- Material Creation and Stewardship: Youth produced Stick Game equipment, regalia materials, and community-use Flower Dance dresses, reinforcing cultural continuity and hands-on learning.
- Strengthened Intertribal Relationships: As workshops expanded, more families from multiple Tribes collaborated, increasing cultural exchange and support networks.

Phase 2 thus represents a move from planning and foundational cultural work into full-scale implementation, expansion, and intergenerational long-term sustainability. These expanded Phase 2 efforts demonstrate a shift from planning to fully realized, sustainable, culturally anchored implementation with measurable increases in cultural connection, hope, and wellness among participants.

ACORN Youth Wellness Program Structure

The ACORN program includes three core components—Make It Stronger, Stick Game Training & Camps, and Flower Dance Workshops—all developed using culturally grounded principles from Phase 1 and expanded during Phase 2.

Make It Stronger Program

A five-session series focused on physical wellness, cultural teachings, food sovereignty, language, and identity. This program integrates Stick Game and Flower Dance values into fitness and personal development activities.

Stick Game Training Sessions and Camps

Youth receive mentorship on Stick Game protocol, cultural expectations, physical conditioning, and intertribal tournament readiness. Phase 2 added structured mentorship lines, more collaborative practices, and expanded regional tournaments.

Flower Dance Workshops

Workshops guide youth through singing, dancing, dress-making, gathering materials, and ceremonial protocol. Phase 2 added weekly workshops, intergenerational beading circles, traditional gatherings, and community-use dresses created by youth.

ACORN Domains of Health & Wellness (A-C-O-R-N)

Defined by the Community Advisory Committee, the ACORN framework organizes culturally based wellness into five interconnected domains. Below are the full meanings and

examples of youth experiences.

A — Appreciation of Our Whole Selves

- Focus: Holistic wellness including spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental health.
- Youth experiences:
    - General Physical Preparedness (GPP) for endurance, balance, and self-awareness.
    - Stick Camp training emphasizing grounding, intention, and physical/spiritual readiness.
    - Flower Dance preparation (running, singing, dress responsibilities, ceremonial roles).
    - Learning how traditional teachings inform discipline, humility, and wellness.

C — Connecting Community, Language, and Culture

- Focus: Strengthening community bonds and cultural continuity.
- Youth experiences:
    - Participation in ceremonies, workshops, gatherings, and land-based activities.
    - Parent and guardian participation is encouraged in all components.
    - Intertribal Stick Game tournaments that promote cross-community friendships.
    - Learning songs, prayers, place names, and teachings from Elders and ceremonial leaders.

O — Opportunity and Access

- Focus: Removing structural barriers to cultural engagement.
- Youth experiences:
    - Access to weekly cultural and physical programming previously unavailable.
    - Teachings on resilience, adversity, and cultural protection.
    - Public Stick Game opportunities for youth to showcase tournament-ready skills.
    - Flower Dance learning from preparation to execution of ceremony.

R — Relationships with Others

- Focus: Building healthy, reciprocal, intergenerational relationships.
- Youth experiences:
    - Mentorship from Elders, cultural teachers, and trained adults.
    - Pro-social behavior development through cultural expectations.
    - Strengthening family bonds through shared cultural participation.

N — Nurturing Nature and Spirit

- Focus: Land-based learning and spiritual grounding.

- Youth experiences:
    - Activities on Tribal lands connecting youth to ancestral homelands.
    - Gathering traditional materials such as hazel, acorns, maple, and mock orange.
    - Storytelling and teachings about ancestral villages, bathing spots, and place names.
    - Practices centered on gratitude, spirituality, mindfulness, and environmental respect.

This expanded and culturally grounded implementation process reflects the evolution from Phase 1's planning and relationship-building to Phase 2's strengthened, consistent, and community-anchored delivery of the ACORN Youth Wellness Program.

Participant Attrition

Some participants attrition occurred across ACORN programming during the Phase 2 Extension period, which is expected in voluntary, community-based youth programs. Attrition was primarily related to external factors such as scheduling conflicts, transportation barriers, and competing school, sports, or family obligations, rather than lack of interested or disengagement from programming. Importantly, many youth returned for multiple ACORN activities over time, including Make It Stronger, Stick Game, and Flower Dance programming, with several participants attending across different program components. This pattern of return participation reflects sustained engagement and suggests that youth continued to find the programming relevant, culturally meaningful, and supportive of their well-being.

Program Delivery

Make It Stronger

"Make It Stronger" consisted of 5 sessions that provided opportunities to engage with the theme of the day or one of the aspects of the ACORN program (A-C-O-R-N) which not only focus on health, wellness and fitness but also included language, cultural sharing, food sovereignty and cultural knowledge. The A.C.O.R.N wellness program includes five domains of health and wellness as defined by and tied to the local Native Communities cultural values: A- Appreciation of Our Whole Selves, C- Connecting Community, Language, and Culture, O- Opportunity and Access, R- Relationships with Others, and N- Nurturing Nature and Spirit.The purpose was to provide Native American youth a holistic approach to wellness. The program incorporated both physical and psycho/social interventions including values and traditions based on local Stick Game and Flower Dance teachings. Physical development activities promote a healthy mind, body, and spirit as it relates to individual wellness as well as wellness to family, culture, and community. The physical activities included discussions woven in to discuss culture

and fitness (traditional and contemporary), healthy nutrition (ancestral diet), body awareness, mental health, mentorships, positivity, hope, teamwork, relationships and community building. Traditional stories and native languages are emphasized to help youth internalize teachings. Indigenous language was a key part of engaging youth and community members through this program. Cultural leaders attended the events as well to help guide cultural protocols and to teach youth about culture in their lives. During phase 2, we were able to complete four Make It Stronger cycles. Each cycle followed a similar format with each day lasting an average of 6 hours. Youth received transportation from Two Feathers staff to and from the event.

Agenda Example:

- 9:30am-10am- Snacks, visiting, sign-in.
- 10-10:15am- Welcome, Ancestral homeland acknowledgement. Opening prayer.
- 10:15-10:20am- All youth move into their assigned smaller groups.
- 10:20-10:30am- Explanation of Make It Stronger Wellness Intervention, Set group rules and agenda for the day.
- 10:20-10:45am- In group ice breaker, Mentors will lead youth in learning to say “hello my name is” in Yurok and share something they like to do and will throw a ball to someone in the group who will then do the same and on and on til everyone has introduced themselves.
- 10:45am-11:00am- All participants- Yurok Native language Session with physical activity (running/walking).
- 11am-12pm- Exercise Stations- Coaches will explain stations and importance of physical fitness for Flower Dance and Stick Game. Mentors will take their groups through 4 workout stations.
- 12:00-12:45pm- Acorns and Language for older group: Education and/or presentation, the youth participants will be taught on how knowing your Native Language can give you a deeper understanding of your traditional and contemporary foods (examples will be given with translation).
    - Lunch for younger group
- 12:45pm-1:30pm- Acorns and Language for younger group: Education and/or presentation the youth participants will be taught on how knowing your Native Language can give you a deeper understanding of your traditional and contemporary foods (examples will be given with translation)
    - Lunch for older group

        - Begin lunch with tasting acorn soup and/or water and learning and speaking how to give thanks for acorns and water in Native Language before eating. Practice eating them with positivity and "in a good way."
    - 1:30pm-2:15pm: Storytelling- Individuals can decide if they want to hear a story/less about Stick Game or Flower Dance. Participants will be divided into two groups by self-selection.
    - 2:15-2:20pm- Youth return to their groups
    - 2:20-2:30pm Group closing exercise
        - One thing you liked and one thing you would change about the day.
    - 2:30-2:40pm- Journal Reflection: Mentors will hand out the Youth's journals for the youth to reflect on the day.
    - 2:40-3:00pm- Evaluation
    - 3:00-3:15pm- Closing Prayer
    - 3:15-3:30pm- Sign out: youth are sent to a sign out table to either wait for a guardian to pick up and sign out or to be guided by transporters to the vehicles.

Specified Cultural Programming

Our cultural programming interventions were designed as a year-long program to help prepare youth to take part in a Stick Game or Flower Dance. The Stick Game program included training/mentorship in regards to Stick game protocol, a Stick game "camp" where youth learned about Stick Game training and also how to participate in a Stick Game tournament. The Flower Dance program was designed to help participants prepare to sing and dance in a Flower Dance. Programming included regalia making, community building, discussion and education sessions, and practicing learned movements and ways of being for ceremony.

Cultural programming included community and cultural leaders to help guide workshop activities. At each of the cultural programs parents, family and community members were encouraged to also attend. These intergenerational events allowed families to participate together in learning more about cultural items and practices. Youth were also invited to lead discussions and tell their own stories of cultural participation in the Flower Dance and Stick Game.

Stick Game Training Camp

The goals of this training camp focus on preparing young men and boys to be ready mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually to successfully compete at tournaments. The purpose of this program is to give participants the necessary knowledge, values, skills and

appreciation of the Stick Game and Stick Game training that promote a healthy mind, body and spirit as it relates to individual wellness as well as wellness to family, culture, and community. The Stick Game training activities are an infusion of culture and fitness (traditional and contemporary), healthy nutrition (ancestral foods), physical literacy, body awareness, mentorships, positivity, hope, teamwork, relationships, and community building. Discussion sessions include Stick Game rules, history, traditional stories, training methods, cultural importance and what it means to play the game of Sticks with honor and in the manner of the First People who created the game during the time before humans. Discussions also include ancestral physical wellness and how it relates to our resiliency, subsistence, and wellness and how being physically fit today can help keep our whole selves and Stick Game thriving.
Agenda Example:

- 12:30-1:15 PM- Check-in/register (snacks)
- 1:15-1:25 PM- Circle Up Intros
- 1:25-1:45 PM- Stories w/ Cultural Leader
- 1:45-2:15 PM- Training (Running, Stone Carry, Water Runs, Push-ups, core)
- 2:15-2:45 PM- Tossel Work
- 2:45-3:00 PM- Teach Positions and how to lock up
- 3:00-3:15 PM- Wrestling Moves
- 3:15-3:30 PM-1 on 1 stations (lock ups/scratching)
- 3:30-4:00 PM-scrimmage
- 4:00- Pick up/ Clean-up

Flower Dance Programming

The purpose of this program is to give participants insight into all that goes into making a Flower Dance happen. Discussion includes a breakdown into everything a family goes through in deciding to do a dance for a young girl, from selecting principal singers, selecting helpers, identifying family members to fulfill roles, site/location selection, necessary resources, payment to medicine people, etc. Participants will leave discussion with an understanding of the many roles and considerations required to successfully hold ceremonies for their own Flower Dance.

Flower Dance programming strives to encourage and support young women to learn and value their cultural strengths while also building their capacity to be leaders and contributors in their communities. We incorporate teachings and values from the Flower Dance ceremony to strengthen systems of support, accountability, reciprocity, and responsibility in our youth.

- Dress Show and Design- 11/12/22
    - Objectives:

        - Youth will connect and build relationships with at least one female mentor.
        - Youth will be able to identify people in the community that can help link them to ceremony and culture.
    - Agenda Example:
        - 9:00 am-10:00 am Set Up
        - 10:00 am-10:15 am Participants arrive, sign in and eat snacks
        - 10:15am-10:30am Welcoming and Setting Intentions
        - Introductions of staff, consultants, and participants
        - 10:30am-11:00am Discussion of Dresses and Materials
        - 11:00am-12:00pm Dress Viewing and Design
        - Line up dresses made by girls who have had their flower dances, show different
        - components, materials, and participants ask questions.
        - 12:00pm-1:00pm Lunch
        - 1:00pm-2:00pm Evaluations, finish up
- Material Prep- 12/5/22
    - Objectives:
        - Youth with work together to prepare material, engage in teamwork and learn how to share resources
        - Youth will learn the hard work that goes into making regalia
    - Agenda
        - 9:00 am -10:00 am Set Up/Transportation
        - 10:00 am- 10:15 am Participants arrive, sign in and eat snacks
        - 10:15am-10:30am Welcoming and Setting Intentions
        - Introductions of staff, consultants
        - 10:30am-11:00am Materials: How do we prep?
        - 11:00am-12:00pm Material Prep Stations
        - Pine Nut Cleaning Station
        - Shell Grinding
        - Dentalium Size Matching Station
        - Leather Cutting
        - 12:00pm-1:00pm Lunch
        - 1:00pm-1:15pm Closing
        - 1:15pm-2:00pm Evaluations, finish up

- Dress Design Kick-Off- 1/14/23
    - Objectives:
        - Youth will begin to learn how to work with leather, leather cutting scissors,and how to sew materials on
        - Youth will learn what it means to come in a good way when making regalia.
    - Agenda
        - 10:00-10:30 Sign in and snacks
        - 10:30 Introduce the day
        - 10:30-12:00 Fringe Cutting, Hole Punching, Processing Materials
        - (Adult Track: Big Lagoon Dresses)
        - 12:00-12:45 Lunch
        - 12:45-1:00 Design Review/Finalizing: Place materials on their
        - leather
        - 1:00-2:00 Sewing Dresses
- Flower Dance Work Day- 2/25/23
    - Agenda:
        - 10:00-10:30 Sign in and Snacks
        - 10:30 Introduce the day/Activity
        - 10:45-12:00 Work on items that need to be completed
        - 12:00-12:45 Lunch
        - 12:45-1:45 Continue working on projects
        - 1:45-2:00 Closing
- Beading- 3/25/23
    - Objectives:
        - Youth will be able to know how to introduce themselves to those around them
        - Youth will learn how to make a ceremonial necklace and how to do so in a good way.
    - Agenda:
        - 10:00-10:30 Sign in and snacks
        - 10:30 Introduce the day/ Introduction Activity
        - 10:45-12:00 Doll Necklaces/Regalia Necklaces/Sewing
        - 12:00-12:45 Lunch

        - 12:45-1:45 Continue Working on Projects
        - 1:45-2:00 Closing
- Abalone Sisters Dress making group- Coastal 2023/2024 2 hours per week, approximately 30 weeks long
    - Week 1 & 2: Introduction to Regalia: Intention Setting, Design Dress
    - Weeks 3-24: prepping materials
    - Weeks 25-30: Sewing, beading, and completing unfinished projects.
- Dress making group- Hoopa 2024/2025 2 hours per week approximately 26 weeks
    - Week 1 & 2: Introduction to Regalia: Intention Setting, Design Dress
    - Weeks 3-19: prepping materials
    - Weeks 20-26: Sewing, beading, and completing unfinished projects.

Demographics

Overview of each Make It Stronger Year

- 2022
    - ACORN Make it Stronger (A)- Sue-Meg- 7/7/22
        - Attended- 49 youth
        - Age- 11.5 years old (Median age is 11 years old)
        - Gender
            - 57% male
            - 43% female
        - Location
            - 32.7% East
            - 67.3% Coast
    - ACORN Make it Stronger (C)- Sue-Meg- 7/8/22
        - Attended- 55 Youth
        - Age- 12.4 years old (Median age is 12 years old)
        - Gender
            - 54.5% Male
            - 45.5% Female
        - Location
            - 22.6% East
            - 77.4% Coast
    - ACORN Make It Stronger (O)- Orleans Elementary-7/14/22
        - Attended- 42 Youth

        - Age - 12.8 years old (Median age is 13 years old)
        - Gender-
            - 47.6% Male
            - 52.4% Female
        - Location
            - 45.2% East
            - 54.8% Coast
    - ACORN Make It Stronger (R)- Hoopa- 7/15/22
        - Attended- 38 Youth
        - Age - 13.9 Years old (Median age is 15 years old)
        - Gender
            - 50% Male
            - 50% Female
        - Location
            - 42.1% East
            - 57.9% Coast
    - ACORN Make It Stronger (N)- Big Lagoon- 7/16/22
        - Attended- 43 Youth
        - Age- 13.2 Years old (Median 14.5 years old)
        - Gender
            - 46.5% Male
            - 53.5% Female
        - Location
            - 37.2% East
            - 62.8% Coast
- 2023
    - ACORN Make it Stronger (A)- Sue-Meg 7/19/23
        - Attended- 55
        - Age- 13.3 Years old (Median 14 years old)
        - Gender
            - 44% Male
            - 51% Female
        - Location
            - 79.7% Coastal

            - 20.3% Eastern Humboldt
    - ACORN Make it Stronger (C)- Katamiin-7/20/23
        - Attended- 60 Youth
        - Age- 13.0 Years old (Median 13 years old)
        - Gender
            - 38.3% Male
            - 43.3% Female
        - Location
            - 33.3% Eastern Humboldt
            - 56.7% Coastal
    - ACORN Make It Stronger (O)- Hoopa- 7/21/23
        - Attended- 62 Youth
        - Age- 13.7 Years old (Median 15 years old)
        - Gender
            - 37.1% Male
            - 56.5% Female
            - 1.6% Trans Male
            - 1.6% Prefers not to answer
        - Location
            - 64.5% Coastal
            - 24.2% Eastern Humboldt
    - ACORN Make It Stronger (R)- South Jettie- 7/23/23
        - Attended- 49 Youth
        - Age- 13.9 Years old (Median 15 years old)
        - Gender
            - 44.9% Male
            - 44.9% Male
            - 6.1% Non-Binary
        - Location
            - 12.2% Eastern Humboldt
            - 81.5% Coastal
    - ACORN Make It Stronger (N)- Big Lagoon- 7/28/23
        - Attended- 61 Youth
        - Age- 13.2 Years old (Median 15 years old)

        - Gender
            - 44.3% Male
            - 44.3% Female
            - 6.6% Non-Binary
            - 1.6% Trans Male
        - Location
            - 72.1% Coastal
            - 21.3% Eastern Humboldt
- 2024
    - ACORN Make it Stronger (A)- Eureka- 5/19/24
        - Attended- 29
        - Age- 11.5 years old (Median 12 years old)
        - Gender
            - 44.8% Male
            - 41.4% Female
            - 3.4% Non-Binary
        - Location
            - 24.1% East
            - 69.0% Coast
    - ACORN Make it Stronger (C)- Sue-Meg- 6/2/24
        - Attended- 50
        - Age- 11.3 Years old (median 12 years old)
        - Gender
            - 42% Male
            - 28% Female
            - 30% Non-Specified/Blank
        - Location
            - 14% East
            - 74% Coast
            - 12% Non-Specified/Blank
    - ACORN Make It Stronger (O)- Hoopa- 6/22/24
        - Attended- 26
        - Age- 13.2 Years old (Median 13 Years old)
        - Gender

                - 30.8% Male
                - 23.1% Female
                - 3.8% Transgender
                - 42.3% Unspecified/Blank
            - Location
                - 34.6% East
                - 38.5% Coast
                - 26.9% Unspecified/Blank
    - ACORN Make It Stronger (R) (Gambling)- Bear River- 8/4/24
        - Attended - 17
        - Age - 7.29 Years Old (Median 6 years old)
        - Gender- 70.59% Male
            - 29.41% Female
        - Location
            - 88.24% Coastal
            - 11.76% Eastern Humboldt
    - ACORN Make It Stronger (N) (Pinenuts)- Mckinleyville- 8/24/24
        - Attended- 32
        - Age- 12.52 Years Old (Median 14 years old)
        - Gender- 21.88% Male
            - 59.38% Female
            - 6.25% Non-Binary
            - 3.13% Not Specified
        - Location
            - 56.25% Coastal
            - 34.38% Eastern Humboldt
- 2025
    - ACORN Make It Stronger (A)- Bear River- 2/23/25
        - Attended- 97
        - Age- 13.36% (Median 13 years old)
        - Gender
            - 43.30% Male
            - 55.67% Female
            - 1.03% Non-Binary

        - Location
            - Coastal 62.89%
            - Eastern Humboldt- 37.11%
    - ACORN Make It Stronger (C)- Blue Lake- 3/9/25
        - Attended- 81
        - Age - 12.39 years old (Median 13 years old)
        - Gender
            - 43.21% Male
            - 54.32% Female
            - 1.23% Non-Binary
        - Location
            - 62.96% Coastal
            - 35.80% Eastern
    - ACORN Make It Stronger (O)- Adornia Center, Eureka- 3/23/25
        - Attended- 93
        - Age- 12.83% (Median 13 years old)
        - Gender
            - 45.16% Male
            - 52.69% Female
            - 1.08% Non-Binary
        - Location
            - 61.29% Coastal
            - 34.41% Eastern Humboldt
    - ACORN Make It Stronger (R)- Sequoia Park and Zoo- 4/6/25
        - Attended- 80
        - Age- 12.56 years old (median 13 years old)
        - Gender
            - 47.50% Male
            - 52.50% Female
        - Location
            - 55% Coastal
            - 41.25% Eastern Humboldt
    - ACORN Make It Stronger (N)- Big Lagoon- 5/4/25
        - Attended - 76

        - Age 12.78 years old (median 13 years old)
        - Gender
            - 48.48% male
            - 50% female
            - 1.32% non-binary
        - Location
            - 63.16% Coastal
            - 27.63% Eastern Humboldt

Stick Games Demographics

- Stick Camp- Clam Beach- 7/16/2022
    - Attended- 10
    - Age- 12.9 years old (median- 14 years old)
    - Gender- 100% Male
- Stick Programming- Mckinleyville- 7/10/23
    - Attended- 21
    - Age- 12.81 years old (median 15 years old)
    - Gender-
        - 61.90% Male
        - 19.05% Female
        - 4.76% non-binary
    - Location-
        - Coastal- 61.90%
        - Eastern Humboldt- 33.33%
- Stick Programming- Mckinleyville- 7/17/23
    - Attended- 17
    - Age- 13.82 years old (median 13 years old)
    - Gender-
        - 88.24% Male
        - 5.88% Non-Binary
    - Location-
        - 100% Coastal
- Stick Programming- Mckinleyville- 7/24/23
    - Attended- 11
    - Age- 13.1 years old (median 13.5 years old)

    - Gender-
        - 81.82% Male
        - 18.18% unknown
    - Location
        - 81.81% Coastal
        - 18.18% Unknown
- Stick Programming- Mckinleyville- 7/31/23
    - Attended- 16
    - Average Age- 12.56 years old (median 13 years old)
    - Gender-
        - 75% Male
        - 18.75% Unknown
        - 6.25% Non-Binary
    - Location-
        - 12.50% unknown
        - 87.5% Coastal
- Stick Making Workshop- Two Feathers Office- 9/17/23
    - Attended- 19
- Feathers Workshop- Two Feathers Office- 9/25/23
    - Attended- 6
- Stick Workshop- Trinidad- 9/28/24
    - Attended- 15
    - Age- 13.47 years old
    - Gender- 100% Male
    - Location-
        - 46.67% Coastal
        - 53.33% Eastern Humboldt

Flower Dance Demographics

- Dress Show and Design- Two Feathers- 11/12/22
    - Attended- 32
    - Age- 11.68 years old (median 12 years old)
    - Gender-
        - 93.75% Female
        - 6.25% Male

- Material Prep- Two Feathers- 12/5/22
    - Attended- 24
    - Age- 12.86 Years old (Median 12 years old)
    - Gender-
        - 85.93% Female
        - 4.17% Non-Binary
- Dress Design Kick-Off- Two Feathers- 1/14/23
    - Attended- 18
    - Age- 11.36 Years old (Median 12 Years old)
      Gender
        - 88.89% Female
        - 11.1% Male
- Flower Dance Work Day- Two Feathers- 2/25/23
    - Attended- 18
    - Age- 12.5 Years old (Median 12.5 years old)
    - Gender-
        - 94.44% Female
        - 5.56% Male
- Flower Dance Workshop: Beading- Two Feathers- 3/25/23
    - Attended- 10
    - Age- 13.7 years old (median 13 years old)
    - Gender- 100% Female
- Cultural Group on the Coast and in Hoopa
    - 5 groups on the coast and 5 groups in Hoopa
        - On average, 7 youth attended each Flower Dance Cultural Group
        - Average age of youth attending Flower Dance Cultural group was 13.23 years old.
- Abalone Sisters Group- Dress Making- Two Feathers- Starts October, 2023 - Ends June 2024
    - Weekly group meetings, excluding holiday breaks.
    - Led by a community cultural leader.
    - Reached a total of 40 youth and implemented the support of 6 staff members.
        - Youth worked on designing, prepping the material, and put the dress together through mentorship and relationship building.

- Abalone Sisters Dress Making Group- Hoopa- Starts Nov 2024- Ends June 2025
    - Weekly group meetings, excluding holiday breaks.
    - Led by a community cultural leader
    - Reached a total of 35 youth and implemented the support of 3 staff members.
        - Youth worked on designing, prepping the material, and put the dress together through mentorship and relationship building.

Local Evaluation Questions

Evaluation Questions:

- To what extent is our programming having an impact on Native youth's sense of hope and belonging?
- To what extent are our youth engaging with culture?
- To what extent are our youth engaging with programming

Design

For Phase 2 of the IPP, the Two Feathers Cultural Programming team sought to better understand the extent to which its programming supports youth hope, belonging, cultural engagement, and sustained participation. To address these evaluation questions, programming outcomes were examined using multiple approaches to capture both program reach and participant experience.

The Cultural Programming team worked collaboratively with the Internal Evaluator to design a culturally responsive evaluation plan, review findings, and develop interpretations and recommendations. Through this collaborative process, a mixed-methods evaluation design was selected. This design allowed the evaluation to document program reach through quantitative measures while also centering youth voice and individual stories through qualitative methods.

Quantitative Design Definition

"Quantitative research is the method of employing numerical values derived from observations to explain and describe the phenomena that the observations can reflect on them." (Taherdoost, 2022). Quantitative data were collected to describe program participation and demographic characteristics. Sign-in sheets were used at each program event and included youth age, gender, home location, guardian contact information, and transportation needs. Data from sign-in sheets were used to calculate:

- Total number of youth served
- Number of events and sessions implemented

- Average attendance per event or session
- Mean and median age of participants
- Gender and location distributions

Quantitative data were collected across all three programs: Make It Stronger, Stick Game Programming, and Flower Dance Programming. Particular attention was given to geographic participation to assess progress toward increasing equitable access for youth from Eastern Humboldt communities.

In addition to attendance tracking, a pre- and post-survey was implemented for Stick Game Programming. Survey questions were developed collaboratively by the Internal Evaluator and the Stick Game cultural programming to assess participants' prior knowledge, expectations, and learning related to Stick Game traditions and participation. Findings from these surveys are presented in the Results section.

Pre and Post Survey Stick Game Questions

- Pre
    - Do you know what a Stick Game is?
    - Have you been to a Stick Game before?
    - Have you played in a Stick Game before?
    - Do you have your own Stick Game stick?
    - What do you hope to learn about when it comes to Stick Game?
- Post
    - Do you know what a Stick Game is?
    - Have you been to a Stick Game?
    - Have you played Stick Game?
    - Do you have a way to attend a Stick Game?
    - Are you interested in continuing to learn about and eventually compete in Sticks?
    - Do you want to make your own Stick and Tossel?
    - What have you learned during your time with Stick Game Programming?

Qualitative Design Definition

"These methods aim to address societies' scientific and practice issues and involve naturalistic and interpretative approaches to different subject matters. These methods utilize various empirical materials such as case studies, life experiences, and stories that show the routines and problems that individuals are struggling with in their lives through focusing on their in-depth meaning and motivations which cannot be defined by numbers." (Taherdoost, 2022).

Qualitative methods were used to explore youth experiences, cultural connection, and perceived program impact. Qualitative data were collected through focus groups and individual interviews using semi-structured discussion guides designed to promote consistency while allowing participants to share experiences in their own words.

Focus groups were conducted for the following programs:

- Make It Stronger
- Flower Dance Workshops
- Abalone Sisters Dress Making Group

Individual interviews were conducted with Flower Dance participants to support deeper exploration of personal experiences and topics related to culture, ceremony, and relationships.

Due to cultural protocol considerations, qualitative data were not collected for Stick Game Programming. At the time of evaluation, the Internal Evaluator identified as a non-community cisgender woman, and it was not culturally appropriate for her to attend Stick Game activities. Additionally, Two Feathers did not have a male-identified Internal Evaluator available to support culturally appropriate qualitative data collection for this program.

Methodology for the one-on-one interviews included recruiting three Native youth who currently attend Flower Dance ACORN Programming. One you has been a part of ACORN programming since 2019, another since 2021, and the final youth recently started ACORN programming. Two of the youth are in the process of preparing for their own flower dance and one youth has already had their flower dance. Each youth were interviewed by a trained Two Feathers staff member with each interview lasting between six to eleven minutes.

Finally, we utilized Thematic Analysis for the focus groups and individual interviews we completed. “Thematic analysis is a method for identifying and analysing patterns of meaning in a data set… It illustrates which themes are important in the description of the phenomenon under study.” (Joffe, 2012). The thematic analysis process was overseen by internal evaluator, Dr. Amanda Young, who utilized thematic analysis for her PhD dissertation. In addition, she completed training for thematic analysis, how to interview, and how to run a focus group for the Cultural Programming team as well as volunteers who were interested in being a part of data collection. The Internal Evaluator and Cultural Programming team met weekly to review the transcribed interviews and discuss different themes that may fit and be true to what the youth were stating.

Qualitative Evaluation Questions

- Make It Stronger Focus Group
    - What MIS events did you participate in?

    - What made you come to MIS programming/events?
    - What did you learn from MIS that impacts your mental wellness?
    - What ways have MIS helped you connect more to your culture?
    - What words come to mind when you think of the Two Feathers Staff?
    - If you were in charge of MIS programming, what would you like to change?
    - Would you recommend others to participate in MIS programming/events next year?
    - What else would you like to share about your experience with MIS that was not asked?
- Flower Dance pre and post individual interviews
    - Pre-Interview Questions
        - What do you hope to learn?
        - What are healthy relationships?
            - Give an example of someone in your life or in the media that shows what a healthy relationship is like.
        - What do you do when you experience strong emotions?
        - What does it mean for youth to be connected to land/nature?
            - Do you feel connected to land/nature? (y/n)
                - What helps you connect?
        - What steps are needed for youth to be connected to land/nature?
        - What does it mean for youth to be connected to a community?
            - Do you feel connected to your community? (y/n)
                - What helps you connect?
        - What steps (helps youth be connected to land/nature) (how can we help youth to be connected to land/nature) are needed for youth to be connected to the community?
        - What does it mean for youth to be connected to their language and culture?
            - Do you feel connected to your language and culture? (y/n)
                - What helps you connect?
        - What steps are needed for youth to be connected to their language and culture?
    - Post-Interview Questions
        - What did you learn during Flower Dance Programming?

            - What is something about Flower Dance Programming that you would change?
            - Or add?
            - What can Two Feathers do to continue to help grow your connection with culture and ceremony?
        - Have you built a new relationship with another person during Flower Dance programming?
            - If so, tell me about the relationship.
        - Some youth expressed that when they participate in ceremonies, they are made fun of or teased. What are your thoughts on why this is happening?
            - How do you feel talking about this topic?
            - How can we help make this better for youth who attend ceremony?
        - How would you describe community to others?
            - What does community mean for you?
        - How is ceremony related to healthy relationships?
            - How do you connect to others through ceremony?
        - How does healthy relationships impact your mental health?
        - How does ceremony impact your mental health?
        - Is there anything else you would like to add?
- Abalone Sisters Dress Making Group
    - What did you think of the program?
    - What did you learn?
        - What did you learn that you didn't know before?
    - What kind of impact did you experience?
        - What kind of impact did you notice others experienced?
    - How will you implement what you learned throughout this program moving forward?

IRB Approval Statement

This local evaluation was reviewed and approved by the California Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS) under the California Health and Human Services Agency's Federalwide Assurance. CPHS granted continuing approval for the protocol titled California Reducing Disparities Project Phase 2, Stick Game and Flower Dance Local

Evaluation (Project No. 2017-114), confirming that all evaluation activities involving human subjects met applicable ethical and regulatory requirements.

Convenience and Snowball Sampling

Our programming is offered for community members, family members, and for youth ages 9 years old and older. Because we do not want to prevent but encourage community members and youths family members to attend, we focused on convenience and snowball sampling methods.

Convenience sampling is defined as a “sampling technique that requires the researchers to go to the public location and ask passers-by to participate.” (Golzar, Noor & Tajik, 2022). We increased our community involvement and presence since COVID-19 precautions were lowered. We increased our tabling at different community events, put on more of our own community events, and increased our outreach initiatives through flyers, phone calls, and volunteering. We have seen a significant increase in our participation numbers and retention rate due to increasing our relationships and being out in the community more.

Snowball Sampling is defined as “participants are then asked to recommend other contacts who fit research criteria and who potentially might also be willing participants, who then in turn recommend other potential participants, and so on. Researchers, therefore, use their social networks to establish initial links, with sampling momentum developing from these, capturing an increasing chain of participants.” (Parker, Scott, & Geddes, 2020). Snowball sampling was utilized to encourage community members and family members to attend our programming. We did see a fair amount of family members attend our programming with their youth and we would like to increase these numbers to help encourage cultural conversations and values being implemented within the home. In addition, we utilized snowball sampling to help increase our resources for cultural materials and knowledge to help us respectfully follow cultural protocol. Our cultural committee recommended different places and people we can reach out to to best fit the needs for our youth and our cultural programming team.

Participants in this project needed to be self-identified as Native American/American Indian people. For this reason, we focused on recruitment during events, organizations, and schools that primarily serve a Native American/American Indian population in the Northern California/Humboldt County/ Del Norte county region. For Make It Stronger, participants were offered incentives for their participant in the evaluation process including: a hooded sweatshirt with the program logo; stickers; snacks; and a lunch. In addition, youth who participated in the focus group were given $25 gift cards. During the Flower Dance cultural programming, youth participants were also provided with incentives for their participation as they were able to take

home the items they worked on or completed during the programing. Youth participants completed a doll size flower dance dress; a collection of natural made materials; and a necklace. Similar to Make It Stronger, the three young girls who participated in the individual interviews were offered $25 gift cards for completing the interviews. For youth participating in the Stick Game, youth were able to complete and take home a stick and tossel. These opportunities and incentives were highlighted in our recruitment materials.

Size

Our original goal was to recruit an average of 50 youth to participate in each Make It Stronger day and recruit 10 youth for the Make It Stronger focus group. For Flower Dance Programming, our goal was to recruit an average of 10-15 youth who attended workshops and education days and 5-8 youth who attended groups. In addition, we aimed to have 10 youth who were a part of the focus group at the end of Abalone Sisters Dress Making group. Finally, we aimed to have an average of 10 youth who attended Stick Games.

Make It Stronger

Our Make It Stronger program served a total of 1,115 youth with an average of 56 youth who attended our 20 events from 2022-2025. The average age being 12.7 years old with a median of 13 years old. 50% Female, 45% Male, and 5% Non-Binary/ Trans/ Not Specified. With 59% of youth being from the Coast, 38% being from Eastern Humboldt, and 3% Unspecified for their location.

Year	# of Events	Total Youth	Average Attendance per Event
2022	5	227	**~45 youth**
2023	5	287	**~57 youth**
2024	5	154	**~31 youth**
2025	5	427	**~85 youth**

*Average attendance per ACORN Make It Stronger event increased from 45 youth in 2022 to 85 youth in 2025, reflecting growing community engagement and program demand.

The Make It Stronger focus group that took place in 2023 had a total of 2 groups, each group consisted of 10-12 youth who were pulled from the general Make It Stronger group in 2023. These youth were asked a series of questions and their responses were compiled and analyzed via thematic analysis.

Flower Dance Programming

Flower Dance Workshop activities were hosted at Two Feathers and served youth from surrounding communities as well as brought a van filled with youth from Eastern Humboldt. Our Flower Dance Workshop program served a total of 102 youth with an average of 20 youth who attended our 5 events. The average age being 12.3 years old with a median of 12 years old. 90% Female, 8% Male, and 2% Non-Binary. We completed 5 groups on the coast and 5 groups in Hoopa for an average of 7 youth attending each Flower Dance Cultural Group. The average age of youth attending Flower Dance Cultural group was 13.23 years old.

Abalone Sisters Dress Making Group was completed at Two Feathers. Each group was completed weekly and excluded holiday breaks from October, 2023 to June 2024. These groups were overseen by a community cultural leader and cultural programming staff. This program reached a total of 40 youth who collaboratively worked on designing, prepping the material, and putting the dress together through mentorship and relationship building.

Another round of Abalone Sisters Dress Making Group was held in Hoopa, Eastern Humboldt at the College of the Red Woods community building from Nov 2024 to June 2025. These groups were overseen by a community leader and cultural programming staff. This program reached a total of 35 youth who collaborated on designing, prepping the material, and putting the dress together through mentorship and relationship building.

Stick Game

Stick Game programming served a total of 115 youth, an average of 14 youth each event, over 8 events. The average age being 13.1 years old with a median age of 13-14 years old. 82% Male, 4% Female, 3% Non-Binary, 11% Unknown/Not Specified. With 78% of youth being Coastal, 17% Eastern Humboldt, and 5% being Unknown/Not Specified.

Measures and Data Collection Procedures

For each program, quantitative measures, we utilized Central Tendency and Descriptive Statistics to determine the demographics averages. Data were collected through sign-in sheets and facilitator records at each event, tracking attendance, age, gender, and participant location when available. Information was summarized using attendance-weighted averages and reported descriptively. It is important to note that some demographic data is missing and was not collected at every event.

Focus groups and individual interviews, qualitative measures, were utilized to better understand youth experiences, perceptions, and the cultural relevance of programming. Focus groups were facilitated discussions with youth participants to explore experiences with the programs, perceived benefits, cultural learning, and suggestions for improvement. Individual interviews were completed one-on-one to gather more in-depth perspectives in groups impact, engagement, and culturally grounded practices. Semi-structured guides were used to ensure consistency across focus groups and interviews while also allowing participants to share experiences in their own words.

Focus groups and interviews were conducted in safe, familiar settings by program staff and trained facilitators. Informed consent was obtained from parents or guardians when required, and youth provided assent prior to participation in focus groups or interviews. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that responses would be summarized in thematic format. Notes were taken during and immediately after each focus group and interview. Focus groups were recorded via note taking and interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Notes and recordings were taken immediately after each event by the Internal Evaluator and was properly and ethically stored to help protect participants and their data. Data was reviewed and analyzed to identify common themes and patterns related to youth engagement, cultural identity, skills development, and program strengths by the cultural programing team and Internal Evaluator. All efforts were made to maintain participant confidentiality. No names or identifying information were included in focus group notes, interview summaries, or reports, and findings were reported in a summarized format.

Local evaluation attrition was minimal, as evaluation activities were embedded within program delivery and completed within the same programming period; as a result, participants who engaged in evaluation activities generally completed data collection in full, and no systematic drop-out from evaluation activities was observed.

Data Analysis Plan Implemented

Data were analyzed using a community-centered mixed-methods approach that values both numerical summaries of participation and the lived experiences of youth and community members. Quantitative and qualitative data were reviewed together to provide a collective interpretation and understanding of our program's reach, engagement, and meaning.

Quantitative data

Quantitative data were analyzed using central tendency and descriptive statistical methods to summarize participation patterns and participant demographics across program activities. Attendance records were used to calculate: total number of youth served, number of

events and sessions implemented, average attendance per event or session. Demographic information (age, gender, location) was summarized using: measures of central tendency (mean and median age) and frequencies and percentages for gender identity and geographic location. When combining data across multiple events and program years, attendance-weighted averages were used to ensure that larger gatherings were represented proportionally. These analyses were intended to describe participation patterns rather than compare groups or test hypotheses, aligning with the programs' community-based implementation model.

Qualitative data from focus groups and individual interviews were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach grounded in youth's voice and community context. Facilitator notes from focus groups and interviews were reviewed multiple times to gain familiarity with the data. Responses were organized and themed to identify recurring themes and shared experiences, with attention to cultural learning, relationship-building, youth engagement, and skill development. Themes were developed through an iterative process that prioritized the language, values, and perspectives shared by participants. Findings were summarized across participants, with quoted examples used to highlight key themes while maintaining confidentiality. This approach emphasized understanding the "how and why" the programs were meaningful to youth, rather than quantifying individual responses.

When considering the data analysis, it is important to keep in mind that the data reflected self-reported information and program records. Not all demographic measures were collected consistently across events, and missing responses were documented as "Unknown" or "Not Specified." Finally, qualitative findings reflect participant perspectives and are not intended to be generalized beyond program participants. Despite these considerations, the combined analyses provided a meaningful and culturally grounded understanding of program implementation and outcomes.

The evaluation sample is considered representative of the broader ACORN CDEP participant population, which consists primarily of American Indian youth from local Tribal and community settings in Humboldt County and surrounding areas. Youth who participated in evaluation activities reflected the same age ranges, geographic communities, and cultural contexts as those engaged in ACORN programming overall. Recruitment and data collection occurred within routine program delivery, supporting participation by Native American youth who are most directly connected to and impacted by the program's culturally grounded services. While participation in evaluation activities was voluntary, the resulting sample provides a meaningful and credible reflection of the experiences of American Indian youth served by ACORN.

Results

Evaluation findings from the ACORN Youth Wellness Program demonstrate strong evidence that culturally grounded programming positively impacts Native youth's sense of hope, belonging, cultural identity, and emotional wellness. Across all program components—Make It Stronger, Stick Game Programming, Flower Dance Groups, and the Abalone Sisters Dress Making Group—youth consistently reported meaningful increases in cultural connection, supportive relationships, leadership development, and engagement in community practices. Quantitative results show substantial program reach (1,332 total youth served), increasing participation over time, and strong representation of youth ages 12–14, the developmental period when cultural identity formation is most influential.

Qualitative findings reinforce and deepen these results. Youth described feeling *"happy," "comfortable," "connected,"* and *"part of a community"* as a result of participating. Across programs, participants highlighted strengthened relationships with peers, Elders, cultural leaders, and Two Feathers staff—relationships that they described as foundational to their emotional safety and confidence. Youth expressed increased understanding of cultural teachings, storytelling, regalia-making, ceremonial roles, respectful behavior, and the meaning of moving "in a good way." They also reported growth in patience, compassion, teamwork, and conflict resolution—key indicators of social-emotional development.

Stick Game survey data demonstrated increased knowledge, exposure, access, and interest in continuing participation, with 100% of surveyed youth expressing a desire to make their own stick and tassel. Flower Dance and Abalone Sisters findings highlighted strong themes of mentorship, identity strengthening, cultural pride, and healing through hands-on cultural creation. Make It Stronger focus groups reflected engagement, joy, belonging, and increased understanding of local tribal cultures and languages.

Together, these findings indicate that the ACORN Youth Wellness Program is meeting its intended outcomes:

(1) increasing youth engagement with culture,

(2) strengthening hope, belonging, and cultural identity, and

(3) supporting mental, emotional, and relational wellness through community-defined cultural practices.

The following sections provide detailed quantitative and qualitative results that illustrate the depth and breadth of program impact.

Quantitative Results

Quantitative findings summarize program reach, participation patterns, and participant characteristics across all cultural programming implemented during the evaluation period. These results describe who participated, how many youth were reached, and attendance trends over time.

Program Reach and Participation

Across all programs and years included in this evaluation, a total of 1,332 youth participated in cultural programming activities. Participation included single-day workshops, multi-session programming, and recurring group-based activities. Average attendance varied by program type, reflecting intentional differences in programming structure, group size, and learning goals.

Make It Stronger

From 2022 through 2025, the Make It Stronger program served a total of 1,115 youth across 20 events, with an average attendance of 56 youth per event. Attendance increased steadily over the evaluation period, indicating growing community engagement and demand for programming.

Year	Number of Events	Total Youth Served	Average Attendance per Event
2022	5	227	~45 youth
2023	5	287	~57 youth
2024	5	154	~31 youth
2025	5	427	~85 youth

Flower Dance Programming

Flower Dance workshop programming served a total of 102 youth across five workshop events, with an average attendance of 20 youth per event. These workshop-based events were supplemented by small group cultural programming designed to support sustained learning and mentorship. Flower Dance Cultural Groups included five groups on the Coast and five groups in Hoopa, with an average of seven youth per group. Youth participating in these groups had an average age of 13.23 years.

The Abalone Sisters Dress Making Group was implemented weekly from October 2023 through June 2024 and reached 40 youth. A second cohort, implemented from November 2024 through June 2025 in Eastern Humboldt, reached an additional 35 youth.

Stick Game Programming

Stick Game Programming served a total of 115 youth across eight events, with an average attendance of 14 youth per event. Attendance reflected the small-group, skills-based

format of this programming. In addition to attendance tracking, pre- and post-surveys were administered to Stick Game participants to assess prior knowledge, expectations, and learning. Survey findings are reported later in this section.

Participant Characteristics

Age

Across programs, participants were primarily middle childhood to early adolescence. Average ages varied slightly by program:

- Make It Stronger: Average age = 12.7 years (median = 13)
- Flower Dance Workshops: Average age = 12.3 years (median = 12)
- Flower Dance Cultural Groups: Average age = 13.23 years
- Stick Game Programming: Average age = 13.1 years (median range = 13–14)

Gender

Gender identity was self-reported and summarized using available data.

- Make It Stronger:
    - Approximately 50% female, 45% male, and 5% non-binary, transgender, or not specified
- Flower Dance Programming:
    - Approximately 90% female, 8% male, and 2% non-binary
- Stick Game Programming:
    - Approximately 82% male, 4% female, 3% non-binary, and 11% not specified

Location

Participant location was summarized when data were available.

- Make It Stronger:
    - Approximately 59% Coastal, 38% Eastern Humboldt, and 3% not specified
- Stick Game Programming:
    - Approximately 78% Coastal, 17% Eastern Humboldt, and 5% not specified
- (Location data were not consistently collected for Flower Dance workshop programming and are therefore not reported for those events.)

Quantitative results demonstrate strong program reach across multiple years and program types, with increasing participation over time in several program areas. Attendance patterns reflect intentional program design, balancing large community events with smaller, skill-based and mentorship-focused programming. Demographic data indicate that programs primarily served youth aged 12–14, with varying gender participation aligned with program focus and cultural context.

Stick Game Pre-and Post Survey Data

Pre- and post-surveys were administered to youth participating in Stick Game Programming to assess prior knowledge, experience, access, and interest related to Stick Game. The pre-survey was completed by 15 youth, and the post-survey was completed by 11 youth.

Knowledge of Stick Game

At baseline, most participants reported familiarity with Stick Game. Following participation, reported knowledge increased further.

Pre-survey:

- 86.7% reported knowing what a Stick Game is
- 13.3% reported they did not

Post-survey:

- 90.9% reported knowing what a Stick Game is
- 9.1% reported they did not

These results indicate a small increase in knowledge following participation.

Prior Exposure to Stick Game

Youth reported increased exposure to Stick Game following programming participation.

Have you been to a Stick Game before?

- Pre-survey: 73.3% yes, 26.7% no
- Post-survey: 90.9% yes, 9.1% no

Have you played in a Stick Game before?

- Pre-survey: 60.0% yes, 40.0% no
- Post-survey: 72.7% yes, 27.3% no

Across both items, a higher percentage of youth reported prior attendance and participation following program involvement.

Access to Stick Game

Access to Stick Game opportunities was assessed in the post-survey only.

Post-survey:

- 90.9% reported having a way to attend a Stick Game
- 9.1% reported they did not

This suggests that most participants felt they had access to continue engaging in Stick Game activities beyond the program.

Interest in Continued Participation

Interest in continued learning and participation was high among respondents.

- 80% of youth reported being interested in continuing to learn about and eventually compete in Stick Game
- 20% reported they were not interested

In addition, 100% of post-survey respondents reported that they wanted to make their own Stick Game stick and tassel.

Learning and Areas of Interest

Youth reported learning about:

- How to play Stick Game
- Good sportsmanship
- The cultural importance of Stick Game

When asked what else they wanted to learn, youth expressed interest in:

- Ceremonial dancing
- Additional cultural history
- Further training related to Stick Game

Pre- and post-survey results indicate increases in youth knowledge, exposure, and participation related to Stick Game following program involvement. Most youth reported having access to continue attending Stick Games and expressed strong interest in ongoing learning, skill-building, and cultural engagement.

Qualitative Results

Make It Stronger Focus Group

Qualitative findings from two Make It Stronger (MIS) focus groups provide insight into youth experiences, perceived impacts, and recommendations for program improvement. Analysis identified recurring themes related to engagement, belonging, cultural learning, and supportive relationships.

Youth Engagement and Enjoyment

Youth described MIS activities as engaging, fun, and appropriately structured for their age group. Participants highlighted storytelling, physical movement, and cultural demonstrations as especially meaningful.

Youth shared that:

- Activities were “short but fun” and “the perfect length”
- Movement and fitness-based activities helped keep them engaged
- Storytelling stood out as a favorite component

One youth shared:

“I liked listening to the Coyote stories.”

Another noted:

“Activities were short but fun — the time was a good length.”

Across both focus groups, youth expressed interest in more storytelling, including learning how to create and share their own stories.

Belonging and Social Connection

MIS programming created opportunities for youth to build relationships, socialize, and feel part of a larger community. Youth reported attending to “be with others,” “make new friends,” and “grow a stronger connection with people in my community.”

Several youth described an increase in comfort and connection over time. One participant shared:

“I was nervous at first, but comfy at the end.”

Another stated:

“Being with others and being with community.”

These responses suggest MIS supported a growing sense of belonging and comfort in shared community spaces.

Mental Wellness and Social-Emotional Growth

Youth consistently described ways MIS programming supported their mental wellness and social development. Key themes included compassion, patience, openness, and teamwork.

Youth shared statements such as:

“You don’t need to know somebody to help somebody.”

“Taking care of each other.”

“It helped me get more patient.”

Others emphasized learning through shared experiences:

“Learning about other tribes and peoples’ backgrounds.”

“Being able to connect with others.”

Collectively, youth responses suggest that MIS supported positive social interaction, empathy, and emotional growth.

Cultural Connection and Learning

Youth reported that MIS increased their connection to culture through language exposure, storytelling, and learning about local tribes. Many emphasized that stories made cultural teachings more meaningful.

Youth shared:

“Learning language.”

“Understanding local tribes.”

“Learning about my own culture.”

“I learned about life through story.”

One youth described cultural expansion beyond their own background:

“It opened myself up to more cultures and learning new tribes I am not from.”

Several youth also noted learning how to introduce themselves in Indigenous languages, which supported both cultural identity and confidence.

Perceptions of Two Feathers Staff

Across focus groups, youth consistently described Two Feathers staff as supportive and relational. Common descriptors included funny, kind, patient, helpful, and understanding.

Youth said staff:

“Get along with kids well.”

“Set boundaries but not too much.”

“Are willing to do whatever to help.”

These responses highlight the importance of staff relationships in creating a safe, welcoming, and respectful environment.

Youth Recommendations and Environmental Considerations

Youth offered constructive feedback to improve programming, particularly around physical comfort and logistics. Common suggestions included:

- More water-based activities
- Cooler or shaded locations
- Increased access to water during hikes

Additional cultural activities such as beading and gathering practices

Youth expressed:

- “More water stuff.”
- “Not standing in the heat for hours.”
- “More language learning.”

Youth also recommended reducing extended periods of adult-led talking:

- “Too much talking by adults.”

Overall Satisfaction and Willingness to Recommend

Across both focus groups, youth overwhelmingly stated they would recommend MIS programming to others. Youth frequently described the program as:

- “Fun.”
- “Helpful.”
- “A good way to learn culture.”

These endorsements reflect high satisfaction and perceived value of the program.

Youth voices indicate that Make It Stronger programming fostered cultural connection, social belonging, and positive mental wellness outcomes. Storytelling, shared activities, and supportive staff relationships were central to youth engagement. Participants expressed strong interest in continuing and expanding culturally grounded programming, particularly storytelling, language learning, and hands-on cultural activities.

Abalone Sisters Dress Making Group Focus Group

Qualitative findings from the Abalone Sisters Dress Making Group focus group (June 2024) reflect youth and staff experiences of culturally grounded learning, mentorship, relationship-building, and personal growth. Participants consistently described the group as a safe, supportive space for learning, creating, and connecting with culture and community.

Meaningful Cultural Space and Sense of Belonging

Participants described the program as a valued and rare space for cultural creation and community connection. Youth, staff, and cultural leaders expressed appreciation for having a dedicated, safe space to work on regalia and cultural materials.

Participants shared:

“This is a safe space — there isn’t a lot of places to do that.”

“It’s important to have a space to build and create.”

“Good community building. Everyone had a hand in building something.”

Many highlighted the importance of learning alongside others:

“It was cool that it was a space for other girls that could work on their own dresses and materials.”

“Parents brought their own regalia to work on.”

These responses reflect a strong sense of belonging, shared purpose, and intergenerational community engagement.

Cultural Learning and Hands-On Skill Development

Participants reported learning a wide range of cultural skills related to regalia making and traditional gathering practices. Learning was described as hands-on, relational, and grounded in tradition.

Participants shared learning experiences such as:

“I learned how to beargrass braid.”

“I learned a better way to strand abalone.”

“I learned how to sand down and grind shells.”

“We went gathering for pine nuts.”

Several participants noted increased appreciation for the time, care, and commitment involved in regalia making:

“I learned how long it takes to make regalia.”

“It gave me a bigger appreciation for the work that goes into it.”

These experiences deepened participants’ cultural knowledge and respect for traditional processes.

Mentorship, Relationships, and Shared Knowledge

Relationships with cultural leaders, staff, and peers were central to participants’ experiences. Youth and staff described learning alongside others with different knowledge bases as especially meaningful.

Participants shared:

“It was helpful to have others that had different knowledge bases.”

“It was good to build relationships with the cultural leader.”

Staff members also reflected on the impact of mentorship:

“It was nice to have a space as a staff member to learn from the cultural leader.”

Participants described feeling supported by both peers and knowledgeable adults, reinforcing the importance of collective learning.

Personal Growth, Confidence, and Emotional Wellness

Participants described personal growth through the process of making, learning patience, flexibility, and emotional awareness. Several reflected on how making regalia supported emotional regulation and confidence.

Participants shared:

“Things take longer than you think.”

“Plans changed and that is okay.”

“I learned how to be flexible.”

Others described increased confidence:

“Increased confidence in making regalia.”

“It made me feel good about myself.”

Participants also spoke about intentions and emotional states being part of the creative process:

“I will remember to put good medicine into my creations.”

“A way to get out of bad feelings is making.”

These reflections suggest the program supported mental wellness and healing through cultural practice.

Impact on Youth Identity and Leadership Development

Youth ambassadors and participants reflected on how the experience influenced their confidence, leadership, and future goals.

Youth shared:

“I learned what I can do for my own dress.”

“Made me want to do more work related in the cultural department.”

“It’s cool that they get to do this for a living.”

Staff noted growth in youth leadership:

“Seeing the youth ambassadors step up and take ownership.”

Participants also described feeling seen in new ways:

“They got to see us in a different light, not just as Two Feathers staff.”

Observed Impact on Others

Participants observed that others became more comfortable and expressive over time:

“People weren’t afraid to be themselves.”

“People became comfortable and came together as a group.”

“A lot of laughing.”

Some also noted increased confidence related to ceremony participation:

“I’ve seen girls feel comfortable coming to ceremony and picking up a flower dance stick.”

Feedback and Recommendations

Participants offered thoughtful suggestions to strengthen the program, including:

- More regular talking circles
- Singing circles
- Short, structured discussion time
- Opportunities for ceremonial learning
- More space for laughter and connection

Participants expressed appreciation for the program overall, closing with gratitude:

“Thank you.”

Qualitative findings indicate that the Abalone Sisters Dress Making Group fostered cultural learning, belonging, mentorship, and emotional wellness through hands-on creation and shared community space. Participants described increased confidence, stronger relationships, and a deeper understanding of cultural practices. The program provided a meaningful environment for healing, learning, and leadership development grounded in tradition and community connection.

Flower Dance Individual Interviews

Qualitative findings from individual pre- and post-interviews conducted during Flower Dance Programming highlight youth experiences related to medicine identity, leadership development, cultural connection, and community belonging. Findings reflect experiences across the five-month program in which youth created doll-sized regalia and engaged in cultural teachings, ceremony preparation, and relationship-building. Analysis identified three primary themes: Living in a Good Way, Emerging Leaders, and Connection, along with participant feedback to strengthen future programming.

Living in a Good Way

Youth described changes in how they move through the world, particularly in relation to ceremony, emotions, and intentionality. Participants shared learning how to attend ceremony and cultural spaces with mindfulness, respect, and awareness of their emotional state.

Youth described being intentional about mindset:

"I try to think good thoughts because we're at the dances and all."

Several youth shared strategies for managing difficult emotions while remaining connected to ceremony:

"Stepping away to reset and then coming back."

"Knowing when you can't fully be in a good way and stepping back."

Youth also expressed that participating in ceremony brought happiness and grounding:

"Being at ceremony makes me happy."

These responses reflect youth developing emotional awareness, boundaries, and respect for cultural spaces.

Emerging Leaders

Youth consistently described stepping into leadership and mentorship roles through Flower Dance Programming. Participants reported guiding younger youth, supporting peers, and speaking up when others needed help.

One youth shared:

"Yeah, I was just there to basically help and guide, I guess."

Another described intervening when peers were treated unkindly:

"If you know who has been teased… you can go talk to the people who were teasing the other person."

Youth shared learning patience, responsibility, and respect as part of leadership:

"Learning how to have patience with kids and how to be respectful in the space."

These findings indicate youth were naturally taking on leadership roles rooted in cultural values rather than formal titles.

Connection and Sense of Belonging

Youth described deepening connections with family, peers, staff, and community through Flower Dance Programming. Some youth shared discovering family relationships they were previously unaware of:

“I’ve met family members that I didn’t know were my family members… and they’re supportive.”

Others shared feelings of trust and collective responsibility within ceremony spaces:

“It makes you closer as a community — praying for the elder, the child, whatever.”

Youth also described expanding their understanding of community beyond a single tribe:

“It’s not just your people… it’s a whole bunch of other different people that can learn different things.”

Friendships, mentorship relationships, and support from staff were described as central:

“Staff is comfortable to be around.”

“Staff helps us learn culture.”

Overall, youth reported feeling connected, supported, and accepted within the Flower Dance community.

Cultural Knowledge and Identity

Youth reported increased understanding of ceremony protocol, responsibilities, and cultural practices, including fasting, gathering, regalia care, and respectful behavior.

One youth described learning ceremony protocols:

“I learned that when they’re doing heavy songs you don’t talk.”

Another explained:

“If your face itches, you can’t touch it — because you’re a spirit.”

Youth expressed interest in continued learning, including gathering practices, making regalia components, and preparing for future ceremonies.

Program Feedback and Youth Recommendations

- Youth provided thoughtful feedback to strengthen Flower Dance Programming, including:
- Increasing the frequency of meetings
- Offering more opportunities to learn gathering practices
- Providing more instruction on regalia-making (e.g., bark skirts, minks)
- Inviting girls who have completed their Flower Dance to speak and mentor
- Preparing youth earlier for ceremony expectations

One youth shared:

“I feel like we should have more events like this so girls can be prepped and know what to expect.”

Youth also emphasized the importance of maintaining respect for elders, ceremony space, and emotional readiness.

Qualitative findings indicate that Flower Dance Programming supported youth development in medicine identity, leadership, emotional awareness, cultural knowledge, and community connection. Youth described increased confidence, stronger relationships, and a deeper understanding of how to participate in cultural spaces “in a good way.” The program provided a supportive environment where youth were encouraged to grow as leaders, mentors, and community members grounded in tradition.

Discussion and Conclusion

This evaluation examined the extent to which Two Feathers' cultural programming supported Native youth’s sense of hope and belonging, engagement with culture, and engagement with programming. Findings from quantitative participation data and qualitative youth voice indicate that programming meaningfully addressed each evaluation question through culturally grounded, relationship-centered approaches.

Impact on Youth Sense of Hope and Belonging

Evaluation Question 1: To what extent is our programming having an impact on Native youth’s sense of hope and belonging?

Qualitative findings strongly suggest that programming supported Native youth’s sense of belonging by creating safe, welcoming, and culturally affirming spaces. Across Make It Stronger, Flower Dance, and Abalone Sisters programming, youth repeatedly described feeling comfortable, supported, and connected to others.

Youth articulated growing comfort over time, increased confidence, and feeling accepted within program spaces. Many described the importance of relationships—with peers, staff, and cultural leaders—as central to their experience. Youth also described learning compassion, patience, and how to support others, indicating growth in social-emotional wellbeing.

In Flower Dance and Abalone Sisters programming, youth described learning how to move through cultural and community spaces “in a good way,” including emotional awareness, intention-setting, and respect for others. These experiences reflect pathways toward hope and belonging rooted in identity and community, rather than individual achievement alone.

Together, these findings indicate that programming meaningfully contributed to youth feeling connected, valued, and supported within their cultural and community environments.

Youth Engagement with Culture

Evaluation Question 2: To what extent are our youth engaging with culture?

Qualitative findings demonstrate deep and sustained cultural engagement across programs. Youth participated in a wide range of cultural practices, including storytelling, language learning, regalia making, ceremony preparation, gathering practices, and physical cultural activities.

Youth described learning not only cultural skills, but also cultural meaning—understanding stories, protocols, responsibilities, and values. Storytelling emerged as a particularly powerful tool for cultural connection, helping youth understand identity, behavior, and relationships.

Flower Dance and Abalone Sisters programming supported development of medicine identity, leadership roles, and respect for ceremony. Youth described increased confidence in cultural knowledge, comfort attending ceremony, and a desire to continue learning and participating in cultural life.

Importantly, youth engagement with culture occurred through hands-on, relational learning alongside trusted adults, peers, and cultural leaders. This approach aligns with Indigenous ways of knowing and supports culturally meaningful engagement rather than surface exposure.

These findings indicate that youth were not only engaging in cultural activities but were internalizing cultural values, responsibilities, and identities.

Youth Engagement with Programming

Evaluation Question 3: To what extent are our youth engaging with programming?

Quantitative data indicate strong participation across programs, with sustained and increasing engagement over time. Make It Stronger programming showed growth in event attendance from 2022 to 2025, suggesting increasing community interest and trust. Across all programs, attendance patterns reflected intentional program design, balancing larger community events with smaller, relationship-centered programming.

Qualitative findings further demonstrate high levels of engagement. Youth attended multiple days of programming, participated in focus groups, and expressed enthusiasm for activities. Youth described programs as fun, meaningful, and something to look forward to. Many indicated they would recommend programming to others.

Youth feedback reflected investment rather than disengagement. Suggestions for improvement focused on expanding programming (e.g., more time, more cultural activities, more gatherings) rather than reducing involvement, indicating that youth valued and wanted to continue participation. Together, participation trends and youth perspectives indicate strong

engagement with programming, supported by culturally responsive design, trusted relationships, and meaningful content.

Strengths of the CDEP

The ACORN Youth Wellness Program demonstrates multiple strengths that align with CRDP goals and reflect the core values of culturally defined evidence practices. First, the CDEP is deeply grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems, with program content developed and guided by Elders, Medicine People, cultural leaders, and Tribal community members. This grounding ensures cultural accuracy, protocol adherence, and community trust—key contributors to strong youth engagement and sustained participation. The program's structure reflects Tribal values of relational accountability, intergenerational learning, and healing through cultural reconnection.

Second, the CDEP's design is highly responsive to community needs, offering multiple access points for youth to engage with culture through Make It Stronger, Stick Game training, Flower Dance preparation groups, and the Abalone Sisters Dress Making Group. This multimodal approach allows youth of different ages, genders, and cultural backgrounds to participate in ways that feel meaningful and developmentally appropriate. The expansion in Phase 2—including weekly cultural groups, year-long Flower Dance preparation, and expanded mentorship opportunities—demonstrates strong program adaptability and community-driven evolution.

Third, evaluation findings highlight the program's exceptional strength in fostering meaningful relationships, which youth consistently identified as central to their emotional safety, confidence, and willingness to engage. Two Feathers staff were frequently described as supportive, patient, relatable, and culturally grounded. These relationships function as protective factors that buffer stress, reinforce cultural identity, and support mental wellness.

Fourth, the CDEP effectively promotes social-emotional development and leadership, with youth describing growth in patience, compassion, teamwork, conflict resolution, cultural responsibility, and the ability to move "in a good way." Youth naturally stepped into leadership roles across all components, demonstrating the strength of culturally grounded mentorship. Fifth, the program's hands-on, land-based, and ceremony-infused learning model strengthens cultural identity and creates healing pathways not available in mainstream mental health systems. Youth reported significant increases in cultural knowledge, confidence in ceremonial spaces, and pride in their identity. Activities such as gathering traditional materials, making regalia, learning language, and participating in storytelling reaffirmed cultural continuity and resilience.

Finally, the CDEP is strengthened by its robust community infrastructure, including partnerships with multiple Tribal nations, access to ceremonial sites, transportation supports, culturally trained staff, and collaborative relationships with local families. These structural strengths ensure equitable access to programming and reinforce regional cultural revitalization efforts.

Collectively, these strengths position the ACORN CDEP as a powerful, community-driven, culturally grounded approach that effectively enhances hope, belonging, cultural identity, and mental wellness among Native youth—fulfilling and advancing the goals of the California Reducing Disparities Project.

Challenges and Limitations

The ACORN Youth Wellness Program demonstrated significant positive outcomes; however, several challenges and limitations impacted implementation and evaluation. Data collection was inconsistent across some program components due to cultural protocols, staffing demands, and the sensitivities of ceremonial spaces. Geographic barriers and transportation needs continue to limit access for some youth although we have tried to close this barrier, it still exists for some. Additionally, lingering effects of COVID-19 may have influenced attendance and emotional readiness. Finally, while short-term outcomes are strong, long-term effects require continued longitudinal evaluation. These challenges do not diminish program impact but highlight structural and contextual considerations inherent to community-defined, culturally grounded work.

Overall, evaluation findings across all ACORN program components indicate that the project is successfully meeting its three primary outcome goals: increasing hope and belonging, strengthening cultural engagement, and supporting sustained participation in programming. Youth consistently described feeling more confident, comfortable, and connected—sharing that initial nervousness shifted into a sense of belonging (“I was nervous at first, but comfy at the end”). Cultural engagement increased across all CDEPs, with youth reporting deeper cultural knowledge, hands-on experience with regalia and gathering practices, stronger understanding of ceremony roles, and pride in learning traditional teachings. Participation data reflected high engagement, strong retention, and growing community demand, while Stick Game survey responses demonstrated marked increases in knowledge, exposure, and access—with 100% of respondents expressing interest in continuing to learn and eventually compete. Together, these findings show that the ACORN Youth Wellness Program is effectively fostering cultural identity, relationship-building, and community-anchored wellness, aligning directly with CRDP goals and community-defined measures of success.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Evaluation findings from the ACORN Youth Wellness Program provide strong and consistent evidence that culturally grounded, community-defined practices significantly improve Native youth's sense of hope, belonging, cultural identity, and overall wellness. Across all components of the program—Make It Stronger, Stick Game Programming, Flower Dance Cultural Groups, and the Abalone Sisters Dress Making Group—youth demonstrated meaningful increases in cultural engagement, emotional regulation, relationship-building, leadership development, and confidence navigating cultural spaces. These outcomes directly align with CRDP's goal of reducing mental health disparities through culturally centered, community-driven approaches.

Quantitative data show that the program reached 1,332 youth across the evaluation period, with increases in attendance over time and strong representation of middle-school–aged youth (ages 12–14), a developmental window in which cultural identity and belonging are particularly salient. Participation trends suggest that community demand for culturally grounded programming is increasing and that Two Feathers has become a trusted and recognized hub of cultural education and youth wellness within the region.

Qualitative findings provide depth and nuance to these results. Youth repeatedly described the ACORN program as a safe cultural space where they feel supported, valued, respected, and connected. Themes across programs—including "Living in a Good Way," "Emerging Leaders," "Cultural Connection," and "Journey to Belongingness"—illustrate clear pathways through which cultural practices strengthen protective factors known to improve mental health outcomes. Youth expressed increased comfort in ceremony, pride in cultural identity, willingness to help others, and a sense of purpose and connection to their tribal communities. Many youth also articulated that participation helped them regulate emotions, develop patience, improve relationships, and practice compassion—all core indicators of social-emotional wellness and resilience.

Programs such as the Abalone Sisters Dress Making Group and the Flower Dance Cultural Groups demonstrated particularly strong impacts on youth identity development, intergenerational connection, and leadership skills. Stick Game survey data showed measurable increases in knowledge, exposure, access, and desire for continued participation, reinforcing that culturally grounded activities foster ongoing engagement.

Importantly, evaluation results show that ACORN programming is not merely additive—it actively fills longstanding gaps created by historical trauma, cultural disruption, geographic isolation, and limited access to cultural mentors. The program effectively operationalizes CRDP

principles by restoring connections to land, language, ceremony, community, and intergenerational knowledge systems. Findings demonstrate that this model provides a culturally congruent pathway to wellness that Western mental health systems alone cannot replicate.

Taken together, the evidence strongly supports the conclusion that the ACORN Youth Wellness Program is achieving its intended outcomes:

(1) increasing youth engagement in cultural practices;

(2) strengthening hope, belonging, identity, and cultural pride;

(3) fostering emotional, relational, and behavioral wellness through cultural learning and mentorship.

The program demonstrates that culturally grounded interventions are not only effective but essential for addressing the mental health disparities experienced by Native youth in Humboldt and Del Norte Counties.

Recommendations

1. Sustain and Expand Culturally Grounded Programming Through Stable, Long-Term Funding

Given the strong evidence that culturally based programming improves youth belonging, cultural identity, and emotional wellbeing, continued investment is recommended to expand year-round programming across sites, strengthen intertribal collaboration, and ensure access for youth who face transportation, geographic, or systemic barriers.

2. Deepen Youth Leadership Pathways Within CDEP Activities

Youth consistently demonstrated emerging leadership, mentorship, and responsibility across Stick Game, Flower Dance, and MIS programming. Formalizing leadership pathways—such as youth ambassador roles, peer mentorship, and opportunities to co-facilitate activities—would extend these strengths and foster long-term community capacity.

3. Strengthen Infrastructure for Cultural Material Sovereignty and Land-Based Learning

Hands-on cultural creation, gathering, and land-based activities were among the most transformative components of the program. Continued investment in gathering materials, regalia-making resources, transportation, and access to cultural sites will deepen engagement and strengthen wellness outcomes.

4. Enhance Evaluation Capacity to Further Validate CDEP Effectiveness

To continue building the evidence base for community-defined practices, investments in mixed-methods evaluation, survey refinement, and community-driven data interpretation are recommended. This includes developing culturally grounded outcome measures aligned with ACORN domains and supporting youth participation in evaluation processes.

The ACORN Youth Wellness Program demonstrates that culturally grounded prevention strategies promote measurable improvements in youth hope, belonging, wellness, and cultural identity. The CDEP successfully reestablishes intergenerational pathways for cultural transmission and strengthens community capacity to support youth mental health. Youth consistently identify Two Feathers as a trusted cultural leader and safe place to learn, grow, and reconnect. Historical trauma continues to impact Native youth, but cultural revitalization offers a powerful counterbalance that reduces isolation, increases wellness, and strengthens resilience.

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