

Interview with Messengers of Health - Báa Nnilah

Messengers for Health is an Indigenous non-profit based on the Apsáalooke (Crow) Reservation in Montana, dedicated to improving community health through cultural strengths. Founded in 1996 through a partnership between Apsáalooke members and Montana State University, the organization began by training community women to promote cancer screenings and support quality care. Today, its programs serve both Crow men and women with chronic conditions like type 2 diabetes. [Báa Nnilah](#), a free health program for Crow elders, includes seven gatherings with meals, where participants:

- Gain practical knowledge and tools for healthy living and self-care to enhance their quality of life
- Explore and apply Crow cultural strengths to support community health
- Learn about nutrition and physical and emotional well-being through interactive, hands-on activities
- Receive encouragement and support from program staff and fellow participants to help put new skills into action for better self-care.

1. How does your program reduce health care costs for your target population?

The Báa nnilah program reduces healthcare costs by empowering Apsáalooke community members with chronic illnesses to better manage their conditions, which leads to fewer complications, reduced need for urgent or emergency care, and potentially fewer medications. Participants reported improved relationships with healthcare providers, greater understanding and adherence to their medications, increased physical activity, healthier diets, and decreased consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages. One participant even reported discontinuing some medications under a doctor's guidance due to improved health. Another described resolving many health problems after losing 50 pounds with family support.

These changes suggest a reduction in preventable health care utilization and long-term cost savings, especially in a community where many travel long distances to access care and experience high rates of comorbidities.

Alma McCormick, Executive Director of Messengers for Health and a member of the Crow Nation, shared, "The greatest benefit was just to see that people knew they weren't alone. We were able to establish a setting that was so comfortable, so safe, so relational, so culturally appropriate in bringing people together. When we brought people together in that setting, it allowed them to feel the power of that love and encouragement to know they are not alone and to know that others are going through the same thing."

2. From your perspective, what part of your program intervention seems to have the greatest impact on participants' health? What noticeable improvements are you seeing in participants' health, confidence, or behavior because of this program?

"We don't take things apart. We keep things whole." — On the importance of honoring personal stories in Indigenous research.

Participants reported profound emotional and behavioral shifts throughout the program. Many felt less alone in their health journeys, while others shared what they learned with family and community members, creating a ripple effect that extended well beyond the individual. Mental health also improved, with one participant stating, "This program brought me out of my depression."

Alma highlighted these meaningful changes, including one participant who now proudly refers to their healthier drink choice as "my Báa nnilah drink" after giving up soda to better manage their health. Program Manager, Christiane, noted the impact of visual tools, such as using sugar cubes to demonstrate the amount of sugar in some participants' favorite drinks. This impactful visual tool made nutrition concepts more tangible and helped community members better understand their sugar intake.

The program also embraced cultural relevance by adapting terms and approaches. Terms were culturally adapted: instead of "goal setting," they used "counting coup," which is relational to the Crow people and the different ways they can gain from the enemy. Participants identify their own "feathers" (personal achievements they would like to gain) throughout the gatherings, often alongside a supportive partner. This peer partnership approach fostered ongoing motivation and accountability throughout the program.

Alma also spoke to the profound impact of grief within Indigenous communities, sharing that many families face one loss after another without time to heal. She emphasized that healing becomes possible when people come together. Báa nnilah has helped revive traditional Crow cultural practices by encouraging a return to a way of life centered on visiting, building connections, and deeply knowing one another.

3. What sets your intervention apart from others?

Alma explained that few programs truly address chronic conditions among Indigenous people. While some standard models exist, Messengers for Health created something "by us, for us"—a program designed with a deep understanding of why community members may be guarded. It was built to speak directly to those experiences. Each gathering begins and ends with prayer, honoring the community's spirituality, which is central to their identity.

4. Do you have any testimonials you can share?



Learn more about Báa Nnilah:

- [Improving Chronic Illness Self-Management with the Apsáalooke Nation: The Báa nnilah Project, a cluster randomized trial protocol](#)
- [The Báa nnilah Program: Results of a Chronic-Illness Self-Management Cluster Randomized Trial with the Apsáalooke Nation](#)