Leading with Legacy: How Native Youth Are Guiding Their Communities Forward

California's Native youth are at the heart of a growing mental health movement rooted in storytelling, traditional medicine, and intergenerational wisdom. Across tribal lands and urban centers, they are building a future of healing grounded in their identity.

For generations, Native communities have endured government-sponsored efforts to erase their culture and break apart families. Federal boarding school systems tore children from their homes, severing ties to language, tradition, and loved ones. Forced relocation and chronic underfunding of Native health services further dismantled support systems. Native youth today continue to carry the weight of this history; grappling with disconnection from culture, limited access to culturally affirming mental health care, and navigating systems that were never designed with them in mind.

"You can't see the impact of what's happening now without understanding the history our communities have lived through," said Jeanine Gaines (Citizen Potawatomi Nation) of The Social Changery, a CYBHI partner. "Native communities have always been doing this work, what's different now is that the state is finally investing in it. The way youth are leading today is shaped by generations of challenges, and the resilience that comes from facing them."

A recent UC Davis report underscores how stigma, the absence of Native providers, and a lack of culturally appropriate services remain major barriers to seeking care, highlighting the critical need for healing grounded in cultural understanding. Native populations experience adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) at higher rates than individuals identifying as White, Black, and Hispanic (Giano, 2020).

Across California, Native youth are reclaiming what was taken, restoring traditional knowledge and stepping into leadership with intention and clarity. They are carrying forth the strength their communities have always held, due in part to investments through The Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative (CYBHI), a 4+ billion dollar state initiative to increase behavioral health supports and services for California's children, youth and families.

Through CYBHI, campaigns focused on raising awareness about ACEs and toxic stress (Live Beyond), providing mental health education and reducing stigma (Take Space to Pause and Community Alliances for Local Impact (CALI), and preventing suicide (Never a Bother) are providing young people with the tools to lead here and now, and into the future.

A Movement of Many Voices

In the *Live Beyond* Campaign, youth are invited to co-create messages and resources that resonate with their peers and honor their cultural identities. They curated Spotify playlists with Native artists, created booklists featuring Native authors, and designed stress-busting tools rooted in traditional and cultural practice. The result wasn't just outreach, it was reflection. The campaign became a mirror of the community it was meant to serve, increasing the likelihood of Native youth engaging in mental health services. Those in the community are already feeling the positive impact.

> **"Oh these [stress busters for Live Beyond] are actually pretty cool. I do so many of these in my day to day life. Now it makes sense why I go to ceremony, to heal, or to drink tea, and to make things like baskets. It's cool to know that those are ways to help heal yourself. It's not that I just want to do it, there's a meaning behind it."**
>
> ***- Love, Youth Leader***

As Native Youth Ambassador Jasmine (Susanville Rancheria) shared, efforts like *Live Beyond* are more than just campaigns; they're a chance to change their futures. "This campaign is an opportunity to amplify our voices, celebrate our resilience and our heritage, and pave the way for a stronger future," she said. "It's about reclaiming our narrative; making sure our voices aren't lost or overshadowed by stereotypes."

Sharing mental health materials made by Native youth, for Native youth, is another way Native communities have engaged with these campaigns. At the National Indian Education Association Convention—an annual gathering of Native educators, students, Tribal leaders, and advocates—three Native youth Ambassadors debuted an "indigenized" version of the *Live Beyond* materials. At their booth, they didn't hand out brochures or give lectures. Instead, they invited attendees to blend their own herbal teas using traditional plant medicines like chamomile and nettle, offering a tactile, culturally-rooted experience of care. Using plant medicines to support mental, physical, and spiritual wellness is a cultural healing method that has been used for centuries.

Angelina and Tokala standing together with the TakeSpace2Pause materials.

"It's not just information," shared a behavioral health staff member from Tule River Indian Health Center. "It's hope, it's culture, and it's theirs."

At the 2025 National Unity Conference, the largest gathering of Native youth in the country, over 3,000 young people came together under the theme Voices of H.O.P.E to share stories, strategies, and visions for the future. The *Take Space to Pause* and *Live Beyond* campaigns came together to sponsor the event, providing youth with a national platform to see their experiences reflected. As one attendee shared, "I went through a lot in my life and experienced trauma. When I watched the ACEs video, I thought, 'finally, something that explains what I've been through.'"

In rural Tulare County, during the Native Dad's Network Wellness Tour and Boys With Braids event, over 400 Native people came together to focus on sobriety, ceremony, and healing. Prior to the event, the Tule River Indian Health Center was sent the Native *Live Beyond* Toolkit. Their staff shared how the youth talking circles lit up around the *Live Beyond* healing journals, which inspired other tribal partners to adopt similar tools.

"What stood out most was how deeply the youth connected with the *Live Beyond* materials," said a behavioral health staff member from Tule River Indian Health Center. "Tools like the *Live Beyond* healing journal are being uplifted as powerful, culturally resonant supports for community wellness."

For Jasmine, who navigated a string of mental health challenges while attending college during the pandemic, those connections reflect something larger. "As someone with lived experiences, I understand the challenges individuals with ACEs face and the importance of creating spaces where they feel supported and empowered," she explains.

Direct Support for Native-Led Organizations

In addition to designing and distributing campaign materials with Native youth, providing direct funding to community-serving organizations was another strategy used to engage Native communities. Grants were provided to Native non-profit organizations that empower young leaders through workshops, advocacy training, and traditional arts.

Lucero and Luna, SPARC participants, with Program Manager, Johnny.

As part of a statewide push to uplift youth-led mental health efforts, the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) Office of Health Equity awarded grants to 28 organizations to design culturally rooted, youth-centered campaigns. This network, known as the CALI, includes Native-led organizations like the Sacramento Native American Health Center (SNAHC) and the Indian Health Council. At SNAHC, youth participated in SPARK, a social marketing program providing young people the opportunity to explore topics like mental health, stigma, and suicide prevention, and then apply those lessons to develop powerful videos and messaging that speak directly to the needs of their community. Ultimately, the program creates a mental health campaign designed by and for Native youth, while also supporting the mental wellness and personal development of the youth involved.

Luna (Yaqui/Apache/Carrizo/Isleta), a SPARK youth leader, described the program as "very inclusive… very community-based," emphasizing how it creates a safe space to talk about hard things. "You're un-teaching the stigma and teaching them how to be accepting, and how to talk about these deep topics that are not really talked about because of the stigma," she shared.

VIDEO CLIP: HEAR MORE FROM LUNA, SPARK YOUTH LEADER, ABOUT YOUTH INTEGRATION AND SPARK'S APPROACH TO SUPPORTING NEW YOUTH MEMBERS

Investing in mental health services specific to Native communities creates the foundation of health necessary to have equity for the Native community. Targeted support and culturally-based methods of healing are critical for the native community to escape cycles of intergenerational trauma. Once established, these positive impacts from mental wellness can flow into other aspects of the Native experience.

"As long as programs like SPARK continue, I think there is going to be hope. I also don't know what the future holds, especially with the new administration and what they are doing in terms of funding for these programs. I think these programs help so much in communities because it builds communities within a community, and that helps the participants along with helping the larger community."

– Luna, SPARK Youth Leader

Leadership in Action

Youth are participating in wellness programs and gaining leadership skills by designing and delivering these services. These skills are building both their personal and career development—setting them up for success in the workforce and beyond. For example, at the Next Gen Tribal Youth Leadership Conference, Native Youth Ambassadors hosted workshops on ACEs and helped attendees build personal stress-busting plans. A healing garden featured at the event allowed youth to engage in practices like deep breathing, journaling, and herbal medicine, each tied to a different stress buster.

While *Live Beyond* helps bring culturally resonant materials and healing-focused activations to community events, other CYBHI-funded programs are supporting Native youth through community-based efforts.

For example, as part of the *'Never a Bother'* suicide prevention campaign, the CDPH Office of Suicide Prevention awarded 33 grants to organizations to provide peer-led outreach, suicide prevention, and mental health education rooted in culture and community connection. One-third of grants were awarded to tribal-led organizations, such as *Two Feathers Youth Ambassadors Program.*

For Trinity (Yurok), a youth ambassador with Two Feathers, the work is both personal and powerful. "Growing up, it wasn't okay to put our stuff out there, so this helps me too because mental health does matter, and there are people out there to help you. And us being those people to put that out there is an amazing thing for me. To show others that I can get through it, you can get through it too."

VIDEO CLIP: HEAR MORE FROM TRINITY, SENIOR AMBASSADOR, AND YVONNE GUIDO, NATIVE WELLNESS COUNSELOR, TWO FEATHERS NATIVE AMERICAN FAMILY SERVICES ABOUT THE OUTREACH DONE BY THE YOUTH AMBASSADORS

Paul (Chiricahua Apache Nation), a Native Youth Ambassador, began his journey behind the scenes, carrying gear and supporting others. Then everything shifted. "One day someone said, 'Paul's going to lead a 30-minute session.' I just did it," he shared. "After that, people saw me as a resource. And that changed everything." That moment of trust unlocked something in Paul. Now, he's developing a curriculum to help children understand mental health through practices like emotional regulation.

"I truly believe that as a child, if you have a sound foundation on how to deal with emotions, you will have more positive interactions in your life. A lot of people tend to go to their vices to deal with sadness and anger, but if you knew how to deal with that in a more natural and helpful way, there would be a lot less need for prevention."

-Paul, Youth Leader

For Love (Conco/Wailaki/Wintun/Western Band Shoshone), another Native Youth Ambassador, the impact of this work is deeply personal. "For me having someone there for you is such a big thing. And so when people don't have people, I want to be that person for them, and I love helping people," she shares. Her long-term goal is to become a teacher, "In a way, you could change a kid's life just by being kind and helpful and wanting them to learn."

The Youth Co-Lab is a group advising CDPH's Office of Health Equity on behavioral health strategies to reach out, and youth leaders are creating bridges across communities. Annie (Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa), a Native youth participant in the group, speaks to the power of shared learning and cultural exchange: "It's a very diverse group of youth from all over California with different ages and different cultural backgrounds,

which has been very nice because it's opening our eyes to the struggles of other communities… A lot of my co-workers didn't really know much that really happened inside the Native communities until I started speaking about it."

VIDEO CLIP: HEAR MORE FROM ANNIE ABOUT HER WORK WITH HELPING LAUNCH THE TAKE SPACE TO PAUSE CAMPAIGN

Moments like these show what it means to lead from within, to honor community, share knowledge, and make sure no young person feels like they have to struggle alone.

More Than a Moment—A Legacy in Motion

The goal is clear: support Native youth leaders today so they can build lasting change for tomorrow. These programs are part of a growing ecosystem of healing, intentionally designed to sustain and pass down knowledge, leadership, and cultural care. Across the state, Native youth are not only sharing resources, they're shaping them, embodying them, and making healing something you can see, feel, and hold.

VIDEO CLIP: HEAR MORE FROM PAUL ABOUT HOW THE SUPPORT FROM HIS COMMUNITY HAS SHAPED HIS JOURNEY

Angelina (Pinoleville Pomo Nation), is equally committed to building a future where Native communities not only heal, but thrive. A first-generation, second-year college student, she's already thinking big: "I definitely know I want to continue to work for my people, but in high positions in big ways [that will] make impactful change in our community."The youth leading these efforts are the future architects of community healing. Their leadership is reshaping what wellness looks like in Native communities today. Led by youth and guided by culture, these efforts are redefining healing. While CYBHI provides critical support, it's the vision and leadership of young people that are driving the transformation.

"It does give me hope that we are actually making heavy change in our communities, and that it is something that can continue to make change over and over and over again until we break a lot of those cycles."

-Angelina, Youth Leader

By weaving healing into the fabric of community norms, Native youth leaders are creating a more inclusive approach that reduces stigma and fosters long-term resilience. Their work reminds us that legacy lives in people, not just programs, and in relationships, not just interventions. With continued support, trust, and investment, these young leaders are just getting started.

Work Cited

Giano, Zachary. "Adverse Childhood Events in American Indian/Alaska Native Populations." *PubMed Central,* https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8098634/. Accessed 12 September 2025.