

The Re-Entry Journey: An Evaluation of the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe Road to New Beginnings Program



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Authors

Lorraine Perales, Kia Heryadi, Dennis Jones, Imani Hutchinson, Selina Ramirez,
Christina Barone, Kate Stepleton

Submitted to

Christina Barone
Director of Court Services
31912 Little Boston Road NE
Kingston, WA 98346

Point of Contact

Lorraine Perales
lorraine.perales@mefassociates.com
(206) 312-1108

Submitted by

MEF Associates
1330 Braddock Place, Suite 220
Alexandria, VA 22314

Project Director

Dr. Kate Stepleton

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Disclaimer

Although the local evaluators, MEF Associates, are independent of the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, two key contributors to data collection and reviewing the storyline—Director of Court Services, Christina Barone, and Program Manager, Selina Ramirez—are employees of the Road to New Beginnings program.

The contents of this report represent the view and understanding of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe.



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Positionality Statement

The authors of this report do not identify as Native American and are not Tribal members. As non-Native researchers conducting this evaluation, we acknowledge that our outsider perspective may limit our ability to fully capture the nuanced experiences and cultural context of the Road to New Beginnings program participants and Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribal members.



Executive Summary

Program Overview

Re-entry programs offer important services for people returning to their communities from prison or jail. Culturally responsive approaches in re-entry programs are especially critical for successful transitions of their participants.¹ Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe (PGST) designed Road to New Beginnings, a culturally responsive re-entry program for Tribal members returning home from Kitsap County Jail or state prison facilities. The program uses a human dignity model incorporating trauma-informed approaches. It also provides transitional housing, recovery coaching, cultural and conflict resolution classes, and service referrals, among other services.

Evaluation Design

The study team conducted a mixed methods descriptive evaluation using the Indigenous Evaluation Framework and Community Based Participatory methods.² The study included qualitative and quantitative research components. The qualitative component used a collaborative storytelling approach through individual interviews and talking circles. The interviews gathered information from program staff and partners to learn about their experiences with program design, implementation, and service delivery. The team also collaborated with a PGST Elder, known as the Knowledge Gatherer, who informed the research and conducted the talking circles with program participants, participant support person(s) (also referred to here as “encouragers”), and Tribal Elders. The talking circles provided insight into participants’ strengths, assets, and needs as they navigate their re-entry journeys. The circles also provided important context and history of PGST to help the team develop findings for how community can better support reintegration. The total sample for the quantitative evaluation included 23 program participants. The total sample for the qualitative evaluation included 11 participants, 8 Elders, 6 encouragers, 4 staff members, and 2 partner staff members.³

¹ Sheppard, M., Hassoun Ayoub, L., and Pecos Melton, A. (2021). *Assessing and Enhancing Cultural Responsiveness in Reentry Programs Through Research and Evaluation*. U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance.

² Joan LaFrance and Richard Nichols, *Indigenous Evaluation Framework: Telling Our Story in Our Place and Time* (Mesa, AZ: American Indian Higher Education Consortium, 2009), 24.

³ To maintain confidentiality, the specific partner organizations interviewed are not named in this evaluation report.

Key Findings and Recommendations

Between September 2022 and 2025, a total of 23 participants enrolled and participated in the re-entry program. Close to half (48%) of the participants completed or graduated, a little over one fourth (26%) of participants remain in the programs, and the rest had dropped out or were terminated (26%) from the program. The average age of the participants was 42.5 years old. Over half were male (61%), the majority were PGST members (87%), almost half of the participants reported having a high school diploma (48%), and over three-quarters of the participants reported being unhoused (78%). One participant in the program returned to jail after the 12 months following their program enrollment or release date from treatment or jail.

Participants shared their experiences with reintegrating into community through engagement in program services and with the support of success coaches, who bring lived expertise as program graduates. Through Road to New Beginnings, participants work towards recovery, further connect with their community, build lasting friendships and support networks with fellow participants, and accomplish goals such as furthering their educational goals and achieving employment.

To strengthen the program, interviewees recommended: (1) expanding services that facilitate participant engagement and success such as incentives and financial assistance; (2) providing culturally responsive trainings from Native organizations to staff and participants; and (3) strengthening community partnerships through improved communication.

Elders and Tribal Council members also offered broader recommendations for PGST community. These include emphasizing healing through positive reinforcement rather than shame, acknowledging the difficulty of facing hard truths as a community, leveraging faith as a facilitator for recovery, supporting participants' families, and offering a variety of activities to help individuals re-engage with the community.

Key Findings by Research Question

Several research questions drove the evaluation. In this report, findings are weaved into the story of a fictionalized program participant, Little Bird. Key findings are summarized in the following table.

Research Question	Key Findings
<i>Overall, what is the implementation experience of the PGST re-entry model from the perspective of program staff, participants, and partners?</i>	• Program staff shared that services that facilitate participant engagement such as incentives and financial assistance are especially helpful for participants • Program staff highlighted a gap in available trainings within the re-entry field that are culturally responsive for Native populations • Partner organization staff recommended strengthening communication through re-entry presentations to their staff and/or regular care coordination check-ins

Research Question	Key Findings
<i>What are the experiences of participants receiving services from the PGST re-entry program?</i>	• Participants develop close and lasting relationships with program staff and fellow participants through program services and activities like transitional housing and cultural classes • Participants cited goals they set and accomplished through Road to New Beginnings. Most participants discussed obtaining driver's licenses, employment, and housing. Participants also mentioned accomplishing goals such as completing education or gaining custody of their children • Participants expressed appreciation for cultural services such as sweat lodge ceremonies and cultural activities like natural resources gathering, to assist their re-entry
<i>What aspects of the program have been most effective in supporting PGST parent participants in their healing and re-entry journey?</i>	• Participants and staff reported that Road to New Beginnings' partnership with PGST's Child & Family Services department provides reunification opportunities for parent participants • Participants shared that coaches serve as a resource for participants seeking custody of their children when working with Child & Family Services • Participants expressed their appreciation for opportunities provided by the program to make amends with their family and reconnect with loved ones, including children
<i>What aspects of the program have been most effective in supporting participants with substance use and mental health conditions in their healing and re-entry journey?</i>	• Participants appreciated re-entry staff's commitment to working with them and encouraging them to enroll in the program while experiencing chemical dependency • Participants cited engagement in referral services to treatment and rehabilitation services as an important facilitator in program success
<i>How can the community better support re-entry participants?</i>	• Elders shared that trauma as the root cause of addiction needs to be acknowledged when considering how to break cycles of hurt • Elders recommended that community members support re-entry participants with positive reinforcement and avoid shaming participants for their previous circumstances • Elders emphasized that community should provide alternative activities to participants in recovery, such as cultural classes and events
<i>What is the frequency with which program participants are re-incarcerated?</i>	• Within 12 months of program start date, only one re-entry participant was re-incarcerated. This equates to a 4.3% recidivism rate.



Purpose of the Report

In this report, we present the findings from our evaluation of the Road to New Beginnings program, a Tribal re-entry program designed by the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe for community members returning home. Using a collaborative storytelling approach informed by Indigenous Evaluation Framework (IEF)⁴ and Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR)⁵ principles, we captured participants' experiences through their own words. These stories are presented through a single narrative following Little Bird, a fictionalized participant whose journey represents the shared experiences of program participants. We employ a canoe journey metaphor throughout this narrative to represent participants' recovery journey and path to healing and reintegration. This metaphor reflects the sacred canoe journey, an annual ceremony for the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe and other Coast Salish peoples that revives ancient coastal tribal traditions. Little Bird's canoe is navigating the waters of their experience, bolstered by the other paddlers—supports, skills, and newfound strength—in the vessel with them.



History of PGST and Road to New Beginnings

I learned from my native side how important it was to be strong. So that's the number one cultural piece that I believe, strong is the S'Klallam way. I believe that Port Gamble S'Klallam way is to pray. I believe when you involve spirit, soul, and body, I've been in prayer, pulling on the canoe in prayer where my spirit was praying, my soul was singing, and my body was pulling. And spirit, soul, and body were unified.

—PGST Elder

The Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe (PGST) has lived across and beyond the Olympic Peninsula and Puget Sound regions for thousands of years. On their ancestral lands, the Tribe hunted, fished, and gathered natural resources to support their community. In the mid 19th century, however, territorial officials began negotiating land treaties with PGST and other tribes of the Olympic Peninsula. In 1855, the Point No Point Treaty was signed—an inequitable agreement that ceded tribes' rights to their ancestral lands. Nearly a century later, in 1938, the PGST reservation was established.⁶ Despite these violations of the Tribe's self-determination, however, the people of PGST remained strong and united as a resilient community and a sovereign nation.

Today, this commitment to self-determination continues through innovative community strengthening programs. In 2013, PGST's social services program developed a day program for Tribal members impacted by the criminal justice system and facing barriers to employment. In 2015, the Tribe's judicial

⁴ LaFrance, J., & Nichols, R. (2008). *Reframing evaluation: Defining an indigenous evaluation framework*. Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation, 23(2), 13–31. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjpe.23.003>

⁵ Collins, S. E., Clifasefi, S. L., Stanton, J., The Leap Advisory Board, Straits, K. J. E., Gil-Kashiwabara, E., Rodriguez Espinosa, P., Nicasio, A. V., Andrasik, M. P., Hawes, S. M., Miller, K. A., Nelson, L. A., Orfaly, V. E., Duran, B. M., & Wallerstein, N. (2018). *Community-based participatory research (CBPR): Towards equitable involvement of community in psychology research*. The American Psychologist, 73(7), 884–898. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000167>

⁶ Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe. (n.d.) *History & Culture*. <https://pgst.nsn.us/history-culture/>

system was awarded a series of Second Chance Act grants through the Department of Justice.⁷ The Road to New Beginnings re-entry program uses a restorative, trauma-informed, human dignity-based re-entry model to serve participants, who are PGST members or members of other federally recognized tribes housed in the Kitsap County Jail or Washington State Department of Correction facilities.

The program's goal was to create a culturally responsive re-entry program designed specifically for a Native population, grounded in a restorative approach to re-entry. Such an approach was in contrast to normative Western approaches that are more punitive in nature.⁸ Road to New Beginnings' mission aligns with PGST values of community, acceptance, and forgiveness, seeking to reintegrate participants into the Tribe as contributing members.

Road to New Beginnings combines evidence-based practices with culturally grounded approaches to support authentic re-entry for Indigenous participants. The program incorporates validated risk and needs assessments, such as the Correctional Assessment and Intervention System (CAIS), to identify participants' unique challenges and strengths. Individualized service plans are developed to address each participant's needs, guiding interventions in areas such as cognitive behavioral therapy, life skills, and substance use recovery.

Road to New Beginnings Program Services

- Transitional sober-living recovery housing (required)
- Chemical dependency assessment and mental health screening (required)
- Restorative circles (required)
- Recovery coaching (required)
- Cultural classes (required)
- Engagement with Elders (required)
- Referrals to Olympic College for GED services
- Referrals to domestic violence and sexual assault support groups
- Referrals to job skills training services
- Referrals to behavioral health services
- Referrals to chemical dependency and/or substance use disorder services

These evidence-based approaches are integrated with traditional Indigenous practices, including guidance from Elders, cultural teachings, and participation in ceremonies or restorative circles. This dual approach ensures participants receive both empirically supported interventions and culturally meaningful support, fostering holistic healing and sustainable reintegration into their communities. By blending best practices with Indigenous values, the program promotes accountability, resilience, and personal transformation while strengthening participants' connection to culture, family, and community.

We provide healing, hope, and opportunities for those who are and have been incarcerated to become contributing members of society by embracing a positive future—through connections, storytelling, culture, and community.

Road to New Beginnings mission statement

⁷ Jayanthi, Akanksha, Kimberly Foley, and Hanying Jiang. 2021. *A Native-Based Approach to Community Reentry: A Descriptive Evaluation of the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe's Welcome Home Program*. Seattle, WA: MEF Associates

⁸ Jayanthi, Akanksha, Kimberly Foley, and Hanying Jiang. 2021. *A Native-Based Approach to Community Reentry: A Descriptive Evaluation of the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe's Welcome Home Program*. Seattle, WA: MEF Associates



Methodology

The research team employed a mixed-methods design that incorporated qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis, described below.

Research Questions

The study team aimed to address several research questions:

- Overall, what is the implementation experience of the PGST re-entry model from the perspective of program staff, participants, and partners?
- What are the experiences of participants receiving services from the PGST re-entry program?
 - What aspects of the program have been most effective in supporting PGST parent participants in their healing and re-entry journey?
 - What aspects of the program have been most effective in supporting participants with substance use and mental health conditions in their healing and re-entry journey?
- How can the community better support re-entry participants?
- What is the frequency with which program participants are re-incarcerated?
- What are the best practices for engaging and delivering instruction on PGST's re-entry curriculum to other Tribal Re-entry community supporting their Tribal members returning from incarceration?⁹

Collaborative Storytelling Approach

The study team employed a collaborative storytelling approach for the qualitative research, beginning with data collection that encouraged participants to recount, and reflect on their personal journeys and allowing them to hold the power to define the meaning and truth of their experiences. To make meaning from this data, the team weaved individual stories into a single, collective narrative that exemplifies participant's shared experiences.¹⁰ The study team used the Indigenous Evaluation Framework (IEF) and a Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach, including storytelling research and engaging with a PGST Elder as a Knowledge Gatherer. The study team employed creative writing techniques, such as storytelling, to present the findings of the re-entry participants in a culturally relevant method.¹¹ The Knowledge Gatherer served as an equal partner in all data collection, analysis, and reporting activities. This collaboration ensured the research was grounded in the community's cultural values and was guided by Tribal member insights and wisdom. The study team collaborated with

⁹ This was an original research question that could not be evaluated because the curriculum was not finalized in time to conduct the necessary training sessions and complete this aspect of the evaluation. Therefore, this research question will not be discussed in the report.

¹⁰ Bishop, Russell. "Collaborative Storytelling: Meeting Indigenous Peoples' Desires for Self-Determination in Research." ERIC, 1999. ED 467 396.

¹¹ Julia Christensen, "Telling Stories: Exploring Research Storytelling as a Meaningful Approach to Knowledge Mobilization with Indigenous Research Collaborators and Diverse Audiences in Community-Based Participatory Research," *Canadian Geographies / Géographies canadiennes* 56, no. 2 (2012): 235

the Knowledge Gatherer to develop discussion guides for the talking circles with re-entry participants, PGST Elders, and Encouragers or supportive individuals of re-entry participants.¹²

The Knowledge Gatherer led these three talking circles with support from study team members. See Table 1 below for more information on the number of participants in each talking circle.

Table 1. Number of participants per talking circle	
Talking circle	Number of participants
Re-entry participants	11
PGST Elders	8
Friends and family members of re-entry participants	6

The study team also conducted six interviews with re-entry program leadership, staff, and community partners. In total, the study team interviewed four staff members and two community partners. Study team members obtained verbal informed consent to participate in the evaluation from all study participants.

The study team worked closely with the Knowledge Gatherer to conduct an initial qualitative analysis of the talking circle data. The Knowledge Gatherer provided insight into contextual factors, including PGST history, culture, and traditions. Following this initial analysis of the talking circles, the study team used Dedoose, a cloud-based qualitative research platform, to analyze the transcripts from the talking circles and interviews. The team created a codebook based on the emergent themes identified by the Knowledge Gatherer and the research questions. Next, the team then aligned the codes to the canoe journey Framework and reviewed the entire stories associated with each code to construct the collective narrative of the participant and identify key takeaways and findings across the talking circles and interviews. Throughout, the team members considered how the codes, themes, and emerging story aligned with the canoe journey metaphor, which would provide the structure for Little Bird’s story below. The development of the narrative began with the program participants’ stories, which were then enriched with insights from the staff, community, and program partners.¹³

Quantitative Data

Program staff collected informed consent from program participants for the evaluation, then shared deidentified program information for those that consented with the study team. The study team observed information from the re-entry program’s case management system, also referred to as PGST data system, and summarized demographic characteristics and completion rates of the program. The research team also received recidivism data from the re-entry program, which included the number of arrests and reasons for arrest since their date of intake into the program or following release from long-term treatment or incarceration. This data was used to calculate the percentage of participants who

¹² The team received IRB approval from Health Media Labs for all research activities. Prior to beginning data collection, the Knowledge Gatherer obtained a human subjects’ protections training certificate through PHRP (Protecting Human Research Participants).

¹³ The qualitative research leaned on the principles of Collaborative Storytelling as its guiding practice. While the study team used qualitative research software to organize and weave the stories together, the core narrative, themes, and framework were co-created and approved by the Knowledge Gatherer and the Road to New Beginnings leadership.

returned to Kitsap jail or prison, including those who were booked and released within one year of the program's start date.



Canoe Journey Framework

The Significance of the Canoe Journey



The annual canoe journey for the S'Klallam Tribe and other Coast Salish peoples is a powerful cultural moment of revitalization and spiritual significance. It is a demonstration of Tribal sovereignty reaffirming access to the tribes' historical ties to ancestral waterways, which were suppressed by federal and Washington state government policies for generations.¹⁴ During canoe journey, Tribal members travel in traditional canoes, "pulling" from one Tribal nation's land to another, welcomed with ceremonies and traditional foods. When a canoe approaches the host Tribe's shore, the skipper,¹⁵ or a designated puller or Elder, will ask for permission to land; this is known as "landing." The community's ensuing gathering and celebration strengthens bonds between tribes, passes on cultural teachings to younger generations, and serves as a potent metaphor for healing and resilience.

Approach of the Canoe Journey Framework

The study team used the metaphor of the canoe journey to develop a framework for interpreting data and presenting the findings of this evaluation in a manner that is both culturally resonant and methodologically sound. The inspiration for the use of the canoe journey metaphor stems from the Healing of the Canoe (HOC) curriculum and research, which similarly uses the canoe as an analogy for preventing substance use and abuse, as well as for promoting cultural identity and belonging for PGST and Suquamish Youth.¹⁶ The Knowledge Gatherer introduced the evaluation team to the HOC work and suggested framing this report using the metaphor of the canoe journey. This approach moves beyond

¹⁴ Connie M. Wernick, "Tribal canoe journey lands at Fort Worden," *Peninsula Daily News*, July 24, 2024, <https://www.peninsuladailynews.com/news/tribal-canoe-journey-lands-at-fort-worden/>.

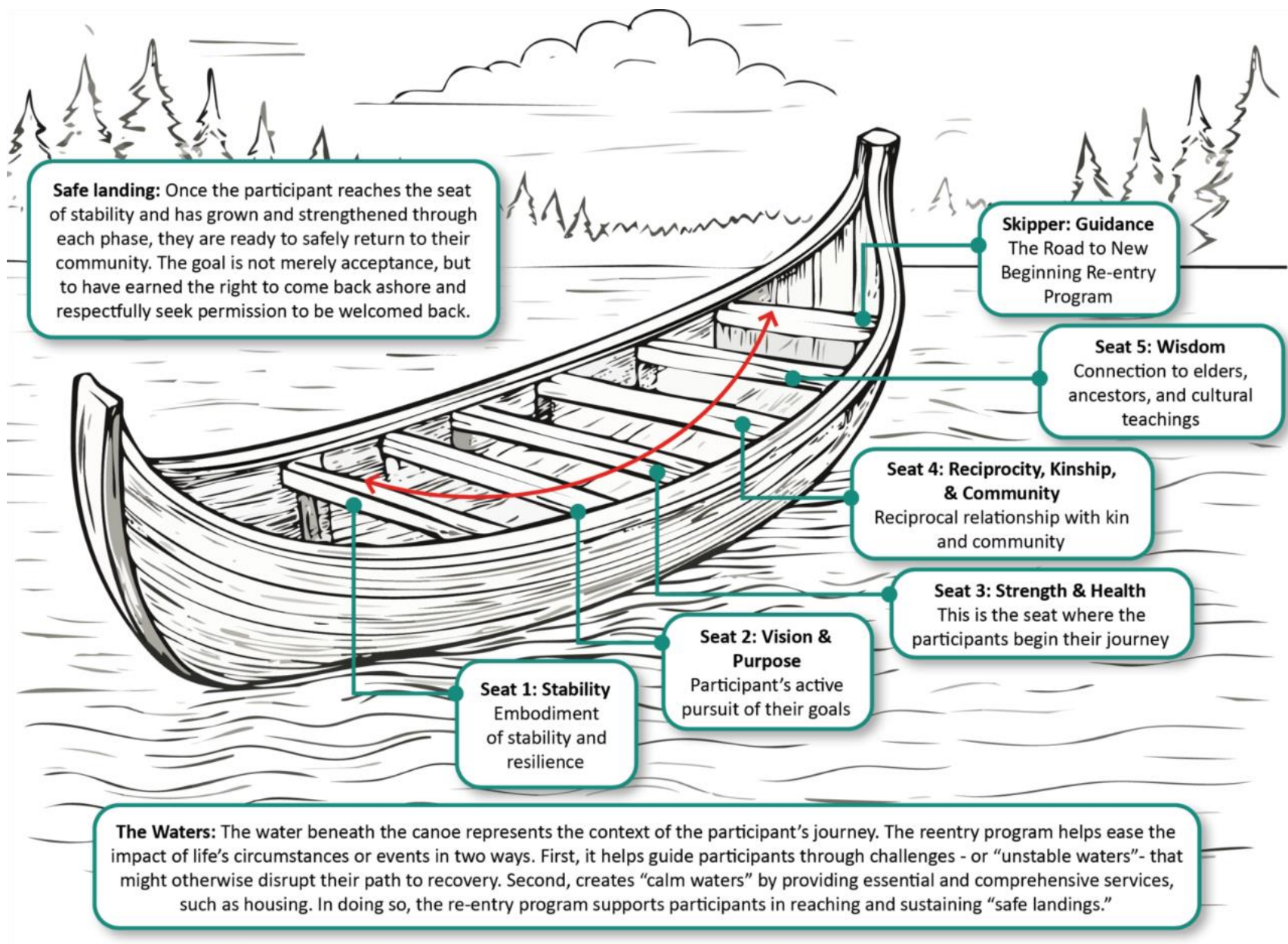
¹⁵ A Skipper is the individual in the back of the canoe guiding the canoe and ensuring the safety of the canoe members and the canoe.

¹⁶ HOC. "Healing of the Canoe Project." accessed August 20, 2025, <https://healingofthecanoe.org/history/>.

conventional Western evaluation models to honor the holistic, cyclical, and community-oriented nature of the healing and re-entry process as described by participants and community.

The canoe journey represents a participant's path to healing and reintegration as a journey across water requiring guidance and wisdom; strength and health; vision and purpose; and kinship and community to reach stability. It highlights not only individual progress, but also the vital role of relationships and shared responsibilities in fostering well-being for program participants.

The study team acknowledges that this metaphor cannot fully capture the intricate, multi-layered nature of a program participant's experiences as they navigate re-entry into their community. However, it offers a culturally resonant framework that surfaces insights about how the Road to New Beginnings program works with participants and how participants move through the months and years following the end of their incarceration and reintegration into community.



The Canoe

The Canoe is the central element of the framework, symbolizing the vessel that carries the participant in their journey towards healing, reintegration, and self-determination. It holds, protects, and carries the participant through both stable and turbulent waters towards safe landings. There are many possible safe landings, representing multiple possible outcomes for participants, each shaped by the unique journey of the individual. The participants steer their canoe through life's challenges, actively navigating their healing journeys. Meanwhile, the canoe reflects the participant's inner harmony and resilience, its balance and integrity dependent on the participant's overall wellbeing. Just like a canoe that requires regular care and maintenance, such as waxing, patching, and tending, the participant must also nurture their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health. It is crucial to note that they are never alone in their canoe; family, community members, and the re-entry staff paddle alongside them, pulling in unison to provide guidance, strength, and support throughout their journey.



The canoe contains five seats, plus the Skipper. Each seat represents a crucial phase the participant embodies on their journey towards reintegration. The seats are Wisdom (seat 5); Reciprocity, Kinship, and Community (seat 4); Strength and Health (seat 3); Purpose and Goals (seat 2); and Stability (seat 1). Each phase has a "puller" that helps move the canoe forward. Each seat offers vital support to the participant. Throughout the journey, the participant may occupy, building and drawing on these characteristics from within. Community members may also sit in these seats, providing support in the areas listed above, pulling the canoe along.

The journey begins with the participant in the third seat, which sits in the middle of the canoe. The participant is guided by the Skipper—the re-entry program, Road to New Beginnings. Over time, as the participant progresses through each seat, they gain the skills and resilience needed to continue in their journey. The goal is for the participant to reach Stability (seat 1), equipped with the strength and wisdom to steer their canoe forward and request permission to come ashore, ready to return to community.

It is important to recognize that the participant's journey is not a straight line toward a single destination, but rather a winding route with multiple safe landings along the way. Each path is unique, and what constitutes a "safe landing" varies. For example, landings can include moments of stability, calm, successes, or new beginnings. With each landing, the participant shifts from seat 3 (Strength and Health), where they are primarily being pulled forward, to other seats, where they can take an active

role in steering their own course. In time, they move from being pulled along by the others in the canoe to becoming the puller themselves, drawing on the experiences and lessons of past landings to guide their journey forward.

The Skipper. This seat represents the Road to New Beginning Re-entry Program (referred to as the “re-entry program”, or simply “re-entry” throughout this report). The re-entry program serves as both a comprehensive support system and a catalyst, guiding the participant through each seat on the canoe. It helps them prepare for each seat, navigate the waters, and reach safe landings.

Wisdom (Seat 5). This seat represents the connection to elders, ancestors, and cultural teachings. As the participant deepens their relationships and self-awareness grows, they draw upon ancestral knowledge, elder teachings, and cultural practices. This wisdom grounds them and helps steer their canoe forward along the path of healing and reintegration.

Reciprocity, Kinship, and Community (seat 4). This seat embodies the reciprocal relationship with kin and community, honoring the participant’s connections with family, community, the land, and ancestors. In this seat, support and responsibility flow both directions: the participant not only receives care and guidance, but also contributes and gives back to those who travel alongside them.

Strength & Health (Seat 3). This is the seat where the participant begins their journey. Positioned in the middle of the canoe, they are surrounded and supported by the pullers — the re-entry program staff, their family, and community, who actively paddle alongside them. This arrangement allows the participant to focus on strengthening their physical, mental, and emotional health while learning to navigate the waters. From this starting point, the participant begins healing past traumas and building the resilience needed to move forward.

Vision & Purpose (Seat 2). This seat represents the participant's active pursuit of their goals, centering on the importance of defining personal purpose. They focus on concrete steps, such as securing employment or continuing their education, that move them closer to a safe landing and reinforces their sense of direction.

Stability (Seat 1). This seat represents the embodiment of stability and resilience. Here, the participant has reached a grounded and healthy state, having released fear and established themselves as a reliable and trustworthy member of the team. They remain composed, listen to the Skipper with an open mind, and are prepared to face challenges while working cooperatively to support the other pullers.

While the seats are presented with numbers for clarity, they do not represent a hierarchy. A participant's journey is organic and multifaceted, often focusing on multiple seats or phases at once. For example, one may focus on building strength and health while simultaneously pursuing their purpose and goals. The aim is for the participant to become a "puller" in any seat, drawing on the strength, wisdom, and support they gained to propel the canoe forward, and over time find stability.

The Waters

The water beneath the canoe represents the context of the participant's journey. The re-entry program helps ease the impact of life's circumstances or events in two ways. First, it helps guide participants through challenges - or "unstable waters" - that might otherwise disrupt their path to recovery. Second, the program helps to create "calm waters" by providing essential and comprehensive services, such as housing. In doing so, the re-entry program supports participants in reaching and sustaining "safe landings."

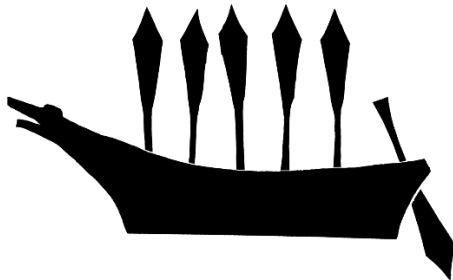
Safe Landing

Once the participant reaches the seat of stability, having grown and strengthened in each seat, they are ready to safely return to their community. The goal is not merely acceptance, but to have earned the right to come back ashore and respectfully seek permission to be welcomed back.



The Blessing of the Canoe

Below is a passage from the study team's Knowledge Gatherer, Elder Dennis Jones, to bless the story of Little Bird's canoe journey. The passage is accompanied by an image of the canoe created by the Knowledge Gatherer. Prior to the journey, there is a ceremonial process of "waking up" the canoe and blessing it with a cedar bow. This ceremony symbolizes the participant's wholehearted commitment to healing and receiving community's blessing for safe passage.



“

I want to open in a good way, with the Canoe of Life.

Like being in a canoe, the Canoe of Life is going through re-entry and recovery. Today is another day, each day is different, and you never know what today is going to bring.

Is there a strong wind? Is it rainy? Will the waters be choppy? Will there be whitecaps or big swells? Or is it going to be calm?

The tide currents, which are easily manageable, do you take them on, avoid them, or power through them?

If you need to call on the seats in front of you or behind you, do so, that's why they are there.

You can lean on each other, or you can turn to your Higher Power, but it's also okay to wait it out and see what tomorrow brings.

I want to end with three questions, which I think are easy to answer:

- 1) Do you want to be in jail, or do you like your freedom?*
- 2) Do you want your addiction or your family?*
- 3) Do you want Life or Death?*

It's your journey, your choice. Life is about choices: only you can make that choice.

”



Preparing the Canoe



The following story centers on a fictional parent, Little Bird, to illustrate the journey of re-entry through the metaphor of a canoe. It tells the story of Little Bird as they navigate challenging waters, symbolizing the obstacles they face while paddling toward a stable, healing life with the guidance of the Road to New Beginnings program and the support of their community.

Life before the Road to New Beginnings program

Before finding the program, the participant, Little Bird, was adrift in turbulent waters. Their canoe was caught in a relentless current—a whirlpool spinning them between the streets and incarceration. This was the cycle of recidivism—one that Little Bird knew all too well, having experienced early and repeated involvement in the criminal justice system. Little Bird’s canoe was unsteady, marked by a long battle with addiction. Drugs, as Little Bird described it, had become their “higher power,” taking the helm and directing a daily life of waking up sick, then figuring out how to get money to use again. Attempts to steer the canoe and paddle toward sobriety through programs like drug court did not last. The small moments of progress were swallowed up by whirlpools of relapse, which led Little Bird to cheat the drug court program—and, ultimately cheating themselves.

"I was in jail all the time, every day, trying to look for drugs, figuring on how to get money to get drugs. And before I went to jail this last time, I was homeless for about a year and a half, living in a tent.. Like the daily struggle of waking up, if I didn't have drugs, waking up sick, having to worry about where to find it and how to find it... It took my life away."

—Participant

The churning waters from the whirlpool of recovery and relapse kept spinning Little Bird's canoe, trapping them in a relentless cycle of addiction. Drowning in this whirlpool, Little Bird pushed loved ones away, severing sacred relationships. As a parent, they often left their child in the care of whoever was around while chasing their addiction for hours or days at a time. This instability eventually capsized their canoe and upended their life, leaving them homeless, living in a tent. The waters were thick with loss and grief; Little Bird watched family and friends swept by the same storms, their deaths intensifying the need to numb their pain. A deep sense of hopelessness took hold. It felt as though no matter what they did, the canoe always steered them back to the same destructive routine. Layered on this feeling was the guilt of hurting people they loved and not being the parent they wanted to be. Their canoe was battered, water-logged, and aimlessly adrift. Past attempts to engage with support programs had left Little Bird with a deep skepticism on whether any program could truly help them.

"I've been through this...going in and out of jail since I was a teenager. [I'm] so tired, I'm so old. And when I heard about 're-entry,'¹⁷ I thought, okay, it's just going to be one of those treatment places. You get out, you go back home."

—Participant

A Glimmer of Hope

Just when the shore seemed impossibly distant, a glimmer of light appeared. The turning point came as Little Bird's family issued an ultimatum: to choose them or the drugs. Pain washed over Little Bird as they saw their child losing faith in them. These external motivators became the catalyst for Little Bird recognizing that they needed to make a change, or lose their family. It was then that a lifeline was thrown from the shore. The re-entry staff did not wait for Little Bird to paddle to them; they came to where Little Bird and their battered canoe were hiding.

Road to New Beginnings Recruitment

Recruitment relies heavily on word-of-mouth referrals but also includes partnerships with the Kitsap County Jail and various Tribal and community programs. The program actively markets itself through monthly memos, flyers, and social media to keep the community informed.

"My wife gave me an ultimatum--It's either the drugs or us and our family. And a lot of people talk about how you got to do this for yourself. It's true, to some extent. But I did this for more than just myself. I did this for my family. I did this for these kids, my nieces and nephews. I did it for my kids. I did it for my grandkid before he was even here, just so I could have a life, so I'm able to give."

—Participant

¹⁷ Throughout the talking circles, staff and participants referred to Road to New Beginnings simply as "re-entry." The selected quotations reflect this language.

The success coaches were determined, proactive, and persistent. Even when Little Bird attempted to hide and lock the door, they did not give up. They kept trying to reach Little Bird, and by not giving up, they planted a small seed of hope. It showed Little Bird that someone cared; that they were worth seeking. With this flicker of hope restored, the real work began; preparing the canoe for the long journey ahead. The program's philosophy recognizes that the waters of recovery are unpredictable, so staff offer multiple chances, and understand that setbacks can happen, that participants like Little Bird may have to go through the program more than once. It was only after losing custody of their child that Little Bird fully committed to re-entry, and the program was there to welcome them back, ready to guide them forward.

"I probably started off in re-entry so many times.... And due to the way I was going about things, not taking advice,... I always ended up falling and going right back to where I came from, the trap house. And I'd end up in jail again, and they'd still be there [the success coaches]. And I'd see them so many times. But this program, they always managed to pull me out of my shell and talk to me and care [about me] and ask me what I wanted."

—Participant

Eligibility and intake

The intake process is designed to be thorough and supportive. The following steps are conducted during intake and eligibility:

- **Background checks:** A comprehensive check is conducted to screen for specific offenses like arson or sexual assault, which makes one ineligible for the program.
- **Mental health screening:** Participants complete an assessment that informs their treatment plans for mental health and substance use support.
- **Individualized service plans:** The success coaches and the participant develop a customized plan based on participant needs and goals.
- **Commitment contract:** Once accepted, participants sign a contract outlining 19 key requirements, ensuring they are fully committed to the program's path to recovery and stability.

Strengthening the Canoe

Little Bird's first meeting with the success coaches was not an interview but an invitation. Many of the staff had navigated these same waters themselves and approached Little Bird with humility and care. They dressed casually, making it clear they were peers and ready to paddle side-by-side with Little Bird. They did not begin with paperwork; they began with their own stories of recovery and cultural connection, building trust and showing Little Bird that a different path was possible. The enrollment process itself mirrored the work of repairing and strengthening a damaged canoe. The staff took their time with the intake, spending weeks building a bond and ensuring Little Bird understood the commitment, rather than scaring them away with a stack of papers.

"...Sometimes we share stories with them about culture because sometimes culture might be uncomfortable or unfamiliar to people coming out of incarceration or coming from the streets where they've not been a part of the community, or the song and dances. That looks like just talking to them about that, or even our own stories sharing how finding your culture again is healing to your spirit."

—Staff

Once Little Bird agreed to join the re-entry program, the success coaches conducted a comprehensive background check to understand Little Bird's record, as the program cannot enroll people with a history of arson or violent behavior. While waiting for the results, the coaches also conducted a mental health screening to identify the unique challenges Little Bird faced. This information helped shape the Individualized Service Plan, a customized plan tailored to Little Bird's needs and goals. The final step was a commitment contract, a shared promise between Little Bird and the Road to New Beginnings program, detailing a year-long journey of weekly meetings, sobriety, and mutual support—the dedication required to paddle forward as a team.

Upon completing intake and enrollment, the first step was to bail water from the canoe. This meant addressing the most fundamental needs. While the ultimate goal was long-term recovery and stability, Little Bird's urgent challenge was survival, having just been released from jail on a Friday afternoon. The success coach understood that food banks might be closed and shelter waiting lists full, leaving Little Bird without food or a place to sleep all weekend. Acting quickly, the coach provided Little Bird gift cards to ensure they would not go hungry, helped navigate the maze of services, offered bus tokens to reach the food bank, and secured safe housing. This hands-on support was the crucial first act of bailing water out of Little Bird's canoe, allowing them to focus on the journey ahead.

Once immediate needs were met, the success coach guided Little Bird to treatment at an inpatient rehabilitation facility where they could achieve sobriety and gather the tools necessary for long-term recovery. While Little Bird was focused on their healing, the success coach worked to secure more stable housing, ultimately placing them in the re-entry program's transitional sober-living housing. A secure home was essential to strengthen and stabilize the vessel for the journey forward.

"... We have clients that get out of jail on a Friday and...depending on their release time, it could be afternoon, so they were too late to go get their food stamps reactivated. Sometimes it's too late to get on the shelter list or sometimes the food banks are already closed. So then, they're left either without a place or without food until the next day, especially if it's a weekend. Then we have the whole weekend that you don't have no food, and so there's been times where we've got a company donated, I think four or five gift cards that were like \$25-45, where we use those directly for people that got out on jail on Friday. So, [we say] 'here's this, you know, I know it's not a lot, but hopefully we'll make you last'...Sometimes depending on time, I would get them straight to the food bank, get some food and then get bus tokens."

—Staff

With the canoe stabilized, the final and most crucial preparation began for Little Bird: an internal shift. With a clearer head, they began to recognize the broken thought patterns that had kept them spinning in the whirlpool of addiction and trapped in the shallow tidepools of crime. Now, guided by a new Skipper—the Road to New Beginnings program—the canoe was being prepared for the journey ahead with support from the collective strength of the pullers representing Wisdom; Reciprocity; Kinship and Community; Strength and Health; Purpose and Goals; and Stability.



Taking Off to the Journey: Paddling in Unison

The Skipper: Guidance

The Road to New Beginnings program offers a steady hand to those who have been cast adrift, tossed by the turbulent waters. The staff do not see Little Bird as “broken” or in need of “fixing”, but as a valued community member whose canoe has been pulled off course. Their guidance is rooted in generational wisdom and values, teaching that the goal is to bring their people home, not cast them out. The program’s sole purpose is to help participants, like Little Bird, navigate the choppy waters and whirlpools, steering them toward safe landing.

“The crux of the program is really to bring people back home that have been lost to incarceration, addiction, or anything else where they’ve been impacted by the criminal justice system. And I think it aligns highly with the values of the Tribe in bringing people back into the fold.”

—Staff

The program takes on a holistic approach to reintegration, guiding Little Bird to establish their place within community, anchor themselves in the strength of culture, and restore their sense of purpose as a contributing member. The program recognizes that each individual follows a unique path, navigating different waters along their journey. Recognizing this, the program’s model is not a one-size-fits-all. Further, it is built on the principles of humanity, dignity, and respect, where participants are celebrated, supported, and reminded of their inherent value and worth.

“We look at things very much in a different way. And so kind of bringing back...that piece of humanity and self-dignity and respect for others. How that just kind of encapsulates who we are as a people, and then how we can bring that together in a program.”

—Staff

The program is staffed with Success Coaches who have themselves weathered the roughest seas and navigated complex systems, including child welfare and the justice system. They understand the murky waters, deceiving tidepools, and treacherous whitecaps—the barriers like trauma that can threaten participants’ progress. The program is strengthened by the success coaches’ genuine care and empathy, guiding Little Bird with experience rooted in lived experience.

While success coaches are essential, the true power of the journey lies within Little Bird and the lessons they gain as they grow to occupy each seat of their canoe. With the program’s support, they chart a new course and set their own destination through their personal goals for a better life. The Skipper provides the compass, Elders offer wisdom, and community lends love—together they guide Little Bird to make the best choices for navigating the waters ahead.

Seat 5: Wisdom



In the sacred journey of the canoe, Elders supported Little Bird from the fifth seat: the seat of Elder Wisdom. From here, teachings were not given in lectures but woven into stories. This was where Little Bird's healing began to take root, receiving Elders' wisdom and leaning into their cultural strengths and traditions. They learned to see their past not as a burden, but as a path to a stronger future.

The first step was meeting with the Elder Panel. Little Bird had witnessed others approach the panel with fear, often thinking they would rather go to jail than face this group of Elders. Little Bird was filled with that same dread and expected to be judged. However, the Elders did not dwell on their mistakes; they surrounded Little Bird with warmth and a deep sense of belonging. An Elder embraced them and said, "Welcome home." In that moment, Little Bird realized that true accountability is not found in shame, but in the unconditional love and support of community.

The Elders taught Little Bird about the importance of vision. They explained that a person is not only a body but also spirit and soul—and a truly healthy life requires caring for all three. They taught Little Bird that prayer could break and release harmful habits, thoughts, and relationships that had kept Little Bird in murky waters. This teaching was not about following a single path; but about finding their own way of connecting with a higher power, uncovering their unique gifts in music, dance, or art, and nurturing their entire being.

"Finding what each person has that gives them strength like that, because we all have that unique gift and talent that refreshes us. Like music or dancing or singing or baking or weaving. It can be something different for each one. I wanted to say that's a spiritual part of spiritual rebirth. That's the way I'm going to pray to break the harmful soul ties and that there would be a spiritual rebirth."

—Elder

Little Bird came to understand the true weight of their choices through a story that was shared with sorrow and tears. An Elder spoke of his daughter who was lost to addiction, and the empty chair that would forever be at his family table. The pain in his voice carried a powerful lesson—revealing how every action ripples outward, touching the entire community. This teaching motivated Little Bird to keep going, to honor the memory of those who were gone, and to protect the families who were still there.

"I lost [my daughter], and we lost [her]. We all lost [her], plus a bunch more. But at the same time, I use [her] story to teach the groups I'm in. And I hope some of these young adults hear what I have to say, because something I say is that chair is empty and it's never going to be full again... (tearful) ...Christmas is different... Thanksgiving is different.... My life is different."

—Elder

As Little Bird walked through the community, they no longer hid. People had seen their struggles and were now witnessing their strength. Little Bird was no longer just an individual—they were part of the whole Tribe. With each step head held high, they carried their Elders' wisdom, paddling the canoe forward. Their journey showed others that returning back home was not only possible, but a reason to be proud.

Seat 4: Reciprocity, Kinship, and Community

Equipped with the Elders' wisdom, Little Bird began to focus on healing and regaining control of their canoe. Finding daily activities, tasks, or responsibilities helped replace the constant thoughts of using substances. Though it was a daily struggle waking up sick, facing the whitecaps of withdrawal, Little Bird found strength through sweat lodge ceremonies, restorative circles, and transitional housing. They leaned on their housemates for support and accountability. Together, they were learning new hobbies, working in the yard, going fishing, and attending community events together, supporting each other in staying sober, and sharing encouragement. In the midst of this changing tide, moving from addiction to sobriety, they found new ways to steady the waters.



Sweat Lodge Ceremonies

Sweat lodge ceremonies are an important cultural practice for many Indigenous groups. Within structures called sweat lodges, ceremony participants engage in prayer and song, though ceremonies vary by tribe.¹⁸ In 2022, PGST community members worked together to build a cedar sweat lodge between the Tribe's transitional houses.¹⁹ Although sweat lodge ceremonies are not a traditional S'Klallam practice, many have embraced the ceremonies as a path to healing.

These new relationships with others in re-entry inspired Little Bird to reflect on their relationships outside of the program. They had family and friends from their past who were still on the streets, trapped in their own whirlpools of active addiction. Often, they found themselves remembering what it was like to experience addiction while observing others whose canoes were unstable and sinking.

In recovery, Little Bird would often think about how tough love had played a role in their family members' healing. Little Bird believed their addiction was fueled by trauma, and true sobriety would only come when they were ready to face that trauma and forgive themselves. Throughout re-entry, these realizations became anchors, helping Little Bird gain and maintain the strength to endure withdrawals and doubts about whether they could remain sober— inching closer to a safe landing.

Having this time in re-entry to reflect on new and old relationships motivated Little Bird to continue their journey to sobriety, remaining engaged in re-entry, so they could reconnect with family, friends,

¹⁸ The Pluralism Project. (2020). *Sweat Lodge*. Harvard University. <https://pluralism.org/sweat-lodge>

¹⁹ Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe. (2022). *Annual Report 2022*. https://pgst.nsn.us/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/2022-Annual-Report_prepared-in-2023.pdf

community, and the land. Thoughts of mending and rebuilding relationships with their children, parents, and friends also helped them get through the rough days. Thinking about what might happen to their family if they didn't become sober weighed on them. Without the Skipper they would be lost at sea, and they did not want their family to have to witness that again.

For a long time, Little Bird's relationship with their children had been strained by their addiction. They had been separated from their youngest children for quite some time, and their youngest children's faith in Little Bird's sobriety was waning. Little Bird also had to reckon with the damage they had caused to their relationship with their eldest son. It felt as though their canoe had been fully swept away by the tides when an episode of violence led to their arrest.

"My son, he was 21. I was mad at him when I was in jail because how the hell is he going to call the cops on me because I hit him. But I'm thinking, he did me a favor. I'd still be out there being drunk and being mean, and hurting my ones I love the most."

—Participant

As the waters began to calm in re-entry, and as Little Bird gained clarity about these moments in their past, they felt that the events leading to their arrest and incarceration were not reflective of who they truly were. They felt a deep need to make amends and become a better parent. With this newfound support and a chance at a new life from the Road to New Beginnings program, Little Bird committed to becoming a better person and parent.

They dedicated themselves to the re-entry program, being intentional about recovering and showing a genuine effort to change. In response, their family began to show up for them with full support that made their journey to sobriety more attainable and meaningful.

"It's been a slow process... but it's a lot easier having my family and everybody being there with me."

—Participant

The support Little Bird received throughout re-entry became a primary motivation for returning to their community sober. While they were working on their own transformation, the tribal community grew more accepting of recovery as a cause worth supporting and an accomplishment worth celebrating. The tides were turning around Little Bird, bringing a safe landing within reach. Despite the whirlpools and whitecaps along the way, Little Bird gained a clearer understanding of the tools and resources—family, friends, and community—within their canoe to navigate the obstacles toward a safe landing.

"The community, I think Indian country all over is just recognizing sobriety in such a different way than it has before. I think that's really motivating not only to me, but to people still in addiction, just to see how celebrated recovery is... Just life in general motivates me."

—Participant

After a period of isolation and loss, through re-entry Little Bird was finding their way back to themselves, to their families, and to their community. They were welcomed with open arms and a new vision for what life could be. Their neighbors greeted them with hugs and kisses.

"When people come out of treatment and we want to show them our cultural strength of helping them, it's just seeing them. Like, I'm happy to see you. Welcome home. You're here. And just hugging them and kissing them and letting them know you're happy to see them."

—PGST Elder

Knowing that they were working hard in recovery, the community came together to support Little Bird making better choices. They were reminded that, even when they were in active addiction, the community was always there. Little Bird felt that the community wanted better for them.

"The community is great. The community is there for you as long as you're there to support you if you're making good choices. I never thought I'd be where I'm at today, but just stay focused. You're going to get all the support you can get. Even if you think that the support around you is not there, they do care. They just want you to be on a better path."

—Participant

Seat 3: Strength and Health

With a renewed focus on sobriety and support, Little Bird was able to acknowledge the shame and guilt that weighed down their canoe. They realized that their past actions—selling drugs, violence, and hurting the people they love—were the heavy stones they'd been carrying. They came to realize, during their time in re-entry, that they were altering harmful thought patterns, changing the course of their journey for the better. Little Bird felt that the person they were before the re-entry program was somebody they became when they were using, not who they truly were.

With support from the elders, the community, and their family and friends, Little Bird felt that they were more equipped than before to take on the whirlpools of their trauma, the whitecaps of their withdrawal symptoms, and other challenges that may arise. Little Bird could look at themselves and see more clearly where they had been and where they were going.

"For many years, we let our addiction control our thoughts and our decisions. And where did that lead us? It didn't lead us into good places. So sometimes there is a time when you need help and guidance."

—Participant

Little Bird gained the confidence to apologize to the people they had harmed. Even though they didn't grow up saying, "I'm sorry," they had to learn how to apologize as part of their recovery. Re-entry allowed them to reflect on their actions, past and present, take responsibility for the impact they had on their relationships, and move forward without the things that caused harm in their life and others. They were releasing pain and suffering and charting a new path.

A significant part of their new life that they learned during the re-entry program was their spirituality and culture, which helped strengthen them for the journey ahead. They frequently attended culture classes and spoke with Elders about the traditions of their Tribe while in re-entry. Little Bird's connection to their ancestors' traditions began with the rhythm of a drum. An Elder was leading a drum-making session and invited everyone to join the circle. When the drum was passed to Little Bird, they flinched. "No, no, I can't," they mumbled, trying to pass the drum on. But the Elder didn't tell Little Bird

that they needed to listen or that they had to learn. He simply led by example, treating Little Bird with the respect he hoped to receive in return. He showed them that they could learn together and gently encouraged them to go ahead. Hesitantly, Little Bird tapped the drum. Soon, the Elder's call to sing "loud and proud" helped them find their rhythm and begin to confidently beat the drum.

Little Bird fell in love with sweat lodge ceremonies, an important cultural tradition for some PGST members. Little Bird would arrive at dawn to start the fire for the other members. They insisted on carrying the heavy river stones themselves, one by one, into the lodge. "Let me suffer," they thought, "for not getting clean before." Each stone was a physical act of making amends. They were so grateful to be sober, and with that gratitude, they began to find themselves again.

"I fell in love with the sweat lodge. I got to sweat a lot there... And then they just asked me to carry rocks in... I'd be up at 6:00 in the morning starting their fire for them and then carry all the stones in... I'd carry the stones in and not even allow them to carry them in so I could suffer because of the stuff that I never wanted to get clean before. But I was so grateful to be clean. There's a certain healing in it, I guess I found."

—Participant

Finding a higher power, going to church, and gaining faith in the power of prayer was also important for Little Bird. Prayer became the main motivator for their journey. Building a relationship with God gave them a new understanding of love. They would often say they adopted a biblical definition of love, that love is patient, love is kind, and that God is going to be good. In the challenging times, they felt that they could let go on to God and for things outside of their control—like their friends and family's sobriety. They would be praying for them to come to the lodge, to get clean. When their family and friends did, their faith was strengthened and, in turn, so was their sobriety.

Seat 2: Vision & Purpose

Through the process of preparing their canoe, Little Bird felt ready to set and accomplish goals for re-entry. Like their fellow re-entry participants, Little Bird carried deep wells of inner strength and determination to paddle through the barriers ahead. Yet, when they thought about the goals they had, they felt unsure about where to begin. Most of all, they wanted to own their own home, but this felt unfeasible due to the cost; to them it felt like a distant shoreline they could not reach. To afford a home, they would need a job, but they remembered that job applications required documents like identification and social security cards, neither of which they possessed.

One day, Little Bird met with their success coach and explained the goals they wanted to achieve, along with their concerns about accomplishing them. As they explained their concerns, their success coach listened attentively, taking careful notes. "These are good goals, let's figure out what you need to do first to get there," said their success coach, offering a map for their journey.

"Pretty much all my goals they helped me accomplish. They help me make my appointments or help me get a hold of all the people I need to get things done and then keep reminding me and pushing me to make the moves to do it, they reminded me, 'Hey, you said you wanted to do this, so you should probably call them up and go try and do this again.' Even though they wanted so much for me to do all these old things like

getting my social security card and ID. My birth certificate was a really hard process, but they kept reminding me and helped me. I'm not very good with computers, so they always helped me get on the computer and get all these things done so I make my payments and stuff. Go get this so you can do this. Keep in my mind that I need to take these steps and don't worry about not having it done because as long as you're taking progress to it and doing what you have to do, it'll get done. Now I do have my Social Security card, my birth certificate. I'll have my driver's license tomorrow."

—Participant

Their success coach gave an example of an achievable step toward their bigger goal. To apply for jobs, Little Bird would need a social security card. Their success coach explained that they could request a replacement card through the Social Security Administration website. "But I'm not very good with computers," Little Bird admitted. Their success coach smiled and assured Little Bird that she would walk them through the entire process online.

In that same meeting, Little Bird mused over small, attainable goals they could work on through re-entry. They remembered various doctor's appointments they needed to attend as part of their sobriety journey. The difficulty was that Little Bird did not have a driver's license or any way of getting to the clinic. The success coach offered to drive Little Bird to their appointments. On a piece of paper, the success coach wrote down "obtain driver's license" as another goal and waypoint on the journey.

By the end of the meeting, the two had written an outline of Little Bird's goals and the concrete steps they would take to accomplish them. Little Bird took a copy of their goals to take home. With this roadmap in hand, Little Bird began tackling their goals one by one. Over the next few months, their success coach checked in with them regularly about their progress. Whenever Little Bird faced a barrier, they knew their success coach would be there to guide and support them.

Little Bird was driven to accomplish their goals with the support of their friends and family both within and beyond the re-entry program. They were motivated by watching their friends navigate their own canoes, achieving successes through the program and making steady progress. Meanwhile, their network cheered them on as they checked off their goals and set new ones, the steady rhythm of their support like oars in the water.

"The biggest strength is just the support system that they have from re-entry. They're learning to advocate for themselves a little bit more. And I think that that shows with the participants that are in re-entry, I feel like with that there is a confidence because they're starting to feel that confidence in themselves because they're learning...a lot of times because maybe they've had so many different kind of setbacks....whatever it is, finding a job or trying to pay off a fine...they have a little bit more confidence."

—Community partner

After a journey of long, hard work, Little Bird finally obtained a job. Bubbling with excitement, they reached out to their success coach to let them know the exciting news. Grateful, Little Bird thanked their coach for all of her support: driving them to appointments, helping them obtain legal documents and a

driver's license, and charting the course through all the steps needed to accomplish their goals. Their coach congratulated Little Bird and reminded them of their resilience and determination that had truly steered the canoe. Through the power of their inner vision and a positive mindset, Little Bird had broken through their barriers and achieved success.

"The little things like that is building that confidence. Telling them how good they're doing, it just gives them the stride to even do better or move forward more...Dang, it's really exciting on our end to be able to watch them grow, and then they're not even realizing it sometimes. No, you're the one doing the footwork. You did this. We was just along the way with you in case you needed help."

—Staff member

Seat 1: Stability

Throughout their journey on the canoe, Little Bird gradually moved from seat to seat. In the fifth seat, Little Bird connected with Tribal elders and found meaning in the intergenerational wisdom and cultural teachings passed down to them. In the fourth seat, Little Bird focused on rebuilding relationships with their family, friends, and community. In the third seat, Little Bird worked to improve their physical and mental health through re-entry program services and made progress on their wellness journey. In the second seat, Little Bird began plotting the course for safe landing by accomplishing goals to help them re-enter community. Now, it was finally time. After achieving a profound personal transformation, Little Bird had reached the first seat: the seat of stability. They felt grounded and secure, transformed mentally, physically, and spiritually.

Members of their extended community looked to Little Bird as a role model because of the dedication they showed in pursuing wellness. Little Bird rebuilt their loved ones' trust, and this achievement gave them happiness and peace.

"I get to be an active member of society today. I get to be a dad, an uncle, brother, son, a nephew, whatever you want to say. I get to do all these things because of this program."

—Participant

Throughout the canoe journey, Little Bird experienced significant growth and transformation. Each canoe seat represented a phase of development reflecting their ability to overcome obstacles and move toward stability. Through working closely with the skipper, or the re-entry program, Little Bird matured into a true leader, ready to take the helm at the head of the canoe and finally request to land ashore.

Parents in re-entry

Parents worked hard to improve their relationships with their children. One participant explained how she had lost custody of her children before joining re-entry but now had progressed to a point where she was able to talk to them daily. Similarly, a staff member at a partner organization relayed a story about a re-entry participant who worked closely with PGST's Child & Family Services and successfully regained custody of his children.



Coming Home and Beginning New Journeys



It had been a long journey for Little Bird, whose journey is emblematic of that experienced by many re-entry participants. They navigated choppy tides and calm waters alike, achieving successes while working through setbacks. Finally, it was time to come ashore; Little Bird was ready to graduate from re-entry. Over the course of the journey, they had undergone a significant transformation. They had worked through sobriety, developed meaningful connections with the re-entry staff and peers, gained wisdom from Elders, reconnected with community and rebuilt trust, overcame barriers, accomplished personal goals, and found purpose. Their story illustrates the way in which the Road to New Beginnings program helps participants throughout recovery, presenting culturally responsive healing activities and supporting them with their aspirations—guiding participants back to community.

For the re-entry program, the ultimate measure of success is participants not just disembarking but thriving after the journey—continuing to paddle, staying engaged in sober activities, and maintaining a strong connection to community. The greatest triumphs come when participants build new lives, regain their children, secure meaningful employment, and even buy homes.

For Little Bird, what once seemed beyond the horizon became reality through a shared journey marked by dignity and respect. The canoe, once adrift, reaches not just safe landing, but a new, promising life on land.

For re-entry participants, this final act of reconciliation—bringing the canoe ashore—completes the journey, transforming the participant from an individual in need of support into a grounded, purposeful, and contributing member of their community, ready to guide others as they begin their own journey.



Recommendations

Participants, staff, and community partners provided recommendations to help strengthen the re-entry program. Recommendations included increasing additional options for house meetings, having additional funding for program services, providing more culturally responsive training for staff, and strengthening collaboration between re-entry program and partners.

Additional options for house meetings. One participant noted that current house meeting times, which are required as part of the program, are held during the daytime and may conflict with work shifts. Another participant shared that some meetings are held in locations that are inaccessible without a car. Participants suggested offering additional options for house meetings, both in terms of timing and location.

Additional funding to expand services. Staff said additional funding for the program would help expand services that facilitate participant engagement and success. For instance, incentives like gift cards and hygiene kits motivate participants to engage in the program. Participants also need financial assistance for crises such as court fees or document replacement. Occasionally, the re-entry program needs to temporarily house participants when the recovery home is at full capacity. Additional funding is needed to fulfill these program needs.

Culturally responsive trainings for staff. Program staff with Tribal affiliation noted that many training courses available within the field are not culturally appropriate for their Tribal client base. Staff emphasized the importance of providing trainings from Native organizations in order to provide appropriate services to re-entry participants.

Strengthened collaboration between re-entry and partners. Staff at one community partner organization recommended establishing stronger mechanisms for communicating to facilitate a better partnership between their team and re-entry. Staff suggested options such as inviting re-entry staff to present on services they provide to their organization or establishing regular monthly or quarterly check-in between staff at both organizations.



Additional Insights from Elders

The study team collected data on community context from Elders to ground the evaluation in the community's specific cultural and historical reality. This is a core principle from the IEF, which asserts that integrating Indigenous ways of knowing and local context is a necessary condition for the evaluation to be truly responsive to community priorities.²⁰ Asking these contextual questions was important, as the Elders' knowledge helps inform the program's immediate impact and derives culturally-relevant long-term implications for the broader PGST community.

Elders and Council members offered additional observations for PGST that have implications for the Tribe's approach to supporting re-entry for Tribal members. Elders' insights on re-entry centered on several key themes: promoting healing through positive reinforcement over shame, acknowledging the difficulty of facing hard truths as a community, and leveraging faith as a facilitator for recovery. They also emphasized the need to support the families of participants and the value of offering a variety of activities to help individuals re-engage with the community.

Elder Panel

An enforcement action utilized by PGST's Child & Family Services Department. This is a panel of Elders that provides guidance to Tribal members, helping them navigate personal challenges before they lead to legal consequences. The panel assists with issues like child support and connects individuals with resources, such as employment opportunities, to address root causes.

Support healing through positive reinforcement

rather than shame. Four Elders emphasized the importance of supporting people on their healing journey through positive reinforcement and praise rather than shaming them for their mistakes. One Elder discussed a Tribal tradition, Elder Panels, which PGST's Child & Family Services department uses as a preventative step before someone faces more serious legal trouble, and suggested having an Elder Panel for the re-entry program. The Elder told the story of how overwhelmed by fear and shame they felt at the prospect of facing the Elder Panel, that they would instead prefer to go to jail. However, they learned that during the panels, their Elders treated them with kindness, love, and support. As the Elder explained, "tough love doesn't work." Making healing a communal, not isolated, experience is crucial for successful re-entry of PGST members.

"When I was younger, I used to think that shame was a tradition, and shaming people was a part of our culture. But I don't know if that's true anymore because I've also, as I've grown older, learned that standing people up and holding them up in a good way is actually a better way to go. Telling them what they're good at and tell them what their strengths are and tell them what you hope for them and tell them what you believe about them, surrounding them with all the good things, I think is a better way."

—PGST Elder

²⁰ LaFrance and Nichols, *Indigenous Evaluation Framework*, 61.

It is challenging—but important—to face hard truths. When Elders were asked to describe methods for addressing the stigma associated with incarceration and addiction within community, they noted that addiction is often not one's primary problem but a symptom of deeper, unresolved trauma. To truly heal, individuals and communities must stop focusing only on addiction and instead face the specific, often painful experiences that led to it, such as bullying, social exclusion, or physical and sexual abuse. The passage below emphasizes that, while trauma is the root cause of addiction, its form is unique to each person, requiring a personalized approach to recovery rather than a one-size-fits-all solution. This process is difficult, especially in close-knit communities, but the Elder argued that facing these hard truths is essential for breaking cycles of hurt and enabling genuine, lasting healing. The Elder's perspective redefines stigma by shifting the focus from the individual's addiction to the community's shared responsibility to break the cycle of hurt by creating safe spaces, teaching new relational skills, and replacing old patterns of social exclusion with radical inclusion and emotional honesty.

"...Addiction is a symptom. It becomes physical addiction after, but it is a symptom. This community, if we want to talk about things we need to be healed, we've got to be real. Yes, it's alcohol, it's drugs. It's also gang rape. It's also rape. It's also the cliques and bullying, laughing at each other. It's also separating people. If we really want to break the cycles, we've got to face the things that we know have really hurt our people. We know that it's a symptom... There isn't one answer that's going to be perfect for everybody. But there is an answer for everyone. Because the trauma is different... We're a close community, and it's hard to face the hard things. There's a lot of wonderful, incredible, amazing, beautiful things. And I live here still because of all of these amazing, incredible good things. But I know one thing we could be better at is facing those things that are hard, that we don't like to talk about. That is at the root of a lot of the addiction."

—PGST Elder

Faith is an important facilitator for healing. Elders discussed the importance of spirituality for Tribal members in nine separate instances. Prayer and spirituality are an integral parts of PGST culture; as one elder explained, "our community is a people of prayer...the Port Gamble S'Klallam way is to pray." Cultural events such as the canoe journey are deeply rooted in prayer and spirituality, and faith plays a major role in supporting community members through grief, tragedy, and transformation. The re-entry program can further harness the strength of faith and spirituality as a primary method of healing and recovery.

Family members need support, too. Addiction has affected PGST members at all levels. Elders shared openly about their loved ones, family and friends alike, who were or are currently experiencing chemical dependency. Many Elders had experienced profound losses because of addiction. In addition to re-entry services for people in recovery, family and friends also need support from the community.

"It's hard for us as family members...it's not just the user who needs support and love, too. I mean, it's the family member also because we're recovering from that lifestyle also."

—PGST Elder

Alternative activities are important for people in re-entry and recovery. PGST offers a variety of activities and events rooted in Tribal values and culture, including cooking classes, natural resources gathering events, and other cultural classes. Elders underscored the importance of presenting alternative activities to people on their recovery journey to encourage healthy choices and support their reintegration into the community.



Participant Characteristics, Program Completion, and Recidivism Rates

The study team reviewed participant data to understand participant outcomes and baseline characteristics from September 2022-2025. Road to New Beginnings provides services to all individuals housed in Kitsap County Jail or Washington State Department of Correction facilities and enrolled in a federally recognized tribe or with proof of descentance. Spouses, partners, and parents of PGST Tribal members are also eligible for the program.

A total of 23 program participants consented to sharing their data with the study team. Below is a summary of key demographic characteristics of program participants, their completion status, and recidivism rates.

Demographics

According to the programmatic data, the average age of the participants was 42 years old. Over one third of participants were female (39%) and the remaining were male (61%). Most program participants identified as Native American (91%) and two participants identified as White. Of the Native American participants, 87% were members of Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe (PGST), while a smaller portion of participants were members of other tribes (13%).

At the time of enrollment, over three fourths of participants reported being unhoused (78%). A few reported having their own home (13%), one participant lives with family, and one participant reported "other" when describing their housing status. No participants reported living with friends.

Additionally, at the time of enrollment, almost half of participants reported having a high school diploma (48%) as their highest level of educational attainment. Over one third of the program participants reported not having graduated high school (35%). Less than a tenth of participants reported receiving an Associate's degree. See Appendix B for participant characteristics table.

Program completion

As of the writing of this report, of the 23 participants, six remain in the program, six were terminated or dropped out from the program, and eleven have completed or graduated from the program. Of the participants who were terminated, four participants absconded and two dropped out of the program due to health-related reasons.^{21 22 23} See Table 2 for details on participant's program completion status.

²¹ Participants may be terminated from the program if they cease communication with program staff or they drop out of the program.

²² Completed participants are those who finished most program requirements in under one year, regardless of subsequent continuation or discontinuation and Graduated are those who completed a full year of the program and formally graduated. This combined grouping includes all individuals who met a significant threshold of program fulfillment and time investment.

²³ A participant who has intentionally ceased all communication and made their whereabouts unknown to their probation or parole officer or the program staff is listed in the PGST data system as having absconded.

Table 2: Completion status of re-entry participants

Completion status	Percentage of participants
Ongoing	26%
Completed/Graduated	48%
Terminated/Dropped out	26%

Recidivism rate

The research team reviewed data from re-entry staff on re-entry program participants, including information on the number of arrests and reasons for arrest since their date of intake into the program. The research team used this data to calculate the percentage of participants who returned to Kitsap County jail or state prison, including those who were booked and released within one year of the program's start date.

The overall one-year recidivism rate for the program was 4.3%. This rate reflects one participant out of the 23 in the program who recidivated within the defined 12-month period following their program enrollment or release date from treatment or jail.

For the analysis, the study team categorized participants in two different groups based on the time between their intake into the re-entry program and the initiation of program services. Whether participants' immediately received the full suite of program services following intake depended on factors such as their release date from incarceration or attendance in a treatment program, both of which could prevent participants from fully engaging with the program until their discharge date.

The groups were defined as follows:

- **Immediate Re-entry:** This group included participants who began full program engagement within one month of their initial intake. For this cohort, the one-year recidivism tracking period commenced on the date of program enrollment.
- **Delayed Re-entry:** This group consisted of participants who experienced a delay of more than one month between intake and full program engagement due to incarceration or a treatment stay. For this cohort, the one-year recidivism tracking period commenced upon their date of release.

Recidivism Rate = (Number of participants who recidivated **within one year of immediate or delayed re-entry**) / (Total Participants)

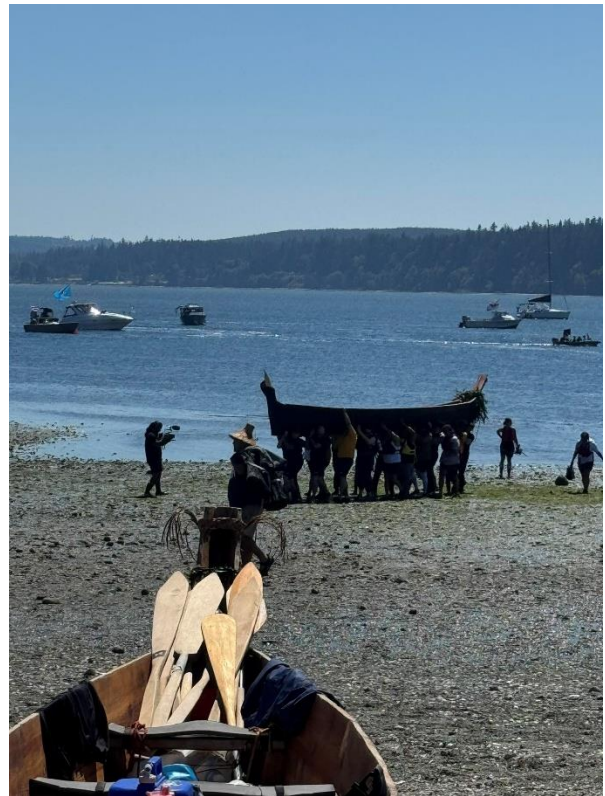


Conclusion

The Road to New Beginnings program stands as a powerful, culturally relevant model designed to replace the damaging, repetitive cycle of the criminal justice system—the "revolving door" of incarceration and recidivism—with a restorative journey focused on human dignity and compassion. This evaluation demonstrates the program's strong performance in guiding Tribal and Indigenous members through healing, connection, and reintegration. Evidence of this success and the program's unique strengths is provided through the combination of quantitative data and deep qualitative insights, all guided by the Indigenous Evaluation Framework (IEF) and Community-Based Participatory methods.

Over the period of the grant, nearly half (48%) of the participants completed or graduated from the program. In addition, the program achieved a low recidivism rate of only 4.3% within 12 months of program completion. The quantitative data is complemented by qualitative research and storytelling. The synthesis of narratives, presented through the collaborative storytelling approach and the canoe journey metaphor, highlights a critical finding: program success is achieved through a commitment to the holistic view of healing for the person, centered firmly within community. Participants credit their safe landings—securing housing, employment, driver's licenses, and regaining child custody—to three primary, interwoven factors:

- **Culturally Rooted Healing:** Participants highly valued cultural services, such as cultural classes and sweat lodge, and specifically appreciated the program's efforts to reconnect them with Elders and community. Through these efforts, participants successfully pursued inner healing and found strength and hope in faith and prayer.
- **Guidance and Relationships:** The journey of re-entry was strongly facilitated by the continuous support and guidance of re-entry staff who bring lived expertise as program graduates. Also, the close, lasting relationships between program participants and with the broader community created a vital support network necessary for navigating the challenges of re-entry.
- **Community-Centered Approach:** The program effectively addresses the historical trauma acknowledged by the Elders and Tribal Council, providing participants with a pathway forward through positive reinforcement; encouraging participants to mend and rebuild relationships with family and community; and embracing their Native identity with pride.



Limitations

It is important to acknowledge the boundaries of this evaluation's findings and data quality.

- **Data Access and Quality:** The study faced constraints in obtaining complete data for baseline measures and program activities, as much of the information was captured only on paper, requiring a significant amount of time for staff to transmit it electronically. Additionally, the program was transitioning to a new data system at the time of the evaluation, limiting access to digitized records needed for a full baseline-to-outcome assessment.
- **Methodological Scope:** This study is descriptive in nature and cannot determine any causal link between the program and participants' outcomes. Furthermore, PGST is a small community, and their re-entry program serves a small number of participants. This evaluation is limited in its sample size (N=23) and the relatively short 12-month follow-up period used to track the recidivism rate.
- **Canoe Journey Framework:** The study team acknowledges that, while the canoe journey metaphor is a powerful and culturally resonant frame, it cannot fully capture the intricate, multi-layered nature of every participant's unique experience.

Lessons Learned from Partnering with Tribal Communities

In collaboration with the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, the study team identified key lessons for conducting evaluations that are respectful of Tribal sovereignty and traditions, and are guided by Tribal priorities and community values:

- **Representation matters:** It was fundamental and necessary for the success of the evaluation, to include a Tribal member, the Knowledge Gatherer, as an equal partner from start to finish. The Knowledge Gatherer, who was identified by re-entry staff and compensated for their time, ensured the work was grounded in PGST's cultural values and guided by their wisdom.
- **Holding to Collaborative Principles.** As a core principle of IEF, the study team prioritized aligning research activities with the program's direct needs and community priorities. This commitment required continuous collaboration with re-entry staff to learn what was most important and to uphold the community's right in defining the meaning and truth of the evaluation findings.
- **Applying Indigenous Evaluation Methodologies:** The study team had to continuously self-reflect and unlearn Western evaluation practices to embrace Indigenous approaches, which meant they relied heavily on the Knowledge Gatherer and the re-entry staff to help guide the talking circles and storytelling approach. The IEF and CBPR methods provided the necessary framework for this shift.
- **The Power of Relationship and Adaptability:** Building and maintaining a strong relationship with the Knowledge Gatherer and the re-entry staff was the foundation for trust and a successful evaluation. The research team prioritized being adaptive and responsive to the program's evolving needs and context.
- **Importance of In-Person Engagement:** While conducting work remotely offered some logistical advantages, in-person data collection was highly important. The stories shared in the in-person talking circles provided rich detail about participants' personal journeys and knowledge from community, reinforcing the need for physical presence in community-based research.

Recommendations for Future Research

To build on the descriptive findings and confirm the program's lasting impact, future research can prioritize longitudinal outcome studies (3-5 years). Following up on program graduates can help inform how participants maintain stability and continue their healing journey over time, confirming the sustainability and long-term benefits of the initially low recidivism rate. Crucially, the research questions, methodology, and focus of this study must be determined and defined entirely by PGST community.



Appendix A

Framework Development and Refinement

Building on the suggestion of the Knowledge Gatherer, the development of the Canoe Journey framework was an iterative and collaborative process, grounded in the lived experiences of program participants. The study team used qualitative data from each talking circle to create the framework. The process unfolded in a few key steps:

Creation of initial elements of framework: The Knowledge Gatherer and study team reviewed and identified key takeaways from the individual stories in the participant talking circle. From the key takeaways, the study team identified the following themes: health, purpose, kinship, community, wisdom, and guidance. These themes provided the foundational structure for the framework. The study team researched the HOC's approach to developing a framework using the Canoe Journey metaphor. These themes were mapped to the metaphor to be more reflective of the Canoe Journey and Port Gamble S'Klallam traditions. The study team identified the key elements in the framework, including the canoes, the seats, the waters, and safe landings. The themes emerging from the talking circles, enumerated above, serve as the "seats" within the canoe.

Refining the seats: After the initial themes were identified, the study team reviewed the Elders and Encouragers talking circle transcripts to further inform and refine the characteristics and the roles of each "seat". For example, the Elder talking circle helped the team understand the specific types of teachings that might be transmitted in the "Wisdom and Guidance" seat, such as wisdom of ancestors, cultural teachings, and how that wisdom is passed down through important cultural practices.

Defining the waters and safe landing: The development of the "waters" and "safe landing" (initially named "safe harbors" but changed after review) in the framework was a central part of the storytelling process. The study team applied the approach of the HOC to tell Little Bird's story, describing how their canoe navigated changing "waters." Turbulent waters to represent difficult or challenging times for a participant, while calm waters are moments of progress or stability.

Initial design of the framework included "safe harbors" to represent the accomplishments of participants. However, upon further review and understanding of the important events that occur within the Canoe Journey—specifically that there are multiple stops and celebrations along the way—the study team chose to illustrate participants' achievements, including the achievement of stability, with "safe landings" to be more culturally appropriate.

Validating the framework

To ensure the framework was culturally relevant and accurate, the study team presented it to the PGST Court Services Director, the Re-entry Program Manager, and Knowledge Gatherer for review and refinement. They provided feedback on the language, deepened the metaphorical connections between the framework and the storytelling, such as defining whirlpools to signify relapse, and added two new elements—Skipper and Stability—to better reflect the physical design of a Cedar Canoe and the core components of a successful re-entry journey. At the recommendation of the Project Manager and

Knowledge Holder, the team incorporated “tidepools” into canoe journey metaphor and, as described above, changed “safe harbors” to “safe landing.” This collaborative process helped strengthen the framework and ensured it truly represented the sacred values, customs, and practices of the S’Klallam Tribe’s Canoe Journey.



Appendix B

Table 3 : Participants Demographics

Characteristic	Average at program entry
Age	42.5
Gender	
Female	39%
Male	61%
Race	
Native American	91%
White	9%
Housing Status	
Have own home	13%
Live with friend	0%
Live with family	4%
Unhoused	78%
Other	4%
Educational Attainment	
Less than High School	35%
High School Degree or GED	48%
Some College	4%
Associates Degree	9%
Tribal Status	
PGST	87%
Other	13%
Total number of participants	23