

Home Modification and Repair Services and Needs in Indian Country

A Data Brief of the Title VI Native American Aging Programs Survey

Introduction

Aging in place is the overwhelming preference of older adults, including elders living on tribal lands.^{1,2} Being able to age where most older adults want to—at home and in their community—preserves the ability to maintain social connections, rely on existing support systems and access needed services that enable them to remain living independently. However, successfully aging in place requires a supportive and safe home environment. Home modification and repair services are critical supports that facilitate independent living while helping to prevent falls and related injuries by adapting or converting features of a home to meet the needs of the older adults who live in them. Home modifications can reduce the risk of falls, which are the leading cause of injuries and injury-related deaths among adults aged 65 and older and occur mostly in home settings.^{3,4} Home modification services range from minor changes such as securing rugs to the floor, improving lighting or installing grab bars and a walk-in shower in the bathroom, to more complex changes that support mobility and independence within the home environment, such as installing ramps, lowering kitchen counters and adjusting cabinets. Some homes may need repairs before they can be modified, such as fixing a leaky pipe before making a bathtub accessible. Repairs may also be needed to ensure the house is safe to live in and accessible. Access to home modifications and repair is an overwhelming concern of tribal elders and the programs that serve them.

There are 720,000 American Indian and Alaska Native elders over the age of 65, of whom approximately 46 percent live on tribal lands.^{5,6} Like older adults throughout the U.S., these elders need access to a range of services and supports, including safe and accessible housing, to continue living safely and independently in their communities. Housing is a common challenge in many tribal communities. A report by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) found that 34 percent of all American Indian and Alaska Native households on tribal lands had physical housing problems—including kitchen, plumbing, heating and electrical deficiencies—compared with seven percent of households for the U.S. as whole.⁷ Home modification and repairs increase the supportiveness of the housing stock to address the needs for current and future residents.

Home Modification and Repair Services Examples

- ▶ **Minor home modifications:** Installation of grab bars, raised toilet seats, handheld showers, handrails and lever door handles.
- ▶ **Major home modifications:** Installation of ramps, widening doorways, lowering kitchen counters and adjusting cabinets to heights accessible for individuals who use wheelchairs or for ease of use.
- ▶ **Repairs:** Maintenance or preventive measures to keep a home in good working order including repairs to the roof, stairs or floors.
- ▶ **Weatherization:** Weatherproofing to protect a home from the elements and improve energy efficiency.
- ▶ **Utility upgrades:** Maintaining electricity, heating, phones and water.



About Title VI Native American Aging Programs

Title VI Native American Aging Programs (Title VI programs), funded by the Older Americans Act (OAA), support the health, wellness and social engagement needs of American Indian, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian elders by providing nutrition services including home-delivered and congregate meals; supportive services such as transportation, homemaker help and care management; and caregiver supports.ⁱ Title VI grants are awarded to federally recognized tribal entities and Native organizations. Title VI grantees are most frequently individual tribes (77 percent), with the remaining grantees being tribal consortia (17 percent), inter-tribal councils (five percent) or another type of entity (one percent). Within these tribal entities, the largest proportion of Title VI programs is administered through independent divisions within the tribe (42 percent). Twenty-two percent are located within a tribal social services agency, such as health and human services, 18 percent are independent nonprofit organizations, nine percent are located within the tribal health department and nine percent are located in other departments or programs. Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of Title VI programs serve a geographic area that is predominantly rural, remote or frontier; 28 percent serve a mix of urban/suburban and rural; and nine percent serve an area that is predominantly urban and/or suburban.

Information presented in this data brief was gathered through the 2020 Title VI Native American Aging Programs Survey conducted by the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a) in partnership with the Scripps Gerontology Center at Miami University with funding from the U.S. Administration for Community Living (ACL).⁸ The web-based survey was administered in September 2020 to the directors of 276 Title VI programs. Data collection concluded on December 18, 2020, with 84 percent (n=231) of Title VI programs responding. The home modification and repairs survey questions were developed in partnership with the Fall Prevention Center of Excellence at the University of Southern California Leonard Davis School of Gerontology with a grant from ACL. This data brief describes the types of home modification and repair services Title VI grantees offer, funding sources, unmet needs and barriers to service provision.

ⁱ To learn more about Title VI services and trends, see the most recent National Title VI Survey Report at <https://www.n4a.org/2021titlevisurvey>.

Title VI program: Title VI, Grants for Indian Tribal Organizations, was included in the 1978 reauthorization of the Older Americans Act. Title VI programs develop, coordinate and deliver nutrition, supportive and caregiver services to tribal elders in locally relevant ways. To be eligible for a Title VI grant, the tribal organization must represent at least 50 Native American elders aged 60 and older.

Title VI grantee: The individual tribe, tribal consortium or inter-tribal council that receives the Title VI grant funds is the Title VI grantee. In this brief, we use the terms Title VI grantee, tribe and tribal entity interchangeably—in all cases they refer to the overall tribal entity, not just the Title VI program.

Home Modification and Repair Services: Availability and Types

Ensuring that tribal elders have adequate, accessible and safe housing is a concern. The 2020 Title VI Survey asked directors about what services and supports are available to tribal elders, whether offered by the Title VI program or other departments within the tribe. **Sixty-six percent of Title VI directors reported that home modification and/or repair services are available to the elders they serve.**

While the Title VI programs may not be the primary providers of home modification and repair services within the tribe, the Title VI directors' familiarity with the needs of and services for tribal elders helps Title VI staff assist older adults in obtaining needed modification or repair services. Title VI directors are well positioned within the tribal entity to provide data on home repair and modification service availability and needs.

Tribal organizations offer a range of services to address the supportive housing needs of tribal elders. The most commonly provided home modification and repair service is *minor* home modification, offered by 52 percent of Title VI grantees. It is also common to refer elders and caregivers to other programs that provide home modification and repair services, including those offered from within the tribe (43 percent). One quarter of Title VI grantees provide home assessments to determine the need for modifications, and 15 percent distribute information about home modification and repair through presentations or fact sheets. As shown in Table 1, about 12 percent provide weatherization services to protect homes from the elements and improve energy efficiency, referrals to or from occupational and physical therapists and *major* home modifications. For more details on the types of home modification and repair services, see the sidebar on page 1.

Table 1: Percentage of Title VI Grantees Offering Home Modification or Repair Services to Tribal Elders

Service	Percent (n=228)
Any home modification or repair service	66%
Minor modifications	52%
Referrals to home repair or modification services/programs	43%
Home assessments to determine needs	24%
Information dissemination about home modification or repair	15%
Weatherization/weatherproofing	12%
Major home modifications	12%
Referrals to or from occupational and/or physical therapists	12%
Repairs (e.g., radon levels, roofing, electrical, carpeting/floors, stair repairs)	11%
Basic utility upgrades	10%
Partnerships with voluntary groups (e.g., Rebuilding Together, Habitat for Humanity)	8%



Home Modification and Repair Funding Sources

A variety of funding sources support home modification and repairs for Native American elders. The most common source of funding, used by 58 percent of tribes, is tribal funding. Forty-seven percent of Title VI grantees use OAA Title VI funds for home repair or modification, and 43 percent use funding from HUD Programs or Grants for American Indians, Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians (e.g., Community Development Block Grant, Home Loan Guarantee Housing Block Grant). Over one-quarter of respondents use non-HUD grant funds and 23 percent receive funding from the Weatherization Assistance Program. Sources of funding for home modifications and repairs are listed in Table 2.

Table 2: Funding Sources for Home Modification and Repair Services

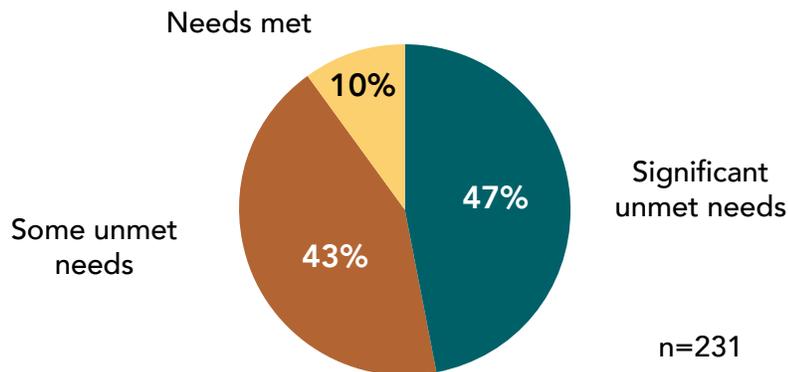
Funding Source	Percent (n=152)
Tribal funding and/or tribal housing funds (non-HUD)	58%
OAA Title VI funds	47%
HUD Programs or Grants for American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians	43%
Grant funds (non-HUD)	27%
Weatherization Assistance Program, Department of Energy	23%
State Funds (e.g., state block grants, state general revenues)	15%
Medicaid Home and Community-Based Services Waiver	13%
Other*	7%
Private pay	5%
Assistive Technology Act programs/Department of Education (e.g., grants for durable medical equipment)	4%
Medicaid Money Follows the Person demonstration program	3%

*Other funding sources included churches, community or neighbor impact groups, hospital, caregiver support programs, OAA Title III and other local resources.

Unmet Needs and Barriers to Service

Home modification and repair services are urgently needed in Indian Country. Overall, home modification and repair is the most frequently reported unmet need for tribal elders, with **90 percent of Title VI survey respondents reporting that there are some or significant unmet needs for these services** among the elders they serve.ⁱⁱ

Figure 1: Unmet Needs for Home Modification and Repair Services



Examining the specific unmet needs related to home repair and modification, 68 percent of respondents indicate that elders have unmet needs related to **major** home modifications and 68 percent reported unmet needs for **funding** for home modification and repair services. Over half of respondents cite unmet needs for weatherization/weatherproofing, and nearly half report unmet needs for basic utility upgrades (47 percent) and minor home modifications (46 percent). Given the distinct experiences, traditions and environments of American Indian and Alaska Native elders, it is not surprising that almost one-third of respondents identified culturally sensitive home modification and repair providers as an unmet need. Other unmet needs can be viewed in Table 3.

Table 3: Significant Unmet Needs in Home Modification and Repair Services

Unmet Need	Percent (n=225)
Any home modification and/or repair service	90%
Major home modifications	68%
Funding for home modification or repair services	68%
Repairs (e.g., radon levels, roofing, electrical, carpeting/floors, stair repairs)	62%
Weatherization	54%
Basic utility upgrades (electricity, heating, phones and water)	47%
Minor home modifications	46%
Home assessments to determine needs	40%
Culturally sensitive home modification/repair providers	29%

ⁱⁱ The next most commonly reported unmet needs for tribal elders were money management (89 percent), personal care (89 percent), homemaker help (81 percent) and legal assistance (80 percent).

Even those tribes that provide some type of home modification or repair service for elders face barriers to delivering these services. Lack of funding was the most reported barrier, cited by 57 percent of Title VI grantees that offer home modification and repair. Beyond funding, the most commonly reported barriers were lack of partners in the community (24 percent) and lack of qualified providers for home modification and repair (23 percent). Other barriers to delivering home modification and repair services are listed in Table 4.

Table 4: Barriers to Delivering Home Modification or Repair Services

Barrier	Percent (n=152)
Lack of funding	57%
Lack of partners in the community	24%
Lack of qualified home modification or repair providers for referrals	23%
Access difficulties due to location or condition of home	16%
Lack of demand and/or awareness of home modification or repair services	15%
Challenging housing stock for home modification or repair service delivery (e.g., mobile homes, rentals)	11%
Not a high priority relative to other service needs	8%

Discussion

Sixty-six percent of Title VI directors report that home modification or repair services are available to elders in their communities. Still, the need for home modification and repairs often remains unmet in Indian Country, with 90 percent of Title VI directors reporting that elders have some or significant unmet needs for these services. Given challenges with funding and the lack of providers who specialize in home modifications, it is not surprising that the most common unmet need related to home modification or repair was *major* modifications, which includes installation of ramps, widening of doorways and more complex and expensive modifications and home repairs.

Thirty-one percent of Title VI directors reported that training or technical assistance on home modification and repair services and programs would benefit their program. This need for training and technical assistance demonstrates the importance of sharing home modification and repair service models with programs that serve Native American elders. Additionally, support for Title VI programs to begin or expand partnerships within their tribes to meet the home modification and repair needs of elders is one way to maximize existing resources and recognize the role of housing in maintaining health.

Home modification and repair services are critical to ensuring that Native American elders can remain in their homes and communities as their needs change across their lifespans. This data brief demonstrates the barriers and opportunities that Title VI programs face with ensuring that elders thrive in supportive homes, age in place and continue their vital roles in sustaining and passing along Native traditions and culture within their communities.

Endnotes

- ¹ AARP, 2018 Home and Community Preferences Survey: A National Survey of Adults Age 18-Plus, https://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/research/surveys_statistics/liv-com/2018/home-community-preferences-chartbook.doi.10.26419-2Fres.00231.002.pdf.
- ² Pynoos, J., et al., Evidence-Based Interventions in Fall Prevention, Home Health Care Services Quarterly 2006, 25(1-2):55-73, www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1300/J027v25n01_04.
- ³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Deaths from Older Adult Falls, <https://www.cdc.gov/falls/data/index.html>.
- ⁴ AARP Public Policy Institute, Falls Among Older Persons and the Role of the Home: An Analysis of Cost, Incidence, and Potential Savings from Home Modification, https://assets.aarp.org/rgcenter/il/ib56_falls.pdf.
- ⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, An Aging Nation: The Older Population in the United States Population Estimates and Projections, www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2014/demo/p25-1140.pdf.
- ⁶ AARP Public Policy Institute and International Association on Indigenous Aging, Lifelong Disparities among Older American Indians and Alaska Natives, www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/ppi/2015/Lifelong-Disparities-among-Older-American-Indians-and-Alaska-Natives.pdf.
- ⁷ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Housing Needs of American Indians and Alaska Natives in Tribal Areas: A Report From the Assessment of American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian Housing Needs, www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/HNAIHousingNeeds.pdf.
- ⁸ National Association of Area Agencies on Aging, 2021 National Title VI Survey Report, www.n4a.org/BuildingCapacity.

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