



# Notes from the Chief

*What I'm working on for You*



Osiyo -

We all have someone close to us who battles illness or disease in one form or another. It is a challenge to be sure, but one area continues to be neglected by not receiving the attention it truly deserves: mental health. Mental health-related issues are frequently stigmatized, which prevents people from seeking and receiving the professional help they need. Undiagnosed and untreated mental illness can be devastating to those who suffer from it.

At Cherokee Nation, we know mental health is equally important as physical health and that treating both is required for good health. We also work to understand and address the impact of historical and generational trauma on our Cherokee citizens.

For years, Cherokee Nation Behavioral Health has used, and is continuing to use, federal grants to train community law enforcement, youth workers and health officials to effectively and compassionately collaborate with individuals with mental illness to address their needs and get them help.

Each of the five courses the Cherokee Nation teaches, funded through a Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration grant and the Indian Health Service, teaches specific risk factors for and observable signs of potential mental illness. The classes also address the role of mental health in emergency scenarios, how we can best assist and how those situations can result in more positive outcomes for everyone involved.

Nationally, there are only about 5,000 instructors who are certified to teach Mental Health First Aid, and the Cherokee Nation employs six of them. During a typical eight-hour course, participants memorize a five-step action plan, learn how to identify mental health risk factors and offer support to be effective communicators.

Having these certified instructors is more than just simply hosting a classroom training; it is helping make a life-or-death difference during a mental health or substance abuse crisis. Detailed preparation for these kinds of scenarios means we can better attend to all parties. We are investing in education and training. Because of those efforts, communities and Cherokee families in northeast Oklahoma are benefiting, and we are able to have more comprehensive and up-to-date crisis services going forward.

Cherokee Nation's Adult Behavioral Health Department has led more than 15 trainings and trained almost 350 people to identify and be better prepared when mental illness, including depression, anxiety or personality disorders, is involved.

Cherokee Nation's Helping Everyone Reach Out, or HERO project, provides children's mental health services. It has also completed seven Mental Health First Aid trainings with 131 participants from schools, family service agencies and students at Northeastern State University. This summer, the HERO project plans to do even more outreach to area schools so that we can offer this vital training to administrators and classroom teachers.

According to the American Psychiatric Association, Native Americans experience serious psychological distress at 1.5 times greater than the general population and suffer from PTSD more than twice the rate as other Americans. Sadly, those afflicted with mental health issues often self-medicate, which in many cases can lead to substance abuse. This complicates emergencies, which is why we are actively working to be prepared and competent at addressing the complexity created by the presence of mental health-related issues.

Another positive result of Cherokee Nation's efforts in this arena is assisting our first responders. Law enforcement engagement with persons with mental illness will be more amicable and result in increased frequency of positive outcomes in Oklahoma because of these trainings conducted by the tribe.

Our behavioral health programs, just like our other health endeavors, rely on federal funding. Cherokee Nation is doing more every day, even as federal policymakers continue to underfund Indian Health Service and other programs that affect our Native population in America.

Striving for a healthy mind, body and soul is how we can move forward, and Cherokee Nation will keep leading the way. May is National Mental Health Awareness Month, and we are taking steps to make our employees and citizens more mindful of these issues and the programs we offer tribal citizens, like individual and group therapy for mental health and substance abuse, relapse prevention, children and family treatment, parenting classes and psychological testing for children and adults.

Our hope is to light the way for each other. By addressing mental health on a policy, community and individual level, we plant the seeds of change within our tribe.

Wado

Bill John Baker

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bill John Baker". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.



17675 S. Muskogee Ave.  
Tahlequah, OK 74465  
918-453-5000

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