2022 Native Youth Summer Camps

Association on American Indian Affairs
A 501c3 Native Nonprofit
We do not accept federal funding.
The Association on American Indian Affairs is the oldest non-profit serving Indian Country protecting sovereignty, preserving culture, educating youth, and building capacity. The Association was formed in 1922 to change the destructive path of federal policy from assimilation, termination, and allotment, to sovereignty, self-determination and self-sufficiency. Throughout its 100-year history, the Association has provided national advocacy on watershed issues that support sovereignty and culture, while working at a grassroots level with Tribes to support the implementation of programs that affect lives on the ground.

The Association started funding grants to Native Youth Summer Camps in 1963 as a powerful way for the Association to achieve its vision, mission, and goals. There is significant research that shows when Native youth are connected to their culture, they fare better mentally and emotionally than those who are not. Healthy and strong Native youth will sustain strong and diverse cultures and protect Native Nation sovereignty for years to come.

The Association provides funding for summer camps that connects Native youth with culture, and supports engaging curriculum on health, wellness, and self-care. Between 2003 and 2022, the Association has granted $235,000 to 170 Native Youth Summer Camps! This year the Association provided funding for 11 camps that offered educational opportunities regarding health and wellness, cultural practices, and languages.

The Association’s 2022 summer camp program supported at least 229 youth from many Indigenous Nations, Tribes, and communities including Navajo/Diné, Sicangu Lakota, Muscogee (Creek), Seminole, Athabaskan, Inupiaq, Yup’ik, Pacific Island, Klamath, Paiute, Modoc Paiute, Pyramid Lake Paiute, Kickapoo, Washoe Paiute, Mauri, Tohono O’odham, Pit River, Oglala Sioux Tribe, Piscataway Conoy Tribe, Piscataway Indian Nation, Lipan Apache, Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan Nation, Mayan, Chippewa Cree, Assiniboine, Sioux, Gros Ventre, Salishand Blackfoot, Soboba Tribe, Tule River Tribe, Cherokee, Ponca Tribe of Nebraska, Northern Cheyenne Tribe of the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation, Shoshone-Bannock Tribes of the Fort Hall Reservation of Idaho, Yurok Tribe of the Yurok Reservation, Gila River Indian Community, and others.

Below is information on each Native Youth Summer Camp. We hope you will continue to share your commitment to Native youth through the Association’s summer camp programs!
The Dlójí Yázhí Day Camp (DYDC) operated in person from June to July at the Thoreau Community Center in Thoreau, New Mexico. Participants included 34 campers, ages 4-13. Youth represented the Navajo/Diné Nation. Daily activities included cooking, sports, art, and nature exploration.

DYDC was led by 8 counselors and 5 counselors-in-training – all former campers. Counselors-in-training helped plan and coordinate activities to build their leadership and confidence throughout the duration of the camp’s programming. Campers at DYDC participated daily in cooking, art, science, and music. Youth received healthy meals and snacks each day and participated in daily physical activities such as sports, teambuilding games, challenges, and nature explorations.

A highlight of this program included DYDC hosting open-invite events for immediate family members of each young person and the greater Navajo Nation communities. Activities included a camping trip in Thoreau, a socially distanced movie night, camp sports, arts and crafts day, a family cookout, a scavenger hunt, and a field trip to Gallup, New Mexico.
Sinte Gleska University’s Camp, Tiwahe Glu Kini Pi – “Bringing the Family Back to Life”, offered Sunkawakan or Horse camps from June through August for Sicangu Lakota children from the Rosebud Reservation. Camps took place at the Camp’s Horse Ranch in Mission, SD. Teen Horse Handler Training Camp that included eight youth ages 15-18 occurred first. After completing the training, youth from this camp were hired for eight weeks to assist with the remaining camps.

Wikoskalaka or the Older Girls Camp, included 10 youth ages 11-18; the Hoksila or Younger Boys Camp, included eight youth ages 8-10; the Boys & Girls Club Camp, included 12 youth ages 10-15; Koskalaka or Older Boys Camp, included eight youth ages 11-18; and the Wicincala or Young Girls Camp, included 15 youth ages 8-13.

The first activity of the camp incorporated teachings about Mitakuye Oyasin, translated as one’s relationship with all of creation. Youth were introduced to their relatives, the Sunkawakan Oyate or Horse Nation. Campers spent time learning about horse anatomy, care and safety, and riding. There were healthy breakfasts, lunches, and snacks throughout the day. Youth learned traditional teachings about the Inipi or Sweat Lodge, Mni or water, and the Fire Lighting Ceremony. Youth also engaged in knowledge sharing about harvesting, drying, and storing Timpsila or wild turnips and sage for winter use.

A highlight of each camp included an all-family cookout to celebrate each camper’s accomplishments. The cookout had activities in Lakota art, beading, tipi knowledge, teachings about the traditional diet from Tatanka or Buffalo and Ceyaka or mint-infused water, and the values of a healthy home. Youth enjoyed a fishing and swimming excursion at a nearby lake and brainstormed ideas to promote health, self-care, and diversity.
The Sons of Mvskoke operated a stickball camp for Muscogee (Creek) youth at the Glenpool Creek Indian Community Center on August 8, 2022. Participants included eight Muscogee (Creek) and Seminole youth. Seven male mentors were also in attendance with one Mvskoke Elder, who lead the instruction. The ball sticks are a crucial element for ceremonial stickball games. The goal of this program was to pass on the knowledge and traditional ways of making these items to the next generations.

The process of making stickball sticks is lengthy and strenuous. Adult mentors cut and prepared hickory wood prior to the start of camp. Three trees were utilized to form eight logs. Each log was approximately four feet long and ten inches in diameter. The camp began with the introduction to ceremonial ball stick customs by a Mvskoke Elder. The participants began the process by splitting the hickory into quarters, and then into eighths. From those smaller, thinner staves of wood, youth were instructed to carve the wood into a rectangular shape. Once the stave was carved down to approximately one inch in diameter, a portion of the wood was further carved out to approximately 3/8 of an inch. The thinner end of the wood was then heated with steam to bend the end piece to make a six-inch eyelet. Everyone completed this process two times to make one set of ball sticks. Youth received healthy snacks and plenty of water to keep them hydrated during the program.

A highlight of this program included an invitation to bring this program to other portions of the Muscogee (Creek) reservation, community centers, and schools. This was an excellent opportunity for youth and mentors to continue their traditional ways and share knowledge of the process themselves with the process.
The Salamatof Tribe Duhdeldiht Youth Services Program conducted a multi-day fish camp beginning in July. The camp operated at the Salamatof/Kenaitze Educational Fishery near Kenai, Alaska. Participants included 10 youth, 3 adult staff, and 1 Athabaskan Elder leading the program. Various ethnicities were represented, including the Pacific Island, Athabaskan, Inupiaq, and Yup’ik Nations.

The camp met at the Cannery Lodge and then traveled to the Educational Fishery Net where Fisheries Staff assisted in setting the net. Campers always worked 6 feet apart. The staff taught everyone how to identify different species, and how to catch, clean, and fillet the salmon using safe knife-handling techniques. Youth also learned how to make a traditional salt brine by putting water into a plastic tote and then adding salt until a potato could float in the mixture. While the youth waited, they discussed traditional values and how families always worked together to ensure the community had enough food for winter. Staff introduced the youth to diabetes awareness, prevention, and personal lived experiences. Conversations on diet and exercise were incorporated throughout the program.

A highlight of the camp included the distribution of extra fish left over from the program. Youth learned how to smoke and cut the fish for storage. The fish was placed into jar-sized pieces and placed in glass jars. The jars were then put into pressure cookers to be sealed. The jarred salmon will be distributed to our Elders later in the year.
The Padua’a Lake Pow Wow was hosted by the Gidutikad Band of the Northern Paiute Tribe. Participants included 21 children ages 3 plus. Native Nations included Klamath Paiute, Modoc Paiute, Pyramid Lake, Navajo, Kickapoo, Washoe Paiute, Mauri-New Zealand, Tohono O’odham, and Pit River. The youth activities focused on creating ways for them to connect with their Native Nations as well as amongst each other. Increased adoption of improved nutrition, health, and physical activity practices was heavily emphasized.

Tribal Elders helped design the event to meet these goals. The physical act of dancing and drumming was a joyful way to promote both physical and mental health. Over the span of 3 days, healthy and locally sourced food was available as snacks and meals to promote healthy eating, diabetes awareness, and prevention. Each day began with youth activities for 2 hours prior to the start of the Pow Wow and during the breaks. All children were invited to attend, and Tribal Elders were invited and encouraged to participate. Elders volunteered to serve healthy foods at the snack bar.

A highlight of the event included Elder Patsy, who shared in traditional storytelling about her life in Fort Bidwell and her experience at a Boarding School in Nevada. All community members were welcomed in hopes of educating, respecting, and connecting with one another.
The 2022 Oglala Sioux Tribe operated a Vice President’s Office Intern Camp for one week in June. Participants in this cohort included 7 campers, ages 13-16. The Vice-Presidential Internship Camp was created to develop the future leaders of the Oglala Sioux Tribe. The program’s efforts aimed to educate youth on Tribal processes, procedures, and issues through an in-person learning experience with the OST Vice President’s Office.

Elders within our communities presented the interns with traditional knowledge concerning the current and historical political structures, boarding schools, language, health, and other local topics. Interns had the opportunity to participate in the Jenny Gulch Gold Mining Objection, where they gathered community signatures for the Objection Letter. In November, the interns will be hosting a Student Intern Panel. The panel is hosted prior to the general elections to discuss needs within the youth community, current issues, and what they look for in future leaders.

A highlight of the camp included the opportunity for interns to be introduced to the standing committees: Land and Natural Resources, Law and Order, Education Finance, Economic and Business Development, Health and Human Services, and Youth Affairs. The VPO Intern Camp provided the youth with the resources needed to be informed on tribal processes, procedures, and issues through the in-person learning experience. The VPO Intern Camp plans to have more cohorts in the future and increase youth participation.
The Piscataway Aviation Camp operated for 1 day in August at the Frederick Airport in Frederick, MD, on the original Piscataway ancestral homelands. Participants included 8 campers (ages 8-17). Youth represented the Piscataway Conoy Tribe, Piscataway Indian Nation, and Mayan.

The day began with aviation in the morning at the AOPA airport followed by cultural classes in the afternoon. Four elders were also in attendance to assist with cultural classes and guidance of the aviation instruction. Children enjoyed healthy snacks and water during breaks. The activities for youth cultural classes included making dreamcatchers and medicine wheels.

A highlight of the camp was the historic reunion of children from both Maryland State Recognized Piscataway Tribes. This was significant because these two Native Nations have not reunited in this way in more than 40 years, making it a very momentous occasion.
Texas Tribe Buffalo Project operated The Iyanee’ Youth Camp during the summer of 2022. The camp took place at the TTBP Ranch Headquarters for 4 days in Waelder, Texas. Participants included 30+ youth (ages 8-15) and 20 adult volunteers. Youth represented the Lipan Apache band of Texas, Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan Nation, as well as local communities from Gonzales and San Antonio Texas.

The Iyanee’ Youth Camp was the first annual Youth Camp to be hosted by the Texas Tribe Buffalo Project. Youth engaged in physical activities such as group bonding exercises, swimming, and sports. The camp provided the opportunity to learn about the Buffalo, healthy food systems, traditional survival skills, and oral storytelling by Lipan Apache Elders.

Daily teachings about traditional and ancestral lifeways were presented to youth as a way of ensuring cultural survival through generational trauma. A highlight of the camp included being able to see the vision of the Texas tribal Buffalo Project come to fruition and the ability to provide a future for generations to come.
Helena Indian Alliance Native Youth Leadership Camp

The Montana Native Youth Leadership Camp operated for 3 days in June at Carroll College in the state capital, Helena, MT. Participants included 18 campers (ages 13-18) and 6 counselors. Campers represented Chippewa Cree, Assiniboine, Sioux, Gros Ventre, and Salish and Blackfoot. The goal of the camp was to have youth experience a visit to the State Capital and interact with Tribal and state leaders.

Youth were introduced to federal policy regarding Native Americans, historic trauma to their communities, and ways of healing through art. Elders from the Native Connections Advisory Committee also attended the camp, interacted with the youth, and provided insight into these presentations.

A highlight of the camp included youth experiencing a tour of the state capital. A youth resource fair was held in the rotunda of the capital, and a display of Plains Indian dancing and singing was held. The youth prepared poster boards and questions for a meeting with the Lieutenant Governor and were grateful for this opportunity.
The Soboba Tribe, Tule River Tribe, and Native Star Foundation operated the Tribal Youth Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) Cultural Exchange Summer Camp from June to July. Participants included 24 campers (ages 14-17). A total of 8 different Nations were represented by participants in this camp.

Camp began with an overview of the importance of following safety and security procedures. The camp was inclusive and supportive of LGBTQ2S+ Native youth, with various orientation talks on how we are all connected and related. Youth camped on the Tule River Indian reservation in the Giant Sequoia Forest and held breakout groups, workshops, and small huddles. Youth learned about diabetes prevention, overall wellness, and mental health. Programming also included (TEK) Tribal Ecological Knowledge, fire prevention, outdoor safety, and community leadership succession workshops. Youth at this camp were introduced to cultural presentations that included clapper stick-making, land acknowledgment, and land advocacy, followed by youth workshops.

A highlight of the camp included the opportunity for youth to engage in hiking, swimming, and observing Mother Nature. Youth often shared in laughter, smiling, and storytelling. Youth enjoyed learning these important teachings about interconnectedness all while building rapport with one another and the communities they come from.
The University of Arizona operated a Native American Youth Entrepreneurship Program for 7 days during the summer of 2022. Participants included 12 youth ages 14-19. Youth represented different Native Nations including Eastern Band Cherokee, Ponca Tribe of Nebraska, Northern Cheyenne Tribe of the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation, Navajo Nation, Cherokee Nation, Shoshone-Bannock Tribes of the Fort Hall Reservation of Idaho, Yurok Tribe of the Yurok Reservation, and the Gila River Indian Community.

Participants engaged in programming related to education on culture, language, and the needs of their Nations. Programming was conducted virtually and there were limited opportunities for in-person community involvement. Participants discussed their growth as entrepreneurs and their business ideas and ways of communicating their vision to the public.

A highlight of the program included participants showcasing their business pitches in a collaborative video that has been published on the Native Nations Institute YouTube page. This provided a fantastic opportunity for youth to practice introducing themselves as young business owners and sharing their ideas in convincing and strategic ways.
Partner with us!

The Association’s 2022 Summer Camp Program Awardee stories are included in this Report and provide a sample of the impacts we can make to support Native youth. But we can do even more.

Currently, the majority of the summer camp program is funded through a single donor: the Ben Plucknett Charitable Trust. The grant program is also funded by Association’s unrestricted operating funds, which come from general giving.

The Association sees a demonstrated need to develop a consistent national program throughout Indian Country that will address self-advocacy and build the Native youth voice. A national summer camp program will also help youth develop leadership skills that will support Tribal sovereignty and self-determination while fulfilling the Association’s vision of creating a world where Native American cultures are lived, protected, and respected. If you would like to participate in the development of this national opportunity, please contact the Association!

Help the Association build a National Youth Camp that is available consistently every summer to Native youth in regions across Indian Country. Curriculum is currently being developed that will provide education through diverse cultural teachings that include:

- Self-care and self-advocacy so that Native youth are not taken advantage of.
- Suicide prevention so that Native youth have a network of support and ways to seek help.
- Health and wellness to stay strong and brave.
- American Indian History and the U.S.–Tribal government-to-government relationship to understand what Tribes need to grow and provide for their peoples.
- Develop political leadership and advocacy to support sovereignty, self-determination, and protection of cultures.

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BE A TEACHER
BE A MENTOR

PARTNER WITH US TO SUPPORT A NATIONAL NETWORK OF NATIVE YOUTH ADVOCACY AND SELF-DETERMINATION