



Overhauling a Tribal Food System

Mvskoke Food Sovereignty Initiative

When Rita Williams first started talking to local health, nutrition, and child care educators in 2009 about the need to change the food systems serving the Mvskoke tribal people, she expected “to be preaching to the choir”—advancing ideas that her colleagues already understood and supported.

She discovered, instead, that many of them had not been exposed to concepts like “food sovereignty” and “food sustainability,” and how they link to the problems of poor nutrition, diabetes, and obesity that haunt the community. “What they see is what comes into their clinical areas,” explained Williams. “They were saying to me, ‘We can give you facts and numbers but we can’t tell you about food systems.’ I started visiting with them to talk about how we can reach out to our communities and help them change.”

Through its *Communities Creating Healthy Environments: Improving Access to Healthy Foods and Safe Places to Play in Communities of Color* (CCHE) national program, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) provided a grant¹ that is helping to advance that dialogue and promote consensus on the need for action. The three-year grant began in 2010.

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

Williams is education and policy coordinator for the Mvskoke Food Sovereignty Initiative, which works to preserve and revitalize the tribe’s food heritage through education, intergenerational sharing, and agricultural practices.

Traditionally, the Mvskoke people were an agriculture-based society in what is now the southeastern part of the United States. In their rich, river-bottom soil, they cultivated corn, beans, sunflowers, and squash; picked the berries, fruits, and nuts that grew in abundance; and hunted and fished for their protein. But the years of ready access to communal food sources ended in the 1830s, when the Native American peoples living east of the Mississippi were pushed west, along the legendary Trail of Tears.

¹ ID# 68256

The Muscogee (Creek) Nation, as the tribal government is officially called, is now spread across thousands of square miles and eleven counties in rural Oklahoma. Seven generations after removal, write project staff, “the process of food colonization has resulted in an almost total end of all Mvskoke production and use of traditional foods, with the corresponding dramatic increase in diabetes and other diet-related diseases.”

Since its launch in 2006, the Mvskoke Food Sovereignty Initiative has been trying to change that, with activities that include developing family and community gardens and sponsoring symposia to encourage dialogue between community members and the tribal government. To engage a broader set of health and social service providers, initiative staff scheduled monthly meetings, and those led to a proposal to form a Food and Fitness Policy Council.

In September, 2010, 18 months after that small group of providers began talking, the council was formally established by a tribal resolution signed by the Chief. “We had to bring in the decision-makers of the tribe, get their input and stamp of approval. We could not move forward without them,” said Williams.

THE FOOD AND FITNESS POLICY COUNCIL BEGINS ITS WORK

Food and Fitness Policy Council members now include administrators of the tribe’s diabetes, nutrition, Head Start, and WIC programs, Indian Health Services clinicians, a dietician, a tribal government representative, and a community farmer. Williams says a slow, deliberate process of education and interaction has helped members understand the need to gain more control over the community’s food. “We struggled when we first met, but finally they are on board, it is clicking in their minds,” she believes. “A whole new world has opened up to them. It’s been a long process of dialoguing so they can get there with their thoughts.”

With the right people committed, the policy council is now deciding how best to collect data on childhood obesity in the tribe. “We are just now trying to figure out: Who do we work with to find these numbers? What about confidentiality? How do we access the information?” acknowledged Williams.

The policy council hopes to offer ways for community residents to purchase more local fruits and vegetables. Food provided through the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Commodity Food Distribution Program and Elderly Nutrition Service typically comes from wholesale distributors and rarely includes fresh produce. “We need some procurement policies whereby the Muscogee (Creek) Nation can purchase from our local growers, but that’s not possible now,” Williams points out.

Through the policy Council, the tribe is also exploring opportunities to grow more of its own food. “We’re talking about how we use the land base that we as a nation own,” she says.

Getting tribal leaders to think more about the long-neglected urgency of overhauling the tribe’s food system remains a priority for Williams and the policy council. “Why are we at this point?” she asks in dismay. “Where have we been as native tribes? Where have we been?”

But she sees shifting attitudes among the tribe’s leaders. “When we are talking about food or gardens, I say ‘This is not just about growing gardens,’ which sounds so mundane. I take them back to who we were, where we came from, what our people did during the growing season and the spirituality of it,” Williams explains. “What the leaders connect with is who they are as native people. We have to dig into their souls and their spirits.”

Ultimately, Williams is convinced their commitment is what will make the difference. “Tribal leaders will push these ideas through the policy council. They are the key for moving ahead with CCHE.”

For more information on the Mvskoke Food Sovereignty Initiative, go to its [website](#).

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