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NIH launches program to advance research led by Native American communities on substance use and pain

Effort aims to elevate Indigenous Knowledge and culture in research, to respond to the overdose crisis and address related health disparities

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) has launched a program that will support Native American communities to lead public health research to address overdose, substance use, and pain, including related factors such as mental health and wellness. Despite the inherent strengths in Tribal communities, and driven in part by social determinants of health, Native American communities face unique health disparities related to the opioid crisis. For instance, in recent years, overdose death rates have been [highest among American Indian and Alaska Native people](#). Research prioritized by Native communities is essential for enhancing effective, culturally grounded public health interventions and promoting positive health outcomes.

“Elevating the knowledge, expertise, and inherent strengths of Native people in research is crucial for creating sustainable solutions that can effectively promote public health and health equity,” said Nora D. Volkow, M.D., director of NIH’s National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). “As we look for ways to best respond to the overdose crisis across the country, it is crucial to recognize that Native American communities have the best perspective for developing prevention and therapeutic interventions consistent with their traditions and needs. This program will facilitate research that is led by Native American communities, for Native American communities.”

Totaling approximately \$268 million over seven years, pending the availability of funds, the [Native Collective Research Effort to Enhance Wellness \(N CREW\) Program](#) will support research projects that are led directly by Tribes and organizations that serve Native American communities, and was established in direct response to priorities identified by Tribes and Native American communities.

Many Tribal Nations have developed and continue to develop innovative approaches and systems of care for community members with substance use and pain disorders. During NIH Tribal Consultations in [2018](#) and [2022](#), Tribal leaders categorized the opioid overdose crisis as one of their highest priority issues and called for research and support to respond. They shared that Native communities must lead the science and highlighted the need for research capacity building, useful real-time data, and approaches that rely on Indigenous Knowledge and community strengths to meet the needs of Native people.

The N CREW Program focuses on:

1. Supporting research prioritized by Native communities, including research elevating and integrating Indigenous Knowledge and culture

2. Enhancing capacity for research led by Tribes and Native American Serving Organizations by developing and providing novel, accessible, and culturally grounded technical assistance and training, resources, and tools
3. Improving access to, and quality of, data on substance use, pain, and related factors to maximize the potential for use of these data in local decision-making.

“Native American communities have been treating pain in their communities for centuries, and this program will uplift that knowledge to support research that is built around cultural strengths and priorities,” said Walter Koroshetz, M.D., director of NIH’s National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS). “These projects will further our collective understanding of key programs and initiatives that can effectively improve chronic pain management for Native American and other communities.”

The first phase of the program will support projects to plan, develop, and pilot community-driven research and/or data improvement projects to address substance use and pain. In this phase, NIH will also support the development of a Native Research Resource Network to provide comprehensive training, resources, and real-time support to N CREW participants.

The second phase of the program, anticipated to begin in fall 2026, will build on the work conducted in the initial phase of the program to further capacity building efforts and implement community-driven research and/or data improvements projects. Additional activities that support the overarching goals of the N CREW Program may also be identified as the program develops.

The N CREW Program is led by the NIH’s NIDA, NINDS, and National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences (NCATS), with participation from numerous other NIH Institutes, Centers, and Offices. The N CREW Program is funded through the [NIH Helping to End Addiction Long-term Initiative \(or NIH HEAL Initiative\)](#), which is [jointly managed](#) by NIDA and NINDS. For the purposes of the N CREW Program, Native Americans include American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians. Projects will be awarded on a rolling basis and [publicly listed](#).

This new program is part of work to advance the [Biden/Harris Administration’s Unity Agenda](#) and the [HHS Overdose Prevention Strategy](#).

If you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, help is available. Call or text [988](#) or chat at [988lifeline.org](#). To learn how to get support for mental health, or substance use conditions, visit [FindSupport.gov](#). If you are ready to locate a treatment facility or provider, you can go directly to [FindTreatment.gov](#) or call [800-662-HELP \(4357\)](#).

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About the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA): NIDA is a component of the National Institutes of Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. NIDA supports most of the world’s research on the health aspects of drug use and addiction. The Institute carries out a large variety of programs to inform policy, improve practice, and advance addiction science. For more information about NIDA and its programs, visit www.nida.nih.gov.

About the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS): NINDS is the nation's leading funder of research on the brain and nervous system. The mission of NINDS is to seek fundamental knowledge about the brain and nervous system and to use that knowledge to reduce the burden of neurological disease. For more information about NINDS and its programs, visit www.ninds.nih.gov.

About the National Institutes of Health (NIH): NIH, the nation's medical research agency, includes 27 Institutes and Centers and is a component of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. NIH is the primary federal agency conducting and supporting basic, clinical, and translational medical research, and is investigating the causes, treatments, and cures for both common and rare diseases. For more information about NIH and its programs, visit www.nih.gov.

About substance use disorders: Substance use disorders are chronic, treatable conditions from which people can recover. In 2023, nearly 49 million people in the United States had at least one substance use disorder. Substance use disorders are defined in part by continued use of substances despite negative consequences. They are also relapsing conditions, in which periods of abstinence (not using substances) can be followed by a return to use. Stigma can make individuals with substance use disorders less likely to seek treatment. Using preferred language can help accurately report on substance use and addiction. [View NIDA's online guide](#).

About chronic pain: Chronic pain affects more than 50 million adults in the U.S. It may last for months, years, or a lifetime after its onset from trauma or another chronic health disorder. Multidisciplinary approaches and access to safe, effective, and quality care are essential for reducing pain and improving quality of life.

NIH...Turning Discovery Into Health