



BRIEF | March 2026

Nurturing Body, Mind, and Spirit:

How Tribal Home Visiting
Supports Nutrition and Healthy
Development



TRIBAL
HOME
VISITING

*Tribal Home Visiting Resource
Institute for Excellence (THRIVE),
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Historically, food has always been sacred. It's our medicine. We strive to hold it in balance. From the variety of our Native foods to the colors and more, it contributes to our physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. It's about our body, our environment, our relationships in our community, and with one another. Our ancestors taught us that it's our responsibility to make sure that all of our people have access to food... to healthy food. ... When people were taken from their homelands and redistributed onto land that was not fertile, or where their Native crops could not grow, or where their history was erased, balance was disrupted. Our traditional knowledge and access to Native foods was taken away. We were given commodities laden with sugar and flour. That's why we are seeing more illnesses like diabetes among our people. I see it with my own health challenges and my clients' too. Recreating our traditional foodways can bring balance and help us today and future generations too.

—Ashley Sayers, parent partner II, skilled doula, child birth educator, and lactation consultant, Riverside San Bernardino County Indian Health, Inc., and affiliated with Leech Lake Ojibwe

Introduction

Through grants administered by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Tribes, Tribal organizations, and urban Indian organizations provide high-quality, evidence-based home visiting services to American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) pregnant women, children, and families. These services strengthen family bonds—including relationships between parents and their children—support parents in promoting healthy child development, and improve the health and well-being of Native children and families.

Tribal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (THV) grant recipients recognize the importance of traditional food practices and effectively enhance their programming to support cultural engagement and increase access to nutritious foods for families at a critical time in child development. Some grant recipients use their home visiting programs to address food sovereignty, which is the right for Tribal nations to determine the quantity, quality, production, distribution, and consumption of their own food systems. By focusing on this, they are supporting health and well-being in all its forms—physical, emotional, and spiritual.



Definitions

- **Food Sovereignty.** The right of Tribal nations and Tribal communities to determine the quantity, quality, production, distribution, and consumption of their own food systems
- **Native Foodways.** Traditional ways of obtaining, preparing, and eating food that are tied to the land, traditions, beliefs, and practices of the Tribal community.

Traditional foodways foster social connection and belonging that is tied to the rich history, culture, and values of AI/AN peoples. Traditional foods also contribute to positive maternal and child health experiences (Kwon et al., 2007). This is especially important for

parents before, during, and after pregnancy as healthy nutrition supports fetal growth, favorable birth outcomes, improved perinatal survival, successful breastfeeding, and the potential for promising long-term health outcomes for the birthing parent and baby (Marshall et al., 2022).

This brief provides an overview of the relationship between food and culture in AI/AN communities and describes the importance of nutrition during pregnancy and early childhood. It documents the promising practices of five THV grant recipients¹ who provided input through interviews and information exchange with the author. It offers their lessons learned for the broader home visiting and early childhood ecosystem related to the promotion of life-long healthy nutrition practices.



¹ THV grant recipients who provided information for this brief include: Future Generations Collaborative, Lake County Tribal Health Consortium, Ponca Tribe of Nebraska, Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, and Riverside San Bernardino County Indian Health, Inc.

Food Sovereignty and Native Foodways

Candace Walahoski, lead home visitor with the Ponca Tribe of Nebraska (Ponca), shared that in her community, “Food sovereignty is about from start to finish—choosing what food you will grow, then growing it, harvesting it, and eating your own food.”

Equally important in Tribal communities is the concept of Native foodways. Shelaya Landers, parent educator with Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribe (PGST) shared, “Native foodways is teaching our community about foods that have been part of our tribe for a long time. We have lots of that here. In the early spring, we talk about harvesting nettles and the different ways you can prepare them. If we have some function where food is served, nettles are always included. They are nutrient-packed, and the tribes put them into different foods like salad or a casserole, nettle pesto pasta, lemon nettle cake, or tea. We do the same with our Native berries. Our people know when berry harvesting is and take advantage of it. Elk and deer meat are the best protein for our families. Teaching young ones to process and skin the meat along with storing it (until next hunting season) includes them in the process. It is good practice and knowledge for families.”



For Native communities, traditional foods are a gift. They are a living legacy and a direct connection with the lands we come from. Traditional foods are more than just commodities; they are our greatest teachers that help us to always remember who we are and where we come from. This is because our foods weave together the very social fabric that makes us a community. They contain the building blocks of our blood, our genetics and when we are actively on the land cultivating or pursuing wild game or fishing our sacred waters, we are gifted with new memories and those of a distant past. They settle us in a sense of belonging that promotes balance and generosity.

—First Nations Development Institute, 2014



THV grant recipients are helping families lean into traditional practices and all that comes with connecting to the foods and recipes that have been passed down for generations. In this way, families are benefiting from both the nutritional value of the Native foods, as well as the traditions, beliefs, healing benefits, and ceremony that are tied to them.





Traditional Food Principles

The Traditional Food Principles were researched and compiled by Elise Krohn, herbalist and author, and Valerie Segrest, nutritionist and author, as part of the Northwest Indian College's (NWIC) Traditional Foods of Puget Sound Project. The principles were developed through community-based participatory research, involving Tribal elders, community members, and health-care professionals in Western Washington. Together, they connect the physical and spiritual health of communities with the natural resources available on land and in waterways. While they are informed by Tribal communities in the Northwest, they may also be broadly applicable to other AI/AN communities.

Exhibit 1. Traditional Food Principles



TRADITIONAL FOOD PRINCIPLES

At longhouse gatherings, public feasts and community events in Western Washington tribal communities, elders often speak about the importance of native foods. They say that wealth is having access to native foods, and the knowledge of how to gather, prepare and serve them. The values and cultural traditions around food today are as applicable as they were generations ago. We call these Traditional Food Principles. They address the physical and spiritual health of individuals and communities, in conjunction with the well-being of the land.

Cultivate Food Sovereignty

Food sovereignty is at the core of tribal sovereignty. It is the inherent right of a community to have access to healthy, culturally appropriate food. When our ancestors signed the tribal treaties, they made sure that we would have native foods for generations to come. Each time we exercise our right to harvest native foods, we strengthen cultural identity, relationship to the land, and to our community.

Food is the Center of Culture

People have always come together around food. It is at the heart of celebrations, family gatherings, holidays and memorials. During European colonization Native Peoples' access to wild foods was suppressed, as was the right to practice cultural traditions. This changed peoples' relationships with the land, the seasons and their community. As we eat together, we tell stories, share songs, observe protocols and remember our connection to the land, the water, and each other. These hold together the deep values embedded in our culture.

Traditional Foods are Whole Foods

Traditional foods are "real foods" that are grown in nature. A whole food consists of one ingredient. It is not industrialized, genetically modified, refined, or blended with additives, dyes or chemicals. Our ancestors believed that good food satisfies the wholeness within us, while most modern foods are fragmented and can leave us hungry. I imagine walking through the grocery store with my great grandparents and wonder: What would they recognize as food?

Promote Generosity

Generosity is a value inherent to northwest native culture, which includes both giving and receiving. People often express gratitude for the abundance of the land and the water, and they pass that gratitude on by sharing. In potlaches and other ceremonies, families work hard to give food and other items away. When we harvest native foods for elders or those in need, we are caring for the health of our community. It is through giving, not through acquiring money or things, that I become truly wealthy.

Eat with the Seasons

We live in a time when many people do not know where their food comes from. Native people historically traveled to areas where food was in season. In spring, families visited prairies to harvest and cultivate camas. In summer, people camped where berries were ripe. And always, people congregated at abundant fish runs and seasonal bird migration sites. Eating seasonal foods reconnects me to the rhythm of the land, which is intertwined with my own rhythms.

Eat a Variety of Foods

Before European contact, Northwest Coastal Native People ate over 300 types of foods and therefore received a wide variety of nutrients in their diet. Today, most Americans eat only 12-20 foods on a regular basis. This negatively impacts our health and the health of the environment. When I eat a wide variety of foods, I ensure my own health and promote biodiversity.

Eat Local Foods

Plants breathe, drink water, and absorb nutrients. After they are cut off from their life source, they begin to lose vitality. The fresher the food, the better it is for you. Eating local food supports our local economy, and protects the environment by reducing the amount of fossil fuels used to transport food to us. When I choose local foods, I help grow a strong regional food system. I taste the beauty of the land to which I belong.

Cook and Eat with Good Intention

Cooking is a time to pay respect to the plants and animals that gave their lives to nourish our bodies. It is a time to honor the people with whom we are sharing food. If we eat while on the go, hurrying to the next task, we miss the pleasure of eating, and our bodies do not have sufficient time to savor and digest. This can leave us feeling hungry for more. When we put good intention into the food we harvest, prepare, serve and consume, we are fed in body and spirit.

Honor the Food Web

Everything in our food system is connected. Salmon returns to their ancestral rivers every year and give their lives so that others can have life. If we take too much of one food or do not give back, we disrupt the balance. Elders instruct us to return oyster shells to the beach to provide a matrix for new oysters to inhabit. It is my responsibility to maintain the health of our food system so I can pass down a world that will support generations to come.

Wild & Organic Foods are Better for Health

The health of the environment determines the health of our food. Wild foraged foods usually contain complex nutrients. Industrial agricultural practices with harmful pesticides and fertilizers deplete the health of the soil and the plants and animals it supports. Organic gardening is simply returning to the way our ancestors grew food. As we return to a sustainable way of growing food, our health and the health of the land we cultivate will thrive.



Researched, edited and compiled by Elise Krohn and Valerie Segrest. These principles emerged from conversations with many tribal stakeholders in Western Washington during the Northwest Indian College's Traditional Foods of Puget Sound Project. For more information on our traditional foods and medicines projects and educational resources, visit: www.nwicplantsandfoods.com. Funding provided by United States Department of Agriculture, and tribal contributions. Artwork by Roger Fernandez, designed by Anne Davis. © 2013 Northwest Indian College.





The Connection Between Food Sovereignty and Nutrition

In November 2024, the National Home Visiting Resource Center (NHVRC) published an Innovation Roundup on “Indigenous Food Sovereignty in Tribal Home Visiting” (Nadler et al., 2024). The resource noted that:

- Culturally appropriate Tribal food sovereignty initiatives can have sustained effects on food consumption habits in early childhood (Rosenstock et al., 2021).
- Tribal food sovereignty efforts support the long-term health and cultural preservation of AI/AN families by increasing access to nutritious and culturally adapted foods in rural and urban contexts (Mittenburg et al., 2022 and Priadka et al., 2022).
- Consuming traditional foods supports the health of AI/AN people (Blanchet et al., 2021).
- Early exposure to a variety of healthy foods has long-term positive impacts on eating habits and physical health (Lioret et al., 2020).

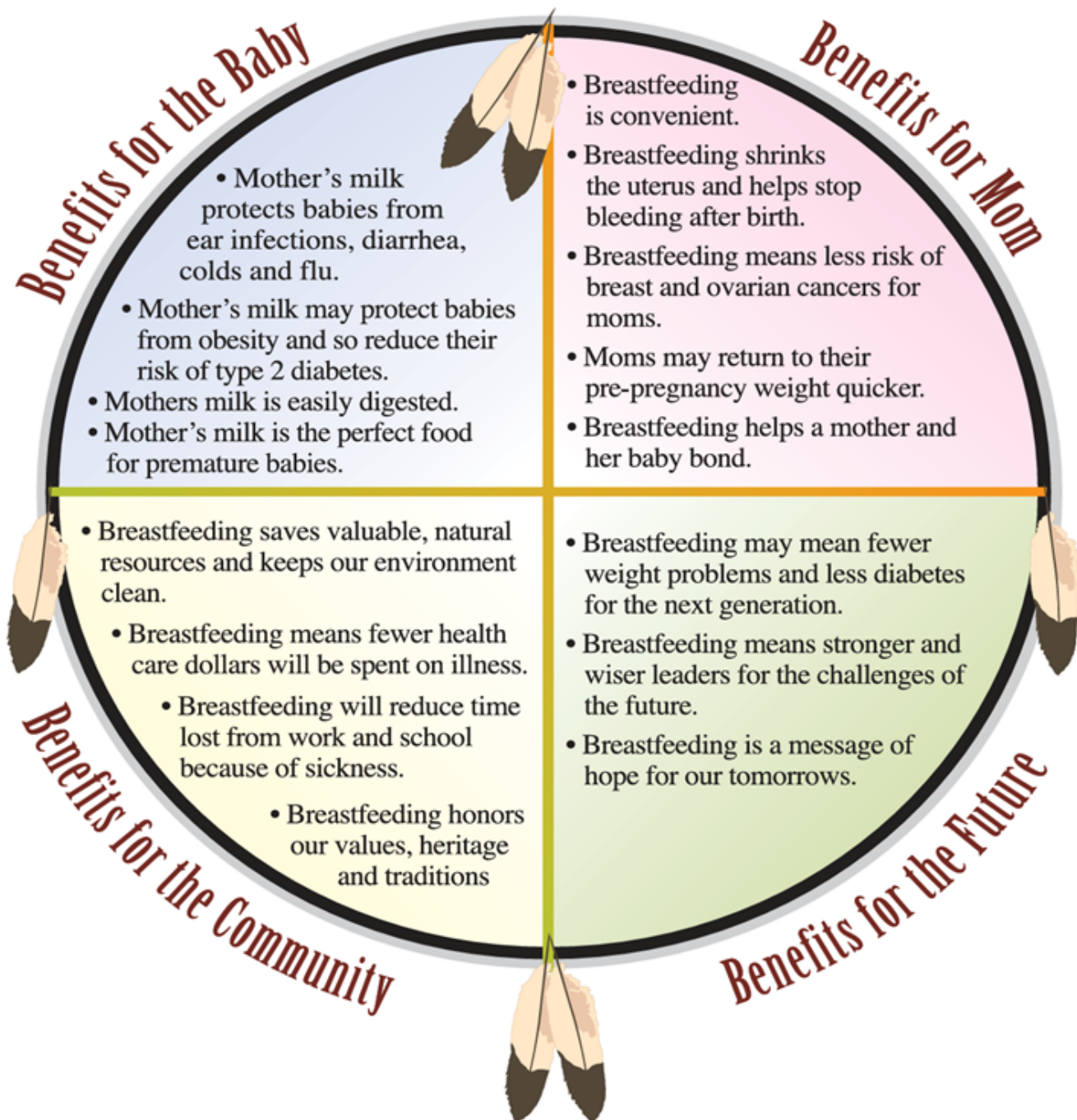
Importance of Nutrition During Pregnancy, Post-Partum, and Early Childhood

Nutrition during pregnancy supports the health and well-being of both the pregnant parent and fetus (Marshall et al., 2022). In addition, support for Native foodways during pregnancy and post-partum reconnects families to their traditional ways of obtaining, preparing, and eating food that is tied to the land, traditions, beliefs and practices of the Tribal community. For many AI/AN women, breastfeeding is a cultural practice that is deeply tied to spirituality, tradition, identity, and sovereignty while also recognized as beneficial to the health and well-being of the baby and mother.

Mothers in AI/AN communities have been breastfeeding their children for generations. The graphic on the following page from [*An Easy Guide to Breastfeeding for American Indian and Alaska Native Families*](#) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women’s Health, 2006) clearly articulates the benefits of breastfeeding for babies, parents, the community, and the future.



Exhibit 2. Breastfeeding Benefits



The home visiting program helped support me with breastfeeding. I breastfed Jayden until he was two years old and now, I'm just starting to wean Jackson at 1.5 years. Breastfeeding is a lot of work. Both kids were NICU babies and neither ever took a bottle. It was all on me. It was mentally straining to breastfeed for so long and to be the only one able to feed my children. My home visitor offered encouragement and support so I could do it. The home visiting program was a big part of my continuing to have success with breastfeeding.



—Josie Shea, parent, Ponca Tribe of Nebraska

Resources on Breastfeeding

The Indian Health Service has compiled a [Breastfeeding Toolkit](#) offering an abundance of resources for providers about the benefits, initiation, and challenges regarding breastfeeding. These resources range from practical explanations of anatomy, equipment, and timelines, to lifestyle and stress management guidance. The toolkit also includes information about formula feeding, labor and delivery, and rooming in. Each topic is addressed in a separate brief intended for provider education.

Additional resources on breastfeeding are included in the Tribal Home Visiting Nutrition Resource Guide.



Nutrition during early childhood is equally important. The introduction of traditional foods and Native foodways during early childhood support the health and well-being of the developing child (Roberts et al., 2022). This is also an important way that families and Native communities pass along their culture and traditions to the next generation. Through ceremony, storytelling, cooking together, gardening, and everyday activities, families can help children make an early and lasting connection between healthy eating and a balanced, healthy lifestyle.

The Tribal Home Visiting Nutrition Resource Guide includes examples of how families can incorporate lessons about nutrition into everyday activities with their children. From reading and storytelling, to counting, ordering, sorting, and cooking, when everyday activities are tied to traditional food and Native foodways, play becomes an active laboratory for children to learn about healthy nutrition, self-care, and well-being.





Innovative Practices to Support Nutrition

Many THV grant recipients recognize that healthy nutrition and the connection to Native foodways is important for supporting the whole body, mind, and spirit of families and children. This requires creativity and commitment, especially among the THV staff, to ensure nutrition is woven into home visiting services -- from intake assessments to community gatherings, to linking families to resources in the community, and much more.

The THV grant recipients interviewed for this issue brief felt hunger and malnutrition is more prevalent now than ever before, with fewer resources in the community to address family needs. "This does not just impact those served by home visiting, but it also is felt by THV staff who often live in the same community and experience their own challenges to food access as well," said Jaclyn Gray, program director, Riverside San Bernardino County Indian Health, Inc. (RSBCIH), and a member of the Little Shell Chippewa of Montana. Therefore, THV grant recipients are using their programs to address

hunger and to support children and families in accessing nutritious, local foods. They are doing this by:

- Identifying hunger and malnutrition among their families
- Supporting real-time access to food
- Supporting breastfeeding and early nutrition
- Providing nutrition education
- Building community gardens and greenhouses
- Establishing partnerships to support nutrition

Several individuals interviewed for this brief noted that the standard home visiting curriculum they use provides limited content on nutrition. As a result, many home visitors are taking the initiative to be creative, fill gaps, and form partnerships to better educate and meet the needs of the families they support.



Identifying Hunger and Malnutrition

THV programs interviewed create multiple opportunities to identify if an enrolled family may be struggling to access healthy food. From intake assessments to comprehensive family mapping, and ongoing screenings, they continuously monitor whether families have access to the nutrition that they need.

Intake

According to Keh Fernandez, program coordinator, Lake County Tribal Health Consortium (LCTHC), all families are assessed as part of the intake process—or family resource check-in—to determine their need for food. “Our food is so expensive. We’ve seen huge jumps in the price of eggs, milk, and other essentials in our community. We know that a lot of our families are struggling with food insecurity, especially towards the end of the month.” Because of this, staff check with families during each visit so they can respond accordingly if a family’s need for food changes.

Comprehensive Assessment

The home visiting program operated by Ponca uses a comprehensive Family Map assessment within the first 90 days of enrollment. “One section of the screener focuses on food insecurity. Results show us whether food insecurity is a high priority that needs to be addressed, or whether the team just needs to keep an eye on it,” said Walahoski. “We always have food access top of mind and are ready to help.”

Supporting Real-Time Access to Food

In addition to referring families to community resources, home visitors also support real-time access to food. Sometimes this means dropping off a box of food; other times it means taking families to a local pantry to help them get what they need. Home visitors ensure that families are aware of food offerings in the community. They always make sure food is available during home visiting group connections (family gatherings with program participants). Some grant recipients have been able to offer gift cards families can use in emergency situations.

Just today, we went to the food pantry in Lincoln for a mom who didn’t have transportation and has a 4-month-old child. It’s hard for her to get out of the home. We brought back corn, squash, eggplant, and more. Shelf stable items tend to be more of a barrier for our families.

—Candace Walahoski, lead home visitor,
Ponca Tribe of Nebraska

Quick Referrals

Programs make helpful connections with other government and community nutrition service programs so that home visitors can quickly refer when they identify a need. For example, the THV supervisor at PGST is certified to enroll families in the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Other home visiting teams are geographically close to, or even co-located with, programs like WIC, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Food Distribution Program for Indian Reservations (FDPIR), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program (TANF), as well as community food sovereignty initiatives. This makes it easy to walk down the hall or across the street to provide families a warm hand-off to other programs that can help.

Food Boxes and Pantries

Through a partnership with the clinic's diabetes program, LCTHC home visitors are able to drop off food boxes to families in need. For PGST home visitors, this is simple because there is a food bank across the street from the home visiting building. When a family needs help with transportation to a food pantry, home visitors often provide a ride and guide them to select nutritious foods.



I've noticed that the food distribution has gotten a lot smaller recently. That is a bummer. It's mostly fruit and veggies and a few pantry fillers like pasta, peanut butter, honey, and popcorn. They used to have meat, but there is less of that now. Most of the families participate in the distribution. The program sends out a mass text to all families. I know if I can't make it, I can ask my home visitor to grab the food and bring it to me. It's super helpful to have this resource.

—Josie Shea, parent, Ponca Tribe of Nebraska



Access to food, however, differs by community. According to Fernandez, "Almost every day of the month you can find a food pantry that is open in Lake County." In Nebraska, food pantries in some communities are thriving as donors continue to contribute. However, in other areas, supplies are limited, and pantries have restricted families to one visit per month. PGST also reports that, while food banks are struggling, funding from their casino helps to fill the gaps.



In Nebraska, we have storms that might knock out power for a week or two. Some of our families lose their whole refrigerator and freezer. They might have to wait several weeks for insurance to reimburse them for what they lost. This is a real struggle for families. We can give families gift cards for incentives, but the amount is very limited – the equivalent of only \$15.00 per month. When a gallon of milk is \$5.00 and a loaf of bread is \$4.00, \$15.00 will not get the family very far.

—Abbi Miranda-Carretero, program director, Ponca Tribe of Nebraska



Special Food Deliveries

Some Tribal communities receive special food deliveries. This is the case with the PGST, where occasionally a meat truck arrives. The Tribe sends out a notice to the community, and all families come to get their share of whatever is on the truck—meat, fish, smoked salmon, and more.

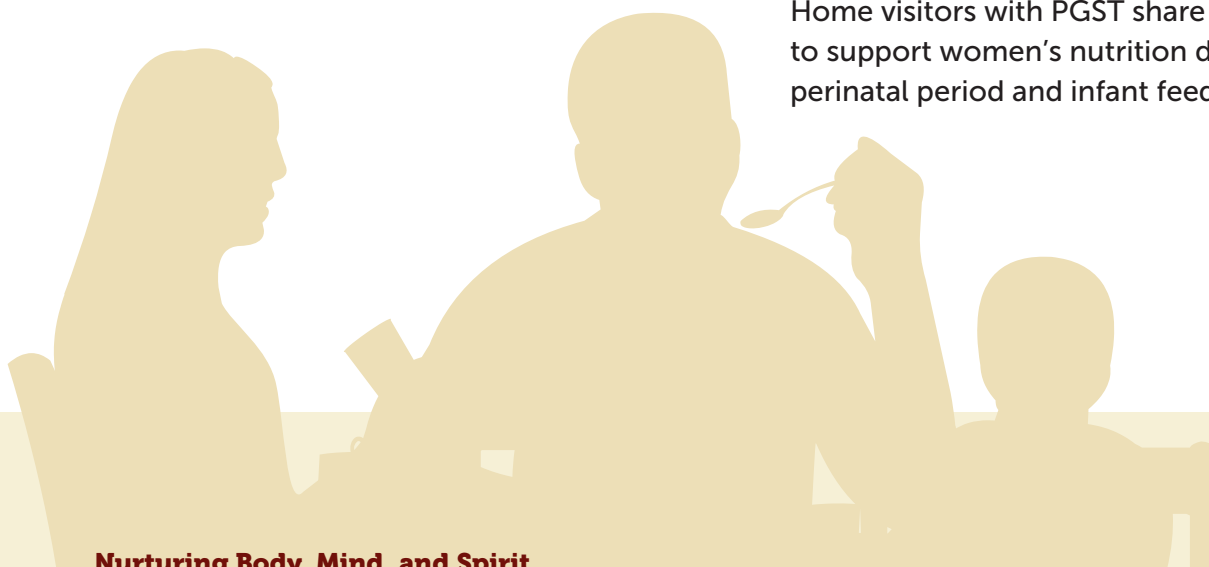
- Local Hunters and Farmers. PGST benefits from the generosity of local hunters and farmers. Many of the young hunters choose to donate the elk, deer, and other animals they harvest. The Department of Natural Resources pays to have the meat trimmed, and then it is made available to the community. A farm near the administration building posts a board outside, listing what is coming ripe, so families can pick their own fresh vegetables. These are examples of the communities stepping up to feed their families.

- Gift Cards for Times of Emergency. Programs have worked with their federal project officers to provide incentives to enrolled families that can be used for food.

Supporting Breastfeeding and Early Nutrition

In the 2022 THV brief [*Precious Moments: Tribal Home Visiting Programs Support Families During Pregnancy and Postpartum*](#), examples are shared from several programs. At Southcentral Foundation, home visiting nurses receive training in lactation support. At Taos Pueblo, staff developed their own prenatal curriculum that includes guidance on breastfeeding. The Inter-Tribal Council of Michigan hosts the Yellow Shawl Workshop, which helps mothers make connections between the shawl's yellow, representing colostrum, and the white fringe, symbolizing the milk that will continue to flow.

Home visitors with PGST share their practices to support women's nutrition during the perinatal period and infant feeding as well.



Our mothers are doing well with breastfeeding. When we look at the data over the years, more moms are now choosing to breastfeed than not, and some have a goal to do it for a full year.



—Eileen Finlay, parent educator,
Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe

Maternal Nutrition and Breastfeeding

When a woman enrolls in the PGST program prenatally, the home visitor provides the mother with the book “Latch: A Handbook for Breastfeeding with Confidence at Every Stage,” by Robin Kaplan. Latch provides information about nutrition during pregnancy and while breastfeeding, including details on the additional calories and protein that pregnant women require, as well as other healthy options. In addition, during National Breastfeeding Month, PGST organizes a pop-up group on breastfeeding where they share recipes and samples of juices and healthy, protein-rich snacks that nursing moms might enjoy.

Breastfeeding is that first baseline of truly being a sovereign nation because we are going back to our traditional lifeways of our first [Tribal] food. It is a gift from the Creator, and it is not something that we necessarily know right out of the gate how to do. We need the love and support of a community and partner so that the [breastfeeding] relationship can be built.

—Bethany Early Moody, RN, CNM, Indigenous Midwife, Indigenous Full-Spectrum Doula, Indigenous Breastfeeding Counselor, Inter-Tribal Council of Michigan Traditional Cultural Lifeways Consultant, as quoted in *Precious Moments*



Infant Nutrition

When a child in the PGST program is four months old, the home visitor gives the family the book “The Big Book of Organic Baby Food: Baby Purees, Finger Foods, and Toddler Meals for Every Stage,” by Stephanie Middleberg. This book provides information on the developmental changes to expect in young children, as well as tips on when, what, and how to feed them. The program also gives families a blender so that they can make their own food.



The cookbook provides lots of ideas for making food preparation fun and creating healthy dishes. We know a few of our moms are preparing their own baby food – veggies and fruit -- and even sending it with their children to day care. It's healthier and less expensive than the jarred baby food or other pre-made foods.

—Darion Roan, parent educator,
Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe

Providing Nutrition Education

Education about nutrition has been woven into THV programs. Even if the home visiting model curriculum does not provide robust instruction on nutrition, grant recipients are doing what they know best and leaning into their own creativity to offer joyful and informative opportunities to discuss nutrition. For some programs, this is incorporated into group connections, where they might invite a speaker to discuss a specific aspect of nutrition or provide a cooking demonstration using ingredients native to their traditional lands, along with takeaways for families to carry the learnings back home.

Fathers also have a vital role in supporting healthy eating. Some programs are capitalizing on their fathers' interest in hunting and gathering. Other programs may provide nutrition education in more subtle ways, with gentle guidance and coaching happening between individual home visitors and families.

The program helped me to think about meal planning with nutritious foods. Now I feel comfortable reaching out to Megan, the dietician, for additional guidance that I might need. And the plates that they handed out for the kiddos are super helpful. The kids like them too. They help with portion control and making sure we eat from all the food groups.

—Josie Shea, parent, Ponca Tribe of Nebraska



Group Connections

Grant recipients are making the most of regular gathering times to share information about nutrition. For example, Lake County hosts weekly community wellness circles, inviting speakers and elders to share topics of interest to the community. A recent gathering focused on acorns—how to gather, dry, and cook with acorns. Lake County also hosts a monthly



“Honoring Motherhood” group for mothers during pregnancy to one-year post-partum. During this monthly meeting, they discuss what to eat during pregnancy, where to buy the freshest vegetables and fruits, and how best to prepare for breastfeeding. The interest and curiosity of the participating mothers always drive topics.

A family attended that has five foster children. The mom took interest in the recipe for overnight oats and Wojapi, a traditional berry sauce or pudding made with a mixture of native berries and honey. Now every time we go for a visit, the mom tells us about how she is using these recipes for breakfast meals. She shares with us how she changes the recipe a bit, maybe adding in another berry or something she finds that is more affordable. One child in her care has celiac disease so with the overnight oats, she can individualize a jar for each child.



—Candace Walahoski, lead home visitor, Ponca Tribe of Nebraska



In April 2025, Ponca hosted “Rooted in Tradition: Affordable Family Feast with Native Flavors.” They invited a dietitian from the Tribal community to discuss cooking from scratch with traditional Native staples. Parents learned about the nutritional value of different foods, received suggestions for simple and affordable kid-approved snacks, and meal-stretching strategies. “Everyone was engaged in the presentation, asking questions and sharing stories of what works for their children and families,” said Walahoski. All attendees—both enrolled families and those on the home visiting waiting list—received “portion plates” to help them create balanced meals at home.

In July 2025, Ponca hosted another group connection on “Traditional Harvesting Practices.” The presenter was from the community and served on the board of the Sweat Lodge. She talked about digestion and harvesting. They gave all the participants the book “Beginners Guide to Native American Herbal Medicine: 75 Natural Remedies for Wellness and Balance” by Angela Locklear Queen, along with a tea strainer, locally harvested tea leaves, and live bitterroot that the families could plant at their homes. Families were able to touch and sample wild mint,

spearmint, mullein, and more.

These group connections not only create an opportunity for families to learn about the importance of nutrition, but they also help nurture the spirit. Gathering and sharing a meal during group connections can support connection and emotional well-being for new families.



These group connections have been great because I get to meet other mothers. I grew up three hours away and didn’t know people in Lincoln. Actually, I didn’t know other Native American families until I started going to the group connections. It’s been good for me, and good for the children too. Jayden (now 4) found a few buddies. And Jackson (1.5 yrs) loves another little girl. It’s good to have the support of other moms, and to sit and share a meal together.

—Josie Shea, parent, Ponca Tribe of Nebraska

Lots of dads are participating. We have many younger families in the program. Joshua Jones, our group leader, is encouraging them and showing them how to do this so that they can gather clams to feed their family and so that they can learn the skills to maybe become a commercial fisherman too.



—Shelaya Landers, parent educator
with Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe

Activities for Fathers

Staff at PGST are capitalizing on their location by the water and are organizing opportunities to engage fathers in activities such as hunting, fishing, and gathering. While the focus is on fathers, elders and children alike often join in as well, with elders sharing stories and generational knowledge. Not only are these activities fun, but they are also a way to revitalize traditional practices. For example, the home visiting program partnered with the Department of Natural Resources to purchase clam-digging tools and then took the fathers to the beach to dig. They taught them about the five species of clams, how to access the patch, dig for the clams, and how to properly purge them so that they could be safely cooked the next day. Staff also organized a fishing activity, purchasing poles and taking the men out to fish when they knew salmon were coming into the bay. Many children also joined and were delighted to catch their own fish. Soon, PGST staff hope to teach the fathers how to pick oysters off the beach and burn them on the fire, the traditional way.

Guidance and Coaching

Staff at RSBCIHI lean on their own experiences as they teach families strategies for accessing healthy food. One of the program's longest-serving home visitors, Marilyn DeLaOssa of the Little Shell Chippewa of Montana, helps families to learn the basics of nutrition. "Some of our parents grew up in homes where healthy food was scarce, or they were in the system and not well fed. Their understanding of basic nutrition is lacking. When they show interest in learning, I spend a lot of time with them sharing what I've learned over time," said DeLaOssa. She teaches them how to read ingredients, compare prices, research to determine if an item is okay even if the expiration date is near, how to build a shopping list that matches their budget, and how to shop the perimeter of the grocery store where there are more fresh foods. She gives them simple recipes that they can make from scratch with a few ingredients that are adult and kid-friendly, too.

DeLaOssa and Gray also help families consider how they can adjust their expenses to have more money for food. For example, if they can pick up diapers from the diaper bank or enroll their school-age children in the school lunch program, then they will have more money for groceries. It's about providing families with guidance and coaching so that they can make informed decisions about the best nutrition options for their family.





I didn't come from a place where nutrition was a big deal. We had lots of diabetes and obesity, and we just passed down unhealthy eating habits. When I had children, I did the same because that was what I knew. You don't feel good when you eat heavy foods. Marilyn opened my eyes to recipes I could try, to local farms where I could go to buy vegetables, milk and eggs. She even taught me that lentils are not as nasty as you think they are if you flavor them! We changed the way we are eating and it works. It works for my daughter who has high thyroid, and it works for my son who has autism and is sensitive to the texture of foods. And Marilyn's encouragement that I just walk my stairs for exercise is working too – I went from a [size] 3x to a 1x.

—Former parent, Riverside San Bernardino County Indian Health, Inc.



Supplemental Home Visiting Curricula that Support Nutrition

The National Home Visiting Resource Center (NHVRC) Innovation Roundup on “Indigenous Food Sovereignty in Tribal Home Visiting” (Nadler et al., 2024) highlighted supplemental curricula that some THV grant recipients are incorporating into their programs:

Gikinawaabi is an early childhood curriculum that supports children's school readiness as part of the Inter-Tribal Council of Michigan's THV program. It incorporates Native language, the Anishinaabe lunar calendar, and traditional food practices in everyday learning opportunities to promote early language, literacy, and numeracy. For example, parents are encouraged to engage their children in counting pieces of fruit or describing their shapes and colors. Research suggests that using the curriculum likely contributed to increased school readiness for children.

Family Spirit Nurture is a curriculum designed to promote healthy infant feeding and growth and reduce the risk of childhood obesity. It offers six lessons for parents on topics such as breastfeeding, infant-responsive feeding best practices, water consumption, moderation of sugar intake, connection to food sources, and healthy eating for the whole family. Home visitors spend time with families to learn about their interaction with and traditional knowledge of food, and they connect families in ways that are most appropriate for each family (e.g., connecting families who live in food deserts to sites for fishing and wild rice distribution). Research suggests that families who participated in Family Spirit Nurture drank fewer sugary beverages, had better infant-responsive feeding practices, and breastfed their children longer than families who did not receive the curriculum.



Building Community Gardens and Greenhouses

Several THV grant recipients are creating spaces for families to learn about gardening, grow fruits and vegetables, and participate in harvesting. The hope is that families will gain better access to the freshest food available, allowing them to grow and enjoy local foods that are significant to their culture and are natural remedies. Community gardens also help strengthen bonds within their community as families work together to tend the garden.

Gardens at Every Clinic

Last year, Gray was instrumental in expanding “Healing Gardens” at three of the RSBCIHI Tribal health clinics. She understood that benefits extend beyond providing a food source; working in a garden and sharing the bounty is beneficial for emotional well-being and promotes connection and a sense of purpose. Her original idea was that staff would take their lunches in the garden, home visitors might visit with families in the garden, children could explore and learn about (and

sample) native plants, and all would play a role in maintaining it. At one point, a mental health day was hosted in a garden and more than 250 people attended. Meeting in the outdoor space offered a sense of healing and calm, unlike a conference room in the building.

Recipe 4 Success

A few AI/AN Early Head Start home visiting programs are implementing Recipe 4 Success, a 12-week food-based curriculum that encourages parent-child interactions and healthy lifestyle habits. Parents are taught how to cook with their young children, turning daily routines into a fun learning opportunity. Research suggests that children are learning important self-control skills and are more willing to eat nutritious foods, and that parents are more engaged, responsive, and supportive of their children’s learning and development (Society for Research in Child Development, 2023).

The whole idea of Native foods and gardening is about embracing our culture as a protective factor. It's a way of life. When we garden, we are revitalizing and connecting to our culture and traditional practices from very long ago. This is what our ancestors thrived from.

—Jaclyn Gray, program director, Riverside San Bernardino County Indian Health, Inc.

Now, with a new Chief Operating Officer at RSBCIHI, the plan is to refresh the existing gardens and build five more so that every health clinic has a garden. The new gardens will be built at low cost to help families see how they can do this at their own homes as well.

Greenhouse to Withstand Storms and Increase the Bounty

Ponca is located in an urban area with predominantly apartment living and limited opportunities for families to garden. The home visiting program previously had a greenhouse; unfortunately, it was severely damaged by the weather. Recently, the Tribal Council and ACF granted approval for the home visiting program

to use carryover funds to construct a larger, sturdier greenhouse for the THV families.

Establishing Partnerships to Support Nutrition

THV grant recipients understand that supporting the health and well-being of enrolled families is strengthened through collaboration with community partners. From Tribal health programs—particularly diabetes prevention teams—to local farmers, sister non-profits that focus on maternal wellness and nutrition, and other government programs, THV leaders are actively building and nurturing partnerships that promote holistic wellness for their Tribal communities.

We have families who would like to grow their own food, but because we are in an urban area, they can't do that. The greenhouse will be a space where families can garden, and children can play nearby...Going to the grocery store can be \$20 for a bag of food. The new greenhouse will be a way for them to grow their own healthy foods.

—Abbi Miranda-Carreto, program director, Ponca Tribe of Nebraska





Partnering with the Tribal Health Diabetes Team

The Lake County THV program collaborates with the diabetes team to leverage resources. For example, the diabetes team sponsors two community gardens and employs full-time staff to tend to the gardens. In 2024, the gardens produced six thousand pounds of vegetables. The gardens are so popular that a third is in the planning stage.

Not only is the garden producing healthy food, but it is also making the essential connection to mind, body, and spirit by focusing on and celebrating Native foodways.

At the start of each season, they host a “Garden Blessing” ceremony, where elders come to speak about the importance of nutrition and the connection between Native foods and their ancestors. Families attend with their children to hear these lessons and take part in a celebratory dinner. The garden is then open for planting, and families are encouraged to

join in and plant a “start” (another word for a seedling). Families come back with their children throughout the season to tend the garden and see the progress. When food is ready to harvest, families are invited to either pick it themselves or they may have a box delivered to them. Often, the boxes (containing 5-10 lbs. of fresh produce) include a recipe or information about the contents, as the produce may look different from what a family typically finds in a store.

The diabetes team also offers weekly classes open to the entire community during the growing season, highlighting various ways to incorporate foods from the garden into meals. THV staff encourage families to attend and provide transportation when needed. Classes focus on growing and using Native plants for medicine, as well as preparing foods that may be new to families. In 2024, a large harvest of eggplant introduced many families to this new and nutritious food.





Partnering with Local Farmers and Farmers Markets

Lake County and PGST both have local farms nearby that are trying to support THV families. In Lake County, a farmer swapped a section of pear trees for planting more vegetables to benefit the community. The farmer set up a roadside stand where families can easily stop, pick up organic produce, and pay by an honor system. A farm two miles from the PGST reservation welcomes families to use their WIC cards to purchase produce. The PGST THV team often holds group connections at the farm to make it easy for families to pick up food before or after a meeting. Near Ponca, there is a monthly farmers market, and all Tribally-enrolled members are encouraged to stop in to pick up food supplies.

Partnering with other Non-Profits

THV program leaders seek opportunities to supplement the education they offer with support from sister non-profit organizations. For example, Ponca partners with the Malone Center in Lincoln and Omaha. The Malone Center provides free maternal wellness classes and support (e.g., birthing classes, pregnancy and childbirth doula services, postpartum doula, breastfeeding support programs, and a breastmilk sharing program). It is a valuable resource that supports moms in achieving successful breastfeeding.

Partnering with other Government Programs

Lake County shared that the health clinic received a CalFresh grant, enabling them to offer cooking classes to the THV families. In these classes, families explore new ways to prepare elk, salmon, vegetables, and more. The classes are designed to be both instructional and hands-on, engaging parents and children together in the cooking process. "The children enjoy learning how to clean and chop veggies and to make their own ranch dip," said Fernandez.



Future Generations Collaborative Leans into Multiple Partnerships to Increase Education and Access to Traditional Foods

The Food Abundance Project of the Future Generations Collaborative (FGC), a THV grant recipient, is in its first year, funded by a partnership with another local Native organization, the Native American Youth and Family Center. The FGC is proud to join the food sovereignty movement, addressing food scarcity in the local Native community by providing access to fresh and traditional foods to families engaged in the Early Childhood Project (ECP) that uplifts healthy nutrition practices and offers space for knowledge sharing and connection through land, food, and medicines.

Through a partnership with the Oregon State University Extension Program (OSU), a Native nutritionist provides cooking and food preservation classes, supporting families in learning practical skills to prepare, store, and sustain healthy foods. This program also donated a freeze dryer to the FGC and offered training on how to use it, expanding the ability to preserve traditional foods for year-round access.

Another partnership with the Multnomah County Health Department brings their Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) nutritionist to family gatherings, offering both group education and one-on-one conversations that help families build strong, sustainable nutrition practices grounded in their own cultural values.



Additionally, the FGC has a first-of-its-kind collaboration between Metro, a local government entity that oversees various parks in the Portland area, and the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife to offer hunting opportunities within city limits at a local rural park for community members, adults, and youth. The first hunt occurred in the Fall of 2024. Two FGC Native youth completed their hunting safety course and field day, earning the opportunity to participate in their first harvest. The meat was processed by community members and gifted to the FGC's food pantry, offering locally sourced, nutrient-dense, and traditional food for families. The young hunters were honored with a First Kill ceremony and stood proudly before the community as providers. This initiative strengthens connections to traditional foodways while increasing access to lean, high-quality proteins that support healthy nutrition practices.

Lessons Learned

The THV grant recipients interviewed reflected on the lessons they have learned as they work to ensure that enrolled families have access to healthy foods that nurture the body, mind, and spirit. Here is what they recommend:

- **Engage in initial and ongoing assessment to determine each family's nutrition status.** Use screeners during intake that are culturally relevant and gather the necessary information to gain a good sense of each family's food status. Regularly check in with families to ensure they have an adequate supply of food. When they do not, help them connect to food that is available in the community.
 - **Ask families what programming they would like around food and nutrition.** The more input families have in the development of programming for group connections and other offerings, the more likely they will be to participate.
 - **Make nutrition education opportunities engaging and specific.** Engage parents (and children, as appropriate) in conversation, meal preparation, and other activities. If you are sharing a resource, take the time to explain why it could be useful and how the family might benefit from engaging with it. For example, when the book "Latch" or a cookbook is shared, the staff reviews the book and flags lessons and recipes that they think the family might want to try.
 - **Build a community garden with families intimately engaged in all aspects.** Encourage engagement at every stage, including planning, planting, harvesting, learning, teaching, and enjoying, rather than just demonstrating. This sparks fun and may inspire families to build their own low-cost home gardens.
- 
- **Budget to support more investment in healthy nutrition programming.** Consider how the program budget can be used to support healthy nutrition programming, such as meals during meetings and supplies for a garden or greenhouse. Investing upfront in a garden or greenhouse can ultimately help families become more independent and food secure in the future.
 - **Connect with resources in the community to support group connections on nutrition.** Ask if a presenter or speaker might be willing to teach a class for free or at a reduced cost, and if they can bring leave-behinds for the families (e.g., books, resources, seedlings).
 - **Be creative, keep trying, and have fun along the way.** Enjoy learning ways to do more, even with a small budget or garden. Think outside the box. Don't get discouraged.

Closing

Healthy nutrition is the foundation for the body, mind, and spirit. It ensures the physical body has the essential nutrients and minerals to develop fully, the mind is at peace and not competing for attention caused by hunger, and the spirit is nurtured when food is connected to tradition and lifeways. The alignment between food, culture, sovereignty, and resilience is strong in AI/AN communities, contributing to overall well-being during pregnancy, childbirth, and early childhood years.

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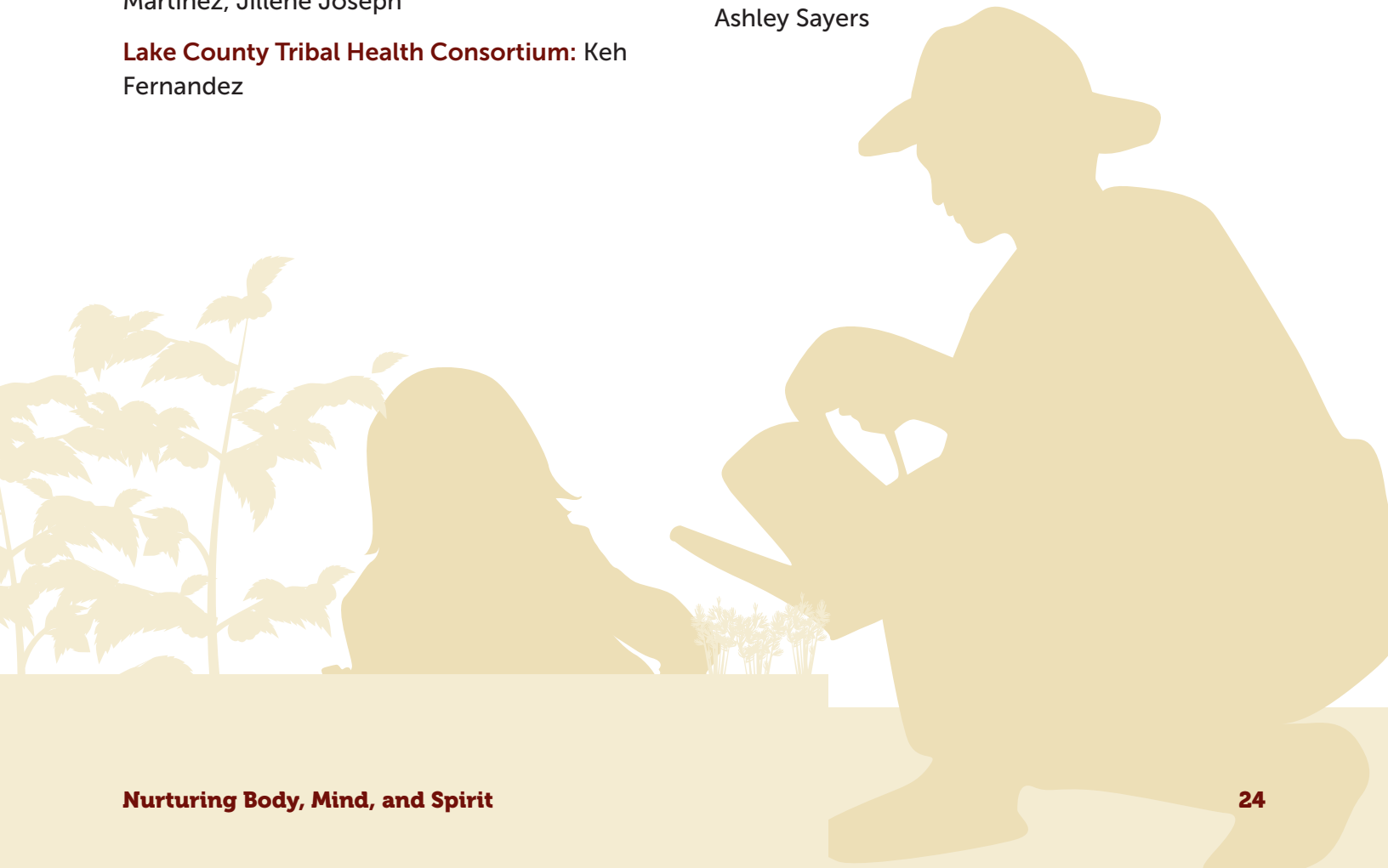
Lake County Tribal Health Consortium: Keh Fernandez

THV grant recipients interviewed for this brief know that it takes collective, community-wide support to overcome the growing challenge of hunger and malnutrition. They demonstrate how commitment to and creativity in integrating healthy nutrition and traditional practices into home visiting can help AI/AN families connect to their past and strengthen their resolve for a healthy future.

Ponca Tribe of Nebraska: Abbi Miranda-Carretero, Josie Shea, Candace Walahoski

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Nurturing Body, Mind, and Spirit: How Tribal Home Visiting Supports Nutrition and Healthy Development

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