

# Relationships as the Key to Effective Tribal Child Advocacy Center Management: An Interview with Jade Carela, Tulalip CAC Director

### NCA Accreditation Standards this brief addresses:

Standard 1: Multidisciplinary Team

Standard 4: Victim Support and Advocacy

Standard 7: Case Review and Coordination

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NCARC Consultant Jade Carela is a member of the Tulalip Tribes in Western Washington and the Director of her Tribes' CAC and Domestic Violence Services programs. NCARC's Jennifer Calder recently interviewed Jade to discuss how she approaches relationship building as a CAC Director. Jade's perspective as a CAC Director allows her unique insights not only into relationships between non-Native providers and their service populations but also into the management of relationships within Multidisciplinary Teams (MDTs) composed of Native and non-Native members representing different governments and agencies with different internal work cultures, mandates, and time constraints. The interview has been edited for clarity and length.

### Could you start by talking about the importance to your community of the work you do?

The goal of our Children's Advocacy Center is to cause less trauma to children who are victims and survivors in our community by providing a more holistic approach to all children who are victims of crime in our community.

As with other communities, not just Native communities, a long-standing pattern has been to sweep these experiences under the rug, to keep them within the family. We haven't always given children a voice or let them make decisions or choices in their lives about things that are hurting them. By bringing a CAC onto a reservation, we are now giving children a voice, and we're saying that this behavior is not acceptable and that the perpetrators in our communities need to be held accountable.



**I'm sure a lot of non-Tribal organizations and providers would share those values with you and your CAC, but they might be wondering where to start in working with a Native nation. Who should they reach out to? What else should they do?**

It would be best to start by connecting with a Tribal member, someone who has some sort of decision-making authority. Each Tribe works differently. Even the Tribes here in the state of Washington—none of us are the same, so our leadership is going to look different, and the way that you get things done here versus on another reservation is going to be different. If you can build a relationship with one Tribal member on the reservation where you're working and get to where they trust you and you trust them, then you can start asking them more questions about how to make things happen.

Every single Tribe is unique. We each have our own cultures and characteristics, even all the coastal Natives in Washington State that have lots of similarities. We're still all a little different, you know? So just because you might have worked with one Tribe, you can't go to another Tribe and assume it's the same.

**What do you see as keys to partnering, maybe as a non-Native provider within a CAC or a non-Tribal member of a Tribal MDT?**

What I tell people all the time is anything to do with Native communities is all built on relationships. If you don't have a relationship, you will get nothing done, which then leads to increased trauma for our children.

For too long, Natives have heard non-Natives say, or seem to be saying, "Let's save the Indians." That's not what we want to hear. We don't need to be "saved." We are okay. We don't need non-Natives to come into our community with that mentality. Instead, we would like to see them come with the mentality that they really want to learn about us and help us in a holistic way. I've had employees that I've let go because they have that mentality. That doesn't work for our communities.

**What would you say is a better mentality or way of orienting oneself?**

Send people who are humble, compassionate, someone who's real and going to be able to think outside of the box on how to get things to happen. And make an effort to learn about our culture. Call the main Tribal line to see what resources are available. Find out if the Tribe has a museum where you could go to learn about their history. Do they have websites where you could go to learn about their Tribe? Are there any events open to the public that you could go to and learn about their culture in person?

I do this with my own team at our CAC. If I have a new employee who isn't a Tribal member, they go to our museum for at least half a day to learn. I also tell my staff outside of work hours that they need to attend our events as they're able to. You need to experience it, right?

**What about actually interacting with the Tribe or with Tribal members? What advice would you offer?**

Be sincere, honest, and transparent with your communication. As Brené Brown says,

clarity is kindness. Listen and communicate with empathy. Provide information on what you can help with, or what your relationship with us would bring to the table. What could it look like?

Think ahead about possible concerns or issues and how to address them before they even happen. Maybe you've heard about other people in your community who have tried to partner with Tribes, and they've had issues or concerns and have ideas about why something hasn't worked. You need to take that information in and digest it, think about it, and think about how you could address it, because most likely it's not gossip. It might be an issue for you, too. Before even addressing a Tribe, you need to think about those kinds of issues and how would you address them.

A lot of addressing those issues, though, is going to come down to you building those relationships. Because once you have those relationships—if you have a true, trusted relationship with a Tribal member, that person will be more open to hearing what your questions are, without taking offense. They will want to give you feedback because they'll want you to work with their community.

**It sounds like you're saying there's a balance between not being naïve about some of the challenges you might encounter, but also being open to the fact that you don't know or understand what is needed.**

You have to be able to anticipate but not assume. It's a fine line in your initial meetings and talks. You need to not talk and to listen.

That's what I tell my staff. I'm very transparent when I hire them. I let them know that I am a safe person they can come to because I want it to work out. I want you to work well with my community, but you, coming in as a non-Native, need to understand that you need to learn about our community, and listening is going to be the biggest thing for you coming in.

We've had people in the past who have said totally inappropriate things in front of clients. They weren't coming from a bad place, but the way that it comes across is just super-inappropriate. I've tried to develop language guidelines with all my new employees. Setting that boundary, that standard for them.

**So as the Tribal member in that relationship, and as the Director, their employer, you set up some clarity of expectations and offer some clear advice about how to approach and engage in the work, while also establishing yourself as a trusted resource.**

They need someone to be able to ask questions of, because that's how they learn. It may not be safe for them to go and ask our clients or even other professionals in the field because they might get offended. But I'm the safe person that you can come to. I'm not going to judge you, and I'm not going to get offended because I'm going to trust that you are coming from a sincere place of wanting to learn. If we don't give people that space, they are going to fail.

I mean to just throw someone into a Native community who is non-Native or maybe a Native but not from that Tribe—that's setting them up for failure. I know what it's

like being somewhere that's uncomfortable or not feeling like you know what you're doing. If you don't feel like you're in a safe place to talk to someone or ask questions, you're not going to grow. You're not going to learn, and you're definitely not going to be the best that you could be in your position.

**I wonder how all of this translates to facilitating an MDT. MDTs require the engagement of several different organizations and partners. How do you build trust with the partners on your team?**

Something that I've always done with newer partners, especially in the beginning, is meeting them in person. When you call people on the phone, there's just really not that connection. I always set up face-to-face meetings, whether it be at a coffee shop, their location, or my location. I ask them what they would prefer to give them some choice. Then when you meet with someone face-to-face for the first time, it doesn't need to be anything official. The message is, "I want to get to know you. I want to understand what's important to you. Do you have any questions for me?" It really just starts by building one relationship with one person and focusing on that relationship.

And I continue those relationships outside of the MDT. We'll go out to lunch or go have coffee. I'll stop by their office with a little gift to let them know that I'm thinking of them. For example, I know the Police Chief likes certain sweets, so I'll go to the bakery in town sometimes and then stop by and see him and drop some sweets off.

Food is very important for Natives. We have potlucks for our MDT, so as a team, we're just sitting there eating together. We'll have our MDT meeting and then have our potluck that's separate from the meeting, and we don't necessarily talk about work anymore. That's where we learn more about people's families and their interests and hobbies.

**I know that Tribal MDTs could look pretty different depending on jurisdictional issues and who the service providers in the community are. Could you tell us who sits on your MDT?**

There are core MDT members: Tribal prosecution, Tribal child attorneys, Tribal police department, and our Tribal CPS, which is known as *beda?chelh*, the word for "our children" in our language. Then the outside agencies on the MDT are the FBI, the State District Attorney, State CPS, and then our forensic nurse examiner. From the CAC we have our forensic interviewer, our mental health therapist, I am at the meetings as the facilitator, and then we also have our lead advocate.

All these people attend all our MDT meetings. It's part of the NCA standards for being accredited. Sometimes you're going to have cases in which the FBI won't be involved because it's not in their jurisdiction, and sometimes you will.

**What is the level of engagement if, for example, the FBI team member is there and you're discussing cases that are not within their jurisdiction?**

This really depends on the relationship that we have with the FBI agents at the time. We've had FBI agents in the past who won't

comment unless it's their case. But then we have other FBI agents like we have right now who are amazing, and they want to work with our detectives. They want to help figure things out with them. They may meet with them outside of MDT. They may ask, "Can we help in any way?"

Another time, when we had a person who needed to be interviewed located a couple of hours away from us, and it would take our Tribal detectives all day to go and do that interview, the FBI agent assigned to us offered to contact one of his agents down in that area to see if they could do the interview. And they gave that option to the Tribal detectives.

It goes through waves because, for the FBI agents, they need experience working with Tribes. It's one of their requirements for going up the ladder. Sometimes you get really good ones who are invested, and then you get other ones who just need to mark the box.

**You talked earlier about gifts and sharing food with your MDT. I'm wondering if you have other thoughts about team building and stewarding those relationships.**

Team building is huge. Obviously, that's a big part of relationships. Once you start building your team, you need to have access to team-building activities within your MDTs and your case reviews. I like to ask questions like, "What have we done on the team this week that's been good for the community?" or "What's a prideful moment for us as a team?"

I do a swag bag for our new MDT Members, so they already come in feeling like they have the CAC support and stuff that they

want from us. Every year I write into grants to allow four or five MDT members to go to training and travel together. I typically always go because as the facilitator of the MDT, it's extremely important for my relationship with each partner. I'll send out an email to everybody about a conference and see who's interested in going. We'll trade off each year who attends. These training trips are so big for relationship building because you're traveling out of state and are really trusting your team members in different ways. You're having breakfast, lunch, and dinner with them, and you're going out and doing stuff, fun stuff, with them in a different city. That is such a blessed way of building your relationships. I mean, even with the people that I'm close with, every time we travel, we come back with our relationship even stronger.

**What about the management piece of it? How do you manage relationships and balance all these team-building goals with actually working on cases?**

Once it's more established, as you have different agencies with different mandates, and you're trying to kind of put them all together in a protocol, that's very difficult. Different professionals with different cultures, policies, procedures, and the politics between the different agencies and their leaders can be confusing for people. Different timelines can add to the friction among team members and then the rotation of team members, like with the FBI.

We have an official orientation for new MDT members, so they know what to do. Open and clear, communication being authentic, being fully present during your meeting

with them. Being aware that we all want to assume the positive intent of each other, we all want to give each other the benefit of the doubt. When you do have concerns that arise, we want you to take responsibility.

As advocates, we argue at times with the detectives, because they want evidence for the prosecution. I'm like, we're not forcing our victims to give this information to you, because that's not our job. That's your job, not ours. Our concern is just for the victim. So there needs to be space to disagree, as well.

**Are there any other formal things you do to help the team function better despite all their different mandates and cultures?**

Every six months we do a survey with our MDT, and I always go over the results with the team. Someone may write in the survey that they're sick of hearing no updates from other MDT partners. And with me, being a very direct person, I don't skate around the issue. I'm just matter of fact. I address the concerns with the team because it's normal to have concerns, and if one person has one, I'm sure others do, as well. What are we going to do as a team to make this better? I think it builds more safety for us to be able to communicate and talk to each other about how we're really feeling. It's a safe space because I'm the one that's facilitating it.

**It's a combination of gathering the information in private, then speaking about it in a nonjudgmental way and making it the team's responsibility to address it.**

Right, and coming up with solutions. I'm the direct one of the bunch. I'm not conflict-

avoidant. I want to talk about it and figure it out. I'm not into triangulation. I don't care who said it, or who the issue is with, or any of that stuff. I always suggest meeting one-on-one and having transparent conversations to address either what I'm witnessing or seeing myself, or a concern that has been brought up by others. Addressing it doesn't mean it needs to change our relationship. But it's my job as the leader or the facilitator to address things.

**These kinds of conversations are challenging, and there is a tendency for people to avoid having them. What other advice would you give to have difficult conversations?**

If I need to address a concern with someone, the first thing I do is think about what I like about them. What is good about them as a human being? I think about giving them the benefit of the doubt. And why could they have done this, or why could they have said this? What could be the reasoning behind this? What is a piece that I'm missing that I don't know about? Recognizing that I don't know the whole story until I talk to them, puts me into a place of more empathy and understanding.

Then I take time to prepare and think about what I'm going to say. What is the actual concern? What are the "I" statements that I can utilize to put it on me, not just them?

And then I meet with them, and I listen. I ask questions. Can you tell me more about this? Can you help me understand? It's really just trying to make it a safe place, not just be accusatory. Because the truth is, I

don't know the whole story. It's feedback with kindness.

These processes can take a really long time. There's no timeframe, no time limit. It's all relationship based. You need someone in these positions who can have these hard conversations and can be transparent about it, and at the end of the day can still get the point across that it's a compact.

**There's a certain amount of grace you're giving people.**

Yes. I think about the fact that if someone had to talk to me about something difficult, how uncomfortable that feels for both parties. And then, also recognizing that everybody's communication style is different. I want people to talk to me like I talk to them. I just want you to be direct. This clarity is good. But then there are people who need to be coddled into getting to that topic. And so again, that's coming from the relationships that you've built with these people. You know what they respond to. If you just don't know, then you should come from a middle ground of trying to be flexible with all of it until you learn what kind of communication style they have.

I'm a people person, and so I learn people. That's another huge piece to building relationships: you have to be curious. I want to learn about people and get to know them. And I test the waters in different ways, little ways of knowing how they would react to something in case something big does happen. Like with our FBI agents, I don't necessarily know them as well as I know our Tribal detectives, so the way that I approach them is going to be different. Even

though it's law enforcement, it will look different.

**Are there any deal breakers for you? Anything that you won't tolerate from MDT members or from CAC staff?**

Something I will not deal with is gossiping. Gossip is the one thing that will turn your team toxic in a hot minute. I just had to address this with staff recently. I sat them all down in a room and I said, "Here's how this works. If I hear of you gossiping, you will be warned individually by your supervisor. If it happens again, it will not just be a write-up. You will be dismissed. Just so everybody is clear on this."

I've worked way too hard to have a team that trusts each other, has psychological safety, and can be transparent—to then have someone come in and not like their coworker so they start gossiping about that coworker to somebody else. It is the fastest way to toxicity. I won't do it. For the most part, I try and give the benefit of the doubt. But gossiping is just a hard, absolute *no*.

**That makes sense. I hear you saying that you're laser-focused on protecting your team's ability to work together. Well, do you have any closing thoughts? Any last bits of advice for someone who might be thinking of starting a Tribal MDT or CAC?**

If you don't know where to start or don't know what to do, reach out to those of us who have done it before. In the CAC world, we don't believe in reinventing the wheel. I've been mentoring Tribes and others who are starting CACs. I'm able to share our protocols, MOUs, and policies as well as my successes and my mistakes. I'll share whatever I have. You don't need to reinvent

the wheel; providing advice gives me a sense of continuing the work that I do. When I'm teaching or sharing, I'm also re-educating myself and reaffirming all the things that I have learned.

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**Jade Carela** is a Tulalip Tribal member and the Director of the Tulalip Tribes' Children's Advocacy Center and Legacy of Healing, both of which are advocacy centers that

serve victims of crime on the Tulalip Indian reservation. Prior to becoming Director of these two programs, Jade served as manager of the Children's Advocacy Center. She is drawn to this work because of her long-standing dedication to protecting victims and survivors in her Tribal community. She believes strongly that maintaining a Tribal-based program for crime victims is an essential component of creating a safe community that protects the victims and survivors.

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