

Eddie Sherman, DIFRC
esherman@difrc.org
303.871.8035 x 244

Erin Shaver, JVA Consulting
erin@jvaconsulting.com
303.477.4896 x 16

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"I feel lost myself...there is no location or place. Youth and elders are not connecting. How do we pass on our stories? Popular music and their peers make it easy for the younger ones to forget their culture. They are getting lost from whom they are."

—A Denver American Indian

"When students can't cope and there are challenges in the family, youth just want to escape from that. As a result, some youth are out on the street and don't come home for weeks. Their parents call me worried that they haven't seen them in days."

—A Denver American Indian

The **Denver Indian Family Resource Center (DIFRC)**, a nonprofit dedicated to the protection and preservation of Indian families, and **JVA Consulting**, a Colorado-based consulting firm that works with nonprofits and social innovators, have just released **the largest community needs assessment ever done on Denver's American Indian population.**

The *Keeping the Circle Whole* Community Needs Assessment, conducted over the course of nine months in 2006 and 2007, highlights the findings of more than 700 youth and adults living in the seven-county metro Denver area (Adams, Arapahoe, Boulder, Broomfield, Denver, Douglas and Jefferson). The assessment was designed to identify the protective structures and gaps serving the mental health of American Indian youths. The work included:

- **9** stakeholder-facilitated work sessions: community, administrators and service provider groups
- **4** steering committee work sessions: key health and community advisors
- **20** key informant interviews
- **11** focus groups
- **700+** surveys from youth and adult community members
- **53** administrator and provider surveys; 13 crisis intervention education specialist surveys

Dr. Jeff King conducted the last assessment of Denver's American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) population in 1993. The first of its kind, Dr. King's study surveyed *approximately 350* people. The new *Keeping the Circle Whole* assessment now provides an unprecedented amount of statistical and anecdotal evidence on the current state of Colorado's urban Indian youth and their families.

"This type of research has never been done before," says DIFRC Executive Director Phyllis Bigpond. "I don't think a lot of people realize how many American Indian people live here in the Denver metro area. It's a good opportunity to shed light on our community."

The needs assessment offers more than just a snapshot of Denver's AI/AN population—more than 27,000 people with nearly 60 different tribal affiliations. It also reveals a group of people that finds strength in its heritage yet, many fear, is drifting from traditional values and becoming disconnected from its historic culture. The candid contributions that make up the assessment results reveal a people that experience racism, suicide and a disproportionately high degree of alcohol and drug abuse, depression and other troubling symptoms.

A few snapshots of the study:

Adults say:

- 78% are proud to be AI/AN
- 46% experience racial prejudice
- 44% feel disconnected from their culture
- 34% suffer from depression

Youth say:

- 62% are proud to be AI/AN
- 42% experience racial prejudice
- 45% feel disconnected from their culture
- 29% want help with their problems

Respondents also cite significant difficulties accessing services for mental health issues such as transportation and fees. Nearly 70 percent of respondents said they would prefer an AI/AN provider for some services, and almost a third could not afford services because they were either uninsured or found Medicaid too cumbersome and inadequate to pay for the what they needed. **A striking number of survey participants identified stigma, lack of understanding and fear of indiscretion preventing families from seeking help they need for mental health support.**

“Through our work, we’ve identified the needs for mental health services, and we’ve realized the resources that exist are not actually accessible to the people we serve,” says Bigpond. “People need more information, and they need to know where to seek help. It’s hard for people to talk honestly about mental health.”

With this new assessment, organizations in the Indian community hope to significantly increase public education about mental health, streamline interagency collaboration and provide wraparound support structures to better serve this population. The revelations of this report come at an opportune time for DIFRC, which just received a five-year, Equality in Health Initiative grant from **The Colorado Trust** to provide culturally responsive child and family therapy. Nationally, AI/AN health issues are at the forefront—some U.S. Congress members are pushing to renew the **Indian Health Care Improvement Act**, which has been grossly underfunded for several years.

“Really there aren’t enough services for anybody, but it becomes even more difficult for populations that deal with other factors, particularly cultural sensitivity,” says Bigpond.

Despite the tremendous challenges that Denver’s urban Indian population faces, including poverty, historic abuse, racism and disparate tribal affiliations, community members express a deep confidence in their ability to forge creative and effective services. As one parent said:

“The need is so big it is overwhelming. I almost lost myself in helping because the need is so great, but the Indian community has a heart for helping. It is a priority.”

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For a copy of the report or to set up interviews, please contact Eddie Sherman at esherman@difrc.org or 303.871.8035 x 244, or Erin Shaver at erin@jvaconsulting.com or 303.477.4896 x 16.

The Denver Indian Family Resource Center, founded in early 2000, is a child welfare agency dedicated to meeting the diverse and emerging needs of Indian children and families in the Denver metropolitan area. DIFRC provides a variety of services that build up the strengths of Indian families and that help children thrive. It is a current recipient of The U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services (SAMHSA) grant to address the needs of youth with severe emotional and behavioral disorders (SEBD). For more information, visit www.difrc.org.

The leading nonprofit consulting firm in the Rocky Mountains, **JVA Consulting** has been helping nonprofit organizations, foundations, school districts and government agencies achieve their goals through a comprehensive approach for nearly 20 years. JVA’s team of 35 works with clients across the state and nationally, with consultants in metro Denver, northern Colorado, southern Colorado and the Western Slope. For more information, visit www.jvaconsulting.com.