

# Wind River Reservation, WY

## Functioning as an Integrated Community

The community within the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming has its own unique set of challenges and strengths. Like many typical communities, the success of providing services to children with special health care needs (CSHCN) depends on a large network of supporting organizations and programs including, but not limited to, the Early Intervention Program (EIP), Head Start, Early Head Start, and Indian Health Services. These programs operate within the communities to ensure families of CSHCN are receiving the services they need.

The reservation itself also makes up a unique community. Governed jointly by two Native American tribes, the Eastern Shoshone and the Northern Arapaho, the Wind River Reservation is the seventh-largest Indian reservation in the country. It spans 2.2 million acres, with the Shoshone occupying the western half and the Arapaho sticking to the central part of the area.

The EI Program is considered part of the Eastern Shoshone Tribe in name because the Shoshone Business Council acts as the program's board of directors. The EI Program provides services to all children with disabilities/delays birth through age five, as well as their families, who reside on the reservation. Funding for the program comes from the state of Wyoming and partly from federal funds. And where in other states, the age 3-5 population is usually grouped within the school districts, this is not the case in Wyoming. Instead, the state is made up of 14 regions that provide special education services to infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. The Wind River Reservation is its own region, Region 14.

## Meeting Families' Needs across Long Distances

One of the defining characteristics of the Early Intervention Program on the Wind River Reservation is that they travel a great deal. Because many of the families they provide services to, both of the Shoshone and Arapaho tribes, have little or no means of transportation and oftentimes don't

even have access to a phone, the EI staff is constantly traveling around the very large reservation to visit children and families in their natural environment. This is the program's primary means of service delivery: outreach. Staff members are accustomed to doing what it takes – reaching out to the families on the reservation – in order to ensure they are receiving services for their children with special healthcare needs.

The EI Program also provides integrated preschool settings in Ft. Washakie and Arapahoe. The preschools are staffed with highly qualified teachers and support staff that provide a “hands-on” approach to learning for children.

The Early Intervention Program does have parent advisory committees that meet as part of the CHILD Project preschool for children ages 3-5. This group of parents meets every other month to discuss the EI Program, fund raising issues, and their children's needs. However, due to the same reasons discussed above, i.e., transportation and

## What makes a Star Community?

ChampionsInC has created the Star Communities program to recognize exceptional communities.

Star Communities will show excellence in 6 Performance Measures:

- Families are partners
- A "Medical Home" provides coordinated care
- Children receive early and continuous screening
- Families have adequate funding/insurance to pay for services
- Services are organized so families can use them easily and are satisfied
- Youth receive necessary services to make the transition to adult life

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communication issues, parental involvement is not as consistent as it could be. As Sue Jezek, Director of the EI Program, says, “we keep plugging away to encourage parent and family involvement.”

### **Improving Communication and Coordination**

When it comes to coordinating services into a medical home, the EI Program has case managers on staff to coordinate with surrounding agencies to ensure families are getting the services they need. In addition, the program has a good working relationship with a pediatrician who works for Indian Health Services within the towns on the reservation. She works with many of the families in this particular area and provides the EI Program with numerous referrals. Sue says, “It has been a struggle, but we do have much better communication with the pediatricians and doctors in Fremont County than when we first started in 1990.”

Part of this growing relationship is attributed to the efforts of another region, Region 6, which serves ages birth to 6 in the towns outside the reservation. Since Region 6 is better connected with the medical community in the towns, the communication between them and the aforementioned pediatrician has been beneficial to the EI Program and Region 14.

### **Network of Services Close to Home**

The EI Program, in conjunction with local school districts, conducts child find screening for children ages birth through five. Community-wide screenings are held in June and August every year all over the reservation. They also receive referrals from other community members, such as those from Head Start, preschools, and daycares, all year round.

When a potential problem is raised, the children don’t have to go far; the EI Program not only screens, they also provide many of the services children need right within their own walls. Full-time staff members consist of physical therapists, occupational therapists, social workers, special education teachers, speech/language therapists, mental health clinicians, and many more.

### **Transition in the Community**

The EI Program on the reservation serves children with special health care needs, disabilities, and/or developmental delays, ages birth through five. When children transition to the public school system, the school takes over their therapy services and care. Transition to adulthood is not something the EI Program is involved with, but another state program, Community Entry Services, does work with high school kids with special needs as they transition through healthcare and find a place to work.

### **Adjusting to the Challenges**

The community that resides within the Wind River Reservation certainly faces its own set of unique challenges. Having the residents spread far and wide is alone a time-consuming and sometimes frustrating difficulty. However, staff members at the EI Program are a reflection of the culture of their community on the reservation and seem to view the challenges with a “that’s just the way it is” attitude. They find their own unique ways of reaching out to families of CSHCN based on cultural norms to ensure they are receiving the services they need and don’t worry much about the extra effort that may be involved. And there are recognizable benefits involved in their steady stream of outreach. Families receive many services and are able to connect with staff members from the convenience of their homes, no matter how far away those homes may be.

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