

Creating a Welcoming CAC Environment for Native Children and Families: An Interview with Lalanía Walker of the White Earth Nation's CAC

NCA Accreditation Standard and Essential Component this brief addresses:

Standard 10: Child Safety and Protection
Essential Component A: CAC is a designated, task-appropriate facility or space

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Tribal CACs, as well as other CACs that serve Tribal communities, should strive to provide culturally responsive environments that promote psychological safety for victims and their families. There are many approaches to creating an environment that reflects local Tribal cultures and community values. NCARC Director Dr. Maegan Rides At The Door spoke to Lalanía Walker, Coordinator of the White Earth Nation's Tribal Child Advocacy Center, to find out how their CAC approached this task. The interview transcript has been edited for length and clarity.

Hi, Lalanía. Thank you for agreeing to talk to me. Could you tell us a little bit about how you and your team set about creating the artwork and changing the physical environment within your CAC?

The previous CAC coordinator started this process by commissioning a mural in the waiting room. It's of Ojibwe woodland florals. She wanted to create a welcoming environment for the kids, one that's familiar

and representative of their culture and who they are. Another key point about that mural is that it was painted by an Indigenous artist who is a survivor of sexual assault. This survivor liked the idea of creating work and putting her energy here because this is a building that's going to be helping kids who survive sexual assault. So, painting it helped her as well. Having art that reflects our Tribal population's culture is part of establishing our good intentions and promoting a feeling of safety for children and families.



And then you worked on a second mural? Could you tell us about that?

We did that second mural in 2021. We have a huge wall that leads to our SANE P (Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner—Pediatric) exam room and both of our forensic interview rooms. It was just a huge blank white wall. Our previous CAC coordinator and I decided that we should have a mural here to create a more welcoming and less institutionalized feel so that it doesn't feel like a doctor's office or some hospital. Children are coming into our space after surviving probably some of the worst things they've ever been through, and then either having to talk about it or go through the SANE exam. We wanted to try every way we could think of to make them feel a little bit more comfortable and as welcome as possible.

Can you tell me about the process of finding an artist for this second mural?

I wanted another Indigenous artist to do the mural. And I just kind of stumbled onto her. I came across this woman who did a beautiful mural in Fargo (North Dakota). I reached out to her and told her who we were, what we did, where we were, and everything like that. And she was more than happy to do it.

How did you pay for the mural?

We didn't have the funds to cover all the expenses, but I thought it was really important to be able to give her what she requested, for all of her work and time and energy towards her art. Fortunately, she received a grant. It was a grant program for artists, and it was meant to create better representation by people of color in communities to promote healing. We paid her mileage and bought the supplies for the

mural, and she was able to pay herself with the grant money.

How did you decide what the mural would look like?

We told her she could do whatever she wanted with it. She knew the children we served and what types of things they'd been through. Her idea was to have the creation story painted on the wall, which I thought was really cool because she is from the Turtle Mountain tribe over in North Dakota, and our creation stories at White Earth are fairly similar. When she finished it, it was just awesome. The animals just looked so cute, and they had those smiley faces. When we got our advocate and I became coordinator, I really wanted to try to incorporate some kind of message to go along with it using our creation story.



Can you tell me more about the mural and the message you think it communicates to the children?

The mural has to do with the turtle and the various animals that were on the turtle's back. They were trying to get the dirt from the bottom of the ocean after the flood to create land again, and all of them tried. Some passed away during that process, like the marten. But the marten was actually able to get that dirt and that's when the turtle started to form Turtle Island. And we have the picture on the wall, and then we typed up the story. It is sending the message that

despite adversity and hard times, there still are new beginnings. So, we hand that out within our advocacy sheets. You can tell that when the kids come in, they love looking at that when they're walking back with me to the forensic room, they'll look at it or they'll start tapping on it and pointing at the animals and smiling.

Are there any other things you think the murals communicate? Or other details you want to tell us about?

Just that it's important to children's healing to have that representation of their culture, to feel like, "I'm welcomed here. I belong here. This is a safe place for me as a Native person. I'm not going to have someone make me feel weird or unwelcome because of who I am or my skin color and things like that." Also, the color choice can be important. For the waiting room mural, we specifically picked colors like blue, yellow, orange to promote feelings of calm and comfort throughout this difficult process. Psychology says that those colors are specifically tuned to help an individual feel calmer and more centered. So just the little things to help the kids feel more welcome when they come to our CAC. It's good to consider all the little things you can do.

It sounds like you have noticed a difference in the kids themselves—their reactions to the space before you had the artwork versus after it was finished.

Yeah, yeah. You notice their reactions. They just look at it and smile. They're curious about it, you know? I feel like it adds a little joy to their day, despite the things that they're there to be seen about or to talk about.



Do you think it has an impact on the families or the caregivers who are also coming in?

Yeah, yeah, definitely. The parents I've seen who come in, you can tell that they really like the space and feel safe as well. Even the social workers talk about it, how they love the center and the artwork. They always are commenting on how it feels so welcoming and child-friendly and child-centered. I feel like it's just a very positive piece to the center. And for the staff, too, it's a little brightness to the day, to see the little turtle and all the floral designs.

Aside from the beautiful artwork and the pictures and the creation story handout, are there other ways in which you try to develop a culturally responsive environment?

We purchased these almost life-sized stickers of woodland animals to go on the wall in the waiting room and in the hallway, which were the little blank places that didn't have murals. We have on the wall bears, fox, raccoons, hummingbirds, rabbits. Just the

animals that you would see outside if you're playing out in the yard. We also labeled them in Ojibwe so that we could incorporate a little language revitalization in the CAC. I feel that it's important to have not only representation of who you are in your culture, but when you heal from traumas, I think it's important to heal that cultural trauma that we have from previous genocide and colonization. So, we try to bring back that language and have it be shown in an interactive way. They say, "Oh, there's a bear—that's makwa. There's a raccoon—that's esiban. There's a deer—that's waawaaskeshii. I feel like it definitely adds a touch of welcoming feelings. Representation of their culture, helping them feel safe, having that little boost of, "You matter to us. With what you've been through, we're going to help you be safe and heal and have justice. But we also care about your cultural identity, your cultural practices. We care about your use of our Ojibwe language." It's a very holistic approach to their healing. I feel like as Native kids, Native people in general, we are a very holistic people. So, it's important to focus on all the healing versus just some parts of it. It's good to have that holistic approach because reconnecting to your culture and your language has a positive impact on your identity and who you are and your overall well-being.

You also have [a coloring book, right? Can you talk a little bit about that?](#)

When I was looking for coloring books, I didn't see any Indigenous coloring books specifically for older kids, school-age kids, or preschoolers. There was nothing available. Then during COVID, there were artists who made a lot of coloring sheets for kids to use,

as we were in quarantine and having to stay in the house. The artists said that these sheets were free to use. I found quite a variety of coloring sheets—from Alaska, Canada, and a couple of places in the South. I compiled them together with a cover sheet listing all the artists who contributed to this work. We have them available in the waiting room or to take them home with them. A lot of the artwork has positive messages like, "Every child matters," "You deserve to feel safe," "You choose your own healing," and "It's not your fault." So not only does this represent the culture, but it also has empowering words in there for children who have been through trauma and abuse. It's important to have that inclusion piece as a part of coloring. Marvel is cool and *Paw Patrol* and all the princesses. But sometimes it's cool to have the Indigenous piece. One of my favorite coloring sheets in that book is there's a little Indigenous fairy. She has a little traditional dress with little wings on. I think that is so cute. I also include that in handouts whenever I present at different conferences. I have that available to different CACs that reach out to me.

[DOWNLOAD THE COLORING BOOK](#)



Listening to you talk about all of this, I have a feeling it might sound a little harder to figure out for non-Tribal CACs than for Tribal CACs, since there are issues like what's an appropriate cultural element to use that you wouldn't know about if you're not from that culture. What would you say to non-Tribal CACs who serve Native children and families about how they might start incorporating some of this into what they provide?

I would say just reach out. If it's someone local to us, and you reach out, we can help with some of these resources. If it's another community, maybe reach out to you guys at NCARC and the National Native Children's Trauma Center. In general, CACs should create good relationships with their Tribal communities in their area. Understand who they are, what they do better. Tribes are always willing to help, especially when there are professionals helping their kids. Our Tribes may have Tribal resource centers, and there are a lot of Tribal resource centers in urban areas. So having those good relationships and asking for permission to use any educational material. I think that would be a good first step.

This is kind of a big question, a dream question. But, if you had all the money in the world and all the resources that you wanted, how would you build a Tribal CAC? And what would it have in it that would be different from what you have now?

That is a pretty big question. Having it in a nice, secluded area on the reservation where there's not a lot of traffic, maybe having some water nearby and a privacy fence, playgrounds. Just have a bigger center

because our center is pretty small. I could see having it separated out more in terms of mental health, forensic interviews, SANE P. Having the evidence-based therapy room. Having a ceremonial area whether it's a drum hall or just a place that we know for sure is safe for spiritual advisors to come and do ceremonies with kids. Having a room for the older kids to do meditation or Reiki. Just other options for healing. For sure, I would want a kitchen so we could cook for the families and the kids coming in. We see a lot of siblings and kids coming in. So, for feeding them we have a little stovetop oven, and sometimes it's just too small. We really pack up the chicken nuggets on it sometimes. So yeah, having a decent-sized kitchen for providing meals to families. Having a nice training room for our MDT. . . . Now you've got me really wishing. There is just so much! We are in the process of getting a facility dog. I would just try to have it be inclusive of multiple healing environments. And having areas for telemedicine. Just being very holistic. It'd be cool to have a circle building versus a square. Because one of my professors taught me how American culture is so present everywhere, even up to the squares of the building that we're in. And he's right. Our people always lived in, like, wigwams. Our people lived in teepees. It's just so crazy how invasive the Western culture is sometimes you don't even know it.

This is really helpful. On the one hand, we know that we would need a lot of resources to make that happen, and we may not realistically have that number of resources right away. At the same time, it's important to think about what the CAC model would look like, what the building would look like, if we were developing it specifically for Tribal people rather than adapting it from a non-Tribal version of that model. What would that look like ideally?

I like to think about it in those terms. Oh, and I would have a little craft area that could be a training meeting room, to have an opportunity for group therapies and things like that, but also having craft nights or something. Beading and moccasins and things like that.

Is there anything I haven't asked you that you would want to say?

Basically, just that all the little details matter. I feel like when you are working with Native kids, they could see one negative thing and be like, "No, I'm done with this place. I don't want to be here." So having these little details and inclusiveness really matters to just gaining their trust. Even though we're Native, and even though our CAC is on the rez, our kids still might not trust us if we didn't set things up in a good way. So, I think it's important to always work towards gaining that trust. It's important because a lot of systems probably have let them down before.



Lalanía Walker is an enrolled member of the Muscogee Creek Nation and a descendant of the White Earth Nation and Mississippi Band

of Choctaw Indians. Lalanía is the White Earth Tribal Child Advocacy Center Coordinator and is trained to conduct child forensic interviews. The focus of her education and career is to foster the healing of Indigenous children and families by implementing trauma-informed and culturally sensitive services.

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