

# *Sovereignty and the Health of Indigenous Peoples*

## **BACKGROUND**

This policy statement refers to the following population groups: Native Americans within the geographical boundaries of the continental United States (or First Nations Peoples), *Kanaka Maoli* (Native Hawaiians), Alaska Natives, Chamorus of Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands, Taino Indians of Puerto Rico, and American Samoans. These groups all share in common the fact that they have been colonized by the United States and as a result their sovereignty has been seriously suppressed.

Because of space limitations, background and historical information on the indigenous groups included in this policy statement are by necessity abbreviated. The authors acknowledge the inherent limitations in describing the complex and rich cultures of our brother and sister nations in this document and refer readers to the references section for more literature about all the indigenous groups discussed herein.

### ***Native Americans (First Nations Peoples)***

- The Articles of Confederation of 1781 gave the federal government sole and exclusive authority over Native American people. This authority was later solidified in the U.S. Constitution, which granted Congress power over Native Americans and established laws that regulated their affairs.
- The 1790 and 1834 Trade and Intercourse Acts separated Native Americans and non-Native Americans and subjected all interaction between the two groups to federal control with the underlying belief that the

“Indians were culturally inferior and that the American Government had a responsibility to raise them to the level of the rest of society, which meant to ‘Christianize and Civilize’” (Lewis, 1995, p. 218).

- The Indian Removal Act of 1830 arranged the forced transfer of indigenous tribes from the eastern United States to the western United States.
- The Indian General Allotment Act of 1887 (The Dawes Act) “allocated” 160 acres of land to be held in trust for 25 years for native peoples by the government. On expiration of the trust the native peoples would receive title to their allotment and would have U.S. citizenship; surplus lands would revert to the government. As a result the amount of Native American-held land declined from 138 million acres in 1887 to 48 million acres in 1934.

### ***Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiians)***

- The first foreigners to become involved with the Hawaiian rulers were sea traders seeking commercial advantages and Christian missionaries seeking mass religious conversion of Hawaiians. These foreigners would play a major role in the disenfranchisement of *Kanaka Maoli* and their *aina* (land). As Blaisdell (1996) wrote, “It was the missionary who drafted our first constitution of 1840, which was modeled after the American Constitution. And it was the missionaries who drafted our *mahele* land laws, which set up a legal system to steal our lands.”
- On January 16, 1893, American annexationists, with the assistance of the U.S. Marines,

overthrew the lawful Hawaiian government and gave all remaining crown and government lands to the United States without compensation. Subsequently, Queen Lili'uokalani, the last ruling monarch of the Republic of Hawai'i, was unlawfully imprisoned in her own home and eventually dethroned by American industrialists (Kamaau, 1989).

### *Alaska Natives*

- From 1750 to 1800 the Russians colonized the Aleuts and coastal Indians to exploit the sea otter trade. In the 1850s the Eskimos made contact with American whalers.
- The discovery of oil in the 1960s and the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971 established a capitalistic, industrial structure through which U.S. and international corporations established access to abundant oil deposits in the northern region. The Claims Act provided \$962.5 million and the title to 44 million acres to state-charted native corporations. It required native people to set up village and regional corporations. The land that the Claims Act transferred ownership of did not belong to individual Alaska Natives or tribes but to corporations (Lally & Haynes, 1995).
- This single set of events has been responsible for both positive and negative consequences for Alaskan Natives related to rapid changes in access to resources and technology, without requisite attention to aboriginal land rights, the retention of hunting and gathering practices, or strategic cultural and economic self-determination (Berger, 1985).

### *Chamorus*

- The Chamorus first made contact with the Western world in 1521, when Ferdinand Magellan, sailing under Spanish authority, arrived on Guam. After decades of Spanish-Chamoru wars, the Chamoru population was decimated from approximately 100,000 to less than 4,000 in 1710. Guam remained a colony of Spain until the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1898, at which time the island became a possession of the United States. At that time Guam

was politically separated from the rest of the

Mariana Islands, hence dividing the Chamoru people. Chamorus became colonial subjects who reported to a governing body determined by which island they were living on. This created a significant barrier in maintaining the identity of the Chamoru people as a collective unit.

- During World War II Japan invaded Guam and occupied the island for nearly three years. Japanese cultural practices were forced upon the Chamoru, who were forbidden to speak their native tongue. This period of warfare resulted in the death of many Chamorus. After World War II traditional villages were levied off as land was redistributed. In addition, the U.S. federal government seized approximately 42 percent of land for its own use.
- Under the continuous control of the U.S. Navy and the Department of Interior, the people of Guam have been repeatedly frustrated by the U.S. federal government's failure to address Guam's quest to establish a participatory plan for decolonization.

### *Taino Indians*

- In the early 1800s the King of Spain granted a *Cedula de Bracia* (The Document of Bracia) to increase the European population of Puerto Rico by awarding land grants to immigrants from South American colonies, Spain, and other European countries.
- The Taino Indians disappeared very early after the Spanish colonization. The main influence in Puerto Rican culture, values, and lifestyles has been the Spanish colonization; they have been under their dominion for almost 500 years.
- During the Spanish-American War, U.S. troops invaded Puerto Rico at Guanica on July 25, 1898.
- At the end of the Spanish-American War, the United States demanded Puerto Rico as "war payment" from Spain in the Treaty of Paris. In 1917, all Puerto Ricans were granted U.S. citizenship.





## *American Samoans*

- The Dutch explorer Jacob Roggoveen was the first European to “discover” Samoa in 1722. Subsequent European expansion into the islands led to disorder and violence, which were compounded by tribal warfare.
- A tripartite treaty in 1899 among Great Britain, the United States, and Germany reorganized U.S. interest east of longitude 171° W; Germany was granted the western islands (which later went to New Zealand), and Great Britain withdrew in consideration of rights in Tonga and the Solomon Islands.
- In 1962 the independent nation of Western Samoa was created from the New Zealand territory; the eastern islands remained under U.S. control as American Samoa.

Social workers must recognize that the effects of colonization on indigenous peoples have resulted in not only the loss of ancestral lands, the violation of the right to self-governance, and the violation of self-determination, but also extreme violation of the basic human right to health in mind, body, and spirit. Within two centuries after first contact with foreigners, the First Nations Peoples experienced a decline of almost 75 percent due to disease and the systematic decimation of tribes and families.

Similar to the First Nations Peoples, Alaska Natives are burdened by high rates of unemployment, poverty, crime, and incarceration. Alaska’s teenage pregnancy rate, 45 percent among Alaska Native young women, is the highest in the United States. The suicide rate of Alaska Natives ages 10 to 24 years is three times that of white Alaskans. The majority of these suicides are linked to alcohol abuse, as are child and intimate partner violence and various other types of crimes (Lally & Haynes, 1995).

According to the Office of Technology Assessment (1988, cited in U.S. Senate, 2001), which compared Native Hawaiian health with that of other ethnic groups residing within U.S. boundaries,

there is little doubt that the health status of Native Hawaiians is far below that of other U.S. population groups and that in a number of areas, the evidence is compelling that

Native Hawaiians constitute a population

group for whom the mortality rate associated with certain [chronic] diseases exceeds that for other U.S. populations in alarming proportions. (p. 53)

Look and Braun (1995) reported mortality from chronic illnesses over the past 80 years as two to five times greater for Native Hawaiians than for other ethnic populations living in Hawaii.

Chamorus on Guam represent the largest ethnic group on the island, at only 38 percent. Nonetheless, their rates for numerous social conditions are significantly higher than their percentage, with an oppressive history in their homelands. For example, the percentage of total Chamorus deaths from heart disease is 61.4 percent; from cancer, 59.3 percent; from diabetes mellitus, 77.6 percent; from chronic liver disease, 66.7 percent; and from HIV/AIDS, 61.5 percent (Workman, 1999).

For the Taino Indians, within one generation of that first contact by Columbus, virtually the entire race of Taino were dead from foreign diseases, starvation, massacres, and abusive enslavement by white colonists.

## **ISSUE STATEMENT**

As a result of cultural loss due to colonization and the resulting overwhelming sense of despair, indigenous peoples historically experience the effect of becoming strangers in their own lands. Sovereignty requires, as a precondition, the right to spiritual, emotional, and physical health. When the body, mind, or spirit of an indigenous person is affected, the spiritual, physical, and emotional health of indigenous peoples diminish.

Due to the extensive colonization of indigenous peoples by the United States and the resultant violation of cultural practices, lifestyles, and the violation of the right to self-determination, the indigenous peoples of the United States and its territories and commonwealths have suffered extreme loss of their right to self-governance and land access and extraordinary violation of physical, emotional, and spiritual health and well-being. When in-



indigenous peoples are oppressed in their own lands, it causes their mind, body, and spirit to become unhealthy with physical ailments, mental illnesses, aimlessness, and other spiritual and health problems.

The ability to have some control over one's environment is basic to emotional, spiritual, and physical health. Within this context indigenous peoples could make choices in accordance with their own values. For example, the best use of land might not be for the money it brings in, but rather for the amount of food, shelter, and spiritual sustenance it can provide.

## ***POLICY STATEMENT***

- NASW advocates for concrete sovereignty issues (for example, self-government, self-determination, native languages, tradition, and health practices).
- NASW should identify policies or practices adverse to the health of indigenous peoples.
- NASW should continue dialogue with indigenous peoples regarding sovereignty and self-determination because these issues affect their spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being.
- NASW supports policy changes at the local, state, and federal levels that acknowledge the right of a tribe to determine its own membership.
- Social workers are expected to be educated and aware of sovereignty and self-determination as these issues relate to indigenous peoples.
- NASW acknowledges that all people are necessary to one another to survive and to thrive on this planet and in so doing joins in the efforts of all indigenous peoples colonized by the United States, including its states, territories, and commonwealths, toward sovereignty as uniquely defined by the indigenous peoples themselves.
- Social workers need to understand the core value differences between the dominant culture and the culture of indigenous peoples (that is, the role within the family, the commu-

nity, and the land and ultimately with Mother Earth).

- NASW recognizes that the overall well-being of indigenous peoples is tied to their economy.
- NASW recognizes that the struggle of indigenous peoples for sovereignty reflects genocidal practices and ethnic cleansing, which have led to their historic violation and the compromise of self-determination; their profound disenfranchisement as a group; and their concomitant violation of physical, mental, and spiritual health.
- NASW recognizes and acknowledges that health is an important goal of the sovereignty movement; therefore, NASW members support indigenous peoples' efforts to regain their physical, mental, and spiritual health.
- Social workers support the incorporation and use of traditional medicines and healing practices within their employing agencies and advocate for funding parity with payers. The incorporation of effective traditional health practices and healing methods into health care will accord it the same legitimacy as effective Western practices.
- Social workers recognize and acknowledge the culture, heritage, and environmental and economic well-being of indigenous peoples that have been grievously endangered and in so doing support and honor the preservation of the traditional spiritual, health, and cultural practices of indigenous peoples.
- NASW advocates and supports the rights of indigenous peoples in their efforts to gain health and self-determination and sustain the physical, emotional, and spiritual health of these people that are consistent with the principles, values, and roles of social work.
- NASW supports all efforts to educate and train indigenous peoples in the profession of social work as practitioners, educators, and policymakers.
- NASW advocates and supports the integration of cultural content related to patients' rights and in the treatment of disease.







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