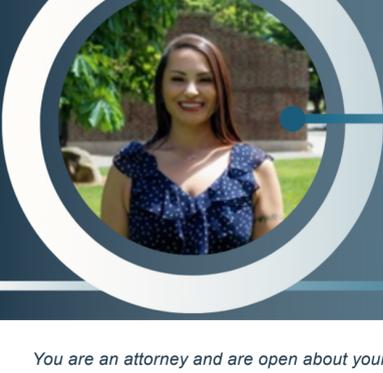


NEWSLETTER



Q & A

Sarai Cook, Esq.,
Servant Leader, National Trauma Awareness Initiative

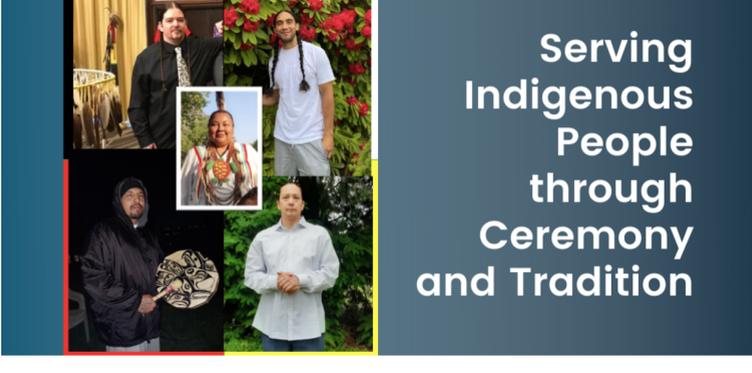
You are an attorney and are open about your status both as “formerly incarcerated” and a trauma survivor. What does it mean for you to be a formerly incarcerated trauma survivor, and how did that translate to becoming an attorney and advocating for trauma awareness?

I’ve suffered from ongoing and complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD) for most of my life. My trauma stems from adverse childhood experiences such as early parental abandonment, domestic violence, and abuse in a foster home before 3. These painful early life experiences led me to a substance use disorder by 12, incarceration at 13, and teen motherhood at 17.

I believe every incarcerated person has a similar story of trauma and abuse at some time in their life. Many have been beaten, raped, sexually abused. These are overt types of abuse. There are also more insidious kinds of long-term emotional abuse that often happen within toxic family structures. Individuals beaten down by life experiences like these—who have lived in the custody of people who harmed them or who have been made to feel powerless by other abusers—can be particularly vulnerable to re-traumatization by the power dynamics of the criminal justice system.

I am one of very few known formerly incarcerated women attorneys in the country. I originally became an attorney because I thought I could positively advocate for Native rights and, more specifically, advocate for my tribe, the Muscogee Nation. It took me three times to pass the Oklahoma bar exam, so during that time, I worked for Muscogee Nation as their community development director. This position created an interest in community development, program management, and technical assistance training. With that experience, I transitioned to the U.S. Department of Energy as their national program manager and worked with tribes nationwide.

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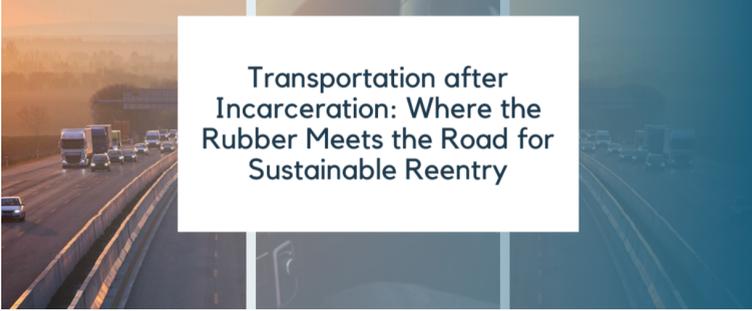
Serving Indigenous People through Ceremony and Tradition

Serving Indigenous People through Ceremony and Tradition

“Ceremony is life,” says Winona Stevens, M.S.W., founder and executive director of Native American Reentry Services (NARS). “It’s something that we all need to do. Ceremony is a time to be Indigenous and, for a moment, step away from the confinement of prison or work release, or whatever your custody situation is. It’s not only our right through the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, but it’s our responsibility to keep our sacred ceremonies alive,” Stevens explains. “They’re very important in all that we do.” Stevens is a member of the Ho-Chunk tribe of Wisconsin and has had family members who are incarcerated.

NARS runs two programs. The first, Helping Enhance Aboriginal Lives (HEAL) for Reentry is a NARS volunteer effort. Its mission is to encourage successful reentry back into the community with the use of Indigenous traditions, ceremony, and values, Stevens says. In addition, NARS has a contract with the Washington State Department of Corrections (DOC) to run the Iron House Medicine program at 21 sites in 12 prisons. The Iron House Medicine program administers religious services to the DOC statewide, with contractors who facilitate sweat lodge services, teaching, and drum and dance circles.

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Transportation after Incarceration: Where the Rubber Meets the Road for Sustainable Reentry

Transportation after Incarceration: Where the Rubber Meets the Road for Sustainable Reentry

Transportation barriers pose significant challenges for individuals involved with the criminal justice system and those with mental and substance use disorders, especially those reentering the community following incarceration. During reentry, returning citizens face a variety of difficulties related to safety, accessing services, and meeting conditions of release, all of which can be exacerbated by insufficient access to transportation. Research indicates that transportation barriers can demonstrably increase a person’s vulnerability to other challenges, such as unemployment, food insecurity, homelessness, and more.

People reentering the community from jail or prison often face specific challenges related to transportation, described as the “five As”: affordability, accessibility, applicability, availability, and awareness. Many individuals do not have the financial means to own a car or regularly use public transportation. Returning citizens may lack appropriate identification to get a driver’s license or may have an infraction, such as a DUI, that keeps them from using a car even if they have one. These individuals may be eligible for Medicaid’s non-emergency medical transportation service. However, even specialized transportation services can present difficulties, such as a lack of awareness about eligibility, advance scheduling requirements, or constraints only allowing transportation to medical appointments, thus limiting individuals’ ability to use them. Rural communities often lack reliable public transit. Some communities resolve this by coordinating travel trips with other community transportation providers serving similar populations. “With so many organizations involved, human services transportation has become a complex and often fragmented system,” notes a recent report from the Transit Cooperative Research Program.

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Flashback on Reentry

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