

Partnering with Tribal Communities to Adapt Family Healthy Weight Programming



At a Glance

Working alongside the Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes of the Fort Peck Reservation, the MEND family healthy weight program was adapted into Zaniyan Kawita ("Healthy Together"), a culturally grounded wellness program that incorporates Indigenous knowledge, Lakota language, traditional foods, and community priorities. Early results from the pilot demonstrated strong participant engagement, 100% program completion, and increased knowledge and motivation to adopt healthier behaviors, creating a sustainable, community-led model for chronic disease prevention.



Key Public Health Challenges

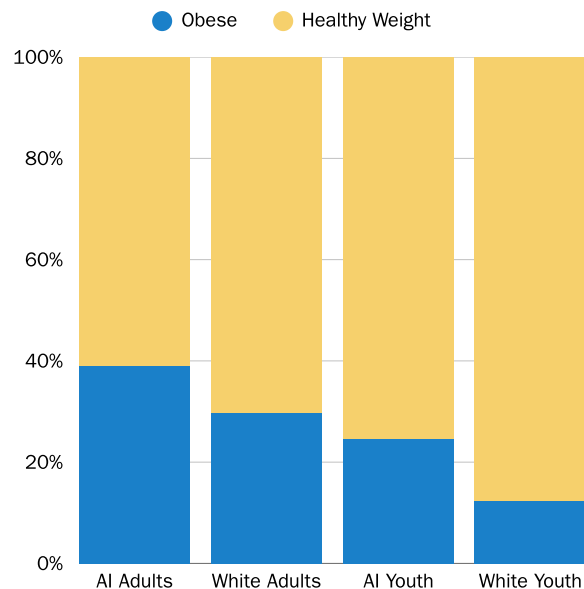
Food Deserts

Limited Access to Registered Dietitians

Lack of Culturally Appropriate Resources

Health outcome differences highlight the need for relevant healthy weight programming in tribal communities. In Montana, obesity affects approximately 39% of American Indian adults compared to 29.9% of White adults. Among youth, 24.6% of American Indian youth were classified as obese in 2023, compared to 12.4% of White youth.¹

A review of existing family healthy weight curricula found that many programs were not well aligned with the cultural values and priorities of the Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes of the Fort Peck Reservation. Traditional approaches often emphasize BMI targets and use terminology that may be stigmatizing or inconsistent with tribal perspectives on health and wellness. Additionally, frontier communities face significant barriers, including limited access to Registered Dietitians.



In Fall 2024, the Montana Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (MT REACH) initiative, in partnership with the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, selected MEND (Mind, Exercise, Nutrition... Do It!) to implement in Fort Peck. The curriculum was subsequently adapted to better reflect community values, local resources, and the lived experiences of Fort Peck families.

¹America's Health Rankings analysis of U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, United Health Foundation, AmericasHealthRankings.org, accessed 2026

Approach

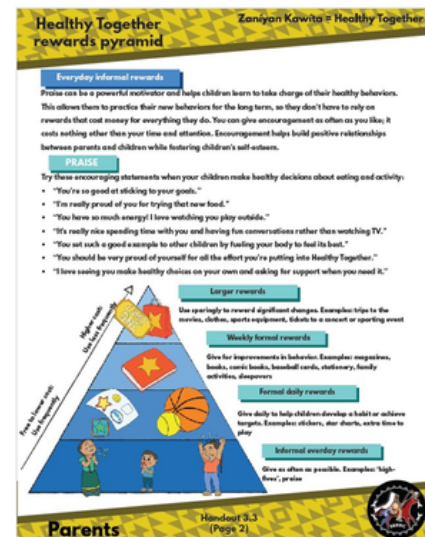
Led by the Spotted Bull Resource and Recovery Center (SBRRRC), curriculum adaption efforts began by gauging community interest and readiness to implement. To ensure community buy-in, the team gathered intensive local data, collecting 145 community health surveys with a 99% completion rate and conducting local focus groups that highlighted a strong desire for nutrition education and community-gathering events.

Using this feedback, the curriculum was adapted through a trauma-informed and food neutrality framework rather than a traditional clinical model. Key adaptations included:

Content	Community & Tradition	Imagery
Partnered with a Montana State University Dietetic Intern to adapt the curriculum using a strengths-based approach to nutrition that emphasized fueling the body rather than labeling foods as "good" or "bad." The revised curriculum incorporated Indigenous nutrition knowledge, explored the role of nutrition in substance use recovery, and included practical strategies for healthy eating in food deserts, including making nutritious choices at gas stations and convenience stores.	Healthy Together was translated into the Lakota language as <i>Zaniyan Kawita</i> . While there is not a direct translation, <i>Zaniyan</i> translates to healthy, whole, or in a state of wellbeing. <i>Kawita</i> translates to gather or come together. The team collaborated with a local food sovereignty program to integrate traditional recipes into the programming.	Engaged a local graphic designer to adapt handouts and program visuals to better reflect Indigenous culture. Dakota floral designs and imagery of Native families that resonate with the Fort Peck community were incorporated, resulting in materials that allowed participants to see themselves represented and reflected in the program.

Results

In Spring 2026, the pilot of the *Zaniyan Kawita* MEND program launched in Fort Peck with two families, including four children. All participants completed the 10-week course. Participants gained practical knowledge, including portion control and healthier food choices. One participant described the program as one of her favorite classes and said she would attend again and bring a friend. She also planned to begin using the community wellness center once her daughter started school, showing continued interest in maintaining healthy behaviors beyond the program. As she reflected on the program, she shared, "Keep pushing yourself to eat more healthier!"



Sustaining Success

The Spotted Bull Resource and Recovery Center plans integrate and sustain this adapted family wellness model within its core community and residential programming. By embedding the program into existing programming, they have built a repeatable, community-led infrastructure for chronic disease prevention that resonates with community members.

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